A Long Time Coming

by Conzieu

Summary

There are signs from the days after the battle of Hogwarts that there is much more to Severus and Harry’s relationship than the conflict and hatred that had define it until then. It will take ten years of changes, personal growth, and maturing, as well as one year when both of them change careers and return to Hogwarts, for their feelings to finally overcome their prejudices, assumptions and fears and for the love of these soulmates to triumph.

Notes

Several people betaed bits and pieces of this through the years: janice_lester who told me
honestly how much part one sucked and gave me the push I needed to rewrite it, carolinelamb who betaed parts that, sadly, were completely rewritten since, mia_ugly without whose enthusiasm for part four I might have given up on writing (she is the sweetest, most darling person in the world, and one of my favorite writers as well). Last but not least, the amazing beta who was not phased by this behemoth, betaed all the rewrites/oldwrites/newwrites, turns over 46000 words in ten hours with corrections and incisive comments, the amazing, one and only, girljim.

It was my great privilege to have veridari illustrate this fic. Her art is embedded within. She was kind enough to draw my favorite scene, and it is gorgeous.
Chapter 1

A Long Time Coming

Part One: Harry

~o~ Prologue, May 1st 1998, 4:48PM ~o~

Sprawled on top of the duvet of the four-poster bed, Harry Potter slept the sleep of the just, the late afternoon sun highlighting his exhausted features. Except for his trainers, he was fully dressed, though bedraggled. The big toe on his left foot stuck out through a large hole in his mismatched socks. He still held a half-eaten sandwich in the hand resting on his chest. There were two wands lying next to his jeans-clad leg. The sounds of voices and activity drifted in through the open window but did not disturb his peaceful slumber. He was not even dreaming.

Abruptly, he sat up, his oblivion shattered, awakened (aghast) by a sudden mental picture of Snape’s corpse, lying forgotten in a pool of its own blood on the filthy wood floor of the dilapidated Shrieking Shack. Sick to his stomach at that image, he dragged himself out of bed, shoved his feet into his trainers and left the quiet dorms, resolved to retrieve Snape’s body and to bring it to lie next to those of the other fallen heroes, in dignity. He felt the need to do this it alone, out of some weird sense of obligation to his professor and, strangely enough, to his own mother.

He crossed the empty common room and took a circuitous route out of the castle and to the Whomping Willow, not wanting to talk to anyone or have to explain his errand. Using a long stick, he immobilized the flailing branches of the tree, and, his muscles aching from the day’s activity, made his way through the low and narrow tunnel to the Shack.

The body was still where they’d left it. Harry stopped in the doorway, surprised at the crushing sadness that hit him. The slanted afternoon shafts of light coming in through the boarded up window, filled with dancing specks of dust, put the black of Snape’s robes and hair in stark contrast to the awful paleness of his face and the brilliant crimson of his blood.

...Crimson blood?

Fresh blood!

Harry rushed to Snape’s side. Though still seeping, the ragged wound on Snape’s neck was almost closed. Harry fell to his knees and lifted Snape’s head onto his lap.

“Snape! Professor Snape!” (Why hadn’t they checked for a pulse? They’d just abandoned him to die! Please Merlin, let it not be too late!) “Please Professor! Stay with me! Hold on! Kreacher! Kreacher!”

Snape slowly opened his eyes and stared critically at Harry. “About bloody time, Potter,” was his irritated comment, before he fainted dead away.

Chapter 1:

~o~ Alive and Sneering, May 3, 1998, 11:00AM ~o~
Harry stared at Snape’s sharp profile, at his stringy black hair, at the slow rise and fall of the grey blanket that covered his thin body. Why he felt compelled to sit here, watching over the unconscious man, he had no idea.

Snape would live. Madam Pomfrey had said so. He had apparently recovered enough after his faint in the Shack (when they thought he had died) to swallow the contents of a collection of small vials that he had prudently been carrying around: an antidote to Nagini’s poison, a tissue regenerator, and a blood-replenishing potion.

There had been more vials, left unused in the hidden pockets of his robes. He had apparently fully expected for Voldemort to attempt to kill him at some point and had prepared himself for a number of possible methods, some fairly gruesome if Madam Pomfrey’s shuddering reaction upon reading the labels on the vials was anything to go by.

Even so, the blood loss from the punctured artery had been much more than he had apparently prepared for. The blood-replenishing potion needed the presence of blood itself in the body to be of use, and there had been so little left and the wound had been so grievous, that it had only kept him on the very threshold of death for hours rather than heal.

Seventeen hours to be exact. Time enough for Harry to view the memories, die in the forest, battle (and defeat) Voldemort, commiserate with his friends and take a well-deserved nap. Harry was still appalled at himself for forgetting about him all that time.

From the Shack, Kreacher had whisked them both to the hospital wing, to the able care of Poppy Pomfrey. That was more than sixteen hours ago and Harry still sat in vigil, despite Pomfrey’s attempt to send him to his dorm and Ron and Hermione’s efforts to drag him away.

The sallow skin, the rattling breaths and the thin lips parted over yellow teeth filled him with revulsion. The hatred in his heart, cultivated over so many years, had not left him. But it was overpowered by so much anger, he was almost choking with it.

From the start, they should have been allies. From the start, Snape could have chosen to see him as Lily’s son, and… foster some kind of bond between them. Instead, he had only seen James Potter’s clone, assigning him all of his father’s worst traits without bothering to get to know him.

So much of the pain, the loneliness, the mistakes of the past seven years could have been avoided had Snape not been such an unforgiving, bitter, and cruel bastard. Even if, to protect himself from Voldemort, Snape had preferred not to befriend him, couldn't he at least have ignored him?

Why was Harry still sitting here? What could he possibly hope to gain from it? Snape would live, yes, yet he would still be the same unforgiving, bitter, and cruel bastard. Nothing would change that. Not Harry’s anger, nor his regrets, not the apologies he intended to make, despite his rage, for his own conduct. It was pointless. The man had nothing to give.

Harry got up. He carefully put the small vial containing Snape’s memories on the night table next to Snape’s beautiful ebony wand, and feeling utterly defeated, left the infirmary.

Snape’s eyes opened. With shaky hands, he dragged both his wand and the vial of memories underneath his pillow, sneered at the door and fell back asleep.
Chapter 2: ~o~ Rebuilding Hogwarts, May 1998 ~o~

After a long shower, Harry slept thirty-six of the next forty-eight hours, waking only to eat and see to his bodily functions. Being back in his own four-poster bed, in clean lavender-scented sheets, wearing a clean undershirt and clean boxers in Gryffindor Tower was simply too marvelous. Waking up to remind himself, again and again, that it was all over was so satisfying that he might have enjoyed doing so a few more times had guilt not forced him to get out of bed to face the world.

Reality was not all sweetness and light. There were so many dead friends. (How would George survive without Fred? What about little Teddy? Like Neville, like Harry himself, he would grow up without parents. And poor Colin. How had he sneaked back into the castle?). Harry had already indulged himself too long. Hermione and the others had started becoming concerned about him, and they certainly did not need more worries.

Having taken yet another shower (after the tent’s cramped and moldy smelling bathroom, with its tepid water, the spotless white tiles and endless hot water of the tower were irresistible), he left the dorms. The extent of the damage Hogwarts had suffered was shocking. The castle needed major repairs and a great deal of clean-up.

Nonetheless, his first stop was the infirmary to check on Snape, who was no longer there. Against Madam Pomfrey’s recommendation, he had discharged himself and returned to the dungeons. She looked torn between her concern for his health and her relief that he had started brewing the potions she desperately needed for her other patients. The infirmary was full and her reserves were swiftly dwindling.

Draco Malfoy was apparently assisting him. (That piece of information was provided by Narcissa Malfoy, who was helping Poppy. She had planned on studying to become a mediwitch herself, but had fallen in love and married Lucius Malfoy instead.)

A little surprised at having experienced his first civil conversation with a Malfoy ever, Harry headed to the Great Hall, where he hoped to locate Ron and Hermione. There, he was greeted with smiles and hugs as if everyone had known that he, not unlike Snape, had also returned from the dead.

~o~

Harry immediately became involved in Hogwarts' repairs and spent the next weeks participating in delicate restoration efforts that had to take into consideration the many wards of the castle, the ancient stonework and the oft-contrary personality of Hogwarts itself.

It actually was going rather well, especially once Malfoy senior started directing the efforts. His experience maintaining and repairing Malfoy Manor proved invaluable. Strangely enough, everyone acted as though there was nothing peculiar in the fact that the known Death Eater and his family appeared to be there to stay.

The atmosphere during the rebuilding effort was a bit surreal. A lot of people Harry did not know had joined the efforts for the love of their Alma Mater. At mealtimes, no one ate at the teachers’ table. Instead, people ate at the students’ tables, separating themselves by Houses.

The Gryffindor table was the fullest, the Weasley contingent alone being quite impressive, if sadly short one of the twins. Neville’s grandmother had remained and with Neville and George Weasley
managed communications with the outside world. It seemed that all alumni unable to be present wanted to be apprised of the progress of the restoration of their beloved school and owls swooped in and out of the owlery constantly.

At the Slytherin table, the Malfoys kept company with a gaunt and grim-looking Snape and a subdued Slughorn (until he departed for Gwenog Jones’ estate, ‘to recuperate’). Andromeda Tonks eventually joined them. She seemed very close to her blonde sister despite their divergent pasts. She arrived at Hogwarts with little Teddy Lupin, who could be found in a crib in the infirmary during the day, and who promised to soon become the most spoilt child in the Wizarding world.

The funerals had been too many: grim and sober affairs everyone attended, but after which people returned and resumed the work with renewed purpose.

It was while Harry was on his way to visit his godchild that he overheard a conversation in the corridor outside the infirmary.

“Staying in Britain is not a choice,” Snape was explaining to Narcissa Malfoy and Andromeda Tonks. “There is no safe haven for me here. As long as there are Death Eaters left alive, my life is forfeit. Although the side of the Light has difficulties believing my true allegiance, Voldemort’s remaining supporters will not. They have nothing left, save revenge. I will be dead the moment I leave Hogwarts’ protection. Perhaps Potter might have done me a favor and let me bleed to death.”

Harry’s persistent anger at Snape was close to the surface and sprang forth easily. He stepped into view.

“I didn't save you, Snape. Your potions did. Kindly blame yourself for your continuing existence.”

“You will continue addressing me as Professor Snape, Mr. Potter. That you inadvertently saved my life in no respect alters our relationship. You will reserve your familiarity for your groupies, if you please.”

Snape’s dismissive response annoyed Harry further. Why was it that knowing more about Snape made it even more difficult for Harry to understand him? So much courage, honor and loyalty existed, he knew, inside this hateful man and yet here he was, as odious as ever. Harry couldn’t reconcile what he had learned from Snape’s memories with the bitter man in front of him.

But he did remind himself that he owed Snape respect, more respect than he had ever shown the man before. For Dumbledore’s sake and Lily’s sake, he refused to listen to his boiling anger, and instead forced himself to say, “You are absolutely right, Professor. Please accept my apologies.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed as if searching Harry’s face for mockery, but evidently found none in Harry’s carefully open expression. He nodded stiffly to acknowledge the apology.

Harry walked on, thinking about Snape’s predicament. Short of checking the forearm of every wizard and witch in Britain, there was really no way of finding all the Death Eaters. It would have been thoughtful of Voldemort to keep a registry… But he, of course, had been able to Summon them.

The work on the castle went on and when Professor McGonagall announced one evening at dinner that there had been enough progress for the goal to reopen on the first of September to now be achievable, the celebration went on for several minutes. The workers continued their labor the next day with renewed energy.
Chapter 3: ~o~ Bye-bye love ~o~

Evenings were fun. The Gryffindor common room was crowded with friends and families and they played chess, Exploding Snap, or charades. Harry mostly enjoyed it after months and months of being cut off from everyone but Hermione and Ron. Sometimes, though, he missed the quiet. And sometimes, when he looked around, all he could see were the people who were missing.

Through all the noise and the laughter, Molly Weasley sat in an armchair next to the fire and knitted colorful jumpers that Harry was sure would be seen again at Yuletide. The chair next to hers was always occupied: Percy would sit in it to read a book or Arthur would look through and comment on the Prophet. Neville’s gran might be there, and knit right along with Molly. Sometimes, Hermione and Ron would share it and she would seem cheered by the sight. Neville seemed to be her favorite companion, though. They would chat quietly, and sometimes he even made her laugh. Harry wished he knew how to do that, how to make her laugh.

He saw how her gaze often followed George around the room, how she would reach for him whenever he was close. Once, as George was sitting on the arm of the chair next to her talking to Neville and Harry, she automatically reached for his arm to hold it possessively. Embarrassed, she caught herself and let him go. “I’m sorry, George,” she said, tears in her eyes. “I can’t seem to help myself.”

George leaned toward her and took her into his arms. “It’s all right, Mum,” he answered, holding her tightly. “It’s more than all right.” He held her for a long time, and Harry realized George needed the reassurance of her touch as much as she did.

Fred was mentioned often, by the Weasleys and by others around them. George seemed to prefer it that way. Usually, there was laughter involved. But although remembering Fred in happier times brought them all some measure of comfort, Molly’s grief remained palpable and Harry did not know how to help.

By contrast, Ginny’s grief was erratic. She might spend a few evenings in high spirits, the life of the party, laughing just a little too loud, and the next few days sitting by her mother, staring into the fire, her face grim, her eyes lost.

On one of those evenings, Harry came to join her. Molly smiled at him encouragingly and he was distraught to think she might still be viewing them as a couple.

“Hey, Gin.”

She turned her face to him and seemed to come back to herself from a faraway place.

“Hey, Harry,” she said, smiling a little.

“D’you want to go flying with me?” Harry asked impulsively.

She looked startled and then gave him a real smile. “I would love to,” she said, getting up. “I’ll go get my broom.”

“Me too. I’ll meet you at the portrait in five minutes.”

As he climbed the stairs two by two to his dorm, Harry felt cheered. The noise, the crowd in the
The common room had been getting to him and he hadn't even realized it. A long flight alone with Ginny in the quiet evening sounded wonderful. He should have thought of it sooner.

On a whim, they decided to try to climb to the top of the tower and fly off from there. Neither of them had ever gone to the tower’s attic, where a ghoul was rumored to reside. Ginny said the seventh year girls thought they could hear it sometimes, at night, from their dormitory.

As they reached the trap door at the very top of the stairs, they could hear… something. It could as easily be the weather vane spinning as a ghoul grumbling. Still, Harry climbed up first, pushing the trap open. The sound of winged things taking flight told them that if nothing else, the attic housed some pigeons.

The room they entered was empty except for a few small piles of droppings, with openings on all four sides to an encircling balcony outside. In one corner, a small spiral staircase went up to what must be the conical space right under the tower’s pointy top. A griping murmur and a slightly unpleasant smell came from there, pretty much confirming the presence of a ghoul. They smiled at each other, having confirmed the legend.

They quietly closed the trap door behind them and in no time were diving off the tower’s balcony. The sun was low on the horizon, getting close to setting, and the sky was already a magnificent dark blue high above. Harry filled his lungs with the bracing evening air and felt as if a weight had dropped from his shoulders. It had been far too long.

They flew east, side by side, their backs to the blinding sun, fast and smooth, grinning like fools at each other. They passed the empty pitch and headed for the high craggy hills above Hogwarts, racing, cutting each other off, enjoying the ascending air currents coming off the stony cliffs, still warm from the afternoon sun.

There was a ledge near the top of the rugged face to the west. After a while, they alighted on it and sat, their feet dangling off the edge, to watch the changing colors in the sky as the sun sank behind the horizon. The slanted light was golden, intensifying the hues of the grass and the leaves, kissing everything with its warmth.

Harry turned to Ginny, who seemed lost in thought, looking outward. Her bright hair was a halo of fire around her sun-kissed face. Her profile was perfect against the night sky, her ear a fragile swirl, her cheekbone and eyebrow delicate and elegant. She was breathtakingly beautiful.

Harry admitted to himself, with a bittersweet pang in his heart, that he was no longer in love with her.

Sensing his gaze, she turned to him and looked questioningly into his eyes. Then she smiled, a wistful little smile that was a perfect reflection of his own feelings. For a while, they stared at each other in perfect understanding.

Once again, she looked out to the setting sun. He felt so attuned to her, he could read her every emotion in her face and posture. It was all there: her sorrow over Fred’s death, her grief at the loss of her carefree self in the harshness of the past year, her worries for her mother. But there was something else, he realized. Something else was weighing on her mind, darkening her face. He reached over and grabbed her hand.

“What is it, Gin?” Harry asked gently.

She took a deep breath, and sighed, shaking her head. She looked down, hiding her troubled face behind the cascade of her fiery hair.
He scooted closer to her, and wrapped his arm around her. “What’s the matter, Gin? Why are you upset?”

It was a testament to their friendship that she did not pretend to misunderstand him. She turned into his embrace, and rested her forehead on his shoulder and he enclosed her in his arms.

“Fred is dead,” she said, “my mum is barely coping, George has lost his twin, and I…”

“What, Gin? What is it?”

“I’ve fallen in love with someone, Harry, and that’s all I can think about.”

Guilt. It was guilt that he had seen, marring her beautiful face. He should have recognized it right away. Guilt was his particular friend. How easy it was to see its pointlessness when it was someone else’s.

Sitting there, with his grieving and guilt-ridden friend in his arms, he suddenly felt so young, so ill-equipped to help her, so overwhelmed by his own unresolved guilt. He sighed, and spoke softly, trying to say the right thing. “Maybe it’s good to think of that right now, Ginny. Maybe it helps. Because, you know, even if you only think of the bad stuff, it’s not going to make it go away. Your mum and George will still be sad, Fred will still be dead…”

Sweet Merlin. That was tactful. Harry decided to stop talking. He was no good at this. He just gave Ginny a squeeze, hoping she understood he meant well. It was nice to hold her like this. Her hair still smelled just as good as it always had. He was so glad they could be friends. Still. She was in love with someone else? He knew it was ridiculous, but his pride was a little wounded.

“Who is it, anyway?” he blurted out.

She pulled out of his arms, a rueful smile on her face. “You’re not very good at this, you know…”

Harry smiled back, relieved that he did not seem to have made things worse. If she was teasing him, it might even mean that he had made them a little better. “Hermione says teenage boys have the emotional range of a teaspoon. I’m doing the best I can here…”

She chuckled.

“So, who is it?” asked Harry again, completely unable to let it go.

“It really doesn’t matter. Nothing will ever come of it,” she answered dismissively.

“Why should nothing come of it?” He knew he should stop prying, but…

She blushed. “He doesn’t even know how I feel, Harry.”

“Well, don’t be silly, tell him. Any bloke would be thrilled to find out that you are in love with him!” Harry meant that with all his heart.

She smiled fondly at him. “Thanks, Harry.” She looked away from him and added gently, “Let’s not talk about this anymore, OK?”

Merlin, but she was pretty. The sun had completely disappeared below the horizon. They should get back before it got too dark.

“Hey, Gin! Let’s dive down the cliff. First one to pull up is a rotten egg!”
She looked at him, shaking her head in disbelief. “I don’t think so, you maniac. I’ll race you back, though!”

And before he knew it, she had mounted her broom and was flying away, laughing at him over her shoulder. He got on his own and kicked off in hot pursuit.

They got back to the common room disheveled and in high spirits, both insisting they had touched down on the front steps first.

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That night, as he was getting ready for bed, Ron came into their dorm room. “Hey, mate!” He started to strip, to put on his pajamas, but Harry could tell he was itching to ask him something. Harry was already under his covers when Ron sat on the sat on the side of his bed and asked bluntly, “So, Harry, are you and Ginny back together?”

He looked a little concerned. He had always been so protective of her. Harry put his hands behind his head. “No. And we’re not going to, either.”

Ron looked both surprised and a little relieved. “Good, good,” he said.

“Gee, thanks, Ron,” said Harry. He was teasing, but curious at Ron's reaction all the same. “Would it have been so terrible?”

Ron had the grace to blush vividly, embarrassed. “No, you git, it’s not that. Just… Hermione thinks it would have been too soon. She said you might both feel pressured to go back to where things were, to make my mum happy and stuff. But also that people shouldn't make important decisions like this so soon after… you know…”

“Wise girl. Not taking her own advice though, is she?” asked Harry, teasingly.

Ron blushed again. “It’s different for us,” he said, shrugging. “I mean, I’ve always known, you know? Well, not always, but for a long time…”

Harry chuckled. “Yes. I know!” he said, rolling his eyes.

“She’s the best,” added Ron, with a grin, totally in love and loving it.

“Don’t you go and get all mushy on me, mate,” Harry said, still teasing. “I’m happy for you, and all that, but puh-lease…”

Ron laughed. “All right, all right. I’ll just go to sleep and dream of my beloved, then,” he said with a dramatic sigh.

“Sleep? Dream? Like last night you mean?” Harry laughed at him. “Well at least tonight, do it quietly, or put up a silencing charm or something.” Harry got a pillow to the head for his trouble.
Chapter 4

Chapter 4: ~o~ Houses Uniting, June 1998 ~o~

Starting in early June, some unexpected guests started joining the Slytherin table for meals. Minister Shacklebolt made an appearance, as well as several high-ranking Aurors Harry did not know. None of them seemed surprised to find the Malfoys at Hogwarts, or in any hurry to remove them and throw them in Azkaban, which was quite strange. It was a good thing though, since their help was invaluable—Draco in brewing, Narcissa in assisting Madam Pomfrey, and Lucius in restoring the castle.

Twice, Flitwick left the Ravenclaws to join the Slytherins in some animated discussions. Ron, Hermione and Harry, along with the rest of the people present were watching these developments and wondering at their meaning.

“Something’s going on,” said Ron, stating the obvious.

“It has something to do with the Death Eaters, I bet,” said Hermione. If Shacklebolt needed information, he would ask the only three Death Eaters who might be willing to give him some. And Flitwick could be involved because of the Mark. It has to be tied to some kind of a charm, maybe a modified bonding… and he is the specialist.”

“Snape said he was basically a prisoner in the castle, because if he steps out, the Death Eaters will get him,” volunteered Harry.

“And there is always a chance they will regroup behind someone else. Just because Voldemort is dead, it doesn’t mean they are unable to do horrible things,” added Neville. He should know. His parents had been tortured into insanity after Voldemort had disappeared the first time.

“Well, I for one am happy to leave it in someone else’s hands this time,” said Harry, meaning it with his whole heart and happily returning to his treacle tart. “I’ve done my part.”

So, of course, it would be that afternoon that Snape would approach him as Harry was helping to restore the belfry. All the workers were covered in white stone dust and Snape made an amazing contrast with them, not even a speck of plaster marring his impeccable black robes.

“Mr. Potter, your presence is required at the Slytherin table this evening,” he announced, without so much as a greeting. Without waiting for an answer, obviously assuming compliance, he spun on his heel and walked away. Resigned to Snape’s incomprehensible ways, Harry decided to ignore them.

“Of course, Professor Snape. It will be my pleasure,” he replied loud enough for Snape to hear. Snape snorted, but did not even bother to turn around.

Harry was surprised when he met Lucius Malfoy’s eyes before getting back to his work. The aristocrat, his hair in a long braid made even whiter by the plaster dust, was wearing only trousers and a shirt with rolled-up sleeves and, like the rest of them, looked like a baker. He seemed highly amused by the encounter. Harry smiled at him and shrugged.

Getting back to work, Harry wondered. Had he just smiled at the man who had almost killed Ginny in second year and been part of the raid on the Ministry that had caused the death of Sirius? The man who would have happily delivered them to Voldemort if Dobby had not saved them? Concentrating again on the block of stone he was squaring, Harry felt awfully confused that he held so little resentment toward a man he had previously despised.
Of course it was no less strange than having Hermione, who did some research about the wards and the original plans of the castle in the library, having lengthy conversations with the same man, and laughing with him…

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Though he had warned his friends about his dinner with the Slytherins, that evening Harry felt horribly self-conscious anticipating sitting at their table. He was relieved when he saw Professor Flitwick at the door of the Great Hall, and realized the diminutive man was waiting for him.

“Banding together to enter the snake pit…” Flitwick winked, putting Harry at ease.

Draco’s eyes were flat and his face expressionless when they approached the table. Harry found himself seated between Andromeda and Narcissa, across from Snape. Flitwick sat across from Narcissa, and greeted her with a genuine smile. Harry wondered if they had known each other long and then realized she might very well have been one of his students.

Surprisingly, it was Lucius, sitting on Snape’s right, who started speaking to him as the meal began. “Thank you for joining us, Mr. Potter. You must be wondering why we sought your company this evening.” He was obviously referring to Snape’s highhanded command, and once again, he and Harry shared a smile of understanding. “I’ll explain. Since the Dark Lord’s demise, the Unspeakables and the Order have been fruitlessly researching a way to efficiently identify and capture the Death Eaters still on the loose.”

He smiled at his son who was as expressionless as Snape and there was no disguising the loving pride in his eyes. “It seems that Draco, however, has come up with a most promising hypothesis. His idea is that we might be able to somehow use our Mark to accomplish that task.”

Lucius Malfoy continued. “According to Professor Flitwick’s analysis, the Mark itself is a form of magical bonding charm, augmented by an enslavement curse. All bearers of it are interconnected. Even though the original caster is dead, there remains an open magical channel between those who bear his Mark. The Dark Lord’s Summoning Charm traveled through these channels. Severus and I tested our Marks. I touched it with my wand, as the Dark Lord used to touch his. I put as much magic as I could behind the Summoning Charm I heard him use countless times, and Severus felt a slight pull, though it was exceedingly weak; the same was true in reverse.”

“I felt that pull also, both times,” added Draco, helpfully.

“We think it should be possible to use this connection to Summon the other Death Eaters,” concluded Malfoy.

Harry frowned. “But you could resist the summons when Voldemort was sending it, couldn’t you?” he asked. All three Death Eaters cringed at his casual use of the name.

“Not easily,” Lucius answered. “It was quite… uncomfortable. In any case, Professor Flitwick believes it is theoretically possible to modify the Summoning Charm into an Apparation one. We could try to resist, but once we understood what was happening, we would have already been Apparated to the location of the Summoning Mark. We would just have to be contained. A large enough group of people, adequately prepared, should be able to stun us all as we arrive.”

It was so bizarre to hear Malfoy speak that way. He was not trying to pretend he was not a Death Eater but was obviously actively participating in planning their capture. Then again, here he was, at the castle. At no point had he even mentioned leaving, yet he surely knew that the Ministry would come for him eventually.
“Well, that’s fabulous!” enthused Harry. "The Aurors would be able to do that."

Snape took over. “Yes, Mr. Potter, obviously. But that is the easy part, is it not?”

“What’s the hard part, then?” asked Harry, impatiently.

“In case you were not paying attention the first time or have difficulty understanding multiple syllable words, Potter, let me repeat for you Lucius’ description of the magical pull we were able to create through the Mark from our best effort: Exceedingly weak. Exceedingly weak means not strong enough, Potter. Not strong enough to force anyone to obey it, nor to carry the energy necessary for compulsory Apparation.”

Harry was too interested in the discussion to take offence at Snape’s usual barbs. “What if you cast the Summoning Charm together?”

Snape glared at him. “We tried, of course! It made no difference. It could be that only the dominant wizard’s Summons makes it through, or that only the original caster's magic had the right magical signature to be able to use the channels efficiently enough to do so with sufficient energy.”

“Well, there has to be a way we can do this!”

They all looked at him with skepticism. Flitwick and Snape both said, one smiling fondly, the other rolling his eyes, “Gryffindors…” which for some reason struck both Harry and Draco as funny. They both snickered and then looked at each other in surprise. Laughing together, rather than at each other, was a new experience. Harry returned his attention to the issue at hand.

“Well, Professor Snape, I am quite sure you didn’t ask me here for the pleasure of my company. So… why don’t you tell me what you have in mind.”

Snape and Lucius exchanged a glance, loaded with unspoken tension.

“Potter, are you still a Parselmouth?” asked Snape.

“Yes, of course! I think… Uh… Well I haven’t tried to use it, since…” He looked at Snape and shrugged. “I’ve no clue.”

Obviously trying to contain his temper, Snape asked sarcastically, “Well, do you think you could you be bothered to check?”

Harry looked around and spotted Malfoy’s walking stick. “May I?” he asked.

Malfoy passed it to him without a word. Concentrating on the very realistic snakehead that formed the pommel, Harry asked it, “Beautiful snake, can I still speak Parseltongue?” He looked up at Snape.

“So you can,” said Snape, having heard only a chilling sibilant hiss. He looked unexpectedly upset. Flitwick and Lucius Malfoy, on the other hand, exchanged satisfied looks.

“Why is that important?” Harry asked Snape.

Flitwick actually answered. “Mr. Potter, it was Professor Dumbledore’s theory that, when you defeated Voldemort as a child, his magic somehow imprinted yours.”

Harry realized that only Snape and he actually knew that he had, in fact, been the recipient of a piece of Voldemort’s soul. Suddenly, the significance of his retained ability to speak Parseltongue became
clear. Whatever magical abilities he had gained from Voldemort’s parasite, he evidently had not lost once the piece of the dark wizard’s soul had remained behind in the waiting room of King’s Cross. He still possessed Voldemort’s gifts.

“You think I could do it!” he exclaimed, in sudden understanding.

Snape looked slightly surprised that Harry had caught on so quickly. “Yes, Potter. If, because of the early influence of his magic on yours, your magical signature resembles the Dark Lord’s enough, there is a chance you could reach the Death Eaters through the Mark with enough power to Apparate them back.”

“How do we find out for sure?” asked Harry, excited.

“We think the only way is to try, Mr. Potter,” sighed Flitwick. “If you are willing.”

Snape looked troubled. Harry asked him pointedly, “Professor Snape, why wouldn’t I be?”

Snape looked up, surprised Harry sought his opinion. He answered, “Well… you have abundant power for someone so young, Mr. Potter, but the magical energy needed for Apparation is not negligible, and the number of Death Eaters remaining to be captured is unknown. If, once the process started, you ran out of power, the Death Eaters in transit would be Splinched, but more grievously, you could fall into a strain-induced magical coma, from which you might not awaken for a very long time…”

That sounded ominous. “How long is a very long time, Professor?”

“There is a special ward in St. Mungo’s for people who overstrain their magic. Some of the patients have been there, insensate, for many, many years.”

“Oh.” All of them were silent for a while. Harry felt very glad none of them were looking at him.

“I think it is unfair to ask Harry to do such a dangerous thing,” said Andromeda, who had stayed silent until now.

“I agree,” said Snape immediately, to Harry’s surprise, “which is why I am not asking. I think we might yet find another solution.”

“Well, I am asking,” snapped Malfoy. “This is not just about your personal freedom, Severus, nor is it your decision. It would benefit the entire Wizarding world. Just think, if it could have been done seventeen years ago, the Dark Lord would have never returned.”

Hearing Malfoy say such a thing was astonishing to Harry. He had always thought Malfoy had been glad Voldemort had returned. He had gone back to him, hadn’t he? And allowed his own son to join the ranks!

“The Dark Lord would have returned either way, Lucius. It might have taken him more time, but he would have returned.” It seemed as if they had had that conversation before.

Snape continued, “I, for one, think that Mr. Potter risking his life for the good of the Wizarding world once already this month entitles him to more than a few weeks’ rest before being asked to do so yet again. We will either find another way to use the Mark, or the Death Eaters will have to be hunted and taken the old-fashioned way, one at a time.”

“The Aurors will never get them all. None of us even know how many there are, let alone who they are. The three of us together can only come up with forty-seven names. You know there are at least
twice that many.” Once again it sounded like an argument many times repeated.

The more Harry thought of it, the more he agreed with Lucius Malfoy. Snape’s reservations about putting Harry in danger again came as rather a surprise. Was it a reflection of Snape’s devotion to Lily? Had he loved her so much he would still continue protecting him for her sake? He was of age, now. He could make his own decisions.

“I think we should do it,” he said.

Snape gave him an angry glare. “Your need for heroism is astonishing, Mr. Potter. Are you so overconfident in your touted abilities as to refuse to consider the possible consequences of your actions?”

Once again, Harry was able to ignore the blatant baiting, though Snape’s obvious reluctance to proceed gave him pause.

“I am not suicidal, Professor. I don’t think we need to do it tomorrow. But I think it is too good an opportunity to pass up. We just have to find a way to make it safe. We can afford to let the Death Eaters go into hiding. If we can make this work, they won’t be able to run or hide.”

The look Snape gave him was thoughtful, as if he was re-evaluating his opinion of Harry.

Narcissa Malfoy weighed in. “I am just as eager as you to see the Death Eaters brought to justice,” she said to Lucius, “but I think Severus and Mr. Potter have a point. Though it would be nice if all this could be over quickly, there is no reason to endanger anyone by rushing. The Mark on your arm is not going anywhere.”

Harry thought he distinctly heard bitterness and grief in that last remark.

“I agree with Mum, Father. Let’s do this right,” added Draco.

More than ever, Harry did not know what to make of the Malfoys. He did not understand them at all. He turned to Snape. “Professor, would you mind if I ask Hermione to help? She is very good at this sort of thing.”

“Though I do not see what Miss Granger could bring to the table that Filius or I could not, by all means, Mr. Potter, bring her into the fold. You might as well invite Mr. Weasley also and my torment will be complete.”

Filius Flitwick bewildered Harry by chortling appreciatively. Did he actually think that Snape was joking?
Chapter 5

Chapter 5: ~o~ Goblins are Funny People ~o~

Walking back through the castle with Flitwick, Harry had to ask, “Do you genuinely think Snape is funny, Professor?”

Flitwick looked sheepish. “I know, I shouldn’t encourage him, but Severus’ humour tickles my goblin side.”

“You think he was joking?”

“Of course he was, Harry. Severus may not be an easy man, nor a charming one, but he unquestionably has a great sense of humour.”

“But he is so awful, Professor!”

“Right you are, Mr. Potter, which is why, tickled goblin side or no, I should not laugh at his jokes. Giving him an audience only encourages him.”

“What does it have to do with your ‘goblin side’, sir?”

“Oh, Harry, it is a shame you young people know so little of goblins, save through the rather bloody history of the goblin–wizard conflicts. Goblins have a sense of humor, but it is unfailingly cruel, just like Severus’. My family reunions are pretty much open verbal warfare.

“Goblins are very thick-skinned. It takes a lot more than a nasty joke about looks, intelligence, or abilities to hurt a goblin’s feelings. They just find it hilarious. A few years back, before you came to Hogwarts, I actually took Severus home with me for the Yuletide. I warned him it might be harsh, but he was so curious about our culture, he could not resist.

“My cousins were fairly annoyed at his presence. They dislike wizards in general. The blood-letting started as soon as we got in the door, but Severus gave as good as he got, no holds barred.

“By the end of our stay, he could have been one of us. My grandmother, in particular, took quite a shine to him. He was actually invited to return, with or without me.”

“And has he gone back?”

“Oh, no, not yet. But he will be welcome when he does. Goblin friendships are forever.”

“Can I ask you a personal question Professor?”

“I think I know what you want to ask. If goblins dislike wizards so much, how did I come about? Am I right?”

“Yes. Sorry, if it’s too personal…”

“Not at all, Harry. It’s actually a funny story. My mother was a witch. She was scrawny, and skinny, and mean as a snake by human standards.” He chuckled. “Her temperament was a lot like Severus’, actually. After she left Hogwarts, she decided to get a vault at Gringotts.
“My father was the goblin who helped her. He found her amazingly attractive for a witch, and started flirting with her, which means he teased her mercilessly, in the cruelest fashion, about her looks, the pitiful amount of money she had to put in her vault, her lower class accent, and on and on.

“She did not take it well. First, she replied in kind, her venomous side rising to the occasion, but finally, when she thought he really had gone too far, she hit him over the head with her purse. That was it for my dad, he was completely smitten. He started to court her, goblin style, which, alas, bears a striking resemblance to stalking, really.

“She was a proud young woman, and did not go to the authorities, but tried her best to cope on her own. She booby-trapped her door, jinxed her sidewalk, Apparated everywhere she went. Of course, though she did not know it, all this only increased my father’s interest. After a month, she was surprised to receive a visit from my grandmother with an official offer of marriage. She was flabbergasted, but relieved as well. He had really started to scare her.

Of course, my grandmother had brought records of all of my father’s financial holdings, which are impressive even by goblin standards, as well as the family heirlooms destined for his wife. She also brought a courting gift, and an engagement one.

“My mother turned down the engagement gift, but took the courting one. And why not? There were no strings attached, and she figured she was owed for her month of anxiety. She thought they would see each other once or twice, and that then she would break it off. After selling the gift she would be several thousand Galleons richer, not a bad way to start out.

“However, once they began spending time together, well, she was done for. My father is very intelligent and well educated. He was much older than she, and she was seduced by his knowledge, his experience. Of course, the goblin-manufactured gifts didn’t hurt.

“They were married a year later. They were very happy, by all accounts. She was a great favourite of everyone. Sadly, she died prematurely. She was only fifty-two years old. I was at Hogwarts myself, a seventh year.”

“I am sorry.”

“Oh, Harry, that was almost eighty years ago. My father never remarried, though. She was the love of his life.”

“Wow. How old is your grandmother?”

“She is nearing three hundred, very old even by goblin standards. But as she says herself, she is too mean to die.” He chuckled. “You know, you could meet her if you wanted. The goblins are very grateful you got rid of… Voldemort, and that you returned the sword of Gryffindor to its rightful owners.”

“Well, that wasn’t entirely voluntary, to be honest.”

“I figured as much.” He chuckled again. “You got credit for it, nonetheless. And Griphook said a lot of good things about you. You would be an honored guest.”

“That’s a very kind invitation, sir. I’m not sure I could take the joking, though. I can hardly stand one Snape, never mind several like him.”

“Oh, I am sure they would go easy on you. You did break into Gringotts. You get a lot of respect for that.”
“Really? I thought they would be furious!”

Flitwick shook his head. “No. They are quite grateful, actually. It made them realize they were getting complacent. With the improved security they placed since, I don’t think it will be done again for a very long time.”

“Well, then. Maybe when all the Death Eaters are rounded up, I’ll take you up on your offer. Your grandmother sounds like quite a character.”

“She is, Harry. She is. Perhaps we can persuade Severus to come as well. She would like that.”

Harry did not think much of that idea, but kept it to himself.

~o~

Harry had not lingered over dessert, and even after chatting with Flitwick he had made it back to the Gryffindor common room before anyone else. Ron and Hermione arrived moments later, eager to find out what was going on. He recounted his conversation with the Slytherins, explained what had come of it. They were excited. The idea of bringing all Death Eaters to justice at once was incredibly tempting.

“Harry, there must be something that can be done to protect you. Probably not a charm, Flitwick would have thought of it. And not a potion either, or Snape would have. That doesn’t leave much. Well maybe… I'll need to go to the library…” said Hermione.

George, Neville and Ginny entered the common room, mentioning joyfully that the staircases, frozen since the battle, had started moving again. They all discussed the progress made in the restoration effort, which reminded Harry of his strange forbearance in the Malfoys’ presence.

“What do you make of the Malfoys?” he asked.

“Beats me,” said Ron, who threw himself on the nearest armchair and put his feet on the coffee table. “Yesterday, old Lucius and my dad were actually having a civil conversation, if you can believe that.”

“I know, it’s strange, isn’t it?” Hermione said, sounding puzzled. “Lucius Malfoy has been nothing but respectful and charming anytime I’ve dealt with him. It’s as if he’d had a personality transplant. Maybe they’re relieved. Maybe they didn’t want Voldemort to win, after all.”

“Well, they could have fooled me!” said Harry.

“Who knows what motivates people,” observed Ginny, quietly. “Maybe all along, they only did what they thought was best for one another. Maybe the safety of the ones they love is the only important thing to them. I think they are very close.”

“Well, Malfoy always just about worshiped his father,” added Hermione. “Perhaps you have got something there, Ginny, but still… they seem so changed.”

“Bloody ferret,” added Ron nonsensically, causing Hermione and Harry to start laughing.

Neville had kept quiet, but now said, shyly, "If you really want to know, my gran can tell you about the Malfoys…"

"Really? There actually is an explanation?" asked George, curious.
"Yes. I asked her, because I too thought it was strange the Malfoys were still here. I also thought it
was weird that Draco has been… well, not nice to me exactly, but cordial, I guess. Let me go get
her."

Augusta Longbottom was seated near the fire with Molly Weasley. Though tiny in size, she was an
impressive old lady, proud and rather forbidding.

"She's not that bad," said George, who'd been working with her in communicating with the outside,
sensing the others' discomfort. "She really loves Neville, even if she kinda has a broom up her arse…"

After listening to Neville, she approached the group of friends with her grandson and Transfigured
one of Ron's trainers, which he had taken off to put his feet on the coffee table, into a straight-backed
armchair.

"My grandson tells me you are perplexed by the Malfoys?" she asked, sitting down. "Don't they
be concerned the Malfoys?"

"The only history we're taught has to do with goblin wars," said Ron, shrugging.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Well, your Muggle-born friends and Muggle-raised friends have an
excuse for their ignorance, but you Weasleys? I am sure your mother, a Prewett by birth and a
Weasley by marriage, adequately instructed you in the old customs… What would your excuse be
for displaying such ignorance of the Wizarding ways?"

Ron, George and Ginny looked properly chastised. "Uh… I'm sure she tried," said Ron, "but we
were probably not paying much attention… Our poor mum had a lot to put up with."

Augusta Longbottom snorted her disapproval, and gave Ron another scathing look. "Well, pay
attention this time and maybe you will not continue shaming your good name by broadcasting your
ignorance."

She Summoned a cup of tea for herself and, after taking a small sip, started to explain. "All the
Malfoys' magic is bound to Malfoy Manor and has been ever since the Manor was built by their
long-ago ancestor, Arcturus, not too much after Hogwarts itself. Binding the family’s magic to the
seat of one’s family, and therefore to their land and the earth itself, increases their magical strength
significantly, especially when they are at or near the Manor, allowing them to better defend it.
Because of this, the Malfoy family has never lost Malfoy Manor in battle. It can also never be taken
away from them legally, and as long as they live within its walls, they are guaranteed the birth of at
least one male heir."

She took another sip of tea, looked up at her captivated audience, and continued. "When Lucius
Malfoy was a boy, he was enthralled with another boy: Tom Riddle, who was three years ahead of
him in school. After Riddle started calling himself Lord Voldemort, Lucius brought him home and
introduced him to Abraxas Malfoy, his father."

Augusta shook her head, in obvious disapproval. "Now, Abraxas was a powerful wizard, but an
idiot who loved flattery. Riddle charmed the socks off him and Abraxas magically pledged his
support to Lord Voldemort's cause.

"After that, how Lucius came to feel about Voldemort did not matter. Abraxas had made that pledge
as head of the family and the Manor itself insured that Lucius either fulfilled his father's commitment
or lost his magic, his title, and his home to a Malfoy relative who would. When Abraxas died, the
pledge remained active, as well as Lucius’ obligation to fulfill it."
Augusta explained further, "A lot of the old families are bound to their home or land. The Longbottoms’ magic is tied to the Longbottom estate, though in a different way. Most of the family's magical strength is bestowed to the head of the family. Neville will not reach his full magical potential until I pass. The Rosiers’ estate has been empty since Evan Rosier's death and will remain so until Rosier Manor finds an heir in the distant family that it approves of."

"So Lucius Malfoy definitely lied after the first war when he said he had been under Imperius?" asked Hermione.

"Pfft! As if there has ever been any doubt!" said Ron.

Augusta put down her empty cup and gave him a quelling look before answering Hermione's question. "Lucius indeed lied about being under Imperius, but the way the Manor honored Abraxas’ promise was almost like a compulsion. The Malfoys were bound to Voldemort by the pledge, enforced by the Manor through their magic. Resisting would have meant the loss of their magic, of their home, of their identity. Few would have resisted."

Hermione nodded in understanding. Harry was amazed. There was so much he didn't know about the world he lived in.

"The moment Voldemort died," continued Augusta Longbottom, "the Malfoys were free. The Wizengamot is composed mostly of the heads of old pureblood families who understand these types of things. That's why they were so easy on Lucius after the first war and why they are allowing him and his son, known Death Eaters both, to remain at Hogwarts for now. Questions?"

They had none. She got up, smoothed her old-fashioned robes and wished them good night, going back to her place by the fire. After a few steps, she must have remembered the chair she had Transfigured and changed it back, not bothering to turn around but just aiming her wand over her shoulder. Ron squeaked in surprise when his trainer suddenly reappeared.

Harry felt he had a lot to think about. He resented the fact that there was no instruction for people like him to inform them about the world they entered when they came to Hogwarts. The pureblood wizard culture was complex and rich. There was more to the disdain aristocrats like the Malfoys felt for Muggle-borns than prejudice. They resented that these people waltzed into their world, taking their right to be there for granted while showing little or no interest in its ways. He promised himself, yet again, to at least read Hogwarts: A History.

Moments later, Hermione was off to the library, no doubt to research what could be done to protect Harry during his attempt at Summoning the Death Eaters, her bag hastily swung over her shoulder and a determined look on her face. Feeling like things were now under control, Harry and Ron joined George, Neville and Ginny in a riotous game of Exploding Snap.

~o~

Hermione now spent her every waking moment in the library. By day she studied Hogwarts’ magic to help with the restoration, and by night she researched a way to ensure Harry’s protection. She started eating her meals with enormous books open in front of her. Her frustration was mounting. She was not finding anything. She snapped another book shut in annoyance one morning at breakfast, startling Neville into spilling a full glass of pumpkin juice down his front and onto the table.

“Oi! Hermione! What’s eating you?” asked George, who had only barely avoided getting juice all over his trousers.
“I’m sorry, Neville.” She cleaned him up with an impressive wordless wave of her wand. “I’m stumped.”

“What are you looking for?” asked Neville.

Hermione discreetly sent a questioning look at Harry, who shrugged. “I’m looking to protect someone who needs to do a spell that requires a large amount of power from being overstrained magically.”

George turned to Harry. “What are you up to, mate?”

“I never said it was for Harry!” said Hermione, chagrined.

“Well, isn’t it?” asked George, grinning.

Neville laughed at Hermione’s expression. “Don’t worry, Hermione. You can never hide anything from this guy.”

“So, come on, Harry, spill!” George requested.

“Yeah, your turn. I already did,” remarked Neville, pleased with his pun. George looked at him with an indulgent smile.

“Just what Hermione said, George,” replied Harry. “I need to do something that might require more power than I have, but once started, it can’t be stopped, so I might run out and go into a coma or something. But I’m not worried. I’m sure she’ll figure it out in the end, she always does.” He smiled at Hermione. “No pressure, Hermione.” They all laughed.

As they were leaving the Great Hall, Neville looked awfully pensive.
They were all shocked when that evening, Neville and Professor Sprout ate dinner with the Slytherins. Once they all returned to the Gryffindor common room, they quizzed Neville mercilessly. Quite unlike his usual modest and slightly apologetic self, he looked flushed with excitement and self-confidence.

He explained animatedly. “There is this plant called Doulah weed. I read about it last year while researching a paper and though it was only mentioned briefly, I recalled something about it after our conversation this morning. It’s a rare and highly magical plant. If someone whose magic is highly compatible with yours is willing to share his or her magical power with you, and if you both chew Doulah weed leaves from the same plant, if possible from the same stem, for about an hour and you make physical contact, it connects their magical core with yours and they can actually pass some of their magical energy into you.”

He added as an aside, “It was used a long time ago during difficult magical births, where the baby just couldn’t be born without magical assistance, like in the cases of mixed parentage. You know, a mixed centaur and human baby, or a goblin and human baby. For the conception to even be possible, the parents’ magic had to be extremely compatible, and so the dad could pass some of his magic to the mum to help her during the birth, to prevent her from completely depleting her own.”

“That’s amazing, Neville.” The pleasure of learning something new lit up Hermione’s face. “Why isn’t it used any more today?”

“Well, I think mediwizardry has come a long way. People who have these kinds of pregnancies just don’t have their babies at home alone anymore, I guess. They have more help, more resources. Plus Doulah weed is so very rare. It only grows in areas where unicorns graze. But the Forbidden Forest has unicorns! Professor Sprout says it does grow in the Forbidden Forest.”

“Neville, that’s fantastic!” exclaimed Harry. "Now we just have to find someone whose magic is compatible with mine!"

Neville looked suddenly hesitant. Hermione sighed.

“What? What’s wrong?” asked Harry.

Hermione explained. “Even in average wizards, each individual’s magic is so unique, compatibility is really rare. When it is found, it’s usually found in soulmates or sometimes in siblings, but the stronger the wizard, the more difficult the match. To be honest, Harry, as powerful as you are, finding someone whose magic is compatible with yours, especially highly compatible, is pretty unlikely.”

“What are you talking about, Hermione? I’m not particularly powerful…” corrected Harry, honestly.

The head shakes, eye rolling, and chuckles answering that statement were truly puzzling. They all knew how he’d defeated Voldemort… Expelliarmus could be cast by a second year, for Merlin’s sake!

“Harry, trust me. You are… a little more powerful than average, and it will make a match more unlikely,” said Hermione. Seeing his deflated look, she added, “Well, there are a lot of people here, and I am sure every one of them would be happy to help. So, there’s still a chance…”
Harry could tell she was just trying to be positive, but decided to follow suit. “Well, how would we go about testing people?”

“Transfiguration.”

~o~

None of them were surprised, therefore, when Professor McGonagall was the next guest at the Slytherin table. Professor Flitwick was there as well. Harry kept an eye on the animated conversation taking place between Snape and McGonagall and wished he could have been a fly on the wall.

Finally, halfway through the meal, Snape got up and struck his glass to get people’s attention. “Before leaving, please Transfigure your fork into a comb and mark it with your name.” He sat back down, without any further explanation. So, so very Snape. Harry laughed to himself.

Once again, there seemed to be some heated discussion between him and the Gryffindor Head of House. McGonagall’s glare and Flitwick’s chuckle told Harry that Snape had probably made another one of his ‘jokes’…

~o~

Transfiguration was used to assess magical compatibility because to obtain the same thing while Transfiguring, say, a hat into a bowl, wizards actually all got to the end result differently. By examining the path the magic took to transfigure objects, an expert such as Minerva McGonagall could tell which objects were Transfigured by the same person or judge how compatible one person’s magic was with another’s.

The Headmistress sat at her office desk and emptied her hat of the comb she had Summoned into it before leaving the dining hall. She sighed. Though necessary, her task was going to be horribly tedious. This would take hours upon hours…

She decided to start with a quick look at Harry’s comb and was ever so glad she had. Her task would be eased greatly by the amazing power of Harry’s magic. She had known the boy’s magical energy was high—anyone could tell just by watching him fly—but how high it really was came as a surprise. And he’d not yet hit his magical puberty… Merlin’s beard…

The path his Transfiguration took was as straight as an arrow, simply changing one object into the other without frills or detours. There was no coaxing involved, no circumvention. First it had been a fork, now it was a comb, and that was that. Each molecule had done what it was told, without argument.

That eliminated ninety percent of the candidates, those who had to seduce the fork into obeying, or beat it magically into submission, or first morph it into a nondescript mass of something before transforming it into the comb.

Of the ten percent remaining, there were the people who simply had a gift for Transfiguration and used little power, such as the Patil sisters or Narcissa Malfoy and her son, and those without that natural gift, who had practiced hard enough to make it now effortless, like Hermione Granger or Filius. There was hardly a trace of the magical energy they had used.

That left only four others whose Transfigurations had as much to do with strength as natural talent. One was hers, one Lucius Malfoy’s, one Luna Lovegood’s, and one Snape’s; these four, and Harry’s, she now had to look at very closely to see the pattern of change. It took an intricate spell over each of them to allow her to see the echo of the alteration that had occurred.
Hers was familiar, of course. As always, the surface of the object had changed first, the transformation then proceeding from there to the core in a domino effect. Luna’s was the exact opposite, the change occurring from the inside out. Lucius Malfoy’s comb showed the man had a relentless and methodical mind, something she would not have guessed. His magic had transformed the fork systematically, starting at the tip of the handle and proceeding to the tines, no part of the object ever being composed of elements of both. Had he stopped in the middle, the handle would now have been a perfect comb, the head still a perfect fork.

She expected Severus’ Transfiguration to resemble Malfoy’s very closely. He, too, had a relentless and methodical mind. However, she was amazed at what she found. The change in his fork had occurred in what appeared to be a completely random pattern. Nothing to indicate where or how it had started, and what had guided its progression.

The power behind it was staggering, but that was no surprise. She had known Severus Snape to be one of the most powerful wizards of her acquaintance. As a student, his disdain for practice had been galling. He only worked on a Transfiguration until he managed it perfectly, and never practiced it again. However, if asked, he could reproduce it immediately, as if once learned it could never be forgotten. And yet it looked as if there was no method to his Transfiguration, as if he had done it all, all at once.

She put it down again, and after rubbing her tired eyes and pushing up her glasses, she took hold of Harry’s comb, recited the spell, put down her wand and sought the pattern of change, hoping it would resemble one of theirs, particularly hers, because she was eager to help him. She picked up Snape’s comb again with its incomprehensible lack of method. She obviously was getting tired. Ready to put it down again to pick up Harry’s, she saw Snape’s name clearly marked on the black surface of the comb still sitting on the table.

She looked at the comb in her hand. She had been so focused on their patterns of change, she had not paid attention to the physical aspect of each object. Harry’s comb was blue plastic, with a gold imprint that showed it had come from a Muggle Hotel in Lincolnshire. Snape’s was heavy black horn. She picked both up to compare them. Yes, they had been created exactly the same way, switching in complete randomness from being one thing to being another, smothered in enormous raw power: Snape’s magic and Potter’s were perfectly compatible. Miracles did happen.

She decided that it would probably be better to let Snape know this information in private. Merlin only knew how he would take it. And she couldn’t pass up the opportunity to tease him a little. This level of compatibility usually belonged to siblings or soulmates. She chuckled. It was almost five o’clock. She decided to invite herself for tea. Snape’s quarters were appalling, but his tea was excellent. She went to her fireplace and Floo-called him.

“Severus?”

He was sitting on his straight-back chair in front of the fire, reading what looked like an old potions book. He looked up.

“What is it, Minerva?”

“May I come by your quarters in a few minutes? There is something I would like to discuss with you.”

Of course he looked put out. “And I suppose you will expect tea?”

“Oh! My! Look at the time! I had no idea it was so late already. Why, yes, thank you, Severus. Tea will be lovely.”
Ten minutes later, she was knocking on his door, which opened by itself and slammed shut behind her. Snape was still sitting in his chair, though a tea tray waited on a low table before the fireplace.

“Good afternoon, Severus.”

His response was a malevolent glare. Had she not known him for almost twenty-five years, she might have been intimidated. She came to the fireplace and bent down to help herself to a cuppa.

“Shall I be mother?” she asked, knowing he despised the expression. He snorted. She poured his tea as he liked it, plain. To hers, she added only a cloud of milk. His tea was too good to alter with sugar, as it would mask the complex and delicate flavors.

And now for the fun part. “Severus, what do you know about magical compatibility?”

He raised an eyebrow at her, signifying he probably knew a lot more about it than she did but was willing to play her idiot game. “That it is rare, and can almost never be found for the more powerful wizards; that it usually occurs only between wizards who share a strong affinity and a deep affection, or close familial ties.”

Since it was obvious they were talking about Potter, he apparently felt free to add, “I would think our best chance in this case would be Miss Granger, or Miss Weasley. Miss Granger is the stronger witch and a very close friend for many years, and I believe there is a… romantic attachment between Miss Weasley and Mr. Potter. Romantic attachment does not necessarily reflect magical compatibility, but I believe the opposite, with rare exceptions, is almost always true if the parties are not blood relatives.”

“Exactly so,” agreed Minerva, “which makes my findings ever so intriguing, I think you will agree.”

She took a sip of tea to prolong the moment. It was so unworthy of her to look forward to his discomfiture, but yet she did and decided she might as well enjoy her pettiness, if just this once. Snape’s face was as expressionless as ever. He was not going to give her the pleasure of showing interest.

“I have checked several times and there is no doubt. As unlikely as one would think it, Mr. Potter’s magic has not just a good, but an ideal match among us.”

Still on his face was that look of perfect indifference. She really admired the man’s control. She smiled sweetly. “Severus, your magic and Mr. Potter’s are perfectly compatible.” She was completely let down. Snape did not even flinch, nor miss a beat.

“Since he will be Summoning the other Death Eaters through my Mark, it is extremely convenient. We shall already be in close proximity.”

She set her cup down on her saucer rather violently. “Severus Snape, you are impossible,” she cried peevishly.

He gave her a sneer and a slight bow. “My dear Minerva, there is an exception to every rule. This is a case in point. We should only be grateful to be so fortunate. I had rather thought the situation was hopeless.”

She sighed, resigned to her disappointment but still annoyed at Severus’ equanimity. He and Potter had hated each other for years! He could at least have had the decency to be flustered knowing that, except for exceedingly rare exceptions, such a magical compatibility indicated the wizards involved to be soulmates! He was right, of course, but still, just once she would have liked to see him lose his perfect composure.
Resigned, she started to think strategically again. “We should call an Order meeting. There is a lot to discuss.”

“Indeed. I shall let you organize it. As you well know, my connections to the Order have been… compromised of late.”

She nodded, and gave him an apologetic look as she got up to leave. He extended her the courtesy of walking her to the door, in his own way apologizing that he had spoiled her fun.

“Minerva,” he added, “please ask the Malfoys to the meeting. Their help could be invaluable.”

“That might not be universally popular.” She thought a moment then sighed. “But I believe you are right. Good night, Severus.” She stopped on the threshold. “I shall tell Harry of our good fortune, shall I?”

“Better you than me,” answered Snape with a smirk.

She glared at him, nodded again, and was gone.
Chapter 7

Chapter 7: ~o~ The Order Meets, June 27th ~o~

Eyebrows went up when George Weasley took the seat next to Severus Snape at the Order meeting. Despite the fact that Snape’s loyalties were proven and that large parts of his life story were now laid bare to public view, which should have softened the general sentiment towards him, Snape remained an unpopular figure and few had so much as greeted him when he entered Dumbledore’s office. When Harry sat on his other side and greeted him with a respectful, “Good evening, Professor Snape,” the tension at his presence seemed to ease somewhat.

No one objected to the attendance of the students who had remained at Hogwarts to participate in the restoration effort. The part each of them had played in the final battle was apparently enough to assure their welcome into the Order.

By the time almost everyone had arrived, the Headmaster’s office was extremely crowded. At first, the different attendees had Transfigured seats for themselves, each according to his or her preference. The late arrivals, however, barely had room enough for small stools. Greetings and conversations went on as they waited for Minerva McGonagall to make her appearance.

Just as she had stepped into Dumbledore’s role (once it had been vacated, rather dramatically, by Snape) as the Headmistress of Hogwarts, she had also, without any objections being raised, taken his place as leader of the Order.

However, when she made her entrance, escorting the Malfoys, her bringing known Death Eaters into an Order meeting still created an uproar. She raised her hand to quell the outraged voices, but it took her banging on a gavel she’d quickly Transfigured from a candlestick to bring the room to order.

“I have called this meeting to share some information with all of you and get your input on an important matter. The Malfoy family is already cognizant of what we are about to discuss and may prove to be of some assistance. It is clear that all of you have strong feelings about their allegiance during the war and I am quite sure they are acutely aware of it. Your objections to their presence among us are duly noted; nonetheless, they will be staying.”

She gestured for the Malfoys, who looked stone-faced but calm, to sit down. “Matters have greatly changed since our last meeting. Lives were lost, acts of great courage and personal sacrifice accomplished and enigmas explained.” Both Harry and Snape had made it clear to her that their roles in the downfall of Voldemort should not be singled out. She would respect their wishes.

“But all is not resolved yet. As after the last war, many of the people who committed grievous acts in Voldemort’s service are still at large, and unpunished.” She paused to make sure she had everyone’s attention. “This time, however, there is a possibility we might be able to bring all of the culprits to justice.”

Once again, she had to make use of her gavel to regain control of the room. She then explained in detail what they were hoping to accomplish. That once again Harry and Snape would be pivotal to the success of the operation, though obvious to everyone, was not particularly discussed, but once she was finished they nonetheless became the centre of attention.

Harry wished he could melt into the upholstery of his chair and unconsciously sank a little deeper
into its seat. It earned him a surprised look from Snape who, of course, had no problem completely ignoring the sudden focus on his person.

The rest of the meeting was mostly administrative. Tasks were distributed: securing a location for the Summoning, approaching the Aurors’ office to obtain help and support, bringing forth a motion to the Wizengamot to plan an appropriate punishment for the Death Eaters now that the Dementor’s Kiss was no longer a possibility, organizing and coordinating the actual Summoning, securing holding space for an unknown number of prisoners, insuring security…

Finally, a date was set for the next meeting a fortnight away, at which point, if all went well, they could proceed with the Summoning.
Chapter 8: ~o~ The Price of Defeat, July 1998 ~o~

For the next two weeks, the Prophet was filled with stories of the Wizengamot Debates. How to punish a Death Eater had, for some reason, become the hottest topic of conversation in the Wizarding world. Everyone had an opinion, and seemed to want to express it in letters to the editor. (The few who thought that catching them was more important than deciding what to do with them once they were caught were completely ignored.)

When the final decision came, it was announced by Minister Shacklebolt in a brief speech, with no questions taken.

The Death Eaters were considered collectively guilty of all the crimes they had individually committed. The penalty for wearing the Mark was two-fold:

First, a potion would insure a complete suppression of the Death Eater’s magical abilities.

Second, he or she was to be stripped of all personal property, as if legally dead. All Death Eaters’ personal vaults would be emptied to pay victim compensation. Children and spouses could inherit, but nothing was to remain in the Death Eater’s name or under his or her control. If necessary, state-appointed trustees would be assigned to manage the minor children’s inheritance.

Once captured, the Death Eaters would have forty-eight hours to provide the court with whatever memories they had that might show mitigating factors sufficient to reduce the sentence. These would be put in a Pensieve and examined by a special Wizengamot committee.

The morning the decision was made public, the newspapers were passed around the Great Hall to everyone. Pretty soon, a lot of eyes turned to the Slytherin table, where the three known Death Eaters became the centre of attention.

The unofficial rumor from the Ministry indicated that Snape’s service to Voldemort was (sometimes reluctantly) acknowledged as being an unavoidable part of his spying for the Light. In fact, it was rumored he was to be the recipient an Order of Merlin, First Class. He therefore had every reason to look unconcerned.

The Malfoy males, however, were contemplating their future. Lucius looked stern but accepting. Draco held his body rigid and his face expressionless, but his jaw was clenched and his face incredibly pale. Harry felt a sudden wave of pity for him.

“You have to hand it to the Slytherins,” commented Ron, “they know how to keep a straight face under duress.”

“I feel sorry for Draco Malfoy,” said Neville in a quiet voice.

“He’s a git,” answered George.

“Still. It’s a hard sentence just for being a git.”

“He is a Death Eater, Neville,” Hermione reminded him. “I saw him put someone under the Cruciatus with my own eyes. And he did almost kill Ron and Katie.”
“He’s smart and ambitious,” said Harry. “Maybe he can make something of himself in the Muggle world.

“You’re right, Harry,” answered Hermione thoughtfully. “I could ask my parents to help him, if he was willing. I should talk to him.”

“See,” reprised Neville, vindicated, “you feel sorry for him too.”

She shrugged, looking a little guilty.

“Well, good luck with that,” Ron told her. “I’d rather cuddle a Blast-Ended Skrewt than offer Malfoy help to enter the Muggle world. I think he would rather die.”

“I think you may be right Ron,” agreed Ginny, looking sadly earnest.
Chapter 9

The two weeks between meetings passed quickly, work on the castle taking all their time, but finally it was almost finished. People started talking about going home. Molly invited Harry and Hermione to come to the Burrow, but of course Hermione was anxious to go to Australia to seek out her parents and restore their memories.

Ron and Harry were going with her, and the three of them were looking forward to the trip as an adventurous vacation. It would be quite a change to go on an escapade without a constant feeling of fear and impending disaster, and without the future of the Wizarding world weighing on their shoulders.

The three of them had decided to return to Hogwarts in September and take their NEWTS with Ginny’s year. Hermione was hoping her mum and dad would, by then, be all sorted out (and she forgiven).

The classes this year would be very off-balance. Both the first and seventh years would be overly large. Like Harry and his friends, a lot of their classmates had not been in school the previous year or had spent a lot of it in the Room of Requirement, not getting much of an education. None of them had taken their NEWTS.

The first year would include all the Muggle-born and the half-bloods who had been turned away the year before. The OWLS had been rescheduled and would be given before the Yule break. The whole academic year was bound to be an administrative nightmare.

After the official confirmation of Snape’s complete exoneration, the Hogwarts Board of Trustees had approached Severus Snape regarding resuming his function as Hogwarts Headmaster. Snape had made it abundantly clear he had no intention of returning in that role, nor apparently was he interested, contrary to popular belief, in teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts. The Dark Arts had been part of his life long enough. He wanted his dungeons and his potions back.

Minerva McGonagall was therefore officially hired for the position of Headmistress and was facing a rather difficult year. She had to find new teachers for three vacancies: Transfiguration, her old post, Defence against the Dark Arts, as usual, and Muggle Studies. Professor Burbage would be missed. She had been an excellent and popular teacher. When she approached Snape about at least being Deputy Headmaster, he had looked at her as if she had two heads and simply walked away. Filius Flitwick took on the position, “until someone better comes along,” he had said.

Harry thought it would be strange to be back in school, attending classes and following rules after a year of independence, but he was also relishing the idea of three delicious meals a day being served to him, of a warm, comfortable bed waiting for him every night and of temporarily relinquishing responsibilities and decision-making to his teachers again.

He had not given much thought to his future last year, thinking rather often that he might not have one. Now he had the rest of his life to look forward to and he felt quite unprepared. This next year would give him time to reflect, time to plan and a last chance to be a teenager.

After that, he would be alone in the world. He would have his friends, of course, and the Weasleys would always treat him like one of their own, but he would ultimately be in charge of his own destiny.
He felt rather detached about the coming Summoning of the Death Eaters. It would either all be for naught, if his magic could not use Voldemort’s Marks, or it would work. It was really out of his hands. He had no concern about the process itself: Snape would be with him. However much he disliked the man, he realized (and refused to dwell on the fact) that he completely trusted Snape.

As for the details, he knew the Order and the hand-picked members of Shacklebolt’s Ministry were up to the task. As far as he was concerned, the sooner they proceeded, the better. Hermione was anxious to see her parents and they could not leave for Australia until this scheme was all played out.

The evening of the Order meeting came at the end of a gorgeous day of relaxation, which they had mostly spent by the lake playing around with Ginny, Neville and George.

George had decided to reopen Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes two weeks before term began to take advantage of the rush of students as they got their supplies for school in Diagon Alley. Lee Jordan would be coming on board to manage the administration of the store, which had been Fred’s forte, leaving George free to focus on research and development, his own particular strength.

George missed Fred in a way no one else could possibly understand and would falter at the oddest moments. It was usually related to something funny that he would have naturally loved to share with his twin. The dichotomy between amusement and grief was crazy-making, but he stayed afloat, thanks to all the love and support around him. One of the most helpful aspects of that support came every Thursday night, when Lee, Angelina and George played Wizard poker. It had been Fred’s game.

They would drink a bit too much and spend half the night laughing, sometimes so hard that Angelina, who did not hold her drink all that well, would fall off her chair. It seemed very cathartic.

Ginny had been rather quiet but had been tenaciously resistant to returning to the Burrow, volunteering for any task that would justify her staying at Hogwarts.

She had even gone so far as to agree to join Snape and Malfoy in reorganising the Potions lab and stores when Professor Snape had hinted that extra hands would not be turned away. The stores still bore signs of Slughorn’s whimsical sense of order.

She had always been quite good at potions and managed to effortlessly stay very cool under Snape’s constant barbs. She explained that growing up with six brothers had rather inured her to petty harassment.

Harry suspected that she wanted to stay close to someone in the castle, but would have been hard-pressed to guess whom. She and Neville were spending quite a bit of time together but he was pretty sure there was no romance there.

All that afternoon, she and Harry had been playing Seeker vs. Seeker above the lake, and it was obvious that despite his long absence from the pitch, Harry had lost none of his skills. Playing Quidditch for Gryffindor again was another activity he was greatly looking forward to in the coming year.

They were all quite relaxed after their first day of true vacation when they made their way to the Order meeting, which this time would take place in the Staff Room to accommodate even more people than the last get-together.

Though Minerva McGonagall still headed the order, this time Kingsley Shacklebolt ran most of the meeting. The location that had been chosen for the Summoning was announced. It was the courtroom where Harry had once been prosecuted for underage magic. It would be transformed into
a massive holding cell. Deep underground, with only three doors, it could be easily secured. The room would have to be set up and prepared without divulging a reason why, but enough Order members worked for the Ministry to make it possible.

According to Severus Snape and Lucius Malfoy, once Summoned, the Death Eaters would Apparate in concentric circles, the inner circles composed of the early, most trusted Death Eaters and the outside ones of the most recent recruits. The Death Eaters already present would not feel the summons. The seventeen Death Eaters already in custody would be Petrified and brought to the Ministry from Azkaban by Side-Along Apparition, an hour before the event, to reduce the power drain on Harry.

The members of the Order of the Phoenix, the people who had fought on the side of the Light in the last battle, and eighty-four Aurors would be there to receive them. The Aurors would only be told of their coming roles minutes before the actual Summoning. Until then, they would believe they were participating in a training exercise.

Dedalus Diggle, Hestia Jones and Elphias Doge, as members of the Wizengamot, were already planning for the examination of the Death Eaters’ memories and their subsequent interviews. They had no way of knowing how many Death Eaters would plead extenuating circumstances, but they would be ready. If needed, they could recruit others of the Wizengamot as interrogators, but would only do so after the fact; they knew that in all probability some members of that celebrated body were Death Eaters.

It was decided the Summoning would take place the sixteenth of August, at three o’clock in the morning. Any sooner was just not enough time to prepare and any later would interfere with the planned reopening of Hogwarts.

The meeting came to an end, and people started to leave, with much excited talk. Harry, Hermione and Ron had just made it to the door when Snape stopped them.

“Potter?”

Harry signaled for the others not to wait for him and took a few steps with Snape to get away from the exiting throng.

“Professor?”

“Though our magic seems to be… perfectly compatible, I think it would behoove us to test Mr. Longbottom's weed. Professors Hagrid and Sprout have gathered a small supply, which is in my possession. The weed is most potent when fresh. Professor McGonagall has offered us the use of the Headmaster’s office.”

He turned in that direction, and started walking.

“You mean, now? You want to do this now?”

Snape stopped and turned to Harry. “Have you got a more pressing engagement, Potter? Something more… vital to see to?” His eyebrow was raised in sarcastic query.

“Well, no, but…”

Snape about-faced again. “Come along, then.”

Harry could not think of any logical reason not to proceed (he was quite sure a game of Exploding Snap qualified neither as pressing nor vital), but he was, as usual, irked by Snape’s presumptuous
and condescending manner. He followed, resentful and sulking.

The gargoyle, newly repaired and back on duty, accepted the password from Snape (Iridescence) and let them proceed up the moving staircase.

Once in Dumbledore’s office (Minerva McGonagall had not yet moved in and Snape had changed nothing in the office during his tenure, so it was still completely Dumbledore’s), where all the portraits were slumbering, they both sat in front of the desk facing each other. There was a tea tray waiting on an occasional table between them, with an antique-looking teapot and elegant bone china cups. Snape ignored them in favor of a covered dish, which he offered to Harry.

Having refused countless lemon drops from the Headmaster, Harry’s response was automatic. “No, thank you, sir.”

Snape sneered, “Do you imagine I am offering you some delicacy? This is the weed, you idiot boy!” He uncovered the dish, exposing two delicate pale green leaves, the shape and size of teaspoons.

Harry felt like an idiot indeed, which was nothing new in Snape’s presence. Had he really imagined Snape and he would have a cozy chat before starting the experiment?

He took a leaf and ate it. It tasted a little like Lemon Verbena and seemed to melt on his tongue. Snape followed suit.

“I don’t feel anything,” said Harry, disappointed.

“According to my research, nothing will happen unless we make physical contact and I actually will my magic to assist yours, my power to sustain your own. A palm to palm contact is recommended by most sources.”

“Um…”

“Mr. Potter, you will actually have to be actively using your magic if we want to test this.”

Harry sighed. There was no helping it. Snape was determined. He extracted his wand out of his jeans, with some difficulty since he was sitting down, and looked around. He pointed it at the heavy stone Pensieve.

“Wingardium Leviosa!”

The Pensieve rose slowly from its shelf and hovered about a foot above it.

“Now put out your left hand, Mr. Potter, palm up.” Harry complied.

Snape’s cool, long-fingered hand came to rest on his own. The touch was light, but Harry felt it acutely, as if every nerve in his palm soaked up warmth and sensation from Snape’s. He could not help a shiver of pleasure. This wasn’t too bad…

“I will start pushing magical power your way on the count of three.”

What, he hadn’t started yet? Then what was that tingling warmth in his hand, in his whole body? Why did the touch make him feel so alive?

He forgot all these questions when Snape’s melodious voice reached “Three.”

Before he could control it, the Pensieve rose another foot. His whole body was humming with power. He ignored his unexpected and swift erection, assuming it was the byproduct of the sudden
rush of extra magical energy into his body.

Instead, just by concentrating on it, he made the tea tray join the Pensieve in levitating. The teapot lifted from the tray and poured a cup at a mere suggestion from his mind. Sugar cubes floated from the sugar bowl to the cup, the silver spoon stirring delicately. It was intoxicating. He felt as if he could do anything.

“Well, that’s one perfectly good cup of tea ruined,” commented Snape dryly. “Be prepared, Potter, I will stop the power transfer in three, two, one…” The tray vacillated for a moment and the teapot landed on the tray with rather more force than necessary. Slowly Harry returned all the items to their original locations. He looked up at Snape.

“Well,” he said grinning, “that went well.”

“Agreed.”

“How much of your magical energy were you pushing to me, sir?”

“Very little, Mr. Potter. The high compatibility of our magic makes your power expand exponentially.”

Very little? But that warmth, that buzz, that… arousal? Evidently, it must be a normal side effect of the high compatibility of their magic. Harry pushed his curiosity to the back of his mind and focused back to what the successful experiment meant. “Excellent! I really hope this works,” he said, feeling optimistic.

“As do I.” Snape stood up. “Unless you have pertinent questions, Potter, that will be all.”

Well, this was probably as much of a cozy chat he could expect from Snape. What a git. He would never understand the man. He bit his tongue so as not to ask Snape if he’d gotten aroused too, just to see his reaction. He was hoping that Snape would change his attitude towards him, and acting like a petulant child was not the way to impress him.

“No questions, sir, pertinent or otherwise. Good-night, Professor.”

Snape turned his back to him and picked up a book from the desk. Harry watched the narrow back, shrugged and left without another word.

Snape waited for the door to close behind Potter to put down the book and dropped back in his chair. It had been just as bad as he had expected from his reading. The level of intimacy created by the Doulah weed had been unbearable. As soon as their hands had touched, he had become aware of the ever-changing tide of Potter’s emotions.

They had not been laid out to read like a book, only disconcertingly present, an ebb and flow of feelings, unexplained by relevant information: repulsion, vivid arousal, confusion, elation, anger, disappointment. Being somewhat prepared, he had been able to Occlude his own well-controlled emotions out of Potter’s awareness, but he had to wonder: what must it be like to live in such an uncontrolled state, constantly prey to the whims of passion? He shuddered at the thought.

No wonder he could read Potter’s face like an instruction manual on his moods. Being in Gryffindor had only encouraged the boy to wear his heart on his sleeve. He wondered briefly how being sorted into Slytherin might have changed Ha… Potter. That it would have been for the better, he had no doubt: sugar in tea, indeed!
Harry made his way back to the Gryffindor common room, feeling optimistic. The fact that the power transfer had worked so well felt like a sign that the whole project would be successful.

The Fat Lady noticed his mood. “Feeling chipper, aren’t we?” she commented as she opened up. Harry grinned at her, and said in his most sepulchral voice, “Indeed…”

Ron, Neville and George were still up. “What did the greasy git want with you?” asked Ron.

Strangely, Harry felt a little defensive for Snape. “He actually had a very good idea. We experimented with the weed.” He turned to Neville. “It’s brilliant, Neville, it works really well. I felt as if I could move mountains.”

Neville smiled a shy but pleased smile, and George slapped his shoulder. Ron rubbed his hands together. “This is going to work, I can feel it!”

“Yes,” agreed Harry. “I am really starting to think so.”

George said quietly, “I think we should stop so casually insulting Snape, Ron.”

“Yes? The git lopped off your ear, George!”

“Yes, and according to Harry, he did so trying to save my life. Without him you might have been short two brothers. I don’t know about you, but I feel I owe the man enough to show him some respect, even if I don’t like him.”

“You know, Ron, I actually agree,” said Harry, relieved he had not been the one to bring it up. “He may be a resentful, humorless bastard, but he did save our arses countless times.”

The other three started laughing, and after thinking over what he had just said, Harry joined in.

Ron calmed down first. “All right, mate, got it. No more calling the bastard a git.”

Hermione rolled her eyes as Harry punched him on the arm.

“I’m just glad I don’t have Potions any more…” added Neville earnestly.

With most repairs on the castle completed, they had more time to enjoy the weather and each other’s company. A lot of the volunteers started leaving, to go back to their lives or take advantage of the rest of their holidays. Being at Hogwarts together with no classes was actually a lot of fun.

After her parents had left, Ginny seemed more relaxed, since she had been allowed to remain with her brothers at Hogwarts until mid-August. She told a lot of stories coming from the dungeons; apparently the stores of expensive or exotic ingredients were quite diminished, and Snape was livid. He suspected Slughorn of selling them on the black market and was unable to exact retribution since old Sluggy was now sunning himself at Gwenog Jones’ beach retreat in the Virgin Islands.

Snape had attempted repeatedly to get Draco Malfoy to discuss the practicalities of a magic-less
future, only to be coldly rebuffed time and time again.

Ginny had witnessed Snape brewing seven different potions for the infirmary at once, moving without pause from one cauldron to another, without hesitation and without notes, which had impressed even Ron.

She had come across manuscripts for at least four books, all written in Snape’s unmistakable handwriting, including one on snake antivenins.

Malfoy had started biting his nails to the quick.

From idle conversations between Draco and Snape, she had found out that there was a grand piano in the Slytherin common room that needed its yearly tuning. Malfoy and his mother apparently both played beautifully.

Harry was fascinated by these glimpses of the Slytherins’ world, realising how little he knew of the reality of the lives of two men he had always thought of only as enemies. He had certainly never imagined Draco Malfoy sitting at the piano in the evenings, playing for his fellow Slytherins’ enjoyment, or Snape sitting at his desk at night, writing something other than nasty comments on his pupils’ essays.

The Room of Requirement made an appearance the first week of August. Neville came with the news, quite elated. Apparently, in the evenings, he had regularly spent some time walking back and forth in front of it, trying to coax it to reopen. Hermione had been of the opinion that the Fiendfyre had probably destroyed it forever, but was thrilled to be proven wrong.

Neville would not say what form it had taken for him, even when pressed quite strongly by Ron and turning quite an interesting shade of red, just that it was functioning again. George looked on with a knowing smile, and Harry promised himself to quiz him later.

Finally, it was August fifteenth. That morning, Harry said goodbye to his little godson. Andromeda was taking him home. Though Teddy was the ward of them both, she would assume primary custody, since Harry was still in school. She encouraged Harry to live a little, so much of his childhood and teenage years having been consumed by adult concerns.

“He is my pride and joy, Harry. I am forty-five, and I have lost both my husband and my daughter. His smiles and cuddles keep me sane. You are eighteen, and have lived through more crisis and tragedy than men three times your age. Have some fun! Date! Travel! Grasp any opportunities that come your way.”

She smiled, looking at the sleeping baby in her arms. “Still, be a constant in his life. You are a good man, Harry, and a great role model for this little boy. Make sure to love him, Floo him, visit him. Between the two of us, we can raise him to be a good wizard, worthy of being the heir of the Primeval and Cunning House of Lupin.”

“There is a House of Lupin?”

“Yes, there is. With a seat on the Wizengamot. As a werewolf, Remus could not come into his inheritance, but Teddy will, I’m sure. The day of his third birthday, if it is proven that he is not a Squib—which we already know since he is a Metamorphmagus—we should get confirmation that the House of Lupin accepts him as heir, and upon his twenty-first birthday he should come into his full inheritance.”

“Wow. I had no idea that’s how it worked. But… I already have my Black and Potter inheritance,
Andromeda smiled. “No, Harry. Just as Teddy will be at three, you have been recognized as those Houses’ heir, so you have access to the minor heir’s vault and one of the residences. It is nothing compared to what you will receive upon your twenty-first birthday. The House of Potter is a minor one historically, without a seat on the Wizengamot, but the Potters have always been very astute businessmen, so the financial aspect of the inheritance should be… significant. The House of Black is as old as the House of Malfoy and, I believe, quite a bit wealthier, with a seat on the Wizengamot which you will be expected to fill, and extensive real estate holdings.”

“Oh, Merlin! I know Sirius left it all to me, but really, it should go to Draco, to you, or to Teddy! I’m not a Black!”

“Ah, Harry, I beg to differ… The House has spoken. It accepted you as heir. If it wanted Draco, Narcissa, myself, or Merlin forbid, Bella, it would have rejected you. But Kreacher obeys you, the wards welcome you, the minor’s vault is at your disposal. Have no doubt: you are the Black Heir. If you so desired, and are concerned to see the House return to someone with Black blood, you could designate Teddy as your heir, but you are under no obligation to do so.”

“That’s a great idea. I'll do that as soon as possible.”

Andromeda smiled approvingly, kissed Harry’s cheek and stepped into the infirmary Floo. “Tonks residence,” and they were gone.

Harry hated to see Teddy go; the baby had carved a place in his heart quite effectively, and Harry was one of the baby’s favorite sets of arms to fall asleep in. (It annoyed Harry quite a bit that Draco seemed to also be a favorite. Anytime Draco held him, little Teddy’s hair would turn as pale a blond as his, and remain that way for hours.) It left only eighteen people at Hogwarts: the Malfoys, the teachers, Madam Pomfrey, Filch, Neville, George, Ron and Ginny Weasley, Hermione, and Harry.

Those participating in the Summoning were to Portkey to the Ministry after a very late supper to sustain them in the hours ahead. Ginny was furious that she had been forbidden to go, and only calmed down after finding out that Hermione would be stuck at the castle as well, with a terrible summer cold resistant to Madam Pomfrey’s ministrations. She would not have to wait for news alone.

It was only during the middle-of-the-night supper that Harry started feeling nervous. With so few people left, the elves had decided to seat them all together around a single table in the center of the Great Hall, as they had done for the Yuletide in years past. The conversation was minimal. Everyone seemed to be thinking about what his or her role would be a few hours hence.

Suddenly, Harry panicked. He convinced himself that his magic would not work on the Mark, that all this planning had been for nothing, and that he was going to let everybody down. He automatically looked up at Snape, who had so much invested in this scheme. If it were unsuccessful, he would have to go into hiding to escape former colleagues out for retribution, or be a prisoner under Hogwarts’ protection forever.

Merlin! Harry just knew it was going to be a complete failure. Snape’s face was as closed as usual and he appeared completely unperturbed. Was it all a facade? Did the man ever get nervous, ever feel afraid of botching anything? Evidently not. He had probably never failed at anything in his life, probably had every tiny detail perfectly reasoned, planned, and executed.

He thought about Snape down in the dungeons, brewing seven flawless potions simultaneously; thought of him planning for his own murder, coolly carrying around life-saving potions for weeks; of
him walking time after time into a snake’s den without fear, sacrificing any personal life for the
greater good; living a full year surrounded by the disgust of his erstwhile colleagues, who thought he
had murdered the Headmaster, without being able to explain, to justify himself. Harry had never until
that moment understood fully the man’s strength, his moral fortitude.

Seeming to sense Harry’s eyes on him, Snape looked up. Their gazes met, and neither of them
looked away.

Harry wished he could tell the man of his admiration, of his respect. Tonight Snape's usually flat
black stare seemed full of depth, warm and receptive. Remarkably, Harry felt no need to break the
eye contact.

For once, he and Snape were not at odds. As quickly as he had lost all confidence just a short while
ago, he now felt his doubts swept aside. Whatever happened that night did not rest only on his
shoulders. Snape trusted him, and would be there to support him. He was not alone.

He almost jumped out of his skin when Ron pushed his chair back. Everyone was getting up to go to
the Portkey. (An old aluminium pie pan waiting on the entrance hall table, its size enough to allow
eleven of them to Portkey together comfortably.)

Hermione and Ginny both gave their friends hugs of encouragement, everyone trying hard not to
look too nervous. Harry smiled as his friends joked but his mind was not on what was being said.
There was a warmth in his chest, a buoyancy to his heart, that he neither could nor wanted to
explain.

The Portkey took them directly to the cavernous room where Harry had once faced the entire
Wizengamot, on trial for use of underage magic. Deciding that the unpleasant memory was definitely
not helpful, he concentrated on the job at hand instead.

The Aurors had just been told by the Minister what the plan for the evening was, and one could feel
their excitement and determination. They had been looking at years of Death Eater hunting, the same
fruitless searches and paltry victories that came at a high cost which had been the rule after the first
war. The concept of a wholesale capture of Voldemort’s followers was a very popular one.

Snape and Lucius Malfoy, knowing what to expect, strategically placed everyone so that, hopefully,
any Apparating Death Eater would be in the direct line of fire of an Auror or of a member of the
Order’s wand.

Snape and Harry were in the very center of the room and, their backs to them on four sides, were the
men they had personally chosen to protect them: Lucius Malfoy, Filius Flitwick, Ron Weasley, and
Aberforth Dumbledore. They would insure that no one could interrupt Harry and Snape or take
advantage of their concentration to do them harm.

Minister Shacklebolt felt compelled to reassure Harry that he was only expected to do his best.
Harry knew the Minister meant well, but he’d had enough platitudes to last him a lifetime and had to
make an effort not to roll his eyes. He could have sworn he noticed the shadow of a smirk on
Snape’s lips.

Finally, it was 2:58 AM.

Harry was supremely conscious of Snape’s presence at his side, dark and ready.

“It is time, Potter,” said Snape encouragingly, handing him a small open container. There were more
leaves today. “Four should do it, I think,” Snape added helpfully, noticing Harry’s hesitation.
After putting the small box away in one of his pockets, Snape rapidly undid the long row of buttons at the wrist of his robes and the long row of buttons of the snow-white shirtsleeve he had thus uncovered. Harry could not seem to look away, strangely fascinated by the slow uncovering of the luminous white skin and the toned flesh of Snape's forearm, of his narrow elegant wrist.

The taste of verbena he recalled from their experiment was filling his mouth again as the leaves seemed to melt on Harry's tongue. The sexual arousal must actually have been a result of the Doulah plant itself, since it had started already.

He placed the tip of his wand on Snape’s exposed Dark Mark, its black outline an insult to the flawless white skin, and held his left hand out to the taller man, palm up. Snape changed its position so he could comfortably intertwine their fingers.

“A more secure hold is probably best,” he explained, his tone gentle, without any of his usual bite.

Harry looked up, surprised by the mildness the professor was showing and his eyes met Snape’s. Again their gazes locked. Seeing nothing but goodwill and trust in the other man's eyes, Harry felt calm, strong, and confident. Snape gave him a small nod and Harry started reciting the complex charm Flitwick had created, that he had memorized with Hermione’s help.

“Now!” said Snape, warning the others of the imminent arrival of their quarry.

Harry pushed all his magic, all his will into the Mark on Snape’s arm. It felt as if his reach radiated from the tip of his wand and traveled through the Mark in all directions, seeking others, reaching, reaching…

Suddenly, his magic found a target and hooked it, pulling it irresistibly back towards him. Harry felt a Death Eater’s Apparation begin, sucking energy out of him. Then there was another hook, and another, and then a multitude at once.

He felt his power seep away like water and almost panicked, but suddenly Snape was there, his magic, his power filling Harry with warmth and strength. It felt so good, so wonderfully right, Harry felt complete in a way he had never known.

The Death Eaters’ Apparations now were effortless, almost instantaneous. He was vaguely aware of “Petrificus Totalus” and “Stupefy” being repeated again and again all around him, and of the thud of bodies hitting the ground hard. There was also yelling, and the sound of battle, but his focus did not falter.

Soon there were only a few Death Eaters left in transit, then only one last one, hooked very, very far afield and brought back in a rush of strength.

The task accomplished, Harry took a deep relieved breath and his surroundings came back into awareness. There was mayhem all around, many battles being fought on all sides. An iridescent shield was around them, evidently placed by their protectors, who were shooting hexes and curses at multiple targets. Snape’s hand was still gripping his own when Harry’s eyes turned to the closest fight, to his immediate left.

Fenrir Greyback held a disarmed Auror by the hair. Flitwick’s “Petrificus” bounced right off the werewolf. As Harry watched, frozen, Greyback tore the man’s throat out and threw the body at Flitwick, who tumbled under the weight.

Taking advantage of the hole in their defenses, Greyback jumped on Snape, reaching for his neck with his bloody teeth like a demon from hell. Without any conscious thought, Harry’s pushed his
magic through his palm and into Snape. There was a sound like a slap, and Fenrir Greyback was gone. Snape let go of Harry’s hand, severing their connection.

“Where has he gone?” yelled Malfoy. "He couldn’t have Apparated out, the room is secured!”

Harry and Snape exchanged a look, and then Snape turned to Lucius.

“I believe Fenrir Greyback is no more,” he stated calmly, starting to re-button his shirt.

“What do you mean?” asked Malfoy.

“In the heat of the moment, I... wished him gone. Mr. Potter put the full power of his magic behind that wish, and… it was granted.”

“Where did you send him?” asked Ron.

“Nowhere,” shrugged Snape, trying to explain. "I believe he simply... no longer exists. What do you think, Potter?"

Harry did not think, he knew. He had felt their combined powers negate Greyback’s existence, just… remove him. It was the most terrifying thing he had ever done: wandless, wordless magic, from a mere thought to reality in the blink of an eye.

“I believe Professor Snape is correct,” he said, trying to appear as calm as Snape. “I think he is gone.”

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” was Aberforth’s comment.

As all individual battles were finally over, people started to celebrate, and no one was paying attention to the six men in the center.

Flitwick, back on his feet, if with robes stained in blood, said firmly, “Let me tell you what happened.” He paused, making sure he had the other five’s undivided attention. “I Banished him, though I am not quite sure where to. He will assuredly turn up somewhere. Certainly, no wandless, wordless, frighteningly powerful magic was performed here tonight. Surely, none of you gentlemen would contradict me on that?”

He stared at all of them in turn.

“I concur,” said Aberforth. “Filius Banished him. No point in making up scary stories that might put strange ideas in people’s heads. Mr. Weasley?”


“Quite a powerful Banishment, Professor,” commented Malfoy. “But weren’t you a dueling champion in your youth?”

“I certainly was. Three years in a row.”

Harry and Snape looked at each other as the official version of Fenrir Greyback’s disappearance was being told.

There was doubt in Snape’s eyes. Harry understood what Flitwick was doing. If the actual facts became known, there would be fear and then suspicion: their combined powers, harnessed by a spell in the service of the Wizarding community, was all well and good. This… omnipotence was a different matter altogether. But could he lie about it? Harry thought about the Deathly Hallows,
which by his decision would forever remain the stuff of legend. This was no different, really.

“It’s too bad Harry and you didn’t see Filius’ spell, Severus,” insisted Malfoy, “you were still too busy with the Summoning, I am sure. It was quite impressive.”

Snape’s eyes were still on Harry, still uncertain. Harry shrugged at him, a small movement that put the decision in Snape’s hands. Snape turned to Flitwick and said, in his elegant way, “Indeed. Well done, Filius,” and the truth would never be mentioned again.

Harry surveyed the grim scene around him as he caught his breath. Four Aurors were dead, their bodies covered with their cloaks, Minerva McGonagall’s hair was singed to the skull on one side, and Angelina Johnson had a rather nasty nosebleed. The judge’s bench was still smoking where it had caught on fire.

One hundred and twenty-three Death Eaters lay on the stone floor, some completely covered with Transfigured sheets, the rest of them immobile. Voldemort’s reign of terror was finally over.

Lying on the fringe of the outer circle wearing nothing but a pink push-up bra (but now covered to her neck by the cloak of a generous Auror) was Dolores Umbridge, a look of bliss still on her face. How long she had been a Death Eater was anyone’s guess. Apparently neither she nor her lover, Fenrir, had noticed the summons, being otherwise occupied. Angelina had stunned her before Umbridge even knew she had left her boudoir.

Sadly, Angelina had not been prepared for the werewolf who had been inadvertently caught in Umbridge’s Apparation. He had broken Angelina’s nose as he tried to escape. Fenrir had never been accepted as a Death Eater. That he had been captured was an amazing stroke of luck.

Flitwick healed Angelina’s nose and handed her his handkerchief.

“Umbridge’s in for a nasty surprise when she comes to,” commented Ron.

“Oh, it’s much worse than that,” smirked Angelina.

“What do you mean?” asked Harry.

“Well,” explained Angelina, “I am pants at Stupefying… I used Petrificus.”

Flitwick laughed, hard.

“What?” Harry asked, still in the dark.

“Mr. Potter,” said Snape in his best lecture voice, “had you learned anything during your time at Hogwarts, you might have known the difference between being Stupefied and Petrified. In case of Stupefaction, the victim loses consciousness as well as the ability to move. Petrified people, however, though they might be unable even to change the unfortunate expression on their faces, are perfectly conscious of their surroundings the entire time.” And for the first time in their seven-year acquaintance, Harry saw Snape’s smile.

Retelling the story to Hermione and Ginny later (and once the hysterical laughter had abated), Harry and Ron had both agreed: Snape’s smile made even his most evil smirk look benign.

End of Part 1.
Chapter 11

Part 2: Malfoys

~o~ When Anything Really Means Anything, Aug.17, 1998 ~o~

The day after the Summoning, Harry, Ron and Hermione returned to the Burrow with a reluctant Ginny. The older three were ready to depart from there to Australia by a three o’clock Portkey to retrieve Hermione’s parents. The Portkey was a gift from the Minister himself, Shacklebolt having both cleared the time-consuming paperwork for them and taken care of the exorbitant fee for intercontinental travel with his discretionary fund.

Under some pressure from the Wizengamot, Kingsley Shacklebolt had invited Harry to join that esteemed body for the Death Eaters’ trials. It had been pointed out to him by some of its members that Harry was the heir to the Black seat, after all, and that having him participate in the trials would validate the entire process in the public eye. Harry had politely turned down his request, since he was leaving for Australia and did not like exceptions being made because of who he was. The three of them had intended to fly the Muggle way, but the Minister insisted on the Portkey to show Harry there were no hard feelings.

An hour before they left Hermione had summarily repacked Ron’s luggage, rolling her eyes while explaining to him that the middle of winter Down Under required the exact same clothing as the middle of summer in Scotland. Harry grinned at their good-natured bickering, and having not researched the weather conditions Down Under was glad he had procrastinated with his own packing...

Ginny sat with him while he threw the clothes Mrs. Weasley had just returned to him from the laundry into his travel bag. In contrast with their happy excitement, Ginny looked profoundly miserable. Earlier, Ron had surmised it was because they had not asked her to join them (Molly had threatened to kill Ron if they did), but Harry thought he knew better. She had been very upset since leaving Hogwarts the day before and he thought the problem lay there.

At two-thirty, as they were all sitting around the kitchen table with a last cup of tea, she suddenly got up and, looking everywhere but at Harry, asked him to talk with her alone for a minute.

Harry was happy to comply; he hated seeing her so wretched and was hoping he could do something to help. They headed outside and walked for a few minutes in silence in the gnome-infested yard, which was nonetheless brilliant with gorgeous blooms. She stopped, scuffing the dirt path with the tip of her trainer.

“Ginny, whatever it is, out with it already.”

She sighed, looked at him briefly, and looked away again. “I have a favor to ask you, Harry.”

“Anything, Ginny, you know that…”

“Please don’t say that until your hear what I am asking. You may regret it.”

He took her chin, and forced her to look at him. “Ginny, I mean it. Anything you need, I am there.”

He was shocked to see her eyes fill with tears. That was so unlike her.
“I really hate to ask, but I have to, Harry, I just have to.”

“Okay.”

“Harry, I want you to try and save Draco Malfoy from losing his magic.”

“Okay.”

Ginny burst out laughing, crying at the same time. “That’s it? Just like that, you’ll help him?”

“I will do anything I can, try everything that might work. You want it, you got it. That is what ‘anything’ means, Ginny.”

“But you hate him!” she wailed. “You hate using your fame!”

“Yes, but not as much as I hate seeing you unhappy…” He smiled at her.

She leapt forward and gave him a bone-crushing hug.

“Wow, wow, Ginny!” he teased. “I won’t be able to do anything if you choke me to death!”

She looked at him with a tremulous smile. “Thanks, Harry. You’re the best.”

“I haven’t done anything yet, and I might not be able to do anything, you know. But first, let me go tell Hermione and Ron that they’ll have to go to Oz without me. I don’t think I have time to go trekking in the bush, not if I want to save Malfoy’s sorry arse.”

“I’m sorry… I know you were looking forward to that trip…”

He grinned at her. “Well, at least I don’t think they’ll miss me all that much.”

Since they made it back to the kitchen at five to three, there was thankfully not much time to explain his change of plans. He hugged both his best friends, told them he would owl them as soon as he could, and they were off. Ron definitely did not seem too bothered. It had only taken him a few seconds to realize that this new development meant he would be alone with Hermione for the duration, without a chaperon.

Luckily, that fact did not dawn on Molly until after they had left. Harry was amused by her sudden stunned look when the realization struck her. She walked out of the sitting room telling herself in a low voice that surely she could trust Hermione…

Harry took Ginny’s hand, and they went back outside. They walked to the stream that ran on the edge of the garden and sat on the grass in the dappled shade of the weeping willow.

“All right, Gin. I don’t have to have Trelawney’s inner eye to figure out Draco Malfoy is the person you’ve fallen in love with. You have to admit it is a bit of a change of heart on your part and a little hard to fathom from my end. So, take it from the top, make me understand.”

“I know it’s… weird. Let me try to explain.” She took a deep breath. “I missed you lot last year, a lot. And not because I was pining for you, though I was at the beginning, but because we’d been spending all that time together, and because things were so hard at Hogwarts.”

She pushed her flamboyant hair behind her ear and looked at him. “I got in the habit of sitting alone against the tree by the lake to do my reading assignments. You know, the big one, where we used to... Anyway. One time, I was studying Potions and I hit a passage that made no sense to me. Trying to work it out, I read it again out loud a couple of times, and tried to reason my way through it, and
then all of a sudden, Malfoy popped out of nowhere and he explained it to me.”

She shook her head a little, and smiled lightly, apparently remembering her disbelief. “He made the whole thing so simple and so clear, and from his enthusiasm I could tell how much he loved Potions. Then he looked kind of embarrassed and just started to head back to the castle. I caught up with him and thanked him and I asked him where he’d come from.”

She shrugged. “He said he liked to sit against the tree just like I did, but on the forest side, away from prying eyes, to get some peace from Goyle and Crabbe and some of the other Slytherins. He’d been there at the same time I was many times before, but said the tree was quite big enough for the two of us and that my presence did not bother him.”

“I didn’t stop coming. It was my spot. I never knew if he was there or not, and didn’t think much about it. Then one day he started talking. He didn’t acknowledge I could hear him, and I didn’t answer. I think he just needed to talk.”

“He’s very different from what everybody thinks, Harry. He loves his parents, and he hated Voldemort. He can be funny, and sweet. And he has hated himself for a very long time and has tried to do the right thing, in pretty bad situations.”

She looked at Harry. “Did you know Snape is his godfather? He often wondered what side Snape was really on. He said he thought Headmaster Dumbledore had been pleading with Snape to kill him and that it had been the right move because now Voldemort trusted Snape above anyone. It had allowed Snape to save him and his parents from the monster’s wrath. He pointed out the times when Snape protected students from the Carrows and how he’d given Neville, Luna, and me detention with Hagrid after we’d tried to steal the sword. Draco loves him, and would do anything for Snape.

“I had my doubts about Snape, but I let him vent. Once in a while I started to talk too, when things really got to me. It was good to know someone was listening, even if he never answered.”

“Did you two become close?” asked Harry.

“We didn’t. He still sneered at me any chance he got; that was part of his persona. But he did things like take students to the Room of Requirement instead of to the Carrows, or mentioned to me where the Slytherin prefects were planning on patrolling that night.

“Harry, he did let the Death Eaters into the school, and he has the Mark. But he does not deserve to lose his magic. He has never killed anyone. Everything bad he has done was to save his family. I would have done the same. It’s not his fault he was born a Malfoy and not a Weasley, that his family was on the wrong side,” she pleaded.

Her voice shook as she added, “When he loses his magic, he will kill himself. I caught him brewing that awful potion one night last week, Fulgur Funera. He didn’t say anything, just looked at me pleadingly, so I didn’t tell Snape. Draco has no desire to live without his magic, that’s why he has no contingency plans. If they take it away, he will be dead within a day. I can’t let it happen. I… I want him to live.” She looked up at him, pleading with her eyes.

Harry remembered how Draco had lied in Malfoy Manor, pretending not to recognize them, how he had kept Goyle and Crabbe from killing him in the Room of Requirement.

He also remembered how he had not been able to leave Draco to die in that room, when it had been so dangerous to go back for him, and how Ron had saved Draco yet again during the battle that day. They had hated each other from day one, and yet, when the chips were down, they had always done
what they could for each other. So many times Harry had wondered what might have been if that day when he had found Draco crying in Myrtle’s bathroom, he had done some things differently, had tried to help him instead of slicing him open.

And on that very first day, on the train, when Malfoy had held out his hand, would there have been a way to make a friend of him? He had just been a brat—a rich, self-important little brat, spouting out what he had heard his father say all his life, nothing more.

“I’ll go to the Ministry and talk to Shacklebolt in the morning. We don’t have much time. The Death Eaters will all be sentenced the day after tomorrow, unless they have provided the Wizengamot with memories to review. Do you think Draco has?”

“No. I heard him talking to Snape. He thinks that letting Voldemort put that Mark on him puts him on a par with the others. Do you think that’s true, Harry?”

Harry considered the question carefully. What choice had Malfoy had, really? With his dad in Azkaban, his mum in Voldemort’s hands, what would Harry have done? There really had been no choice at all.

“No, Ginny, I don’t.” He smiled at her ruefully. “What’s the point of being the Boy Who Lived, and the Man Who Killed Voldemort if I can’t use it to try and get my way, once in a while? I’ll do everything I can. I promise you.”

She gave him a look that made him think that Malfoy was a lucky bloke, even if he didn't know it. He squeezed her hand.
Harry’s Floo-call to the Minister that evening, accepting his offer to temporarily join the Wizengamot, surprised Shacklebolt but also pleased him. He knew that bringing in Harry would earn him a lot of political points. So it was agreed that Harry would assume the seat of the House of Black for the duration of the trials, due to start the next day at one in the afternoon.

Shacklebolt had explained that the process would be quick: the presence of the Mark was considered sufficient proof of guilt for the standard sentence to be applied. Death Eaters who had presented memories in their defense—and there were only thirteen of them—would get a continuance, until the Wizengamot’s interrogators made their decision as to whether the events shown in the memories were indeed sufficient to afford the Death Eater some clemency.

Because he was not being officially inducted into the Wizengamot, Harry would not wear the customary attire. However, Shacklebolt had made it clear that only dress robes would be appropriate for the occasion. Harry had grown a bit in the past year, and the dress robes he’d worn at Bill’s wedding, stuffed in Hermione’s beaded bag and used as a blanket for extra warmth in the tent during their meanderings, had seen better days.

He needed to do some shopping. He decided to go to Diagon Alley bright and early the next morning and enjoy himself. He spent the rest of the evening trying to familiarize himself with the workings of the Wizengamot and its many traditions from a book he borrowed from the Burrow’s limited library, but went to bed feeling it had confused him more than anything else.

In the morning, he stepped out of the Leaky Cauldron as the stores were opening. Diagon Alley looked incredibly different than the last time he had visited, following Hermione disguised as Bellatrix Lestrange, on his way to rob a bank. Almost all the shops had reopened, even Fortescue’s, and it had regained all its wonder in Harry’s eyes. He grinned. He loved this place!

His first stop had to be Gringotts, where despite Flitwick’s reassurance he was a little wary of showing his face. To his surprise, no one at the bank acted any differently than they ever had. However, when the time came for him to go to his vault, it was Griphook who appeared from somewhere in the back, with his small oil lamp and his piercing eyes.

“Harry Potter,” was his greeting. They boarded the small trolley and made their way underground in silence. They stopped in front of the Harry’s vault. Harry opened it and was horrified to find it completely devoid of coins. He stared at the empty room for a moment and turned questioningly to Griphook, only to find the goblin holding his sides in silent laughter, tears of mirth on his cheeks. Remembering Flitwick’s lesson in goblin humor, he turned to look in his vault again, hardly surprised to find it as it always had been, quite filled with gold Galleons.

“You should have seen your face,” snorted Griphook. “Priceless!”

“I wish I’d seen the face of the head of Gringotts when he found out you helped me break into the place,” replied Harry.

“You’re right,” said Griphook, wiping his eyes. “That was pretty good too…”

“Did you get into much trouble?” inquired Harry, suddenly concerned.
“No. I got a promotion,” Griphook smiled with satisfaction. He added, “I don’t think anyone could do it again, though, even with inside help. Breaking in was a great service to our bank. Security is much improved now. But you are owed an even greater debt, Harry Potter. One the goblins will not soon forget. Voldemort would not have been benevolent to our kind.”

“Well,” said Harry, shoving handfuls of coins in his moneybag, “does that mean I get a better interest rate?”

That started Griphook laughing again for a while. He wiped his face once again, and commented, “That was a good one… Are you done here, then?”

“I am,” said Harry.

Griphook closed the vault and handed Harry his key. They rode back up in silence.

“Griphook, “ asked Harry suddenly, “how would I go about designating an heir for my money?”

“Oh, very smart, very smart, young Potter. Let’s take this into my office.”

Griphook preceded him to the back of the bank, along a crooked corridor with some doors big enough for wizards, and others obviously reserved for goblins. There were words in runes on his door, and his office was a very beautiful room, from the rug on the floor, an intricate work of art in golden tones, to the forged bronze furniture, the seats of which were lined in rich brown leather. There was a tapestry with thousands of California poppies behind his desk, swaying to an unfelt breeze, and the paint on the wall gave the impression of a forest in the fall.

Oblivious to Harry’s admiring survey of his surroundings, Griphook was all business. “Potter, Henry “Harry” James,” he said, as he tapped on a very large file cabinet with his long finger. Three leather-bound books appeared on his desk.

“My name is Henry?” Harry asked flabbergasted. “Are you sure?”

Griphook stared at him as if trying to decide how to respond to such an imbecilic question. “Harry is a nickname, Mr. Potter. Henry is a common first name and middle name in your family. Your father’s full name was James Henry Potter, your paternal grandfather was Henry Rumpelstiltskin Potter, and your great grandfather was Charlus Henry Potter, who by the way was married to Dorea Black, Mr. Sirius Black’s great aunt.”

“Oh. Er… OK, then. Henry it is. Weird…”

Griphook rolled his eyes. “Anyway, Harry Potter, though you are of age, you have not yet reached your magical majority. You will attain it either when you come into your full power or reach the age of twenty-one, whichever comes first.”

“Full power? Am I to get more power?” asked Harry, confused.

Griphook let out a heavy sigh. “No, Harry Potter. At your magical… puberty if you will, you will gain access to all of your power, most of which is locked in your magical core until then.”

“Really?” Harry was blown away. He’d never heard of this.

Griphook shook his head. He grumbled, “For Bodrog’s sake, don’t they teach Muggle-born and Muggle-raised wizards anything in that school?” Then he sighed and recited, as if terribly put upon,
“Harry Potter, some morning in the next few years you will wake up with almost no magic. You will feel sick and weak all day. Your temperature will go up and you will have hallucinations until you lose consciousness. When you recover, you will have access to the full extent of your magical power. On that day or on your twenty-first birthday, you will reach your magical majority and come into your full inheritance.”

He leaned forward, eyes shining. “Sadly, only then will we be able to review together the extent of your assets.” He gleefully rubbed his hands together. “But trust me, Harry Potter, they are… not negligible.” He sat back again and, turning the books one by one in Harry’s direction, went on. “They consist of the Potter estate, the Black estate, and the Lupin estate, though if all goes well, the Lupin estate will only be yours until the little Metamorphmagus Theodore Henry Lupin reaches the age of three alive and well.”

“Wow, wow, slow down, I’m really confused. Why do I have the Lupin estate, and how is Teddy supposed to handle even his minor heir’s vault at the age of three?”

“He is not. His estate will be managed by his guardians—his grandmother, Mrs Andromeda Callisto Tonks and yourself—until he, himself, reaches his majority. But you were Mr. Remus Lupin’s sole heir until the birth of his son, and will remain his heir until Teddy Lupin reaches his third birthday.”

“Oh. I didn’t know. Wait. My aunt Petunia was my guardian. Surely she didn’t manage my accounts?”

Griphook snorted inelegantly. “Don’t be ridiculous. Your aunt may have had your physical guardianship, but your financial assets were, and will remain until your majority, in the best possible hands.” Griphook grinned at him, showing his very pointy teeth. “Mine.”

Harry could not help laughing at his expression. “How did that happen?” he wondered.

“When he came into his inheritance, your father was an Auror fighting a war. He had neither the desire nor the wherewithal to analyze investments, deal with long-term planning, or decide when to hold or sell assets. I have had the pleasure to counsel the Potter family in financial matters since your great grandfather Arthur Henry Potter, Charlus’ father. Your father entrusted me with the complete management of his fortune. I continued my work with the Potter estate after your father died and the Black estate’s portfolio came into my care after Mr. Black’s death, since you are the heir to the House of Black.”

“Oh, I see. That’s great. I’m glad I don’t have to worry about any of it for a couple more years,” said Harry, honestly. “But in case I die before then, I’d like to arrange the distribution of my assets. If I can do this, I’d like the Black estate to go to Teddy Lupin and the Potter estate to Ron Weasley. So, can I do this?”

“The only heir never denied the inheritance of its assets by a House is the legitimate wizard son of the previous Head of the House. In this case, there is no guarantee that the Black and Potter Houses will accept your choices, especially that of Ronald Bilius Weasley, since there are no blood connections between the Potters and the Weasleys. But being your heir of choice for these estates will put them at the head of the line, so to speak, and who knows what criteria the Ancient Houses use to decide to accept or reject an heir?”

He tapped his long finger on the two books concerned, naming Harry’s chosen heirs, and they opened to a page showing Harry’s decisions laid down in legal terms. “Please tap your wand at the bottom of the page while saying, “Read and approved,” and sign in the space provided,” Griphook requested.
Harry did what he was told. “So I can do this, even though I have not reached my majority?” he asked, curious.

“Correct. This is considered a magical contract, and you can legally enter such a contract as soon as you are of age. Before July 31st, 1997, there was nothing you could have done. Magical contracts entered into by wizards under the age of seventeen are null and void, and are of no legal value.” Griphook shook his head. “They should really teach a basic law class at that school of yours. How wizards are expected to function as productive members of society without this basic knowledge is beyond me…”

Griphook got up. “Well, Harry Potter, if there is anything else, you’ll have to make an appointment. I have things to do.”

