

Beginning To Live

by juniperus

After surviving Voldemort's psychosis, Dumbledore's machinations, and Nagini's bite, Severus Snape tries to begin anew half a world away from home. "It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live." - Marcus Aurelius

It Began With A Dare

Chapter 1 of 6

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Ah, a dare.

He could see the boy out of the corner of his eye, his lank hair still a convenient curtain though which to view the world. He's seen this boy before, in his wanderings around this part of the city, but only with the gang of miscreants (currently huddled together behind the forsythia) on rare Saturdays. Most Saturdays, the boy sat alone with a book.

Closer, the boy crept silently (*rather impressive, really*) toward the park bench. Severus knew he was as much a figure of ridicule and fear now as ever, although this boy had never before joined with the other children in mocking him until he scowled (triggering a hasty, screaming retreat). Whether this was by choice or because the children never asked him to join them in *anything* remained to be seen.

Cheeky little monkey, he thought, smiling inwardly, as the boy inched forward with an arm extended. *Ah, he has merely to touch me, then* Severus' mouth twitched as he prepared to strike.

Suddenly his hand shot out and grasped the boy's wrist. "May I ask, young man, what, precisely, you are doing?" Severus rasped, looking intently at the gaping mouth and wide eyes staring at him in fright. Those eyes sidled to the left as the sound of the gang of miscreants fleeing the scene reached them, then returned to look Severus square in the (still narrowed) eye. *Very good*, Severus thought before noting, "You needn't bother with them. They clearly aren't your friends. Dared you to approach the dark, scary stranger, did they? And promised you what – friendship, a place in a game, a handful of coin?" Severus scowled.

"N-no, Sir. Uh, y-yes, I mean," the boy said, twisting slightly against Severus' long fingers, still tightly circling the thin wrist. "They didn't believe me when I said I'm not afraid of you." He lifted his chin defiantly. "I'm not. I've seen you around, and there isn't a boogey-man, anyway," he finished.

Severus eyebrow raised slightly. "Is that so?"

"Mom said so," the boy said confidently, nodding.

"And your mother...", Severus began.

"Is smarter than anyone," the boy interrupted, eyes narrowed as if challenging Severus to disagree.

"Is that *so*?" Severus responded, eyebrow raising higher as the corner of his mouth quirked in amusement. As the boy nodded vehemently, he continued. "My question, before I was interrupted—" He stared at the boy, who had the good grace to look embarrassed. "—related to the present location of that apparent genius who gave you life."

"Oh, she's working," the boy said, cocking his head in the direction of the storefronts across from the park entrance. "She's *always* working." He pulled his arm free and started for the gates.

Severus stared after the boy. *He must really not be frightened, if he's willing to take me to the woman he champions with such verve. Interesting.* He ran his thumb and fingers down his chin thoughtfully.

"C'mon, mister," the boy called over his shoulder.

Severus followed, intrigued.

Smarter Than Anyone

Chapter 2 of 6

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"...feekeepseeOOOmega!" the boy (no, *Simon Marcus Aurelius Gregory*; Severus reminded himself) wheezed, then gasped for breath, grinning up at his companion. "See," he said proudly, "I told you I could recite the whole thing in one breath!"

Severus looked down at Simon, dark eyes crinkled in amusement in spite of himself, and drawled, "So you did, so you did/very impressive, indeed." The two continued on through the gates, leaving the cool, tree-lined walkway upon which they had ambled across the park. Severus had shortened his strides to match those of the boy, so the otherwise brief span of the park turned into a long stroll filled almost completely with Simon's energetic monologue.

"Mister, do you want to know who I was named after?"

"Severus."

"Hey, you *do* know! Awesome! He was named..." Simon counted the names off on his fingers, "Marcus Annius Catilius Severus first, and then..." he continued as he jogged backwards in front of Severus so he could look at him while they were, *he was*, talking.

"What?" Severus stopped, looking confused.

"Huh?" The boy peered at Severus. "You said Severus. That was one of the names Marcus Aurelius had when he was a boy like me. That's where my middle names come from." He turned as if to start down the sidewalk again. "I've read all about him. Mom said he was one of the best Roman Emperors."

"My name, Simon - Severus is my *name*." He corrected, beginning to scowl as the boy's enthusiasm for what appeared to be his favorite subject approached impertinence. *Americans!* Severus inwardly huffed.

