Through the Foe-Glass and What Severus Found There

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Summary

Severus discovers compelling reasons to go on living after the events of Half-Blood Prince.
Chapter One

Come, hearken then, ere voice of dread,
With bitter tidings laden,
Shall summon to unwelcome bed
A melancholy maiden!
We are but older children, dear
Who fret to find our bedtime near.
-Rev. Charles L. Dodgson

One thing was certain- it was Wormtail's fault entirely. Had Wormtail not shown up at Spinner's End that day, Severus would never have found the bottle.

A visitor entering Spinner's End- not that Spinner's End ever had guests- might remark to herself that perhaps the place had seen better days, at least until she met her host. Then the visitor would remark to herself that she ought to be going, then back away slowly.

It had been three months since Severus Snape's flight from Hogwarts, and each day could have been a year for the deep lines that marked his face. His hair, lank and greasy at best, had been unevenly shorn so that it stuck out at odd angles. He was unshaven, and his dark eyes, now bloodshot, seemed to have retreated into his skull. His threadbare robe was missing a number of buttons, and those that remained were fastened unevenly, giving him the appearance of a malevolent scarecrow. The only vestige of his former self that remained in full force was his foul temper.

When Wormtail shook him awake that morning, Severus awoke with a snarl and seized him by the throat, wand pressed firmly into the smaller man's jugular.

"What are you doing in my house, vermin?"

"I-" Wormtail's beady eyes rolled in panic. "I have a message from our master."

Severus tightened his grip. "Liar."

"No, Severus, wait!" he squeaked. "I'm telling the truth!"

"Then why did he not summon me himself? No, Wormtail, you have sought me out for your own ends, forgetting what I told you I would do to you if you ever set foot in my house again."

"You wouldn't!" Wormtail's face had drained of color. "The Dark Lord would kill you."

Severus laughed harshly. "And what a great pity that would be." He released Wormtail with a sneer. "Consider yourself lucky that I don't feel like dealing with your smelly corpse today. Now, leave my house and never come back."

Wormtail was still breathing hard. "It's about Bellatrix and Rodolphus."

"Get out."

"But Severus," Wormtail wheedled, "I know you hate them as much as I do, the way they put on
airs. I thought you might-

"GET OUT!" Severus seized the front of Wormtail's robe and dragged him to the top of the stairs. He put his face very close to Wormtail's. "Remember this, you piece of filth. Until the Dark Lord himself wishes to end my exile, any of his followers who dare approach me for their own purposes will meet the same fate as Albus Dumbledore. Have I made myself clear?"

Wormtail nodded.

"Good." Severus threw the smaller man headfirst down the stairs.

He lingered for a moment at the top of the stair to make sure that Wormtail was still alive- assuredly so from the pitiful weeping that emanated from below- and returned to his room. Squinting against the midday sunlight that poured through a rip in the window shade, he finished off the bottle of cheap whisky that sat on his nightstand and let the empty bottle fall to the floor. The alcohol burned on its way down his gullet, and he welcomed the numbness that followed. Soon the blinding white light would fade, and he could forget.

He laid back on the bed and let his eyes fall closed.

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When he awoke, he was in nearly complete darkness, which would have been a relief had his body not chosen that moment to protest his earlier generosity with the whisky. He staggered to the commode and was noisily ill. When he could heave no more, he rinsed the sourness from his mouth with tap water, pointedly avoiding looking at himself in the mirror. He stared at his hands. They had already begun trembling.

He drained the dregs of all the liquor bottles scattered on the floor, but it wasn't enough. His head hurt too much to get to sleep and his stomach was painfully empty. As much as his stomach turned over at the thought, eating something would probably help. Besides, he needed another drink. He pulled his robes up and stumbled down the stairs.

In the sitting room, he lit the sconces with a wave of his wand and blinked in surprise. The room had been completely torn apart. His books had been thrown from their shelves and the pages torn from their spines. The upholstery had been slashed, the legs broken off the chairs, and all of his ink poured on the carpet. His lamp had been smashed, and his father's chess set had been dumped unceremoniously on the floor.

Wormtail.

Severus sat on his ruined sofa and dispassionately surveyed the damage that the rat had wrought. He was lucky that the blithering idiot was so short; otherwise the valuable Muggle books on the upper shelf wouldn't have survived the rat's revenge. Selling them to antiquarian book dealers was his only source of income and he was not keen to sober up or starve. He stood and wandered into the kitchen.

Wormtail had visited the kitchen as well, as evidenced by the empty pantry shelves and the profusion of broken glass and ruined food on the floor. It was then that Severus felt the first stirrings of panic. He tore open the door to the cellar and ran down the stairs to check on his precious liquor stores. When he had illuminated the cramped cellar, he uttered a cry of outrage.

The shelves were empty, and the bottles had all been smashed. Ignoring the broken glass and slick layer of grime under his bare feet, he began frantically searching for an unbroken bottle, but it was to no avail. Wormtail had destroyed them all.
Hot, bitter tears welled up in his eyes as he sat down hard on the stairs. There was nothing left. Nothing. His left foot was bleeding, and he didn't care. The tears began to roll down his cheeks, and he began dragging himself up the stairs. From his vantage point on the floor, he was able to find a relatively unspoiled packet of crackers that the rat had missed. They were stale, but he didn't care. All he could do was focus on getting them into his stomach.

He felt as if he were moving through treacle, and he reduced a third of the crackers to inedible crumbs before he could maneuver them into his mouth. His hands were shaking in earnest now, and his stomach was roiling. Water. Water should make it better. He cupped his hand under the kitchen faucet, but most of it dripped out of his shaking hands before he could bring them to his lips.

He abandoned the enterprise with a growl. It was so hot and stuffy that it made his head swim. He fumbled with his robes and managed to strip down to his smalls, but it didn't help. He needed to lie down. After limping painfully to the sofa in the sitting room, he stretched himself out, growling at the stuffing that snagged on his stubbled jaw.

He screwed his eyes shut, waiting for unconsciousness to take him.

But it didn't come. All of the things he was trying to forget, that night on the tower, the following night in the Riddle mansion, and every tedious, awful day since, were replaying themselves on the insides of his eyelids. When he could no longer stand it, he opened his eyes. His heart was racing and he was short of breath. All his being cried out for a drink, even though he knew it was all gone. Summoning all his energy, he raised his wand.

"Accio alcohol!"

Instantly, something began rattling beneath a floorboard beside the sofa.

He rolled off the sofa and shoveled aside the ruined pages and chess pieces that littered the floor. The corner of one floorboard beneath the sofa was slightly raised. He succeeded in pulling up the board with his fingernails, and a brown bottle flew into his hands. The yellowed label read "Poison: Laudanum."

Severus nearly fainted with relief. His weakling mother had been good for something after all.

He pulled the stopper from the bottle and let the alcohol scent wash over him. It was entwined with something earthy, something spicy. Hardly stopping to think, he took several large gulps. He leaned back against the arm of the sofa and gazed at the back of the door, waiting, willing the laudanum to take effect.

As he lay, his focus shifted to the foe-glass he had installed on the back of the front door- one of the few precautions he'd taken in the first days of his exile. The glass was a cloudy silver swirl from which the shapes of his enemies would emerge as black silhouettes. Still uncomfortably hot, he rose to open the front door and let some air in.

As he reached for the door handle, he found himself face to face with himself. He stumbled backwards in surprise. There was no mistaking it- his own face was clearly reflected in the normally opaque surface of the foe-glass. That couldn't be right. The glass must be broken.

He examined the glass more closely, intrigued by both the anomaly of seeing himself in the glass and the changes to his own face that were so clearly reflected. He raised a finger to the surface of the foe-glass and traced the harsh lines at the corner of his reflection's mouth. The surface of the glass felt cool and oddly pliable, almost like the surface of fluid.
Behind his reflection, the silvery mist of the foe-glass had dissolved, revealing a hazy reflection of the room in which he was standing. But as he drew his gaze from his reflection to the reflected room, he realized that things looked subtly different.

Again he nudged the surface of the foe-glass, and it rippled. Applying steady pressure, he pushed his hand through the surface of the foe-glass. His hand looked colorless and gray, but otherwise, exactly the same as he expected to see it. He withdrew his hand and flexed it experimentally. It felt perfectly normal.

Severus gazed into the foe-glass curiously. Why the glass showed him his own face wasn't terribly difficult to discern. Gulping down decades-old laudanum for its alcohol wasn't exactly conducive to good health, and the glass was tuned to show people who meant him harm. But what was behind, or rather within, the foe-glass was a curiosity, and Severus did not understand why had the glass revealed it. His gaze fell to the rickety table inside the foe-glass room, where a seemingly identical bottle of laudanum stood.

Severus threw back his head and laughed. Of course. It wasn't real. It was a hallucination. As if to prove his point, he thrust his index finger into the surface of the foe-glass and watched it ripple. The undulating silver was surprisingly beautiful.

Well, if this was to be his first experience as an opium eater, who was he to refuse the visions granted him? He threw his discarded robe around his shoulders, seized his bottle of laudanum to keep the memories at bay if needed, and stuck his hand through the surface of the foe-glass, followed by his arm, and then his shoulder.

He took a deep breath, screwed his eyes shut, and stuck his head through the surface of the glass. He then lost his balance and fell.