“No, that’s it I think.” They walked back to the bank’s lobby. “Thank you so much for your time and patience, Griphook. I learned an enormous amount,” said Harry gratefully. “Goodbye, then.”

“Goodbye. Give my best to my fourth cousin thrice removed, and tell him I went easy on you.”

“That would be the giant squid, right?”

Griphook started laughing again and dismissed Harry with a wave of his hand, chuckling away as he disappeared back in the depths of the bank.

Harry was quite pleased with himself. He was looking forward to relating this encounter to Flitwick to see if he had held his own with Filius’ distant cousin.

He next stopped at Madam Malkin’s for the dress robes he needed that afternoon.

“Well, if you want them right away, there will be an additional charge for spelling them to fit immediately, and you will have to return them for me to permanently alter them, as the spell will wear out over time,” she warned, chagrined at being unable to do things the right way the first time around.

He smiled at her. “I understand, Madam Malkin. But this is an emergency.”

“What are the robes for, anyway, Mr. Potter?” she asked.

“I am sitting in at the Death Eaters’ trials this afternoon, as the heir to the House of Black.”

“Oh, Mr. Potter! That is such an honor! Let’s get robes that match the color of the Wizengamot attire then, don’t you think? It is this nice maroon over there.” She picked a model off the rack and added black dress trousers, a white dress shirt with a straight collar, a maroon-and-gold striped cravat and a velvet maroon waistcoat. She put it all in a small room with a three-way mirror and told him to put them on.

She seemed to sense when he was dressed in the new garb, for she entered the room after only a perfunctory knock. Harry felt like a child trying on his father’s clothes, everything being so big on him. She made him stand on a small platform in front of the mirror and performed the complicated wand motion of what appeared to be a complex charm. Next thing he knew, the new garments fit Harry perfectly.

The robes were made of pure maroon wool flannel lined with heavy gold colored satin. Their clasps closed, the neckline showed his high collar and his cravat and the robes flowed to the ground in elegant folds, the sleeves so wide they dropped from his wrist to his knees, showing the contrasting lining. Clasps open, they revealed the complementary waistcoat, which made a beautiful contrast
with the satin lining and the fitted black trousers that were extremely flattering to his slender silhouette.

"Wow. Thanks. These are… really nice," said Harry, surprised and quite pleased with the way he looked.

She smiled at him. "You will never be tall, Mr. Potter, but you have grown a few inches in the past two years. You might as well wear robes that fit, especially since your proportions are perfect and you were gifted with a beautiful frame and long muscles, which, despite your smaller stature, give you that lithe, elegant look many would kill for."

Harry blushed, but looking in the mirror he had to admit he did like what he saw. Feeling suddenly bold, he purchased a whole new wardrobe: school robes, dress robes, casual robes, and several pairs of the very fitted wizard trousers with stirrups he'd always substituted jeans for.

He had a great time picking the materials for waistcoats: one with the Black coat of arms, green with three black crows; one with the Potter one, dark blue with five small white flowers; one with a snake pattern, small silver snakes on a grey background, to celebrate his ability to speak Parseltongue; one with golden Snitches on a sky-blue background; and finally one with the golden Gryffindor lion on a dark red background. Madam Malkin helped him pick the matching cravats.

He even included socks, undershirts, and smalls that actually fit him to his order, promising himself to get rid of every Dudley hand-me-down as soon as he received his new garments. He loved the ankle-length leather boots he replaced his worn trainers with. Maybe he wouldn't feel so scrawny now that his clothes were not three sizes too big.

Leaving Madam Malkin with his maroon robes opened on his waistcoat, he felt every inch the wizard. Diagon Alley was now bustling with people shopping, carrying on with the day’s business, or simply enjoying the beautiful morning in the revived street without a worry in the world. People happily greeted each other, stopped and chatted, celebrating with every smile the victory of freedom over darkness.

Harry, having performed a powerful Notice-Me-Not charm on himself, passed unseen amongst the throngs, soaking up the joyful atmosphere. He felt a lot of satisfaction on behalf of the Order of the Phoenix and of all his friends. As far as he was concerned, this walk was a much better victory celebration than any of those banquets he'd been invited to.

He stepped into Ollivander’s, which was doing brisk business: a lot of half-bloods and Muggle-borns had had their wands confiscated and destroyed, and the Ministry was paying for their replacements. Several witches and wizards were in line, Ministry of Magic vouchers in hand.

What surprised Harry the most was the fact that the stock looked undiminished from his first visit, years ago, to buy his own wand. He knew the entire store had been emptied by Voldemort’s minions.

A willowy young woman with Ollivander’s unsettling pale grey eyes and a very thick blond braid that reached her waist was serving customers. She looked enough like Mr. Ollivander that Harry immediately assumed she was his daughter. He approached the counter.

The young woman seemed as knowledgeable both about the stock and about matching wands to wizards as Mr. Ollivander himself, her small thin hands quick to pull boxes from the shelves and her melodic, soft voice dismissing unsuitable wands and celebrating matches with as much authority as her father’s.
Finally a lull presented itself and Harry accosted her, negating the Notice-Me-Not by doing so. “Excuse me, miss. Is Mr. Ollivander around today?”

She looked at him, a bit puzzled not to have seen him approaching the counter. She evidently recognized him right away. “He is in the back, Mr. Potter. Please! Come through, I am sure he would be glad to see you.”

She lifted a hinged section of the counter to allow him to step through and gestured vaguely to the back of the store, already concentrating on the next customer.

Harry made his way through walls of boxes that formed a murmuring labyrinth, as if the magic of each wand was reaching out in search of its owner, whispering to him as he passed. He got to a door and knocked lightly.

“Come in, Mr. Potter,” said an elderly but strong voice. How did Ollivander know who was knocking?

Harry entered a small room bright with sunshine. The entire back wall was a gigantic window made up of hundreds of small square panes. Sitting on a high stool in front of a workbench was Ollivander himself. A jeweler’s loupe was affixed to his eye, and he was meticulously laying a unicorn hair on the polished shaft of a thin black wand.

“Ebony, twelve inches, with a core of unicorn mane hair. Nice and supple handling, springy. It will be very good for Charms.”

The whole wand glowed brightly for a second as the long white strand sank right through the wood and disappeared.

“Not too many people get to witness this step, Mr. Potter. It is a trade secret, you know.” He carefully placed the newly finished wand on a bed of green silk inside its long narrow box.

“But I think you know more about wands than most wizards do,” Ollivander put down his loupe and gave Harry a thin-lipped smile. “Have you ever considered a career as a wand-maker Mr. Potter?”

“Uh, no… Not really.” The idea had never crossed his mind.

“Good, good, you would be terrible at it,” chuckled Ollivander. “Your magic is as bright as a beacon, and as straightforward. I am afraid wand-making requires a certain level of devious manipulation of which you are completely incapable. There has never been a Gryffindor wand-maker, did you know? Slytherins, every last one of us, I am afraid. Alas, my daughter Edelweiss, who is minding the store today, was a Ravenclaw. But my grandson Orion is learning the trade. He is only eight, but I have no doubt where he will be Sorted. The wands talk to him, just as they talk to me. He will take over, someday…”

“I am glad to see you back in business, sir. The Alley was not the same without your shop.”

“Thank you, Mr. Potter. But I am here only thanks to your timely rescue, you know. I could not have lasted much longer in the hands of that madman.”

“And I would not have been able to defeat him without the knowledge of wand lore you shared with me, Mr. Ollivander.”

“Then I guess we’re even, aren’t we, Mr. Potter?” He looked at Harry with unreadable eyes. “May I see your wand, please?”
Harry did not like to give it up, but did not know how to refuse the man who had created it. He reluctantly handed it over. Ollivander accepted it with both hands, holding it reverently in the noon light.

“One of my best, I think,” he said. “And all the better for this impossible repair.” Eyes closed, he passed the tip of his finger along its length, and smiled. “It will be with you until the end, Mr. Potter.” Then Harry’s wand glowed brightly for a second as if hit by a spell, and Ollivander returned it to him. Harry could not help snatching it back and checking it, alarmed.

“You did me a great honor and showed me great trust by letting me handle it. I have added a little something to it.” Ollivander chuckled at Harry’s horrified look. “Oh, no, don’t fret. It is a good thing. One I can only very rarely bestow, because it takes a very special wand and a very special wizard to make it possible. From now on, you will sense where it is at all times, it will never accidentally fall from your hand, and no one will ever be able to take this wand from you, Mr. Potter, or use it, unless you give them express permission to do so. It is impervious to Expelliarmus or any other spell of that kind. I do not think you will find that all that useful anymore, times being much safer… But one never knows, does one?”

Harry looked at his wand. It seemed unchanged, but even though it had always felt good in his hand, now it truly felt like an extension of his being, a part of him. He spun it on the tip of his index finger and smiled. He could feel he would never drop it again, or misplace it. It felt bound to him somehow.

“Wow, thank you, sir. It feels amazing.”

“Don’t mention it. I do not get to do this trick very often… It was my pleasure. But I must get back to work, now.” He extracted what looked like a thick twig from a quiver-like holder.

“Hawthorne,” he mumbled to himself. “Temperamental…” He seemed to have already forgotten Harry’s presence.

“Mr. Ollivander?”

“Yes?”

“Your inventory seems intact. I thought Voldemort…”

“He did. He took all of the stock from our store. Of course, the wands burned, when our boxes self-destructed. A nasty surprise for him, that was… One that almost cost me my life. Most of the boxes out there are empty, only for show, to reassure our customers. We had only a few hundred wands stored in our Gringotts vault, which is why I must get back to work…”

“Of course. I am sorry. It’s good to see you, sir. Goodbye,” Harry left, realizing that Ollivander had already dismissed him from his mind. He retraced his steps through the store and back under the counter, sent away by Edelweiss with only a nod. He would probably never be fully comfortable with Ollivander, but neither would he forget that when the chips were down, the wand-maker had stood with the side of the Light, Slytherin or not.

Casting Tempus, he realized it was time for him to go to the Ministry. He walked to the Leaky Cauldron and Flooed from there. He went to get his wand examined, but the employee just looked at him as if he was an idiot. “Only visitors need register their wands, sir. Not members of the Wizengamot.”

“Oh. Right. Of course.” Harry went to the lift reflecting that he had just met the one wizard, except for Snape, who was unimpressed by Harry Potter…
The courtroom was almost full already, the Wizengamot members chatting amicably with each other. Kingsley Shacklebolt had evidently been waiting for him, since he welcomed him with a smile at the door and walked in with him. “Harry, thanks for doing this.” He added with a wink, “Nice robes, young man. Now you look like an honorable wizard.”

Harry grinned, actually pleased with the compliment. “Where do I sit, Kingsley?”

“First row behind the Presiding Interrogator, her assistant, and myself, actually. The first open seat on the left, there, between Beetroot and Carrow.”

Seeing Harry’s shocked expression, Kingsley added, “The main branch of the Carrows. Second cousins once removed from the charming siblings that terrorized Hogwarts’ students. You will like the Head of the House of Carrow. She is a lovely older woman who used to teach Charms at Merlin College.”

“Oh, okay. Well I’d better go and take my seat, I guess.”

“Yes. We will be starting momentarily.”

They both went down the steep stairs that divided the balcony in two. Kingsley took his seat at the front and Harry made his way to his seat. As soon as he approached, the Head of the House of Beetroot got to his feet and greeted him with a formal bow. Harry was terribly self-conscious as he bowed back, sure he was doing it all wrong. He’d read about male Heads of House bowing in greeting to other Heads of House the night before, but had obviously never practiced.

He must have done all right somehow, since the man was still smiling at him as he introduced himself. He was of medium height, balding slightly, with bright blue eyes and the pink cheeks and lips of a cherub. “Clarence Omer Beetroot, at your service, Mr. Potter. It is honor to meet you.”

How in the world did you respond to that? “Uh… Thank you. Nice to meet you too, sir.”

He must have said the right thing since the man beamed at him and sat back down. Harry, still standing, turned to the elderly woman seated regally on the other side of the Black seat. He bowed again. “Good afternoon, ma’am. I am Harry Potter, sitting for the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black,” he said, using the traditional introduction he’d read about the night before.

The old lady smiled at him and the twinkle in her eyes would have rivaled Albus Dumbledore’s. “Well, do sit, then, young man, or I’ll get a kink in my neck talking to you.”

Harry obediently sat down. The lady patted his knee. “That was well said, Harry, the correct way to introduce yourself. I am Rose Prewett, sitting for the Honorable House of Carrow. You are certainly an improvement over old Walburga. A stupider woman I have rarely met, with her ridiculous blood pride… ‘Toujours Pur’ indeed. I guess you are stuck with that, are you not.”

“Yes, of course, though I have decided its real meaning has nothing to do with blood, obviously, otherwise the House would not have accepted me,” said Harry with a smile. “I think from now on, it will refer to the hearts and intentions of the members of the House of Black. What do you think?”

The old lady let out a very youthful giggle. “I like that very much, Harry. It is a vast improvement.”

Griselda Marchbanks, the Presiding Interrogator, interrupted all conversations with a few raps of her gavel. She was sitting between the Minister of Magic and a grey-haired wizard with a bottlebrush mustache and half glasses who looked punctilious and disapproving. In a clear voice, she announced the beginning of the trials.
“Please bailiff, bring Mr. Tertius Waldo Yaxley before this court.” The man accompanying the bailiff had a magic-suppressing collar on and his hands and feet were shackled. He wore simple tan robes with the word Azkaban printed on the front and the back. The bailiff removed the shackles, but as Yaxley sat in the chair in the middle of the court, chains wrapped securely around his wrists and ankles.

“Interrogator Minski? Please proceed,” said Griselda.

The grey-haired gentleman squared a stack of papers on his desk and said, in a monotonous and gravelly voice, “The accused will state his name.”

“Tertius Waldo Yaxley, Head of the Powerful and Dignified House of Yaxley,” answered the prisoner arrogantly.

“Not after today, I’m afraid, sir. You have been found guilty of being a Death Eater…”

“How nice for you,” said Interrogator Minski, dismissively. He went on, “As you submitted no memories that might have mitigated your sentence, all your personal wealth is as of this moment being transferred from your personal vault at Gringotts to the special treasury for victim compensation, following the Ministry override 1432-333 in accordance with the Wizengamot decision of August 1998, and under the supervision of Frymice, Head of Gringotts Wizard Bank. Your wand was reported and certified under oath to have been destroyed by Auror Charles Hector Chavez after your capture. You can either voluntarily drink the magic-suppressing potion that will permanently disable your magical abilities, or you will be forced to do so by a court mandated Compulsion Charm. Do you have any questions?”

“How dare you stand in judgment of me, you are not worthy of licking the Dark Lord’s boots!” yelled Yaxley.

“Unlike yourself, no doubt,” answered Minski.

Yaxley kept turning his head away from the strange iridescent potion presented to him by the bailiff.

They watched it go on for a minute until Minski commented, “Hmm. Compulsion, I guess.” He grabbed the wand at his side and flicked it in Yaxley’s direction. The man immediately stopped resisting and drank the slightly smoking liquid to the last drop. He put his head down for a moment and the bailiff took advantage of it to remove his magic-suppressing necklace. The chain fell away from his arms and legs.

“Mr. Yaxley, you are now a Squib. Any physical violence by yourself towards others will be punished by imprisonment in Azkaban,” warned Griselda Marchbanks.

“Physical violence! What do you take me for? Some Muggle thug?” spat Yaxley.

“If no family member is present today to retrieve you, you will be given a set of plain robes, five Galleons, and five English pounds, courtesy of this court. Goodbye, Mr. Yaxley, and good luck,” continued Griselda Marchbanks, not unkindly.
“I don’t need your charity. I am a Yaxley! You will all regret this when the Dark Lord returns. He will annihilate you!”

“Mr. Yaxley, as I am sure you were made aware, Mr. Tom Riddle is deceased, with no hope of return. You might do well to accept it, and concentrate on building a new life for yourself.”

Walking out of the courtroom to the antechamber, accompanied by the bailiff and joined by a tall, dark haired woman carrying a garment bag, Yaxley laughed and said, “That shows what you know, Marchbanks! Just you wait and see.”

Yaxley had been in court less than ten minutes. Shacklebolt was right. This was not going to take a very long time.

“Well,” commented Minski, “That went well… Let’s plan for a twenty-minute break at five for a cuppa, and a forty-minute one at eight for supper. If we start early tomorrow, we could be done by tomorrow night.”

Griselda and Kingsley nodded as she said, “Please, Bailiff, bring Mr. Albert Baltus Rockwood to the court…”

The same scene was repeated again and again that afternoon. Some Death Eaters showed remorse, some despair at their loss of magic, some were almost catatonic in disbelief, some aggressive and arrogant like Yaxley. Harry was pleased to note that they all looked in good health, clean, with no trace of abuse at the hands of their captors and no evidence of deprivation.

Once without magic, none of them seemed inclined to resort to physical violence after they were free from their bindings, and all were met by relatives on the way out of the court.

One of them, an Anton Jay Barrow, purveyor of rare and mostly dark potions ingredients, kept saying, as if it excused his actions, “It was business, just business, I tell you! I took the Mark so he would buy from me! It was like any contract! He was my best customer in difficult-to-obtain ingredients! I never hurt anyone!”

“And what do you think these ingredients were used for, Mr. Barrow?” questioned Minski. “Making butterbeer? They were made into the only potions these ingredients can be used for: potions to torture, maim, possess, and kill. And you have a share in the responsibility of every crime committed with these potions.”

“But it was business! Just business!” he continued insisting, even as he was walked out of the court.

It actually made Harry curious. He asked Rose Prewett, “What is the legal meaning of the Mark? I know from Professor Flitwick’s research that taking it bonded a Death Eater to Voldemort, and that it contained an enslavement component, but what does it represent legally?”

“Griselda would be the best one to answer that question, Mr. Potter. To ask her a question, you simply raise your wand, just like you raise your hand in school.”

“Oh, but I don’t want to interrupt…”

“You are not here merely to witness, Mr. Potter, you are here to participate. You have a question, and a good one. Ask it.”

“All right.” Harry did as he’d been told and raised his wand, feeling a little silly.

A light went on in front of Griselda’s desk, and the three forward seats turned as one, now facing the
assembled interrogators. Mr. Minski said, “The Wizengamot recognizes the House of Black. Mr. Potter, you have the floor.”

Now Harry was completely embarrassed even though Griselda Marchbanks and the Minister, both Order of the Phoenix members he called by their first names, were smiling at him encouragingly. Mr. Minski just looked politely interested.

Harry took a breath, told himself not to begin his question with “Uh…” and started. “My apologies for the interruption. I was wondering what the Dark Mark represents legally, what its legal significance is.”

“An important question, Mr. Potter,” said Griselda, putting him a bit more at ease. “Though it contained a hidden enslavement component, the Dark Mark represents, before anything else, a voluntary bonding between a Death Eater and his … Lord. As with all bonding, it actually is a legal contract, and it is on that basis that we were able to come to the decision we did regarding sentencing. Does that answer your question, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes. Yes, it does, thank you.”

The chairs turned back toward the front and Griselda Marchbanks called for the bailiff to bring in the next Death Eater, Erasmus Brutus Bluegum. It was the big blond Death Eater Harry had had more than one run in with. He did not, however, pay much attention to the man’s sentencing; he was too busy internally celebrating.

He had come to the Wizengamot fully prepared to make an arse of himself, milking the Boy Who Lived, the Man who killed Voldemort, and the essential part he had taken in the Summoning to his maximum advantage, basically hoping to save Malfoy from his fate by playing on his fame and the debt the magical world might feel he was owed. Though he had promised Ginny to go to any length to secure Draco’s release, he had not looked forward to doing something he so wholeheartedly despised. And now, he would not have to.

He was so incredibly relieved that, instead of the nausea he had expected, he actually felt excitement when, at twenty to five, Griselda called for Lucius Abraxas Malfoy to be brought before the court. She was being told by the bailiff that he had been released on his own recognizance when Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco Malfoy entered the court. Lucius Malfoy, without further ado, took his place on the accused chair in the middle of the room. The chains wiggled, but did not bind him.

Mr. Minski looked at him above the rim of his reading glasses. “The accused will state his name,” he said, in a rather bored voice.

“Lucius Abraxas Malfoy.”

“Mr. Malfoy, you have been found guilty of being a Death Eater. As you submitted no memories that might serve to mitigate your sentence, you will surrender all personal wealth to the court for victim compensation, turn over your wand or destroy it forthwith, and drink a magic-suppressing potion that will permanently disable your magical abilities. Do you have any questions?”

“No.” Lucius Malfoy was displaying remarkable calm. He extracted a small gold key from his breast pocket and put it down on a velvet-lined tray that had appeared at the side of his chair.

“This is the key to my personal Gringotts vault,” he said. Next he hesitantly took out a wand. “My own wand was destroyed. I have been using my late father’s.”

“I am sorry, Mr. Malfoy, but if you have used this wand for more than thirty-seven days,” he waited
for Malfoy to confirm this with a nod, “this wand is considered yours by law, and you will need to surrender it, or destroy it in our presence.”

“Very well.” Lucius was obviously about to break it over his knee, when he hesitated, and stopped. “Could I be allowed to use it one last time, your Honor,” he asked Griselda, “before I lose my magic?”

Griselda turned first to Kingsley Shacklebolt and then to Mr. Minski, who both nodded imperceptibly. “As it has remained in your possession until now, I do not see why not, Mr. Malfoy. Make it quick, please.”

Malfoy stood up and, picking up the walking stick that had been leaning against the chair, Transfigured it into a magnificent bouquet of long-stem red roses. He walked the bouquet to Narcissa, who looked stunned but took it with tears in her eyes.

Then he walked back to the centre chair, snapped the wand over his knee, and took up the glass of shimmering potion that was waiting on the tray. Without the slightest hesitation, he drank it down in one swallow. He made a face and a long shudder shook his body. It was done. Lucius Malfoy was a wizard no more.

He put the pieces of wand and the glass back on the tray, and walked to the public area, to stand by his wife. She slipped her hand into his and gave him a brilliant smile, tears rolling down her face. He leaned over to kiss her temple, then turned to Draco and gave him a hard hug. Without waiting to be called, Draco made his way to the central chair his father had just vacated.

“The accused will state his name,” said Mr. Minski, not even looking up, in the same bored voice.

“Draco Atticus Malfoy.” His face was pale and his voice lifeless, but he showed no fear.

Harry raised his wand, and as it had happened previously, after the light came on in front of Griselda’s desk, the three front chairs turned back. Once again Mr. Minski said, “The Wizengamot recognizes the House of Black. Mr. Potter, you have the floor.”

This time, Griselda, Kingsley and Mr. Minski all looked at him questioningly.

Harry had been planning his speech all afternoon and spoke with conviction. “Presiding Interrogator, Minister, honored members of the Wizengamot, it was confirmed earlier by the Presiding Interrogator of this court that the Dark Mark is the physical manifestation of a magical bonding contract entered into by the Death Eaters with the so-called Lord Voldemort.

“Like any magical bonding or other magical contract, it can only be entered into legally if both wizards concerned are of age. When the accused, Draco Atticus Malfoy, who was born June 5th, 1980, received the Mark, he was barely sixteen years of age and therefore his bonding was not legal. Regardless of the presence of the Dark Mark on his arm, he is not, nor has he ever been, a Death Eater.”

The members of the Wizengamot were whispering excitedly among themselves. Finally, Mr. Minski leaned forward and asked, staring at Harry above his glasses, “And what made you think of this, Mr. Potter?”

“I am in school with Draco Malfoy, sir, in the same year, or was, anyway. He is only a couple months older than I am. In the summer before sixth year, when he got the Mark, I couldn’t even Apparate legally.”

That did not really answer the gentleman’s question, but it was true, and the man was nodding
understandingly nonetheless.

“Do you have any personal interest in seeing Mr. Malfoy… exonerated, Mr. Potter?” That question had come from behind him and Harry had no idea from whom.

“None. I don’t even like him, actually,” admitted Harry.

“Why is that, Mr. Potter?” That came from Griselda Marchbank herself.

“I think he’s a git,” said Harry, shrugging apologetically.

There were several chuckles at that, and a comment, once again from somewhere in the back, “Like father, like son…”

“But you do not think he deserves to share the fate of the other Death Eaters.” Griselda Marchbank was making a statement, not asking a question, but Harry felt compelled to explain.

“Draco Malfoy and I are two faces of the same coin, really. Our destinies were pressed upon us, by our births, our families, our parents’ actions. I succeeded in killing Voldemort. He failed in killing Dumbledore. I was there on the tower that night. I saw it. The Headmaster was at his mercy and Draco Malfoy lowered his wand. It’s not easy to go against your destiny. He made a choice that night, which said a lot more about him than the Dark Mark on his arm does.”

“Thank you, Mr. Potter, for preventing this court from a grave judicial error,” said Griselda Marchbanks. The chairs turned back to face the accused and the public area again. “This court finds that the bonding between Tom Marvolo Riddle and Draco Atticus Malfoy, which is physically represented by the Dark Mark, was contracted before Mr. Malfoy was of age, and is consequently legally null and void. All charges against Mr. Draco Malfoy are therefore dismissed. Mr. Malfoy, you are free to go.”

Draco started to rise from the chair, but abruptly dropped back down. He covered his face with his hands, and appeared to take several deep, long breaths. Uncovering an expressionless face, he stood up again and walked calmly over to his parents. Narcissa put down her bouquet of flowers and opened her arms to her son, whose facade suddenly broke, showing the happiest smile Harry had ever seen on that pointy face as Draco rushed into his mother’s embrace. They held each other very tightly, and Lucius’ arms found their way around them both. They stayed in that huddle for several minutes and then stepped back, all three of them smiling.

Narcissa looked at Griselda. “Thank you, your honor. Thank you for my son.”

“You are welcome, Mrs. Malfoy,” said Griselda, gently.

Narcissa then directed her smile to Harry, who smiled back. Lucius acknowledged him with a nod.

“On this happy note, I’d like to ask for a twenty minute recess,” said Minski in his bored gravelly monotone.

Griselda struck her gavel. “Granted. We will reconvene at 5:20 PM.”

Harry hurried out to catch up with the Malfoys. “Malfoy! Uh… Draco, I mean,” he added when all three of them turned around. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Draco’s face was once again unreadable as he nodded in agreement. Narcissa and Lucius walked far enough ahead to give the two young men some privacy. Harry and Draco made their way to an alcove in front of a long window.
“What do you want, Potter, the expression of my eternal gratitude?” asked Malfoy flippantly.

Harry chuckled. “Yeah, right. Please, Malfoy, don’t make me ill. Besides, I didn’t do this as a favor to you, believe me.”

Draco looked at him, calculatingly. “Is this your way of paying us back, then, for when my mother lied to the Dark Lord to protect you?”

Harry shook his head, amused. Slytherins saw the world so differently than he himself did. “No, Malfoy. I did it for someone I care very much about, who would do the same for me were the circumstances reversed.”

“Snape?”

Huh? Snape?? Why would Malfoy think that? It certainly was food for thought, but for now, he simply shook his head again. “No, Malfoy. Would you believe… Ginny Weasley?”

The look Draco gave him was for once completely unguarded and devoid of pretence, showing genuine surprise and definite interest. “Why? What does your girlfriend have to do with this?”

“She has not been my girlfriend for over a year, Draco. It would seem, however, that she has grown rather… fond of you.”

Draco’s pale cheeks suddenly turned a most becoming shade of pink. “She has?”

Harry grinned, pleased by Draco’s reaction and deciding to let him off easy. “Just thought you might like to know, Malfoy. See you around.” He turned to leave.

“Potter?”

Harry turned back.

“Thank you,” said Draco. He added, with a smirk, “For telling me about the Weaslette, of course.”

Harry smiled back at him. “Don’t thank me, thank her—for me, as well. She made me do it, but she was right, you know. Welcome back, Malfoy.”

He turned away again, heading back to the courtroom, grinning, and this time, did not look back. He chuckled. Draco Malfoy was such a git.

The tribunal session went on until eleven that night, and Harry would have liked to spend the night in a room at the Leaky Cauldron, but he wanted to tell Ginny about Malfoy and put her out of her misery.

When he Flooed in, the whole family was still in the sitting room. Ginny and George were playing wizard chess, Percy was writing something on Ministry parchment, Molly was doing the household accounting, and Arthur was reading a Ministry report, making notes in the margin.

Harry shook the soot off his robes and stepped in, greeting everyone.

“Oh, Harry! Don’t you look sharp, love,” said Molly with a warm smile. “Come here, though, you still have soot on the lining.” She did a quick charm to clean him up.

“So, Harry? How was it?” asked Arthur.

He had all of their attention, and Ginny was chewing her lower lip in nervousness. “Each case is
pretty quick really, and they are either broken, arrogant, or doing the stiff upper lip thing. The Malfoys were the only ones who broke the mold. Lucius Transfigured his cane into a bouquet for his wife before breaking his wand, and Draco got off.”

“He did?” said George, excitedly. “How did he manage that?”

“He had nothing to do with it. It was determined that he took the Mark before he was of age, and that the Mark represents a bonding contract which he was legally too young to enter into. The Presiding Interrogator pronounced the bonding contract null and void, the Mark insignificant, and Draco was released.”

Percy nodded approvingly and Molly said, “I’m glad. He’s so young. Narcissa must have been beside herself with relief.”

Harry grinned. “So was Lucius. They had a group hug for several minutes, and all three of them had big smiles on their faces, quite unlike the customary Malfoy deportment.”

Ginny got up and left the room quietly, and Harry was probably the only one to guess she was not heading for the loo. He said, “Well, we are starting again at seven tomorrow morning so, I’m for bed.”

Molly approved. “Good idea. Another long day ahead of you tomorrow?”

“Yes. They want to finish by tomorrow night.”

“Good heavens! What’s the big hurry?” she asked.

“I think they figure the quicker it gets done, the sooner everyone can put the war behind them and look to the future. No point in dragging it out and keeping people in Azkaban any longer than necessary, I guess.”

“Kingsley has made a lot of changes in Azkaban. There are medwizards on staff now, decent uniforms for the prisoners, clean bedding and three meals a day,” mentioned Arthur. “Of course, there are also human guards now that the Dementors have left. The place was quite crowded with all the Death Eaters. Aurors were sent to help the guards out. We can now take pride in the fact that prisoners are treated humanely, but it certainly is a noticeable drain on the Ministry’s budget.”

They exchanged goodnights, and Harry left, heading for his and Ron’s room. As soon as he closed the sitting room door behind him however, Harry got an armful of happy red-headed girl.

“Thank you, Harry! Oh! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Harry laughed. “You’re welcome, Ginny. I feel pretty good about it myself. Things would just not be the same without the ferret around.”

“Did you have to lay it on thick with the Boy Who Lived stuff? Was it very horrible?” He could tell she felt terrible having put him in that situation.

“No, actually. I told the truth in there. It was pretty much as I described, I just happened to have brought up Draco’s age at the time he took the Mark to the Presiding Interrogator’s attention.”

“And you just thought that up, just like that, because you are secretly a legal genius?”

Harry stuck his tongue out at her. “No, you jerk. It was serendipitous. And as you can see, on top of my legal genius, I now have the ability to use five-syllable words… Anyway, Griphook at Gringotts
told me that a contract is only valid if you are of age, and about three hours later, Griselda Marchbanks described the Mark as the physical evidence of a bonding contract, that’s all. It just clicked together nicely. I was just glad not to have to play on my notoriety.”

“Well,” she said earnestly, “serendipitous or not, I am impressed, and forever grateful. So… he’s free?”

“Yes, Ginny. Draco Malfoy is free. I am sure it will take him a few days to get use to the idea after the thoughts he must have been harboring since Kingsley announced the sentence Death Eaters would be facing. Now he’s got to figure out his future.”

Ginny said wistfully, “Even if I never see him again, I am really glad.”

“I know what you mean, but as far as not seeing him again… I wouldn’t count on it. You know, those bad Knuts have a way of always turning up.”

She smiled. “Oh, hush. Thanks again, Harry, really. Hey, were you going up to bed? I better go finish my chess game or George is going to wonder where I got to.” She gave him one more smile. “Good night.”

Harry walked upstairs feeling great, though he was tired and was facing more long sessions again the next day. He hung up his robes and fell into bed.

The next day was but a repeat of the day before. The last two Death Eaters to come up for sentencing, at seven-thirty that evening, were the Carrows, brother and sister. Both were filled with spite and bitterness and left the court accompanied by their mother, a woman who reminded Harry of Walburga Black. The interrogators were thrilled to be done. A small committee would review the memories of the thirteen Death Eaters who had presented them for evaluation, and would decide their fate. Harry had not answered Griselda’s call for volunteers to man the committee, so his duty was at an end.

Griselda and Kingsley both thanked Harry for his astute intervention in Draco’s favor, and more than one member of the Wizengamot made sure to greet him personally before he left. It was getting on nine by the time he made it back to the Burrow.
Chapter 14

Chapter 14: ~o~ Gratitude ~o~

He needed to relax, and as soon as he got back asked Ginny if she would go for a flight with him. She was enthusiastic and walked upstairs to grab a jacket as they chatted. He had just hung his robes when there was a knock on the door. Ginny opened it.

“Harry?” It was Arthur Weasley, looking a little uncertain.

“Sir?”

“Severus Snape is downstairs to see you, Harry.”

For some reason, Harry’s heart seemed to think it was a galloping stallion. “Snape? What does he want?”

“I have no idea. I guess you had better come and find out.”

“Sorry, Ginny. Let’s fly in the morning, okay?”

What could Snape possibly want with him? Harry took the stairs down two at a time.

Molly was waiting at the bottom. She whispered, “He is waiting for you in the sitting room. I’ll bring coffee in shortly, shall I?”

Harry was sure that she was just making an excuse to come and check on him, and was glad of it. “Yes, thank you, Mrs. Weasley. That will be great.”

He tried to calm himself before entering, but then inadvertently tripped on the corner of the rug as he walked in and made a less than suave entrance. Snape, luckily, had his back to him and Harry had recovered his balance before Snape turned around.

He was at his most… Snapish: all black robes and black hair, hands behind his back, his pale face giving nothing away.

“Good evening, Professor Snape. What can I do for you, sir?” asked Harry, politely.

Snape stared at him for a few seconds, his eyes sweeping up and down his body, without saying anything, making Harry uncomfortably aware he was still wearing his perfectly fitted trousers, his shirt and tie and his velvet waistcoat, a far cry from his usual attire.

“I have been informed of what transpired yesterday at the meeting of the Wizengamot.” Snape’s voice was soft and smooth, yet deep and harmonious. Unbidden came the realization, to Harry’s surprise, that it was very beautiful.

“Er… Yes?”

Again a few seconds of utterly uncomfortable silent staring.

“What you have done for Draco is beyond anyone’s ability to repay, Mr. Potter. As was what you did… for me, with the Summoning.”
To Harry, the situation had just gone from uncomfortable to unbearable. That this man, after all he had done and suffered, should feel the need to express gratitude, if that was what this was, was not something he could stand.

“Sir, I only did what was right, in both cases. There is nothing to repay, nothing at all. I rather feel that I should be the one…”

Snape raised his hand, effectively quieting him. “I do not believe you have to fear unbecoming shows of gratitude from Draco Malfoy, Mr. Potter. It is not in his nature, nor is it in mine, for that matter. But it has occurred to me that I might have been… unfair to you, in the past, in regard to your… motivations. I thought I ought to acknowledge my error.”

“Oh…”

A twirl of robes, and Snape was standing in front of the fireplace, a small box of Floo powder taken from a pocket somewhere now sitting in his hand.

A short bow, “Good night, Mr. Potter.” Green flames, a flapping of dark cloth, and he was gone.

Harry dropped onto the settee. Of all the awkward moments in his life, this short interlude with Severus Snape came near the top. And what did it mean? He really had no idea.

Molly chose that moment to make her entrance, a tray with two steaming cups of coffee floating ahead of her. “Oi! Where did he go?” she asked, looking surprised.

“He’s left already,” said Harry shrugging.

“Well, what did he want?” she asked, not hiding her curiosity.

She sat herself next to Harry on the settee, picked up one of the two coffee cups, and took a sip. No point in wasting fresh coffee, after all.

“To thank me, I think, or maybe… apologize? Not sure.” answered Harry, still nonplussed.

Molly patted his hand, commiserating. “Oh, my dear, how terribly awkward for you.” She brightened up. “Neither likely to happen again any time soon, I bet.”

She smiled at him, and drank up her coffee. Putting the cup back on the tray and giving him a one-armed hug, she added, “Get some rest, now. Tomorrow is another day.”

Harry wondered why, when coming from Molly Weasley, this type of nonsensical platitude sounded so wise and reassuring. He took her advice, glad he had postponed his flight with Ginny, suddenly out of energy. He was in bed with the lights off less than fifteen minutes later. He fell asleep thinking vaguely, and none too consciously, how warm and sexy Snape’s voice had sounded. He woke up with a mess on his belly, but thought nothing of it. He was eighteen years old, after all.
Chapter 15

On the 27th of August Ron returned. Harry had elected to spend the last few days before the new term started at the Burrow, relishing Molly’s coddling, the seemingly endless stretch of good weather, Arthur’s evening conversation with his children about their futures (treating Harry just like the rest), the beautiful garden, Ginny’s giddy happiness, and the reclaiming of his right to be a lighthearted teenager.

He could not remember ever having felt this carefree. Was this what life would be like from now on? He certainly hoped so.

One evening, right after dinner, a rather tanned Ron unexpectedly walked in through the back door. “G’day, mates!” he said, laughing.

Molly jumped up and ran to him, hugging him within an inch of his life. They all started asking him questions he could not possibly answer, smothered as his was by his mother’s kisses.

“Where is Hermione?”

“How was it?”

“Did you find her parents?”

“What’s Australia like?”

“Mum! Mum! Let me breathe here! I was only gone a couple of weeks, for Merlin’s sake!” he teased Molly.

“Well, I am glad you’re home,” she said smiling.

“Really, ‘cause I couldn’t tell,” he joked, kissing the top of her head.

“Welcome home, son,” said Arthur, smiling to see Molly so happy.

Ginny made room for him on the settee by kicking off George and said, “Sit right here and tell us all about it!”

“What am I,” protested George, feigning outrage, from the spot on the rug where he’d landed, “chopped liver?”

“You’re old news George. Now, hush,” ordered Ginny.

Ron sprawled on the seat and looked at his sister, “What, no tea?”

She kicked his thigh with her heels. “Speak, Ron, before I hex you!”

Ron laughed again, evidently thrilled to be home, and told his story. The retrieval of Hermione’s parents had not gone exactly as planned. They had been found easily, in Melbourne, a nice city full of cars and friendly Muggles who talked funny, and their memories had been restored without any difficulty. But then they had shocked Hermione by deciding to remain in Australia, where they had
built a nice life for themselves running a B&B on the coast.

“Bonkers, they are,” commented Ron. “Who’d want to live in a place with 2,900 different species of spiders, I ask you?”

The only thing that had plagued their happiness during their year Down Under had been unexplained dreams of a little girl with bushy hair and chocolate brown eyes that had haunted them both… Now they knew why and rejoiced to have their girl back, but had no intention of resuming their dental careers. Hermione had decided to stay with them as long as possible and would Portkey back just in time to catch the Hogwarts Express.

While Down Under, Ron and Hermione had followed the news from Britain closely and had been amazed to read about Draco Malfoy’s escape from his fate, especially when it had become obvious their best friend had been involved.

“You know, Harry, it’s funny, but we were both really happy at the news,” admitted Ron. “Malfoy’s a git, but I guess he’s our git. What’s the story with Lucius’ ‘Grand Gesture’?”

That was what The Prophet had labeled Lucius Malfoy’s last use of his magic.

“I don’t think it was a ‘gesture,’ to be honest,” said Harry. “I think that whatever else can be said about Lucius Malfoy, he truly loves his wife.”

“Well, she is his meal ticket now,” observed Ron, pragmatically. “I guess he’d better stay on her good side…”

“Yes, that too, I suppose, but temporarily. The Manor and everything Malfoy will become Draco’s when he turns twenty-one.”

“Wow, imagine that. All that money,” sighed Ron. “Must be nice. I don't suppose we’ll ever see him again.”

~o~

Of course, Ron could not have been more wrong. Later that night, as they were enjoying each other’s company in the sitting room playing a loud game of Exploding Snap, the Floo chimed. George, who was closest to the fireplace, answered. Draco Malfoy’s face appeared in the grate.

“Ferret!” exclaimed George. “You got the wrong Floo, mate!”

Malfoy pointedly ignored him, seeking Arthur with his eyes. Once he found him, he asked, in a rather formal voice, “Mr. Weasley, may I be permitted to come through?”

Harry put his arm around Ginny’s shoulders, noticing that she had suddenly gone a little pale.

“Certainly, young Malfoy, do come in,” answered Arthur, kindly.

Harry had to admire Malfoy’s gumption as he gingerly stepped into the sea of redheads, most of whom he’d insulted frequently and viciously for years, looking perfectly composed. Mrs. Weasley, who had been darning socks, watched the tall, handsome and well-dressed young man with curiosity as he bowed slightly to her first.

“Good evening, ma’am.”

She smiled warmly at him. She always approved of good manners. He turned to Arthur, and once
again bowing slightly, said, “Sir.”

“Mr. Malfoy.” Arthur could not help a glint of amusement showing in his eyes.

“May I request permission to speak to your daughter privately for a moment, please?”

Harry felt Ginny shiver under his arm, and he watched a blush creep up on her porcelain skin. The Weasley boys were too shocked to do anything but gape at Draco.

Arthur did not let his surprise alter his impeccable (if rusty) pureblood manners.

“Certainly, young man. Ginny, why don’t you show Mr. Malfoy the garden?”

Malfoy walked towards Harry and Ginny and offered her his arm, greeting Harry with a dry, “Potter.”

Harry could not help but grin at him and thought he saw the merest twitch at the corner of Draco’s mouth.

As soon as they left, the room exploded with noise. The Weasley boys had finally recovered from their astonishment, but Harry did not pay attention to their ranting and speculation. He watched Molly and Arthur and the silent communication that seem to take place between them: a raised eyebrow, a quick smile, a shrug, a nod.

The game resumed, more subdued, as they all seemed to be waiting for Ginny and Draco’s return.

“Maybe I should go see if she’s all right,” said George, starting to get up.

“Sit down, George,” ordered his father, sharply. “I’m sure she’s fine. Besides, I do believe your sister is perfectly able to take care of herself.”

“But Dad…” complained Ron, who’d been thinking along the same lines as George.

“Do you actually believe you would need more than one Weasley to wipe the floor with a Malfoy in a duel?” asked Arthur, raising his voice just a little.

Harry laughed to himself at Mr. Weasley’s manipulation. Now, going to check on their sister would be putting her abilities in question, and the boys would rather die.

After less than a fairly tense half hour they were back, Ginny wearing Draco’s cloak on top of her dress, and he looking stylish in a perfectly cut long-jacketed suit. Once again, Draco ignored everyone in the room but Arthur and Molly.

“As the Head of the House of Malfoy, I would request a word with the Head of the House of Weasley, if I may, sir?”

Arthur looked at his wife, who gave him a quick smile, and got up. “Let’s have a mug of tea in the kitchen, Draco.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Ginny slipped off the elegant cloak and laid them on the back of her father’s chair. She came back to sit next to Harry, carefully not making eye contact with anyone, biting her lower lip nervously. Molly looked at her with loving amusement.

George, Ron and Percy were talking all at once.
“Mum, what’s going on?”

“Ginny, what did that git want?”

“What does Malfoy want with Dad?”

“Go back to your game,” said Molly, in a voice that brooked no argument. “I’m sure they won’t be long. You can ask him yourself.”

Harry reached for Ginny’s hand and gave it a squeeze. She looked up at him, her eyes shining brightly; a joyous smile lit her face. Harry smiled back, happy for her. Less than fifteen minutes later, Draco and Arthur returned from the kitchen. Arthur returned his robes to Draco and they shook hands in front of the fireplace before Draco stepped back into the green flames to leave. Even as he was disappearing in the magical fire, he made eye contact with Ginny and gave her a smile that Harry had only seen on that pointy face once before, in the courtroom when Draco had been set free.

Once again the boys started talking all at once, directing questions to their mother, father, and sister, indiscriminately.

Arthur, still standing, raised his hands to stop the onslaught. Once peace was restored, he turned to his daughter.

“Ginny?” he said, not unkindly, “Do you want to tell them, or shall I?”

All eyes turned to her. “What Gin? Tell us what?”

She took a deep calming breath, and said, her voice shaking slightly, “Draco Malfoy and I are… betrothed.”

The brothers all jumped up as they expressed their disbelief, unable to convey their feelings sitting on the ground.

“What the hell?”

“You’re only seventeen!”

“You got to be joking!”

“Dad?”

Arthur was running his hands over his face. He sat down in his usual chair and looked at his assembled family.

“Boys, sit down and stop gesticulating.” He was immediately obeyed, so rarely did he issue an order. “Draco Malfoy is the head of the Malfoy family. As such, he came tonight to formally ask permission to court your sister.” He raised his hands to quiet them down again and shook his head. “No matter how little we care about it, we are purebloods, you know, and well, that’s how things are done.”

He looked at his daughter. “How long has this been going on?” he asked her, curious.

“Yeah, Ginny, when did you start dating the ferret?” asked Ron, less gently.

She looked down at her hands. “Tonight,” she said in a little voice.

“What is going on!” cried Percy.
“Ginny, what the hell?” said George.

“Shouldn’t you date him a while before getting ‘betrothed’?” continued Percy, ignoring George’s interruption.

“You hate him, Gin! Hell, we all hate him!” Ron reminded her.

“He is not forcing her to do this, is he?” asked George, worried about all the weird pureblood courtship rituals out there.

Ginny looked up. Her usual fire was back. “All right, all of you. Enough already! I don’t owe you or anyone else any explanation, but I do know this is unexpected, so I will make an exception… However, you three will watch it or I will hex you. The truth is, I have been in love with Draco Malfoy for nearly a year and he with me for much longer than that. You know as well as I do that, as the Head of his House, Draco can’t just date casually. He has responsibilities and he takes them very seriously.” She blushed scarlet. “But even if it wasn’t for that, there is nothing casual about how we feel toward each other. It just feels… fated, somehow.”

The boys were staring at her, floored. Molly’s voice filled the silence. “Lucius and Narcissa were engaged the day she turned seventeen,” she recalled, out of nowhere. “We were still in school. She was going to be a mediwitch. She did not even like him while he was still at Hogwarts.”

Her children were staring at her, surprised. She shrugged. “What? She and I were good friends. We were partners in Potions and in Herbology. Lucius had been out of school two years when, two days after her birthday, he showed up at a Quidditch game. She was a Slytherin Chaser. Slytherin won against Hufflepuff. He talked to her afterwards, walking around the pitch after her team had gone to hit the showers, and that was that, they were betrothed.

“He left, and went to talk to Pollux Black, her grandfather, who was the Head of the House of Black at that time, to agree on a courtship ritual. They were married a year later, shortly after she left Hogwarts. Andromeda thought Lucius had put her sister under a spell, but Narcissa just smiled and that’s exactly what she said, that it was ‘fated’.”

“Ginny, this can’t be right. He’s a Slytherin!”

“Well, I guess you’ll have to get over it, Ron,” said Ginny, rolling her eyes at him.

Ron turned to Harry for help. “Mate, say something!”

Harry turned to Ginny making sure to have a terribly serious look on his face, and frowned as he pretended to think for a moment. Finally, he said, “Congratulations!” and grinned.

She burst into giggles.

“You’re supposed to talk some sense into her,” exclaimed Ron, disgusted.

Harry shrugged. “She loves him, he loves her. We should all be so lucky, mate. And you said it yourself, he’s a git, but he is our git. I guess that’s official, now.”

Ginny laughed again, hitting him playfully on the arm.

“So, is he coming back to Hogwarts?” Harry asked Ginny.

She looked shocked. “Oh, my God! I don’t even know!” She hid her face in her hands. “This is ridiculous.”
“You’re telling us,” said George in a whiny voice that made them all laugh.

“I know the answer to that,” said Arthur, smugly. “Draco will take his NEWTS in December. Until then, he will be at Hogwarts, to review for the exams and act as a teacher’s assistant to Professor Snape. Then he will be going on to law school, like a true Malfoy.”

Ginny’s face had lit up at the thought of Draco being with her for three whole months at Hogwarts. Harry teased her. “You’ve got it sooo bad, Gin.”

“Don’t I know it,” she said, without a shred of embarrassment.

“I miss Penelope,” said Percy sighing dramatically, out of nowhere. Then his face lit up and he got up off the floor. “I think I’ll go and write her a letter.” As he left the room, they all started laughing again, the tension relieved.

The game of Exploding Snap was abandoned. Ginny and George teamed against Ron and nominally Harry in a game of chess instead. Harry, in fact, contributed nothing, just watching his best friend strategize his siblings’ defeat.

Harry was close enough to them to hear Molly ask Arthur, “So, what courting rites did you agree on?”

“Well, he wanted the Sylvan rites,” answered Arthur, “but I pointed out she still had a year of school. I offered Parnate rites, but he is required by the rules of his House to have a time limit. So we settled on the Mantes Rites, same as us. No less than eighteen months, no more than two years, no consummation before the final step,” they looked at each other and Mrs. Weasley giggled as he reached for her hand with a smile, “and weekly four-hour conversations in the presence of a chaperon. He agreed on Pomfrey or Flitwick, whoever is available. So they can go on regular dates while at school, and the formal conversation once a week will give them a chance to continue to get to know each other. He wanted the full rites. He would not forgo his obligation to give her monthly gifts, and insisted on her weekly Sunday meeting with her future mother-in-law. But Narcissa is lovely. I think it will work out well.”

“Yes. Good choice, Arthur,” approved Molly.

Harry decided he really needed to study not only the workings of the Wizengamot, but also some of the traditions and rites of the magical world. For the first time, he understood a little of the frustration felt by people like Malfoy, who placed such importance on their heritage, with people like himself who entered their world without bothering to learn the first thing about it.

After a few more minutes of silence, he heard Molly say to Arthur, “Well, that leaves only Charlie and Harry, then,” which made him both feel pleased that she had just counted him as one of hers, and curious about George…
Chapter 16

Ginny let go of Malfoy as soon as they stepped out of the house and crossed her arms tightly over her chest, conscious that she wore a simple summer dress in contrast to his impeccable dress robes. The sun was setting, the light extraordinarily golden, the evening air clear and alive with the songs of insects. They walked in silence on the weed-infested path, sending a gaggle of gnomes scrambling for cover.

Molly’s flowers were a glorious riot of color. They reached the edge of untamed roses and turned back, facing the house, still not speaking. Ginny was horribly conscious of how shabby the Burrow looked, built willy-nilly and held together with magic. She peeked at Malfoy, but though his eyes were on the crooked house, his face showed her nothing of his thoughts.

Near the well, he turned away from the house and took the path that led to the stream but stopped halfway there, under the big maple tree where the swing hung, the ropes unraveling.

He finally turned and looked at her, his silvery grey eyes searching hers. “Potter said I had you to thank for his help,” he stated.

She shrugged her thin shoulders. Harry had a big mouth.

Malfoy looked at his feet, then met her eyes again. “He also said that you had grown… fond of me.”

“He has a big mouth.” She had said it out loud this time and it was her turn to look down as she felt herself blushing again.

“I have been saying so for years, and have only gotten hexed for my trouble,” remarked Malfoy, deadpan.

Ginny could not help a burst of laughter.

Draco smiled and started strolling again. Ginny waited to hear what he would say next.

“He is a pillock, but I only started hating him in earnest when we were twelve. On Valentine’s Day. When you sent him that horrible excuse for a poem. I was so jealous, I could have cried.” He looked at her sideways. “So I made fun of you, of course, and made you cry.”

She could not walk anymore, too amazed by that confession, her heart beating very fast suddenly.

“I did not speak to my father for the entire summer, that year.” Draco added quietly. “He still has no idea why.”

She looked up and their eyes met. “You almost died because of him. It took me a long time to forgive him, even though he had had no idea, when he first gave you Riddle’s diary, of the depth of danger he had put you in.”

She started walking again wanting to get away from the terrible memories of that year.

Malfoy walked beside her and continued, “That said, I think there are some things you should know
about me, even though you may not be able to remain so fond of me after hearing them.”

He took a deep breath and started speaking purposefully and earnestly. “I am a bit of a coward. I am vain and arrogant. While in sixth year, I nearly killed Katie Bell and your own brother Ron. I let Death Eaters into Hogwarts, knowing full well people could be killed. I did not know Fenrir Grayback would be among them, but had I known, it probably would not have made any difference. It is because of me your brother William was disfigured and nearly died. I truly meant to murder Dumbledore myself, and regardless of Potter’s legal wrangling, I voluntarily took the Mark, and was a Death Eater.”

He took another deep breath, as if collecting his thoughts, and continued, “I am spiteful and jealous. Though I hated Voldemort and most of the other Death Eaters, I still believe wizards are better than Muggles, that our culture is unique and worth preserving. I believe that Muggle-borns and half-bloods should either embrace it exclusively or get out.” He stopped again for a moment. Ginny could sense he wasn’t done yet, so she waited.

“I am manipulative. I am proud. Proud to be a wizard, proud to be a pureblood, proud to be a Malfoy.”

He looked Ginny in the eyes intently. They were now standing on the edge of the stream and could hear the delicate sounds of the water on the rocks and the calls of the frogs.

“I will not lie to you, Weasley. I may have been in love with you since I was twelve years old, but were you not a pureblood, I wouldn’t be here tonight.”

He was finished now, she could tell (he was not a coward). She let everything he had said hang between them for a moment, enjoying the twilight and the residual warmth of the day radiating from the path.

She answered finally, “Aside from the fact that you have been… in love with me for six years, you have not told me anything tonight I didn’t already know, Malfoy.”

She looked at him. He was so beautiful, this blond boy with his cold, cold eyes and his unsmiling mouth. His face showed nothing of the turmoil he might be feeling after his confession.

Having organized her thoughts, she went on. “I, also, am proud of being a witch, and of being a daughter of the Tolerant and Benevolent House of Weasley, with all that it stands for. That means being able to accept and live peacefully side by side with all sorts of people, including people who do not share our views.”

She gave him a rueful smile. “It allowed me to listen with equanimity to all you had to say when we sat on opposite sides of the tree by the lake, and to really hear you. Knowing you were a Death Eater, I thought hearing your inner thoughts would make me hate you even more than before. But that’s not how it worked out.”

“How did it? Work out, I mean.” Draco sounded unsure for the first time that night.

After his earlier brutally honest description of himself, she felt owed him the truth. “I fell in love with you.”

He was very quiet again for a while then he said softly. “You heard my most intimate thoughts, Weasley, my doubts, my inner conflicts, and you fell in love me?”

She looked up at him again. His grey eyes suddenly held wonder and hope.
“Yes.” She let her feelings show in her luminous smile.

He chuckled softly, disbelieving. “I dared to hope after Potter... But I did not really believe him.” Pushing a strand of her hair behind her ear, and gently cupping her cheek he said, his voice still soft, “If it’s all right with you, then, I would like to call you Ginevra.”

“All right,” she said, loving that name on his lips. He leaned forward, looking into her eyes for permission and kissed her. His lips were warm and dry, caressing hers, and then they opened up to each other, and his tongue was soft and gentle. His kiss felt so right, so perfect, like coming home.

He backed away a little, smiling into her eyes, and said, “You know this is forever, don’t you, Ginevra?”

She understood he was warning her that he did not give his heart lightly. As for herself, she had absolutely no doubts. “Yes, it is, Draco.”

They kissed again, savoring the simple joy of it. She shivered. The sun had gone down behind the hills, finally and it was getting cool quickly. He unclasped his elegant cloak to reveal a perfectly cut overcoat, and put it around her shoulders.

“I’ll need to speak to your parents, you know.”

The Head of a pureblood House did not engage in casual dating. She understood the ramifications.

“I know.”

They walked back to the Burrow quietly. As they passed the well and the silhouette of the Burrow appeared against the night sky, Draco said, “I like your house. It looks friendly.”

She squeezed his hand and almost tripped on a gnome. “I suppose you like our gnomes, as well?” she teased.

“The Manor has its garden pests too,” he countered straight-faced. “Some pesky white peacocks...”

She burst out laughing. He turned to her with a smile, and in a rare spontaneous gesture, pulled her into a tight hug. “I’ve always loved your laugh,” he whispered into her hair.

Her cheek resting against his chest, she took a deep breath. Draco smelled like a summer’s rain. He was tall, his shoulders broad, and his arms wrapped around her perfectly. ‘I’ll never be afraid again,’ she thought nonsensically, and sighed. His heart was beating slow and strong next to her ear. ‘This is where my head will rest, and I will hear this heartbeat in my sleep, every night of my life.’ There was not a doubt in her mind, their future a clear path ahead of them.

His arm still around her, they walked the rest of the way in silence, their bodies in harmony.

End of Part 2.

Chapter End Notes

One of my betas hated part two, which she felt had been highjacked by the Malfoys. "Where is the Snarry?", she complained.

I, for some reason, am inordinately fond of them. Considering how long the fic turned
out to be, I felt it was OK to give them a few chapters and embraced the concept by naming Part 2 after them.

Part 3 will be as Severus centric as Part 1 was Harry centric, and just as short as part 2. Part 4, which is actually 75% of the fic, is where the Snarry goodness really starts...
Chapter 17

Part 3: Severus

Chapter 17: ~o~ Losing It. Jan. 1999 ~o~

It started innocently enough. Professor Severus Snape had gone for a stroll by the lake by the light of the full moon, enjoying the crunching of the frozen snow under his boots and the thick white clouds his breath made in the air. The night was beautifully clear and very cold. He’d kept his gloveless hands in the folds of his warm winter cloak, its hood protecting his ears from the frosty wind. Outside of the sound of his steps and breath, there was only perfect stillness, and silence.

He’d returned to his office feeling at peace, luxuriating in the sense of freedom afforded by the knowledge that Voldemort was gone forever, that the war, the spying, the constant fear of failing in his mission were over, that his life was finally his own… Only to find young Creevey standing at his office door, an expression of deep indecision on his face. It turned to relief at his approach.

“Mr. Creevey, to what do I owe the displeasure of your presence at my door this evening?”

“Detention, sir? You gave me detention this afternoon…”

Of course. The exploding cauldron of Pepper-up in fifth period. Detention at seven o’clock.

“And how long have you been standing here, wasting your time and taking up space?”

Creevey looked at his Muggle watch. Funny how the Muggle-borns never let go of that one instrument.

“An hour and fifteen minutes, sir.”

“And it did not occur to you, realizing I wasn’t in, to assume that something more important than your detention needed my attention, and that you should consider it re-scheduled to tomorrow?”

“Uh… No, sir. I wasn’t sure. I thought you might arrive any minute…”

“For over an hour?”

“Well, you see…”

“Yes, sadly, Mr. Creevey, I do see. Deductive reasoning and decision-making are obviously beyond your limited abilities. I have no patience left for your incompetence tonight. Tomorrow, same time. Don’t be late. You are dismissed.”

Strange that he had so totally forgotten poor Creevey. That was a first. Well, the Shrivelfigs would still need shredding tomorrow. No harm done. And it was gratifying to know that the mere thought of his displeasure could keep a sixteen-year-old boy standing in the freezing corridor for over an hour.

The next day, he forgot the essays he meant to return to the first years in his office, and had to tell them that their work had been so dismal he couldn’t stand grading them all in one sitting.
Friday, he forgot to shave and would have missed the teachers’ meeting as well had Flitwick not mentioned it to him during dinner. He started worrying.

Saturday morning, he allowed himself to sleep in past seven for the first time in… for the first time. He got in the shower at seven-thirty, hoping the extra sleep would help his focus. Finished, and about to step out, he hesitated. Had he washed his hair or not? He could picture himself putting the oily, flame-retardant concoction he brewed for himself and used as shampoo in his hand, but was that today, or yesterday? It must have been yesterday. He did it again. The shampoo foamed instantly in his clean hair; he had done it already.

Annoyed at himself he left the shower, only to realize he did not have a towel. He dripped water on the hardwood floor all the way to the armoire where the house-elves left his fresh ones. He never used a towel twice, and always got a new one out before heading to the shower. Always!

His mood was so foul at breakfast that even Flitwick gave him a wide berth.

He stopped by the infirmary on the way back to get the list of potions Madam Pomfrey needed him to brew, and felt absurd satisfaction that he had remembered to do so. He spent the entire morning in his lab, doing what he loved best, brewing five potions at a time. The final cork put on the last bottle of Skele-Gro, with only the Dreamless Sleep to finish later (it had to simmer for six hours), he headed to lunch feeling much better. He left the door to his private lab unwarded and wide open behind him.

Over the next three weeks, things went from bad to worse. He coped as best he could, writing notes to himself and sticking to a very strict routine. There had been some close calls. A few nights ago, halfway through brewing he had had to stop with the horrifying awareness that he did not remember what potion was simmering in the cauldron nor what he was supposed to put in next. He had forced himself to calm down and, examining the ingredients on the lab bench, had remembered he was brewing Pepper-up—and from its light pink color, that it was ready for the mint leaves. Still, it had shaken him to the core.

The day after, the worst one yet, he had stood in glacial terror in front of his own door, unable to recall his password. For what seemed an eternity, though it had probably only been a minute or two, his mind had been frozen, completely blank. He could not bring to mind any password. Not the one for the Slytherin dorm, not the one to his private lab, not the one to his Gringotts vault.

He had turned around, heart racing, cold sweat sticking his shirt to the skin of his back, walking away from his door like an automaton. By the end of the corridor, the sight of a gargoyle triggered a flash of recall. Calcite. His password was calcite. The Slytherin dorm’s was Black Adder, his lab’s was Aspergillus, and his vault’s Excalibur. He had leaned on the wall, his knees weak with relief.

Sitting in his office one afternoon, he contemplated miserably his deteriorating condition when there was a soft knock on his door.

“Enter!”

It was a second year student whose name he could not, for the life of him, recall at that moment. A competent brewer, though.

“What is it?” he asked scornfully.

“Uh… sir. Is class cancelled today?”

Merlin’s beard! It was two-thirty! He’d forgotten the second years!
“Of course not!” Never mind that he was thirty minutes late, what kind of question was this? “I’ll be there momentarily. Prepare yourselves for a test!” There wasn’t time for them to brew the Cheering Potion now, and after all, they had to do something.

He could never let this happen again. The next morning he left his rooms in plenty of time for breakfast, to make sure not to be late for first period. The corridors were strangely silent. He was almost alone at breakfast and thought he must have left even earlier than planned. He took up the Daily Prophet that was lying next to Flitwick’s plate. Ah… It was Saturday. He rested his head in his hands. This would not do. He was going to have to talk to Poppy.

He was surprised to cross her path in the dungeons, and decided to take advantage of that opportunity to arrange for an appointment. She looked at him strangely.

“Severus, I am on my way to your rooms. You came by after breakfast and asked me to drop by.”

“Good Lord!”
He hustled her inside his sitting room, and immediately started pacing in front of the empty fireplace, enumerating his symptoms.

She sat down on his couch, realizing that waiting for an invitation to do so would only leave her standing all afternoon.

As expected, he was very organized and thorough in his cataloguing of the frustrating incidents that had plagued him for over a month. A long and dispiriting half hour later, he took a seat next to her.


Without a word, she stood up and forced him to a reclining position on his narrow and uncomfortable couch. She ran her wand over his body, spending extra time over his head and neck.

“There is nothing wrong with you physically, Severus. You are as fit as a fiddle.”

“But I am losing my mind!”

“Don’t question that, Severus, I am just saying it has to be entirely psychosomatic. This sort of short-term memory loss in wizards is only associated with two conditions: dementia, which has its sources in the physical, and of which you show no sign whatsoever, and psychological stress.”

“For heaven sakes, woman!” He jumped to his feet and resumed his frantic pacing. “Are you out of your generally competent mind? Psychological stress?

“Spying for a devious old man in the very bosom of a psychotic one, that’s stress!

“Occluding without a pause for years on end or protecting the so-called Chosen One from his own foolishness, time and time again, that’s stress!

“Brewing potions for both sides of the war, all the while teaching a very difficult and dangerous subject to four hundred idiots who could not care less and have the gall to despise you, that’s stress!

“Knowing for months you are going to have to kill your beloved mentor and live with the scorn of your erstwhile so-called friends for who knows how long, now, there is stress!

“Lying on a floor bleeding to death while hoping the antivenin and blood-replenishing potion you have carried for weeks in your pockets for just such an occasion will be enough to stop you from dying until help arrives, for seventeen hours! That is stress!

“My life since that bastard’s death has been the least stressful I have ever lived!”

She grabbed at his hand as he was passing by and forced him to sit back down. “Calm yourself, Severus!” She looked at him with great concern. “I understand this has unsettled you, but you must control yourself, or we cannot hope to find the source of the problem!”

“You are right, Poppy,” Snape answered, completely overwrought. “My apologies. It is just that… You see... I have not been blessed with the most… handsome face, or the… easiest of personalities.”
Poppy almost rolled her eyes at the understatements.

“But my mind! I have always had a… a… beautiful mind. It has been my source of pride, of satisfaction, my lifeline. I am losing the only precious thing I have ever had! Without it, I have nothing. Nothing!”

Such a heartfelt confession from such a private man only showed the depth of his despair. Poppy, who had always secretly favored the snarky Potions Master, felt it keenly.

She dared put her hand on his arm. “We will get to the bottom of this, Severus. I promise you.” She pulled back her hand, feeling reluctant to take any further advantage of his momentary weakness.

She had been right. Already he was berating himself for the spectacle he had made. He once again took control, his features returning to their usual mask of disdain, his body back to perfect straightness, his aloofness restored. As she watched that transformation, a sudden niggling thought appeared in the back of her mind. “You have Occluded your mind for years, you said?” she confirmed.

“Yes. From necessity, obviously. I couldn’t exactly let Voldemort wander freely through my thoughts, could I? And he was the most powerful Legilimens that ever lived.”

“I have heard that said, and by Albus, no less.” She agreed. “I also heard him say that you were the most consummate Occlumens alive, that not a thought escaped the confines of your mind unless you let it consciously do so. ‘A mind like a black hole,’ I think were his words.”

She looked thoughtful. Then she asked softly, “How do you do it, Severus? How does one close off his mind so completely, so efficaciously, and for so long?”

He accepted her digression from his immediate problem as it gave him a chance to further compose himself. “It takes discipline, Poppy. You build walls in your mind, and false doors. You suppress, hide, and even forget your emotions. You do not allow your mind to wander. Not ever. You do not revive memories unnecessarily. You control your thoughts and hide the truth behind intricately woven lies.”

“But still, Severus, a powerful Legilimens should be able to find the truth, to see it behind the lies, shouldn’t he?”

“Not if it is not there. You see, Poppy, to resist him, I had to completely erase any distracting thoughts, to forget anything that could make me vulnerable. And then I had to convince myself that what was left was all there was, all there’d ever been. I had to lie… to myself.”

She was quiet for a long time. Then she said, “Perhaps this is where the problem lies. Is it possible that you have hidden so much of yourself, even from yourself, that you are only left with an echo of who you really are? That your barricaded mind is so well trained that it refuses to even process any thought or feeling that could endanger your impregnable defenses?”

“But what would that have to do with my memory lapses?”

“It would produce stress, Severus. You would be faced with a terrible void, unable to feel emotions that would naturally occur now that you are at peace, since you have denied even the possibility of their existence, unable to process thoughts relating to options now open to you because you have convinced yourself they are not possible.

"I think the end of the external stresses you so eloquently described may have allowed internal ones to emerge, stresses of such magnitude that your mind is unable to cope. If, for a long time, you have
denied any side of you that was not needed for survival in your dangerous environment, once that
danger is removed, your equilibrium is lost and you find yourself lacking the basic tools, the
adaptability to face your new surroundings.”

He was stunned. He was vaguely aware of having shunted—at first with difficulty, but after a while
completely automatically—a number of thoughts, a number of avenues he had never explored. His
interests had been culled, his focus honed to perfection. What had been ignored, hidden and
forgotten, he had no idea. And how was he to find what he had lost when he was not even aware of
missing anything? Yet what Poppy said somehow rang true. After all, what had he been doing with
all his newfound freedom? Taking walks in the dark? Was that the extent of his interests?

He thought of all the things others were passionate about, all the things that gave meaning and depth
to their lives: music, art, travel, friendship, sex. None of them held any interest for him. He could not
fathom bothering to sit through a concert. He had only attended Quidditch games out of obligation,
finding Minerva’s enthusiasm for the sport completely incomprehensible. Despite his childhood
affection for Lily, he had never felt any sexual attraction to anyone, couldn’t grasp what the fuss was
all about.

Potions, yes. Occlumency, strategy, obfuscation, yes. Dark arts and the defense against them,
absolutely. But all these things that he understood, excelled at, thrived upon, were all a means to an
end. And that end had come. And he was left perfectly prepared for a world that he was grateful no
longer existed, but woefully ill-equipped to make life in this new world worth living. Surely, there
was more to him than this? But where was it? Could it be recovered?

He finally spoke, “If you are right, and I believe you are, recovery of what has been suppressed is
essential. Therapy is hopeless. Even Veritaserum-enhanced therapy would not work to uncover what
one really believes does not exist.” He thought for a moment. “I think a variation of Veritaserum that
could disable Occlumency might have some merit.”

“Severus, it does not exist.”

“Whatever depth I may be lacking, Poppy, I am a Potions Master. That a potion does not exist
merely delays its use. It only has to be created. This is not Wolfsbane that we are talking about.
Disabling Occlumency through a variation of Veritaserum should not be an insurmountable problem.
”

He started thinking aloud. ”But nothing would come of it as long as the patient’s perceived need for
self-delusion remained. And to eliminate that, one would have to overpower the atavistic drive for
self-preservation. An interesting challenge… I’ll start working on it. I will let you know when I have
something ready for testing.”

“As you pointed out, Severus, this is not Wolfsbane. How would you propose we test it?”

“Well, on me, of course. But I will need your help. Suppressing self-preservation without shutting
down the limbic system might prove… difficult. I have no desire to die trying.”

“Merlin’s beard!”

“Well, this was all your idea…”
Chapter 19

It took a little over three months to work out the right combination. The potion was composed of several individual parts, each of them frightfully dangerous both to the body and to the mind.

The first one was a modified version of a phobia-suppressing potion, and fairly removed the emotion of fear completely from the psyche. The second one was an elixir that, taken alone, rendered a person completely defenseless against suggestions, depriving them of free will. It was almost as good as a well-aimed Imperius. The third caused the conscious mind to stop overriding the subconscious. The problem with that one was an annoying side effect. It caused complete, if temporary, amnesia. A few extras were added to keep the heart beating and the diaphragm moving, and to counteract the sudden urge to kill oneself that occurred when the first three parts were mixed together.

On a nightly basis, Severus had come to the infirmary and tested this aspect or that aspect of the concoction. Poppy was a nervous wreck. Severus had come close to dying several times and would certainly have without their preparations and her constant monitoring. When she objected to continuing, he threatened to proceed without her and she had to relent.

As the level of Severus’ external stress increased (sleepless nights of research, constant preoccupation with brewing individual parts, imminent danger, and physical discomfort from side effects) his internal stresses must once again have gone dormant, as his memory was now as perfect as ever.

Finally, the complex mixture was brewed, bottled, and ready. There was only one more problem.

After taking it, Severus would be unable to lie to himself, but also lacking any desire to probe his own mind and search for the source of his problem on his own. And after the potion wore off, he would remember nothing of what might have occurred while he was under its influence. He was going to need some assistance.

Poppy would be in the infirmary monitoring his life signs through his wand and could not help otherwise. Someone else had to be involved. Someone Severus trusted (an extremely short list), someone who liked him enough to be willing to help him (an even shorter list), someone with enough perspicacity and intimate knowledge of Severus’ life to ask the right questions.

Flitwick’s time was consumed in choir practice and preparation for his yearly Easter bash, so that left Minerva McGonagall. Poppy, who had come to a very keen appreciation of Severus’ lack of social graces and of his reluctant nature, volunteered to approach her.

Of course, she immediately accepted.

~o~ A Joy and an Honor ~o~

Knowing how difficult Severus could be, Minerva sighed and knocked on the door. She knew perfectly well that he was already aware of her presence. His door had more wards than a Gringotts vault, Merlin knew why. There certainly wasn’t anything to steal from his spartan interior. Well, the books, maybe, if one favored potions and the dark arts…

He took his sweet time coming to the door, which she expected. It was bound to irk him to have to
use her help. He opened the door without a word and let her pass, adding some exotic silencing charm to it for good measure. Well, he was a very private man. This was bound to hurt. He gestured for her to sit down. She Transfigured his straight back chair into a plush armchair. She was going to be there a while and might as well be comfortable. He rolled his eyes. He started pacing.

“You do understand that I will have to Obliviate you.”

“Yes, Severus. That’s fine.”

He stopped walking and faced her. He held his hands in tight fists, rigidly at his sides as if having to force himself to do something against his will.

“I am… grateful for your willingness to… assist me in this matter.”

Ah, but that must have cost him. She decided to be kind anyway, which did not mean the same thing when one talked about Snape as it did about others.

“Well, if we could get on with it, I don’t have all day,” she said brusquely.

He nodded, extracted a small vial from his pocket, and sat down. After the slightest hesitation, though she might have imagined it, he opened it and drank it down.

“It will take a minute or two to start working. You do understand that I will have no memory of this at all, once it’s over?”

“Yes, Severus. Poppy went over it with me in great detail.”

“I prepared a quill and some parchment for you,” he added, quite unnecessarily, since they were in plain sight on a small occasional table next to her chair.

“Yes, I see them. Thank you.”

He sighed deeply and closed his eyes, his head coming to rest against the back of his chair as his posture relaxed. She waited a moment. Had he fallen asleep?

“Severus? Are you with me?”

He opened his eyes, sat a bit straighter, and… smiled at her.

“I am, Minerva,” he answered amiably, “and a pleasure it is, as always.”

Well, this was certainly going to be interesting…

~o~

Minerva reread some of her notes, shaking her head, and smiled affectionately in the direction of the man who, lying on a very comfortable looking leather couch, was deeply asleep. It was going on eight. She had been in Severus’ quarters for over six hours. It had all gone as Poppy had predicted.

After five intense and very illuminating hours, Severus had started yawning deeply and, with an apology, had “closed his eyes for only a minute.” That had been an hour ago. He should be waking up soon.

“Severus? Are you with me?”

“Of course I am,” he replied archly. “Where else would I be?”
Ah… The old Severus was back. He sat up and frowned at the couch as if it had personally offended him.

“I would thank you to cease rearranging my furniture, Minerva. I like it as it is.” The couch changed back to the straight-back horror it had been (before he had Transfigured it himself, a few hours previously, grumbling that its seat “had to be stuffed with peach pits”).

She took the blame without comment.

He glanced at the sheath of parchment, now covered in her neat, spidery handwriting.

“Ah. I dare say it is done, then?” he asked, glaring at her.

“It is, Severus,” she replied, getting up gingerly. “I must be going.”

Saying nothing, he followed her to the door and took out his wand.

She raised her hand to stop him, “Before you do this, I would like to say something to you, Severus. I have always liked you. Well, except for last year of course, but that doesn’t really count, does it? I have liked you, and respected you, and at times admired you, since the day you came back to teach at Hogwarts. At this moment, when I know you better than anyone else, better than you know yourself, in fact, I want to tell you this: nothing I have heard today has changed my good opinion of you; quite the opposite, actually. It is truly a joy and an honor to know you, Severus. And I think I would like to hold on to that thought.” She took out her wand, and pulled her thought out of her temple.

She looked at him expectantly. “Now, do your worst, my dear,” she said.

It took only a second for him to erase the previous six hours from her mind. She stood there a moment, looking slightly disoriented and frowned at the silvery strand hanging from the tip of her wand. With a shrug, she put it to her temple and as it disappeared back into her head, a look of understanding came to her face.

She nodded, and smiled up at him. “Well, good evening, Severus.”

“Good evening, Minerva. And… thank you,” he added, as an afterthought.

“You are very welcome, Severus.” She left his rooms without looking back.

He stood by the door for a moment and looked at the stack of paper she had left. He had a vague urge to throw it in the fire. But he didn’t. Instead, he walked calmly to the table, pointed his wand at the writing, and muttered a spell. The text was now hidden. To anyone looking at it without uttering the proper password, it would appear to be something they would be most disinclined to read. He glanced at the first page:


He went about his nightly routine to get ready for bed. It was only nine o’clock but he felt very tired. An aftereffect of the potion, of course: the crushed water hyacinth and the anteater saliva would see to that. Dressed in his usual grey nightgown, he got under the thin duvet on his narrow bed, leaving his slippers in easy reach.

He lay unmoving for a long time, his mind blank.

“Like Pandora’s box” Poppy had said, her remembered voice disrupting the silence in his head.
Whatever was in those pages, once read, would never be forgotten again.

He tried to empty his mind again.

“It is a joy and an honor to know you, Severus.”

He sighed, annoyed at his lack of control. But then, what was he afraid of? What was so great about his current life that he would cling to it so fiercely?

In another second, he was out of bed, the duvet falling noiselessly to the floor. He picked it up and wrapped it around himself. His bedroom was not heated. He went back to the slightly warmer sitting room and picked up the stack of parchment.

After a glance at his austere couch, he sat himself in the plush chair Minerva had forgotten to return to its original state. It was extremely comfortable. He arranged his blanket, straightened the pages, took a breath, said the password, and started to read.
Chapter 20

Looking back, later, Severus realized the recovery of his denied self hadn’t happened as Poppy and he had imagined it would. He had pictured dragging heavy boxes out of a faraway hidden attic and tediously looking through them, finding a few interesting elements amidst a great deal of useless data. But what he had hidden through the years was not stored neatly, in the deep recesses of his mind. It was everywhere, hidden in plain sight.

From the moment he had started going through Minerva’s carefully penned notes and reading his own answers. (“For a few months now, you appear to have been suffering from extreme personal stress, Severus. Do you know what has caused this?” “How could I not know? He is leaving, Minerva. Three more months and then it’s probable that I shall never see him again.”) He had felt as if his perception of himself was undergoing a sea change, like a black and white photograph shifting to brilliant color and then slowly becoming tri-dimensional.

He was the same man he had always been, just… more so. Nothing he had held true about himself had been wrong. It had only been the basic barren musical phrase to the complex symphony of who he really was.

After only a few pages, he put the papers down. He did not need them anymore. They had been a catalyst, nothing more, the key to unlock his self-imposed mental shackles. Now freed, he already knew all the answers. His complete self had been there all along, quiescent, and had now suddenly emerged fully formed, fully functional.

He looked around his bare, empty rooms and shivered at the self-denial they represented. They felt like a cell. He had the urge to get out. He needed to be outside, in open space. He got out of his rooms, out of the dungeons, and found himself walking down the front steps into the spring night.

Even in the chilly Scottish April, it was much warmer outdoors than it had been in the dungeons. He let his flimsy duvet fall to the ground and, reaching the Quidditch pitch, he stepped out of his slippers to better feel the soft lushness of the grass. He looked up at the stars peeking through the clouds. Thunder rolled in the night and like a sigh, rain started falling densely over the grounds.

He spread out his arms, then pulled off his threadbare nightgown. He stood naked in the downpour, staring at the sky, his pale skin bathed in moonlight, rivulets of rain running down his face and lean body.
He felt whole and alive, vibrantly alive. He smiled, then chuckled, and finally laughed as he had never let himself laugh before, his entire body shaking with mirth.

Stress indeed: the stress of contained life, bursting at the seams and screaming to get out. And once again, of course, Albus had been proven right, because of all the interests, feelings, and emotions he had been suppressing, it had been love—passionate, irrepressible love (love!)—that had finally been the undoing of his prudently crafted persona.

He laughed even harder at the absurd irony that he should be brought back to life, first physically and now figuratively, by the same person. After being so resentful for owing Harry Potter his continued existence, he suddenly had to face that, against all odds, it was his passionate love for the same man, that beautiful, untamed and eternally frustrating adolescent, that gave Severus’ life its meaning. Why should he be surprised that the untainted, completely inappropriately young, yet infinitely desirable target of his feelings be Potter? Wasn’t it always Potter?

He picked up his discarded nightgown, his soggy slippers, his abandoned duvet, and headed back
inside, unapologetically nude. Because life owed him so many favors, he made it back to his rooms without encountering a soul.

After a long hot shower, he dressed in his softest and most elegant clothes, threw a few more pieces of clothing in a small leather bag along with two or three items he wanted to take. He sat down at his desk and wrote a short resignation letter.

Checking that it was still before midnight, he left his quarters for Minerva’s office. No doubt she would be there, catching up on whatever it was he had kept her from that afternoon. The gargoyle let him through and he knocked lightly on her door. He smiled when he heard her answer.

“Come in, Severus.”

~o~

Minerva had, of course, forgotten all that had been said that afternoon, but Severus had apparently been willing to leave her something she had gathered from the experience. Her feelings for him had been intensified and her understanding of him deepened. She had known, departing his quarters, that he would be leaving Hogwarts. She didn't know the exact reason for this conviction but it was blended with her deeper appreciation of him.

He deserved more out of life. He was still quite young by wizard standards, and had so much to explore, to enjoy. Yes, she had known he would be leaving, though not how soon. However, when there was a knock on the door at this hour, she had had no doubt who it was and what he was coming to tell her.

He looked the same, yet amazingly different. His body was relaxed and though still straight, his posture had lost its stiffness. His eyes, which had always seemed to be flat black mirrors, had depth and warmth. His stark facial features were as homely as ever, yet radiated an energy, a lust for life that had never been there before.

He sat down without invitation, as one would do visiting a friend, and handed her a letter.

"I am sorry, Minerva. I am sure this is bound to make your life difficult, but I cannot stay."

"I was expecting it, Severus, though obviously I don’t know why," she answered, putting the unopened letter on her desk. “I have already contacted Horace to ask him to return, and though I told him I didn't know exactly when I would need him, I did warn him it would be short notice. I will start looking for a permanent replacement for your position tomorrow."

She smiled at him. "I will miss you, Severus. Where will you go?"

He shrugged. "To London, first, I suppose, to get my bearings. I have no idea what I am going to do."

This statement did not sound as it would have coming from a person lost, but more as if it had ended with the word ‘first’.

"I shall be leaving your quarters as they are for now, at least until a permanent replacement is hired. If you ever need a place to stay…"

"Thank you. I do not think I will return, at least not for a while, but it is good of you."

She could tell he was eager to be on his way. She stood up and walked him to the door.
"Goodbye, Severus," she said, daring to place a hand on his arm.

He looked at her with an amused expression and then enveloped her in a warm hug. After a second of surprise, she hugged him back tightly, her throat closing with emotion, her eyes filling with tears. It occurred to her, quite randomly, that in another life he could have been her son.

"I will miss you, too, Minerva. And Filius, and Hagrid." He stepped back from her. "Tell them goodbye for me."

"I will."

He smiled at her, an unusual sight, but it suited him. It was smirky and showed some very sharp teeth. Then he was gone, in his usual show of robes.

Minerva sighed and sat back at her desk. She was not going to get anything further done tonight and certainly could not call Horace back at this hour. She got up again and opened her window. A sleek cat with unusual markings hopped from the windowsill onto the thin ornamental ledge on the facade and in three more leaps was walking gracefully on the top of the roof to sit, alone, in the moonlight.
Chapter 21

Chapter 21: ~o~ The Long Goodbye, April 23, 1999. ~o~

Voldemort was dead and gone and the Death Eaters incapacitated.

Harry’s enjoyment of his last year at Hogwarts was not overshadowed by anything more sinister than his NEWTS, the performance of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and the difficulty of keeping his very full dating schedule in order so as not to call a girl by the wrong name. Perhaps because of his newfound peace of mind, his classes and his reviews for the exams were going surprisingly well.

Even his performance in Potions seemed to have improved enough that most his finished products were worthy of a grade. He had got more from the Half-Blood Prince than improved directions for potions. He had learned techniques and had finally understood some of the subtle elements of brewing, which benefits carried beyond the destruction of the book.

Snape could still be a bloody bastard, but Harry was able—most of the time, to Hermione’s approval and Ron’s irritation—to let his abuse go unchallenged, defusing the situation. Snape no longer unfairly accused him of attention-seeking, compared him to his father, or misrepresented his childhood. Now he limited himself to questioning Harry’s intelligence and Harry, considering how stupid some of his mistakes could be, sometimes actually concurred.

If Snape was particularly difficult, Harry reminded himself of the warmth and strength he had felt upon receiving Snape’s magical support during the Summoning, of the feeling of completeness he had experienced that day, as well as of the surprising warmth in Snape’s eyes that evening, which had given him the confidence he had needed to proceed, and could feel his temper dissipate.

Following the Easter break, it seemed as if everyone suddenly expected him to know what he was going to do with the rest of his life. Considering he was still often astonished that he did have a future, he had not the faintest idea. Quite innocently, a lot of people were pressuring him, some by giving advice, some by making assumptions.

That evening Ron had mentioned their applying for Auror training together, and Harry had been unable to fall asleep. Being an Auror had lost all of its appeal. The last thing he wanted to do was be on the wrong end of a wand held by someone who meant him harm. Frustrated, he picked up his Invisibility Cloak and went for a walk through the sleeping castle.

In the Great Hall, he stopped to admire one of his favorite paintings, which showed England’s Seeker Phillipus Lestrange making a spectacular catch of the Snitch for the win in the World Cup of 1832. He was brought out of his reverie by barely audible footsteps coming down the main staircase.

It was Snape, looking… amazing, his tall silhouette accentuated by beautiful robes, his dark hair clean and glossy tucked behind his ears, and his features… His nose was still too large, the folds from it to the corner of his mouth still present, his eyes still black, his cheeks still hollow, and his cheekbones still prominent. Yet he looked so different. There was a small ironic smile on his lips replacing his usual sneer, and his demeanor was… relaxed.

At the bottom of the stairs the Potions Master stopped and seemed to listen, then scanned the entry hall quickly with his eyes, his glance passing over Harry twice. Then he continued toward the main doors. He was carrying a small leather satchel.
Harry followed him, intrigued. Once again, Snape stopped. He turned in Harry’s direction and his eyes unerringly focused on him. His lips curved in the ghost of a genuine smile, one Harry had never imagined could appear on these lips.

"Out of bed after curfew again, Mr. Potter?"

Harry took off his cloak, and suddenly realized what the satchel meant. "You’re leaving, Professor."

It was not a question, but Severus nodded anyway.

"But the quarter is not finished, sir. Our NEWTS are in three months!"

Harry felt surprisingly upset. He wondered why he found the thought of Snape leaving so distressing.

"You will be happy to know that Professor Slughorn is returning, Mr. Potter. Between him, Miss Granger, and the Half-Blood Prince, you should do quite well."

Snape was looking at Harry intently but, strangely enough, without animosity. Harry felt himself blushing under his scrutiny, a highly unwelcome and embarrassing sensation. He grasped at the first thing he could think of saying.

"I am sorry, Professor. I’m afraid The Prince is gone, burned in the Fiendfyre in the Room of Requirement last May." Harry missed the book a lot, and not only for the improved potions directives.

Snape was still staring at him, his eyes traveling over his body, then concentrating on his face as if memorizing it, or searching for something.

"Well, in that case," Snape said, reaching into his bag. He found what he was looking for, hesitated for a second, his expression wistful. Then, to Harry's surprise, he handed him a leather-bound journal. "Please take this. It is a little more advanced… but you might nevertheless find it of some use."

Harry opened the book. The slim tome was full of Snape's elegant writing, pages and pages of it, with diagrams and illustrations. Astonished, Harry looked up at Snape questioningly.

"It is a treatise on potions creation," the professor explained. "I thought of publishing it at one time, but frankly, it could be very dangerous in the wrong hands."

Why would Snape give him such a priceless gift? Harry was desperately, searching for something to say. "Er… won't you need it?"

Once again, Snape’s eyes were on his face. "No, Mr. Potter. There is nothing in it I do not know intimately. I was keeping it for… sentimental reasons, which makes it even fitter for you to have it," he added, as if it would explain the unexpected gift. "If you look at the beginning, you will notice it is written in two hands. I started it in my school days as a common project with my Potions partner… Lily Evans."

"You loved her, didn't you?" Harry blurted out. He had been wanting to ask that question for a year and could not let it pass.

Snape's eyes met his. "Do you love Miss Granger, Mr. Potter?"

"Well, yes, I do. But not that way… "
"I did not love your mother 'that way' either, Mr. Potter. But she was my dearest friend. I miss her to this day."

Though he was surprisingly reluctant to do so, Harry made to hand the book back. "You should keep this, then."

Snape shrugged lightly. "I really do not need it and it would… please me very much to know that you have it." Was he blushing? Harry could not be sure because Snape immediately picked up his bag again, ready to go.

Once more, Harry felt too overwhelmed and confused to voice what he was feeling, so he simply said, "Thank you, then. And goodbye, Professor."

Snape gave him the strangest look, one that was full of meaning he did not grasp, that left him feeling wholly unsettled. "No, thank you... Harry. And farewell."

Then he turned around, a whirl of black, and was gone, the heavy front door shutting quietly behind him, leaving Harry stunned, too stunned to think. He walked to the staircase and sat on the bottom step. Snape was gone. There was a painful hollowness in his chest, a strange sense of loss. He opened the notebook to the first page.

There it was, “This book is the property of the Half-Blood Prince,” but then, underneath, in a handwriting Harry knew from rereading her letter to Sirius so often, was his mother's contribution, “And his faithful assistant, Lily."

His faithful assistant. Just what he would be to Hermione, were she ever to write a book with him.

Throwing his cloak back on, he started back to the Gryffindor dormitories. Snape had given him more in those few minutes, than he had in their entire acquaintance. The echo of the old anger in his heart over what their relationship might have been all these years resurfaced but it was now tainted with regret and bittersweet sadness. Harry did not know what to make of it.
Chapter 22

Chapter 22: ~o~ Majority ~o~

It took a long time for Harry to fall asleep that night, his restless mind unable to stop reviewing his encounter with Snape again and again, trying to sort out his conflicting feelings. When finally he slept, it was an unusually deep slumber, and he did not wake until mid-morning the next day, when Ron shook him repeatedly to get him up for Quidditch practice.

He got up on jelly-like legs and dragged himself to a cold shower, trying to shake out the cobwebs. His Seeker padding seemed to weigh a ton, and his stomach revolted at the sight of the slices of toast Ron had snagged for him at breakfast. His head felt fuzzy, as if filled with cotton wool. He had to sit for a breather in the common room before continuing down to the pitch.

Some pretty blonde girl he had snogged on the lawn by the lake the day before waited for him outside the entrance to the Gryffindor common room. After meeting her while checking out Neville’s latest Herbology project in Greenhouse Three, he had invited her to watch today’s practice. He gave her a peck on the cheek and held her hand as they walked together with Ron to the main staircase.

He made a panicked and clueless face at Ron, who chuckled before leaning down and whispering in his ear, “Amy Foxworthy, sixth year Hufflepuff…”

Harry mouthed “Thank you!” to Ron, rolling his eyes at himself, making Ron chuckle again.

“So, Amy,” he asked, “are you enjoying your project with Neville? He mentioned you have a real gift for Herbology…”

He meant to pay attention to her answer, he really did, but his fuzzy head had started to ache. He tried to ignore it but the pain rapidly became so severe that he broke out in a cold sweat and had to close his eyes against the diffuse light of the staircase, which suddenly seemed to have the brightness of the sun. His knees gave out and he ended up sitting on the stairs, his coccyx unpleasantly jarred. He curled up on himself, his arms cradling his throbbing head, moaning, feeling that he might very well throw up, though—his stomach being empty—it would be difficult.

“Harry, sweetie! Are you okay?” cried Amy. Was the girl a complete idiot? Did he look okay?

Ron, being much smarter and more used to Potter emergencies, called out, “Kreacher! Harry needs you!”

Kreacher Apparated with a loud pop, took only a moment to evaluate the situation and, his skinny arm around Harry’s shoulders, whisked him away to the hospital wing.

By the time Madam Pomfrey came running to investigate the rather loud ‘pop’ of the elf’s Apparation, Harry, nauseated further by his sudden journey, was dry heaving while sitting on his usual hospital bed, Kreacher standing next to him.

One snap of Kreacher’s fingers and Harry was naked but for his boxers. Another and he was wearing a hospital gown, one more snap and he was in bed, the blankets to his chin, the isolation curtain closed around the three of them and the lights on low.

“Master has the headache,” Kreacher said to the mediwitch, who was a bit shell-shocked. Then, his
duty done, he Disapparated with another ‘pop’.

~o~

Harry had already drunk a strong painkilling potion and was resting comfortably on his pillows when Ron and Amy, red in the face and out of breath, arrived at the infirmary. He smiled at Ron. “Thanks for your quick thinking, mate. It really hurt.”

“Harry, my poor sweetie! Don’t worry, I’m here!” said Amy, displacing Ron, sitting next to Harry on the bed and pushing his sweaty fringe back from his forehead. She really was pretty, with honey blonde hair, eyes as blue as forget-me-nots framed by dark eyelashes and perfect white teeth between lush pink lips. But this really was not a good time. Besides, my poor sweetie? No, just… no.

“Er… Amy. Madam Pomfrey insists I really have to get some rest, so I’m not to have a lot of visitors. Perhaps we can… get together again after I get out?”

“But I’m not a visitor, silly! I’m your girlfriend!” Amy said with a sweet smile and a shake of the head. “I won’t abandon you in your hour of need!”

“We’ve only spent about three hours together. You are pretty and sweet, and certainly have a lot of girlfriend potential, but potential is all it is. Right now, I need some peace and quiet and I am uncomfortable with having someone I barely know in my hospital room. Please, Amy. I am trying to be nice about this. Just go, okay?”

“You’re breaking up with me? I can’t believe you’re breaking up with me!” Amy started crying. “After… everything! I can’t stand it! I can’t stand it!” She got up and ran out of the hospital wing in tears.

Harry turned to Ron, chuckling. “Maybe this migraine gave me amnesia or something, but didn’t I just meet her yesterday afternoon?”

Ron looked at him, a stunned expression on his face. “Harry, you and Amy have been together for almost three months, and mate… she’s pregnant!”

Harry sat up, horrified. “Oh my god! I’ve got to catch… ” Then he noticed Ron was just about peeing himself laughing and lay back in bed, disgusted. “Ron, you are such a git.”

Ron was still laughing, not even able to talk. Harry watched him trying to catch his breath, and couldn’t help but grin. “Arse,” he said.

Madam Pomfrey returned to Harry’s bedside and threw a curious look at Ron, who was still chuckling, quite red in the face.

“Feeling a bit better, Harry?” she asked, deciding to ignore his best friend’s antics.

“Much. The pain is much less though I still feel like my head is packed with cotton wool and I can hardly keep my eyes open.”

“Did you not get enough sleep last night, young man?” asked Madam Pomfrey, who had heard of Harry’s popularity with the girls through the grapevine.

“Well, it took me a long time to fall asleep, but I didn’t get up until ten, so I got at least seven hours.”

“Hm.” She started running her diagnostic wand over Harry’s head and neck. “Did you get a Bludger to the head during your last practice, or have some kind of an accident?”
“No. Nothing I can recall.”

Ron started cracking up again. Harry rolled his eyes at him.

Harry took a deep breath. The nausea was still there, it felt like the room was tilted a little, and he just was achy all over. “Merlin, Madam Pomfrey, I really feel terrible. Even my hair hurts.”

“Have you had something unusual happened to you Harry? Something emotionally painful perhaps?”

Ron, annoyingly, let out a bark of laughter.

“Mr. Weasley, do you plan on sharing with me the source of your hilarity? Otherwise I am going to have to ask you to leave,” said Pomfrey, finally fed up with Harry’s sidekick.

“Harry just broke up with his girlfriend.” Ron managed to say, before losing it completely. Harry got his wand out and Ron, raising his hands in surrender, headed for the door, still laughing.

“Ron is just teasing me, Madam Pomfrey. I don’t have a girlfriend. He’s just being an idiot.”

She shook her head with a smile. “It’s so good to see all of you acting like teenagers. I am glad it wasn’t too late, that you all are still able to forget your hard-earned maturity for a while and enjoy a little irresponsible adolescence.” She got serious again. “So, no emotional crisis?”

“Nothing deep, no. Why?” He was not about to mention the weird feelings of anger and loss at Snape’s dereliction of duty, or the painful emptiness left by his departure. Those did not add up to an emotional crisis. It was because it had been late at night that he had experienced that deep sense of abandonment, of shameful rejection. In the light of day… In the light of day, it was different. He could completely stop himself from thinking about it.

“How old are you Harry?”

“Eighteen.”

“Could you do a simple spell for me? How about lifting my quill from your side table?”

“Sure. Wingardium Leviosa!”

The quill trembled a little, but stayed put.


She patted his hand. “Calm down, Harry. Surely you know about magical maturing?”

The conversation Harry had had with Griphook a few months before came back to him. He’d called it something else... “I heard about reaching my magical majority. Is that it?”

“That’s the legal ramification, indeed; you reach your magical majority after you go through magical maturing. You are a little young to go through it now. The average age for it is twenty-seven but though rare it is not unheard of for it to occur sometime in the late teens.

“Sometimes the change can be precipitated by an emotional shock, hence my earlier question, but that is not a fixed rule. Why don’t you relax while I Floo Professor Snape? He can brew a potion that
will help with the nastier symptoms.” She walked toward the fireplace.

“Madam Pomfrey?”

She turned back. “Yes, Harry?”

“Professor Snape is gone, haven’t you heard? He left last night… for good.” Harry was shocked when his voice shook. What the hell?

Madam Pomfrey was immediately back at his side, and took his hand. “Are you sure, Harry? How do you know?”

“I was out after curfew. He… he just ran into me on his way out. If I’d not been there, he wouldn’t even have said… said goodbye.” Harry was horribly embarrassed when tears filled his eyes and then actually escaped and rolled down his cheeks. “He just… left! He just abandoned m… us all! I bet he… he didn’t even say goodbye to his… his Slytherins! As if he didn’t matter to us, as if we didn’t care!”

A portion of Harry’s mind was slapping him about the head and asking what the hell was wrong with him, but another one hurt so badly it felt like letting go and crying on Pomfrey’s shoulder like a baby. To his complete astonishment, the second one won, and soon the mediwitch was holding him in her arms and rocking him while he cried and cried, his body shaken by sobs and hiccups, pathetic little wails issuing straight from his heart, seventeen years worth of misery pouring out on her wet plastron.

Gone… Leaving him all alone… His mum, his dad, his godfather, Dumbledore, Remus, all the adults he ever loved, and now, the one man he could always count on… Severus Snape was gone too, had left him too, had abandoned him without a backward glance… Why did the people he loved always leave him?

~o~

Poppy was astonished. Harry never cried. Not over broken bones, not over excruciating pain, not over dead friends, not in fear… Never. And now, suddenly, the dam had broken, and he was sobbing like the child he had never been, finally broken, and by what? By Severus’ departure.

Did he realize he had just included Snape in the people he loved?

She held him as he wept and allowed herself something she had never let herself do before, either: to let her affection for this child, which she had always hidden in the name of professionalism, to come to the fore. She gently rocked him, ran her fingers through his hair, kissed the top of his head, and said silly nothings like, “There, there,” or, “I’m sorry, Harry,” or “This too shall pass…”

It took him a very long time to calm down, and about an hour later she gently laid him down, deep asleep. She dried his face carefully and put a monitoring charm on him before going to her rooms to change her soaked top. Then she quickly prepared for what was to come: the fever, the delirium, the visions. How bad would those be, without Severus’ special potion?

She’d only had to guide a handful of young people through the change in all her years, and had always used the special decoction. But she knew most people did not have that recourse and did just fine. She herself had not, and only remembered speaking to her dead grandmother and thinking she was a badger for a while, which she later suspected would have probably been her Animagus form had she ever learned to transform successfully.

Of course, when her magic had matured at the age of thirty, Poppy had not had as many grievous
losses or seen as many horrors as poor Harry had at his young age. Maybe she should keep him under with some Dreamless Sleep? But so many people came through having resolved some deep hurt, having found closure, describing the experience as cathartic… Anyway, without Severus’ advice, she dare not do so, not knowing how it might affect Harry’s magic.

There was a knock on the door and Hermione Granger came in with a more subdued Ron Weasley. “How is he, Madam Pomfrey?” the young woman asked.

“He is fine, Miss Granger. He is just going through his magical maturation. Young for it, of course, but when has Mr. Potter ever done anything in the usual way?” She smiled at Hermione. She was turning into such a pretty young woman, and smart, so smart… She and Mr. Weasley looked at each other. They were worried.

“I understand there are visual disturbances that accompany the fever. Are they influenced by reality? Because then they could be especially… bad in Harry’s case, couldn’t they?” reasoned the girl.

Poppy sighed. “Yes, Miss Granger. I was thinking the same.”

“Would you like us to… stay with you? Maybe we can help. Will he be in touch with reality at all?” she asked.

“Most people go in and out. Your presence might help. He has no fever yet, so it will be some time before the visions start. Why don’t you both go to lunch and enjoy a bit of this beautiful day. Come back around five. Then you all can have a cuppa together, and relax until it starts.” They agreed to her plan and left for the Great Hall. Poppy was glad the two young people would be with her. They had shared most of Harry’s adventures. If he relived any of them, they would know what to expect.

Harry was waking up. She brought him a glass of water, which she had doctored with a bit of a tasteless and odorless Calming Draught. He drank gratefully, but could not bring himself to look at her. She made the decision to lie though her teeth.

“Mr. Potter, do not be concerned about your emotional outburst. During the change, it is very common for people to become easily overwhelmed by their feelings and find their reactions to them extreme and out of character,” she said in a no-nonsense voice. He finally made eye contact, looking relieved.

She continued in her usual practical manner, “So don’t let what happened bother you and instead, tell me how you are feeling now and let’s concentrate on what you might yet experience.”

He took a deep breath and let it out. “I feel really tired, and my head still hurts. My whole body feels achy, my muscles are sore, my eyes and my skin are… oversensitive. I am really nauseated, and the room… the room is tilted to the left. A lot. Like my bed should be sliding that way right now.” He gave her a sheepish smile.

Poor Harry. If only Severus was here… His potion helped with all these symptoms.

“I’m sorry, Harry. Here, take two tablespoon of this, it’s an anti-nausea potion, and drink the whole vial of this one, it’s a mild pain reliever.”

Harry made a face at the taste of the first potion. It was very bitter, but worked very fast. The minty pain reliever almost tasted good after that.

“Hey! That is better.” He sighed in relief. “The nausea is gone, and that was the worst of it. Wowwww! The room just tilted the other way! That’s so weird!”
“Harry, I can assure you the room is perfectly straight. It’s just a faulty perception. As the day progress, you will experience more and more visual disturbances. You will develop a fever, and as the fever goes up you will start to actually hallucinate.

“Some people feel that these hallucinations are not fever-induced, but that people going through the change sometimes have true visions. I have no opinion on the matter. Some visions you will remember, some you will forget, some might help you to think about certain things differently, or to let go of some issues from your past.

“Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley came to see you and will come back for afternoon tea. They have volunteered to sit with you through your visions, just in case you need them.”

“Well, you’ll be there, won’t you?” asked Harry, looking nervous.

“Yes, yes, of course.”

He was quiet for a while, but she could tell something was on his mind. “What is it, Harry?”

“I am glad you were here earlier when I… that you were here and that no one else was. I don’t… I can’t… I’d prefer if… It seems that some private things might come out, and I’d much prefer if you were the only one there, to tell you the truth. There are things about me no one knows, not even Ron and Hermione. I’d rather it stayed that way… If you don’t mind.”

She could tell how important that was to him. She patted his hand. “Very well, Mr. Potter. We will send them away after tea, shall we?”

He looked so relieved. “Thanks, Madam Pomfrey.”

As he dozed off again, she sat next to him with a book she was not really reading. She reflected how much he and Severus had in common. Hiding their feelings and weaknesses behind volatile tempers, their public personae never showing their hungry hearts, choosing to handle things alone, trusting no one with their past misery, their hurt. Their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the greater good, to be figureheads in the war, to put up with people reducing them to one-dimensional characters, be they good or bad. How could she have missed it previously when now their similarities were so obvious? Two orphaned boys, driven to do terribly difficult things by their need to be loved by a manipulative old man…

Her monitoring spell animated and she got to her feet. Harry’s face was flushed, beads of perspiration on his brow and upper lip, his thready pulse racing under her fingertip. He opened eyes that were brilliant with fever and said, “… hot, Madam Pomfrey, thirsty…”

She gave him more water with Calming Draught and he drank two full glasses. He was burning up and it was only early afternoon. He pushed his blankets off with his feet. “… hot… room is spinning…”

“Can you hear me, Harry?” she asked gently.

His eyes focused on her. “Yes. I’m jus’ hot.”

“It’s started, Harry. You are here in the hospital wing, and I will be with you the whole time, no matter what. Remember that when you can, it will keep you grounded.”

She locked the door and sat next to him, holding his hand. He smiled at her. “Hand’s cool. Feels good.” He chuckled. “You’re a badger! Your stripes are so cute! Do you wanna see my Animagus? Look!”
There was a very long snake curled inside the hospital gown, light grey-colored head, dark grey body. The snake opened its mouth and Poppy realized it was ‘smiling’. The inside of its mouth was all black. For some reason, that was not reassuring. She was relieved when Harry was back again.

“Wow! I’m a snake! Ah! I really should have let the hat put me in Slytherin!”

Harry frowned. “Snape doesn’t like snakes. He was bit by one, once. One more reason for him not to want me.” He raised his hand, as if reaching for someone’s face. “I’ll never change into my Animagus, Severus, I promise. I want you to like me. I want you to want to be with me, to forgive me…” He whispered, “Don’t go, please… Don’t leave me…”

That was the last coherent thing to come out of Harry’s mouth that afternoon. His fever kept climbing and he spoke nonstop, called out, and tried to get up. Poppy secured him to his bed with medical restraints that did not stop him from imaginary motions. From what she could tell, he ran, fought several battles, spoke to multiple people including Albus, Voldemort, Remus and Tonks, Ron and Hermione, and his parents. She thought he argued loudly about some sensitive subject with a dog and a stag, changing again into that scary snake at the end, hissing, his fangs dripping venom. She also believed he flew on his broom for a while, quiet and relaxed.

She became worried when his temperature spiked to 104. He was agitated, panting, and perspiring profusely. Pushing off the covers she had managed to keep on him, she covered him in conjured ice. Even wrapped in her professional mantle, she blushed when she noticed a very prominent erection tenting his hospital gown and realized, from the motion of his hips, what his current vision might be about. He seemed to find his release and she refused to attach any importance to the fact that Severus was the name he murmured in reaching orgasm. He said it too softly for her to be sure, really, and hadn’t he called out a multitude of names that afternoon?

He finally lost consciousness and she gave him a magical sponge bath, changed his gown, and changed his sheets. He would sleep until morning now, his temperature slowly dropping back to normal.

Half an hour later, Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley came to join Harry for tea, and she explained to them that his maturing had been faster and shorter than average. It was all over already. They did take tea and reviewed for their charms NEWTS at his bedside, but left again for dinner in the Great Hall.

On Monday morning, Harry woke up bright and early. He took a shower and dressed in clothes Ron Weasley had brought.

“How do you feel, Mr. Potter?” Poppy asked him after running a last diagnostic spell on him, which came out perfectly normal.

“More rested than I have in a long time. I hardly remember anything of yesterday after I got that headache going to practice.” He frowned and looked around, grinning. “There was a badger in here,” he chuckled, “and Gilderoy Lockart gave me his autograph… So I think I did hallucinate for a while. Will I remember more with time, do you think?”

“Probably not. I’m afraid none of what you said made much sense. Have you tried using magic yet?”

The quill on the bedside table took off on its own, planting itself in one of the ceiling beams, and Harry’s wand tip lit up with a blinding white light. “I didn’t say anything! I just thought about the spells…”

“Wandless, wordless magic…” She nodded. “You were powerful before Mr. Potter. More so than most. Now only very few wizards might rival you, if any. You should have Severus…” I mean
Minerva McGonagall test your strength. It might also behoove you not to show anyone the extent of your abilities, and to control your temper. People naturally fear wizards with seemingly unlimited magic. You do not want rumors that you might become the next Dark Lord to start spreading around.

Harry listened to her carefully, and nodded. She was glad he was taking her seriously.

“Now go and have breakfast, Mr. Potter. And if anyone asks, tell them you drank too much of that bootleg Firewhisky Mr. McMillan seems to have an endless supply of on Saturday nights and that you had a terrible hangover.”

Harry laughed. “You know about his stash, do you?”

Madam Pomfrey grinned. “I always know when he has been sharing it from the number of Gryffindors at my door the next day, begging for hangover potion…”

~o~

Harry soon learned to hold back on his spells so his increase in magic went unnoticed. With only a bit over two months left, Harry studied hard, pleasing Hermione and unnerving poor Ron. Professor McGonagall had tested his magic to the extent of her ability and had deplored Snape’s departure as she felt only he would have been able to truly evaluate Harry. Her conclusion was that he might well be the most powerful wizard alive.

After he’d heard Madam Pomfrey confiding that she missed Snape dreadfully, as Slughorn’s potions were ever so much weaker, Hermione complaining that they would not benefit from Snape’s traditional review sessions, and some random Slytherin whining that Professor Vector just wasn’t as good a Head of House as Professor Snape, he was ready to use his new-found powers to Crucio them all.

The man had abandoned his post. As far as Harry was concerned, good riddance. Things went on just fine without him. He was not indispensable, or even wanted. If people would shut up about him, Harry would have forgotten the man even existed by now. If he’d read the leather-bound journal from cover to cover twice already, it was only because it greatly helped him in his Potions reviews and no other reasons.

One of the last topics covered in Transfiguration was the possibility for some wizards to learn to change into animal forms. It was just quickly mentioned by Professor McGonagall, along with the fact that it could take years to learn to transform successfully. So Harry, his classmates, and Professor McGonagall were all a little surprised when, after Professor McGonagall had them all repeat the Animagus transformation spell out loud, Harry’s chair was suddenly occupied by a rather dangerous-looking snake.

It was not all that helpful when Hermione said, in a little voice, “That’s a Black Mamba! One of the ten most dangerous snakes on earth!” Minerva McGonagall addressed the snake sternly. “Mr. Potter, are you able to change back or do you need some help?”

Harry replaced the snake. “Well, that was weird,” he said. Then he made a face. “Why do I have to be a snake? Why can’t I be a red hawk, or even a gull? Why can’t I be something that flies?”

He realized this might not have been the smartest thing to say when he noticed that McGonagall was outraged. “Mr. Potter! For Merlin’s sake, count yourself lucky! Do you realize how few wizards are Animagi? Are you aware of how much pain and effort one normally has to put into to becoming one? Something that flies, indeed! I thought that was what your broom was for! You will write a twenty-four-inch essay on Black Mambas and on the potential usefulness of your ability to transform
into one for our next class and give us a presentation about it. Maybe it will help you develop the right amount of gratitude for this amazing gift!"

He did do the work, and did develop an appreciation for the ability to change into a creature that could easily hide, tell if people were lying from the pheromones they released in the air, move as fast as an athlete running all out, and, well, kill with a bite… But it also made him more cautious than ever about reining in his magic.