"Oh. Oh!" Simon grinned. "You're named after an Emperor, too! Hey, we're here!" Suddenly the boy took a sharp turn and pulled open a glass-fronted door. "Mom, Mom, *Mooooom!*" Simon called out.

Severus winced at the explosion of volume as he followed the boy through the door. He stopped, and a small smile started to form as he took a deep breath and looked at an impossibly narrow shop filled with impossibly tall bookcases packed full of old books all the way up to the antique tin on the impossibly tall ceiling. 'There is nothing better than the smell of old, leather-bound tomes,' he thought to himself as he succumbed to the feeling of calm that always accompanied his entry into a book-filled space.

"Mom, I brought my new friend Severus for lunch! Mom!" Simon continued to holler as he disappeared between towering bookshelves.

Lunch? Friend? Severus was startled out of his reverie. It was with a look of surprise, then, that he greeted the woman who was dragged out of the shadowy rear of the store by a steam-driven locomotive of a boy.

"Simon! I'm so pleased! Where is this little friend of yours..." her voice trailed off as her eyes traveled up from the point at which she expected to find a face to stop two feet higher at dark eyes wide with shock. "Oh!" She stammered, "W-well, how n-nice! Er, lovely, uh, I mean..." She stopped and took a breath, then thrust out her right hand. "Ursula Gregory," she smiled, "I'm afraid today is tuna salad, but the bread is fresh for a change and I have peaches from the pushcart."

Severus took her hand gingerly as he replied, "Severus Snape. And I didn't intend to interfere with your mid-day meal, Mrs. Gregory." Severus, although uncharacteristically warmed by the idea that the odd young lad declared him *friend*, he realized the myriad ways his befriending a young boy might appear, none of them positive. "I'm not, I had no idea he'd..."

"Nonsense, you're welcome to stay," she dismissed his interrupted apology with a wave, then frowned, "But I'm *amiz*, not a *missus* - in any case, please call me Ursula."

Simon looked up at him expectantly. "The tuna is really *goood*," he wheedled.

Severus tried to muster a scowl at the boy who had so cleverly ambushed him, but could only manage to look down his nose imperiously and ask gravely, "Is that so?"

Simon grinned and nodded enthusiastically before taking Severus by the hand and leading him further into the bookstore, following Ursula's throaty chuckle.

Paradise Lost

Chapter 3 of 6

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Severus peered at the eight-foot tall bookcases on either side of him as Simon dragged him through the bookstore, but he caught naught but the sight of a few familiar spines (ah, how he missed his copy of *The Complete Shakespeare*, all five glorious inches of shoddily-constructed spine that he constantly *Repa*rd'd) and made a mental note to make his next pass of the shelves sans boy.

Despite his irritation a mere hour earlier at being the target for a dare, he was hard pressed not to feel somewhat pleased about this odd development. That morning, he had awoken feeling more devoid of hope than he had the day before, just as that morning had been worse than the previous. It was on *that* morning he had made the mistake of glancing at the calendar as he waited for his tea to steep: September first. It was the first time in seventeen years he did not awaken to the realization that a castle-full of children would arrive before dinner and a new group of eleven-year-olds would be homesick and looking to him for guidance – but instead of relief, he felt unsettled and adrift.

He had spent the next hour considering the last four months of his life. His careful planning had paid off, if that's what survival and self-exile could be called. The years following the fateful culmination of the Tri-Wizard Tournament had been spent administering miniscule doses of Nagini's venom to build immunity and developing a new type of long-acting Blood Replenishing Potion that, when applied to a run-of-the-mill bezoar, remained in stasis until swallowed. Oh, yes, and risking his life, not to mention destroying what good reputation he had developed in the Dark Lord's absence, on an increasingly regular basis as double-agent.

At least the potion (marketed in America by *Pozioni di Principeso* as not to be confused with some Muggle musician with the fashion sense of Albus Dumbledore, himself) had been profitable.

He then spent the next two days holed up in his small flat, sinking into a deepening depression as he re-lived his every mistake over the twenty-some years previous, beginning with that fifth-year day by the loch that left him scarred, hollow, and alone. Once he had finished his supply of Muggle whisky, then the last of his tea as he brewed Hangover Potion, he showered. He threw open the windows to air out the lingering scent of over-ripe man who spent thirty-six solid hours crying into his cups, then filled the latest order for Sanguicreo Potion and took his customary walk around the corner and down two blocks to the post-box (*Ingenious Americans and their bloody brilliant idea to create Wizarding P.O. Boxes within the Muggle system – I never need buy Owl Treats again!*)

The post-box is near the entrance to the neighborhood park, his favorite place for a bit of a wander and a sit-and-think.