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Severus fell forward gracelessly through the foe-glass and into the room that lay beyond it. Once he had pulled his legs through, he scrambled to his feet and clutched the bottle protectively to his chest.

His surroundings were as misty and gray as they had appeared from the other side of the foe-glass. The room was somehow darker and lighter than its other-world counterpart, and none of the angles in the room seemed perfectly square. However, the room was no tidier than the room on the other side of the foe-glass.

The glass through which he had come shimmered blankly on the door behind him. All was well, then. Unless being on the inside of the foe-glass meant that his enemies would appear cloudy and those that meant him no harm would be clearly defined. He shook his head. This was a hallucination, not quantum physics.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a flash of crimson amid the gray. Upon investigation, Severus was surprised to find that his Muggle father's chess pieces were walking around like their Wizard chess counterparts. He leaned closer and was surprised to hear them speaking to one another in earnest conversation.

The white king seemed to be having a temper tantrum, while a white castle and knight made futile attempts to calm him. Most of the red pieces were avoiding the white pieces altogether, though the red queen seemed to be deriving great enjoyment from zapping the white pawns with a tiny wand when their backs were turned.

"Now, my dear," admonished the red king. "You must be patient. We've not yet begun to play."
The red queen tossed her head. "But the pawns' squealing is so entertaining!"

"Remember," said the king, "we must give the white king ample reason to leave the first square before he can castle."

"I know, I know," said the red queen crossly. "But it'd be so much easier to take him out now."

"And you remember how well that has worked in the past. We must wait for him to come to us. He's far too well protected, even now. Now, have you seen your knight anywhere? I haven't seen him for a long time."

"You were the one who sent him off," countered the queen. "You find him. At least it seems as if the other side is missing a piece as well."

"Only the queen's pawn," sneered the king. "Hardly enough to compensate for the loss of a knight."

"Very well," sighed the queen. "I'll see if I can locate him."

"See that you do," said the king. "The game must start very soon, and we will need all of our players."

Severus found the pieces' conversations to be largely uninteresting and was soon distracted by the torn page that a white bishop and castle were making their way across. There was a pen and ink rendering of a monster on it that seemed somehow familiar. He seized the sheet, upsetting the pieces, who swore loudly, and attempted to read the unfamiliar language written on it.

Ytromerdol

suatilleb eht dna teril sawT'
tserdibof eht enumehcra diD
sremikal eht erew devloserg llA
tsergtuo eehpro eht dnA

He squinted at it, attempting to make any sense of it, before realizing that it was written backwards. He snorted. He hoped that not all writing would appear the reverse of how it normally appeared, reflection of the real world or not. He took the page across the room to the foe-glass door, and held it up. This is what he read.

Lodremorty

'Twas liret and the bellitaurs
Did archemune the forbidrest
All gresolved were the lakimers,
And the orphee outgrest.

"Beware the Lodremort, my son!
The eyes that burn, the soulesplit
Beware Lecarrowstrange and shun
Naginos Pettinet!"

He took his gryffish sword in hand
And sought the vileunn fragsole far
And found a space in grimmish place
And rubbed his cursiscar.
And as in idlewhile he rests,
The Lodremort with eyes of flame
Burforsted from the forbidrest
And avked as it came!

One, two! Three, four! And more and more
The gryffish blade turned bloddirud;
At last it died and by his side
The orphee prodtor stood.

"We have now slain the Lodremort.
So take my hand, O Prodtor Brave,
We'll not be friends, but when this ends,
You'll be not revilnave."

'Twas timumph, and the orpheements
Did partabrate in hoggydron,
All dellerpy the wordwize was,
And the prodtor livpollon.

Gibberish. Worse than gibberish. Nonsense. Severus crumpled the paper into a ball and threw it across the room, ignoring the cries of surprise from the chess pieces that were still milling about on the ground.

As there was nothing of interest in the sitting room, he headed toward the kitchen. Crossing the room, he took another pull from the bottle of laudanum, hoping it would brighten up the rest of the hallucination.

He heard something snap and cried out as something sharp pressed into the bottom of his foot. He sat down on the sofa to examine his foot. The skin was unbroken, but little indentations marked where he had stepped on something hard.

A tiny shriek pierced the quiet. He looked down to see the white king hopping frantically across the floor. The white queen was lying at his feet. She had been broken cleanly in half.

He kicked the fragments toward the king and pressed his hands into the ruined sofa cushions to steady himself. He decided that the reason for his sudden queasiness was because he was hungry. He was irritated to find that the larder of the foe-glass kitchen was as bare as the one in his world. Feeling thoroughly disgruntled, he kicked aside a biscuit box and wavered, his balance thrown off by the laudanum and oddly angled house. He steadied himself on the door that led to the garden.

The garden- now there was a thought. Severus opened the door and stepped outside.

He expected to find it night outside and was surprised to find that it was daytime in the foe-glass world, but the garden and putrid river beyond were enveloped in a dense fog. Severus thought it had never looked better.

This garden looked vastly different from his garden at home. Whereas his was neglected and weed-choked, the plants in this garden contained the largest, most perfect flowers Severus had ever seen. The effect was augmented by the gray sky above them, their vivid colors ranging from deep purple to palest pink. The hollyhocks seemed to spiral endlessly into the sky, and the pansies spread colorfully at his feet. He wandered down the rows of flowers feeling both comforted by and completely isolated from the loveliness around him.

Suddenly, he stubbed his bare toe on the root of the squat apple tree that occupied the center of the
garden and went sprawling. He scrambled over to where his bottle of laudanum had fallen and was relieved to find it unbroken.

He heard a scornful laugh and pointed his wand in the direction from which the voice had come. It seemed to be coming from a row of lilies.

"Who spoke?" he snarled.

"Nobodee spoke to you," said a dazzlingly white lily. "You must be 'earing things."

Severus blinked. The silvery voice made him suddenly aware that his robe was unfastened, and it had definitely seen better days. "I certainly am now."

A deep red lily next to the white one shook her petals, "Now you've done it. Now he'll want to have a conversation."

"I do not like zee look of him."

"He's certainly begun to wilt."

"Do you suppose 'e has fungus?"

Both flowers began to tremble.

"Now, now, girls," said a kind, motherly voice that sounded vaguely familiar. "He looks so tired. Why don't you have a rest against my trunk?"

Now the tree was speaking. Had Severus's head not already been spinning, it certainly would have then.

As he lowered himself to the ground, he heard faint rustling all around him. Apparently, the other plants in the garden were keen to have a look at the newcomer, in spite of the threat of fungus.

"What is he, do you think?" a pansy asked the petunia in the next bed.

"A blackthorn bush?"

"No, he moves too quickly," piped up a lavender bush. "Everyone knows blackthorns are sloe."

"I still theenk he is a fungus."

"What rot," exclaimed a narcissus. "He's a nettle if ever there was one."

"Maybe he just needs a drink to remove the sting?" suggested a rose.

"Girls!" said the apple tree a bit more sharply. "He needs to rest. He's going on a long journey and we must do all we can to help him."

Severus turned to look at the tree, half expecting to find a face at which to scowl, but encountered only the lined bark. "I am not doing anything of the sort."

"Of course you are," said the tree in an amused sort of voice. "You can't just go back the way you came."

Severus jumped to his feet. "I don't know what kind of game you and your frilly friends are playing, but I'm not interested." He stalked across the garden in the direction he had come, but the walls of flowers seemed to have shifted. He broke into a run, not caring about the shouts of protest.
from the flowerbeds he traversed, but he could no longer see his house or anything else that looked familiar. He was lost.

He stopped running, utterly winded, and was surprised to find that he was back by the apple tree.

"Poor dear," tutted the tree.

"Look," snarled Severus, jabbing his wand at the tree, "I don't know what you've done, but I will burn you and the rest of this garden to a crisp if you do not release me instantly."

"Dear boy," said the apple tree as if explaining things to a dim child, "I don't make the rules, I'm simply relating them to you. You're here, and now you're part of the game. You must play your way out. And don't threaten the girls like that. The pansies are particularly sensitive."

Severus capitulated with ill grace. "What blasted game do I have to play?"

"It's a game you know very well," said the apple tree, gesturing with a low branch. "Look."

For some minutes Severus stood without speaking, looking out in the direction the tree indicated. A most curious sight it was. The fog had lifted, revealing a vast valley. At first, Severus took it to be a farm from the perfectly square areas that were divided by brooks and hedges. Severus vaguely remembered the conversation between the red king and queen and groaned. The valley consisted of eight rows and eight columns.

"You must be joking."

The apple tree ignored him. "You need to choose a side."

"Neither will have me, so what does it matter?"

"Both red and white are missing pieces," insisted the tree, "and both sides need you in order to win."

Not that Severus would ever admit it, but he felt a twinge of guilt for having broken the white queen. A memory brushed the surface of his consciousness, but between his skill at Occlumency and the opium, he squelched it effectively. He took another sip of laudanum for good measure.

"White it is," he said in a bored voice. "What pieces are they missing?"

"The queen, the queen's bishop, and the queen's pawn."

"I'll be the queen, then."

"I'm sorry, dear, I don't think the other pieces would accept you as queen. If you want to be queen, you need to earn it."

He sneered automatically at the mention of the queen's bishop, and paused. There was really no choice. Broken piece fixed firmly in mind, he nodded. "Then I'm the queen's pawn," he said with a finality he did not quite understand.