The only time he did not hold back was while flying as a Seeker for Gryffindor. He’d had superior skills and a superior broom. Now his speed was fuelled by his massive power, and he was completely uncatchable. Before he even left Hogwarts, the offers to join professional teams came rolling in.

He was never happier than when he was on his broom, pushing himself to the maximum of his abilities. Since this was something he had trained hard for, so that his natural gift could become what was now a truly amazing skill, he knew without a doubt that the recruiters did not want him because he was Harry Potter, but because he had the potential to someday be one of the best Seekers alive.

The day after taking his last NEWT (and doing quite honorably, he thought), he accepted the offer from Puddlemere to become their relief Seeker. By the time his NEWT results came, the fact that he’d earned all O’s was a source of great personal satisfaction, but was not needed. He had already been training with his new team for two weeks, and he loved it.

End of part 3
Chapter 23

Part 4: Hogwarts, ten years later.

Chapter 23: ~o~ Bye bye, Love, Again… April 21, 2009. ~o~

Harry sat on a park bench, watching a child throwing a stick to a mixed-breed dog who obviously lived for the game. Spring had been late in coming this year. The sky was a pale watery blue, but the bushes were leafing out, and the yellow daffodils were gently swaying in the breeze. On a farther bench, an old lady was feeding the pigeons. Harry could hear the voices of children playing in the playground around the corner.

He took a deep breath. He knew he had done the right thing. One should not stay engaged to a sweet, lovely young woman after spending the morning (when she was out for a wedding dress fitting) fucking the new next-door neighbor.

He had met said neighbor on the stairs. Harry was about to go out for a stroll, and she was coming up from the basement with a basketful of laundry. Ever the gentleman, he had offered to help her carry it back to her apartment. She had accepted and led the way. She had been thin and angular, wearing a singlet, jeans, and flip-flops. Her hair had been black and glossy, cut in a pageboy.

He had loved the way her vertebrae made such a sharp ridge on her upper back. She had been receptive when, after putting the laundry down, he had reached out and touched her face. He had kissed her and run his hand on the tips of her small hard breasts. He had taken her from behind as she leaned her stomach on the back of her sofa, staring at her bony back and the cascade of black hair that swung in rhythm with his thrusts, loving that she was quiet and let his imagination run wild.

He had come with his eyes closed, savoring the feeling of the tight arse under his palms and of the long legs on each side of his. Laying her on the sofa, he had then used his tongue and fingers to bring her off, twice. She had tasted of his come and of something tangy, and had smelled of patchouli.

When Sarah had come home, he had already packed his bag. She was so beautiful, even with tears streaming down her face. He had explained that he had been wrong, that he was not ready to get married, ready to give up his freedom. He had told her he loved her, which he did, very much. He had apologized, and held her as she wept, telling her how wonderful she was, how special, and that he was an idiot, but that he just would end up hurting her more in the long run, because he knew he would not be able to remain faithful and give her what she deserved.

She had admitted having seen his eye wander. She had felt he was holding back. She had hoped, and forged ahead, fooling herself, but she said she had really known all along. They held each other for a long time and he had left, his bag shrunken to fit in his pocket.

It was the middle of the afternoon and he was homeless. They had been living at her place. He would go to a hotel. He sighed again. He needed to talk to a friend. He Apparated outside the Manor’s main gate, and let the Malfoys’ wards do their job. The gate opened and Ginny, beautiful as ever, met him on the way to the imposing front door. They walked back, talking about the weather, her morning sickness (finally passed), and her funny cravings (figs, figs, and more figs…). They went to her favorite sitting room and she called for tea.
“All right, Harry, what’s going on? What are you doing Apparating all the way here? Is your Floo on the blink, or are you just showing off?”

“I wasn’t near a Floo. I didn’t think about it. It’s not that far…”

She rolled her eyes. Never mind only a handful of wizards could hope to Apparate such distance without Splinching themselves. “Right. Whatever. What’s the matter?”

“Why would you assume something is the matter, Gin?” he said, trying to delay the inevitable.

She put her hand on his knee and moved until she’d caught his eye. “Please. Just stop. Talk to me, all right?”

Harry sighed. “Sarah and I are through. I called off the engagement. I just couldn’t go through with it, the wedding… Everything.”

She’d almost believed this was it, this time. “What happened?”

He bit his lower lip. “I had sex with the neighbor.”

“Galloping Grindylow, Harry. Did Sarah catch you at it?”

“No, no, she doesn’t even know. That’s not the point. I wouldn’t be having sex with someone else four weeks before my wedding if it were… ‘It’, or whatever, you know. I love Sarah. She is sweet, and pretty, and smart, and funny. But the thrill is gone, has been gone for months. It just wasn’t right.”

Ginny sighed. “Well, I’m really sorry, Harry. I really thought it might work for you this time. She is a great girl.”

“It’s not her, Ginny. It’s me. What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I find what you and Draco have, or Hermione and Ron? It never feels right, I keep looking for something, and I don’t even know what.” He knew he had no call sounding so hurt. It was all his fault.

“Well, what about that neighbor girl? Is there something there?” asked Ginny, ever the optimist.

“I just met her this morning. I don’t even know her name…” he shrugged dismissively.

“Really, Harry…” She shook her head, looking startlingly like Molly for a second.

He sighed. “I know, I know…” He put his head in his hands for a moment. “My life seems so pointless, you know. There has to be more than… this.”

She took his hand. “Oh, Harry…” This time her eyes were full of concern, and he felt guilty. Why should he worry her? He was successful, healthy, rich, and single again. Boohoo.

He smiled at her. “Don’t worry, Gin. I’m just feeling sorry for myself. Let’s talk about something else, shall we? When was your last mediwizard visit? How did it go?”

She suddenly lit up like a candle. “You’re not going to believe it. I went yesterday, and he had the most amazing news: we’re having twins!”

Harry grinned, so happy for them. “You are! Oh my god! That’s fantastic! What did Draco say?”

“He is thrilled. Worried a little, I think, for me mostly, though I feel fantastic. But we’re so excited! You’re the first person I’ve told, by the way. I don’t want to tell Mum. She’ll worry herself sick.
Keep it to yourself, okay?"

“No problem. You are taking care of yourself, aren’t you?” He squeezed her hand.

“Of course I am.” She looked distracted for a moment. “Draco’s coming,” she said, getting up and approaching the fireplace.

“Ginny, you are aware that there is absolutely no possibility, magical or otherwise, for you to know that, don’t you?”

She looked at him and shrugged. “I know…”

Just then the Floo chimed, and she wiggled her eyebrows at him with a big grin on her face.

Harry shook his head disgustedly as Draco stepped out of the fireplace and took her in his arms, kissing her as if his life depended on it. These two were really sickening. Ginny whispered something in Draco’s ear and he sighed, rolling his eyes.

“Potter. Bothering my wife again, I see. And to what do we owe the displeasure… Oh, wait! You broke up with Sarah, didn’t you?”

“Draco!” chided Ginny.

“Well, he did, didn’t he,” said Draco, quite gleeful. She nodded in acknowledgement. He rubbed his hands together. “George owes me five Galleons…”

“Oi!” said Harry, miffed. “You bet George that I would break off my engagement?”

“Oh, no. We both knew you would. He bet it would last past Easter…”

Harry was disgusted. Was he really that predictable? Merlin, he was turning into a buffoon. He got up, needing to get out.

Draco looked a little guilty. “Potter, don’t run out. I’ll go change. Talk to Ginny, I’ll leave you two alone for a while…”

Harry shook his head. “No, Malfoy, thanks. I have bored Ginny with my pathetic entanglements long enough. I’ll get out of here.”

“Why don’t you go to Hogwarts?” asked Ginny. “Easter break just started and it’s Wednesday, Ron will be there. They’ll be glad to see you.”

That did sound good. He hadn’t seen Ron, Hermione, and the kids for at least a month. It would be a nice change of pace.

“Do you mind if I fire-call Hermione from here?” he asked, pleased to have something he was looking forward to.

“Be my guest,” she replied.

Five minutes latter, he was stepping out of the Floo in Hermione’s office. He had just agreed to spend a few days with them. And why not? After all, he did have his bag right in his pocket…
Chapter 24: ~o~ The Right Place at the Right Time ~o~

Harry was sitting on the colorful wool rug in front of Ron and Hermione’s living room fireplace, enjoying a cup of cocoa with a lot of marshmallows (and a shot of dark rum), a book on Levitation Charms on his lap, his gaze lost in the dancing flames. He had not been reading for a while, but rather had been reflecting about the state of his life while Ron and Hermione were putting their kids to bed.

He had been at Hogwarts for a week and had loved every minute of it. He had helped Hagrid and Flitwick organize the annual Easter egg hunt for the students who did not go home for the two-week break and it had been a blast.

In addition to a vast quantity of traditional chocolate eggs, they had charmed a small number of eggs to hold surprises. These ranged from plain useful items, such as one-Galleon pieces, a new set of quills, a Rememberall; to frivolous ones such as a bottle of scent that would adapt to complement its owner’s natural chemistry, a morale-boosting mirror that would always complement its owner, a small bottle of potion that would allow someone to sing with perfect pitch in a beautiful voice for an hour and another that would have a person speak in rhymes for a whole day; to, last but not least, a handful of truly valuable ones, like the egg containing a one-hour supply of Felix Felicis, another hiding the familiar of a person’s choice (fully grown, of course) such as an owl or a toad, or the one with tickets to the next finals of the Quidditch British championship.

Harry had ‘hunted’ for eggs with Rose and Ron with Hugo as Hermione took pictures of the event. After the maturing of his magic Harry had developed a sensitivity to magical resonance, and to him the charmed eggs and their magical contents were as obvious as if they had glowed in the dark. He wistfully eyed the small egg wrapped in pink foil containing the Felix Felicis hidden in a clump of snowdrops, and steered little Rose away from it and toward plain chocolate eggs. A six-year-old did not really need the extra luck…

The rest of the week he had played with his friends’ children, had accompanied, at the request of Headmistress McGonagall, a student outing to a freshly snowed-in Hogsmeade, which looked like a quaint toy village, had played pick-up Quidditch with the students (though it was pretty nippy out), and had spent time with Aberforth Dumbledore and his goats, smoking pipes of herbs he was fairly sure were not tobacco.

Puddlemere’s early spring training was due to start on the first of April. It was not mandatory for first-string players to attend, though young prospects and free agents would be trying out with the rest of the team. Harry had never missed this early training before, regardless of the fact that his attendance was only required four weeks later. Earlier in his career it had been because after three months of hiatus, he had been more than ready to get back on a broom. This past two years, however, it had been more out of a sense of obligation.

This year, he had no interest in going and could not motivate himself to do so. He loved flying and loved Quidditch. After seven years of his childhood and teenage years dedicated to battling evil and shouldering crushing responsibilities, playing for a living had been heavenly and definitely the right decision after taking his NEWTS. But after ten years, he was starting to feel that he needed more out of life. He’d actually been feeling this way for some time. Did he still want to play the game professionally, now that the fun had gone out of it?

When they returned from the children’s bedroom he would ask Hermione and Ron (who was at
Hogwarts on his usual Wednesday visit) if he could remain until the start of term and perhaps even a couple of weeks beyond that. He had some serious thinking to do.

Of course, he was not really homeless. He could always go to Grimmauld Place. The dark and dreary house it had been was only a distant memory. After some structural work had been done by professionals, to add en-suite baths to every bedroom and French doors opening on balconies in living areas, Harry had hired a decorator to guide him in his home improvement decisions. Once a plan was laid out, Harry and Kreacher had proceeded to implement it. Removing every last trace of dark magic had required Kreacher’s powerful elf magic as well as Harry’s usually well-hidden but devastating magical abilities.

Harry had infinitely enjoyed the removal of Sirius’ mum’s screaming portrait. At the very end of the remodel he walked up to it and told her casually, “I am tired of your screeching and your insults, and frankly, were you to stop, you were never pretty enough for this portrait to ever be aesthetically pleasing. I am afraid you will not fit in with the new decor. Since Kreacher now despises you for pushing Regulus to follow the man who was ultimately responsible for his death, I see no reason not to remove you and burn you in the fireplace.”

She had looked at him with an arrogant and dismissive little smile and said, “You disgusting little upstart of a half-blood, the degenerate blight on our noble house who called himself my son may have left his undeserved inheritance to you, but you will never command the house of my fathers. You want to remove my portrait? I’d like to see you try…”

So Harry had grabbed the frame, reached in for the overwhelming power he never used, and had simply commanded, “Off!”

The portrait had practically jumped off the wall and old Walburga’s eyes nearly popped out of her head in horrified surprise. She managed to pick her jaw up from off the floor and exclaim, “But… but… but… that’s … impossible!”

Harry smiled sweetly at her as he headed for the roaring fire in the huge fireplace in the main drawing room. “You mean ‘improbable’ don’t you? As it’s clearly not impossible.” He knelt in front of the fire. “Any last words, Walburga?”

Even panicked she did not relent from her usual rhetoric. “You maybe powerful, halfbreed, but the Dark Lord is more powerful yet and will be the death of you!” she said with satisfaction.

Harry grinned. “Oh. I’m sorry. Didn’t anyone tell you? I killed ol’ Voldemort years ago. Before my magic matured even. And with an Expelliarmus! And by the way, did you know he was an actual half-blood, unlike me? My mother was a witch, my father a wizard. I am legally a pureblood. His father, however, was a Muggle! Bye!” And he dumped her in the flames. The fact that he walked out of the room and did not even bother to watch her burn was probably the worst insult of all.

The only thing remaining of the previous owners was the restored tapestry of the Black family tree. That particular salon now also contained the Potter family tree, the Weasley family tree, the Longbottom family tree, the Lupin family tree, the Dumbledore family tree and the Prince family tree. Harry had really not been home long enough to study any of them, and could not really explain, even to himself, why the Princes had been included in the collection and not the Malfoys…

Grimmauld was now a very beautiful, comfortable, and welcoming home, Kreacher’s pride and joy. It had been placed under a stasis charm when Harry had moved in with Sarah. They had planned on relocating to Grimmauld after the wedding, but had decided to enjoy the coziness of the one-bedroom apartment and the fun of living in a Muggle flat with electricity and modern appliances. Kreacher had been at Hogwarts in the meantime, though he was always available should Harry ever
call out for him. He had transferred all his undying loyalty to his new master, following him from pitch to pitch during the Quidditch season and Harry felt no end of affection for the old elf.

However, it seemed silly to reopen Grimmauld just to close it back up again in six weeks when the season started again and to disrupt Kreacher’s life. In addition, he really enjoyed being with his childhood friends again.

The Floo chimed suddenly, making Harry jump. It was the communication chime, just a warning, since the Floo was open. Headmistress McGonagall’s head appeared in the flames.

“Ah. Good evening, Mr. Potter. Is Professor Granger-Weasley about?”

“She and Ron are reading stories to the children, but they should be done soon, I think. Should she call you back?”

“No. I just need to speak with her for a moment. It is rather urgent. Can you tell her I’ll be by in about fifteen minutes?”

“Sure. I’ll let her know.”

It was only about five minutes before the happy couple finished their parental duty. Harry had made cocoa for them as well, kept warm with a charm, and they sat down next to him, mugs in hand, with sighs of satisfaction.

“Thanks, Harry. I needed this,” said Hermione.

Ron smelled his cup and grinned. “Hmm… Do I detect the delicious aroma of a special ingredient?” Hermione took a sip. “Oh, yum! Dark rum? This is fabulous!”

“Oh, yeah. Now, that’s what I call hot cocoa…” said Ron.

Harry smiled at his friends. “Thanks. It’s so chilly tonight. I thought we needed it. Don’t get sloshed though, Hermione.” Hermione rolled her eyes. Harry explained, “McGonagall Floo-called and said she’s coming by momentarily. She said she needed to speak with you rather urgently. Maybe I should make her some cocoa. She seemed a little shaken.”

“It must be serious for her to disturb us on a Wednesday. She’s usually really good about that,” said Ron.

“Yes. I wonder what’s going on.” Hermione was the deputy headmistress, which did not seem to be too much of a hardship since McGonagall had the reins of Hogwarts well in hand, though the older woman had expressed her desire to retire. Hermione headed the hiring committee for her replacement.

There was a knock on the door and the three Gryffindors got up from the floor to welcome their old Head of House. They sat back down on the sofa and loveseat, locations more appropriate than the floor in her presence.


“Hot cocoa sounds very good, Auror Weasley, Thank you.”

Harry Summoned a fourth cup of cocoa from the kitchen, one without the added rum, though Minerva looked frazzled enough it might actually have done her good.
“Hermione, we have a problem. Xiomara Hooch was in an accident.”

“Oh, no! What happened?”

“Well, you know she has a… special friend that she has been spending every holiday with for years. The man is a Muggle, and loves sports. They bike for weeks in the summer, go scuba diving, skydiving, and who knows what. They met in New Zealand, jumping off a bridge with a rubber band around their ankles. Completely insane, if you want my opinion, but well, he makes her happy.” She shook her head and took a sip of cocoa. She went on.

“I just got an owl from her.” She showed them a regular envelope with a Muggle post stamp on it. “She sent it to the owl-post office in Hogsmeade, just like the parents of the Muggle-born children do, and they sent it onward to my office. Xiomara and Jack (that’s the Muggle’s name), were skiing off trail, whatever that means, after being dropped from a helicopter, and both fell into a crevasse in some glacier or other. Instead of revealing herself and Apparating them away, she waited with him for rescue for two days and went with him to a Muggle emergency room. They both have broken bones and frozen extremities, and are sharing a room in a Swiss hospital. Believe it or not, their casts will be on for six weeks, and then they will have to go to some kind of therapy to regain strength and agility. She won’t be back until September!”

She looked resolute. “Hermione, we need to find a flying instructor and a Quidditch coach and referee until the end of the year. I am not cancelling Quidditch! Gryffindor has a good chance at the Cup for the first time since your lot left. Filius is starting to think it belongs in his office. He’s been using it as a vase!” She looked appalled. “… Not that I show any partiality to my old House, you understand, but…” She noticed all their grins and laughed at herself. “Who am I fooling?”

“I’ll look into it and start making calls tomorrow Minerva. We cannot have the Quidditch Cup used as a vase!” said Hermione teasingly. They all chuckled, and quieted down as they brainstormed.

Ludo Bagman? Too old. Victor Krum? He’d retired a few years back. Maybe… Oliver Wood? He did not even fly anymore since marrying the Clean Sweep heiress.

Suddenly Harry realized he had the perfect solution. “I’ll do it.”

The other three looked at him, completely taken by surprise.

“Doesn’t the season start in six weeks? Don’t you have to go to spring training in a month?” asked Hermione reasonably. “The school term is not over until June 30th, Harry.”

“I’m through playing professionally. The fun has gone out of it. I’ve been thinking about it for a while, which is why I’ve only signed one-year contracts these past two years. I’m due to sign another in two weeks. Draco is working on it. But it’s not what I want anymore. I’m not sure what I want to do, so working at Hogwarts for a few months is a perfect opportunity, really. If you’ll have me…”

He was so excited at the idea, he was grinning like a fool. He jumped to his feet, filled with nervous energy. “Please, Headmistress. I’ll do a good job, I promise. I really, really want to do this!”

“Are you sure, Mr. Potter? The pay…” she asked seriously.

“Positive!”

“All right, then.” She smiled at him. “Welcome to Hogwarts, Coach Potter.”

Harry laughed with glee, his joy so communicative that soon all four of them were laughing.
“I think this calls for more cocoa, don’t you?” asked Ron.

“It certainly does, and don’t forget the rum in mine this time,” said Minerva.
Coming out of his impromptu bath in the eternally icy lake, Harry did not bother to put his shoes, tie, or robes back on. He was officially on vacation, after all. He lay down on the springy grass where the lawn sloped towards the water.

It was actually almost too warm today. There was not a cloud in the sky, but the dappling shade of the trees made the brilliant sunshine bearable. With the students gone, the peace and quiet was palpable. He had been at Hogwarts for almost twelve weeks now and he felt utterly content.

He loved his job; he had enjoyed teaching DA in fifth year, but he loved teaching flying and coaching Quidditch even more. The feedback he was getting from the students was great, and all the other professors seemed to think well of him.

He did not miss his career one bit. No more hotel rooms, no more Portkeys, no more early morning training sessions, no more public. Definitely, he missed that part least of all.

After the first few days, the students had stopped looking at him as the Saviour of the Wizarding World and the champion Quidditch player, and had only seen Coach Potter, the enthusiastic, friendly, and extremely knowledgeable replacement to Madam Hooch.

No more crazed fans following him about, no more reporters hanging on his every word and watching his every move. He had meant everything he had said to Minerva. He wanted to stay and continue teaching, and since Madam Hooch had decided to retire and marry her Muggle, he wanted the position permanently.

The past twelve weeks had been the happiest he had had since… well, since seventh year really: since that euphoric year when Voldemort had been dead and gone, when his friends had been around every day, when all had been good, and familiar, and sweet relief from their year in hiding. When the future had seemed so full of promise. And it had kept its promise, he admitted to himself.

The past ten years had been good, really good. He had played the game he loved, and played it exceedingly well. He had made a lot of money, and spent it with abandon. He had travelled the world and taken advantage of every opportunity. And, he thought, smiling, there had been the girls, of course. Quite a few girls… Ok, lots of girls… After all, he was a successful, rather dashing (according to Hermione and Ginny) young Quidditch player, and a hero to boot.

And he loved girls. He loved their company, their smooth fragrant skin, their softness, and their grace. Each of them was different, each of them attractive in her own right. He had even had “real” girlfriends a few times.

When had it all started getting old? When had he started to feel disenchanted, aimless? To be honest, probably two or three years ago he had become aware he was lacking something, missing some essential part of his life, not knowing what it was.

He still did not know what the missing piece was, but evidently more adventures, more toys, and more girls had not helped, the feeling having only grown in the past two years. Hermione and Ginny were of the opinion that he needed to settle down, have a family, and live a more normal life. And he agreed that he wanted children.
He thought he had found the right girl in Sarah: beautiful, intelligent, funny, educated, successful, loving, and more than willing to have as many children as he wanted. Why had he screwed it up so royally? Even as he told himself that he could definitely have handled it better, he remembered that as they were planning their wedding and their life together, his feeling of pointlessness and emptiness had only grown stronger.

Now, at last, he felt on the right path. There was real joy in being here, in teaching, not just endless fun. Friends and colleagues surrounded him, not hangers on. And somehow he had a feeling of quiet anticipation that he could not remember experiencing in a long time. He started to doze off in the afternoon heat, the soothing lapping of the water on the shore of the lake, the bird sounds, and the crickets creating a gentle score to his reverie.

He came awake to the sound of an animated conversation. Two people were approaching, talking and laughing with each other. He opened his eyes and sat up. Professor Vector was coming up the path from Hogwarts’ entrance with a tall, dapper stranger.

He had a long stride and seemed to walk effortlessly up the hill. His dark silhouette and graceful gait looked somehow familiar to Harry though he could not place them. He must be the old school chum that she had gone to meet at the gate. They were going to pass right next to him, so, though feeling a little scruffy in his open-necked, rolled-up-sleeved shirt and his bare feet, he stood up to greet them.

“Harry!” she said with a wide smile, “This is my friend Petr DeVries, from Amsterdam. Petr, this is Harry Potter, our Quidditch coach.”

Petr DeVries was a handsome man in his late forties. Tall and lean with a sculpted face, light blue eyes, and very dark shoulder-length hair tucked behind his ears. His smile was warm and his teeth very white. Close up, the feeling of familiarity disappeared. Though handsome, the face was unknown to Harry. His greeting was friendly, though he looked Harry up and down, no doubt wondering about his relaxed attire.

“I was just swimming in the lake,” Harry felt compelled to explain. “On a lark, obviously. No togs, no towel. But it’s so warm.”

He felt a little flustered under the intent gaze of the man, and was thinking he sounded like an idiot.

“A perfect day for it,” Petr replied, making him feel a little better. “Or for a nice high flight.”

Vector jumped in. “Petr loves to fly, Harry. I was just telling him that you would probably be happy to loan him a broom and take him up tomorrow, for a scenic tour.”

“I would be glad to,” replied Harry. He ought to have felt a little more annoyed to be put on the spot, but was actually already looking forward to it. “We should go in the early morning,” he added, picking up his shoes and clothes and falling into step with them. “I think tomorrow might be as hot as today. What sort of broom do you like?”

They chatted about broom selection all the way back to the castle. DeVries was very knowledgeable, and eager to try out a broom from Harry’s extensive collection. Septima Vector listened to them tolerantly, an indulgent smile on her lips.
At the front door, they separated. Professor Vector had been a Slytherin and made her home in the east wing above Snape’s old dungeons, and Petr had evidently been given quarters in the same area.

Harry went to the Gryffindor tower, excited to see his new quarters. The house-elves had probably transferred all his possessions already, and Kreacher was sure to have brought Harry’s favourite things from storage, now that it appeared that they were here to stay.

He still could not believe that Minerva had indulged him in his strange choice of residence. His new home was at the very top of the tower, right under the roof. His living room had French windows on all four sides opening onto a surrounding gallery, and a tiny circular staircase in the south corner of the room took him right under the pointy roof, where he had wanted his bedroom, with gabled windows pointing to the four cardinal points.

He hoped he would not regret ignoring Minerva’s warnings of sweltering heat in summer and of frigid gales freezing him to death in winter. He was a powerful wizard, after all. Surely he could maintain his comfort through magic.

When he entered through the central trap door, he was very pleased. Kreacher and the Hogwarts elves had always had a soft spot for him and it showed. Despite the sweltering heat outside, the room was perfectly comfortable. His butter-soft leather couches in tobacco colours, antique Persian rugs, and handcrafted walnut furniture fit the space beautifully. The pale green walls and heavy draperies were exactly what he had wanted.

The Muggle “Portrait of a Man” by some unknown early Renaissance master was in the place of honour, above the fieldstone fireplace. He always looked at it with pleasure. Its acquisition had been serendipitous: he had once provided Ron with cover by accompanying him on an assignment to recover dangerous magical artefacts that had found their way to a Christie’s auction.

This non-magical portrait had been in the catalogue, and he had found it so compelling he had outbid even the Louvre’s purchaser for it. He had paid two years worth of a very generous salary but would have paid much more if he had had to. Though it did not move or speak as magical portraits did, its eyes, so dark as to seem almost black, watched him go about his daily life and gave him a strange feeling of companionship.

He climbed the tiny staircase to his bedroom. Like all his preferred sleeping quarters, it was white on white: pale cream walls, crisp white linens, an undyed wool rug, an old painted cast iron bed frame. Even the lamp and the box of tissues were white on a whitewashed pine chest that served as his bedside table. He found the colourless environment incredibly soothing, and in it he seemed able to sleep through the night with fewer nightmares (though really, they had been less frequent in the past few months).

Off of the bedroom, his bathroom was very small, with a tiny basin, a utilitarian commode, and a shower barely large enough for one; space had been created for it out of the thickness of the coffered wall. But with limitless hot water and thick soft towels, it was enough.

He quickly showered and dressed for dinner, taking more care with his appearance than usual. Petr DeVries would be eating with them in the Great Hall, and he wanted to make a better impression than he had in his sloppy attire that afternoon.
Chapter 27

Chapter 27: ~o~ Wizards Are Gay, Too. ~o~

The whole of the staff was present for dinner this evening, and the narrow staff table was set on both sides to accommodate everyone. He knew that Minerva would be making an announcement and assumed it had to do with her decision to retire.

Since Petr DeVries had looked up and smiled at him when he entered the hall, Harry took the seat next to him, across from Hermione. She was engaged in conversation with Septima and Petr. Listening in, he realized that Petr was describing how his background in Arithmancy related to his work in public health.

He was apparently the head of an international commission for research in that field. The technical details were well over Harry’s limited understanding of Arithmancy, and he had never given a thought to the topic of public health, so he felt a little out of his depth. Hermione, of course, seemed quite knowledgeable. She alluded to some research Petr had done in the past that apparently had been “seminal” in reforming international public policy on non-human magical sentient creatures.

Harry was not sure what “seminal” meant, but he was pretty sure house-elves were non-human sentient creatures, and understood why Hermione was so enthusiastic.

Ron made his entrance, looking tired but in a very good mood, and took his seat next to her. Their children had left that morning on the Hogwarts Express, along with the students. They were to spend a month at the Burrow being spoiled rotten by Molly. Ron was obviously looking forward to a long weekend alone with his wife. They turned to each other and started chatting quietly.

Professor Sinistra directed her attention toward Harry and teasingly asked how he liked his aerie. He smiled at that description of his new abode and invited her to come see for herself.

“How many steps would I have to climb?” she asked. “I am getting on in years, you know.” Since she could not have been much over fifty and was fit as a fiddle, he knew she was only joking.

“Two hundred and forty-four. But that’s only if you start from the ground floor. From your level, it should only be about a hundred. And I have a twenty-five-year-old Laphraoig that should make it worth your while,” he replied, knowing her weakness for the peaty scotch.

“Right,” she quipped. “Then I can break my neck coming down!”

They laughed. “Harry has just moved to the very top of the second tallest tower of the castle,” she explained to Petr DeVries. “Hagrid had to displace the ghoul that occupied it and relocate it to the belfry. Hopefully, it will leave the bells alone…”

The food appeared on the table and the conversations slowed down as people started eating. The fare was a little more exotic than the usual school menu. Harry thought that the elves enjoyed being creative now that they did not have to worry about pleasing the students. Just as an elaborate desert appeared, Minerva stood up and cleared her throat.

“As most of you, if not all, of you know,” she started, “I have decided to step down from the post of Headmistress of Hogwarts.”
There were only a few murmurs at that. She had been talking about it and planning for her succession for over a year.

“It has been a pleasure to guide our school through these past ten years, but it has also been a great responsibility, and I find that I am ready to do other things with my life and let someone else take the helm.”

Seeing the school through the post-war years had not been an easy task, with a lot of difficult choices to be made. She had done it brilliantly, Harry thought, navigating the choppy waters of reconciliation and tolerance with infinite dexterity.

“It is my opinion, and that of the board, that the curriculum needs to be updated, and some of the aspects of the education we offer would benefit from a fresh approach. Were I thirty years younger, I might have enjoyed the challenge, but frankly, deciding what to do with my days once I leave here is challenge enough. I suspect it will involve a lot of good books, and long naps in the afternoons…”

There were a few chuckles at that. These past couple of years, it had not been uncommon, when visiting the headmistress’ office after lunch to find a familiar-looking cat stretched out in a comfortable chair in the sunshine.

“It is my pleasure to tell you all that the selecting committee, after considering many applicants, has made its decision, and that we only await the chosen candidate’s final answer to make the official announcement.”

Well, that was news indeed. Hermione, who chaired the committee, looked like the cat that swallowed the canary. It made Harry suspect that the new Headmaster or Headmistress of the school would be someone Hogwarts could be very glad to have.

Septima Vector turned to Petr. “Well, Petr, just how long do you think we will have to wait?”

“Oh, I am sure it will be no more than a couple of days…”

Seeing Harry’s puzzled look, he explained, “The final candidate is my partner. He is at a conference in Washington at the moment, but will join me here shortly. I came a little ahead to catch up with Septima. But as you know,” he added in Hermione’s direction, “there is really no doubt what his answer will be, though I understand the need for discretion. After all, he did send in his application.”

“A good thing, too. We would never have thought to approach him, never dreamed he might even consider the position!”

Harry was suddenly having difficulties following the conversation. His heart had started beating hard and fast in his chest, and he was having a difficult time paying attention. Petr was gay! He mentioned his “partner,” his male partner, as casually as one would mention one’s wife. And nobody seemed shocked in the least! It seems they all knew the new Headmaster was gay, and did not care.

Wow! No one cared? It was okay to be gay? Why had he not known this? After all, he did not know any gay wizards. Not one! He had honestly thought only Muggles were gay. And look at how they were treated by other Muggles. There were gay wizards! Right here, next to him, was an educated, successful, well-liked, and openly gay wizard! Harry suddenly could not sit any longer. He had to move. He stood up so fast his chair almost toppled. Hermione looked at him with concern.

“You’re okay, mate?” asked Ron, “You’re as white as a sheet!”

“Sorry,” he replied, feeling like he was making a scene, but unable to stop himself. “I’m fine. I just need some fresh air.” He smiled shakily at his friends. “No worries, just a spot of headache. I’ll be
right back.”

He headed out of the Great Hall, not sure he had been very convincing but too upset to care. What was he so upset about? What was the matter with him? Why was his heart still beating frantically?

He went out the front door and down the stairs to the grounds. It was still daylight and warm; the crickets were still singing. Everything looked so normal. So ordinary. He took a deep breath, concentrating on calming himself down, and then took another. There. Breathe. Better. Everything was fine. He was fine. One last calming breath. Okay.

The lake looked beautiful tonight. Was that an eagle over there? Such a lovely evening. They had picked the new Headmaster. Wasn’t that interesting. Good thing, too, the uncertainty was not good for morale. He headed back in. People were almost all done with pudding and coffee, and some were getting up and leaving. He sat back across from Hermione and gave her a reassuring shrug. Petr turned to him.

“Are you all right? Still up for a flight tomorrow?”

“Yes. Yes. I am totally fine. I am looking forward to it. Is seven all right?”

“Yes, seven is great. Where shall we meet?”

“Let’s meet here at breakfast at a quarter of. I’ll bring the brooms.”

Petr flashed him a very white smile. “Excellent” he said. He turned to continue his conversation with Sinistra.

Harry suddenly felt very tired. Looking around, he realized that most people were calling it an early night. Hermione and Ron made their apologies and got up and he joined them, making sure to mention to them how tired he was so they would not feel compelled to offer him a nightcap. He could tell they were eager to be alone. They parted in front of their door on the fourth floor of the Gryffindor tower.

The climb to the top seemed very long tonight, and by the time he reached his rooms, he hardly had time to undress and clean his teeth before he fell, naked, into bed. The night air was very warm, but a breeze blew across his bed from the wide-open windows and he felt incredibly comfortable. Before he knew it, he had fallen asleep. However, he did not rest easy. He tossed and turned all through the night, in and out of weird confusing dreams, but never quite coming fully awake.
Chapter 28

Chapter 28: ~o~ Flying High. ~o~

He woke up in the early morning, feeling a little groggy but eager to go for a flight. He showered to finish waking up and threw on his usual gear before heading out the door with his two best brooms. He would let Petr choose, since he liked them both equally.

He was already seated for breakfast when Petr arrived, dressed in well-worn but beautifully cut leather riding clothes, the trousers showing off his long legs and narrow hips. He wore the traditional short robes—really more of a cape with sleeves that always looked good while in flight. Harry never wore them, since they were of no practical use, not even keeping one warm as they trailed in the wind. He favoured a fur-lined short-waisted jacket that provided warmth while allowing free movement. He only wore the cape-like robes for Quidditch, as they were part of the uniform, though those were always full length.

Petr put down the riding gloves that had been tucked under his arm along with a gorgeous light blue riding scarf in the preferred cashmere and silk blend, and with a quick, “Good morning,” sat down to eat. He obviously rode often, and his gear was far more elegant that anything Harry owned. He looked wistfully at his old Gryffindor scarf that he had had since first year, which was sitting next to his plate. He gave a mental shrug. What he lacked in sophistication he more than made up in skill, and that was always what counted in the end.

In short order, they were heading out of the castle and toward the pitch. Petr had chosen the Skyhawk racer, showing he preferred speed to manoeuvrability. The new generation Firebolt Harry would be riding could turn on a pin and pull out of the steepest dive. They had agreed to a few exercises before heading out on their sightseeing tour. Petr proved to be a talented flyer, only backing out of Harry’s most outrageous moves.

“I may love to watch you,” he laughed, “but it doesn’t mean I have to follow you!”

Harry could not help feeling a sharp rush of pleasure at that. He was vaguely aware of his desire to impress Petr in some way. Maybe because the man was so many things Harry would never be: tall, cultured, sophisticated, effortlessly graceful…

They headed to the sea in a very fast, high, and frosty flight, and then up the coast, closer to the ground, enjoying the updraft of the cliffs. They raced, laughing in pleasure, right above the water, the tips of their boots skimming the surface and sending brilliant sprays into the morning sunshine. It was a glorious run. Around ten o’clock, Harry set down on top of a cliff and spread himself out on the grass, exhilarated. There was nothing else in the world that gave him that feeling. He would fly until his dying day if he could, and preferably die on his broom. Petr landed next to him and lay down as well.

They shared a quiet moment of complete bliss. That was the pleasure of flying with someone else, especially someone who loved to fly—that knowledge of shared enjoyment. He used to feel that way with Ginny, when they occasionally went out before she got pregnant. He missed it. Bloody Malfoy. He chuckled and sat up, getting out the crisp apples he had carried in his pockets. He threw one to Petr, who barely caught it.

“And this is why I never could have been a Seeker. Can hardly catch a slow apple from six feet away,” Petr said jokingly. After a pause, as if he hesitated to mention it, he added more seriously, “I always loved your games, you know. You were a joy to watch.”
“You follow Quidditch?” Somehow Petr did not seem the type.

“Not particularly. But my partner is an avid follower of Puddlemere. We go to their games as often as we can. And we were at the 2004 World Championship game in Rotterdam. That was an amazing two days. You were brilliant.”

Harry shrugged. He had been brilliant. It was one of the best games of his career. They had won by ten points. He had spent almost eight hours keeping the opposite Seeker from the Snitch, with every skill he had, catching it himself seconds after his team had reduced a two hundred and ninety point margin to one of only a hundred and forty points, assuring their victory.

“Any chance you might go back?” People often asked him that question, but for some reason, the way Petr asked it, so wistfully, it seemed to mean something different. Surely Petr did not care about Puddlemere needing a new Seeker. His “partner” was their fan, not him.

He responded with his usual answer anyway, “No. Not a chance. That’s a closed chapter for me.”

Petr nodded as if he had already known the answer, and resigned himself to it. It was a little strange, really. Harry decided to change the subject.

“So, are you going to commute?” he asked.

“Commute?”

“Yes. My friend Ron commutes from London. He is only here on Wednesday nights and at the weekends. He and Hermione seem to do okay with it. Or will you be moving to Scotland?”

“Oh, I see what you are asking. Neither, I am afraid. I will be staying on in Amsterdam.”

Confused, Harry told himself to let it go, but couldn’t quite. “I, um, I thought the new Headmaster and you were… um… Never mind. None of my business. I am sorry.”

“It’s okay. You thought we were a couple. We are. We have been for five years. But he really wants this post. It was a rather sudden decision on his part, and I have very serious professional commitments back in Amsterdam, with a completely unpredictable schedule.”

He looked out to the ocean a little wistfully, and then shrugged. “We will see each other during school breaks.”

“Wow. I don’t know if I could do that. I’ve never been good at long-distance relationships.”

“I have never had one. I think it might indeed prove to be very difficult. But there is really no other choice here. It was an opportunity he did not feel he should let pass. I would rather it was otherwise, but there it is.”

He stood up and stretched. Harry was conscious of having been extremely indiscreet. He was surprise at Petr’s candor, but he also was glad to have had his curiosity satisfied. Though why he had been so interested in the first place, he had no idea. Petr turned back to him.

“So shall we start back?” he asked with a grin, obviously putting the subject to rest.

“Let’s drop down the cliff face,” Harry grinned back. “First one to pull out is a rotten egg.”

“I don’t stand a chance,” Petr replied. Nonetheless, he dove straight down and made a good show of it, whooping the whole way. But he was right, of course. When Harry pulled out of his dive, half the
bristles of his broom trailed in the water. There wasn’t another person alive who could have done that.

They raced back hard and fast over the empty moors, swerving around the craggy rocks and frightening the sheep.

They got back, windswept and in high spirits, just in time for lunch. It was a quick affair, as almost no one else was around, and as they headed out Harry asked Petr if he would join him for a swim in the lake.

“I would love to, Harry, but I can’t. I am meeting your future Headmaster at the Apparation point in less than an hour. We will see you at Septima’s reception tonight, won’t we?”

“Of course, wouldn’t miss it.” They parted at the bottom of the stairs.
Chapter 29

Chapter 29: ~o~ Sexy Men ~o~

Strangely disappointed, Harry climbed all the way back to his rooms. He could still go for a swim, it was certainly warm enough. He stood undecided on his balcony, long enough that after a while he saw Petr walk down the path and step though the gates, heading to the Apparation point. Another tall wizard appeared, and they embraced each other. Harry could not make out their faces; they were much too far. When they walked through the gates and then up the hill, they made a perfect pair—walking in step, shoulder to shoulder, dark robes flapping in the wind. He could not tell which was Petr and which was his guest.

They had the same dark head, the same graceful stride. He felt a twinge of envy, and told himself that it was of their shared height. Harry spent the rest of the afternoon in his quarters. He no longer felt like swimming but he was restless, walking around the room, checking the organization of the cupboards, arranging his books, flipping through Quidditch supply catalogues.

He went out to his balcony and started pacing, circumventing the tower again and again, looking out to the hills, the lake, the castle, the forest, the hills, the lake… He went back inside and threw himself onto his couch, rested a few minutes with his hands behind his head, and finally sat up, running both hands back and forth on his buzz-cut head in frustration. He could not avoid it. He was going to have to think about it. It was as if the proverbial elephant in the room had taken permanent residence in his mind, and he was no longer able to ignore it. He started pacing again, back and forth across the room. All right, then. From the start: Petr was gay. There were gay wizards. No one cared that Petr was gay. Hmm…

Certainly Harry didn’t care. Didn’t mind. Petr was gay, tall, dark, and… handsome. Well now, there was something to think about a little bit more. Harry had noticed that Petr was handsome. He was aware that some men were handsome, very aware at times. Petr could even be described as sexy. Harry would certainly describe him as sexy. Now that he thought about it, he knew quite a few sexy men. Attractive men. Oh Merlin, oh Merlin, oh Merlin. Harry found men attractive. He was attracted to men. He needed a break.

Harry stepped out again and returned to walking around the tower. The lake, the castle, the forest, the hills… His heart was once again beating hard in his chest, seemingly trying to get out, possibly through his throat. Attracted to men. Oh Merlin. How long had this been going on?

He thought back. The goalkeeper in his team, Everett Spike, he was attractive. The journalist he always picked to interview him, Carl Stamos, he was attractive. Charlie Weasley, whom he spent many a summer with at the Burrow, Charlie was definitely attractive. Oliver Wood had been attractive. Blaise Zabini: very attractive. Oh my god! Draco Malfoy … Draco Malfoy was sexier than hell. He still could not stand the git, though, but he was unquestionably attractive.

Harry suddenly felt he needed a shower. Showering was his preferred method of stress relief. He shampooed his almost nonexistent hair, scrubbed his body from head to toe, shaved, stood under the warm spray while flossing, then brushing, his teeth. Finally he could not stand it any more and tossed off to a parade of naked, attractive, and decidedly sexy men. In less than a minute, he sprayed the tiles with his seed in the most intense orgasm he had ever experienced and leaned against the wall, completely spent, letting the warm water clean him off.
He got out of the shower, wrapped a towel around his waist after a cursory rubdown, and fell onto his bed. He liked girls. He really did. His record showed just how much he liked girls. But he had spent the past fifteen years denying to himself the fact that he might like boys too. Maybe even more than he liked girls... And it turned out it was okay. There were gay wizards, and they were not treated like pariahs. They were even considered for important positions, like Hogwarts Headmaster... The ramifications...

He suddenly fell deeply asleep. He did not move or even twitch for almost two hours and woke up without transition, his new awareness firmly in place. He glanced at the time and jumped up from bed. He had to talk to Hermione.

Harry knocked on the Weasleys’ door. There was no answer. Well, they had to be in; the party in honor of Septima’s Order of Merlin was in less than an hour. He knocked again, a trifle harder. Hermione opened the door, in her bathrobe, with a towel around her hair. They stood facing each other for a beat.

“Hermione…”

Another beat.

“Harry…”

Harry gave her his “I need to talk” look. She shrugged.

“Oh, all right. Come in. But you’ll have to talk while I do my hair. I am not going to that party with it looking like a rat’s nest, and it takes time.”

Harry followed her to her bedroom and sat on the top of the laundry hamper as she removed the towel from her hair and took the stool in front of her dressing table. Rat’s nest indeed. She eyed him in the mirror.

“What now?” she said. She started running a brush through her messy curls.

“Petr DeVries and the new Headmaster are gay.”

“Uh-huh.”

“There are gay wizards.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Hermione, I didn’t know that wizards were gay!”

“Well, not all of them,” she smirked.

He glared at her. “You know what I mean. We don’t know any gay wizards!”

At that, she stopped brushing and turned to him. “Harry, you can’t be serious.”

“What do you mean?”

“Of course ‘we’ know gay wizards.”

“Well, I sure don’t!”

She turned back to her mirror, resigned, and started brushing her hair again. “Harry, Dumbledore
was gay.”
“What?”
“Sirius was gay.”
“No way!”
“As a matter of fact, Sirius and Remus…”
“Remus was married!”
“Not until after Sirius died.”
“You’re having me on. Anyway, how would you know this?”
She shrugged. “Everybody knew.”
“Well, they’re all dead.”
Hermione rolled her eyes at the non sequitur. “Neville’s not dead.”
“Neville Longbottom is gay?”
“Well, George certainly doesn’t come here so often for his health, does he?”
“Oh, Merlin! Him, too? I can’t believe this!” He got up and started pacing. “Is there anyone we know who is not gay?”
“Oh, please, Harry. Honestly. And anyway, why should you care. You’re not gay!”
“Well…”
She turned to him again, her brush suddenly still. “What do you mean ‘Well’?” She put the brush down with a whack. “You’ve only slept with half the female population of Britain!”
“Have not!”
“Well, you certainly gave it a good go!”
“… Whatever. It’s neither here nor there. Hermione, I think I might be attracted to men.”
Well, that got her attention. She turned back to the mirror, and resumed her grooming. “You are attracted to men…” she prodded.
“Well, I think Petr DeVries is sexy.”
“You are attracted to Petr…” she prodded again.
“Not just Petr. I think Charlie is attractive, too, and Blaise Zabini, and even… Malfoy.”
“Ew!”
“I still think he’s a git, but he’s a very sexy git.”
She thought about it for a second, and shook her head no. “Sorry, still ‘ew’.”
“Well, Ginny thinks he is sexy…”

“More power to her. Let’s get back to the matter at hand, shall we? I don’t have all day. You think you may be gay, or maybe bisexual…”

“I think there are no maybes about it.”

“And what do you want from me? My blessing?” She was on to phase two in hair care now, wrapping her curls one by one around her finger after spraying them with SleekEasy. “You know, actually, that might explain a lot. Why you can’t commit. Why no girl is ever enough.”

“Hmm... I didn’t think of that.”

She rolled her eyes. “So, when did you make this startling leap in self-awareness?”

“Only this afternoon. You are the first to know,” he added, jokingly.

“You know, you can joke about it, but it’s really good that you have figured this out. And it’s not that big a deal.”

He looked skeptical.

“Really, Harry. No one cares about this stuff in the Wizarding world. It’s all about how much magic you have, not about who you fancy, and Merlin knows you have plenty of magic!”

He watched his best friend put the finishing touches on her hairdo. She was really very, very pretty. “Hermione, you are really very, very pretty,” he told her.

She beamed brilliantly at him. “Well, thank you, Harry!”

He smiled back at her and got up to go. “I should let you get dressed,” he said.

She got up, too, and walked him to the door. “You should be getting dressed also.”

As soon as he passed the threshold she called out, “Harry!”

He looked back questioningly. “Keep your hands off Ron, okay?”

“Hermione!”

She shrugged as she closed the door. “Just saying…”

Harry shook his head in disbelief as he walked back to his rooms. He would have liked to talk to Ginny as well, but he really ought to get dressed, and anyway he really could not stomach facing Malfoy, so soon after discovering that he was toss-worthy.

He took exquisite care in his dress, using cufflinks at the wrists of his snowy white shirt, and choosing a beautiful tie. His trousers and waistcoat were perfectly tailored, the waistcoat a favorite: dark grey velvet embroidered with silver serpents. His shoes were polished to a high shine and his midnight blue robes had the understated elegance only money could buy. He checked himself in the mirror and liked what he saw. He, too, was a very attractive man.
Chapter 30:

The first person he saw upon entering the Great Hall was Lucius Malfoy. He looked great. His carriage was as proud as ever and his clothing as refined, but there was a light of humour in his eyes and laugh lines around them. Next to him stood Narcissa, willowy and beautiful, and his hand was at the small of her back.

Once deprived of magic, few of the Death Eaters had chosen to remain in the magical world, and those who had were living on the edge of society, ashamed or resentful. Not so Lucius. He was as much a public figure now as he had been before his downfall, with the notable difference that he was now almost universally well-liked and respected.

That he no longer had any magic or fortune of his own was generally looked upon as the second best thing that had ever happened to him. It was universally agreed that the first was his wife, who had stood at his side, unwavering in her love and loyalty, through the worst of the years. Even the nay-sayers now recognized that their attachment was genuine and that his “Grand Gesture” on the day of his sentencing had been a true reflection of his feelings.

Lucius had been reinstated as a member of the Hogwarts Board of Regents just two years ago and had been influential in instituting the systematic recruitment of Muggle-born students, supported by their automatic access to financial aid.

Narcissa saw Harry enter and gave him a smile. That he had stood against the indictment of Draco as a full-fledged Death Eater had made her his ally for life. (That he had done it out of friendship for her future daughter-in-law and not at all for Draco’s benefit had not made any difference to her.) Draco had been given a second chance and that was all that had mattered in her eyes. He smiled back.

He saw George Weasley in deep discussion with Ron and Hermione and crossed the room to join them. Why had he never before questioned George’s presence at this kind of event? He was obviously not here in any kind of official capacity, and therefore had to be there as someone’s escort. That he had been Neville’s had never even crossed his mind, and yet, there they were, side by side as usual. How could he have been so oblivious?

Flitwick, who was standing on a wide stool and seemed extremely cheerful, intercepted him on his way. “Harry! Stop and keep me company for a minute. If I don’t want to be stepped on, I have to stand on this thing, so I can’t circulate and have to recruit my own audience!”

Harry was happy to comply. Flitwick was always excellent company, and what he lacked in height he made up in humor. He started a running commentary on tonight’s eveningwear choices and though he never said anything unkind (another reason Harry liked him so much), he pretty soon had Harry in stitches.

“You look quite dapper yourself this evening, Filius.”

Putting his arms to the sides to give Harry a better view of his outfit, Flitwick asked, “You like?”

His waistcoat was a work of art, richly embroidered with magnificent buttons that matched the clasp of his robes.
“One of the many advantages of being part goblin,” he quipped. “Goblin-crafted Christmas present. My grandmother made this for me last year. Look!”

And he prodded one of the vest’s beautifully embroidered blue birds with his finger, causing it to take flight across his chest, to land on the delicately stitched branch of an orange tree above his heart.

“Wow! That’s amazing!”

The small man glowed at Harry’s open admiration. “I know!” he exclaimed. “Goblin magic. There is nothing like it. I did not inherit much of it, really,” he added wistfully. “My magic is mostly wizard magic, but my relatives are generous with their gifts…”

They both turned around at the sound of laughter. Petr DeVries was entertaining a small group of people with a story that seemed to involve his wand being caught in something, as he was miming his attempts to retrieve it.

Harry thought he looked very good indeed this evening, relaxed and happy. He supposed the reason for it must be the man whose back was turned to Harry, all black hair and black cloth. He felt a twinge of dislike for him, the man who could put such a glow on Petr’s face. He chided himself for his pettiness.

The stranger threw his head back as his laughter erupted. It was a deep, hearty chuckle that made Harry smile in response. With laughter like that, the new Headmaster could not be all bad. Petr made eye contact with Harry and leaned to talk privately to his companion, their identically dark heads almost touching. There was something very intimate in the closeness of his lips to the man’s ear, and after a few seconds Harry had to look away.

But his eyes wandered to them again. The stranger was shaking his head “No” and shrugging. Petr put a hand on his shoulder in a gesture of support or encouragement, and once again Harry felt a faint twinge of jealousy. He was being completely ridiculous, indulging himself in a schoolboy crush.

“Minerva told me he signed this afternoon,” said Flitwick, noticing Harry’s attention on Petr’s companion. “I can’t believe it, he could have gone anywhere, done anything. We are very lucky.”

“Hermione feels the same way you do. What exactly has he done?”

Flitwick turned to him, obviously surprised at Harry’s ignorance. “Are you joking?”

“No, seriously. I really have no idea. I have been out of the academic loop, you know.”

“Harry, he found the cure for Squibs!”

“Oh my god! He’s the one? I had no idea. I read about it, of course. They are running trials, right?”

“Yes. But they are almost over. It works. It really works. Did you know Argus Filch was a test subject?”

“No, I didn’t! How is he doing?”

“Well, he is a changed man. He has as much magic as you and I.” Flitwick chuckled. “Well, may be not as much as you, really, but you know what I mean. I have been teaching him Charms. He is a natural. I have never had a more eager student.”

Harry was impressed despite himself. He had only read about the cure in the Prophet and knew
nothing technical about it, but it had been hailed as the greatest discovery in the magical world since the Wolfsbane potion, and even that paled in comparison. Now he understood what the fuss was all about. That someone like that should become the new Headmaster of Hogwarts was amazing indeed.

There was a bit of a commotion behind him as the lady of the hour made her entrance. Everyone turned to her and commenced clapping. Septima gave everyone a smile. She looked at ease and very pleased. Even the most modest of people enjoyed recognition once in a while. In Harry’s opinion, her Order of Merlin for Outstanding Service to the Wizarding Community was about twenty-five years overdue. Fifty years of teaching at Hogwarts deserved more than a medal: sainthood, maybe?

He took advantage of the general distraction to resume his observation of the new Headmaster, who was now facing the door. His first impression was of a lean, chiseled face, with strong features and an aquiline nose. Then, as if he had felt Harry’s attention, the man met his stare. It was as if Harry was looking into the eyes of the portrait above his mantelpiece. The eyes were jet black, with great depth. Then the man raised a single eyebrow and suddenly the different features of his face came together and Harry recognized him for who he was. Standing there, staring coldly at him, was Severus Snape.

For the third time in as many days, Harry’s heart started beating a thundering tattoo inside his chest, signaling its desire to get out. After an awkward nod to Snape, he turned away from him, and stumbled in the general direction of Ron and Hermione as the party settled back to normal. He stood on the edge of their group for a while, happy to be ignored and trying to recover from his shock. Random thoughts were battling with wild emotions and an acute physical reaction to completely confuse and unsettle him. He took a deep breath and focused on Neville’s red signet ring encircling the index finger of the hand holding his punch glass. It looked old. Silver filigree and what appeared to be garnet. Had it come from his grandmother? No, probably not, it was definitely a man’s ring. His father’s maybe. Neville’s parents had both died in their sleep at only a few days’ interval a couple years ago. They had been interred by the sea near Glenn Cyan, where his mother was from.

Harry had gone, of course. It had been a gorgeous day, and Neville had listened to the many stories told by Order members about his parents and confided to Harry later at the pub that he wished he could have heard those stories before, while still a boy, while they were still alive. Many times Harry had thought to himself that Neville’s tragedy had been greater than his own.

Septima Vector was now approaching their group and introducing her parents, an adorable and diminutive elderly couple, frail and white-haired, glowing with pride in their daughter. They were trailed by six equally frail and smiling ladies who turned out to be Septima’s older sisters—Prima, Secunda, Tertia, Quartella, Quinta and Sexta—who seemed a Greek chorus to their father’s words.

“So proud!” he chirped.

“So proud,” they echoed.

“Such a great honour,” he added.

“Yes, yes, a great honour,” they chorused.

“Well deserved,” said the one in pale pink.

“Our clever little sister,” added the one in pale yellow, shaking her head, as if Septima was five years old and had just learned to tie her shoes.

“So clever,” said pale blue.
“Got it from her mum,” inserted the father, squeezing his blushing wife’s hand.

“And so modest,” added pale lavender.

“Yes, yes,” nodded pale green and pale peach.

Septima, standing at the back and easily a head taller than any of them, rolled her eyes comically but smiled with what obviously was great affection.

“Harry,” she said, a wicked light in her eyes, “my sisters love Quidditch, and are great fans of yours…”

Six pairs of pale blue eyes turned to him and before he knew what had happened he was signing in their small leather-bound autograph books and explaining that yes, he still loved the sport, but no, he would not play professionally again.

Septima could hardly hide her mirth, and Ron had to turn away and “cough” discreetly into his cocktail napkin. And of course it would so happen that, over the pale blue shoulder of a happily nodding lady, he would meet Snape’s eyes again, glowing with a wicked light of their own.

The evening proceeded as expected, with the Minister putting Septima’s Order of Merlin around her neck after a thankfully concise speech, and Minerva bringing tears to her eyes with a lovely and heartfelt recognition of her fifty years of devotion to the education of Hogwarts students.

But what should have been a heartwarming evening in celebration of a friend’s dedication became an uncomfortable and awkward series of small mishaps for Harry. He spilt some punch on Hermione by gesturing a little too enthusiastically with a drink in his hand and felt Snape’s eyes on him as he clumsily mopped her up.

Trying to discreetly dispose of a half-eaten canape that turned out to be stuffed with anchovies, he met Snape’s eyes after hiding it in a potted plant. And who should hold Minerva McGonagall steady after Harry inadvertently jostled her by turning around too suddenly but Snape, of course.

By the time he left the party with Ron and Hermione, he felt unsettled and inadequate, as if before even exchanging a word with Snape he had been found wanting and had confirmed the new Headmaster’s low opinion of him. He was angry with himself for letting Snape’s presence affect him in such a way, and naturally took it out on Hermione.

“Please, Hermione, explain to me how in Merlin’s sweet Britain you would come to hire Severus Snape as Headmaster of Hogwarts?”

Ignoring the tone of the question, Hermione chose to answer it literally. “Well, we had been soliciting resumes for months, and were actually quite advanced in the selection. Down to three candidates, to be exact. And a month ago, out of the blue, we received his application. There really was no contest after that. He has the support of the board, and was each committee member’s first choice.”

“But the man is a git! A sneering, smirking, cruel, unfair, and resentful git!”

“You forgot greasy,” supplied Ron. “Though I guess not so much that anymore…”

This time, she could not help but snap, “Oh, for goodness sake! It has been ten years! You two are no longer children. Times have changed, and so has he. And so have you! Can’t you take into consideration what you now know about him and give the man a chance? He may have been a disagreeable teacher, but may I remind you that he was one of the good guys? That he saved you,
personally, time and time again? That he brought every last Death Eater to justice? That he just single-handedly helped bring out the magic of countless disenfranchised members of our society? He is a great man, you know, and we should consider ourselves very lucky to have him.”

“You don’t understand, Hermione! I was so glad to be back here. I was starting to feel like I was getting somewhere, doing something worthwhile. And now he is here, and I get to feel like a complete idiot anytime he points his barbed tongue in my direction.”

“But he hasn’t yet, has he?” She did not wait for his answer. “Harry, be reasonable. In any case, this is not about you and how you feel. It’s about Hogwarts. He will be very good for the school. He has great plans for changing the curriculum, in exactly the way we have been thinking of doing it for years. He has the will, the strength, the experience, and the clout to make it all happen. And he loves Hogwarts and its legacy just as much as we do. Do not let your memories of who he was years ago stop you from seeing the man he is today!”

Though he knew her to be absolutely right, he just could not let it go. Why did Snape have to return and ruin his peace? “I just don’t understand him. He had a good relationship, a great career, a lot of money, and public acclaim for his accomplishments: everything he could want to be happy. And he is giving it all up to come back here, right where he started… It makes no sense! What?”

Hermione and Ron were looking very amused. “You do realize that you could be describing yourself, don’t you?” she remarked.

That gave him pause. “True,” he admitted grudgingly. “Though I would point out that while I am completely clueless as to my motivations, I am willing to bet that Severus Snape knows exactly what he is doing, and why.”

And to that, she had nothing to add.
Since Severus had Apparated at the gate, the awareness of Harry Potter’s proximity had been part of his consciousness. As he was greeting Petr, he had taken his first view of the castle and his immediate thought, all-pervasive, was that Harry was within its walls. Every moment of that day, as he visited Minerva’s office, greeted old colleagues, met new ones, and strolled through the corridors, enjoying a feeling of homecoming, he had also expected at any moment to encounter him, and it had colored the whole afternoon with anticipation.

Finally, he had started to relax at the reception. The moment of reckoning was unavoidable, and fast approaching. He felt like a child on Christmas morning, and inwardly laughed at himself. Petr, who should really have known him better than that, credited the satisfaction over his new position for his uncharacteristic distraction.

He had actually physically felt Potter enter the room, had felt the humming presence of his magic. Of course, he told himself he was imagining it, but Petr leaned to him to confirm the arrival of the Puddlemere star and offer to introduce him. Snape had shaken his head, reminding him that he had known Potter since he was eleven and had never got along with him. Petr’s wistful look made him wonder if he didn’t know him ‘better than that’ after all.

He had felt Potter’s eyes on his back and only given the conversation around him cursory attention. Finally, as Septima made her entrance, he had been unable to prolong the suspense and had looked directly at Harry. They had stared at each other for a moment, and Snape had wondered at Potter’s searching glance. Only when he had raised an eyebrow and seen realization dawn on Harry’s face had he understood: Potter had not been aware of his identity. He had no idea how that could have been, but Potter’s surprise and his subsequent loss of composure elicited no other explanation.

Though Severus tried to resist the temptation of staring at him for the rest of the evening, he was unsuccessful. Potter was absolutely gorgeous. He had, of course, been aware, through his “Potter watch,” of Harry’s Muggle eye surgery (he shuddered at the thought… ) and of his radical haircut. But the newspaper pictures had not prepared him for the reality of the man. There was nothing of his parents in his face, his own strong character overshadowing any remaining similitude.

The luminous eyes, the sensuous lips, the elegant jaw line, were a magnet to his gaze. He felt a little guilty, as his concentrated attention obviously was making Harry nervous and causing him to experience a number of small mishaps.

Severus had to hold back laughter at Potter’s chagrin at being mobbed by the gaggle of Septima’s sisters in quest of his autograph, and at his mortification at getting caught disposing of one of those disgusting anchovy canapes. That he had not simply Banished it, as Snape himself had done, he had found achingly endearing.

He had to get himself under control. The cup of his decade-long Potter crush runneth over. But he knew he was still completely lost when, upon Potter’s hasty retreat from himself and Minerva, he had noticed a small comma-shaped scar behind and slightly above his left ear that showed white against the black stubble of his hair and had been completely undone by it.

“You may look, but you can’t touch,” he reminded himself. He had guessed being around Potter
might be a little difficult, but had decided the pleasure of it would be worth the trouble. He realized now he had grossly underestimated the slow torture to which he had willingly subjected himself, as well as the acute delight Potter’s physical presence engendered. Yet he would not have changed his decision for the world.

After Potter left the party, Snape decided he had indulged his obsession enough and resolved to, at least for the moment, douse the torch he had been carrying. Instead, he concentrated his attentions on Petr. They had not seen each other for a week and Petr was glad to have him back.

He was a wonderful companion: handsome, educated, witty and worldly, and deliciously submissive in bed. Snape could not have dreamed a more satisfying partner. In short order, they were back in Snape’s rooms, enjoying first each other’s company and then each other’s bodies. Potter was a fantasy; this was reality, and a very agreeable one indeed. Snape was aware that his and Petr’s relationship was bound to suffer from the distance and the limited opportunity for contact.

After sharing a life for five years, it was going to be a difficult adjustment for Petr: the empty flat, the empty bed, the silent evenings. How long would it be before this charming man gave up on him and found a more satisfying companion? Snape reasonably gave it six months. But it was a sacrifice he was willing to make.

The next day at breakfast, Minerva officially announced that he had accepted the post and gave him the floor. His speech was short and to the point. He was pleased to be here, he would start the first of August, there was a lot of work ahead, and would they be so generous as to return to their duties nearly three weeks ahead of the normal schedule to facilitate the transition?

As this was customary when a new Headmaster took office, they had all been expecting it, and there was therefore only token grumbling. Potter had looked weary, yet full of nervous energy, Granger smacking his drumming fingers a couple of times. What would he be doing with his four weeks off? It wasn’t important. What mattered was that in four weeks time, when he returned, Potter would be there and that they would be thereafter under the same roof.

Petr and he left Hogwarts that afternoon on their way to what promised to be a very pleasurable holiday in Burgundy: wine tasting, hiking, and time for each other. They had to make the best of it while they could. Merlin knew how long it would be before they were able to get away that long again together. August would come soon enough.
Chapter 32

Chapter 32: ~o~ Cigars All Around ~o~

Harry went home in a wretched mood, somehow made worse by the fact that he simply loved his new rooms. Was it too late to change his plans and just go back to Quidditch? Even this late in the year, he was sure Draco would have no problem getting him a contract. But he did not want to play Quidditch anymore. He wanted to be here, at Hogwarts, teaching flying and coaching the game.

Severus Snape.

How could he enjoy working for a man who never saw anything but his shortcomings, and never let him forget about them? Snape had always been such a vindictive and cruel man. Then, in seventh year, just when he had started acting as if maybe he had stopped loathing Harry, he had suddenly left, abandoned… his post, his responsibilities, his students, on a whim. Snape could never be trusted.

But things might be different now. Harry was an adult, successful, well-liked, and the best at what he did. He would stay. He would just make sure to have as little to do with the new Headmaster as possible.

Harry remained awake a long time, hands behind his head, watching the moon make its way from one window to the next, trying not to think. The next morning at breakfast, Minerva made it official. Snape was the new Headmaster. Since Harry had not planned on leaving Hogwarts during the break, it made little difference to him to have to be ready to resume work by August first. He had no idea how he could possibly help “ease the transition,” but he would do his best to stay out of everyone’s way.

The Headmaster and his partner left in the afternoon, while Harry was at the Hogsmeade station collecting Teddy for their annual vacation. Harry was thrilled to have his godson back. They saw each other often, as Harry always made being part of Teddy’s life his highest priority.

If he went away for professional reasons, Andromeda’s was always his first stop on the way back. He had regularly taken them along on his away games, whenever Andromeda and Teddy’s schedule permitted. During his twelve weeks at Hogwarts, he had only been able to go and see them four weekends. He had missed his boy.

Harry and Teddy were going to have a fabulous time. As he had done every year since Teddy had started primary school four years ago, Harry was taking him for four weeks of his summer vacation. It gave Andromeda a well-deserved break and allowed Harry to really get to know his godson.

This year, they were camping… in the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid helped them set up their tent in a peaceful clearing next to a fast flowing stream. They fished (very unsuccessfully), they hiked, they walked to Hogwarts for dinner, they lit a campfire every night, and had lots of visitors: Hagrid, centaurs, Hugo and Rose, unicorns, Flitwick, and Buckbeak.

Teddy was a bright and happy child, with a mischievous streak a mile wide and a heart of gold. He loved hearing stories about his parents (especially stories of the year when his dad had taught Harry at Hogwarts) and building homes for the different forest creatures.

They had constructed a frog palace by the water, in twigs and moss, with operable leaf windows and a sun-bathing area. (Teddy did not seem disheartened in the least that no frog had yet taken
They had dug a rabbit hole, with corridors and several entries. (They dug by hand, across from each other, until their wiggling fingers met, and then connected the tunnels. Rabbits had not yet arrived either, though Teddy had made soft little leaf beds for them at the bottom of the hole.) They had made a rain shelter for the unicorns, with intertwined branches and moss. They spent a lot of time in it themselves, making it their fort, their pirate hold, their hiding place, and their outdoor bedroom when the nights were warm enough.

Teddy was a fearless tree climber. He could lengthen his fingers for a better grip, or his arms for a longer reach. He could even grow a prehensile tail in a pinch, though Harry discouraged that because it ruined his trousers.

It was almost time to light the fire on the evening of the seventeenth of July when Hagrid showed up with his quilt and some marshmallows.

“Hagrid!” exclaimed Teddy, who adored the big man. “You’re gonna sleep with us!”

“I am gonna sleep with yeh, yeh mean, little fella. Harry is goin’ to take the nigh’ off, and go visit Ginny Weasley!”

Hagrid turned to Harry. “Draco Malfoy sen’ word for you to come to St. Mungo’s. Ginny’s gone inta labor.”

Harry’s blood ran cold. It was too early. Not three months, like last time, thank Merlin, but still. She wasn’t due for another three weeks. He left as quickly as he could, without even returning home to change out of his camping clothes.

The waiting room of the maternity ward at St. Mungo’s was full of Weasleys, by birth or by marriage, but to his great relief they were already celebrating. Ginny had been delivered, in record time, of two very small but healthy infants, a boy and a girl. Lucius Malfoy and Arthur Weasley were serving champagne, and Molly was laughing happily with her four daughters-in-law: Fleur, Penelope, Hermione, and Katarina.

The boys, including Neville, were playing Exploding Snap. They had come prepared for a long night, and though the children had already been born, the midwife was not admitting more than one or two visitors at a time. They had to wait their turn for the first glance at the latest members of the clan.

Narcissa came out of Ginny’s room, looking very happy indeed. “Harry, you’re next!” she said.

“No fair!” griped Ron. “We were here first!”

“Be that as it may, Ginny wants him, and whatever the new mother wants, she gets!” replied Narcissa.

Harry went in. Draco, still wearing lime green scrubs, was sitting on the side of Ginny’s bed. She looked pretty and fresh, her long hair braided away from her face, wearing a lovely nightgown of pale pink, as if she had just woken from a pleasant nap, not given birth to twins. She and Draco were holding hands and looking at their two infants, sleeping together in a see-through cot next to the bed.

“Harry! You’re here!” She beamed at him.

Harry kissed her lightly on the temple and nodded to Draco, before going around the bed to take a peek at the children. They were tightly swaddled, one in a pink blanket, the other one in blue, looking very much like any newborn babies: red and wrinkly. They were tiny, the girl even more so than the boy, but sleeping peacefully enough. The girl’s little thumb was in her budlike mouth and
she appeared completely bald, but her brother had a lock of red hair on his forehead.

Harry grinned at Ginny. “Well done, Gin.”

“Aren’t they cute?”

“Beautiful,” Harry replied.

Draco came to stand next to him. “Liar. They are wrinkly and red, and their heads look like cones,” he observed impartially.

“They take after you, Malfoy,” concluded Harry.

Ginny laughed. “I say they’re cute and Mediwizard Brennan says they are healthy and that is all that matters.”

They were all three quiet for a moment, appreciating the absolute truth of her words.

Harry looked at Ginny. “You have no right to be looking this good, Gin. You’d think you’d spent the day at the spa.”

Ginny laughed again. “Believe it or not, I did!” she answered. “A treat from Fleur. It was lovely: massage, pedicure, manicure, facial, the works. One of my waters broke on the way home, so I came straight here. Lucky Draco arrived as quickly as he did or he would have missed the whole thing. They were both born in less than an hour. They called it a precipitous labor. I call it a blessing; I feel great.”

“And you look gorgeous,” added Draco, kissing her hand.

“I should give someone else a turn,” said Harry. “There was some grumbling in the crowd…”

Draco and Ginny exchanged a look, and Ginny smiled at her husband encouragingly.

“Potter, would you be our girl’s godfather?” asked Draco.

Harry was surprised and thrilled. “Really! Wow, thanks, I would be honored. What are you going to call her?”

“Well, I wanted to name her after you, but frankly, ‘Henrietta’, or even ‘Harriet’… Well, I’m not that keen on either,” replied Ginny. “Would you mind if we called her Lily, after your mother?”

Harry always thought he would name his own daughter Lily, but it certainly did not seem that that was going to happen anytime soon, especially now… A goddaughter named Lily would be wonderful.

He bent over the cot. “Hello, little Lily,” he said. “That’s great, Ginny, thank you,” he added, straightening up.

She grinned at him. “Don’t thank me,” she said, “it was Draco’s idea…”

Harry looked at Draco, surprised. “I love the name Lily,” he explained, shrugging, but he smiled, and Harry smiled back.

“What about the boy?” he asked.

“Scorpius Severus, for our great-great-grandfather, and his godfather,” replied Draco.
“Ginny and you are related?” Harry asked, surprised.

“Aren’t we all,” replied Draco, shrugging again. “You and I are fourth cousins twice removed, Potter.”

“Really? I didn’t know that!”

“I’m not proud of it,” smirked Draco.

“Scorpius Severus. That’s quite a moniker.”

Draco leaned over his son. “Look at him, Potter, all red hair and pointed chin. He will have the Weasleys’ temper and the Malfoys’ evil streak. Who’s going to dare make fun of his name?”

Malfoy had a point. Harry looked at Ginny, wondering what she thought of Draco’s prediction, but she was laughing. “He might have my dad’s easy-going nature and your mother’s sweetness, you know.”

“Then everyone will love him too much to tease him,” Draco answered, unperturbed.

“We wanted to call him Frederic, but George wants to save the name for his own son someday,” added Ginny.

Harry looked at her, surprised. “A little unlikely, no?” he asked diplomatically.

“That’s what I thought,” she replied, lifting her shoulders, “but he was quite sure. He’s already said no to Charlie and Ron, when Franz and Hugo were born. I didn’t insist. Neville didn’t seem to care, and if he doesn’t, why should I?”

Why indeed. Harry took one more look at his diminutive new godchild. Already, he felt her tug on his heart.

“Okay, I’d better go. Ron and Hermione are champing at the bit.” He turned to Malfoy. “Congratulations to both of you, and thank you, I’m thrilled to be Lily’s godfather.”

“She made me,” said Draco, gesturing to his wife, but his smirk said otherwise.

“All the same,” replied Harry, smirking back.

He stayed a little longer at the hospital, sharing everyone’s joy and unspoken relief. As he was walking back to the Floo he could not help but remember a very different night, two years ago, when Ginny had lost her little boy and almost her life.

Harry had not truly understood the depth of the love Malfoy felt for his wife before that day. They had waited helplessly together outside the room where the mediwizards and Healers were desperately trying to stop Ginny’s life from bleeding out of her womb.

The little boy had been lost on the way to the emergency room from Harry’s apartment—where they had been having dinner, celebrating Harry’s new contract, which had been negotiated masterfully by Draco.

Draco had been ashen, despair and fear etched in the lines of his face, as he stood in the corridor, his back to the wall, his haunted eyes never leaving the swinging doors.

When the mediwitch had come out briefly to say that the hemorrhage was under control and that Ginny would live, he had slipped down to the ground as his knees gave out. When Harry had helped
him up, Draco had collapsed on his shoulder and wept long, harsh, and uncontrolled sobs in utter relief. They had never spoken about it. When the mediwitch had returned to tell Draco that he could see his wife, he had straightened up, wiped away his tears, and been a rock at her side through her grief.

Harry had gone home that night to his empty place and stayed up for a long time sitting by the remnant of the fire, wondering if he ever would love anyone like that. Perhaps he just did not have it in him. It had left him feeling desperately alone.

But tonight, he returned to Hogwarts spreading good news. He left behind him a trail of smiling faces as he worked his way back to the forest where he, Teddy, and Hagrid celebrated by eating way too many roasted marshmallows.
Snape officially took over from Minerva on the first of August. He had moved back into the dungeons the week before. It seemed that his rooms, including his private potions lab and ingredient stores, had been kept for him through the years, and that he had apparently occupied them off and on throughout Minerva’s tenure, though he had rarely made appearances in the castle proper. When asked about it, Minerva explained that Hogwarts had been Severus’ home for many years, and that it had not occurred to her that the fact that he was no longer a teacher there should alter that in any way. Though that raised a few eyebrows, now that he was the new Headmaster it had become a moot point and soon ceased to be a topic of conversation.

So on the first of August, when Harry arrived for breakfast Snape was seated in the central chair at the teachers’ table, chatting amicably with Flitwick. Had Harry not seen with his own eyes Minerva sitting in that same chair the day before, it would have been easy to think it had been his forever. There was nothing awkward in his behavior, and truthfully, he really looked as if he belonged there. Where Minerva’s slight physique had always been somewhat overwhelmed by the ornate chair, Snape’s height and his imposing presence fit it perfectly.

He was wearing again the type of traditional black teaching robes he had always worn as a Potions Master, though these were neither threadbare nor as shiny from use as his old ones had been. They were obviously tailor-made, of the finest fabric. His hair did not hang limply on sallow cheeks. It was glossy and held back with a black ribbon at the nape of his neck, emphasizing his stark features. He had grown into his unfortunate nose, his strong personality having shaped his face to go with it. He was still striking, but interestingly so, no longer unattractive.

Probably sensing Harry’s gaze, Snape looked up and greeted him with a “Potter” and a slight nod. He greeted all the other arrivals the same way, though he called his old colleagues by their first names. When Hermione arrived, to take the seat next to him as Deputy Headmistress, he welcomed her with a smile (a slight asymmetrical stretch of the thin lips, that nonetheless reached the eyes).

“Professor Granger-Weasley,” he said, “good morning. I have a favor to ask of you, that you should feel free to refuse.”

“Good morning, Professor Snape. And what, may I ask, is this favor that I am free to refuse?”

“Your name. I was wondering if you would permit me to shorten it?”

“Do you mean to call me Hermie? Or Mione, perhaps?” she asked innocently.

He smiled appreciatively. “Nothing so familiar, I am afraid. I find it impossible to call my former students by their first names. Would you permit me to call you ‘Granger’?”

She smiled warmly at him. “For old times’ sake? I certainly will, if you promise not to assign me detention, or refer to me as a “Know-it-all.”

Flitwick interjected, coughing in a loud stage whisper, “If the shoe fits…” which set a lot of them, including Hermione herself, chuckling.

Harry was astonished by how everyone else seemed so comfortable around Snape. He himself could
see the changes in the man. But it was still Snape. No amount of shampoo or well-cut cloth could change that. He looked toward Neville, who sat quietly at the other end of the table. Well, at least there was someone else not perfectly at ease with the new Headmaster. Professor Longbottom was staring at his plate, slowly mangling a piece of bread into smaller and smaller crumbs. Snape had taken off George’s ear, after all. Harry felt a little better.

Once everyone had arrived and breakfast had started in earnest, Snape asked for a moment of their attention.

“I want to thank all of you for cutting short your well-deserved summer holiday. Implementing changes in the curriculum will not be an easy task, and if we want any of it to take effect in the coming year, we need to decide which steps are appropriate to take at this time. I would like for us all to meet this afternoon to organize ourselves for the task ahead. I will see you all in the old lecture amphitheatre at three o’clock.”

There were murmurs of assent. All of them were looking forward to hearing what the Headmaster had in mind.

Harry had really no idea what changes needed to occur. After all, things had been all right when he was in school, hadn’t they? Whatever had been good enough for Dumbledore was certainly good enough for him. But Hermione had been going on for years about how archaic the pedagogies of the magic school were. Remembering his Potions classes, Harry could only shudder at the thought of a Snape-devised curriculum…

He was planning on taking a leisurely flight to occupy his morning, but Hagrid had other ideas. He stopped to talk to Harry on his way out of the Great Hall.

“Harry! Hev yeh got some time this mornin’? I could use a hand with the thestrals.”

“Sure, Hagrid. I’d love to help.”

“All righ’ then. I’ll meet yeh in the front paddock once yeh’ve changed.”

Since Harry was dressed quite casually that morning, it occurred to him that whatever he had just agreed to help with, it would probably end up being very messy. He ran up to his rooms two steps at a time. When he got to the door, he was pleased to realize that he was not even breathing heavily. Climbing up to the top of tower several times a day was doing wonders for his conditioning.

He put on an old pair of jeans and some workboots, as well as an old jumper Molly had once knitted for him. This was northern Scotland, after all.

Hagrid was already there, as well as Neville and Dermott. They looked ready for action, Neville even wearing leather chaps over his jeans.

“One of them nipped me last year,” he said by way of explanation. “I had a bruise for two weeks.”

Harry started wondering what he was in for.

Four hours later, he was ready for a long shower and possibly a week of bed rest. They had herded the thestrals into the paddock, Hagrid and Neville on foot, Harry and Dermott on brooms. Apparently, it was time to wean the foals by giving them their first taste of red meat, all the while keeping them from gorging themselves to the point of being sick.

Once the mares were tethered—which was easier said than done—the young stayed quite willingly, but Harry discovered that the only thing more difficult than convincing them to take that first bite was
to remove them from the carcass once they started on it.

He was covered in blood from wrestling the beasts away from their meal, and had been nipped half a dozen times. The dams were extremely protective of their foals, yet very willing to wean them and eager to help once they caught on to the idea. That included pushing the foals toward the meat with their heads and flanks, and if a human happened to be in the way, it made little difference. The foals, once fed, were extremely playful. A great time had been had by all.

“Now you understand why we volunteer every year,” said Dermott with a huge grin, his face sporting a streak of mud from cheek to chin. Harry did. Though exhausting, it was the most fun he had had in quite a while.

“It’s a great way to take your mind off things, that’s for sure,” said Neville.

Harry thought back to Neville’s moroseness that morning at breakfast. It was true that he had not thought of Snape for a minute out there either.

“She’s not doing any better, then?” Dermott asked Neville.

“No,” replied Neville. “She’s going downhill fast.” Seeing Harry’s confused look, he clarified. “My gran, Harry. She fell and broke her hip. At her age, Skele-Gro can only do so much. Her whole body seems to be shutting down. The Healers think it’s the end.”

On his way back up the tower, Harry reflected that he might be the only one upset about Snape’s arrival after all. After his shower, he decided to skip lunch and take a nap. It wouldn’t do to fall asleep during the staff meeting.
Chapter 34

Taking a page from the Headmaster’s book, he had dressed in his new teaching robes to attend the meeting and was glad he had, since everyone else had also.

It was amazing how much was accomplished in very little time. A curriculum committee was elected and several basic changes were voted without any fuss.

Muggle-borns would now benefit from a class in basic magical education, which covered everything from an overview of magical powers to practicing quill calligraphy to learning basic Wizarding law, and other general enculturation. Harry was amused to see that The Tales of Beedle the Bard was part of the required reading.

In parallel, the children from Wizarding families would have mandatory Muggle studies, and would be exposed to some very simple and useful Muggle inventions, such as telephones and ballpoint pens, as well as some of the more exciting aspects of popular culture, such as cinema, to increase their appreciation of Muggles in general.

Binns would be replaced as Magical History teacher. It turned out that he had been delaying his ascension to a higher plane until a new teacher could be found, and after seventy years was quite relieved to give up his post. To everyone’s surprise, Hermione would be taking over his position.

Professor McGonagall had agreed to return to teaching Transfiguration until another teacher could be found.

Dermott McClallan was thrilled to learn he was to be given a teacher’s assistant. Apparently, the new Headmaster was sensitive to the many demands placed on Potions professors.

The next topic was the eternally problematic DADA position. Even with Voldemort dead and gone, no DADA professor had yet been able to teach for more than one year. It seemed the curse would never let up, and the pool of possible teachers was depleted. Frankly, half of them (to be kind) had been hopeless.

The Headmaster had come up with an interesting scheme. He had already contacted the head of the Aurors’ office and arranged that different Aurors should rotate through Hogwarts throughout the year, each one of them concentrating on a different aspect of Defence.

“I have outlined a comprehensive overview of all that should be covered in seven years of Defence, and I think syllabi should be written by topic and levels,” Snape explained. “They would serve both as a guide and as a reference for the different teachers, to ensure continuity in the learning process as well as making sure no aspect of the subject goes unaddressed.”

Harry was impressed. This novel approach would certainly be a great improvement over the randomness that had been the order of the day in that class for as long as anyone could remember.

“If we are to implement this system successfully, it would be optimum if syllabi for the first two topics were written for all seven years before September. It represents quite a large amount of work, and I think would benefit from a group effort. Are any of you interested in participating?”

“Count me in!” enthused Flitwick. “I haven’t had to work on a syllabus for a very long time. After fifty-two years, I could teach Charms in my sleep. This should be fun.” He was rubbing his small
hands in anticipation.

“I would like to help also,” said Minerva. “Defence has been a thorn in my side for ten years. I love this idea.” She smiled warmly at Snape. “I think it’s brilliant.”

“I know a fair bit abou’ dark creatures. I’d love ta help if I can be o’ use,” Hagrid volunteered, a little unsure.

Snape turned to him. “Thank you, Hagrid. Your expertise in that area will be most welcome.”

Hagrid looked both surprised and gratified by Snape’s response, and Harry was pleased on his behalf.

Once Sinistra also decided to join the effort, it seemed that the project was well on its way.

Before calling an end to the meeting, Snape had one more topic he wanted to discuss. “A new aspect of Wizarding education is shortly going become necessary,” he started. “It seems that the Ministry is not quite ready to address that need, and I think that Hogwarts, as a respected institution, should possibly lead the way.”

He stood up and started pacing, his robes fluttering in his wake, and Harry was suddenly transported back in time. Even his voice seemed to reprise the slow melodic cadence of his lectures, and Harry was reminded that even when he had absolutely loathed the man, he had always enjoyed listening to him.

“Hundreds of wizards and witches, until recently considered hopelessly magic-less, are about to come into their powers.” He had everyone’s attention. “The clinical trials of the potion that allows the so-called Squibs to access their magic are successfully over.”

He was forced to stop as Minerva, Hermione, and soon everyone else in the room started clapping. After a moment of surprise, he acknowledged them with a nod, and continued.

“These individuals often have been around magic all their lives, but completely lack practical training. They have heard basic spells hundreds of times from their family members, but have never held a wand. I do not believe, unlike some members of the Ministry, that they will simply acquire the skills necessary to control and take full advantage of their magic through … osmosis. I think it is essential to be prepared to provide these individuals with tailored adult education, if they are to successfully make the transition to being full members of our society.”

He stopped pacing, and faced them all. “I am sure you are aware that this is a matter of great importance to me. Knowing about magic and being magical are two entirely different things. Squibs have been neglected and ignored by our society as long as it has existed. I will not let them be neglected and ignored now that they can finally take their rightful place within it. I intended this so-called cure to be a blessing, not a curse. I think Squibs are going to need help, and I intend to give it to them, as well as the respect they deserve.

“I think the pathetic lives currently enjoyed by most Death Eaters adequately demonstrate the difficulties of being without magic in a magical word, and should only heighten our respect for those who have lived that way since birth, while preserving their dignity. You all have full schedules. I am aware that any engagement on your part in this endeavor will have to be to the detriment of your personal lives, and therefore, I cannot require your participation. But I would ask you to consider it, if at all possible.

“Several retired faculty members have volunteered to help with this project, and its coordination will be in the hands of a personal friend, Narcissa Malfoy, until such time as funding might become
available from the Ministry. I have made the entire east wing available to her to do as she chooses. Her office will be next to Poppy Pomfrey’s, and you should contact her directly if you are interested. I think that will be all for today. We will reconvene next Tuesday at three. Thank you all.”

Conversations immediately broke out all around the table. The positive energy in the room was palpable. They were all excited about the tasks at hand and invigorated by the challenges ahead. Harry was amazed to realize how well they had all responded to Snape’s leadership. He himself was looking forward to the coming year with renewed enthusiasm and a fresh sense of purpose. He was impressed despite himself.

Snape stopped next to him on his way out to say a few words to Hagrid, and when Harry picked up his notes, he noticed a small piece of parchment sitting on top that had not been there before. He opened it. The handwriting was unmistakably Snape’s.

“Drinks. Eight o’clock. My rooms.”

Harry was completely nonplussed. Snape had passed him a note? Drinks? He just could not make sense of it and wondered, as he climbed the tower stairs, if he had not just gotten detention.
Chapter 35

~o~ The Note, Harry ~o~

At dinner, Harry sat between Flitwick and Septima and talked mostly about what they started to refer to as Narcissa’s project. It seemed that Flitwick was already very involved. Charms expertise was such a basic magical necessity; it would be a skill new wizards would have to acquire.

He was thinking of involving his NEWT class, possibly as an opportunity for extra credit. Harry thought that was brilliant. However, it wouldn’t work for him. At Hogwarts, flying classes were only offered to the first, second, and third years, as flying was not even an OWL subject but more of a basic skill. He did not feel it would be appropriate to involve thirteen-year-olds in the adult education program, and he knew from experience that the Quidditch players had no free time to speak of.

He, however, was willing to give Narcissa as much of his free time as she would take. Flying a broom was really something every witch or wizard should learn how to do.

Septima was positive she could find some way to help. Arithmancy was much too esoteric to be of interest to adult wizards learning the basics, but she felt Narcissa might need volunteers for other subjects, and thought she could probably teach beginners’ level in a lot of them.

Harry could not help stealing glances of Snape once in a while. He still could not fathom Snape giving him that note, or asking him for drinks, or… It just was too surreal. At no point did their eyes meet. Snape seemed completely oblivious to the confusion he had sent Harry into.

At one point Hermione gave him a “What?” glance, as she thought he kept looking at her. He just shrugged it away. At the end of the meal after Septima had left, she left her place at Snape’s right and, taking her cup of coffee with her, came to sit by him.

“Are you okay, Harry?”

“Sure. Can a bloke not look at the prettiest girl at the table without getting the third degree?”

She smirked. “All right, that just confirms it: you want something!”

“No, seriously. Nothing. When are the children getting back?” He knew that mentioning Hugo and Rose was a sure way to redirect her thoughts. She wasn’t fooled.

“No, seriously. Nothing. When are the children getting back?” He knew that mentioning Hugo and Rose was a sure way to redirect her thoughts. She wasn’t fooled.

“Nice one, Harry. Very subtle. Nevertheless, I will bite. They will be back next Wednesday. They will Portkey in with Ron. But then they will go to day camp in Hogsmeade. There is just too much to do around here for me to have them on my hands all day long. Hugo will also be helping Hagrid two mornings a week and on Saturdays. They are birds of a feather, those two.”

“And what will you do when he brings home a pet hippogriff?”

She chuckled. “Put it in with the niffler, I suppose. Do you want to come over later?”

“Nah, thank you, though. I have some things to catch up with. This month will go quickly, I think.”

She nodded in agreement. “Yes, definitely. I have to prepare for my classes. Binns’ notes are useless. He was fixated on the Goblin Wars. There is so much more to cover in the history of the Wizarding world, all the way back to Merlin. Of course, breaking it all down into the important cultural turning points…”
Harry interrupted her, grinning. “So what text will you use? Hogwarts: A History?”

“Well, it would be— oh, hahaha…” She hit him on the arm but couldn’t help adding, “It’s really good, you know.”

“Yes, I know, Hermione. I’ve read it. You made me, remember.”

She laughed. Harry remembered the disastrously rainy weekend the three of them had endured in Corsica a few years back. A very worn copy of Hogwarts: A History had been the only book in English available at the small Wizarding hotel, and Hermione had been so sick of Harry and Ron playing Exploding Snap she had, in desperation, agreed to play strip chess with Ron, leaving the book as the only entertainment option for Harry.

Harry checked the time. It was a little past seven. “Well, I’m for home,” he said.

“I’ll walk with you.”

They made it to her door in a companionable silence.

“Good night, Harry.”

“Good night.”

He had wanted some time to think before his meeting with Snape, but now that he was alone he wished he still had Hermione to distract him.

He just didn’t know what to think. What could Snape possibly want with him? They hadn’t had a conversation in almost ten years! Was his job in jeopardy? Did Snape not agree with McGonagall that he was well qualified for it? Did he want to talk about the past? Start with a clean slate, maybe? That would be bound to be an uncomfortable conversation. Perhaps he should just ignore the note. He was no longer Snape’s student! He did not have to go just because he was summoned!

That brought his mind back to the summer ten years ago, when he had been the one doing the Summoning. It had worked brilliantly, really. Their one successful cooperation. And Snape had been set free. Free to choose where to live, what to do with the rest of his life, without ever having to worry about lurking Death Eaters doing him in the first chance they got.

Oh, Merlin! Surely Snape had not asked him over to thank him again or some such nonsense! It had been uncomfortable enough the first time!

There were so many unpaid debts between them. A regular ‘I save you, you save me’ contest. Thanks just should not enter the equation.

He made it home. He changed into his favorite jeans. He might as well be physically comfortable, since there was no way in hell he would be comfortable in any other way…

He started down at twenty to eight, but really, going down was much faster than going up. He was in the dungeons at six till. No way was he going to be early. He walked to the Potions classroom. It was locked. Were all Potions teachers paranoid? Well, he had to admit that there were a lot of dangerous things in these labs. He walked back to Snape’s door and knocked at eight o’clock exactly. He felt the powerful wards on the door, though they had evidently been lowered enough to allow him to come that close. Paranoid Potions Masters, indeed.

“Come in, Potter.”
Ever since dropping the hasty note onto Harry’s papers at the meeting, Snape had been beside himself. What, in the name of all that was magical, had come over him to do such an asinine, idiotic, and ridiculous thing?

How old was he, fourteen? What would Potter think? That Snape had lost his mind? Well, he obviously had. A note! A note! He hardly remembered what he had written, but it had mentioned drinks, and his rooms! What next? Come see my etchings? Could he possibly have done anything more out of character? How could it have seemed, even for a moment, like the thing to do?

Fifty years of intelligent thinking and then, oh, I’ll just pass Potter a secret note? Inconceivable. If he opened a dictionary to the word mortified, he was sure to find a picture of his ugly mug, hopefully trying to hide in embarrassment.

Dinner had been a trial. He had felt Potter’s disbelieving stare throughout the entire meal, as if Harry had expected the answer to, “Why would this greasy git pass me a note like a third grader?” to suddenly appear on Snape’s forehead.

He was pacing in front of his fireplace, unable to shut off his inner ranting. He looked at the clock. It was a quarter of. How should he handle this?

Should he mention the note? Apologize? Plead temporary insanity? How could he explain this bizarre behavior to Potter, when he could not begin to understand it himself?

“Severus, calm down! You will wear out the rug! And you are keeping me from my nap!” Snape looked guiltily to Albus’ small portrait hanging unobtrusively above his desk. He did need to calm down. He needed to talk to Potter and, given their past history, he would have to tread lightly if he wanted anything positive to come out of the conversation.

He remembered too well Potter’s short temper, and his own need to provoke it. That was what he needed to focus on, not his incomprehensible lapse in judgment. He had just decided to brazen it out when his wards warned him of Potter’s presence. He was early.

The wards signaled he had left again. Yes, he would not want to be early. That might send the wrong message. By the time Harry once again tripped the wards, and this time knocked, Severus had managed to recover his balance. His last thought before responding was that nothing worthwhile ever came easily, and armed with that platitude, he answered.

“Come in, Potter.”
And So it Begins ~o~

Chapter 36

Completely in the dark as to what to expect, Harry opened the door and stepped in. Snape was standing next to the lit fireplace. The room was warm and pleasantly lit, a happy contrast with the rest of the dungeons. Snape gestured to his comfortable-looking couch.

“Thank you for coming, please have a seat.”

Harry held back his “Did I have a choice?” because he realized he had, actually.

“Would you care for some tea?”

So tea was what “drinks” meant in Snape’s world? Since he himself was much more comfortable with the concept of ‘Tea with Snape’ than with that of ‘Drinks with Snape’, he held that remark back as well. Tea gave one’s hands something to do, and a well-placed sip could give one valuable time to think.

“I would, thank you.”

One wave of Snape’s hand and a tray appeared on the coffee table. Snape sat down in a reading chair between the table and the fireplace and poured two cups. He picked up his own and sat back.

“Help yourself,” he said, indicating the tray. There was milk and sugar available, and though Harry usually took copious amount of both, this time he added neither. It would have made him feel childish, somehow. Conscious that it was not a rational thought, but acting on it nonetheless, he took a sip of the plain, fragrant tea.

“You asked Minerva for your position permanently, did you not?” asked Snape.

“Yes, I did.”

“So, you feel you are qualified to teach in this school?”

“And I take it you don’t?” he challenged Snape, defensively.

“You take it completely wrong, Potter. I am quite positive that you are. As far as your teaching abilities, you were a better Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher in your fifth year than most of the Defence teachers you yourself had had. As for your grasp of your subject matter, I do not think it is equaled at this time by anyone living. You are, if anything, overqualified. I think Hogwarts’ students are extremely fortunate to have you as their instructor and coach.”

“Really?” Harry immediately berated himself for his lack of cool. In his astonishment, he had sounded like an eager six-year-old. Snape raised a mocking eyebrow but thankfully let it pass.

Somewhat recovered, Harry tried to answer the original question. “Yes, I think my qualifications are adequate to the task. Why do you ask?”

Snape put down his cup and gave Harry a searching look. “Being a teacher at Hogwarts comprises many roles, Potter. The actual teaching itself is only one of them. You and I agree you have what it takes to be a teacher here, and to do it well. However, I have to ask: do you intend on fulfilling only part of the job, or are you going to invest yourself fully in the task?”
“I don’t understand what you are asking, sir.”

“Sir”? Had he just addressed Snape as “sir”? How did that man manage to completely pull Harry off balance? Why did he feel so inadequate around him?

The eyebrow went up again, but once again Snape let Harry’s faux pas pass without comment. He sat forward on his chair. “Today at the staff meeting, your only participation was your vote, Potter. You did not put forth your candidacy to become part of the curriculum committee. You did not express a single opinion, or ask a single question. You, who managed to vanquish the most dangerous dark wizard of all time, who more than adequately taught the class yourself in your fifth year as a student, did not offer to participate in the writing of the DADA syllabi. Would you care to tell me why?”

Harry felt extremely ill at ease. How could he answer that without contradicting his earlier statement as to his confidence in his qualifications? Around the other, more experienced, more educated professors, he did feel out of place. He did not feel his opinions valid enough to go against those of people he still thought of as his teachers. Who was he to say anything?

But Snape had a point. He either was a teacher here or he was not. Last term, when he was only a temporary replacement, he had had every right to feel that the general running of the school, the choice of the teaching approach, or the management of the students were none of his concern. But if he was going to stay and make teaching at Hogwarts his life, then he needed to take on his share of the responsibilities.

Still, he was not a full professor. He was an instructor, a coach. His subject did not encompass anything academic. He voiced these misgivings to Snape.

“Potter, do you think that Madam Hooch just stood on the sidelines during staff meetings? I can assure you that she did not. Nor did any of us ever take her insights lightly, or underestimate her opinions because she taught flying and not Astronomy. Her contributions to this school were invaluable. Why should you feel yours would be any less so?”

Harry was very glad he had his cup of tea. He took a sip. He felt so… confused? Nothing in their past experience had prepared him for this type of interaction with Snape. He was having difficulties truly absorbing what was being said simply because his mind was refusing to process a situation where a conversation with Snape would be anything but conflictive and defensive. And the worst part was that Snape seemed to feel his inner turmoil, and gave him an out.

“It is late, Potter, and I have a lot of work to do. I am meeting tomorrow at nine in the Headmaster’s office with the other volunteers to start on the Defence syllabi. You may want to consider joining us.”

Harry was relieved at the dismissal. He needed time to think. He put down his cup and Snape accompanied him to the door.

He was almost out when he remembered the note. Though he understood now why Snape had wanted to talk to him, it did not explain that note. That had just been… bizarre. He could not leave without mentioning it; it would continue driving him crazy otherwise. How to bring it up? He turned back.

“Oh, Snape,” he said as casually as he could, “there will be ten points from Slytherin for passing notes during staff meetings.”

Snape did not even blink. “The staff meeting was well over, Potter,” he answered dismissively.
Harry had to admire Snape. The sudden change of topic had not perturbed him in the least. But he had to know.

“Still, Snape, a note?”

“Just trying to be helpful, Potter. It seemed like a mode of communication you would be comfortable with, judging from the frequency with which you used it in my class.”

Harry raised an eyebrow in what he hoped was a fair imitation of Snape’s own expression.

For the first time that evening, Snape looked less than perfectly at ease. He shrugged. “A temporary leave of my senses. One never to be repeated, I assure you.”

This admission did more to convince Harry of the reality of Snape’s goodwill than anything else would have done.

He smiled at Snape and wished him goodnight.

“Good-night, Potter.”

The dungeons’ corridor was drafty and cold, even on this warm August night. Harry was glad when he made it back above ground. He decided to go for a short walk outside; the night was so beautiful, the sky full of stars, and the hunting owls passing above like black shadows on quiet whispers of wings.

His meeting with Snape had left him with much to think about. Not so much about the subject matter; he had already accepted the accuracy of Snape’s observation and decided to change his approach to his job accordingly. No, what puzzled him was the man himself.

First his rooms. He had always assumed that Snape lived like a monk. But they had been welcoming, comfortable, filled with beautiful artwork and thick carpets. Had they already been this way when Snape taught Potions? Or had Snape changed them in the intervening years?

Then his tea. It had been incredibly good: fragrant, full of earthy undertones, tasting green and invigorating. Ordinarily, Harry hated plain tea. It was just funny-tasting water until generously doused with sugar and milk. But Snape’s tea had been marvelous, a drink in and of itself.

And then, of course there was… Snape. Harry had not been this close to the man since his return, but now that he had sat only a few feet from him, he had noticed so many differences between the actual man and his school years memories of him.

His skin was pale, but not sallow. His hair was thick, lustrous, not straggly and oily. But the greatest change was in his eyes. They were deep and warm, a window to the soul, not the flat cold black he remembered. Now that he thought about it, he remembered two other occasions when Snape’s eyes had seem to hold unspoken things.

When they had made eye contact all those years ago at supper, the night of the Summoning. That night they had held confidence and strength, and had calmed him when he needed it. Had Snape used Legilimency? It was strange that Harry should wonder about it now, for the first time, after all these years…

Then there had been the night when Snape had left Hogwarts. That night he had looked at Harry so intently, and his eyes had been full of… something Harry had never understood.

But really, all those things were irrelevant. Tonight, Snape had treated him with respect, had tactfully
made observations when he could have rightfully been reproachful and viciously mocking. And he had done so in private, mindful of Harry’s position as the youngest and newest teacher.

The raised eyebrows had been proof that the old Snape was still in attendance, but he had given Harry a break. Snape was no longer the paper cut-out of the villain he used to be. There was more to this Snape. So much more, and Harry found himself looking forward to getting to know him.

He had made it back to the doors, and made his way home. As usual, Hermione had been right. He had to let go of his prejudices and forget the past. Snape had changed. Harry himself had changed. Hadn’t he always wished things could have been different between them, even more so after learning of Snape’s history with Lily? This was his chance. The chance to get to know his mother’s friend, Dumbledore’s protégé, and Petr’s partner. He made it to his room, feeling optimistic, and went directly to his desk, where he started taking random notes of what he felt should be taught in DADA and his own possible contributions towards it.
Chapter 37

~o~ One of the Team ~o~

At nine o’clock the next morning, once again in his teaching robes, Harry arrived with several sheets of notes in his hand at the Headmaster’s office. The gargoyle simply moved aside to let him in to the staircase. Was there to be an “open door policy” under the new Headmaster? The office door was ajar, and he heard his answer.

“No, Minerva. I simply told it the names of those who would be attending. I’d neglected to give you the password yesterday.”

“Well, that’s a relief. I thought perhaps your years at that Muggle university had addled your brain. I mean, what next, teacher-parent conferences?” Professor McGonagall sounded so peeved at that idea that Harry could not hold back a chuckle as he entered the room, after rapping smartly on the door.

She instantly turned her attention to him. “Ah, Potter. I told Filius you’d turn up! What are you smiling about?”

“It’s just so good to see you, Professor. I was dreading Hogwarts without you,” Harry said truthfully.

“Humph,” was her only reply, but she looked pleased nonetheless. Hagrid made as discreet an entrance as he was ever able, and they were all present. An oval table stood under the window, and Snape and Flitwick were seated, already in deep discussion. The rest took their places around it, Hagrid noting with pleasure the larger chair that waited for him.

Once they were all seated, Snape looked up and simply said, “Let’s get started.”

Minerva McGonagall was having none of it. “Well, good morning to you too, Severus. And where is the tea?”

Snape waved a careless hand and there were steaming cups in front of everyone. It was the same marvelous tea again.

“Is anyone here to work, or did you all simply come for my special blend?”

Flitwick, comfortably seated in his own special chair, admitted cheerfully, “A little of both, naturally. I have missed it since you last visited!”

“Happy workers are productive workers, Severus,” added Sinistra. “So what have you got for us?”

Snape passed copies of his course overview around the table.

“To begin, let us examine this tentative first draft and add whatever you feel I might have overlooked…”

By the time the meeting broke up, a lot of ground had been covered. Snape’s overview had been incredibly thorough, but the other faculty members still found things to add. Harry was very pleased he had come prepared. His particular contribution had been to add Wand Lore to the curriculum, pointing out that his life had been saved, twice, by previously unexplored properties of his own wand, and that his greater understanding of wands and their properties had led to his defeat of Voldemort.
Each of the faculty was put in charge of three topics, except for Snape. He took only two, but since one of them was Antidotes and Antivenin, on which the others’ knowledge was extremely limited, he would end up handling it virtually alone.

The person in charge of a topic would write syllabi for years six and seven (the NEWT years) and edit the other five, each written by another participant.

Harry was in charge of Wand Lore, Unforgivables, and Blood Magic, and had to write one of the syllabi in each of the other topics. Some of them would be quick and easy (he had to write the first year syllabus on Sex Magic, which—given the age of the students—consisted of little more than the mention that it in fact existed, was most often dark, involved sexual aspects, and would be further explored at a later time); and the year three syllabus of Antidotes and Antivenins (where he pretty much was only expected to make Snape’s outline into a text that could be grasped by thirteen-year-olds).

Other syllabi, however, would not be so quick and easy. He had year five of Defence Against Dark Magical Creatures, which included Dementors, Inferi, and vampires…

Hagrid had been a little overwhelmed at the idea of being responsible for any of the topics but Snape had been quite insistent that he felt Hagrid’s knowledge to be up to the task.

When Hagrid had protested that he “knew things, but jus’ didn’ write so good,” Snape gave him a rather chilling smile, and told him that if he thought he was going to get out of the hard work by acting like a bumbling oaf, he should realize that all those present knew better.

He had anticipated Hagrid’s evasive tactics and had already talked to Madam Pince, who had “enthusiastically” agreed to act as Hagrid’s secretary. Snape’s final remark had Hagrid choking on his tea and blushing rather noticeably.

“He will do wonders for your organization, syntax, and grammar, but Irma has been sweet on you for years, and might try to take advantage of the situation…”

Flitwick chuckled at that, but Harry was surprised to see Minerva and Sinistra both nodding knowingly.

He was excited that all students of Hogwarts would be required to study Animagi. Though only about twelve percent of them were actually expected to successfully transform (“after much effort and many discouragingly disappointing tries, unlike an ungrateful natural Animagus of her acquaintance,”) their knowledge on that topic (under Minerva’s capable hands, of course) would be extensive.

All of the faculty members were conscious that a massive, though not insurmountable, amount of work lay ahead. They chatted animatedly all the way to the Great Hall where they enjoyed a well-deserved lunch. Their enthusiasm was palpable. At the end of the meal, Snape escorted Madam Pince to Hagrid’s side with a decidedly evil glint in his eye. Flitwick was gleeful, especially when Minerva remarked that Snape was sure to get his own back.

“Do you remember the time he put that Jarvey in Snape’s trunk?”

“Oh, Merlin, yes, that was priceless!”

Harry was astonished. “Do you mean Hagrid used to play practical jokes on Professor Snape?”

Flitwick and Minerva exchanged a look. “No,” she answered, “not while he taught here. This was after, when he came back on summer breaks from his Muggle university.”
“What did he study there?”

Minerva shrugged, as if deciding there was no reason to keep it a secret. “Severus received a Muggle Ph.D in genetics from Harvard University,” she said.

“That’s a good one, isn’t it?” confirmed Harry.

McGonagall shrugged again. “One of the best, I understand. Though how he could stand it I’ll never know…” she added pensively. “Months on end without magic, and having to transcribe his papers and his thesis from longhand to print on one of those dreadful machines—computers. So impersonal… You can sense nothing of the author on a typed essay. How do the teachers get to know their students? You only get the words, you know?” She shook her head, as if it made no sense to her.

Harry was impressed in spite of himself. He had been raised in the Muggle world and still found it awkward to have to fit in on the rare occasion when he had had to. Magic was so much a part of his life. It was like walking around deaf in one ear and blind in one eye, constantly having to watch oneself not to slip up.

When out in the Muggle world, he usually kept his wand out of reach in his boot or in his sleeve, because his hand would automatically reach for it in the pocket on the seam of his trouser leg countless times a day.

But Snape had spied on Voldemort for years without ever slipping— Muggle university was probably nothing to that. Why do it, though? Snape was already a Potions Master, a highly educated man. Why study Muggle science? And why genetics? Maybe he would ask him someday, if the occasion presented itself. Until then, he had things to do.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he said to his companions, “I am off to see Mrs. Malfoy, to volunteer my services.”

“Don’t let her get all your free time! I need that fourth year Siren Charm syllabus in a week’s time, Harry,” reminded Flitwick. Siren Charms and Defence Against Magical Creatures were the two topics that needed to be ready before September first. Harry felt like a student again, with too much homework, the only difference being that now he knew better than to procrastinate, since he did not have Hermione to rely on…

Harry smiled at Flitwick. “Such a taskmaster…”

Flitwick grinned back. “Yes, and you without Hermione Granger to copy off of…”

Harry started laughing. “I bet I could get her to help,” he teased, looking over at Hermione, whose head was buried in a history book.

“I’m not taking that bet, as I am sure you could,” Flitwick answered, “but I am betting you won’t. I think you are enjoying the intellectual challenge, after so many years spent chasing a little golden ball…”

“That requires a lot of thinking, I will have you know!” replied Harry, acting wounded.

“Oh, I am sure! Where did it go? Where did it go? There it is! Oh no! Where did it go? Where did it go?” teased Flitwick, acting out searching for a Snitch under his sleeve and around his back.

“Would you like to play one-on-one Seeker with me some time, Filius?” grinned Harry, enjoying the friendly banter.
“Alas! No time, my dear Harry. I’ve got syllabi to write!”

Minerva was laughing right along with them. As he left the hall, Harry thought how glad he was to be there, how good it felt to be part of Hogwarts again, and how grateful he was to Snape for pushing him to be involved. It had felt great to participate, speak his mind, and do his share.
Harry’s knowledge of Siren Charms was severely tested, and he had to admit he learned more about them writing the syllabus for the fourth years than ever before.

Filius had provided him with a couple of books but Harry, taking a page from Hermione, had decided to spend a lot of time in the library, researching his topics as thoroughly as possible.

Often he would see Hagrid and Madam Pince sitting at her desk behind the counter and working furiously. They seemed to be getting along quite well, and he even heard Madam Pince laugh out loud on several occasions. She actually had a lovely laugh, and seemed to enjoy the change in her routine immensely. She never shushed Hagrid, though his booming voice sounded even louder in the usually silent library. With the students absent, she seemed much more relaxed than usual.

Harry often sat across from Hermione, who was also doing a lot of research. He felt as if he were back in time, cramming for NEWTS. Once done with the syllabus, he was rather proud of his work. He was thrilled when, at the next meeting, Filius had found nothing to correct and nothing to add.

“Very good work, Harry. Excellent research.”

“I learned research from the best. Seven years with Hermione…”

“Through osmosis, was it?” asked Snape, almost too quietly for Harry to hear.

Harry’s hackles were immediately up, until Filius and Minerva both chuckled. He then remembered Filius’ long ago lecture on goblin humor and, though he rather thought Snape really did not think much of him as a scholar, he tried to take the remark lightly and answer in kind.

“Sadly not.” He sighed and continued in a regretful tone, “That never worked for me. Otherwise, if one considers the number of times I fell asleep with my head on your mind-numbingly dull lecture notes, I would be a Potions Master by now.”

