

# Severus Snape and the Story with No Plot

*by MHaydn*

Plot-what-plot acquires a new dimension.

## The Characters Arrive

*Chapter 1 of 9*

Plot-what-plot acquires a new dimension.

### **Chapter 1: The Characters Arrive**

"Why me?" wailed Biff Barston.

"Because you're terrible with women," said the editor, checking her lipstick in the compact mirror. "That means you observe them closely and write them accurately. That means you're full of angst and agony ready to pour on the page." She put her compact away. "Just spill your guts and then make everything come out right—the way you've fantasized a thousand times—the way you think that if you had done just one small thing different, you'd be with the love of your life."

Biff slumped in his chair. "But what about the sequel to 'My Wand is Quick'?"

"It will have to wait," said the editor.

"But people like my hero, Buffalo Biff, The Lone Wizard."

"It will have to wait," said the editor.

She sighed and explained her magazine's plight. "You know the regular writer for our popular Snape-Granger romance serials is incapacitated. We tried to reduce her potions to the point where she could formulate a sentence, but she tried to leap out the window."

"That's the effect her stories had on me," said Biff.

"Quite," said the editor. "We're going to miss that edgy quality. She keeps muttering about never writing another chapter even though we're all hoping for a speedy recovery." She looked at him. "We can't let the readers down. It's up to you."

He started to leave.

"There's one more thing," said the editor. "I've found a couple of interns for you from the wizard school. They've just finished their sixth year, and they're the two brightest in their class."

He slumped back into the chair.

"And you can stop glaring," she said. "You know taking on students earns us lots of points with the daily rag and the school instructors. It helps counter the accusations that we're a bunch of functioning addicts."

"I could use a hit now," he said.

She opened her desk drawer and offered him the choice of bottle or powder. She took a refreshment break herself and said, "Their names are Snorri Severson and Harmony Grayson. Try to remember. It creates a good impression."

Several days later, Harmony Grayson decided that the first day on the job she should form a working relationship with Snorri Severson. She had always thought the Gryffindor-Slytherin rivalry was overdone. As a diplomatic Slytherin, she would make the first move.

"What's this?" she said, finding him engrossed in a pile of pamphlets. "Are you looking at source material? You surprise me. I always thought you were a lazy scholar."

She picked up one of the pamphlets. "Batman Comics!?"

"I'm seeking psychological insight into a complex character," he said.

Insight struck her. "You're going to steal a bunch of non-wizard stories and present them to the wizard world as your own," she accused him.

"Plagiarism will get you through times of no creativity better than creativity will get you through times of no plagiarism," he replied loftily, returning to his stack of classics.

"Honestly," she huffed, stomping out of his study to her own awaiting room with its pile of blank paper – a pile of blank paper and a book of Victorian literature. She was certain it was the only thing the writers in this establishment ever read. She glanced at the introduction. She knew that Gryffindor weasel was to blame for what she was about to do.

Having decided to bring out a Serial, the Writer racks her brains for a suitable name with which to christen her story. Friends are generally useless in an emergency of this kind; they suggest all kinds of impossible names; the following were some of the titles proposed in this instance: "Potions and Pedestal," "Slither and Mane," "The Prince and the Prissy," and "Spirits United"; the two first had certainly great attractions to our mind, but at last our own ideas have hit upon the modest little "A Pearl of a Love Story," as more suitable, especially in the hope that when it comes under the snout of an immoral and lazy fellow writer, he will not trample it under the heavy foot of the mediocrity to which he is disposed, and feel free to rend the tale with his brutish and borrowed inserts, but that he will become a subscriber to its quiet dignity. To such a better disposed piggywiggy, I would say, for encouragement, that he has only to keep up the appearance of contributing by regularly attending work, giving constructive criticism, always appearing interested in this uplifting tale, simulating a respectable and decent character, and that if he only is clever enough never to be found out, he may, sub rosa, enjoy the good life till the end of the summer, and dishonestly earn a glorious epitaph on his record, unless the world is just, and at last the Devil pegs him out for the oink that he is.

"I see I'm an inspiring fellow."

She yelled and jumped. "I didn't know you were here. But I suppose sneaking is another one of your talents."

"Wouldn't you say it starts off strong and then begins to ramble?" he observed as he left the room. "Take that as constructive criticism."

Back in his office, Snorri was integrating what he had learned from his research into an archetype. He was thinking that Snape was heroic but it was a dark heroism that not everyone appreciated.

"Yes, that's quite impressive," he said, looking at the two mangled bodies. "I see by the expressions on their faces that they took a long time dying."

She beamed.

"I suppose this was practice," he said.

"Practice?" she replied. "I don't need practice."

"Of course not," he said. He assumed the demeanor of someone putting something delicately. "I only thought you might be using those who are, shall we say, less resistant to refine your methods."

She looked as dangerous as she was. "Are you implying that I'm choosing non-wizards because they're easier than wizards?"

"I said no such thing," he stated.

She glared at him. He assumed an innocent air that radiated unconcern about her methods or targets. Maintaining full dignity, she turned and vanished.

"You're playing a dangerous game, Severus," he told himself. "It's not safe to goad Bellatrix."

Nevertheless, to sustain fear and hate among the wizard population for the Death Eaters, he had to make certain the Death Eaters tortured and killed wizards. Even the most liberal of wizards was all too willing to ignore the deaths of non-wizards. There were so many of them if nothing else.

"*Agent provocateur* is the term, I believe," he told himself.

Snorri thought he had begun rather well.

Two doors down, Biff assumed the creative posture of leaning back in his chair with his feet on the desk. The sound of a lonesome harmonica danced through his head.

A weary cowbroke topped the crest of a ridge and looked down on the deceptively sleepy frontier town showing few lights in the early dusk. He knew, and the town knew, the railroad was coming. Some would get rich; some would lose everything. The general store owner who welcomed the rails had made shady deals. The widow whose land stood in the way had a past. Violent men were gathering.

But more problems than met the eye awaited The Lone Wizard.

In the town saloon, Severus, the competent but bitter town doctor, sat at his usual corner table and nursed a Flaming-Eye. As usual, he did not notice the interested glances from Pansy, the co-owner of The Horse and the Duck. On the outskirts of town, Hermione, the new and untried schoolmarm, tossed and turned as she tried to fall asleep.

Biff was softly snoring.

# Watching the Watchers

Chapter 2 of 9

The plot moves forward with all the speed of a Cigarette boat on a sandbar.

## Chapter 2: Watching the Watchers

"I've never heard such a cockamamie idea."

"That's why I need your help," he said. "Look, I found a flip chart. You can outline the plot and jot down all your inspired ideas."

She glared at him. She was not going to be swayed because of some dumb story-aid.

"I have these," he said, holding up a handful of multi-colored writing implements.

Her pupils dilated. How did he know she was devoted to color-coded study charts? Her pupils narrowed. It was Mary Lee Perkins. Mary Lee Perkins had ratted her out. Vengeance might not be swift, but it would be inexorable. She would hex her betrayer's lingerie into the next size. Ha, the vain bitch would think her boobs had shrunk. Nobody stabs Harmony Grayson in the back and lives happily ever after.

"You should look behind the flip chart," he suggested.

Suspicious of more treachery, she cautiously moved the stand aside. She caught her breath. There, battered but in working order, was a cappuccino maker. At school, the dungeon ran on caffeine.

"You devil," she said.

"I found it in the basement," said Snorri. "I think the regular staff has moved to harder stuff."

Her inner conscience wrestled with her inner child. She dare not let him know her fatal weakness blueberry muffins.

"There's a bakery around the corner," he said. "We should celebrate our good fortune. I can get anything you like while you fire up the caffeine machine."

Her eyes danced between the colored pencils and the coffee marvel. Visions of blueberry muffins danced in her head. "You fiend," she said.

"Who's that witch sitting with Professor Snape?" asked Ron as he joined Hermione for lunch.

"I don't know," said Hermione in the calm state of exhaustion and relief at the completion of her fifth-year exams.

They soon learned she was Professor Misako Ogami, joint instructor of Plants and Chemistry at Denver. She was on a summer exchange program, and she would be working with Professor Snape.

"I should exchange places with Snape," said Ron, ogling the lady. "I'm an altogether friendlier program."

"Professor Snape is doing well enough," replied Hermione, thinking she should be glad, not irritated, that Ron had shown more poetic imagination than a teaspoon. And it must have been exhaustion that caused her to be equally irritated, instead of happy, that Snape seemed to be playing the gracious host. Nevertheless, she smiled when she learned that Professor Ogami would be staying in Ravenclaw Tower instead of the dungeon.

"She looks puzzled by her lunch," said Ron. "Maybe she wants some chopsticks." He began waving his wand at his knife and fork, causing them to assume strange shapes. "I'll gladly play 'chopsticks' with her."

"She looks mixed-descent, and she was probably raised on rock-and-roll, hotdogs, and apple pie," said Hermione, thinking the mixed-descent had turned out well and she should stop Ron from making a fool of himself and he had never offered to play 'chopsticks' with her. "She's probably looking for the ketchup."

Several days later, in the wilds of Scotland, Severus was watching Misako stomping on a shovel as she tried to dig up a plant. "Brilliant spade work, Miss Ogami. You're going to break the shovel. And if you hurt your foot, I will have to waste time taking care of you."

"How thoughtless of me, Severus. And I'm sure this is your special shovel." She scanned the landscape to make certain they were alone, pulled out her wand, made three quick flicks of her wrist, and lifted a perfect tetrahedron of rocks and soil containing the plant.

Severus noticed her spell had sliced cleanly through several rocks.

She moved the plant to its pot. "Before this, I only worked in a greenhouse, and I'm more at home with a Bunsen burner."

"Bunsen burner?" he asked.

"Yes, you know, Bunsen burners, test tubes, the lot." She paused. "Are you telling me you still use cauldrons?"

"Cauldrons give very good results," he said.

"Cauldrons are clumsy, reactive, and dangerous."

"Perhaps for the unskilled," he suggested.

She smiled. "That's rich. I was warned about your sense of humor."

Severus was thinking the lady must have a very keen sense of humor. His remarks had been too subtle for his.

"I was so busy getting ready for this field trip that I never got a chance to see your lab," she said.

"I was hesitant when they suggested I entertain you, but I think it will be easy. I can take you on a tour: quaint castle with quaint moving stairs, quaint kitchen with quaint slaves, and quaint Potions lab with quaint cauldrons."

"That's good," she said. "I like wizards with a sense of humor. Any chance of getting haggis around here? I keep hearing about it."

"Now that you're on our quaint island, you're determined to have the adventure of a lifetime, aren't you?"

"Yes," she said.

Back at the castle after the field trip, Professor Ogami introduced the excitement of poker to the summer staff. They played on a balcony during the long summer twilight.

"I relish seven-card stud," she confessed to the players around the table: Severus, Filius, Minerva, Pomona, and Dobby.

Dobby, grinning at his pile of knuts, missed her licking her lips over the other kind.

"Walk me to my room?" Misako asked Severus after one game when they were the last to leave the balcony.

"Are you still getting lost?"

"No, I've mastered your quaint stairways. I thought you could entertain me by being a quaint gentleman," she said.

After leaving her at the door to the Ravenclaw dorm, Severus reflected that escorting Misako was one of life's small pleasures. After escorting her to her door the second time, he accepted her invitation for a nightcap of herbal tea.

"It's one of the things that improve sleep," she said.

Severus finished his tea and left for the dungeon. Misako was left thinking that either Brit wizards were thick or Brit wizards were asexual or the Potions master was so full of self-loathing that he couldn't make the world around him a better place to live.

Two days later, Misako was in the Potions lab with Severus and was unpacking a box of supplies from Denver. "I always thought the bigger test tubes looked rowdy but the smaller were versatile. It's all about how skillfully they're used." She lined them up. "Don't they look good all in a row and erect like they were on parade." She petted them. "All hard and shiny." She pulled out the strangest looking contraption. "Of course, like all good little boys, they perform better when they're properly warmed up."

"I'm tempted to describe your visceral approach to your work as beyond quaint," said Severus.

"You're cute when you're being witty," she said. She wondered if she was finally getting through to the thick Brit. For all the action she had seen in the castle, she was beginning to wonder where little Brit wizards came from. Perhaps they were imported caught wild in Australia and Canada and shipped to the Motherland in crates.

"That's a good start," he said to the lady at the flip chart who was trying to decide between orange and red-orange for the next plot line

She carefully put her pencils back in the box. "How long before we get them in bed?" she asked.

"This is a general circulation magazine," he replied. "That's out of the question."

"If we can slip it in, it will improve sales. We'll be doing everyone a favor." She gave the story more thought. "We need more snark for Severus to be in character. We could have him poke fun at her small breasts."

Snorri shook his head. "We can't have him poke fun at her breasts and then expect her to get in bed with him."

Harmony looked skeptical.

"Suppose," he said, "that I mentioned your breasts were on the small side."

"Men! All they think about are big boobs! Big mummy boobs! Why don't you run home to mummy, little boy?!"

"That's what I'm talking about," he said.

"It's nearly lunchtime," she said.

"They're paying us very well, and I'm inspired by our character. Care for sushi for lunch?"

"But London is famous for its fish and chips," said Harmony.

Snorri shuddered flip charts, colored pencils, chips the sacrifices he was making for his art.

When he returned to the writing room that afternoon, Snorri found Harmony reviewing the morning's effort and shaking her head.

"Flat and featureless prose," she announced.

She thought she should wield the quill while he handled the flip chart. After all, she already had the colors picked out which was the difficult part. Weakened by lunch, he offered no resistance.

After embarking on a course of action, it is often difficult to recall what prompted the initiative, especially when numerous consequences come of the adventure. Memory is notoriously fickle about such pivotal occasions; the following were some of the reasons that came to mind: jealousy over a possible rival, fear of an unknown intruder, anger at the mismanagement of past affairs, and eagerness to demonstrate pluck; all four had their merits, but a more considered line of thought picked acute-perception as the principle motivation; a conclusion supported by its obvious lack when the heroine's friends had recently charged into needless action which had cost everyone dearly and which had been saved from being a total disaster only because of a lucky and last-minute intervention.

Thus it was that the arrival of such a personage as Professor Ogami caused more stir among the spectators than among those whose business it was to engage the new visitor in a professional capacity or those whose business it was to ensure her personal comfort. The aforementioned perception guaranteed that much of the upheaval came from the fair sex with their suspicion that the exchange scholar was more than willing to intertwine her professional business with her private pleasure. It was only natural to those with such suspicions that other suspicions be generated since the difficult times had produced a wariness where it seemed only prudent to not dismiss items that might be ignored under more convivial circumstances even if these items could not be readily verified as potentially harmful. And so the ones with the heightened awareness that seemingly insignificant events could tip the balance in the struggle for the soul of the wizard world found themselves engaged in activities that they would scarcely recommend under usual conditions but seemed mandated by a proper concern for the safety of all and surely partly justified merely by the inconvenience and discomfort of carrying out these precautions in the face of the indifference or even censure of individuals who did not realize that without bending some of the rules of propriety the game might be lost.

It had fallen to the more astute among them to bend their minds to the multiple dilemmas facing the conscientious who would rid their society of the malcontents seeking to do it harm since it appeared ill advised to embark too openly on the necessary course of action lest their well-meaning but slower-witted allies either curtail the campaign because the need was not clear to them or forbid involvement because of the danger or ruin the well-laid plans by their clumsiness. To this end, the uncertainties and apprehensions could be allayed by a program of clandestine but comprehensive surveillance.

It was the details of the surveillance that caused our heroine to wrack her brains since her compatriots were full of ideas that while inventive would hardly past muster; the following schemes were proposed: aerial reconnaissance that would certainly have attracted the attention of anyone in the vicinity, disguise as a crew to fix the castle plumbing which faltered on the realization that none of them knew the mechanics of hydraulics, and constant visits on pretence of using the castle library which would raise the suspicions of those who knew the weak scholastic impulses of the available volunteers; the first idea of constant flybys seemed fun and easy, but was discarded in favor of a plan that had the same result but required talents possessed by a greater number of people and had equivalent recreational potential: apparently impromptu outings by wizard-witch pairs that could stroll through the castle countryside and surreptitiously watch the happenings while appearing innocent.

A difficulty arose, however, in the pairings which had to appear compatible but could not be compatible to the point that the couples forgot the purpose of their mission or aroused the protective instincts of adult guardians. The first pairings suggested were of this latter variety, and much persuasion and appeal to higher purpose were needed before those involved saw reason and then only grudgingly agreed to spend time with someone not their first choice. Discussion and diplomatic effort finally produced three teams: Ron Weasley with Parvati Patil, Harry Potter with Padma Patil, and Hermione Granger with Ginny Weasley, and although the teams were a compromise, they were effective enough on their maiden voyages to establish that observing Professors Ogami and Snape was potentially hazardous because both had a sense of when they were being observed even when the observation was conducted at long distance with a spyglass but that Professor Ogami confined her activities to the castle and occasional shopping trips with Professor Snape and that she engaged in no obvious rendezvous.

"Stop fidgeting, Ron."

This outburst occurred because Hermione Granger, the mastermind of the operation, had had second thoughts about the pairing of Ron and Parvati when, before this couple's third foray, she had observed Ron assiduously grooming, humming a happy tune, and preparing to leave early instead of grousing as he had before the pair's first venture. She had decided to keep everything on an even keel by taking the risk and making the sacrifice of accompanying Ron his fourth time out even though it had caused a tremendous row with Ginny who asserted that Harry was showing the same disconcerting signs that Ron had exhibited. She was also discovering that his constant fidgeting upon the air mattress they were using to protect themselves from the cold and stony ground was almost as irritating as his barely disguised disgruntlement at not being with his original partner not to mention that, distracted by his restlessness and upset by his disloyal preference, she had been careless and discovered, in the spyglass, Professor Snape looking at her and, worse, Professor Ogami giving her a cold glare that froze Hermione's heart even though she was certain neither professor could see them from this great distance. Hermione had snapped at Ron as she came to the conclusion that if Professor Ogami was an enemy, then she was a deadly enemy indeed.

She would have to warn the second team of Harry and Padma that Professor Ogami was more sensitive to her surroundings than previously reported, and it was even more reason to resist the complaints of Ginny that she should be the one to accompany Harry since Hermione was certain that Ginny and Harry together would not keep their attention completely focused on the assigned task even though Hermione had to admit that, while she was glad that Harry and Padma had settled into a comfortable partnership, propinquity, as with Ron and Parvati, was having a more salutary effect than was desirable for this delicate operation. Nevertheless, Hermione felt confident in trusting the natural antipathy of Harry and Padma whereas she was not certain that natural antipathy was sufficient when it involved the less disciplined characters of Ron and Parvati.

Harmony looked pleased at the story's progress.

"Do people read that?" asked Snorri.

"It's character development," said Harmony. "It's the lifeblood of romance literature, and our audience is ninety-percent female."

"I knew there was a reason I never bought this magazine," said Snorri. "Do you really think ten-percent of the readers are male?"

Several hours later, Biff Barston wandered in to check on progress but found that Severson and Grayson had left for the day. He perused the manuscript, concluded it was amateurish, but knew he was a professional enough writer to adapt.

The sun was setting as slow and reluctant as the last saxophone solo at an amateur jazz club when Biff, Wizard for Hire, discovered the castle was being watched. He would spend some time watching the watchers even though his assignment was to ascertain what Misako Ogami was doing in this backwater. Her outspoken interest in the Brit conflict had the ears and eyes of officialdom as alert as a finely bred hound in the field. Their inquisitive noses had turned to England as intently as a pointer who had heard a rustle in the wilds of the Scottish brush.

Two lean greyhounds, as innocuous as death in a silent rush, had coached him for spying on the British aristocracy: disguise himself as a servant, preferably a cleaning servant who could go anywhere and remain unnoticed. After the briefing, he had tried to recall why the two had made such an impression on him, but not even his trained mind could focus on any detail about them. But their information was good, and he had assumed the strange persona of a house-elf. As a laundry-elf, he had categorized Misako's wardrobe as half rugged-adventuress and half slinky-seductress. Elf society was a time-trip to a mythical place where slaves were happy. Biff was taking evening tours of the castle environs in his natural form to retain a tenuous link with sanity when he discovered others were interested in Misako. He regarded them as a pack of amateurs who were more likely to alert the quarry than track and capture it.

"What genius arranged a stakeout with hormonal pairs of adolescents?" he asked himself. "I should thank him. This is going to be entertaining."

Entertainment was hard to come by amongst the house-elves.

The first pair consisted of a gangly, red-haired wizard and dark-haired witch of striking beauty who might be of Indian descent. They appeared stand-offish at first, but both had a lively disposition, and they were soon engrossed in discussing the minutiae of their lives. They occasionally broke off their conversation to peer at the poker group with a spyglass. "They're doing it right by accident," Biff observed to himself. "Don't stare at Misako too long; don't underestimate her."

The second pair had a more serious demeanor: a dark-haired wizard and another beauty that also seemed Indian. They talked quietly. Biff was placing his bet on these two: it's the quiet ones.

By their third evening together, the first pair was as compatible as a mellow song over a vintage merlot. Their time was spent chatting and looking at the stars. By the end of their watch, the witch was touching the wizard whenever she spoke to him. When the poker party broke up, the witch glanced through the spy glass to check that Misako was still there.

The third evening for the second pair was as broken as a string bass arpeggio and as bonding as a walking chord progression. The wizard seemed to have matters of great import on his mind which came out in a halting fashion. The witch touched him several times as he talked, and when he finished, she reminisced in the manner of one relating past sad events. Despite the intensity of the conversation, they were a conscientious pair who periodically checked the group on the balcony. The evening ended with the witch talking quietly and lying close enough to touch a new piano ready for the deft fingers that would bring out her first melody, preferably using the dark keys.

The next evening was as jarring as a bebop riff. The red-haired wizard was back, but he was accompanied by a pale-skinned witch who appeared to be telling him things instead of talking to him. The wizard was lying on his back, not seeing the stars and obviously missing his previous companion. Biff almost yelled a warning when he saw the witch stare at Misako through the spyglass. To Biff's surprise, another member of the poker party became aware of the surveillance. Biff recognized him as the wizard with whom Misako was working and marked him as someone to treat with caution. Biff watched the pale-skinned witch turn paler and hastily put away the spyglass. "A bossy klutz," concluded Biff.

Biff decided to take the risk of warning the watchers. He easily learned the identities of some of the participants by talking to the house-elves, but he had no quick way of getting a message to them without the possibility of revealing his cover. His voyeurism had produced an irrational protective urge, and he went out the next evening in case the message had not reached them. It hadn't. The boy he now knew as Harry Potter appeared at dusk with his raven-haired partner.

Biff was wishing he had learned the name of the girl even though it seemed she had already made a choice. She looked as if she was wearing her second best skirt and blouse in an attempt to be noticeable but not be obvious about it, and she looked as crisp as a Coast Guard cutter coming into harbor under the eyes of the old salts. She convinced Harry they should find a more hidden location, and she let him do the spying while evincing the nervous eagerness of a filly at the starting-gate. She began with tentative touches until he touched her back. She let him get closer and closer until she only had to move her lips an inch to meet his. He was unsure what to do after their first kiss, but she embraced him while he adjusted to being in her arms. They held each other until the poker party broke up, checked that Misako was still there, and left holding hands.

Barston set down the quill with a feeling of satisfaction.

## Hackneyed Plots and Tired Clichés

*Chapter 3 of 9*

The plot dissolves like the ink of a sonnet under a flood of bitter tears.

### Chapter 3: Hackneyed Plots and Tired Clichés

"They hate Misako!"

"Who? The faculty?"

"No. No, you ninny, the readers," raged Harmony. She thought Snorri looked entirely too calm. "They've threatened to kill her if she comes between them and Severus ... I mean, between Hermione and Severus."

"Do you think they'll waft her a poison-fan letter?" he asked before he realized how murderous Harmony looked. A little rationalization was in order. "Hate is better than indifference, and we have to get Severus experienced."

"Experienced?"

"In all the stories I've read, Severus is a bedroom god," he said. "He transports Hermione; he takes her to another world. He's the very devil with his tongue. He's got to learn how to do that. He's not going to acquire any skill brooding in the dungeon."

Snorri couldn't resist. "Unless you think it's his acid tongue that eats pussy."

"What?"

"We can let him become accomplished with Misako before she has to return to the States, leaving him free," said Snorri. "Does that make you happy? We can create some dramatic tension."

"The dramatic tension is supposed to come from the heroine's concern over his feelings for her, not from the anguish of seeing him behave like an adolescent," said Harmony.

He accused her of writing another predictable romance. She accused him of having Severus fornicate with anything in a skirt as an immature male wrote out his fantasies.

During a lull in the exchange, Snorri pointed to the first chapter and said, "It looks like Mr. Barston has a private dick."

"I don't see that his personal life has anything to do with this," she said.

"I was talking about the story," he said, handing her the magazine. He thought himself lucky to discover Harmony was poison early in the game.

Harmony read the last section by Biff Barston. It reinforced her impressions from yesterday. Misako was an inspired character rich in plot potential. Harmony had been distressed by the hate mail and had wanted to work with Snorri on the plot problem, but he had become defensive and critical, and the whole discussion had gone wrong.

"Look," said Snorri, "I obviously don't have the depth of understanding needed to capture the romance crowd, so why don't I let you go back to your office and work on the part of the story that needs your special skills."

He turned to his stack of classics, clearly dismissing her.

Her hopes of another great session with the pencils and flip chart crashed around her feet. Harmony trudged to her office, trying to figure out what was wrong with Snorri.

Keeping in mind the cold and unforgiving nature of girls, Snorri picked up his pen.

She never got to meet him during her stay in Britain even though she roamed the isle from the wilds of London to the calms of the moor while always seeking an encounter. She once thought she had a glimpse in a smoky pub; she could have seen more of a cowl-covered figure if she had dared to crawl closer to the bonfire ritual; there was a brief flash of a thin, pale hand as it wielded a wand to torture a victim in the basement of an old mansion; but his full countenance was never revealed to her. Misako Ogami had heard that meeting the Dark Lord face-to-face could change one's way of looking at the world.

Back in her own office, Harmony reflected on Snorri's failure to engage in a reasonable discussion and his provocative statements about romance novels. His failure to be a mature individual and appreciate the benefits of an exchange of opinion with her meant she would have to salvage the next chapter of the tattered story by her own steadfast efforts. She stared into space while her quill hand moved of its own volition.

How does one tell the story of a tale, quickly over, that changed the fate of those involved and whose ripples touched the far reaches of wizard society though some

lives merely bobbed on smooth waves while other lives were torn by a rushing tide from their moorings and dashed on the waiting rocks? How can it be told by a young writer abandoned by her compatriots and who has not the skill of characterization by dialogue of the first or the knack of the penetrative simile of the second? Her only hope is to strike as close as she can to what happened and pray the story itself provides solace to the reader in her troubled times, especially a reader who has been betrayed by a lack of fortitude and commitment when she sought only a communion of spirits.

Harmony paused to stifle a sniffle. It would take some time to recover from Snorri's unforgivable dig that romance novels were obvious from the first paragraph and that reading them was equivalent to cheating at solitaire.

Is there not a special dispensation granted to a summer dalliance that renders the alliance immune to the usual criticism often heaped upon a brief affair that quickens the heart and restores the courage of those lucky enough to have found a companion who gladdened their spirit, though only a short while, on the long and often sad journey that we all must take, especially those whose destiny has picked out to receive more of the burden of existence so that others may better flourish?

How like a tender shoot our Professor Snape was during that fateful summer when a corn-fed colonial set her sights on stripping him of his husk of reserve and sampling his golden kernels until leaving him but a cob of a wizard although it is a testimony to the hardihood of our stock that she did but butter the "ear" of our hybrid and leave him sweeter and smoother, worthy of a dash of salt and able to plow a long, cross-pollinating furrow.

"Will anyone know what you're talking about?" asked Snorri.

Harmony jumped and yelled.

"You've got to stop sneaking around," she said as she re-gathered her writing implements. "Women always know when you're talking about sex. And why don't you go back to your office and cheat at some more solitaire."