"Good boy," beamed the tree. "Have an apple for the road. Malus sieversii, you know. Not what you're used to, I'm sure, but quite delicious. Now hurry, you have to get to the second square soon. And watch out for her, she's tricky."

Severus took a bite of the apple. It was crisp and tart, but it made him feel a bit odd. Was it the laudanum, or was the apple tree suddenly taller? "Who's tricky?"
His question was answered when the red queen, now of a height with him, came crashing through the rose bushes, smiling at the cries from the flowers. Her eyes narrowed when she saw Severus.

"There you are," she said, looking suspiciously at the apple tree, who rustled her leaves innocently. "We've been looking for you everywhere. The game's about to begin!"

She knocked the partially eaten apple out of his hand, wrapped her hand around his forearm, and began to run. The queen went so fast that Severus was out of breath instantly.

When they were nearing the second brook, Severus managed to yank his arm free.

"What are you doing?" asked the queen, whose face had gone a darker shade of red. "You belong next to my bishop."

"This is my space," he managed to get out between gasps.

The queen goggled at him for a moment, then began laughing uncontrollably.

"I knew it!" she crowed. "I knew it all along! Thank you for declaring yourself at last, pawn." She spat out the word. "The king will hear of this, and then you will die. Enjoy the game. It will be your last."

She sped off, leaving Severus alone on a grassy hillock with nothing but his wand. As a pawn, it would soon be time for him to move, and he had to decide whether to move one or two squares. After a moment's reflection, he decided that the best way to help the white side would be to replace their queen without being taken himself. That would require aggressive action on his part.

With this in mind, he raised his wand to the ready, cautiously descended the hill and jumped over the first of the six brooks that stood between him and the eighth square.

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There was a deafening GNAB, and Severus found himself flat on the muddy bank as a gigantic chartreuse submarine suddenly surfaced in the middle of the brook. A hatch flew open, and a conductor in a loudly patterned uniform stepped out.

"Welcome to the Sub Thgink," he announced, "emergency travel for folks of all stripes, which is good, considerin' you're looking a mite stripey." The conductor eyed Severus's mud-streaked face as he pulled himself to his feet with what little dignity he possessed.

He gratefully accepted a hand up from the conductor and a warm but fuzzy robe.

Severus followed the conductor down the hatch, which closed loudly behind them. "Now," said the conductor, "where are you headed?"

"Fourth square."

The conductor whistled. "Fourth square, eh? We don't get many o' your sort willing to take it on. Well, suit yourself. Keep the robe, by the way. There's not many who'd wear lavender so well. For six pips I'll throw in a pair o' wellies, too."

"I haven't any pips."

"That's all right, I haven't got any wellies, either. Just for that, I'll let you ride free. Now, 'ere's your berth," he said, gesturing to one of four large empty shelves along the side of the sub, "and the head's right around the corner where you'll find a nice hot shower wi' plenty o' soap. Good
The conductor winked. "Just give us a shout if you need anything."

Severus took the unsubtle hint and indulged in a shower before returning to his berth. A good Tergeo removed most of the mud from his clothes, though it had the unfortunate side effect of dissolving most of his already threadbare robe.

The shower bag that had been thoughtfully provided left him smelling like an English garden, and the lavender bathrobe completed the effect. After a quick shave, Severus skulked into the berth area, hoping to avoid conversing with anyone.

Unfortunately, the berth area was no longer vacant. He found a black dog, a deer, and a bumblebee the size of a raven sitting around the table in raucous conversation. The bumblebee was in the middle of a no-doubt amusing anecdote.

"And then the ice-cream man says, 'Honey? I beg your pardon, I hardly know you!'"

The dog and deer burst out laughing. Severus seized an abandoned newspaper from the table and skulked to his berth, hoping to escape the others' notice. He was disappointed to find that the newspaper was written backwards, just as the poem back at the house had been. Even more disturbing, when he attempted to read it he found that all of the articles were reprints of the same nonsense poem, only in different typefaces.

He tossed the paper aside, grabbed the bottle of laudanum, and took a deep pull. The deer glanced his direction.

"Don't you care for poetry?"

"I fail to see how that nonsense could be considered poetry."

"You must be blind," exclaimed the dog. "Everything you need to know is there!"

Severus shot the dog a look of pure venom. "Every other word is the invention of an addled mind."

"Now really," said the bumblebee, speaking for the first time, "isn't that a bit harsh? I'm sure the author had some intention in writing it, apart from making you angry."

"Then why is it utter nonsense?"

"You're new, aren't you?" said the deer suddenly.

"Yes," he answered tersely. The others looked at him with interest.

"Heading for the fourth square?" asked the dog.

"Yes."

"Bold," said the bee, looking over the rims of his compound spectacles. "You wouldn't be trying to reach the eighth square, would you?"

"Perhaps."

The deer whistled in appreciation. "My advice? Don't forget that the king can take you. I was paying so much attention to avoiding a bishop and protecting my pawn that he was able to sneak up on me."

Severus's curiosity was rapidly overcoming his anti-social tendencies. "You were taken?"
"All of us have been taken," said the dog proudly.

"Were any of you part of the current game?"

"No," said the deer. "I haven't been in a game for ages. Bumblebee was in it most recently."

"I was taken out shortly before the game began," said the bee. "Quite a dramatic thing."

"That's absurd," said Severus. "How can you have been taken before any moves were made?"

"You'll have to ask the red side," said the bee mildly.

"You're too politic by half," said the dog. "It's rubbish, pure and simple. I wouldn't want to take part in this game. It's not the kind of game I fancy. Give me a good old red-and-white situation any day of the week. All of this cloak-and-dagger nonsense is simply not on."

"If that's the way the game is being played, then it's best to match strategies," commented the deer to the dog. "I know chasing things up trees is your favorite move, but sometimes a more subtle approach is called for."

"Subtle, schmuubtle," scoffed the dog. His devastating comeback was cut short when the sub gave a sudden lurch.

"That'll be the edge of the fourth square," said the bee. "The sub will take you to the middle of the square, so we're close to your stop. I sincerely hope you're not planning to go out like that."

Severus glanced down at his bare feet and fuzzy lavender robe. "I haven't much choice in the matter," he said tightly.

"Why didn't you say so earlier?" said the deer. "We should be able to get you properly outfitted for the fourth square, at least."

"There's no need to look so offended," said the bee. "It's not charity. We want to see the white side win. Our old side, you know. Now, in the corner you will find a pair of hip waders. Necessary for where you'll be going. I'm afraid there's a bit of water in them, so you'll have to empty them out before you put them on."

"You should always tip your waders," added the deer.

The dog had been nosing through a pile of clothing on one of the berths and emerged with a long buttoned garment. Severus was pleased that it was his customary colour and immediately replaced the fuzzy robe that the conductor had given him.

"I'm sure you'll find it quite durable," said the dog in a satisfied voice. "There's nothing quite like a black lab coat."

"I'm sure it will be satisfactory."

The conductor chose that moment to fetch Severus. The others wished him luck, and he quickly emptied and donned the bee's hip waders.

The conductor was waiting for him "We're nearly there. You'll want to brace yourself against the ladder when we surface."

The submarine slowed to a grinding pace, engines straining, but rose perceptibly upward. When
they stopped, the conductor ascended the ladder and opened the hatch.

When Severus joined him topside, he found the submarine in the middle of a vast and featureless bog. The conductor gave him a measuring look.

"Well, you look a bit better now. Dunno if it'll help you much in the game, though. I thought the lavender suited you a bit better, but this is more practical like. Well," he said, gesturing toward the ladder. "Off you get."

Severus nodded at the conductor, then climbed down the side of the submarine. As soon as he released the last rung, the Sub Thgink disappeared beneath the surface of the swamp with a slurping pop. Severus was quite alone.

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After a quick survey of his surroundings, Severus fancied he could see a small speck on the horizon to the north. Observing no other distinguishing features, he began slogging through the knee-deep sludge. It was hot work, and Severus found himself unbuttoning the top buttons of his coat and occasionally stopping to catch his breath. The speck on the horizon grew steadily larger.

At long last, he approached the object, which turned out to be a signpost with a number of arrows nailed to it.

"TO FRED'S COTTAGE," read one arrow, which pointed off to the west. "TO GEORGE'S BUNGALOW," read another arrow, which pointed off to the east. The other arrows read, "TO OUGADOUGOU," "TO THE VIRGINS," and "TO MAKE MUCH OF TIME."

Severus glanced to the east and west and was surprised to see specks on the horizon that had certainly not been there before. However, his attention was elsewhere, for another memory was trying to manifest itself in his mind. He squelched it firmly and took another mouthful of laudanum. He was beginning to loathe the cloying syrup, but it was better than the alternative. He forced himself to swallow it.

Panting from the effort, he staggered and was surprised to find himself leaning against a tree that hadn't been there a moment ago. Gazing at his surroundings, he found that he was now in a dense forest with a small path leading off to the east. Not really caring where it took him, he followed.

He wandered on, muttering to himself, until, on turning a sharp corner, he suddenly came upon two stocky young men dressed identically in knickerbockers and boaters. They were blocking his way.