“That would explain the drool stains on your essays,” replied Snape, without losing a beat.

“No. I’d drool remembering those sexy robe effects you favored us with while lecturing.”

When a moment passed without a proper repartee from Snape, Flitwick commented, “Point to Potter.”

“Severus speechless!” agreed Minerva. “That’s might even be worth two points!”

Snape looked up with an alarming smile. “Just working on giving him a false sense of security…”

Harry was glad when the moment passed and things went back to business. He could not believe what he had said to Snape. Sexy robe effects. Could that be misconstrued as flirting? He had just said the first thing that came to mind, and had surprised even himself… McGonagall and Flitwick certainly didn’t seem to think anything of it. Harry put it out of his mind and concentrated on the rest of the meeting.

The second syllabus he finished, this time for Hagrid, was long and chock-full of information, but had, in a way, been much easier to write. Harry was, by his own estimation, overly familiar with the
first two dark magical creatures (Dementors and Inferi) and most of the text on the third creatures (vampires) consisted of debunking the majority of nonsense that was said about them.

He had had a couple of encounters with vampires, the first one while still in school, and had found that behind the mystique they were rather disappointingly dull people, forced to follow a strange diet and bored with living.

Sanguini, with whom he had spent a little time, was a case in point. Before being turned many years ago, he had been an accountant and had developed very few interests since then beyond his obsession with Quidditch, which he could not even play.

Once again Harry felt he had done his topic justice, and Hagrid and Madam Pince seemed pleased enough with his effort.

The two most urgent syllabi out of the way, it was time for him to start working on his own topics. Wand Lore had been a fascination of his for many years, and he had remained in touch with the Olivanders, becoming good friends with Edelweiss and watching Orion grow from a precocious eight-year-old into a calm and patient young man, now in Switzerland earning a Mastery in his craft.

Harry liked Orion very much. He did not have the slightly creepy persona that made Harry uncomfortable around his grandfather. Orion and he had spent a lot of time together in Edelweiss’ kitchen while she made them fabulous dinners, in long discussions about even the most arcane areas of wand-making and wand lore.

Knowing Harry would never divulge them, Orion had shared with him many trade secrets that were completely unknown to most wizards. To outsiders, much of it remained obscure and mysterious. Intuition played such a great part in the wand-making process. How a wand chose a wizard was also an unknown.

Those who denied that it occurred were still unwilling to give up their own wands, though they might only admit to sentimental reasons. Orion had a theory that the wands also subtly influenced wizards by making certain kinds of magic easier and others more difficult, therefore predisposing them to certain choices. He was writing his thesis on the subject.

Harry easily wrote both those syllabi and sent copies of them to Orion by owl. He was pleased when they returned with only a few comments added in the margins. He made the suggested modifications and was done.

His other topic was going to be the most challenging of all. Blood Magic, because of his own personal experience, was something Harry abhorred. Yet he was going to have to learn all about it and understand every aspect of it. Once again he found himself in the library, mostly in the Restricted Section.

It had been decided that the sixth year syllabus would cover animal sacrifices, and that human sacrifices would be kept for the seventh years. Since he was in charge of the topic he had to write both, and was not looking forward to it.

He also had to check facts and review the third year syllabus, already turned in by Sinistra. She had been horrifyingly efficient, having also given Minerva the first year Cursed Object syllabus. Flitwick had accused her of trying to make them all feel like slackers and had, while she went to refill her tea cup, convinced all of them to turn in their Time Bound Curses syllabi within a week, just to get her back.

Luckily the second year syllabus in that topic, which Harry had to write, only covered coming-of-age
curses, and those were fairly straightforward. It also didn’t hurt that it had been one of Hermione’s interests for a while, after a university friend’s brother had suddenly turned into a frog in the middle of his coming-of-age birthday party. He had only remained in his amphibian form until his mother and father officially changed his name to Berthus, his grandfather’s name, as promised to the old man on his deathbed. His grandmother had been outraged at his baby naming to find out he would be called Arthur instead, and had found cursing the innocent newborn an expedient way to make them hold to their word.

However, because of her wording she had cursed him as one would a full wizard, and it had not taken effect until he came of age. Since the young man had always rather disliked the name Arthur, and had subsequently retained the ability to change into a frog, becoming the first amphibian registered Animagus, there had been no lasting hard feelings. Harry was quite satisfyingly finished with that syllabus in no time at all.

After many hours of research, Harry was only reinforced in his conviction that Blood Magic was the worst of the worst. Some of his readings left him sick to his stomach, and for a few nights, images of bleeding babies haunted his dreams. But he refused to be cowed and forged on. He eventually had to approach Madam Pince, as some oft-mentioned reference texts were missing even from the Restricted Section.

“These three books are extremely rare, Mr. Potter—for the better, really. Let me check my records.” She pulled out an enormous tome, which Harry thought must be charmed as there was no way such a frail lady could have lifted it otherwise. She did not thumb through it, instead just touching its ornate front cover with her wand to get it to open to the proper pages.

“Malefice du sang. That one is in French, by the way. It is listed in the library of Malfoy Manor, but it may have been confiscated by the Ministry.” She looked at him above the rim of her reading glasses. “If that’s the case, you would have to apply for a special permit to see it, as it would be in the Unspeakables’ possession. Let me know what you find out.”

She consulted his list again. “Of the Transference of Life’s Force from Beasts to Man… A charming read, I am sure. Only five copies listed in Britain. Look at that! What a coincidence: one of them is actually in your possession, being in the Blacks’ library. You will have to check the shelves at Grimmauld Place.” She looked up at him once again. “Do be cautious, though. Don’t just Summon it using Accio. These books get insulted easily, and they can nip pretty hard, especially the old ones…”

She tapped the cover for the third time. “Only three copies of A Life for a Life were ever known to exist, only one of those in Britain. Ah, but lucky for you, it is in the hands of your erstwhile Potions Master, now our new Headmaster. Hmm… now that I think about it, I have never known him to loan any of his books out…” She shrugged. “Oh, well, I’m sure you’ll work it out. Good luck, Mr. Potter.”

Well, he would have to do without the first one, since he did not have a word of French beyond ‘Bonjour’, and that with a horrible accent. He would send Kreacher for the second. It would please the elf to visit his old home again. The stasis charm on the place had to be refreshed, anyway. And he would just have to convince Snape to change his lending policy. This was for a worthy cause, after all.

He approached Snape that night after dinner.

“May I?” he asked, indicating the chair Hermione had vacated just minutes previously.

“If you must,” was the caustic reply.
Harry sat. Snape ignored him, sipping his coffee, in solitude for all the attention he paid to those around him. Did he think Harry had just changed seats for the view?

“Uh… Snape?”

“Oh, must you speak as well?” he replied irritably. He put down his cup as if the coffee had been tainted by the interruption. “Very well, do get on with it, then."

Harry thought this was not the most auspicious setting for asking a favor. Why did the man dislike him so much? He never said a word to Harry beyond a cold “Potter” in greeting, outside of the meetings. Snape did not spend a lot of time in idle chatter with anyone, but he did seem to manage to be civil to the others… Harry plunged in.

“I am working on the seventh year syllabus on Blood Magic… ”

“I should hope so.”

Harry looked up at him, disconcerted. What an irascible and unpleasant person he could be. “Madam Pince told me you are in possession of a referenced book I would like to consult.”

He had finally gotten Snape’s full attention.

“A Life for a Life?”

Harry was impressed despite himself. “Yes. It is referred to in a few texts, and… ”

Snape actually made eye contact. “You are being extremely thorough, Potter.”

Harry shrugged. Snape continued, “I read the syllabus you wrote for Flitwick. It was very good.”

Why should Harry feel insulted upon being told he had done a good job? He didn’t know, but he was anyway. “I was hoping… ”

“I do not loan my books out, Potter,” Snape started.

“But I need it if…”

“Let me finish.” Well that was rich, considering he had interrupted Harry at every turn! Harry held his tongue with great effort.

“As I was saying, Potter, I do not loan my books out; you are, however, welcome to come and consult them in situ.”

That left Harry without much to say.

“You may come by later on this evening if you wish. Eight o’clock? My rooms?”

Did Harry imagine the amused warmth in Snape’s eyes? Was he making allusion to his note?

“For drinks?” answered Harry, feeling bold.


Harry blushed despite himself. So Snape knew he had come early last time. Bother. He left the Great Hall not sure how he felt. Dealing with Snape was like tickling a sea urchin, but it always left him strangely… thrilled. How confusing.
The amount of work, to prepare for the coming year, was staggering. Snape found himself busy from morning till night. He put into his work the focused single-mindedness that had made him successful in every other endeavor in his life.

His work with Narcissa was utterly satisfying. He had been encouraged by the enthusiastic response of the staff and other qualified volunteers for the project. Already it was bearing fruit. Some of the pioneering adult students were showing amazing progress. They took nothing for granted and worked with a fervor rarely shown by the children.

Arabella Figg had taken to Transfiguration like a fish to water, and had turned out to be an Animagus. She had hopelessly studied the subject for years, certain she must have been a cat in a previous life. She had already known so much about it that learning to make the change had been incredibly easy (that she turned into a cat was only what she had expected). She and Minerva were spending a lot of time together, some of it on the roofs.

Filch, who wanted to remain on at Hogwarts, was very good at Household Charms. The castle was in its best state ever, suits of armors gleaming, windows sparkling, and many of the annoying drafts sealed for good. This winter would be quite comfortable, comparatively. Filch had also completely refurbished Myrtle's bathroom. She was thrilled.

Potter had organized a hodge-podge Quidditch team with some interested students. You could hardly get them off the pitch. It was a pleasure watching them, and reminded Severus how thrilling flying could be.

A short little witch from Aberdeen showed amazing gifts in Divination, which Severus had always been quite sure was nothing but hogwash. He was certain she would eventually make a fortune, counseling witches on their love lives and finding misplaced objects. (He suspected she was also a natural Legilimens, and made sure never to make eye contact with her.)

The syllabi for Defence Against the Dark Arts were coming along quite well. He had read most of the finished products, and was surprised when the one that impressed him most had come from Potter. He would have suspected him of getting help from Granger, had he not known her to be fully absorbed in History of Magic.

The thrill of Potter’s presence had not abated. He was… entrancing. His engaging grin—though never directed at Snape—his walk, his laugh, his able hands, his green eyes, that scar behind his ear… Severus shivered. Watching Potter on a broom always left him a little… breathless. Harry seemed to have finally learned to control his temper, and developed a sense of humor. He particularly seemed to enjoy joking around with Flitwick.

Snape sat back in the ornate and comfortable chair behind the Headmaster’s desk. He thought back to his own banter with Potter, only that morning. He had been unable to restrain himself from needling him, even though he had done it hardly loud enough to be heard. He had immediately regretted it, as it seemed Potter was going to take it the wrong way. But Potter had rallied.

His first retort about the mind-numbingly dull lectures had been a pleasant surprise, but his next one had left Snape totally speechless. Point to Potter, indeed. ‘Sexy robe effects’. Thank Merlin Snape never blushed. Though he knew full well Potter had been joking, he had not been able to quell the surge of arousal at having Potter describe him as ‘sexy’.

He was a fool, but could not help replaying the moment in his mind. Why did he torture himself with his infatuation (ha!) with a straight man?
A couple of days later, Potter surprised him by joining him at the dinner table after Granger had left. Since Snape had been vividly remembering Potter coming back from the pitch with his team that morning, attractively windblown, the man’s sudden appearance next to him had been a little… unsettling.

Then Severus had caught Harry’s scent, which had made its way directly to his groin. My god, but the man smelled good. He had a brief flash of burying his face in Potter’s neck to breathe him in, his trousers getting a little tighter than completely comfortable, when Harry had interrupted his thoughts again. Something about the Blood Magic syllabi. He had gotten hold of himself, finally.

Potter wanted to consult A Life for a Life? He was really serious about his work. Snape was impressed he had even found out that book existed.

He found himself interrupting Potter constantly, just to see the muscle clench along his jaw line in annoyance.

That he was that dedicated to his task was a very pleasant surprise. Though Severus was the one who had pushed him to join the effort, believing him to be perfectly capable, Potter’s performance was well above his expectations.

He could not help wanting to get to know Harry better, and therefore was pleased at the excuse this afforded him to spend some time in his company. There was more to the young man than his (undeniable) sex appeal.

Snape was pleased Harry had caught the reference to the note immediately, but he had to watch himself. With his own feelings coloring every aspect of his interactions with Potter, it would be easy to misconstrue Harry’s quick retorts as flirting. That the man was desperately straight, and out of bounds, was to stay foremost in Snape’s consciousness at all times. But dear god, that scent…
Chapter 39

~o~ Sharing His Passion, Harry ~o~

After reaching his quarters, Harry checked the time. He had just enough for a quick shower before heading to the dungeons, and took advantage of his softened stubble to shave quickly as well.

He pulled on his favorite jeans and a white t-shirt, and after a moment also grabbed the sweatshirt that was lying on the back of the couch. He had only put it on for a few minutes after practice that morning so it was clean enough, and the dungeons corridors were always so cold.

He assembled his notes for the seventh year syllabus. He had already rewritten his rough draft into an almost satisfactory finished product, but really felt he ought to read A Life for a Life before considering his research complete. He also took a couple other books with him that he might have to refer to, and plenty of writing material.

This time he tripped the wards exactly at eight.

“Come in, Potter.”

Harry entered. After the chill of the corridors, the room felt pleasantly warm. Snape was reading comfortably in a chair by the fire, a teacup balanced on the arm. He was barefoot, which for some reason made Harry feel like a voyeur.

“There’s tea on the sideboard, if you are interested,” said Snape, not even lifting his eyes from his book. Harry noticed a leather-bound book on the side table next to a chair matching Snape’s. He put his materials down next to it and went to get himself a cuppa.

He was glad to recognize the fragrance of Snape’s special blend. The stuff was almost addictive. He filled his cup and raised it to take a sip, breathing in the sweet scented steam. It really was very good.

As he turned back, he realized Snape had stopped reading and was observing him.

“I like your tea,” he felt compelled to say.

“Hmm…” and Snape was back to his book.

Harry sat down and soon was engrossed in his reading. He stopped once in a while to jot down a quick note. The rituals and spells described in this book were revolting, but no less so than their aim.

Apparently Voldemort’s obsession with immortality was not unique, and was only surpassed by the obsessive desire of some to retain youth and beauty. The creation of Horcruxes was explained in detail, as well as the ritual sacrifice of children to allow beautiful witches to remain so well beyond their time.

It was a compendium of horrors. Harry could see the flaws in many of the described spells that would render them almost useless. They ignored the importance of innocence and joy in the beauty of children, two feelings anyone thinking to use these spells would be incapable of. They also ignored the importance of love, friendship, and compassion, which made a long life worth living.

Harry looked up from his page to find Snape staring at him.

“Not a pleasant read, is it?” he inquired.
“That’s an understatement,” answered Harry. “I just hope that some of this is theoretical, and was never actually put to the test…”

“Thankfully, I think you are right,” answered Snape. “I believe the author was imaginative, as well as criminally insane. Not to say that some fools did not actually think of trying some of this. Thank Merlin it is not so easy to put one’s hands on a ‘fair-faced set of identical twins’ without raising a certain amount of suspicion.”

“Well, we do know only too well some of them are real, and have been tried. Horcruxes do exist,” sighed Harry. He put the book down. He had had enough. There was no end to the depravity of man, and it was time for him to balance his last few days of research with some kind of reminder that there was no end to man’s loving kindness or selflessness either.

“I feel a sudden urge to go hug Hermione’s kids,” he said to lighten the mood, only halfway joking.

Snape nodded understandingly. “How about a game of chess, instead,” he offered. “I am afraid it is past the children’s bedtime.”

The mantel clock showed it was well past ten. Harry did not feel tired, but neither did he feel like chess.

“I am pants at chess,” he replied honestly. “I don’t even like the game, however unsophisticated of me that may be.”

Snape actually chuckled at that. “Now that you have admitted it, I guess I will as well. I do not like chess either. I just could not think of another distraction suitable to the situation, and you look in need of a break.”

Harry knew exactly what he needed. Snape seemed approachable tonight. Should he dare? “Would you join me in a night flight?” he asked, almost certain he was going to be turned down.

Snape gave him the strangest look before replying, “You enjoy flying above all else, don’t you?”

Harry shrugged. He wondered if Snape had meant that in a good or a bad way. “I love it,” he answered. That was the truth. Snape could think what he wanted.

“Then, by all means.”

“Really!” Oh, no! He sounded like an eager six-year-old again. Up came the eyebrow.

“Really,” answered Snape. He stood up. “Give me a few minutes to get ready.”

“Brilliant!” said Harry, already at the door. “I’ll get the brooms and meet you on the front steps.”

Running the stairs, Harry wondered why he was so excited. He had never thought Snape flew for fun. And this was something Harry was good at, really good at. Snape was better at everything else, for sure, but in the air, Harry was the best. Why that should matter, he didn’t know.

Back at his rooms, he grabbed his scarf, his fur-lined jacket, his gloves, and two Silver Arrows: the latest one and the Special Edition from a few years back. It was a very forgiving ride, though still high performance. Harry had no idea how often Snape flew.

He stopped in his tracks. Snape probably had his own broom. Oh, well, he would bring both anyway. If Snape had his own, he could shrink one and put it in his pocket. Down again he went.
Snape walked back to his room after dinner, trying hard to think of something else besides Harry’s upcoming visit to consult his book, which of course made it impossible. How could it be that, even nearing the age of fifty, he could feel such unadulterated emotion for that man? He ought to be jaded and cynical by now, or at least reasonable. But he was not.

His analytical mind surveyed his symptoms. His heartbeat was elevated, as was his breathing rate. His blood pressure would probably be slightly increased, and his pupils dilated. His palms were moist. A textbook case of excited anticipation, hormonally driven, but nonetheless directly linked to his state of mind.

Off the top of his head, he could think of … seven, no, eight potions that could alleviate the physical symptoms and return his peace of mind. But the truth of the matter was that he liked the way Potter made him feel. He liked it and only wanted more. However, it would not do to act upon that feeling. It would, after all, be neither welcomed nor returned.

Entering his sitting room, he decided to carry on with his routine exactly as usual, as if this evening were any other. He went to his bedroom and got rid of his robes, his high-neck waistcoat, his shoes and socks, just as he did every night.

He went back to his living area, lit a fire and made some tea. Well, he did have to set out a second cup, did he not? He would if Minerva or Hagrid were coming to call.

He took his usual seat, picked up his reading material… and sat there, not reading a word, in breathless anticipation. He would not check the clock. He would not. It was twelve minutes till. Oh, for Merlin’s sake!

He put down his reading and went to the bookshelves lining his walls. A Life for a Life by Simeon Selwyn, a black leather cover, he recalled, about an inch and a half thick. There it was. He put it on the side table he placed next to the chair across from his own, and sat back down.

Four minutes till. He cursed his speeding heart and picked up his book again, staring at it a full minute before noticing it was upside down. He actually laughed out loud. He was pathetic. Getting hold of himself he read a few sentences, and almost jumped out of his skin when the wards were tripped and Potter’s knock came.

“Come in, Potter.” The intonation was perfect, cool and indifferent, and he used it again to offer him tea, keeping his eyes incongruously glued to the word ‘cerulean’ the entire time. He only looked up when Potter turned his back to him to go to the sideboard.

Perfect. Potter was perfect. The perfect arse, in the perfect jeans, the perfect v shape of his back, the perfect wrist out of the sleeve of the sweatshirt, and that damn scar in the dark hair above his ear.

Harry turned back slightly as he took his first sip, after inhaling the fragrance of the tea… and caught him staring. Thanks to seven years of Snape’s intimidation tactics, however, he was too unnerved to wonder why, and just tried to hide his discomfort with a comment about the tea.

“Hmm…” was Snape’s answered. As in: whatever you say, I couldn’t care less, I am absorbed in my important reading. He could almost believe it himself.

Potter sat down and—demonstrating a power of concentration Snape would have not credited him with outside of the Quidditch pitch—proceeded to read, take notes, and otherwise work for the next two and a half hours without a break. Though Snape’s head was bent to his book, his eyes never left
him.

A Life for a Life was not light reading. Occasionally Potter’s jaw would clench. He was freshly shaven, and the line of his jaw was perfect. Once or twice he closed his eyes briefly, obviously unsettled by the material, but read on. He jotted down notes once in a while. Snape loved the way he held the book in one hand and turned the pages with the other.

At some point, probably warmed from the fire and the tea, he stripped off his sweatshirt, momentarily pulling up his untucked t-shirt, showing a washboard stomach and a tantalizing treasure trail that widened before disappearing into his trousers. Even that did not break Harry’s concentration; he went right back to work.

As for Severus, if there had been any chance he would get anything done, it was gone now… He just sat there drinking in the sight, memorizing the curve of the ear, the play of muscle on the forearm, the perfect teeth chewing on his lower lip.

Harry, keeping his finger on a particular passage, flipped pages back and checked something in Cardigen’s Common Errors and Flaws in Spell Casting (a tome, Snape was impressed to see, Harry used like an old friend), and looked grimly satisfied. Seeming to finally sense Snape’s stare, he looked up.

“Not a pleasant read, is it?” Snape inquired.

“That’s an understatement,” answered Harry. “I just hope that some of this is theoretical, and was never actually put to the test…”

“Thankfully, I think you are right,” answered Snape. “I believe the author was imaginative, as well as criminally insane. Not to say that some fools did not actually think of trying some of this. Thank Merlin it is not so easy to put one’s hands on a ‘fair-faced set of identical twins’ without raising a certain of amount of suspicion.”

“Well, we do know only too well some of them are real, and have been tried. Horcruxes do exist.”

Harry’s comments about the book were insightful. His expressed desire to hug his friend and her children was so healthy, so sane, after such reading. Snape loved him for it.

It was clear Potter was done for the night, but Severus did not want him to go. He disliked chess, but offered a game anyway, repeating stupidly in his head, “Say yes, say yes, say yes… ”

“Well, I am pants at chess. I don’t even like the game, however unsophisticated of me that may be.”

Well, there was one thing they had in common.

“Now that you have admitted it, I guess I will as well. I don’t like chess either.” Potter’s honesty warmed him. Considering the many times Snape had taken advantage of any and all of his weaknesses, it was amazingly courageous of him to expose vulnerability. “I just couldn’t think of another distraction suitable to the situation (ha!), and you look in need of a break.”

In the same situation, needing a break, Snape would have wanted to brew. For him, that was pure joy. Though he was quite sure brewing was not on top of Harry’s list, he would actually love to do it alongside Potter. There would be something very intimate in sharing with him what he loved best. Inconceivable, of course.

He noticed that Potter seemed hesitant, and then looked almost shy.
“Would you join me in a night flight?”

Snape’s heart began to pound. The parallel was too achingly sweet.

“You enjoy flying above anything else, don’t you?” he asked gently, keeping the emotion out of his voice.

A shrug. “I love it.”

And I love you. My god, would there ever be a chance to say these words? Flying was not on top of his list, but just in case it would mean a fraction to Harry of what brewing with him would mean to Snape, there was only one possible answer.

“Then, by all means.”

“Really!” Again the pounding heart. It did, it did mean something to him. He had sounded like an eager child (which, even at this moment, Snape could not simply let pass unnoticed). He raised an eyebrow, but softened it by repeating, “Really.”

He stood up, wondering if he could even find his flight jacket. “Give me a few minutes to get ready.”

“Brilliant!” said Harry, already at the door. “I’ll get the brooms and meet you on the front steps.”

Harry sounded excited. Did it mean anything, anything at all? God, but he was pathetic. Harry was STRAIGHT. Snape had to get hold of himself. And find that bloody jacket. Potter had not even asked him if he had a broom, assuming, rightly, that he did not. Snape just had to hope Potter would be wise enough not to loan him a high-strung, performance-enhanced ride or Hogwarts might be short a Headmaster.

He had flown without a broom once, and the memory of it made him shudder. A neat trick Voldemort had taught him, and one of the darkest spells he had ever used. Never again. He’d rather die.

Ah, there was his fur-lined jacket. He despised the short robes some people wore as unpractical and ostentatious, though they certainly looked fine on Petr. He hadn’t thought of Petr in days. He did not want to think of Petr, certainly not now. He stepped out of his bedroom.

Harry’s sweatshirt was on the back of his chair. He would bring it up to him. He grabbed it and, after only a moment of hesitation, brought it to his face, inhaling deeply. For a while, he stood there pathetically, his head buried in the shirt, breathing in the man he loved.
Night flying was always special. Once your eyes had become adjusted, you could actually see pretty well, especially on a cloudless night like this one.

Snape did not look bad on a broom. Harry was glad he had brought the Special Edition for him. On top of being a reliable ride, it suited Snape’s lanky frame. Snape’s flying equipment was perfectly fine. His jacket was similar to Harry’s, as were his boots. He did not have a scarf, but had slipped on a turtleneck. His gloves were just regular winter leather ones, impractical to catch a Snitch but perfectly adequate to keep one’s hands warm.

They flew effortlessly in the quiet night, quite fast (Snape had never been short on magical power). It was peaceful, soothing, strangely comfortable. Harry could not fathom why it would be so satisfying to ride side by side with Snape, but it was.

At some point Snape let go of the broom, straightening himself up. Spreading his arms like wings, he embraced the night, a move decidedly not for the faint of heart. Harry followed suit, filling his lungs with the night air, exhilarated by the feeling of freedom. He heard Snape laugh as they both grabbed their broom handles again. It made him incredibly glad to have suggested the flight.
They did not stay out very long, turning back towards Hogwarts at the same time, neither one of them questioning their wordless communication. They spot-landed on the front porch, Snape taking no more than a step or two, nothing to be ashamed of. They got off the brooms and walked inside. Snape made to hand his broom back. Harry realized he did not want it back. He wanted Snape to have it. Without thinking, he said, “No, you keep it, it suits you.”

Snape looked shocked. “I could not. I am sure it is worth a fortune. I had never flown such a broom.” But he did look at it longingly.

“It’s only a loan. So you can practice for our next flight.”

Snape’s eyes met his. Dark as they were, tonight they were luminous, warm, soft. Harry could not look away. He wanted to read what they held; it seemed important. The moment passed as Snape answered lightly, “I am not sure it will see much use, but thank you. I had forgotten how wonderful flying is.”

They were about to each head their separate ways, when Harry remembered something. “Snape, I left my sweatshirt at your place.”

For some reason Harry could not fathom, Snape looked away. “Did you? I’ll bring it up at breakfast, shall I?”

That was perfectly logical, so Harry had no idea why he answered, “Don’t trouble yourself, I’ll just come pick it up tomorrow.”

Snape looked surprised, but not put out. “I’ll be out all day. After dinner?”

Why should that suggestion please Harry so much? “Eight o’clock, your rooms?”
“I’ll make tea,” answered Snape, lips twitching.

They parted for the night. Harry found himself whistling as he climbed his stairs, broom in hand. Life was good.
~o~ A Hopeless Fight ~o~

Snape lay in bed for a long time without even trying to sleep. His heart was filled with Harry, his mind with warnings. It felt so right, and was so wrong.

His intellect was telling him to stop, stop deluding himself, stop the foolish hope, stop the quiet tumbling of his defenses. When reality reasserted itself, when this mirage evaporated, it would hurt, and hurt badly. If he let himself fall much farther, he might not ever be able to recover.

But his imprudent heart wanted none of this, and as usual when it came to Potter, his heart was winning. Following his heart, he had left behind a life, a career, a lover, to return to Hogwarts. He had done all this for the sake of seeing Potter, of being, however peripherally, part of his life again. Now, he was recklessly involving himself deeper and deeper in Harry’s life, and in direct contradiction to the adage, familiarity did not breed contempt. The exact opposite was true…

No matter how he berated himself, he could not help but find encouragement in every look, double meaning in every action and word. The longer it took for the other shoe to drop, the easier it was to believe that it never might.

Why had Potter turned down his offer to bring up the shirt at breakfast? It was the most logical thing to do. And again, the not so subtle reference to the note, like a running joke with slightly ambiguous overtones…

Stop. Stop! It means nothing. There is nothing. Just let it go!

But that searching look, earlier, after the easy assumption that there would be another flight. “Our next flight…” Snape had wanted to kiss him, kiss that lovely mouth, bite that soft lower lip, so badly he had bitten the inside of own his cheek instead. What had that look meant? Something, he was sure of it. Snape had wanted so badly to use Legilimency—the ultimate bad idea, obviously, but he so wanted to know, to understand…

There was nothing to understand. Potter was just a… kind and… friendly man. He was just being himself. Concerned, thoughtful. A bloody Gryffindor, through and through. You loan me a book, I loan you a broom. Tomorrow was Wednesday. Ron Weasley would be visiting his wife. Potter, wanting to give them privacy, had a free night. It meant NOTHING.

Snape got up and went to his potion cabinet. He took a sip of Dreamless Sleep and came back to bed. What he needed was rest. Not fruitless thinking. He yawned, closed his eyes, and slept.

He awoke the next morning, his schedule for the day running through his mind. Rest had done him good. He and Granger had a visit to an incoming Muggle-born student today. There were seven of them entering Hogwarts this year, a high number.

Minerva and Vector had done two, Lucius and Narcissa another two, Hermione and he would do the last three. She had done some the previous year and, being Muggle-born herself, could really have handled it alone, but Minerva had instituted the policy of going in pairs and everyone seemed to agree it was better that way.

That would take care of the morning. He would teach two hours of Basic Potion Making to the adult students after lunch, and then had to finish the last two outlines for Antivenin and Antidotes syllabi for Minerva and Flitwick to rework.
At five he was meeting with a Cassandra Batgut, who would be the first Auror to rotate though DADA this year. Shacklebolt liked her and thought she would be perfect to help iron out the kinks in the new system. She would be teaching Creatures, of course, which was a student favorite, and a good one to begin the year.

It would be full day.

He rose, showered, putting a Muggle suit on beneath his robes for the visit. As he headed out to breakfast, he saw Potter’s sweatshirt on the back of the couch. He had NOT taken it to his room. That would have been just… wrong. He almost grabbed it to bring it up now. Almost.

He met no one in the corridors and arrived at the Great Hall for breakfast second, after Hagrid. He sat next to him, disregarding the usual seating, and had a pleasant meal talking of this and that. Hagrid was one of his oldest and dearest friends, really, and sharper than most. He was taking Hugo Weasley to visit a hippogriff’s nest that morning. The poor beast had to lie on its egg for seven weeks and could use the company.

Since Snape was sitting in Flitwick’s chair, Flitwick took his, and had a great time doing a startlingly good Snape impression as he greeted the latecomers.

“Granger. Looking forward to the marital visit, I trust?” Hermione wiggled her eyebrows at him comically, and stole his newspaper.

“Minerva. Having a rather late start this morning, I see. Out chasing mice half the night with Arabella Figg again?”

Minerva gave him a smile and pulled a dead white mouse out of her pocket. She had evidently just Transfigured her handkerchief, since it had her initials monogrammed on its flank.

“Don’t be jealous, I brought you one,” she said, waving it under his nose.

Snape had to laugh at Flitwick’s raised eyebrow and disdainful sneer.

“White mice are useless for potions making. I would hope an educated woman such as you would know that, Minerva.”

They were all still chuckling when Harry made his entrance.

“Potter. Late again. Twenty points from Gryffindor. Sit down.”

Harry bent to Flitwick and responded in a stage whisper, “No, Filius, only fifteen. He likes me now…”

Everyone laughed again, and after splitting Flitwick’s paper with Hermione, Potter sat down. He immediately looked up, met Snape’s eyes across the table, and smiled at him, a warm and spontaneous smile. All of Severus’ carefully restored defenses were swept away in a reckless surge of hope.
Harry’s day was busy. He spent the first four hours of it teaching flying to nervous first-time adult students, the latest wave in Narcissa’s program. She had instituted a six-week intensive magical training, with ten new attendees arriving every Monday.

They slept in the east wing in individual rooms, and took their meals together in a large refurbished classroom. Their enthusiasm was unbelievable, and they worked tirelessly. Being around them was the greatest morale booster Harry had ever known.

It made him realize just how lucky he was, what a wondrous gift he had, and how fantastic the Wizarding world was. Some Squibs had lived completely in the Muggle world for years, only keeping in touch with their families, if even that.

The Ministry was tracking them down, though it was not always easy. But no matter how long they had been away and what life they had on the outside, every single one of them was coming back, even if temporarily, to learn to use their newly revealed gift.

They were generally quite intimidated by broom riding. After the first try, however, most couldn’t get enough, and a lot of them wanted to try Quidditch. It was incredibly fun. Harry’s only holdout was Arabella Figg. She was a cat Animagus, she could transfigure a shoe into a lovely bone china tea set, but she would not get on a broom. Too old, she said. As if, thought Harry. He even tried to get Minerva to sway her, to no avail.

After lunch, he finished both his Blood Magic syllabi and started reviewing Sinistra’s. It was quite good, though he was so sick of the subject he could not finish it.

He moved on to the outline Snape had given him (as well as an impressive pile of quoted reference books) for him to complete the third year Antidotes and Antivenin syllabus. He expected to hate doing it, but to his surprise was soon quite fascinated and found himself reading much more of the provided references than necessary. He remembered Ginny mentioning, when she was helping Malfoy and Snape reorganize the potions stores right after the Battle of Hogwarts, that she had come across a book on antivenin Snape had written, and was now most curious to see it.

He had never realized the importance of the brewer in the brewing. If he thought about it, it made sense to him that a potion brewed by a more powerful wizard would be more potent, but he had never known of the importance of intent in brewing.

Just as the Unforgivables had to be meant, certain poisons had to be brewed with the actual intent to kill. Their antidotes, in the same way, had to be brewed with the intent to save, and were much more potent if brewed for a specific individual by a loved one, or at least by one who wished them well.

Snape had brewed poisons for Voldemort, Harry knew. How much of his soul had that man left behind in the war? How had he survived those years? And what did it say about him that he had spent many years afterward creating a potion that was giving new meaning to the lives of so many?

He started to write. Snape’s notes were so organized, his outline so complete, that it was actually very easy. He realized he had learned more on the actual subject matter doing this task than he had in his entire life previously, and was surprised to find he really wanted to read the other six syllabi.

Could he ask Snape, or would that be too weird? He did not want Snape to think he was… kissing
up or something. After all, when had he ever shown an interest in Potions, outside of what was needed to pass his exams?

Well, there had been the Prince, of course. And Snape and his mother’s Potions journal, as well. He had read that book cover to cover many times. But hadn’t that been a way to feel connected to her, more than an interest in the subject matter? Of course, she had only worked on about a fifth of it, and he had always read the entire thing. Maybe he liked Potions more than he had thought…

He marveled for a moment at the elegance of a complex sketch Snape had drawn to illustrate a point. Harry hated to reproduce it, knowing his would not be half as good. Could he somehow transfer it, without removing the original?

Hermione would probably know, but for some reason he did not want to ask her. He should be able to figure this out for himself. He put his quill down and decided to look it up in the library, when he was shocked to realize he was almost missing dinner. As soon as he noticed the time, his stomach gave a loud growl. He was starving.

He arrived at the dinner table just in time for the main course. He was glad to see that Ron and Hermione had not given up on him, but had saved him his usual Wednesday night spot between the children.

When Ron asked him why he was late, he told them he had been doing research. Ron thought he was kidding, but Hermione knew better. She was very intrigued by this new facet of Harry’s personality. (She also wished wistfully he had shown it while they were still in school.)

It was so good to see Ron. The three of them got to spend so little time together these days, with Ron’s job and Hermione and the kids taking priority. Harry felt a little guilty realizing, when they made to include him in their after-dinner plans, that he would have to disappoint them.

He had not thought about Ron at all the night before. Though his visits were usually a highlight in his week, Harry did not even consider giving up his own plans. He just said lamely that he was in the middle of something urgent.

“Harry, are you not finished with Flitwick’s syllabus yet?” scowled Hermione.

“You know how it goes,” was his noncommittal response. Ron had no problem believing in Harry’s procrastination, and there were no more questions.

Ron and he played outside with the children until the sun went down, and then Harry made his excuses. He went home and automatically started undressing for a shower.

Why did he feel the need to shower before going down to the dungeons? He had showered before lunch and done nothing strenuous in the afternoon. The hot water did feel good, though. He shaved as well, and brushed and flossed for good measure. After all, he never sweetened Snape’s tea so it would save him doing it before bed…

He was acting so weird. He dried himself off and started getting dressed. He had already worn his jeans yesterday. He opened his closet and stopped to think. What was he doing? What did he care if Snape saw him in the same jeans two days in a row?

He slipped on his jeans and grabbed the t-shirt at the top of the pile. After all, who cared what he wore to Snape’s? (It just so happened that the top t-shirt had been a green one, the one that matched his eyes…)

He left at twenty to eight, then stopped half way down the tower. For his first visit, he had been
summoned. The second time, he had gone to consult a book. What was he going there for today? Would he just grab his sweatshirt and leave? That would make the shower REALLY pointless.

Snape had said he would make tea. But what were they going to do? Sit down and chat? He ran back up and grabbed Sinistra’s syllabus, for something to do. He hesitated. That would be weird too: was he going to sit there and read? What if Snape had been joking about the tea and said that just to complete the reference to his note? What if Snape just opened his door, handed Harry his sweatshirt, and said goodnight? That would suck.

No, if he were going to do that, he would have brought it at breakfast. He checked the time. Shit, it was six minutes till. Harry was going to be late. He started down the steps at top speed. Late for what?
“Come in, Potter.” Harry felt the wards like a tingle on his skin as he passed through the doorway. “You’re late. Fifteen points from Gryffindor. After all,” Snape looked up with a twitch in his lips, “I like you now…”

Harry was so relieved he actually laughed. Why had he been so anxious? He suddenly felt very comfortable there, in Snape’s room. He noticed the tea tray on the sideboard.

“Will you bring me a cup as well?” asked Snape.

Harry dropped Sinistra’s syllabus on the occasional table next to the chair he had occupied the night before and went to the sideboard to pour out two cups. Since Snape had resumed his reading, Harry carefully balanced Snape’s cup on the arm of his chair and sat down. He savoured his first sip, looking into the fire.

“Did you meet Narcissa’s new group yet?” asked Snape. He had put down his book and picked up his cup.

“Yes, I met them this morning, brooms in hand. A nice group of people, I think.”

“How did you like the fellow from Coventry?”

Harry had to laugh, as he knew exactly whom Snape was referring to. “I think he might be the long-lost brother of Mundungus Fletcher,” he replied.

“Twins separated at birth, methinks. Did you count the brooms before putting them away?”

Harry laughed again. “Not this time. They haven’t learned the Shrinking Charm yet…”

“He brewed a fine Pepper-up, though. They all did. It is quite amazing, really. It was only their third lesson.”

“Could it be that you are not terrifying them to death as you teach them?” teased Harry.

“Possibly,” puzzled Snape. Then in mock horror: “Could I be losing my touch?”

Harry laughed hard, and sobering himself up, he answered, “Never.”

Somehow, that sounded as if it meant something entirely different than he had intended, and for reasons he could not understand he felt himself blushing. He drank some tea to hide his awkwardness. If Snape noticed, he did not let on.

“The tall young woman, Joanna Silver, is it? She would make a fine Beater, I should think…”

The woman was indeed very athletic, and had confessed to Harry she was itching to try Quidditch. She was only twenty-two and lived in Prink the Waddle, a small Wizarding village in the Cotswolds. Her younger brothers were both still at school, Daniel in third year and Jake in sixth, both in Hufflepuff. Jake played Beater. A shame Snape’s potion had not come ten years earlier, in her case, though she was anything but bitter. Overjoyed was more like it.

“It’s amazing, you know, what you’ve done for these people,” said Harry, realizing too late he had
stated the obvious.

But Snape only answered seriously, “It is, is it not. It is an amazingly rewarding feeling to see them love their magic. It was present all along, just waiting to be uncovered.”

He looked at Harry with a smirk. “Just like your ability to write a decent paper, it would seem.”

“Oh yours to be charming. Oh, no, wait. That’s still in hiding…”

Snape snorted. They drank their tea in comfortable and quiet companionship for a few minutes.

Snape sighed. “However much I enjoyed our little chat,” he said, “I do need to get some work done tonight.”

Harry was crestfallen. He did not want to go. He tried to contain his disappointment and, picking up his empty teacup, got up to leave.

“Refill mine as well, will you?”

Confused, Harry looked at Snape who, book already in hand, was distractedly handing him his cup.

Harry took it, giddy with relief. Snape did not mean for him to go, just to start working again. He went to the sideboard, carrying both cups to the tea tray. He was so… glad. Glad? That he would get to sit there, drinking tea, editing a syllabus on a topic he despised, in the company of a man he used to hate? Hmm… Well, he couldn’t think of a single place in the world he would rather be.

He turned back, holding two full and steaming cups. Snape was absorbed in his reading, his book in one hand, the thumb of the other caressing his lips between turning pages. One naked ankle rested on the other knee, the toes of the foot on the floor kneading the thick rug. His long sleeves were rolled up on his elegant wrists, his shirt collar open, the light of the fire playing on his stark features.

Harry almost dropped the cups with shock when he felt his cock start to stiffen. He went to put down Snape’s cup on its precarious perch and sat back down, rather less comfortably than before.

Wow.

He stared into the fire. Things began to ease up in his pants, and he was able to cross his legs and relax a little. He stared at the fire some more. Wow… He deliberately put down his cup on the side table and picked up the syllabus. (Wow.) He took a deep breath and began to read.

The next hour passed in complete silence, both men deeply absorbed in their reading. Above the desk, Dumbledore’s portrait was smiling benignly, his eyes twinkling.

“This can’t be right,” said Harry, suddenly.

Snape looked up.

“You can’t break a Blood Oath of Silence by just finding the true name of the oath holder and doing an unbinding incantation, can you? You would need more blood spilt, by both parties, wouldn’t you?” Harry looked at Snape. “You wouldn’t happen to have Grassfoot’s On Oaths and Promises by any chance?”

“I do.” Snape got up, and walked to a bookshelf on the east wall. He stood there for a moment and then reached up for a slim volume, bringing it back to Harry.

“There.” Snape sat back down and Harry felt his eyes as he was flipping through the pages. He had
just read about this in this very book the day before yesterday, sitting in the library across from Hermione. He was sure there was something more.

Oh, for Merlin’s sake, why did these old books never have indexes? Did people have time to reread everything, every time, in the olden days? He seemed to remember it was towards the end. Ah. The Blood Oaths. Breaking the Blood Oath. Oath of Fealty, Oath of Bonding, Oath of Obedience, Oath of Silence. Finally.

He scanned the passage. True name… incantation… Aha! ‘A concoction of the melded bloods.’ He’d been right!

“You need a potion,” stated Snape matter-of-factly. “Not a true concoction; it is used loosely in this text, as it was a lot in that period. It’s an admixture, really. It has to be drunk by both parties, and will kill the oath holder if he has not renounced his right aloud to a witness.”

Harry looked at him, not sure whether be awed or annoyed. “And you did not tell me this right away instead of watching me search, because…?”

“Sorry,” Snape said. “Once a teacher, always a teacher, I guess. You will retain it better for having found it again yourself.” He shrugged apologetically.

“Is there anything you don’t know?” asked Harry rhetorically, stretching and running his hands over his shorn head.

“No,” deadpanned Snape.

Harry smiled at him. “You know, I’d almost believe that?”

“How foolish of you, Potter.”

“Always, it seems, where you are concerned.” Harry realised his answer could be interpreted in many ways, but since they were all true, he did not change it.

He liked the way Snape was looking at him and saying nothing, though it ought to have felt uncomfortable. He was confused about the subtext of their entire evening, but not bothered. Somehow this felt right, and he did not like questioning it. He did need to correct Sinistra’s omission, though.

“Do you mind if I use one of your quills for a moment?” he asked, gesturing toward Snape’s desk.

“No.” Harry must have looked as unsure as to what that answer meant, since Snape clarified, speaking slowly and over-enunciating: “No, I do not mind in the least. Please, go right ahead, Mr. Potter.” Harry smiled. When had he begun to appreciate Snape’s mockery? Probably when he had started recognizing it for what it was.

He went to the desk and bent down to reach for the quill in its holder. He dipped it in the inkwell, and quickly added his correction—belatedly realizing the ink was red. He straightened out and turned with a grin, holding out the quill.

“Oh, my god! Is this THE quill?”

“The very same, Potter. It has never left this desk. Alas, it has not seen any use in many years…”

“I should burn it,” said Harry, looking down at it. “Or exorcise it, or something. This thing has the power to maim.”
“Only the over-inflated egos of underachieving students, I assure you, and only when wielded with the proper venom,” answered Snape. He sat back in his chair and added wistfully, “I take full responsibility for any harm it may have caused. I may not always have been cognizant of the consequences of its vitriol.”

Harry came back to sit. “Why?” he asked. “Why were you so…”

“Evil?”

“I was going to say unsympathetic.”

Snape shook his head. “Unsympathetic is a little mild. Evil may be a little strong. Spiteful? Malicious? Cruel?”


Snape was silent for a moment, looking almost sad. “Because I could. Because I am not a very nice man, and felt no need to hide it.” He looked up at Potter. “There was a time in my life when I did not much value human interaction. Very few things mattered, and my students’ feelings were definitely not among them. By nature, I am a vindictive, cruel person. At that time I was also bitter, unhappy, and under a great deal of stress.” He looked up, and with his unsettling smile added, “And it amused me.”

“You’ve changed,” concluded Harry.

“Not at all,” answered Snape, in all seriousness. “My priorities have. Do not let the tea and company fool you, Potter.”

It sounded like a warning, a challenge. Harry looked at him. “I am not afraid.” He smiled. “You like me now.”

He meant it only half in jest. Snape’s eyes did not leave his. “That I do, Mr. Potter. That I do.”

The sudden warmth Harry felt was unnerving, yet welcome at the same time. It was immediately doused when Snape added, “You are a great addition to our staff.”

Oh. Right.

Harry was a qualified teacher, a dedicated coach, a decent syllabus writer. What’s not to like? He took a somewhat shaky breath. Well, it was definitely time to go. “I should be going. It’s getting late.”

It was not yet ten, but Snape did not comment.

“Good night, then,” Harry continued.

“Good night, Potter.” Snape did not get up to walk him to the door, but picked up his book again.

Harry felt suddenly chilled, as if in anticipation of the drafty corridor. He grabbed the sweatshirt from the back of the chair and made his own way out. He stood outside the door feeling terribly alone, suddenly.

Snape’s last comment had cut him to the quick. Why? It had been a compliment, hadn’t it? “You are a great addition to our staff.” Harry’s throat felt tight. Shit. Snape would know through his wards that Harry was just standing there. He did not want to be out here. He wanted to be back inside, listening
to Snape’s voice, in the warmth of the fire. He obviously couldn’t go back. He left, feeling as if he had made some terrible mistake and not knowing why. He wanted to talk to Hermione. No, not really. Not Ginny, either. No, he really wanted to talk to Snape.

“You are a great addition to our staff…” But not that Snape.

The other Snape. The one who teased him about his improved writing ability. The one who negligently handed him his empty cup, assuming Harry had been going for a refill. The one who fucking gave him a hard on...

Why the fuck was he so angry? Why was his throat so fucking tight?

He arrived back in his rooms without a memory of climbing the stairs and dropped his papers on the floor. He stripped off his clothes, letting them fall as he went, and got under a punishingly hot shower. He just stood there, his hands on the white tiles, letting it beat down on his back, blinking it out of his eyes.

The grout was light grey when wet. The water was combing the fine hair on his forearms all in the same direction. On his thighs, as well. It made a little tornado-like funnel before disappearing down the drain, around, around, and around. Around, around, and around. Around, around, and around.

If he did not live in a magical castle, he would certainly have run out of hot water by now. The skin of his hands was pruned. He turned the water off, wrapped a dry white towel around his middle, and dripped his way to bed. The sheets felt warm and clean. He buried his head in his pillow and fell asleep.
~o~ Reading it All Wrong ~o~

As the door clicked shut behind Harry, Snape cursed himself. Where was his self-control? Why would he say such a thing, and in such a manner, to Potter?

“That I do, Mr. Potter. That I do.”

He had seen the embarrassed heat on Harry’s face, as the thought that his greasy old teacher was coming on to him probably flashed though Harry’s mind. Severus had tried to salvage the situation by putting the conversation squarely back on a professional level, but it had been too late. His slip-up had ruined the easy interaction they had been enjoying.

This could not happen again. Harry was straight. The only thing Severus could hope for was his friendship, and that would only be possible if he stopped letting his feelings taint his perception, if he stopped looking in everything for something he knew full well could not exist.

The evening had gone so well. He had managed to make Harry feel comfortable and relaxed from the very start. It had been so pleasant to work, aware of—but not overwhelmed by—Harry’s presence. He had managed to keep himself in check, enjoying the warm companionship. Until Potter had bent down over his desk, that is.

Snape squeezed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. How could anyone be so damn… perfect? It was as if every aspect of Harry’s physique had been designed specifically to drive him to distraction. (He had been wearing those damn jeans again. Argh…) And the way he moved, like energy harnessed by feline grace. It was so… easy, so easy to slip, to want more than was possible.

He would have to do better. Keep his distance, be more aloof. Why had he put himself in this untenable position? Because he had no choice, that’s why. He had waited for ten years. He could stay away no longer.
Harry woke up early in a terrible mood. He put on his training gear and flew to the pitch straight out of the south window on his Firebolt. He put himself through the paces, training as hard as he would have were he still playing for Puddlemere. He worked both in the air and on the ground, including the abs-buster sequences and the one-handed push-ups. It had been a while, but it felt good, cathartic.

He walked back to the front doors (he never flew directly back; the climb helped him keep in shape) and ran up the stairs two at a time. He showered, put on his teaching robes, and headed to breakfast. He took with him a book on pedagogy that Hermione had loaned him, which he had not yet had the time to read. School would be starting soon and he wanted to feel comfortable in his role as an educator.

So far, he had followed his instincts when it came to relating to the students. He felt, however, that he needed more solid background for the times—and he supposed there would be many—when he might be out of his depth. After all, he would be dealing with pre-teens and teenagers, with nothing more than his own experiences to draw upon.

It was still early when he arrived at the Great Hall; half the seats were still empty. He was glad to see that his special requests for the meal, which he had communicated to Kreacher before showering, had been provided. He made himself a plate of hard-boiled eggs without yolks, fat-free farmer’s cheese, and peeled grapefruit pieces. He added yeast and wheat germ to his cheese and drank a shot of wheat-grass juice.

He quickly became interested in his reading, only giving perfunctory greetings to Dermott and Neville when they took their seats on either side of him. He found it amazing that so much research had been done on the psychology of learning and teaching.

He finished his green tea and gave an amused smile to Hermione, who, as she did every Thursday morning, arrived dead last, hair still damp. That would mean he had only about fifteen minutes left before he had to meet his adult education class. He closed his book and got up. He headed out with Flitwick, who was also due in the east wing.

“What are you reading, Harry? You hardly looked up from your book all breakfast.”

Harry showed him the cover of the obviously Muggle book. “Hermione recommended it. I want to know more about teaching. Muggles have done a lot of research on the subject. I feel as if I have been winging it, and I thought learning more couldn’t hurt.”

“From all that I have heard, you are a natural at it. But you are right, learning more can’t hurt.” He added reflectively, “You know, it is a fact that sometimes, even after fifty years or more experience, there are times when you feel completely at sea. Young people can be so unpredictable.” He looked up at Harry. “I don’t want to sound presumptuous, Harry, but if you ever need a sounding board, feel free to come to me.”

Harry was very touched. He held Flitwick in high regard, both as a teacher and as a person. That he would offer him his help and advice was very comforting. “Thanks, Filius. I really appreciate it. I’ll remember that.”

(Filius Flitwick was pleased his offer had not been taken the wrong way. He remembered all too well
a very harsh rebuke from another young and new Hogwarts teacher, many years ago. That young man was now a dear friend, and the new Headmaster, but it did not change the fact that it had taught him to tread lightly when it came to offering advice.

Harry’s morning was busy and fun. The group he taught that morning was in its last week of the program. It should have included Arabella Figg. Harry was still disappointed he had never managed to convince her to consider giving flying a try.

At lunch (three grilled chicken breasts, heaps of steamed greens, roasted almonds, and whey to drink), Hermione traded seats with Neville to sit next to Harry. She had noticed him reading her book at breakfast and was interested to hear what he thought of it. Harry was really pleased when she seemed genuinely eager to hear his opinion, and enjoyed their discussion very much. When she noticed his glass of whey, she shuddered.

“Good heavens, Harry. I always thought you drank the stuff because you had to, as part of your training. I didn’t think you actually liked it!”

He grinned. “I hate it, and the food, mostly, but for some reason, with school starting so soon, I feel the need to get back to it.” He looked at her a little sheepishly. “I really want to do well, Hermione. I want to be good at this. I don’t want to muck it up.”

Her smile was so warm and loving, it felt like a hug. “You are going to be great, Harry.” She added, lightening the mood, “Thanks to your readings, though, not your diet…”

He laughed. “Hey, you want me to take the kids off your hands tonight? I could take them out for ice cream after dinner.”

“What don’t you take all of us out for ice cream? I could use a break.”

That thought cheered Harry up tremendously. He could use a break too, after all that Blood Magic stuff.

He spent the afternoon looking over the school brooms and Quidditch supplies with Filch, trying to organise what was there, and deciding what needed to be ordered. He knew more than enough about broom manufacture and maintenance to do a lot of the work needed on the brooms himself, and found that Filch was very interested in helping him and learning some of it in the process.

Flitwick had been right; Filch was a changed man. When asked, he somewhat shyly showed Harry his new wand. Harry had noticed it when Filch had rid the broomshed of what looked like (and probably was) many years of accumulated spider webs and dust. It was a thing of beauty: ebony, with a gorgeous twist in the hardly noticeable grain.

“It’s got a core of dragon heartstring. I got it at Ollivander’s. ’Twas a gift.”

“It’s really beautiful,” said Harry, truthfully.

“Couldn’t really have afforded the like of it myself, but they all went in on it: Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Professor Hagrid, Professor Sinistra, Professor Vector… All of them. Even Professor Trelawney. He came with me to Olivander’s, Severus did. To make sure I’d get the best there was, that matched me.”

He shook his head. “Isn’t it ironic? I always hated him, from a boy. He was so powerful a wizard, even as a kid, and so arrogant. Well, I hated all of yous, really, but him especially. And he went and done this, invented that potion. Can’t take back the hate from the past, but I’ll tell you this: I’d lay my life down for that man, now. It’s like what you did ten years ago, you know? No way for the rest of
us ever to repay. Him, or you.”

Harry was floored. Outside of the notoriety and the official acclaim, only a handful of wizards had ever thanked him personally. That Filch would do so now, putting him together with the man who had given him his magic, touched him beyond words. He could only nod in acknowledgement.

“Could I see yours?” asked Filch tentatively. “It’s ok, if you’d rather not…”

Without any hesitation, Harry handed him his wand. “It’s not as beautiful as yours, but I am very attached to it.”

“Same one you had in school, is it?” Filch was holding it with both his hands, as a wizard should when shown another’s wand.

“Yes, I have only had the one.” Harry had never considered Dumbledore’s or Malfoy’s his. This was his wand, and always would be.

“What is it?”

“Holly, with a phoenix feather at its core. Fawkes’, actually.”

Filch handed the wand back to Harry, presenting it on both his palms, as was correct. “I remember when you Summoned that broom, at the tournament.” He chuckled. “A neat trick, that. And now that I’ve learn the spell, I know how much power that took, from a wee lad.”

Harry laughed in recollection. “That wasn’t power,” he admitted, “it was desperation.”

“Well, that Horntail sure qualified as a strong motivator, I expect,” chuckled Filch.

“That it was,” agreed Harry, laughing as well. He hadn’t thought about this for years. This man had known him from a child. It all seemed so long ago.

His train of thought was interrupted when Filch handed him a ruin of a broom. “Check out this one. It must be a hundred years old, if it’s a day.”

It was indeed an antique. The stirrups looked hand-forged, and the scotch broom tail only had a handful of twigs left. Even in that advanced stage of decay, it still vibrated slightly in Harry’s hand. But as Harry could have ridden a Muggle street-sweeper’s broom, it meant nothing; this broom would never fly again. Even so, Harry hated to just throw it away.

“Don’t worry,” said Filch sensing his regret. “I’ll burn it good and proper, and throw the ashes on the pitch. It’s only fair.”

That’s when Harry started counting Argus Filch as a friend.

They worked together amicably until late afternoon, when Harry called it quits. He wanted to wash up before dinner. He was incredibly grimy. They would start refurbishing the existing brooms the next afternoon. In Harry’s opinion, they needed quite a lot of new equipment. He would have to talk to the Headmaster before ordering what he thought was needed. His current budget would just not do.

Conveniently, he ran into Snape on his way to dinner.

“Good evening, Potter.”

“Good evening, Headmaster. I need to talk to you about my budget. Do you have any time
Snape thought for a moment. “If you come to my office at five o’clock, I’ll have about an hour.”

“It shouldn’t take that long. Would five-thirty be all right? I have a busy afternoon.”

“That will be fine.”

“See you then.”

Harry took his seat and soon was explaining his new diet to Neville and Dermott. They were looking askance at his tuna, still shaped like the tin it had come from, and his unattractive brown rice and lentil entree.

“Was the wheat grass for you, then?” asked Neville. “One of the kitchen elves came for some this morning.”

“Yes. I drink a shot of it at breakfast.”

“You should eat some sorrel, and lots of parsley. They are really good for you, too…”

Soon, Dermott and Neville were busy discussing the properties of many other plants and ingredients Harry could add to optimise his diet. Neville’s suggestions were generally less objectionable than Dermott’s, who recommended, for example, the foot-pads of greyhounds and raw octopus.

“Muggles eat raw octopus,” he argued, defending his recommendation to his disgusted table companions. “They call it Sashimi. It’s quite tasty, I’ve heard.”

His doubtful expression bellied his words, and had Neville and Harry roaring with laughter.

After dinner, Harry, Hermione, Hugo and Rose walked to Hogsmeade and had a great evening out, though Harry did not even taste the ice cream. He drank lemon water instead.

By the time he went to bed, he was very ready for it, especially since his alarm was set for five again.

He was going to be all right. He’d hardly thought of what had happened with Snape at all, all day.

He woke up shuddering in the middle of the night from the most erotic wet dream he had ever had. It had involved sucking on elegant narrow toes, among other body parts, lying on a thick rug in front of a fire, and hot, fragrant tea-flavoured kisses. Wow…
Chapter 46

~o~ Pathetic ~o~

When Severus had arrived at breakfast that morning, Potter had been completely absorbed in the book next to his plate. He had left with Filius, for more flying lessons, no doubt.

At lunch, Harry had been tied up in his conversation with Granger. Severus had enjoyed Longbottom’s company. The man was a brilliant herbologist. The help he had provided in the manufacture of the Squibs’ potion had been invaluable.

He had taken a plant that was on the verge of extinction due to the impossibility of cultivating it, and not only had found a way to do so, but he could produce enough of it to accommodate the daily needs of hundreds. It now grew, in neat pentagon-shaped plots, in a modified greenhouse where the lighting sequence was equivalent to a seventeen-hour day.

Why Longbottom had never, not even once, mentioned or even made allusion to the way Snape had treated him as a child, Severus could not fathom. He had made that boy’s life a living hell but the man had never let that influence their interactions. He and George Weasley had occasionally been guests at his house in Amsterdam, George and Petr enjoying many flights together.

He had run into Potter on his way to dinner completely by chance, if you ignored the fact that he had been standing in the corridor for fourteen minutes, listening intently for Harry’s unmistakable steps down the stairs (no one else above the age of eighteen jumped the last three stairs of every flight of the great staircase).

Their interaction had been completely professional. He would see Harry tomorrow for half an hour to talk about his budget (which, Severus was perfectly aware, was woefully insufficient). It was a start.

Hermione Granger had been in a chatty mood, looking forward to her evening out with Potter and the children. It brought a measure of peace to Severus to know what Harry would be doing that evening, since he was certainly not coming to the dungeons for tea. Pathetic.

His day had otherwise been very busy. With his habitual efficiency and focus, he had accomplished a tremendous amount, met important people about important matters, solved numerous thorny problems, made huge progress on several fronts. But who cared?

Seeing Potter reading or chatting from across the table and speaking to him for all of two minutes was what had given Snape’s day meaning. Pathetic.

Snape spent his evening in his usual chair, reading, drinking tea, staring for long periods of time at the empty chair across from his. Pathetic.

He went to bed early (the sooner he slept, the sooner tomorrow would come). He did NOT smell the chair for any possible remnant of Potter’s scent. He did NOT check the blotter on his desk for the inverted imprint of Potter’s writing.

He thought about it, though.

Pathetic.

He woke up, another busy day ahead of him. He and Granger had another visit to a Muggle-born.
The last one had gone very well. The impish eleven-year-old’s parents had been immensely relieved their rambunctious child’s peculiar talents finally had an explanation. They had been pleasant and interesting people.

The mother taught piano and the father bred hunting hounds. Their lovely affectionate bitch had taken a shine to Snape and had lain on his feet the entire time. It had made him want to get a dog. (Did Potter like dogs?)

If the child, Hamish, did not end up in Slytherin, Snape would eat his hat. For one thing, he played the piano beautifully, and Slytherins seemed the only wizards with a musical bent. The family would not even need financial aid. Apparently, breeding hounds was lucrative.

Later, he would teach Arabella’s group their last Potions class. They would have a choice of which potion to practice: a salve for dry skin, a repellent that kept pests out of a garden, or hangover potion.

Snape amused himself for a moment trying to guess who would choose what. Wouldn’t he be surprised if Arabella went for the hangover brew? He chuckled at the thought. She was a sweet lady for whom, as far as he knew, a small sherry after dinner was only for special occasions.

He would skip lunch to free up half an hour of his crammed schedule at the end of the afternoon. He had picked the end of the day for Harry’s visit, so they might get a chance to walk to dinner together. Pathetic.

At a quarter to five, he allowed himself to think about the upcoming visit. He had had a rational, satisfying day. Hogwarts’ reorganization was moving along beautifully. This year would be a good one.

He brewed a pot of tea, mostly because he was starving and needed something to tide him over until dinner. He hated missing meals. Would there be any way this could be misinterpreted as anything less than professional behavior? No, of course not. If Minerva or anyone else were coming at that time of day, he would have made tea. He was over-thinking everything. He had to relax. But not too much.

Potter was prompt. He had evidently just showered (and shaved). Snape vaguely wondered what he had been doing this afternoon that would cause him to need to shower before the meeting. The explanation came quickly.

“Filch and I have been reorganising the Quidditch equipment, and refitting the brooms.”

Snape had seen the state of Madam Hooch’s broom shed. This had to have been a very dirty job, even with Filch’s excellent cleaning charms. (But Harry had shaved…)

“The school is down to fifty-seven able brooms, only twenty or so of those capable of any kind of performance. A lot of the Quidditch padding is in very bad shape. Believe it or not, the ones I used in my years here are still in service, and they only held for me because Hermione charmed them back together countless times. The newest uniforms are over three years old, and we have only three ball sets.”

“You need a budget extension.”

“A significant one, I am afraid.”

“I can authorize a certain amount, above which I will need to get authorization from the board. How much do you need?”
He was impressed when Harry pulled out several sheets of parchment covered in calculations.

“The bare minimum would be around eight thousand and seven hundred Galleons.” He pulled a face. “‘Bare’ and ‘minimum’ being the key words there…” He looked up at Severus.

“It all depends on the type of program we want for the school. We could do a decent job with twelve thousand, and really be tops with twenty. I could pull some strings and get us some deals, I am sure, if I let them use my name, and you could if you let them use Hogwarts’ in their promotions. I don’t think you should, by the way. I don’t care about my name, but Hogwarts’… I don’t know. It would seem wrong somehow, even if the Royal Family does it.” He shrugged. “Maybe I am just being impractical.”

The limit of Severus’ discretionary spending was five thousand Galleons. They would have to go to the board, no matter what. They might as well go for broke.

“Let’s be the best we can be, shall we? Work on a presentation, make it good. The board meets next Tuesday. You can give it yourself. Without that, I could only give you five thousand, which obviously will not do.”

Harry looked hesitant. “I am not sure what the best approach would be. I don’t want to come across as… I don’t know…”

“The Boy Who Spends?”

Harry burst out laughing. “No, more like ‘The Coach Who Lost Touch With Reality’, or, ‘The Burned Out Seeker With Delusions Of Grandeur’.”

Snape chuckled.

“Burned out, indeed. I happened to catch sight of you over the pitch this morning, during my constitutional. Brilliant.”

Oops. Well, at least he had not admitted forgoing his run in favor of sitting under a tree for an hour, out of sight, in awe of Harry’s acrobatics. He was relieved when Harry looked sheepish and not horrified.

“I am preparing for the year’s start. I may be going a little overboard.”

“I believe we all do it, to an extent. Each new year is a new challenge. If we didn’t get a little nervous, we shouldn’t be teaching.”

Well, he himself wasn’t teaching, per se. But he had always felt the same need to hit the ground running every year he taught, and he certainly would not get up at five to go running once school started.

“I could look over your presentation before Tuesday, if you’d like. I know quite a few board members. I might be able to help choose the best approach.”

“Would you? That would be useful. I have no experience begging for funding.” Harry frowned. “My days are pretty full, though, as I am sure yours are. You did not even make it to lunch today, did you? Hermione said you were working.”

Had Harry asked about him? No, of course not, it must have come up in the conversation.

“Evenings would be better,” Snape agreed.
“Sunday night would be best for me. That way I can work on it some more Monday, if need be.”

“Very well.”

Harry looked at his Muggle watch. A lot of Muggle-borns never gave those up. It looked like a nice timepiece, sexy on his toned wrist. (Good grief!)

“It’s almost dinner time. Are you eating dinner, at least?”

“I am dedicated, Potter, not masochistic. Shall we go?”

Just like that. They were colleagues, working together for the good of the school. He had got his walk with Potter, and an… appointment with him Sunday night. And Potter was not acting weird, or worried for his virtue. Could he have misinterpreted what had happened two nights ago? Severus had to contain the bounce in his step.
Harry had spent the morning preparing for his meeting with Snape, the school’s inventory and Quidditch supply catalogues in hand. He had worked hard and come up with three budgets. He would be very happy with the mid-range one, with a couple of extras. He had no idea what to expect.

He thought it was lucky that Snape was a Quidditch lover. After all, Petr had mentioned he was a Puddlemere fan. He probably had followed them since childhood, as Ron did the Cannons. He tried to picture a child Snape with posters on his walls. Hmm.

Potter had joined Puddlemere right out of school, as Relief Seeker. The next year they had not renewed the starting Seeker’s contract, and he had gotten the job—the youngest Seeker in the league. He had been that good. He had given it everything he had, and was proud of his record, but he really loved teaching the game to people, coaching. It was such a joy.

Snape had not been at lunch. He knew, from talking to Hermione the night before, that she and Snape were going to meet a prospective student and her parents that day, but she had been back. At pudding he joined her, sitting in Snape’s chair, and asked her how it had gone. Hermione was pleased. She said she thought she could sense a Gryffindor. The last one, she admitted, had had Slytherin written all over his smirking, impish face.

“Where is Snape?” Harry had asked, casually.

“Working, he said. He had to make some room in his schedule for an extra appointment today, apparently.”

Oh.

She shook her head. “The man is a workaholic. No wonder he drove us so hard in school. He is so focused. I thought I was intense…”

Filch and Harry worked hard all afternoon, trying to coax a few more years out of Hogwarts’ equipment. At least the broom shed was totally in shape now, everything organized, labeled and inventoried. Sadly, the lack of clutter only made the scarcity of the equipment more noticeable.

Harry was filthy and rushed to his rooms to shower and change into his teaching robes before his meeting. Catching sight of his five o’clock shadow in the mirror, he looked at his watch and squeezed in a shave.

Completely useless, really. He would have to shave again in the morning anyway. It did look nicer, though. “Honestly!” His exasperated inner voice sounded just like Hermione at her most frustrated. He chuckled. His wet dream was messing with his head.

All business, he got to Snape’s office right on time. Ahhh… there was tea. He very thankfully accepted a cup. Dinner was still forty-five minutes away. Perhaps he and Snape would get to walk down together? (“Honestly!”)

The meeting went very well. Snape was open and supportive, the perfect Headmaster and mentor. The conversation was pleasant and easy, a little banter added, this time NOT mistaken by Harry for
flirting on Snape’s part.

There was one slightly awkward moment, when Harry let it slip that he had inquired as to Snape’s whereabouts at lunch, but it went unnoticed. Harry could not help feeling pleased Snape had caught sight of him that morning. He knew how good he looked in the air. (“Honestly!”)

Harry felt he had struck just the right note. They were colleagues, working together for the good of the students. Did it matter that the best part for him was that they did get to walk down to dinner together, and that they had a date for Sunday night? Well, not a ‘date’ date, of course.

Then why the hell was he so glad?
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

This is one of my favorite chapters. I just loved Harry here.

~o~ A Flying Fig ~o~

Harry had worked hard on his presentation. He had run it by Hermione and Ron, and also shown it to George, who could have sold anybody anything. Harry was pretty happy with it. However, none of them knew any of the regents well, so Snape’s opinion would be invaluable.

Harry could not believe that the students would be arriving on Friday. The summer had flown by and he felt he had never worked as hard as he had in his last month of holidays.

He was lying on the lawn at the edge of the lake, under an ancient oak tree. He had just finished his Sunday morning training, which always started much later and was much more leisurely than his weekday sessions. It was probably close to nine. He should get up and shower. There was a special luncheon at twelve o’clock for the initial group of Narcissa’s students, who were finishing their program today.

They would leave Hogwarts with a very well rounded, if concentrated, magical education, armed with the basic skills necessary to fully participate in the Wizarding world. Narcissa was already speaking of offering another six-week course a year hence. They could return at that time and deepen their understanding of whatever aspect of magic they had the most interest in after a year of using their powers. Harry thought it was a great idea.

The program was a huge success. There was a long waiting list now, so many new wizards were wanting to take advantage of the opportunity to learn. The coming year was going to be extremely busy for everyone at Hogwarts, since so many of the teachers had volunteered their limited free time to keep the adult program running. Everyone agreed it should be free and offered to anyone who wanted to participate, so until Narcissa found funding, she could not hire paid teachers.

Harry got up, picked up his broom and headed back to the castle. Further up the path, a small grey cat came out of the bushes. It stretched in a patch of sunshine before transforming back into Arabella Figg. She also started walking in the direction of the castle. Harry could not pass up the opportunity; he had to try one last time.

“Mrs. Figg, wait up!” He jogged to catch up to her.

“Oh, hullo, Harry! Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“It is. A lovely day for flying.”

She looked severely at him. “You are not going to start up with that again, are you?”

He grinned at her, putting out as much charm as he could muster. “Yes, I am. I know that you don’t want to get on a broom by yourself so I had an idea. Why don’t I give you a little ride, just so you can experience flying without actually doing it yourself? Come on, it’s a beautiful day, you said so just now. This is your last day at Hogwarts. Don’t you want to see the castle from the air? It’s an
amazing view!”

“I…” She tried to interrupt, but he would not let her.

“Don’t you dare tell me you are afraid of heights! You are a cat! I have seen you on the roof, doing your high wire act with Minerva!”

She looked a little sheepish. “All right, I won’t tell you that. Let me think of another excuse. Or better yet, Harry, why don’t you explain to me why it is so important to you that I should try flying? Don’t you have bigger fish to fry?”

Harry looked at her earnestly. “Mrs. Figg, I love flying. It is the most amazing, wonderful, magical thing in the world. I don’t want you to miss out on it. You may not think so, but you are a special lady to me. You were the only person who was ever kind to me when I was a boy…”

“Come on, Harry, I bored you to tears with my cat albums…”

“And you gave me biscuits, and you let me sit on your couch and read your books. You did not bully me, or make me weed your yard, or yell at me…”

“Umph…”

“Really, you were nice. And you were there for me when I needed you. You walked home with me after that Dementor attack, despite the fact that if they’d come back, there would have been nothing you could have done to defend yourself. And you testified on my behalf, when everyone else thought I was a liar…”

“Not everyone, not Dumbledore. Don’t make more of it than it really was…” She looked a little embarrassed, but touched at the same time.

“Whatever you may think, it meant a lot to me. And taking you up for a ride is the best way I can think to thank you.”

She shook her head and sighed. “All right, then. I’ll do it.”

“Brilliant!”

“But I warn you, Harry, none of that fancy stuff you were up to this morning. Just up and around the castle and down, no fancy stuff…”

“Of course not: the gentlest ride ever, I promise you. You are going to love it.”

She looked doubtful but resigned. Harry mounted his broom, kicked the stirrups down for an upright sitting position, and keeping it perfectly stable hovered it only about two feet from the ground.

“Here, sit in front of me, as if you were riding sidesaddle on a horse. I’ll have my arms around you the whole time. You’ll be perfectly safe.”

Arabella Figg was not much bigger than Rose Weasley, and he had taken her like this many times. She sat down gingerly, very ladylike, and giggled when his arms came securely around her. “Are you getting fresh with me, Mr. Potter?”

“It’s not every day I take a pretty lady up for a ride!”

He took off so smoothly she did not realize they had left the ground. When she did, she let out a little nervous squeal.
“I’m all right, I’m all right. You surprised me, that’s all,” she said immediately.

And up they went, soon catching the updraft from Hogwarts’ walls, higher and higher, gently gliding into the warm air, until the view was breathtaking.

“Isn’t it beautiful from here, Mrs. Figg?”

She was taking it all in, an enchanted look on her face. “Can we go over the forest?” she asked.

In a graceful and easy arc, they were above the top of the trees, and were lucky enough to catch sight of a small group of unicorns in a clearing, two mares and their foals.

“Oh, Harry, would you look at that!” she said in a whisper, as if afraid to spook them.

A curious Thestral came and joined them in the air and flew at their side for a moment before heading down again, having lost interest. They headed back over the grounds.

“Oh! Look!” She said. “Professor Hagrid’s hut! It looks just like a dollhouse from up here!”

Harry smiled, enjoying her delight. “Do you want to say hello to the Giant Squid?” he asked.

“Oh, why not,” she giggled.

They came down over the lake, the water sparkling in the morning sun. With perfect timing, the squid raised one of his tentacles out of the water, as if in greeting, creating ripples that caught the light.

Gently they curved around again, in a slow arc that took them all around the castle and the grounds.

“Had enough?” asked Harry.

“Can you show me the Quidditch pitch?”

Smiling again, Harry turned in that direction and passed between two of the loops.

“Wow, they are much bigger than I thought! I’ve only ever seen them from the ground.”

She was quiet as they crossed the whole length of the pitch to the opposite goals, and then said in a little voice, “Harry, could we do a loop-de-loop?”

He chuckled. “Are you sure, Mrs. Figg? That’s pretty fancy stuff, you know!”

“I can take it,” she answered, determined.

“All right, then. First we’ll have to gain a little speed.”

He pushed his magic into the broom and they smoothly accelerated. She squealed again, loving it. They were now speeding along, wind blowing her wispy white hair into his face, tickling his nose.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready,” she giggled.

Harry executed a perfect loop-de-loop, smoothly and effortlessly.

Arabella let out a gleeful shriek. “Do it again!” she begged excitedly.
He did it again, and followed it with a straight climb and a gentle down-spiral, Arabella whooping in delight.

He slowed down a little and took one more leisurely turn above the entire grounds before descending and landing them gently, with perfect precision, on the exact spot where they had taken off.

She got off, her face radiating with pleasure and her cheeks pinked by the flight. She tucked her hair back in its bun, smiling at him as he dismounted. No sooner had he done so than she had her arms around his middle, giving him an enthusiastic hug.

“Thank you, Harry,” she said, her head pressed to his chest.

He hugged her back, one-handed, laughing.

She backed away, still smiling a big happy smile that he had never seen on her small face before.

“Oh, Merlin’s hat, Harry! That was… the best. Did you see those unicorns, with the baby ones? And that squid, waving at us? And that loop! That was amazing…” She chatted excitedly all the way to the castle, reliving the experience again and again, not even noticing that Harry was just walking silently next to her, smiling and loving her joy.

He walked back to his rooms still buzzed by the experience. Flying was the best. His happiest moments had been on a broom. This one was near the top, right under his night flight with Snape.

He took the last two flights at a run, entering his room through the trap door. That had taken a bit of getting used to, but now he did not even notice it, climbing through having become as routine as opening a door.

He stripped off his gear, storing it carefully in the downstairs closet, and climbed the circular stairs to his room in nothing but his underwear. He headed to the shower.

Why had that flight with Snape been so special? It had just been a short night flight. But flying with Snape had been so… wonderful? Wonderful and lovely, and…

Under the warm water, Harry’s cock filled, slowly but surely, to a hard erection. Going with the flow, he started rubbing himself leisurely.

…Wonderful, and lovely, and… intimate. He pictured the both of them together, speeding through the night, their arms wide open, their fingers almost touching. He thought of Snape the other night, reading in the light of the fire—his wrists, his naked foot, his long toes kneading the rug. He thought of his own amazing dream, of what tea-flavored kisses might really feel like, and Snape’s hand on his cock, and Snape’s mouth on his mouth, and Snape’s cock up his… He came in long spurts, and milked it to the last drop, moaning softly. Wow.
Chapter 49

~o~ Malfoy Manor ~o~

The luncheon was fun. It took place under a marquee in one of the interior courtyards, buffet style. It was all about the adult students: what their favorite part of the program was, what spells they liked best to perform, what the highlights of their six weeks had been.

There was a lot of laughter and a lot of emotion. They showed off their best spells and their new wands, and promised to keep in touch with each other. The shared experience had created a lot of bonds between them, regardless of their age or place in life.

Harry noticed that they all called Snape by his first name and were very easy around him. Severus was gracious, talkative and funny, showing none of his usual aloofness and arrogance. He looked… happy. After all, thought Harry, this joy was the direct result of the research to which Snape had dedicated the last ten years of his life. This was the fruit of his labor.

Harry spoke with everyone, really enjoying himself, but his eyes kept returning to Snape—his sharp profile, his long elegant hands as he returned a student her wand, his Adam’s apple going up and down as he drank, the way he threw his head back and laughed, hard, at one of Filius’ jokes.

When their eyes met (as Arabella was recounting her loop-de-loop), Harry felt he could lose himself in those black depths forever. He looked away quickly, lest his own eyes betray his racing heart.

When he returned to his rooms in the middle of the afternoon, he felt restless and on edge. Nothing kept his attention very long, not his presentation, not his next syllabus, not the Quibbler. He did not want his mind to wander to recent events he did not need to over-analyze. Deciding he could do with a change of pace, he chose to visit his little goddaughter.

He knew from Narcissa that Lucius was spending the afternoon at the Manor visiting his grandchildren, and so was not worried about interrupting a romantic tête-à-tête between Draco and Ginny. He Floo-called, asking Shim, one of the house-elves, to get her. She came, holding a sleeping baby in a blue receiving blanket. He had been so busy; he had not spoken to her for over two weeks.

“Come through, Harry! I am so glad to see you!”

He threw in some more powder and walked into the lovely sitting room Ginny liked to use most. The baby in her arms was little Scorpius Severus, his golden red hair forming the Malfoy widow’s peak on his forehead. He was a gorgeous baby.

They walked into the larger drawing room, where Lucius and Draco were conversing over coffee. Little Lily was asleep on the forearm of her father, her tiny behind in his palm and her little face in the crook of his arm. Her hair was so blond it looked almost white.

“You want some coffee?” asked Ginny, gently depositing her burden in his grandfather’s waiting arms.

“No, I just had some, thanks. Narcissa’s party was almost over when I left fifteen minutes ago,” he added to Lucius.

“How did it go?”

“Great. Really great. Her program is amazing.”
Lucius smiled warmly at him. “She seems happy with it. She said your classes are very popular, and your games of pick-up Quidditch as well.”

Harry agreed. “They all love flying. We have a great time.”

“It is one of the things I miss most. That, and Apparating. And bossing the house-elves around, of course,” Lucius added, jokingly.

Lucius’ strength and resilience were amazing. He never expressed the slightest bitterness or showed the least self-pity over the loss of his magic.

“I’ll take you up anytime,” Harry said, meaning it. “Just ask.”

“Thanks, Potter. I might take you up on that next time I come to Hogwarts.”

“Anytime,” said Harry again. He turned to Draco. “How is my goddaughter?”

Draco, who had just been lovingly staring into his daughter’s sleeping face, looked up. “She is the best. She takes after me, I think. An angel.”

Ginny started laughing. “You weren’t saying that last night, when you were changing her nappy at two-thirty!”

“True, but I have since seen the light… And she’s asleep,” he answered, smiling at his wife.

The Floo chimed in the other room, signaling Narcissa’s arrival. When she walked in, she was not alone.

Harry’s heart jumped in his chest at the sudden appearance of the man he had come to the Manor to forget. Next to Narcissa in her lovely white summer dress, he looked like the night. Beautiful.

“Harry!” exclaimed Narcissa. “You’re here! We were just talking about you.”

She turned to Lucius. “He convinced Arabella Figg to go on a flight this morning. She couldn’t stop raving about it.” She laughed happily.

Narcissa really was a gorgeous woman. She came to sit on the arm of Lucius’ chair, her graceful arm on his shoulder, looking lovingly at her grandson. She started to tell them all her impressions of the party.

Snape had yet to say a word and stood quietly, leaning with his shoulder against the side of the fireplace. Since no one besides Harry seemed to find that strange, he assumed that was Snape’s usual spot. Uncalled, a house-elf appeared and handed him a snifter of golden liquor. He swirled it for a while, eventually taking a whiff and then a sip of the drink, never entering into the conversation.

Harry was aware of his dark, silent presence, trying hard not to look in his direction. It became increasingly difficult. It would not do. He had to get out of there.

Ginny, sitting next to him on the couch chatting with her mother-in-law, seemed to sense his decision. She turned to him.

“You are not leaving already, are you?” she asked him quietly, surprised. “You just got here, and I haven’t even had a chance to talk to you.”

“I am restless. Take a stroll with me outside?”
Ginny got up immediately, smoothing her pretty dress on her almost-recovered figure. “I am going to take advantage of all you babysitters. I feel like a walk. Harry, come along? I want to hear about your flight with Mrs. Figg.”

Harry felt a rush of affection for his friend and played along. “All right, Gin.”

He could tell from Draco’s smirk that he wasn’t fooled, but did not care. (When had he ever cared what that git thought?)

The afternoon was lovely, as were the Malfoys’ grounds, with the fountains, the heavily scented roses, and the white peacocks.

Harry and Ginny talked easily about babies, syllabi, Narcissa, and Weasleys. At the heart of the park-like gardens, five paths met. In the center was a delicate stone pillar with a gorgeous crystal ball sitting on top. It threw a point of light on the surrounding sundial. There were benches around the edges, tucked away under climbing roses on arbors. Ginny chose to sit under a cascade of small, fragrant pink roses. They enjoyed a moment of peace, the birdsong the only sound around them.

~o~

Ginny looked at Harry under her lashes. She knew him very, very well. There was something different about him. He looked very healthy, in top shape, in fact, but fragile somehow. She had never gotten that feeling from him before.

She nudged him with her foot. “What’s up, Harry?”

The look in his eyes was incredibly vulnerable, and she put her hand on his, interlacing their fingers. “I’m not sure, Gin. I don’t even want to think about it. My life is changing, and it’s all good, but I…” He stopped, unsure of what he was trying to say. “How many times have I fucked things up, Ginny? How many times have I taken a good thing and turned it to shit?” He shook his head, frustrated. “I guess I’m just…”

His face had the same look Draco had holding Lily for the first time: swept over by love, and scared shitless. She could not believe it, had started to think she would never see it. Harry was in love.

He broke the mood. “I am just an idiot. That’s what I am. Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing. New job jitters, that’s all.”

She did not believe that for a moment, but she could tell she shouldn’t push. She scooched up close to him, put her arm around his shoulders and squeezed.

They got up and he smiled at her. He looked a little more settled, and took a deep breath.

~o~

They walked back to the house holding hands. They entered the living room through the large French windows on the terrace.

“Unhand my wife, you cur,” said Draco.

Harry leaned over and kissed Ginny’s temple. “Jealous much, Malfoy?”

Draco smirked at him. “Not even a little bit. The girl is mine, my friend, body and soul.”

“Spoken like a true Malfoy,” commented his father. “We are irresistible.”
Ginny and Narcissa both burst out laughing, but their eyes shone with the truth of it.

Lucius’ arms were empty. The baby was now on Snape’s arm, awake but looking perfectly content. He looked very small, surrounded as he was by the black cloth of Snape’s robes; the man had sat down in a leather chair across from Draco’s.

Draco got up, a little awkwardly due to his sleeping daughter, and gestured to Harry to take his place. “Here, Potter, make yourself useful.” He handed Harry the little bundle of pink and white that was his goddaughter. She barely stirred. “Don’t drop her.”

Harry settled himself comfortably. Lily smelled warm and sweet, a tiny bubble on her budlike lips. She smiled in her baby dream, her little thumb coming to her mouth. She was all Malfoy, from the pale blonde silk on her head to the tiny pointed chin.

He looked up to meet Snape’s unreadable black gaze, but Snape looked back down at his godson and talked to the infant in a quiet voice in a language that was not English, his hand on the baby’s tiny head. He then placed a kiss on his brow and got up, with none of Draco’s awkwardness. Narcissa took the baby from him.

“How must you go so soon, Severus? Won’t you stay for dinner?”

“The students are arriving in four days,” he shrugged, and turning to Lucius: “I’ll see you Tuesday.”

“I’ll talk to Eldridge and Johnson. That should help.”

Harry realized they were discussing the Regents’ meeting, and wondered if Snape had told Lucius of his upcoming presentation.

Snape turned to Ginny and Draco. “Scorpius looks well,” he conceded. “You may continue to care for him… for now.”

They both smiled at him. “He will be in Gryffindor,” said Ginny teasingly.

“And pigs shall fly,” answered Snape matter-of-factly.

He gave Harry a nod. “Potter.”

“Snape.”

And he was out the door.

“Well, I see you two have become good chums,” commented Ginny, sarcastically.

Draco only smirked.
Severus was sitting in his usual chair, still wearing his robes. Potter had not made it to dinner. He must have stayed on at the Manor.

How absurd that he and Ginny holding hands should have made Severus cringe. She was so in love with her husband it was sickening.

Which one of them had broken it up, all those years ago? Ginny, having fallen under the Malfoy spell? Did Potter still carry a torch? Was that why he had never managed to stay in a relationship? If you could even call what he had had relationships.

Well, there had been Sarah Dobson. However, the engagement had only lasted four months. (What could he have possibly seen in that one? A Hufflepuff?) Well, she had been pretty, and smart, and popular. A decent Chaser, as well. And a woman.

Snape could not get out of his mind the image of Harry with little Lily in his arms. He obviously loved children. Severus felt a sick tightening in his gut.

He got up abruptly and walked into his room. He took off his robes and threw them angrily to the floor. He unbuttoned his waistcoat but did not remove it. He walked back to his sitting room and came to stand in front of his fireplace, looking at the empty grate, holding on to the high mantel with both hands, resting his forehead on the cold stone.

He struck the mantel with his fist. Why had he come back? It was too much. If Harry…

‘If…’ Ha! Of course he would date. He struck the mantel again. He will date, and marry, and have children, you utter fool and you… you…

Oh god. What would he do?

He grabbed a delicate Venetian glass decanter off the mantel and threw it viciously across the room. A book fell off its shelf and the paintings on the walls started vibrating as his anger spilled out in uncontrolled magic.

“Severus!” Albus’ voice was sharp. “Control yourself!”

He was being chastised by a portrait! Snape turned to his fireplace, and bright purple flames roared into life, seemingly out of nowhere, burning on nothing but his pain, his anger, and his magic.

He regained control, finally. He could put an end to this at any time, he thought sarcastically. He could just confess his feelings to Potter, and the man would be gone by morning, running as far and as fast as he could.

He could quit his post and return to Amsterdam, to Petr, and their life together.

He could get a frontal lobotomy.

Snape laughed bitterly. Because that would be what it would take, wouldn’t it? For him to stop wanting Potter, loving Potter. Distance and time certainly had not stopped him. Logic and self-preservation did not.
He sat down again, leaned his head back against the chair, and closed his eyes. He took a deep slow breath. In his mind, green eyes were looking back at him, a deep ocean he could drown in. The wards shimmered.

No, not yet, he thought. I’m not ready. I can’t do this.

Nevertheless, there came the knock, and he knew the love of his pathetic life was standing in the corridor, probably shivering, and wondering what the delay was. He took another long breath and wished, for the first time ever, that Poppy had never freed him from his mental shackles.

Disgusted with himself, he got up and walked to the door. One last breath and he opened it, his face as tranquil as a lake, his voice completely neutral.

“Come in, Potter.”

Snape had evidently startled him, and Harry looked a little unsure. Severus turned away and asked, “Would you care for tea?”

“Yes, please.”

He waved his hand and the tea tray appeared, with steaming cups. He liked to brew his tea himself, but had not thought ahead. Magic would have to do.

He handed Potter a cup and made his way to his chair. Potter followed him, set his cup carefully on the side table, and sat down, several pieces of parchment in his hands.

“All right, then, let’s hear it.”

Potter’s presentation was perfect, using the right approach, in exactly the right tone. He was extremely well rehearsed, had prepared handouts, and knew his subject perfectly. His enthusiasm and winning personality did the rest. They would get the money, Snape had no doubt. He had not even needed to ask for Lucius’ help and influence, though those would not hurt.

Finished, Potter looked at him expectantly.

“How much time did you spend on this?” Snape asked, curious.

Harry looked crestfallen. “Quite a bit. Does it need a lot of work?”

“Don’t be a fool, Potter. You’ve almost convinced me to single-handedly finance the program out of my own vault.”

Harry grinned. “Thanks.”

Snape picked up his cup and took a sip. The tea had cooled but tasted good nonetheless. Potter was still smiling as he also retrieved his cup.

“No fire tonight?”

“Are you cold?”

“No, it’s just nice to look at.”

Another wave of the hand, and there was a jaunty fire in the grate.

“Oh, well done,” said Harry, quite impressed.
Snape chuckled. “This from a man who has been clocked at a hundred and thirty miles an hour…”

“But I am pants at fire magic.” Harry warmed up his hands. “I’m actually jealous…”

Snape berated himself for being so ridiculously pleased.

“What were you saying to him?” asked Potter suddenly. “To Scorpius, I mean, before you left?”

Snape was surprised at the abrupt change of topic, but answered anyway. “An ancient Hebrew blessing over children. Wishing him peace.”

“Would you teach me? For Lily? And Teddy?”

“It’s slightly different for girls than for boys, but yes, if you wish, I will teach you. You can bless your own children, someday.” He was satisfied with his tone: even and light.

“Oh, Lily and Ted are my only children. I mean, I won’t have any of my own.”

“Whyever not?” asked Snape, astonished, before he could stop himself.

“It’s not meant to be, you know?”

No, he didn’t know! Why in the world was that supposed to mean? Was Potter sterile?

“I won’t have children just to have them,” Potter explained. “I think they deserve parents who love each other, like Hermione and Ron, or Draco and Ginny.”

Snape snorted. “And you’ll never find love? What are you, all of thirty?”

Harry gave him the strangest look, so filled with undertone it was like a stormy sea. “Oh, I have found love,” he said. “But just because you find it doesn’t mean you can have it.”

Oh, Ginny Weasley? It had to be. Unless… Granger? No, not Granger. He certainly never looked at her in anything but a sisterly way. Sarah Bloody Bolton?

“So teach it to me.”

Oh, right, the blessing.

It took a while. Hebrew was not the easiest language, but once Severus sang it to the sweet tune his mother had always used, Harry learned it almost effortlessly. His voice was clear and warm, and he sang in tune. Lucky Lily.

They had more tea and chatted easily, for a very long time, of music, of places they both knew, of places they thought the other should see, of tea, of Narcissa’s students, of dogs (Harry loved dogs, especially big ones). It was very late when Harry finally got up to leave. He turned back at the door, hesitant.

“Will you fly with me tomorrow?”

“Not at five o’clock in the bloody morning, I won’t!”

Harry laughed. “After dark?”

“All right.”
Harry grinned happily and left. Snape sat back in his chair, pensive.

Harry Potter was in love with someone, and it was apparently utterly hopeless. Did that mean that he would not… date? Marry? Did that mean that Severus would at least be spared that?

He allowed himself one of his rare smiles, the ones he knew could send unpleasant shivers down people’s backs. He was such a selfish bastard.
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

One of my beta said she loved my Filius Flitwick so much she wanted to date him... I thought that was a fabulous compliment!

~o~ Make Lemonade ~o~

It was very late. The clock chimed two when Harry entered his quarters. Too bad, he had a lot of thinking to do. Maybe he could talk Poppy out of some Pepper-up in the morning. He was pretty sure he was not getting any sleep tonight.

When Harry had arrived at Snape’s he’d had the strangest feeling that he was interrupting something. Though Snape did not even have a book out, Harry’s feeling was only reinforced by the fact that Snape was still wearing his waistcoat and his shoes, and that neither the tea nor the fire had been waiting. But Snape had not said anything, and the impression soon had faded.

He had felt good about his presentation but had still been crushed when he thought Snape did not like it. Now he was extremely glad he had worked as hard on it as he had.

Harry opened his French doors and stepped into the night. He took a deep breath, stilling himself. He had tried to ignore the signs, to explain them away, to wait it out until it passed, but there it was, and he might as well face it: he had fallen in love with Severus Snape.

There. He had said it to himself. After almost saying it to Ginny and, in a roundabout way, saying it to Snape, Harry was ready to admit it.

He also had to face the fact that never in his entire life had he felt anything that even came close to what he admitted to feeling tonight. Not his infatuation with Ginny, not his lust for the girl who had taken his virginity, not the affection he had felt for Sarah, not the many, many crushes he had burned through. This was different.

This was it.

How did he know for sure?

For him, children were ‘not meant to be’. He had said that without even thinking. It had been as big a surprise to him as it had to Snape. (“Whyever not?”)

But he had known, as he said it, that it was true. He would never love a woman enough to want to have children with her, because he loved a man.

He would have Lily, he would have Teddy. And Rosie Lu, and Hugo. And that would be enough. Adoption was not an option in the Wizarding world. Birth control spells were so efficient, and magical children so precious, adoption by a non-relative did not exist.

His long-time dream for his own family meant nothing compared to his yearning for Severus Snape.

The night was beautiful. The moon was rising above the forest, gleaming softly on the ripples of the
lake. The night air smelled clean and fresh. Harry went back inside and grabbed his Firebolt. He left the balcony in a smooth dive and just let the wind carry him, gently gliding through the air, looping and swerving lazily.

Snape was in love with someone else. He had a partner who was charming, bright, handsome. Harry was a younger colleague, someone to mentor. Even a friend, perhaps, in due course. But nothing more. Could it be enough, really?

Sex was fun, but a quiet evening with Snape by the fire was more satisfying emotionally to him than any night of sex he had ever had. (How sad was that?) He would miss sex, certainly (and with Snape, want it, and ache for it... God!).

When it became too much, he would deal with it. After all, he was an expert on one-night stands.

He felt at peace. For the next few years, quite a few of them hopefully, he would be here at Hogwarts and so would Snape. For now, he could tell himself that it would be enough. He would not dwell on the pain, the loneliness, the jealousy, the burning desire he knew very well would come. He would enjoy what he was given: the tea, the companionship, the quiet conversations. And yes, for a while at least, it would be enough.

He returned to his rooms, flying all the way to his bed just because he could. He dropped on the covers, his broom next to him. Still dressed, he folded the covers over himself and slept for exactly seventy-three minutes before his alarm went off.

Surprisingly, he felt very well. He changed into his training gear and went out again through his window, this time with the finicky and high-strung Rip 400. It required a lot of concentration to keep all his moves smooth and safe, but when he had adjusted, he felt like a knife cutting through butter, like the sound of a wet finger on the crystal edge of a tumbler, silky and pure.

He had to add fifty extra abs to even get the shadow of a burn, and hardly felt the push ups. His body and he were in sync, in harmony. Just for the fun of it, he rode back home today, standing up on the broom, balancing like a surfer (a stupid move he would kill any student for even trying).

His feeling of well being lasted all day. Hermione remarked on how healthy he looked. They spent the afternoon in the library with the windows open, as he worked on the syllabus for third year Fire Magic (which he was pants at) for Sinistra.

Fire Magic, like Earth Magic, could go both ways, dark or light. It had the benefit of not requiring bleeding or torturing anyone, and ironically, could only be defended against with more Fire Magic.

("Who said you can’t fight fire with fire?

"Ho! Good one, Harry, so original..." Hermione rolled her eyes.)

She was putting the last touches on her own syllabi, and was just raring to go.

Flitwick popped in around four humming to himself, and walked to Harry, a sparkle in his eye. He stood in front of him with a goofy grin on his face sing-singing: “Harry’s a new teacher, Harry’s a new teacher.”

Harry wondered what bee had gotten in his bonnet, but Hermione squealed, “Oh my god! He is!” She joined in. “Harry’s a new teacher, Harry’s a new teacher...”

“What?” asked Harry.
At which they both changed to, “Gotta have a party, gotta have a party…”

“Oy! Stop it, you two. What party?”

Hermione had a big grin on her face. “It’s a Hogwarts tradition, Harry. When a new teacher starts, they have a small party the night before term starts so everyone can meet them.”

Harry shrugged. “I know everybody already.”

“Oh, nice try, Harry, but you are not getting out of it,” said Flitwick, grinning. “You are throwing a party, my friend, Thursday night, in your rooms. Open the Floo, I am not climbing all those stairs—and have plenty of liquor.”

“Wouldn’t Snape frown upon all his teachers getting sloshed the day before the students arrive?”

Flitwick snorted. “Who do you think asked if anyone had mentioned this little tradition to you yet? Nothing big, Harry, just a little get-together. See you Thursday!”

And off he went, humming, “Harry’s a new teacher, Harry’s a new teacher…”

Hermione giggled. “I love Filius,” she said.

So. Snape wanted him to have a party. Harry thought he might as well do it right. A half hour before dinner, he left Hermione in the library and walked to the kitchens. Even so close to dinner things were pretty relaxed, with only the faculty and Narcissa’s students to feed.

Kreacher greeted him happily and was thrilled when Harry told him what he needed. He loved parties. Now Harry only had to talk to George.

At the end of dinner, Harry and Snape happened to leave the Great Hall at the same time, walking next to each other (Harry had made his living intercepting moving objects seemingly effortlessly, after all). Before they each went their separate way, Snape turned to him, and said, “Ten?”

Harry just grinned and nodded.
Chapter 52

~o~ The Next Best Thing, Harry ~o~

Harry showered, brushed, flossed, and shaved. He put on some especially well cut and tight-fitting training leathers and a beautiful green cashmere jumper which, with a thermal undershirt, should be enough to keep him warm on the beautiful August night. He slipped on his fingerless gloves and looked at himself.

His hair was almost an inch long, and nicely tousled. The sweater matched his eyes exactly. And the leathers… well. Snape was not free, but neither was he blind. Might as well give him something nice to look at. Harry grinned at himself. He should have been in Slytherin. He grabbed a Snitch and left.

He arrived three minutes early and settled to wait. He leaned his shoulders negligently on one of the columns, one leg folded, his hands in his pockets, the broom at his feet. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes in the clear moonlight.

He knew from experience that one could never hear Snape’s footfall, but that he was always precisely on time, so by his calculation Snape spent exactly six minutes watching him before making his presence known. Not bad.

“Past your bedtime, Potter?”

Harry opened his eyes and smiled his well-practiced “Come hither” smile. He put his hand out to his side and his broom made a nice smacking sound as it hit his glove. “Ready?”

“If we must,” replied Snape, but his eyes were shining.

They mounted and were off, fast, and soon climbing almost straight up. They were high above the Quidditch pitch when Harry took out the Snitch and showed it to Snape. “Wanna play?”

“It’s dark, Potter.”

“And I am a wizard,” replied Harry. With a quick spell, the Snitch was glowing like an ember, and when Harry released it, it took off with a tail like comet.

With the Snitch so visible, half the Seeker’s job was done. One only had to catch it.

“How about it?” asked Harry.

And they took off at the same time, chasing the speeding Snitch. Harry intertwined his flight path with Snape’s, who seemed to soon realize that the goal was not the Snitch but the aerial ballet they performed, getting close enough to touch, flying apart, crossing, passing each other, and returning again.

They formed spirals around each other to prevent each other from catching the Snitch, reaching for it shoulder to shoulder, dropping like rocks after it, the lights of the castle their only reference as to the height of their flight.

On and on they flew, dark shadows in the night after the small glowing ball, speeding on their magic. Harry could have done this all night. He was doing what he loved with the man he loved, and it came as close to making love to Snape as Harry thought he would ever get.
However, he knew also that this was not as effortless for Snape as it was for him. In a burst of speed, Harry put an end to the chase, catching the Snitch with an impossible move that was filled with death-defying grace, as frightening as it was beautiful to watch. It was a move for Snape’s eyes only, in a flight that was, to him, as close to a declaration of love as he could get.

They landed on the pitch. Snape was breathless, but his expression was delighted and his eyes were burning with something Harry recognized. No, Snape was not blind, even if he wasn’t free. Harry would remember that look, late at night, his hand on his pulsing cock, whispering Snape’s name in the dark.

They walked back to the castle in silence, the path lit by moonlight.

At the top of the stairs, Harry handed Snape the Snitch. “I know you are a Puddlemere fan,” he said. “This is the Snitch that won them the 2004 championship. A gift.”

Snape took it, and looking down at it said, “You caught it after seven hours and forty-two minutes, in a perfect Wronski Feint.” He looked up. “I was at that game. You were brilliant.”

Harry shrugged. “And while I was chasing balls just like it, you found a cure for Squibs. Brilliant is as brilliant does, Snape. It’s just a game.”

“And the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is just a painting. Don’t denigrate your gift, Potter. The only important thing in this life is that we make the best of what we were given. On that score, we are even.”

They stared at each other for a moment, and then Harry smiled. “Another few hundred flights like this one and we might make a Seeker of you yet. Perhaps you should try to teach me brewing again. Then we’ll be even.”

Harry thought he saw that burning in Snape’s eyes again, but that made no sense, and Snape looked away too quickly for him to be sure.

“First we have the Board of Regents’ meeting. Then we can think about making a Potions Master out of you. Tomorrow at two?”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good night, Potter.”

“Good night, Snape.”

Each went in his own direction. It was midnight. Only five hours of sleep? No, he was sleeping in. He would train at six, just harder. He wanted to be at his best for the meeting.

~o~ The Next Best Thing, Severus ~o~

Severus had woken up the morning after their long talk, wondering what Harry’s rooms looked like. Or rather if anything in Harry’s rooms could give him a clue as to who had captured and would seemingly forever hold Harry’s heart.

But he was curious about his rooms as well. He wondered if Harry would ever invite him up. Whatever for? Potter seemed perfectly happy with their established routine.

He went for his run, away from the pitch, along the lake, and through the edge of the forest, his slow heartbeat even. Running was not something a lot of wizards did, but he had gotten into the habit
during his years in America, when he had lived like a Muggle.

He had even participated, as a subject, in a program of the medical school that studied the physiological aspect of muscle development. He was glad he had. He was in better shape at fifty than he had been at forty (or thirty, or even twenty, for that matter).

If he put his mind to it, he was sure he would find a way to have a look at Harry’s living quarters. He let his mind wander freely as his feet beat a steady rhythm on the dry ground. Why did anyone ever go to anyone else’s quarters? A conversation, a message, a meeting, a friendly gathering.

By the time he returned, he had remembered Hogwarts’ tradition of making newly hired teachers hold small ‘Meet and Greet’ parties the day before the students arrived. (His had been a painful and thankfully short affair, his rooms at the time boasting only two straight-backed chairs, and his idea of refreshments being tea and biscuits).

It would be completely pointless in Potter’s case, since he already knew everyone and had already been teaching for over two months, which is probably why no one had even thought about making him follow the tradition.

However, after a month of hard work, he was quite positive the prospect of a relaxing get-together in Potter’s new quarters would be something no one would object to, and he knew exactly whom to talk to about it…

At lunch, he casually mentioned to Filius Flitwick that, despite the fact that Harry had been teaching the preceding year, contractually this was his first year of employment and he was in fact a new hire…

He would therefore now be seeing Harry’s quarters by eight o’clock on Thursday. Once a Slytherin, always a Slytherin…

By dinner, Snape was wondering (a little anxiously) if maybe Harry (though he had looked awfully chipper at lunch) was too tired from their late evening the night before to pursue his idea of a night flight. After all, no solid plans had been made. Snape was not fooled by the serendipity of their simultaneous exit (but oh, so pleased) and correctly interpreted it as Harry’s way to confirm a time.

He had managed to work for two hours that evening, making headway on the fifth year syllabus on Fire Magic (at which he was brilliant) for Sinistra.

At a quarter to ten he had showered and gotten dressed for flying. At ten o’clock exactly he had stepped outside of Hogwarts’ front door.

The sight of Potter, unselfconsciously waiting for him and looking like a wet dream, had literally taken his breath away. Aware that he moved perfectly quietly, and that Potter could not know of his presence, he had taken his time admiring the view, storing the image for later use. (Where did that man get his trousers?)

When he thought he could safely speak without croaking he had accosted him, just to have Harry turn on him liquid eyes as green as spring grass and a high wattage smile that would have melted a glacier (the way the broom jumped into Harry’s hand had been only a faint echo of the effect the man’s smile had had on Snape’s cock…).

They took off. The broom Harry had loaned him was a wonder. It responded to his slightest movement and fit his frame perfectly, transforming his passable skills into a much more rapid and smooth flight than he had ever experienced before.
When Harry got out a Snitch, though, Snape had a flash of concern. He had never played any kind of Quidditch and had never understood how the Seekers could find the thing, even in broad daylight. Harry’s quietly confident spell-casting (pants at Fire Magic? Ha!) had been sexy as hell, and Snape had suddenly decided to throw caution to the winds and enjoy himself as much as possible.

The chase was exciting, but Snape had seen Harry play Quidditch often enough to realize that he was not even trying to catch the Snitch, just using it to create an interaction between them that soon took on a life of its own. Though he was quite certain Harry was completely unaware of it, it was by far the most erotic thing Snape had ever done with anyone outside of bed.

Though he could feel his power waning, he never wanted that dance between them to stop, unless they could go straight from it to his bed. In a move that nearly stopped Severus’ heart, Harry demonstrated that, indeed, until then he had not been trying to catch the Snitch.

When they landed, Harry’s eyes laughing into his, Severus wanted him more than he had ever wanted anyone. His hard cock pulsed with each of his heartbeats, which were much faster than they had been during his morning run. He just wanted to push Harry down onto the grass of the pitch and have his way with him.

Incapable of speech, he walked alongside Harry, grateful to the night and his flight jacket for keeping his feelings hidden.

At the top of the stairs, Harry surprised him by handing him the Snitch.

“I know you are a Puddlemere fan,” he said. “This is the Snitch that won them the 2004 championship. A gift.”

“You are the only reason I ever watched Puddlemere, Harry,” was what Snape wanted to say. More reasonably, he answered, “You caught it after seven hours and forty-two minutes, in a perfect Wronski Feint.”

He looked up, remembering how that day also, Harry’s move had nearly stopped his heart. Along with the hearts of thousands of fans. But tonight’s catch had been for his eyes only. Severus held that thought close, like a warm flame in his chest.

“I was at that game. You were brilliant.”

Harry shrugged. “And while I was chasing balls just like it, you found a cure for Squibs. Brilliant is as brilliant does, Snape. It’s just a game.”

Did Harry really feel that all his skills, all his grace, were worth nothing because he was not busy clothing the poor and feeding the hungry?

“And the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is just a painting. Don’t denigrate your gift, Potter. The only important thing in this life is that we make the best of what we were given. On that score, we are even.”

They stared at each other for a moment, Snape wanting to kiss the man so badly his lips actually tingled. Harry smiled and Snape almost lost it.

“And the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is just a painting. Don’t denigrate your gift, Potter. The only important thing in this life is that we make the best of what we were given. On that score, we are even.”

They stared at each other for a moment, Snape wanting to kiss the man so badly his lips actually tingled. Harry smiled and Snape almost lost it.

“Another few hundred flights like this one and we might make a Seeker of you yet. Perhaps you should try to teach me brewing again, then we’ll be even.”

Doing the thing he loved with the man he loved, thought Snape, looking away quickly to hide his yearning. He had to bring his mind back to mundane matters or he would try to kiss Harry, and ruin
everything.

“First we have the Board of Regents’ meeting. Then we can think about making a Potions Master out of you. Tomorrow at two?”

There. The Regents, Hogwarts, the Quidditch program’s financing…

“I’ll be there.”

“Good night, Potter.” (I love you.)

“Good night, Snape.”

Each went in his own direction.

Whatever heartache comes from this, thought Severus, it would be worth it. If only for a night like tonight, if only to spend the next few years in Harry’s proximity. That would be enough.
As Snape had predicted, Harry received his funding, a neat twenty-thousand-Galleon one-time disbursement to overhaul the program and a tripled yearly budget for the following five years.

He had been very, very good, incredibly professional, knowledgeable, charming, and convincing. (He looked very… nice in his robes.) He had left after his presentation and the board meeting had proceeded normally, addressing all the last-minute details that needed to be handled before term started.

Snape felt very good about the amount of reorganization in the school and reform of the curriculum that had been accomplished since his arrival. He was looking forward to the coming year.

“I need a cup of tea,” said Lucius as they were leaving the meeting.

“Come up to my office. I have some time before my next appointment.”

They went up the moving staircase to the Headmaster’s office. The decor was more sober than it had been in Dumbledore’s days, and a lot less ‘cluttered’ (that was Minerva’s word for the incredible mess she thrived in…) than during the previous Headmistress’ tenure.

Severus took the time to make the tea properly, easily chatting with his oldest friend as they settled in a pair of deep leather chairs to enjoy the view of the southern lawn, the windows wide open on the late summer’s afternoon.

“Potter was excellent. I needn’t have bothered preparing the terrain, he would have carried the day either way,” said Lucius.

“Yes, he was well prepared. He is turning out to be a great asset to the school. He works very hard.”

“Well, I suppose you don’t become the best Seeker in Britain by sitting on your arse…”

“If he had worked half as hard in school, he could have made something of himself.”

Lucius snorted. “Something better than the Savior of the Wizarding World, the best Quidditch player in memory, and a valuable new asset to your school, you mean?” he asked sarcastically.

Snape laughed. “Yes. A Potions Master, perhaps. You know, something worthwhile…”

They were both laughing now.

Suddenly Lucius asked, “You’re still in love with him, aren’t you?”

Snape sobered and sighed. “I told you this in confidence almost ten years ago, Lucius, in a moment of unforgivable weakness. Can you not let the matter rest?”

“I have kept your confidence. Even Narcissa has no idea.” Lucius looked at Snape. “I thought you’d gotten over it, especially when you met Petr. But when I learned you had sent your resume to the committee, with only weeks left in the search and days after the paper announced Potter had taken the coaching position permanently, well…”

“He is straight, Lucius, and young, and probably the most eligible bachelor in Wizarding Britain
today,” snapped Severus. “What does it matter what I may or may not feel for him?”

Lucius leaned forward and put his hand on Severus’ arm. “It matters to me, my friend, when I see you put yourself in such an untenable position. You have never been masochistic, Severus. Why set yourself up for inevitable pain?”