It's also the favorite place to escape and read and have a sit-and-think of a certain young boy – a boy pulling Severus through the doorway at the rear of the store. He tucked the memories of these past two days and his lingering surprise away as his eyes met those of the woman who stood, hands on ample hips, assessing the situation before her.

"Simon! You're going to pull his hand right off!" she mock-scolded, eyes crinkled in amusement.

The boy stopped dead in his tracks and looked behind him, worriedly. Severus made an elaborate show of turning his hand on his wrist several times and shaking it out.

"I think," he said, looking down at Simon with an expression of utmost seriousness, "I'll be able to save it...*this* time." The sight of the boy's wide eyes at the pronouncement undid him, and a small smile escaped, unbidden. *I'm already losing my touch*, he thought as his smile was returned by a toothy grin.

The thought didn't upset him a bit. He began to idly wonder *if that* should upset him, but his train of thought was interrupted by the sight of Ursula dropping to her knees in front of a metal box on the floor. She opened the box and started handing brightly-colored plastic containers to Simon, who had already moved a basket of picnic dishes from the top of the box to a folding table around which sat four folding chairs (none of which matched the table or each other, Severus noted). By the time he made the mental connection between the comparatively small metal box and the refrigerator in his flat, Simon had already set the table for three.

Ursula stood, holding a pitcher of what looked like lemonade, and frowned. "Tsk, I forgot the bread, Simon. Could you run upstairs and get it, please? And be careful carrying the knife!" Simon quickly snatched the proffered keychain from his mother's hand and took off through the store.

"It'll only be a moment, Mr. Snape – we live over the store. Is lemonade OK with you? I could see what else we have if not..." Ursula asked as she began to pour.

"Severus," he said, inclining his head, "and lemonade sounds wonderful, thank you." He noted her shy smile and offered one of his own. These were the first interesting Muggles he had met since making his way to the American Midwest two months before, and meeting the acquaintance of a woman who is "smarter than anyone" and not only *would* teach but *could* teach her child the Greek alphabet was grounds for the sort of unfettered internal celebration that even Severus Snape couldn't contain behind a mask of emotional neutrality.

Paradise Found

Chapter 4 of 6

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"I saw Mr. Hooperstein arguing with Mr. Grumpy this morning," Simon commented after inhaling half his sandwich in three bites.

Ursula offered Severus the bowl of peaches. "Mr. Hooperstein owns the grocery down the block."

He nodded. "He was willing to acquire a jar of Marmite for me, he was very cordial. *If not a little nosy*, Severus thought, *but he obviously feels protective of his neighborhood and anyone who lives in it. I can respect that.*" And Mr. Grumpy?"

Ursula blushed. "That's the man who has the pushcart with the fresh fruit and vegetables. He's... contentious, particularly with Mr. Hooperstein and the news vendor next door."

Severus nodded at Ursula, then shifted his attention as Simon, who had been practically fidgeting out of his seat during the exchange, burst forth with the rest of the story.

"So Mr. Grumpy had some signs and wanted Mr. Hooperstein to put one in his window."

"Signs? What did they say, did you see?" Ursula asked, now curious.

"Pa-well waj-waj...waj-sick?" Simon furrowed his brow.

"Pawell Wójcik," Ursula corrected, then turned to Severus. "He sells antiques and unique imports furniture, mostly. His shop is around the corner, next to the rear entrance of the shopping center that borders that side of the neighborhood, but he lives in the apartments over and behind this store."

"*Pa-vel Voy-chick*," Simon said, carefully. "Oh yeah! Pawel! Is that his whole name, Mom? Where is that name from?" Simon's volume rose with his curiosity. After a pointed look from his mother, Simon continued, quietly, "...for city council representative."

Ursula finished chewing her bite of sandwich before speaking. "Poland, Simon. Pawel came here from Poland with his parents when he was your age." She looked thoughtful. "He's running for council? I'm glad he's a good man. But what does Mr. Grump... er, Mr. Grummand have to do with it?"