Severus glanced at them and, judging them to be harmless, stepped around them and continued on his way. He followed the path around another corner and came across the men again. This time, Severus favored them with a glare before continuing on his way. This time, Severus favored them with a glare before continuing on his way.

The third time he came across them, he had had enough.

"Why are you following me?"

"Us follow you?" inquired the first man, whose embroidered collar proclaimed him as Fred. "You've got it all wrong."

"Contrariwise," chimed in the other, whose collar identified him as George. "You've also got the measure of things."

"I haven't any time for nonsense," barked Severus, pointing his wand at each of them in turn.
"Leave me alone."

They gave him identical smirks. "Now that's hardly manners," admonished George.

"And it's hardly the way to play the game," added Fred.

"I'll take my chances." Severus shouldered past the twins and stalked off down the path.

He turned another sharp corner and found the twins waiting for him. He was about to curse whichever was closer, when he suddenly realized what was happening. The great oak behind the twins was the same oak that had been behind them when he first saw them. They weren't following him; he was somehow traveling in circles, in spite of the fact that the path wasn't circular.

The twins were gazing at him with expressions of polite disinterest, but their amusement was palpable.

"Well?" he asked crossly.

"'Well' what?" asked Fred, with feigned surprise.

"How the blazes do I get out of here?"

"That's an easy one," said George. "Just think, 'how do I stay in the same place'?"

"By walking," answered Fred.

"Hush," admonished his brother, "let him answer one."

"So," prompted Fred, "you get somewhere else by…?"

Severus mumbled something.

"Sorry, couldn't hear that," said Fred. "Try again."

"By staying in the same place," said Severus with violent enunciation.

The twins applauded enthusiastically.

"Bravo! Bravo!"

"A fine deduction!"

"And while you're here," said George with a wink at his brother, "we could be convinced to provide entertainment."

"Spare me."

Fred gazed at Severus with a measuring eye. "No, this is one you ought to hear. Now make yourself comfortable and prepare to be moved."

Once he had seated himself in the roots of the tree, the twins stood before him.

"We proudly present a lesson in song form: *The Young Lady's Pleasures and How She Gained Them,*" announced Fred.

"Or, *You Are Young, Little Lion,*" added George, with equal ceremony. The twins breathed
simultaneously and began to recite:

"You are young, little lion," the serpent opined,
"And an insolent sniveling brat,"
Yet you came to my aid when my name was maligned,
"Tell me, what was your reason for that?"

"All my friends," said the lion, "will see what they see
For as long as they shutter their minds.
But now I have learned, and I'm sure you'll agree
That the future and dreams intertwine."

"You are dull, little lion," the basilisk lectured,
"With a mane predelicted to frizz,
Yet while others were stymied, you made your conjecture
Recumbent, while taking a zizz."

"It is true," said the lion, with a challenging mien,
"That my foresight's eccentric and odd.
But for all that it seemed it was merely a dream,
It quite logically pierced your facade."

"You're a fool, little lion," he said with a sneer,
"And your judgment is hardly sublime
You've thought villains were victims and frauds quite sincere;
Now you try to absolve me of crime."

"In my youth," quoth the lion, "I was easily fooled
By a shining exterior guise.
By that bias my instincts are no longer ruled,"
She said, seeking the basilisk's eyes.

"You're a fool," he rejoined, "as I mentioned before.
"You've no concept of what you are saying.
You could die from my clandestine glance, nothing more;
I suggest you commence with your praying."

"You are trying my patience," the lion exclaimed,
"With your doubt and superior airs.
Please desist with the threats that I'll die or be maimed;
I demand that you take me upstairs."

Severus, who found himself nodding off, sat up suddenly. He was surprised to note that the tree
he was resting on was no longer in the dense forest, but next to the intersection of a small brook
and a low hedge.

"Ah hah," said George, tapping the side of his nose. "That's got you paying attention."

"Good thing, too," commented Fred. "This is where it starts getting exciting."

"I have no desire to hear any more of your sordid little rhymes," said Severus standing. "And I
will be on my way."

He turned on his heel and leaped across the junction of the brook and hedge.

The twins turned to look at one another, crestfallen.
"But he can't just leave," fretted George. "He needs to hear the next bit!"

"If the silly sod can't see past the end of his nose, there's not much we can do about it."

"Unless we make his nose bigger."

"Even I'm not that cruel!"

~o0o~

Severus listened as the twins' chatter faded from his hearing. Such rot the people here talked. It was insufferable. He stalked angrily northward, vehemently quashing the pushy memories that were now assailing his mental walls. It was becoming harder and harder to do so. Severus took a deep breath. If he wanted to get to the eighth square, he would need all of his focus.

Now, he currently occupied the fifth square-

He stopped short.

He hadn't simply jumped the brook; he'd gone diagonally, a move a pawn could only perform if it was taking another piece. What on earth had possessed him? What if the piece was protected?

The woods here were very strange; the trees were all very thin and curved about at ninety-degree angles. In fact, they weren't trees at all, but a jungle of metal pipes. He kept walking and realized he was in a giant bathroom, and the air was filled with fragrant steam that swirled about him. He advanced slowly, keeping to the shadows in the corners of the room. Not hearing or seeing anything of interest, he stepped out into the open to get a better look.

It was then that he heard a sound.

Cursing himself for the worst kind of fool, he ducked behind a stone column. When it was clear that the source of the sound was moving no closer, he cautiously peered out.

In the very center of the room was a large, perfectly circular pool that was rimmed by a myriad of different taps. By the edge of the pool stood a red pawn. To his surprise, the pawn was weeping copiously, his sobs interrupted only by great shuddering breaths.

Severus cleared his throat.

The pawn looked up at him with a resigned look. "You're here to take me, then?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Don't be sorry," said the pawn, furiously scrubbing the tears from his cheeks. "I'm just glad to be out of the game. It's been awful."

"What's so bad about it?"

"Everything!" answered the pawn passionately. "First he sent me out to get the white queen. Like that would have ever happened without me getting taken. I managed to thwart a move by the king's knight, but that wasn't good enough. So here I am, out here as bait. I hope he's angry that he only drew a pawn's response instead of a better piece. No offense."

"None taken." Severus regarded the other pawn curiously. "So what happens now?"

"You just kill me, I think," said the pawn. "I really don't know. Being taken's a new experience
for me. Can you make it quick?"

An idea sprang into Severus's mind. "Yes, I can make it very quick."

Severus raised his wand. The pawn screwed up his face in anticipation, but no spell came. Instead, the water in the pool next to the pawn began bubbling loudly, which was followed by the loud GNAB of a rusty hatch being thrown open.

"Welcome to the Sub Thgink," came a voice, "emergency travel for folks of all stripes- oh, it's you again, is it? Whatchoo doin' 'ere? We left you one over!"

"Actually, I was hoping you could help my friend here."

The submarine conductor gazed at the pawn in wonder. "Blimey, the king's bishop's pawn?"

The pawn stood up, surprised to be recognized.

"You know me?"

The conductor guffawed. "Know you? We've been following you since before the game began!"

The pawn blushed. "May I come aboard?"

"Of course you can," said the conductor. "There's bugger all for you to do here now that you've been taken, and there's lots of other good folks aboard that's been taken in previous games. Prepare yourself for a grand journey. Next stop is the Sea of Holes."

"The Sea of Holes?" The pawn's eyes were shining. "I should love to see that."

The conductor took the pawn's hand and helped him aboard.

"Just a moment!" the red pawn called to Severus. "You might need this. I don't know exactly what it does, but it'll do no good if it leaves the game with me."

The pawn tossed Severus a small golden key, which he placed in his pocket.

The pawn smiled at Severus. "Thank you for being so kind to me."

"You're welcome," Severus said. "Good luck."

The pawn disappeared down the hatch with a soft smile. When the sub had vanished, Severus breathed a sigh of relief. He had successfully taken his first piece and done so without bloodshed. Now all he had to do was survive three more squares.

He was relieved to see a brook just to the north. Fearing the worst and hoping for the best, he jumped over it.

~o0o~

When he landed on the other side, he was relieved to find himself on a green plain, which rippled in the soft breeze. Cumulous clouds rolled across the bright blue sky, and the smell of grass and clean earth filled his nostrils as he breathed deeply.

His reverie was broken by the sound of hoof beats.

A knight dressed in crimson armor was galloping toward him. The color seemed to be caused by a large amount of dried blood. When he lifted his visor, matted gray hair trailed down to his
breastplate. "Check," he snarled, gazing hungrily at Severus. To his disgust, a rivulet of spittle rolled down the knight's chin.

The knight raised his sword overhead and spurred his horse toward him, but Severus was ready. But before he had a chance to cast the curse the knight so richly deserved, a white knight appeared and parried the red knight's wild cut.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, mate," said the white knight. "Or did you and your master miss the fact that I was here?"

The red knight snarled furiously. "I'll take you both!"

"Sorry," said the white knight, "you can't take him without getting taken yourself, which would be pretty thick, as you're already down one knight. Now go back to where you came from and wipe your chin, already. You'll put us off our lunch."

With a howl of fury, the red knight retreated to his square.

"Git," said the white knight.

"He seems more like a psychopath, as far as I can tell."

"I meant you," said the knight. "What were you thinking, taking the red pawn? You nearly put our king in check! Are you playing our game or your own?"