Damn the interruption. Now she had to regain her train of thought.

Having decided to write about this most delicate of subjects, the author searches her conscience for the most appropriate manner in which to present the story. The usual rules for writing are generally useless in an undertaking of such a delicate nature. The suggestion to provide the reader with concrete details that one hears in grammar school conflicts with the necessary modesty and restraint recommended for our topic while the strategy of balancing narration with dialogue runs the risk of clinical description interrupted by sentiments that bring a blush to the ear of the sensitive. The writer can at best grip her courage with both hands and venture forth with the hope that the audience subscribes to an effort that attempts to balance quiet dignity with the directness needed to accurately portray a personal moment in the lives of the two protagonists.

The verbal byplay and suggestive manner of Misako Ogami in the lab combined with her late-night invitations for tea that were laced with comments about recreation in the face of loneliness soon had Professor Snape wondering about the sincerity of her hints. He had long cultivated a manner which discouraged attempts at familiarity and which correspondingly limited his ability to reply in kind, but the isolation of his life had him longing for the company and conversation of a lovely and talented lady.

Late one Friday evening while partaking of tea in her apartment after the card game, he managed to say, "I do need to get away from this castle. After breakfast tomorrow, I intend to head into London or somewhere else for lunch and possibly some sight seeing and recreation. I don't know if spending the day in such a manner is appealing to you or not."

A little reflection shows our professor had thought things through since the invitation was open-ended enough for Misako to mention whatever activity she preferred, and if she declined, he could spend the day away from her, engaging in those things which would let him forget her: drinking in a pub, for instance, while railing against teases.

"I think getting away from this castle for a while is a wonderful idea," she said. "I suppose there's a wizard complex in London. Would you mind showing it to me if that's not too boring for you?" Propelled by his long awaited invitation, things she had meant to keep in reserve found their way to her lips. "And surely, you come from someplace, Severus. I would like to see it if it's not too inconvenient."

Unknown to our friendly and spontaneous Miss Ogami, her words had struck dread into the heart of her companion who until then had been experiencing an almost delirious sense of well-being, but her open good-spiritedness won against the wall he had erected against the rest of the world, and he ventured to remark that his background was humble and his childhood memories were not pleasant ones.

To his surprise, this revelation caused her to step to within a personal distance of him and reply that he was all the more admirable for having overcome a disadvantaged background and non-supportive family to become one of the world's most accomplished Potions masters and a professor at Britain's school for witches and wizards and that she had some idea of what it had cost him in terms of hard work and alienation from close relatives to achieve his present position.

At this point he could not help but put a hand on the waist of someone who was so physically close and sympathetically understanding and who had demonstrated a perceptiveness of hardship, sacrifice, and struggle that he previously had dismissed as unknown to someone who appeared to accept her position as a world-wide expert in such a natural and easy manner that she had appeared born to assume the mantle. He began to see previously unnoticed depths to Misako Ogami that transcended her obvious physical and social charms and that suggested a meaningful relationship with her would be a life-enhancing experience, and for the first time, he began to wonder if her imperturbable attitude was only a façade that hid strong emotions that she dare show only to those who she trusted.

"You're quite lovely," he managed to say. This simple statement drew forth more than he expected as she embraced him and brushed his lips with hers. It is tempting to write that he responded gently and in kind, but his pent up emotions that had been whipped into a turmoil by constant exposure to a desirable lady he considered unattainable burst through the floodgates that had already been cracked by her suggestive conversations and her open preference for his company, thus causing him to pull her to him, plunder her mouth, and press against her in such a lascivious manner that a modest maiden could well be forgiven for retreating from an embrace that appeared almost an assault, but this maiden was made of stern stuff and not only withstood the barrage of undiluted affection and admiration but was able to reciprocate as well as she received and even to indicate that more unbridled devotion and wanton longing would be welcomed.

We can well imagine that our hero, suffused by the charms of an enthusiastic witch, was able to make only primitive gropes that, despite bringing out delighted squeals disproportionate to their audacity and crudeness, did little to advance the action in progress to a mutually satisfying resolution, which placed the rational course of affairs in the hands of the witch who doggedly maneuvered her busy wizard into a chair where he at least had the presence of mind to lift her skirt, a move that had the two-fold effect of revealing amazing limbs that further enflamed him and of freeing those worthy legs to straddle him, and although we could hardly advocate the lady's actions, it is only just to note that in this case, as in most of life, it is only due to the efforts and guidance of the female that events can come to a successful conclusion.

A lovely lady in his lap and in a posture inviting behavior that bordered on improper caused both delight and confusion to our favorite professor: his imagination, hoping for this and more, was at war with his past experience that involvement with the opposite sex caused great pain, and his imagination, now running wild, was in conflict with his reason that told him his acquired, protective behavior was not likely to attract and hold a fair damsel; and these fears were in addition to the usual hesitancy in approaching a female due to the eternal questions about what she really wanted; but his instincts, which were quickly surfacing, had him performing the minimum actions of embracing her and stroking her hair; and his admiration of her as a person, not to mention his adoration of her physical charms, had him murmuring endearments that, while not practiced or polished, were balms to her ear and bolstered her inclination to remove some restrictive garments whereupon he fastened himself upon her bosom with such hearty enthusiasm that both were transported to a new level of activity that sought a more nearly perfect union of body and spirit which they were ready to achieve once several last items of clothing no longer impeded them.

"Do you mind if I make love to you, if I make love to you while you have me?" she asked.

There was no immediate answer as the shock of entering Misako, accompanied by her moans of pleasure of at last receiving a wizard she had long wanted, preempted any rational response he might have had and flooded his nervous system with an ecstasy he had not known could be his. Misako, too, was not in command of all her faculties as she discovered how powerful it was when a wizard who already had captured her emotions captured her physical affection as well.

"Then all rational thought stopped as his dart of love scored a bulls-eye in her knickers," interjected Snorri.

"You're not helping," screeched Harmony.

Thus it was some time after she had completely accepted him that she was able to express, with tracing fingers and nibbling lips, her gratitude that he had accommodated her and to ask, with pleading eyes and begging kisses, that he possess her.

How tempting it is to write that despite being lost in the shining eyes, raven tresses, gripping thighs, lovely breasts, and welcoming sheath of a woman whose company was everything to him, our hero tended her with finesse and took her to the outer limit of bliss, but the simple fact of the matter is that he was lost, and being lost, his most basic instincts took over and his body responded quickly and eagerly to the matter at hand with the result that he made no effort to postpone the pleasures of mating that surged through him and into his receptive lover, and if the sad truth be told, his sense of completion stilled any regrets he may have had about his performance.

Misako, far from being unhappy, held him gently and whispered that she was glad they were lovers at last, and Misako, with a tenderness he did not know she was capable of, was coaxing him into reciprocating those small acts of fondness that mean so much to both parties when, to their surprise, they found him regaining his readiness which prompted him, after he was fully erect, to stand and, with Misako wrapped around him, walk over to the bed where, still inside her, he managed a comfortable arrangement that let him discover the delights of making love to a witch (screwing Misako's brains out): resting lightly in her total and gracious embrace (Misako sopping wet and parting for him), moving in an affectionate manner that rocked her in a gentle but compelling rhythm (Misako's feet waving in the air), enjoying her building tension accompanied by the sounds of pleasure and the murmurs of endearment (Misako groaning and slopping), seeing her become a little girl as her passion removed the signs of age (Misako's head tilted back and her face contorted), feeling her intense writhing as their coupling consumed her (Misako grunting and jerking in copulation), experiencing the intimate convulsions of her mating (Misako having an orgasm), and finally holding a woman as she snuggled in her afterglow (Misako flushed and sweaty and making a wet spot).

A few minutes later, seeking reassurance that she was special to him in a manner consistent with feminine modesty, she said, "I suppose I'm another of your many conquests."

The thick male, who possibly had some excuse because of recent events beyond his wildest expectations, merely shook his head no.

Taking the initiative in holding the relationship together, which so often falls to the female, and still hoping for a positive affirmation of some regard for her, she said, "You can summon some clean clothes and spend the night if you like."

She got only a questioning look.

Completely giving up on the male animal uttering a kind word or making some gesture that he wanted her companionship, she declared, "You seduced me. You should spend some time cuddling me." She paused. "You don't think we're going to keep this a secret, do you? In a magic castle?"

At last, her wizard, showing some life, said, "I'll be glad to stay if you like."

"Yes, I would like that," she said, thinking she better give a direct answer since any subtlety was obviously lost on him.

Misako was happy to discover that, once in bed, he would let her snuggle while Severus, expecting it to be uncomfortable and finding he did have to adjust, found contact with her soothing and he slept peacefully through the night. When they arrived together at the breakfast table the next morning, Severus was initially nervous about the reaction of the other castle inhabitants, but he soon relaxed as they greeted Misako and him and acted as they did any other morning, and in fact, the summer passed with everyone acting normally even though Severus believed something extraordinary was happening.

In order to mingle with non-wizard society if it became necessary, Miss Ogami had traveled by conventional aircraft, and now that it was time to return home, she had said farewell to everyone in the London wizard complex and traveled alone to the airport where, arriving early, she sat in a cafeteria overlooking the runways and sipped a final cup of British tea. She scribbled a few lines on a napkin, and when her flight was announced, she stuffed the napkin into the glass of ice water that obliterated the script as thoroughly as the return home would obliterate her stay on the magical island.

Can you hear the drums, my Severus?

Calling from your distant past it's time to go.

Recall the fire, my Severus,

Burning bright to hide the starlight in its glow.

Does duty call, my Severus?

Every hour every minute longs to be.

Turn your back, my Severus,

Not knowing everything you mean to me.

Can you say goodbye, my Severus?

Let me go and never think about our lives?

Farewell to you, my Severus.

We both are lost no matter who survives.

Harmony was proud of herself. Not only had she written the bothersome Misako Ogami out of the story, she had accomplished it in a manner that would make the readers happy to see her go. Misako had slipped under Snape's barbs instead of performing the dance of insults and the contest of wills for which the audience hungered; she had introduced Snape to the delights of the opposite sex but in such a natural and uninhibited manner that proper persons everywhere would be taken aback; and she had shown Snape that women could relate to his troubled past and be sympathetic, but she had done it easily without the drawn-out tension and multiple misunderstandings that a hero-heroine relationship needed to provide a decent plot. Harmony was particularly proud of the poem dissolving in the glass of ice water that gave the tale an artistic touch while, at the same time, identifying Misako as overly sensitive and with a streak of creativity that would certainly repel most wizards especially if a fellow writer, that plagiaristic pig, was representative of the species.

Our favorite professor was now primed for the inimitable Hermione Granger.



Several hours later, there was another appraisal.

"No, no, no, no, no," raged Biff Barston when he read the opening to the third chapter. "Not another Granger-saves-Snape-from-the-alien-spores story. It even has the cliché of the spores delivered by a femme fatale."

His reasoning was straight forward. Miss Grayson had obviously written this section, and Biff knew that Miss Grayson would not stray from the formula romance. Anything else would alienate the readers. At most, if the story even acknowledged it, the formula romance had the dark hero commit his unfaithful dalliances off camera. The fact that Miss Grayson wrote it explicitly meant the dalliance had a dark and tragic side from which only the love, talent, and devotion of Miss Granger could save him.

Biff knew the story could take several directions as Miss Granger fought to save Severus from the spores and protect him from the consequences of his unpredictable personality changes.

But each had been done to death a thousand times over.

Biff Barston assumed the Hermione-saving-Severus theme came from the original. He supposed the saga began with Severus Snape, a brave but overwhelmed young wizard, failing to save the mother of his child from the Evil One. Severus would hide his love for his child under gruffness until, at the end, he would reveal himself and, in a grand act of redemption, help his son defeat the Evil One while seeming to give his own life doing so. But Hermione, a friend of his son who secretly loved Severus and who was the brightest witch of her age, would use incredible skill and devotion to save him.

Biff Barston tipped his hat in admiration. It had to be a well-crafted saga with scenes of great power. He would have to read it someday.

But people were continuously confusing Snape with that other dark hero, Lord Spock from 'Pride and Star Quest' who was always being chased by marriage-minded damsels because of his property and constantly being infected by behavior-altering, alien spores.

Biff hated it when people got the classics of literature confused.

Recalling the love he once had for his craft, he decided he would treat this as a challenge. No matter how hackneyed and brainless the plot, he would do his best to infuse it with new life and fresh insights.

"Miss Patil, not quite yet," rang a baritone voice like a bronze bell through a mountain village.

Padma paused and glanced at the instructions on the board. "Oh, right. Stir another minute before dropping in the ground beetle shells, sir."

About half the class paused in their premature addition of the beetle shells and, in the calming reverberation of the voice through the chamber, reread the instructions and profited thereby.

Ten minutes later, Miss Patil, along with the rest of the class, turned in a tube of arthritis-relief potion, shimmering a brilliant azure blue.

After lunch, the first-year Ravensclaws and Gryffindors awaited their first Potions lecture in a large, sunny, airy room that had materialized on the second floor of the castle. The instructor entered.

"Not many of you will like Potions because it is difficult and exacting, but if you have the talent, it is one of the more rewarding fields. It is the source of the household products you use everyday, and it is responsible for the healing draughts that contribute to the quality of a long wizard life. It is a major part of the economy with about one-hundred wizards engaged in research and refinement and about one-thousand wizards engaged in the production, delivery, and retailing of everything from broom polish to antidotes. A significant fraction of medical wizards specialize in diagnosing maladies and prescribing the appropriate potion."

The change had not gone unnoticed.

Ron Weasley knew what had happened. "Misako Ogami," he stated, recalling the raven tresses, the bright eyes, and the lithe figure. "But the effect is going to wear off, and it'll be worse than before." He was more convinced than ever that he should have been the one to host the visitor. On the other hand, there was Parvati of raven tresses, bright eyes, and nice figure.

"Hi, Parvati," he said at the breakfast table.

"Oh, hi, Ron. Say, have you heard about Professor Snape? Padma says he's become the best teacher she has."

"He's okay," said Ron.

"I wish I was taking Potions. Don't you just love those penetrating eyes that look right into you and understand? Do you think he'd notice a girl who wasn't in his class?"

Before she finished describing her fascination with the Potions master, Ron, with all the grace of an actor cut from a major scene, said, "Look, I think I'll join Harry. We need to schedule some practice."

"Okay. Bye, Ron," replied Parvati.

Parvati turned to the girl next to her. "Are you going to apply to be Professor Snape's assistant? I'm sure he'd choose you. Wish I was good at Potions. How many hours a week would you have to work?"

"He's looking for two people," said Hermione. "Each works two two-hour shifts a week between tea and dinner." Hermione gave Parvati her serious look. "Aren't you worried about his change in behavior?"

"Why? Because he's not being mean to everybody? My sister says he's stricter now than before, but he's helpful, and everyone is doing better."

"Are you sure this is the real Professor Snape?" asked Hermione.

Parvati began backing away. "Why wouldn't he be? Are you sure you're okay? You did get hit with an evil curse last spring." Parvati became accusing. "Just because he's a Slytherin doesn't mean he can't be a nice person. You should give other people a chance. I bet even Draco could be nice if he tried. I bet he'd be dreamy. He's smart and witty and good-looking, and more people would like him than like you. He wouldn't have to try hard to get any girl he wanted." Suddenly aware of what she was saying, Parvati clamped her hand over her mouth and ran out of the Great Hall.

Under normal circumstances, Hermione would be amused at Parvati evincing signs of a ferret in season, but there were serious matters at hand. She hadn't given much thought to spying, but she now recognized the harm a double agent could do. It occurred to her that previously it had been easy to tell the good wizards from the bad wizards because the bad wizards treated people cruelly. But if the bad wizards adapted a façade of good will, there was no telling what they could get away with. They could insinuate their way into power like warm honey flowing into the nooks and crannies of a muffin, and the wizard community would be toast. They could be doing so even as she sat at the breakfast table gossiping with Parvati and doing nothing.

She concluded it was an insidious plot, indeed, and something had to be done. It appeared up to her to capture the simulacrum and rescue the true Snape. It would be difficult if the simulacrum were nearly as powerful as the original. Nevertheless, it was the most serious attack yet made by their opponents. She had no choice, and her only chance was to ambush the fake-Snape. She hoped to take the simulacrum intact, but she reminded herself that it and its cohorts probably hadn't been gentle with Professor Snape. Not that treating the sarcastic twit gently was at the top of her list of demands for a better world. Realistic projection said that neither of

her usual male partners would be adequate for this challenge and that she should be prepared to use her feminine wiles. The next morning, she, along with one-hundred other witches, paid more than usual attention to her grooming. That night, noticing the futility of her initial effort, she began practicing her stunning spells.

Older and wiser heads, as they would have us believe, were also considering the matter.

"You've both read the report, I assume," said Severus. He, Albus, and Minerva were having a private tea. He had delivered the results of the hospital examination early that morning.

"Alien spores," said Albus. "Sexually transmitted."

"Is there a cure?" asked Minerva. She was less enthusiastic about a cure than she wanted to admit. The Potions master was one of the few who were her equal, and now he was humane and charming instead of sarcastic and sadistic.

"This may offer us an opportunity," said Albus.

"You can't be thinking about taking advantage of this poor man's affliction," said Minerva.

"Imagine our opponents laid low by an attack of good will," said Albus.

"We would be spreading the disease," said Minerva. She turned to Snape. "I hate to say this, Severus, but we don't know the long-term consequences. It could be disabling or fatal."

"Our opponents intend to disable and kill us," said Severus, "but on the other hand, spreading the spores to them would increase the chances of the general population becoming infected."

None of the three mentioned the method of transmittal or how transmission could be aided by the appropriate potions.

"These spores are too dangerous to play with," stated Minerva, determined to oppose any scheme to the best of her ability.

"I think it's worth the risk," said Albus, determined to put his plan into action. He was mentally running through a list of opponents' wives and wondering which were best to put in Severus's path. He had no doubts about the seductive powers of the new Snape. He had seen the female student body react. To his credit, he did not consider using them. Well, more accurately, he hadn't considered it very long although staking out an infected Hermione Granger had its attractions.

Minerva was certain Albus was making another error in judgment. He hadn't been giving Harry Potter enough information and support, and now he was throwing Severus into the fray without thinking through the possible consequences. He was, once again, contending with inadequate means against formidable forces. Minerva decided that she had to eliminate any Death Eater witch infected by Severus, or at least hold the infected witch in stasis until a cure was found and the crises was over. She spent a significant part of the next morning in front of her vanity mirror thinking that a glamour might let her waylay a Potions master on his way to a Death Eater's wife an act of self-sacrifice of course.

"I really admire your new classroom, Severus."

He paused on his way to lunch. "I don't know why I didn't realize earlier that plenty of light and excellent ventilation would make a good Potions lab."

"Have you chosen your lab assistants yet?" asked Minerva. "I'm tempted to apply myself. I could use a refresher in Potions, and some lucky girls, er, students, will get to work with you."

"I'm not certain they'll be so lucky."

"Oh, I am," she said. "In return, we could try some advanced transfigurations together."

"That's a thought," he said, walking to lunch with her.

In case this manuscript falls into the wrong hands and the reader is shocked, it can be mentioned that witches have a life-expectancy of one-hundred-fifty and that they age proportionately. If the reader's Arithmancy skills are as poor as some chroniclers who got a number of things very wrong, it can be added that a non-wizard would peg Minerva as being in her early thirties. She had, it is true, left the blush of youth behind, but some witches are more attractive in their middle age. She had also left behind some awkwardness although her ambition, her severe manner, and the social strictures of her profession had left her inexperienced with wizards.

The house-elves were cognizant of all the above immediately, and Biff, Wizard for Hire, was among them. He informed his employers and received the expected reply: stop Snape. The American officials had decided that it was to their advantage to prolong the civil war that continued to weaken Brit wizardry. They had long suspected that Miss Ogami was part of an underground movement seeking to bring an end to wars.

Biff also informed his employers that he needed a new cover. One more month as a house-elf and he would celebrate his own version of Guy Fawkes Day plus Fourth of July.

Snorri read the manuscript in despair. The next plot direction was clear, but what did he know about evil ladies? This section belonged to Miss Grayson with her personal insight into their psychology.

Fate oft takes a hand where plans fail.

To our dearest Professor Snape,

Two ladies of your long acquaintance find themselves both desiring and needing your kind services as an escort to a ball and social affair of some importance.

We beg a prompt and positive response.

Yours,

Two devoted and grateful servants.

Severus was thinking they were the wrong witches. He didn't have a chance with the rich bitch, Mrs. Malfoy, and he wasn't looking forward to dealing with her bitchier older sister. But he was also thinking it was a chance. He could circulate at the soiree and meet more amenable women.

He was puzzled by the small voice telling him that he should be gracious to Narcissa and Bellatrix since they had invited him and he consequently had the duties of a guest.

Out of his melancholy longing arose a solution to escorting the two Black sisters: he would pretend they were Misako and treat them accordingly. As a result, the two sisters had a marvelous time dancing and mingling. When the evening ended, they were reluctant to part with his company, and they asked him to escort them back to the Manor.

Narcissa wondered about Severus. Had he finally grown up and got over his schoolboy crush on a little red-haired girl? It would have been a great love story if it

had turned him into a noble person, but it had turned him into a mean-spirited bully taking his disappointment with life out on helpless students. But word had traveled fast in the small wizard community about his transformation, and Narcissa was curious if the reported change was as genuine as it appeared to be this evening.

Bellatrix also wondered about Severus although she was concerned that he might no longer be a prospective partner. After some initial torture for her failure at the Ministry, the Dark Lord had excluded her from his company, and she ached for the proper attention. She had plans for a cruel Snape, but she despaired over a considerate one. Nevertheless, longing is always present in the human heart, and it was possible the polished exterior hid a cold soul grown all the more sadistic for being forced into concealment. She would play his game up to a point.

"You've been a charming escort this evening," Bellatrix told Severus as they arrived at Malfoy Manor.

"You are too kind," he replied. "I think my manners are rusty."

"A little practice can cure that," she said, giving him a smile as they entered a cozy withdrawing room. "Cissy will be here in a minute. Can you stay for tea while we relax, or must you be back at school?"

"They expect me late; tomorrow is a Sunday; and I would love to relax over tea if I'm not intruding," said Severus, taking a comfortable chair.

Bellatrix sprawled across a couch and kicked off her shoes. "Then Cissy and I will have to save our vicious gossip for breakfast, so we don't harm your delicate ears."

Narcissa arrived and followed her sister's example of sprawling on a couch and kicking off her shoes. "I hear you're experimenting with new equipment, Severus."

Severus was thinking he must be missing Misako terribly because he had to make a conscious effort not to stare at their shapely ankles and calves.

Over a cup of tea, he tried to describe test tubes. Narcissa and Bellatrix looked puzzled when he asserted they let him concoct more precise potions. The two women were intrigued and wanted to hear more about it when they were more alert. There weren't any social occasions next weekend, but they hoped he could come and play quoits and croquet with them at the Manor. "Certainly," he said. They hoped they weren't too forward if they suggested a game of croquet tomorrow afternoon.

"A leisurely game in the open air would do us good after a strenuous ball and a stifling evening," said the two ladies.

"A capital idea," he said.

After he had left, Narcissa yawned and remarked that cultured and well-mannered wizards were a rare find while Bellatrix yawned and hoped his manners cultured a good and mean streak grown sly.

Back in his quarters at the castle, Severus was undressing and thinking that some intelligent, adult company would be good for him.

After the Sunday croquet game, Severus returned refreshed to find Albus asking how the plan was proceeding. Severus reported that everything was in hand, the best approach was slow and easy, no one was suspicious, and the scheme would catch the enemy unawares. When the old codger finally left, Severus consulted his calendar: more relaxing games in the sun and fresh air with two gracious ladies, another masked ball with attractive and witty women in abundance, and trips to some interesting places on the continent with Bellatrix in disguise. He was an honorable friend of the family, offering diversion and solace in a time of stress.

An equally fruitful meeting was taking place in a high tower of the castle.

"Would you consider recommending me to Professor Snape?" asked Hermione.

"Don't you think he's a bit old for you?" replied Minerva.

"I'm sorry," said Hermione. "Is he too old for me to be his lab assistant?"

"Oh, that," said Minerva.

"It's an excellent chance to review Potions and learn things not in the regular courses," said Hermione.

"I assure you, the regular courses have been well planned and contain everything you need," said Minerva.

"Yes, yes, of course," said Hermione.

"Besides," said Minerva, "I suggested to Professor Snape that some faculty interaction would be good. He welcomed my interest in potions and seemed interested in trying some transfigurations."

"But aren't you and the other faculty members already experts?" asked Hermione.

"Are you suggesting that we are too old to try new things and have exciting adventures?" asked Minerva.

"No, professor," said Hermione.

Hermione left thinking the old bat would never see forty again while Minerva lamented that the only intellectually qualified student was too innocent for the current fracas.

Pomona was willing to recommend several wizards while Filius could choose five good candidates from the bevy of witches that had sought his support. Severus decided to think about the applicants over the weekend a weekend that would test his thesis that he was an honored friend of the family.

"I could have sworn your ball was further away," said Snape as he watched Bellatrix knock her ball into his and then send his ball out of the court and down the hillside.

The third time it happened, with the two witches making an effort to keep a straight face, he became suspicious.

"Aha," he said, twirling suddenly to catch Bellatrix's ball moving along the ground. He had seen the telltale movements of a wand under her cloak.

Severus knew the rules of chivalry, and he knew the ladies knew the rules of chivalry, and he knew, and they knew, the rules of chivalry did not extend to croquet. He glared at Bellatrix.

"I've been a bad witch," she said.

He clutched his mallet and ground his teeth.

"I deserve to be punished," she said.

"Yes," he found himself saying.

"If you can't find it in your heart to forgive me, you should spank me now and get it over with," she said. "I beg you to not let it fester until your righteous wrath turns to cruelty."

This was taking a strange turn, but the memories of trudging after his ball after he was certain it was aligned for a winning shot and the disappointment of a perfect afternoon for croquet ruined overcame his prickling sense of being drawn into a game not of his choosing.

"Now is fine," he said.

"If your soul is so hardened that you must have revenge, then grant me the courtesy of retiring to a private place where I can retain a shred of dignity," she said, taking his hand and leading him into the Manor and hence to her bedroom.

Severus was momentarily at a loss, but he fell back upon a solid pillar of his existence: he was a secret fan of Buffalo Biff. It had been ages since a new episode had appeared in the magazine, but he had internalized the simple, stern ethics, and The Code of the West knew what to do with people who cheated at croquet. A spell he had performed many times turned his wand into a buggy whip.

*Crack Yee Haw! Crack*

The occasion demanded a ten-gallon Stetson, boots with spurs, a cloak, and no more. Visions of a lone, misunderstood, but intrepid wizard galloped through his head as he galloped around the room.

Mule train, Hyah, Hyah, *Crack*

Clippetty-clop, clippetty-clop, clippetty-clopping along.

There's a load of bonded sherry for The Horse and The Duck.

There's a wand made of cherry for a wizard out of luck.

There's a crate full of bagpipes for to play a marching song.

Mule train, Clippetty-clop, clippetty-clop. Get along.

Hyah. *Crack Crack*

"What about me?" complained Bellatrix.

"I need a star," said Severus.

"Yes, you can have a star. You're the Deputy Marshall," she said.

"I'm placing you under arrest, ma'am. You seduced the bank vice-president for the combination to the safe. You swiped the deed to the Widow Hardy's apple spread, nicked the silver from the payroll wagon, and laced the sherry at The Horse and The Duck with LSD."

"Fond memories all, love," cackled Bellatrix.

"Under Sub-Galactic Code, Section 912, Paragraph B, you are due to receive numerous lashes and assorted personal indignities."

He waved his whip-wand. Bellatrix found herself face down and spread-eagled on the bed with her wrists and ankles tied to the bedposts. She had a moment of doubt about dismissing the rumors that Severus had gone wonky. Now she wasn't so confident. Sub-Galactic? What adult wizard spouted that nonsense?