Simon shrugged. "I guess he's running the campaign, at least that's what he told Mr. Hooperstein. That's what they were arguing about."

"Mr. Hooperstein is friends with Pawel... did he refuse to take a sign?" Ursula looked concerned.

"No, he took one," Simon continued, between gulps of his lemonade, "And I don't know what Mr. Grumpy said before I got close enough to hear, but Mr. Hooperstein waved his hands in the air and shouted," Simon screwed up his face as he tried to mimic the grocer's nasally voice, "'You can't run his campaign, you pear-pushing half-wit! You couldn't successfully run a *bath* with *written instructions*!'" Simon grinned.

Ursula covered her mouth and looked away as she tried not to laugh. "Well, I expect things will be rather uncomfortable on that corner for a while, eh?"

Severus had watched the conversation with interest. Gaining an understanding of the neighborhood dynamics without having to ask questions himself was, after all, comfortably Slytherin. And Simon was an enthusiastic storyteller with a fine memory and a talent for mimicry clearly a friendship of sorts with the boy had benefits beyond knowing *one* child in the neighborhood who wouldn't be carrying a spitball shooter loaded for bear and aimed in his direction.

Then there was his mother, and the bookstore, and the lemonade. He had been able to spirit away all of his personal goods, lab equipment, and books from Hogwarts (with the loyal help of his favorite house-elf, Bitsy), but it was too dangerous a proposition to retrieve his favorite Muggle tomes from Spinner's End. And up to this point, the most contact he'd had with a real person since he'd moved into his small flat consisted of the lengthy conversation with the grocer on whether he took special orders for imported food. And Ursula didn't over-sweeten the lemonade.

Thank you, Simon, he thought as he took a last sip of (*refreshingly, perfectly sou*) lemonade and wiped the cup's condensation from his fingers with a paper napkin before bringing them up to steeple in front of his face as he prepared to speak.

"I fear, in the excitement of the tuna salad," Severus smirked as Ursula blushed, "I nearly forgot my purpose in asking Simon to deliver me to your doorstep. I felt that you should know that..."

A gasp interrupted him as Ursula turned, wild-eyed, to Simon and frantically hissed under her breath. "What did you do?!"

Although intensely curious about Ursula's sudden change in demeanor, Severus stopped any further questioning of the panicked-looking boy with a smooth gesture of his hand.

"Simon is to be commended. I have had unfortunate experiences with the children who play in the park since I moved here, all but your son. Today he approached me in an attempt to convince the little cretins that I am not, in fact, the *boogey-man*." Severus decided to leave out the bit about the dare; he didn't want to inflame whatever was lurking behind Ursula's odd reaction. "I doubt his bravery will save me from further irritations during my regular walks, but I appreciated the attempt. And then I appreciated the very polite conversation that followed. I have been informed that you, madam, are 'smarter than anyone'."

Ursula's mouth opened and closed, searching for a response, as her cheeks reddened. "Well, that's quite a claim, one I don't think I can live up to, but thank you for letting me know." She looked at her son, relief and warmth crossing her features, in turn. "He *is* a polite boy."

Severus looked at Simon and agreed, "Yes, he is."

Simon grinned at Severus, then at his mother before asking, "Can I be done, Mom?"

Ursula turned to Severus and asked, "Would you care for anything else?" In response to a brisk shake of his head, she stood. "Yes, Simon, go ahead." The boy began collecting the dirty dishes as his mother returned the tuna salad to the refrigerator.

As Severus pulled his long legs from under the small table and carefully unfolded himself, Ursula approached him. She stared at his face appraisingly before quietly commenting, "Thank you, Severus. Thank you for telling me of Simon's heroics you didn't have to go out of your way to be friendly and kind to a small boy, and I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

Thoughtful? When was the last time anyone called me thoughtful? Severus inclined his head as he replied, "Not at all. I don't recall when I last had such pleasant," he looked Ursula in the eye before flicking his gaze to Simon, busy behind her, "and *entertaining* company. While the unfolding of this morning's events was a surprise, I must admit it was not an unwelcome one. But you have a bookstore to manage, do you not, Ursula?"

"And I'm sure you have important ways to occupy your time, as well," she responded.

Severus nodded. "Yes. Although I appreciate your generosity in fortifying me for the afternoon, *to* need to buy groceries and attend to other errands."