"Of course I'm playing your game," snapped Severus, irrationally hurt by the accusation. "And what do you mean, 'check'? Please tell me that fool of king hasn't advanced already. What on earth is he thinking?"

The white knight raised his visor, revealing a fringe of red hair and a rather downtrodden expression. "That's the trouble," he said, dismounting and walking over to Severus. "He's not thinking. He's rushing in without any sort of strategy because he's after you."

"Me? Why?"

"Because, you daft git, you're the reason we're playing without a queen. The king's been inconsolable."

"Wonderful. An irrational king. Just what we need to win."

"You don't know the half of it. Our game strategy involves landing on seven particular squares of the board. They're the sort of squares you recognize only when you're on them, and sometimes only if you search from top to bottom. We've managed to find four. The trouble is that since you joined our side, the king has been barreling after you without giving any thought to the game. If you didn't have a three space lead, he'd have taken you already."

"So the white king is out to get one of his own pieces. This is the most ridiculous game I've ever played."

"Well, if you've got any suggestions, I'd love to hear them."

Severus thought for a moment. "Tell me more about these three remaining squares. How do you know the number left to find?"

The knight smiled sadly. "It's a long story."
"If it's crucial to the game, I must know."

The knight sat on the turf and began to recite:

"I'll tell you everything I can:
Though this is hardly all;
I met an aged aged man,
A-hanging on the wall.

I asked him, "How do you remain,
As you no longer live?"
His answer swirled around my brain.
Like thoughts in a Pensieve.

He said, "I hunt for baubles bright
That grave events portend.
I hide them from the knaves that might
Exploit them for their ends.

To they who seek the wide world o'er
I give this wisdom fine
In hopes these trinkets nevermore
Malevolently shine."

But I was focused on my plans
For challenges and jousts.
This stalwart stance since I began
I always had espoused.

Bewildered by his muddled words,
I said, "Then tell me why
The lake is filled with flying birds
And fish swim in the sky?

A twinkle lit his eye; he said,
"My boy, an answer lies
Within a home of bricks once red
Now grayed from sooty skies.

In which a magpie had been caged
Until I set him free.
I did not know just how enraged
From this the bird would be."

I frowned at him, for this was not
An answer I desired.
He seemed instead to think I sought
New riddles to acquire.

"Have you no answers, hanged man?"
I asked him in a huff.
"I've taken all the tripe I can,
And Riddles, I've enough."

He said to me, "I've answers here
To fill the oceans wide.
Your duty is to persevere
And questions to provide.

For instance, answer forty-two
Means little on its own
But with its question I or you
Could know the great unknown."

"But I digress," he then demurred,
"And answers you enjoin.
I daresay that you may have heard
Of swords and cups and coins.

You all shall find the final suit,
Encased in hands of rock
And accessed through a downward route
Reptilian rebus lock."

I shook my head for I could not
These riddles penetrate.
But now it seemed my every thought
Was new imbued with weight.

I thanked him much for telling me
What questions I should seek,
Suspecting as a side that we
Were up a certain creek.

And now pursuing far and wide
The magpie and its kith,
I think on our respective sides
To sever truth from myth.

I sigh, regretting my poor view
Of that old man that I once knew,
Whose eyes were of the brightest blue,
And greatest honors did accrue,

Who often liked a fuzzy shoe,
And garments of the brightest hue,
With whom no subject was taboo,
Whose comments I did misconstrue,

Who sipped the vilest, bitterest brew,
And one night off the tower flew,
Whose enemies we now pursue,
Who gave us every crucial clue,

A-hanging on a wall."

Severus digested the white knight's words for several long minutes. He would have dismissed it as nonsense if not for the knight's somber recitation and the fact that he could feel his memories stirring beneath the layer of laudanum. He squelched them forcibly. "Do you know what it all means?"
"Yes and no. We figured out the second riddle about the hand of rock, but we haven't yet worked out the magpie riddle."

"How much time would you and your allies need in order to reach the necessary squares?"

"That's a bit tough to estimate," said the knight, chin in hand. "At the rate we're losing pieces, we could need nine or ten moves."

"Are any other pawns in position to reach the eighth square?"

"None that have made it so far as you have," said the white knight, with a look of dawning comprehension. "I think I can look threatening enough to keep the red queen from taking you, if you can manage to avoid her castle and bishop. Once you become queen, you'll have the mobility to draw our king back to where we can protect him."

Severus remembered the red queen's threat. The red king would not be happy to have lost a piece to the white side. "I have a hunch that the red king will be after me as well."

"So much the better," said the knight. "If you can draw him into one of the squares we control, we might be able to force mate."

Severus looked at the knight with appreciation. "That could work."

The knight pulled down his visor to hide his flush of pleasure. "Well, you've still two squares to go. Don't count your Augureys before they hatch." He mounted his horse noisily. "Well, I'm back to my square."

"Do try not to get yourself taken."

"And you. If you can't make it to the eighth square, I may just let the kings fight over you. It's not as if they can take one another, you know."

Severus's snort was lost in the pounding of hooves as the knight galloped off, easily jumping the hedge to the west.

When the knight had gone, Severus set off across the plain, heart considerably lighter. When he reached the next brook, he looked carefully from side to side. Seeing nothing beyond, he took a deep breath and jumped across into the seventh square.
Chapter Two

The seventh square was a grim-looking square building that appeared to have been destroyed in a fire. The high railing that surrounded the building was largely intact. Hoping to avoid notice, Severus slunk along the perimeter of the railing until he found a gate, which squealed on rusty hinges. He ascended the steps to the front door, which hung crookedly from its frame.

The entryway opened into a hallway that had once been tiled with black and white porcelain. However, the tiles were scattered haphazardly and stuck up unevenly like broken teeth. The walls were a mess of burned wood and broken plaster, and broken gas pipes were clearly visible in places.

Ruined though it was, the hallway seemed to continue endlessly on in both directions. Remembering his experience with the twins in the fourth square, he walked for a short time, then paused. A soft breeze whispered through the ruins, and Severus noticed that the hallway had shifted slightly.

All at once, he came to a set of stone steps that were suspended by no visible means. It was curious. Though the fire must have occurred many years ago, this place bore unmistakable traces of more recent violence. There were definite hex marks on the stone, and he spotted a few drops of wet blood on the floor.

As he examined the base of the steps, a flash of silver caught his eye. It was the figure of a lion cast in silver that curved outward in a spiraling shape until the end, where it had been snapped from whatever object it had originally been part. With an unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach, he recognized it as being part of a bishop's crosier. A bishop had been here and had done battle, but it was impossible to tell with whom and who had won.

He raised the bottle of laudanum to his lips, but the fortifying sip made him gag. He wiped the liquid from his lips and resolutely placed his foot in the center of the first step. It was reassuring solid. The first steps were equally steady, and he ascended with increasing confidence toward the second story.

The landing of the second floor was pristine, and Severus frowned. The second floor corridor hung unsteadily in the air, as large sections of it had been burned, but the first door in the corridor was as untouched as the landing. He opened the door with a wave of his wand and was surprised to find a windowless room that contained nothing but an iron bed frame and a battered wooden wardrobe. The ceiling was almost all intact, though he could see the gray sky through several openings.

Severus thought for a moment. The place, with its gas pipes and simple tile, had to be Muggle in origin. However, this section of the building had obviously been preserved by magic, and for some purpose. His memories chose that moment to struggle furiously against his mental barriers with such vigor that he could almost hear them humming. He pressed back and managed to silence them, though he didn't know how much longer he would be able to do so.

Focus was necessary. He examined the walls of the room and found them to be free of the hex marks that had marred the downstairs. Upon closer examination, the only part of the room that bore evidence of magic was the wardrobe, which was marked from numerous curses. He waved his wand to open the doors.
Nothing happened.

"Alohomora!"

Still nothing. He bent closer to examine the lock. It bore heavy gouge marks, as if someone had tried to prise the lock. However, the fact that it remained locked led him to believe that the attempt was unsuccessful.

A Reductor curse had no effect, and neither did any of the dozens of other spells he tried, from burning to crushing. He felt his temper begin to fray, and with it, his control over his memories. He could feel them pounding against the shield in his mind. His stomach turned at the thought of taking more laudanum. He placed his fingertips firmly at his temples and forced his mind back to stillness. Panting, he leaned against the wardrobe and slid to the floor.

After the pressure in his brain relented somewhat, he noticed a pinch coming from a fold in his coat, just below his hip. He fumbled in his pocket and his fingertips brushed against the red pawn's key.

Inspired, he fished it out of his pocket and slid the key into the lock. It opened with a click, and the door swung open.

Severus wasn't sure what to expect, but he was still surprised to find the wardrobe empty. But no, it wasn't completely empty. On the topmost shelf rested a rough wooden box. It had a small golden lock that appeared to fit the wardrobe key. Still, something about the gleaming metal that rimmed the aperture made him suspicious. Instead of inserting the key, Severus slid the pins out of lid hinges and opened the box.

In a nest of golden silk lay a dainty porcelain teacup.

He picked up the teacup by its handle to examine it more closely. It was a fine thing, so eggshell thin that he could see the shadows his fingers made, even in the dim light. The lip of the cup was gold, and a curious badger device had been painted on the outside. A memory surged in his mind so violently that he wasn't able to suppress it entirely. It was an image of an elderly woman holding a golden cup out in front of her. He knew this cup, and he had a feeling that it was very dangerous.