He snapped the whip-wand, and Bellatrix was left with only her most enticing garment. "I must say, ma'am, you certainly do justice to black silk. Yee Haw."

Bellatrix decided he was a man of direct action and judicious taste and the rumors about his going wonky were exaggerated.

Severus, The Lonely Wizard, sat on the footboard of the bed, letting the tip of the whip run over the body of an apprehensive lady.

"It ain't right, but I'm goin' t' have to drive my mules hard tonight," he soliloquized to the stars above. "Some varmint done contaminated the sherry at The Horse and The Duck, and if'n I don't get this shipment to those thirsty railroad workers in time, there's gonna be a rumble."

He cracked the whip in the air. Bellatrix screamed.

Bellatrix didn't feel the blow. She concluded she was hurt badly enough that the injured part of her body had become numb. She winced as he trailed the whip down her back, seeking the next place to strike. He brushed the end of the whip across her silk-clad bum. She tried not to react, but he watched the delectably-shaped silk move.

He thought it time for a series that built to a crescendo of thundering hoofs and ended with a wild ride.

She felt the tip of the whip on the inside of her left knee and knew he was taking careful aim. *Snick*. There was nothing. The tip of the whip must have cut like a razor blade. She felt the tip of the whip on the inside of her right knee and knew he was, once again, taking careful aim. *Snick*. Once again, there was nothing.

The Dark Lord had once made a string of razor cuts up her back that she did not immediately feel. Then he watched her body twist in its bonds as the wounds registered. He watched her face contort as she tried not to scream. She had broken and sobbed as he leered at her.

Now, she tried to control herself, but her body knew what was happening, and it writhed as the whip made its way up her thighs. Stroke. *Snick*. Stroke. *Snick*. She was breathing hard when the whip paused, halfway to the junction of her legs. There was a smart snap on each of the globes of her ass, so sudden and unexpected that she cried out.

The whip returned to teasing the inside of her thighs. Stroke. Stroke. He watched her desperate dance, and he watched the expanse of black silk between her legs develop a wet streak. She knew her knickers were getting wetter and wetter. She thought it was blood.

The lady was groaning and moving with the ballet of the whip. Stroke. *Snick*. It reached the black silk.

Bellatrix had never experienced such delicate and diabolical agony. Her husband's touch, whether erotic or punishing, had always been clumsy. The Dark Lord's tortures had been exquisite, but they had not left her longing for more. Now, she was sure she was going to die from the last whiplash and die if the next didn't arrive soon. The vicious instrument trailed up between her legs and flicked the tender spot between them. She moaned and struggled in her bonds. There was another flick of the vicious and achingly blissful whip. And another. She could not endure another. When it came, she yelled.

Bellatrix Lestranger's toes curled, and the black silk expanse between her legs became dark with its soaking wetness.

Severus was caressing her. The Dark Lord, too, had caressed her after torture. She was still lying face down and waiting for the numbness to wear off and the deep cuts to make themselves known. She was waiting for the pain. But this torture-euphoria was unlike anything the Dark Lord had produced.

And the Dark Lord had never removed her restraints and her knickers and said, "Spread your legs, sweetheart."

The servant of the Dark Lord did what she thought she would never do again. She spread her legs in invitation. She gave the wizard between her spread legs an affectionate look and pushed herself across the sheet toward him. When he touched her wet entrance, it told her to move closer. She inched toward him, causing a parting of puffy lips, and the parting lips told her to sigh and arch her back which brought him inside her which made her moan and spread her legs wider and wiggle closer to him until he was buried in her. The whip was right: there was the offer of all the delights in her knickers. Severus deigned to let the senior Black sister impale herself. It wasn't so bad the moving of muscles in her shapely legs, the arching of her elegant back, the twisting of her cute bum, the inviting depths of her sex, the look of surprise on her face.

Bellatrix was doing a slow squirm that caused the tip of the wizard to rub a special place inside her. Someone was making a wet noise and softly moaning. Severus was calmly accepting the sacrament of the witch he was capturing. She was thinking that neither the Dark Lord nor anyone else had done anything so healing, so compelling, and so intense that she never wanted it to stop, but just when it became unbelievably good, a liquid bliss spread from her spine to her brain and then to the rest of her. The wet noise and soft moaning was replaced by the sound of heavy breathing.

The wizard accepted the witch clenching and drenching him. He began easing in and out of her, now wetter and more demure, as she let him enjoy all the charms of a classy lady.

"Sweetheart," he told her. He brushed the hair back from her face. He wanted to look at his lady as he mated with her.

Severus shot his load of sperm and spores into Bellatrix daughter of purebloods, wife of Rodolphus, servant of the Dark Lord, and craziest nooky west of the Firth of Forth. Yee Haw.

As he drew the bath water, she examined her backside in the mirror. "The skin's not broken. I don't see any welts. I'm barely pink, and I think that's from sex."

Severus paused in testing the water temperature. "You sound both disappointed and grateful."

"I don't know what to think," she said.

"You'll have to work it out," he said.

Bellatrix bit her lower lip and gathered her thoughts. "Let me adjust."

She thought sleeping together was silly, bourgeois, and dashed inconvenient. Severus told himself that perhaps it was for the best that he not become too entangled with her life, and he retired alone after setting his wards.

An hour after midnight, an alarm jolted him out of a sound sleep; he grabbed his wand and rolled out of bed, ready for action. It was Bellatrix entering his room.

"I'm having nightmares," she said, a bit puzzled why she was telling Severus her problem. She couldn't imagine anyone helping her.

He climbed back into bed and motioned for her to join him. Since she had bothered him, she didn't think it was proper to just leave, and there weren't many options, so she did join him. Once in bed, she could hardly refuse when he coaxed her into cuddling. What could he do to her that he hadn't already done? She thought that maybe she could relate some of the horrors and return to her own room, but simply being snuggled around him was soothing, and she decided to relax a while and then leave.

She woke in his arms with the early sun streaming through the window. She greeted the house-elf who was placing the morning tea on the bedside table and turned to the lump beside her.

"Severus? Sweetie?"

He opened one eye, and she handed him a cup of tea. He added early-riser to her list of psychoses.

He looked cute in the morning. It wouldn't hurt to give him a friendly kiss, nothing too lascivious. She thought it friendly. He was muttering about spilling his tea what a grump. She placed his tea back on the stand, thinking he had better use for his hands. She tried a more intense nibble now that the cups were out of the way. This was pleasant. And his hands were now free to hold someone who was just being friendly a little wake-up ritual. How comfortable to hug and nuzzle a little. He should wake up and hug back. Oh, yes, he was. She could snuggle in close against him, and he was warm and comfortable and kissing her. She could press her breasts against him they had been so neglected. She offered them to his lips. Surely, he could do one little thing for them, for her. Oh, my. That was better than she thought it would be. There was a stirring below her navel that wanted more. Certainly she could kiss him passionately if she liked, especially after what he had done to her last night. He didn't seem to mind, but she didn't know what to do with the ache between her legs. Maybe if she showered affection on him, he would do something. She let her lips move down his torso until they found his erection a lovely, lovely erection. She let her lips and tongue tend it. Oh, it was hard and slick, and then he was lifting her head to kiss her and pulling up her nightgown, and his hand under her knee was opening her thighs, and there was her aching, aching self, and he was in. He had slid in so easily, so easily, and she had made an animal sound when it entered her. She knew he was looking in her eyes, watching her turn soft, drinking in her sweet sadness at yielding, listening to her panting moans as she waited for the strokes that would take her. When his insistent moves began, she was kissing his eyes, his nose, his mouth as her inner core warmed. She moved for him as a primitive part of her accepted him and welcomed him. She heard herself whimper with the piercing pleasure of being taken. She smiled. Sheer, feral lust shot through her, and she was not aware of her last desperate cries and frantic moves before her system blanked out from overload.

When the world returned, she was one with it and her lover.

Then all of last night and this morning connected in her mind as she held him in her peace and stillness. She, Bellatrix Black Lestrangle, had a lover. The world was different nothing had changed everything was wrong her life was better. She would have to deal with it, but first things first. "I'm off to the loo, love," she said.

Severus sat on the edge of the bed. His thoughts kept returning to Misako, the idyllic summer, the impossibility of joining her in the States because he was needed in the current conflict, and the impossibility of her remaining with him because he was caught between both sides in the coming cataclysm. He was thinking that some kind of sex was better than no sex, but Misako had spoiled him. He wanted sex graced with romance. Now, he was in the clutches of a witch who was witty, energetic, good in bed, and whacko. He was getting tired of his life being destroyed because of a power-hungry sociopath.

"Curse you, Dark Lord. Curse Evil. Curse Wickedness."

## Jingle Jangle Jungle

## The plot tries to thicken and turns lumpy.

### Chapter 4: Jingle Jangle Jungle

Snorri Severson woke with a yell from a nightmare about Miss Grayson chasing him with the intent of tattooing 'Hermione' on his member. He sat in bed, recovering and reminding himself that since he was a writer, there were no bad experiences, only material. He gulped down a hot tea, hurried to his office, grabbed a quill, and wrote furiously while the nightmare about Miss Grayson was still haunting him.

Bellatrix was waiting in an old abandoned tower, disconcerted because she was apprehensive about Severus keeping the appointment. She had never fretted about a meeting with Tom Riddle. She considered her cowardice more afraid of rejection than torture.

Severus arrived. "Why are we meeting here?" he asked.

"And I'm glad to see you, too," she said, embracing him.

She was lost for a while as he put an arm around her waist, drew her close, nuzzled her affectionately, and let her indulge in a long, luxurious meeting of lips and tongues.

"It's my sister," she finally answered. "She's becoming murderously jealous."

He was thinking he couldn't do anything about that, thinking he didn't know anyone with the skill and nerve needed to cope with her sister.

"I missed you," she said. "I miss you when you're not around. I wonder what you would think about what we're having for dinner, about what I'm reading, about what I'm wearing."

"I missed you, too," he said.

"Really?" she said, hauling him over to the couch and sitting beside him close enough that they were touching.

He could feel the roundness of her hip and the warmth of her thigh. He could feel her warm breath as she leaned into him to put her tongue between his lips. She unbuttoned her blouse and guided his hands inside her bra. She nibbled and murmured as he cupped her breasts. Her hands unbuttoned his trousers.

"Oh, Severus, I need this."

Her patrician face distorted as her mouth engulfed his cock and tended it lovingly. She stopped, smiled at him, and then lifted her skirt and dropped her knickers.

"Do me, my sweet," she said, lying on the floor and opening her legs as she pulled him on top of her.

Severus loved sliding into Bellatrix listening to her intimate sighs, parting her slick flesh, nestling between her firm thighs, and best of all, watching her lovely face as he mounted her.

They were too engrossed to notice a team with evil intent sneak into the tower. It was a very young group of assassins: half a dozen virgin enchanters six unfucked wizards.

The first wizard flung himself up the stairs only to stop, stunned by the sight of pale splayed legs, dark furry slit, and a wizard between them and in it.

Severus plunged into the depths and hurled a curse out of his depths. Hit wizard number one got the total experience of getting into a mature woman's knickers. He experienced premature ejaculation, followed by premature demise.

Severus had a few moments of wet, fleshy fun before he heard the next wizard approaching. His response was to hump Bellatrix hard enough to push her body behind an old chest. The second wizard was surprised to see her feet jerking in the air and even more surprised to see her head jerk into view on the other side of the chest.

With Severus pounding her, Bellatrix did her best with her wand. "Uh." Flick. "Uh." Flick. "Uh." Flick. Hit wizard number two was struck with the intensity of Severus penetrating a pink and moist orifice. His eyes popped open; his asshole puckered; and his cock snapped to attention. Bellatrix's next spell penetrated a vital orifice. He died happy.

The third assassin was blasting away at the chest concealing the couple in congress.

Deep into coitus, Severus jammed himself completely into Bellatrix and held her hip with one hand and her neck with the other as he rolled across the floor, pausing to press into her whenever he was on top. She held on tight and grunted with the bump and grind. The assassin paused to gawk at the bare limbs that were alternately rolling with the wizard and opening for the wizard. Twelve feet from the chest, the imperative to bang Bellatrix became too great to pause for rolling, and Severus banged away with both wands. Hit wizard number three received the full impact of plumbing the twat and riding the ass of a Black sister. He groaned in ecstasy, and his nerve endings impacted from sensory overload. He fell twitching and became still.

The fourth wizard thought the pair was hopelessly lost in rutting an all-consuming, slapping, slurping, grunting, body-jerking rut. And it was true that the witch's thighs were squeezing her wizard in the final stages of a splendid fuck as she squeezed off a splendid jinx. Hit wizard number four, quite literally, ejaculated his brains out and fell to the floor in his love-death.

The fifth wizard snuck behind the couch for an ambush.

Severus jabbed his wand with every fiber of his being as he jabbed himself with every fiber of his being into his lady's welcoming essence. Hit wizard number five was jabbed to his essence. He went blind and stumbled out the window to fall ten stories, holding his cock with both hands and spurting out his life on the way down.

Bellatrix was writhing with the joy of Severus shagging her brains out when the last assassin peered over the stairway railing. "Ahhhhhh," went Bellatrix, as the wave of her climax hit and she simultaneously waved her wand. Hit wizard number six waved as his brain climaxed and he had his first and final *la petite mort*.

Severus was making his final thrusts into the aristocratic and deadly pussy while trying to think who sent the assassins. He could think of three suspects in order of likelihood. Albus? He enjoyed shooting a stream of sperm into the wanted, but uncaught, murderess. Narcissa? He savored squirting his seed into her impaled sister. Tom? He celebrated pumping the last of his goop into a once devoted follower.

Severus was thinking that this was it. It was over, final, finished, goodbye. He had had enough of life with Bellatrix. He couldn't take any more.

"Oh, Severus, they sent a sextet after us for our sex tête-à-tête. Wasn't that considerate?"

Her eyes were shining like never before. His will wilted like a starched collar in a steam room when she said, "Promise me that we'll do this again."

Dang.

There was great consternation on the part of Harmony Grayson. She had deftly written Misako Ogami out of the story only to discover that Severus was straying into the arms of a compatible villainess instead of engaging in interminable bickering with his one true pairing. The two irresponsible writers were giving Severus someone who offered him understanding, affection, and excitement in some version of an immature male fantasy while ignoring the overbearing witch with whom readers wanted to identify, and they were failing to give a bookish girl the undying romance and incredible sex that every reader knew she deserved. Men. She considered carving 'Hermione Granger' on their peckers since that's what they were thinking with. Harmony looked at the morning effort by Snorri and snorted. Just like a male to write a little pornography and quit.

She stormed into Snorri's office to find him and Biff taking an undeserved break over cups of cappuccino. And they hadn't left any for her. They looked at her thundercloud countenance and intercepted a lightning strike with raised cups and a chorus:

Ladies love outlaws like babies love stray dogs.

Outlaws touch ladies deep down in their souls.

Harmony stopped, pivoted, and stormed back out the way she came. What could a lady do with a pack of entertaining miscreants, a pair of lovable rascals? She sighed. It was obviously up to her to weave the scattered threads of the story into some semblance of acceptable literature.

Her suspicions about male incompetence were confirmed later that morning when she was ready to pencil in the plot lines for Professor Snape's two lab assistants. She couldn't choose the appropriate colors for them until she knew who they were. She would continue using purple for Hermione Granger, but the choice between pale-pink and steely-blue clearly depended on gender. She wandered into Snorri's office and asked.

"I was thinking of a pair of smart Ravenclaws," he said. "How about Cho Chang and Padma Patil?"

"You can't use Cho," said Harmony. "Everybody hates her. Nobody will read the story if we use Cho."

Snorri looked skeptical. Harmony tried her best to give him the big picture. "We could write the fan fiction equivalent of 'Anna Karenina,' but if it had Cho in it, no one would read it."

"I thought Cho was one of the good blokes," said Snorri. "What did she do?"

"She kissed Harry and cried," said Harmony.

"Cor' Blimey!"

Under Harmony's glare, Snorri searched his memory. "Cho's friend betrayed Harry Potter, and Cho defended her friend." He looked puzzled. "But defending your friend is what Harry Potter would do."

"In another version of the story, they gave Cho truth serum, and she betrayed Potter," said Harmony.

Snorri stared into the distance, recalling more of the story. "By the gods, that's worse than torture. Can you imagine the poor girl babbling her most embarrassing secrets to a group of smirking, anal-retentive bureaucrats? And we can guess what she babbled about. Her confusion over Cedric cutting in when she liked Harry more. Cedric, the hero who everyone thought she should prefer. His hands on her after the Yule Ball. Her anguish over Cedric dying. Her guilt when that freed her to be with the boy she liked. Her gut-wrenching love for Harry in the face of not being part of his inner circle. Her sniffing and blubbing that she would rather die than betray Harry. And then she betrays Harry. All in front of the smirking, anal-retentive bureaucrats."

"Potter never forgave her," said Harmony.

Snorri stroked his chin. "That goes against what we want to believe about Potter's character. There must be some reason that it's acceptable." His brow furrowed. "This cuts deep. There's a hierarchy of needs. A person needs to be free of physical and emotional harm, and then a person needs unconditional acceptance by a group. Only after that can a person consider self-esteem issues such as achievement and romance."

Harmony tried running with the idea. "The villain first attacked Potter when he was part of a family, when he had his basic needs. The villain never attacked when he was with his evil guardians."

"A homeless, hungry reject doesn't fight for truth and justice," said Snorri. "The next threat didn't appear until Potter was relatively safe and had friends who would stand beside him no matter what."

"How convenient," said Harmony. She paused. "Cho must be perceived as threatening the integrity of Potter's support group, without which he could not be a hero."

"There's another consideration," said Snorri. "Cho's a Ravenclaw intellectual who should repel boys, but she doesn't; she's a first-rate athlete who should intimidate boys, but she doesn't. And she's the object of desire for two Triwizard Champions. Why don't we know more about her? She's the Alma Schindler of her age."

"She's a hussy who got more attention than she deserved," declared Harmony. "And why are you smiling at me like that?"

Both were temporarily lost in thought. Harmony was thinking about one popular version of the saga where the last chapter described the characters two decades after the final battle. The final pairings had struck her as both too convenient and too improbable except they preserved the primary support group, without which there could be neither achievement nor romance.

Harmony suddenly remembered why she had come to see Snorri. Now was the time to strike: while he was contemplative. "I think Padma Patil and Hermione Granger should be Snape's lab assistants. I already have their colors picked out. We can use pale-pink and royal-purple."

Snorri, still lost in thought about the saga being too fragile to support two truths, merely nodded.

As she was leaving the room, Harmony was thinking that she had handled everything rather well. Padma was one of Snorri's suggestions, and she was no threat since she was making eyes at Harry. On her way back to her own room, however, she had mixed feelings about their conversation. She had been pleasantly surprised at Snorri's depth of feeling. Perhaps he wasn't a complete pig. She had enjoyed being carried aloft by his reasoning. Perhaps he wasn't a complete loss. But she had seen the glint of steel and the flash of a razor. The conclusions had drawn blood. She didn't want to think about her heroes and heroines needing a support group and sacrificing innocents to preserve it. Perhaps Snorri was not a comfortable person to be around. She consoled herself with the thought that she already knew that and had no plans to associate with him.

She was ready for more consolation. If the boys could write Severus chasing every bit of skirt, then she could have the bookstore she had always dreamed about. And her favorite characters could have a bit of fun. She knew how to do it without creating a Mary Sue, too.

How charming it was to enter a new bookstore and discover it was both well-stocked and well-appointed from an elegant chime announcing the arrival of a

customer to the hardwood floors with areas containing comfortable chairs on oriental rugs to the rows and rows of packed bookshelves and all presided over by a quite presentable wizard she had never seen before, who greeted her with a solemn nod, invited her to peruse the shelves, and declared himself available for questions in a professional manner that, primed by her recent primping for a fellow professor and her resulting heightened social awareness, had her as interested in making his acquaintance as making herself familiar with the shop, which prompted her to ask how the books were organized in a manner designed to encourage an extended response although one could never count on a wizard rising to the social occasion no matter how plainly one presented the opportunity even when, as on this occasion, he seemed eager to extend every courtesy and had even acted as though his eye had been caught by her natural beauty augmented by the earnest efforts to appear her best as part of the campaign to interest and attract a fellow instructor whose transformation had quickened her long dormant desire for a companion with whom she could share her dreams and enrich both of their lives.

"Half the store is devoted to high-volume, low-profit, recreational reading: romances of both kinds," he said.

"Of both kinds?" she asked.

"For the girls, romances in the modern sense where the heroine struggles to win her destined mate, often a dark character, initially clueless about the virtues of the fair damsel. For the boys, romances in the classical sense where the hero endures social disapproval, overcomes great odds, performs high deeds, and saves the world."

"I suppose reading any kind of book is good," said Minerva, "instead of spending their money on candy."

"A book lasts longer than a lollipop, and it's better for their teeth," he replied.

Amused by his quip, she blurted out, "These books look a bit tattered," and then mentally kicked herself. The personable young man was not going to find any virtue in a damsel that criticized his stock.

"The books on this side of the store are all second-hand," he said. "We sell them for four Sickles each. If the reader doesn't want to keep the book and hasn't damaged it, we buy it back for two Sickles."

"That makes this a rather expensive lending library," she said, wishing, once again, that she could control her critical remarks.

"From the point of view of a free, public library, yes," he agreed, "but we offer a selection that no public library matches. Follow me."

She took a few steps with him into the romance section. Seemingly endless rows of filled bookshelves opened before her.

"This space is large enough that we had to place arrows pointing to the exit on the floor," he said. "Renting a book a week from us would only cost six Galleons a year." He gave her a quizzical look. "If you'll pardon me, you have a critical air about you. Does this come from your profession?"

"I'm a professor," she said. "McGonagall, Transfiguration. But call me 'Minerva.'"

"Biff, at your service." He had recognized her, of course, from his days as a castle-elf, but didn't want to reveal that. Now that he was slightly taller than she was instead of knee-high to her, he could see that she was attractive in a severe way and not totally formidable, which had him thinking he wouldn't mind making an impression on her. "In addition to our used selection for light reading, we have a scholarly selection. In fact, some of our reference books are under lock and key."

Her interest was piqued.

"Naturally, a professor is qualified to look at them," he said, leading her to the back of the store, waving his wand to open a concealed door, and inviting her to browse at her leisure.

We can imagine that Minerva was all aflutter at the prospect of examining a new and extensive cache of manuscripts, having poured over and absorbed all that her school and established bookstores had to offer, and we might imagine that she went immediately to the section on transfigurations, but there, dear reader, we would have missed the significance that Minerva attached to her conversations with Miss Ogami, even though, it must be said, that Minerva did not entirely approve of the visitor's flirtatious nature, and we would have overlooked the weight that Minerva accorded to Miss Ogami's description of new trends in the colonies from whence came a desire to check that if this store, with its operator obviously from the colonies, had any of the volumes alluded to in the long evening discussions that had Minerva thinking there were fresh approaches to magic which would be profitable to pursue and that now had Minerva roaming the aisles containing the more theoretical books which, to her delight and surprise, did contain the most important of the output from the Denver analytical-school: *Real Magic*, *Complex Magic*, and *Functional Magic*, and, to her everlasting joy, did also stock the central investigations of the Seattle combinatorial-school *Magical Groups*, *Magical Rings*, and *Magical Fields*, and the combined impact of finding those treasure troves did, as the reader may very well have guessed, cause Minerva to come over weak with the ethereal elation of the true scholar even as the price tag of the volumes caused her to come over weak with the impoverished state of the public school teacher.

It is at this stage of the game that Biff, paying more attention to Minerva than a casual observer might guess and noticing both her excitement and dismay, managed to deduce their causes: the core output of the two American schools combined with intellectual avarice and scholarly impecuniousness, and offered the suggestion, based as much on solicitation for a dedicated professor as on fascination for an interesting and attractive lady, that the lady try a lay-away plan that let her read a volume in the store as she paid for it in increments, which was received by the lady as both generous and ingenious since it allowed her to begin the immediate study of the material, justified her spending time in the cozy bookstore, and gave her an opportunity to make the further acquaintance of a perceptive and generous young man who did not seem averse to her company and even, by small signs, indicated her presence would be welcome.

Knowing she shouldn't jump into the middle of a subject but unable to resist seeing one of the more exotic results Misako had mentioned, Minerva took the volume on *Complex Magic*, settled herself in a reclining chair, and opened to the section on Linear Fractional Transfigurations. There it was, the second example in the chapter: transfiguring an infinite plane with boundary into a disk something Minerva had believed impossible. She began reading. What she really wanted, of course, was the inverse transfiguration from finite to half-infinite. Half-infinite? What did the Americans mean by that? Well, she would soon master it. Hmm. The way the people at Denver developed them, linear fractional transfigurations weren't that difficult. She had to have these treatises.

Biff, bringing her a fresh tea and glancing at the page she was reading, said, "The trick is to do it with something harmless."

He waved his wand through a series of moves that hurt Minerva's eyes to follow.

"I should have warned you," he said.

Floating in the middle of the room was a disk of light. Another sequence of wand moves had the disk opening into a half-plane of light. The light was blocked by the walls, but where it went through the windows, it seemed to go on forever.

Yes, Biff, Wizard for Hire, knew those spells. He didn't tell Minerva that the apparently less impressive half-plane-to-disk was the basis for some of the deadliest killing curses. He was thinking there wasn't any reason to mention that particular, obscure fact.

Minerva was thinking there was more to Biff than a personable nature and was about to engage him in a deeper conversation when two school girls walked in and Biff greeted the new customers who identified themselves as Miss Patil and Miss Granger in search of Potions manuals and possibly some recreational reading, which Biff agreed with wholeheartedly since the mind had to relax occasionally, especially if, as the girls discreetly let him know, the onerous duty of being prefects weighed on them along with the honor of being lab assistants for a very demanding professor who would settle for nothing less than excellence, which was uppermost in their minds of course as they asked the courteous store operator for his help and suggestions in the matter of scholarly treatises that needed more thought before they could commit to the purchase of a pricey monograph but, in the meantime, perhaps he could recommend some high-quality romances about which they would love to have a more extended discussion except that a Transfiguration professor appeared to be radiating annoyance at what was merely youthful



vitality and healthy curiosity, but possibly his initial endorsements were good enough and they could return, together or separately, at another time since they were oh so very glad that a high quality bookstore had appeared in their midst and their scholarly instincts were telling them that a friendly store operator would take them to new heights of intellectual endeavors a thought that had them extending extremely friendly farewells with promises to return soon, particularly since a raven-haired damsel believed a level-headed wizard had looked at her with a twinkle in his eye while a fair-complexioned witch believed a knowledgeable male responded to her as a girl.

As the two were leaving, three couples entered the store and immediately split into separate genders heading toward their respective romance sections, which had Miss Patil happy that the store was prospering with long term possibilities with respect to the operator but apprehensive that he would not remember a raven-haired girl among all the customers and which had Miss Granger delighted that the Transfiguration professor would not get to monopolize the operator but apprehensive that he would forget a scholarly girl among all the excitement; but Biff did notice them pretending to examine the window display and gave them a friendly nod, which allayed their misgivings and, unknown to them, reinforced Biff's conviction that the bookstore was a better cover than the two alternatives that had been proposed: a taco stand with its low-class status and culinary mess or a career as a potions salesman with its long hours and constant travel, not to mention the bookstore justified having an intelligent assistant, who should arrive as soon as the paperwork cleared the American Administration Complex, and that it served as a convenient center for spying as a house-elf, which was desirable since fellow house-elves knew every secret in Great Britain: the location of the Dark Lord's followers, the members of the Phoenix Club, everybody's affairs, and everyone's plots, and were often desperate for a sympathetic ear, especially when accompanied by beverages that were not usually allowed household staff high comedy, except that people were going to get killed, and the next time he would hire better assassins.

Harmony Grayson set her pen down. It was time for lunch, and the narrative had outrun her plotlines, which were stymied because she couldn't decide between crimson and dark-orange for Minerva. It was a weighty decision, and she would tackle it after lunch when she had a clearer head.