Severus got up and gazed outside at the reflection of the craggy hills onto the still lake, his back to his friend. “You are not telling me anything I have not been telling myself.” He shrugged and turned back around. “You once told me, when you feared the worst, that to stay with Narcissa you would become the shadow of her hand, the footsteps of her dog… Do you remember?

Lucius nodded.

Severus shrugged again. “Then you know why. I have not the slightest choice.”

If Lucius Malfoy understood anything, it was absolute love. He had felt it for his wife from the first time he had held her hand, many years ago. It was a feeling of utter devotion and inevitability, of perfect rightness, of eternity.

“He is a good-looking young man,” he said, changing tack, with a teasing grin.

Severus fell back into his chair, taking his head into his hands, and moaned. “You don’t know the half of it. You should see him in training leathers, on a broom, by moonlight…”

They both laughed: at the absurdity of the situation, at the irony of fate, at life. They drank tea, enjoying each other’s company.

When it was time for him to go, Severus sent Lucius back to his home by Floo, as he would a package. Lucius never complained, never made anyone uncomfortable about his absence of magic, even if they made the worst faux pas. He was one of the men Severus admired most.

~0~

Cassandra Batgut arrived through the same Floo just minutes later, holding a ridiculously large trunk. Severus called an elf to take care of setting it in her assigned quarters. She would be in residence for the next three and a half weeks, with the last week overlapping the stay of the next DADA instructor.

A lot was riding on how well she managed. It was the test run of Severus’ plan. She was enthusiastic, engaging, and he had high hopes. She was also very attractive, he realized: sparkling brown eyes, wavy hair, a dimpled smile, and a lovely figure.

His pleasure in her presence was immediately soured by that realization, and he cursed himself. He had always been an extremely jealous person. Just the thought that Harry might find her attractive started a swirl of bitter venom roiling in his gut.

He suddenly hated his idea for the DADA class, recognizing that seventeen young Aurors would be coming through Hogwarts this year and every year thereafter, half of them females, young, attractive females, each of those a temptation to Hogwarts’ charming Quidditch coach.

Being who he was, he managed to hide the intense dislike he now felt for her from the poor girl. (She would later gush to her astonished mother, who had sat through seven years of Snape’s Potions, about how warm and kindly his welcome had been…)

He called another elf to take her to her quarters, apologizing for not doing so himself due to his tight
schedule. He sighed with relief as she left. Standing again in front of the open window (he might as well put himself out of his misery and jump), he tried to relax and logically analyze the situation. He had to face reality.

Severus never did things halfway. At dinner that night, he introduced Cassandra to everyone, a warm and friendly welcome, and sat through the meal chatting pleasantly with her.

Did she like Quidditch? She did. Would she like to meet Harry Potter, their Quidditch coach? She would (blushing slightly). Did she fly herself? She did. Had she brought a broom? (One should hope so, considering the size of her trunk.) She had. After dinner, as they were all standing around drinking coffee, he called Potter over (and Lucius said he was not masochistic!) and introduced him personally.

Potter was charming, warm and very friendly. Snape (and it was like walking barefoot on broken glass) suggested he take Cassandra for a flight.

He got the surprise of his life. “Oh, I’d love to, Headmaster, but I just don’t have any time for pleasure flights right now. But hey! I have a great idea!” Harry turned to Cassandra. “My friend Dermott, the Potions professor, was just telling me he was itching for a flight. Let me introduce you!”

As he swept the girl away to take her to Dermott, he actually turned and winked (winked!) at Severus.

Severus wanted to laugh out loud. His relief was so intense (and humiliating), he was giddy with it. He suddenly felt alive again, and in the best of moods.

He enjoyed the rest of the evening immensely, joking around with Flitwick and Hagrid, soon putting Hermione and Minerva in stitches. His eyes kept returning to Harry, who was chatting with Septima and Longbottom, paying no attention whatsoever to Dermott, who had pulled out all the stops and was sweeping Cassandra Batgut off her feet.
Chapter 54

~o~ Hiding the Prince ~o~

Harry was fully back in his training mode. He woke up minutes before his alarm, dressed on automatic, and was over the pitch on his Firebolt in no time at all. He had always had a love-hate relationship with training, hating having to do it, but loving the way it made him feel afterwards.

It was not something he could do while thinking of other things, though. He had to concentrate on his moves, so it wasn’t until he was in the shower that he thought back to the day before and planned for the coming one.

He had been much less nervous doing his presentation to the board than he had been doing it for Snape, and was thrilled to have gotten the funding he needed. He thought he could actually stay well under the allotted monies, taking advantage of the eagerness the Quidditch supply companies had to use his name while that still lasted. After all, a few years from now he would only be a distant memory on the Quidditch circuit.

Leaving the board meeting, he had dropped by the Hogsmeade Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes to purchase one or two things for his party.

Last night’s dinner had been entertaining. The new DADA teacher had seemed very nice, and she had immediately caught Dermott’s eye. He was a very good Potions professor (would soon sit for his Mastery), and a good-looking bloke, but he was very shy around women, especially those he found attractive. Cassandra Batgut was very cute and Dermott had a thing for dimples. Harry had teased him a little.

“With you around, I don’t have a chance anyhow, Harry.”

“What are you going on about?”

Dermott made a face. “I’ve known you for what, three years? I have yet to meet a pretty girl who didn’t fall for you when you made your move.”

“I don’t have a move!”

Neville and Dermott both started laughing. “Right, Harry,” said Neville. “Tell that to someone who hasn’t seen you get into the knickers of every cute girl you have met since seventh year…”

“Hey, I haven’t had a date in over four months!”

“My point exactly,” said Dermott, resigned. “The girl is yours.”

Harry felt like laughing in their faces. If they only knew…

“Seriously, Dermott, I’m not interested. I guess the thing with Sarah has got me vaccinated. I am not going to be dating anybody, not for a very long time.”

Neville had looked at him curiously, but then had joined him in his efforts to build up Dermott’s nerve.

When Snape had called him over, he had tried to think of a way to bring Dermott into the conversation, and then Snape had given him the perfect opening and he had jumped on it. Dermott
was quite good on a broom; he had played Chaser for Ravenclaw in his Hogwarts days. Harry had
never tried to be a matchmaker before. It had been quite fun.

He had been impressed with Snape’s efforts to make the girl feel welcome. That was a little out of
character, but Harry guessed Snape had tried a little harder, with the whole new DADA scheme on
the line. He had seemed in an unusually good mood, though. Harry loved to hear his laugh. It was
always sudden, deep, and rumbling, and made him smile in response, even though he had no idea
what Snape was laughing about. Its scarcity made it all the more special.

He went to bed early. His next day was going to be very full. He had to order all the new equipment
and make a few calls to try to sweet-talk special prices out of his contacts. That would take all
morning.

Then he was meeting Andromeda and Teddy to go shopping for Ted’s school clothes and supplies.
It was their annual tradition. It was Teddy’s last year at primary school already. Next year he would
start at Hogwarts and Harry would see him every day. He was very much looking forward to that.

Today they would go to Diagon Alley, shop, and end the afternoon at Fortescue’s for ice cream (and
lemon water). Then they would go home to Andromeda’s for the evening and he would stay for
dinner. At the boy’s bedtime, he would get him ready and read him a story. He dreaded the day that
Teddy would be too old for a nighttime cuddle in the dark, but he knew that it would probably be
very soon. Thank god he had Lily’s hugs to look forward to.

Harry was back at Hogwarts by nine, and he dropped by Hermione and Ron’s. Hugo and Rose were
in bed already as well, and it was a really nice evening with just the three of them, which did not
happen often these days. They played three-way chess, with Harry and Hermione teaming up to try
to beat Ron, failing miserably as usual, and getting roundly yelled at by the chess pieces, who made
no effort to hide their disdain for their obvious incompetence.

Hermione made hot cocoa with marshmallows and they talked about the children growing up, the
Cannons’ lousy luck in the championship, the History of Magic curriculum, and whether there was
actually a chance that Dermott would work up the nerve and ask Cassandra for a real date.

“What about you, Harry?” asked Hermione. “Are you ever going to date again?”

“Oi! Give him a break, it’s only been four months!” said Ron.

“I’m tired of dating. I am holding out for true love, now,” joked Harry.

“Well, then it’s a good thing you broadened your field; it’s not like you have many candidates
around here.”

How Ron could be so casual about the fact that Harry had discovered an interest in blokes still
amazed him. When he had found out, Ron had even offered to introduce him to a couple of Aurors
he knew who would love to meet him. Harry had definitely not been ready for that, and now, well,
he figured he never would be.

He went home at eleven-thirty and realized that, having been too late at breakfast, he had not seen
Snape at all today. Nevertheless, he was aware that Snape had been on the back of his mind all day,
and it was he who occupied his thoughts as he went through his bedtime routine. What had he done
today? Why had he left breakfast so early? Was he still up, reading, right now, barefoot in front of a
fire?

Harry went to bed and let his thoughts wander, his hands behind his head. He wondered if things
would change as time went by, as, hopefully, they became friends, and Harry got used to the constant tug on his heart. Right now, he just wanted Severus’ company and was glad to know he would see him tomorrow and have him here, in his own rooms, in the evening. What would Snape think of his home?

Harry was suddenly wide awake. He had to take the portrait off of the wall. He got up immediately, as if Snape was due any moment, walked into the living room, and looked at his painting for a long time. How could he have ignored, all these years, the striking resemblance of the portrait to Severus Snape? Hermione and Ron had never mentioned it either, nor Draco and Ginny. Was it just in his eyes? Certainly not. The eyes, the hair, the nose, the high black collar, it was all there.

He loved that painting, had held it as one of his most precious possessions ever since acquiring it. What did that mean? And what did it mean that aside from a broken Snitch, the fragment of a letter from his mother to his godfather (of which Snape had a missing bit…), his brooms and his wand, his other most prized possession was a leather-bound Potions diary?

He took down the portrait and, just in case people wanted to see his bedroom also, he slipped it away from prying eyes on top of his bed canopy. He fell asleep, aware of the hidden presence of the severe and noble-looking man (The Half-Blood Prince?) over his bed, looking down on him.
Chapter 55

~o~ The Party ~o~

The next day, he taught flying to his adult students all morning and again to a different group in the afternoon. He had seen Snape at breakfast ("Potter," and again at lunch, when Harry had been caught staring at him and looked guiltily away instead of just nodding or something. Stupid.

He was pleased at dinner when he saw that Cassandra was now sitting between Septima and Dermott. Things were looking up. He made sure to tell her about the party, but Dermott apparently had already offered to show her where Harry’s quarters were. George joined them for coffee, having come up from London to spend one last evening with Neville before school started. During the year, Neville was the Head of Gryffindor House and was too busy with those responsibilities for them to meet other than at the weekends.

Harry went back to his rooms after dinner, too early for Kreacher’s taste. He was sent to his bedroom to get him out of the way. Harry showered and dressed (with Snape in mind, as appealingly as possible but without looking as if he had tried). He then half-heartedly picked up the syllabus on Wand Lore Flitwick had turned in, and waited for Hermione. She had promised to be early so he wouldn’t be waiting alone for the guests to arrive.

He had gotten a bottle of 1996 Chateau D’Yquem for her. She would love it. He had the twenty-five-year-old Laphroaig for Sinistra, and Kreacher had found out for him everyone else’s favorite poison. Harry had made sure to get the very best. The gallery around the apartment was decorated with twinkling fairy lights and cherry blossoms that rained petals in the warm wind. The evening was beautiful.

Hermione arrived at a quarter to, and was as excited as a child by the miniature enchanted jazz band in the corner of the room. The instruments played by themselves, and looked like plastic toy versions of the real ones, in bright colors, but the sound was fabulous and the repertoire impressive. It was, of course, a WWW product.

Hagrid arrived next. He ensconced himself in one of Harry’s marvelously comfortable soft leather loveseats with all the appearance of having no intention of moving from it for the next couple of hours. It was his favorite spot. From it, he could see the forest and a bit of his hut (and could easily reach for his Guinness, which Kreacher placed at his elbow).

Poppy Pomfrey was next. She was so sweet, she had brought Harry a house-warming gift, a soft throw pillow with dried fragrant flowers mixed in with the down stuffing, for relaxation. It smelled lovely. She was tickled pink by the Perrier-Jouet champagne she was served. She had tasted it a long time ago at a Muggle wedding and it had been her favorite ever since, though she very rarely got to enjoy it.

Minerva and Flitwick arrived through the Floo one right after the other, she in full tartan, and he in a great party mood. He started by requesting the band play “Black Coffee.” (How he could be familiar with Muggle jazz was a puzzle to Harry.) Filius then thanked Kreacher profusely for the literally ice-cold Absolut Currant and discussed vodkas with the house-elf for a while, to Harry’s astonishment.

Minerva received her glass of Ardmore appreciatively and walked to the balcony to enjoy the darkening evening.

Filch, in a set of recently acquired dress robes, made a discreet entrance. Harry had insisted he come.
He made a point to welcome him and bring him some Ogden’s Private Reserve himself. When Filch commented on the amazing views, Harry introduced him to Muggle binoculars. Septima Vector, who had just entered with George and Neville, gave them a try also, and soon she and Filch were trading them back and forth.

“Argus, check out the unicorns, next to the woods, by the water!”

“Look in the water, Professor, a mermaid just came up!”

“Oh, wow, it’s a whole family! I didn’t know they came up in the evening…”

Septima’s idea of a drink was to put a slice of lemon in her water. Still, it was Evian, and a Meyer lemon. Harry wasn’t sure if she could tell the difference, but she did remark on the beauty of the crystal tumbler he served it in. That pleased him. He had sent poor Kreacher to his storage locker for it, and was pleased it had not been in vain.

Dermott and Cassandra had arrived while Harry was talking to Filch, but Kreacher had taken care of them. Dermott was holding his Martini and Cassandra had some fancy cocktail with an umbrella.

Madam Pince was sitting on the arm of Hagrid’s seat and they looked right chummy, heads bent together over one of Harry’s photo albums. To Harry’s surprise, she drank straight Tequila. One could never tell with the quiet ones…

Professor Trelawney and Firenze, who had made their peace a long time ago, were now also on the balcony with Sinistra, talking stars. Sybil drank Sherry, though the Palo Cortado Harry had gotten for her might forever put her off her cooking wine. Firenze, of course, drank nothing. Eating and drinking was not something centaurs did in public. Even the ever-quiet Whitherspoon was in attendance, a glass of chilled Chassagne-Montrachet in her thin hand, her narrow nose in a Quidditch magazine.

The party was going well. Everyone was having a good time. Where the hell was Snape? Harry had asked Hermione to come early because he had figured on everyone being fashionably late except for the Headmaster, and had not wanted an awkward tête-à-tête. (Or maybe had wanted it a little too much…) Yet it was quarter past nine, and he had not yet arrived. Was he not going to come? That thought just upset Harry well beyond reason.

He grabbed his own drink (Perrier water with a twist of lime) and headed outdoors, along with almost everyone else, to watch the sunset. Tonight it was magnificent, coloring the grounds in gold, the lake like liquid light. Minerva had to admit that she had been wrong: Harry’s choice of residence was inspired indeed, though she certainly would not like having to climb the stairs all the time.

“I see you up on the roof often enough,” Harry teased.

“That’s different,” she replied, most seriously. “That’s for fun.”

After the last of the red glow followed the sun below the horizon, they all went back in as the temperature dropped rapidly. Harry stayed behind to check on the surprise fireworks, which were hidden behind the rail, and cast a strong warming spell. That would allow people to come back out to the balcony comfortably and enjoy the pyrotechnics when it was fully dark. They were set to go off in another half hour, Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes absolute best. He had gone a little overboard, but he adored fireworks. As he straightened back up, a dark shadow against the wall took life in a swirl of cloth.

“Nice sunset, Potter,” said Snape, as if Harry had ordered it from a catalogue. He was a vision in
black as he stepped forward, an almost empty snifter of 1928 Artemis Armagnac in his hand.

Afraid that his heart might be heard across the balcony, Harry did not answer right away, taking a long sip of his water and an equally long breath.

Snape was here. He had come. How long had he been here, lost in the shadows of the evening? How had he entered, without Harry noticing, when Harry had been listening so intently for his arrival?

“Good evening, Snape,” said Harry with all the nonchalance he was capable of. “When did you get here?”

“You were showing Granger your jazz band. Your elf gave me my drink, and I came out here to take in the view.”

Harry could not believe it. He had been there all along.

Snape gave him a half smile, raising his glass. “My favorite.”

Harry knew he was standing stupidly and should move somehow, but all he could do was stare at Snape’s mouth, wanting to lick the brandy’s taste from his lips. Harry’s own actually parted, and he made a conscious effort to not lick them before closing them again.

“Would you like another?”

They walked back in together. Flitwick, standing on the coffee table, was complimenting George on WWW’s new Illusion product, which could change the view out of any window. One could turn a back alley filled with rubbish bins into the most magnificent and breathtaking scenery. It was multi-sensorial, with fresh scented breezes, crisp sunlight, and even the chirruping of birds available at will. As a promotion, George had outfitted every window of St. Mungo’s with them. Patients loved it. They could enjoy the views and invigorating air of the Austrian Alps, a great improvement over London’s grimy streets.

Flitwick and George then started trading jokes. Not all of them were very good ones, but as the members of their small audience were quite relaxed, it did not take much to amuse them.

Harry was aware of Snape’s physical presence at his side. They were close enough to touch, and Harry could imagine he felt the heat of Snape’s body through his robes. Neither of them said very much, and never to each other. Harry just enjoyed Snape’s proximity.

Around ten o’clock the fireworks started going off. Everyone excitedly moved back out to the balcony. Unconsciously, Snape and Harry made their way there as one, going from standing next to the sofa together to standing outside in the beautiful evening without the distance between them ever changing. The fireworks were breathtaking, lasting for almost forty minutes, and the entire time Harry’s body sang with Snape’s closeness. It was absurd. He had never felt this level of physical awareness with anyone, even while holding hands with a lover. Harry knew it was all in his head, but he loved it nonetheless.

After the fireworks, people drifted back in and started saying goodnight and leaving.

“I think I will live dangerously and take the stairs all the way down,” said Vector. “Walk with an old lady, Severus?” It was a natural request, since they were both in the same wing, though Septima was on the ground floor.

“My pleasure,” replied Snape gallantly.
Harry could not help a twinge of disappointment. (What had he been hoping for?)

Snape turned to him. “Nice party, Potter.” His words were echoed by others who shared the sentiment. Leaning closer, Snape added quietly, “I… loved the fireworks,” and was gone before Harry could be sure what that had meant, if anything.

Soon only Neville, George, Dermott, Cassandra, Hermione, and Flitwick were left.

Dermott asked Harry to show Cassandra his broom collection. Harry went to get the cigar humidor where he stored them. He had twenty-seven (“Twenty-six too many,” commented Hermione), shrunken and kept in the climate-controlled box.

“May I see the Arrow you rode at the last World Championship?” asked Cassandra.

Harry removed the four-inch-long broom from its velvet bed and returned it to its full size. It was very nice, rosewood with copper stirrups, a very smooth ride, gliding and swift. This one had been customized to Harry, the grip area slightly flattened and narrowed for more precise steering one-handed, and the bristles lengthened for speed. He liked it a lot.

“Which one is your absolute favorite, Harry?” asked George.

He smiled and reached for the bottom of the box.

“I like them all for different reasons, and I usually ride whichever one fits my mood on any given day. But I do have a sentimental favorite.”

He took out his original Firebolt, the one sent to him by Sirius, the one he had ridden against the dragon, and in his Gryffindor days. Once returned to its full size, it paled in comparison with the more sophisticated and advanced Arrow, definitely showing more wear.

“I don’t ever ride it anymore. It couldn’t take the strain. But it is very special to me.”

One after the other, he took out the brooms for his friends to look at, shrinking them and putting them all back in at the end.

“Harry,” asked Flitwick, who had rejoined them after getting the band to play all his favorites, “do you actually keep your brooms in there continuously?”

“Yes. It has the same climate conditions as the room where they store the brooms at the Quidditch museum.”

“You mean you keep twenty-odd brooms under a shrinking spell at any given time?”

“Huh… Yes. It’s just really convenient.”

“And you never feel the strain?”

“The strain of what?”

“Of having such a constant drain on your magical energy.”

“Uh… no. Should I?”

Flitwick just chuckled and shook his head. “I guess not. It is a neat way to store them.”

It was getting close to midnight, and the students would be arriving the next day. They all said their
good-byes and headed home.

Harry sat down in one of his sofas but, noticing the empty hook above the fireplace, got up again and went to his bedroom to retrieve his painting. He returned it to its rightful place and smiled.

“Welcome back, Half-Blood Prince.”

He looked around the room, where all traces of the party had already been removed by his ever efficient and attentive house-elf.

“Thanks, Kreacher,” he said aloud. “Great party.”

“Master Harry is welcome, sir,” Kreacher’s disembodied voice answered. He knew Harry wouldn’t mind the informality, and he was already warm and cozy in his little bed, his arm lovingly surrounding the shoulders of a very pregnant Winky.
Chapter 56

~ o ~ Spying ~ o ~

Snape held Septima’s arm all the way down from Harry’s place to her front door, chatting about the party. She was a delightful woman, one of the brightest of his acquaintance.

She had taught him Arithmancy in his youth and had always treated him with kindness and respect, even in the years when his temperament had been at its most difficult. She was getting on in years, probably closing on ninety, but was spry and as sharp as ever.

“Well, good night, my dear. Thank you for walking me home.”

“‘Twas my pleasure, Septima.”

She looked at him with a twinkle in her eyes. “Methinks your pleasure would have been to remain there a little longer, Severus. But let me remind you, from one Slytherin to another, that good things most often come to those who wait. I believe it would be injudicious, in this case, for one to be overly hasty.”

Snape was astounded. Was he that transparent? Septima smiled at him fondly and patted the arm still supporting hers.

“Be of good cheer, my young friend. Your secret is safe. Not all those around you have known you as long as I have, nor have made a life study of Arithmancy. Whatever will be, will be. Sleep well.”

And in she went, humming to herself. Snape stood for a minute outside her door, disbelieving. Had he just received advice regarding his hopeless attraction to Potter from such an unlikely quarter?

He must have misunderstood (though what else Septima could have been on about he had not a clue). He repeated the conversation in his mind several times on his way down to his own rooms, no further enlightened. It helped his understanding none at all that he knew Septima to have such great affection for Petr. Had she been drinking anything but her usual lemon water at Potter’s, he might have felt easier.

He walked into his rooms and the first thing he did was make himself some tea. As it brewed, he went to his bedroom to change. As usual, off came his robes, his waistcoat, his socks, and his shoes. He released his hair from the small leather tie that held it back and ran both hands through it. Even without including Septima’s puzzling remarks, the evening had been… interesting.

As was his quasi-pathological habit, Snape had been exactly on time, though aware that it might have been prudent to arrive fashionably late. As luck would have it, Granger had been early and Harry distracted. He had seized the opportunity to observe without being seen and escaped to the balcony.

It was pleasant to be able to stare at the man without the fear of discovery. As usual, Harry had looked… nice (if nice meant gorgeous, unbelievably beautiful, perfect in every way, or created to fulfill Severus’ every fantasy). For over an hour, Severus had enjoyed the show, grateful to be able to remain out of everyone’s way by simply walking around the tower to avoid first Minerva and then the three stargazers.

Harry’s living quarters were beautiful and masculine. Snape particularly liked the green walls and draperies. The Shiraz carpet was magnificent. He had, however, seen nothing that could give him a
clue as to Harry’s attachment. The host was obviously concerned with everyone’s comfort and enjoyment, making particular efforts to make Argus Filch feel welcome, something Severus appreciated.

As more people moved outside, he stood back against the wall, sipping his Armagnac. Potter had evidently researched everyone’s taste, but he still was impressed. Artemis had an extremely limited production and was not commercially distributed. That Harry had got hold of that particular 1928 vintage was impressive indeed, so few bottles being in existence. Severus himself had never gotten hold of anything older than 1953. It was exquisite.

Once everyone had returned inside, he had been treated to something even more delightful than the spectacular sunset as Potter had bent over to check on something below the railing. Trying to keep his imagination in check, he had finally made his presence known and regretted it almost instantly, as Harry’s parted lips had been almost too much to resist.

The slow torture had continued the rest of the evening. He had been incapable of stepping away from Potter, his desire to touch him keeping him closely at his side. Back on the balcony again, he had ached to kiss him amidst the magnificent fireworks but instead had been tormented by Harry’s scent: close, oh so close…

It had been with great relief that he had accepted Septima’s invitation to walk together, having feared he would not have the strength to tear himself away on his own. He had been incapable of resisting leaning in toward Harry once more to breathe in the warm aroma of his skin one last time.

“I… loved the fireworks,” was all he could think to say. And he had, though his eyes had mostly been on the shorn head of the shorter man slightly in front of him, on his shell-like ear, on the angle of his jaw…

The next day was September first. The students would be at Hogwarts by dinnertime, and his days, which had already seemed quite full, were about to become even busier. He would see far less of Harry, be much more preoccupied by the demands of his job. Thank Merlin.
Chapter 57

~o~ The Sorting ~o~

Harry and Hermione spent the entire next day together. They walked Hugo and Rose to school in the morning. Both children were very excited; it was the beginning of the term, and they also had gotten to eat breakfast at the teachers’ table.

Usually during the school year they ate their breakfast at home with Mink, their nanny. She was one of the oldest Hogwarts house-elves, and had had four children herself.

Minerva had made an exception to the rule when she had hired Hermione. No other Hogwarts teacher had ever been married or had school-age children. The teachers were expected to dedicate themselves wholly to the school and its students.

A rather complex but now well-established series of compromises had been made. When the students were present, Hermione ate breakfast and lunch in the Great Hall, alone. On Wednesday nights, her husband and children joined her at the teachers’ table for dinner. At the weekend, Hermione had to be present for at least one meal per day.

She was exempt from night patrols, but took on many of the other teachers’ detentions, which were served in her office adjacent to her apartment after the children were in bed.

It had been essential for her to have a nanny for them. Many had been interviewed, until one day Mink had come to offer her services. She had been retired from regular duties, instead working in the elves’ nursery and daycare, but there were very few elven children, and several retirees like her to take care of them.

She had heard of the new young teacher and her difficulties in finding adequate help. Mink had wanted the job, so much so that she had accepted that Hermione pay her for her services. (She had yet to use any of the shiny Galleons, but the elven children loved to play with the tinkling gold coins…)

Hugo and Rose adored her, and she them, but her authority was never challenged. Were they to be too slow in obeying, she gave them the ‘evil eye’, a rather stern look that had worked on her own children, and Hugo and Rose would immediately jump to it. Hermione only wished they were half as compliant with her. (She had tried her own version of the ‘evil eye’ only to have Hugo and Rose dissolve in hysterical laughter…)

Harry and Hermione had a cup of tea in Hogsmeade and enjoyed a leisurely walk back to the castle. Pleasantly ensconced in Harry’s living room, they had both spent the day working: he on reviewing the syllabi turned in by others, and she on some of the tedious paperwork that came with the job of Deputy Headmistress.

Ron arrived at four o’clock, having picked up the children from school on his way home. Tonight the children would get yet another unusual treat: dinner alone with Ron while their mum called the new students to the Sorting Hat and sat next to Headmaster Snape during the Welcoming Feast.

Of course, that meant that they would get to eat anything they wanted. After much debate, they decided on tea and crumpets followed by ice cream for afters. Hermione just rolled her eyes. Harry asked hopefully if he could skip the feast and have the crumpets and ice cream with them instead, with no success.
At half past seven, he left them to get ready. All the teachers were expected to be at the table at ten of eight, when the first of the carriages would arrive.

At eight thirty, the first years would make their entrance and be Sorted. Harry had never given any thought to the pomp and circumstance of the Welcoming Feast and was amused by it all, especially when Flitwick and McClallan, cutting it a bit tight, arrived at the last minute almost at a run.

By the time the first students walked in, however, the teachers were all regally seated. Next to Harry’s plate was a list of names. It was the first years. Neville explained to him that it was for a little game the teachers played every year, trying to guess who would be sorted where.

As the student were called to the Hat, the teachers marked the initial of the House they thought they would end up in next to their name. The teacher with the most correct guesses would be exempt from night patrol for the whole month.

Apparently, Flitwick was very good. He had won seven out of the last ten years, but Snape was rumored to have been unbeatable in his day, and they were all looking forward to a hard contest. Harry could not believe that Snape had ever participated in anything so frivolous while he taught, once again reminded that he had really not known him at all.

Hagrid arrived a little windswept from his boat ride across the lake with the first years (despite the neat braid he’d been sporting lately), a grin on his rubicund face.

“A lively bunch they are, this year,” he said, sitting down. “All terrified of yeh already, Severus,” he said teasingly to the Headmaster. “They’ve all heard stories abou’ Professor Snape from their mums and dads. A right ol’ ogre they think you are…”

“Excellent,” answered Snape, completely serious, to everyone’s amusement.

When the first years entered, escorted by Hermione, Harry was astonished by how small and young they looked. He loved the expression of wonder on their faces and enjoyed the discreet and wary glances they all gave the Headmaster. Hagrid was right; his reputation had definitely preceded him. The sneer of cold disdain on Severus’ face did nothing to reassure them.

The Hat’s song was jaunty and light-hearted, much as it had been the last few years according to Dermott, which was a good sign indeed.

The roll call started.

“Ashcroft, Percy.”

The boy was small and handsome, with a spark in his eye. Harry marked a small G next to his name.

“Slytherin!” shouted the Hat. Oh, well.

“Barento, Maxine.”

She was tall, skinny, and looked very shy. Harry guessed Hufflepuff.

“Ravenclaw!” Shy but smart, then…

“Barnaby, Simon.”

Simon had curly blond hair, clear blue eyes, and an angelic face. Not fooled for a moment, Harry immediately put him in Slytherin.
“Gryffindor!” Oops...

“Carmichael, Heather.”

Dark hair, dark eyes, a widow’s peak and a smirk. Very sure of himself this time, Harry put down an S.

“Ravenclaw!” Well, Harry thought, this was going well, wasn’t it?

“Cartwright, Isobel”

She had red hair, and a cute little upturned nose. Harry’s first thought was Gryffindor, but having done so poorly so far, second-guessed himself, and put an H next to her name.

“Ravenclaw!” The Ravenclaw table was going wild. Three out of five was amazing. Harry was disgusted. He obviously was very bad at this.

By the time they got to

“Menzies, Hamish.”

G.

“Slytherin!” Harry, who still had not gotten a single one right, decided he might as well quit. He randomly assigned letters to the ten remaining names and sat back. Of course, it would so happen he got the next three right. He chuckled to himself. But his luck did not hold. By the time it was all said and done,

“Yannow, Michelle.”

“Hufflepuff!”

he had only gotten four of them right, out of thirty-seven… He had a feeling he would not be getting out of patrolling.

He was absolutely right. The next lowest score was Sinistra’s, with eight. Flitwick had assigned the first years to their rightful Houses an astonishing twenty-one times. But he did not win. Snape had scored twenty-two. He negligently dropped off his list in front of Filius, on his way to give his welcoming speech. Flitwick shook his head in absolute disgust.

Harry had been wondering what Snape’s speech would be like. His black velvet voice reached everyone in the room, clear, calm, and warm. He did not have to raise it, the Great Hall having gone absolutely silent as soon as he had risen from his chair and made his way to the lectern, his robes draping elegantly around him. He stood, tall and black, his physical presence easily dominating the room.

“Magic is a gift very few are given. At Hogwarts you have the opportunity to learn to use your gift to its fullest extent. You will also be taught to use it with respect: for the natural order, for your own limits, and for all others, human or not, magical or not. You shall be expected to make it a blessing, not just for yourselves but also for all those around you, and to strive to do the very best with what you were given.”

Though he stopped talking, the hall remained quiet, the students enthralled. Harry remembered the feeling from Snape’s speech in his first Potions class, before he had discovered the Potions Master despised him. Almost on second thought, Snape added, “Please acquaint yourselves… thoroughly
with the rules of our school. Delinquency, slothfulness, and disrespect will not be tolerated, and leniency will not be forthcoming. Professor Hagrid runs the grounds, Mr. Filch runs the castle, and I run the school. We, and the rest of Hogwarts’ staff, were entrusted with your education, well-being, and guidance. We will give you our very best. We expect no less from you in return.”

A wave of his hand as he turned away and the feast appeared. The spell broke and the children recovered the power of speech. Well, that had not been a warm and cozy pep talk, but it had certainly made an impression. Harry had a feeling the students would think twice before transgressing. There was no amused and tolerant twinkle in Snape’s eyes.

On the other hand, they would feel empowered and challenged to excel. He knew very well how far he himself would have gone as a student for a word of recognition from that man, had there been any hope of one.

Suddenly, the hero worship the Slytherins had always shown for Snape when all the others had loathed him made sense. One would feel safe and warm under the dragon’s wing.

Several times during the meal he found his gaze drawn to Snape’s profile, trying to see him through the eyes of a new student. His face had so much character. There was a small divot between his forehead and the beginning of his prominent nose, and hollows in his cheeks below the prominent cheekbones. His ears were very tight to his skull, and even they were angular, exposed by his ponytail. His hair was still dark as the night, though he must be nearing fifty.

Harry thought he actually looked younger than when he had taught ten years ago. With the high, many-buttoned waistcoat collar and the stark white shirt underneath, and the draping black robes, he truly cut an imposing figure. (Yet that same man had playfully dropped his winning list onto Filius’ plate.)

Severus was looking pensively over the four House tables, his gold drinking goblet held in his elegant, long-fingered hand. (Large nose, long fingers… Harry forcefully pushed his mind in another direction…) The Heads of Houses were leaving, ready to guide their charges to the dormitories.

Filius was the only remaining Head of House from Harry’s school days. Septima Vector now headed Slytherin House, Neville Longbottom, Gryffindor, and the ever-quiet Witherspoon, Hufflepuff. On the way out, Filius said something to Snape, causing them both to look at Harry. He wasn’t sure he liked Flitwick’s smirk, wondering whom it was for, Snape or himself?

After all the students had left the hall, Snape got up and stopped by Harry’s chair.

“Potter.”

“Headmaster.” (School had started, after all…)

“Professor Flitwick has brought to my attention that you scored the lowest of all the teachers on the sorting tonight. It means the first night of patrol is yours.”

“Oh.” Harry had never done night patrol before. “What do I need to do?”

There was a definite glint in Snape’s eye when he answered, “It seems to me you spent so much time as a student dodging those doing the patrolling, you would be extremely familiar with the procedure, but Filius insists that you need someone to accompany you this first time.

“It appears that everyone feels, in view of my exemption for the rest of the month, that this… tiresome duty comes to me. Patrol usually does not start until after curfew, but I thought you might want to meet as soon as is convenient for you so I can explain the best… strategies.” He stared
impassively at Harry.

“Twenty minutes?” asked Harry.

“My rooms. We will have tea first, it’s usually a long night,” and Snape left, in a swirl of robes.

Harry felt like whistling on his way back to his rooms: ahead was a long evening with Snape.
As soon as he entered his rooms, Snape prepared tea. He only had a few minutes to relax. He reclined on his couch, his head on his hands.

Thirty-seven new students was a small number, especially if you took into consideration the fact that two of the youngsters, who were treated Squibs, were a year older than their classmates.

Flitwick had pointed out that it would be a shame for them to be deprived of a Hogwarts education because they had been born a few months too early to have benefited from the treatment in their eleventh year as one of their new classmates, Julius Marchbanks, had.

The next oldest Squib was fifteen, and really would have been too old to start with the eleven-year-olds, and too far behind to be expected to take his OWLS at the end of the year. He and two others would have to be taught at home through private tutoring.

But Maxine Barento and Jack Griffin would blend in well enough with their younger peers. They were both in Ravenclaw, which had taken the lion’s share this year (both figuratively and literally, as Gryffindor had only gained four) with eighteen students.

Next year would see an even lower number of new students. Not many people had decided to start or increase their families the last year of Voldemort’s life. Theodore Lupin would be coming in. Harry would be glad of that. The year after next, however, would bring in a bumper crop. Sixty-two were expected so far, and that was without taking the Muggle-borns into account.

Severus was amazed at how right it felt for him to be back at Hogwarts, at how much he cared about the school and its students.

The intervening years, their challenges and successes, seemed now to fade away. He belonged here, Potter or no Potter. He had not been conscious of how true that was until now. He was very glad of that. His rash decision had been the right one, no matter what happened.

Ah. Potter was here. If he was not otherwise distracted, he could feel Potter’s influence on his wards when he was still several meters away from his door. He wondered vaguely just how much power the man had. He also imagined (surely…) that he could now recognize Potter’s magical signature even before the wards identified him. There was the knock.

“Come in, Potter.”

He got up from the couch and went to the sideboard where their tea was ready, grabbed a cup and sat in his reading chair, observing Harry as he also helped himself to a cup.

His hair was freshly shorn, the shortest Snape had seen it yet. His teaching robes suited him very well. Though he was not tall, his trim and fit body allowed them to drape elegantly. He turned around, caught Snape’s gaze and smiled before taking his first sip.

“What do you put in this stuff? Whatever it is, I think it’s addictive. I am completely hooked.”

If it keeps you coming back, thought Snape, all the better. “It’s just tea, Potter. It’s all in the brewing.”
“Of course it is,” said Harry, taking another sip, licking his lip, and smiling in his eyes. Was Potter flirting with him? (Of course not!)

“Night patrol,” said Snape.

“Riiiight,” said Harry, seeming to shake himself from a bit of daydream. “Right, night patrol. What do I need to know?”

He sat in his chair. (Well, the chair Snape thought of as his.)

“There are two methods, Potter. You can be seen and heard, thereby discouraging students from sneaking about, or you can use stealth and catch them at it.”

“No use asking which you prefer,” joked Harry, probably remembering Snape materializing out of the darkness, his wand suddenly lit, scaring the life out of him.

Snape chuckled. “I am naturally quiet. What would you have me do, whistle loudly as I walk about? I just use the method best suited to my nature. Hagrid walks around sounding as loud as a herd of hippogriffs. Both ways work…”

“All right,” conceded Harry.

“Contrary to the students’ belief, one does not patrol alone. Monitoring the corridor is also the duty of the Houses’ ghosts.”

“What?”

“Yes, they float around all night and regularly report infractions to the teacher on duty. If the perpetrators are from their own House, they warn them of the impending arrival of the patrolling teacher and send them scrambling back to their dorms, reinforcing the students’ impression of House unity. If the students are from other Houses, they make themselves known and warn the students that they are about to report them, which results in the exact same scrambling. It’s an excellent system. Regardless, the ghosts immediately apprise the teacher of the situation and, using a few shortcuts, the teacher arrives in time to give the wayward students a good fright, usually only seeing the back of them as they flee for their lives.”

“I can’t remember how many times I thought Nick saved me from being caught. And all this time he was working for the Man… I feel so let down,” admitted Harry, chuckling.

Severus was suddenly brought back to those days. “Your school years were different, Mr. Potter, especially during your second and third years,” he recalled thoughtfully. “You were in actual danger. It took a bit of the fun away from the experience, I assure you, for those of us in charge of keeping you alive.”

He looked up and realized Harry looked uncomfortable, which had been the farthest thing from his goal. He could have kicked himself for having brought up a time where their relationship had been one of hatred and animosity. It was so long ago.

He cut Harry off before he could say anything and added lightheartedly, “Of course, you always had the unfair advantage of that damn Invisibility Cloak, though your heart usually beat so loudly one almost always knew you were there.”

Harry looked at him pensively, his eyes full of unsaid things, and Snape, unsure whether he wanted them said or not, decided to bring back the topic at hand.
“The castle is full of secret passageways, supposedly known only to teachers. If you are done with your tea, I’ll give you a tour.”

“All right,” said Harry. “I am afraid I know quite a few of them already,” he admitted sheepishly.

“By the time they leave here, most students are familiar with almost every one, amazingly, but by then, they are usually old enough to decide their bedtime for themselves, I think. The third, fourth, and fifth years are the main trouble. Old enough not to be terrified of the castle at night, yet too young to have their priorities in order.”

They left Snape’s rooms and walked along the corridor to the kitchen.

“This,” he said, pointing to the painting of the fruit basket that hid the entrance to the kitchen, “and a few secluded and romantic spots, are their main destinations.”

He stopped in front of the portrait of three house-elves playing pick-up sticks. They scrambled to their feet and bowed, smiling at Severus.

“Headmaster Snape, we is happy to see you back, sir.”

“Potter, this is Mac, Tiddle, and Miri. They have been monitoring this corridor for over four hundred years.”

“Coach Potter, sir. You has lost the Sorting game, then,” said the shortest one, looking sympathetic.

“Four out of thirty-seven,” chuckled Snape.

The elves considered that dismal score for a moment. “You will do better next year, sir,” said one of the elves consolingly.

“You could not do much worse, sir,” added another one, nodding gravely, apparently meaning it as an encouragement.

Harry laughed. “From the mouths of elves…” he said.

“They work with the other portraits, and make sure the students go straight back to their common rooms. If they do, we ignore them. There is little harm in a midnight snack. The kitchen elves are encouraged to be generous. Teenagers are always hungry.”

Harry was astounded. He had always thought of a trip to the kitchen as a daring adventure. To know that it was expected and tolerated was quite disheartening.

They moved on. Snape took him to all the obscure recesses where students liked to hold their romantic assignations.

“You have to monitor these constantly,” he explained seriously. “Students should not be given more than fifteen minutes at a stretch without disturbance. The ghosts are good at that. Needless to say, this is one case where stealth is not advised. You should make your presence known.

“I usually approach with my wand at full Lumos. They can see me coming from quite far. Filius likes to sing. Trelawney talks to herself. Whatever you do, give them some warning, but note who they are, and do take points. If the same pairing recurs more than three or four times, they will get a little talk from their Head of House. We make allowances for hormones, but they are here to get an education and we need to encourage their focus to remain mostly on their studies.”
Harry silently recalled his seventh year. He had dated… a lot, and was familiar with most of the
discreet corners Snape was showing him. There had been constant interruptions to his romantic
activities, which had kept them both exciting and quite innocent. He had not lost his virginity until
after leaving school, and it certainly had not been for lack of trying. Now he would be on the other
side of it. What a job!

He was indeed familiar with all the secret passages Snape was using to move from one end of the
castle to the other, the reason the patrolling could be handled by only one teacher every night. He
was amazed, however, to find out that in each hallway there was a portrait in charge of monitoring.
Without Invisibility Cloaks, the students really did not stand a chance.

After almost an hour, Snape and Harry’s steps led them to the front hall. Argus Filch was there,
sitting in a comfortable armchair wearing simple but nice light brown robes, his clean hair in a queue,
reading a Charms book. He stood up at their arrival.

“Headmaster, Coach Potter. How are you, sirs?”

“Very well, Mister Filch. Any miscreants about this evening?” asked Snape.

Filch smiled, something he did quite frequently these days. “None outside of the two of you, sir, but
the night’s still young, I daresay. The pitch is so tempting this time a year, the nights still warm and
all…”

“I am about to show Potter Rowena’s corridor. Care to join us? You are able to use it now, you
know.”

Filch looked suddenly pleased. “Right you are, Headmaster. Hadn’t thought of that!” He looked as
excited as a child.

“What’s Rowena’s corridor?” asked Harry.

Snape walked to the statue of a knight in full armor standing guard next to a large tapestry.

“It is a fully magical hallway created entirely of Wizard space by Rowena Ravenclaw. It opens and
allows passage only to wizards who have come of age. Apparently, she disliked children and
avoided them if at all possible.” He stepped aside. “Mr. Filch, would you do the honors?”

Filch came to stand in front of the statue and pointed to the stone cross on the knight’s chest. “Here?”

“Precisely.”

Filch pressed his hand to it. The statue took life and bowed slightly, letting them into a wide hallway
that had appeared out of nowhere.

“From here, you can go to a similar knight near each of the common rooms’ entrances with only a
few minutes’ walk. You can also go to the library, the owlery, and the Astronomy Tower, our
current destination,” explained Snape as they entered.

Indeed, after a couple of right-angle turns, and in less than five minutes, they were stepping out into
the clear September night on the parapet of Hogwarts’ tallest tower.

“I love magic,” commented Filch, echoing Harry’s thoughts exactly.

“The students can’t even see the entrances, even if they are wide open,” explained Snape. He smiled
evily. “Nothing unsettles them more than to be chased away from here, run back to their common
rooms using every shortcut they know, and find you waiting tranquilly for them in front of their own door.” He chuckled. “I’ve always found it highly amusing.”

Harry could not even imagine the Snape he remembered playing this sort of game.

“Headmaster,” said Filch in a soft voice, pointing to a dark recess where a young couple was kissing rather enthusiastically. “That’s a sixth year Ravenclaw, Heather Montgomery, and one of yours, sir, Spencer Lewis.”

“Ha, but Mr. Filch, they are all mine, now…” answered Snape, equally quietly.

“Right you are, sir.” Filch’s grin said he was not buying that for a second.

Snape stepped forward into the moonlight and said rather theatrically, “This, Mr. Potter, is the less imaginative students’ favorite place of assignation. Oh, look over there! Do I see someone in that alcove?”

Within seconds, the two young people had disappeared down the staircase, their steps resonating in the confined space.

Filch and Harry could not help laughing. Snape, a smirk on his lips, grandly gestured them back into the magical hallway.

“I’ll go back to the front hall and get back to my book, if you don’t mind, and let you both get on with it,” said Filch, still amused, as he took a hallway that had appeared off the main corridor as he spoke.

Snape stopped and looked at Harry. “So, shall you go and intercept our young Ravenclaw or accompany me to the Slytherin common room?” he asked.

“I’m with you,” said Harry. “I don’t want to miss seeing the Master at work.”

That was the answer Snape had been hoping for. Within minutes they were in the dungeons. Harry stayed back a little as Snape nonchalantly positioned himself in the shadows next to the entrance to the Slytherins’ domain. Soon hurried footsteps could be heard, and a young man arrived at a full run, skidding to an abrupt halt when Snape’s wand suddenly lit to reveal him, a shoulder resting against the wall, examining his fingernails. The astonishment on the student’s face was priceless.

“Five points from Slytherin, Mr. Lewis,” he said coolly, not even bothering to look up.

“But, sir…”

Snape, deigning to give an appraising glance, raised a questioning eyebrow. “Mr. Lewis?”

The young man, flustered, seemed to gather up his courage. “My mum said you never take points off Slytherin, sir.”

Snape took his time in answering, directing his most reproving glare at him. “I do so with great displeasure, I assure you, and I would be… most disappointed to have to do so again on your account, Mr. Lewis. But that will not occur, am I correct?”

“Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir. I mean…”

“Dismissed, Lewis.”

“Yes, sir. Good night, sir.”
As the young man was about to enter the Slytherin common room Snape added, “A Ravenclaw, Mr. Lewis?”

“She is brilliant, sir,” Lewis responded, thrilled at Snape’s minute show of interest. “Really.”

“I should hope so,” he answered. “She just cost us five points.” And he let his lips show the smallest of smirks.

Spencer Lewis’ face lit up, but recognizing the dismissal, he closed the door behind him.

Potter came out of the shadows. “How do you do it?” he asked.

“Do what?” asked Snape, nonplussed.

“You scare the heck out of him, take points off, threaten him, and yet he leaves ready to lay his life down for you. You have a gift, you know.”

Potter’s admiration seemed genuine. Snape was touched.

“Slytherins are easy, for me.” He shrugged. “I know how they think. Your lot is a mystery. They will soon hate me just as much as you did, you’ll see.”

“No one could ever hate you as much as I did,” blurted Harry, his tone heartrendingly bitter. He immediately looked as if he wished he could disappear into the floor.

Snape met the appalled green eyes and held them, wanting more than anything to ease Potter’s distress. What could he possibly say? Their past would always be there, unchangeable. That it should still be so raw in Harry’s mind was painful.

“Would it help if I told you I regretted my behavior towards you in those years?” he asked, genuinely curious.

Potter took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds as he thought about it. He sighed. “Yes,” he admitted honestly. “I think it would.”

“There are only very few things in my life that I regret more,” Snape said, truthfully. “At the time, however, I was utterly incapable of acting any other way. It is no excuse,” he added sadly, “but it is the truth.”

They stared at each other for a long time, Harry’s expression, for once, unreadable. Then he smiled, a small wistful smile.

“Well,” he said, effectively putting an end to their intense interaction, “you like me now.”

That I do, Mr. Potter. That I do. But he would not let himself betray his feelings so glaringly again.

“Your company is not overly tiresome,” he answered dismissively.

Harry laughed, hard. At least he got his jokes, now. They started walking away together.

“Shall we break for tea?” asked Snape, gesturing Harry in the direction of his rooms.

“I would like that very much,” he answered. “What time is my shift over?”

“During the week, it is generally safe to assume the worst of the mischief will be over by midnight. You are on call all night, but you can certainly retire by then. The ghosts will come and get you, if
need be. At the weekend, I usually do a last check around two o’clock. It is tedious, but necessary. I must confess, though, that I never disliked patrol duty as much as some of our colleagues. I enjoy the quiet. I like the pacing. It’s helped keep me grounded at some extremely difficult times in my life.”

He shrugged, annoyed at himself. Why did the past keep resurging tonight? He was grateful to reach his door, which opened smoothly for them. A wave of his hand refreshed the tea tray.

“Would you excuse me for a moment, Potter?”

“Of course.”

Snape went to his bedchamber, closing the door behind himself, and got rid of his extra clothing, glad to shed the constraining waistcoat and robes and happy to feel the ground under his bare feet.

In the bathroom, washing his hands, he stared detachedly at his reflection for a moment. He traced the permanent vertical crease on his forehead between his brows.

His face was gaunt, his features stark and unlovely. He removed the tie in his hair and let the hair fall forward. It did not help at all; his nose was still like a beak, his eyes still a relentless black, his mouth still thin and framed by deep grooves.

Potter was so beautiful. So, so beautiful. He passed a tired hand over his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose for a moment. He imagined himself walking back into his sitting room, walking right to the younger man, brushing aside the teacup in his hand, and kissing him, their bodies pressed together, his hands framing the beautiful, beautiful face, his tongue tasting the sensuous lips.

The ache of his want was a physical thing, a stabbing in his solar plexus, a tightening in his gut. Like a moth to a flame, he was already longing to go back, to burn himself on that beauty. He took a deep breath, pushed his hair behind his ears, and without another look to the man in his mirror, returned to his addiction.
Harry watched Snape disappear into his bedroom, their last exchange filling his mind. He had thought, honestly thought, he had gotten over the past, but as it kept coming up this evening it had become obvious that he had been overly optimistic.

His outburst had only shown how close his hurt and anger at Snape were to the surface, still. He did not know how to handle Snape’s response. He believed the man’s regrets. He just could not understand why he had been ‘utterly incapable of acting any other way’.

He took off his robes, laying them carefully on the back of the couch. The room was warmer than the drafty corridors and he wanted to relax for a while. He got himself a cup of tea and stood in front of the fireplace, sipping it and staring at the flames.

He felt suddenly bone weary and wished he could go home and to his bed. He was not sure he could handle his attraction to Snape tonight. He felt unbalanced, torn by the dichotomy of his feelings. On one hand, he still childishly wanted to rage at him—for the unnecessary hurt his attitude has caused, for the pain he had so gleefully inflicted, for the loneliness he had left behind when he had abandoned his post without explanation. On the other, he wanted to follow him behind that door, wanted to drown in his dark eyes, to feel his arms around him, to kiss him senseless.

He made a quick decision and, returning his half emptied cup to the tray, put his robes back on. Snape came out of his room a few minutes later. Having shed his public persona, he looked perfect to Harry. (Severus’ bare feet had become a central feature of Harry’s nighttime fantasies.) Harry could see his surprise that Harry was still wearing his robes and standing, instead of being comfortably ensconced in his chair.

“I am feeling pretty tired,” Harry explained. “I think I’ll make my last round now and go to bed. I’m sorry. The day seems to have caught up with me all of a sudden. Thank you for the help, tonight.”

Snape’s expression was, as usual, unreadable. Harry had no idea if he even cared about Harry’s rather abrupt change of heart.

“It is the first evening back. I am quite sure you will not find any more delinquents. You should be glad you won’t be on call tomorrow night. I am sure Sinistra will have her hands full. Good night, then, Potter.”

“Good night, Snape. See you tomorrow.”

As Harry was closing the door behind him, he could have sworn he heard a heavy sigh from the man inside. Was it one of relief? Annoyance? Possibly just plain weariness after an eventful day?

He left, letting his steps take him on a complex loop that passed most of the important nooks and recesses before leading him back to the Gryffindor tower and his own quarters. He wished classes were starting in the morning, was eager to establish a routine.

Oh, well. Tomorrow, he would get up and train, and go to the east wing. Surely there would be some adult students eager for a private lesson, or a pick-up game of Quidditch. He would invite himself to Ron and Hermione’s for the evening.
For reasons he could not comprehend, he needed to lie low and lick his wounds, though he was unclear as to what these wounds were. For the first time in weeks he felt the need to distance himself from Severus Snape. He went to bed uneasy, slightly headachy, and wondered if he would have problems falling asleep. But as soon as he was in the dark his thoughts became sluggish and out of focus, and he soon sank into a deep, dreamless slumber.

By the time he went to breakfast the next day, he was feeling more at ease and relaxed. He lightheartedly described Snape’s interaction with the wayward Slytherin student to Neville and Dermott, who laughed appreciatively.

“I never thought of using Rowena’s corridor during my rounds. After all, the point is to monitor the students, and they can’t get in there. I’ll have to try it,” said Neville, who then added wistfully, “though I don’t imagine I can pull it off with quite Snape’s flair…”

“I know what you mean, Neville,” said Dermott. “Neither could I, I don’t think. The students think of us as people. We just don’t have that aura of dangerous omnipotence that he projects.”

“Dangerous omnipotence?” laughed Harry.

“Yes, you know, that ‘I can read you mind, I know all your secrets’ thing he has going. They would just laugh at us…”

All three of them looked towards the Headmaster. Not a second later, he was looking back over the spine of his book, an eyebrow slightly raised, but then, dismissing them completely, he went back to his reading.

“See what I mean?” chuckled Dermott.

“Well, it’s easy for you to laugh, you never had him as a teacher,” commented Neville.

“Was he really as bad as all that?” asked Dermott.

“Worse,” answered Harry and Neville in perfect unison, which started them laughing, albeit briefly, as they were aware of the presence of the students and the need for decorum.

Already, curious eyes had turned to the staff table, taking in the laughing teachers.

“And that is why,” commented Harry, “unlike him, we will never be able to keep them completely enthralled.” He shrugged. “Oh, well.”

He looked again, briefly, at Snape. He loved his profile, his darkness. He wondered what he was reading.

“I was utterly incapable of acting any other way…”

Why had that been? Because Snape had despised him? Because he had hated James Potter? Because he had loved Lily, and she had given up her life to save his? Because protecting Harry had forced him to play a double agent role he hated? Because eyes had been on Snape at all times, ready to report his every misstep to Voldemort? Because Snape had been, himself, so miserably unhappy in those years, he had been unable to care?

Harry took a deep breath. Probably all of the above were true. He knew nothing of the man Snape had been, nothing of the life he had led. Who knew what else the Potions Master had endured in those years? Who was he to judge, really? Harry was no longer a child. He knew now that things were not always simple. He certainly did not understand his own actions on occasion.
Suddenly, Harry felt as if a weight had been taken off his mind, as if a page had been finally turned, the past really put to rest at last. Snape regretted his actions. He would not repeat them. What more was Harry waiting for? Just like that, while sitting at breakfast on what promised to be a beautiful day, watching Snape’s Adam’s apple moving up and down in his throat as he drank his tea without taking his eyes off his book, Harry forgave Severus Snape, absolutely and completely.

With perfect timing, Snape looked at him again above the rim of his book and met his eyes. Harry could not help but give him a wholehearted smile which, to his secret delight, caused Snape to briefly lose his perfect countenance, almost dropping his book in his porridge.

By the time Severus looked up again, Harry made sure he was absorbed in conversation with Neville, even though he was only asking him how his grandmother was. But he felt Snape’s questioning glance as clearly as if he had seen it.

Harry and Neville went to Narcissa’s office together, though she was off to London and Lucius for the weekend, Neville to check the coming week’s schedule and Harry to see if there were any names down on the pick-up Quidditch roster. He was elated to see that there were eight. He went home to change and was on the pitch at nine, the appointed time, ready to play.

He spent the afternoon and evening with the Weasleys. First he was put in charge of covering the children’s schoolbooks with butcher paper and Spellotape, a chore Ron and Hermione both despised. Molly, after years of training, could do it with a flick of her wand, but neither of them had bothered to get the hang of it, and Harry enjoyed the task, finding it as soothing as the wrapping of presents. He loved the feel and sound of the sharp scissors cutting the thick paper, the origami of getting the creases just right, and the peeling and careful placing off of the self-sticking labels on which he had spelled the children’s names and the books’ titles in a pleasing round calligraphy. He made two piles, the edges of the spines perfectly lined up, and looked at them with a ridiculous sense of accomplishment. Ron took in the scene and chuckled.

“You need to get a hobby, mate,” was his comment.

“I need to get a life,” answered Harry. But when Rosie Lu checked the results of his hard labor, her sweet exclamations of delight at the perfect corners and at the pretty handwriting made him glad he had bothered.

He loved both of his friends’ children, but admitted (only to himself) he had a definite sweet spot for Rose Luna. When she came to thank him with a kiss, he pulled her onto his lap and tickled her just to hear her delightful childish giggle and hugged her tight until she squealed, still laughing, “Let me go, Uncle Harry! I can’t breathe!” With a last raspberry in her soft neck he let her go, watching her run off to her next adventure, a graceful little slip of a thing.

Then he took his usual trouncing at chess, Ron all the while explaining to his son all the mistakes Harry was making. At the end, Hugo looked at him with pity. “You are really pants at chess, Uncle Harry,” he commented, very seriously.

“I know, Hugo. But if you learn to play well, maybe someday you can beat your dad.”

“No one can beat my daddy,” the small boy stated with complete certainty. “He is the best.”

“Well, then maybe you can at least be a worthier opponent.”

He could have sworn he heard the child mumble under his breath, as he walked away, “Well, that shouldn’t be too hard,” which was confirmed when Ron commented, “From the mouths of babes…” He and Ron just laughed.
In the late afternoon, taking advantage of the lovely weather, they went for a long hike on the moors. They had a picnic for dinner on top of a round hill that afforded a great view of the distant castle. As the sun began to set, they Apparated back to the gates and walked home from there, Harry carrying Rosie Lu in his arms, a little rag doll in her slumber.

After putting the kids to bed, they sat down in the comfy living room and talked quietly of nothing in particular. Just as Harry was about to take his leave to give his best friends some time alone, however, Hermione asked him how he was faring with the DADA syllabi. He was glad to be able to tell her that he was finished with seven of the twenty he had to complete and had so far kept up with the reviewing of those that had been turned in to him by the other instructors.

“Twenty!” exclaimed Ron. “I’d no idea you had to write so many!”

“It’s a huge amount of work, really,” agreed Harry. “We are basically writing seven books, one for each year, each covering all seventeen topics.”

“Better you than me, mate,” said Ron.

“I am actually enjoying it,” admitted Harry, still surprised at the fact. “I am learning so much, and it’s fascinating stuff, you know?”

“Watch out, Harry, you’re starting to sound like Hermione.” Ron was rewarded by a (none-too-gentle) punch in the arm from his wife.

“I always knew you had it in you, Harry,” she put in.

“Liar,” he said.

“Ok, I sometimes suspected you might be less hopeless than you appeared. Truthful enough for you?”

They laughed.

“It’s weird, really. I never thought I would enjoy learning for learning’s sake. You’d think I would have figured that out in school.”

“Well, you spend your first six years fighting Voldemort and your last one chasing girls,” Hermione pointed out quite accurately. “I guess your mind was elsewhere.”

“A bit of an exaggeration,” answered Harry ruefully, “but true enough, I suppose.”

“What’s it like working with Snape?” asked Ron, curious.

“Motivating,” admitted Harry. “His overview of the course was brilliant, really. We added a few things to it, but his grasp on the Dark Arts is remarkable. And his Antidotes and Antivenins section is just amazing. He is spoon-feeding it to the rest of us, doing ninety percent of the work. He really knows his stuff. You want to put out your best work as well, you know? You want to keep up.”

He sat back, and added reflectively. “You know, Ron, you have to admit, even when we hated him, back in school, we always worked harder in Potions than in anything else.”

“True,” admitted Ron.

“Well,” grinned Harry, “it’s the same now, except that once in a while I get a ‘Well done, Potter.’ Shocks me every time!”
Hermione giggled. “I know what you mean,” she said. “Even after all these years, I genuinely crave his approval. It’s ridiculous.”

“Do you guys ever talk about the past?” wondered Ron.

“It comes up once in a while,” said Harry, the previous evening’s event fresh in his mind. “Not a favorite subject, obviously. But believe it or not, I’m over it.”

“Really?” asked Hermione, astonished.

“Yes. The past is past.” He shrugged. “He was a git, I was a brat. We’ve both grown up, I guess. I respect the man he is now, and I think he feels the same. A good thing, too, seeing neither one of us is going anywhere soon.”

“I am really glad you feel that way, Harry. You both belong here, somehow, you know?”

Harry smiled at her. She was such a Gryffindor. “Ready for Monday?” he asked.

“I can’t wait,” she answered.

“Gee, thanks,” piped Ron.

Far from mortified, Hermione sent him a sultry look. “By the time I am done with you,” she purred, “you’ll be looking forward to a restful Monday too, Weasley.”

“And that would be my cue to exit,” said Harry laughing, getting up from the couch.

Hermione and Ron walked him to the door. “See you tomorrow?” asked Hermione.

“Not unless you spend the day in the library,” he answered. “I’ve got syllabi to research.”

“Boooriiing…” said Ron.

Harry laughed. “Good night, you two.”

He took the stairs up to his rooms two at a time. He did have a lot of work to do, and he intended to do it well. He was in bed by ten, looking forward to eight hours of sleep before training.

He wasn’t exactly tired, but knew just how to get himself relaxed enough to go to sleep quickly. It had to do with his right hand and thoughts of a tall dark man: of his walk, his profile, his voice, his hands, his eyes, his toes, haaaaaa… Yes.
~o~ Back to Work ~o~

Snape watched Harry leave his quarters, resigned. He sighed. Reaping what he had sowed, all these years ago.

“No one could ever hate you as much as I did.”

Except maybe himself, right now. No, that wasn’t true. He did not even hate the man he had been. He accepted him. He recognized, in hindsight, the necessity of what he had done, to himself, to others. He had made a terrible mistake, had spent eighteen years atoning for it and ten years making repayment in the best way he knew how. It was enough, damn it.

Well, it might balance out in the big picture, but it did not when it came to individuals. And there was nothing he could do about it. Potter would get over it or he would not. It was completely out of his control. He gave a thought to Longbottom. He wondered what that man thought of him, really. Was there anger, like Potter’s, beneath the amiable surface? Was the veneer simply thicker?

He Banished the tea, took a sip of Dreamless Sleep, and went to bed.

He had known to expect a solitary breakfast the next morning, since Minerva had gone to Little Whinging for the weekend and Granger would be eating in her quarters with her family. He had brought a book on ghosts, having decided which syllabus he would work on next, and was surprised to find out how little he knew about the subject.

He had just made the decision to have a chat with the Bloody Baron later that day when he realized he was being observed. He looked up automatically to find Longbottom, Potter, and McClallan staring at him. He brought his eyes back to his book, not even wanting to consider what in the world could have brought that on.

Potter looked good this morning, just out of the shower, obviously, and wearing the green t-shirt under his opened robes that brought out the color in his eyes. Snape almost snorted to himself. He had looked up for less than three seconds. He certainly had no idea what the other two were wearing, or whether their hair was still damp. He went back to his ghosts, or tried to. Potter, Potter, Potter. He was getting bored with himself and his obsession. He was indulging in it far too often.

He replayed Harry’s exit from his quarters the night before in his mind. He would do well to dwell on that for a while, and get hold of himself. He had a life to live, a job to do. There were more important things in the world than Potter’s t-shirts. So, one last look, and…

Above the spine of his book his eyes met Potter’s, and Harry smiled that smile… His book slipped out of his hands and he barely caught it before it landed in his porridge. He looked up at Harry again but he was just chatting away with Longbottom, curse him. What did that smile mean? (It looked as if it meant, “I want to see you naked,” but Snape was quite sure that was a mistranslation on his part.) Please God, let it at least mean, “If you invite me to your quarters for tea again, I will come, and this time actually sit down and drink some.” Severus was quite sure it did, and he found that he had no further trouble concentrating on his reading, feeling suddenly at peace with the world.

Snape did not see Potter again until Sunday night’s dinner. It was a raucous affair, the students loud and excited. It would be a very good thing for classes to start and channel their wayward energies.

Potter spent the meal with his nose in a book, taking occasional notes in the margins (Snape hoped,
for Harry’s sake, that it was not one of Pince’s...), and left immediately after pudding, looking like a man with places to go. Who could have guessed that Potter would turn out to be such a bookworm? Snape wondered which syllabi he was working on now. He had seemed quite absorbed.

He refused to spend the evening sitting in his reading chair, a book opened on his lap, trying to think up excuses to invite Potter for “drinks” after dinner in the coming week. Instead he got up and rifled through the pile of Antidotes and Antivenins syllabi that had been turned in for him to review. That he selected Potter’s (even though it had been buried in the pile) was entirely coincidental.

It was excellent. It read as if Potter had actually consulted and understood every reference book Snape had provided. Could that be? Severus thought the topic fascinating, but he was well aware it was not an opinion shared by many. Yet there were a couple of details in Potter’s examples he was sure he had not provided in the outline.

On one of the last pages, he noticed a small illustration in his own hand. He stared at it, intrigued. Well, it had been rather good, to be sure, but how had Potter lifted it from the original? And why? He could have just copied it, it wasn’t that involved, and certainly less trouble than to find a spell to transfer it. Snape felt unaccountably gratified, and cursed himself for it. When had he ever cared about someone else’s opinion of his work, especially about something as insignificant as a small graph? It was a neat trick, though. He would ask Granger about it. It could definitely come in handy.

Breakfast the next morning was less hectic than the usual first day of term breakfast, as the schedules had been distributed on Saturday morning. Snape had arrived bright and early and greeted the teachers as they came in. Some, like Flitwick and Minerva, were completely relaxed. Others definitely showed first day jitters. Poor Cassandra Batgut was a nervous wreck and hardly touched her food. Potter seemed completely oblivious, his nose, once again, in a book.

Severus had caught sight of him above the pitch long before breakfast and had had to make a conscious effort not to stop running and stare. He wondered if Potter would keep up his intense training schedule now that school was on. As it was, he would have a busy week. The new equipment was due to arrive, and would have to be inventoried and organized. At least Quidditch would not start for a couple of weeks. Thinking of Potter reminded him of his syllabi. He turned to Hermione, who seemed absorbed in her own course’s outline.

“Granger?”

“Professor Snape?”

“I was reviewing Potter’s Antidotes and Antivenins syllabus yesterday and I was wondering what spell he used to transfer the graph from the outline to the final text.”

Hermione looked extremely confused. “I’m sorry, I have no idea,” she answered.

Snape was taken aback. “Oh. I’d assumed he’d got it from you…”

She gave him a look he would have been proud to include in his own repertoire. “It might surprise you to learn that Harry has not once consulted me about any of his work with the DADA syllabi, Headmaster. One might wonder about the significance of your immediate assumption that he had.” She straightened out the edge of her pile of papers on the table with a sharp rap, got up, and left without another word.

Her rebuke was clear, and Snape felt properly chastised. He suddenly understood that she had all along continued to address him as “Professor Snape” as a sort of endearment. He was shocked to find how chagrined he was that she should suddenly use his proper title.
Flitwick watched her go and sauntered over to take her place. “Well, Severus, what did you say to Miss Granger to put her knickers in such a twist?”

Snape shrugged. “She feels I have insulted Mr. Potter’s intelligence, I believe.”

“You? Underrating Harry Potter’s intellect? Shocking!” answered Filius chuckling, to Snape’s annoyance.

“I wasn’t!”

Filius rolled his eyes. Snape could not believe it. Did people still think he disliked and underestimated Harry? How laughable! He had tried to be discreet about his feelings for the man. Obviously, he had been brilliantly successful.

Surely Granger’s behavior was a typical Gryffindor overreaction. He certainly had not meant to imply that Potter… He knew Harry was intelligent, and he also knew him to be extremely diligent in his work.

He raised his eyes to check the young man, whose attention to his reading had not wavered. Then why had he made that assumption so readily? Old habits died hard. No, Granger had not overreacted. She had been right. Hmm.

Suddenly the Slytherin in him woke up and rejoiced. Snape got up to leave. As he passed Potter, he stopped and hovered. The bright green eyes looked up and a smile automatically appeared on Harry’s lips. How nice.

“Good morning, Headmaster.”

He acknowledged the greeting with a nod. “I would be interested to learn more about the spell you used to transfer my illustration to your syllabus, Potter. It could be very useful.”

“I would be happy to tell you about it,” said Harry getting up as well, “but I must get to the pitch, or I will be late for class.”

“No hurry. I can certainly wait until later.”

Potter hesitated and chewed on his lip for a second, then he said quickly, without looking at Snape, “I am free this evening…”

“Excellent. I’ll see you at eight.” Snape strode away towards his office, the students parting like the sea in front of him, leaving Harry to gather books and papers behind him. Snape did not smile. Merlin forbid the dunderheads should think it was directed at them.
The first few weeks of school were a blur to Harry. He had thought August had been busy, but September gave new meaning to the word. He was infinitely glad he was in superb physical condition, and held on to his training routine as to a lifeline.

On top of his regular teaching schedule, the first two weeks were occupied with receiving, cataloguing, and organizing equipment, in which Filch’s help was invaluable.

The four teams held tryouts the third weekend of the month, all of them eager to get started with training. Though Harry supervised, and readily discussed the potential players’ strengths with the captains, he withheld any advice as to the choices they made. He did think that in general their decisions were sound, though he was amused by the differences in reasoning between the team captains, finding them very colored by their House affiliations.

The Hufflepuffs ended up with several alternates to each position, everyone being given a chance. The Gryffindor captain chose the new Beater who would best fit in with the rest of team, and not the most talented one, who was a bit of a hot shot (reminding Harry of McLaggen), and retained the rest of the previous year’s selection. The Slytherin captain (“Well, hello, Mr. Lewis…”) was looking at each individual’s talent and strength, but acceded to his best player’s preference, the Keeper’s talent apparently giving him a right of veto. The Ravenclaw captain, seeking his third Cup in a row, was very sharp. Three of his teammates having left the previous year, he knew his was an uphill battle.

He approached Harry casually during the trials and mentioned he had seen him training in the mornings. “Do you intend to continue all year, sir?”

“Yes. It helps keep me sane.”

“Would you mind company, sir?”

Harry was taken aback. “I think of it as time for myself, Mr. Lennox. I will be available to help you train your team during your regular practice time.”

“Of course, sir. I was not suggesting…”

“What were you suggesting, then?”

The young man blushed but forged on. “Ravenclaws are bookworms, sir. I was thinking that, maybe, those interested in improving their physical condition could benefit from daily exercise. We could train alongside you, sir, not be trained by you.”

“And you think your teammates would get up at five in the cold and dark morning to do that?”

“I would, sir,” Lennox answered vehemently.

“I’ll think about it.”

The young man, intelligently, did not push.

“Thank you, sir.”

Lennox picked his three new players. Looking at them—a lanky thirteen-year-old girl and two
skinny and slightly gawky fourteen-year-old boys—Harry could see the captain’s point. He also knew the kind of self-discipline it took to stick to the type of program he himself followed, and reasoned that no matter how many of the children would start, most of them would drop out within a few days. Anyone dedicated enough to stick it out would probably not give him much trouble.

A few days later, he met with all four captains to work out a fair allotment of the pitch for their training schedule. They grumbled when they were told it was off limits to them on Sundays, as it was reserved for pick-up games for the Adult Students.

Harry thought it would have the added benefit of insuring that the team members would have at least one Quidditch-free day to catch up with their studies. At the end of the meeting, he made his announcement.

“I train at five-o-five every weekday morning, and at seven on the weekends. Starting next Monday, any player in the teams who is willing is free to join me.” That certainly got their attention. “The exercises are for physical conditioning, not Quidditch proper. I will not be giving anyone individual attention or Quidditch-related advice.”

He sighed. “I enjoy the peace and quiet of training alone. I am willing to give that up, but I will expect participants to be committed. If you miss more than two days’ training in a row, you will not be welcomed back, unless you were in the infirmary. Oh, and I do not want to see any team colors, and House rivalries will not be tolerated.” He made eye contact with all four captains. “Tell your teammates, but do not coerce them. This definitely has to be their choice. Frankly, at your age I wouldn’t have done it,” he added ruefully. “It was hard enough to make it to breakfast.”

He noticed their reflective look as they tried to reconcile with the fact that their adult teacher had once been in their place. He smiled at them.

“You know, when I was a wee student here at Hogwarts,” he teased. “When the dinosaurs still roamed the earth…” They all laughed a little sheepishly at that.

“The dinosaurs and Voldemort,” said Lewis, his eyes cautious, as if he had wanted to bring this up for a long time but was wary of offending.

Harry was surprised. None of the students had ever referred to his past in such an open manner. He did not know what to say. He gave Lewis a small smile to let him know his remark had not offended him.

“All of which are now mercifully extinct,” he replied, putting a quiet but firm end to the subject. Then he added, purposely cheerful, “Whereas Quidditch, of course, will live on forever.” They all chuckled again and, on that lighter note, disbanded.

Harry’s second patrol night had been on a Monday night and completely uneventful. After his first two rounds, he had gone back to his quarters to get one of his syllabi and had continued his tour of duty reading Flitwick’s work on Wand Lore, which was spotless. He reflected wistfully upon the fact that he had only been to Snape’s once since his very first rounds in his company. It had been the evening he had shown him the charm to reproduce sketches. The spell was a little tricky, but not that complicated once you got the hang of it.

“How did you not just reproduce it?” had asked Snape, curious.

“Uh… Yours was very… nice? (Harry had felt a little uncomfortable at that point, but had opted, as he often did in these cases, to simply be truthful.) I wasn’t sure I could copy it and retain its… purity of line? Elegance?”
Snape’s face had been unreadable, of course, but he’d nodded. His next question had left Harry even more flustered.

“Wouldn’t a spell to remove the sketch completely from the original and place it in the new document be simpler?”

Which it would, of course. But Harry had wanted to keep Snape’s original outline intact. “Uh… I did not want the original damaged.”

“The outline? Why? You’re finished with it, aren’t you?”

Now Harry had felt truly awkward. What reasonable excuse could he have to want to keep the original outline, and keep it unmolested? The truth just would not do. (Snape’s outline had found its way into the box that contained his mother’s letter, Snape’s Potions diary, and Harry’s other irreplaceable valuables.) So he had lied.

“Oh, I just was curious to see if it could be done. I found the simple spell to move the sketch from one place to another, and it got me wondering, you know, so… Too much time on my hands, obviously,” he finished lamely.

Snape had simply nodded again and the conversation had moved on. Since Harry had had the foresight to bring some work along, they had spent a quiet and companionable evening together, Harry leaving around ten, needing his sleep.

After that, there just hadn’t been any occasion to meet. Harry was so busy, and he assumed Snape was as well.

When he found himself doing his third night of patrolling, still not having had an evening alone with Snape, he wondered what to do about it. He missed the dungeons, and Snape’s tea. (Harry smiled to himself. Yes: just the dungeons and the tea, of course…) He did not take a syllabus along on his rounds but simply used the time trying to find a suitable excuse to precipitate an invitation. He wondered, with a bit of trepidation, if he simply should dare knock on the man’s door tonight and invite himself for a cuppa. Quite sure he would not have the nerve, he nonetheless rehearsed an imaginary conversation in his mind.

“Good evening, Snape. I was just passing your door on my rounds and thought you might be so kind as to spot me a cup of your wonderful tea… Patrolling is such thirsty work!”

He mentally kicked himself. He was such an idiot. Even to him the imaginary guilelessness was cloyingly obvious. Where was his inner Slytherin tonight? He was still berating himself when he turned a corner and practically ran into the object of his mental meanderings.

“Snape!” he squeaked. Oh, for Merlin’s sake! He cleared his throat. “Snape.” There, two octaves lower, and with a modicum of self-control.

“Potter.”

Damn the man and his ironic facial hair! “Patrol duty tonight?”

“Yes. A quiet night. You?”

Did Harry imagine a slight hesitation?

“Just a stroll. Would you like some company on this round?”
Harry shrugged casually, glad his inner Slytherin had made an appearance at last. “Sure.”

They walked a long circuitous route, which took them past every possible hiding place in the castle, in complete silence, while Harry’s heart and several of his other internal organs had a little party, with singing and dancing. He was such a fool, he thought, smiling to himself. They were back where they’d started, near the library.

“Would you like a break?” asked Snape. “A cup of tea, perhaps?”

“Yes!” Oh, for magic sake’s. Could he possibly sound more eager? “Yes, I would, thank you.”

Taking Rowena’s corridor, they were down at Snape’s door in less than three minutes. Inside, the fire was burning. A wave of Snape’s hand and the tea tray was in its usual place, and a minute later they were facing each other, cups in hand, relaxing in their usual chairs.

“Thank you, I needed that,” said Harry honestly, after taking a swallow of the wonderful beverage, knowing full well Snape would think he was talking about the tea.

“As did I,” replied Snape after a long sip; then after a few quiet moments he asked, “Are you satisfied with your new equipment?”

“Very,” said Harry. “We have everything we need, and quite a bit of cash to spare.” He continued, warming to the topic, “I have been considering a change in the rules, by the way. We have forty-eight new brooms: Cleansweeps, Nimbuses, and Shooting Stars. They are all equally high-performing, just different styles to accommodate personal preferences, so I would like all Quidditch matches to be played on school brooms, to even the field.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He sat forward as he explained. “As a student, I always had a very unfair advantage over the other Seekers, having a much better broom. Only Draco Malfoy’s was a match for my own.”

“You still beat him every time…”

“Yes, well…” smirked Harry. “Superior skills will tell.” He sat back. “But it was still unfair to the others. I just don’t think students whose parents can afford better brooms should be able to use them in competition.”

“You’ll get some grumbling.”

“I will point out that those who grumble must be unsure of their own talent, and hiding behind their brooms. That should shut them up.”

Snape chuckled. “Indeed.”

Looking at the fire, Harry searched for another acceptable topic of conversation. ‘I have missed this…’ wouldn’t do. ‘I constantly have erotic dreams about you’ wouldn’t, either. ‘I say your name when I come’. No. Definitely not that. He smiled to himself. Truthfully, he was perfectly content just sitting there in companionable silence. He looked up at Snape and met his dark gaze.

“You look very fit,” said Snape. “Still training?”

“I am. Daily. I have agreed to let some students join me, by the way.”

Snape looked doubtful.
“At five in the morning? How many?”

“I don’t know yet. We will start Monday. I have no doubt most of the ones who start will drop out in a week or two,” he admitted. “But they asked, and I think a few of them might benefit.”

Snape was quiet for a moment as if hesitating to voice an opinion, and then said, “Being a teacher here is so very demanding, Potter. One can appreciate your dedication, but…” He stopped and shrugged. “My apologies. Unsought advice is the worst kind.”

“No, no,” said Harry. “You taught for a very long time, Snape, and I am grateful for any advice I can get—from you, from Flitwick, from any of the more experienced teachers. Please go on.”

Snape stared at him for a moment as if gauging his sincerity. “Very well,” he conceded. “Make sure you keep some time for yourself, Potter, for a private life of your own.”

“No, no,” said Harry. “You taught for a very long time, Snape, and I am grateful for any advice I can get—from you, from Flitwick, from any of the more experienced teachers. Please go on.”

“Snape had the grace to chuckle. “Learn from my mistakes. Do not let the job devour you. There is more to life.”

Harry was touched by Snape’s concern on his behalf. He had considered that exact point himself quite carefully before agreeing to Lennox’s suggestion. Impulsively he said, “Fly with me, then. Tomorrow or the day after. Please.”

Snape actually laughed. “Is that your idea of personal time, Potter? Flying with a colleague?”

Harry felt bold, and went with it. “No, not really. But flying with a friend, however, is a definite yes.”

Snape did not answer right away and the Gryffindor’s foolish bravery evaporated, leaving Harry wishing very, very hard, for a Time-Turner.

“Considering the advice I just gave you,” Snape answered finally, “denying your request would be both counterproductive and hypocritical. Tomorrow night would suit me very well. Say, eleven o’clock, the Astronomy Tower?”

Aware he was grinning much too brightly, Harry nodded and got up. “I’d better get back to patrol,” he said, “or the Headmaster will have my hide.”

“Doubtless,” said Snape, picking up a book. “Good night, Potter.”

“Good night, Snape.”
Severus put down his book as soon as the door closed and went to his room. Off came the extraneous clothing. He went back to the sitting room, refilled his teacup, and sat in Harry’s chair.

The evening had come to a very satisfactory conclusion. After almost three Potter-free weeks, he had been unable to continue with his resolution to let the younger man initiate their next encounter. It had seemed easy enough at the beginning; he had been so busy that time had gone by rather fast.

However, these past few days he had found himself thinking of Harry with increasing frequency, turning their last conversations over and over in his head, rethinking every look, and generally, well… obsessing. It was ridiculous, and interfered with his work. So he had taken matters into his own hands and ambushed Potter during his rounds.

It showed the extent of his perdition that the pacing of the deserted hallways with the quiet young man had been the most pleasurable activity he had engaged in over two weeks. Harry had seemed eager for tea, and he had finally, finally, gotten Potter back where he belonged, in his rooms, in this chair. (The irrationality of this possessiveness did not escape him. It just could not be helped.)

Just as he had after their last encounter, Snape reviewed tonight’s exchange, systematically purging from them the meanings his own infatuation had added to Harry’s words and actions.

‘I needed that’ had referred to the cup of tea, of course, not Harry’s visit to Snape’s quarters. (Unlike Snape’s answer…)

Harry had looked so… fine, staring into the fire, a small unconscious smile on his lips. That had been his thinking back to something pleasant that had happened during the day, not his feeling as content as Snape himself had felt, the beautiful man in his sight. And beautiful he was. His hard daily exercise seemed to have distilled his exquisiteness to its essence, the lines of his face pure, his movement utterly graceful and precise. Caught staring, Snape had been unable to refrain from a comment, and was glad Harry had not seemed to find it odd.

That Potter should be willing to hear (and take to heart) Snape’s advice about preserving a modicum of private life had pleased him enormously. There had been a time when Harry would have automatically done the opposite of what Snape suggested, on principle. It was encouraging that he now accepted that Snape had his best interests in mind.

Severus’s heart started beating harder as his analysis of the evening’s events approached his favorite moment:

“Fly with me, then. Tomorrow, or the day after. Please.”

Severus closed his eyes and rested his head back on the smooth leather of Harry’s chair. He replayed the words in his mind again, with the same sharp delight.

“Fly with me, then. Tomorrow, or the day after. Please.”

Harry, seeking his company, seeking to share his passion… with him.

He had laughed and had tried to make light of it because he had been so close to making a fool of himself, so close to exposing his feelings. He had been aware of Potter’s own trepidation at having
acknowledged their developing relationship as friendship. He was very gratified by that.

It was irrelevant that his whole being was crying out for so much more. That Potter should start considering him a friend was progress indeed. (Progress towards what, you ridiculous fool?)

He had chosen the words of his answer very carefully, the weight of their past, his turbulent feelings, and his irrepressible hope all having to be taken into careful account in his phrasing. (Ha! To be a Gryffindor and simply blurt out what first came to mind! He imagined that for a moment and shuddered at the possible consequences…)

They would fly together tomorrow. (Would Potter be wearing his training leathers? One could only hope…) They were becoming friends. It had been a very satisfactory evening indeed.

Snape arrived at the Astronomy Tower at ten minutes to eleven wearing his usual robes over his flying clothes, his (Potter’s…) broom shrunken into his pocket. He quickly searched the parapet for snogging students, though he had picked eleven PM to fly because it was after curfew.

Once he was certain that he was alone he removed his robes, shrank them, and put them in his inside pocket, taking out and resizing the broom. He did not want the friendship between the Headmaster and the Coach to become fodder for student gossip. Harry arrived exactly on time, obviously oblivious to such considerations, since he just flew over directly from his balcony on the Gryffindor tower. He hovered there, smiling warmly at Snape.

His grin was contagious, and had the power to drag Snape’s thoughts away from petty concerns and focus them on the moment. Amazing himself at the pure surge of joy he felt, Severus mounted his broom and joined Harry. The Gryffindor might have been less oblivious to such considerations, since he just flew over directly from his balcony on the Gryffindor tower. He hovered there, smiling warmly at Snape.

Above the moors, the night was very dark. Snape had no idea how Harry was directing their flight, but cared not, as the only reference he needed (and wanted) was the young man beside him.

Keeping pace, he soon noticed from the ever-increasing pull on his magic that Potter was steadily accelerating. After a while, Severus knew he was flying faster than he ever had. To continue increasing the pace, he had to actually make a conscious effort to concentrate on smoothly translating his magic into forward velocity, the resulting speed intoxicating, liberating.

He had not known he had in him the desire to test his magical limits in such a way, but found he relished it. The physicality was simple: the wind streaking in his hair, in his face; the broom handle a hard anchor under his palm; his body naturally leaning forward to lessen the air resistance. The mental workings, though, were new: a delicate balance; the strangest, headiest awareness of the mind’s power over matter; a funneling of all his magical resources into a single point.

He reached the apogee of his ability with a cry of triumph at the amazing pace his concentration had allowed him to achieve, before letting his focus relax and chuckling in disbelief at the experience as he quickly lost momentum. Potter sped on and away for only a few moments before making a graceful and impressive turnabout to rejoin Severus.

“It’s a high, isn’t it?” Harry asked then, obviously familiar with what Severus had just been through.

Snape could only laugh in agreement. They went down and alighted on the meadow, Snape collapsing in a heap, still laughing, a distant part of him astonished at his lack of inhibition. Potter lay down next to him and they relaxed, the grass cool under their backs, looking at the stars.
After a while Snape, his breath recovered, asked Harry, “How often do you do this?”

Harry laughed. “Every chance I get.”

Harry’s voice had come from a place shockingly close to Severus’s ear. It would be so easy, so easy, to just roll over and kiss him, to press the lean body between him and the grass, to slip a leg between his and…

Severus stopped his train of thought, struggling to control its physical wake, feeling as if a fist had tightened around his heart.

“How often do you do this?”

Harry had come up on his elbow, so close, Severus felt his breath on his cheek. Snape could not even look at him as he answered.

“I am fine. I may have to sleep here, though. I am wrung out.”

“Nah,” replied Potter amicably, as he fell back on the turf again. “It’s just the afterglow. It will pass in a while, and you’ll be able to go again.”

Snape almost snorted out loud at he thought of other, even sweeter circumstances which could have prompted that same speech from Potter, but abstained, knowing Potter had not even been aware of the sexual connotations of his remark.

They headed back at a much slower pace, conversing as they would have sitting in Snape’s quarters, having to fly very close to each other to do so, their thighs nearly touching. Severus felt at ease and unguarded, the part of him that objected to such an uncharacteristic feeling given no attention at all. It was without any qualms whatever that he said, “I have to start brewing a batch of Wolfsbane Tuesday evening, so it can be ready for the next full moon. All Potions Masters are required to do so twice a year, you know, to supply the Ministry’s Werewolf Support Program. Care to keep me company?”

“Wow. I’d love to. I have always wanted to watch you brew.”

That pleased him enormously, but he had to ask why. Harry answered without any hesitation. “Ginny Weasley mentioned watching you, once; she thought you were amazing. It was a long time ago, when we were still in school. It made me see you in a different light, forced me to admit there was much more to you than the greasy git I loved to hate.” Harry’s broom lurched suddenly. “Sweet Merlin. Did I just say that out loud? I’m sorry, Snape, I…”

He stopped apologizing when he realized Severus was quietly laughing at him. Obviously Snape was not the only one whose guard was down.

“That will be twenty points from Gryffindor for putting your foot in your mouth, Mr. Potter.”

Harry’s answer was to bump lightly into him, throwing him a little off course, and then they flew on, both smiling.

“I suppose you will be getting up at dawn to train again, Potter?” Snape asked as they approached the castle.

“I’ll be on the pitch at seven.”

It was well after midnight.

“I’ll see you on Tuesday, then. Eight o’clock?”
“Wouldn’t miss it.”

They parted in the air, Snape returning to the Astronomy Tower and Harry to his balcony. As he landed, Snape reflected on the benefit of endorphins in one’s social interactions. He had never even considered inviting Harry to his private lab before, and was amazed at Harry’s positive response. Brewing Wolfsbane was complicated, draining magically, but some phases of it were incredibly tedious. During those, he would enjoy Harry’s company. And during the rest of the time, Harry would get to see him do what he did best, what he loved most. He went home not sure (and not caring) if his elation was still left over from the rush of that flight, or due to the anticipation of his and Harry’s next appointment.
~o~ Dobby ~o~

Harry landed on his balcony with his usual spot-on precision and entered his dimly lit living room. He threw his broom on the couch, followed by his jacket, and ran upstairs, peeling off his clothes as he went. He headed straight to the shower and entered the warm spray with a sigh of relief, his hand already on his erect cock, his face in the spray.

He had been hard all evening. He fisted himself toward relief, fast and tight. In his mind, he could see Snape falling down on the meadow laughing, as relaxed as Harry had ever seen him; he could see his profile as it had looked when Harry had come up on his elbow to check on him, so close he would have only had to lean over slightly to kiss his nose. He had felt the insane desire to do just that, or to lick the man’s smiling lips.

Harry came with a growl, his whole body jerking with his release, and leaned on the shower wall, squeezing out the last drop, catching his breath. He could not remember ever desiring someone with this kind of intensity, this kind of need. He washed quickly, his cock still semi-hard, and came out of the stall, toweling himself off.

As he retraced his steps back into the bedroom he picked up his discarded items of clothing, laughing that his trousers and jumper were actually on the stairs. He had been in a hurry. He put away his jacket and training leathers. (Having a house-elf did not mean he had to be a slob).

Back upstairs, he went to floss and brush his teeth, and fell into bed with his towel still around his waist. He looked down at the slight tenting of the cloth and took it off before sliding under the duvet.

He had hoped Snape, who had seemed to enjoy their previous flight, would get caught in the acceleration. The focus of magic, the concentration, the speed and the thrill they engendered was something he had wanted the other man to experience. It was cathartic and led to an amazing physical release of stress and tension.

He had loved how loose and spontaneous Snape had acted afterwards. And he had been so tempted to take advantage of it, to throw caution to the winds, to forget that Snape loved elsewhere, and kiss him breathless.

Would Snape have let him? How would the thin lips feel beneath his own? How would it feel to have Snape’s body under him, to rut against his long thigh… his hard-on was back with a vengeance. Left-handed, he reached for the drawer in his nightstand and grabbed his bottle of lube, squeezing a generous amount between the palm of his right hand and his hard shaft. He threw the bottle back in the general direction of the drawer, making a note to find it come morning and put it away before Kreacher came to make up his bedroom.

He let out a moan of pleasure as his hand glided smoothly over the head of his cock, his thumb applying just the right pressure to the rim of the head. A drop of warm lube slid onto his balls and he palmed them before stroking his whole length again. What would it be like with Snape? He shivered at the thought of Snape’s hand doing what his hand was doing. He brought his left hand down to play, cupping his balls, as his right one squeezed the head.

What would it be like to be fucked? He was surprised at his cock’s enthusiastic response at the thought. Curious, he let the fingers of his left hand explore, caressing the soft sensitive skin behind
his balls and circling his arse hole. That was surprisingly pleasurable. He applied a little pressure with his slick middle finger and breached himself, raising his hips unconsciously.

Merlin, he wanted Snape here, doing this to him. His finger felt all right, but the thought of it being Snape’s finger, Merlin, that was awesome. Snape’s finger there, fuck, Snape’s cock there… He came suddenly, with a long shudder, amazed he had never known how much he craved this, not really even knowing what ‘this’ was.

Though he felt a little wobbly, he got up again, went to his bathroom and washed his hands. His finger had been up his arse. That definitely called for some soap and water. How did guys deal with this? Cleaning spells, like the wandless one he did now on his cock and belly, were all right, but, really… He supposed if one did a thorough Scourgify beforehand, then it would be all right… He shrugged.

He went back to bed, rolling himself in his duvet, eager to make the most of the few hours of sleep he had left, and was immediately unconscious.

When he woke up the sun was rising, but one could only tell from a general lightening of the gloom. It was raining, dense, small drops that meant business. He sighed. The dry weather had been too good to last and now his determination to keep up his training would be put to the test.

He rolled out of bed, threw the bottle of lube back in the drawer, and started dressing, spelling everything to repel water, though he knew from long experience that he would still come home soaked to the bone. He was grateful he at least no longer had to deal with fogged up, sliding glasses. Out his window he went, his hair and face instantly wet, the tips of his fingers protesting the cold already. Ugh. He hated this.

Kreacher was waiting for him with a towel for his hair when he returned, and dried every bit of his training clothing and gear with a snap of his finger, grumbling about foolish wizard nonsense and precious antique Persian rugs. The sensation of sudden dryness was shocking but incredibly welcome, and Harry grinned at him, handing him back the wet towel and stretching luxuriously.

“Kreacher’s master will catch a cold,” the elf predicted gloomily, collecting Harry’s equipment as he removed it and storing it back in the wardrobe.

“You’ve been saying that for years, and it has yet to happen,” replied Harry, stripped down to his thin long silk and wool underwear. “Stop fussing.”

“Yes, Master,” answered the elf, holding out his hand.

“What?”

“Give Kreacher the stinky underwear, Master Harry. Kreacher might be too busy to come back today.”

“What’s going on?” asked Harry complying, completely un-self-conscious in front of the elf who had seen him in all states of undress and nursed him back to health several times from Quidditch injuries through the years.

The elf’s face was suddenly full of conflicting emotions as he blinked up at Harry. “Winky is having the baby today, Master Harry.”

“You mean she is in labor? Right now?”

Kreacher nodded with a shy smile.
“Oh wow, Kreacher!” Harry grinned back. “Go on, get out of here! She definitely needs you more than I do! And don’t you dare come back until you are a daddy and they are both sleeping, you hear?”

“Yes, Master. Thank you, Master.” He Apparated away with a loud crack, Harry’s undergarments held at arm’s length.

The news put Harry in a buoyant mood. He went into the shower incongruously singing “Jingle Bells,” wondering what elven babies were like, and thinking of his goddaughter. Before he left for breakfast, he Floo-called the Manor, asking permission to visit her and receiving a dinner invitation for his trouble. He put in a little work on the syllabi in the morning and headed there right after lunch.

He had a nice time at the Manor, spending most of his afternoon with a sleeping Lily in his arms. They ate dinner after the babies had been put to bed, and it was very nice to spend an evening away from Hogwarts, with people whose company he enjoyed, speaking of topics that had nothing to do with students, Quidditch, or babies.

Draco was thinking of making a bid for the seat of Principal Interrogator in the Wizengamot. Ginny had started writing again, a new installment of her novel. Its commercial success was still a wonder to her. She had decided to add a treated Squib to her cast of characters to increase the public awareness of the challenges they faced, trying to support Narcissa’s effort in her own way.

When Harry made it home around eleven, he was anxious for news from the elfin front, but wasn’t sure how to proceed. He did not want to disturb Kreacher but was dying for news. He needn’t have worried. An ice-cold butterbeer was waiting for him on top of his coffee table, with a note from Kreacher.

It’s a girl, Master Harry!
Winky is naming her Dobby.
She is beautiful like her mother.

Harry throat constricted. Dobby. He sat on his couch, opened the bottle, and sipped the drink that always reminded him of his childhood. Dobby had been gone ten years now, as had Fred, and Remus, and Tonks, and so many others. He was glad that he could sincerely say that the Wizarding world was a much better place for their sacrifice. Promising himself to call Teddy in the morning, he went up to bed.

Harry enjoyed the pick-up Quidditch game on Sunday and the great afternoon he spent with Ron, Hermione, and the kids that afternoon.

On Monday he trained in the dark and the pounding rain with seventeen students. He was quite sure the rate of attrition would be very, very high. After all, the students did not have the luxury of coming home to an attentive (and proudly grinning) house-elf with a warm towel in his hands and drying magic at his fingertips. That evening he finished off two syllabi.

His Tuesday was filled with training (thirteen students), classes, and a short meeting with Poppy Pomfrey, who let him know exactly what she thought of having six students coming in for Pepper-up to relieve their head colds so early in the term. He told her what he had told Snape. Most of them would drop out after a couple of weeks, no one was forcing them to train. She had to admit he was probably right.

Throughout all of it, though—the Manor, the Weasleys, the training, the classes—he was sharply aware that he was only marking time until Tuesday night, eight o’clock. It was absurd and he tried to fight it, but it was true. At dinner he kept sneaking glances in Snape’s direction. That was absurd
also; had Snape been looking forward to their evening as much as Harry was (which was impossible) his face would have, of course, shown nothing.

Harry did not even pretend to try and accomplish anything after his shower and shave and before heading to the dungeon. It was pointless. He spent a ridiculous amount of time deciding what to wear, and settled for hip-hugging cargo trousers that were very flattering to his assets, and a red shirt that molded his torso just right. It was a change from his usual, and definitely sexier than was called for to go brewing. But he had no intention to brew; he just wanted to watch, and would not object to Snape watching as well…

After dressing he just sat, staring at his clock. Kreacher made an appearance carrying freshly laundered robes. His timing was obviously a little off, as he would not ordinarily have risked interrupting Harry’s evening with clothing delivery. Kreacher stopped in his tracks, surprised to find Harry just sitting there doing nothing.

"Is Master Harry all right?" he asked with concern. Harry shook himself. The last thing Kreacher needed was to worry about him.

“Yes Kreacher, I’m fine. How are you?”

Kreacher’s smile said it all. Fatherhood obviously suited him. “Kreacher is fine, Master Harry. Very fine.”

“And Winky? And … Dobby?”

“Fine too, Master Harry.” Kreacher seemed to hesitate and then asked shyly, “Is Master Harry wanting to see a likeness of the baby?”

“Oh, wow! Yes, Kreacher, I’d love to!”

Kreacher put the robes carefully down on the couch and took off the locket around his neck. He opened it and stared inside with a smile before handing it to Harry.

In the left-hand window was a portrait of Winky, but not as Harry remembered her. This Winky was smiling, and had a sparkle in her eyes and a glow of happiness on her face. In the right-hand window was a picture of the cutest little face Harry had ever seen. Dobby had a round nose, like her mother, but it was tiny, like a button. She had great big eyes, which looked back at him with wonder, and the cutest little mouth sucking on her thumb. She had Kreacher’s pointy ears and a wild tuft of hair at the top of her head.

“She’s brilliant, Kreacher,” said Harry honestly. “Just brilliant!”

Kreacher nodded in agreement, glancing again at his daughter. “She will be a good elf to Master Harry,” he said proudly, settling the locket back around his scrawny neck.

Harry bit back the protest that first came to his lips. He had learned much about house-elves and house-elf pride in his years with Kreacher. It had not occurred to him until this very moment that this new Dobby, this little elven baby, was his property. He never thought of Kreacher as such, but he knew very well that Kreacher certainly (and proudly) did. Despite his true feelings on the matter he answered, “I am sure she will, Kreacher. Just like her father.”

He knew this had been the right answer when Kreacher’s eyes glowed with pride.

“Thank you, Master Harry,” the elf answered with a tremulous smile. He picked the robes back up and went to hang them in Harry’s wardrobe, humming a little song (that sounded a lot like a lullaby)
while doing so. Looking at him, it was hard to remember the barmy old elf that had haunted Grimmauld Place.

Kreacher was still old, and his hair still white, but his steps were spry, his back straight, and his eyes bright. He had found love in his old age, and now he had a family of his own. It could not have happened to a better elf, thought Harry affectionately.

“Good evening, Master Harry.”

“Good evening, Kreacher.”

And Kreacher disappeared with a crack.

Harry looked at the clock. Yes! It was twenty-five till. He got up from his couch, put on his trainers, and left his rooms, intent on walking slowly and taking the long way round to make it to the dungeons right on time. The tune he hummed as he went sounded an awful lot like Kreacher’s lullaby.
Severus had already been in his lab for a while, preparing the ingredients for the Wolfsbane base, when he felt Harry’s presence. He had first thought he was imagining being able to feel him through his walls and his door despite the radiance of his own wards, but either because Potter took less care to hide the magnitude of his power around him, or because Snape had become more attuned to it as they got to know each other better, he now could identify Potter’s potent magic easily.

Not for the first time, he wondered in passing just how strong the young man was magically. He was very aware of the constant control Potter exercised on his abilities and thought he understood the reason why. In the Wizarding world at large, it was well understood and very much feared, after the ascension to preeminence of wizards like Voldemort and Grindelwald, that absolute power easily corrupted absolutely. Dumbledore was a case in point. Aware of the possibility, refusing for years the tempting position of Minister of Magic to avoid it, and yet abusing his magical force in the manipulation of others.

Potter had, evidently, early on chosen the simple strategy of not letting anyone know what he was capable of, of never using his full strength except possibly when it came to the speed of his flight. Severus knew for a fact that he himself would have been incapable of such denial and discipline. He had no doubt that, in possession of even half the abilities he sensed in Potter, his natural inclination would have been to use them and to influence the magical world to follow his will. His admiration for Potter’s self-control knew no bounds.

He left his lab and walked through his quarters, opening his front door suddenly just as Potter was raising his hand to knock. They both grinned, and Snape believed for a moment that Potter might actually be as happy to be there as he himself was to see him. Potter was dressed as a Muggle, wearing some type of trousers with many pockets, made out of thin beige material and resting dangerously low on his hips, so low the zipper was very, very short. Though they were very casual, Snape couldn’t help but approve of them; they molded the younger man’s arse like a second skin. His shirt was a long-sleeved t-shirt in a beautiful shade of red, untucked.

As low cut as the trousers were, Snape was certain that Harry was going commando and that if he were to stretch at any point, as was his habit after sitting too long, Snape would be treated to a view of the area where the dark treasure trail met his pubic hair, a prospect certain of his body parts signaled they were awaiting eagerly.

Harry also had brought another of those hooded jumpers, to put on, Snape assumed, if the chill of the dungeon got to him. Snape waited for Harry to walk ahead of him to the lab to do the charm that would increase the ambient temperature to a very comfortable twenty-two degrees Celsius, making sure the jumper would stay off…

“I take it from the absence of protective robes in your outfit that you have no intention of actually helping me with the brewing this evening?” he remarked teasingly.

“I came to watch a master at work. I will not be distracted from the pleasure of observing you exercising your gift by being pressed into gutting flobberworms or dicing slugs.”

“Neither of which is ever done in potion making, Potter, something you would know had you paid any attention in potions class,” Snape answered, falsely castigating.
“Or had I brewed something more complicated than tea in the past ten years…” answered Potter, chuckling. “Truthfully, I would not feel confident trying to help. I only have a vague notion remaining of the difference between dicing, chopping, and julienning any more. I would need a refresher to not be a danger to myself and others.”

Snape could tell from Potter’s tongue in cheek smile that he was perfectly aware that julienning was a cooking term and not a potions one, and that he was pretending to be much more clueless than he actually was. After all, he’d passed his NEWTS with flying colors. He obviously really wanted to be only a spectator that evening, and watch Snape brew.

Snape could not help but chuckle when Harry Transfigured a lab stool into a cozy chair and a beaker into a matching foot stool, setting himself up extremely comfortably.

“By all means, make yourself at home,” he commented. Potter just smiled.

Without further ado, Snape started on the Wolfsbane. It took several hours to make and the first break he would get, during which he intended to sit with Harry and relax with a cup of tea, would only occur once the base was ready and set to thicken.

He set his largest cauldron on a hot flame, pouring in fifteen liters of water with a well-aimed Aguamenti.

“I’ve never seen a cauldron this big,” commented Potter.

“I need to deliver a hundred doses to the Ministry. The limiting factor for each batch is the strength of the brewer’s magic, especially while adding the last ingredient and saying the incantation. I brew the whole thing at once as my power is up to the task.”

“Oh, I see…”

In went, one by one, the finely chopped Rosa Mulliganii petals, the ground cardamom, the Saint Astier lime, the powdered silver, and the Monarda Didyma distillate, each addition separated by a set period of gentle stirring in a clockwise direction. The scent of the Wolfsbane base was very pleasant. The two hundred grams of Aconitum Napellus pollen changed the color from pink to a rich orange, yet the ingredients were still identifiable as separate entities.

A magical element had to be added to help draw the brewer’s magic into the base and start the transformation of what was nothing but a strange stew into an actual potion. Snape was lucky enough to be able to use unicorn mane, chopped into a powder, from the ready supply collected by Hagrid from the Forbidden Forest trees where the unicorns liked to scratch, with no harm done to the creatures. It was extremely potent and added its own healing properties to the brew.

As he sprinkled the snowy particles into the brew, he concentrated on his intent and focused his magic. Soon the liquid in the giant cauldron had turned into an effervescent, milky, apricot-color solution, the small bubbles letting out sparks as they burst the surface. Leaving the fire as hot as possible, Snape set a long glass spoon to stir counterclockwise until the liquid thickened to the consistency of honey. It would take close to half an hour.

He Transfigured his own stool into a chair matching Harry’s, and summoned the tea tray he had prepared earlier. A wave of the wand and the water in the teapot was boiling. He dumped in the tealeaves, sat back and looked at Harry. The warmth in the young man’s eyes he felt to his core, and the open admiration on Harry’s face made him feel incredibly good.

“It’s like a well rehearsed dance,” the young man said. “You do not hesitate or pause to think. Every
one of your motions is just as it needs to be. It’s beautiful to watch.”

Though his reaction to the pleasure of the compliment was quite physically tangible, Snape reflexively tried to deny its validity. “Anyone can brew an adequate base, Potter. There is nothing to it.”

Harry waved his hand in dismissal with an annoyed click of the tongue. He put his feet on the ground and moved forward in his chair to emphasize his next words. “Take a compliment, Snape. You look … beautiful really, and powerful as you brew. At the very end, I could feel your will shaping the brew into what it ought to be. You glowed with the magic you released. It was awesome to witness.”

Snape could no longer help but smile with pleasure, and Harry smiled back so openly that it could have been an invitation, and Snape’s body had already moved forward in his seat to respond to it and to gently kiss Harry’s supple lips when he caught himself with a jolt and poured the tea instead.

He actually imagined a shadow of disappointment on Potter’s face, a testimony of how deluded he really was by his own feelings. He forgot about it, though, when Harry inquired if there were other potions that could be made from the Wolfsbane base, and the role of each ingredient added so far in the end result.

He seemed truly interested in the fact that so many of the ingredients at this stage were the brewer’s choice. Any rose would do for the first ingredient, even rose leaves in a pinch, but Severus chose the petals of a rose that gave out a beautiful fragrance to help hide the acrid odor of other ingredients.

There were over two hundred and fifty types of Wolfsbane flowering plants (or Aconites), which, along with their use, gave their name to the potion, and any could be substituted. The pollen, roots, and leaves were used in turn, and Snape liked to use different species for each addition, feeling their slightly different properties made the final potion more potent.

The lime could be any lime; even natural chalk would work. Saint Astier lime was particularly potent, if a bit expensive. Finally, Snape used Monarda, or bergamot grass, instead of the orange-like fruit most brewers used. It was part of the improvements he had made to the original recipe.

Many treatises mentioned that “Bergamot eased growth and change, and soothed the nerves” and that this was why the creator of the Wolfsbane potion, Damocles Belby, had used the fruit, but Snape had tested both fruit and herb and concluded the treatises referred to the second and not the first. As far as he could tell, the fruit only increased the bitterness of an already bitter brew without adding anything to it.

As he was explaining his reasoning to Potter, Snape had gotten up again and was now preparing the next set of ingredients. After the fragrant and pleasing first stage of preparation, this second stage seemed to contain nothing but rather revolting components.

It started with crushed spiders, the more venomous the better. He personally preferred Phoneutria nigriventers imported from Brazil if he could get them, and luckily his position at Hogwarts allowed him to procure just about any legal ingredient he desired.

Next came the brainstem of a carnivorous animal. He used a mixture of the brains of Carcharodon carcharias, or great white shark, and Crocodylus johnstoni, or Australian freshwater crocodile, since animals that considered humans a natural prey were best. He would have liked to add polar bear and Siberian tiger brainstems to the mix, but these were endangered species, so the shark and crocodile were it.
Chopped-up *Vespa mandarinia japonica* came next. They were giant hornets whose venom was incredibly potent. The enormous insects were as big as his thumb, alive but *Stupefied*. He did not bother waking them up before putting them to the knife. They were quite dangerous.

The chopping of *Bufo bufos’* lungs, livers, and male genitalia was a messy job, but the parts of those amphibians were necessary.

The diced roots of *Aconitum ferox* were the only vegetal ingredient of this stage. They were a potent poison.

The final ingredient was the only magical one. The chrysalises of fairies were added whole to the mix. Though the intelligence of fairies was extremely limited and though, in the wild, birds or stoats ate ninety percent of their chrysalises, Severus always felt ambivalent about using the sentient creatures in potions. He had tried many substitutions, from silkworms to monarch butterflies to magical moon moths, but the resulting Wolfsbane was completely useless.

The chrysalises he used were from a group of domesticated fairies husbanded by Hagrid. They showed no concern at all when Hagrid harvested the chrysalis from which a new full-grown fairy would have emerged. As a matter of fact, once they laid their eggs the fairies completely ignored eggs, caterpillars, and chrysalises. They had no parental instinct whatever.

Snape had talked to Harry throughout the preparations, checking once in a while that he was not boring him to death. On the contrary, Harry appeared to be enthralled by his explanations, asking pointed questions any time he stopped speaking. The Wolfsbane base had reached the perfect consistency and all ingredients of phase two, except the magical ones, were premixed together in a disgusting paste. He warned Harry that the next stage required all his attention before starting.

Stirring the thick base in a figure eight, Snape added the paste, large drop by large drop, to the mix. With each addition and subsequent lengthy stirring, the potion changed. Plop, and ten minutes later it turned red; plop, and eighty figure eights later it thickened like custard; plop, stir twenty-two times, it smelled like burned hair; plop, figure eight figure eight, counterclockwise circle, figure eight figure eight, counterclockwise circle… for fourteen minutes, it was a watery purple; plop, stir quickly only in figure eights again, the smell of lilacs was cloying; plop, stir clockwise, it looked in every way like water; plop, stir counterclockwise, it was the color of tar and smelled of decomposed flesh; plop, eight, eight, eight, eighteen times, it now smelled of cabbage; plop, it was a virulent green; plop, it smelled like vinegar; and on and on. Snape could have recited all the changes by heart. So far the potion was perfect.

The last additions did not change the poisonous green color or the water-like consistency, but individual bits and pieces of ingredients made their appearance. Reducing the flame to a minimum, Severus once more concentrated on his intent and focused his magic before dumping fifteen fairy chrysalises into the cauldron. He shivered with distaste, but the potion was particle-free once more, transparent neon green. It would have to simmer for forty minutes, undisturbed, before the next stage.