Furious with himself for losing control of his mind, he took another mouthful of laudanum, but he was unable to make himself swallow the viscous tincture. He spat it onto the floor, coughing to rid his mouth and throat of the sticky feeling. He was positive that the barrier keeping his memories at bay was failing, and no amount of opium could stop it. He had to get to the eighth square. Then he'd have the rest of the game to occupy his mind.

He shoved his finger through the cup's handle, closed the wardrobe door, and locked it behind him. Without warning, the wardrobe burst into flame. Severus leaped backwards, only to find that the door to the hallway had locked behind him, and that the door had no keyhole. Attempting to Apparate accomplished nothing other than giving him a splitting headache. He attempted to douse the flames, but like the wardrobe and door, they were resistant to his magic.

Already, smoke was making it difficult for him to breathe. He had to think. Whoever had created this trap would have been certain to leave no way for him to use magic to escape.

At last, he flung the bottle of laudanum at the wardrobe in frustration. It shattered, and the blaze flared from the alcohol. He was truly and utterly stuck, and all he had to aid his escape was a useless wand and a vaguely threatening cup.
The cup. Of course. He had sprung the trap by taking the cup. The white knight's song rang in his ears. The cup must get to the white knight. He laid the golden key in his palm and transfigured it into a small pigeon. He focused on giving the bird a more complex brain than the average dove and he was pleased with his efforts, even if the bird's feathers still had a distinct gold cast. He bound the cup firmly to the bird's foot.

"Take this to the white king's knight as fast as your wings can take you," he instructed the bird.

"You might say 'please,'" remarked the bird in a sulky tone.

Severus gestured to the rising flames. "I might also say 'rotisserie.' Clear off."

When the bird had escaped through a hole in the ceiling, Severus found himself alone in a burning room. He lay down on the floor and covered his face with his sleeve. The flames had engulfed the inside walls and were beginning to spread across the floor. He gazed up at the smoke, opaque and gray as the surface of the foe-glass, and felt suddenly calm.

His meditation was interrupted by the sound of ceiling timbers cracking. He reflexively rolled away from the sound and narrowly missed being crushed by chunks of burning wood. He forced himself to slow his breathing. Even as he pressed himself against the only remaining wall, he knew that there was no sense in dying terrified. Furthermore, there was even less sense in dying without proper reflection on one's life. Bearing that thought firmly in mind, he released the iron grip on his memories.

As the flames grew closer, his eyes fluttered closed and the memories began to pour across his mind's eye. Flashes of green and red, haunted blue eyes, his name, flight, fire. With the images came pain, punishment, exile, and the descent into obscurity. His consciousness was sinking deeper and deeper into a kaleidoscopic mandala of the past.

He could feel his skin beginning to blister, and it was becoming more and more difficult to draw breath. Soon it would be over, and he would be at peace with the memories, at peace with himself. This was his absolution. This was his punishment. This was his reward. The fire roared louder, and he prepared himself for the end.

But wait. For the fire to roar, it must have found air. He opened his irritated and watery eyes and saw that the flames were flaring where the ceiling timber had fallen. It had crashed partially through the back wall of the room, and when the black smoke cleared for an instant, he could see daylight on the other side of the wall.

He was vaguely aware of the heat and the acrid smoke displacing the air in his lungs as he crawled toward the broken wall determinedly. His vision was fading to gray and his head felt as if it were being squeezed in a vise. With the last of his strength, he pulled himself to his feet and heaved himself into the burning wall. The last thing he remembered was the sound of splintering wood as his body went limp and the pain disappeared into darkness.

~o0o~

When he woke, the first thing he noticed was the pressure on his brow.

His eyes flew open, surprised at the odd sensation on his head, and even more surprised to be alive and unscathed. He put his hands up to the heavy something that was wrapped firmly around his head. He lifted it off and held it in front of him to make out what it could possibly be.

It was a golden crown.

He stared at his surroundings and nearly fell over backwards. He was standing by a window in a
room that was filled with all manner of bells, from enormous brass bells to tiny silver ones. He ran his finger along the edge of a particularly fine bronze bell, but the buttery ring was quickly lost in a chorus of irritated squeaks. Apparently, this belfry had bats, and lots of them.

Not wishing to disturb them, Severus walked over to the window. Below, he could clearly make out the burning building in which he'd been trapped, just to the south of a tiny brook that sparkled in the sunlight. The reflected sunlight made him start. He'd made it. He was in the eighth square.

From the belfry he could make out the neighboring squares. He was not high enough to see the entire game, but he occasionally saw flashes of movement in the distance, and at one point the white king's knight flashed through the treetops of another square and waved enthusiastically. Severus nearly found himself waving back.

It was then that he noticed the red queen sitting in a golden throne not twenty feet away. She was scowling at him over a cup of tea.

"Won't you join me in a cup of tea?"

"Rather stupid of you to offer."

The red queen ignored the insult. "Suit yourself. You won't be going anywhere for quite sometime. And when you do, you won't go far." She took a sip of tea and smirked at him.

He didn't answer. The less said to the red queen, the better.

They both stared out over the game. Severus wished he could see more of the action.

"Nice, isn't it?" asked the red queen, daintily nibbling the head off a gingerbread man.

"Only if you can't go anywhere else."

"I'm queen," she said, calm façade cracking. "I can go anywhere, and I can take you if I want."

"You're not about to take me if it means getting taken yourself, and there's that pesky white knight to worry about."

The red queen glared at him. "I wondered who had been helping them strategize. It was you, wasn't it?" Finally she sighed. "The game's not the same without you, you know."

"Yes. I noticed that there are still a number of white pieces on the board."

"Not that, you fool. I meant that no-one else stirs me to a violent frenzy the way you used to."

"I'm told I have a similar effect on most."

"Which reminds me," said the red queen with relish, "I hear the white king's no happier with you than the red king."

"The white king can get stuffed for all I care," said Severus. "But I'm going to win this game for him, whether he likes it or not."

"Well," said the queen, enunciating carefully, "You will eventually have to deal with both kings at some point, and that knight won't always be here to protect you."

"I won't need him."

Not pausing to savor the furious look on the red queen's face, Severus took a deep breath, stepped
up onto the windowsill, and ran down the side of the bell tower to the southwest.

~o0o~

Never in his life had he moved so swiftly or so easily; not in a car, not on a broomstick. The squares whizzed by in a blur. In the first square, the other white knight stood grimly over the body of a three-legged lion. The second square was a circular room with blue candles, where soft light poured forth from an open door. Severus felt drawn to it and nearly stopped running, but he kept his head down and continued. The third square was a graveyard dominated by a large white tomb. The fourth was filled with people singing. The fifth was a dark forest on whose westernmost border was a crenellated wall of stone. He had reached the edge of the board.

Feeling unpleasantly as though he were being watched, he ran south along the wall another square, which was covered with gravel and large boulders. When he felt that he was no longer in danger, he gazed to the north and northeast, trying to decide where to move next. He placed his hand against the cool stone wall and sighed.

"Boy, why are you sighing?" came a voice from behind him.

He spun around to find that on the other side of the brook was a vast library with a flagstone floor. The stone wall that edged the game board had large windows through which sun poured.

The source of the inquiry came from a white rook, who was perched precariously at the top of the closest bookcase. She wore a flowing white blouse that was cinched at the waist with a lovely patterned belt and at the neck with a matching cravat.

He raised an eyebrow at the castle- she couldn't have been more than eighteen- and scowled. "'Boy?"

"Yes, boy," said the castle, primly closing the book she was reading. "Hardly more sense than a schoolboy, but at least you made it here in one piece."

Severus felt oddly drawn to the queer creature but took exception to being called a schoolboy. "I am queen, you know."

"Yes," she said, gesturing to her lithe form, "and I'm a castle. Funny how these things work, isn't it? If I were setting up the board, I should have made you a knight. But we have only limited control over such things."

Severus's memories began fluttering at the edge of his consciousness, and he let it. For the first time, he cursed the drug that was making his memories vague and sluggish. Her repeated inquiry interrupted his musings.

"You still didn't tell me what made you sigh so."

"I was thinking about the king."

"Well," she said tartly, "that's enough to make anyone sigh. I hope you don't think you're entirely without fault in the matter."

"Yes, yes," said Severus impatiently. "I've already been informed that I'm the root of all evil in this game and that if the white side loses, it will be entirely my fault."

"Where on earth did you get that idea?"

"I thought that universal antipathy was standard for those who destroy beloved leaders."
"Where have you been this game?" asked the castle, throwing her hands in the air in exasperation.

"Getting to the eighth square, you impertinent chit!" Severus snapped. "I notice you haven't even left your space!"

"Why should I have?" asked the castle with infuriating calm. "My job has been here."

The scathing reply came automatically. "With your nose in a book the whole time, no doubt."

The castle smiled. "Yes, with my nose in a book the whole time." She had dimples. She tossed Severus the book she'd been reading.

It was a notebook of sorts, with heavily edited entries, many side notes, and a few scratched out drawings of a chessboard. As he stared at the sequence of scribbled moves, it dawned on him why he had encountered so little resistance from the red pieces in his advance across the board.

"You instructed the other pieces to protect me."