Several doors down, working into the lunch hour, Biff was penning in a post-coital scene between Severus and Bellatrix although he wasn't certain yet where to inject it.

She was coiled around her lover as relaxed and content as a boa constrictor that has raided the chicken coop and swallowed the cock of the yard.

"Have you thought about my sister?" asked Bellatrix. "She's lonesome, and she likes you."

"I don't rightly know, ma'am, about two fillies in the same corral."

"You don't think she's some kind of blonde angel, do you?" asked Bellatrix. "Don't let her sweet face and cool manners fool you. Just because she's calculating about it doesn't mean she's any less cruel."

"I'm sure she's roamed a wild range, ma'am, and kicked as high and hard as any mustang."

"Well, she's been put out to pasture now," said Bellatrix, "but she wants to be wildly ridden as she kicks high and hard."

"Are you sure it's fittin', her being your sister and all?"

"Pillow the blonde witch, Sev, before she cracks and hexes us both."

Biff, hearing a wail from the editor's office, dropped his pen and hastened to discover the source of anguish. She was staring disconsolately at a letter on her desk.

She looked up when he entered. "Are you off the sauce?"

"Well, yes," he admitted, taking a chair.

"It shows," said the editor. "Your work is regaining its literary quality." She paused. "Listen, if you're in trouble, you can tell me. I'll be more than willing to help."

"Are there problems?" asked Biff.

"I just received a note from Wizard Public Broadcast," she said. "Thanks to your rehabilitation and the squabbling of our two interns, that last chapter of 'A Pearl of a Love Story' was so disorienting and arty that they want to read it on The Sunday Evening Modern Literature Hour."

"The Kiss of Death," said Biff. "You're going to say no, of course."

"If this gets out, we'll lose half our readers," said the editor.

"Are you sure I can't offer you anything from the drawer?" she asked, setting several bottles and powders on her desk.

"For one wild moment, I thought you were offering me everything in your drawers," he said.

She frowned. "That's the type of literary license that's going to destroy us, Biff."

She sniffed and poked at her eye with a tissue. "Oh, Biff, I don't know what to do. I haven't felt this distraught since ... since four years ago when that bastard husband I had decided to divorce me." She sniffed and poked at both eyes. "He said ... he said he couldn't live with the bitch I had become."

"I remember," said Biff.

She dried her eyes. "I remember, too. You had just arrived. I was twenty-four, and my life was shattered. You were twenty and bursting with talent. I was so jealous."

She grabbed another tissue and blew her nose as the memories flooded her mind and the tears flooded her eyes. "I asked where you got all your ideas, and I still remember your answer. You told me it was like sin, the thoughts came unbidden to the mind."

She grabbed a clean tissue which was soon soaking wet. Biff was thinking she was cute when she was vulnerable. He clamped down on the unbidden thought of her soaking her drawers.

"In the beginning, you were constantly bouncing your ideas off me," she said, smiling through her tears at the sentimental remembrances. "I love being an editor."

"We've always been strictly professional," she added.

He nodded agreement.

She gave him a quizzical look. "Did your wild thought of the moment upset you?"

It took a few seconds to figure out what she was asking. He shook his head no.

"Are you sure?" she asked, rising and walking over to his chair.

"I'm sure," he said as he took her hand and guided her into his lap.

She found sitting in his lap natural and comfortable. He had always understood her, but when had she grown so fond of him? Her arms were around him, and her head was

on his shoulder. Tears of release were flowing.

She was warm and cuddly. Why had it taken him so long to realize how attractive she was, how talented and compatible she was? He held her and stroked her hair. His spirit soared.

She sat up straight, grabbed his hair, and sniffled, "If you tell anyone about this, I'll tear your heart out."

Severus was feeling as grand as a maraschino cherry on a hot-fudge sundae as he walked Bellatrix to her room even though she was biting her lower lip and giving him sideways glances. Her voice was tremulous when she asked, "You won't make many demands on me this evening, will you?"

He slid into his role as easily as the bright red tidbit slides down with the thick chocolaty goodness to reveal the cold core underlying the scrumptious concoction.

"Oh, I don't know how I should stand it," she sighed. "The very thought of your tortures and indecencies brings a blush to my face and a weakness to my knees. Take pity on a lone and castaway maiden with no one to turn to in her hour of need. I am but a frail flower tossed upon the rocky shores of life."

"Ma'am, your very words have inflamed me, and I shall be heartless," he declared as he flung open the door to her boudoir. In the two steps it had taken her to enter the room, Severus had his costume of black Stetson, boots with spurs, and concealing cloak.

"Just step behind that screen, ma'am, and put on something appropriate."

She appeared a minute later in a tweed sports coat and matching skirt that reached to the floor. She had black pumps with white socks; her hair was in a bun; and she was wearing spectacles.

"My, my, if it ain't the schoolmarm, traveling West for the first time and captured by the Redskins," he said.

La brunette le plus jolie was in les prises the peaux-rouges.

A wave of his wand had her tied spread-eagled on the bed, face down with a pillow under her that lifted her bum in the air. She wondered about the authenticity of the feather pillow but recalled that Redskins didn't stint when it came to torture. Worse, this was a White-Indian who would try to show he was more Indian than the Indians. He was doing a toe-and-heel number around the bed, er, stake. "Hee. Ya. Ha. Ha." She knew Indians had a rain dance. Did they have a sex dance? Was beating on their tom-toms a euphemism?

The White-Indian reached in his cloak and whipped out the ultimate torture implement of the Great Plains: an ostrich feather.

The schoolmarm screamed.

In the adjoining room, Narcissa turned on the table light and opened her copy of 'Brothers Karamazov.' It was going to be a long evening.

A wave of the wand disposed of the schoolmarm's shoes and socks, leaving her bare to the ankles. She tried to retain her composure, but the heretofore unknown state of undress had her blushing and wiggling her pinkies in acute embarrassment. The ostrich feather passed over the bottom of her naked feet. Her toes curled as daintily as a Geisha's having an orgasm in the middle of a haiku.

After what seemed a long interval full of screams and muffled groans, Narcissa heard the rhythmic thumping of the bedstead. She thanked heaven above that there was enough left of her sister to shag although, by some miracle, these sessions produced a radiant Bellatrix showing no marks or scars whatsoever.

A little while later, Narcissa heard the door to the adjoining bedroom open and someone clank down the hallway. She looked out to see Severus heading toward the kitchen.

"I've got spurs that jingle jangle jingle."

"By all the gods," Narcissa muttered to herself. She followed Severus to the kitchen out of curiosity and watched him rummage through the refrigerator.

He noticed her. "Where's the barbecue and the corn squeezin's, ma'am?"

It irritated her that she had no idea what he was talking about. Not only that, his outfit reminded her of that godawful 'Buff, The Wizard Rider' or whatever it was that took up space in her favorite magazine even though the writer of the best serial for the periodical seemed to have either gone on the sauce or off the sauce. Nevertheless, she said, "There's some roast beef and horseradish. Help yourself."

She watched him put his plate on the table and asked, "Who are you, exactly?"

"A wrangler of colorful wisdom, ma'am."

"You mean a rider of the purple sage."

"Yes, ma'am."

His riding the pink mage had caused quite the commotion. She would watch him ride the purple sage from a safe distance.

He noticed her irritation, but he didn't worry about it since he thought something would give him a handle. He noticed what she was wearing and said, "Quite an attractive nightgown, milady. The lacework reminds one of the best that Victorian England had to offer."

"This old thing," purred Narcissa, brushing the lacework and arching her back so the nightgown showed her figure to advantage. "It can hardly match any of the originals. The Victorians dressed grandly in a grand age."

Taking his cue, Severus let his Stetson become a top-hat, his cloak become a Victorian cape, his boots and spurs morph into hiking-boots, and his wand transform into a modest but serviceable walking stick. The game was a-foot.

"I see you've recently taken a new elf into the household after suffering the loss of an energetic one," he said. "Milady is quite gracious to have accepted an old, grumpy elf and offered him the hospitality of your Manor. It is the type of deed that many Victorians aspired to but few could manage."

"Really, you're too kind," said Narcissa, "although he is a trial sometimes." Then her brow furrowed. That was supposed to be a secret. She gave him an inquisitive look.

He replied easily, as if anyone could make the elementary deductions. "The kitchen, and parts of the hallway, show signs of recent neglect. One elf left, and elves, being traditional creatures, hadn't managed to reassign the household duties before a new elf arrived. It's a new elf, not the return of the original elf, because part of the china is stacked differently. But the new elf must be old or crippled since he can't clean as well as the elf that left as evidenced by some parts of the kitchen which are still left unattended. There's some china missing and silverware bent which indicates the new elf is doing damage but only minor damage that has not yet landed him in trouble."

"Can I trust you with a secret?" asked Narcissa.

"A Victorian secret?" he asked.

"Yes, I've always dreamed about vigorous but discerning Victorian gentlemen, but I've always feared they would reject me because I wouldn't be able to act the proper Victorian lady."

"I would think any Victorian gentleman would be proud to have you as his lady. What could possibly make you think otherwise?"

"It would be my adoration of him," she said. "He would give me wild, uncontrollable, most unladylike urges."

"Surely not," he said.

"I can show you." She stood, walked over to him, and sat in his lap. "I would want to be his little kitten."

Severus let Narcissa settle comfortably and put her arms around him as he embraced her and stroked her hair until she did a good imitation of a purr.

"I admit," he said, "milady might possibly be overstepping the bounds of proper behavior."

"It's only the beginning of what I would want," she replied.

"Are you suggesting that your adoration of the gentleman would be your approach, and seductive kisses promising affection would be your method? Would you tease the gentleman?"

"Is he not constantly teasing me preening, strutting around while I am confined by custom to not responding?"

"Are you saying you would go beyond teasing and attempt to entice the gentleman into transgressing?"

"Oh, sir, I blush at your plain speech. Please turn your observational prowess elsewhere and spare baring my shame."

"Are you thinking that, after some proper Victorian experimenting, you would have discovered your powers as a seductress, one that no healthy male could resist?"

She leaped out of his lap. "Fie on you, sir. Not even a maid of dishonor, as I am not, deserves the lash of your sharp tongue."

He stood and stepped towards her. "Your adoration of the gentleman would be your approach, and seductive kisses promising affection would be your method." He leaned close and whispered. "And the lashes of a sharp tongue your deepest desire."

"Uncouth and unworthy of a gentleman," she cried, stepping back against the wall.

The indignities visited on the maiden in Victorian times the tortures inflicted on a schoolmarm by Great Plains Indians Great Societies think alike.

Biff was interrupted by the editor charging into his office. "Oh, Biff, something terrible is happening."

"They want to read the whole damn story on The Modern Literature Hour?" he asked.

"No, no, this is much worse," she said. "We're getting threats. The letters are in my office."

As he walked with her to her office, he said, "The magazine is always getting threats from the fans of the saga. But, no, you wanted this instead of the sequel to 'My Wand is Quick.'"

"These are different, Biff," she said. "I'm frightened."

He sat and read the four letters she handed him.

*'If the current tale of Severus Snape continues, I cannot guarantee anybody's safety.'*

*'I must speak to the authors of 'A Pearl of a Love Story' as soon as possible. It is a matter of life and death.'*

**'STOP STOP STOP THE STORY STOP YOU MUST STOP STOP'**

**'You are meddling with things that ought not to be meddled with. You are warned.'**

He waved his wand over them. "Yes, you're right. There's real anguish here ... and menace."

"But this story's been told a thousand times. No one's ever sent serious threats," she said. "I would have rejected the story this time if you hadn't put that twist into it."

They looked at each other.

"The twist," they both said.

"All the other hundreds of versions that I've read were strictly Granger and Snape," she said, "but you ruined the story by getting Snape involved with the Black sisters."

"Wait a minute," he said.

"Bellatrix," they both said.

"And possibly others," he said. "We've received four threats, all different."

"Four," she said. "Which four witches?"

"Too bad I can't trace the letters," he said.

She brightened. "But you can. There's that incredible bookstore. If it can turn a disk into an infinite half-whatever, I bet it has the volumes you need to do first-rate detective work."

He gave her a sad look. "That bookstore is part of the fictional story, love." He paused before delivering the rest of the bad news. "Not everything Severson and Grayson write is real. They're making up some stuff."

"Fantasy magic?" she asked. She looked disappointed. "People should be more careful what they write." She sighed. "Oh, Biff, I'm so confused. I need a break."

"There's all the stuff in your drawer," he said.

"I don't want that anymore. I want you to hold me."

Meanwhile, back at Biff's office, Harmony had arrived for a visit on the off chance that Biff thought Cho Chang deserved all the bad things that had happened to her. It would be nice to talk to a mature, reasonable person for a change. She examined his interrupted manuscript, decided the Victorian sentiments showed a fine sensibility, but

the text was flat and needed panache. She steeled herself. The Victorian age was vigorous, and it would require everything within her to do it justice.

What turmoil Narcissa must have experienced when she discovered that a gentleman she had trusted with her innermost secrets because his deductive powers signified a personality refined by the ardors of higher reason turned out to be a libertine in philosopher's clothing who would now use her secret longings to breach the meager defenses she had against a world that would show her no mercy if she did but permit herself a brief moment of bliss.

He placed a forefinger in the middle of her forehead. By the time it slid to the tip of her nose, her mouth was open, and when it reached her lips, she nibbled it. His hard, warm body was only a fraction of an inch from hers when he whispered that she was the most desirable witch in all of England and he would be happy if she would grace his day with a token of affection, perhaps her arms around him. Alas, when her arms were around him, he told her in a quiet voice that she was a loving lady and this simple contact had him quite content, and this sentence, delivered in a friendly voice with no attempt on his part to be the least bit aggressive, had her pressing against him and moaning. He did nothing but tell her how comforting her touch was, and this had the lonely lady asking him to hold her, which he did in a soft embrace that conveyed his tender feelings for her and that seeped through her and warmed the inner girl that was ready to believe his devotion and offer all the big girl had in return.

It is understandable that anyone would view the following with disdain, but one must ask oneself how one would act if a wizard appeared offering strength and solace when the world was a dark and lonely place. It is true he was involved with her sister, but this was almost a recommendation given her sister's recovery from an imprisonment that had attacked her will and eroded her soul for fifteen years and how many readers have not looked upon the companion of some lucky lady and concluded all the good ones were taken. It is true she was married, but her husband had neglected the estate and placed the family, particularly her son, in danger for the sake of a Dark Lord who daily appeared more insane and more incompetent and how many readers have not had second thoughts about vows taken when they, the world, and the person to whom they pledged themselves seemed very different. Narcissa was more honorable than most and these thoughts cut her to the quick, and she was certain she was condemning herself to everlasting retribution for her betrayals, but she was a lady in desperate straits who had been tripped up by her own ill-advised confession that she longed to shower affection on someone who would not scorn her. The breakdown of our tormented lady began, and if it aids in providing sympathy, then it can be said that never before had Cissy shed tears of relief as she held someone.

The interlude would have been of small comfort to our lady if the gentleman had not demonstrated that he held no small desire for her and if he had not demonstrated that he was aware of her inner conflict, and for this purpose, he breathed that she should place her hands above her head and as she crossed her wrists, he induced her into swaying like an enticing younger sister while his hands slid down from her waist until his fingertips made small dents in her promising round softness and her breasts brushed against him in the way of a woman offering an invitation until she was breathing heavily and the flush of romance overcame her modesty and convinced her that surely he wanted her physically since a world where he did not was too cruel to exist and did he not say he would accept her and no greater favor could she ask as his lips and tongue crashed upon her open mouth like a wave and she pressed against him like the unstoppable tide rolling up the beach causing her to sigh and barely hear the command to raise her nightgown as he dropped between her knees and with lips and flickering tongue teased the exposed skin as she raised her garment and spread her legs to let the attention-giver express his adoration of her pleasing form to the utmost perfection of her junction where the roughness of his tongue acknowledged the cleft of a silk garment moist and reeking with arousal before making its way up her torso over her breasts and to her lips that devoured his with the promises of her heart if he would but pay proper attention to her aching self now available as she pushed her knickers down and guided his head to her need which he did rudely tend while the elegant lady cried out louder and louder until the crescendo of her primitive cries matched the crescendo of the primitive bliss that surged through the younger sister.

It would be more comforting for all if the evening had stopped at this point leaving Cissy's ultimate virtue intact, but, alas, that perception for which the fair sex so often longs in vain proved, in this case, to be her undoing although the major failing must rest on the shoulders of the gentleman since, once her heart was opened to him, she had placed her trust in him and looked to him for guidance a fact that he could have used to take the more morally uplifting path instead of tending to the lady's deepest desires, for, contrary to her distant exterior and what anyone would conclude from her recent history, Cissy Malfoy was a woman of great appetite and she regarded the first round of the evening, imminently satisfying though it was, as a bit of caviar on toast and merely a prelude to the standing rib roast, which, like a true lady, she preferred to have served to her with style while her host joined her in the main course with a virile gusto that overshadowed any indelicate eagerness on her part with his even greater enthusiasm.

The very Devil must have prompted Severus to speak plainly to the woman now glowing in his arms. "I admire you, you know. I have watched you work to keep everything together." He paused to stroke the hair and kiss the forehead of an exemplary witch. "You keep your sister safe when the world wants to crucify her. I wish I had someone half as devoted to me." He looked into her inquisitive eyes and nodded that he was serious. "And still you're able to play and put up with us without a single complaint. I have never known anyone this strong." He had to wait while her hug squeezed the breath out of him. "I have never known anyone whose understated beauty was this breathtaking, either."

Now the reader can imagine that her lips sought his and conveyed that she would make love to him in exchange for anything that he might want to give her, which he did in full measure, causing a thrill to run through her as she carried out his whispered instructions to let her knickers fall to the floor, raise her nightgown, and spread her legs, and it is at this point that it would be diplomatic to record that he met some resistance, but honesty requires telling that he slid with all ease into a married lady who made such helpful wiggles and satisfied moans that one could very well be forgiven for suspecting that she enjoyed the spiciness of being unfaithful, especially since she nuzzled him so gratifyingly when he was completely inside her that his taking her was akin to making love to a witch who was now his, and indeed, as reluctant as anyone should be to admit it, the sounds of Cissy coupling began with the musical moans of a woman happy that a wizard was making such demanding claims on her intimate anatomy that no female could be blamed for allowing him to continue until she responded with sinuous movements that, while admittedly inappropriate for someone else's wife, did advance her participation into an excited state where she indicated with yearning groans that the male need only accept her giving him what she had pledged to another and, while we couldn't advise enjoying such an outburst of infidelity, it must be conceded that having a witch one admires surrendering to you with abandonment could close one's mind to higher morality and leave even the most prudent wizard susceptible to the charms of a classy lady overwhelmed by loving attention to the point where her squirming became frenzied, her helpless smile acknowledged her naughtiness, and the non-discerning might easily misinterpret her intense whimpers as the squeals of an unfaithful wife just before her entire system was wracked by the force of a forbidden orgasm.

Cissy's contorted face relaxed into a childlike beauty, her knees buckled, and she slid to the floor where Severus followed and held her.

Harmony dropped the quill and waved her wand to lock the door before budging up her skirt and placing her now vibrating wand in the puffy cleft of her garment as a kind and considerate bookstore owner with a past confessed that he admired her and escorted her to a secret room full of rare and unopened volumes, and as they perused an elementary treatise, the dim disk of a lonely girl unfolded into a shining half-plane of mind-searing beauty. After he had led her back to the doorway to the world with promises to wait for her, she discovered her wand was sticky, but the rumor among the older Slytherin girls was that this kept the wood supple.

On her way out of the building, she heard caterwauling from the dump Severson called an office. She crept close while keeping out of sight.

Do not forsake me O my darling,

On this my shameful day.

Do not go away in parting.

Please stay. Oh, please stay.

I do not know what fate awaits me

Now that my soul's stripped bare.

I had to face the ones who hate me.

And I lay helpless; I was helpless in their lair.

I only know I wished I'd lied,  
Than say the things they made me say.  
If I could I would have died.  
And now it's you; now it's you I cannot sway.  
You can't forgive me that I know.  
I see now that you're not brave.  
Just lie a coward, just lie low,  
Just lie a coward in your grave.

"Holy martyr at the stake," muttered Harmony to herself. "Gryffindors are supposed to slough off that stuff, not compose odes about it. His summer job as a writer is going to his head, and he's discovering his soul."

Later that evening, Harmony tucked herself into bed still concerned that her fellow writers were going to lose the plot and mangle the story.

She tried to tell herself to go to sleep, that there was nothing she could do. Constantly checking on him and finding him apparently healthy eased her mind, and she wanted to believe that her concern for him had some benefit on a spiritual level, but she had the growing suspicion that she just wanted to see him, and she was certain this selfish desire interfered with the transference of benefits on the higher plane. She told herself to go to sleep and not be selfish, got out of bed, threw on a nightgown, and made her way to his secret lab in the dungeon where she was certain he would concoct the potions needed to overcome the Evil One if only he survived long enough. She arrived at the hidden room and peered around the corner to see his back as he worked at an impressive array of tubes and beakers.

"I know you're there, Miss Grayson."

She was struck to the core with a fear that almost equaled her relief at discovering he was both thriving and alert. There was nothing for it but to take her punishment. She stepped into the secret lab. "Wow," she said, discovering her fears could be overcome by awe of his endeavor as well as by relief at his well-being.

"I cannot believe you are spying for the enemy, but the other option of some concern for me is equally hard to accept. Tell me, Miss Grayson, what are you doing here?"

His dismissal of possible feelings for him produced a spark of anger. "I suppose to you I am but a schoolgirl incapable of the finer emotions, but I sometimes think you hold all females in such regard, and indeed, you do act as if only Professor Snape alone on this planet had any sensibilities worth considering."

She stopped, surprised by her outburst and chagrined to the core at the thought that it was an accurate description. "Sir," she added.

"Your arrival may have been fortuitous," he said. "I am discovering that this experiment needs an extra pair of hands. You can stir this beaker of blue fluid so that the emerald dust in it does not settle while making sure this larger beaker of pink, viscous solution does not boil over. I need to prepare the next compound."

For the next five minutes, her attention was fully occupied with stirring a container and adjusting a flame. After that, she listened to his explanation of what he was attempting and helped stir, mix, and distill the various components.

When the potion was completed and safely stored, he said, "It might be better for your safety that I wipe your memory of this evening. Our opponents would go to extremes for the information now in your head."

She nodded. "I understand, and it would erase my embarrassing outburst."

"But not the truth of what you said or the reason for your spying on me. Come, let me introduce you to a terrible habit. I have coffee with whiskey after experiments. It interferes with sleep and produces the strangest dreams, but I have found no other way to relax."

Harmony couldn't believe that she said, "If you are tense, you should let me rub your shoulders. It would help you and let me be of some use."

He poured the aromatic brew and handed a cup to her. "If you feel that you're of little worth without charitable acts, I shan't impede you."

It was all going too fast: the euphoria of getting her hands on Severus, the thrill of actually helping him, and his gracious acceptance of her company. All this and the caffeine-liquor concoction had her floating floating into his lap with her arms around him, nuzzling him, and whispering her most intimate longings. And then his confession of wanting her, watching her, desiring her, not daring to approach her.

Severus turned serious. "While I swore that I would never place any witch in danger, the conflagration you have incited within me has burned out my previous resolutions which were made not knowing the fiery heat a lady of substance could produce within me and make me question my reluctance to drag anyone on the path fraught with peril that I must tread, and so the choice is yours to make, Harmony, and I know you will choose with all the cunning and ambition that runs through every fiber of your being."

The Slytherin tendency to support the strong is frequently misunderstood or even reviled, but it is the strong who, at a critical moment, often need an extra push to win through and carry the day for us all whereas supporting the weak to rise to mediocrity is, in comparison, a paltry affair. And those with great strengths have great faults, and their companions must abide both. Thus, with every strand of her cunning and ambition, Harmony Grayson decided she would stand beside Severus Snape. She would celebrate what he was and fill the void of what he was not.

What followed was no model of wild lust or prolonged erotica, but merely the somewhat awkward consummation of their decision to be a pair. He did have the presence of mind to encourage the fairer sex by means of graceful nibbles and whispered endearments, and these did prompt her to run her hands over his torso and eventually unfasten his shirt whereupon she unfastened hers in return, which prompted him to cup her silk-covered breast, creating such a need for more that she had soon tossed aside both shirt and bra and was guiding his lips to her nipples. His kisses seemed divine enough that, at first, she wanted them to go on forever, but his lavishing attention on her breasts produced an ache between her legs that not even her virgin blushes could deny, and which caused her to tentatively, and then with enthusiasm, check if he had a similar reaction. Once she found his erection, she could not let go it was an expression of his desire for her that she wished above all else. With some embarrassment, but not able to stop herself, she unbuttoned his trousers, and when she reached in and held him, she was so transported that she did not realize she had just soaked her knickers although she was now thinking that they were certainly in the way. Prompted by romance into activity she had never imagined, she stood, rid herself of an impeding garment, and straddled her dearest, ready for an intimacy that would have caused her hesitation if it were not for their burning devotion. Despite the sensation of his entering member flooding her system and her lust shutting down her critical faculties, she was aware that he was taking her slowly and gently with obvious concern for her well-being. Then he was all the way in, and she was gripping him and panting from the shock of penetration. Severus held her until her defenses went down, and then he enjoyed the sound and feel of Harmony Grayson making love to her chosen wizard. The first time was too overwhelming for her to notice that, at first, she liked it, and then, she wanted it, and finally, she couldn't stop her frantic jerking and animal grunts. Just before she thought she would scream, a white light burst in her brain and she cried out, "Oh, Severus." He held her as the flutter of her supreme moment subsided and she slowly went limp. He was glad for her.

As the afterglow was seeping through her and she was becoming one with her partner, a wild-looking figure charged into the secret lab.

"Success, Severus. Success, my boy. Beyond our fondest hopes," said Dumbledore. "Your potion has Narcissa and Bellatrix cutting a swath through the Death Eaters. Bellatrix even infected a Dementor and it's spreading through their ranks. The evil-doers are finished."

"What?" exclaimed Harmony. "You've been cheating on me? With married women?"

Her brain cells bent. "Bellatrix did a Dementor?!"

They were all thinking an aphrodisiac that powerful might be profitable even married couples were a market.

Dumbledore noticed Miss Grayson's naked thighs straddling her professor and addressed Snape. "If you haven't yet, there's no reason to make her squeal, old bean. We've won."

Miss Grayson was thinking that was a good reason to do so a time-honored victory rite. She looked at Dumbledore. "We're having a private moment, sir, if you don't mind."

Harmony Grayson's eyes popped open, and she made a silent vow: no more pistachio-nut ice cream on top of anchovy pizza.

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Author note one: I wish this chapter were not so long.

Author note two: I have no idea where this story is going.

Author note three: I'm beginning to think stream-of-consciousness arose from Victorian Literature by way of omitting punctuation.

## The Miss-Laid Story Line

*Chapter 5 of 9*

The story falls into the plot bunny hole.

### Chapter 5: The Miss-Laid Story Line

Snorri decided he should explore the non-wizard world since several of the characters in the story had a non-wizard background. Combining artistic impulses with necessity, he took his clothes to a non-magic Laundromat. After feeding the required coins to the strange-looking machine, he opened a book he had brought but found himself absorbed by the high-tech washer. It had a pre-wash, a wash, a rinse, a spin, another rinse, and a final spin. He watched the contraption as it rotated one way, paused, rotated the other way, rotated at low speed, paused, rotated at high speed, and then repeated itself. He was thinking he needed to get out more often.

"Where's that assistant you promised me?"

The young man who had just arrived from the States assumed the air of grandeur befitting a dispenser of largesse. "They sent me to prepare you, to make you aware of the opportunity that was being presented to you."

Biff thought cool silence might be the best ploy.

"It's one of our new programs," said the young man. "The overall strategy was well received at headquarters, and in fact, people who are willing to give this program their all, to rise to the challenge, will be well thought of at headquarters."

Cool silence still seemed viable.

"It's really an equal opportunity effort to show the rest of the wizard community that our heart is in the right place. And they do work for minimum wage," said the young man.