Ursula gave him another of her shy smiles before offering her hand. "It was lovely to meet you, and we enjoyed having company for lunch. I hope we'll see you again."

Severus understood the question behind her statement and nodded solemnly. "But of course, madam, your son's my knight and champion against the trials and tribulations of the park miscreants, and this *is* a bookstore." He straightened to his full height and looked down his nose imperiously, but without his customary look of icy

disdain. "I assure you, when it comes to books, rabid manticores couldn't keep me away."

If he was surprised that he had grown comfortable enough with these Muggles to carelessly allow a euphemism from Magizoology slip, he was astounded when Ursula's small smile expanded to a wicked grin. "My, you *are* a devoted reader!" She chuckled. "Well, then, I look forward to your next successful thwarting of our local mantichore population, rabid or not."

"Bye, Severus!" Simon smiled widely and waved before turning back to his chore.

Severus offered a formal bow, then made his way through the bookcases. As he approached the front door of the bookstore, his eyes crinkled briefly when he heard Simon's voice carry from the back room. "Hey Mom, what's Marmite?" He closed the door quietly behind him and took a deep breath before striding purposefully down the sidewalk towards Hooperstein's.

The Burden of Atlas

Chapter 5 of 6

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And so it was that after trips to the post office and grocer (including a special order for lemon curd and loose-leaf Twinings, but excluding any Muggle whisky) Severus returned home (*home, it's home now...it has to be*). He methodically put his purchases away in cupboards and the Muggle refrigerator, then he carefully chopped herbs for red sauce (his own recipe) and hovered over the Muggle stove until the pasta was cooked perfectly *al dente*.

He ate in silence (*at least I've not started talking to myself, yet*). Orders were opened and cataloged after dinner was eaten and dishes attended to. He took his evening tea sitting next to the front-facing window in the lounge (*living room is what it's called here, if a flat little larger than a bedsit can be properly calleliving*) and watching the Muggles go by.

Tonight, however, two dozen Muggles holding a nudist footrace accompanied by Pipes and Drums couldn't have stolen his attention from his tea cup as he swirled the dregs, lost in thought. If he held any truck with the *noble* arts of the seer (*snort!*), he would look for the answers to his as-yet-unformed questions.

But he did not.

Severus' brow furrowed as he placed his tea cup back on its saucer and left it on the table for the morning washing up. The furrow had blossomed to a full frown by the time he'd taken the few steps necessary to cross the room and shut the lights. He entered the only room of the flat that was unabashedly magical and shut the door behind him with a sigh.

"Lumos."

He toed off his boots, the only item in his wardrobe that he adamantly refused to go Muggle. His relatively well-made trousers (black) and wool jumper (also black) were carefully laid over the back of a straight-backed chair reminiscent of the one he always kept in his office for students, and shirt and socks were dropped unceremoniously onto the floor as he padded into the lav to see to his bedtime rituals. An absentminded wave of his hand sent the clothes on the floor to the hamper as he fell onto his woefully short (*that old dormitory four-poster would be heaven in comparison!*) bed.

"Nox."

It had been Severus' habit, since he was a boy, to recount the day's events to himself after retiring for the night. After years of practice he had honed the mental and observational skills, which allowed him to pick through details, re-play visual cues, mull over conversations, and digest information that he (both consciously and automatically) tucked away in his mind for later consideration. These skills proved very useful for, and were greatly enhanced by, his years of spying following the return of the Dark Lord (*Voldemort...I can call him byname, now*).

Although it is to these skills, as much as (if not more than) any others, that his ultimate survival can be attributed; it was a close thing. Even if a part of him wanted to believe that he'd never again need his ability to re-play the day as he had those terrible years, the rest of him was rather unfamiliar to optimism and hope and, therefore, stuck firmly with his *modus operandi* of 75% preparation and 25% paranoia. And, like many of his habits (of which there were more than a few, he'd be first to admit), it was a *part* of him: born of a boy's need to occupy his mind to block out the sound of his parents' oft violent (and always loud) personal exchanges, continued as a study aid (and to help better formulate plans for revenge against the merry gang of Gryffindors) during his years at Hogwarts, and practiced in adulthood in the subsequent foreboding of his faded (not disappeared) Dark Mark.