He was completely surprised to find Harry quite close behind him on a high footstool. He had evidently been watching the evolution of the potion as it occurred.

“That was amazing,” he commented as Snape washed his hands vigorously with a stiff-bristle brush and special nightshade ash and lemon oil soap. “Aren’t your arms sore, from holding that beaker up and stirring for over an hour?”

“No. They were at first, when I started my studies to get my Mastery. But the right muscles develop over time, and you don’t even think about it any more.”
“How many changes did the potion go through?”

“Twenty-seven. As you could see, it stabilized at the end, and adding more of the paste would just make it taste worse and be less potent.”

“What if you put too much at once and skip a phase, or not enough and prolong one?”

“It depends. It might decrease the potency, or render the potion useless altogether. It is a big issue for the werewolves who are part of the government assistance program. The quality and potency of the potion changes from moon to moon. They never know how difficult the change is going to be, or whether or not they will keep their consciousness. They lock themselves up and prepare for the worst every time. It is hard on them, and terrifying for their families.

“The monetary compensation for brewing the Wolfsbane for the Ministry is woefully low, and some potioneers use the cheapest possible ingredients to make the brewing worth their time. I am lucky that I do not brew for a living, and that I can afford to purchase the best quality ingredients. I believe the Wolfsbane I produce is the absolute best I am capable of making.”

They had sat back down and were having another cup of tea. Severus was gratified to note that Harry seemed just as fascinated as before. He enjoyed very much the warm regard that shone in the green eyes. He was almost utterly shocked when Harry picked up one of his hands and caressed it lightly.

“That scrub brush maybe necessary, but surely washing your hands this roughly must dry your skin and give you chilblains.”

Snape laughed to himself. Potter was checking his skin! Not making some romantic gesture! His hands felt warm and soft and dry.

“Are you going to prepare any more ingredients?” asked Potter.

“No. There are only three more and they need no preparation.”

Harry still hadn’t let go of his hand, worriedly caressing the reddened skin. “Do you have some kind of lotion?” he asked.

“Yes. I occasionally apply it before bed, after I brew.”

“Accio Snape’s hand lotion,” said Harry, who deftly caught the jar that arrived almost instantaneously, flying at a dangerous speed. He lifted it up and asked Snape, “All right?”

It was interesting how Severus’s brain immediately provided the random and irrelevant information that the hand cream ingredients made it a perfectly acceptable lube. He did not vocalize that thought, however, nodding his permission instead.

Harry opened the jar and got a generous dab of cream out. Then he proceeded to massage Snape’s hand with the moisturizer, gently and thoroughly. It was extremely pleasant, and conducive to a plethora of ridiculous fantasies. Harry was intent on his task, which allowed Severus to look at him as much as he wanted while Harry said something about potions.

Harry’s eyelashes were thick and dark, his skin perfect for all that he was thirty and spent so much time out of doors. His hair was fine but incredibly thick, and his bone structure beautifully symmetrical, delicate yet masculine.

Finished with Severus’s left hand, he took out some more cream before reaching for the right. His
own hands were lightly callused and very strong, his massage knowledgeable. Of course, he must have received hundreds of them in the course of his Quidditch career.

“…wouldn’t stop making fun of me, accusing me of having a crush on him,” Potter was saying laughingly. “Not hard to see why, really, since I did sleep with the Half-Blood Prince under my pillow.”

Potter was smiling as he reminisced, and Severus suddenly wished he had paid more attention. Potter had been accused of having a crush on the Half-Blood Prince? He had developed an interest in Snape’s younger incarnation from reading his potions book?

Potter looked up, his eyes full of mirth and warm affection. Directed at him? Potter did not break eye contact, his gaze open, confident, unapologetic. Snape’s heartbeat was so loud he thought he might be well deaf to anything else. Potter held his right hand between both of his, his palm pressed against Snape’s.

Once again, Snape wished he had been a Gryffindor, able to act on the moment, consequences be damned. That smiling mouth would be his now, taken in a passionate kiss. But his calculating Slytherin mind would not let him take the unlikely chance that Potter might be aware of the signals Snape was reading into his actions.

He knew, he knew, that they reflected a hard-earned trust between them that he could shatter with one false move, ruining a budding friendship more precious to him than anything. He was a Slytherin to the core. A bird in hand and so on…

“May I have my hand back, Mr. Potter?” he said with a raised eyebrow.

Harry blushed bright red and stammered, “Of course. Sorry. I thought you might enjoy a massage after… Sorry.”

“Potter, the massage was very welcome, I assure you, but I do have a potion to finish.”

Potter looked stunned for a moment, then let out a peal of self-deprecating laughter. “And yet another reason why you are the Potions Master and I played a child’s game for a living. I completely forgot the Wolfsbane!”

He stood up and joined Snape at the cauldron. The potion looked unchanged, gently simmering, the occasional wave on the surface the only sign it was not simply some colored water.

Snape opened a beautiful wooden box. It contained what looked like enormous pearls nestled in dark blue velvet.

“What are these?” asked Potter.

“The reactant. Runespoor eggs. Impossible to obtain legally, therefore provided directly by the Ministry. One of the few resources of Burkina Faso, a small country in Africa. Exchanged for the supply of all the potions needed by their hospitals, about half of what is needed by St Mungo’s.”

He lined a slotted ladle with a leaf of Aconitum uncinatum, transferred one of the eggs to the ladle and lowered the whole thing into the potion, where it instantly dissolved. Six more leaves and six more eggs went the same way, until the violently green potion was marbled with whirling currents of milkiness. The last egg remained in the protection of the velvet. The potion was ready for the last ingredient.

Though he was unsure what Potter’s reaction would be, he decided to take a chance in the name of
the lycanthropes who would receive his potion.

“We are ready for the last ingredient and for the incantation now,” he told Harry. “The stronger the wizard to do this last step, the more potent the brew. I am sure the werewolves who will make use of this potion would be grateful, were you to do the honors.”

“You are just as strong a wizard as I am, Snape. I’m sure…”

“Mr. Potter. For twenty years, Albus Dumbledore was my friend and mentor, and I spent half those years much closer to Voldemort than I would have liked. I know the feeling one gets in close proximity to awe-inspiring strong magic and harbor no doubt that yours easily surpasses both of theirs. I admire and respect your decision to conceal the extent of your power and will abide by your choice. However, I am sure that it must be frustrating at times to always restrain your abilities—one reason why flying must be such a joy and a relief for you. Consider this another chance to unleash the fullness of your magic for the benefit of others, all without the risk of discovery.”

Potter looked as if he was about to protest that Snape was mistaken, but gave up, realizing the uselessness of it. Instead, he shrugged and blinked slowly, taking a deep slow breath, freeing his magic. For an instant, he seem to shine with an inner light, but then the wards Snape had around the walls of his laboratory to reinforce them against potions accidents, and those protecting his quarters, became momentarily brilliantly visible. Potter was now looking as he always did, the gentle and well-loved Harry.

“I have to let some of my power continuously bleed into the castle wards,” he explained self-consciously, “otherwise I… sorta glow with it.”

Snape shivered at the realization that, unbridled, Harry’s power was actually more than his body could contain. Merlin had been described as occasionally emitting a brilliance. Were he inclined to use his magic, what would be in Harry’s power to do? As it was, the green eyes looking up at him brimmed with that power.

“So, what’s that last step?” Harry asked.

Snape had to focus again on the potion, so undone was he by what he was witnessing. He could not even fathom living with this kind of power at his fingertips and not taking advantage of it.

“The last step is not much spoken of. You know how people feel about Blood Magic… Though, in this case, one drop of blood is all that is needed from the wizard to add to the potion as the incantation is recited.”

“All right. One drop of blood.”

Snape got a quill and a piece of parchment and wrote the incantation down as legibly as possible. “You have to focus your intent: to ease a painless transformation, to allow the werewolf to keep his human mind intact, to help him sleep through the change; and you have to back that intent with as much magic as you can muster.

“Focus, intent, lots of magic,” summarized Harry. “Got it.”

Snape smiled at Harry, handing him a spotless scalpel. “No time like the present, Potter.”

Harry read the incantation a few times to familiarize himself with it and made a cut between the knuckles of the major and ring fingers of his right hand, where the scarcity of nerve endings would keep it almost painless. He waited for the blood to well up before turning his hand over and letting a large drop fall into the cauldron as he flawlessly recited the incantation. “Ligans animum corpori per
There were no outward signs of his power being released. The potion just changed to a pearly iridescent white, beautiful to watch as it moved in the cauldron ceaselessly. Snape killed the flame and cooled the cauldron with a charm. He took hold of Harry’s hand, but the cut was already healed, without a trace, a wand, or a spoken word.

Snape levitated a crate of a hundred vials to the top of the bench and plunged a graduated ladle into the potion, measuring out the exact dose necessary. As he filled the first vial, the other ninety-nine vials filled as well. He corked the vial, then covered it completely with green carnauba wax, securing it against tampering by applying his personal Master’s seal to it. Again, the other vials in the crate magically received the same treatment.

“You know, Snape,” said Harry, looking at the white liquid in a vial, “it’s weird, but I could have sworn I remembered Remus’s potion as being green and… smoking.”

“It was. My Wolfsbane always is, though it is paler and releases fewer vapors than most. It denotes an incomplete reaction, and the presence of residual untransformed second-phase ingredients. The addition of extra eggs is useless. I’ve tried. The limiting factor is the power of the brewer. Even when brewing small quantities of Wolfsbane, I cannot ever achieve a perfect result.”

He held a vial to the light. “But you have. This is what completely reacted and stable Wolfsbane looks like. It probably would have an indefinite shelf life. I’d never seen the like before, obviously. It’s quite beautiful.” He smiled at Harry. “Thank you, Potter.”

Harry smiled back. Snape could tell the young man’s power was once again contained and restrained, hidden in its core.

“No, Snape, thank you,” he answered. “For letting me watch you brew. For letting me see you do something you love. Truthfully, I could watch you do so for hours. By the way, what is that thing you do with your fingers?”

“My fingers?”

“Yes, you wave then in the steam of the cauldron… like this.” Potter was rubbing his fingers together, showing what he meant.

“Really?” Snape reproduced the motion he was not aware of making while brewing, frowning. Then he smiled. “Oh, yes, of course. I suppose I do do that, don’t I? I am testing the steam. Depending on the temperature, different elements vaporize at different times. It’s a way to feel the density, the oiliness of the vapor, of judging how far along the potion is. I was not really aware of doing it…”

Harry nodded in understanding. “I wish I had seen you brew as a student,” he said. “So I could have seen what it looked like when done right. Had we seen you, you probably would have gotten the same level of compliance from us, though instead of being terrified of you, we would have been in awe of you.”

Snape laughed, but Harry, smiling, insisted, “I am perfectly serious, Snape. Here I am, an adult, and I am in awe of your abilities.”

“Does that mean I can count on your presence when next I am called upon by the Ministry to provide the Wolfsbane?” asked Snape, taking advantage of Potter’s good will.

“It will be an honor,” replied Harry, and Snape felt a wonderful warmth suffuse his insides, because Harry was not joking.
The young man smiled wistfully and added, “Well, sadly, I must take my leave. Five o’clock does come rather quickly, sometimes.”

“Still at it, then?”

“Yes, with a dozen students. Only two Slytherins left, by the way. The Seeker and the Keeper,” he laughed, “and no Gryffindors. I guess only the Puffs and the Claws have the staying power…”

He stretched, and as Severus had predicted, the red shirt rode up, showing the sculpted belly with its bisecting trail of dark down tantalizingly widening in the lower region. He shivered with the potent desire to drop to his knees, pull down those trousers, and take Potter’s cock in his mouth.

They were back at Snape’s front door. Severus realized he’d been hard off and on all evening, and so much so at that moment it was actually painful.

“Good night, Snape.”

‘What the hell, Potter, just sleep here. Forget about training in the morning. I am sure we can think of a way to raise your heart rate and get you sweaty…’ “Good night, Potter.”

Snape was closing the door, smiling to himself at his ridiculous thought, when Harry stopped it with his hand, making Snape’s hopes surge ridiculously.

But Harry only said, looking troubled, “I use it to fly, and will use it to help with the Wolfsbane, but that’s it, Snape. I won’t even talk about it. It would be best if you forgot about it, and if that happens to be a problem for you, I could help you along.”

Potter looked mortified to be making what could nearly be construed as a threat to someone he valued. The plea was clear in his eyes. Snape realized he could not possibly be the only one aware of Potter’s abilities, and yet he’d never heard them spoken of. His friends, his former teachers, all respected his decision to live a normal life.

“No help necessary, I assure you. Just a deeper appreciation for who you are, Potter. An amazing Quidditch player, a man who will give of himself for the good of others, but also one who thinks julienned flobberworms belong in Wolfsbane: in short, a potions teacher’s nightmare. But you are forgiven, if only because you give a decent hand massage.”

Potter laughed in joyful relief and Snape could only grin in response.

“That cream was great, very… slick. Maybe you could teach me how to brew that,” said Potter, his green eyes dancing. He turned and walked away, chuckling, leaving Snape to wonder helplessly if that had been an innuendo or a genuine request. For all his openness, Potter could be a puzzle, and Snape loved it.

In the last ten years, Severus had come to understand his attraction, his willingness to subvert his own magic to those of greater power. He had promised himself never again to give up his freedom of choice, his abilities, to a more magically gifted master.

He had fallen in love with Harry Potter when the young man was in seventh year: powerful, yes, but mostly kind, thoughtful, respectful, and so, so beautiful. He intended to continue loving him for his humor, his intelligence, and his caring nature. He would not let Potter’s quasi-omnipotence even enter the equation, because that was not who the young man he loved was.

He smiled to himself, because he truly meant it. It was a heady feeling to feel good about oneself.
The year was going marvelously well. Classes went smoothly, the competition between Houses was fierce but not bitter, the adult education might even soon be fully funded.

Severus Snape’s second term as Headmaster was so far a complete success. Even the few situations yet unresolved looked positive. The interviews for a new Transfiguration teacher had, according to Minerva and Granger, produced several excellent candidates, the refurbishing of long abandoned parts of the castle to lodge the adult education full-time faculty and their offices and classrooms were progressing nicely, manned by students in detention with Mr. Filch.

The man himself, who now wore simple but clean and well fitting robes, was becoming a favorite of the students, and his detentions hardly a punishment at all.

Best of all, as far as Snape was concerned, was the frequency of his evenings with Harry. It had been three weeks since they had brewed Wolfsbane together, and the slightest excuse seemed to be an acceptable occasion for them to meet, be it the final roster of the Quidditch teams, Flitwick turning in the last syllabus on Blood Magic, a clear evening to fly under the stars, the report of the Ministry on the last batch of Wolfsbane, or—as on that evening—nothing more concrete than “things to discuss.”

Therefore, Severus was in an excellent mood when he arrived in the Great Hall for dinner. He noticed immediately that Filius was seated in Granger’s usual spot. She was at the end of the table next to Neville Longbottom, speaking animatedly with him, Dermott, and a young blonde woman.

Was that the new Auror? Granger usually did not pay them that much attention, and the new one, not due for a couple more days, was a wizard, he thought. He knew that face, those clear eyes. Sweet Merlin. Sarah Bloody Bolton, Potter’s ex-fiancée. What in the hell was she doing here, all blonde locks, sun-kissed skin, and white smiles?

He knew she had studied Transfiguration at University, a couple years behind Granger. Was she here for Minerva’s position? Severus’ blood ran cold, and he sat in his chair, a horrible feeling of dread in his heart, just as Potter made his entrance.

“Harry!” was Sarah’s joyous greeting.

Potter’s face lit up. “Sarah!” and into his arms she ran, being enfolded in a warm tight hug.

Severus could not help notice how well they fit together. Potter was probably three or four inches taller than she was, and his arms encircled her slender waist and delicate shoulders with practiced ease.

Severus felt his bile rise with rage and impotent jealousy. Potter was smelling her hair! And smiling in her neck! Would they ever stop this… unsightly public display of affection? There were children present! Finally, they walked to the table, hand in hand. Why was Potter always holding hands with his ex-girlfriend?

Severus realized that Filius had been talking to him. He turned away from the younger people and apologized. “I’m sorry, Filius, you were saying?”
“A shame they could not make a go of it, they are so cute together, don’t you think?”

Was Filius channeling Molly Bloody Weasley?

“She is a Hufflepuff,” he answered icily.

Flitwick looked at him in surprise. “A grave sin indeed,” he commented sarcastically.

Snape realized he was being an arse. “I only mean that I think Potter might need someone a little more… spirited. Like Ginny Weasley for example, or Hermione Granger.”

“Both very happily married to other men,” remarked Filius annoyingly.

“Must you purposefully misinterpret everything I say?” Snape snapped. “Someone like them, for Merlin’s sake, not them.”

“Oh, Severus,” replied Flitwick derisively. “I did not realize you had such thorough understanding of your younger staff’s emotional needs. Please do forgive me.” He was giving him a stern look that Severus had only seen very few times before.

Snape closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment. “I am sorry, Filius. I am in a foul mood tonight. Tired, I dare say, and it’s only Tuesday.”

When he looked up, he was horrified to see understanding dawning on Filius’ face. “I am sorry, Filius. I am in a foul mood tonight. Tired, I dare say, and it’s only Tuesday.”

They went on, discussing the upcoming Ravenclaw-Slytherin game, Severus unbelievably grateful that he had Filius Flitwick as a friend.

While coffee was being served, Harry came to sit in Flitwick’s freshly vacated seat. The thought of his upcoming fire call to Petr firmly in his mind, Severus did not even flinch when Harry quietly made his excuses for that evening, even though Snape had been looking forward to their time together all day.

“Sarah is only staying with Hermione for tonight.” Harry volunteered. “She is going on to Wales in the morning. She has taken a post as a primary school teacher there. I probably won’t get a chance to see her for months.”

“By all means, Potter.” It was very easy to be magnanimous with relief coursing through one’s veins. She was not staying. She was sleeping at Granger’s. She did not want Minerva’s position. He was such an idiot, making mountains out of molehills. “Have a good evening.”

Harry looked a little flustered for a moment. “May I come tomorrow?” he asked, looking at his
hands.

Severus suddenly felt that life was marvelous indeed. “Eight o’clock, my rooms,” he said.

Harry gave him the smile he loved. “For drinks,” he answered, before returning to his friends, a smile still on his lips.

Severus got up also and headed for his rooms. He had a call to make.

~0~

Petr was in, glad to see him, free this weekend, and thrilled to come to Hogwarts for a visit. He was such a handsome man. Snape started to look forward to Friday.

Potter and he spent the next evening together, drinking tea. Harry thought Slytherin would take the game Saturday. Their Keeper was amazing, really. Ravenclaw’s Chasers, though nimble, would have their work cut out for them. The Seekers were equally good. Luck would probably determine who would catch the Snitch.

Snape had received an advance copy of a very interesting experimental potions treatise by Antonin Burbage, the brother of the regretted Muggle Studies professor. Burbage was well known in potions circles for his forward-thinking and exacting research techniques. It was a fascinating read, very exciting stuff.

Hugo Weasley had brought home another stray, a small crow this time, that he had found half frozen on his way back from school. The bird had recovered nicely from what ailed him, and now answered to the name Atticus.

The French Ministry of Magic had asked to be allowed use the patented recipe for the Squibs’ potion to produce it themselves, but Snape did not think they would be able to grow enough Pentius Hollyweed, since Longbottom seemed to be the only one capable of sensing the plant’s changing needs enough to cultivate it successfully.

Snape enjoyed their relaxed conversations. The easy exchanges always brought him the most acute pleasure.

Potter’s hair was freshly shorn, emphasizing his sensuous features, and he was wearing his green cashmere sweater, the exact color of his eyes, Snape’s favorite on him.

Severus loved the natural way with which Harry stood to get a refill for his cup, grabbing Snape’s without even asking and returning it full to the arm of his chair without a second thought. He could smell Potter’s scent as he leaned towards him to do so, and just wanted to reach up and cup his cheek in his hand. In a vivid flash, he imagined Harry turning his face in his hand to kiss his palm, and shivered with want.

After he left, Snape sat in Harry’s vacated seat as had become his habit, enjoying the remaining warmth and imagining it retained a trace of Harry’s scent. He went to bed and fell asleep, emptying his mind of all thought, as was his usual routine.

Thursday evening was occupied with a meeting with Narcissa, since he tried to keep the adult education business outside of his regular office hours.

Young Matt Pilot, on top of being a very able assistant to McClallan, was devoting an enormous amount of time to the adult program. Narcissa was thrilled, since Slughorn was so unreliable and Severus so busy. She had lost none of her enthusiasm for the project and did not complain of the
huge expense her daily Floo commute represented, as she went home to Lucius every night.

Lucius, on his end, was lobbying very hard at the Ministry for more funding for the program. Narcissa joked that they might get some money just so that the Minister could see a day go by without Malfoy at his door.

On Friday Snape, aware that he would not see a lot of Potter at the weekend, made some effort to keep from staring at him and was not so successful. Potter’s searching gaze caught him three times in one day. He was glad he had the excuse of Petr’s visit to compensate for his lack of control. That should definitely reassure Potter, if by any chance he was starting to find Snape’s attention uncomfortable.

He made a point of mentioning Petr’s coming to Potter on the way out of dinner. Harry would probably look forward to flying with Petr, both of them being so passionate about it. After speaking to him, he wondered if Potter had had a bad day. He looked a little out of sorts. He wished…

Enough. Petr would be there in a little over an hour. Handsome, witty, and sure to be very horny Petr. Keeping that thought in mind, he took a shower, shaved, and cleaned his teeth before leisurely heading to the Apparation point. Sex, at last.

Chapter End Notes

I know.
I Know!
Tell me about it. Aaargh...
~o~ Peeping Harry ~o~

Harry felt Snape’s eyes on him again. Or was he imagining it? He looked up. There were Snape’s obsidian eyes, quick to look away again. Harry’s heart started beating harder in his chest. Three times. Three times he had caught Snape looking at him today. Did it mean anything? It had to. They had spent many an evening together, in easy, comfortable companionship, but this staring, this was something different, wasn’t it?

Harry’s entire day now revolved around the couple of hours he might get to spend in the dungeons in the evenings. Had these hours become equally important to Snape? Both of them seemed to grasp any excuse to spend time together.

Dinner was over. Would Snape stop by on his way out to invite him down again? From the corner of his eye, he saw Snape get up from the central chair and walk his way. It meant nothing. He could just walk by, as he often did. No, he was stopping! Harry’s heart nearly jumped out of his chest with relief and anticipation.

“Potter? May I ask a favor of you?”

“I’d like that,” answered Harry automatically, before realizing Snape had not asked the anticipated question. “I mean, certainly, Headmaster. What can I do for you?”

“Petr DeVries is arriving tonight for a weekend visit. He quite enjoyed his flight with you when he last was at Hogwarts. Would you be so kind as to go fly with him again?”

Harry’s castles in the sky came crashing around his ears. He managed a smile that felt more like a grimace and answered, “It would be my pleasure, of course. Sunday morning would be best for me, if it can work for him.”

“He will be at breakfast tomorrow, perhaps you might suggest it to him then?”

“I’ll do that.”

“Thank you, Potter.” Snape continued out of the hall, and Harry watched his robes elegantly fluttering in his wake.

Feeling suddenly exhausted, Harry turned down Sinistra’s invitation of a game of chess, using several unedited DADA syllabi as an excuse. His rooms felt much too far away. Harry walked up his stairs one at a time, his feet as heavy as his mood.

Petr DeVries was coming tonight, which explained Snape’s buoyant mood much better than Harry’s ridiculously optimistic fantasies. The tall, handsome, cultured, and charming wizard would be spending the weekend. Harry would probably hardly see Snape at all, and surely not alone.

Would he be so kind as to go fly with Petr again? Well, he would, of course, and probably enjoy himself, too. Petr was nice, and interesting. It was certainly not his fault that time with Snape had come to mean more to Harry than time flying with a fellow enthusiast.
He was absurd, really. Snape didn’t mind his company, obviously. But what had he to offer? Most of his opinions were Hermione’s really, and outside of Quidditch, did he actually know anything Snape did not already know as well?

Petr was tall. Handsome. Interesting. Witty. Charming. His company was not merely pleasant. It was probably stimulating, exciting. Something Snape would look forward to, not just something to pass the time.

Once home, Harry took the throw off his couch and went out on the balcony to look at the stars. Well, there were no stars tonight really, but the moon was very bright, playing hide and seek amongst the clouds. Bright enough to entertain Harry, evidently, since he stood frozen on the balcony under the inadequate quilt for a very long time.

Long enough for him to see Snape walk unhurriedly down the path to the gate, and to the Apparation point. Harry hadn’t known for sure Petr would Apparate, had he? He could have Flooed in. It was just chance, wasn’t it, that he was out stargazing tonight, to watch Petr appear, and watch him and Snape embrace for a very long time?

As they started walking back, he had a flashback to July, when the same scene had taken place with the players reversed. They still looked great together, in harmony. Tall, dark-haired wizards, walking in step. They would come in through Rowena’s corridor, he thought. Where no one could see them.

Well, he could wander the corridor at the right moment and see them, of course, being of age, but how would he explain his presence? “Oh, I was just out for a walk in this empty and lonely hallway”? But he wanted to. To see them interact with each other. To see how Snape acted around Petr. Did he look at him as he sometimes looked at Harry, when Harry caught him unawares? Or was that just a look he reserved for younger men he mentored? Caring, but reserved, held back somehow.

Harry probably saw too much in these looks, projected what he wanted to see. Down there was the man whose company Snape craved, wanted. The man he had chosen as a partner long ago. Hating himself, Harry went back in, chilled to the bones, and walked to his closet to get out a jumper. And there it was, hanging conveniently within reach: his Invisibility Cloak. He could go, and observe, and not be seen.

Without thinking any further, he threw on the Cloak and ran out of his rooms, down the spiral stairs, down the main staircase, down to the dungeons. He had never made it so fast. He went to the stone knight’s shield, put his palm on the cross, and slipped into Rowena’s corridor as soon as it opened. They should be approaching the front doors now. They would be in the passage in a minute, and down his way in a few minutes more. He could not believe he was doing this. What could he possibly gain by it?

But he had to know. He had to see for himself that Snape loved another man. That being Harry’s mentor and friend was all he wanted, all Harry could hope for. So he would stop dreaming, imagining what-ifs that took too much of his time, of his energy. So that he could concentrate and learn to appreciate Snape’s friendship for what it was. Friendship. Nothing more.

He heard them first, before they appeared past the corner. They were coming along the corridor, laughing, shoulder to shoulder, shoving each other like kids. Petr pushed Snape against the wall and kissed him passionately. Harry’s stomach rose into his mouth as Snape’s hands came to Petr’s arse, to pull him tighter against his groin. Petr started rutting against him, hard.

“How I’ve missed this,” he said.
“Really? Show me,” grinned Snape as he pushed Petr down on his knees. Petr opened Snape’s robe and must have undone his fly since it was obvious from Snape’s appreciative moans that his cock was being very satisfyingly sucked. His head was resting against the stone wall and his eyes were closed as Petr’s head bobbed up and down.

Harry’s throat was tight, and his eyes burning, but he couldn’t take his eyes off Snape, at once hating and loving the look of bliss on his face. Jealousy was like a knife in his gut, a searing, burning, raging ache. He finally turned away from the lovers, turned the corner and walked away, Snape’s sounds of pleasure seemingly following him all the way to his rooms.

He stood in his living room for a long time, holding his cloak tightly in his right fist, staring at the Half-Blood Prince.

Why did it have to hurt so fucking much?

Chapter End Notes

*sighs*
Yep.
Poor Harry.
Chapter 67

~o~ What Harry Doesn’t See ~o~

Nearing orgasm, Snape took hold of Petr’s head and plunged into his throat, fucking his mouth hard, grunting loudly as he came, careless of Petr’s gagging sounds, knowing that for him the lack of air was arousing.

He moved back and leaned against the wall, a satisfied expression on his face. That had felt… very good. Petr stayed on his knees, one hand against the wall, getting his breath back, then he rose up again and leaned into his lover. Snape’s arm came around his shoulders and Petr nuzzled his neck. It felt great.

“I love you, Severus.”

Snape felt his expression harden immediately. Not again. “Some things are better left unsaid, Petr.” He made sure his voice carried a warning.

“Sorry, sorry, I know.” Petr looked up at Snape. “It’s just that you’re so… far away and it has been so long. Am I losing you?”

Snape felt himself grow cold. “You know where I am, and where I will be. How could you lose me?”

“Don’t play word games with me, Severus. You know exactly what I mean.”

He hated that Petr was so needy but reminded himself they had not seen each other for weeks, and that it must have been much more difficult adjustment for Petr than for himself. “Would I be fool enough to give up such inspired blow jobs?” He leaned forward, and bit Petr’s lip, none too softly.

“You liked that, did you,” smiled Petr, reassured. “No one knows you like I do. I can make you come whenever I want, I can play your prick like a violin…”

“Stop bragging, Petr, it’s unbecoming,” said Snape in a mock stern voice, his cock twitching, then filling again. (So soon? It had really been much too long.) “Or I may have to discipline you, right here, right now…”

Petr shivered and whispered against Snape’s lips, “Do it!”

So ready, so eager. Snape was fully aroused again.

He turned Petr brutally against the wall and bent him over. Petr had to put out his hands not to crash, face first, into the wall. Snape pushed up Petr’s robes, brought his hand to Petr’s front to open his fly and pushed down trousers and pants to his ankles.

“Spread them.”

Petr worked one of his feet out of its shoe with the toe of the other, and took it out of his trouser leg. He spread himself, exposing his lovely arse, but Snape kicked his black-stockinged foot even farther out, and with a wave of his wand cast the medical spell that would banish the contents of, cleanse, and all but sterilize Petr’s bowels. He sucked on his own fingers and leaning down, spread Petr’s arse with one hand, circling his entrance with the other. He pushed one, then two fingers up Petr’s hole, which was nice and tight after all this time.
“Yes! Fuck yes… more,” begged Petr. Snape spat generously into his hand and slicked his cock. Removing his fingers, with a hard push he replaced them with his prick, roughly enough that Petr’s head hit the back of one of his hands against the wall. Snape started fucking him hard, so hard Petr grunted with every push, his body rocking with each thrust.

“I love… this… Severus… I love… it …when you… fuck …me…”

Snape grabbed Petr’s hips, and pounded into him relentlessly.

Petr rested his forehead on his bent arm to cushion it from the wall and grabbed his own prick with the other. He started pumping himself in rhythm with Severus’s relentless plunges. Severus, knowing exactly what his lover needed, let go of one of Petr’s hips and grabbed his hair in his fist, viciously pulling Petr’s head back.

“Come, Petr, now!” he hissed.

Instantly, Petr spurted long jets of ejaculate on his hand and on the wall, screaming incoherently. Snape kept pumping hard throughout Petr’s orgasm, but then slowed to a stop as Petr’s climax came to a shuddering end.

“Who plays whom like a violin now, Petr?” he asked in a cold voice.

“You. Always you.”

“Now, turn around and suck me again,” said Snape, pulling out roughly, his prick glistening.

Petr turned around on shaky legs, got back on his knees and took him in his mouth. He stayed still as Snape, holding his head once again, pumped his whole length in and out, causing Petr to gag every time, his throat muscle spasming around the head of Snape’s cock.

“You love the taste of your own arse on my cock, don’t you, Petr?” Snape said, knowing the truth of it. “And I …love… fucking… your… mouth…” He came again, deep in Petr’s throat, heedless of blocking his airway.

When he pulled out, Petr coughed hard for a few seconds, taking in strangled breath. Watching him coolly, Snape put himself back in order and closed his robes before helping Petr, who was still catching his breath, to his feet. Snape bent down, helped him back into his trouser leg and shoe, and pulled the pants up with tender loving care, responding to Petr’s need. He leaned in for a long, slow, tongue-filled kiss, cradling Petr’s face in his hands.

“Words of love I don’t need, Petr. This is what I want from you.”

“You can have anything you want,” answered Petr, a sob in his voice. “Do anything you want, fuck me any way you want. I am yours, all yours…”

As if Petr weighed no more than a child, Severus bent down to pick him up, one arm around his shoulders and one under his knees. He knew Petr craved this… abandon. He walked on toward the dungeons, feeling no strain, his stride still smooth and elegant. He made his way back home, his head bent to whisper hot descriptions of things to come in Petr’s ear, cradling him like a child.

They did not make it to breakfast the next morning, or even lunch, getting things to munch on from the kitchens between naps and sex. At two in the afternoon, though, they got dressed and ready to go watch the game.

The day was cold but clear, the sky a cloudless blue. The stands were already packed when they
made it to the teachers’ box. Petr was greeted affectionately by Septima, and sat conversing pleasantly with everyone. He was at home anywhere, with an ease that Severus, as always, found attractive.

Snape sat down and his eyes went immediately to the pitch searching for Potter, who would be refereeing.

There he was speaking with Filch, in full umpire regalia, looking very, very good. (For the love of Merlin! Five, five orgasms in less than twenty-four hours, and still…)

The game was exciting. Potter was right. The Slytherin Keeper was amazing, never letting anything pass. As usual, though, the Slytherin team had little cohesion, a collection of individuals playing the same game, but no togetherness. They also were very aggressive players, very physical.

Under Potter scrutiny, though, they had to follow the rules. Ravenclaw received two penalty shots that only the finesse of the Slytherin Keeper prevented from being transformed into points.

The score stayed Slytherin 30, Ravenclaw 0 for a very long time, Ravenclaw dominating the field, the Slytherin Keeper constantly under attack. He finally let one in, to delirious cheers from the stands. (Though Minerva had done much during her tenure to diminish House rivalries, the Slytherin team was still the one to beat.)

But suddenly the Seekers were on the move, two streaks in the sky, executing moves that owed a lot to their coach’s experience and training. They were both equally impressive, and as Potter had predicted it was only a chance change of direction from the Snitch that allowed the diminutive Slytherin Seeker to make the catch. She took a victory lap around the pitch, her small face radiating joy.

It was very much to Minerva’s leadership’s credit that the Ravenclaw Seeker shook her hand with equanimity when they dismounted, and that the Slytherins were cheered and congratulated by more than the green-and-silver crowd.

Potter was walking the players back to the locker rooms, a grin on his face, when his eyes met Snape’s. His smile instantly disappeared, and as he turned away Snape thought he saw something in his eyes. Hurt? It was so brief, he must have imagined it.

He certainly had, as Potter was now laughing with the Ravenclaw captain as they entered the building.

It was already getting dark when they all made their way back to the castle. The next game would have to be started earlier.

Dinner was loud and fun, everyone still excited by the game. Granger, her husband, and her children were sitting at their usual spot at the end of the table with Potter, who looked relaxed and happy. Septima was sitting next to Petr, and she was in high spirits, her team having just won the first game of the year. She was teasing Flitwick affectionately. He didn’t look any worse for wear. After all, the season was just starting, and he had had the Quidditch Cup in his office two years running.

“We always lose the first one. It gives everyone a false sense of security. It works every time,” he explained. Septima and Petr just laughed at him.

Suddenly Potter was there, standing between Severus and Petr.

“Great game, Harry,” said Petr. (Why was it Petr could use that name so familiarly?)
“Thanks. It was pretty good, wasn’t it,” agreed Potter, pleased. “Hey, are you up for a flight in the morning?”

Petr looked thrilled. “I’d love to. Eight-thirty?”

“Perfect,” Potter turned to Snape. “Care to join us, Headmaster?”

Petr snorted, but Harry had been serious, of course. After all, Severus had been flying quite frequently, hadn’t he? (Did Potter actually think that it had been for flying’s sake? Of course he would. But how could he not know that for Severus, all the pleasure of flying came from flying with him—alone with him?)

“I’ll pass. But thank you, Coach Potter.”

A second later, Harry was back with the Weasleys and Petr was staring at him, a strange look in his eyes. “You’ve been flying?”

“A few times,” Snape said dismissively.

“On what broom?”

“Potter’s loaned me one of his.”

“Oh. I see...” Did he really?

Petr was rather quiet for the rest of the evening, but that night, back in the dungeons, he made love to Severus as he had not for a long time, teasing him with his hands and lips endlessly, indulging in the caresses he himself preferred to give, his face buried in Severus’s arse for a long, thorough tongue-fucking, and actually topping for the first time in years. Afterwards, they held each other a long time in the dark, quietly, and fell asleep tightly entwined.
Harry had tried hard to enjoy his weekend. After all, it was filled with extremely positive events.

Friday night after the Rowena corridor debacle, he’d managed to have a nice evening with his friends. He had gotten a Floo-call from Dermott, asking him if he wanted to go for a drink at the Three Broomsticks with him and Cassandra, whom he was still dating. There they had met with Neville and George and had Floo-called Ron and Hermione, managing to get them to give up a romantic evening and join the fun.

They were already having a great time when Dermott and Cass put the icing on the cake by announcing that they were engaged to be married. It had been a fabulous evening, during which Harry had managed not to think about the scene he had witnessed between Snape and Petr. Not too often, anyway. Half a dozen times, max. Or maybe a dozen, but no more…

Saturday had been extremely satisfactory from a professional standpoint. Both the Slytherin and Ravenclaw teams had played very well, showing huge progress from where they had started just weeks before, and the players had had fun as well as demonstrating a lot of fair play, Slytherin only receiving two penalties. There had been a lot of positive comments from spectators to the new coach about the game, which were very nice to hear.

Saturday night Harry was on patrol. It was by far the busiest one he had ever experienced. He really came to appreciate the help of the ghosts and of the paintings, catching numerous couples in the nick of time and taking off an astounding number of points from all four Houses. It was obvious that both Ravenclaws and Slytherins had had get-togethers at which Muggle alcohol was present, and whether they were celebrating or commiserating, the spiked drinks had obviously lowered the students’ inhibitions. He did not go to bed until 2:30 AM, and he was incredibly glad that for the first time since the beginning of school he had cancelled the morning training, since he would be flying with Petr. He didn’t think any of the students would have shown up anyway…

Sunday morning, Harry and Petr had gone through a light training and then had flown very high, under Notice-Me-Not charms, speeding in the frosty sunshine. It had been very pleasant and relaxing, though the clear sky had brought with it really chilly temperatures. After about an hour and a half they had taken a break, landing on an outcrop with a 360-degree view of the moors, Petr surprising Harry with some very welcome hot cocoa made from Droste cocoa powder, which he swore was the best in the world. It did taste delicious and was marvelously warm.

“Another thing on which Severus and I disagree,” Petr said. “He swears by Scharffenberger, the heathen…” It was a lighthearted comment but seemed to carry some deeper meaning Harry could not fathom. Perhaps Petr resented the separation imposed by their respective careers?

“Is it very hard, being apart?” Harry asked rather thoughtlessly and then added, realizing how intrusive his question was, “I’m sorry. Please ignore me, sometimes I speak without thinking.”

Petr waved off his apology. “It’s okay, Harry. Your question is welcome, actually. At home I put up a happy front, acting as if nothing’s changed, so no one asks, and Severus… Well, he’s not one to dwell on things that cannot be changed, so I’ve not really been able to talk about it. The truth is, it’s been hell, really.”

Thughtfully, he added, “Interestingly, I miss his presence in the house more than anything. It’s been
terribly quiet and so… lonely. As Headmaster, Severus is always busy. I am as well, of course, but…

Anyway, the owls are few and far between and Floo-calls… well, they make things worse
sometimes. One moment he is there and everything is great and then the call ends and the silence in
the apartment is twice as oppressive.”

He looked at Harry, and shrugged. “With the separation, our lives have naturally started to diverge. I
do the things I like that he has only limited interest in, instead of the activities we used to engage in
that pleased us both, and he, too, is free to pursue his own interests. Over time, if we are not careful,
we will have less and less in common.

“Being away, Severus loses touch with our friends, our community, and gets involved in his own.
This weekend was an eye opener for us both. We have realized that some care must be taken, some
efforts made on both sides, to protect what is precious in our relationship or, no matter how strong it wa… how strong it is, it can just slip away.”

Petr sounded so… melancholy. But Harry had seen how playful they were together, how in tune to
each other he and Snape had been on Friday. He guessed the upcoming separation was weighing on
Petr, making things seem much worse than they were. He genuinely liked Petr and wanted to cheer
him. “Amsterdam is not that far. You can come visit all the time!”

Petr smiled at Harry. “Severus’s schedule does not seem to free him more than a couple of hours at a
time and mine is highly unpredictable but you are right, now that things here are more settled, we
might be able to manage more frequent visits than once in eight weeks,” he admitted. He smiled
sheepishly. “But enough about me. What about you, Harry? Any new lady in your life?”

Harry’s insides seemed to twist with guilt. ‘Well, I am madly in love with your partner and have
constant fantasies of him ravishing me, conveniently forgetting that you even exist…’ Instead, he
said, quite truthfully, ‘Being a teacher in a boarding school is not exactly conducive to meeting a lot
of women… And Hogsmeade is not rich in prospects either! But since this is my first term of
teaching, I’m not really focused on my love life, truthfully. Everything is new and quite exciting
enough at this point. I feel like I’m barely keeping my head above water.”

“The witch population of Britain must rue the day you quit Puddlemere for Hogwarts, then,” said
Petr, teasingly.

Harry chuckled self-deprecatingly. “Oh, yes. They are all in mourning, haven’t you heard? Well, the
three girls I hadn’t dated yet, anyway…”

Petr only barely avoided spraying hot cocoa out of his nose. He joked back, “I guess you have
earned a break, haven’t you. You definitely have done your duty by Britain’s magical females.”

“And I have the Order of Merlin to show for it. What? You thought it was because of that little thing
with Voldemort?” They were both laughing now, enjoying the silliness.

After a while they headed back. Harry had his dominical Quidditch pick-up game with the adult
students. Since they were a man short of two full teams, Petr decided to join them, playing Chaser. It
was good that his flying was so much better than that of the beginning students, because he could not
catch a ball to save his life. He’d drop the Quaffle at practically every pass and have to chase it as it
fell to the earth. He was very good-humored about it and had no problem putting up with the ribbing
he was getting from the other players, easily laughing with the others about it.

A tiny gentleman, seventy years old if he was a day, caught the Snitch and ended the game. His grin
showed every one of his six remaining teeth. It reminded Harry to send him to Poppy, so she could
grow him a new set.
The whole morning reminded Harry how much he liked Petr, how attractive the man was and how good a friend he would no doubt have become if they saw each other more often. At least it might have been so, was it not for the fact that Snape loved him. On that basis alone, Harry wished the man had never been born.

He spent the afternoon with Ron, Hermione, and their children. Atticus, the foundling crow, took an immediate shine to him and used his shoulder as a perch for hours.

“Uncle Harry, you should keep him,” declared Hugo. “He really, really likes you.”

Harry chuckled and joked, “Sorry, Hugo, but it’s been years since my hair has been long enough to qualify as a crow’s nest…”

“True,” said Ron, “but now you live in one instead!”

“You know, Harry,” added Hermione thoughtfully, “I do believe crows are sometimes able to be imprinted with the Avian Mail Carrier spell.”

Harry looked at the bird on his shoulder. He was the complete opposite of Hedwig, black to her white, long-beaked to her flat mien, bold and boisterous to her discretion. He had never bought another owl, but somehow owning Atticus would not feel like he was betraying the memory of his childhood confidante.

He looked back at Hermione and teased her. “Eager to keep Hugo’s zoo population at an even dozen, Hermione?”

She and Hugo laughed. “That as well, of course,” she said, ruffling her son’s hair. “Let me look the spell up, okay?”

Once she had found it, it took only a minute for Harry to cast it. Atticus glowed white for a moment, spread and shook his wings, and let out a proud squawk. Harry borrowed a quill and a piece of parchment to pen a quick note as Hugo followed the diagram in his mother’s spell book to attach a leather lanyard to a very cooperative Atticus’s leg.

‘My name is Atticus.’ (Harry grinned, suddenly remembering it was Malfoy’s middle name…) ‘I am Harry’s new bird and this is my maiden delivery. Please, praise me and give me a treat!’

Harry rolled up the message and Atticus hopped down from his shoulder to the arm of his chair, extending his leg to him.

Harry secured the message and said, “Take this to Molly Weasley at the Burrow, please, Atticus, and wait for an answer.” It was a fairly long flight, and would be a good test of the spell’s success.

He petted the bird, got up, and opened the window. They all watched as Atticus took off, flying a couple tight circles to get his bearings before popping out of sight.

“Uh…” asked Harry. “Is it supposed to do that?”

“Oh, my god!” said Hermione, disbelieving. “It Disapparated!”

“Nope… Definitely not supposed to do that,” answered Ron. “Was this the right spell?”

“Well, of course it was!” answered Hermione, insulted. She opened the book at the page she had marked. “‘Avis, intelligere. Invenies mea correspondente Quantum accelerare poteris iter.’ Basically, uh…: ‘Bird, understand… find my correspondent, travel as swiftly as possible.’ See, it’s the right
spell. Oh. It says here “The more powerful the caster of the spell, the more efficient the bird.” She grinned at Harry. “I guess that kind of explains it. Atticus is going to be an express delivery bird…”

“‘Bird, understand?’ With you casting the spell, Harry, that bird is probably ready for its NEWTS!” teased Ron, laughing.

Harry made a face. “I hope he’s all right. I should have let one of you cast the spell…”

Hermione squeezed his arm affectionately after re-latching the window. They headed back to their seats. “I’m sure he’s all right, Harry. Anyway, we’ll know soon enough.”

“It Disapparated from within Hogwarts wards,” emphasized Harry.

“Oh,” said Hermione, whom that detail had escaped. “Riiight…”

Ron was laughing. “Oh, Merlin! Super-bird! It going to give a whole new meaning to ‘Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night…”

Harry chuckled. “Oh, shut up, Ron.”

Hugo, who though he did not understand the fuss could tell Harry was worried, patted his knee and said, “He’s a tough bird, Uncle Harry. He’ll be all right.”

“Thanks, Hugo.” Harry took the boy on his lap. “You never knew her, but when I was at Hogwarts, I had the most beautiful snowy owl…”

Ten minutes later, Atticus was tapping the window with his beak. Hermione chuckled as she opened the window to let him in. Atticus flew to the arm of Harry’s chair and proudly extended his leg.

Molly’s message said, “Atticus is a lovely bird, Harry. And so smart! I told him to give me a second to read the message and I’d have a treat for him, and he flew to the pantry and brought back a can of sardines! I wasn’t sure he knew what they were, but I opened the can just in case. He ate all six. I suppose you give him those a lot. Anyway. I told him he’d done well and was a good bird. He is on my shoulder as I write this, staring at what I am writing as if he could read this note. He’s so funny!”

“Well done, Atticus. But please make sure you are out of sight before you Disapparate, next time, okay? Mail birds aren’t supposed to be able to do that.”

Atticus blinked slowly in assent. Harry shook his head and said, “Good grief…” giving dirty looks to his laughing friends.

Yes, Harry’s weekend had been very nice. Yet the entire time, confused and conflicting feelings were warring inside him, tinting everything the color of ashes: guilt, jealousy, anger…

Guilt was eating at him on two fronts. First, were he not spending so much time distracting Snape at Hogwarts, wouldn’t the man pay more attention to his relationship with Petr? And second, of course… Also, as much as he liked the man from Amsterdam, should he really wish for him to vanish as if he’d never existed as often as he did?

Jealousy so intense it felt like a physical sickness burned him from the inside. He wanted what Petr had, Snape’s love, Snape’s attention; he wanted what they both had, what Ron and Hermione had, what Malfoy and Ginny had: that loving bond, that acceptance, that special communication though a look, a smile, which excluded all others.

Anger at Snape, completely irrational, made his blood boil. Anger for making Harry fall in love with
him, for not loving him back, for having sex with someone else, for not having time for him, for
being so clueless, for not realizing that Harry, not Petr, was the man he was meant to be with…

Finally, he was overwhelmed by diametrically opposed thoughts that had him wondering if he was
developing a split personality disorder.

He would stop seeing Snape alone immediately, and focus on his work—yet he already had six good
excuses to go down to the dungeons Monday night.

He would leave Hogwarts forever and not look back—yet he was so glad to be at the school, where
he could see Snape every day.

He had to stop living for the time he spent with the man and tying every event and every thought to
him—yet he wondered what Snape would think of his new bird, of Dermott and Cassandra’s
engagement, and what would it be like to be married to Snape, to make love with him every day?

Harry, exhausted, skipped dinner Sunday night, drank a dose of Dreamless Sleep, and was in bed at
seven-fifteen.

~o~

Maybe because the mornings were getting chilly, Harry started taking very long hot showers after his
morning workouts, so long in fact that he only had time to pop into the Great Hall, drink his wheat
grass juice, roll his egg white omelet inside a piece of whole wheat toast and run out to make it to his
first class on time, not even sitting down.

On the days when he taught the adult students first thing in the afternoon, he reasoned it made more
sense to eat lunch with them in the refurbished classroom in the East Wing. His spare time was
limited, so when he did eat in the Great Hall he brought one of Hermione’s books on pedagogy to
study while he ate. They were fascinating, and he would be fully absorbed for the whole meal.

Harry started eating dinner with Hermione and the children several times a week and participating in
the adult evening review and practice program, eating dinner in the East Wing when he was not at
the Granger-Weasleys.

On Friday nights he went with his friends to the Three Broomsticks. On Saturdays he coached the
House teams before spending the evening with Teddy and Andromeda and on Sundays arbitrated the
adult students’ pick-up game and spent time in the library working on the last of the DADA syllabi.

So it was obviously completely happenstance that it had been nearly two and a half weeks since the
Slytherin-Ravenclaw game, and Harry and the Headmaster had not exchanged more than a dozen
words, most of them, “Mr. Potter,” and “Headmaster,” with a nod of greeting.

But despite his best efforts, when he went to bed at night—often the first chance he had to slow
down and think in his busy days—Harry felt Snape’s absence from his life like a physical ache. He’d
pictured the man’s sitting room in his mind, the warm fire, the smell of the fragrant tea, of parchment,
of books, and the Headmaster himself, in shirtsleeves, barefoot, with his cup balanced on the arm of
his chair. He would have happily lost the two hours of extra sleep he had been enjoying lately just
for a chance to sit there, reading quietly, drinking tea. What was he saying? He would have given
just about anything to be in Snape’s presence, to have his attention in one of their quiet
conversations, to meet the man’s eyes and feel that pull on his heart.

Then he would recall Snape and Petr’s laughter in Rowena’s corridor, Petr going to his knees and
Snape’s sounds of pleasure, and would have to close his eyes and take a few slow, painful breaths.
He imagined they now shared nightly Floo conversations, having resolved to cultivate the relationship they valued. Snape had a life, a lover. Using his lonesomeness to attempt to intrude between Petr and him was inexcusable.

During their Quidditch teams’ training, he’d overheard some third year Hufflepuff girls describe a charm that was popular right now with the female student body. It was called the Periscopus charm and allowed a reader to see a small but sharp image of whatever the spine of the book was aimed at, in the corner of the page. The last two times he had eaten lunch in the Great Hall, Periscopus had allowed him to watch his fill of Severus Snape while appearing completely absorbed by his reading. It was embarrassing and he still preferred to avoid the hall completely, but it was impossible to resist.

Recently Hermione, at one of their dinners, had tactfully mentioned that even with her special status earned through tough negotiations, she had to eat a certain number of meals in the Great Hall. The children and she loved his company, but shouldn’t he…? He shrugged it off.

Filius Flitwick participated in the evening practice and review of the adult students at least as often as Harry did. One evening almost three weeks after the game, as they were walking back toward the entry hall together, he mentioned that Harry’s absences from the teachers’ table had been noted and commented upon.

“I enjoy the occasional meal in the east wing myself, Harry. The adult students are wonderful company. But there are many reasons we all eat together. It does promote friendship, cooperation, and understanding between the teachers of different discipline and presents the students with a united front, so that they know their teachers cooperate and work as a team.”

He stopped at the base of the staircase where their paths diverged and added with a pointed look, “Beyond that, my young friend, we miss you. Neville and Dermott behave much too well without you. We need more levity. Severus has been as jolly as an undertaker lately and Septima mentioned she missed your smile.”

He himself smiled kindly at Harry. “Just food for thought, Harry, of course. And though I was not your Head of House, do remember that if you ever want to talk, about anything, I’ll be happy to listen.”

His deep-set eyes met Harry’s; for the first time Harry noticed they were of a pleasant hazelnut color, but also filled with compassion and understanding. He suddenly realized how good it would feel to tell someone about what he was going through, someone who would not judge, who might laugh with him and not at him, and whose discretion he could count on.

“Well, Filius, now that you mention it… I was a bit cool in the east wing tonight. I could use a cup of tea…”

Flitwick’s smile was really pleased. “I was going to have one myself. Why don’t you join me? I’m around the corner, not forty thousand steps up.”

Harry laughed. “Forty thousand? No wonder you never visit…”

Flitwick’s sitting room was… cozy. The ceiling could not have been more than eight feet high and the room itself was quite small, with a tiny fireplace, a loveseat and a small reading chair, two walls covered with shelves full of books. The desk with its chair could have belonged to Hugo. Yet the overall feel was comfortable and masculine, the small dimensions not at all oppressive.

“Make yourself at home, Harry. I’ll go to the kitchen and make us some tea. I like to do it without magic. For some reason, it seems to taste better that way.” He entered a small door in an alcove,
which evidently led to a kitchen. Harry removed his teaching robes and sat in the loveseat. Though rather low to the ground, it was very comfortable. Above the fireplace were three portraits, only one of them animated, showing that its subject was deceased. The other two were obviously goblins.

The first, a male in expensive clothing sitting in an office, had his thumbs hooked in the armholes of his gorgeous waistcoat. One could tell immediately that he was Filius's father. His eyes were the same warm hazelnut as Filius’s, and he had passed on his small pointy ears to his son. His rather alarming smile, full of very sharp teeth, he had thankfully kept for himself.

Harry had never before seen a female goblin, so he looked upon the portrait of the obviously very old, very distinguished lady goblin next to Filius’s father’s with curiosity. She had thick, very long hair, black as the night, braided in a long plait that disappeared at the bottom of the frame and that Harry guessed probably went to her feet. She also had the same neat pointy ears as her son and grandson and her hazelnut eyes were bordered with thick dark eyelashes. They were deep-set under prominent though delicate brows and framed by very sharp cheekbones. She had a pointy chin, but her most noticeable trait was her long, thin, and pointy nose. Her dark skin had many thin wrinkles, tracing the lifetime of an expressive face. Like her son she had a rather… disquieting smile, very thin lips framing teeth any great white shark would have been proud of, with canines quite a bit longer than their neighbors. Yet somehow she was beautiful, and had probably been beautiful all her life.

The last portrait was that of a witch. She had dark hair with a widow’s peak, pale skin, and an excessively thin face with a prominent narrow nose and high cheekbones. Her lips were so thin as to be almost inexistent and her eyes were quite small. Yet they could have been considered her one beauty: green next to the pupils changing to blue at the periphery of the iris, and circled with a black line. They were truly striking. When she smiled at Harry, they were full of humor and good will.

“I am Diana Flitwick-Grishreshssnakst,” she said in a high, disagreeably piercing voice. “Let me guess. You would be… the flight instructor, young Harry Potter, am I right?”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I am sure Filius and you have a lot to talk about. I’ll go visit with a friend. Have a nice evening.”

And before Harry had time to answer, her portrait was empty.

Filius came back with a tray holding a large teapot covered by a really ugly pink and grey knitted tea cozy, with a large milk jug, a full sugar bowl, and a plate of digestives. The cups were large porcelain ones, unmatched and chipped. The spoons were also mismatched. He set the tray on a very low table in front of the fireplace.

He poured Harry a tea so dark it looked like coffee. “I’ll let you doctor it as you like,” he said, filling the upper third of his cup with milk and adding a tablespoon of sugar. He sat back in the reading chair and put his stockinged feet on the coffee table. Harry fixed his tea the same way, toed off his ankle boots and tucked his feet under him on the settee.

He took a sip of his beverage. It was strong, sweet, warm, and delicious. He sighed as his body relaxed in the warmth of the fire and smiled at Filius. “This is nice. Thank you.”

The small Charms professor smiled back and said, “So, Harry. Why don’t you tell me why you have all but disappeared in the past three weeks.”

Flitwick was so friendly and matter of fact. Harry decided to just jump right in. “I’m embarrassed to admit that like some third year Hufflepuff girl, I have been avoiding someone I’ve fallen in love with, who does not return that sentiment.”
“Ah. Unrequited love. I have very little experience of life beyond these walls, having taught here
since my youth, and until quite recently had none at all with love, but strangely enough, unrequited
love is now something I perfectly understand… but never mind that, we are talking about you.”

Harry was very curious, but could tell Flitwick would not speak any more than that about the subject.
He did, however, want to see his situation through the eyes of an uninvolved third party. “Yes, well,
I afraid in this case it’s not just unrequited, but unrequitable. Completely hopeless really,” he
confessed.

“Ah.” Filius nodded in understanding. “The lady in question is otherwise engaged.”

“Uh… yes, rather irreversibly so.”

Flitwick was quiet for a moment then said, “Let me ask you this. Are you avoiding the Great Hall
because it is easier for you not to see the person in question, or in respect for her present relationship,
not wanting to possibly interfere with it?”

“I was seeing quite a lot of… her before, and loved every second, though I was aware it would not
lead to anything. But I realize now that it was taking time away from her established relationship and
possibly creating some tension she might not be aware of between her and the person she loves. I do
not want to do that, as I am quite sure they are perfect for each other. They have a lot in common
with each other. Age, experience, a past. I… well. I have nothing to offer hi… her. So I have been
staying away.”

Filius Flitwick was quiet for a moment, obviously thinking through what Harry had said. He asked,
“Do you believe this person capable of making the right choices for herself?”

Harry frowned. “Yes. I do.”

“Do you think, if she considers it ideal, that she could be influenced away from her relationship
through contact with someone who is completely incompatible with her?”

“Uh… No.”

“Have you been happier since distancing yourself from her? Is it easier for you not to see her so
often?”

“Definitely not. I miss…her very much. Even though I knew the feeling to be one-sided, the time
spent in this person’s company was the highlight of my days.”

“I’m sure you can see where I am going with this. You already have all your answers, don’t you?
And you have nothing to feel guilty about; that couple’s relationship is not your responsibility.”

Filius smiled happily at Harry, continuing to look at him over the rim of his cup as he drank his tea
quietly.

Harry had to admit he had not really thought about the situation very logically. But wasn’t there more
to his complete avoidance of Snape than what he so glibly admitted to Filius? If he was honest, he
would have to confess he had been angry with the man and had tried to punish him because he knew
that Snape, though not romantically interested in him, derived some enjoyment from his company.
He had been ridiculously immature and childish.

He remembered the peace he had felt the night he had admitted to himself that he loved Severus
Snape, and his grateful acceptance then that their platonic friendship was the best he could hope for.
How could he have forgotten it so easily?
He smiled gratefully at Flitwick, who, though he had not uncovered all the ramifications of the situation, had helped him think things through. He wondered who Flitwick’s unrequited love was, but knew that was a topic for another day.

The diminutive man apparently sensed Harry was done with his self-reflection and asked, “So, Harry, how are you doing with your syllabi? Any of them giving you trouble?”

They discussed their work on behalf of the DADA for quite a while, and Harry discovered that Flitwick also wanted to read the rest of Snape’s work on antivenin, having found his part of it fascinating. Flitwick also taught him a quick charm that could be used to alphabetize or otherwise organize by size, year, or any other criteria anything he wanted. That would come in very handy in collating his work.

Harry went home around midnight, not looking forward to the alarm in the morning, but on the other hand very happy to not feel he had to hide away and hoping a little that Snape might be willing to resume their quiet evenings together.

When he got home there was a note slipped under his trap door. It said, “Coach Potter, Please come by my rooms tomorrow evening at 8:00 PM to discuss your habitual failure to attend communal meals. Headmaster Snape.”

Harry went to bed feeling better than he had in three weeks.
After Petr’s weekend visit, Snape had fully expected to spend the evening with Harry on Monday. But he had missed him at breakfast, leaving the hall as Potter entered it at a run, evidently quite late. Then Potter had apparently taken lunch elsewhere and had been again absent at dinner. During his next day’s breakfast conversation with Granger, he learned Potter had dined with her and her children. Snape lingered over his morning coffee as long as possible, only to see Potter arrive again at the last minute, grab his food, and leave, not even bothering to sit.

Pretty soon it became obvious that it was to be the younger man’s new routine: breakfast at a run, lunch with the adult students (Snape had gathered that information from Narcissa, who related how much they enjoyed their flying instructor’s company), and dinner either with Granger in her home or, on Wednesdays, in the Great Hall with the whole Granger-Weasley family.

The few times Potter had lunched in the Great Hall he’d arrived early and kept his nose in some Muggle book the entire time, eating his unappetizing food quickly and leaving early. The Headmaster was extremely frustrated. Not only did Potter constantly escape before Snape was able to invite him for the evening, but gone also was the undeniable pleasure of looking at him throughout the meals.

The last eye contact Snape had had with the man had been after the Slytherin-Ravenclaw game, when Snape had thought Potter looked strangely hurt. But surely he had imagined that? Petr had said that he’d had a great time with Potter the next day…

Every night, Snape stared resentfully at Potter’s empty chair. After Petr’s visit, the straight young man had to know he did not need to fear that his old gay Potions professor might proposition him. So what was keeping him away?

Knowing Harry was on patrol the night of Halloween, Snape had had high hopes of catching him while he walked the corridors.

Potter had made it to the feast but, like everyone else on that special night, had played musical chairs, visiting with different groups of students, talking with the ghosts, charming pumpkins into declaiming verses, or dancing around to entertain the younger students.

Snape planned to intercept Potter during his rounds but had forgotten what Halloween night was like. Walking the castle in search of Potter, he became a de facto second patroller; so many students being out of bounds and intent on mischief, there was certainly enough mayhem to keep the two of them busy—and apart.

Septima and Filius both occasionally mentioned missing Potter’s uplifting presence at meals, but it was Minerva who handed him a solution to the problem. She lectured Snape on the benefits of teachers taking their meals together in the Great Hall and expressed her disapproval that Severus had given Harry permission to ignore the demands of his contract, in view of the negative impression it could make on the students.

Granger, apparently knowing perfectly well there was no such permission, had quietly admitted to Severus having mentioned his obligations to Potter to no avail. She had no clue why Potter suddenly chose to eschew the communal meals that he had until then seemed to enjoy.
Armed with an official reason, yet not wanting to make it an official reprimand (and missing the man more than he had ever thought possible), Snape took a walk to Harry’s quarters that very evening and knocked on the trap door. He was bitterly disappointed when there was no answer and concluded Harry must be lending a hand with the practice and review session for the adults.

He quickly reviewed the current adult roster mentally, wondering if perhaps… No. There were no particularly attractive or otherwise remarkable young women who might have caught Potter’s fancy in the current batch. Anyway, Potter had said he was unavailable, hadn’t he?

Snape tried to remember to be grateful at how involved the young man was in the success of Narcissa’s enterprise and left a note for Potter requesting a visit from him the next evening. Though it pained him, he shied away from referring to his very first note as had been their habit. He could not think of what he might have done to disrupt his and Harry’s budding friendship, but he knew something had been lost. He only hoped it could be found again.

Going back to his rooms he sat in his chair, thinking of conversation topics that might interest Harry, that would perhaps entice him to stay for tea the next evening, maybe even for a full evening of pleasant conversation.
~o~ Back on Track ~o~

The next day Harry arrived to breakfast on time, greeted happily by everyone.

“Potter.”

“Headmaster.”

Just two words across the table, but any time Harry looked up, he met Snape’s burning gaze. Headmaster.

At lunch it was Severus Snape who went missing, and come dinnertime, he was engaged in a heated debate with Hermione and Flitwick and paid no attention to Harry whatsoever.

Waiting for eight o’clock, Harry was a mess. He could not wait to be with Snape but was aware that the first thing he wanted to say, though he knew well he had absolutely no right to even think it, was, “How could you?”

He showered, shaved, and dressed in very fitted black trousers that emphasized all his good points with a snowy white shirt with rolled up sleeves and an open collar under his favorite green cashmere jumper. It looked beautiful on him and made him feel confident. He was at Snape’s door exactly at eight. It opened before he even had time to knock.

The Headmaster was sitting in his chair in his usual relaxed evening attire, reading a book, when Harry entered. On the sideboard, the tea tray was in its usual place, his cup waiting for him. Feeling nervous despite the familiarity of the setting, Harry helped himself to tea and sat down. Snape put his open book face-down on his lap and met his eyes. They smiled at each other, neither of them able to hide the pleasure they felt at each other’s presence.

“Filius explained to me the logic behind the communal meals, and Hermione pointed out my contractual obligations. I apologize for my dereliction of duty and I will be sure to eat in the Great Hall as often as I can from now on,” said Harry hurriedly, hoping to get that part over without having to lie while explaining his reasons for staying away.

“Good to hear. Aside from a breach of your duties, your absence had a negative impact on the staff’s morale. It would seem that your colleagues have become fond of you. You were missed, Mr. Potter,” commented Snape, his tone indifferent, though his pointed gaze made Harry blush a little.

“I realize now I missed the company of my colleagues as well,” admitted Harry. He continued, feeling quite bold, though he turned his eyes to the fire in the grate while he talked, “Since they have personal lives, attachments outside of Hogwarts, I did not appreciate that they would notice or care about my absence.”

“You were mistaken, Mr. Potter. Apparently you have carved your own niche in their routines, and your nonappearance emphasized how precious your company has become.”

Harry could not help but glance at Snape after what could easily be construed as a personal declaration, but the man’s gaze was also directed to the grate, the fire’s warmth possibly responsible for slight coloring of the usually pale cheeks.

Harry smiled to himself, deciding to interpret Snape’s words in the way that made him happiest.
Snape was fond of him and had missed him. Snape thought his company was precious. Feeling really good, he changed the subject to a more comfortable one.

“I missed your tea,” he said, smiling.

“Needlessly.” Snape shrugged. “Your cup is on the tray every night, Potter,” Snape added, lightly. Harry’s heart jumped in his chest. Did that mean he could visit without an invitation? That he was welcome every night?

“I could come and enjoy a cup… anytime?” he asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

Snape looked at him and smiled; that smile that could not help but be slightly predatory. “Really, Mr. Potter. Though as you know, I often use the time after dinner to catch up with work and may not always be able to grace you with my stellar conversation as you drink it.”

“Well, I can always bring work as well, in case you are too busy…” answered Harry, who felt like getting up and dancing around.

That particular night, however, was one when Snape was obviously not overburdened with work. They caught up after their three weeks apart, speaking of everything and anything, though a common concern was Neville’s grandmother’s failing health. It seemed the old lady was reaching the end of her days, and both men knew how hard it would be on Neville.

“Without Mr. Longbottom, I do not believe George Weasley would have survived the death of his twin,” observed Snape. “I think in the same manner, Mr. Weasley will be of great support to his partner, though they are, perfurce, apart from each other a lot of the time. I am sure Granger’s, McClallan’s, and your friendship will be of great importance to him.”

Harry nodded in agreement. “Mrs. Longbottom had taken on the duties of head of the family. Without her to represent the Enduring and Persistent House of Longbottom, he will have to be inducted into the Wizengamot and find someone he trusts to be his proxy,” reflected Harry. “I can’t imagine he will be able to take the time off to actually attend.”

“If he has not already given it some thought, maybe you can advise him. You are the head of the Black House, are you not?”

Harry nodded and added sheepishly, “I am the head of the Black House and, ridiculously enough, also the head of the Rosier House as well as the head of the Lupin House since I am the legal guardian of my godson. Draco Malfoy is my proxy for all three votes, though he has to get my assent before casting them.”

“The Rosier House as well? How did that happen?”

“The Rosiers’ estate was in probate for years after the death of Evan Rosier, who had no direct heir and died intestate. Apparently, the House would not accept his second cousin and his third cousin twice removed as heirs, but as they might have sons or daughters it would approve of, it waited. When both of them lost their magic after their sentencing as Death Eaters, the House apparently lost all interest in their possible progeny and turned to the next eligible heir, Rosier’s fourth cousin, Sirius Black.

“Though deceased, he had an heir the House approved of. Me. It appears that by the rules of the Rosier estate (and of the Black estate as well, actually), since my father was a wizard and my mother was a witch, I am considered a Pureblood wizard. So until Teddy comes of age, I am de facto the head of four Houses, three of them having votes in the Wizengamot…”
Snape smiled. “Good thing you failed in your murder attempt on Draco Malfoy in your sixth year, then. I am quite sure if someone had told you, while you were busy gutting him, that you would one day entrust him with your affairs you would have thought they were insane.”

Harry started to protest, hurt and upset, even after all these years, “I wasn’t trying to kill…” and saw the gleeful spark in Snape’s eyes at still being able to get a rise out of him. “Oh, ha, ha…” he grumbled, annoyed. “I am so glad one of the worst memories of my adolescence amuses you.”

“Oh, no! Not at all. I agree that there is nothing amusing about it. Your reaction, however…” commented Snape, still smiling, picking up his teacup and taking a sip.

Harry could not comprehend Snape’s cruel enjoyment of his remorse. He looked into the challenging dark eyes and suddenly realized that, after Snape’s earlier quasi-confession of having missed Harry’s company and thinly veiled open invitation to his quarters, some part of Snape needed reassurance. Harry’s resilience was being tested. Would he leave in a huff, or would he show that he accepted Snape as he was, warts and all, that he would endure the less attractive aspects of Snape’s personality, which were so far outweighed by his countless admirable qualities?

Harry smiled at Snape, the same unguarded open smile he had bestowed upon him that morning at breakfast when he had finally let go of the past. The smile said, ‘I see the whole of you, and you are worth it,’ with a little ‘I really want to see you naked,’ thrown in. Why should Harry be the only one off balance?

Snape precipitously put down his cup and coughed into his fist, a sip of tea having apparently gone the wrong way.

“All right, Snape?” asked Harry, full of innocent concern.

His throat cleared, Snape answered, still a little flushed, “Yes, yes. Fine, thank you.”

Harry got up and freshened both their cups. Going back to safer ground, they discussed how well young Matt Pilot, Dermott McClallan’s assistant, was performing, both in the normal Potions classroom and as a volunteer instructor to the adult students. Dermott would be taking his Mastery exams soon now, and Snape, as his thesis Master, had no doubt he would succeed. Matt would then able to take the title of Apprentice, starting his own uphill struggle to Mastery.

The scheme had worked so well, Snape had managed to get consent from the board for another apprentice to join Hogwarts’s staff, this time assisting Flitwick, who donated so much of his time to Narcissa’s students, in Charms. Applications for the post would be accepted until the end of November and the new staff member would start in January.

It was close to midnight when Harry made his way back to his aerie, light footed, light hearted, smiling and humming to himself all the way, more in love than ever. He would heed Filius’s advice and enjoy Snape’s company as much as Snape would allow. He was not responsible for the man’s relationship. Snape and Petr could deal with their own issues.
When Potter had come in on time that morning for breakfast, Severus had greeted him as he always did.

He had also lost all interest in food, sipping occasionally from his cup as he helplessly stared (and was caught countless time doing so) at the young man. Had Harry always been so… beautiful? He could not take his eyes off him, rediscovering the angle of his jaw, the perfect musculature of his neck, the grace of his movements, the healthy glow of his skin…

Reasoning that nothing could be gained by his making an even bigger ass of himself at lunch, he decided to skip it, finishing work he might normally have taken home in the evening. That night, he wanted to concentrate on Harry.

At dinner, he discussed the upcoming interview of Charms Apprentices with Filius and Granger. McClallan had not participated in the selection of Matt Pilot as his assistant, since he had known several of the candidates and did not want personal feelings to influence the ultimate choice. Filius insisted his own assistant’s selection should be handled the same way, though both Granger and Severus thought his input would be invaluable, since through conferences and after having taught Charms for half a century, he knew all of the candidates. Filius carried the day and Snape and Granger coordinated some slots in their schedules to meet the candidates.

As the appointed time for Potter’s visit grew near, Severus could only embarrassedly describe his state of mind as giddy. He carefully prepared tea, lit a warm fire against the chill of the evening, and cast warming spells on the stone floor and even a needless dusting spell on his shelves. At the last minute he went to the bath to run a brush through his lustrous black hair and retie his queue, which did not need retying.

He was relieved, sensing Harry’s magic approaching. Merlin knows what he would have done next, he thought, chuckling to himself. Trim his toenails? Cut his nose hair? Oh, Merlin’s balls! Did his nose hair need tending? He forgot all about it when the door opened, choosing to pretend to be absorbed by… Essential Molds by Ernst Gale? Was that the book he’d grabbed? He practically knew that tome by heart… Well, never mind, Potter did not know that.

Not until Potter had sat did Severus look up, and then he was so damn happy to see him he could not help but smile. He so wanted to get up and just hold the younger man tight. Merlin, he had missed him so very much. And Potter was smiling right back at him, so beautiful…

“Filius explained to me the logic behind the communal meals, and Hermione pointed out my contractual obligations. I apologize for my dereliction of duty and I will be sure to eat in the Great Hall as often as I can from now on,” said Potter, addressing the contents of his note right away. It did not explain his reasons for staying away for three weeks, but as far as Severus was concerned, that was good enough.

Could he have been more obvious in telling Potter that he had missed him, or more heavy-handed in issuing him a permanent invitation to visit his quarters? Hardly. But he would save kicking himself for his lack of Slytherin subtlety later, for now he chose to just savor how pleased Potter seemed at the invitation.

It seemed he should not have worried about finding topics to speak to Harry about. Their
conversation was animated and spontaneous, flowing naturally, both of them happy to catch up after their long separation.

Like Potter, he was very concerned about Neville Longbottom’s grandmother. Poppy had visited her at St. Mungo’s and felt she only had days to live. A difficult but strong and loving woman, she was Neville Longbottom’s last remaining family.

Potter pointed out that on top of natural grief, her death would bring more responsibilities to the young Herbology professor. Severus could not imagine Longbottom had the slightest interest in managing his affairs.

He was surprised to realize the extent of Potter’s estate. The Potters had been wealthy and industrious. As far as he knew the Blacks had extensive properties and assets, but that Potter had also inherited the House of Rosier probably placed him on equal financial footing with Galen Weston, Head of the Enterprising House of Weston and of the Traditional and Venerable House of Westminster, a definite step above the Malfoys.

Severus wondered who took care of Potter’s financial affairs. Potter spent like a young man who had made a lot of money playing professional sports, not like a young man who had wealth beyond Severus’s imagining at his fingertips. Severus had a feeling that outside of 12 Grimmauld Place, the entirety of Potter’s fortune was in trust to a third party.

Severus had slowly reacquired all the pieces of the Prince estate pissed away by his grandfather and purchased back the small remaining legacy that had been inherited by a Runcorn cousin at a very decent price. The estate of the House of Prince was now whole again, as it would have passed to his mother had she not been disinherited by her family, and to himself had he not been a Half-blood. The real estate holdings needed extensive restoration and maintenance, for which Severus counted on the financial windfall from his patent on the Magic Revealing Potion, which annoyingly, everyone seemed to call the ‘Squib Cure’ potion. Some day, his rightful inheritance would be something he could be proud of.

It was ironic that after years of distrust between them, Draco was now Potter’s solicitor, a role which had made the younger Malfoy’s reputation. Thanks to Potter’s trust, Draco wielded four votes in the Wizengamot, making him a force to be reckoned with. Severus thought back to that terrible day in the girls’ bath, when Draco had almost died from Severus’s own spell. He could not help but tease Potter about it.

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, though, he wanted to kick himself. It was obvious Potter still carried a lot of guilt about the episode, and his and Severus’s fragile, newly restored friendship did not need this kind of strain… Why was he such a bastard? Why did he so enjoy pointing out other people’s shortcomings? Severus berated himself even as he brazened out his discomfort behind a smile and hid his remorse in his cup of tea.

Potter, after a short time of reflection, surprised him completely by looking up at him and smiling back, his miraculously open expression showing that he knew what to expect from Severus and found it acceptable that to enjoy his qualities, he also had to accept his flaws. Was there something else showing on that beautiful face, a light in his eyes that spoke of attraction, of desire? Severus, shocked, let the tea in his mouth take the wrong path and had to put down his cup to cough.

By the time he had recovered, Potter’s “All right, Snape?” full of innocent concern brought Severus back to reality. Harry Potter was kind, and forgiving, and sadly, also straight.

But so, so very beautiful.
The next evening the Headmaster, strangely enough, found himself yet again at leisure. After serendipitously meeting Potter in a dungeon corridor at about ten o’clock, he was able to patrol with him the entire evening. They took a break around midnight to have a glass of the 1926 Artemis Armagnac Severus had savored at Potter’s party. Left to his own devices, Potter would have apparently drunk water but, though Potter warned him of the possible consequences, Severus insisted he should partake of the wonderful brandy.

Though he agreed that the Armagnac was very good and, ignoring his usual diet, ate a couple of shortbread biscuits so as not to have alcohol on an empty stomach, Potter had not exaggerated. He was an absolute lightweight. About fifteen minutes after they resumed patrolling, he started being easily amused… Very easily amused. Before Severus had time to stop him, he sneaked up on an amorous couple in a hidden alcove yelling, “Boo!” and spraying them with a wordless Aguamanti, causing the Hufflepuff girl to scream like a banshee and her Gryffindor companion to hit Potter with an ill-cast Knee Reversal Hex, which affected only one of his legs.

Potter, off-balance and giggling his head off, hung onto Severus as the two students made their rather precipitous escape. Severus tried to appear disapproving as he reversed the spell, but ended up laughing along with the younger man. A giggly Potter was hard to resist.

Almost too hard to resist, actually, especially dangling from Severus’s neck and looking at him with smiling adoration. “You are very good at spell reversal,” Potter informed him.

“Indeed,” said Severus, trying not to let the feeling of Harry’s breath on his lips distract him.

“You can cast spells really well too,” Potter reminded him, nodding for emphasis.

“Quite,” agreed Severus, grinning, relieved that Potter had backed up a bit to have enough space to nod.

“And you’re just amazing at Potions,” Potter whispered, apparently confiding this important secret to Severus’s lips, sending a shiver down Severus’s spine and letting the Headmaster’s vivid imagination run wild.

“One should hope so, Potter,” he answered as he stood up straight, simultaneously relieving the ache in his lower back, prudently placing his lips more than half a foot higher than Potter’s and stopping the flow of highly inappropriate images that had been flooding his brain.

Still, Potter did not let go of his neck, nor did he put any distance between their bodies. It was… incredibly pleasant. And completely inappropriate.

“Your knees are functional once more, Potter. Is there a reason why you are still using me as a prop?” he asked pointedly.

Potter sighed and reluctantly let go of his neck. As he stepped back, swaying a bit, he whined accusingly, “Well, you’re all warm and nice smelling!”

“And I think your patrolling is over for the night.” Severus chuckled, making light of the situation. Potter was obviously under the influence and it was Severus’s own fault for teasing him into drinking alcohol. As they headed towards the library Potter was singing some inane song about monkeys
monkeying around, and kept bumping into Snape’s side. As soon as possible, Severus had them in Rowena’s corridor heading back to the Gryffindor tower.

“Don’t like Rowena’s corridor,” confided Potter, who inexplicably sighed rather heavily, suddenly sad. Ten minutes later, Severus helped Potter through his trap door. “To bed with you, Coach Potter. I believe you have training in the morning…”

“Flying!” Potter was smiling again, the melancholy that had overwhelmed him on the way apparently dissipated. “I’m really good at flying,” he informed Severus, who had started down a couple of the stairs.

Severus looked up at Potter, who was now slightly taller than he. “You are better than really good,” he said, taking advantage of the fact that the man he loved would probably not recall his words in the morning to express some of his feelings. “Amazing. Remarkable. Exquisite. Superlatives fail to express what you are in the air. Beautiful to behold.” Then he added under his breath, starting down the stairs again, “In the air… and not.”

Back in his quarters, he sent his personal house-elf to deposit a hangover potion on Potter’s bedside table; chuckling as he recalled the Hufflepuff’s squeal, he promised himself never to make Potter drink while on patrol. After tossing and turning in his bed, he got up and took a cold shower and was finally able to fall asleep.
Harry woke up with a headache and with his stomach churning. He vaguely recalled returning to patrolling the night before after drinking a snifter of eighty-five-year-old brandy and scaring some poor students. After that the evening was a blur. He just hoped he had not puked on Snape’s shoes.

Opening his eyes, he noticed a small blue vial on his night table and recognized a hangover potion, which he drank gratefully. Whatever had happened, Snape was obviously not too mad at him…

Wow… That stuff was great. Not only was his headache gone and his stomach settled, but he felt fabulous, rested and full of energy. He got up humming, put on his gear, and flew out his window, not even caring that wet snow was falling from the low grey clouds.

Though he would have loved to, Harry restrained himself from knocking on Snape’s door every night. He decided to spend Wednesday evenings with Ron, and to participate in the adult students’ practice and review sessions two nights a week, probably on Mondays and Fridays.

The routine of his visit was always the same. He would arrive at Snape’s door around eight, get some tea, and sit. His favorite moment was when Snape would stop whatever he was doing, look up at him, and smile, somehow making him feel as if Harry’s visit was the highlight of his day. They would chat over the first cup of Snape’s amazing tea and then work or read for the next couple of hours.

Around eleven, Snape would once again put down his book or his papers and they would talk about their plans for the next couple of days. Shortly thereafter Harry would leave, after being bestowed with a “Good night, Potter.” As he closed the door he would meet Snape’s dark gaze, and wonder all the way home if he would ever be able to read its depths.

A Sunday morning in mid-November, as he refereed a pick-up game, he noticed a dark silhouette with robes billowing in the icy wind on the turf below. Concerned, he immediately dove down, landing on the sodden snow-speckled ground. Dismounting, he asked, “Snape? What is it?”

“The Granger–Weasleys and McClallan have already left for St Mungo’s, Potter. I said I would come and get you. Mrs. Longbottom is in and out of consciousness. She will be gone very soon, and I thought you might want to be with Mr. Longbottom when the time comes, to offer your support.”

“Oh, no! Poor Neville. Thanks, I’ll be going as soon as I can. Could you open my Floo to the national network, please?”

“Of course.”

Harry whistled the players down and explained the situation, canceling the game. He flew back to his balcony and was welcomed by Kreacher, who obviously was aware of the situation and had already laid clothes out for him to wear after his shower.

Harry stepped out of the St. Mungo’s Floo less than half an hour after spotting Snape on the ground and was welcomed by Hugo Weasley.

“Hello, Uncle Harry. Mum told me to wait for you and show you where the old lady is. She’s gonna die, y’know?”
“Yes, Hugo. She’s been unwell a long time.”

“Aunty Minerva said she’s not that old, but that grief put her in an early grave. What’d she mean?”

“Mrs. Longbottom’s son and daughter-in-law were… hurt right after the first war against Voldemort, by some rogue Death Eaters. They were not quite right after that, and they never got better. It was as if they were dead, but yet they were still alive, and it was very hard on her, and on your Uncle Neville, of course. Also, Mrs. Longbottom had to raise baby Neville, even though she was quite old.”

“Oh. I see. Thanks, Uncle Harry. Nobody ever tells me anything around here. I hate it.”

The waiting room was full. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were there. George and Neville had been together for many years. There were some older witches and wizards who were deep in conversation with Minerva, probably schoolmates of Augusta’s. It was hard to believe the two women had been in the same class. Augusta had always looked many years older to Harry. Neville’s friends Hermione, Ron, and Dermott were there as well, speaking quietly with George.

Neville, very pale, came out of his gran’s room. “George, she wants you.” He noticed his friends. “Hi, you guys. Thanks for coming.” He collapsed into a chair, his face in his hands. “Gosh, this is so hard. I don’t want her to go!”

Ron sat next to him and wrapped his arm around him. “I know it’s hard, mate, but you still have us. Whether you want us or not. We come with the red-headed git Augusta likes so much.”

Neville shoulders shook and he put down his hand, chuckling. “I know! Why do you think I’m about to cry?”

They all join in the quiet laughter, enjoying the release of tension. George poked his head out of Augusta’s room and called Neville back in with him. The door closed again.

Half an hour later they came back out, both with red eyes and traces of tears on their faces. Neville looked gutted. George went to talk to some of the older people, some of whom got up and went to Augusta’s room. He rejoined Neville and their friends, sitting next to his partner and taking his hand.

“That’s it,” he explained. “She’s said good-bye to us. She doesn’t want us back in again. She doesn’t want Neville to see her go.”

Neville took a deep breath, trying to conquer his emotion. He smiled lightly at George. “What did she say to you when you went in alone?”

“That I should stop worrying if I was worthy of you. That you will love me until the day we die and beyond, that we are soulmates. Then she told me to remember her prediction, that it will happen soon now. You?”

Neville caressed George’s face, and George turned and kissed his palm. “She said that I was lucky to have found you,” he answered. “That we would grow old together, and still love each other in the hereafter, and that her prophecy was supposed to come to pass forty-one days after she died.”

They lightly kissed each other. “I can’t believe I’m stuck with you for all eternity!” griped George.

“Tell me about it. I always hoped for a soulmate who wouldn’t snore…” replied Neville.

“And I wanted one who could help me with potions creations!” retorted George.
“Oh, well,” Neville shrugged. “At least you’re kind of cute.”

“Thanks.” George smirked. “At least you’re really good in bed.”

Neville blushed and chuckled at the same time. “Thanks, George. I always wanted my colleagues to know that.”

“Anybody who’s ever been at the Burrow at the same time as the two of you already knows, mate,” said Ron, grinning. He added, imitating George’s slightly raspy tenor, “Neville! Yes, oh god! Yes, don’t stop! Neville! Neville! So good!!”

“That’s amazing! Oh, Neville! I love youuuuu!” concurred Hermione.

George was laughing, not embarrassed in the least, but Neville moaned and hid his bright red face in his lover’s neck. He was grinning, though.

“Hey,” asked Harry. “What’s this about a prophecy?”

“Don’t worry, Harry. Nothing bad,” said Neville, happy for the change of topic. “Gran’s a seer. Well. Kinda. She has prophetic dreams, anyway. She’s registered and everything. She hates it, though, because her predictions are always so… well, mundane. I mean her last two dreams were that Molly was going to burn a roast, which she did, and that Minerva would twist her ankle, which she has, and Pomfrey put her to rights in about three minutes.”

“But at least she’s never wrong,” George pointed out.

“That’s true. Anyway, when I was in seventh year—the first time—and she was worried about whether or not I’d survive the Carrows, she had this dream that she thought meant I would have a son. She didn’t know I was gay at the time, or that I was with George…”

“And Fred was still alive. She didn’t tell us until after Neville’s NEWTS, when she found out Fleur was pregnant. By then, she knew about us. She just said to make sure that if Bill and Fleur had a boy, they did not call him Frederic, because we’d have our own boy someday,” said George.

“Little by little she’s told us more details. It turns out it was more than a dream. That night she woke up and she wrote down what she remembered in her dream diary without bothering to fully wake up or to turn on the light. But the next day she realized it wasn’t just another “Martin’s owl will lose a package in the swamp,” this time. It was worded like a true prophecy. It said:

“The dreamer’s last breath forty-one days past
To the Enduring House an heir is bestowed
Cut and marked by gold, the son of twins from heaven falls
His savior the savior and this one father’s twin,
By name and by mane as that one father’s twin.”

“Clear as crystal, that is,” said Ron. “I always love me a good prophecy!”

“Gran’s sure it means we are to have a son named Frederic,” said Neville. He suddenly looked stricken as he added, “I guess we will know soon enough.”

George hugged him tightly, and spoke softly in his ear. The pall that had lifted from their group for a while was back, as the circumstances of their get-together returned to everyone’s consciousness. They were all pensive for a while.

A witch with long and thick snow-white hair piled somewhat haphazardly on top of her head, who
had just left Augusta Longbottom’s room, approached them. She had the bluest eyes Harry had ever seen, a very small nose, and a long upper lip.

“Which of you is Harry Potter?” she asked, not a question Harry heard every day.

“I am,” he said.

She looked him up and down, raised an eyebrow in disbelief, and said with clear disdain in her tone, “You. You’re saying you killed Voldemort?”

Harry had never been accused of lying about that. He was surprised and very amused.

“No, of course not,” he said chuckling. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m obviously too runty to have done that!” He leaned toward the witch and whispered, pointing to Hermione with his thumb and winking, “My friend Hermione here, who is taller and ever so much smarter than me? She did it. I’ve stolen the credit from her for years now. She has no clue. She still wonders why no one ever mentions her amazing feat…”

The witch sneered at him. “Poor Augusta is on her death bed!” she reminded him sternly. “Merlin only knows why the poor dear asked to see… you.” She spat that last word as if it hurt her mouth, her face full of contempt. She patted Hermione’s hand. “And you should be ashamed of yourself,” she finished before stalking off.

“Oh, I am! I am!” Harry assured her, unsure of whether he should be ashamed of his cheeky answer or of having stolen Hermione’s credit for years. The friends looked at each other in disbelief and when Hermione started giggling, they all joined in. Harry shrugged, rolling his eyes, and got up to go to Augusta Longbottom’s bedside. He wondered what she wanted.

The room had two large windows, showing rolling hills under a pale winter sunshine, compliments of WWW. Mrs. Longbottom’s eyes were closed, sunken in her gaunt face. She was reclining on pillows, wearing a beautiful pink embroidered gown and its matching lacy cap, obviously brought from home, and a downy morning jacket closed at the neck by a satin ribbon. There was so little left of her that her body hardly made a lump under the bedding.

The area around the bed glowed with some kind of field. The room smelled of green things, and one could hear the chirping of birds and the sounds of a brook in the distance. The effect was wonderfully soothing. Harry approached the bed, noting that the woman’s hands, all bones and knuckles, had beautifully manicured nails, almond shaped and painted pink to match her gown.

“Mrs. Longbottom? It’s Harry Potter.”

Augusta Longbottom opened her eyes. Her body might be diminished but her spirit was not. Her eyes shone with intelligence and strength of purpose.

“Oh, good. Venus managed to find you. I was a bit concerned. She’s not all there, the poor darling, hasn’t been for quite some time. Potion-induced dementia, you know.”

“Oh. I feel bad now. She acted as if she did not believe I’d vanquished Voldemort, so I told her she was right, that Hermione Granger did and that I had just taken credit for it. She told me I ought to be ashamed of myself. I am now. I never imagined she might actually be ill.”

Augusta was laughing quietly and had a bout of coughing. “Oh dear,” she said, once she’d caught her breath. “I wish I’d seen that. Don’t feel bad, Mr. Potter. Venus was always a bit of an idiot, and incredibly dull. Now that she is a demented idiot, at least she is entertaining…”
She closed her eyes for a while and Harry thought maybe she’d gone to sleep, when she opened them again.

“Did Neville and George tell you about my dream, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes, they did.”

She recited, her voice weak and raspy,

”The dreamer’s last breath forty-one days past
To the Enduring House an heir is bestowed
Cut and marked by gold, the son of twins from heaven falls
His savior the savior and this one father’s twin,
By name and by mane as that one father’s twin.”

She stopped speaking to cough again. Her breathing was getting labored.

“Should I get a healer, Mrs. Longbottom?” asked Harry, worried.

She held his hand before he had time to leave to go get someone and she gestured for a glass of water, which Harry quickly handed to her. She took a small sip and said, “Don’t forget, Mr. Potter, so that you may know him when the time comes…” Once again she started coughing, a dry sound that was painful to hear, but her grip on Harry’s hand did not weaken. Finally, in a short moment of respite, she said, “Minerva…” and let his hand go.

He left and quickly went to get his old Transfiguration professor. “Mrs. Longbottom wants you, Minerva,” he said.

Minerva McGonagall stood up and smoothed her tartan robes. “It’s the end, then,” she said, bracing herself. She held her back straight, a dignified Scottish woman, as she entered her lifelong friend’s room.

“McGonagall is Augusta’s Testament Executor,” explained George. “Augusta will just want to check one more time that she took care of everything. She’s punctilious in her responsibilities.”

Fifteen minutes later, Minerva exited the room again and quietly closed the door behind her. Her eyes were red but she was calm and collected. She walked to Neville. “I, Minerva McGonagall, Chief of the Generous Clan Nicolson, salute Neville Longbottom, Head of the Enduring House of Longbottom…” Then her eyes filled with tears and her voice shook as she said, “Oh, Neville! I’m so sorry! She’s gone…” She brought her hands to her lips as the tears spilled to her cheeks. Neville got up and held her in his arms.

There were a lot of tears in the room, and after Minerva rejoined her friends Neville sat back down heavily, looking at the sorrow-filled faces around him.

“Thanks for being here, all of you. It means a lot. She was such a presence in my life… But I know I’m not alone, I have all of you, and it makes a big difference.”

They all stayed by his side until Augusta’s body was magically transferred to rest in state at Longbottom Manor. Then they left and returned to the school, knowing that Neville would call on them if he needed to.

The funeral took place the next Saturday, on the twenty-fifth of November. The temperature had plummeted that week and it had snowed non-stop for three days. The storm was over, the sky pure blue with a pale sun illuminating endless fields of pristine snow. It was beautiful. Those present at the
small chapel on the Longbottom estate included the Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Principal Interrogator of the Wizengamot, Griselda Marchbanks, and so many Heads of House it looked like an official occasion. Yet they were all there either because Augusta had been their friend or their colleague in the Order of the Phoenix, or because they were friends and co-workers of Neville Longbottom, who was liked and respected by all who knew him.

Harry, dressed in the elegant mourning robes he had bought for the occasion from Madam Malkin, had stood with Dermott McClallan and Severus Snape during the ceremony. When they all made their way to the gravesite in the family cemetery plot however, he noticed immediately the tall handsome wizard waiting by the magically dug grave. Petr DeVries spoke to Neville for a moment before being joined by his lover. Harry went the opposite way, choosing to stand with the Weasley family instead, on the other side of the grave. Petr and Snape, as usual, looked perfect together, clad in identical mourning garments which accentuated their height and the elegance of their silhouettes. Only their outer winter cloaks differed slightly, somehow still complementing each other, Snape’s made of cashmere lined and bordered with sable, and Petr’s of silk velvet trimmed with chinchilla.

Harry fought to keep his mind on the last homage rendered to a remarkable witch and on a beautiful blessing sung a capella in her honor. Yet he knew the sharp ache in his heart had nothing to do with the sad occasion.

After the burial Petr and Snape, ahead of Harry and Dermott, walked together to the Apparation point, speaking quietly. When they stopped, Petr looked pale and sad. His eyes met Harry’s before he Disapparated, too late for any kind of greetings before he turned on the spot. Snape, Dermott, and Harry followed one by one. Harry was surprised Petr was not with them at the gates of Hogwarts.

With Dermott walking slightly ahead, Harry and Snape fell into step.

“I thought Petr would stay the weekend,” commented Harry.

“It’s the end of term. I have a lot of work,” answered Snape. “He’ll join us for winter break,” he added, in lieu of an explanation.

“Oh,” said Harry. “…That’s good.” He kicked himself for not going away for the holidays. He could have gone skiing with some old teammates, or gone somewhere warm… Maybe he still could!

It was stupid. He could not run every time Petr came to stay. In those two weeks, he had plans with Teddy and Andromeda, with Ron, Hermione, and the children, with the Malfoys. He couldn’t just blow everyone off…

Strangely enough, though Snape had so much work because of the end of term, he and Harry continued to spend four nights a week together, including several very cold, short night flights, and the Headmaster even found the time to keep Harry company on his nights of patrols, though they never drank anything stronger than tea on those nights again…
Chapter 74

~o~ All I Want for Christmas ~o~

Severus had decided that he had never made as good a decision as when he had issued Potter an open invitation. The young man sought his company any time he was not with the adult students or spending the evening with his best friends. It was remarkably comfortable to have him just... pop in and settle by the fire.

A few times they’d gone for flights, though the temperatures were truly appalling. Severus did not mind, though, because back in his quarters Potter would strip his heavy winter gear completely unselfconsciously, down to his body-hugging long woolen underwear, and that was worth the eyelashes freezing together, the icicles in the neck, and the frozen toes and fingers. How could Quidditch players stand hours upon hours of flying in those frigid winter temperatures?

It was obvious Potter wore nothing under his woolens... A good tug south, and they would slip down his legs, exposing his perfect arse, freeing his cock, liberating his balls... Snape, who always disappeared to his bedroom upon their return, would come back clad in his normal evening outfit and would sit and (thank Merlin) remain seated for the duration.

Potter would walk around, bend down to remove his boots, and go to the sideboard to fix Snape tea and himself a cup of cocoa with marshmallows. Snape, his cock terminally hard, would stare his fill at the V-shaped upper-body, the sexy slope of the lower back, the mouth-watering muscular arse.

Severus had taken an unreasonable number of cold showers in the past few weeks...

For the last two weeks of term, Potter had been able to work with Narcissa’s students every day, having cancelled the flight classes, closed his morning training to the students, and even, to the students’ horror, cancelled the Quidditch practices, something Madam Hooch should have been doing all along.

Since he’d had some free time, he’d joined Severus and Granger for the last interviews of the remaining candidates for the Charms Apprentice position. The decision had been unanimous. Miss Luna Lovegood had carried the day. Charms had always been her forte. She had given up academia for a few years to help her father run his newspaper, but had decided to return to her studies. She had received a Charm INQT from Beauxbatons (Inovation de Nouvelle Qualite ou Technique) at the end of a three-year course and therefore qualified for the apprenticeship.

Her imaginative and unconventional approaches to the subject were exciting and, as Granger pointed out, would also challenge her Charms Master, who had been, after all, doing the same thing the same way for three quarters of a century. It would be announced as soon as Miss Lovegood officially accepted the position.

Severus was trying not to think of the fact that, though he would see Potter regularly, they would not have time alone for close to two weeks, when school started again. But there had been no way to cut Petr’s visit short. Already, when he had come to England for the Longbottom funeral, he had assumed he would be coming back to Hogwarts for the rest of the weekend, and had not taken well being sent back immediately.

It was understandable. The expense in Floo powder had already been made; he could have Apparated to Hogwarts with Severus and enjoyed an evening and a night with his lover at the very least. But it had been Saturday, and Potter always came on Saturdays and was able to stay later,
training late on Sundays, so obviously… No.

Potter was due any minute. Severus felt a tingle on his skin, his latest reaction to Potter’s magic. Then he felt its brilliance through the wards and his heart accelerated in anticipation. A light knock on the door, “Come in, Potter!” And here he was. Their eyes met and Harry smiled, a smile no straight man had the right to bestow upon a gay one. Severus could not help smiling back, feeling that he was showing his feelings for all to see by doing so.

“No book today?” asked Potter.

Hmm. Right. Severus had broken their ritual. “No. Not tonight. I just want to make the most of your visit, since it will be the last until school starts again.”

Potter, who was pouring the tea, interrupted his task to smile that smile at Severus again, as if he’d gotten an early Christmas present. He finished his task and brought the tea.

“That’s great,” he answered, bending down to place Severus’s cup in its precarious position. He sat down and crossed his legs. “That’s perfect,” he added.

They spoke of nothing stellar. Lovegood, and how glad Potter was that yet another of his close friends would be joining them; Christmas presents, of which Potter had to buy many he took great care in choosing, and of which Snape had to purchase none to speak of, as all the teachers got the same thing, ordered by owl, and Petr just saw his opera season tickets renewed. Everyone else got a card with a printed message addressed by his elf.

Potter looked at him pointedly. “Get me the same gift you give Septima and Filius and I’ll never speak to you again,” he said. “For that matter, get me opera tickets and I will never speak to you again, either…”

“Really. Do you think, for some reason, that you have a special status to me amongst my staff?” asked Severus, with a raised eyebrow. “More astonishingly, do you imagine yourself higher in my consideration than my… partner?”

“To the first I say yes, indubitably yes. I am your Wolfsbane brewing assistant,” explained Potter, very seriously. “As for the second,” he rolled his eyes, “I was not referring to your consideration but to the fact that I am not an aficionado of opera!”

“Oh… I see,” said Severus, caressing his chin with a thoughtful air.

“I hope so.”

“Well. I might have to think of something, then.” He raised an eyebrow. “So… Should I expect something special from you as well?”

Oh, Merlin. Did Potter even know how easy it would be to misinterpret that… look? It seemed to say something along the lines of “For Christmas, I will suck your cock under the table during dinner, and after dinner, I will wait in bed with only a bow on my cock so you can ravage me all night long.”

But Potter only said sweetly, “Of course. You are difficult to buy for, but I am up to the task!”

By the time Potter left, Severus needed yet one more cold shower. It was a good thing Petr was coming, after all. Regular sex would definitely put Potter’s unconscious flirting into perspective.

~o~
When he Apparated, Petr looked great, happy and carefree. They walked to the castle leisurely, talking easily. Though it had been almost two months since his last visit, neither of them seemed to feel the physical urgency that had so characterized his last visit. After all, Petr would be here for two whole weeks. They did not pass through the Hidden Corridor, but walked through the castle proper, meeting a few students and greeting Filch as they passed him, busy as he was helping with the Christmas decorating this year.

They had a drink and shared an Armagnac-flavored kiss before heading to the bedroom. Things heated up a little and soon they were both undressed, mock-fighting for dominance. It was all for show, as they each knew which role the other preferred. It didn’t take long for Petr to be face down on the mattress with his arm twisted behind his back by a wolfishly grinning Severus.

“On your knees, Petr,” he purred into the other man’s neck, releasing his hold.

Petr complied eagerly. After quickly slicking himself with lube, Severus slipped inside his welcoming heat with a sigh of pleasure. He started moving easily, in and out, in and out, suddenly realizing that Petr’s hole was entirely too welcoming for not having been stretched and not penetrated by anything larger than his own finger for well over a month. He pounded savagely into him two or three times.

“Who’s been fucking you, Petr?” he asked in a dangerous voice.

“No one.”

“Don’t… fucking… lie… to me…” growled Snape, punctuating his words with vicious shoves.

“I’ve been… going… to the club…” Severus was still pounding hard into him. “I’ve been… a bad… boy… Punish me… Severus…”

Angrily, Snape gave another couple of deep hard shoves and saw Petr’s hand come to his cock, as he was, as usual, turned on by the violent fucking. Suddenly Severus was sick of it, sick of the dominance play, sick of the power games and of Petr’s submissive tendencies. He did not want this any more, did not want this man any more. He stopped moving, his cock starting to soften.

“I can’t do this any more, Petr,” he said.

Petr tried to fuck himself on his cock a couple of times, then stopped too. “Do what?”

“Do this, with you, any more.”

They were both still for a moment.

“Severus, are you breaking up with me with your cock still up my arse?” asked Petr, disbelieving.

Snape pulled out with a wet pop and sat back on the bed. “Sorry. I guess I was.”

He pushed himself up so he could lean back against the head of the bed. Petr turned around and asked, pointing to his shrinking but still leaking prick, “And you could not hold that thought for another minute?”

Severus had to laugh. He couldn’t help it. Neither could Petr. They both chuckled for a while. He liked Petr, very much. Petr settled himself next to Severus and pulled the duvet over their legs and bellies. They sat quietly for a few moments.

“It’s Potter, isn’t it,” asked Petr, already knowing the answer.
“Yes.” No point denying it now.

“It’s always been Potter, hasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“You fucking bastard.”

“Yes.” They chuckled again.

“I’m sorry, Petr,” added Snape, meaning it.

“I know. I’m sorry too.”

“You knew, then?”

Petr shrugged. “You’d been flying. After that, it all made sense, you know?”

“But you still came back. Why?”

“You’re a great fuck, Sev.”

“Don’t call me Sev.”

“You just dumped me for a straight man who is fifteen years younger than I am. I’ll call you whatever the fuck I want.”

“Good point.”

They were quiet again for a while.

“You are in for a world of pain, my friend,” said Petr.

“Yes.”

Petr sighed. “I should go.”

“You’re all right?”

“I will be.”

“Good.”

They both got out of bed and dressed.

“I’ll walk you back.”

“No, please don’t. I want to go alone.”

“As you wish.”

Severus walked him to the door. They embraced, a hard quick hug, and Petr walked out. Before Severus could close the door, he stopped it with his hand. “I love you, Sev.” And he was gone.

Severus closed the door and walked back to his chair. He put his head in his hands, his mind filled with conflicting emotions. It took him a few minutes to identify the dominating one. Relief. No more lies. No more ambiguity. He was in love with Potter… Harry, and come what may, he would be true
He went into the shower and washed himself thoroughly. He came out of his bathroom wrapped in a towel and stripped his bed, making it anew with snowy white sheets. He took all his clothes, his towel, and his bedding and put them in his laundry basket, which he then Banished to the laundry room.

Naked, he slipped between the sheets, put his hands behind his head, and gave himself permission to think of Harry, in this room, in this bed. Harry walking to the sideboard in his perfect jeans, Harry on his broom in the moonlight, Harry laughing, Harry leaning against a column at the top of the stairs in his training leathers, Harry in his woolens, Harry’s hands, his smile, his eyes, his voice, his scent.

For the first time ever, he allowed his hand to grasp himself with Harry on his mind, allowed himself to imagine, imagine… His kiss, his taste, his touch, his skin, his scent everywhere, his voice whispering things in the dark… His orgasm was so achingly sweet, “Harry…” that he thought he might cry with the wonder of it. He slept.
Petr walked up to the ground floor, thinking of what he had just left behind. (Well, it had been done with six months ago, really, hadn’t it? And he had known it for two.) Five years. Five very good years. Severus had never made any promises, any commitment. Petr had already grieved, these past weeks, and moved on. Now it was official.

He was all right. Sad, but all right. Life would go on. He was almost to the front doors when he changed his course. He ran up the stairs of Gryffindor tower, all the way to the top. Completely out of breath, he knocked on the trap door. There was no response. He knocked harder.

Harry opened it, looking down on him with surprise. “Petr! Come in!”

Petr climbed through the trap door, which Harry let close behind him. They stood awkwardly for a moment, Harry wearing nothing but pyjama bottoms, hair tousled (good lord, but he looked fine…), Petr catching his breath.

“Sit, sit. Do you want… tea? A drink?”

“No, thanks. I came to cancel our flight tomorrow.”

“Oh… Well, okay. No problem.” Harry looked nonplussed.

“I am going back to Amsterdam.”

“Oh. When will you be back?”

“I won’t. Severus and I just broke up.”

“What?”

“We just broke up. So… you know, I’m going. Forever. No flight tomorrow.”

“Hmm.”

“Just thought you ought to know.”

“All right… Thanks…”

“He is a very jealous man, Severus. His one fault, really.”

Harry looked very confused. “Is that why you broke up, then?”

“No, no. Just letting you know. In case.”

“In case what?”

“I’ve no idea. I’ve got to go. Bye, Harry. Do come say hello if you ever are in Amsterdam. We could go flying.”

“All right.”

Harry helped him with the door and Petr started down.
“Bye, then,” said Potter.

Petr just kept going, waving vaguely, but not looking back, feeling pretty good about himself. He liked Harry. Always had. (How fair was it for a straight man to look that good? What a waste.)
Harry closed his door and sat on his couch. What had just happened?

He had been deep asleep, unconscious, really. He had trained to exhaustion for hours in the frigid cold, to fall asleep quickly without having to lie there letting his mind wander to the dungeons, to the image of Snape grabbing Petr’s arse in the corridor that time, to the sounds Snape had made, and the look on his face.

He had thought he heard a knock, almost didn’t get up, but then he had definitely heard a harder one and had stumbled down the circular staircase to go and open the door.

Had Petr DeVries really just been here? To cancel his flight with him tomorrow? They hadn’t had any plans for tomorrow, had they?

“We just broke up. So… You know. I’m going. Forever. No flight tomorrow. Just thought you ought to know.”

Perhaps Petr had been drinking? He certainly had not seemed overly put out for a man who had just broken up a five-year relationship. Quite chipper, really.

Harry stepped onto his balcony, barefoot in the snow, shivering in the December night.

There was Petr, in the moonlight, walking alone to the Apparation point. Against all odds, Harry had not been dreaming. He walked back in, hugging himself for warmth, his heart beating so hard he could feel it through the wall of his chest. He stood there, incapable of but one thought.

Snape was free. Snape was free. Snape was free.

He sat on his couch, his head in his hands, and started laughing. Snape was free. There were weeks and months and years ahead of them, and Snape was free. He recognized the feeling in his gut, warm, and intense, and surging. Hope. There was hope. He stood, barely. He was still punch drunk with exhaustion, and dragged himself up the stairs and back to bed. He collapsed, a smile on his face. Snape was free.

Harry woke up late, having trained plenty the day before. The sun was already up, but it was snowing, big fluffy white flakes. He loved snow. He got up and stretched. He loved stretching. He got into his small shower. Ahhh… He loved hot water.

He got out humming, dried himself (he loved his fluffy towels), and dressed in warm comfortable clothing. He really loved cashmere. Down his little staircase he went. He loved his rooms. It suddenly all came back.

Snape was free.

At once, he panicked. What if it had been a dream? It could have been a dream, the whole thing, a dream. He flew down the tower steps, hardly touching any of them, and continued down the main staircase like a madman. He tried to minimally compose himself, then entered the Great Hall.

There was Snape. And he was alone.
Harry’s heart had a life of its own, dancing to its own beat. He walked in, sat next to Neville (he loved Neville), and tried to make sense of his silverware. The spoon for the farmer’s cheese, the fork for the grapefruit. (Better not touch the knife this morning.) He drank his shot of wheat grass. (He loved wheat grass.) He did not! He loathed the stuff. He had to get a grip and to stop giggling like an idiot. Neville was looking at him funny. He took a deep breath, and snorted with laughter again.

“What is with you, Harry?” asked Neville, smiling tentatively.

Harry just burst out laughing as if Neville had just said the funniest thing in the world. Neville looked puzzled, but then his lips twitched and the next moment he was laughing as well. For several minutes, they could not look at each other without dissolving into manic giggles.

Hermione sat down in Dermott’s spot. “What is so funny?” she asked.

It got them going again. Finally, they calmed down a little.

“So,” said Hermione. “Give.”

Neville cleared his throat. “I’ve no idea,” he admitted. “Harry started it.”

Harry looked at them, wiping his eyes. “I’ve no idea either,” he lied. “No idea at all.”

Hermione looked disgusted. “You are both certifiably insane.” It was her turn to chuckle when they nodded at the same time, very seriously.

Septima Vector arrived, very late for her, having obviously enjoyed a bit of a sleep in on the first day of break. “Good morning, everybody. Good morning, Severus. Where is Petr?”

“I’m afraid he had to go back to Amsterdam,” answered Snape, his voice even.

“When will he be back?” Septima inquired, sitting down and unfolding her napkin.

Snape took a moment before answering. Harry held his breath. “I am sorry, Septima. Petr is not coming back. We have… parted ways.”

“Oh,” said Septima, her glass of juice halfway to her lips; then she shrugged and said, “Oh, well. Life goes on,” and drank up.

Harry breathed. Snape was free.

“We are still friends, good friends,” Snape added to no one in particular, trying to ease the remaining awkwardness of the moment. “We have just ended our… closer association.”

“Well, he doesn’t seem too broken up about it, does he?” whispered Hermione.

“Guess not,” replied Harry, the urge to laugh almost too strong to resist. He had to get out and calm himself down, or he would just… explode. He had a brilliant thought. “Hermione, are the kids up?”

“Yes, I’m sure they are. Why?”

“Do you think they’d like to build a snow fort?”

Hermione smiled brightly at him. “I’m sure they would be thrilled. Let me go get them dressed for outside. We’ll be down in a few minutes.” She left, a bounce in her step.