"They?"

"Vampires," said the young man.

"Let me speak to your supervisor," said Biff.

"Unfortunately, the vampire 'spoke' to him first," said the young man.

"Then let me speak to your new supervisor," said Biff.

"No, no, you misunderstand. The old supervisor will be back ... in about a week ... They think one more transfusion should do it," said the young man.

"And if the supervisor has turned?" asked Biff.

"That contingency was foreseen in the original presentation to headquarters," said the young man proudly. "The accounting department is going to perform a time-series analysis, and if the secretarial turn-over crosses a certain deviation, the alarms will go off."

You had to be impressed.

"Harmony's right. We're ignoring Hermione Ganger."

Biff looked up from his cup of cappuccino. "Good stuff. I'm glad you resurrected the old machine. Well, you're the right age to write Miss Granger."

"Do we have anyone smart enough for her?" asked Snorri.

"That may not be necessary," said Biff. "She's an overachiever hungry for recognition. We get in her knickers not by being smart but by pretending to appreciate her intelligence. And the fact that she's a girl."

"That might be. In one version, she married Ronald Weasley."

"The poor sod. I hope the rest of his life went well."

"I can go get the books that have arrived," said Padma.

"I'll get them," said Hermione. "Besides, I told Madam Pince that I would pick up her library books, too. And I've already sent a message to Biff that I'll be there in a little while."

"I can help carry the books back," said Padma.

"No. No, I don't need any help," said Hermione, dashing out the door and towards the village bookstore before Padma could manage any reply.

A little later, Biff looked up to see a breathless girl enter the store. He recognized her as Hermione Granger who had been perusing the shelves for information about simulacrams. He had been daydreaming about her raven-haired companion, a lady that had a calming effect on him and whose quiet conversation he enjoyed.

"I'm here to pick up the books."

"Just you," he said. Noticing the disappointed look on her face, he added, "There're quite a few books. I thought the school would send both of you."

"Padma didn't want to come," asserted Hermione. "She'd rather work in the lab."

It was Biff's turn to hide his disappointment.

"This is a really great bookstore," said Hermione. "I'm glad you're here. It's full of all kinds of things. I could spend hours here, and you make it very comfortable."

Biff, devastated by Padma not wanting to see him, decided he needed some companionship. "It will take a few minutes to gather the books. Would you care for some tea while waiting?"

"Oh, yes, thank you. You're always so considerate."

"Are you certain there's not some wizard waiting impatiently for you back at school?" he asked.

"I don't think anyone at school knows I'm a girl."

"I find that hard to believe. In fact I thought that's why you were interested in simulacrams. Other wizards trying to look like your favorite wizard. It would be worth the effort just to be close to you for a while."

"Oh," she said, blushing. "No, I'm afraid some people have replaced an instructor with one. But I shouldn't be telling you this." She paused. "You'll probably laugh at me. I haven't told anyone, and it's driving me crazy."

"You do look tense. Why don't you sit on that footstool where I can massage your neck muscles? I'll put a sign on the door that says the store is closed for delivery."

"I shouldn't put you to any trouble, sir," said Hermione, moving to the footstool.

Several minutes later, a more relaxed Hermione said, "No one has ever done this for me before."

"You are tense," he said, moving his hands to her shoulders. "You need someone to talk to so you can relieve the stress."

His hands massaging her shoulders had her both relaxed and aroused. The massage had her shirt and bra moving almost imperceptibly across her nipples; both of them knew it; and this made her tingle. She wished he would massage her breasts, but his hands made their way down her back instead. Fifteen minutes later, she was limp, euphoric, and moist. He announced that she could drink her tea as he packaged the books, but she declared she wanted to help and followed him to the storeroom.

"That was wonderful," she said.

"We can do it again. It's good for your health."

"Really? You don't mind?" she asked, putting her hand on his arm.

"It was my pleasure," he said, putting his arm around her shoulder and giving her a squeeze.

He loaded the books onto a floating platform, and they headed toward the castle. She reached over and touched his hand. He took hers in his.

"Do you really think someone at school is a simulacrum?" he asked. "A long term disguise is unusual. The typical shape-changing is for one night, to fool someone else's wife, husband, or lover."

"That doesn't sound very satisfactory," she said. "Don't people want someone else to like them for themselves?"

"That would be better," he said, "but I can imagine someone finding you so attractive that just being with you for one night would tempt them."

"I almost wish that were true," she said.

"I'm sure it is," he said. "Maybe you study so hard that you don't notice."

"What about you?" she asked. "Didn't you leave someone behind?"

"No, I was too scholarly and not interested in athletics, and then I started this business, and I've been busy. Besides, I've always liked intelligent girls, and it's hard to get their attention."

"Smart girls aren't used to boys liking them," she said.

"I've always admired their independent spirit," he said.

After they delivered the books, Hermione asked, "Do you have to hurry back, or can I show you some of the school?"

Ron and Harry were gazing from an upper story window when they saw a pair come out of the castle. One was Hermione, and the other was Biff. The couple sat on a nearby bench. As Biff talked, Hermione pointed her knees at him, and as their conversation continued, she leaned toward him. She occasionally touched his shoulder. She suggested something.

The two boys watched them take the gravel path to the Herbology section with Hermione talking animatedly. Her hip and breast kept brushing against Biff, and she seemed to both dance and float as she accompanied him. Biff put a possessive hand on an entranced Hermione and guided her into the concealing bushes.

The two boys were thinking they would miss the rest of the show when their high vantage point let them see two figures despite the bushes.

The wizard was pressing the witch against a wall. She was shaking her head no. There was a small tussle followed by the girl wrapping her arms around a wizard she could no longer resist. His tongue played her like a flute; his hands on her breasts had her heart drumming; and the once bossy witch weaved like a charmed cobra.

She was shaking her head no and trying to push him away when his hands disappeared under her skirt, but she arched her hips away from the wall so he could pull the white-cotton garment down to her knees, and she moved her legs to let it slide to the ground. One hand gripped her lush, flowing hair and tilted her head to look into her liquid eyes while the other hand remained under her skirt to seek her dark center. Her legs spread as the hand under her skirt moved like a cobra. She was gasping and twisting as its fangs sank into her and the fiery venom turned her eyes dark and her center liquid. Biff calmly gazed into the eyes of the bossy witch weaving at his command, eyes that said she would let him have what he wanted, eyes that knew she could not resist. Panting and shaking her head no, she raised her hands above her head and crossed her wrists. She was still shaking her head no when she parted for him.

The two boys saw Hermione tilt her head back with the primal cry and open-mouthed shock of intimacy as her body jerked in time with a wizard's entry. They saw her face contort with the intensity of it.

They watched the wizard pause to enjoy being the first to experience her hot essence, to savor being the first to possess the little witch. Harry and Ron watched the witch they had known for a long time as her face became soft with the sweet melancholy of surrender, a surrender they had never seen before. They watched their friend caress the wizard with her fingers, her lips, her body as the powerful male captured her spirit.

For quite some time, Harry and Ron would remember Hermione pressed against the wall and moving up and down as she let Biff have what he wanted.

The couple became still with Hermione holding Biff and looking pensively into the distance.

"Do you think he came in her pussy?" asked Ron.

"Yeah," said Harry, a bit shocked by what he had witnessed. "He fucked her."

"Cool."

"Wow," said the two boys. It wasn't every day you saw someone steal a witch's virginity.

Biff handed Hermione her knickers, waited till she put them on, took her hand, and began walking out of the bushes.

After a few steps, she stopped and asked, "Do you really like me?"

"Yes," he said. "Can you have lunch with me?"

She nodded yes and flung herself into his arms. He held her until she recovered, and they walked back to his flat hand in hand.

"You've ruined everything."

"No, we haven't," said Snorri and Biff, looking up from their cappuccino. Experience had taught them a valuable lesson. "We saved a cup for you."

"I'm talking about the story, Dumkopsf," said Harmony. "Hermione Ganger is supposed to get seduced last, not first."

She glared at their bewildered faces and tried words of one syllable. "She's the heroine. That means she has to be a good girl. She has to be the last one seduced to show she's the one with the most virtue."

"We thought she was such a stick-in-the-mud that we better give her a running start," said Snorri.

"Yeah," said Biff. "We were getting her warmed up for Severus."

"We're doing the same for Granger that we're doing for Severus," said Snorri. "He's become the very Devil with his tongue."

"Not to mention the honeyed words," added Biff.

"He's found the g-spot. And his finger work with the clit, oo-la-la," said Snorri.

"Imagine that rich, hoarse whisper in your ear: 'I'm going to make you scream my name,'" said Biff.

"You two don't understand anything," said Harmony, storming out of the room.

"Do you think we let her cappuccino get cold?" asked Biff.

The sound of Harmony stomping to her office and the door slamming was replaced by the sound of feet running toward Biff's office.

"Do you think that's the editor looking for you?" asked Snorri.

"Naw," said Biff. "Let's get back to the story."

"Maybe I'm doing everything all wrong. Harmony was pretty upset," said Snorri.

"Yes, but she'll probably read that scene over and over," said Biff. He smiled at Snorri. "You look skeptical, but I'll bet Harmony lusts after somebody, too." He paused. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"I write girls as if they were boys and had feelings," confessed Snorri. "Otherwise, I don't think anything would happen."

"That's all we can do," said Biff.

Meanwhile, back in her office, Harmony knew she couldn't trust those two klutzes with a proper description of a girl entering into a relationship. Even for her, it was going to be a challenge.

How vexatious it is in the early part of a romance for the wizard to be overly solicitous about the female getting full satisfaction when the lady is primarily interested



in exploring the social and emotional aspects which comprise by far the greater part of a relationship, especially since the concern places additional stress on the witch and even leads her to think her companion is primarily interested in his stud factor, which might incline her to think he is more concerned about his performance than about her comfort in an awkward and vulnerable phase of her life where, in contrast, she is trying hard to adapt and please her new friend who, if her hopes come to fruition, could become an important part of her life the fullness of which she was always hoping to share and then, once trust and compatibility are established, the more intimate aspect of their pairing can blossom in an atmosphere of communication and sharing and thereby be taken to heights undreamed of when they were but strangers unsure of each other and even of their own feelings, and certainly, this higher degree of meaning is worth not rushing, and in addition, this misplaced concern has the possibility of creating feelings of inappropriate guilt in the female, who, after all, did but succumb to the seduction of the male, and surely it is part of the social contract that he take responsibility for those urges which society has allowed him to have and not expect the lady to express those rude desires deemed inappropriate to the fairer sex but whose fulfillment is properly assigned to the direct action of a wizard acting in accordance with the established standards of manhood, and even though we of the fainter heart are often disappointed, it is the eternal hope that those we have entrusted with providing the happiness for which we all yearn will strive to do their best with desire balanced by sensitivity, and thus it was that, despite her anxiety and the lapses on the part of the male, Hermione nevertheless achieved ultimate bliss the fifth time that Biff coaxed her into that ultimately primal but devoutly sought union of male and female although her heart still rightly clung to the first episode in the bushes, which she always fondly remembered as the first time a wizard expressed such an ardent need for her total being that she was willing to disregard society's strictures and, with trembling heart, let him possess her heretofore unblemished body as she sacrificed her honor on the terrifying altar that lay under the archway to a promising new world full of hope and peril and possibilities yet undreamed of a world she was beginning to glimpse as, for the first time, more than just friendship relied upon the emotions of another whose inner life was as hidden to her as it was important to her and, as she was slowly coming to realize, whose feelings were not influenced by her constantly having him on her mind despite her wish that it were otherwise, but surely her prayers for a just universe would be answered and it would be sufficient if he reciprocated only a small part of the regard she had for him, which is no more than a beleaguered writer can do as she prays that her audience has not misinterpreted her attempt at a sympathetic treatment as condoning what she has described or misinterpreted the attempt at a readable presentation as implying that our seduced maiden acquiesced too quickly, and lest anyone think otherwise, it would be well to record that our proper young miss was still coming to terms with the inelegance of the mating procedure, which, on the occasion she had her first climatic moment, began with his guiding her into his bedroom, a nearly socially improper act producing a giddy feeling for the girl that she herself hardly condoned even though the male acted out of that desire which is so ardent that it sweeps away all reticence and which, as a consequence, is so eagerly anticipated by our more fragile breasts that we cannot but succumb, and once the couple achieved privacy, the wizard held and kissed his companion with an affection that might be commendable if it were not for the intent and the resulting questionable anticipation it aroused in his fair partner who found it difficult not to reply in kind, which led to gentle fondling that indicated the male found the look and feel of the female pleasing enough to warrant his attention: an attention so desired by our sex that how often it has led us astray and to which our sex naturally responds by removing concealing and restrictive garments to facilitate receiving more of the life-giving affection that is often handed out so niggardly, and which devotion, as he caressed and nibbled every curve and every inch of skin, caused her to move sinuously under his touch, and even though the writer is blushing as our fair maiden must have done, it must be told that his touch traveled up the length of her thighs causing her legs to spread wider and wider in an invitation that he accepted by letting a finger part her folds and slide to her nub where, even though she was surprised by her own slick readiness, she could not help but be betrayed by nature into an involuntary squirm that reached such intensity that the male took the liberty of sliding his fingers into her and kissing her breasts, a combination that produced an internal flutter that left her flushed and so obviously at his mercy that, painful as it is to tell, she made no protest, but merely looked at the wizard demurely as he lifted her legs into a position that had her presenting her most intimate and least attractive part, pinned her hands while looking in her eyes to let her know she was his to take, and poised on the back of her thighs, made a measured and assured entry whose crudeness had her thrilled and whose audacity had her feminine nature moaning and yearning for more of those demanding pushes into her that rocked her body and gave her wizard such evident pleasure that it stripped away all concern for modesty and she could not help but move in the ancient rhythm until it focused all her emotions on the fact that he desired her and this perception, for what redeeming value it is worth, dear reader, is the factor that sent our once prim heroine over the edge into a wanton frenzy that lasted but a short time before a blinding sensation took away all thought and all will to the point where she lay passive, and though it may cross the bounds of propriety, the author who wishes to record honestly must admit that our heroine's crossing the threshold was accompanied by such a manly pounding, warming the cockles of the witch's heart as thoroughly as it warmed her intimate self the pounding that drives the foundation pile deeper so that the structure can reach to the heavens that no trace of blame could be assigned to any female for her consequent actions, while the wizard with the enthusiasm that at last revealed in its fullest glory the underlying great desire for her that overcomes all restraint and strictures and that we of the frail disposition, it must be blushing admitted, long to receive above all else completed his possession of her, leaving her with a wildly beating heart and a sense of fulfillment.

As Miss Grayson gratefully laid down her pen after describing her heroine's initial peak experience, an initial meeting peaked in an outdoor café. The stranger introduced herself as 'Odele.' Odele ordered tea, sipped it a while, and asked, "How did you happen on an old manuscript? We thought we had all of them in our possession."

"We don't have a manuscript," said the editor. "Our contract writers are turning out another serial fiction. At least, that's what we thought."

"That's hard to believe," said Odele, "It's hard to believe that they would write the true story by accident when no one else has." She sipped more tea. "But perhaps I'm revealing too much."

"Believe me, you haven't revealed anything," said the editor. "I'm completely mystified. And why would anyone care that a piece of fiction accidentally describes some real event, whatever that real event might have been. I have no idea what it might have been, and I don't care."

"There are those who do," said Odele, "and you have their interest."

"We would delete the story immediately if that would do any good," said Biff, "but a sudden deletion would create suspicion."

"Yes," said Odele. "If what you are telling me is true, then you can honestly reply that it is all a coincidence when they ask."

"Ask?" said the editor. "Who's going to ask anything?"

"Officialdom, for starters," said Odele. "They will ask politely at first, but they will not let go until they are satisfied it is a coincidence. Others will not be so polite. If you do have a manuscript, you are better off telling me now."

"We have nothing," said Biff. "And I don't see why this is so serious."

"I will tell the others your answer," said Odele, rising and leaving.

"I'm really scared now, Biff," said the editor, taking his hand.

After Odele left, another wizard rose and followed her. Biff and the editor wondered if the second person was a friend or foe of Odele.

Upon Biff's return to the magazine office building, he retired to a basement storeroom that he and Snorri had found and that seemed hidden from everyone else, especially if a few discreet concealment charms were used.

Snorri smiled and asked, "How was 'tea' with the editor?"

"It was a business meeting," said Biff.

"Yeah, right," said Snorri. "Are you still 'up' for the business of our story?"

On the floor above their heads, they heard several sets of hurried, feminine footsteps moving down the hall from office to office.

"Do you think anyone is looking for us?" asked Snorri.

"Naw," said Biff. "We're just a pair of writers. We meet the deadline. Otherwise, no one cares about us."

"That's true," said Snorri, leaning back in his chair. "I'm sure they've decided to leave us alone to create in peace."

"And we have the cappuccino machine," said Biff, firing it up as Snorri took pen in hand.

## Coffee, Gods, and Sisters

Chapter 6 of 9

Too many writers spoil the plot.

### Chapter 6: Coffee, Gods, and Sisters

"I can't get started this morning."

"I'm having the same problem, dear; those brats have hidden the cappuccino maker."

"We have to make them pay for this. What do you think of slow roasting followed by grinding their beans?"

"I know what to appeal to," said the editor. "It's a favorite of writers. The Greek playwrights used it all the time."

They crossed their wands and spoke words of power.

Crack!

"Vengeance lth Mine," saith *Deus Ex Machina Caffearum*

"They Thall Be Ground To Duth," saith *Deus Ex Machina Caffearum*

"Their Headth Thall Be On A Pike," saith *Deus Ex Machina Caffearum*

Harmony and the editor looked at each other. "Ooph."

Meanwhile, blissfully unaware of their impending doom, Biff produced cups of foamy elixir while Snorri tried his hand at depicting a mature relationship.

"I did not bring you along to charm the pants off the shop girls."

"I was merely listening sympathetically."

"Your 'listening sympathetically' will get you in the knickers of half the witches in England."

"They're both married."

"That hasn't slowed you down yet."

"That's not fair, Cissy. Besides, their major complaint, their only real complaint, is that the store is understaffed, their hours are long, and they're not getting home in the evenings in time to take care of their husbands and families."

"Oh, Sev, I know that. Our shops are making contributions to the Dark Lord, and they're all in financial straits. I don't know what to do. Our customers expect that shop to be open for them, and they expect adequate staff to give them the service they deserve. I can't afford more help, and I can't afford to lose those two girls. Those girls have been there ten years; they know all the customers and all their quirks. They're paid very well."

"My profession may be betraying me, love, but in Potions, one competent person is worth ten dunderheads. I would reduce the store hours and keep the girls."

It was mid-morning after the evening in which Professor Snape had stolen Mrs. Malfoy's virtue.

The first thing Severus had faced was a rant.

"I hope you had your fun," she had said. "I suppose you're going to run back to my sister. I suppose you think that cow is a better bed-warmer." She had flung herself across the sheets in despair. "Go ahead. It won't bother me. I'm just a skinny rich-bitch."

"Didn't you hear anything I said to you? Didn't you believe any of it?" he had said as he coaxed Cissy to her half of the bed, climbed in, and pulled the covers over them. She had held him, alternately sniffing that she was a poor specimen of womanhood and murmuring with the animal satisfaction of being cuddled before falling asleep in his arms.

He had lain awake for a while wondering if things could get any crazier had decided it was a stupid question.

He had woken to find her sitting in bed and looking at him thoughtfully.

"Severus, I need help," she had said.

His first thought had been, yes, she needed to sleep later, and then, for a few terrible seconds, he had been certain the Black sisters wanted him to help settle some bloody awful feud.

"I realize you must work at least sixty hours a week as a professor, and you have duties for the Dark Lord, but I'm going spare taking care of all the businesses and investments," Narcissa had said.

"I'm a Potions professor, not an investment advisor."

"You're a friend, and I need help. Just come with me for moral support. I know it's a lot to ask, but I do need you."

"I can try, but I can't promise anything," he had said.

There was less of an explosion from Bellatrix than Severus had feared when Narcissa had announced at the breakfast table that Severus would be spending most of today, and numerous other days, with her as she made her business rounds.

Bellatrix had examined the breakfast item on her fork, "I have to make do with this little sausage and you get a big fat one."

"Bella, we have to take care of the estate, or it won't take care of us," Narcissa had said.

"I understand perfectly, sister dear, especially about all the care a Malfoy ass-set needs," Bellatrix had said. "Obviously, you're starting with the cherry orchard."

"You're impossible," Narcissa had said. "Well, it can't be helped. Severus and I will be on our way."

Now, after beginning with a visit to a fabric and clothing store, Severus and Narcissa were having tea and biscuits before visiting a potions and apothecary shop.

At the shop, Narcissa greeted the manager and proceeded to the warehouse office while Severus remained to talk shop with the manager and his two assistants. When he joined her, she was looking over the warehouse book and the sales book and frowning.

"Oh, Sev, I'll never be able to make sense of this mess."

"We need to match these entries against what's in the warehouse," said Severus.

"We have the receipts," said Cissy.

"Let me think," said Severus. "Sales versus expenditures isn't a good tracking tool because the store manager and his assistants are good brewers. They can make expensive potions from cheap ingredients."

"We don't want to track the manager and his assistants closely because they're artisans who take pride in their work. Close scrutiny would have an adverse effect," said Severus.

Narcissa felt a tingling that puzzled her.

"Ingredients," announced Severus. "Everything that comes into the warehouse goes out over the counter, either by itself or in a potion. We could cast a spell that monitors the ingredients in everything on the retail shelves and everything sold. That plus what's in the warehouse should equal the total bought."

He waved his wand and lines appeared in the air. "My first thought is that we want three columns. There're the bulk materials in the warehouse; there're the retail packages and finished products on the shelves; and there're the items that have been sold. Perhaps a fourth column would help, one that translates shelf items and the sold items into their basic constituents, the warehouse item."

"Okay," said Narcissa.

"I'm going to need help, Cissy. I can't keep all this in my head and the spell going at the same time."

"You're great at visualization," said Narcissa, admiring the skeleton for the spell hanging in mid-air. "Could I read the list of materials we buy while you place them in the first column?"

Halfway through the list, she said, "The older materials are in alphabetical order, but the newer ones were added to the list as we decided to acquire them."

"We'll get them all up first," said Severus. "Then we can order them."

Narcissa read the rest of the list.

"I think we need three things," said Severus. "We need to order this list; we need a spell to add new items; and we need to extend the ordering-spell to include the new items."

"One thing at a time, Severus, I like that," said Narcissa, feeling a strange warmth in her undergarments, one that she had never experienced outside a bedroom or moonlight.

"I was in that new bookstore the other day, and it had a compendium of utility spells that I bought. One of them is a simple-minded thing called a 'bubble-sort.'" He explained it to Narcissa. "I'll try to keep the visual spell going while you do the sorting-spell."

Narcissa waved her wand. "This is kind of fun," she said, watching the items rearrange themselves.

They finished the spells for the first column and began on the second column.

"I couldn't do this by myself," said Severus.

Narcissa Malfoy smiled, put her hand on his shoulder, and felt strange stirrings inside her.

The transformation spell used by the second column needed all the potions made by the shop along with the ingredients for each of them. Narcissa thought listing all these items would be tedious in the extreme, but she found working with Severus ameliorated her normal impatience. He would sigh with relief after each potion and its constituents were added, and she would pat his shoulder in commiseration and smile at a brilliant professor doing the donkey work of bookkeeping.

When the second column was finished, Narcissa was feeling elated and uncomfortable at the same time. She excused herself for the loo where she discovered the reason for her confusion. "You just soaked your knickers over an advance in inventory," she told her reflection in the mirror. "Isn't it amazing how romantic gestures will turn a girl's head? No doubt you'll squeal if he balances the books." She consoled herself with the thought that the real cause was the enthusiastic participation of a desirable wizard working with her. For the first time in her life, she was a real partner.

She decided it would be better if he didn't know the effect he was having on her. After all, she didn't know what he thought about her. He had been considerate last night, but it was possible he was only taking care of his lover's sister before she had a case of 'female hysteria' and brought the Manor down. He had been attentive, even loving, and had spent the night with her, but now, as she recalled the evening, he had not had a climactic moment and he had not made any attempt on her virtue this morning while they were both in bed. Her stomach went hollow at the thought that he was merely being kind. She told herself that she was married and he was involved with her sister and it was foolish to entertain fond thoughts about him. So thinking, she brushed her hair until it was sleek and trim and checked her makeup and attire before returning to the storeroom where he was waiting.

He smiled at her when she returned, and she found herself floating over to him, putting her hands on his shoulders, and saying, "I suppose you've been thinking about the poor condition of our stores."

It was time to pull another rabbit out of the Victorian hat. "The Malfoy hand lies lightly upon the wizard world," he said. "No store or workshop has 'Malfoy' in its title, and banking is in the hands of the goblins. The only complaints are long hours and lack of maintenance since the Dark Lord returned, a connection the shopkeepers have not made by the way. The burden of supporting the Dark Lord has not yet been evenly spread it has fallen upon those with ready cash, implying that considerable Malfoy assets cannot be readily converted into wizard currency, at least not without attracting unwanted attention, not to mention the unfavorable exchange rate the goblins offer for converting non-wizard money to wizard money."

Cissy sounded both impressed and sad when she said, "It's obvious you've deduced the rest of it. A long-lived family has made careful investments in the thriving non-wizard economy, which brings up questions about why such a family would want to attack the non-wizards."

She looked into the distance. "I know what you're thinking, and you may as well say it. The rich get the poor to give them their money by concocting an external threat that scares the shit out of them the end of civilization as we know it. We're not going to get their money by being that threat."

Her fingers dug into his shoulders. "You may as well say it as have me say it for you. We've been bloody awful stupid. Don't sit there looking understanding, either, damn you. I'm not asking for your pity. This whole thing is hind-end foremost, and the last thing I need is your smirking superiority. Why don't you just tell me that we've made a muck of it, and get it over with, you sorry-assed, snotty bastard?"

Severus turned to face an enraged Narcissa. He said, "People do place their fortunes and lives at risk for what they believe."

"I don't need that, you pompous twit."

"What do you need?" he asked. "For me to get excited and yell back at you, to have a screaming match that clears the air?"

"I don't need that psychological crap, either. Can't you just say that everything's fucked up, like a real man would?"

"I don't think everything's a mess," he said. "You're keeping everything going."

"How would you know? You spend one morning looking at two shops, and suddenly you're an expert?"

There seemed to be no alternative. Severus stood and roared, "Why are you yelling at me? I'm trying to help. I didn't make one critical remark. I'm not the one who got you into this pickle."

"You don't have to shout."

"The hell I don't have to shout," he shouted. "If I don't yell back at you, you'll never calm down."

Narcissa considered the matter. "Are you going to leave me now? Now that you know I'm a bitch with a temper."

Severus stepped close, took her hand, and was suddenly behind her. She heard him whisper, "I might like that. I might like a fiery girl."

She felt possessive arms go around her and pull her close. "You're what I want." She moaned.

She felt his warm breath as he nibbled his way down her neck and nipped her shoulder through her blouse. "I want to have you." She did a slow writhe against him.

She placed her hands over his as his strong fingers took control of her breasts. "I want all of you." She leaned her head back and made small animal sounds.

He held her hands in his as they slid down her side, over to the juncture of her legs, up over her navel, and back to her breasts. "I want to take you." She brought his hands to her lips and mouthed his fingers.

His fingers massaged her temples. "You'll be mine." She leaned against him and sighed.

He nuzzled the back of her neck. "Let me have you." Narcissa bent over the desk and looked back at him fondly.

He ran his hands up and down her back. "Show me how lovely you are." She bunched her skirt around her waist.

He stroked her hair. "Show me everything." Narcissa pushed her knickers down and moved her legs till they dropped to the floor.

He looked into her bright, intelligent eyes. "Offer yourself, sweetie." She was breathing deeply; she spread her legs.

He kissed her and kissed her and kissed her. "You're lovely." Narcissa moaned as he parted her and slowly slid into her.

He moved in and out of her. "You're the girl for me." She could hear her slimy slickness.