Tonight, like every night, Severus sprawled on the bed with his hands tucked behind his head, eyes open but unseeing, running his mental tally of every encounter and conversation. He smiled to himself as he recalled the dare, and Simon's look of shock as he was grabbed by the strange, dark man on the park bench.

Well, that was certainly good for a moment's entertainment, Severus thought as he chuckled inwardly.

He recalled the faces of the children who had dared Simon to approach him then hid themselves (*towards*) and memorized them for future opportunities for, ah, entertainment in the park.

He went over the conversation (*monologue*) with Simon that began on the bench and ended at the door to the bookstore, sorting and labeling each small bit of information for easy access should he need it, later.

Let's see, young Simon was named after a great Roman emperor and philosopher, and he knows it. Excellent choice of namesakes; the stoics held a prominent place in my personal library at... Spinner's End.

Spinner's End, not home. This is home now. Severus sighed to himself before giving himself a mental shake and going back to task.

His clothing looks worn (but carefully-maintained), and the trousers are beginning to show his ankle, but he's clean. His brown hair is straight and floppy and in dire want of

a trim. He smiles widely enough to show the gaps in his upper teeth waiting for his canines to erupt, and there is mischief in those hazel eyes, enough to give the Weasley twins a run for their Galleons.

He knows the Greek alphabet at...what?...nine or ten years of age. He lacks no confidence, but he's hardly arrogant. He seems to have no relationships with his peers, and I wonder why that is so...he's extremely bright, interested in books more than childish games, but that hardly seems like enough to alienate him. On second thought, it probably is enough...it was enough for me.

Severus frowned into the dark before continuing.

He is polite, has assigned tasks and does them without complaint, communicates clearly (and dramatically...he certainly possess a gift for storytelling), and is respectful of, and comfortable with, adults. I find him curiously pleasant company.

And he was raised by his mother, alone.

Ah, yes, the mother. *Ursula*.

She is friendly, courteous, and welcoming. And honestly so...the warmth of her smile (shy, but not hesitant) went all the way to her eyes. Hazel, like Simon's Severus smiled to himself...it had been years, if a day, since he was greeted so warmly.

Although he was fully capable of voiceless, wandless, and nearly undetectable Legilimency, it was his practice to avoid it, even with Muggles. It was considered unconscionably rude, albeit extremely useful in spying...in fact, it saved his hide on more than one occasion. Being an exceptionally skilled Legilimens, however, meant he was able to pick up on stray thoughts and strong emotions without any intrusion whatsoever...and although he was sure some foolishly noble Gryffindor-type would object, he saw no reason why he shouldn't glean the air for the bits of information that littered the fore-minds of Muggles and the non-Occcluded. He hadn't been sorted into Slytherin for nothing.

Honest. Yes, *Ursula* is honest. Although, unlike most Muggles (and especially unlike these loud American Muggles), she kept her thoughts largely to herself Severus mused. Small amounts of emotion did slip out, enough to know that what she felt and what she said weren't at odds. As necessary as near-constant deception had been all his adult life, Severus held honestly... genuine and open honesty (not what passed for it in *Gryffindor House*, as he disparaged often and openly during Albus' too-frequent staff meetings)...in high regard.

And he looked forward to discovering the source of the waves of panic and fear *Ursula* broadcast. He hadn't a good puzzle to solve in quite a while.

Smarter than anyone? Despite her modesty, she does appear erudite, Severus admitted. It will be interesting to discover where her education lies, apart from Mediterranean alphabets, that is. She is well-spoken, and it's clear from the lazy drawl of her (delightfully!) rich alto that she was raised far from the land of flat vowels and harsh Rs. Simon seems to have both the peculiarities of dialect of his mother and this part of the country, he mused.

The mental cataloging continued apace.

Blonde hair, and I'd bet *Sickles* to biscuits it would hang a good way down her back if she didn't trap it that McGonagall-esque bun. She's rather pretty, I'd say, although she'd hardly get a nod from *Playwizard* readers. No, they'd not spare *Ursula* a glance...I doubt she's much taller than five-foot-two, and there's not a flat plain on the woman.

Not that Severus considered such a thing a *flaw*.

But it was also not as if he would willingly admit *that* to himself, either.