"Well spotted!" she said with another smile. "After I convinced the king's knight, it was easy. He's quite good at this game, you know. So in spite of the white king, you managed to claim another of the seven squares we needed, and you've replaced the most powerful piece on our side."

"How did you know I was really on your side?"

"It came to me, just like this did," she said, expansively gesturing around her.

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't you find things around here to be a bit strange? That's because I'm dreaming it all."

"As much sense as it would make to know that this world came from the mind of a young female, you didn't dream this," Severus retorted. "I'm hallucinating it."

She regarded him curiously. "But you're wearing a funny hat. You always wear funny hats in my dreams. You don't happen to feel an irresistible urge to kiss me, do you?"

Severus wasn't quite sure which of her extraordinary comments to respond to. "This is a crown that I bloody well earned, ridiculous child. As for your inquiry, I should say not!"

Rather than look put out, as he had hoped, she looked even more interested. "Do you hallucinate like this often?"

"The frequency of my hallucinations is none of your concern." He avoided her penetrating gaze by flipping through her book. He was surprised to find the nonsense poem, yet again. The difference is that it was written so that he could read it, and it was annotated. This is what he read:

Lodremorty Yes.

\begin{verbatim}
Twas liret (late + dire?) and the bellitaurs (Centaur? Taurus?)
Did archemune (?) the forbidrest (Forbidden Forest)
All gresolved (grim+ resolved?) were the lakimers (mersea?)
And the orphee (Order) outgrest (?)
\end{verbatim}

"Beware the Lodremort, my son! (Yes, yes)
The eyes that burn, the soulesplit (Yes)
Beware Lecarrowstrange and shun"
Naginos Pettinet!" (Yes)

He took his Gryffish sword (Really?) in hand
And sought the vileunn (vile+villain) fragsole far (Yes.)
And found a space in grimmish place
And rubbed his cursiscar. (Clue or just a cute rhyme?)

And as in idlewhile he rests,
The Lodremort with eyes of flame
Burforsted from the forbidrest (An ill-conceived gambit?)
And avked as it came! (Ouch.)

One, two! Three, four! And more and more
The Gryffish blade turned bloddirud; (bloody + red )
At last it died and by his side
The orpee prodtor stood. (Order's what?)

"We have now slain the Lodremort.
So take my hand, O Prodtor Brave, (?)
We'll not be friends, but when this ends,
You'll be not revilnave." (?)

'Twas timumph, and the orpheements (We win, apparently)
Did partabraste (Partake? Party? Celebrate?) in hoggydron,
All dellery (?) the wordwize was,
And the prodtor livpollon. (?)

What is the prodtor? A protector? A predator?
When does the attack come?
What needs to be done to win? Gryffish sword, cursiscar, the soulesplit.

Severus looked up at the castle, who had observed him in silence.

"You say you dreamed that I was on your side?"

"Yes. It took me some time to convince the other pieces that you were, but as you can see, they've all been helping."

"All but the king," said Severus nastily.

Her smile faded a bit. "I think he'll come around," she said with more confidence than she probably felt. "When push comes to shove, I think he's accepted the evidence that you were on our side all along. It's just taking his heart a little longer to catch up with his brain."

"It's weakness. It could get us all taken."

"His irrational anger with you is weakness," countered the castle, "but his love for the previous queen is what's keeping him in the game. I suspect it's also what's keeping you in the game."

Severus didn't say anything but returned the notebook to the castle. As she took the book from him, his fingers brushed hers, and he met her eyes.

"Who are you?"

"The king's castle," she said. "And your friend."
"In that order?"

She leaned down and placed her hand on the side of his face. "That all depends on you."

"Prodigal."

"Pardon?"

"Prodigal traitor. That's what the Prodtor is."

"Wonderful," she said. "Now all I need to do is find a prodigal traitor willing to help our side."

"Don't be stupid, girl," said Severus, irritation finally piercing the opium fog in his brain.

A slow smile spread across her face. "I'm so glad to hear you say that. By our calculations, we can checkmate the red king in five moves. Two of those moves are yours. Make them count. I'll find you when the game is over. Pay attention to what's happening. It could be important."

He covered her hand with his own and gave it a gentle squeeze. She rubbed her thumb against his.

"Now, if you would be so kind as to get that red pawn out of my way, we can start endgame."

Severus turned to the north and raced off.

~o0o~

The lumpy, lopsided red pawn never knew what hit him. He barely had enough time to wheeze in surprise before Severus struck. Then, before Severus knew what had happened, the pawn disappeared. No pop of Apparation, he simply vanished.

Severus then ran northeast as hard as he could to the northernmost edge of the board. As he caught his breath, he looked at the square around him with interest. He was standing on a hill that overlooked the entire board. Behind him stood a large manor house that must have been quite fine once but had fallen into disrepair. The view from the hill was troubling.

Several squares away, he two kings were facing one another, wands out, but neither was able to make a move toward the other. Severus realized that the kings were stuck until one of them was checkmated and suspected the red pieces would be coming to the same conclusion. Upon further scrutiny, Severus noticed that the white king was decked out in a number of odd items. On a heavy chain around his neck, the white king wore a battered black book, shards of the cup Severus had found, a golden locket whose front was missing, a supremely ugly ring with a cracked stone, and what appeared to be a broken wand.

He could see the red and white knights threatening each other with swords, the bishops gliding, taking pawns and circling one another, and both castles teaming up to drive off the red queen, who had made a daring move deep into white territory.

His perusal was interrupted by a soft hissing noise behind him. He turned to find the largest, deadliest looking snake he had ever seen coiled and ready to strike. He leaped to the right, and the snake's arrow-shaped head whizzed past him, fangs bared. Severus retreated out of striking range and cast a Stupefying Curse at the snake. The snake dodged and glided rapidly toward the house.

Severus pursued the snake, firing off more curses as he ran. The snake dodged them easily and disappeared through a broken window into the house. The haze surrounding Severus's memories was still thick, but every instinct screamed at him that the snake needed to be eliminated.
Rather than squelch the feeling as he would have earlier in the game, he ran to the front door of the great house and slipped inside.

The entrance hall of the house was dark, in spite of the large windows on either side of the door. A round table in the center of the room was covered with a dustcloth, as were the other articles of furniture. Decades of spider webs hung from the chandelier, and a thick layer of dust coated every surface of the room.

To his relief, there were dozens of s-shaped tracks in the dust over the rotting carpet. It would be difficult to track the snake, but not impossible. Severus lit his wand silently, and followed the darkest and freshest-looking of the snake's tracks to the left.

The next room was nearly pitch black on account of the heavy velvet draperies covering the windows. As dilapidated as it was, Severus could tell that it had been a fine room, with its pale crimson walls and an ornate mirror over the marble mantelpiece. As he examined the room in the small circle of wandlight, his gaze fell upon a loveseat and two overstuffed chairs, all of which faced the fireplace. Curiously, they were devoid of dust covers.

He was startled to discover the faded chalk outlines of three bodies that had apparently been found sitting there. The figures appeared as negative shadows, in the light, almost as the outlines of ghosts. As he gazed at them, willing his mind to impart to him the significance of this find, he became aware of a soft sound coming from the floor to his right. His reflexes did not desert him, and he cast a stunning hex in the direction of the sound.

He was gratified to hear an angry hiss, and in the light of his wand, he saw the tail of the great snake disappear up the flue of the fireplace. He cast a quick hex, but it struck the back of the fireplace. Cursing the snake's unnatural intelligence and speed, he ran out of the drawing room up the stairs.

He raced past several bedrooms, finally finding the one that shared a chimney with the downstairs drawing room. He stopped short in the doorway, listening for his quarry as he tried to quiet his fast breathing.

There. He swore that he could hear the foul serpent's belly scales whispering across fabric. He quickly lit his wand, and stepped cautiously into the room in search of the snake.

He crossed to the bed and flung off the bedding, which released a cloud of dust but revealed no sign of his prey. He coughed and unsuccessfully attempted to fan the dust away from him. A slight movement on the other side of the bed caught his attention.

The bell-pull! The cunning snake had coiled itself around the rope bell-pull and had lain in wait, perfectly camouflaged, for Severus to venture close enough for it to strike. He aimed his wand.

"Reducto!" To his shock, the snake threw itself off the bell-pull a split second before his curse hit.

"Stupefy!"

But it was too late. The snake had slithered back to the fireplace and disappeared into the chimney.

The snake could have retreated to the ground floor, but Severus didn't think so. He threw the bedroom window open and twisted himself so that he could see the side of the house more clearly. The sheer walls that had appeared unscalable from a distance had large blocks of stone on the corners and around the windows, which protruded enough to grip. The snake would be expecting him to approach by the stairs, which presumably went up to the attic.
Severus placed his wand between his teeth and swung himself out the window. He wedged his toes into the space between two stones and began climbing. It was hard work. Sweat dripped into his eyes and his muscles protested as he lifted himself, arm over arm, up the side of the house. As he ascended, he felt a droplet of water strike his face. A storm was brewing.

He put his head down and kept climbing. It was odd, the house hadn't appeared this high from the outside. And what had been carefully worked sandstone cornerstones soon gave way to rough blocks of granite. The climbing was easier, but, judging from an upward glance, he had much further to go than he had initially supposed.