He made the confident strokes. "Give me what I want." Narcissa groaned with his coupling.

He gripped her offered softness. "You have what I want." She began her mating slither.

He gazed at the aristocratic face. "I'm getting what I want." She was wide-eyed as he plumbed her.

He listened to her soft panting. "I like having you." Narcissa's world was turning sweet.

He enjoyed the liquid slaps of his coupling. "I'm taking you." She thought everything smelled wonderful.

He watched her fingers knead the desk. "Give yourself to me." She wanted the moment to last forever.

He stopped and held his witch. "I have you." Narcissa became aware she was having an orgasm.

"Honestly. You'd think that two people tanked with cappuccino could do better," said Harmony.

The editor nodded in agreement. "The boys are letting us down. As per usual, it's up to us. And all we have is our triple espressos from the corner shop."

"They Thall Eat Mud In The Afterlife," saith *Deus Ex Machina Caffeinarum*

"Quite," said the editor.

How easy it is, when describing intimate encounters, to overlook the quieter interludes in favor of the more lurid encounters where the fire consumes the pair, making a spectacle that is ripe for display by the wordsmith who wishes to easily capture his audience and let them, in a rush of their own emotion, imagine, often falsely, that such an all consuming conflagration can continue, when, in actuality, the bonfire quickly dies, leaving ashes, while it is really the

more somber flame that warms the relationship and reaffirms that, even if passion is less high than the moon and perhaps because it does not enter orbit, it is a devotion that remains vibrant and strong, and thus it was, after Cissy had regained some semblance of rationality after Severus's verbal and physical declaration of his longing for her, that she rose and guided him to a chair where she straddled him with a presentation of her most intimate self, took him inside her in a calm manner that proclaimed their union more fervently than any impassioned impaling could ever possibly convey, and then, with a quiet dignity born of her complete surrender, begged him with her gentle kisses to make love to her as she offered herself as best she could, which, in all honesty, might strike some of our dear readers as a feeble effort since, remaining honest, it must be confessed that Narcissa Black had arrived in the world with the soul of a reptile and an observer might well question if there was any romance at all in the flickering tongue of her kisses and the primal, undulating slither of her body, but if the spectator had been able to see into that diminished organ, she would see that it was still the heart of our own fair kind and hence, able to beat strong enough to forge a link and possibly, in this case, because her lizard heart did not completely overwhelm her reason, it combined with her higher faculties to form a union based on the wizard's acceptance of her as an intelligent and competent woman, and the steel of this link, skeptical reader, is built of two people struggling together against the world and not to be underestimated, and it is in this light that we must interpret the sincerity of Cissy's flickering kisses, murmured endearments, and sensuous slithers as she sought with all her being to entice her wizard of choice into completing the impregnation ritual of their mating, and it is in this light that we must sadly note the propensity of our poor sex, even those with a reptilian heart when their one true soul-capturing wizard is between their legs, to succumb to the act of making love to the point where the flickering nibbles can become consuming kisses, the murmured endearments can become the whimpers of lust, and the controlled slither can become the writhing of a woman lost in passion, and once again the world became sweet for our helpless heroine as she realized she was having another orgasm, but to her relief, her beloved was not unaffected and he exhibited the unmistakable grips and moves of a wizard about to complete the possession of his lady, and his lady rejoiced as he surrendered to a witch that he admired for all her qualities, a witch he accepted as an equal partner in their journey even though he viewed this last episode as the final derailment of the original plan to stay with the Black sisters only until their husbands escaped from prison, which would surely happen given the incompetence of the Ministry, and then relinquish them, and with the aid of potions, let them and their spouses spread the spores among the enemy, but he had become attached to Bellatrix as a worthy companion, who, overly dutiful as the eldest sister and misled by youthful longings, had committed crimes that a clear-headed, capable adult now regretted, and he was becoming equally attached to Narcissa with her competence, reservoir of anger, and cool manners, and he was anticipating more days of mutual effort toward worthy goals and more bouts of the intimate and satisfying nature of her subdued passion to the point of deliberately encouraging the capable and lush lady in his lap to bond with him and to the point of hoping that she felt a relationship with him would enrich her life beyond anything she could previously imagine.

"Theveruth Thnape lth A Wuth," saith *Deus Ex Machina Caffeinarum*.

"What?" said Harmony.

"Theveruth Thnape Weareth White Boxerth With Yellow Daithieth," saith *Deus Ex Machina Caffeinarum*.

"Severus Snape is a refined and worthy gentleman," said Harmony.

"Oh, dear," said the editor.

"Did you hear a funny noise upstairs?" asked Snorri.

"Naw, keep writing," said Biff.

Severus heard a shriek and ran to the house, arriving in the foyer the same time Bellatrix did.

"I told those servants to move that barrel of ice water," said Bellatrix. "Cissy, you're drenched. You're shivering so hard you can't even hold your wand for a warming spell."

Severus used his wand to dry and warm Narcissa and turned to Bellatrix. "You've been a bad witch. You deserve a spanking."

Bellatrix squeaked and ran to hide in her bedroom with Severus in hot pursuit. Narcissa decided her sister was taking everything better than anyone could expect and Severus was rising to the occasion like a true gentleman. The day with Severus had left her content as never before; she could let her sister have her fun and games and spend the night with him. Besides, sleeping together was silly, bourgeois, and dashed inconvenient. She had never condoned it before, and she didn't know what had possessed her last night. At any rate, she knew that she now had herself and the situation under control.

"You had him last. He gets to spend the night with me," Narcissa found herself saying in the reading room after dinner.

"Nonsense," said Bellatrix. "You had him today, too. I saw the look on that smug puss of yours. And he left me to spend last night with you."

"I've had to put up with your smug puss for weeks, not to mention all the noise you make while you re-enact Custer's Final Fling," said Narcissa.

"Well, your Little Swiss Miss was yodeling from the highest mountain," said Bellatrix.

"I was a proper Victorian lady, unfairly taken advantage of," said Narcissa, "and you can be his little heifer tomorrow night."

"I'm not his little heifer. I'm a thoroughly-bred thoroughbred that carries him off into his sunset," said Bellatrix. "And the fact remains that you had him last night."

"Fine, you can have him tonight," said Narcissa storming off. "He can cram his cock up your thoroughly-bred ass for all I care."

"Sing to me, O muse, of the anger of Narcissa

The crashing storm that scares the stranger,

The virulent revenge that shakes the villa

Earth-shaking, ball-busting: bits are in danger."

"Whatever are you muttering about?" asked Bellatrix.

"We've got to get this on a rational basis," said Severus.

"Why? What for? Cissy and I would die if we couldn't squabble."

It was the collateral damage that worried Severus.

"You don't think we're getting a caffeine high, do you?"

"I don't know. Brew another round, and let's see where it takes us," said Biff.

"Hello, boys," said a sultry voice.

Um, hello," said Biff. "And you are?"

"And I am? You just called me: 'Sing to me, O muse.' I heard it clearly, and here I am: A-1 muse, at your service. This was about vengeance, was it not?"

"Well," said Snorri.

"Don't tell me you invoked me for nothing," said the muse, sounding petulant.

"Um, we're getting there. We're getting there. And when we get there, we want it to be really good. That's why we called you," said Biff.

The muse's brow clouded.

"We could use your help on the way," said Snorri quickly. "After all, half the punch is in the build-up."

"I do remember the slow burn leading to Achilles's snit," said the muse. "Let's get with it. Where's the inspirational stuff?"

"The what stuff?"

"Your amphora of wine," said the muse. "By the gods, I miss getting smashed with Aeschylus. After two amphorae, I used to run through the hills under the full moon tearing apart goats, or maybe it was little boys things weren't very clear at the time."

"We have this," said Biff, trying to keep his hands from shaking as he handed her a cup of cappuccino.

She took a sip and paused. "This might tide me over. Which do you prefer, the spirit above your shoulder whispering in your ear or the more spirited lady in your lap whispering in your ear?" She smiled in remembrance. "Aeschylus was a lap type, but we haven't seen his equal in ages."

The muse skimmed the last several paragraphs. "I have sisters, too, you know."

Biff took pen in hand.

Sharp slivers of sunlight cut through the windows and then through the open door frame as the golden ray that was Padma Patil entered the bookstore.

"Hi, Biff."

He gave her a nod cooler than any darkened shadow.

The sails of her hope disappeared beneath an ocean of pain. Picking a random book off a shelf, she sank into a chair. Perhaps he was just busy, but he could have at least smiled. She had loved the way he had been smiling and saying, "Hello, Padma," but now he was cold to her, and she had no idea what she had done or failed to do. Everything had been going so well, and a serious, studious girl who once had the wind beneath her sank into a chair with her breath taken away.

At a loss for what to do, she looked at the books someone had piled on the table between her chair and an empty one: *My Sister, My Self*; *Chicken Soup for Sisters*; and *If I Am Hexed or Cursed: A Sister's Story*. An attractive, older witch returned carrying *When Blood Is Thinner than Water: The Disowning Family*. Padma decided that speaking to strangers was less painful than dwelling on her own problems.

"I have a sister, too," said Padma.

"I have two, one older and one younger," said the stranger.

"We're twins," said Padma. "We look alike, but we don't act the same."

"My sisters and I act differently, too," said the stranger.

"I'm Padma, by the way, Padma Patil. I keep wishing I could get in touch with my sister and talk the way we did when we were younger."

"I'm Andromeda Tonks, and I keep wishing the same thing."

Padma smiled at the common ground, and then it hit her who the stranger was. The shock must have shown on Padma's face because Andromeda said, "Yes, my sisters are Bellatrix Lestrange and Narcissa Malfoy, and we've become quite different."

Under ordinary circumstances, Padma might have fallen silent, but the price of not continuing this conversation was to return to the unbearable pain of dwelling on Biff snubbing her, and she said, "Do you think it's hopeless? I sometimes think it's hopeless with my sister, but my better judgment keeps telling me it's a phase. After all, we are sisters. We had so much growing up together."

Andromeda smiled sadly. "We had lots and lots growing up together all the sisterly love and hate, all the confidences and betrayals. It all seems so silly now, but I wish I could get it back."

Padma was grasping at straws, anything to keep talking to this kind lady, anything to keep from thinking about Biff. "I know this is farfetched, but our Potions master seems to be a friend of the Malfoy family. Maybe he can find out what Mrs. Malfoy thinks."

"That's very considerate of you, Padma, but it is farfetched."

"May I buy you a tea," said Padma. "I've had enough of this bookstore for a while."

Something of Padma's desperation must have come through because Andromeda gave her a quizzical look, glanced at her own selections, and said, "I agree. Bookstores can be very depressing at times."

Biff didn't know whether to be happy or sad that Padma finally left the store. His emotions had played him false, and he was attracted to someone who didn't care for him. He desperately wanted to be just be near, but her cool indifference to him was tearing him apart pretty girls have hearts made of stone.

Over tea, Padma talked about her and her sister trying to establish their own identities when they were young while, at the same time, constantly borrowing each others clothes and jewelry. Andromeda reminisced about how she and her older sister were of similar build compared to a slimmer younger sister. The two older sisters used to tease the youngest sister by having mock fights about borrowing each other's too-small lingerie while the youngest sister fumed over her undeveloped figure. Andromeda sometimes wondered if Narcissa still had a complex about it. Padma smiled at the clever baiting and agreed that they had been quite cruel.

Andromeda talked for a while about her daughter growing up alone, her recently becoming an Auror, and while she was proud of her, her inclination to volunteer for dangerous assignments.

Padma stood up. "There's Professor Snape. He's leaving the bookstore." Padma waved.

To Andromeda's surprise, based on what she knew about the cantankerous twit, Severus strolled over to the pair.

"Good morning, Miss Patil."

Andromeda stood. "Andromeda Tonks." She shook his hand. "Please join us. I hear you have been accompanying my sister."

"It's moral support," said Severus. "I merely tag along as Mrs. Malfoy audits the stores."

"That's not what I heard," said Andromeda.

"The people in the stores take me too seriously," said Severus. "They're constantly pulling me aside to give me their suggestions and complaints, hoping I'll convey them to Mrs. Malfoy in a discreet manner."

"Do you?" asked Padma, becoming fascinated by her professor's other life.

"He does very well from what I've heard," interjected Andromeda. "But do you have time for all this in addition to teaching?" she asked Severus.

Padma was thinking Andromeda was following her sister's life quite closely.

Severus was silent.

"Ah, very good, Professor, you don't want to tattle that my sister is using you and wearing you out," said Andromeda.

"I'd protest, but I can see the both of you are too clever for me," said Severus.

"He has assistants at school," said Padma.

"Yes, you told me," said Andromeda. "But my sister is very good at asking for help." She considered the situation. "Perhaps I can help at school, too. After all, even though we're estranged, you're doing my sister a favor. The Black family owes you."

"There is some extra funding, but the pay is minimal, and there may be obstacles for outsiders," said Severus.

"Are you afraid of adult women, Professor Snape?" asked Andromeda.

Padma's eyes popped open.

Severus appeared to give it some thought. "That is a hazard of the profession, too much time amongst youngsters. And protocol demands that we avoid seductresses."

"My, what a flatterer," said Andromeda. "Wherever did you get your silver tongue?"

"Academic politics," said Severus.

"Do you think your silver-tongued politics could wrangle you an adult assistant who's not preoccupied with her studies?" asked Andromeda.

Severus was thinking Andromeda Tonks might not be a pureblood snob, but she was definitely a Black sister.

Padma was nodding yes at Professor Snape. She rather liked Andromeda.

He would always wonder if he had agreed out of curiosity, a chance to observe all three of them.

Andromeda Tonks originally appeared for work early in the morning, causing Severus to conclude the entire Black family was afflicted, but she changed to the afternoon when she discovered the joys of working with Padma Patil and Hermione Granger. There was so much to talk about: families that didn't understand, sisters with different values, the shortage of eligible wizards, and officious Potions masters.

One afternoon, Andromeda appeared melancholy, and the girls persuaded her to stay for dinner at the castle. No one would notice an extra plate among hundreds of voracious teenagers. After Mrs. Tonks left, Hermione snuck Padma into her common room. There was much to talk about.

"She says her husband neglects her."

"I'm still gobsmacked. 'Stately beauty' actually applies to her."

"How did Andromeda fall into this?" asked Snorri.

"I don't know. She just dropped out of the blue like a dragon pouncing on a golden plot-point," said Biff.

"I wasn't aware we had any golden plot-points," said Snorri. "It's another witch in the brew; Harmony is going to kill us."

"No, just carve 'Hermione' on our peckers," said Biff.

"I wish you hadn't said that," said Snorri.

"Is it revenge time, yet?" asked the muse.

"Care for another round of foamy inspiration?" asked Biff.

"You can't live like this."

"Yes, I can. I found a dry cave. I have a winter's supply of smoked elk."

"You're running with the wolves and hiding from the Yellowstone Park Rangers."

Her eyes were sweeping the landscape for a small herbivore for dinner.

"A doctoral candidate at the University of Montana already has a dissertation on the change in wolf behavior. There's debate on whether it's best described as urban-pack or uber-pack."

"The wolves do seem to be doing better," she said.

The Dean of the Denver School for Magic wished her a good hunt. Half the faculty wanted to bring her in for de-hexing after her trip to England. He thought Misako Ogami had fallen in love late in life after deciding it would never happen to her. He had seen stranger behavior from smitten witches.

# The Good, the Bad, and the Elf

Chapter 7 of 9

The posse rides out and tramples the Plot Bunny.

## Chapter 7: The Good, the Bad, and the Elf

"Why are we hiding in this coffee shop?" asked the muse, sipping her espresso and watching the sun try to poke through the morning clouds.

"Rodney says the girls planned revenge, but it got out of control."

"Rodney?" asked the muse.

"That's me," squeaked the office-elf.

"Of course, revenge got out of control," said the muse. She smiled. "I sense a good plot coming."

"Yes, but the *deus ex machina caffeinarum* is coming for us," said Biff.

"Aren't you scared?" asked Snorri.

She snorted. "Who do you think created the *deus ex whatevers*?"

"At any rate, in return for his warning, we told Rodney we'd produce a tale for him," said Biff, addressing the muse. "We could use your help."

The sky outside darkened, the air inside the shop crackled, and the espresso in the muse's cup exploded into steam. "You loaned me out? I honored your invocation only to find you have no use for me?"

"No, no," said Snorri. "It's not like that, not like that at all. We have great use for you. We need you. Without you, words would fail us on an elf-story, and we would be shamed by not keeping our agreement."

"I see. I misunderstood," said the muse. "You would expend part of a divine gift to pay a debt. That is honorable."

Biff signaled the waiter to replace the muse's scorched and cracked cup with an undamaged one of the house specialty.

"We can toss a few elf-ideas around and see where they lead us," said Biff. He looked at Rodney. "What themes do elves use?"

"Elves no write."

"Let's try another tack," said Snorri turning to the elf. "What would you like to see in the story?"

Rodney grinned. "Elf is hero."

The elf grinned again. "Sex."

"We'll let that last one percolate," said Biff. "Meanwhile, our illustrious muse has been most inspirational, and we need to get a load of good stuff down on paper."

A smile played across her face as she sipped an inspired latte.

The stranger came out of the night like a prophet whose word was the gun and whose soul was on its way to a place unthinkable. His form filled the door to The Horse and The Duck before crossing the room to where the bartender automatically placed a bottle of the finest and a shot glass on the counter. His coal-black eyes flecked with red swept the occupants before settling on the poker game in the corner.

"Mind if I join?"

"Haven't seen you before, stranger," said the one with a star.

"Biff, Buffalo Biff."

"Wyatt Elf," said the one with the star.

"Doc Severson," said the gent on his left.

"They call me 'Calamity Cho,'" said the lady on his right.

"Lovely name for a lovely lady," said Biff, to the approval of the others at the table.

"Welcome to Runestone," said Calamity.

After several rounds, Biff noticed that Calamity Cho was trying to keep her eyes off the sheriff and she was playing poorly, as if distracted. He wondered how Wyatt could ignore such a noble and obviously interested lady.

"Seen the schoolmarm, today?" Wyatt asked the Doc.

"Passed by her outside the General Store and said 'Howdy,'" replied the Doc.

After several rounds, the sheriff was dealing when he glanced at the saloon door and momentarily paused. Biff inched his hand unobtrusively closer to his six-speller. He moved his head as if to stretch his neck but could only see that a primly dressed lady with a decent figure had entered and was walking toward them.



She stopped behind the Doc and placed her hands on his shoulders. "Care for some luck?" she asked.

Biff noticed that Wyatt gave a small start, and then Biff noticed that the lady was looking at him. He stood. "Buffalo Biff, ma'am."

She shook his hand. "Pansy Pinkerton." She gave the stranger a sharp look. "It's a time of change and trouble. Some types can make a lot of money. Or get themselves killed."

"Just here for a friendly game of poker, ma'am," said Biff.

"Are you telling us that you're just passing through?" asked Pansy.

"Now, Pansy," said Doc. "There's already enough turmoil in town without you interrupting our evening game."

"Lots of turmoil," said Calamity and Wyatt together.

"And out there, somewhere, is Chief Sitting Riddle," said Doc Severson.

"I never could figure that bloke out," said Pansy Pinkerton.

After a number of rounds in which Wyatt and Calamity played poorly and Miss Pinkerton beamed with the luck she was bringing Doc, Biff announced he had had a long day, gathered his winnings, and walked across the street to the hotel.

The next morning, Biff was sipping his coffee and waiting for his ham and eggs when Doc appeared.

"I think I riled up Miss Pansy last night," said Biff. "And isn't the sheriff going to join us?"

"Miss Pansy is always getting riled, and Wyatt had to ride out early to settle some trouble between miners up in Death Hollow Gulch," said Doc as the waitress brought Biff's breakfast and Doc's usual.

Doc cracked his first egg, dropped it in the first shot glass of whiskey, and tossed it down. He paused to enjoy the morning eye-opener and repeated the performance.

"Efficient," said Biff, "and it contains all the nutrients known to sustain life." He took in some ham and biscuit and sipped some coffee. "Death Hollow Gulch doesn't sound all that propitious."

Doc nodded in agreement with both statements. "I would have ridden with him, but I'm due down south, fowls and babies. Death Hollow Gulch is easy to find. Head West on the road out of town for two miles until you come to an abandoned shed with a dry water pump. Turn right and follow the trail. It's another three miles to the gulch."

"Might take a look," said Biff, finishing his coffee.

While he was saddling his horse, Biff saw Pansy Pinkerton talking to Doc. She intercepted Biff on his way out of the stable.

"Care for some lemonade, stranger?" she asked. Several buttons of her blouse had been undone, and the top of two mounds were visible. "Mite cooler inside," she said, "although it could get warmer." She propped her boot on the water trough to check its lacing. There was a flash of calf and white thigh.

"Maybe later, ma'am."

Four hours later, Biff rode back into town leading the sheriff who was slumped in the saddle. Calamity ran screaming out of the saloon, yelled at people to get a stretcher, and had Wyatt carried to her room. She insisted that Biff ride south and get the Doc. Biff fought off as unworthy the thought that he would almost be willing to change places with Wyatt.

Calamity, Doc, and Biff tended the sheriff the next three days. Biff was amused that the Doc and the dedicated lady regarded him as nearly an errand boy to send to the store for supplies. He was purchasing some bandages and canned peaches when a severe lady approached him and said, "I hear we have you to thank for saving our sheriff."

"Twern't nothing ma'am," he said.

She gave him a full, shiny eyed look. "To hear some people say it, you merely rode out and brought him back, but anyone with sense knows that outlaws don't just bushwhack a law officer and then leave without finishing him off." She paused. "Are you that good that you can rescue someone from an ambush and remain unharmed?"

"You give me too much credit, ma'am," he said.

"I don't think I give you enough. I'm the local school teacher, by the way, and if no one else here appreciates what you've done, I certainly do."

"You surely are the best looking school teacher I've ever seen," he said.

She gave him a warm smile. "Well, don't make yourself a stranger. Stop by, and help me clean the blackboards."

After that, the schoolmarm always smiled and waved to Biff whenever she saw him in the streets.

Biff was in the room when the sheriff regained consciousness and asked, "Pansy?"

"No, it's me, Biff."

The sheriff slowly nodded in recognition. Feeling as forlorn as a coyote without a moon, Biff thought about Cho and lamented how emotions played every man false.

The next day, Wyatt was well enough to talk, and Calamity, Doc, and Biff were asking if he had recognized any of the ambushers. He hadn't.

"The turmoil and trouble has begun," observed Doc.

"And out there, somewhere, is Chief Sitting Riddle," said Wyatt.

"I never could figure that bloke out," said Calamity.

"Wait till friends see this," exclaimed Rodney. "All other elves jealous." He grabbed the manuscript and vanished before the others could say anything.

"Time for a break," said Biff. He looked at the clock. "It's either late tea or early lunch."

The muse looked disappointed. "Aeschylus would take us to a wine shop after a morning of writing. Of course, he got up much earlier. But he was still a favorite among the

muses."

"All we've had is coffee," said Snorri. "I'm twitching. Do you think we can find one of those non-wizard places that serve those fancy late breakfasts?"

Biff and Snorri noticed the latte in the muses's cup was boiling.

"Just one more round," pleaded Biff. "Then we can go to my place. I stocked it with some burnt-wine, grapes, olives, and goat cheese."

"I think your bad climate dampens the human spirit," mused the muse.

Pansy Pinkerton knew she was evil and had come to terms with it, which allowed her a great freedom of action. Now, by come to terms with it, we do not imply there was an epic inner struggle for her soul, nor do we imply there was any soaring moment of epiphany, but merely a realization and acceptance combining the subjective and objective parts of her being. As unexpected as it may be to the more innocent sojourner, the major manifestation of this freedom was a natural serenity, kindness, and sense of responsibility, and this must not be mistaken for the ruse of honey drawing more flies than vinegar, but must be interpreted as a soul in cohesion flowing through life. In an effort to describe her accurately, we mustn't over-interpret this and assume she was all sweetness and light. Oh, no, she had a finely developed and strict code of ethics, and those whose crudeness or cruelty caught her eye certainly received an earful. Thus it was that she was universally admired by the better part of society who knew that adherence to rules was the best hope of mankind.

Surely, only those blessed with harmonious evil manage great achievements with the aplomb that we often believe only the idle rich have. She required the two men working in the Pinkerton Security and Arms station to be well turned out at all times. Arriving at work unshaven or with less than crisp linen earned a scolding and the directive to return to the boarding house and not return until presentable. Of course, this placed a burden on the laundry services of the boarding house, but so strict and admired were her standards that the staff of the boarding house took delight in the extra effort. Were they not contributing to the much-desired spread of civilization? Even when running contraband to the surrounding tribes, the rule was that the two men be sober, somber, and polite. The natives not being the uncouth savages of popular prejudice, but being possessed of nobility equal to the common lot of men everywhere thought the repeating rifles they received to be more powerful because of this.

(The comment about the nobility of the natives seemed sophisticated when it first popped into mind, but mature reflection reveals it to be lame. Nevertheless, it will not be struck out but left to remind the reader that the writer tries to be clever but fails. This attempt at honesty is pathetic, but it, too, will be left in.)

So deeply was harmoniousness ingrained in Pansy's being that even in what is often termed the most private of moments, she held true to her lofty standards even though in these later, and more enlightened times, not all of her criteria would withstand scrutiny, but certainly she deserves to be judged according to the views of her day. The modern lady and gentlemen might disapprove that she regarded an elf as an animated peg, but she would certainly regard the current practice of the woman herself moving the instrument of pleasure as uncouth. The properly bred member of the fair sex would no more condone self-stimulation than she would agree to couple on the steps of the village church. Yes, she adhered that strongly to her ethical standards, which can make one doubt that we have improved despite our conceited opinion that our views are better. Moreover, in accordance and in harmony with her public self how little we manage that these decadent days the elf had to appear freshly bathed and bearing a flower. Many an hour was spent by many an elf finding a blossom in that harsh climate, but it need not be spectacular. No matter how humble the offering, it received its own vase between two candles on the mantel in the bedroom. With the honored flower and the subtle candles conveying grace, her integrated being then enjoyed the most luxurious and passionate evening possible before the invention of batteries.

In contrast, Doc Severson did not accept his mean-spiritedness, which made him cantankerous. He took some pride in the fact that he was a good medical man and had saved horses and men that others would have lost. If he saw this assessment, however, he would snort, yes, snort, at the praise, and his first impulse would be to scratch it out, but he would not, you see. He would leave it to let everyone know he was guilty of vanity, and he would nurture this secret sin as it gnawed at him.

In his own assessment of himself, he regarded his persona as critical to a fault, but he did not regard this as a fault, not in the least, since he was equally critical of himself. He sometimes thought others did not acknowledge this and failed to see that he was a fair man struggling to fit into the society of others. And possibly, the key to his temperament lay within this secret judgment, which he would never admit to others and only to himself when his resolve faltered and the pain of flagrant misunderstanding provided the strength to contend. He kept silent, you see, out of spite, even when he thought a confession might make him acceptable to a kindred soul. Indeed, when others criticized him, usually for a misperceived superior attitude, he made no reply because he silently acknowledged that the fault must be his although he was thereafter cold to his accuser for some period since he himself knew of the fault and assumed it obvious to others which meant his accuser had only pointed it out to him in order to attack and ridicule him for not being like others which pained him greatly since he would have given almost anything to be able to join the camaraderie of his fellows and he regarded the jibes at his being an outsider the major reason for his avoiding others.

Naturally, his relationship with the fair sex was terrible, or it would have been terrible if he had had any at all. He noted every defect a woman had while simultaneously placing her on a pedestal as a creature above him, which is the opposite of the correct strategy of ignoring her defects while treating her in a casual manner, which can be done with style only if the male has a cavalier attitude toward all females. Paradoxically, this increased the ardor of the few women who were genuinely attracted to him. And, yes, there were such ladies, for he was superior in many ways, and is there not someone for everyone? Their augmented attraction for him did no good, however, since his past experience had taught him that he was not attractive to the opposite sex, and by the time he began to wonder if the girl really was interested and had decided to be receptive, she had given up and his decision to let himself be attracted broke his heart once again.