Harry turned to Neville. “Well, Neville, how about it?”
“What?” asked Neville, looking confused.

“Go put on some clothes. We’re going to build a snow fort.”

“Harry, we’re thirty years old,” he said seriously.

Harry, who had already gotten up, sat back down. He looked in Neville’s eyes, his hand on his shoulder. “Friend, have you got something better to do?”

Neville’s lips stretched into a smile. “Not that I can think of.”

“All right, then. Let’s go!”

They spent the whole morning outside. They built a snow fort, then snowmen. Hagrid joined them and built a snow dragon. Flitwick started the war. He had been pretending to just admire their labor, but was discreetly making snowballs. When he had a large enough pile he charmed them to hit randomly, all the while looking perfectly innocent. Hermione figured out what he was up to and retaliated the old-fashioned way.

Soon it was bedlam. Dermott, Witherspoon, and even Filch joined in. The few students that had remained over the holidays couldn’t believe their eyes, but joined in enthusiastically. By the time they finished, they were all red-cheeked, happy, and soaked to the bone. As he walked back upstairs to change for lunch, Harry felt he had finally gotten his emotions under control. He didn’t think he had ever been this happy.

~o~

Harry spent the rest of the day in Hogsmeade with Neville, shopping for presents. They were both going to the Burrow for Christmas day and there would be plenty of folks to spoil there.

Christmas Eve at the castle had been pretty quiet, just a bit nicer than a normal dinner. Harry was a little hesitant about whether or not to show up at Severus’s door afterwards. On the one hand, they always spent Saturday nights together, and he really, really wanted to give Severus the present he had finally received from France that day in private. On the other hand, they were not supposed to spend an evening together until the eighth of January, and going now felt a bit like dancing on Petr’s grave…

What if despite his cool demeanor at breakfast, Snape was really hurting, but just hid it well? He might want to grieve in private. Harry’s gift might be completely inappropriate…

The hell with it. Harry wanted to go. He wanted to spend the evening with the man he was in love with, savoring the fact that it was the first night when he could act naturally without constantly double-checking his behavior, not worry his feelings might show, and maybe even flirt a little without guilt.

At eight, he was knocking on Snape’s door. He jumped when the man opened the door himself, and about melted into a puddle when he said, in a soft, low, low voice, “I was hoping it would be you…” before moving aside to let Harry enter. Harry put his parcel on the sideboard.

To Harry’s surprise, the chairs were gone from in front of the fire. Instead there was a thick rug with large cushions, and Snape was wearing… well-fitting? Glove-like? Anyway, the most marvelous trousers Harry had ever seen. Black suede trousers…

“Sorry it’s so warm, Potter. I’ve been lounging on the floor, and there was a cold spot…” explained Snape, and he removed his shirt, leaving only a sleeveless vest, the name of which Harry’s brain so
conveniently provided. A wife beater. Weird name, that, but a wonderful, wonderful garment it was, showcasing defined shoulders, and biceps, and triceps, and smooth, smooth skin, and …

“Join me?” Snape was back lounging on the floor, large pillows behind his shoulders and neck, feet towards the flames.

The invitation came just in time, since Harry had become so weak-kneed he might have dropped to the floor anyway. The pillows next to Snape’s had obviously been Transfigured from his usual chair, but before Harry could lean on them Snape reached over one-handedly to pull Harry’s jumper up and off, throwing it over his shoulder, and then leaned over and removed Harry’s boots, throwing them one after the other so they both hit his front door.

“Better, no?” Snape asked. “That’s a nice shirt. Soft.” He was slowly running the back of his hand up and down Harry’s silk t-shirt, apparently unaware of the burgeoning nipples or of the embarrassing sound that escaped Harry’s lips. Harry had not said a word, his brain on ‘pause’.

To his great disappointment, Snape leaned against his cushions again, his hands behind his head, looking at the dancing flames. He breathed deep and sighed. “I always love the way you dress. I love… Shit. I think I’m drunk.”

Snape tried to touch his nose with his little finger and poked himself in the eye. He laughed. “Fuck yes! I’m sooo drunk. How could anyone sober miss that nose?” He turned to Harry. “Sorry, Potter. Celebrating. I’ll be right back. Before I yank off your socks and start sucking on your toes or something.” He got up effortlessly and gracefully, showing none of the intoxication he claimed, retrieved his shirt and disappeared through a door at the back of the room.

Wow. That had been… different. Harry got up. There was a bottle of Firewhisky on the floor within reach of Snape’s hand, next to broken pieces of its wax seal. It was three quarters empty and there were no glasses in sight. Oh, yes. Snape had been good and drunk, all right. Harry wondered if the man had just collapsed on his bed and was going to sleep it off.

With a vague wave of his hand, he put the room to rights, not even giving it a thought. He also put his boots back on, and the room having returned to a normal temperature, was glad to slip his cashmere jumper back over his t-shirt. Grieving the aborted toe sucking, he helped himself to a cup of tea, setting another on the arm of Snape’s chair, just in case. He noticed another small package on the sideboard besides his own and wondered if it was his present.

Suddenly Snape was back, and looked very pleased that his rooms were back to normal. He sat down in his chair and took a sip of tea. “Please allow me to apologize, Potter. I’m afraid I had a bit too much Firewhisky. I hope I did not do or say anything to offend you while under the influence. The sobering potion I just took gives one the equivalent of eight hours of sleep and cures any hangover, but I’m afraid one’s memory of what happened is just as unreliable as it normally would be.”

“I hardly noticed that you were intoxicated. Don’t mention it,” said Harry, who would have given his weight in Galleons to know what else Snape loved besides his clothing and maybe even more for the aforementioned toe sucking.

“I was thinking you might not come this evening,” mentioned Snape, “that perhaps you might have made other plans. I am happy that it is not the case.” Snape walked to the sideboard. “I have a present for you.”

Smiling, he handed him the small package Harry had seen earlier and sat down again. Harry removed the white ribbon around the box and looked up to see Snape biting his lower lip as he
watched Harry’s reaction. He was nervous! Harry smiled and peeled back the blue paper, uncovering a plain wood box. He opened it, and inside was a simple glass flask, the kind the students used every day. The potion inside was blue, like the paper, and the label said, To warm extremities while flying in cold weather.

“One sip, and your toes, your fingers, and your nose will stay nice and warm in any weather condition for up to four hours,” said Snape.

“Really? Merlin! What’s it called? I wish I’d known it existed when I played for Puddlemere! I’d given anything for something like that, especially in the winter of ’04!”

“It does not have a name… Yet. I made it so you’d be more comfortable when you train in the mornings and it is cold outside,” said Snape, offhandedly.

“You created this? Recently? For me?”

“I thought about it the first time we flew in the falling snow, but it took until last week to perfect.” Snape smiled. “It even tastes like blueberries. Two weeks ago it tasted like socks smell. But you always complained about the taste of my potions when you were younger so I persevered…”

Harry looked at the small bottle in his hand and wondered how many hours of research it represented. He was touched beyond words. Never mind that if Snape wanted to sell the patent to a Quidditch supply company, it would make him a small fortune. He had created this potion for Harry. Harry looked up at him. He could tell the man was pleased Harry liked his gift, but he had no idea really, no concept, of what that gift meant to him and Harry could not tell him.

Even though Harry knew he probably read too much into it, he felt cherished by a man he loved. He chose to smile at Snape and to put in that smile all that he couldn’t say. Snape looked pleasantly surprised, and smiled back.

Harry got up and retrieved his gift. It felt far less precious than what he had just received, but it was all he had.

Watching Snape notice his perfect wrapping job, he was glad he had put in the effort. The wide satin bow was grey and the paper itself a pale orange. It, too, contained a wooden box. Smiling at the similitude, Snape opened it. On a bed of silvery silk was a bottle of 1909 Artemis Armagnac. It was a century old, one of a kind, the oldest Artemis to be found, a gift to Harry from the patriarch of the Artemis family himself.

The Chateau and its magnificent wine cave had been slowly slipping toward the Dordogne River, the foundation—unbeknownst to the builders five centuries ago—resting on a deep cavern which had been collapsing on itself. Nothing could be done, according to the architects of the French monuments, until a young British architecture student had gone spelunking inside the cave and had, if he was to be believed, made a hole in a wall that allowed the water that weakened the cave to flow out to the Dordogne.

“Impossible!” had said the architects, “That cave doesn’t even have an access!” And they were absolutely right. But Harry was not an architecture student. He was a wizard. A powerful wizard. He could move rock from very, very deep below vineyards, where it would never be missed, to perfectly fill a natural cavern under the foundation of a castle, correcting a four-century-old problem, and asking, when promised “Anything! Anything you want!” by the grateful owner, for his most valuable bottle.

Snape looked up at Harry, apparently amazed. “A century old Artemis? Potter, how in the world did
you get hold of this?”

He liked it! “I have my ways…”

Snape chuckled. “So we both gave each other something to keep our extremities warm. This is incredible, Potter, thank you.”

“Oh, it’s only one of two. You will, of course, get a pair of red socks with flying Golden Snitches, like the rest of the staff, including the house-elves…” Harry burst out laughing at Snape’s horrified look. “Just kidding. It’s actually red silk boxers with roaring lions.” He was laughing again.

Snape rolled his eyes, but he was grinning. “Grow up, Potter,” he said with no venom whatsoever.

“Talking about interesting accessories to your wardrobe, can I see it?”

Snape chuckled. “It’s in my office, next to the Sorting Hat.”

“Please?”

“Oh, all right. But it’s only because you softened me up with that century-old brandy, you understand?” He stood up and threw a fistful of Floo powder into the fire and totally took Harry by surprise by pulling him tight against his body and stepping through. He released him and stepped away as soon as they were in the Headmaster’s office. The torches lit immediately and Snape pointed to the bookshelves behind his desk.

Snape had had no idea why he had been requested to attend the reading of the will of a woman he hardly knew but Neville’s gran had bequeathed him a very special item. There on the bookshelf, next to the familiar Sorting Hat, sat Augusta Longbottom’s notorious vulture hat. When Minerva had announced Snape’s inheritance, poor Neville had thought he would die of embarrassment, but to his complete surprise Snape had just laughed, a good from-the-belly kind of laugh.


Snape leaned against his desk, arms crossed, facing Harry. “Yes, that is what all the men say, the first time they see my… hat,” he quipped.

Harry exploded in laughter.

Snape made a face. “That sobering potion might not be as effective as I thought… Please forgive this tasteless innuendo.”

“Why are you apologizing? It was very funny. I’m thirty years old, Snape. I think I can handle the occasional sexual innuendo and a few tasteless jokes are not going to change my high opinion of you,” said Harry. “Besides, it’s liberating. I won’t feel so horrified if I ever say something uncouth.”

“Uncouth?” Snape grinned. “Potter, I am impressed. To think I used to believe you to be inarticulate.”

“Yes, uncouth,” repeated Harry, smiling. “You know… rude, coarse, impolite, vulgar, offensive, distasteful, indelicate…”

Harry loved Snape’s rumbling laugh. With Snape resting on his desk, they were of a height, only separated by a couple of feet. Their eyes met and held. Snape’s eyes were so dark, his gaze deep but soft, too, like velvet. Harry did not trust his reading of its meaning, all too aware he was projecting his own feelings and desires onto Snape. Though the man was not looking away, and a smile was
floating on his lips…”

“My dear boys! So good to see you both!” Dumbledore’s portrait had woken up, breaking the moment (if moment there had been outside of Harry’s feverish imagination). “Happy Christmas!”

“Happy Christmas, Professor Dumbledore,” replied Harry, looking up at the painting of the old man.

“Happy Christmas, Albus. It is good to see you awake. I was starting to consider kissing you…”

Dumbledore chuckled. “You may be the Half-Blood Prince, but I am no Sleeping Beauty. You are doing such a fine job as Headmaster, there is no need for any of our advice. It is nice to sleep when you dream of heaven…”

“We will let you sleep, then. Sweet dreams, Albus.”

“Good-bye, boys. It is good to see you together at last…”

They left the office through the door and made their way to the Great Hall. Harry still had an enormous pile of presents to wrap before leaving for the Burrow, and considering that there was absolutely no way he was going to stick to his diet when faced with Molly’s cooking, he had to train in the morning.

Besides, he was self aware enough to know that he would try and create another ‘moment’, knowing full well that they just happened and could not be willed into being. It would be the fastest way to completely screw things up with Snape. No matter how the man felt about his break-up, Harry needed to give him some time before he started to try to plant the seed of the idea that maybe, just maybe, the two of them could be more than friends…

“I’m for home, Snape. I still have a lot of wrapping to do before tomorrow, then I need to go train in the frigid morning to give your gift a trial by fire.” He smiled at Snape. “It was amazingly thoughtful. I… It…Well, what I mean is… Anyway, thanks. Really.”

“Ah! Here is the ever-so-articulate Harry Potter I remember!” said Snape, smirking.

“Git,” replied Harry, smiling.

“Your gift was much appreciated as well, Potter.”

“Well, it was no vulture hat, but one does what one can. Oh, by the way, are you still planning on dropping by the Burrow tomorrow afternoon?”

“Unless unexpectedly otherwise detained, I mean to honor Molly’s generous invitation indeed.”

“Great. Something to look forward to.” Harry started up the stairs. “I’ll see you tomorrow then, Good night, Snape.”

“Good night, Potter.”
Chapter 77

~o~ Duty before pleasure ~o~

Sadly, by five o’clock the next day, Severus had to owl Molly his apologies. One third year and three first year students who were spending their holidays at Hogwarts came up with the brilliant idea of sledding off the roof of the library, counting on the thick snowdrift twelve feet below to cushion their landing. Alas, the sled had been kept indoors and the pads were warm, making snow stick to them and considerably reducing the sled’s velocity. As a result, the landing was short of the snow drift, the sled falling backward instead against the library wall and bursting through the priceless stained glass windows before sled and students fell to the stone floor, twenty feet below.

Two skull fractures, four broken arms, two broken legs, eleven broken ribs (including one perforated lung), multiple lacerations from the glass (including one severed artery), two bruised kidneys, and last but not least, a severe spinal injury at the level of the second thoracic vertebrae, was the toll taken from the four children, surprisingly enough none of them Gryffindors.

Two healers from St. Mungo’s were called to give Poppy a hand. Dermott McClallan was spending Christmas with his fiancée’s family and Matt Pilot had gone home to his father and brother. So Severus was called to exercise his art. Poppy would have trusted no one else to brew the extremely complex and delicate nerve-regenerating potion that young Perry Beetroot needed to ingest within six hours of his injury if he was to ever walk again.

Severus called on Hagrid to get him some centaur’s blood, definitely not an easy task, especially when you only have an hour to do so. Luckily he had all the remaining ingredients in his private stores.

By midnight, all four students were resting comfortably in the infirmary, out of danger. Severus felt completely drained after holding young Perry’s hand as he screamed in pain while the potion did its work. There was nothing to be done to alleviate it. It was awful and heartbreaking. The poor child was in a complete body bind, his facial muscles and his respiratory pathways the only part of his body not immobilized.

Though his pain was not quite that of Cruciatius it was extreme nonetheless, leaving only minutes of respite between bouts of excruciating suffering. After two hours, the boy had no voice left to scream, his face bathed in tears, his eyes glazed. As Severus gently wiped the tears off cheeks still showing the roundness of childhood for the umpteenth time, the boy whispered to him, “Let me die, sir, please…” before wailing pathetically once more, his voice broken.

During the next reprieve Severus gently said to him, “We are never tested in life with anything more than what we are able to withstand. The severity of your challenge tells me, Mr. Beetroot, that you have to be one of the strongest, most resilient and bravest people I was ever given the honor to meet. Be assured that your suffering is almost at an end and that you are past the worst of it. You will survive this and come out the stronger for it. You make me exceptionally proud to be a Slytherin.”

As the pain took hold of him again, the child handled it with renewed determination. It was over in another twenty minutes. Suddenly, relief appeared on the small face and his whole body seemed to relax within the bind. “It’s over,” he said, astonished, beaming at Severus. “It’s over and I survived!”

Severus smiled back. “I never doubted it for an instant.”
Poppy came to check on him, alerted by a monitoring spell. She removed the body bind, only keeping the vertebral column immobile. “Well done, Mr. Beetroot, well done. This might easily be the hardest thing you will ever have to face in your life and you handled it with amazing aplomb. You need to rest now…” She gave Perry a dose of Skele-Gro to insure the perfect healing of the vertebrae, dosed the boy with Dreamless Sleep, ruffled his hair and left again.

Severus got up. “Have a good night, Mr. Beetroot.”

The child’s eyes were already closing. “I used to be so scared of you, sir, but now I see … why Coach Potter…. likes you so much. …. He says… you…. are…”

The child was deep asleep now, and Severus was amused that he had the urge to shake the boy and ask him what exactly Potter said he was. ‘An irresistible sexy bastard’ would have been rather nice, though that was fairly unlikely. ‘His brilliant, unconventionally attractive, favorite fantasy, perhaps? A walking wet dream with the brains to match? Severus guffawed at his thoughts as he walked away.

He fell gratefully into bed, though he could not help but be disappointed to have missed his chance to see Potter. He was still pleased beyond reason when he remembered Potter’s unguarded reaction regarding his planned visit to the Burrow.

“Great. Something to look forward to.”

Potter had plans, now. He was going to Andromeda Tonks for a few days, and they would not see each other until the Malfoy New Year’s Eve bash, where they certainly would not have any chance to be alone.

He was being ridiculous. Since he had ended his relationship with Petr, he imagined double meanings to every one of Potter’s actions, to every one of his looks…

In his office, he’d actually truly believed Potter and he were about to kiss before being interrupted by Albus. He had wanted to consign the old man’s portrait to the fire in the grate in frustration…

He could not imagine what Potter might have done to obtain the bottle of century old Artemis Armagnac he had gifted him with. Severus knew Potter went to great lengths to choose and obtain the right presents for his friends, yet he had purchased most of the rest of them in Hogsmeade.

Surely the Armagnac showed he had made more than his customary effort in finding an appropriate gift for Severus? Was the Headmaster right to imagine it showed a unique desire to please Severus, above and beyond even Potter’s natural desire to please his offerings’ recipients?

His own desire to create the potion had originally been completely selfish and practical. It had also been challenging and fun. He had almost discussed it with Potter one evening, until it had occurred to him what a perfect present it would be. Potter had been appreciative beyond his wildest expectation.

Truly, it would have been underserved had Severus been content with achieving his primary goal, but somehow, he had been driven to go an extra step and make the potion palatable. Only for Potter would he have made such an unnecessary effort and it had required more work and creativity than the potion itself and had been much harder to accomplish. The potion now tasted deliciously of blueberries, and he had colored it to match. A foolish exercise to be sure, but the smile Potter had rewarded him with had made it absolutely worthwhile…

~o~
Severus spent the next few days organizing the finished DADA syllabi into their final book format. He scheme for the class was working extremely well, his team of writers putting out superlative material, something they would all be able to be proud of once the seven-tome comprehensive DADA manual was printed in book form.

Each and every one of Potter’s syllabi was above and beyond expectations, his efforts amongst the best of all of them. His edited section on wand lore, which had been his own contribution to start with, had been taught right before the holidays. It had been received by the students with wild interest, filling a need no one had been aware of.

It was helping greatly in the casting of such wand-related spells as Expelliarmus, making it much easier for every sixth and seventh year to learn to Accio their own wand, teaching the students how to approach someone else's wand the right way to be able to use it efficiently in case of emergency or, in case of the seventh years, to attempt double casting. Severus himself had learned many things reading that section and now felt a new appreciation for his own wand.

Harry’s courage, his loyalty, his athletic abilities had overshadowed his keen intelligence. Severus’s attraction to him grew with everything he discovered about him. He was so in love with him, he knew his control was slipping dangerously.

How long before he mistook an innocent smile for the invitation he so wanted to see? How soon would he ruin everything by showing his feelings? He had barely caught himself in his drunkenness on Christmas Eve.

His celebratory drink by the fire, marking the end of his disgraceful use of a man as worthy as Petr and his acknowledgement of his heart’s desire, had turned to two then three drinks, then the opening of a new bottle and the discarding of his glass altogether as he also faced the frustration and heartache the relationship with Potter would lead to. How could he stand the constant platonic presence of the man he loved in his life? A man so beautiful, so carelessly sexy, so attractive, so innocently tempting?

Then Potter had knocked and entered, smelling oh so good, looking delectable, and Severus’s addled brain had come up with the decision, since Potter’s shirt was so soft, to just ’fess up. Thank Merlin for the self-preserving emergency override which had apparently kicked in, perhaps a reflex remaining from years of holding back certain facts no matter how long a torture the Dark Lord subjected him to, no matter how close to losing consciousness he was.

Maybe these few days apart would help him. Perhaps he would be able to achieve some kind of peace with the situation and the next time he saw Potter he would have his feelings contained and would once again be in control of the situation.
Chapter 78

~o~ Dreams Do Come True ~o~

His Uncle Lucius was one of Teddy’s favorite people. When Lucius’s owl came, telling Andromeda that he and Narcissa were going to the Manor a day early and that he hoped his favorite sister-in-law and his nephew could join them, the child was so excited. The Manor was a place of wonder and Uncle Lucius knew it like the back of his hand, including secret rooms and passages, hidden staircases and deep dungeons.

The bestest part, though, was that Uncle Lucius needed him, Teddy, to open all the hidden doors and say all the magic passwords because, for some mysterious reason, Uncle Lucius was without magic.

Harry assured them they should go. He had some work to do at Hogwarts he had been putting off, so, really, this all worked out perfectly.

He’d had a great time with Teddy, really he had. But … Since Molly had received Snape’s apology, Harry had been unable to stop wondering if perhaps Snape was not avoiding him. Looking back, Harry worried that, whether it had been his smile to Snape when given his gift or his staring at him trying to work up the courage to kiss him in the Headmaster’s office, his advances had had the finesse of an elephant in a glassware shop and had probably been just as welcome.

He knew he was paranoid, was quite sure his overtures had not even been noticed, but he wanted to go back to Hogwarts to see for himself that everything was fine, that his relationship with Snape was intact.

He congratulated himself on remembering to Apparate outside the gates. He had found himself distractedly using his absurd power a couple of times lately; actually, since helping Snape with the Wolfsbane, it was as if suddenly his magic had been reminded what it was capable of and resented anew its constant binding. Home, he dressed to fly, grabbed his Arrow, and headed down to the dungeons.

Snape, smiling, was holding his door open for him when he arrived. “I thought I was well rid of you for a couple more days, Potter. Proven wrong again, I see.”

His actions took all the sting out of his words, and Harry smiled back, feeling incredibly happy. “Put on your gear, Snape, it’s cold as a Muggle’s tit out there and we’re going flying. Lucky for us, I have this amazing (and delicious) potion that will keep our toes and fingers nice and warm.”

“Lucky indeed. Such a potion could only have been created by an absolute genius. Wherever did you get it?” replied Snape as he disappeared into his bedroom laughing his wonderful laugh.

Harry leaned on his broom as he waited, grinning widely. Snape was obviously happy to see him, in a wonderful playful mood. He was so glad he’d come back.

~o~

They started at the pitch because Snape wanted Harry to teach him to roll. It was harder than he’d expected, but he realized just how extraordinarily good Potter was at his job. His explanation was technical yet clear, dissecting the move into its individual components.

The overcoming of the broom stabilizers, the gravity-powered quarter turn to the upside-down position, the magically powered return to upright position, and the boost to the stabilizer so as not to
start another unwanted roll.

He was very patient, his correction of Snape’s errors sounding like gentle pointers, and finally, once Snape had accomplished a couple of technically perfect rolls, his grinning final advice: “Okay, now you forget everything we just went over, fly to the hoops and back, and just roll without giving it a thought. Your body and your magic know what to do. Just have fun!”

Severus had been doubtful, but he did as he was told, zooming around the hoops and, when it felt right, rolling. It was perfect, completely natural, and it was fun. He laughed and made his way back to Potter, who was smiling at him.

“I know how to roll!” he said.

Potter agreed. “You know how to roll.”

Severus could not help but laugh again. Merlin, how he loved that man. “Let’s fly to Scourne Bay, what do you think?”

“Sure. I doubt there will be anyone on the A894, with the snow that fell again last night.”

They flew close to the ground, swiftly, Severus once again marveling at his broom. Well, at the broom Potter seemed to have permanently loaned him, anyway. They were side by side, quite close, often turning to smile at each other. Potter had been right. The road had not even been cleared from last night’s snow. Near the ocean there was a wicked wind and enormous clouds were racing inland from the water. The waves were very tall, white-capped, crashing violently against the rocky shore.

They stopped their flight, hovering, and Potter must have done something because they suddenly were insulated from the wind and the noise of the storm, able to relax on their brooms. “Look at that,” said Potter. “The storm is moving inland. There’s going to be a blizzard tonight, and another serious snow dump. Let’s follow the coast for a while, do you mind? I love to watch the ocean in a storm. We’ll cut over by Priest Island to avoid Ullpool and start inland at Loch Ewe, if that’s all right with you.”

“You know the coast very well.”

“I don’t like Obliviating people.”

Severus nodded in understanding.

“Snape, if the wind gets too much, let me know,” said Potter seriously. “We can head inland at any time. It will much worse when we cut through the bay by Priest Island, so if you can barely stand it before that, we should forget about it.”

Severus was not insulted. Harry had played Quidditch many times in appalling conditions, after being awake for a couple of days. He, on the other hand, had flown more in the past six months than in the last twenty years put together.

They started down the coast, Potter flying on the edge of the cliff, adding the ascending air currents to the powerful wind and playing with the seagulls, which also seemed to relish the turbulent conditions. Severus, more sedately above land and close to the ground, could sometimes catch the sound of Potter’s laughter.

The storm was rolling in, the clouds now overhead, low and fast moving, threatening. Potter rejoined him and pointed to the ocean, his gesture indicating it was time to cut across the bay to stay out of view of the Muggle village of Ullpool. He tilted his head questioningly and Severus grinned and
nodded, deciding to challenge himself.

As soon as they left the land, he started questioning his sanity. He felt like a cork on a mountain stream. Maintaining a constant altitude required all his concentration and a worrying amount of magic. Potter, on the other hand, was having a great time riding the turbulences. Maybe that was the key. Severus sped up and stopped fighting the wind, forcing himself to let go of his fear and relax, trusting his instincts, trusting his broom and his magic. What had been a terrifying flight became a wild exhilarating ride.

Potter flew close to him for a moment and they exchanged grins.

“I knew you’d figure it out!” yelled Potter. “…..great instincts…… graceful!”

The wind had swallowed half his words, but his smile was radiant, and he had looked at Severus with unmistakable warmth. That Potter’s approval should please him so was … well, yet another symptom of his complete surrender to his feelings. He was so fucked! He laughed out loud, sped up some more, and let the storm carry him.

~o~

Watching Snape’s efforts at controlling his ride in the chaotic elements without seeming to, Harry saw the exact moment when the man understood that he was fighting a losing fight and made the leap to trust his instincts and his broom. From there, he rode as he did everything else, with ease and grace. Though through watching Snape’s flying skills improve in the past few months, Harry already knew the man had great instincts paired with natural ability, it was rewarding to see it confirmed.

It warmed him to know Snape was genuinely having a good time, having often suspected that perhaps Snape flew mostly to please him. Harry just had expressed his pleasure. He flew closer and they grinned at each other. Harry knew, he just knew, that this man was his destiny. It just was not possible that he should feel such sweeping, all-encompassing love for someone for nothing. It would happen. Maybe not today, or next week, or next month, but it would.

He watched Snape dance with the wind and smiled, warmed to the core. He gazed out to sea, watching the increasingly powerful… What was that? Oh, for fuck’s sake! Of all the harebrain things! A fucking plane! Small two-seater, mono-engine, a Piper, Harry thought, getting the shit beat out of it by the storm. Its engine was coughing, sputtering, it was banking out of control and dropping closer and closer to the water.

Shit, one more cough and the engine had stopped. The plane was only about four hundred meters high and the propeller was starting to drop down. Oh, fucking hell, they were nose-diving. Harry whipped out his wand and flattened out their flight. He needed to get closer. They were still going down, though at a slower rate, but he was getting no help from the pilot. The ailerons, the flaps, and the tail elevator were pushing down the nose.

Snape was at his side, able to ignore the wind, which carried them to and fro. His wand was in his hand.

“Can you lower the elevators?” yelled Harry, busy keeping the damn plane horizontal.

Snape gave him a blank look. “The flaps on the tail. They need to go down,” he yelled.

Snape nodded, pointed his wand, and soon enough the tail elevator evened out.

“The same with the wing flaps!” yelled Harry.
It was a relief when, after Snape’s intervention, the plane stopped fighting him. Harry could see Priest Island, still quite far off. Its cliffs were at least seventy-five meters high. He could not let the plane drop below that level. As always when he used the spell, he heard Hermione’s childhood voice in his mind, “It’s LeviOsa, not levioSA!”

But a Piper plane was no feather, and doing a Wingardium Leviosa from an airborne moving object to another airborne moving object was no picnic. Snape was still close to him and Harry suddenly felt the man’s hand on his shoulder offering moral support, the only thing he could offer at that point.

Harry accelerated forward, no point in dilly-dallying. He was glad to feel that the faster speed helped keep the plane aloft. Soon the cliffs were in sight. Harry tried to balance things so the plane would only be a couple of meters above the cliffs when they reached the island, so the landing would not be too rough. The damn thing had wheels, and there was a cushion of about a meter of snow on the ground.

Oh great! Somebody in the plane suddenly decided they didn’t like Harry’s plan, and catching him completely by surprise, raised the flaps again, causing the plane to both slow down and drop suddenly. The left wheel hit the edge of the cliff and broke off, the plane crashed nose first in the snow in a spin that was going to throw it off the cliff, and the right wing folded.

Harry stopped the plane’s forward motion and all went still, the disturbed snow falling back gently on top of the plane. Harry and Snape landed, sinking in the snow to their thighs. Harry Transfigured the soles of his boots into snowshoes and made his way to the downed Piper.

He automatically created an area of peace around the plane, getting them out of the winds and the sounds of the storm, and climbed onto the plane’s nose. Through the windshield, he could see the pilot. His head had fallen forward, his eyes were open, and a rictus of pain was on his face. His hands were on his lap and his skin had a grey tinge to it. “The pilot is dead,” he reported to Snape. “I’m pretty sure he had a heart attack. A while back, I think.”

In the co-pilot seat was a woman leaning on the back of the chair, her wavy golden-red hair in a braid, skin pale, and bright red blood dripping from her lips and seeping from her ear. She opened her bright blue eyes and blinked slowly at Harry. “The woman in the co-pilot seat is badly injured, but she’s alive, Snape!” He jumped off and rushed to the door on her side. The door window had a telltale starburst break. He helped Snape wrestle the door open. The woman was not wearing her safety harness. Snape was running a diagnostic spell over her.

“Muggle, skull fracture, brain swelling, broken fifth spinal vertebra, crushed ribcage, perforated lung, cardiac tamponade, fractured ulna, broken pelvis.”

Harry had gone across to the pilot’s side again and had managed to open the pilot’s door and enter the plane. He could hear the sound of an electrical arc forming off and on somewhere in the bowels of the plane. He came to the woman’s other side. He and Snape exchanged a look. No matter what they did, the woman only had moments left. Harry nearly jumped out of his skin when the woman’s hand gripped his arm. He looked up at her.

“…He’s alone… in the world!” she whispered, unable to take a breath. “He has no one… no one… my baby…” her eyes lost their brilliance. She was gone.

Harry stood up and looked around the small compartment behind the seat. There was a blue blanket covering something in the corner. Dreading what he would find, he lifted it. He was met with bright blue eyes and a toothless grin. The baby was in a car seat with a three-point harness and plenty of cushioning. He seemed absolutely fine. Something was off, though… though Harry could not figure out what.
Snape had joined him in the small space and was running the same diagnostic on the child he had run on his mother. He looked at Harry with relief. “The child is fine, Potter.” He chuckled. “From the magical trace, when things got bumpy, it seem the little guy wrapped himself in a cushioning charm. That and this excellent Muggle car seat and here he is, not a scratch on him…”

“Of course! He’s magical!” Harry smiled, recognizing what had seemed off to him. “His parents were Muggles, Snape, but he’s magical!” He looked again at the baby, who was busy making bubbles with his mouth. He was wearing a gold bracelet with a small plaque. Harry caught the chubby arm and looked at the bracelet. The name ‘Frederic’ between two small stars. He lifted the little hat on the baby’s head, uncovering short bright red curls, more hair than a baby that young had any right to own.

“Well, hello there, Frederic Weasley-Longbottom,” Harry whispered softly. “Nice to meet you.”

“Potter, we have to get out of here,” said Snape, who had stepped away to check something. “The right wing’s reservoir is leaking, and I think there is an electrical short somewhere.”

Harry quickly liberated Frederic from his harness, wrapped him in the blanket and Apparated a safe distance from the plane. He was immediately joined by Snape. He Accioed their brooms just as the plane exploded. He instinctively created a bubble around the explosion and threw in a stasis charm, effectively stopping the blast mid-blow.

He turned to Snape. “Priest Island is pristine. It’s a bird preserve. I hate to see it polluted.”

“Can you do anything about it?”

“I think so…” Harry concentrated. He opened his eyes and got his wand out, to help focus his magic. He closed his eyes again and Banished the bubble.

“It’s going to blow as soon as it gets where you sent it, you realize.”

“Yes. I thought about the ocean, but the fish… and the kerosene… then I thought underground, but… Anyway. I sent the bubble down into the earth’s outer core. By now, it’s completely gone.”

“Into the earth’s outer core, three thousand kilometers below ground? How… efficient of you.”

Harry looked at him steadily, daring him to comment further. He had told Snape how he felt about using his full magical power but he had broken his resolution spectacularly that day.

Snape returned his gaze and only said dismissively, “Well done, Potter.” Looking at the bundle in Harry’s arms, he wondered out loud, “Whatever shall we do with this child?”

“Bring it to his fathers, of course,” replied Harry with a smile, tucking the blue bundle against his body inside his jacket. “Would you hold me and the brooms as I Apparate us?”

Snape raised a questioning eyebrow but did as requested. With a very loud clap, they Apparated into the middle of the main room in George and Neville’s Diagon Alley house.

Neville was in the kitchen area, cooking something that smelled delicious for lunch, and George was setting the table. “Ah, dear Harry, it’s good to know you take us seriously when we tell you that you can drop by anytime!” he teased. “Hello, Professor Snape. Welcome. Harry, should I add some settings, will you be joining us for lunch, perhaps?”

Harry chuckled. Then he asked Neville, his voice gentle, “Neville, would you tell me your gran’s prophecy again? I would like Snape to hear it.”
“Oh, sure Harry. Okay. Here goes.

"The dreamer’s last breath forty-one days past
To the Enduring House an heir is bestowed
Cut and marked by gold, the son of twins from heaven falls
His savior the savior and this one father’s twin,
By name and by mane as that one father’s twin," he recited.

“Ah,” said Snape, as Harry got the bundle out of his jacket and started unwrapping the blanket. “I see.” He thought for a moment then said, “Mrs. Longbottom has been gone forty-one days today. The Enduring House is the Longbottom House, of course. A plane crash is definitely a fall from heaven, and that gold bracelet does say ‘Frederic’. You saved his life, Potter, the Savior of the Magical World, and you were born the same day as Mr. Longbottom, making you his twin, in a cosmic way. Of course, baby Frederic shares a name and bright red hair with his other father’s twin.”

Neville had left the stove and approached his long-time friend with a look of wonder on his face. George did not even realize the plate he had dropped had shattered on the hardwood floor as he, too, approached Harry. Frederic was deep asleep in his arms, all fiery hair and baby plumpness, a gorgeous, gorgeous baby.

Snape took the wooden spoon Neville was still holding out of his hand, and Harry gently passed Frederic to him. “Your son and heir, Neville.”

Neville looked at George, tears in his eyes, but smiling the most radiant smile. “We have a son, George, we have a baby!” George put one arm around his mate’s shoulders and one arm under his son, and he kissed his lover’s temple, gazing with wonder at his child. “We’re a family, love. By Merlin, Augusta’s prediction came true. Hello, little Fred.” He grinned at Harry. “Have I ever mentioned that you can drop in anytime?”

Harry laughed. Snape looked at the new fathers and said, “Far be it from me to break up this idyllic picture, but when Frederic wakes up, he will be hungry and need a nappy change. He is also going to need clothing, bedding, and who knows what. Mr. Weasley, your younger sister has two children the same age as Frederic. Perhaps you should contact her promptly and request her assistance?”

“This man is so, so wise…” said George. He walked to the Floo, threw some powder in and knelt. “Nice elf, get me my sis, please. It’s urgent.” He waited, apparently counting on her quick arrival. He was right. “Gin, remember when you wanted to call Scorpius Frederic, and I told you I’d have my own one day?… Riight. Well, Fred is here. He’s about five months old, and sleeping at the moment, and we were completely unprepared for his sudden arrival…. Sis, we will have time for that later. You are missing the salient point here. We don’t even have a clean nappy…. Now, that sounds like a plan…. Yes, definitely. Thanks, Sis.”

He turned to his partner with a smile. “Neville, we have been invited to the Manor for a few days, where even as we speak there are three experienced mothers, as well as every bit of equipment our child might require.” He held Neville’s smiling face in his hands. “Ready for a crash course in fatherhood, love?”

Neville shook his head in awed disbelief. He chuckled. “We have a baby!”

George laughed with him, and kissed him over their sleeping infant. “Come on, love.” They walked to the Floo. Remembering Harry and Snape, Neville said, “Sorry. Please, do stay and have lunch. It’s ready, and there is dessert in the cool cupboard. Don’t let it go to waste.”

“Malfy Manor!” and they were gone.
Harry and Snape looked at each other and grinned. “Let’s eat!” said Harry.
There was a time when the very idea of a formal soirée would have made Harry run screaming in the opposite direction, yet he was very much looking forward to the formal New Year’s Eve celebrations at Malfoy Manor. Part of it was that he’d attended so many such functions through the years that they had lost their mystique. Part of it was that it was that this particular one was offered by one of his best friends and would host practically everyone he cared about. Part of it was that Madam Malkin had outdone herself and that he looked absolutely stunning in his formal robes, and Snape would be there to see him. The last and best part was that Neville and George were going to surprise everyone by introducing their child and officially naming him.

Harry slipped on the heavy silvery silk trousers, fitted to his lower body from hip to ankle, with stirrups made to go under the sole of his short boots to keep them perfectly in place, and put on a snow-white shirt. He decided to wear the Rosier crest cufflinks, the crest’s colors perfect for his outfit, with its Azure field and white rose motif. The next item to go on was a short-waisted jacket, its front much like a waistcoat, which was handed to him by Kreacher, who took as much pleasure dressing up his master for fancy parties as an eight-year-old girl would dressing her Samantha Stevens doll.

The jacket was also fitted, dark blue silk with silver snowflakes embroidered throughout, no two of them alike, the buttons beautiful silver snowflake filigrees. The robes were silvery velvet lined with pale blue silk. He wore the Potter seal on his left ring finger and the Black seal on his right.

“Master looks very good,” Kreacher informed him after he fussed with the sleeves of the jacket and brushed off invisible dirt from the robes. “Now shoo. Master Harry is going to be late and people will think Kreacher is a bad elf who can’t get his master out on time…” He walked Harry to the Floo. “Master is not to forget the presents for Master Malfoy and for Mistress Ginny,” the elf said, pushing a small wood crate into the fireplace and handing Harry a small box. Harry was bringing a case of six bottles of 1990 Cristal Champagne as a house gift for Draco, and a bottle of the perfume he’d had a French perfumer from Grace create just for Ginny years ago. She never wore anything else.

He Flooed to the Manor, was welcomed and dusted off by elves who relieved him of the gifts, and was guided by one of them to the ballroom, where he was announced from the top of the stairs: “The Head of the Black, Rosier, Potter, and Lupin Houses, Mr. Henry James Potter, Order of Merlin, First Class.” He laughed. They’d obviously let Lucius have his fun.

He walked to his friends, who all had champagne glasses in their hands, and started chatting with them, catching up with everyone. He was conscious of being observed and enjoyed the sensation for a while before turning around and offering Headmaster Snape a brilliant smile. Snape, who was speaking with someone Harry had seen before but could not place, smirked and nodded, acknowledging his greeting.

As he was talking to Seamus and his wife, a lovely witch from Jamaica with a wonderful accent, a pair of small cool hands covered his eyes and a musical voice asked, “What is the Latin word for moon?” He knew that touch, that voice, and especially that scent, like crushed fern and clipped grass. “Luna!” He turned around, lifted the blonde witch in his arms and twirled her around while she laughed her lovely musical laugh.

She was one of his favorite people in the world and had been his lover off and on for years. Their
sexual chemistry was great, but they were both aware that they had no future beyond their friendship with benefits. Their affair had stopped when she had married Rolf Scamander, whom Harry had liked very much. It had been such a horrible shock when he had died less than a year later, killed by a chimera.

About an hour into the evening, Ginny asked for everyone’s attention. George and Neville appeared at the top of the stairs, George carrying a red-headed child everyone assumed was Scorpius. Neville, who had performed a mild Sonorus, announced, “Friends, family,” he chuckled, “total strangers, it is George’s and my pleasure to introduce to you our beloved baby boy, our son and heir.”

The room exploded with questions, congratulations, and exclamations of surprise.

He raised his hands and cleared his throat, and silence was re-established once again. “We will be glad to tell you the amazing circumstances that led him into our life, but first, we would like to name him, and put him to bed. It’s way past his bedtime… Severus Tobias Snape, would you do us the honor of being our son’s godfather?”

“The honor is mine, Professor Longbottom,” said Snape, joining them on the steps.

“Henry James Potter, would you do us the honor of being our son’s godfather?” asked George Weasley.

“The honor is mine, Mr. Weasley,” Harry answered, joining them on the steps as well.

“The two of you have already saved him once, and have brought him to us. We ask you to protect and support our son, and to care for him like your own should we one day be unable to do so. Do you accept that responsibility?”

“I accept it,” answered Snape, smiling down at the child.

“I accept and welcome it,” said Harry.

Snape put his hand on Frederic’s head and looked questioningly at Harry, who immediately understood and put his hand on the child’s head also. Softly they both recited, “Ye’simcha Elohim ke-Ephraim ve hee-Menashe,” then sang with a lovely melody, “Ye’varech’echa Adonoy ve’yish’merecha. Ya’ir Adonoy panav eilecha viy-chuneka. Yisa Adonoy panav eilecha, ve’yasim lecha shalom.” Snape translated the song into English, “May God bless you and protect you. May God’s face shine upon you and show you kindness. May God look favorably upon you and grant you peace.”

George and Neville both looked surprised but pleased. The Malfoys were smiling as were a couple of other people in the audience. Neville then announced, “May I introduce Frederic Frank Tobias Henry Weasley-Longbottom.”

George chuckled, and added, “We know it’s a mouthful, but we had to fit it all in; it’s not as if we’re expecting to have another chance at this!” He waited until the laughter died and added, “We will be coming back in a little while. See you soon, everyone.”

Harry and Snape both accompanied the boys as they took a smiling, wiggling Frederic to bed. George changed his diaper like an old pro. “That was a Muggle blessing you guys gave our boy. Did you rehearse it? Did you know we were going to ask you to be godfathers? What language was that?”

Harry let Snape answer. “It was Hebrew, Mr. Weasley. The House of Prince is Jewish. The Jews are the only witches and wizards who have retained some of their ancient culture. There are but few.
The House of Crimsonshield, The House of Levi, to which your friend Anthony Goldstein belongs, the House of Silver.”

“Snape is Scorpius’s godfather, and I am Lily’s. I heard him bless Scorpius once and wanted to learn, for Lily, Teddy, Rose and Hugo. I think it’s lovely.”

“Besides, in this case, it is highly appropriate,” said Snape.

“Why do you say that?” asked Neville.

“The prediction said cut and marked by gold, did it not? Have you wondered about the cut part?” asked Snape.

“Yes, actually. We thought maybe Fred was supposed to have gotten a cut in the accident, but we found nothing.”

“I could not help but notice your child’s penis as you changed him. His foreskin…”

“Oh, yes. We asked the mediwitch about that. She said Muggles sometimes remove it.”

Snape smiled. “Exactly. Jews, in particular, always circumcise or remove the foreskin of their male children. It’s referred as being ‘cut.’ That and the small star on his bracelet tell me Frederic was born Jewish.”

George, finishing buttoning Frederic’s romper, said without thinking, “Oh, so that means that your pe… Merlin! Sorry Snape. Never mind.”

Snape chuckled. “It’s all right Mr. Weasley. Your curiosity is completely natural, and yes, I too, am cut. Just like your son. And it makes no difference where it counts.”

George was red to the roots of his hair and chuckled in embarrassment. Neville, on the other hand, was quite matter-of-fact. “Oh, good. I was actually wondering about that. Should we do anything different when we clean him up or anything?”

“No. Nothing at all.”

“Great. Thanks,” he smiled. “Gran would be so proud. Her one important prophecy came exactly true.”

All four walked back to the ballroom together, Harry speaking to Neville and George to Snape. It was getting a bit crowded. When Harry turned to talk to Snape he was crestfallen that the man had left their small group and returned to the area of the room he had graced previously.

Oh, well. They would talk later. Harry grabbed Luna and pulled her to the dance floor. They were together for most of the evening, catching up, dancing, goofing off, making plans for her Hogwarts rooms.

Several times Harry looked towards Snape. He had gone back to talk to that same man. Who was he, who had captured Snape’s attention so completely? Harry observed the man more closely. He was of average height, well built, with curly chestnut hair to his shoulders, light blue eyes, and dimples. Snape must have made a joke, because he laughed, his head tilted back, his teeth very white. Harry noticed Snape noticing his throat, then moving his gaze up and down the man’s body, and wanted to howl in misery.

He managed to turn his attention back to the conversation between Luna and Ginny, and Malfoy
came and joined them, slipping his arm around his wife, whose willowy body, without a trace of her recent motherhood, was outlined by a floor-length pale yellow chiffon dress cut on the bias.

Malfoy grinned at Harry. “So… Snape,” he said.

“Snape?” inquired Harry.

“Petr’s gone, Severus is free,” Draco clarified.

“And?” asked Harry.

Malfoy just chuckled, “Just making conversation, that’s all.”

“He may not be free for long,” commented Harry, gesturing towards the two wizards who were standing ever nearer to each other, speaking with their heads very close and laughing frequently.

“Terence Higgs. Six years ahead of us at school. Was the Slytherin Seeker before my father bought me a spot on the team… I believe he left Britain to get away from the Dark Lord. His father was pressuring him to join, Severus not to. He studied Potions in Australia, I think. Got his Mastery. He would be a great match for Severus.”

“Yes,” agreed Harry, who wanted to throw up.

“Just like Luna would be a perfect match for you, you idiot.”

“Luna?” Harry shrugged, looking at his attractive friend. “Yes, I suppose, but it’s just not meant to be, you know?”

“Boy, you’re thick. Yes, Potter. I know. That’s exactly my point.”

Seeing Harry’s confused look, he shrugged and said to his wife, “Come dance with me, Beautiful. I want all the men in the room to wish they could be me!”

Ginny laughed and they kissed, a short but very real kiss, and as they walked to the dance floor Ginny’s cheeks wore a lovely blush.

Luna’s eyes followed the direction of Harry’s gaze. She looked at Harry and smiled. “He’s so in love with you. His aura is the color of your eyes. He’s trying to distract himself, working hard not to look your way.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Harry.

“It would help if he knew you were gay, you know?” she commented.

Harry accepted that she somehow knew about Snape. This was Luna. “It’s kind of complicated, Luna…”

“I feel the same way. But you know? I don’t think that’s true. We just have to see that it’s really quite simple…” She sighed. “You haven’t gotten laid in months Harry. Your aura is all crinkly. That’s not healthy.”

Harry laughed. “Are you offering?”

“You would not even get hard. Your body does not want me any more, you know…”

Harry sighed. “I know. Let’s dance. It’s almost midnight.”
When the clock struck twelve, they had been waltzing a Viennese waltz, having a great time. Harry gave Luna a peck on the lips, “Happy New Year!” and a tight hug. And over her shoulder he saw Snape and Terence Higgs exchanging a passionate, deep, long kiss, Snape’s hands on the old Slytherin Seeker’s arse. Harry felt as if misery was a Beater’s bat and he had been hit terribly hard on the back of the head. His throat closed up and his eyes embarrassingly filled with tears. Snape opened his eyes, and by mischance his gaze met Harry’s. He stepped back from Terence as if scalded, but Harry had already turned his back and hidden his ridiculous tears in Luna’s abundant blond hair.

“Tears are very cleansing,” she said, “Did you need to get rid of ocular pollutants? It’s all these different perfumes. The vapors are quite noxious. Let’s remove ourselves.” And she Apparated them next to the front door. “Go home, Harry. If you stay, you’ll have to say “Happy New Year!” to all and sundry, with your aura looking like a grey paper bag. You would not have a good time. A grey paper bag aura, in your case, requires altitude, speed, and fresh air. I’ll tell everybody that you felt ill. What do you think: Hemorrhoids? Bad gas? Those are always good, I find.”

Harry could not help but chuckle. “How about a migraine headache?”

She shrugged. “If you’re sure. My excuses are more believable, though. The migraine is so overdone…”

“I’ll live with overdone. Good night, Luna. Thank you.”

“You know, he opened his eyes because he was surprised that what should have been a very nice kiss made him think of fat slugs and because his penis stayed completely soft. It would have been just a kiss, anyway. He doesn’t like his scent, and he’d been comparing him to you all evening and finding him wanting in every way…”

“Luna, how in the world would you know that?”

“You know I can hear people’s thoughts sometimes. He’s usually silent as a tomb, but he was really upset about something and was projecting like crazy. Good night, Harry.” She turned away, walking back towards the ballroom.

Harry did not want to put up with the Floo but he had not brought a cloak, so a walk from Hogwarts’s gates to the castle in the bitter cold night was not a good idea. He shrugged and just Apparated into his living room. He stepped on his balcony. After yesterday’s storm, today had been clear and cold. The sky was beautiful, the moon very bright. He sighed.

Luna was… Luna. He had seen Snape moving into closer and closer conversation all evening with a very attractive wizard, which had culminated with a passionate kiss at midnight. The normal trajectory would bring them to a bed next, a night of lovemaking. The younger wizard and Snape shared a passion for potions, a common House, and a past when Snape’s influence had saved Terence from making a costly mistake. The passionate night might recur, followed by shared weekends, then shared evenings and a shared bed, and Terence would be a permanent feature, having so much more to offer than evenings drinking tea.

Harry did not want to think any more. He went to his bathroom cabinet, and drank a vial of Dreamless Sleep. He’d had it a while, because he had not had nightmares in a long time. As far as he remembered, though, Dreamless Sleep did not go bad. He cleaned his teeth and, feeling sleep approaching like a locomotive at full speed, Banished his beautiful clothes to his armoire. He fell into bed and was asleep before having time to get under the covers.

Kreacher put down Dobby, after having brought her to his beautiful young wife for her night
feeding. Winky had fallen back asleep already. He smiled, the happiest elf on earth. Master Harry was home early and had Apparated right into the house. Foolish. If it came out that Master had more power than ten wizards and ten house-elves put together, wizards would get scared of him and Master Harry would be in Azkaban before Dobby could say ‘Dada’.

Master Snape was very smart and had protected Master Harry always. Kreacher sighed. How long did it have to take for wizards to recognize their soulmates? How could Master Harry and the Headmaster be so intelligent and still not see what Kreacher, and all the other house-elves, for that matter, had seen months ago? Master Harry had looked very beautiful tonight. Kreacher had made sure. Did Master Snape notice? He wasn’t blind! Did he do anything about it? Apparently not.

Kreacher popped into Harry’s room to check on him. All was quiet, the clothes put away, and Master Harry dead to the world, naked as the day he was born on top of the blankets. Never mind it was sixteen degrees in the room, and minus twelve outside! Kreacher snapped his fingers and Harry’s duvet was now on top of him. Kreacher recognized the bitter tang of Dreamless Sleep on his master’s breath. Running his hand over Harry, he realized Harry’d taken too much, had eaten nothing since lunch, and was slightly dehydrated.

He went to the kitchen, filled up a bottle of water half way, and brought it back to Harry’s bedside. With a snap of his fingers, he Apparated the water from the bottle directly into Harry’s stomach. Then, while he was at it, he snapped his fingers again and Apparated the contents of Harry’s bladder and of his intestines straight into the toilet. There. Master Harry would sleep comfortably, now. He went to flush the toilet and Apparated back to the cozy little room he shared with Winky and the baby. The things a good house-elf had to put up with!
Severus had accepted Lucius’s invitation to stay at the Manor a few days before school started again and had arrived mid-afternoon. Lucius had been busy playing four-hands on the piano with Teddy Lupin. The son of a Hufflepuff and of a Gryffindor, and he was going to be a Slytherin. Severus could not wait to see Minerva’s face…

He had settled in his usual rooms, enjoying the luxury around him and the small touches he knew were Narcissa’s, like the rose buds in a tiny crystal vase on the side of the sink, the fruit bowl with pomegranates and pears on the occasional table, and the bottle of San Pellegrino water he’d become addicted to in America on his night table.

He had spent some time with his godson. The baby was growing like a weed, half again as big as his sister, happy and boisterous. Lily in contrast was calm and quiet, but had a smile that would conquer nations. Longbottom and Weasley brought in Frederic, who looked more like Scorpius’s twin than Lily ever would. He was a happy-go-lucky child, smiling complacently as he watched Scorpius roll across the floor.

He and Lucius retired to the library for a moment’s peace.

“So, are you going to pursue Potter?”

Severus should have known that as soon as Lucius found out that he and Petr had parted ways, he would jump to this conclusion. “Repeat after me, Lucius. Potter is straight. Straight men fuck women. I am not a woman. Pursuit is futile. Quod erat demonstrandum.”

“Repeat after me, Severus: Dum vita est, spes est,” answered Lucius.

Severus smiled. “True enough. But everyday that I let myself hope, quod me nutrit me destruit.”

“Poor Severus,” said Lucius grinning. “Nil desperandum, omnia vincit amor.”

Severus chuckled. “Quidquid Latine dictum sit altum videtur.”

Lucius chuckled, too. “Balaenae nobis conservandae sunt! You’re right. It does sound better.”

To which Severus added, “Braccae illae virides cum subucula rosea et tunica Caledonia-quam elenganter concinnatur!”

They were laughing now, like men who had been friends for thirty years.

“Bibo, ergo sum, Lucius. A whisky and I will tell all.”

“Excellent.” He poured two glasses of forty-year-old Highland Park and sat back down in one of the very comfortable leather armchairs of his library. He passed his glass to Severus.

“Potter and I have developed a friendship. We spend four evenings a week together, sitting by the fire in my rooms, talking, working, reading. Sometimes we go flying together. We accompany each other on patrol. When I came back to Hogwarts, I thought I was in love with him. I had no concept
of what being in love was. Now, I know. My love for him is a defining aspect of who I am. Everything about him thrills me. I would give my life for him without a thought, and were he to leave this world, I would have no interest in remaining behind.”

Lucius was grinning. Severus knew Lucius loved his wife with that kind of passion, so he had no qualms about speaking about it to him. The only difference, of course, was that Narcissa returned Lucius’s feelings. His love was unrequited. Unrequitable, had that been a word.

“You are so fucked,” stated Lucius, coming to the same conclusion as he had the day before.

Severus laughed. “You should have said it in Latin. It would have sounded better.”

“Drug his tea with an aphrodisiac,” suggested Lucius. “Fuck the hell out of him, show him what he’s been missing. No one is a hundred percent straight.”

“I’m sure he’d be thrilled with me when the potion wears off,” said Severus, chortling. “Your rigorous sense of ethics astounds me, Lucius.”

“Well, you are a potions master! Amortentia?” Lucius offered with a grin.

“Thank you for suggesting I commit a crime that could at best put me in Azkaban and at worst would have me spend my life knowing the feelings of the man who shares it are a potion-induced lie,” answered Severus, rolling his eyes.

“Picky, picky, picky…” grouched Lucius, slouching in his chair and taking a drink to hide his smirk.

~o~

When Potter had been announced, Severus had looked to the stairs, thinking he might catch his attention. Instead, he had literally felt his blood abandoning whatever mission it was on and head to his cock. Beautiful. Heartbreakingly unaware of how attractive he was, chuckling at the silliness of the introduction, moving down those stairs like a dangerous predator, all liquid grace and contained energy. Perfect. Perfect…

Severus had been talking to one of his Slytherins, an interesting young man who recently had obtained his Potions Mastery. He was also an out and proud homosexual and Severus wanted to cover the man’s eyes. That dream vision on the stairs, in those amazing trousers (oh, Merlin!), that V-shaped torso emphasized by a short jacket and flawlessly cut robes, was his, dammit. How dare Terence Higgs even look that way?

“Wow!” said the cretin in question. (How could Severus have thought him even remotely interesting earlier?) “Potter looks very… fine. Hot as fuck, actually. Merlin, those trousers… He teaches at Hogwarts now, doesn’t he? Professor, how ever do you resist?”

“Harry Potter is straight, Terence,” answered Severus icily, wishing he had the ability to do a Creata Eunuchus wandlessly.

“Riiiight. I don’t care how many women the Boy Who Lived has shagged. No straight man dresses like this,” decided Terence. “He’s trying to impress someone and, sadly enough, it’s not me…” His eyes lit up. “Hey, Professor, you wouldn’t mind introducing me, would you?”

“And here I had heard you preferred older partners,” Severus purred. No way was this attractive young man going anywhere near Potter.

Terence answered, “There is the fantasy and the reality, Professor. I’ve been flirting with you ever
since I arrived, and I don’t even think you noticed. I’ll take my chances with the supposedly straight Savior over there. I guarantee you he’s at least curious…”

Severus gave him a look that almost caught the other man’s robe on fire. “Not all of us are obvious in our appreciation, nor blatant in our interest, Master Higgs. Otherwise I might well have been dismissed for my prurient interest in a sixth year student…” That was a bold-faced lie. He had never felt attraction for any of his pupils, and the very night he’d discovered his feelings for one of them, he had left the castle.

Besides, he’d always found Terence’s pale blue eyes very unattractive, and his voice was grating. Also his scent… not the bergamot/violet/musk/orange eau de toilette which he probably brewed himself and which was extremely pleasant, but his natural scent, underneath, a sweetish burning kind of smell. Repelling.

“Oh, my god! Sixth year, really?” Terence blushed, very pleased, and added, looking a bit shyly at Severus, “That’s when I fell… that’s when I developed this huge crush on you. Can we… Can you and I… you know, after the party?”

Mission accomplished. He’d forgotten all about Potter… Severus just smiled, looking into his eyes. Terence grinned happily. Severus could already feel the nascent headache that would, sadly, force him to change their plan and retire to his rooms alone at the end of the night. The only drawback to this plan was that he would not get to spend any time with Potter at all.

As if he had felt Severus’s gaze, Potter turned to him and smiled, a confidential, happy smile that warmed Severus’s inside. There was something there. Wasn’t there? If Terence was right and Potter had not dressed for the pleasure of the witches in attendance but to—how had he phrased it? Try and impress someone, a male someone, he would be that someone, wouldn’t he? Hope was a dangerous thing…

Ah, Luna Lovegood-Scamander had just joined him, a merry widow, apparently. They appeared very fond of each other. He concentrated on Terence for a while. All right. The young man was interesting, and attractive to boot. His research on brewing artificial blood replacement for vampires was fascinating, actually.

Neville Longbottom and George Weasley appeared and presented their boy. He had spoken with them at length about the circumstances that had brought the child into their life. He felt very touched when they asked him to be godfather, the last proof of his redemption, that his most abused student and half of the pair of his most often punished students should honor him in such a way.

That he was to share that honor with Harry made his pleasure complete. Blessing the child together, their hands touching, Harry’s countertenor in flawless harmony to his own tenor had been deeply meaningful. Though they had given the child to its rightful parents, he would always belong to them as well to some small extent, binding them together forever.

His analytical mind noted that it was becoming harder and harder not to touch Potter. It was a constant fight not to caress his cheek, not to hold his hand, not to take him in his arms and kiss his forehead. It was separate from the all-consuming sexual desire he harbored for Harry. It was a physical expression of the deep affection he felt for him.

He still did not want Potter within ten feet of Terence, and detached himself from their group as soon as possible. Though he was trying not to, he found himself regularly looking Potter’s way. Why could the young man be in constant physical contact with his friend Luna, holding her hand, putting his arm around her shoulder, playfully lifting and twirling her, kissing her cheek, when Severus had to be content with the “accidental” touch of their fingers while passing a book to each other, or
rubbing of shoulders in a narrow corridor?

Potter and Lovegood did seem extremely close. Very affectionate. His mind suddenly went blank, refusing to deal with the logical conclusion to his observation. He took a shaky breath and faced the facts. She was the one. She had been unattainable, married to Scamander, but now she was a widow and she was coming to Hogwarts… An icy shiver went down Severus’s spine, with the certitude that Potter’s unrequited love was soon going to be requited, that he had not dressed in that gorgeous outfit for him but for the woman he loved.

He watched her. Her ethereal looks had matured, the delicate bone structure of her face promising she would be beautiful all her life. Her exophthalmia, perhaps due to a thyroid malfunction in adolescence, had corrected itself, and her heavy blonde mane, dropping in ringlets to mid-thigh, was magnificent. Her electric blue sequined dress, with long sleeves and a modest round neckline, was the same length as her hair, showing off long shapely legs. She was barefoot, but then she was Luna Lovegood. Her toenails were painted the same shade as her dress.

She was absolutely lovely, Severus realized. She was also brilliantly intelligent and charmingly quirky, unafraid of people’s opinion of her. She had been one of his favorite students, though of course she had never known it. Even now, as she danced cheek to cheek with Potter, he could not hate her. Seventeen hours bleeding and poisoned on the floor of the Shack had been painful, boring, panic-inducing, but somehow, he had known he would live. Now, watching the man who was his entire life joyfully spinning the woman he loved on the dance floor, he felt himself dying.

“Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, Happy New Year!” Severus reached for Terence like a drowning man grabbing onto a float and kissed him, putting all his pent up passion for another man in his kiss. The younger Potions Master responded enthusiastically, with great skill, pressing a hardening cock against Severus’s leg and moaning in appreciation of the sudden attack.

Nothing. He felt nothing. Terence was a fabulous kisser, yet the meeting of their tongues brought to mind the mating of a pair of slimy slugs. His cock was completely uninterested in the proceedings, and this close, Terence’s natural scent was a complete turn-off.

Severus opened his eyes and was met by Potter’s stare from across the room. Shock. Pain. Sadness. Absolute misery. His face was an open book, his eyes filling with tears. Severus could not step away from the awful kiss, from the wrong young man, fast enough, but Harry had turned away and was hiding in his friend’s hair.

Leaving a stunned Terence behind, Severus weaved through the crowd to reach Potter and his friend, but was still a ways away when they Disapparated. He must have looked ill, because Granger, who had been dancing with her husband, stopped and addressed him. “Are you all right, Headmaster?”

“What? Oh, yes, fine, thank you, Granger. Just a spot of headache.”

“It’s all those different perfumes,” said Lovegood, back again alone. “They bothered Harry’s eyes. He said he had a headache, too. His aura was all grey and crinkled. Well, the crinkly part is because he’s not had a proper shag in so long, but the grey part is definitely because he’s miserable. It could be a migraine, or hemorrhoids, or a broken heart. Care to dance, Severus?”

Crinkled grey aura? No proper shag? Hemorrhoids? Broken heart? Severus’s re-introduction to Luna Lovegood’s strange and exciting view of the world drove mentioning she did not have leave to use his first name out of his head, and he had been waltzing with her for a few minutes before he remembered he had meant to demur.
“Harry is my friend,” she said, as if they were continuing a conversation. “He cares.” She nodded wisely, and smiled at Severus. She tilted her head a little, thinking. “Encountering my soulmate so young was awkward. It was just not feasible. Teenagers are so insecure and teachers are… iconic, you see? (You’re a very good dancer.) Even as an adult it’s daunting. Harry will be there for me. He won’t laugh at me. People think he’s special because he can fly really fast and he got O’s on all his NEWTS, but that’s just silly. He’s kind. Through and through. That’s why we both love him, isn’t it? Well, you also want in his trousers, obviously. He’s your soulmate, and he’s so sexy.”

The music stopped. “Thanks for the dance, Severus!” Severus felt shell-shocked. He was probably going to have to watch the memory of her monologue three times in his Pensieve before he could make sense of it. But she’d said Potter was his soulmate. Of that he was quite sure. Potter, Harry, had gone back to Hogwarts with a headache. But Severus was sure he had seen the pain of betrayal in his eyes. He was so fucking confused. A hand touched his shoulder and he turned around to meet eyes as confused as his own.

“Pro… Severus, did I do something wrong? I…”

Poor Terence. Severus felt like a heel. He smiled at the young man. “You are a wonderful kisser. You did nothing wrong, believe me. I happened to open my eyes for a second and by chance witnessed something unsavory happening on the dance floor that could not be allowed to go on. I apologize for my brutal retreat from the most pleasant welcoming of a New Year I’ve ever had the pleasure to experience.”

Terence smiled, relieved. “Is the problem solved, then?”

Severus honestly answered, “There was a misunderstanding. The injured party has left. It will probably take some time, but hopefully wounds will heal and the incident will be forgotten. I do however have the most painful migraine. I am afraid our plans will have to be cancelled. I am going to retire and dose myself with Dreamless Sleep, the only thing that seems to help when the pain is this acute.”

Terence looked gutted. Severus squeezed the younger man’s shoulder. “Perhaps you can go find Potter and see if he is really willing to take a walk on the wild side. He and his friends are congregated by the pillar over there. Good night, Terence. Congratulations again on your Mastery.”

At the mention of Harry, Terence seemed to perk up. Severus walked away, laughing inside. Harry was kind. Severus had made an effort to let Terence down easy. But he was not kind. Being a bastard was much more fun…

Chapter End Notes

1
Dum vita est, spes est – While there is life, there is hope.
Quod me nutrit me destruit – What nourishes me, also destroys me.
Nil desperandum, omnia vincit amor – Nothing must be despained at, love conquers all.
Quidquid Latine dictum sit altum videtur – Anything said in Latin sounds profound.
Balaenae nobis conservanda sunt – Save the whales.
Braccae illae virides cum subucula rosea et tunica Caledonia-quam elenganter concinnatur – Those green pants go so well with that pink shirt and the plaid jacket!
Bibo, ergo sum – I drink, therefore I am.
Chapter 81

~o~ Unrequited Love ~o~

Harry woke up at five, dressed warmly, got out the custom-made Blue Streak racing broom he hardly ever used and dived out of his balcony. As usual, the Blue Streak’s peculiar balance and its relaxed stabilizer took a while to adjust to. It required a lot of the weight to be transferred forward, putting a lot of strain on the rider’s shoulders and arms, and during turns allowed the rider’s body to lean about eight degrees more than the Firebolt, giving the impression it was going to just about to dump you. It was a racing broom, not a Quidditch broom. The body position decreased air resistance and the relaxed stabilizers allowed acceleration in the turns.

Using it to train for Quidditch moves was terror inducing, a thrill like no other. It was also ridiculously dangerous and stretched Harry’s flying skills to their maximum. It required all his concentration, with no thought spared for parties, kisses, or anything else.

He ran back home calculating the actual power extended by his magic to keep the seventy kilos of Harry, gear and broom a hundred and fifty meters up in the air, moving forward at a velocity of eighty kilometers per hour against an eight-kilometer-an-hour wind. That, too, took all his concentration.

“Morning, Kreacher.”

“Good morning, Master Harry.”

“How is Dobby this morning? And Winky, of course.”

“Dobby and Winky is good, Master Harry. Dobby is rolling over.”

Ginny had told Harry that Scorpius was rolling over but Lily had not yet. Dobby had been born on September 22 and was three months younger than the twins.

“Is she early, Kreacher? Human babies roll over around their fifth month, I think.”

Kreacher smiled. “Dobby is, Master Harry. Zibo says Dobby is being a fast learner.”

Was Zibo the Hogwarts elves’ Healer? “It’s because she has such good parents, Kreacher,” Harry responded with a smile.

Kreacher looked at him, eyes wide, his hands on his chest and tears in his eyes. “Oh! Master is so, so kind!” He smiled proudly. “Kreacher tells Winky what Master Harry says, sir. Thank you… thank you.”

Kreacher, unlike the original Dobby, was not given to gushing. Harry’s remark must have touched on some sensitive aspect of the house-elf psyche. He was glad. Kreacher had been so utterly unhappy for such a big part of his life, Harry rejoiced at any happiness he could help him achieve.

He was in the shower rinsing shampoo out of his very short hair when the image of Snape’s passionate embrace suddenly appeared, in detail and living color, behind his lids. A single gut-wrenching sob escaped his lips before he clenched his teeth and forced himself to get a grip on his misery. He tried to review what had happened objectively.

Perhaps the night before he had made mountains out of molehills. It was only a kiss at midnight on
New Year’s Eve, for Merlin’s sake. Maybe if Harry had been standing next to Snape at midnight, he
would have been kissed senseless too. (If only…)

And even if Snape and Higgs had ended up in bed (Harry wondered vaguely if he could perform a
long-distance Creata Eunuchus on that blue-eyed, curly-haired prick…), yes, even in that case, he
knew single gay wizards often engaged in one-offs. It meant nothing.

And even if it was the beginning of an affair, Terence had nothing on Petr, and if Snape could break
up with Petr, what chance did Terence have? So Harry would only have to wait it out, because this
too would pass…

Harry had promised Luna to help her set up her rooms. He made his way to the Ravenclaw tower,
were she had been given airy ground-floor high-ceilinged rooms with French windows opening into
an interior courtyard that filled with all pink blooms from early spring to the first snow. Her front
door was guarded by a beautiful painting of Basil Fronsac in his raven Animagus form. Capable of
speech, the raven was a great animal to change into.

“Hello, Headmaster Fronsac. I’m here to visit Luna.”

“Obviously.” The bird stared him down with his jet black eye.

“Er… could you open the door, or let her know I’m here or whatever?”

“You’re Atticus’s owner.” The bird’s beak was black and very sharp.

“Yes. I am,” said Harry, who really liked his crow.

“Do you know how much power it takes to have that simple a spell create the kind of intelligence
that bird now possesses, and give him the ability to Apparate, even in and out of Hogwarts’s wards?”

“Obviously.”

Harry had never heard a raven laugh, but this one did. “Touché,” he said. “All right. She’s dressed.
You may go in.”

Harry knocked and entered. “Hey, bella Luna, how are you?”

“I’m a bit itchy. My skin is dry, I need to get some rosehip oil. You? Rested?”

“Yes, surprisingly. I got up and trained at five and felt fantastic. Not bad for four-and-a-half hours of
sleep.”


“Huh… what?”

“When you didn’t come yesterday, I had to make sure the dabberblimps hadn’t gotten to you so I
went up to your rooms. Your house-elf is very funny. You forgot that the potency of Dreamless
Sleep increases as it ages. I’ve never taken it. Do you really not dream?”

“Oh! Twenty-eight hours! Sorry Luna. And yes, you really sleep without dreams.”

“What’s the point of sleeping, then?”

“Er… Rest, I suppose.”
“If you’re not going to dream, you might as well rest by meditating naked. It’s just as good.”

Harry chuckled. “I’ll take your word on that. So, is there anything left for me to do in these rooms?”

“Oh, yes! We need to paint, and hang pictures, and clean out the Nargles, and…."

~o~

A fun day was had by all. Harry was so glad Luna had come. Lunch was definitely a highlight, though. Luna had been seated—logically, since she, too, was an apprentice—next to Matt Pilot at the opposite end of the table from Harry and Neville. Matt was still at his father’s, so he would never know that Harry had rearranged the seating. The next day when the new Auror arrived, he could sit by Matt but Luna would sit between him and Neville, Dermott moving next to Septima, closing the gap where the Auror usually sat. There would still be six people on each side of Snape, keeping things even. Septima liked Dermott very much and looked forward to having him back when he returned from Cassie’s parents.

Lunch was about halfway through when Snape swept in wearing a heavy cloak, with snow in his hair and on his boots. A house-elf appeared and relieved him of the bulky outdoor garment and a wave of his wand dried his footwear. He looked so imposing: tall, lean, and dark in his floating black robes. He took in everyone’s position at the table at a glance and sat in Dermott’s chair, next to Harry.

“You changed my seating plan, Mr. Potter,” he said softly, for Harry’s ears only.

“Oh. Yes, I… Sorry,” answered Harry, embarrassed. “I thought the seating was just the house-elves’ decision. I will…”

“I am glad you did,” interrupted Snape. “I had not realized when I made it how close a friend you were to Miss Lovegood. Friendships are important, Mr. Potter. Time with a close friend is precious, one of life greatest pleasures. Speaking of which, I was hoping for your presence in my rooms this evening. I have… missed you. Greatly. Even the company of charming, intelligent young men who share in my professional interests seems dull compared to yours, regardless of how carried away one might have seemed to get in the welcoming of the New Year.”

“Carried away?” repeated Harry, hopeful, his heart hammering in his chest.

“Mortifyingly so. A very short bout of insanity, thankfully. I suspect Miss Lovegood’s Nargles to be responsible,” explained Snape, straight faced.

Harry grinned, feeling suddenly lighthearted “Maybe we should get you a butterbeer-cork necklace to make sure it does not recur.”

“Is it important to you that it should not?” asked Snape looking into Harry’s eyes, his gaze warm and soft.

“…Yes. Yes, it is,” confessed Harry, blushing to the roots of his hair.

“Then it shall not,” pledged Snape.

He got up and went to his own chair, leaving behind a young man with a persistent grin and a head full of questions.

~o~
That evening at dinner Dermott was back, as was Neville, baby Frederic on his lap. Neville, usually a quiet man, was chatting excitedly, his buoyant mood communicative. He and George were selling the house in London and getting a cottage in Hogsmeade. George would move the WWW research and development to the Hogsmeade store and Bitty, the house-elf who had raised Neville, was moving in to happily reprise her role of nanny.

Neville had spoken to Headmaster Snape about benefiting from some contract modification similar to Hermione’s to get more time with his family, and it was all worked out pending the Board of Regents’ approval.

Frederic kept reaching for his father’s food and happily trying to gum broccoli, then mushrooms, then a hard roll (unsuccessfully, though the bread kept him busy for quite some time), then—with much better results—some mashed turnips. His coordination was not ideal yet, and sucking food off of one’s fist is really not an efficient feeding method, but fortunately his father and godfather were both wizards, who could clean up messes with the flick of a wand.

Dermott’s first contact with his fiancée’s family had been a great success. He was the only child of parents also devoid of siblings and had loved Cassie’s brother and her three cousins. His parents had been there as well, originally invited only for Christmas dinner but ending up staying until New Year’s Day. They had had some wild Gobstone tournaments, and the two dads were already planning to travel together to see the Wales Gobstone Championships in March.

Harry often looked in Snape’s direction, sometimes meeting his thoughtful gaze. Luna had happily told him after lunch that his aura was still crinkly but that at least now it was all orange and swirly. A definite improvement, Harry figured, over a grey paper bag…

Kreacher demonstrated the endless patience of house-elves as Harry got dressed for the evening, refolding jeans, khakis, fitted black trousers, white button-down shirt, silk and cashmere blend long-sleeved shirt, plain green t-shirt, turquoise polo shirt… but finally announced, “Master Harry wears what Kreacher put on the bed,” before Disapparating.

Harry put on the grey fitted twill trousers with stirrups to go under his short calf’s leather boots and white mandarin-neck shirt, the plain dark blue waistcoat, and the light merino dark grey casual robes. He looked in the mirror and smiled. It was early yet, and he had decided to try and read the Blood Magic syllabus turned in that day by Minerva when, practically as his wards warned him of an approaching visitor, there was an urgent-sounding knock on his trap door. Visitors usually preferred the Floo because of the climb, so it was a surprise. Even more so when, paying attention to his wards, he realized Filius was his unexpected guest. He lifted the trap with no further ado and the diminutive Charms professor climbed in, not even out of breath. He looked quite wretched, however.

“Welcome b…”

“Harry! It is not to be borne!” Filius, clearly agitated, was not even aware of having interrupted Harry’s greeting. He looked at Harry with pleading eyes and started walking to and fro. “How could they? How could they! I can’t stand it!”

“What? What is it, Filius? What’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter? I’ll tell you what the matter is! They’ve accepted Luna Scamander as my apprentice!”

“Luna’s very good, Filius, she is more than qualified,” said Harry, surprised by Filius’s dismay.

“I’m sure there were plenty of other qualified candidates! Why her? Why Luna?” He sat down on
the low wooden box where Harry kept his broom cleaning kit and buried his head in his hands.

“I always rather thought you liked Luna, don’t you?” asked Harry, sitting down on the rug across from him.

Filius looked up. “Like her? Oh, Harry. That is not the problem. I do like her. Very much. Do you remember our discussion a few weeks ago about unrequited love?” Filius sighed. “Harry… As ridiculous as it may sound, I’m in love with her…”

He looked away, remembering. “That dreadful year, when the Carrows terrorized our school, she and a few others openly defied them, secretly undermined them, and resisted their rule at great personal risk. She was so brave, so fearless. We fought side by side in the battle of Hogwarts and she was magnificent.

“She held that little Creevey boy as he cried for his brother, she helped Poppy in the infirmary, she joined her father to rebuild their press and printed an ardent defense of Severus Snape, shedding light on his activities in that last year for all to read. I admired her greatly.”

He rubbed his very long-fingered hand over his face. “She came back for her seventh year and was as modest, as intuitive, as quirky as ever. It was as if war could not affect the deep core of who she was, her inner strength immutable. She was a breath of fresh air and more beautiful than ever, something I had never noticed in any of my students before. She really came into her gift for Charms that year and did a special project with me.

“I didn’t notice at first how much I looked forward to Wednesday evenings, when we met and worked together. But we talked more and more, eventually taking walks in the gardens after our work. Soon I was worried about what I wore on those nights, re-braiding my hair before she came, asking Severus for a potion to remove the stains off my teeth. Ridiculous. When I realized what was happening, it was too late. I’d fallen in love with Luna Lovegood, eighty years my junior, two feet taller, beautiful, brilliant Luna.”

He sighed and his shoulders slumped. “When she left Hogwarts, I was sick for two months. Physically ill! Poor Poppy was at her wits’ end. I lost five kilos, not a joking matter when you only weigh twenty-seven, with not much padding to spare to start with. In despair of wizard medicine helping in any way, Poppy agreed to release me from her care so goblin medicine could be tried, as I stayed with my grandmother.

“She took care of me herself, and put my head back together, if not my heart. She did this strange goblin magic before I returned that makes memories feel old and faded even though they are very fresh. My story with Luna felt like something that happened a long time ago… I never want to see her again, Harry. If I do, the magic will fail and…”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Even with it, I still love her so… I can’t face her! I cannot face that hopelessness again.”

“Filius, there is nothing wrong with loving someone! Luna is a widow, you’re unattached, you both are wonderful people, kind, caring, you share a passion for Charms, what makes you think it is hopeless?”

Filius raised his eyebrows. “Harry, you are sitting on the floor so you can look me in the eye as we talk. I am three foot three inches, not even one full meter tall. My nose, on the other hand, is four inches long and I wear the same shoe size as Dermott. My hair grows about an inch a day, my nails a quarter inch, and though my teeth are human in appearance, I do have three sets of very sharp canines and no premolars. I have four lungs and two livers, but only one kidney. I hear in the dog
range, and see colors you don’t. I cannot eat dairy of any kind, and could drink Hagrid under the table. I am freakishly goblinesque amongst humans and freakishly humanoid amongst goblins. Like a mule, I am also sterile.”

He shrugged. “It had never bothered me. I am who I am. I always knew I would spend my life alone, and it was fine. I have a wonderful family who accepts me as I am, good friends, work I enjoy, and abilities I take pride in. I never, ever figured love as part of my plans, because I am pragmatic. Because, realistically, Harry, why should someone as lovely, as brilliant as Luna ever want someone like me?”

Harry was quiet. He knew there was nothing he could say to change Filius’s mind about his attractiveness. He was different, no doubt about it, but not repulsive in any way and if someone was capable of seeing the beauty in the difference, it was Luna.

“Filius, a few weeks ago you gave me very good advice. So now I offer you mine. You have nothing to gain by dwelling on the impossibility of seeing your feelings returned. They will be or they will not. It is out of your hands. In your hands however, is a choice: to enjoy being with Luna, seeing her, talking to her, resuming your walks in the park with her, loving her, celebrating every day the blessing of her company, or you could choose instead to run away and hide. I think you know which will bring you the most happiness.”

Filius was quiet for a while, then he looked at Harry with a rueful smile. “I am glad you are my friend, Harry.” He grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl on the coffee table. “Now, use that ridiculous power of yours and transfigure this for me into a beautiful bouquet of cornflowers. I have to go welcome back a beautiful blue-eyed lady to the castle and cornflowers are her favorite.”

Harry got up and checked in his herbology book that he was thinking of the right flower, took the apple from Filius, got out his wand, and complied. The resulting round bouquet was wrapped in stiff white lace with a wide satin bow. Harry was proud he’d managed to give the flowers the sweet scent of apple.

Filius smiled in delight. “It’s just like magic!” he joked. He smelled the flowers, shook his head in wonder, and said, ‘Oh, well done, Harry! Five points to Gryffindor!’”

Harry opened the trap door and Filius started down. He turned back again, smiling. “Thank you, my friend. As for you, hang in there. Severus is free, now. He’ll come around.”

Seeing Harry’s shocked surprise, followed by a sheepish grin, the small Charms professor chuckled as he continued down to go and visit his lady love.

Harry, smiling, closed the trap. He picked up another apple and started munching, wondering if Luna might fall in love with Filius. He was halfway through his apple when he noted the time. It was 10:15. Shit. He got up and ran.
Chapter 82

~o~ Once a seeker... ~o~

After the party, Severus could not sleep. He got up, threw on plain black robes over the white undershirt and low-slung sleeping trousers he’d worn since his years as a student in America, and went to the library. He tried to read. It was pointless. Hating to use it without express permission, though he knew it would have been granted, he removed the heavy Pensieve which had seen the thoughts of generations of Malfoys and placed it carefully on the desk. After concentrating a few seconds, he pulled out the memory he wanted and dived in.

Memory Severus puts his hand behind Terence’s head and pulls him into a passionate kiss. Turning to the dance floor Severus walks toward the area where Harry has just given his friend a peck and is now hugging her tight, laughing. It is obvious they care about each other, but also obvious that the peck and hug are completely platonic.

Harry looks up to where Memory Severus has just lowered his hands to Terence’s arse and pulled him closer. From were Harry stands it looks like the most enamored, passionate, sexually laden kiss. Harry looks as if he’s been slapped. Shock, pain, and misery follow each other quickly in his expression and he turns away before seeing Memory Severus step away from Terence.

Harry’s face is buried in his friend’s hair. Over the music, Severus hears her say, “Tears are very cleansing. Did you need to get rid of ocular pollutants? It’s all these different perfumes. The vapors are quite noxious. Let’s remove ourselves.”

Severus cannot believe Potter is actually crying, but he cannot follow them after they disappear. Memory Severus has tried to reach the couple but is too late. When he arrives they are already gone. To others he might look ill. To himself he looks impotent and self-recriminating, self-hating. With his face drained of blood and his feverish eyes, it is no wonder Granger asks him if he is feeling all right. A headache, of course.

“It’s all those different perfumes. They bothered Harry’s eyes. He said he had a headache, too.”

Is she looking at Severus knowingly? Unlike Potter, she is impossible to read.

“His aura was all grey and crinkled. Well, the crinkly part is because he’s not had a proper shag in so long, but the grey part is definitely because he’s miserable. It could be a migraine, or hemorrhoids, or a broken heart. Care to dance, Severus?”

Suddenly he sees it in her eyes. She is telling him what he needs to know and is counting on his perspicacity for him to catch her message. Harry no more has a headache than he does. He is uninterested in casual sex. He is miserable and heartbroken.

“Harry is my friend,” she says next, continuing to impart information. “He cares. Encountering my soulmate so young was awkward. It was just not feasible. Teenagers are so insecure and teachers are... awe inspiring, you see? (You’re a very good dancer.) Even as an adult it’s daunting. Harry will be there for me, he won’t laugh at me. People think he’s special because he can fly really fast and he got O’s on all his NEWTS, but that’s just silly. He’s kind. Through and through. That’s why we both love him, isn’t it? Well, you also want in his trousers, obviously. He’s your soulmate, and he’s so sexy...”

Translating her message is easier now. She and Harry are not involved. The fact that she has loved a
teacher since her schooldays is interesting, but irrelevant. The salient point is that, even for an adult, it
is daunting to approach a teacher one was once in awe of with your feelings. Finally, though Severus
hurt Harry, he will be forgiven, because before anything else, Harry is kind.

The most important part of the message, which Snape truly hopes he understands correctly, is that
sex with him would not be beyond Harry. How else could he be Severus’s soulmate?

The lovely, mystifying woman thanks him for the dance and he is pulled back out, falling back into
the desk’s comfortable leather chair.

~0~

The next day, he tried to enjoy the company, participate in the conversations, and play with the
babies, but he felt like a caged lion. That night he slept, but was haunted by memory-dreams of
verbally abusing a defenseless child Harry, blaming him for things he had no control over, ridiculing
him, placing words in his mouth and punishing him for them. Then the dream would shift to Harry’s
distraught expressive face on New Year’s Eve, a mirror of his childhood’s misery.

He woke up feeling dreadful and not fit for human company. After breakfast, during which he heard
not a word of what was said, he took refuge in the library where he wore a path in the Persian rug
with his pacing. After a couple of hours Lucius came in and sat in front of the fire watching him. A
few minutes later Severus sat in the chair across from him.

“Do you want to talk about it?” asked Lucius.

“Not especially, no.”

“He really is a beautiful man. Those trousers…”

“Fuck off, Lucius.”

“Let me finish, for Merlin’s sake. He was not dressed like a straight man, Severus! Those trousers
were not designed with women in mind. He dressed to look beautiful to men. Because you are my
friend, I am hoping he had one particular man in mind. You. There are bisexual men out there, you
know. You of all people should know things are not always black and white.”

“Stop. Stop, please. I… Lucius, I cannot afford to hope. He might have wanted to look gorgeous for
me, he might have put his sex life on hold for me, he might have been gutted when I… Whatever.
The point is, he might not. A few months ago he told me that he is in love with a woman who is
unavailable and that it was it for him. I thought perhaps it was the recently widowed Luna Lovegood
and that now that Scamander was out of the way…”

“She is stunning. I certainly can see the attraction. Draco says she’s brilliant as well. Eccentric and
peculiar, but crazy like a fox.”

“They are just friends, she says. She’s in love with someone else.”

“So? It could still be her,” Lucius pointed out.

“Ah. You’re right of course. She obviously wouldn’t know it.” Could that look on his face not have
been because he was kissing Terence, but because Harry had just found out that Scamander had
never been the true obstacle to Luna’s heart, that all along she had loved one of the teachers at
Hogwarts?

Severus sighed. “And that is exactly why I cannot afford to hope, why I must keep my wits about
me. I am privileged to have his friendship. I can savor every moment I share with him, enjoy seeing him, talking to him, flying with him into the night, loving him, celebrating every day the blessing of his company, and be content with that.”

Lucius nodded. Severus knew his friend. He would not let this rest. He wanted Severus to be truly happy. The warmth of their friendship was a tangible thing.

“So… what exactly did you do that might or might not have gutted the young man?”

Severus shook his head. “You are like a dog with a bone. Can you view memories in a Pensieve?”

“No on my own. You have to keep physical contact with me the whole time.”

“The memory is already in your Pensieve. I apologize for using it without leave, but it was the middle of the night.”

“Don’t be absurd. Mi casa es su casa.” Lucius chuckled, “more accurately, La casa de mi hijo es su casa. Better yet, la pensadero de mi hijo es su pensadero…”

“If you are done entertaining yourself, perhaps we could proceed?”

Lucius rolled his eyes. “You are such a killjoy.”

At the desk, they grasped hands and Severus bent down to the swirling silvery liquid. They disappeared.

When they returned Lucius had to grasp Severus’s shoulder not to take a spill. He let go of his hand and placed it on Severus’s other shoulder and shook him gently.

“How can such an intelligent man as you do such imbecilic things? Get out of here, Severus. Go to him. Use that eloquence of yours to put things right. You and Potter may only be friends yet and you may not afford to hope, but for whatever reason seeing you with another man pained him. Go salvage the friendship that is so precious to you.”

Severus nodded, got his heaviest cloak from his room, and Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts. The Floo would have been faster, but he wanted to think about what he meant to say and how to phrase it. As soon as he walked in, he noticed the new seating arrangements and silently blessed Potter, whom he was sure had initiated the change, for the perfect opening. As luck would have it, McClallan was not back yet and Severus was able to sit next to Potter.

Lucius could laugh, but there were instances such as this, or such as when explaining away an obvious proof of lack of faith to the Dark Lord, when a silver tongue was a blessing. He neither truly explained nor truly apologized for what had happened on New Year’s Eve and gave a promise that in truth told him what he wanted to know. Well, that and also that Potter was adorable when he blushed…

He feasted his eyes on Potter at dinner. All four younger staff members looked so happy and carefree. Frederic looked perfectly content. Snape wondered if somewhere in that developing brain there were memories of the accident and questions as to where the woman with the Venetian blonde hair who loved him so deeply had gone… Well, he certainly was not lacking love now. Severus had told Longbottom that Wednesday evenings were traditionally family night and that George and the baby would be welcome. The face of Hogwarts was changing. For the better, he thought.

By a quarter of eight he was ready for Harry, sitting in his chair, a book in his hands, the tea on the sideboard, the fire burning brightly. Despite what he had told Lucius, and against his own better
judgement, hope burned in his chest as bright as the fire in the grate. He would not push, not try to hurry things up. If he understood Harry’s behavior rightly, they had all the time in the world. If he was mistaken, one false move could destroy their friendship.

He picked up the book on his lap and, just to prove he could, started reading, concentrating on the meaning of the words. It was a fascinating read, recommended by the Bloody Baron, about scientific experiments with ghosts in which the ghosts had willingly participated, trying to identify their exact nature, the molecular composition of ectoplasm, the story of each entity, to discover why they had not continued on. Severus was actually absorbed in his reading enough that it was quite a while until he stopped, subconsciously registering that much more than fifteen minutes had passed and Potter had not arrived.

Eight forty-two! He had been reading for close to an hour! And Harry had not come. He took a deep breath, trying to relieve the tightness in his chest. It had never occurred to him that Harry might just not come.

But why? He did not know what to think. He reviewed the end of their conversation at lunch.

Harry grinning at his joke, “Maybe we should get you a butterbeer-cork necklace to make sure it does not recur.”

His own pointed question, “Is it important to you that it should not?”

And Harry’s welcome answer, “…Yes. Yes it is,” accompanied by a fetching blush.

Severus’s promise, “Then it shall not,” which had prompted a delighted and persistent grin from Harry.

Potter had never actually said he would come, but surely it was obvious Severus expected him to? Potter was considerate to a fault. He would not change his plans without letting Severus know.

Unless he did it on purpose, as a message to him. What would that message be? That his friendship should not be taken for granted?

Perhaps he regretted his lunchtime admission that he cared if Severus had physical relationships with other men. Perhaps he had realized it could be read as a desire to engage in such a relationship himself, and after greater consideration found the idea repulsive.

Severus could go insane trying to make sense of something with as little information as he had to go on with. They needed to have a serious conversation.

Again, the fear of losing Harry’s friendship by assuming too much, by showing too much of his passion, of his desire, made him reject the idea.

Logic would dictate to just wait and see what happened next, but he did not have the strength. He got up, sat at his desk, and removed a sheet of parchment as well as his favorite quill from the drawer, dipping it in black ink.

Potter,

A series of misunderstandings seems to have interfered with the smooth enjoyment of the deep friendship I feel towards you, which I hope is returned. It is extremely precious to me, and anything that might jeopardize it saddens me greatly.

He stopped. Merlin, this was pathetic. He Vanished the offending note from the page and started again.
Harry, No. He Vanished the greeting.

Potter,
It seems I must keep making an arse of myself and create strife between us. I am counting on your good nature to give our friendship another go. Please let me know if you can come to my rooms for tea this evening at eight.
Severus.

Not too bad. He got another piece of parchment out and, for his own sake, wrote down his unguarded thoughts.

Harry,
I call you Harry in my mind all the time if I do not watch myself constantly. I would say ‘my beloved Harry’ or ‘my beautiful love’ if I was perfectly honest, because that is who you are.

I fell in love with a courageous, gifted, loyal, attractive seventh year student and left Hogwarts immediately. I followed his amazingly successful career and colorful romantic life in the press and when I found out he was returning to Hogwarts for good, I left a life, a career, a lover behind to join him because I could no longer stand to stay away.

I have tried to let our friendship develop at its own rhythm, constantly holding back, reining in my desire for emotional and physical closeness. I have learned who Harry Potter is today and I love him more than words can say.

You have been heterosexual all your life and I hesitate to make any kind of overture that might be distasteful to you, but as my love grows, so does my possessiveness and my jealousy, my greatest fault.

My erratic behavior New Year’s Eve was my first trying to keep Terence Higgs away from you and then jumping to the conclusion that you had formed a romantic attachment to Miss Lovegood. I behaved like a complete arse, and beg your forgiveness for any pain I have caused you.

However, I must confess that your pain fills me with hope. Could you return toward me even a measure of my own passion toward you? After our short discussion at lunch, I thought with great trepidation that it might be so.

The fact that you did not honor me with your presence tonight leaves me anxious and confused. Please, do come tomorrow. Despite this heartfelt confession, I assure you that I will parallel your own behavior regardless of my feelings, being who you need me to be, a friend, a mentor... a lover.

You own my heart,
Severus.

Severus sighed. He looked at the time—10:04. All hope was gone for that evening. He closed his eyes, uncomprehending, for an instant wishing he’d never come back to Hogwarts. He took his short first note and rolled it tightly, securing it with a wave of his wand. He would owl it early in the morning. It would be more discreet than leaving the note on Potter’s plate. Heavy hearted, he got up and stretched. He Banished the cold tea to the kitchen and made a new pot. He sat down with a cup balanced on the arm of his chair, something that had always driven Petr to distraction but did not seem to bother Har... Potter in the least.

He opened his book again and felt a shiver down his back. Hm... It wasn’t cold... His skin tingled, and his heart started to race, and yes! There was Potter’s brilliant, singing magic making its way along the corridor. Severus got up like a jack-in-a-box, rushed to the desk, balling his confession and
throwing it and the tight roll of his note across the room into the fire. He went and opened the door, finding an out-of-breath Potter whose hand was raised to knock.

“You are late, Mr. Potter,” he said in his best bastard teacher’s voice. “That will be a detention with Mr. Filch.”

“I would be delighted to spend an evening with Argus, but look, I brought you a peace offering.” Potter, smiling ingratiatingly, held out to him a small mixed bouquet of gardenias, honeysuckle, lime flowers and red tulips held together with a large red satin bow. It was wonderfully fragrant. Even the red tulips smelt delicately of apple.

Severus chuckled and took the bouquet. “Transfigured?”

“From a half-eaten apple while running down the stairs.”

“You make Minerva proud, Potter. Five points to Gryffindor.”

Potters laughed. “That’s what Filius just said when I transfigured a bouquet of cornflowers from another apple for him to welcome Luna. Do you think Gryffindor is actually getting these points?”

“Undoubtedly. You have just earned more points for your House in the last hour than you did in your entire seven years as a student.”

“Hey!” Harry protested. “I earned plenty of points, thank you very much!”

Severus smiled evilly. “I was speaking of the true total, after subtracting the points you lost.”

Harry laughed good-naturedly. “Then you are probably right… Though I would like to register an official complaint. I was never awarded any points for the small part I played in the permanent removal of Tom Riddle from this vale of tears. Surely, it was worth something…”

“Indeed,” said Severus, nodding seriously. “Let me immediately correct this gross injustice.” He frowned as if deciding what ridding the world of the most evil dark wizard in centuries was worth. “One point to Gryffindor for a nicely executed Expelliarmus.” Potter started laughing. Severus continued, “Oh, and… say, two points for voluntarily dying for our kind…” Potter laughed harder as Severus finished, “and of course, fifty points for bringing me to the infirmary.”

Harry lost it, unable to stop laughing. Severus grinned, loving the dancing mirth in Harry’s eyes, loving his unrestrained joy.

Finally, Potter took a deep breath and regained control. “I completely agree with your evaluation of the worth of the deeds. Saving your life is worth at least fifty times more than ending his.” He smiled a little tentatively at Severus. “To me, it’s worth more than anything.” He blushed, terribly embarrassed.

Loving this moment, looking in Harry’s eyes, Severus softly said, “Thank you for that…” Not wanting to overwhelm him, he added, “I was never given flowers before, so I do not own a vase, but luckily I have plenty of beakers. Please, have some tea, I shall return momentarily.”

He returned with the fragrant bouquet in water, under a permanent preservation charm, the bow tied around the beaker, just in time to see Potter, who had sat in his usual chair, collect his balled-up confession from the floor. Apparently, his aim was less than perfect.

Potter tightened the ball as he said, “I apologize for not sending word that I would be late. Fifteen minutes before I had to go, Filius came to visit, which he never has done before. He needed… moral
support. We spoke for quite a while and in my concern for him, I’m afraid I forgot the time.”

“Interesting,” said Severus, thoughtfully. Potter was throwing the ball of parchment in the air and catching it flawlessly. Snape did his best to ignore it. “May I ask you a non-sequitur question about Miss Lovegood, Harry? It’s rather privileged information and I would not ask unless I had an excellent reason.”

“If I feel it would be a violation of her privacy to answer, I will let you know. Ask away.” Up went the balled-up parchment, caught on the way down with the speed of a cat’s paw.

“Has Miss Lovegood ever been attracted to people of her own sex?” Severus was trying not to think about what that parchment contained, so of course it was foremost in his brain.

“No. Absolutely not. She was… pursued a while back by a beautiful young lady. She was kind about it but made it crystal clear that she was not interested. It was open enough a situation that I feel comfortable sharing it with you. She evidently does not care if her sexual orientation is publicly known. Why do you ask?”

Despite his anxiety, Severus could not help but admire the accuracy of Potter’s motions. Now he had the scrunched-up ball on the back of his hand, would flip it up and catch it in a downward motion, throw it up again and catch it on the back of his hand to start all over again. Severus took a deep breath. Bloody Seeker. He answered the question.

“She confided in me that she considered one of the teachers she had while attending our school to be her soulmate, and that she had applied for her apprenticeship here at Hogwarts partially in the hope of reuniting with the person she loves and feels she is meant to share her life with.”

Severus reasoned, “Since she was speaking to me, it would indicate I am not that person, which leads me to the conclusion, once the female staff and the recently hired staff have been eliminated, that she could only be speaking of two people: Rubeus Hagrid or Filius Flitwick.”

The balled-up parchment was still in Potter’s hand. He sat forward a little with a grin on his face. “Marvelous. Because it can’t be Hagrid; you see, Luna never even took Care of Magical Creatures. From childhood, she has always had a special, instinctual relationship with magical animals and did not need that class.”

“Which leaves Filius, who, unless I am mistaken, came to you distraught by the knowledge I imparted him after dinner of his apprentice’s identity,” concluded Snape.

“You are not mistaken,” answered Harry, his face suffused with the pleasure of knowing two of his friends were about to find happiness.

Smiling, he started to mindlessly flatten the ball of parchment onto the occasional table where his cup of tea rested and Severus almost keened in anxiety. The letter was face down. As he turned it over to flatten the other side he looked up at Severus, whose heart was in his throat.

“I think Filius Flitwick is the most intrinsically good person I know,” said Harry. “Though his looks are unconventional, he has an enormous amount of charm, no pun intended.” He folded the sheet of parchment in two, and looked down at it to match the corners exactly before smoothing them down, completely hiding the written words. “Why he would think himself hopelessly unattractive to humans because he is half goblin is beyond me,” Harry added, his eyes still on his folding. “After all, his mother chose his father, who was a full goblin!”

Harry was now quickly folding the parchment in a complex origami and Snape was mesmerized by
the random appearance and disappearance of some of his writing. Harry was concentrating on his
task, making sure each fold was perfect, obviously paying no attention to the written text. Snape
wondered if the fortuitous appearance of his own first name would attract his attention and watched
the process with his heart in his mouth. His blood ran cold when the words “My beloved Harry”
became visible for what seemed like an eternity, though it was only probably three or four seconds.

Harry, now remarking he had never known Luna to hurt anyone purposely, did not seem to notice it.
“She has the loveliest way of putting people in their place without even meaning to,” he added. He
blew into his finished intricate folding and part of it puffed up into a sphere. It was an origami Snitch,
of course.

“She once told Ron, ‘You say very funny things sometimes, don’t you? But you can be a bit unkind.
I noticed that last year.’ No one had ever called him on his less attractive behaviors before, and he
knew Luna says things as she sees them. He was mortified.” Harry laughed. “Knowing her is good
for the soul.”

Harry got up. “I hate to go so early after having arrived so late, but I… did not accomplish anything
yesterday. I am meeting Argus in the morning to get the broomshed back in perfect order, and do
necessary repairs on the equipment. These kids are harder on the brooms and pads than professional
players,” he said, shaking his head and chortling. “May I return tomorrow?”

Severus, of course, hated to see him go, but was reassured that their friendship was important to
Harry as well, perhaps progressing to something more, and that his… indiscretion was forgotten.
“You should know by now that you are welcome here at any time. I find I have a certain
commonality in that with the owners of pug dogs.”

Potter looked confused. “How is that?”
“Just like a pug owner, I have grown accustomed to your unfortunate appearance as well as used to the strange noises you produce, and would miss your familiar presence.”

Harry burst out laughing. “I am not even going to try coming up with a comeback,” he said. “I do not care how the invitation is phrased, as long as it is made.” He looked seriously at Severus. “These evenings here with you are the highlight of my days, Snape.”

Severus wished he had gotten up and walked Harry to the door. After such a declaration, he might have stepped closer to him and looked down, giving Harry the ability to initiate a kiss if he so desired. Did he so desire? Severus did, enough for the both of them. Potter raised his open hand and the origami Snitch came alive and flew to Severus, who caught it gingerly.

“Good night, Snape.”

“Good night, Potter.”
Chapter 83

~o~ His greatest fault, 2 ~o~

Harry visited Snape’s room every night the rest of the break and it was as if both of them wanted their routine, their comfort with each other, to be fully reestablished before anything else. Potter worked on his few remaining syllabi, discussing some aspects of them with Severus, and Severus reviewed the students who were to receive letters in the coming month inviting them to Hogwarts.

He was preparing for the visits to Muggle-borns and planning for the needs of some exceptional students. Three treated Squibs and two young werewolves would require potions. Two other students, both recently added to the list, would create different challenges. One was a young half-Veela girl, whose beauty when she hit puberty would create havoc, and the other a rare alkonost/wizard hybrid boy who had inherited only two things from his mother: colorful, fully functional wings, and his beautiful voice. He was, however, unable to speak without singing his words.

These children would traditionally have been taught at home, but Hogwarts’s new Headmaster felt strongly that they had a right to the same opportunities as other magical children.

Snape had been glad when classes started again, reinforcing the feeling of everything having returned to normal. The new Auror was Martin Hepworth, Blaise Zabini’s younger half sibling, who, like Blaise, had inherited his mother’s beautiful Ethiopian features but, unlike the standoffish Blaise, was friendly and very, very funny. He and Matt Pilot were fast friends and even the terribly shy Weatherspoon could occasionally be heard laughing with the other two.

At the other end of the table the conversation was constant and animated, Longbottom, Lovegood, Potter, and McClallan a close, happy group. Granger remarked how glad she was Luna Lovegood had come. Snape agreed wholeheartedly until she added hopefully, “Luna and Harry are so good together. They have been lovers off and on for years, but it never seems to stick. Maybe this time, if they give it another go, it will be for keeps. After all, they never lived anywhere near each other before. It could be just the ticket.”

Severus knew why Luna had returned. He knew how Harry felt about her and Flitwick, and that he had no romantic interest in the young woman. Still. To know that she had known him in that way, held him, caressed him, given him pleasure… He could hear the blood pounding in his ears and put his hands on his lap to hide their shaking.

His jealousy was pathological. He knew that. It was bound to a difficult, deprived childhood; to school years of misery, being taunted for his poverty, losing his one true friend to his worst tormentor; to an early adulthood of complete self-denial for the greater good. Knowing it did not make it any less potent. It just helped stop him from acting upon it. Severus left the table before dessert, citing urgent paperwork.

It was Monday. Potter would not come tonight, he would go lend a hand to Narcissa’s group. Thank Merlin. Snape would have one night to regain his balance. He went to the library and did a magical search in the card catalogue of “Harry Potter and Luna Lovegood,” and summoned all references mentioned to one of the faculty’s private reading rooms.

After greeting Madam Pince with a nod and a smile as he went by, he entered the small room, locked and warded it as if Inferi were after him, and sat down.
He ignored the books about the war and instead pulled towards him the stack of Witch Weekly, Daily Prophet and Quidditch reports, all already opened to the right page, each article of interest glowing slightly.

Two hours later, he knew all there was to learn out of gossip magazines about Harry and Luna Lovegood, friends and lovers. The last whiff of romance between them went back to six months prior to Luna’s marriage to Scamander, a happy union by all accounts. Since then Luna, like Granger and Ginny Weasley, was referred to as a “long-time friend.” It was stupid, but it helped to know. Severus hated this aspect of his personality but at least had learned to appease it.

He was scanning one last article by the abominable excuse for a reporter Rita Skeeter where she quoted Luna Lovegood as saying, “He was my first friend, and my first lover.” What did that star refer to? He looked at the bottom of the page. In very small print was a short sentence.

*Quoted from reporter’s own soon-to-be-published biography of HP

What in the world? He checked the date of the article. Almost a year and a half ago. He Banished all the material back to the stacks, asked Madam Pince to direct him to the Skeeter biography of Albus Dumbledore, and noted the publisher. He borrowed writing materials from the helpful librarian, penned a quick note, and walked to the owlery.

Yiri, his Tengmalm’s owl, was glad to see him and to be sent on a night errand. He accepted the caresses on his soft black and white feathers as his due and took off, silent as the night.

Feeling slightly ill at ease, Severus returned to his rooms. He buried himself in work until the early hours of the morning and finally, exhausted, went to bed.
Harry woke up in a great mood. His morning workout went well. It was really incredibly cold outside, but Snape’s potion literally worked its magic and having the company of the few diehard students who had lasted more than the first few weeks made it a lot more fun.

He did not have any regular classes to teach on Wednesday mornings and looked forward to teaching Narcissa’s group, and tonight was the Slytherin practice, which was always fun. They were so competitive it was easy to motivate them and get them to go the extra mile. Of course, all the benefits of this more rigorous training were ruined by their lack of teamwork.

It had been two weeks since he and Snape had resumed their shared evenings together, two weeks since he had noticed, after folding an origami Snitch from a piece of discarded parchment from Snape’s fireplace, the words I fell in, who Harry, own passion and my heart under the wings, provoking hours of tentative guesses as to what the whole text had said.

Cautious openings on his part seemed to be received with obvious pleasure, Snape looking at him with burning eyes, the softness of his expression making Harry feel he was infinitely precious to the other man.

Feeling great, he went down the staircase in his usual manner, skipping the last few steps of each flight, just as he used to when he was a student. The enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall showed a cloudless sky. It was going to be a beautiful day.

It took him only a few seconds to realize that something was off. At his entrance the room had gone quiet and then filled with excited whispers and quite a few giggles. At the staff table, everyone looked a little grim. Hermione, in particular, looked upset. Minerva had not yet made it, or had already left, so the seat to Hermione’s left was vacant. He took it.

“What’s going on?” he asked her.

Filius wordlessly handed him his copy of the Prophet. Harry’s stomach made a flip. What now? He had not made the paper in months! Then he saw the front page:

“From the Boy Who Lived to the Man Who Loved”

It was an interview of Rita Skeeter. She had written a book about him. Now he truly felt sick. He put the paper down and turned to Hermione. “I don’t want to be reading this here, do I?”

“No, Harry, probably not,” she agreed, cringing. “I’m so sorry. Try not to get too upset.”

His appetite was gone. He drank his shot of wheat grass, grabbed an apple, and asked Filius: “Do you mind if I take this?”

Flitwick shook his head ‘no’ and added, “Harry, don’t climb all the way back home. You can use my office, I’ve got a class.”

“Oh, thanks.”

They walked out together. Harry noticed that the paper was circulating amongst the students, some of them leaning together to share it. Great. Just great.
Filius’s office was just around the corner. He opened his door, entered with Harry to remove papers and books from the visitor’s chair, summoned a tea tray with a steaming pot of the green tea he knew Harry favored in the morning, and patted his arm before leaving. “This too shall pass,” he said.

Harry sat down, took a deep breath, and started reading.

“FROM THE BOY WHO LIVED TO THE MAN WHO LOVED”
The rumors that have been floating around are true! Rita Skeeter’s latest unauthorised biography is that of Harry Potter, the Wizarding world’s Most Eligible Bachelor! It is shortly to be available at your local bookstore. See interview on page six.

‘Most Eligible Bachelor’? That was a new one. Prepared for the worst, he opened to the interview.

THE MAN WHO LOVED (Sweet Merlin!)
The Rita Skeeter interview, by Betty Braithwaite.

Once again, I have had the privilege to be welcomed to one of our most beloved authors’ lovely home for an exclusive interview, before the release of what is sure to be yet another best seller: her new book, an unauthorised biography of famous Quidditch Seeker, Savior of the Wizarding world, and Most Eligible Bachelor Harry Potter.

We sit in her intimate boudoir, where she is kind enough to offer me some tea and delicious finger sandwiches.

“Rita, why Harry Potter?”

She smiles at me, looking a little mysterious. “Well, Betty, I have known Harry since he was a boy. He and I have always had a close relationship. I am sure you remember the exclusive interview he granted me, years ago, regarding the return of You Know Who. We all feel we know everything about him from the thorough coverage of his valiant exploits and illustrious career, but the truth is, there is so much more to Harry than the world perceives, and I wanted to show my beloved readers the more… let’s say, intimate side of the man, the one known only to his very close friends… in this case, his close female friends.”

“Do you include yourself among these female friends?”

Her lovely laugh fills the room. “Oh, no, no Betty, certainly not in that sense! I am almost old enough to be Harry’s mother! But seriously: we all know through the almost constant coverage of his social life that Harry is a little bit of a… ladies’ man, shall we say? I just wanted to find out more about that, what makes him so attractive, why all these young ladies seem so eager to be photographed on his arm.”

“Did you have a difficult time finding young ladies willing to talk about him?”

“Would you believe, my dear, if I told you that just going back through the Prophet’s archive, I discovered over a hundred young women whose names had been associated with his? No, finding material was not a problem. It was more a question of whose stories would make it into my pages!”

“Oh, my! Over a hundred!”

“Actually, when all was said and done, I had talked to three hundred and twenty-one young women, and a hundred and thirty of them provided me with detailed interviews.”

“Good heavens! He must have left quite a trail of broken hearts!”
“Well, Betty, this is where I started to realize that Harry really is an exceptional young man. Despite the quite staggering number of romantic adventures our favorite Quidditch player has had, none of them, let me repeat this, none of them had anything negative to say about their experience!”