He gritted his teeth and kept climbing. The rain was falling harder. Fortunately, the rough-hewn stone had enough indentations for him to keep his grip. At last, he came to the crenellated edge of the chimney, but really, it appeared to be more of a great tower. As he pulled himself onto the tower, lightning flashed overhead, and he allowed himself to catch his breath.

There was no sign of the snake. Undoubtedly it had gone below to avoid the rain, which would make it more difficult for the snake to move. Severus welcomed the cooling rain, and when he felt sufficiently recovered from his climb, he tentatively approached the wooden door that led below. It was slightly ajar, just wide enough for a snake to get through. He peered through the crack in the door and froze.

The snake was curled up inside the door, lying peacefully atop a wooden trap door. Clever creature. Had he approached from below, the snake would have felt his attempts to open the trap door and could have bitten him. He considered, weighing whether he could take the snake by surprise. He finally decided that he ought to force a confrontation. After discarding a few strategies, he focused on the door beneath the snake.

"Colloportus."

The squelching noise immediately roused the snake, which seemed startled to have its exit taken away. It recovered quickly and darted behind the door where Severus couldn't hex it.

Severus threw the door open, hoping to crush the snake behind it, but it had gone all the way to the doorjamb, and struck out from between the hinges, forcing him to jump backwards. He slipped on the wet stone and fell.

Seizing the opportunity, the snake flopped to the ground and struck at his outstretched foot. The snake buried its fangs harmlessly in the thick rubber heel of his boot, and Severus sent a Stunning Spell toward the snake and struck it squarely in the midsection.

The snake was thrown backwards, and Severus scrambled to his feet. The snake seemed to sense that it had lost its advantage attempted to escape through the door to dryer environs, but Severus sealed the silently. Sensing failure, the snake launched itself over the edge of the tower.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The green beam hit the serpent midair, and the snake, which had been writhing frantically in search of a surface on which to cling, went completely limp. As if in slow motion, Severus watched the snake fall to the base of the tower. For an instant, even the raindrops seemed to hang in the air.

And as suddenly as the rain had started, it stopped.

A blinding beam of sunlight pierced the cloud, and Severus looked out from the tower, which had been entirely shrouded in mist, and saw the entire game board stretched before him. He could
clearly see the pieces on the board. His heart leapt to see his castle gliding deliberately to the sixth square, where the red king was watching her with a look of contempt.

He glanced at the castle, the knight, and the white queen's bishop. All wore similar looks of triumph.

Checkmate.

However, the white king seemed to realize that something was amiss. The red king, with whom he stood face to face, did not disappear. He didn't even tip over. He just stood there, glaring at the pieces that had trapped him, refusing to concede.

From his vantage point on top of the tower, it appeared to Severus as though the two kings were speaking. Suddenly the red king drew his wand and dropped into dueling stance.

Severus frowned. This wasn't how the game was played.

Then the white king did something strange. He looked up at the tower and caught Severus's eyes. Somehow sensing the question, Severus nodded.

The red king cast a spell and the white king dodged. But instead of pulling out his wand, the white king drew a large sword with a red gem in the pommel. With one swift cut, the white king cleanly severed the red king's head from his shoulders.

As the red king fell to the ground, the world around Severus began to melt. The colors of the squares ran together and he found himself suspended in a silvery fog. This time, he was not alone.

The white king hovered in front of him. He did not appear pleased.

"Look," he said at last, "I know we've had our differences in the past, but we couldn't have won the game without you."

Severus felt a scornful look twist his features. "Obviously," he said, infusing each syllable with as much derision as possible.

A rueful smile lifted the king's lips. "I guess this is my way of saying I don't like you, but I owe you my life." He extended his hand to Severus. "And my gratitude."

For one brief moment, Severus contemplated refusing to shake the king's hand. However, the king had ultimately trusted him and believed him.

He took the king's hand and shook it firmly.

Odd, the king's hand felt smaller than it looked, and it was much softer. He squinted. The king's face was fading in the mist, yet the gentle pressure on his hand remained.

~000~

Severus scrubbed his eyelids with his other hand and opened his eyes. It was daylight, and his blinds had been opened. He examined the room, marveling that it was clean, all the bottles were gone, and finally, at the brown head that lay next to his hip on the bed.

He winced, expecting the sun to do serious damage to his retinas, but no sting was forthcoming. Far from it—he felt quite hale, and surprisingly sober. Several empty potion vials sat on the nightstand, along with an empty soup bowl and a half-full glass of water.
He regarded the woman, who occupied the chair by his bed and whose head rested at his side, and whose hands clutched his right hand. She had nursed him back to health. A glance at the foe-glass on the door clearly indicated that she was not an enemy, but who was she? What was her purpose?

He gently moved his hand, and she uttered a soft mewing sound before sitting bolt upright in her chair, eyes wide.

"Oh! You're awake! Are you all right?"

He was too shocked to respond. The woman, no, girl, who had probably saved his life was Hermione Granger, one third of the bane of his existence.

"You!" he managed to hiss. "What the hell do you think you're doing here? You- what day is this?"

"September fourth. You've been out for nearly a week."

It was true, her face and clothing showed signs of a lengthy vigil. He glared at her. "Why aren't you at school, Miss Granger?"

She blinked at him in surprise, and to his surprise, began laughing, a high crystalline sound. "I'm so happy to hear you say that!" she exclaimed, brown eyes warm. "I was afraid you'd suffered permanent damage."

"Miss Granger," he said, disentangling his hand from her grip, "You will kindly tell me what you are doing in the house of an accused murderer instead of safe in class at Hogwarts."

"I had more important things to do than school."

"Such as nurse a killer back to health. What would precious Potter say?"

"He'd call you a greasy git, shake his head, and get back to work. He knows the truth."

Severus's jaw worked. "What in Morgan's name do you mean 'the truth'?" he demanded.

She looked seriously at him. "That you were following Professor Dumbledore's orders when you cast the Killing Curse. He had you do it to save Malfoy and to save yourself from the Unbreakable Vow you took. We also know he would have died that night, even without your intervention."

He felt the blood drain from his face. "Impossible. Nobody knew."

"Professor," she said tentatively, "I don't mean to pry, but do you remember any of your dreams while you were, you know-"

"Orbiting the moons of Jupiter."

"-orbiting the moons of Jupiter," she finished.

He thought for a moment. "Yes, I do. Parts of it, anyway."

"Then," she continued awkwardly, "you should write it all down. Even the slightest detail could be really important. I'd like to hear about it as soon as possible."

"Since when do you place such stock in dreams, Miss Granger?"

"Since I saved your life," she said with a slight smile. "Now, since you're awake, you really ought
to take a shower. I'll be downstairs making dinner. We'll talk more then."

She left him alone, and as he mechanically followed her instructions, his mind was whirling. When he had dressed himself in a robe that she had obviously repaired, he followed the lovely smell of food down the stairs.

His sitting room had been returned to relative order, and he found himself drawn to his father's chess set, which had been placed in the corner. His hand sought the white king's rook, and he put the piece into his pocket.

"Professor?" came Hermione's voice from the kitchen. "Are you ready for supper?"

As he crossed his tiny sitting room to the kitchen, Severus felt as if he were in another alternate version of reality. Perhaps he'd gone beyond the foe-glass world into another stranger place. But when he saw the perfect shepherd's pie Hermione had prepared and the expectant look on her face, he wondered if he didn't vastly prefer this place to the previous realities he had experienced.

And really, he thought, patting the castle in his pocket, as long as Hermione was there, he suddenly found that he didn't really care about which was his dream and which was hers.

Which do you think it was?

~o0o~

_Ever drifting down the stream-_  
_Linger ing in the golden gleam-_  
_Life, what is it but a dream?_  
-Rev. Charles L. Dodgson

~o0o~

THE END DNE EHT

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Mr. 42 for everything, including editing, idea bouncing, beta- and gamma-reading, and just plain awesomeness. This story is immeasurably better because of him, and my life immeasurably richer.

Special thanks to Moonlit River, whose initial Wonderland Challenge spawned "Down the Ferret-Hole," and, by extension, this story. For long-time readers of SS/HG, the chess metaphor was drawn completely from Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There and not from any venerable unfinished works.

Other direct quotations/acknowledgements: "Honey? I beg your pardon, I hardly know you!" is Bob Hope's response to Fozzie's request for honey ice cream in "The Muppet Movie." "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" is a poem by Robert Herrick, also known by its first line, "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." "The Young Lady's Pleasures and How She Gained Them" is based on "You are old, Father William," from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, which, in turn, is a spoof of "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time."
of Robert Southey's poem, "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them." The original is a boring and didactic poem that was supposed to teach Victorian children the importance of temperance and piety. Thank goodness Carroll's is the version that survives.

The "Aged Aged Man" poem is based on the Looking-Glass White Knight's Song, which in turn is based on Carroll's earlier poem, "Upon the Lonely Moor," which was published anonymously in 1856. "Sea of holes" is from the Beatles animated film "Yellow Submarine." "Boy, why are you sighing?" imprecisely echoes Wendy's first words to Peter in J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan. Having one person's dream intersect with another's drug trip came from Tony Kushner's "Angels in America," as did the phrase "orbiting the moons of Jupiter." Aah, the threshold of revelation. The stanzas at the beginning and end were written by Lewis Carroll (aka Charles Dodgson) as frames for Through the Looking-Glass.

I shamelessly stole a plot device from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Ten points to your house if you can identify it!

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