The schoolmarm, even though criticism was essential to her profession and often turned upon herself and hence able to grasp his nature, was halfway to despair over him. She had immediately noticed him upon her arrival, and soon tiring of the empty conversation of the other townfolk, had engaged him in discussions about his work and background. But perplexity had set in since she was certain he was as interested in her as she was in him, but he made no move to seek her company. She had begun to wonder if she had faults that only his higher level of discernment could fathom, and this caused considerable distress as she concluded that those she thought worthy were the very types to reject her a distress that was turning to anger and criticism as she reminded herself that no one was perfect and she was willing to overlook his lapses in sociability. But if anyone had put the problem to her, she would glare, yes, glare, at her would-be benefactor, for she had no intention of appearing so weak as to acknowledge a rejection, and then the interloper would be treated to her cold anger although it would be with a breaking heart since she yearned to return the kindness.

"What's this shit?" asked Harmony.

The editor recalled her course in Comparative Literature and shuddered. "It's Snorri Seversonovich Vodkaninski, and he thinks his liver is diseased."

"Are you telling me the muse confused the cowboys and the Cossacks?" asked Harmony.

The editor nodded. "I have this image of Buffalo Biff thundering across the Ukrainian wheat fields with a Winchester repeating rifle in one hand and a bottle of Smirnoff Clear-Eye in the other."

"We thought it was bad when the boys were tanked on cappuccino," said Harmony.

What a burden an honest chronicler assumes when she sets out to relate the tale of a virtuous girl who, when fighting against all odds, did occasionally perform those deeds which some believe better untold even though readers not given to unfair judgment would regard these questionable acts as evidence of the depths of despair to which our heroine had been driven and would acknowledge that these seemingly sordid episodes when viewed in proper perspective illuminate the position to which our doughty lady has climbed by her own efforts and then justly view the writer as one attempting to capture the

height, depth, and breadth of the human experience as she takes up the story of our distraught schoolmarm strolling through the lonely night with her will torn between inner urges and outer constraint the desire to weep openly about her mistreatment but restrained by a sense of decorum and the desire to confront the man who has slighted her but bound by her profession not to enter the tavern where he sits brooding and it is in this state of mind that she met Wyatt Elf on patrol, who, trying not to think about Pansy Pinkerton at this very moment in the tavern fawning over Doc Severson, literally walked into the preoccupied schoolmarm with enough force to give them both bruises, whereupon our heroine, out of both politeness and a desire for company, invited the sheriff to her cabin for a spot of tea and crumpets, which, unhinged by his own misery, he accepted with a gallant air that did lighten the heart of a fair maiden who escorted him to her dwelling, offered him a chair, put on the pot, set out the crumpets, and settled herself on the sofa as she asked him socially about his coming to this town while slowly and reluctantly admitting that she was coming to see her move here as a noble gesture that was exacting too high a price from a constitution not conditioned to rough society, and so moving was her plight that the elf could not help but move to the sofa in an effort to comfort the lady who was doing so much to bring civilization to this god-forsaken outpost, and this comforting did include his embracing the girl to which she responded with so grateful a hug that she pulled him into her lap where he was able to embrace her more comfortably as silent tears rolled down her cheeks while he made the soothing noises that any decent individual would provide, and it was during this interlude of commiserating that, despite his desperate attempts at virtue, he could not but notice the soft and firm mounds against his chest and the promise of the shapely lap under him, and this caused him to begin a gentle nuzzle, which, in her current depressed state, was soothing enough to our noble scholar that she sighed, wrapped her arms around him, and began a slow weave with her torso that brushed her hardening nipples against the accommodating companion in her lap until her breathing became noticeable and her head tilted back and she did not really notice that his hands were now cupping her breasts as her breathing became heavier, and she did not mind as his lips brushed over her blouse-covered nipples and his fingers undid the buttons, and she was moaning with the pleasure of it as he removed her bra and fastened upon her lovely breasts with a wild hunger until an ache built that caused her to guide his hand down to the juncture of her thighs where she felt his hand continue of his own volition down her wool covered leg and under her skirt whereupon he slid off her lap in order to inch his fingers up the inside of her knees, which were slowly parting as she arranged herself on the sofa so that he could lift the lady's skirt and let her present him with a view of the soft and warm flesh of her thighs which she let him spread until his eyes fairly popped out as her legs opened to reveal a smooth expanse of satin filled to roundness by a human female and his nostrils flared as he caught the whiff of her female need which sent him so quickly beyond rational control that she barely registered his quick removal of her impeding garment and an equally quick placement of his member at her heretofore secret place although she heard his, "Is Missy ready?" which she was not able to answer because the shock of his impaling the most unsightly and most compelling entity ever viewed by elf caused her to arch her back and moan with heretofore unknown desire, a desire she knew was caused by the Devil himself, that nevertheless grew and grew as she wiggled for the earnest elf between her legs until it seemed that no mortal frame could bear this hellish bliss, and indeed, none could, and as the male of the hour gave full measure to a species of female notorious for both its ugliness and its enthusiasm, she fulfilled all expectations with a busyness that belayed her normal stern demeanor and grew in intensity while her benefactor reveled in the fulsome feel of the grotesque-looking creature whose soft body strained against his in the throes of copulation until the ill-favored but still irresistible lady gave the lust-graced elf a smile as helpless as her writhing, which was followed in quick succession by her becoming slimy slick, her crying out, and her rhythmic clenching as her spirit soared, her world blanked out, and her ravisher grinned from ear to ear as he savored the much-sought convulsions of a human witch until the reek of her surrender filled his nostrils, and that, as generations of elves could have told him, caused his small body, wedged between her ample thighs, to jerk uncontrollably and have its moment deep in the luscious abundance of the now doe-eyed scholar, and their combined release oozed out of the schoolmarm's sin, flowed over the schoolmarm's still-contracting pucker, and ran like the river to Hades down the crack of the schoolmarm's bum as two tattered, lonely, wild individuals made the wet spot of lust on a tattered sofa in a lonely cabin on the wild frontier.

## Reversals and Recognitions

Chapter 8 of 9

The plot bunny tries to soar, but is aerodynamically unstable.

### Chapter 8: Reversals and Recognitions

"Ouch."

Harmony limped into the room, favoring her right big toe.

"Don't kick the *Deus*, dear," said the editor, "unless you want it to recover from its coma. And it's likely to be angry."

"It called Severus a wuss," said Harmony.

"Yes. And then you pulled your wand on it, and we were all in for it."

"How did you know to hose it down?" asked Harmony.

"I didn't. I turned the fire hose on it because I couldn't think of anything else to do. It slipped on the wet floor and bumped its head. But that's the least of our worries. We have a story to continue."

"The boys have got us into a real pickle with the plot," said Harmony.

"Nothing a little writing talent can't get us out of," said the editor. "Get your tools, and let's brainstorm."

Harmony dashed to her office to fetch the flip chart and colored pencils.

The problem, neatly captured by several colored lines, was getting the story back on track whilst integrating the plot lines in a manner that was clear to the reader. The editor watched as the solid lines first became dashed and farther apart, but then slowly grew in thickness and strength until they converged at a solid purple hexagon.

Harmony grabbed her quill and parchment. "We'll show those caffeinated prats they aren't the only ones who can write adventure."

The editor nodded. "Short, terse sentences, dear. And remember, bring the story lines together."

Misako Ogami and the uber-pack of wolves, on their way to Runestone, slipped through Chief Sitting Riddle's territory as unobtrusively as a ghost gliding by a symposium of logical positivists.

*I never could figure him out,* thought Misako.

Several hundred miles to the south, things were returning to normal at The Horse and The Duck as the wounds healed and they all celebrated the arrival of a wagonload of bonded sherry.

Several thousand miles to the east, things were returning to normal.

"You're going to the masked ball of course," said Dumbledore, entering the lab after the last class had left.

His eyes twinkled like lemon drops dunked in cognac as he added, "Both the Black sisters should be full of spores by now repeatedly injected, we might say performed with vigor and sacrifice made possible only from devotion to our cause by a hero dipping into the very pit of evil and exposing himself to seductive charms whose embrace ..."

"Sir," said Severus.

"Yes," said Dumbledore, "we mustn't get carried away. It is for the Black sisters to be carried away, satisfying the hungers of evil doers who would tear the garments of decency from our social fabric and pervert the body public with lusts that penetrate to the core of all we hold dear and, under the mask of a crusade, perform such unspeakable acts that ..."

"Okay, okay, I'll go," said Severus.

Dumbledore gave him an inquiring look.

"And take the Black sisters with me," added Severus.

Dumbledore gave him an entreating look.

"And I'll make a full and detailed report," finished Severus.

After the Headmaster had left, Severus turned to discover that Andromeda had heard everything.

"There's no need to tell me it's not what I think it is," she said. "Thank the gods I'm on the side of goodness and light."

"Quite," said Severus.

When Severus arrived at the Manor the evening of the masquerade ball, he expected the women to be either dressed in high-fashion outfits that made no sense or decked out as tarts whose behavior would be an embarrassment. Instead, they wore ensembles that flowed and brought out their class and mature femininity brought it out to the point that no male could maintain decorum in their presence. *Bloody indecent, that's what it is,* he thought.

But Severus was familiar with the two Black sisters. An occasion that would awe most of the wizardry world was another event to them. He had seen the telltale signs, and he had his hand on his wand and ready when Narcissa tripped over a previously absent bump and was falling toward a mud puddle. He had her levitated and safe in an eye blink. He performed a numbing and soothing charm when Narcissa began smirking and Bellatrix began scratching her crotch as if it itched horribly. In the carriage, on their way to the ball, Severus sat between the two sisters.

When they arrived, Severus looked around the room converted to a dance hall. It was the ideal time to set the infection-plan into motion. He thought about the two Black sisters, their caution and defenses stripped away by the effects of the potion he could easily slip into their drinks. He imagined an eager group promising to provide Bellatrix with her favorite entertainment and, when she was secured, laying her flesh open to the bone. He imagined an enthusiastic gang luring Narcissa to a private place with offerings of admiration and dumping her, broken and bleeding, in a corner after they had used her. The spores would spread like leaves on an autumn lawn.

A young swain approached the table, bowed, and said, "I would be greatly honored if either of you lovely ladies would care for a dance."

Bellatrix and Narcissa looked at Severus.

"A gentlemanly and gracious offer," said Severus. "I'm heartened that good manners rule the evening, and I will not have to confront anyone about a lapse in courtesy."

The young swain blanched but held his ground. Narcissa stood and led him through a waltz. When she returned to her table, she and her sister watched the young man spread the word about Snape while Severus appeared not to notice anything.

Later, on his way to the punch bowl, Severus passed the Dark Lord who indicated he wished a word.

"Good performance, Severus," said the Dark Lord. "I can't say I agree with protecting grown women who should watch out for themselves, but overlooking the weak pretence, you did establish yourself among the gathering."

Severus acknowledged the compliment and proceeded to the refreshment table.

He was formulating his speech to Dumbledore.

"I don't know what went wrong, sir," he would say. "The two women were primed and ready to go, but no one approached them. I can only imagine that the more daring of the Dark Lord's servants have run afoul of their own bravery and those left are too intimidated to show initiative."

"Hmm," Dumbledore would say.

"I suppose it's my fault, sir," Severus would explain to Dumbledore. "I only used enough potion to make them receptive. More potion would have made them aggressive, but the behavior change would have likely triggered alarms. It's been a paranoid crowd since the last round of arrests. Nevertheless, I blame myself for the failure, sir."

"You did what you thought was best, Severus," Dumbledore would say. "It would have been foolish to act rashly and expose our stratagem. We'll have other opportunities."

Severus looked up from the punch bowl to see Bellatrix and Narcissa smiling at him from across the room. How do women do that?

They were two hypocrites each presenting herself as a dutiful wife pining for her absent husband while carrying on a sordid, kinky affair that was healing one powerful witch and keeping her from tormenting the populace and that was sustaining another powerful witch and letting her manage a source of capital for the benefit of the wizard world. They were prejudiced people supporting a program of hate whose cool reason and selfish concern for their own welfare were curbing the excesses and channeling the activities into good works with a future payoff of gratitude. They were cold and cruel aristocrats whose demanding emotional needs were nourishing his spirit and giving him a center of caring he had never enjoyed before. He would stomp them underfoot. But not so fast.

He brought their drinks and danced with them in turn. There was the full figure of Bellatrix with its athletic firmness and the lithe form of Narcissa with its inviting softness. They seemed even lovelier in their formal wear since he knew everything underneath the elegant gowns. They circulated among the other

guests like two queens. He put it out of his mind that he did not even bring the potion that would induce their wanton behavior.

When the evening affair ended, Severus resumed his active role as chaperone. Contrary to chivalry, he entered the carriage first after directing the younger sister to the other side. He lent a helping hand as each sister entered, keeping himself between them.

On the return trip, he concluded he was right to postpone things. Bellatrix deserved another spanking for her crimes. Justice must be allowed to run its full course. Narcissa deserved a penance of helping society prosper in payment for her past transgressions, and her penance could include the extra mile of expressing gratitude to a competent partner. Severus knew the quality of mercy must not be strained. And it needn't be rushed either. He was seeing himself in a new light: the dispenser of justice, mercy, and other delights of the human soul. *Everyone should try hubris*, he thought.

Severus felt the air crackle. "Up! Up! Grab your brooms!"

He kicked the door of the carriage open and the three tumbled out in disorganized flight. The carriage exploded in an orange ball as a curse hit it. From behind a concealing bush, a witch flung hexes at the Black sisters. Bellatrix screamed, and her right arm hung useless as blood soaked her sleeve. Narcissa groaned as her ribs cracked and the wind was knocked out of her. Severus roared in fury, and flung a wide area curse that knocked the ambushing witch off her feet. He looked up in time to see a huge bat descending upon him, and then he was engaged in a ferocious struggle to keep the vampire away from his throat.

Yelling Severus's name, Bellatrix flew behind the vampire and wrapped her good arm around its throat. The impact yanked her off her broom, and she and the vampire plummeted toward the ground as the vampire twisted and its teeth shredded her arm from the shoulder to the elbow. Severus dived after Bellatrix which saved him from a curse from an aerial wizard that would have incinerated him. Severus managed to grab Bellatrix, and the two stopped in mid-air, but she lost her grip on the vampire which bounced once on the ground before springing back into action. It went for Severus while ignoring Bellatrix, never a good idea. She leaped on its back and drove her wand into its heart.

Meanwhile, after Severus's spell had flung the attacking witch away from the concealing bush, Narcissa spotted her and aimed a flurry of hexes. One lucky curse tore the ambusher's shoulder open and sent her wand flying into the night, and another struck her in the hip, taking her down. She began crawling away, leaving a trail of blood. Narcissa was running to join Severus and her sister when a curse from the aerial wizard knocked her into the ditch and broke her arm. Narcissa used her good arm to pull herself out of the ditch, and the three hurled spells at the aerial wizard.

Seeing that his partner was going to survive and deciding it was better to appear heroic, Biff swooped down, grabbed Hermione and her wand, and flew to the store where he patched her wounds and selected the healing potions.

A few moments after Bellatrix, Narcissa, and Severus arrived at the Manor, the sisters summoned two medical wizards.

When the medical wizards left, Bellatrix asked, "Who was that?"

No one knew.

By various small signs, it was obvious that the two witches did not want to separate for the evening and they expected Severus to stay with them. "We'll heal better." They checked the wards and alarms and ensconced themselves under the covers. He gave a small start at their icy toes, but they snuggled until their cold feet were wrapped around his and becoming toasty warm.

As the feet go, so goes the heart.

The two warm-hearted sisters spent the week refining and expanding his inventory spell. When he reappeared Friday evening, they pestered him to block out more spells for them. They had a number of ideas but were waiting for his visualization and organizational skills.

"Why are you even bothering, Bella?" asked Narcissa as her sister worked on a new enchantment.

"Come on, Cissy, don't you want to be a little evil?"

"This is pointless. Okay, so the lending establishments adopt this bookkeeping spell, and every time an interest payment is made and there's a fraction of a knut, the spell rounds up for the borrower, rounds down for the lender, and the knut drops into our account."

"Isn't that clever? It was in a book Severus brought me."

"It's a good scheme for the non-wizard world where they handle millions of transactions a day. What will it get us, a galleon a day, two galleons a day? You spend more than that on a bottle of wine."

"Oh, Cissy, you've lost the thrill of the chase."

In the following weeks, Severus earned some respite by supplying them with new volumes from the bookstore. Narcissa immersed herself in Thucydides while Bellatrix devoured the Icelandic Sagas. Severus concluded that both women were fascinated by reluctant heroes borne to their doom by social forces beyond their control.

The editor was proud of their action sequence. She wanted to show it to Biff, and she wished Biff would get over his current ultra-dedicated phase. It was great he was writing like a fiend, but a missed deadline could be taken in stride. Her imagination soared as she invented wicked schemes that would cause a dedicated man to share the cappuccino machine and miss a deadline. Miss a deadline!? She was checking her pulse when she heard a commotion in the hall.

"It's the *Deus*," cried the editor. "Come on, Harmony, we can't let it hurt Biff and Snorri."

Harmony was thinking that's why they conjured it, but now was not the time to argue. The two witches stood in its path, gripped their wands, and hurled the spells they had practiced.

"Percolator!"

"Artificial Whitener!!"

Blue sparks sprang from the monster's fingertips. "Your artheth are grath."

"Thod off," yelled Harmony, "I mean ..."

There was an ominous rumbling.

The two flung their final curses with every fiber of their being.

"Instant Coffee!"

"Freeze! Dried!! Crystals!!!"

There was a final "Crack!" as the floor under *Deus Ex Machina Caffearum* exploded and left a hole with charred-wood edges.

"I had forgotten there was a basement," said the editor, rushing to the opening and looking in. "Do you think that's where the boys hid the cappuccino machine?"

"What about *Deus*?" asked Harmony.

"Oh, right," said the editor, looking again. "Nope, no sign of it either."

Several rooms away from the smoking hole, Snorri looked up from the manuscript that Biff had just filched from the editor's office. "Did you hear something?"

"Naw, keep writing."

Snorri returned to the narrative. "We'll show those daft bints they aren't the only ones who can write romantic mush."

Biff nodded. "Remember, old bean, long, flowery sentences."

Even though some moments in life are awkward and are painful to live through, think what a strain depicting these events must be for the author who has reached such a critical point in the ongoing saga and who must now struggle to present the scene in a way that the reader feels every tense moment and thought of the characters but in a manner that the text flows smoothly enough that one is propelled through the crisis in an exhilarating rush that lifts the spirit, and it is in this spirit that the narrator can only ask for the readers' sympathetic understanding for what follows since by fickle fortune, the joy and burden of writing this episode has fallen upon poor little me.

It is well-known that reconciliation is most efficacious when it occurs by accident since if one party enters into it deliberately, the elaborate constructions and arguments that have accumulated in the mind, not to mention the distraction of determination, leave the well-intentioned party less able to respond effectively to the opportunities of the moment and to the entreaties of the other party who is often desperate to present their side of the story with the expectation that, once they are understood, it will be realized that no harm was intended and all their acts were justified to the extent that any misunderstanding was merely a temporary rent in the fabric of the relationship, and it is with this knowledge in full display that the next train of events unfolds.

It was in an agitated state of mine that Padma entered the bookstore early on a Sunday afternoon, carrying her briefcase full of school texts both as an excuse for not studying in her dorm and as a symbolic shield that gave her an object upon which to focus during any strained social moment and, with heart pounding, acknowledging the greeting from Biff who was behind the counter as she proceeded to the stacks where she pretended to pick out several relevant volumes which she carried to the table and chairs that cried out to her to sit before her knees gave out from nervousness and where she deposited the chosen volumes in a heap before she retrieved a textbook from her briefcase and tried hard to concentrate on it while she worried about the propriety of her current actions to the point that she was startled when Biff appeared to offer her a cup of tea which she accepted with such a show of gratitude that he nodded and smiled in return which only caused her heart to beat faster and made it even more difficult to extract anything from the jumble of words that comprised her assignment, and it was in this anxious frame of mind that she gulped down the offered cup and several more before she experienced the inevitable physiological consequences of consuming copious amounts of tea and then experienced the embarrassment of asking directions to the necessary to which she retired certain that her actions had ruined all her chances.

She returned and plunked down in a blue funk comprehensible only to those privy to the depths of emotion that run through seemingly abstracted intellectuals, but while she was staring out in the window in despair, Biff arrived with a pot of tea and a plate of biscuits, announced that he needed a break, and asked if he could join her, a request to which she managed to nod yes, whereupon he poured the tea and commented on her studiousness, and this interest prompted her to say that it was not possible to study at school since it was all abuzz with the rumors of an attack the previous evening that included an exploded carriage and, some asserted, involved a professor to which he agreed that rumors could be wild and it was best to wait for confirmation, but in the meantime, perhaps she could quiet her mind for the arduous academic week ahead by some light reading that was appropriate for these troublesome times since the novel he had in mind was about some infamous army that had been written in a turbulent period when her countrymen could profit from being reminded of past achievements made possible by courage and this novel was in the section of romances that could be rented, and when after reading the first several chapters, she wished to take a break she discovered that Biff had completed the day's bookkeeping and seemed eager to reminisce about the small events of their lives, and it was thus that several hours after she had arrived, Padma felt not only reconciled with the wizard that she held dear, but sought after by him since he had invited her to stop in often, offering the feeble excuse that people attract people and having her in the store would encourage others to drop in.

"Writing this drek is hard if you're not an air-head," complained Snorri.

"I know," said Biff, picking up his quill. "Take a break for a while."

Unknown to the couple, the reconciliation was witnessed by Hermione Granger who had left her dorm to question Biff. She had participated in the ambush to capture the Snape simulacrum alive, but Biff had used deadly force, and he hadn't mentioned the vampire either.

After Padma left, Hermione watched Biff start to put away the teacups. Hermione was debating whether or not this would be a good time to confront him when Biff stopped to listen. It seemed someone was knocking on the bookstore door. When Biff opened it, Padma flung herself into his arms. She was clutching him and crying. He recovered enough to hold her.

She was giving him a melancholy, pleading look. He kissed her on the tip of her nose. His lips caressed her face before moving to her lips where she responded shyly and then gladly and finally with devouring enthusiasm. She began to weave in his embrace.

Hermione watched Padma's knees buckle and saw her slowly slide to the floor. She watched Padma pull Biff down with her. They were lying side by side with her arms around him and his lips flowing over her face and neck. His hand moved from her waist to cup a blouse-covered mound. Padma made a feeble effort to move the hand fondling her breast, but after a few seconds, she was arching her back to press both breasts into him. He was nuzzling the inviting mounds. He began unbuttoning her blouse. Once again, she made a feeble effort to stop him, but he continued, and her hands dropped to her side. When he kissed the skin above her bra and then moved to the covered nipples, she sighed, and her arms went around him. She was shaking her head no as he unfastened her top garment and her full and lovely breasts fell out. Hermione watched Padma sigh and tilt her head back as his lips tended the dark peaks.

Biff's lips moved from one erect nipple to its sister as his hand traveled from her breast to her waist and then across her skirt, gripping her hips and feeling the shape of her legs. When his hand slipped under her skirt, Padma pressed her legs together and raised her knees. Her hand went to stop his, but he shifted to kissing her legs just above her knees. His lips and tongue grazed the top of her thighs as her skirt fell away to expose more golden skin. Padma's impeding hand dropped to the floor, and her knees parted as Biff enjoyed his way up her inner thighs. Hermione watched his eyes feast on his lady's charms.

Biff was lying beside Padma and assuring her of her loveliness and his devotion as his hand again and again played it way up her legs and across the smooth fabric covering her sex. When the motions of her body began to reciprocate, he took her hand and placed it on the bulge in his trousers. She pulled it away, but he spoke more encouraging words and moved it back to hold it there. Hermione watched Padma's eyes turn shiny and her hand explore the fascinating shape.

Biff produced his wand and placed it on the inside of Padma's knee. Hermione was thinking it must be vibrating because Padma gasped as the instrument moved from one leg to another on its delicious way to her center. Padma's face displayed more and more pleasure as the wand repeated the journey. Padma's head tilted back and her mouth opened to make a sound Hermione was glad she couldn't hear as the wand settled in the cotton-covered crevice. Hermione watched the pleasure spread through Padma's whole being. Padma was holding her wizard and rolling her hips as his wand had its way with her. Rolling her hips became a whole-body squirm. More and more intense. Hermione saw Padma's face turn feral. Padma became rigid as her thighs squeezed

together.

Biff was talking to a lush golden-skinned girl, running his fingers through thick raven hair and persuading her until she nodded in agreement. Padma reached down, raised her hips, and removed her knickers to reveal a wild bush of curly black hair. Biff was in position with his hands on top of hers. Something more wonderful than a wand parted the tawny folds of the doe-eyed girl. Padma's face became soft. The interconnected bodies moved together.

Hermione saw Padma's look of acceptance as Biff's sperm swam through her.

As they left, Biff held Padma for a loving embrace before taking her hand and escorting her back to the castle.

"Great action scene," said Biff as the editor seated herself at his table.

She thought the day had gone rather well and had decided to treat herself to a sherry at a pub that featured live music. When she walked in, she had spotted Biff, and almost involuntarily, she had walked over to him.

"Thanks," she said, reaching to hold his hand. As she sipped her sherry, she thought about telling him that he and Snorri had done a wonderful job of getting Hermione away from Biff and ready to partner with Severus, but the text had left her a bit shy. She recalled their encounter several days ago when she had cried the first time she had sat in Biff's lap. She had been feeling embarrassed, but Biff had remembered and had given it a beautiful treatment in the Padma narrative. Now, holding hands with Biff made her breasts feel tingly.

"That Wild West chapter may have lost us some readers, but it's outrageous enough that no one can claim we're copying some secret document," said Biff.

They relaxed, feeling safe for the first time in several weeks. The editor told Biff about her adventures with Harmony and the colored pencils. Biff commented that they still had a muse getting impatient for a dramatic revenge climax. They listened to the music and enjoyed each others' company. They did not notice the dark stranger walk in and seat himself behind them.

"Don't look behind you," they heard someone say.

They froze. "You two really take chances," they heard.

"We have no secret manuscript," said Biff.

"Then how do you explain the Wild West episode? No one would write that if they didn't know the secret history," said the voice. There was a pause before the hidden stranger said, "I hope whatever you're getting out of this is worth what it's going to cost you."

They heard the scraping of a chair and a rustle as the stranger left by the back door.

"Oh, Biff," said the editor.

He was lost in thought. He finally said, "Wild West, Americans, wolves, Indians."

"And vampires," she added. When he looked puzzled, she said, "They've appeared several times, and Snorri did write like a Slav."

"We'll figure it out," said Biff, "but I keep thinking we're overlooking an obvious clue, something important."

## Feathering the Nest

*Chapter 9 of 9*

A nest of vampires suck the life out of the plot bunny. It dies.

### Chapter 9: Feathering the Nest

"Oh bury me not on the lone prairie,

Where the coyote howls and the wind blows free."

"Aargh."

"We're leaving the prairie behind."

"Whose idea was this, anyway?"

"We decided to look for the Blood Mountains."

"There're lots of bloody mountains ahead."

"*The Blood Mountains.*"

"Do you have your vampire disguise ready?"

"Look, 'Tacos, Next Exit,' about eight miles."

???

"Aren't you going to have Hermione kill Padma in a fit of jealousy?" protested the Muse. "Think of how exciting it will be to write about the resulting bloodbath of retribution

as Padma's relatives join the game. Or think of the poetry you could create as that two-timing bookstore owner has a moment of self realization. You could let his anguish over the strife he has created drive him to heroic deeds until his transformed self is destroyed in a cathartic cataclysm."

The two wizards shook their head no. "We can't have mayhem back at the school if this story is going to work."

The Muse brightened. "Okay, you can have Hermione castrate the double-dealing book dealer. Think of the gut-wrenching scene when his raven-haired beauty waltzes into the store to be with her beloved only to discover his separated bits in the display case for rare volumes. You could write volumes. Wait, Padma might be so insensitive as to create a scene at school."