On Boxing Day, 1975, Severus Snape received his first...and last...kiss. At the end of the previous summer, he had wandered through the woods after choppers had been through, and there he found a lovely chunk of box elder with a knot that looked like starburst. He had an old Muggle pocket knife his father had discarded, and he spent every spare moment until winter hols (despite it being his OWL year) hewing away at that wood. He became proficient at self-healing those months and, quite frankly, was lucky he didn't manage to lop off a finger and have to explain to Madam Pomfrey that he kept Muggle weapons about. As he worked the wood, as he formed a lioness...sitting proudly on her haunches with a starburst on her head like a crown...he thought of his own... his Lily, his best friend. He finished it the day he returned home, scrubbing it gently with steel wool to take away the edges and then rubbing oil into the porous surface until it glowed. When Lily's pebble hit his window, he made his way outside, as he always did, and greeted her with the little figure. Her eyes lit up, *teared up*, and before Severus could grasp what was happening she had leaned in and pressed her lips to his. Then she scampered off, back to her house.

Severus had stood in the knee-deep snow for several minutes, the fingertips of one hand pressed to his still-tingling lips, before going back inside. He did not see her again until the train back to Hogwarts, and never thereafter could he catch her without one of her idiot housemates around. He could have, *should have*, just written down what he wanted to say to her, but he feared it falling into the wrong hands. He'd wait, he thought, until after OWLs, after they left for the summer and she was away from Potter and his merry band of imbeciles. *Then* he'd tell her how he felt...*then* he'd have his day.

That day never came.

And so he tucked that memory away, kept it close to his heart, and waited for the day when she'd realize what a pompous fool Potter was. She'd finally accept his apology, she'd lean in for another kiss. His intellectual vanity and naiveté resulted in stupidly taking the Dark Mark...still he waited. She married...still he waited. He would have waited forever for his day.

That day never came, and never would.

And an anguished Severus Snape presented himself to Albus Dumbledore, vowing to remain faithful to her memory...he'd protect her son, he'd teach and spy and anything else the old codger could think up, and he'd keep the memory of that one moment of true happiness inviolate.

He was, however, still a man. His body reacted automatically to sensory input as any young man's would, but the very *idea* of reacting to a woman not Lily was abhorrent to him. He willingly, willfully, became an emotional flagellant. At the first hint of attraction he'd begin mentally whipping himself; if his body reacted, he'd punish it for its infidelity by standing in a cold shower and scrubbing at his skin even as he scrubbed the offending images from his brain. He built walls of ice and cruelty around himself. He only left Hogwarts when necessary. He avoided socializing with his colleagues when he could and shoved them away with his sharp tongue when he could not.

Still, he'd notice the female forms around him. And punish himself. But as he grew older, and the random biological drive of the young man gave way to control, those occasions grew more and more infrequent. His body wouldn't react to *any* female form in his vicinity anymore, but it did react (and strongly) to...*certain* female forms. Those most unlike himself, with softness to cushion his sharp angles and...

And because he wouldn't...*couldn't*...admit to himself that he fancied a female's topography *at all*, much less one so unlike his Lily, he eventually convinced himself that his surreptitious appreciation of those rounded hills and shallow valleys was a respect for *Classical* beauty.

At least, that was one less punishment in those years of unending stress and pain leading up to the final stand of Lily's boy, that his body had to endure. He'd remained faithful to her memory...promises kept, Dumbledore's will be done.

Until tonight. Until one stray thought as he began to drift to sleep.

Right bit of totty, that one.

Severus gasped at the thought, eyes snapping open and staring into the nothingness of the pitch-blackness before him. He waited for that old familiar feeling, that urge to scrape his body's betrayal from his skin and his mind.

It didn't come.

He squelched rising panic as the comfort of his self-disgust deserted him, panic less about his attraction than the void inside him that was once filled with self-loathing. Once he got his breathing under control, but still feeling at sixes and sevens, he drifted into fitful slumber.

Perhaps he should have bought some whisky, after all.

The Fool and The Squire

Chapter 6 of 6

After surviving Voldemort's psychosis, Dumbledore's machinations, and Nagini's bite, Severus Snape tries to begin anew half a world away from home. "It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live." - Marcus Aurelius

It was a good thing that Severus had stocked up on pasta and tinned soup, because he didn't leave his flat for four days.

The first day he brooded, worrying a hole in the tatty couch as he was worrying his frayed nerves over the night before. He played and re-played the offending observation in his mind, hoping that repetition would rouse his familiar self-disgust from its slumber so he would again feel himself...but all he served to do was feel disgust over how pathetic it was to do so.