“How is that possible?”

“Let me tell you, Betty: Apparently our Harry is charming, sweet, and fun to be with. And that’s just, let’s say, in public… On the more intimate side of things, the adjectives that the young ladies used were much more… complimentary: ‘incredible’, ‘passionate’, ‘generous’, ‘attentive’, ‘amazing’, are a few that come immediately to mind.”

“Oh, my… so, young Harry is quite a lover, then.”

“Indeed. They all confided he was the best lover they’d ever had. I selected thirty-two interviews to compile in my book, but of all of the woman I spoke to about Harry, of all those that had had, let’s say, intimate knowledge of our hero, not one, not one! expressed any regret over the experience, no matter how short the liaison.”

“Remarkable! But Rita, how free were they with their confidences?”

“I told them I would use their first names only in the book if they preferred. A few of them insisted I use their initials only before opening up. Some were more willing to go into… hum, romantic details, shall we say, than others, certainly, but generally, they were quite open to discussing their intimate relationships with Harry. Young people are much more broad-minded about these things today, you know…”

“So, this will be quite an… exciting read, then?”

Rita chuckled and winked at me. “Definitely. Exciting, titillating, and at times downright steamy! Certainly not for underage young witches, though young wizards could certainly learn a thing or two on how to treat a lover from following Harry’s example!”

“How does Harry feel about your book, Rita?”

“Well, he has not read it, of course, since it is, after all, ‘unauthorized’. But I am quite sure that he will quite pleased… After all, it is all extremely complimentary! And I assure you that, just like in all my previous literary work, nothing in this book is not supported by solid, unequivocal research.”

“Well, I can’t wait to get my hands on a copy! And I bet I’m not the only one…”

“Oh, it won’t be long now! The first printing is done and will be available in stores in less than a week. For a, shall we say, substantial fee, you can actually owl the publisher and have them owl your very own copy today!”

Harry, horrified, just stared blankly at the page. This could not be happening. It had to be a nightmare he would wake up from at any moment. Please, please god. He put his head in his hands. He was due on the pitch in less than half an hour. How could he face anyone after this? How would he ever be able to face anyone once this book came out? (Devastatingly, his chest tightening up, he thought of what really mattered: how would he be able to face Snape?)

There was a knock on the door. “Harry?” It was Hermione.

“Come in, Hermione.” He did not even bother to look up.

“Oh, Harry… I’m sorry.”
He took his hands away from his face. “’Mione, I hate my life,” he said, meaning it.

She bristled. “No. You hate Rita Skeeter, you hate nosy people like her prying in your private affairs.” She grabbed his hand, speaking with conviction. “You love your life, Harry. I have never seen you as happy as you have been these past few months. Don’t let this… bitch ruin it.”

Harry was shocked. “Did you just say ‘bitch’?”

She smiled at him, eyes full of concern. “I should have stepped on her when I had the chance,” she replied, very seriously.

Harry took a deep breath. He had friends. He was not completely alone in this.

“Draco just Floo-called my office, Harry. He is looking for you.”


“Yes, yes, it’s nothing like that. It’s urgent, though. Call him back. He is at the Manor.” She squeezed his shoulder. “You’ve got friends, Harry. Don’t ever forget that. I’ve got to go. I’ve got the third years in twenty minutes.” With one last supportive smile, she left him.

Urgent? Now what? Could this day get any worse? Harry decided to abuse Filius’s hospitality a little more and call Draco back from his fireplace. He also had class in twenty minutes, but Draco did not use the term “urgent” lightly. He purloined a handful of powder from the box Flitwick kept on the mantel, knelt in front of the grate and threw it in the fire, called out, “Malfoy Manor, Draco Malfoy’s office,” and stuck his head in the flames.

His call was immediately answered.

“Ah, Harry. There you are.” Draco, impressively dressed in his solicitor’s best, had evidently been sitting next to his Floo waiting for him to call. He had a quill in his hand and a half-written letter in the other. He did not even give Harry time to greet him. He handed him the parchment.

“Here, sign near the bottom somewhere, I’m not finished.”

Harry complied, reflecting how much things had changed, that he would trust Malfoy with a blank document. He handed it back. “What’s up, Draco?”

“I’m on the Skeeter thing. Don’t panic, and let me handle this. But we don’t have a lot of time. I’ll call you back or owl you. Whatever you do, don’t talk to anyone.” And he was gone.

Harry stood up feeling a foolish surge of hope, though he had no idea what Draco could possibly do at this time. But he also felt stronger somehow, more able to cope. No matter what happened, he did have friends. Hermione absolutely was right, he did not hate his life. He vaguely recalled the buoyant feeling he had experienced just that morning, coming down the staircase. Fuck Skeeter.

He left a short thank-you note on Filius’s desk, confessing to his Floo powder theft, and left his office to go give ten very excited people who deserved his full attention (and who had lived for years in a world out of their reach, with more difficulties than Harry would ever have to face) their first taste of one of the wonders of that world: flying. So definitely, yeah…

Fuck Skeeter.

~o~
When he returned to the staffroom before lunch, there was an owl from Draco waiting for him. He removed the message from its leg with shaky fingers.

Potter,
I couldn’t reach Severus, so I got Mrs. Deputy Headmistress to cancel your classes for the rest of the day. I’ve arranged for an emergency quorum of the Wizengamot to meet at 1:30 today in Courtroom Four for a Cease and Desist order on printing, delivering, and selling Skeeter’s book. She has been subpoenaed, as has her so-called research. Please come to my office as soon as you can. (Try to look like the Head of three Houses and not some… ragamuffin, please!) And you owe Granger big time. Malfoy.

He climbed the steps to his rooms two by two and started disrobing as soon as he closed his trap door. Toeing off his flight boots he called out, “Kreacher!”

The elf appeared with a small pop. “Master Harry?” He started picking up after Harry, following him around.

“I’m going into the shower. I need you to lay out…”

Kreacher cut him off, still trailing after him, the pile of clothes in his arms almost hiding him from view. “The dark grey wool trousers, the white shirt with the Black crest cufflinks, the green waistcoat with the three crests of the three Houses, and the black velvet robes with the silver snake border? Shim already talked to Kreacher, Master Harry. It’s all out on Master’s bed.”

They had made their way up the small circular staircase as they spoke and, indeed, the outfit was neatly laid out, ready to be put on.

“Perfect, Kreacher. I was just going to wear the plain black robes with the dark grey satin lining, though.”

Kreacher snapped his fingers and the dirty clothes vanished for parts unknown. “The snakes, Master Harry. Master Malfoy is saying the snake robes Master Malfoy gave Harry Potter for Christmas. “Half the interrogators will be Slytherins, and the snakes will remind the other half of who killed Voldemort,” Master Malfoy says.”

Harry shook his head with a smirk. “Thank you, Kreacher.” He was glad Draco was on his side.
Chapter 85

~o~ Don’t fuck with Draco ~o~

As the day unfolded, Harry was to think the same thing again many times.

As soon as he had seen the article in the Prophet at breakfast, Draco had Flooed the publisher of the book and obtained a copy. He had speed-read through it, taking notes of any possible opportunity he could use to keep it away from the public permanently.

He had been shocked to see that after four chapters reprising the life and trials of Harry Potter, the first interview quoted verbatim was his own wife’s, containing details of her and Potter’s innocent teenage romance and of their unwilling break-up that she had never confided even to him. He’d shown it to her and she had been appalled. She had no recollection of ever speaking to Rita Skeeter, nor of ever giving some of these details to anyone.

Skeeter conveniently gave information in the narrative of the interview that helped them narrow down when and where the ‘interview’ could have taken place… Eight years after the end of the war… meeting in a café with a courtyard filled with blooming lilacs…

Ginny thumbed through her old appointment diary. There! April 23, 2006, she’d had an appointment with a Craig Sanchez from the Literary Review about her second book at Les Lilacs, the beautiful café on Miss Tick Alley. She could not remember anything about it. Nor had anything come of it, strangely. Only her third book had attracted enough attention for her to be interviewed by the renowned publication.

Her diary mentioned that she and Draco had gone to Hermione and Ron’s for dinner that night. She Flooed Hermione on the extremely slim chance she might recall anything about it, though the couples got together quite often and she certainly would not recall that particular occasion.

Hearing what Ginny had to say, Hermione surprised her by saying, “Give me a few minutes, I have something for Draco.”

Fifteen minutes later, Draco had in his hand the letter sent to Bathilda Bagshot regarding her interview for Albus Dumbledore’s biography and its mention of her predictably having no memory of the interview, and the book itself where the references to ‘tried and true methods of extracting information’ had been highlighted.

That was all Draco had needed to build his case. He contacted his brother-in-law and Ron sent Zebulon Levi, the Aurors’ best memory modification specialist, to evaluate Ginny. He indeed found a memory-free three-hour period three years ago.

Draco’s personal clerk, Flavia Belby, was also quoted in the book. (Harry had been a man about town.) Zeb found a similarly blank period in her mind, at a time when she had taken a long lunch to get a free fashion consultation from Twilfitt and Tatting’s. After reading her interview, she burst into tears. “It’s all there!” she cried. “Every word we said, everything we did, to the smallest detail. How dare she! It’s… It’s… personal!” She was suddenly horrified. “Mr. Malfoy, please tell me you did not read this, please!”

“Of course not, Flavia. I read two interviews, carefully choosing people I did not know, except for my wife’s. I would never have chosen to read yours. It would be an egregious violation of your privacy.”
The young woman sniffed and dried her eyes. “Thank you, sir. Mr. Malfoy, you cannot allow this book to come out. I am sure all the other women in it would feel the same way. It is… criminal! She must have used Veritaserum, because I never confided any of these details to anyone, not even my best friend.”

“Can I count on you to testify?”

“Of course, sir.”

When Harry had Apparated into Draco’s minuscule Ministry office straight from his bedroom, completely forgetting in his hurry that one could neither Disapparate from Hogwarts nor Apparate into the Ministry, Draco, rolling his eyes in disgust that such power should have been wasted on someone like Harry, handed him a piece of parchment.

“Here, read this. Three times. It’s what you are going to say when they ask you why you feel they should permanently stop Skeeter’s book from being released.”

The statement was short and to the point. It claimed his right to a minimum of privacy and questioned her sources. It stated that the three hundred young women she had spoken of in the Prophet, insinuating they all had had some kind of relationship with him, actually included any young woman he’d ever spoken to. They were classmates, teammates, waitresses, coat checkers, store clerks—and most of those interviews consisted of them saying a variation on, “Go away, I don’t want to talk to you.”

After Harry had made his plea to the Wizengamot Quorum, Draco had entered the letter to Bathilda into evidence as well as the quote from the book. Zebulon Levi testified that both Ginny and Flavia had been Obliviated around the time of their “interview” and Flavia swore under Wizard Oath that she never would have given the type of information present in the interview without Veritaserum.

The suspicion was strong enough that Rita Skeeter was asked to agree to a Veritaserum interrogation herself or be fined and detained for contempt of court.

“Yes, I used Veritaserum during my interviews. I mix it with a drink or inject it in candy.”

“I purchase it from a small apothecary in Estonia.”

“I am not sure about purity. It works, doesn’t it? It might be a little strong, it lasts for three hours with six drops.”

“Yes, I know the maximum allowed dosage for Ministry interrogation is three drops, but I need it to last. Yes, sometimes I renew the dose.”

“Yes, I of course I Obliviate my subjects. They might demand I turn over my material to them otherwise…”

Veritaserum was a controlled potion and its use was severely restricted. Obliviating someone without his or her express consent was also against the law.

Draco had finished with the evidence from Ginny, whose innocent interview could be read in court. At the end of her calm and beautifully articulate testimony, Ginny had suddenly looked stricken and had lost all composure. Tears rolling down her face, she’d reached out to her husband. “Oh! Draco! Oh, my love! Our baby! She killed our baby!”

The cool and collected attorney had disappeared. Ginny’s loving husband, Scorpions and Lily’s doting father, had replaced him. He had rushed to his wife, holding her, caressing her hair and back,
as they both grieved anew for their lost child.

Harry, thrown off at first, had suddenly understood and had gotten up to address the interrogators, who were looking very confused.

“Excuse me… Uh. If I may? I know… er.. Let me explain. Ginny, Mrs. Malfoy, almost died, I mean really, almost died, the Healers had prepared Draco for the worst and everything… Anyway, she almost died from bleeding after she lost her baby when she was six and a half months along. Two and a half years ago. The Healers had no clue why it happened. Everything was fine, better than fine, really good, at her last check-up, and, I mean, you know, she’s a Weasley, so… Anyway. It was the first of May. I know because we were celebrating the renewal of my contract, and they’re due the first of May, if the team wants you to be eligible for that year. But whatever… I was there. The baby… Oh, god… It was so sad, and Ginny, all that blood…”

He took a deep breath, trying to get to the point. “That was exactly a week after Skeeter dosed her with Veritaserum. Everybody knows you can’t give it to pregnant women. Everybody knows it destroys the baby’s brain and… kills the baby.”

Griselda Marchbanks did not need to hear anything more. It was obvious from her demeanor that she first got out of the way what she considered to be a minor matter, putting Harry’s Cease and Desist request to a vote. “All in favor of Mr. Potter’s request say ‘Aye.’”

There were ten ‘Ayes’. The ten Heads of Noble Wizarding Houses had just heard that through underhanded means someone had all but murdered the Heir to the House of Malfoy. They were not amused.

“Miss Rita Skeeter, you are charged with illegal possession of Veritaserum, illegal use of Veritaserum, one hundred and thirty counts of reckless endangerment, manslaughter, illegal use of Obliviation, slander, and uh… public nuisance.”

Harry would have laughed if he’d not been concerned for his friends, who were still hugging, Draco now speaking softly in Ginny’s ear. Marchbanks was pissed and throwing the book at Skeeter. Could a person be charged with manslaughter for causing a miscarriage in the magical world?

Griselda Marchbanks continued, “Bailiff, arrest that… woman. Pending trial, Miss Skeeter will be held in Azkaban Prison.” No nice Ministry holding cell for her, then…

The gavel fell, and Harry thought his nightmare was over.

He accompanied Draco and four hit wizards to the publisher’s. They were provided with a precise accounting of the first printing. A small incineration perimeter was established and the books remaining at the publisher’s were Banished within. They immediately went up in flames. All the booksellers on the list were contacted and given the Banishment coordinates. A spell placed on the area insured an accurate accounting. Only a few times did the hit wizards have to Apparate to a bookseller and nudge them to Banish some missing copies.

The original manuscript was brought out and destroyed. Finally, Draco opened his briefcase and offered his copy to Harry. “If you want to keep one, you can have mine.”

Without even opening the book, Harry threw it within the incineration perimeter with perfect precision. They watched it burn together.

“You know,” said Draco, “I paid good money for that book.”

Harry grinned. “Let that be a lesson to you. You should not spend your hard-earned Galleons on
trash."

Draco grinned back. "Oh, I wasn't complaining. Its cost is already included in my bill…"

They both cracked up.
Chapter 86

~o~ Domino Effect ~o~

“Come in, Potter.”

Snape was sitting in his favorite reading chair, a cup of tea balanced on the armrest, a book resting on his crossed legs. Harry sighed as tension seemed to leave his body. After the craziness of the day, Snape’s quiet sitting room and the man’s tranquil aura were like a balm to his overwrought nerves.

He filled the cup waiting on the sideboard with the tea that he now permanently associated with Snape. Its fragrance, mixed with the scent of the eternally burning fire and the dry smell of parchment and books, was part and parcel with the quiet evenings, along with Snape’s deep soothing voice, and the comfort of the chair he thought of as his own.

He sat across from Snape, rested his head on the back of the chair. Just as he had known it would, his day and its hectic and stomach-turning moments faded away, as if this room, this man, this time, were everything that really mattered. As long as he had this, he would be all right.

He looked at Snape. As usual, the Headmaster was completely absorbed in his reading, his face relaxed, his eyes moving quickly over the page, the long fingers of his right hand flipping the pages as needed. His left hand now held the teacup, from which he was taking occasional sips. He put down the cup again and brought his relaxed hand to his face, cupping his chin with his fingers, and caressing his lips with his thumb, in an unconscious gesture that never failed to fascinate Harry.

Snape looked up and, to Harry’s surprise, smirked at him. “Hard day at the office?” he drawled.

Harry was a little bit thrown by the smirk and the tone of the question but replied nonetheless. “Draco came through. There was a recall from all points of sale, and printing has ceased. They can account for every copy but four that were pre-ordered and mailed to private parties, but they should be able to track those down. I really did not think it could be done, but it looks as if my sex life might remain private after all.” He could not hide the relief in his voice. He so wanted this mortifying episode to be over with.

“A shame, that,” said Snape.

“Pardon?” Harry was sure he had misheard. But there was no mistaking the malicious expression on Snape’s face as he raised the book he was reading from his lap to expose the cover. Harry stared at the lurid yellow jacket from which his own smiling face was winking back at him.

“Quite a talent you have there,” Snape added.

Harry’s heart missed a beat, then started thundering in his chest. He felt cold, then hot, then as if he had a hard time getting air. He stood up on wobbly legs, sending his cup crashing to the floor. The room suddenly seemed dark, and he felt a violent urge to vomit. He closed his eyes, certain that he was going to faint, but then took a ragged but deep breath. Without a word, he turned and left the room, closing the door carefully and quietly behind him. He needed to fly. Now.

“Kreacher?”

The elf appeared with a snap. “Master Harry?”

Harry grabbed his slender shoulder. “Would you take me to my rooms, please?” A mere instant and
they were there. “Thanks, Kreacher. I am going flying.”

He threw on his fur-lined jacket, his gloves, and his flying boots. Wrapping his scarf around his neck, he stepped onto his balcony, where Kreacher was waiting for him with his Firebolt and his potion bottle. He took a couple of swallows. The elf shook his head and, looking put out, closed his eyes in concentration and snapped his fingers. Harry was astonished to find himself wearing his flying leathers and could have sworn he felt his woolens underneath.

“Wow. Thanks, Kreacher.”

“Not easy to do, that, Master Harry. Even for a house-elf. Next time, please, Master Harry is smart and does it the normal way? Kreacher is too old for this.”

Exactly three minutes after his cup had crashed to the floor, he was airborne. He climbed as high as he could stand it and, with cold efficiency and perfect focus, channeled his pain, his shame, his sense of betrayal, his humiliation, his self loathing and his rage, all his roiling emotions, into his magic. Then he forced all of it into speed, becoming an unthinking, unfeeling human bullet streaking across the night sky.
Chapter 87

~o~ Now He Knows ~o~

After watching the door close, Snape put the book back down on his lap. He took up his teacup and had a long sip. Then he sent it hurtling across the room where it crashed, with a crystalline sound, against the wall. The book followed, its trip ending with a shower of sparks when it thumped, neatly, against the back of the fireplace, and immediately ignited. Snape watched it burn, the magical ink creating unusual colours in the flames, until there was nothing left but a pile of ash. Then he got up, opened the door to the sideboard, and poured himself a large glass of twenty-year-old Glenlivet.

Potter’s reaction had been frightening by its quiet intensity. When he had stood up, all color draining out of his face, Severus had been quite sure he was going to faint. But he had left, without a word, without a rant, without a shout. And Severus’s heart had left with him, if the empty feeling in his chest was to be believed.

His prurient curiosity, his masochistic obsession, his overwhelming jealousy had finally driven him to do something quite unforgivable, and Harry, his Harry, had left, their fragile trust shattered and their nascent relationship probably damaged beyond repair. Skeeter had not lied. The interviews were very… candid, the descriptions of the lovemaking erotic at best, downright pornographic in other cases, all describing the man he loved pleasuring others, being pleasured by others…

It had been so painful to read, and yet he’d been unable to stop, going from one interview to the next and the next, all of them painting Harry as an amazing lover, gentle, tender, passionate, generous, indefatigable… The hurt had consumed him, jealousy choking him. How could a man who so obviously loved the female form be anything but purely heterosexual? He had mistaken Harry’s true affection for him for something more, projecting his own feelings onto him.

When Harry had arrived, obviously relieved to be in Severus’s rooms, in his company, Severus had felt such… fury. How dare the man hurt him beyond Cruciatus and find peace and refuge in his presence, in his home? And so he had retaliated, in perfect Snape fashion.

His anger at himself was so intense that he would gladly have ripped out his own eyes if it could erase what he had done. As it was, he ascertained by a quick look at the mantelpiece clock that it would take at least another five minutes for Harry to reach his rooms, before he could Floo-call Harry, and beg for his forgiveness. Nothing mattered more than this. Not his foolish pride, not even his self-respect. He would grovel, and he would plead, and humiliate himself if necessary, but he would fix this. He threw a handful of powder in the fire and knelt.

“Potter? Potter?”

Not there yet, then. After all, it took Severus close to fifteen minutes to make it from his to Harry’s door. (Not that he had ever knocked on said door. But on sleepless nights, he had once, or twice perhaps, made the climb. Just for a place to go.) He waited another five minutes and tried again.

“Potter? Potter, are you there?”

Had he stopped on the way? Perhaps he had gone for a walk outside. Maybe he had gone to visit Hagrid. Not likely. He had been livid, not in any shape to go for a chat. Maybe he was just not answering.

“Potter? …Harry?” He thought better of that. “Potter, I… I am sorry. So very sorry. Please, your
friendship is … infinitely precious to me. I have burned the book. I should not have read it…”

He should not have ordered it. Why did he order it? Why did he need to know? So he could vicariously taste what he now knew he would never have? So he could confirm to himself that Harry loved women? Pretty, young, soft, beautiful women? To torture himself with the knowledge that he was the exact opposite of all Harry desired and enjoyed in a partner?

“Potter, please, I need to explain. If you are there and not answering, beware, I’m coming through.”

He threw some more Floo powder on and stepped into the now harmless fire and out of Potter’s cold fireplace. He had only been in this room that one time, with everyone else, the night of Harry’s party.

The place looked different now with the lights dimmed, comfortable, warm, welcoming, but it was definitely empty. The view was breathtaking under the light of the moon. Why should Harry spend so much time down in his dungeon when he had such a place?

He walked closer to the window, his hand trailing along the supple leather of the sofa. Opened on the arm was the book by Burbage that he had mentioned to Harry a while back. When had he gotten it? And why was he reading it when his interest in potions was so limited? He turned it over, surprised to see minute notes in the margins. On the coffee table were much more general reference texts on potions. Had Harry turned to them to help him with the more complex Burbage?

On the side table was a lovely picture of Potter, Weasley, and Granger after they had finished at Hogwarts. Had it really been eleven years? None of them had changed very much. He picked it up. Not true, they had changed. Ron Weasley had lost his gangly appearance. He had filled in, matured. Hermione was even more beautiful now. She had lost some of the roundness in her face and her hair was tamed nowadays, mostly. And Harry.

Gone were the round glasses, and the unruly hair. But the light in his eyes was the same, and the charm in his smile. He, too, was more beautiful now, in Severus’ eyes. He loved those lips, and the angle of his jaw, and… Well, enough of that. He put the frame down. He loved everything about Harry. And now, because he could not stand the thought of him making love to someone else, he had retaliated by trying to humiliate him, a job well done, by all accounts. He sighed.

There were the binoculars that had been such a draw at the party. He himself had enjoyed watching the Thestrals flying over the forest. Next to the binoculars was a small piece of parchment, obviously well used, many times folded and unfolded. His curiosity aroused, he took it up and was shocked to see his own ludicrous note from that staff meeting, months ago. ‘Drinks, eight o’clock, my rooms.’ That had been their first evening together. And Harry had kept it?

He started feeling self-conscious. He was in the man’s home without leave. He was looking at his things. Yet he was strangely elated by his findings. He suddenly felt even more wretched than before. Had he wrecked something more than a wonderful, platonic friendship? Could he really have become important to Harry? And after cultivating that hope for months, had he finally ruined it completely? He turned back toward the fireplace, ready to make good his escape, and stopped to stare at the portrait above it.

This had not been there on his last visit. There had been a hook, but no painting. And he thought he knew why. The man in the painting was gaunt, dressed in black with a high collar. His face was severe, with a long nose, glossy black hair cut just below the ear lobes, and very dark eyes. It was obviously a late medieval painting of extremely high quality, probably worth a fortune. And it looked like him. Not enough to be mistaken for his own portrait, but certainly enough that people would have remarked upon it, especially people who had known him ten years ago.
Severus approached the painting. The man’s eyes seemed to follow his movements. On the edge of the mantel, a picture of that same painting was lying on top of a folded letter in Potter’s hand and an open one on the letterhead of Le Musee du Louvre in Paris. Curious, he picked up the one from the Museum. It was a request, from the curator of the medieval art section, for a three-month loan of the painting for a special exposition of Late Medieval Grand Masters. So the portrait was indeed of great value.

He could not help but read Potter’s response. He was surprised to see that he had turned them down. He ‘could not part from the painting for such a long period of time’. But he was enclosing a picture of it that they were welcome to include in the catalogue of the exposition, with a request: though when he had purchased it six years ago it had been referred to as ‘Portrait of a Man’ he would prefer it be labeled ‘Portrait of the Half-Blood Prince’ in the catalogue, as he himself thought of it.

Severus swallowed hard. Harry had bought it six years ago. The Half-Blood Prince. Prominently displayed, above Harry’s fireplace. Severus was a fool, an unmitigated and utter fool. He had not been imagining Harry’s attraction to him. As unbelievable as it would appear, that vibrant, beautiful young man did indeed seek his company, research his interest, keep his idiotic note, and ‘could not part’ even for three months from the portrait of the Half-Blood Prince.

With a wave of his wand, he lit a fire in the grate and threw a handful of Floo powder in. About to step into the flames, he looked around the pleasant room one more time. His eye caught the symbol of Skeeter’s publisher on a slim volume lying horizontally on top of the neatly organized books in the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Curiosity got the better of him. He let the green flames die out as he walked across the room to retrieve the thin volume.

Wizards in Love: Essential Information about Homosexual Sex, by Josephus Rathbone, Healer. Realizing the meaning of such a book being in Potter’s possession, Severus perused it randomly. It was accurate and concise, with anatomical illustrations and useful spells. Overall, a very sound, if coldly clinical, introduction to male-on-male lovemaking. And now that he could finally believe that there had been some foundation to his ridiculous hopes, he had probably completely destroyed them with his petty jealousy.

Heartsick, he Flooed back to his rooms and fell into his chair, his head in his hands. He was disgusted with himself, and choking with misery. He took one look at the still full glass of Glenlivet on the sideboard and got up. He had neither the time nor the stomach to get drunk. He walked instead to his potions cabinet, opened it, and uncorked a tiny blue vial which he downed in one swallow. There were benefits to being a Potions Master, after all. He barely made it to his bed before he fell into the total oblivion of twelve hours of induced Dreamless Sleep.
Harry’s only focus was the transmutation of everything he had into forward momentum. The wind whipping his face and the pitch of its shrieking in his ears was his gauge of success. He had flown for days at a time before, during Quidditch games, but he had never pushed himself so relentlessly and with such single-mindedness. From an escape it became a challenge, then a goal. How fast, how far, and how long could he go? Near morning, he suddenly felt depleted. His slow-down and drop were a little abrupt, and his landing far less than elegant. He crumpled to the ground in a boneless mass of exhaustion and might have even fallen asleep for a few minutes, the broom still between his legs.

When he finally stood up, he felt more physically drained than he ever had before, standing straight almost a challenge in itself. He looked around. In the pale light of dawn, he realized he had not a clue as to his whereabouts. It had been a little after ten when he left Hogwarts and it must be approaching seven in the morning now, if the sun was anything to go by. He had left his room from the south window but had been heading into the sunrise by morning. He had been traveling for probably about nine hours. Where was he?

He tried to transfigure his broom into a walking stick, and then simply to shrink it, but could not gather enough of his magic for either so, his Firebolt on his shoulder, he headed for what looked like a road at the edge of the field where he had landed. It took him about thirty minutes of slow trekking to get to a small village. There were cows and horses in the fields. The houses were big and square and very quaint. The church bell rang eight times, eight o’clock, then, and the signs were in … German? Ah, there was an edelweiss motif painted on the edge of a roof, and a flag with a white cross on a red background. Could he really have made it as far as Switzerland? He must have.

A woman on a bicycle gave him a strange look, and as soon as she had passed he (finally!) shrunk his broom and slid it carefully along his wand in the special pocket on the outer seam of his trousers. He was freezing. There was a small hotel with what looked like a café at the corner of the street, and he headed into the warmth. The barkeep was thin, with blue eyes, short hair, and wire-rimmed glasses. He spoke perfect English and showed no surprise at all that an Englishman should want breakfast in his establishment so early in the morning. Before the man brought him his coffee and croissants, Harry had realized why.

There were other foreigners in the room and more were coming down to breakfast from the rooms upstairs. From the few other conversations in English in the room, he realized there was a horse-jumping competition in the village. From a brochure on the counter he learnt he was in the town of Elgg, not far from Zurich, which was very good news. He had been in Zurich many times on professional tours. Zurich did not have a team, but the nearby town of Winterthur did. It also had a large Wizarding community hidden in the middle of the pedestrian streets, and an Apparation point still very clear in Harry’s mind.

He was quite relieved. He would not have too much trouble getting home. He felt very guilty as the nice Swiss restaurant owner gave him change for his payment, a fifty-franc bill Transfigured from the tourist brochure to match the money left on a neighboring table. Harry would make good on it later. He stepped out and found a quiet path along a canal populated by ducks to Apparate to Winterthur. Once there, he walked to the Swiss branch of Gringotts and withdrew enough currency to Floo home.

At the Floo terminal, he hesitated. Today was Saturday. No classes until Monday. He really did not
want to go back and… argh. He couldn’t even think about it. Snape’s malicious smirk. That stupid book. What must Snape think of him? Why did he have to be such a nasty bastard? Couldn’t he just this once have given Harry a break, instead of rubbing his face in it?

He had so needed Snape’s calm, his voice, and his company. Why did he need him, want him, so much? Why did Snape have to be the only one that mattered? Merlin, how he hated that man!

He wasn’t going home just yet. He needed a break from all the craziness, and since there was no respite to be had in the dungeons, he decided to take a short holiday. He Floo-called Hermione to let her know that he was going away (she had no way to know he was not calling from his rooms) and would not be back until Sunday night. No, he wasn’t sure where yet. Maybe to the Burrow? She should not worry. Yes, she was right, he could certainly use a break…

Now, what was he to do with his thirty-six hours of freedom? Going to the Burrow was the last thing on his mind. He could imagine a blushing Molly unable to keep herself from reading the ‘revelations’ about his abundant love life in the Prophet. But he really did not want to be alone. Victor, maybe? Or some old teammate?

On a whim, he Floo-called Petr DeVries. He made up some lame excuse for being in Amsterdam on his way back from some Hogwarts business and secured himself a dinner invitation. Then he went back out into Wizarding Winterthur and blew all his money on an exquisitely tailored pair of trousers, a gorgeous shirt, an outrageously expensive waistcoat, and the most stunning set of robes he had ever owned. He even splurged on calf’s leather ankle boots and new undergarments.

He took his bulky package back to Gringotts, got some more money out, and Flooed to the best Wizarding hotel in Amsterdam. He had a shower, a massage, a pedicure, a manicure, and a fresh haircut. He had not been this ridiculously extravagant since the heights of his Quidditch days, and by the time Petr picked him up at his hotel he felt ready for anything.

Whether Petr felt his mood or had himself looked forward to a slightly wild night on the town Harry did not know, but they spent the evening eating fabulous food and smoking copious amounts of legal marijuana in a sophisticated jazz club where the clientele was obviously homosexual and the waiters attractive, playful, and very sexy. By the time they made it back to Petr’s place and were drinking Armagnac from very large glasses as well as smoking very high-quality dope, Harry was as high as a kite.

The various pictures of Snape and Petr he was examining on the fireplace mantel only reminded him that the man he was with had felt Snape’s kisses, that that man had been fucked by Snape. And so when Petr came to stand oh-so-close to him to mention that a particular picture had been taken in Prague, and then grabbed the back of Harry’s head and kissed him senseless, Harry only tasted the lips Snape had tasted, the tongue Snape’s tongue had played with, and felt pressing against his flat belly the prick Snape had caressed.

In the midst of the kiss, Petr, who was a bit more sober than Harry, Apparated them both to the bedroom, and divested them of their clothing. Snape had slept in this room, fucked this man in this bed. Soon, Harry was tasting the cock Snape had sucked and hearing the moans Snape had enjoyed. In his Snape-obsessed, drugged-out-of-his-skull state, he forgot to whom that lean tall body really belonged, looking up to see a fall of glossy black hair, closing his eyes in satisfaction at Snape’s moans of pleasure.

By the time Petr rolled him over and started stretching him, in Harry’s mind it was Snape’s hands touching him, Snape’s fingers penetrating him, and finally, heavenly, Snape’s prick breaching him and bringing him to the edge, Snape’s hand around his cock, and Snape’s name on his lips as he shot his come in desperate spurts.
~o~ Cowardly Retreat…~o~

Petr covered the sleeping Harry with a blanket and went back to his living room to finish his brandy. Well, that had been a first. Never before had he been called by someone else’s name while fucking. Though his ego was a little bruised, he admitted to himself with a chuckle that he would rather have any gorgeous young man yell another man’s name while Petr fucked him than have someone else fuck a gorgeous young man while he yelled "Petr!". At least in the first case scenario, he got to get off…

And that it was Severus’s young man and Severus’s name did not hurt… It was in itself a little bit of poetic justice. Harry had obviously been inexperienced, though his blow job showed great promise. Had Severus even an inkling that Harry was open to experimenting on the other side? He had always been so adamantly that Harry was exclusively straight. Had he any idea that Harry fantasized about him?

Until that revealing cry, Petr had not realized the depth of Harry’s intoxication, nor of his infatuation with Severus. It was clear in hindsight that the young man had only let their evening turn physical out of desire to experience something that Severus had enjoyed previously. Petr was generous enough, though, to be glad his former lover had not thrown away their relationship for nothing. It was obvious that there was hope here. Truthfully, he was glad that there might be even more than that. He still loved Severus, and liked Harry a lot, enough to want them both happy. Still, he had fucked Harry, and he had fucked him first. He was not noble enough not to find some satisfaction in that…

The Floo alarm went off and he felt incredibly guilty when Severus’s face appeared in the flames. “Petr?”

His heart beating a bit faster than normal, Petr approached the hearth. “Severus! Good evening! I am afraid you just missed Harry. He went back to his hotel after dinner. Is it something urgent? You can probably reach him there.”

Severus looked a little surprised. Why should he? Harry could have gone already, it was well after ten.

“No, nothing that can’t wait until he returns,” Severus answered. “Did you have a good evening?”

“Excellent, though he seemed a little tired.” He might as well explain why the evening had been so short.

“And how are you?”

Hoping all the while that Harry would stay asleep, Petr made small talk with Severus for a few more minutes and then said his farewells. That had been extremely uncomfortable. Actually, he realized that the next morning would probably be very awkward as well, and made a quick decision. A few minutes later he was dressed and, having written a hasty note to his sleeping guest, he headed out to go sleep at his private club. Sometimes a quiet retreat was the best approach.

~o~

Severus was completely flummoxed. After half a day of expecting to meet Harry (and maybe even seeking him out in all his usual places), he had finally heard Granger, during luncheon, mention that
Harry had left that morning for parts unknown—though possibly for the Burrow—to ‘take a break’.

After another few hours of self-flagellation, Severus had felt the need to talk to an old friend, one who also happened to know of his hopeless attachment. Never in a million years had he expected to hear that Harry was in Amsterdam and that he had just had dinner with the same ‘old friend’. Petr had certainly acted as if Severus should have known all about it, and he was wondering what story Harry had fed him. And now he was also wondering what the two of them had talked about. What did they have in common, outside of their love of flying and… him? Well, at least Harry was safe. And Petr, whose friendship he never doubted, might even have put a good word in for him.
Chapter 90

~o~ Self recrimination ~o~

In his waking sleep, Harry felt a glow of happiness. Severus had made love to him. As he woke up further, he realized that it had only been a dream, but still one that left him with a wonderful sense of wellbeing. Maybe someday it would be more than a dream. As he rose further into consciousness, he became aware of some rather weird physical sensations. He felt a little woozy, and his… Harry was suddenly wide-awake. His arsehole felt quite tender. He remembered a dream about making love with Snape, but he knew that had not really happened.

Oh, shit. He was in Amsterdam, with Petr. Fuck, fuck, fuck, he was in Petr’s bed. Fucking, fucking hell. Petr had fucked him. He felt vile. His stomach lurched and he emptied its contents all over the carpet at the side of the bed. This was the exact reason why he never drank. He always woke up the morning after regretting what had happened while he was under the influence, not to mention sick as a dog.

But this morning after was by far the worst he ever had experienced. He had had sex with a man for the first time. A man who was not Severus. His stomach tried hard, but could not find anything else to expel. For a brief moment he actually wished for death. Anything not to have to face this morning’s reality. He crawled out of bed, dry-heaved when he saw his new boxer shorts on the floor, and again when he tripped on a bottle of lube. And once more for good measure when he felt the twinge in his arse as he emptied his bladder in the white toilet.

He leaned against the sink and stared at himself in the mirror. Self-loathing did not begin to describe how he felt. How could he look so normal when he felt so utterly disgusting? He parked himself under the showerhead and turned the water on full blast. He scrubbed his body mercilessly, including that most tender part of his anatomy. He started crying, sobbing as tears just streaked down his face. In self-pity or self-hatred he wasn’t sure. Probably both. He sat at the bottom of the shower stall, wrapped his arms around his knees, and just wept.

He saw Petr’s note on the night table when he returned to the bedroom, a towel around his middle. Before reading it he picked up his wand and cleaned up the floor, then opened the window. It was cold outside, but the smell of the vomit outlasted its presence on the rug.

He sat on the bed and picked up the note.

Harry,
Sorry I had to run out so early. An emergency at work. I had a great time last night. Perhaps we can do it again sometime. Call me next time you are in town.

Petr.

PS: Severus called while you were sleeping. I told him you intended to return to Hogwarts tonight, and apparently whatever it was can wait till then.

Harry read the note again, dread in his heart. ‘Severus called while you were sleeping.’ That made absolutely no sense. How had he known where Harry was? He couldn’t have. He must have been calling Petr for some other reason. And Petr had probably just assumed Severus knew that Harry was there. Could things get any worse? Did Snape have to know every one of his indiscretions? Considering what his opinion of Harry must have been after reading that book, did he have to find out immediately that Harry was apparently no better at keeping his pants on with men than he had been with women? How could he ever face that man again?

Well, he had to, sooner or later. He picked up his beautiful new clothes and shoes and Flooed back
to his hotel room, where he threw the lot in the hotel-provided laundry bag. He put back on the
clothes he had worn on his flight, checked out of the hotel, and went home from the international
Floo station. He was so relieved to be back in his rooms he honestly felt he might never have the
desire to leave them again. It was a little after ten Sunday morning. In twenty-two hours, he would
have to be teaching the third years the finesse of spot landing. He had to get hold of himself and get
over recent events. He had to stop just reacting and actually think—about what he was doing, where
he was going, and what he really wanted.

Ordinarily, when he had something he needed to figure out, he would talk to Hermione, or Ginny, or
both. But he had confided in no one about his feelings for Snape, or even his emerging friendship
with him. It seemed too important to share, even with his best friends.
He realized that this, right there, said it all. Nothing in his life had ever felt as important as this. His
judgment in the past had been questionable. Certainly his judgment, or lack thereof, last night was a
case in point. But his connection to Snape was real, and intense, and precious, and… true. Genuine.
He had nothing to gain by it, and no reservations about it. Snape was still a cruel bastard, difficult
and demanding, but even with his eyes wide open, Harry still wanted him, enjoyed him, needed
him… shit. Loved him.

So really, no matter how difficult this was going to be, and no matter how painful and humiliating, he
could do nothing but stick it out. Because he knew that it was all that really mattered, all that ever
had. He sighed. He was tired, really tired, but relieved. He knew what he was doing, where he was
going, and what he wanted. He had really known for some time. He just had to stay the course. He
took off his clothes and went to bed. He was too tired to do anything more constructive than sleep.
And he might as well be rested when the time came to face the music.
The next day, in truth, he could not bring himself to meet Snape’s eyes, not wanting to see the
disgust in them. He was glad it was one of his evenings with the adult students. He just could not
bear to face the man.
The next day at breakfast, his heart fell when a beautiful Tengmalm’s owl brought him a brief note.
“Mr. Potter, Unfortunate circumstances are forcing me to cancel our standing plans both this
evening and Thursday. Please accept my apologies. SS”

Snape was not present at breakfast, nor was he at lunch. Harry went and sat in his chair.
“Looks like I get to sit with you. Lucky me! Where is the Headmaster anyway?” he asked Hermione.
“I am not quite sure. Hogwarts business, though, he’s not taken time off. I heard from Draco that
three out of four copies of that stupid book were found and destroyed, and the owners given a
magical gag? He also said the last copy was destroyed by the owner? You must be so relieved!”

“You have no idea. I will never say another word against Draco.”

Hermione giggled. “Somehow, I doubt that… But he is brilliant, isn’t he. Ginny told me about the
baby. Thank god for Lily and Scorpius. Otherwise finding out what happened might have destroyed
her. As it is, she is pretty devastated.”

“Marchbanks charged Skeeter with manslaughter. Can they do that in the magical court for the death
of a fetus?”

“I researched it.” She smacked Harry on the arm before he had time to say anything.
“Hey!” he protested. “I didn’t say anything!”

“Shut up. You were thinking it.”
Harry chuckled. “So, what did you find out?”

“The fetus is considered alive after twenty-four weeks, and is entitled to all the protection afforded any wizards under the law. Ginny was twenty-six weeks pregnant when the Veritaserum damaged her baby’s brain beyond hope. So yes, Skeeter will be tried for involuntary manslaughter. That’s four years, normally, but because the victim was a child younger than eight, the penalty is doubled. Reckless endangerment is one year, and she has one hundred and thirty counts, all the people she said she interviewed. Illegal possession of Veritaserum is five years, illegal use is ten. Obliviation is three years. The rest of the charges will probably be fines. So that’s one hundred and fifty six years in Azkaban, ten years if she is allowed to do them all concurrently, though that’s unlikely. Better her than me.”

“Wow. Couldn’t happen to a better person. Maybe she can pen a book about her years as a detainee. Still, I’m glad Azkaban is no longer what it used to be. No one deserved that.”

That evening, Harry went to research the last syllabi he had left, the fifth year Cursed Objects, for Minerva. How he got roped into explaining symbiotic properties versus additive properties in potions to a group of first year Hufflepuffs he would never know, but it was extremely rewarding when, at the end of the night, it made sense to all of them.

Snape did not return Wednesday, nor Thursday, nor Friday, so when Harry’s wards signaled five people approaching on Friday night, he didn’t mind. He could hear a discussion through the trap door.

“Perry, you knock!”

“No way! My idea. You knock!”

“Come on, for Merlin’s sake! We didn’t come this deep in red and gold territory to just stand there!”

“Well, you knock then, Hamish!”

Chuckling, he opened the trap on five startled little faces looking up at him. Signaling for them to enter, Harry asked, “Mr. Ashcroft, Mr. Menzies, Mr. Beetroot, Mr. Flint, Mr. Ramirez, greetings. To what extraordinary circumstances do I owe your visit this evening?”

Hamish Menzies looked at his classmates and shook his head disgustedly. “Perry was talking to Maxine, you know? Tall Maxine Barento from Hufflepuff? Anyway, she said you were dead helpful to them with that stup… with explaining the concept of symbiotic properties versus additive properties in potions for our paper on ingredient replacement.”

Perry Beetroot was encouraged by Harry’s calm demeanor. “We don’t get it either, Coach Potter. Professor McClallan is off to see Auror Batgut and Apprentice Pilot, well, he’s nice and all… but he eats half his words, and he speaks so fast, and he stutters, and when he is done explaining, well, you still don’t have a clue…”

“Have you boys thought of asking help from Headmaster Snape? He is a Potions Master and a Slytherin.”

“See, told you!” said Perry Beetroot.

“Uh, sir?” Percy Ashcroft started explaining, “Except for Perry here, we’re all scared shitless… Fuck! Oh, Merlin… Sorry sir, please excuse my language. What I mean to say is that we’re frightened of him.”
Harry had a very hard time not laughing. These kids were so cute. “I think I can relate. When I was your age, I was bloody terrified of the Potions professor. My roommates thought he was a vampire.”

The children looked at him in shock, then burst out laughing.

“But I know him now,” added Harry. “He has a brilliant mind, and vast and eclectic knowledge. Sometimes I feel there is nothing he doesn’t know. He is generous and caring, he spent years working one way or another for the betterment of wizardkind, and as a friend, he is amazingly loyal. He has a marvelously sarcastic sense of humor and a great laugh. And unlike when I was your age, he doesn’t look anything like a vampire any more. He’s still not... handsome, but he has a lot presence.”

He realized the boys were looking at each other. Finally Paco Ramirez said, “Wow. Perry wasn’t kidding, you really do like him, don’t you?”

Harry shrugged. “Yes, yes, I do. But anyway. There are only the five of you in your dorm, is that correct?”

“Yes, Coach Potter, it’s just us boys in first year.”

“Good. I don’t want to have to do this again. Did you bring your notes? Good, then sit down and let’s get started.”

“Your rooms are really awesome, Coach. Can we go onto the balcony when we’re done?”

“Sure.”

Once again, he went through the whole important notion of symbiotic versus additive properties in potion ingredients, remembering Hermione explaining the same to Ron and him years ago. The boys were smart and got it faster than the four Hufflepuffs the day before.

They started talking about their classes, and it was interesting to hear how popular Neville was. They felt McGonagall (“Professor McGonagall, boys…”) favored the Gryffindors, and they loved History of Magic. “It’s like Professor Granger-Weasley tells you a story and you can see it in your head. It makes it easy to remember. It’s great to know about the past.” They were astonished by Hagrid. “He wanted us to pet a ‘baby’ Acromantula, because wasn’t it cute? The thing was the size of a serving platter, with venom dripping from his fangs. I think his feelings were hurt when we all demurred. He’s a little barmy, you know?”

Paco Ramirez got out a pack of cards and asked Harry if he wanted to play Exploding Snap. They had a great time. Harry then went with them onto the balcony and quizzed them on their astrology, and suddenly the boys had to run out to make their weekend eleven o’clock curfew. Harry stood outside for a few more minutes breathing in the night. When he came back, he was surprised to find Perry Beetroot sitting on his couch.

“Perry? You are going to get caught out after curfew, you know.”

“I know, but… Sir, with all due respect, I have a question.”

“All right. What is it?”

“The portrait above your fireplace? Did you buy it because it looks like the Headmaster?”

“Well... Yes. I suppose I did.”
“I was wondering... You... You love him, don’t you. I mean you’re in love with him.”

“That’s an extremely personal question, Perry. Why do you ask?”

“I really like Julius Marchbanks, from Ravenclaw. Percy, Hamish, Andreas, and Paco, they go on and on about Maxine, or Heather and Isobel. I mean they’re nice girls and all, but I wouldn’t want to kiss them.”

“But you’d like to kiss Julius.”

“Oh, yeah...”

“Do you think that’s a problem?”

“I’m the last Beetroot. My parents are always talking of my getting married and producing an heir. I don’t want to disappoint them.”

“I see. Well, I like both boys and girls, Perry. Be patient, you might find at some point that you do too. Or like Professor Longbottom, you might be able to adopt a baby some day, or, like me, have a godchild you are really close to, and have him be your heir. Just because you’re gay doesn’t mean you’ll never have a child. Don’t force the issue. Go with your heart. Your happiness is what’s important.”

Harry grinned. “Besides, you are a little young for kissing anybody right now, anyway, don’t you think? Wait a couple of years, and if you still want to kiss Julius, and he feels the same way, kiss away. Life is too short to waste kissing opportunities.”

Perry smiled. “Yeah... Thanks, Coach. Would you give me a pass? Professor McGonagall is patrolling, and she’s not crazy about Slytherins.”

Harry wrote the pass and the child left, grateful. On the other hand, Harry’s heart was heavy. He’d not seen Snape in four days. Petr had hinted at the man’s jealousy. Being fucked by his ex was probably pretty high on Snape’s No-no list.

The next day Snape was back, and attended the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch game. Harry was very proud of the teams. They flew extremely well, played a clean, fast, exciting eight-hour game, staying motivated the entire time despite the cold, and in the end, when Gryffindor took the Snitch for the win, they thanked and shook hands with the yellow-and-black-clad players with a real sense of camaraderie. They made their coach, their Houses, and their school proud.

They all ate a late dinner, everyone happy to be out of the cold and appreciating the chowder and warm desserts prepared by the elves. Snape did not once meet Harry’s eyes, nor did he congratulate the coach on a game well played, which hurt Harry much more than it should have. The students seemed happy to celebrate in the Great Hall, all together, until curfew. After that, Coach Potter and Professor Longbottom were invited to the Gryffindor common room for an illegal butterbeer.

Halfway there, Harry realized he had left his scarf behind, on the back of his chair. It was the scarf he’d had since his first year at Hogwarts and he was ridiculously attached to it. He went back to the Great Hall for it, but it was gone. He assumed an elf had picked it up and that it would be back in his rooms. He joined Neville in the Gryffindor common room and had a lot of fun, feeling like they were going back in time. They even climbed up to their dorm and checked for their names, carved underneath their beds at the end of their seventh year.

At midnight Harry climbed into bed, feeling angry at himself, hurt by Snape’s pettiness in not acknowledging his professional achievement, and completely discouraged. His scarf was not in his
rooms either, and Kreacher had no clue where it might be. The highlight of his week had been time spent with the students, adult and children. He would do more of that.

He spent Sunday with Teddy and Andromeda, cooking lunch and dinner, and teaching Teddy how to make chocolate chip biscuits. Teddy told him all about the secret passages in the Manor, so Harry used his magic to create one from behind the mirror in Teddy’s room to the broom closet between the kitchen and the living room. The password was “ssefsessss” which meant tail in Parseltongue and was easy enough for Teddy to learn and remember. Teddy sported waist-length pale blond hair and pale silver eyes these days, with the plumper, child version of Lucius’s aristocratic face. He had not changed since late December, and after three weeks everyone was getting used to it.

Another week passed without Snape ever talking to Harry or even meeting his eyes, and yet another and Harry stopped hoping. Another week, and then a month, then it was March, and Easter was in one month, and Harry despaired of ever being forgiven by the Headmaster for his indiscretion. He had turned in his last syllabus to Minerva in early February, and the last one he had to edit, on Unforgivables, was finally turned in to him in the nick of time by Hagrid and Madam Pince, two weeks before that section was to be taught.

He dropped all seven completed and edited Unforgivables syllabi off in Snape’s office within hours, to give the Headmaster as much time as possible to review them. Snape nodded to him in acknowledgement, but was busy interviewing teachers for Muggle Studies and Basic Magical Education and did not interrupt himself. Hogwarts had gone without either since the beginning of the year, a retired magical primary school teacher who lived in Hogsmeade doing an adequate job at covering both, but with an extremely reduced curriculum. Several excellent candidates had passed the selection committee and Harry wondered whom Snape would settle on.

That evening, once the students had left the Great Hall, Hermione introduced the two new hires. Albert Nott, Theodore’s older brother, had been a Death Eater. Deprived of his magic, he had chosen to live as a Muggle. He’d gone to University, getting a business degree, and had founded a small, very successful and lucrative company that imported luxury automobiles and motorcycles to very wealthy customers in Great Britain.

He had set up excellent managing teams to keep both sides of his business going and wanted to return to the magical world, without magic but with sufficient funds to compensate for its absence. He paid one of the Nott’s old house-elves, who was devoted to him, to help him function and had married a witch, Daphne Greengrass, who seemed to have no problem loving a Squib. He would teach Muggle Studies.

Theodore Nott had studied law with Draco Malfoy. Though the younger brother, he was the Head of the Nott House, which was a very minor House and had no vote in the Wizengamot. He was married to Astoria, Daphne’s sister, and the four, so far, lived together. He was not keen on practicing law and had had difficulty finding a challenging place in the world. He had never adhered to his family’s separatist convictions and had always hated his father, finding his suicide a cowardly way out, especially in light of his brother’s success.

Harry liked both of them. Theodore was tall and thin, with dark hair and brown eyes. Albert was stockier, with dirty blond hair and hazel eyes. They were both friendly and laughed easily. They would start after the Easter break, in a month and a half.

Minerva took advantage of the fact that everyone was present to announce that Harry had been first in finishing his assignment for the DADA. Everyone knew, from hearing the members of the committee discuss it and from the comments of the Aurors who had come to teach, what a major undertaking the concurrent writing of the seven years’ worth of seventeen topics was and the staggering amount of work it represented for each volunteer.
Harry had not known he’d been the first and was very pleased with the congratulations expressed by his co-writers, and the cheering and clapping. He was deservedly proud of his own achievement. For the first time in weeks, his eyes met Snape’s. So much of his work had been done during their peacefully shared evenings, and though he had tried to forget about them, he missed the man’s company so painfully…

Snape was clapping politely, his eyes flat and bored. Harry looked away, hurt, realizing that had it been anyone else, Snape would have made the announcement himself, and praised the individual publicly. Had Minerva not taken it upon herself to do so, would Harry’s achievement have gone completely unrecognized? He was suddenly angry at Snape’s lack of professionalism. So his ex had fucked Harry? So what? Harry’s private life was just that, private. Unlike some, he’d not had a man suck his cock in a public corridor, and there certainly was no reason to deny his professional successes because of a one-night stand Harry could hardly remember.

As everyone left the Great Hall, chatting, Harry arranged to walk next to Snape for a moment. He laid his hand on the man’s forearm to stop him and waited for them to be alone. “Am I right to believe that my professional performance been satisfactory, Headmaster?” he asked dryly.


“Then, regardless of any private disagreement we might have, I would thank you to treat my contributions with professionalism. If you are unable to separate the two, I might have to find some other employment. I suffered enough from your petty personal vendetta as a student. I will not let it taint my career as well.” And he walked away.

“Mr. Potter!” Harry ignored him. It felt remarkably good to put the man in his place, to be in the right for once.

“Potter!…Please. Please hear me out.”

Harry loved him so much. They were in a very public area of the castle. Snape might be heard, or seen. Harry would not have him humiliate himself in front of the students. He stopped and let Snape catch up.

“Thank you, Potter,” said Snape. He took a deep breath. “You are absolutely right. I should have mentioned how well the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff game was played, and I should have been the one publicly mentioning and celebrating your impressive achievement in DADA. Against her own better judgment, I asked Professor McGonagall to do so in my place, believing you would be more comfortable with the acknowledgement coming from her than from myself. I apologize if I was in error, and would like to assure you it in no way reflects a lack of appreciation for your accomplishment. Henceforth, I assure you I will not let personal feelings interfere in our professional dealings.”

“That’s all I ask.” Their eyes met. ‘That, and that you look at me, and smile, and ask me to spend time with you, and love me, and show me what it is really like being made love to by you…’ Harry shook himself.

Snape looked about to say something more, but then didn’t. “Good evening, Mr. Potter,” and he was gone.
Chapter 91

~o~ Goblin Peace ~o~

Forty-seven days. Forty-seven days since Potter had stood up, his cup shattering, and had left Severus’s rooms. By the worst luck, the week after Severus had received news of two more young werewolves, these born with the condition from parents turned by Greyback as punishment for refusing to join the Dark Lord. It had taken all his tact and all his persuasion to make sure the children would attend Hogwarts come autumn.

He had left a quickly penned note to Harry, knowing he would miss two of their evenings. When he’d come back, exhausted, that Friday, Potter had not come. Since he had arrived minutes before eight, he assumed Potter thought he was still away, and the next day he had been at the game. It had been incredibly long but exciting, the students’ conduct exemplary, their flying skills truly impressive even in exhaustion, a true credit to their flying instructor and their coach.

Snape had held back his opinion, certain he would see Harry that evening, though it was getting on. But Harry had not come. True, by the time dinner and the celebrations were over, it might have been too late…

Sunday, after reading a special report on the arrest of Rita Skeeter in the Prophet’s supplement, Snape could not even meet Potter’s eyes. How could he have violated the man’s privacy to such an extent? He remembered how irate he had been at Potter looking at his memories when the boy had been a mere fifteen years old and at a time when they had enthusiastically hated each other. What was his excuse as an adult, when Potter had every right to expect friendship and respect from him, and perhaps more?

Sunday night came and went without a sign of Potter. Monday, Harry worked with the adult students in the evening, so it wasn’t until Tuesday that Snape ran out of excuses for him and had to face the facts. Potter just wasn’t coming back. He thought a hundred times of apologizing, but remembered the stupid kiss to Higgs Potter had kindly overlooked, his relationship with Petr Potter had patiently witnessed, and felt he may well have run out of chances with the man he loved.

Maybe if he stayed away for a while? If Potter missed their time together even half as much as Severus did…

He had many sources of information on the man he loved. Granger was always happy to speak about Harry. If Severus went to the Manor, he heard news about Lily’s godfather, especially from Draco, who was strangely loquacious on the topic. Filius, who was always in a wonderful mood lately, spend a lot of time in the aerie with Lovegood, George, Neville, and Frederic, and spoke of the young man often.

Surprisingly, little Perry Beetroot visited Snape regularly in his office and seemed to make it his responsibility to keep him apprised of Harry’s every word about him, his every intonation while Harry spoke of the Headmaster. Evidently, the five first year Slytherins had found refuge in Harry’s rooms. Harry’d even purchased an upright piano for Mr. Menzie’s use.

“The other Slytherins are not very nice to us. It’s weird I guess, because we have no girls. When we speak to the second year girls, the second year boys get all territorial, and then of course, Hamish is Muggle-born, and the upper classmen try to make a big deal of it, but we stick with him. He’s brilliant, he is. Worth ten of those idiots. Who cares if he’s Muggle-born?
“They wouldn’t let him play the piano in the common room, can you believe that? That’s why Harry, Coach Potter, got one. Hamish just asks Kreacher if it’s ok, and he can go practice anytime, and we can go with him. We just have to mind Kreacher, and he’s really neat. More like a wizard than an elf. We do our homework and play cards and run around the balcony up there. It’s really neat.

“And he’s got that great big painting of you that follows you with his eyes. I mean, we know it’s not you, but we all know it is, right? Harry looks at it and sighs. Have you ever thought of Harry, you know, like that, sir? Because Harry really likes you. A lot.”

Severus had been incredibly proud on behalf of Harry when he had turned in the Unforgivables syllabi to him, edited and corrected, only hours after receiving the last syllabus. Without Hagrid and Irma delaying him, he would have been ready a month earlier. As it was, his work was impeccable, the editing perfect. Snape wanted to mark the occasion but Harry… Time passed, but it seemed Harry would never forgive him for his indiscretion.

He went to Minerva and asked her, as Harry’s old Head of House, to celebrate the young man’s achievement publicly. She was appalled.

“What is wrong with you, Severus? Why in the world would you not do it yourself? Will you forever hold this man in contempt for whatever wrong his father did and what he himself might have done as a boy? Don’t think we didn’t all notice your snubbing him at the last game. Amazing flying, impeccable student behavior, remarkable eight-hour game, and not one positive comment from you? It was shameful, is what it was. And now you want me to do your job and acknowledge his achievement? Severus Snape, I am ashamed of you!”

“Minerva, I assure you that you are jumping to conclusions. Potter and I have had a… minor disagreement and he is currently… upset with me. We have become close friends, as a matter of fact, but as you well know for having been driven to distraction by me many times through the years, I am a difficult man, prone to hurt most the people I love best. I hope with all my heart that Potter will be as forgiving as you, Filius, or Hagrid have always been, and that our friendship will resume its normal course in time. I just feel words of praise would be more welcome, and perceived as more honest, coming from you, that’s all.”

It seemed that had been yet another colossal mistake on his part, but since it got Harry to speak to him and look at him, he could not be arsed to care.

“That’s all I ask,” Potter had said, but had his eyes asked for something else? Snape wasn’t sure. Well. However briefly, they had talked. It was progress. The next day at lunch, Severus swallowed his shame and stopped shying away from the anger he might find in Potter’s eyes and just looked at him. Soon enough, Harry looked up and met his eyes, surprised, but then smiling, a tentative yet illuminating smile. Severus felt as if a boulder had been taken off his chest. He took a deep breath and smiled back.

Lovegood said something to Potter and the moment was gone, but Severus felt wonderful all day. It was Thursday, of course Potter wouldn’t come, but there was always tomorrow…

~0~

Friday, to Severus’s utter disappointment, Potter missed lunch. Then, at 5:00 PM, as he was leaving his office, Filius Floo-called him, asking him to come to his rooms. The small man rarely invited Severus to his living quarters. Severus was six foot six. He had to lower his head to make it through the doors, and none of Filius’s furniture was even remotely comfortable for him. Severus concluded it must be important.
He knocked on the low door with a vague sense of unease, which disappeared as soon as he saw Grelska Grishreshssnakst, Filius’s grandmother, smiling at him from a chair next to the fireplace. She still looked exactly like her portrait, though it was thirty years old, including that unsettling goblin predatory grin.

“Severus, my friend!”

Severus was fully aware of the honor bestowed upon him by the matriarch’s calling him a friend. He bowed deeply. “Friend Grelska,” he answered, correctly.

“Still ridiculously tall, but you look well my friend, now the mad one is gone… And bantritch, I hear.”

Filius, who had just put down a tea tray, hid his face in his hands. “Grandmother!”

“Well he is, isn’t he? I bet it’s impressive too. Call the boy, will you, Fili?”

“What am I, Filius?” Asked Severus, never quite knowing what to expect from goblins.

Grelska answered him: “Bantritch, Severus, Boy-hard-boned, literally translated, but it refers to the sexual organ. Human would say, wants to fuck a boy, I think, but bantritch is polite. Not fucking politely,” she chortled, “but a way to refer to wanting to fuck a boy in polite conversation, which I guess you people just don’t…”

Potter was just stepping out of the Floo, looking like he was going to fall on his face at first, but then recovering his balance quite gracefully.

He smiled first at Grelska, though she was his elder, breaking his first rule of goblin etiquette of the afternoon, and immediately broke the second by speaking first to a high-ranking female, saying, “You are so like your portrait! Just as beautiful. You have the most gorgeous hair I have ever seen.” Another example of Potter always landing on his feet. A female’s hair among goblins was an object of pride. He had innocently paid her the greatest compliment, and its obvious spontaneity made it all the more precious.

Grelska smiled at him. “Hello, Harry Potter. My nephew Griphook is right. You rob banks, dispatch dark wizards, and yet you look like a Nischkayat, a soft round-toothed angel creature, innocent and beautiful, that bring good dreams to children. I can see why you inspire bantritch in my friend.”

“Tea, Harry?” asked Filius, hastily changing the subject.

“Yes, thank you. Does your grandmother’s visit means what I hope it means?” asked Harry hopefully, breaking yet another rule by implying the woman needed a reason to visit her grandson.

Grelska laughed. “Yes, Harry Potter! The girl has lovely hair, so pale. She is gentle, and tied to the invisible world. She is not rich, but no matter, Filius is. A perfect match for my prosaic grandchild, plenty of mintritch there, on both side. Luna Lovegood accepted the engagement gift. They will mate soon.”

Harry had been sitting on the floor. He grabbed a laughing Filius and gave him a hug. “How could she have not loved you? And you were worried! Congratulations… I’m so glad, Filius!”

He turned and, to Severus’s horror, put his hand on Grelska’s wrist and said, “Thank you for being so accepting of my friend. She is the most wonderful girl.”
Grelska laughed. “Two hundred and ninety-seven years without being touched by a man outside of my family, and now, molested by none other than the slayer of the Flying Death! Lucky for you my husband is gone! He would have cut off your hand… But he is fifty years dead and I must admit, I rather liked it, humans are so warm blooded.”

“Oh Merlin! I’m sorry, ma’am. I didn’t mean any disrespect. I’m just so glad. We were really taught nothing of your culture. I won’t do it again, promise! Will I still be able to hug Luna, though?”

“Not if you don’t want me to cut off your arms,” said Filius, looking stern for three seconds, and then laughing. “Yes, Harry. You can hug my fiancée, and later my wife, as much as you want.”

“And you can touch my wrist when no one’s looking!” mocked-whispered Grelska, joking.

Severus had sat on a footstool and was drinking his tea. Harry grabbed his own cup and sat on the couch as Filius and his grandmother started speaking quickly in Gobbledegook. Several times they looked at them and laughed. It was a bit disturbing, though Severus could guess where the mirth came from as he caught several bantritches.

“They’re engaged,” said Potter, as if he meant something else by it.

“Indeed.” Severus looked at him, trying to communicate all he felt with his eyes.

“Snape, I… I really don’t know what to say… but… Merlin, I miss you!”

Severus knew this was his chance. “Sometimes friends do make the most grievous errors in judgment. In jealousy, in anger, they commit… thoughtless, hurtful acts. And regret them bitterly shortly thereafter, but don’t know how to put things right.”

There. He had said what he’d wanted to say for weeks. How grotesque a mistake buying that book had been, how his jealousy of Harry’s previous lovers and his anger about it had driven him to want to hurt Harry back. How he had wanted to put things right immediately, and how sorry he was for the hurt he had caused. Would Harry forgive him?

Harry smiled. “I guess forgiveness and generosity of spirit are important parts of friendship, things that are not always easy to achieve, but if the friendship matters enough, I guess anything can be forgiven and forgotten,” he observed.

Thank Merlin, Harry had heard his quiet apology, his plea for understanding, and that wonderful man had forgiven him…

“Will you come tonight, then?” asked Severus, hopeful.

“Yes, please,” answered Harry, his smile irrepressible, making Severus so, so happy.

“My grandmother is leaving now. You are both invited to visit, though she recommends you read a book of goblin etiquette first, Harry, if you want to come back with all your limbs.” Filius chuckled. “I’ll Floo with her to Hogsmeade. See you both at dinner.”

Severus and Harry walked together to dinner. They passed five grinning first years at the Slytherin table, and when he sat, Severus got a smile from Minerva. “You two worked out your differences?”

“We did. Thank you.”

“Well done. Will you be going to the Three Broomsticks with Harry and his friends this evening then?”
Oh. Right. Harry had been doing that for weeks now… “It’s up to him. We’ll see.”

Severus did not want to share him, but if Harry wanted to go, he would happily come along. He would take Harry’s company in whatever way he could.
Filius had been courting Luna. You had to be blind not to see it. Luna had been happier than Harry had ever seen her. Each of Filius’s smiles, each of his small attentions, each of his charming gifts she treasured in her heart. When he had seen Filius’s grandmother, remembering the courtship of Filius’s parents he had been told about years ago, he had just known.

He was very happy for his friend. They made an unusual but curiously well-matched couple, and both deserved happiness.

He loved Severus at least as much as Luna loved Filius, and would Severus be so jealous if he didn’t have feelings for him? It was so unfair. Would Severus ever forgive him? Then, a miracle. Severus had shown he understood Harry perfectly.

“Sometimes friends do make the most grievous errors in judgment.” Like sleeping with the wrong man… In jealousy, in anger, they commit… thoughtless, hurtful acts. He had been angry at Severus for reading that stupid book, and jealous of Petr for having had what Harry had not. And regret them bitterly shortly thereafter, but don’t know how to put things right. He had hated himself the morning after, but how did you erase something like that? Yes, Snape had obviously given it some thought and understood Harry’s situation perfectly.

Harry’s response had been full of hope. “I guess forgiveness and generosity of spirit are important parts of friendship, things that are not always easy to achieve, but if the friendship matters enough, I guess anything can be forgiven and forgotten.”

Snape’s answer asking him to visit that night had been all the response he needed. Finally, finally it was over. They could be friends again. When Neville and Hermione had reminded him of his set date for Friday night, he’d wanted to cancel, but Snape, smiling, had said he would join in. They had sat side by side at the Three Broomsticks and their legs had touched under the table, their hands had accidentally brushed against each other as they reached for their drinks, and Harry had had to gently place a lock of hair that had escaped his tie behind Snape’s ear.

Snape’s soft smile had been thank you enough, but as they walked back, he had pulled the hood of Harry’s cloak over his shaved head, remarking how cold the evening was, his hands for a moment framing Harry’s face.

The next two evenings in the dungeons had been like heaven, their friendship renewed, their laughter over Harry’s faux pas with Filius’s grandmother and over how they imagined her first meeting with Xenophilius filling the room, their banter as good as it had ever been, their speculation about why Teddy would still choose to look like Lucius going from serious to absurd.

Now when Harry went home, Severus walked Harry to the door, and their good nights were said while standing closer and closer.

On Tuesday, Harry announced that it was the night when, for weeks now, the young Slytherins had usually been his guests. Would Severus mind coming up to Harry’s instead of the reverse?

Aside from Perry, who looked positively chuffed about it, Hamish, Andreas, Percy, and Paco looked completely terrified by Severus’s presence. By helping them with their potions essays, reading and correcting them, Severus did nothing to change that state of affairs. It had Harry in stitches.
They did loosen up when Severus took revenge on his laughter by describing some of Harry’s worst potions efforts and the ritual two explosions per class his group had always favored: Mr. Longbottom, leading with an early, noisy, but generally impotent kaboom! and Mr. Finnegan, who followed with a less noise-producing but generally more soot-projecting kerplow!

By then having his audience laughing, Severus continued describing Harry’s occasional explosions, which were always silent but lethal (and caused more often than not by Slytherin sabotage), in one of which the vapors alone had rendered Mr. Weasley bald for a week, another which had caused Harry’s hair to turn pink, another yet which had given Professor Granger-Weasley tentacles. Finally, in seventh year, the spectacular one that had caused all of Harry’s clothes to disappear.

Harry was outraged. “That last one never happened!” The boys were laughing so hard they couldn’t stop. “Boys, really, I swear, he made it up! It never happened!” Paco was on the floor, holding his belly.

“Oops,” said Snape, looking straight into Harry’s eyes. “You’re right! It never happened. That was just a fantasy of mine…” The boys laughed harder while Snape’s gaze heated up and Harry thought his clothes were really going to disappear as the man licked his lips.

The moment passed and Snape played four-handed piano with Hamish, extremely poorly, creating more laughter, and played wizard chess against Percy and Paco, extremely well, making them moan in despair.

Before they left, thinking Harry was safely setting out seeds for birds on the other side of the deck, they broached a subject they had obviously discussed before. Amused by the exchange, Harry still felt for Severus, ambushed by the young Slytherins, all the while admiring Severus paring their concerted attack like the duelist he was.

Hamish: “Sir, do you think Harry is attractive?”

Severus: “Don’t you? He is a very handsome man.”

Perry: “Yes, but, would you kiss him, if you got the chance?”

Severus: “That’s a very personal question, Mr. Beetroot.”

Percy: “Fine. Don’t tell us. It’s none of our business. Just do it, okay?”

Paco: “Because the coach is in love with you. You can’t tell ‘cause he hid your portrait.”

Andreas: “But he is positively mad about you, and how could you find anyone better than him, you know?”

Severus: “I will take your words under advisement. Now run, or I will assign you detention myself for missing curfew!”

They disappeared like a flock of birds seeing a cat. Harry came in from the cold. “Oh. They’re gone? I was going to give them notes, they’ll get detention if they meet Dermott.”

“They have two more minutes. They’ll go through Thaddeus the Terrifying’s passage and make it on time. All Slytherins know about that one.”

“Okay. Thanks for putting up with them. If they could, they’d be here every night. I only let them come Tuesdays, but Kreacher says they are here almost every afternoon before dinner. It sounds like the Slytherins are quite cruel to them. They’re not welcome in their own common room. Shouldn’t
“It is hard to change a House’s behavior. The balance might shift with the arrival of the new crop of first years. I’ll speak to Aurora, see if she is aware of the situation. Do I get tea for my efforts?” asked Severus, his hand behind his head.

“Mine is not like yours,” said Harry innocently.

“Variety is the spice of life,” answered Snape, his voice low and caressing. “I am sure I will love yours. Warm and different on my tongue, full in my mouth, perfect in its own right, exotic…” Harry just stared at Snape, mouth slightly open, disbelieving he could be making such provocative innuendo.

“Tea?” prompted Snape.

“Oh. Yeah. Kreacher, tea please.”

A full tea tray appeared, beautifully presented.

“Impressive.”

“Kreacher is the best.”

“Thank you, Master Harry,” came a disembodied voice.

They had tea and when Snape left, he stopped after a few steps, looking up at Harry.

“You think you may be bisexual, don’t you, Potter?”

“Er... I’m quite positive, yes.”

“Good night, Potter.”

“Good night, Snape.”
Chapter 93

~o~ Cat and Mouse ~o~

Severus was going insane. He masturbated in the shower, fantasized and played with himself forever in bed, had sneaked into cupboards to jerk off. It was his own fault. He had started this foolish game, and Potter was just better at it than he was.

Light touches, interrupted motions, ridiculously blatant innuendos, clothes that would damn a priest, hardly disguised flirting…

It had begun when Septima had come for tea, as she was wont to do every fortnight or so. She had seen the bouquet given him by Harry right after Christmas and had said, “Whoever gave you this really likes you, Severus…”

“Why?”

“Hmm. If you know anything about the Victorian language of flowers…”

“I don’t. Enlighten me…”

“The gardenia tells you that you are lovely, the sender’s secret love; the honeysuckle assures you of his devoted affection, of his bond of love for you; the red tulip assures you that love is undying; the lime blossom… well the lime blossom means only one thing.”

“More sickeningly romantic declaration?”

“Er… no. It… It demands intercourse.”

“It what?”

“Oh for Merlin’s sakes! Severus. I assume this was sent to you by Harry? It means, “You’re hot, I secretly pine for you with real and enduring love. Let’s fuck.” Is that clear enough?” asked Septima.

Severus cleared his throat. “Crystal.”

She laughed at him. “Do you want to respond?”

They settled on green bachelor buttons, phlox, balsam, orange roses, orange lilies, and coriander: “We think alike, I desire you, have lust and passion for you, and feel ardent homosexual love for you.”

The bouquet was neither as pretty nor as sweet-scented as Harry’s but it got the point across and made for a pleasant evening with an old friend. Harry received it with equanimity, never showing he assigned the flowers any special meanings.

Neither Severus’s nor Harry’s actions ever went overboard, so at no time had either of them taken that next step. Severus was still wary of pushing Harry when he was not ready. He wanted him to make the first move, though soon he was going to break.

He decided to wait until the first day of Easter vacation. Granger had mentioned that Teddy Lupin would be visiting her boy, so Severus knew Harry would be at Hogwarts. Two weeks without classes…
Chapter 94

~o~ Back to bite ~o~

Today was the sixth of April. It had been the last day of classes, and Harry and Snape had, as they now did every Friday, gone to the Three Broomsticks with Hermione and Ron, Neville and George, and Dermott and Cassie. No one remarked on the fact that they always sat next to each other, or that Snape’s arm often found its way around the back of Harry’s chair. If they sat close it was because space was at a premium, and if they sometimes spoke in each other’s ears it was because it was so loud in the tavern, it was hard to hear. So they looked like the fourth couple. So what.

They had a great time, staying out much later than usual, and unlike their friends they neither Flooed home nor Apparated to the Hogwarts gates. They walked, enjoying the night. It was ridiculously cold, and Severus put his arm around Harry’s shoulders, keeping them both warm. They let go of each other as they entered the grounds, but smiled to one another.

In Snape’s rooms, Harry removed his robes while Snape went to change, and sat in his usual place. He wanted Snape. He was done waiting. He wanted to be with him, to love him, to wake up with him… everything. He could no longer stand the current situation. Life was too short to continue this game.

He decided to push things a little. When Severus returned he asked, “Any special plans for the Easter holidays, Severus?”

“No. I will be staying at Hogwarts this year.”

“Would it be a problem if I went to see some old Quidditch teammates?” Harry had no intention to do so. He just wanted Severus to ask him to stay.

It completely backfired. “Have a good Easter, then. We’ll see you in two weeks.”

Maybe he’d been crazy all along, and Snape did not want him. Maybe that bouquet a couple weeks ago was the result of complete coincidence. After all, he only knew the language of flowers because so many fans thought it was a creative way to get a message to him…It had been months. Why was he still waiting? Because once in a while Snape gave a small sign that he might be interested? Harry finished his tea and said, “I’ll be off in the morning. Have a good night, Snape.” He walked out.

Snape had not even gotten up, or put down his book.

Harry closed Snape’s door, shoved his hands in his pockets, and sighed. What had he expected? He wasn’t sure, but “Have a good Easter,” certainly hadn’t been it.

Fuck. This was absurd. Harry knew Snape. Why then was he waiting for him to break the standoff? The man could outlast a manticore and would never put himself in a vulnerable position. He just did not have it in him. Well, somebody had to.

He turned around and knocked.

“Come in, Potter.”

Harry opened the door and leaned against the jamb. Severus had not moved. He was still sitting there, a book in one hand, a cup in the other, at almost one in the morning. Nor did he look surprised at Harry’s return.
Harry crossed his arms on his chest. “Would you really have let me leave for two weeks without saying anything?” It was a rhetorical question, really.

“I guess you will never know, will you?” replied Snape, putting his book, spine up, on the arm of his chair.

“You are a hard man.” He stared at Snape.

Snape raised an eyebrow. “I think that at this point, it would be particularly ill-advised for me to pretend to be other than I am, don’t you agree? This is who I am, Potter. Deal with it, or give up on me.”

He was right, of course. Harry nodded, walked in, and closed the door behind him. He went back to his chair, reminding himself that he loved this impossible, prickly man and that he was quite sure said man returned at least some of his feelings. He was a Gryffindor. He would forge ahead.

“I would hate to spend these two weeks without seeing you,” he started.

“As would I.”

Oh, so Snape was at least not going to make this as hard as possible. Harry was encouraged.

“As a matter of fact, I would like it to be quite the opposite. I would like to take advantage of the holidays to see more of you.”

“I concur.”

Well, that had been easy. Harry was relieved. The hard part was yet to come, but at least this had been gotten out of the way without any difficulty. On to bigger and better things.

“I have very much enjoyed our friendship.”

“As have I.”

Harry suddenly internalized the meaning of the expression ‘going out on a limb’. This was it.

“However, I find I would like for our relationship to be something more.”

Snape’s expression did not change. “What did you have in mind?”

Why did Snape have to choose this stage of the proceedings to stop being helpful? His face was unreadable, as usual. They might be talking about night patrol, for all the emotion he showed. Harry was at a loss. He was brave, but he was not foolish, nor was he immune to the pain of rejection. He thought back to the countless times when Snape had been close enough to touch, close enough that Harry had felt his breath on his face. Just today, when they had been watching the carriages leave the grounds from the Headmaster’s high arched window, their shoulders had been so close he had imagined he could feel Snape’s body heat. “I should have just kissed him,” he thought, kicking himself.

He did not want to be sitting this far from Snape, having this clinical discussion. He put his face in his hands, desperate to find the right words and the nerve to say them, hating this contrived situation. This was not how it was supposed to go. He looked up again and met Severus’s dark gaze. It was warm and gentle. What he did not know how to say, he could see in those eyes. Merlin, but Harry loved him.
“I would very much like for us to become lovers, Snape.”

It had been simple after all. Harry gave him a tentative smile, but Snape said nothing, his face showed nothing. Instead, he got up to stand in front of the fireplace, his forehead resting on the man-high mantel between his hands. His knuckles were white, and his body rigid.

“Do you even know what you are talking about, Potter?” he asked, his voice quiet and tense.

One hand still on the mantel, as if to provide him with an anchor, he turned to Harry. “Do you have any idea?”

His eyes were burning, his body shaking. He looked so angry. Harry had no idea what to say, what to think. For weeks they had played with each other. Harry could not count Snape’s sexy insinuations, his barely hidden suggestions, and now this? Had there been once again some terrible mistake? What had gone wrong? Severus turned back to the fireplace again. He hit the mantel with his fist. Oh. He was not angry, Harry realized. He was... scared. Of what?


“I know all that, Snape,” Harry reminded him. “I know who you are. I am not functioning under some delusion that you would be any different as a lover than you have ever been.”

Snape turned to face Harry a moment, doubts etched on his face, then he sat back in his chair, his face in his hands. “Do you?”

Harry came to kneel at his feet, gently taking his hands from his face. Looking into his eyes he said, “Yes, I do, and I still want you.”

Severus’ eyes were deep pools of warm, enveloping darkness. He brought a hand close to Harry’s face, but let it hover, not touching him.

“You are a beautiful man, Potter, so beautiful. I desire you physically, greatly. I want you, dream about you, fantasize about you. I have for a very long time. You have been straight all your life. You think yourself bisexual, but what do you even know of making love with a man? What makes you think you have the stomach for something that would be as essential to me, in our relationship, as breathing?”

“I might not have been at my best, that night with Petr in Amsterdam, but it did go all right,” Harry answered, dismissing Snape’s objection.

For a moment, Snape looked confused, but then his eyes hardened. “You slept with Petr?”

“I thought you knew…”

“You had sex with Petr DeVries. You let him… fuck you?”

“I thought you understood…”

Snape got up again, almost causing Harry to fall backwards on the floor. Harry stumbled to his feet.

“Understood?” Snape face had gone white, expressionless. With a jolt of fear, Harry recognized the man in front of him. This was not his friend. This was not the open-minded Headmaster. It was Professor Snape of old, Professor Snape after Harry had looked in his Pensieve.
“Understood? Quite the contrary, Mr. Potter,” sneered Snape, viciously. “It is quite obvious that this entire conversation has been nothing but a colossal misunderstanding. Let us not waste anymore of each other’s time. You know your way out.”

“But, Snape…”

“Get out, Potter.” Snape’s voice was low and dangerous. “Get out, or I will throw you out.”

Harry was looking into his face, at the flat eyes, at the sneering mouth, and seeing nothing, nothing of the man he had grown to love. He could feel Snape’s anger radiating from him through his magic. The front door flew open, pressing the point. Harry backed away, disbelieving of what was happening. This could not be, it couldn’t end like this.

The air was vibrating and the temperature had plummeted. He could see his breath. He kept backing away from the tall, menacing presence made of darkness, inside and out. As soon as he passed the threshold, the door slammed shut and he was repelled back as the strongest wards he had ever encountered went up. He could not have touched that door again if he had tried.

Snape hadn’t known! Petr had never told him. So why had he shut out Harry for all these weeks? Harry felt utterly confused, his assumptions shattered. He had to think. He had to review Snape’s actions in the past months, and reinterpret them in this new light. But not now. Not here. With one last look at Snape’s door, which shimmered with magic, he started on his way back to his quarters, his mind completely blank.

He got home not remembering how he got there. He fell, fully dressed, on his couch and closed his eyes, an arm across his face, fighting the flood of thoughts, questions, and emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. He had thought that this was meant to be, his reward for a life he had led as best he could. His destiny. He was suddenly so tired. So, so tired. He concentrated on his exhaustion, ignoring the burning tears that slipped from under his tightly closed lids and rolled down his cheeks. So, so tired. How long could he keep wanting, how long could he keep fighting for a love that was not returned?

He sank deeply into a dreamless, coma-like sleep, but for a long time tears kept coming, rolling down his cheeks, gathering in his ears and soaking his hair and shirt collar.

Kreacher came in, shook his head at the stupidity of the Headmaster who would make sweet, loving Master Harry cry. Harry’s clothes came off and he was put to bed under his quilt. Kreacher made sure that his master’s sleep would be deep and undisturbed, and that he would be at least physically refreshed in the morning when he woke up to train. He considered giving Master Snape acute food poisoning, but knew, in the end, that it wouldn’t help anything. He sighed and went to bed.
Snape watched the door slam behind Harry’s retreating figure and let his rage spill forth in wave after wave of magic. They fed his wards and brought the room’s temperature ever lower. His pain was exquisite. He had thought he was loved. He had considered giving his heart, bonding with that man. But not only must he live with the knowledge that Potter had fucked half of Britain’s witches, now apparently he had started making his way through the wizards. Well, not through Severus.

How Potter must be laughing, thinking about Severus’s fear that he would not enjoy gay sex after experiencing a night of sex with Petr. Severus had stupidly thought sex with a man would be brand new to Potter. He would have made it beautiful, and special, and tender… but Potter had spoiled it all, giving his arse to the first taker, to a fucking bottom of all things!

He was going to kill Petr. He had trusted him! He had confided in him. Oh, what a sweet revenge that must have been for him, to be the first to fuck the man his ex-lover wanted. Once again what Severus wanted, his hope of love, had been stolen from him.

With murder in his heart he Floo-called Petr, obviously waking him up.

“Severus? Is everything all right?” How dare the traitor look concerned. Lying bastard!

“I hope I’m not interrupting. Deflowering anyone tonight?”

“What? I’m alone. It’s the middle of the night. What’s the matter?”

“You fucked Harry, you son of a bitch.” He’d wanted to drag it out, but just couldn’t.

“Oh. That. That was weeks ago, Severus. It was nothing. Why in the world would he even tell you?”

“Because he thought you already had.”

“So what do you want from me, an apology? Because you are going to wait for a long time. You and I were no longer together. What I did, and do, is none of your business.”

Severus was profoundly irritated that he could not find a flaw in Petr’s argument. But still, Petr was his friend! Didn’t he care he might hurt Severus? “It is if you do it with the man I lo… wanted!”

“Wanted? Do you mean to tell me that you will break up with him over this?”

“There is nothing to break up. We were not a couple, and now we will never be!”

“So you are giving up even the potential for a relationship with Harry, a man you have loved for over ten years, because of your fucking jealousy? You, you, you… cretin! We had just had dinner at Gigger’s. He was stoned out of his mind! He didn’t know which way was up. I completely took advantage of him. He was screaming YOUR name while he came! Harry is in love with you. Truly, madly, deeply, in love with you! You …imbecile! If you blow it with him over this, because of your pathological jealousy… Argh… Just get out of my Floo! Get out!”

Severus was violently pushed back as Petr suddenly blocked the connection. He had never seen him so angry. He felt more than a little shaken by it. He had thought himself the injured party, and had
been anticipating abject apologies. The realization of how far from reality his expectations had been suddenly brought the situation into a different light.

His reaction had been extreme. And truthfully, unwarranted. After all, Harry and he were not yet a couple. They certainly had not been a couple two months ago. He had not even dared dream that such a thing might someday be possible before visiting Harry’s rooms uninvited that night. And Petr said Potter was in love with him… (“He was screaming your name while he came!”)

What he had wanted so desperately for so long had been right there, within his reach, and he had thrown it all away because of his injured pride, his stupid jealousy. He was a cretin, and an imbecile, and whatever else Petr would have called him.

He had said ‘No!’ He had thrown Harry out, he had sent him away, after Harry had had the courage to ask for what Severus would not, to risk his heart on a man as difficult as him, fearlessly, in the name of love. There really was no word for Severus’s stupidity. He had once again hurt the man he loved. How many times would Harry try before giving up? How many weeks would Harry have to wait this time until Severus forgave himself?

None. None. Severus loved him. It was time for him to grow up, to take his pride and his jealousy and banish them for good. Harry wanted to be his lover. Harry knew him, and wanted him anyway. Suddenly, Severus's heart was singing. Harry loved him! Harry would forgive him. He would probably not even think there was anything to forgive and would take him back in an instant. He had offered himself to Severus: His heart, his body, it was all there for the taking. And Severus wanted it all, had wanted it for so long.

Severus walked towards the door, needing to go and confess to Harry that he was a fool, that he wanted what Harry had offered more than anything in the world. He stopped himself.

Harry would be asleep now. Sad and upset because of him. Oh, Harry…

Severus thought back to the recent months, reliving Harry’s smiles, Harry’s looks, the slow but wonderful awakening of Harry’s love. Harry had always expected so little. Severus promised himself he would love him wholly, withholding nothing, giving him everything. He promised himself he would bring love, and joy, and everything good to Harry’s life. No one had ever deserved it more.

He slept for a couple of hours, then showered, shaved, and put on his nicest black robes. It was ridiculously early but he could wait no longer. He had to see Harry, had to see him right now. Thank Merlin Teddy Lupin would be arriving by the eight o’clock train: he knew that Harry had to be still around. Actually, Severus had a pretty good idea of where he might be.

He walked up from the dungeons and climbed up the Astronomy Tower. The air was clear and crisp, a slight breeze carrying the fresh scents of the early spring morning. Severus walked to the edge of the battlements and looked over Hogwarts' grounds. There Harry was, in the delicate light of the sunrise, just as he had expected, flying high above the pitch, poetry in motion, as beautiful as any bird in flight, executing moves that made Severus hold his breath.

Severus watched him for a long time, amazed that someone capable of such skill and grace would even look at him twice. As Harry headed down for his landing, he himself came down the stairs of the tower, making his way toward the entrance to the Great Hall, to meet Harry on his way in.

He opened the front door and stepped out just as Harry reached the top of the hill and started walking down. His broom was on his shoulder. He was coming, with that feline gait, deep in thought, looking sixteen kinds of sexy. And Harry was his.
Chapter 96

~o~ Finally ~o~

Harry had enjoyed his training and his flight in the morning sunrise. He would always have that, at least, and his friends, and his godchildren. He and Teddy would go somewhere fun after his visit with Hugo, getting away from here and the shards of Harry's shattered heart.

Somewhere Muggle perhaps, now that Teddy knew to control his metamorphosis. Disneyland Paris, maybe. He would stick around a few more months, not to leave the school in a bind, and after the end of the school year he would start again somewhere new. Do something else. Get a life. He would get over this. Eventually. He would.

For the first time, Harry had given it all that he could give, his heart, his pride, and still he had been found lacking. How could Snape not value at all how much, how completely, how deeply Harry loved him?

That pain in his chest, the dead feeling where his heart should have been, they would go away. They would. They had too! Oh, god. He could not stand it. Why? Why?

How could a life without Severus hold any meaning? How could Harry leave when everything he held dear was right here?

He looked toward the castle, the place where he truly felt at home, his vision blurry, his throat too tight. Why?

There was a dark silhouette he would know anywhere, with robes dancing in the wind, on the landing at the top of the majestic front stairs. Harry’s heart leaped.

No. Snape had said no. He would never forgive Harry for his night with Petr. Harry pushed down the hope rising in his chest.

And yet... It was Snape, looking down at him as Harry was making his way toward the castle. Then, as Harry got closer, Snape was coming down one step, then two, then all the way down to the grass at the foot of the staircase.

They faced each other, a few feet apart. Harry was looking at Snape’s face, so beautiful to him now, trying to read the stern features he had grown to love. And he saw it all in the dark eyes: regret, warmth, desire, joy. I’m sorry, they said. Then, ‘yes, yes, yes’ as Snape smiled, really smiled, as he still rarely did, his whole face smiling, his body all open. Not sure how he got there, Harry was in his arms, and Snape’s hands were cupping his head gently as he whispered, “I’m sorry, Harry. So sorry. Please forgive me.”

Oh so gently their lips met, brushed, pressed, and opened in a kiss that took Harry’s breath away, a kiss made of joy, of life, and sweet, oh so sweet.

Harry could not get enough and cursed his short stature as he rose to his toes, pulling down on Severus’s head to get more. This was heaven, the warm lips, the soft tongue, the demanding mouth, deeper and deeper, and still it was not enough, not nearly enough.

Snape pulled back, to look into his eyes, to smile, leaning in again for a lick then a nip at Harry’s lower lip, and another wonderful kiss, but then pulling back in earnest as Harry said, “Teddy.”

Severus said, “I know.”
Harry looked in his dark, burning eyes, pleading, “Tonight.”

And Severus simply replied with a hungry smile, “Oh, yes.”

Then Harry had to go or be late, and no matter what, he would not be late for Teddy. He went rushing up the stairs to put away his broom and change his clothes, and ran down the stairs again and on to the station, all the while smiling so hard it hurt.
Chapter 97

~o~ Love ~o~

The second Snape closed his door Harry was pressing himself against his body, his arms around his neck, kissing him fiercely. He wanted this mouth, he wanted this man, he wanted… Snape’s response was everything he’d hoped for, as his head was cradled by the long hands and the kiss deepened. But then Snape started stepping back from it, detaching their lips, holding first the sides of Harry’s face, then his shoulders, then his hands as he backed away saying: “Potter, Harry… Wait, wait…”

Harry wanted none of it. He stepped forward, grabbing at Snape’s robes. “What? Why? You want this, I want this… Please…”

“Wait, Harry. Slow down.” Snape took a shaky breath. “I have wanted… ‘this’ for over ten years. I cannot, will not, do ‘this’ casually, I do not want it if…” he choked on the words. “I couldn’t bear it if…”

Vulnerability was naked on his face, his eyes beseeching, a sight Harry had not thought he would ever see. Oh, my god. It was real. Snape wanted him, had wanted him for a long, long time. His heart leaped with fierce joy.

“Snape… Severus,” he loved that name, “Severus, there is nothing casual about the way I feel about you. Nothing. I want you. I… I want to be with you, only you, today, tomorrow, for…” How could he still be afraid to express how he felt after seeing that look on Severus’s face? “I…” Damn it. “I love you.” There. “I haven’t loved you for ten years, but I…”

He didn’t finish. Severus’s hands were cradling his head again, and their lips were together, their tongues longingly caressing, and the kiss was soft, and wet, and alive with hope, and yearning, and trust, and surrender.

Severus grabbed Harry’s hand. “Come,” he said against his lips, and led him to the door Harry had opened so many times in his mind, to the room he had wanted for so long to enter.

Exactly like his, the room was white on white: pale cream walls, off-white rugs, snowy bed linens and pillows, white duvet. The only note of colour was his scarf, his silly first year Gryffindor scarf, the one he’d lost and missed, sitting on the white bedside table.

To his questioning glance Severus answered simply, “It smelled of you.” And he stepped close to Harry and put his face in his neck and breathed in, a long voluptuous breath full of Harry’s scent. As Harry claimed his mouth again, insatiable for their kiss, Severus’s clever hands unclasped Harry’s robes, unbuttoned his waistcoat and his shirt, and pushed them caressingly off his shoulders.

Then Severus stepped back and undid Harry’s belt and trousers, and Harry toed off his shoes, took off his trousers and smalls, and bent down to slip off his socks. He stood up again, under Severus’s lustful and admiring gaze, watching his face, conscious that he was very hard, that he looked very fine, and was very glad of it.

He slowly reached up to Severus’s buttons, at his wrists first, then at his throat and down, and took his time undoing them, savoring the moment. The shirt came off, slipped silently off the smooth pale skin. Severus’s placket also had buttons, five of them, and then the fine wool trousers were sliding off the narrow hips onto the floor, and Severus, who had been barefoot when Harry arrived, just
stepped out of them, completely nude.

“No smalls?” Harry couldn’t help asking.

“Hate them,” was the answer.

Severus was a study in narrowness and length: long elegant legs, long narrow torso, narrow shoulders, with the lean muscles of a strong yet thin man. And his circumcised cock was long, erect, and crowned by a large swollen glans, with a clear drop at its tip. Harry looked up from it and smiled at Severus, a slow smile of simmering lust, desire, and anticipation, which gave Severus a delicious shiver.

In one smooth motion, Harry fell to his knees. He took the quivering cock in his mouth, one hand behind Severus’s thigh and the other cupping and rolling the heavy balls. Severus’s intake of breath and moan of surprised pleasure delighted him, and he licked and he sucked, getting a thrill from every sound that escaped the lips of the usually restrained man and loving the taste of him, loving his musky smell.

Severus resisted grabbing that head and pumping in, first making fists, then biting on a knuckle (hard), then lacing his fingers together behind his head, all the while looking down at the shorn head of Harry, at the comma-shaped scar behind his ear, his Harry, whose wicked, small, and unpracticed mouth nonetheless threatened to bring their lovemaking to an early end.

“Harry, Harry, wait…”

This time, Harry didn’t mind. He stopped suckling the pulsing head and looked up, smiling.

“What do you want, Severus?”

“You. I want you. I’ve always wanted you…”

Severus helped Harry up and took him to the wide white bed. He pushed him gently down and he lay next to him, very close, their bodies touching completely. They kissed again, a long, sweet, slow kiss that talked of want, and hope, and promises kept. Severus was cradling Harry’s head, their chests touching, their breath mingling, looking in his eyes. He leaned close and started whispering, “Harry, Harry, Harry…” against his lips, and continued saying his name as he dropped small kisses on his cheeks, nose, eyelids.

Severus rubbed his chin along the line of Harry’s jaw, loving the interplay of stubble. He nipped his jaw, kissed his neck, his lips following the muscle to the collarbone, licking, sucking, caressing. Harry’s scent was delicious, intoxicating. He followed it with his tongue to the pit of his arm, and breathed it in, his breath tickling the soft hair and making Harry squirm. That scent went straight to his head, answering some atavistic call, making his whole body hum with need.

Harry’s eyes did not leave his face as Severus caressed his body in long passionate strokes, kissing every inch of his warm, smooth skin and again taking in the scent of his neck, of his armpits, of his groin. Harry had never been on the receiving end of such worshiping attention, having always before preferred to give than to receive. But now it was himself he was giving over, completely, offering himself to Severus’s exploration, holding nothing back, just concentrating on the feelings born of Severus’s touches and caresses. He listened to his body as it sang.

He closed his eyes when the thin lips, reaching his prick, sharply focused his awareness; sighing with contentment as the soft tongue teased the slit, slid around the foreskin, worked its way down the shaft. Severus’s hand came up to softly squeeze the head of Harry’s cock while he mouthed his balls
and, after gently pushing the knees open wider, licked the silky skin behind his sack.

To Harry’s surprise and shocked pleasure, Severus’s warm, wet, soft tongue dipped lower and circled his puckered entrance. It was a completely unexpected and novel sensation, of intense intimacy. And there Severus lingered. Harry’s hole was kissed and licked and sucked and probed by that supple, hot, exploring tongue as Harry progressively lost his mind, mewling, thrashing, begging, and wanting it never to stop, until a new desire took over, clamoring to be satisfied.

“Severus, please, now, please…” he urged as Severus came up between his legs, lifting them back so that Harry’s ankles rested on his shoulders. Severus stopped for a moment, his cock in his hand at Harry’s entrance, devouring him with his eyes, loving the vision in front of him, savoring that instant.

“You are so, so beautiful.”

A whispered spell, a deliberate push, and Severus breached him with the thick leaky head of his cock. He pressed on, relentlessly, with a throaty growl, until he was sheathed in Harry’s body to his balls. Harry felt as if he was being burned from within and stretched beyond tolerance. He shut his eyes and bit his lip, welcoming the searing pain and accepting the fullness that was Severus, his Severus, inside of him.

Severus stayed still now, his hand on Harry’s cock, gently pumping and squeezing, his other hand running lovingly on the smooth skin of Harry’s perfect stomach, allowing him to open and relax slowly around the hard cock inside.

“You are so tight, Harry, so warm, so perfect, just… perfect.” Severus said, with wonder in his voice, making Harry’s heart sing. “Open your eyes, Harry. Look at me.”

Harry did. He lost himself in the black depths of Severus’s eyes, filled with love, longing, and lust, as his pain receded. Severus started moving again then, easing slowly outward and then back in, gently, in long easy strokes, his gaze never leaving Harry’s, keening softly, his efforts not to come glazing his eyes.

It was a strange sensation, one Harry welcomed, with the pleasure of giving Severus pleasure. Then the tip of Severus’s cock started rubbing repeatedly on a place inside of Harry that sent waves of delight through his body, and the experience ceased to be selfless giving, becoming shared bliss instead.

The pain of Severus’s inexorable penetration had been intense, but nothing to the ecstasy that was building up now, as Severus’s hand, feeling better than Harry’s own hand ever had, fisted his cock in rhythm with his strokes, and as the head of Severus’s cock continued rubbing there (oh god yes, there), with Severus’s burning gaze never leaving his own.

Harry felt owned, possessed, taken, branded, and loved, oh, so loved. The pain was gone, the cock in his arse the most pleasurable thing he’d ever felt. He was being undone, and scattered, and gathered again, on a crest of never-ending delight, desperate sounds issuing uncontrolled from his throat.

After an eternity of bliss, Severus’s rhythm grew faster, the hand on Harry’s cock tighter, and the strokes harder and deeper, and Harry was finally brought to his climax, with an explosion of light behind his lids as jet after jet of semen sprayed his chest and belly. Balls emptied, he continued to come in drained waves of crashing, mind-blowing pleasure, magic pulsing through him and into their mating.

Reopening his eyes in elated wonder, he saw the most marvelous sight. Severus, his lover, arching
back, slamming into him again and again, chanting a crescendo of “You’re mine, Harry, mine, mine, oh, Harry!” in a hoarse guttural voice as he emptied himself in Harry’s warm depth, the heat of his seed spreading inside Harry. Then magic pulsed out of Severus as well, as his orgasm continued far beyond its physical manifestation…

Now still, buried in Harry, Severus looked at him with wonder, both of them riding the magical climax of their mating, their compatible magic melding, bonding, rejoicing, the ecstasy of it overwhelming them, physical, emotional, mental… The thought occurred to Harry that they might be dying of pleasure, before his magic finally returned to its core, and Harry closed his eyes, exhausted.

Severus lowered himself slowly on top of him, letting Harry’s legs slide down to his hips, drenched in sweat, shaking uncontrollably. As his cock slipped out of its sanctuary, he found Harry’s mouth in a desperate kiss, as if he could not stand their connection to end just yet. Harry kissed back with everything he had, answering his need. Then he folded the duvet over them and held Severus tightly with his arms and his legs until his shivers diminished and finally stopped. In his embrace was the man he loved, the only one he wanted, the lover who had given him more pleasure than he had ever experienced.

“I had never before had sex with someone I love,” Harry reflected quietly.

Severus rolled to his side. Cupping Harry’s cheek in his hand and looking into his marvelous green eyes, he smiled and answered softly, “Neither had I.”

Though sated for the moment, they did not stop kissing, touching, caressing, whispering to each other things neither one of them would have ever imagined saying to another, with words like beautiful, and forever, love, and yours, everything, and always. They fell asleep still embracing, still breathing each other’s air and sighing with ease in their slumber at small unconscious touches and brushes of fingers.
Severus stirred a few hours later and, feeling Harry’s body in his arms, forced himself awake to savor the moment. His lover’s head was on his shoulder, his arm across his chest, and one of his legs between his. A torch was still burning on the far wall, its light dancing in the room. Severus’s heart was filled to the brim, with the warm body against his own, the heady scent all around him. Harry was his, Harry loved him, his kisses whole and soulful, his body a fount of amazing pleasure.

How many perfect moments did one get to experience in a lifetime, moments when nothing, nothing could be better? It seemed that all of Severus’s included Harry, a flight, a kiss, lovemaking, and this, waking up, with a lifetime of such moments ahead of him. He smiled in the soft changing light.

He could hardly remember the day. After their morning kiss, it had just been a succession of hours to fill until that knock on his door and that other kiss.

When it had felt like the fulfillment of all his desires, he had suddenly been afraid. He could stand never having Harry as a lover, but he knew he could simply not stand having him and then losing him. He had had to know, to hear from Harry’s lips that he understood.

“When I had never before had sex with someone I love,” Harry had said later, and Severus had known it to be true, had felt it with every caress, every touch. (For a moment, and for the first time, his heart hurt for Petr, who had loved him without reciprocation.)

His Harry was so beautiful, his perfect body like a gift, his soft skin, his chiseled muscles, his soft hair, so dark. Even the tight black curls of his pubic hair were soft. He had wanted to discover it all, to see it, to touch it, to smell it and taste it all.

He had never understood (though he certainly had enjoyed it) Petr’s passion for rimming him. But last night, on what he had intended to be a quick pass on his way to Harry’s gorgeous feet (he had such gorgeous feet...), he had suddenly been distracted by the mysterious pucker behind his sac, and had not been able to restrain himself from a tentative caress. Harry’s shuddering response had been enough to encourage him to explore more, to lick a little, and probe the small hole with his tongue, and it had been so, so sweet, a hint of roasted caramelized almonds, so surprisingly delicious he had wanted more of it.

As he had gone back for seconds, he had felt Harry’s body shudder again, and heard the most arousing mewling. His nose in Harry’s balls, which smelled divine, he had found himself fucking the tight hole with his tongue, helping himself with a finger, and sucking the juices. He could not get enough, and just the memory of it all made his cock fill again, pressing against Harry’s hip. And he still hadn’t tasted Harry’s toes!
Why wait?

He ran a hand along Harry’s body, rutting a little against his hip.

“Huummmm,” said Harry, “more…”

Severus smiled and complied happily, rolling Harry on top of him to get better access to his back and buttocks, thrilled to feel Harry already hard as a rock. Harry came up on his arms, his cock lined up with Severus’s, his eyes shining in his own, a hungry smile on his lips.

“Hey, there.”

Severus felt momentarily self-conscious about his breath when Harry bent for a kiss, but quickly forgot about it when Harry’s wet tongue made its way between his lips and sucked on his as if it was a tasty treat, frotting his erection against Severus all the while like a randy teenager. Severus tried to roll them over, only to be pinned down by the smaller man, who looked at him with mischief in his eyes.

“My turn,” Harry said, and kissed the tip of his nose. “I want to do to you what you did to me last night, down there, with your tongue. It’s amazing, you’ll see…”

Snape did not have the heart to remind him that he had been gay all his life, or tell him that he had many times before been rimmed by an expert. Harry was so sweet in his naïve excitement.

Harry took his time getting there, and if he was inexperienced in gay sex he certainly showed that, when it came to awakening every erogenous zone from neck to groin, he was very well-practiced indeed. By the time Harry was pushing his knees apart, Severus was no longer even remotely self-conscious about the noises he made, and felt more aroused than ever in his life. After Harry slipped a small bolster under his hips and when the small hands spread his cheeks apart, he shamelessly pushed himself into Harry’s face, wanting, wanting. He got smacked sharply on his arse for his trouble, and could not believe how incredibly good that felt.

“Arrghhh…” he said, and was evidently perfectly understood since a second smack, even more deliciously stinging than the first, landed in the same spot, right before the warm little tongue came dancing across his entrance, twirling, poking, teasing, and yes, yes, probing, sucking, licking, and “Smack!” and some mouthing of his balls (how could he fit both of them in that little mouth of his?), and “Smack!” before the blessed tongue was back dancing deliciously in his arse, and a knowing hand was expertly milking his cock, a thumb across his leaky tip, and “Smack!” and that tongue and that hand, and the sting and the wet and the warmth and "Smack!" and… Severus’s brain suddenly short-circuited completely and he came, screaming with pleasure, and came, and came, spraying his chest, his chin, his belly, disbelieving, panting, and whimpering like a lost puppy.

Harry made his way back up his body, as leisurely as he had gone down, licking up every drop of semen he could find, finishing by kissing the daylights out of Severus, who suddenly realized that this was going to be a relationship of equals, and that just as Harry was his, he was Harry’s, completely, and he absolutely loved it.

“I want to fuck you,” said Harry, matter-of-factly, staring seriously into his eyes. “May I?”

“Yes, please,” answered Severus, who’d only let Petr top three times in five years, meaning it with every fiber of his being, his cock already twitching again.

“Turn over, please.”

Severus turned over and shamelessly hitched his arse up, legs spread, as the smaller man parted his
cheeks again with his hands, spat on his hole (spat!), and, with no further ado, pushed his lovely cock in.

“Oh, god!” Harry said, suddenly very still, “oh, god, Severus, this is… so… fucking… hot…”

He started moving again, holding Severus’s hips, and searching in his strokes until the guttural moan Severus could not hold back let him know he had found the spot that had so obviously delighted him the night before. Having found his bearings, Harry started moving in earnest, and Severus found himself submitting to the most thorough pounding he had ever received, relentless, the well-aimed strokes driving him to the brink. He was in heaven. When he reached for his cock, Harry batted his hand away and took it instead, tightly, oh so tightly (Oh! God!), pumping it lightning fast (Hahhhhhhh!), never slowing the punishing deep hammering of his arse, grunting, calling out, “Severus, fuck, Severus!” and Severus felt his mind unravel as Harry brought them both, within minutes, to blinding orgasms.

Severus collapsed flat on his stomach, boneless, mindless, the entire weight of his lover’s sweaty body on his back, Harry’s heartbeat so strong it resonated in his own chest. Dear god. Dear, dear god. He had come so incredibly hard. Was that what he had to look forward to from now on? He would be dead inside of a year: His heart would burst, or the top of his head would blow, or he would ejaculate his balls right through his cock… He chuckled and felt Harry’s answering mirth. He rolled over and held his amazing lover in his arms, nuzzling his neck. They looked at each other and chuckled again.

“Wow,” said Harry.

“I concur,” he answered, which started Harry laughing again.

“I am so in love with you,” said Harry.

“Ditto,” he agreed, kissing the sweaty temple.

“I need a shower, I smell like a goat.”

“You smell like praline and cumin,” corrected Severus.

Harry smiled happily at him. “And you smell like the forest after the rain. So good, I wanted to fall asleep with my head on your thigh, but I wanted to kiss you even more.”

“There will be time, for both, and for more, many, many nights falling asleep and waking together,” answered Severus, meaning it.

“Life is so good to me,” sighed Harry, grinning.

They kissed again for a while, because it felt so nice and they had waited so long and had been through so much to get here. Life was good indeed.

“Check this out,” said Harry smiling, and louder: “Music, please, Kreacher, something festive!” A jaunty song started to play.

“How does he do that?” asked Severus, astonished.

Harry laughed and got to his feet, dancing on the bed, completely uninhibited, his cock swinging
against the rhythm.

“I don’t know…” He grinned. “Magic? Get up!” he said, holding his hand out to Severus. Severus did, and Harry made him dance despite his initial reluctance and it was such fun, to dance naked, and hug and dance shamelessly some more. They jumped off the bed and danced their way to the bathroom, holding hands, Severus twirling Harry to the music and laughing.

In Severus’s enormous shower they soaped each other up, kissing and playing. Severus had not even known happiness such as this could exist. Had it been with anyone but Harry, he would have been scared to death, but it was Harry, his Harry, his loyal and true Gryffindor, and he knew, just knew, with every cell in his body, that this was finally his, forever.

“Bond with me?” he asked Harry, amazed at his own boldness. It was a huge commitment, a lifetime promise. Harry grinned lovingly and said, “Oh, all right!” Then he laughingly pointed to the depiction of the Prince crest on his own upper arm to his oblivious lover, and to that of the Black, Potter, and Rosier crests on Severus’s. “Oh! Oops! Already done!”

Severus ran his fingers on his arm and on Harry’s arm, caressing the magical proof of their absolute commitment. He smiled, disbelieving, thrilled. “You know what a spontaneous bonding means, don’t you?” he asked Harry, who was smiling at him, loving his joy.

“I do. It only ever occurs in soulmates, Severus.” Harry smiled, and cupped Severus's cheek in his hand. “You are my soulmate.”

He once again looked at Severus with glowing playfulness. “Oh, by the way, Half-blood or not, it looks as if the House of Prince has accepted you as its heir.”

Severus realized, with a pang of pride, that other meaning of the Prince crest on Harry’s arm. “Merlin. You’re right…” It felt great, as though his mother was vindicated, as though he himself was finally truly accepted into the fold. He smiled at Harry, feeling completely, absolutely happy. “I love you, Harry.”

Harry smiled as well, looking at his tattoo. “I know. I’ll always know.” He looked at Severus. "And I love you."

Severus grinned. “I’ll never feel jealous again.”

Harry reached for his hand and squeezed it. He said earnestly, “I never could have given you a reason to anyway…”

Severus smiled at the man who knew him, understood him, and loved him anyway. “Thank you, Harry. Thank you for that.”

-The End-

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