"That's true," said Biff. "School girls are notoriously emotional."

"Besides," said Snorri, "the editor thinks we've already pushed Hermione too close to the edge for a romantic heroine."

"Romance!" thundered the Muse. She drew herself to her full height. "To Hades with that syrupy nonsense. It's power and lust and bravery and betrayal." Her eyes narrowed. "You agree don't you?"

"Yes, yes," said Snorri. "We're with you on power and bravery."

"Then have the Black sisters track down the ambusher," said the Muse. "I know they'll be worthy. Think of the descriptive passages they'll inspire as they gouge eyeballs and rip out entrails." Her eyes began to shine. "It might push the two of you to the heights of Aeschylus."

"We were thinking of working up to the major themes by way of some lust and betrayal," said Biff.

"You two are no fun," pouted the Muse.

"She's right," said Snorri. "We don't have enough bad-asses."

"Even the *Deus Ex Machina Caffeinarum* thought Severus was a wuss," said Biff. He had a thought. "Perhaps we could write Harmony into the story."

"Or the editor," suggested Snorri.

Biff shuddered.

"We need inspiration," they said. They looked at the Muse. "But not too much. Maybe if you juiced up the cappuccino machine?"

"It will give us an edge over the girls," observed Snorri.

Thick air, flying sparks, enunciated words, sizzling electrical cords. Biff and Snorri approached the scorched implement and drew a cup. They sipped the foamy essence of bad-ass prose and smiled. Evil has a kick.

"What's that?"

He gave a small start that caused his quill to leave a streak of ink across the parchment. He quickly crumpled it and threw it in the trash bin.

"Bloody hell, woman, can't you make some noise when you enter a room?"

"I suppose I could stumble over the cracks in the stone floor," said Andromeda.

*Another imperturbable Black sister*, thought Severus.

He told her that he was trying to apply Arithmancy to Potions but he was running into nonlinear transformations, and after he said that, he realized he would have to tell more lies to cover up this one, which led him to say that, despite her offer of help, he intended to take a break from the rigors of similarity classes.

She replied that her uncle was a good Arithmancer but the demands of the discipline made him a grouch too an observation that did not have the soothing effect on Severus that one might think it would.

Andromeda scanned the syllabus for the week's classes in Potions and proceeded to the storeroom to check the supplies. As she worked, Severus considered a modification of the Headmaster's suggestion to infect Miss Granger with the spores and stake her out for the Death Eaters. Perhaps Mrs. Tonks would like to take an active role in the fight against evil. It would begin with her declaring to see the light about preserving blood purity, continue with reconciliation with her family, and conclude with her being accepted into the folds of the opposition. It was bloody brilliant, but it had the snag of infecting Mrs. Cool-and-Disdainful.

"Good afternoon, Professor," said Miss Granger on her way through the lab to join Mrs. Tonks in the storeroom.

He returned the greeting and returned to his project. Bellatrix and Narcissa were exemplary women, but the scheme to use them to spread spores was not working, and they had husbands who would certainly learn of his involvement if he did not end the relationships soon. He was considering becoming covertly involved with other wives of the opposition. He wondered which of them were dissatisfied with their husbands, and he wondered if he should begin by sending them notes as a secret admirer. He had been working on such a note when Mrs. Tonks had rudely snuck up on him.

There was a cry and the sound of glass shattering from the storeroom. *They're usually not that clumsy*, he thought. He heard quiet sobbing, followed by soothing noises. He concluded that Miss Granger had received only one hundred percent on some essay and Mrs. Tonks was comforting her. He also reflected that he was losing control over his student assistants to Mrs. Tonks. *Perhaps we should have girls' dorms and boys' dorms with Dorm Mothers and Big Brothers*, he thought.

He tried going back to his latest project, but all he could think of was his dismal life: three and a half decades of being unwanted, being an outcast, and being alone. The brightest thing in his existence was the relationship with the two Black sisters, but that was based on failed treachery. Now, his social efforts were focused on creating more counterfeit unions that he hoped would come to nothing once their purpose was served.

"Aha, we've found it," said the editor. "I told you we could raid the basement while the boys were out to lunch."

Harmony picked up the cappuccino machine. "The last act of *Deus* was to point us to it, an act of divine inspiration."

"Then his passing was a noble one," said the editor, "and he passed the inspiration to us."

Harmony glanced at the manuscript on their way back upstairs. "More battered psyche junk. Snorri is reading too much Batman."

After interminable dithering by the male component of the species, how pleasant it is to write that the task was accomplished by a heroine who demonstrated both intelligence and courage, for who else, other than one of the gentler kind, could, on slim evidence and against opposition, pick up the scattered pieces and knit them together, and her efforts began with the simple expedient of retrieving and reading the only piece of parchment in the trash bin that was



crumpled, thus exhibiting a keen instinct for ferreting out what people wished to remain hidden, a talent that would serve her and her cause well in the coming drama.

"You're not writing secret love letters to students, are you?" asked Andromeda, confronting Severus.

There was a momentary shock from this accusation out of the blue, but as he recalled the incidents of yesterday, it dawned on him what had happened. "Most certainly not," he replied. "Can I take it that Miss Granger's distress was not due to an insufficiently high mark on an essay? And can I take it that you are snooping into my private affairs?"

"Parchment in a school trash bin is not a private affair," she asserted, "and of course, her distress was over some male. Who else wounds us so?"

"I could point out that I obviously prefer mature women, but I'm treading on a mine field if I mention that to you," he said. "Perhaps a better defense would be to ask if your eagle eye and your deep concern for female students have noticed any impropriety on my part."

"My deep concern. Oh great, now I'm accused of mothering them. I'm not just a mother."

"It seems I've stepped into another mine field," he said.

"Your sympathetic act and your accusing me of being touchy are not going over well," she said.

"Then I shall get huffy and say you have no right to question any of my actions, and if you want to continue this conversation, you will have to follow me to the professors' lounge since it is time for our afternoon tea. It is the end of another day of dealing with students, and none of us miss the chance to unwind. You will have me at a disadvantage since I will be relaxed and, after a fatiguing day, no longer able to keep my guard up. Also, the elves will be plying us with excellent tea along with scones, strawberries, and clotted cream, which will reduce my resistance while giving you renewed energy to pry into my dirty secrets."

"You're a sly devil, you know," she said.

Oh, what a mix human emotions are even in the most ordinary circumstances, and these circumstances were far from ordinary as Severus escorted Andromeda to the instructors' lounge and introduced her to the few professors who had not met her, for despite her initial assumption that she was an adult who had experienced the world in contrast to instructors who had remained in the scholastic cocoon, she had discovered they were highly skilled professionals who led a more varied life than one would think possible given the persona they had to present to the students, and since this was her first visit to their private enclave, she was both curious and nervous while being suspicious about Severus's activities, angry at him for dodging her questions, and grateful to him for bringing her and graciously introducing her to those present, and on Severus's part, he was annoyed by her accusations, fearful of her learning too much, and proud to seen with an attractive woman, and as the tea proceeded and Andromeda circulated and earned him envious glances from the male instructors, his annoyance and fear dissipated to leave him with a contented feeling, especially when it became clear that Andromeda favored his company, whereupon he concluded that the elves must have put something in the strawberries.

"I've reconsidered," said Andromeda after the other instructors had left to grade essays and she and Severus found a quiet corner in the lounge. "My daughter thinks highly of you and believes you're working against the Dark Lord. You must be planning some subtle subterfuge."

"I'm glad you changed your mind," he said.

"But this isn't over," she added. "I'm tired of being on the sidelines. Whatever you're doing, I'm certain I can help. I insist."

"It's a delicate affair," he said, "and certainly not one for a refined lady."

"I knew you would come around and let me help," she said.

Before our beleaguered professor could protest that she had completely misunderstood his last statement, the lady leaned in and planted a thank-you kiss on his forehead, and we can only guess at their surprise when this gesture intended to be innocent sent a shock through them that seemed to reverberate through the entire lounge, and it was in this state of giddiness that she planted a less innocent one technique be damned, her heart was in it and after that smackeroo, the wizard had to shift to hide an embarrassment that had popped up like a rude country-cousin at a refined tea.

*Definitely something in the strawberries,* he thought.

"Now," she said, "tell me what I need to do to help."

"Harmony," said the editor, "I have to go out for some scouring powder. The boys have made a total mess of our cappuccino machine."

Harmony followed the editor back to the editor's office, looked at the machine on the desk, and said, "It looks scorched. What did they do?"

The girls stared mournfully at the device and decided they needed a tea break to fortify themselves before beginning. When they returned, Harmony found Snorri reading her latest effort.

"Are you certain you want to use Andromeda? Isn't she a canon good witch?" he asked.

"It'll be high drama," said Harmony, "She reaches the heights of anguish as she struggles to overcome her deeply held moral code to make the supreme sacrifice for the greater good."

"Hmm," said Snorri.

"She finally comes to a decision and tells Severus that she's willing to shag every Death Eater that crosses her path," said Harmony.

"Girls can't say things like that."

"I'm not a girl. I'm a writer."

"I know that. I was talking about your character."

"Oh," she said. "I thought you were being sexist."

"Weren't you upset when Hermione was seduced?"

"That's different, and since you're so smart, I'll let you write this section. I'll help the editor clean the machine you and Biff destroyed."

"That'll be easier than salvaging the mess you've made of this story," said Snorri.

"Oh yeah, just because I wrote something so original that you can't plagiarize a comic book to match it doesn't mean the story is in a hole," said Harmony, gabbing a handful of colored pencils. "Get out of the way and let a real writer do her work."

"You don't have to like me," said Andromeda. "You don't even have to pretend you like me."

*Bloody hell, thought Severus. I may not get out of this alive.*

One can imagine how much confusion such a frank and honest statement from our heroine of the hour would create in the mind of a typical male companion not used to reading or caring about any clue as to the emotional state of those often asked to bear a greater share of life's travail, and would it not be doubly so in this case when one of the kind-hearted has quietly and with great dignity accepted a task that had repeatedly proved itself beyond the capacity of the more rugged of the species, and even more confusion was generated when the one on whom the burden should have fallen had hesitantly explained the nature of the spores and, instead of receiving a return blast of indignation, had received a merciful show of understanding for his less than honest interactions with the heroine's sisters and also had received an immediately conceived plan since, in accord with her warm nature, the dutiful lady had agreed to watch over a friend's cats and plants while the friend visited her mother for the weekend, and she had announced that she could stay at the friend's house on the excuse of convenience thus creating a perfect opportunity for the transference of the spores, about which some would hold it too delicate to reveal, but using the courage of our determined lady as an avatar to which a timid writer can only aspire, the narrator will attempt an unadorned account of our lady greeting her reputedly equal partner at the door with the gallant affirmation of understanding and intent that is recorded above, and despite his poor response to such poise, she exhibited such solicitude for his comfort that he was soon relaxing on the couch, and so well did she play her role that he found it quite natural when she insinuated herself onto his lap where the close proximity of her charms and the noble aspects of her countenance reminded him what a marvelous agent she would be for the undoing of the forces of evil, and for the immediate future, her warm and shapely thigh with a glimpse of its inner glory afforded by a conveniently short skirt had that part of his anatomy responsible for the first part of the impending task not only ready and willing but even eager, and it is with this inadequate preamble, that we must not only pardon but try to appreciate her forthrightness in carrying the project through to completeness, for in his initial effort, the wizard, as is so often the case, did merely complete his niggardly part and possibly transfer the spores without eliciting much response from his partner, but seeking total assurance, the dedicated lady did insist upon repeated efforts until, honesty forces the author to state, the liquid slaps and accompanying moans reached past her waving feet to the exalted heights of her devotion to the enterprise, and during the final sessions of coupling, performed to guarantee mission success, her unswerving enthusiasm and dedication to the cause inspired even her flagging companion to perform above and beyond the call of duty for the sake of the good and the just.

"A truly extraordinary woman," said Snorri.

"I've more than done my part in getting this show on the road," said Harmony, gathering her pencils. "Try not to mess everything up while I help the editor restore our cappuccino machine."

Later, that same weekend, Severus was sitting on the edge of the bed and wondering how many springs Andromeda had broken. She interrupted his idle musings by bringing him a tea.

"A Knut for your thoughts," she said.

"I'm thinking I can't do this. I'll use your sisters as I originally intended."

"You can't," she said. "They're too vulnerable, and you know it."

"And you're not?"

"Everyone knows my sisters and their weaknesses, and everyone knows they're in disfavor with the Dark Lord, which means it's open season on them."

She sat beside him. "They've survived because the wizards think you'll blast their bits off if they look at the Black sisters cross-eyed, which is really very sweet of you," she said, giving him a hug, which he liked more than he wanted to admit.

"It's more than just your survival."

"Oh, you're jealous. I like that," she said. "With a few charms, I'll look like my cousin Terry from New Zealand, a refined version of Bellatrix. All the lechers will be careful because I'm an unknown who might become the Dark Lord's new favorite."

"You're my new favorite."

"Only your favorite," she asked, "not your one and only?"

"You're a married woman."

"There is that," she admitted, "but a lady can have hopes, can't she?"

She looked into the distance. "I know my family, and it's going to take more than spores to change them. You're full of spores, but you're still scheming."

"Thanks."

"When I was growing up, there was a room we were not allowed to enter," she said. "I'll wager it's full of incriminating evidence, and it's a perfect place for a tryst."

He was thinking that she was correct: the Black family never stopped scheming.

Several weeks later, after all reasonable people had gone to bed, Andromeda appeared at Severus's place, knocked, entered, and announced that the evening had been a success.

"I don't want to hear the body count," said Severus, sticking his fingers in his ears.

"I was referring to this, my sweet," she said, handing him a document. "It's from the secret room."

Severus imagined the recent activities in a secret chamber and groaned.

"Don't fall apart on me now. I need you," she said. "Get a light, and let's see what we have."

It is only due to remarkable and entirely unforeseen circumstances that the following tale has come to the light of day, which, in its own way, is fitting since the tale itself consists of remarkable and unforeseen events. It is a story of lives that while full of triumph are also filled with such strife and anguish that it is well that the characters capable of effecting these actions would be of the type to be unaffected by them. But the story is getting ahead of itself. It would be well to begin at the beginning, but this artistic device, although producing much satisfaction in fiction, must be foregone for this narrative, where the episodes arose like a rocky crags out of a turbulent sea crags on which hopes were dashed but the survivors clung and, by the grace of the gods, prospered.

"I hate literary efforts," said Andromeda.

"Me too," said Severus. "We need information, not hyped prose."

"How soon before we get the cappuccino machine back?" asked Snorri.

"It shouldn't take too long. The girls want to scrub it till it shines. They're implying that we're not tidy, that we're dirty little boys who swiped their precious toy," said Biff, "but our counter in this psychological cold war is to hint that a lack of foamy elixir might cause us to miss a deadline."

The muse stared morosely at her triple espresso.

"Don't withdraw on us," Biff told her. "At five o'clock sharp, we change to mead laced with scotch, I mean ambrosia. And Snorri wants to try his hand at the Wild West, which can't be that different from the time of Aeschylus."

The muse brightened.

"Thar's varmints in them thar hills."

The crowd at The Horse and The Duck were silent. The railroad worker had entered ponderously, strode straight to the bar, and knocked back a stiff one before proclaiming what most of the customers were thinking.

Wyatt Elf looked up from his cards. "Them thar hills' are outside my jurisdiction, but I can always take a day off and go out for a ride."

"That's dangerous. That's asking for trouble," said Calamity Cho. She turned to Pansy Pinkerton and said, "Tell him to be reasonable."

Pansy looked at Doc Severson who raised the bet and said, "I could use some fresh air."

"I'm only hired to protect the payroll," said Pansy "but sooner or later, varmints-in-them-thar-hills decide to go after the silver."

"I can ride and shoot as well as anyone," declared Calamity.

They all looked at Buffalo Biff who was calling the bet. "You talked me into it," he said.

After three days of scouring the hills and finding nothing, they decided to surreptitiously watch the railroad workers' camp from a nearby hill. Two nights later there was a commotion in the camp. They rode down in the morning to talk to the foreman and the guards. No one had seen anything. The foreman thought either Indians had snuck in to steal supplies or some worker or workers had decided to desert and had stolen some supplies as they left. The five searched the area around the camp, but they found no sign or tracks for either Indians or deserting workers.

"Creatures of the night," suggested Calamity.

"That range over there is now called the Sangre de Cristos, but its original name was Blood Mountains," said Doc.

"Lovely," said Pansy. "What kind of creatures, do you think?"

According to Doc, the Indians had always avoided certain parts of the range. There were tales of meeting lost friends or relatives, but they were transformed and dangerous. There were no Indian traditions of the full moon being especially dangerous, and someone transformed into a werewolf would not be recognizable.

"Vampires," said Wyatt.

"Looks like," said Biff.

"I'd prefer werewolves," said Calamity. "Silver bullets are easier to make than wood bullets."

"Doesn't Harmony want to write the next section?" asked Biff.

"Don't tempt me," said Snorri. "It's time to return to the adventures of the virtuous Saint Andromeda. For some reason, Harmony has the ability to write duplicitous characters as easily as she breathes. I want to do more Wild West, but duty calls."

"Brave man," said Biff.

Andromeda arrived at Severus's place in the wee hours of the morning to find him waiting up for her with a pot of strong tea. She sat and stared into space while she drank two cups. Finally, she looked at him and said, "Hold me."

They moved to the couch where he held her until the demons left and she showed signs of life.

"I grabbed two more items from that super-secret room where wizards take their doxy of the evening," she said. "I have no idea what they are, but they must be valuable if they're kept there."

She opened her purse and took out two pieces of parchment.

"Your purse?" asked Severus. "I thought you would hide them in a more private place."

"In my bra?" replied Andromeda. "Every wizard at the party was trying to get his hands in there."

"Oh, right," said Severus. "Well, let's see what you have."

"You've already seen what I have, but I can remind you if you think your memory is faulty." She assumed an offended air. "But we'll look at what you consider more important first." She unfolded the documents for examination.

"This one is junk," said Andromeda. "As a little girl I had to memorize the family tree." She looked into the distance as the facts drilled repeatedly into her returned. "Sirius, Phineas (disowned), Arcturus, Belvina, and Cygnus were the progeny of Phineas and Ursula. This one has them descending from Guy Black and H something. It's blurred. It's nonsense." She threw the parchment into the trash bin with disgust.

"This might be what we're looking for," said Severus. "It's a receipt for shipping something not specified from Romania to the States."

"Dragons' blood," said Andromeda. "It's rare in the States and strictly controlled by the Romanian Ministry." Her face lit up. "That's it. That's the big family secret. Their fortune was built smuggling dragons' blood."

"If it's discovered, the fines and penalties will ruin the family," said Severus.

"We have to put this somewhere extra safe," said Andromeda. "We can counter any nefarious scheme they have by threatening to expose them."

"We obviously hide it in your purse," he said.

"I don't know if I can keep this up much longer," said Biff.

"You mean how much longer Harmony and the editor are going to be mad at us?" asked Snorri.

"Oh, those two being angry and not talking to us is a relief," said Biff. "It's the eternal wrangling about plot, their accusations we can't write relationships, the whole bloody lack of real action that's the killer."

"You're holding out okay," said Snorri.

"I'm about to crack," said Biff.

"Listen, why don't we blow everything off, write some Wild West, and let the girls rescue the story for once?"

Biff smiled. "Good idea."

"You're not fooling everyone, you know."

Doc Severson looked up from his ham and eggs to see the schoolmarm, Honoria Farmer, looking as fresh as a kitten on a calico pillow and as accusing as a cat left out in the rain.

He stood and pulled out a chair for her. "May I offer you a coffee?"

She sat and said, "The locals are turning out wood bullets on lathes for you, and while they're puzzled about it, they accept the story that you're going green."

"And you?" he asked.

"I keep wondering if there's another way to handle the problem," she said.

"Dynamite," he suggested.

"That would separate them into their constituent parts, but then it would be hard to put a wood bullet into their hearts," she said, "unless you're a great shot."

He started to protest but noticed she was smiling. "Are you saying we should start practicing with heart-shaped skeet?"

"There might be another approach," she said. "What are they stealing from the camps?"

There was a screech from the utility room.

"Probably a mouse," said Biff as he Snorri raced down the hall to save the girls.

"Look. Look at this," said the editor, "Look at the inscription on the base of the cappuccino machine."

Biff and Snorri looked: Made in Runestone, Colorado, USA

"We got a 'Thank You' note," said Pansy.

"And more," said Calamity. She opened the leather pouch and took out two rubies and a silver bar.

"Better than we had hoped for," said Doc.

They all looked at the schoolmarm.

"It was simple deduction," said Honoria. "The vampires probably fled Romania to escape persecution. They were able to bring their essentials, some memorabilia, and most of their valuables, but they miss the good things that life had to offer in their home country."

"So we contacted the dragon tamers in Romania, ordered the goods, and set out a wagonload of plum brandy and assorted Romanian wines," said Biff.

"We're keeping the receipts like real business people," said Calamity, "and the Romanian agent did as we asked and didn't specify the goods so that no one can guess what we are doing and intrude on our market. The agent signed herself as 'Odelle, Special Agent for the Special since 1453' and included a complimentary sample of blood sausage." Calamity's brow furrowed. "This is too cozy. I'm feeling hemmed in."

Pansy nodded. "The dragon tamers were enthusiastic about the brandy. Apparently, it can take your head off, but they thought the wine was sissy."

Doc looked at Honoria. "Mighty good thinking, ma'am."

Honoria blushed, but charged ahead. "We're ready for the next step. We can run this advertisement in all the big city newspapers."

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Post Office Box 001, Runestone, Colorado

"Well, this trip is starting to look like a waste of time and energy," said Biff. "We flew to the States, drove across umpteen miles of prairie, found the foothills of the Blood Mountains, and located the ghost town of Runestone."

"We had the right idea," said Snorri.

"But we were too late," said the editor. "All the records have been removed from the courthouse."

"We're probably a hundred years too late," said Harmony. "That one historian we talked to said the town was abandoned around 1890. He claims it's something of a mystery. Usually, the mines peter out and the land is overgrazed, but the persistent rumor for Runestone is some kind of strange spore, most likely from contact from some wild tribe in the mountains. He thinks it mutated into something benign before there was any panic. At any rate, the people who don't want anyone to know what happened probably returned about that time and destroyed the evidence."

"I wonder if they destroyed all the evidence," said Biff.

"What?" said the others.

"Wait, you might be right," said the editor. "If what you wrote while tanked on cappuccino was inspired, that should give us a clue."

"We can't ask the Muse," said Biff. "She said England was bad enough and there was no way she would travel to the American Southwest."

"The best bet for finding a written record is the schoolmarm's shack," said the editor.

Two hours later, they had located the ruins of a lonely shack in the woods. Beside the rusty bedsprings, was a rickety cabinet, and in the cabinet, there was an old diary.

"Careful with it," said Snorri.

"I'm being careful," said Harmony. "Here're the last entries. There're dates, but no year."

"We can assume it's the early 1870's," said Biff.

May 14

Pansy claims we were overly conscientious. I blame the wine. Curmudgeons who know no better would blame the dynamite plum brandy, but that's because they've only experienced cheap binges, not the effect of daily living a quality existence. It started when the second wagonload arrived for the vampires. Biff and Calamity wanted to sample the contents to 'make sure we are supplying our customers with a quality product.' Well, we are. Now, we want the quality product instead of the local swill.

May 17

The boys are going to get themselves killed. The girls aren't any better. And it's not my fault. All I did was ask if Chief Sitting Riddle and his tribe had anything to do with the vampires. Well, yes. After some maneuvering, there was a powwow and we discovered that the tribe believes the Great Spirit placed it on earth to act as a buffer between the vampires and their human prey. And then all I did was ask if vampires had to have human blood. Well, no. Then Biff and Calamity and Pansy got all worked up and perverted my idea that peaceful trade is better than conflict. Now, they and Doc are out rustling cattle that they will take to the Blood Mountains where no rancher will follow. I am really worried. Supplying the vampires with female companions that no one will miss is one thing, but stealing cattle is serious.

June 10

Something has to be done. Our little group is about to burst at the seams. We all agreed we can't display our new wealth. We would be robbed and killed. The mob would backtrack our activities, which would lead to the vampires and Indians, and the result would be a three way slaughter fest. There lies the problem. We want to expand our horizons. The simple pleasures of a small town, which were sufficient when we were poor, no longer entertain us. I had not realized that being able to have a grand time but refraining from doing so could create such stress. The worst part is that there aren't any more life-threatening challenges: we're trading with the vamps, at peace with the Indians, and have rustled enough cattle. It's only a matter of time before Calamity and Doc revert to type and begin provoking the townspeople into gun duels.

June 15

Calamity's head has been quite turned by an English tourist. He seems to be doing her good since her poker game has improved. He's a sportsman, and before dawn, he and Calamity ride out to blow away some of the local wildlife, usually deer or rabbit, but he has come to agree with Calamity that squirrel give good game a man after a girl's heart. They arrive back in town about noon, give the day's bag to the hotel staff, and clean up for the afternoon round of cards.

June 21

I had a twinge of guilt today and mentioned that the vampires were paying us with valuables taken from their victims. Calamity's Englishman shrugged it off and said that any substantial amount of wealth was going to be blood money. He and Doc and Biff get along famously.

July 5

Calamity's Englishman made a suggestion that makes a lot of sense. Instead of piecemeal bargaining with the vampires, make a long-term agreement for a substantial amount of remuneration. He pointed out that a large sum could be invested and the return would pay for the supplies and support a comfortable life style. His phrase was 'live off the interest instead of the principal.' He also mentioned that London would be an excellent base of operation, but I think this reveals his true motive. He wants Calamity to return to England with him. But still, it makes sense.

July 7

I shouldn't write this, but Pansy and Biff are shacking up. I shouldn't write this either, but I think that, under their facades, they are two outlaws whose hearts beat together. They're thinking about London, but Buffalo Biff says he'll have to change his monicker if he wants to be accepted in polite society.

August 2

More legerdemain. I asked Doc if this would ever stop. He replied that we were setting ourselves up for the best kind con the aristocrats, become one, and live off the populace. I always suspected Doc to be a social cynic. Calamity's Englishman claims that an old family is dying out and we should present ourselves as a long lost branch of the family. The boys introduced the mayor and the county clerk to the joys of plum brandy, and once they were no longer capable of interfering, Doc and the Englishman did some extensive alterations of the records in the court house. Okay, I helped. They would have botched it otherwise.

August 17

Doc and I finally married, and we're off to London to begin a new existence, but I have to remember not to call him Doc anymore. We are Mr. and Mrs. Guy Black. I believe it is a good omen for our future as a couple, even though the others are trying to tell me it was beginner's luck, that I won the round of cards for the special coffee maker.

"We're saved," said the editor.

"We write a different ending," said Snorri. "The spores die out and Brit wizardry returns to inspiring insightful narratives."

Harmony sighed. "With only a couple more colored pencils, we can relate how the Black sisters' involvement with Severus has deepened them and made them more aware

of their duties to the social order and filled them with a desire to reform their husbands in order to uphold the family values they have come to realize are essential, along with handing that underhanded bookstore owner what he deserves in such a manner that any reader who once held him in esteem will comprehend the magnitude of his perfidy and relish the justice dealt to him while, at the same time, letting Mr. Snape perceive how misguided his affections have been and, full of remorse, undergo the agonies of winning the affection and approval of the one he should always have held dearest until, out of the generosity of her heart, the bravest heroine of all forgives his past transgressions, ends his suffering, and in a full bloom of harmony that lifts the audience's spirit, Hermione and Severus admit they are soul mates."

Biff stared into the distance as plot lines gamboled across the landscape like fawns in the early spring. "The trade agreement goes sour, Doc and Pansy and Calamity die a heroic death saving the town from the enraged vampires, Honoria returns to the East with her grief, Wyatt stays to reminisce about the good old days, and Biff rides into the sunset on his way to his next adventure."

END