The second and third days he divided his time between brewing what was needed to complete the orders he'd collected from his post box and running his hand through his increasingly lank hair as he paced the tiny living room. Five steps forward, turn. Five steps back, turn. Repeat. He was general, infantry, and bystander to a war inside himself between the opposing factions of 'replay *it*, dissect *it*, distill *it*' and 'don't think about *it*, just suffer *the punishment*...bollocks to whether or not you need it, *crave* it...and deny *it* ever happened!'

It had happened, however, and eventually the part of him that identified dunderheads, idiots, and fools at fifty paces could no longer tolerate any further attempt to play ostrich about the situation.

And so he spent the remainder of day three *considering*. Considering every single interaction (and all had been catalogued, tagged, and filed) over the previous two decades that had ever called forth *the punishment*.

Considering *the punishment* itself.

Considering Lily.

As he lay in the dark he swore he could *hear* her...and could even feel the sting of the two fingers she would use to poke his shoulder in righteous indignation when making a point...as she said, what he knew with grim embarrassment she *surely* would have said, had she been there in his flat to see what a pathetic wretch he had become.

"Why do you *do* this, Sev?"

"Because. Because if I cannot have you, I should not have anyone."

"Why? Do you think it will bring me back? *Has* it brought me back?"

"No. No, Lily, I..."

"Why do you think you deserve to suffer?"

"Don't I?"

"Do you? Why, Sev?"

"Because. Because I hurt you."

"You were a barely more than a child, you idiot. You made stupid choices, and so did I. You couldn't control your housemates and their prejudices anymore than I could control Sirius and James."

"Because I never deserved your forgiveness."

"You did. You *did* and I was too stubborn to give it to you when you needed it most, and by the time I had realized what a fool I was it was too late to offer it. And I'm sorry, Sev, I always *was*."

"It would not have been too late."

"Too late for our friendship, Sev."

"It would never have been too late."

"You're right, and I was never less of a Gryffindor than when it came to you...it would not have been. If I had, would you have allowed yourself to be happy, Sev?"

"No. I gave up any right to that when I joined Him."

"That's idiotic...with such an attachment to martyrdom it's a wonder you weren't sorted into Gryffindor."

"Shut up."

"Make me. Admit you deserve to live. That you've deserved to live all these years you've locked yourself in a crypt and played ghoul."

"Shut UP. I won't."

"Why? Tell me!"

"Because you are dead."

"You did not kill me, and you did not betray me...Peter did."

"The Prophecy..."

"You didn't know who that referred to, not until it was too late, and *you know* it."

"But I've done..."

"Terrible things. *Awful* things. Things for which you've offered penance and have long since been given absolution by *those who matter most*. Things you did trying to right your wrongs and the wrongs of everyone else, things for which you've suffered. Haven't you suffered enough, you twit?"

That was a good question. Lily always *was* good at painting him into a corner, then handing him the brush she'd used to do it before she smiled and closed the door.

"Well?"

"I don't know, Lily."

"I do. And I think you could admit that *you* do, too, if you weren't such a stubborn pain in the arse, Severus Snape."

And he agreed. In *part*. On *principle*.

Bollocks.

But every time he moved to the door intending to take a walk, to check his post box, or to give in to his base and desperate need to quickly reach oblivion via Muggle whiskey, Ursula's face would swim in front of his eyes. What would he do if he saw her on the street, buying fruit from the vendor (*Mr. Grumpy*, he could still chuckle to himself) or sweeping the stoop of her shop? Would he cut and run? Would he push her away, like every one of his peers in Britain, with cruel barbs shot with force and accuracy? Would he...*could he*...act as though he hadn't just, with great precision, skinned himself alive emotionally and left his carcass to bleed?

Until he knew the answer to that question, he dared not cross his threshold.

On the fifth day he rose with a sigh, knowing he could put it off no longer...*he must* leave his flat. His special orders would surely be in, his post box was likely full, his orders needed sending, and he was out of bloody bagged tea.

He was no closer to an answer, but sod an answer...he needed a cuppa *Now*.

Hands deep in jacket pockets and wearing his most formidable scowl, he trudged down the pavement to the Merlin-and-Nimue-be-damned Starbucks for overpriced bagged tea served by teenagers who were clearly too stupid to respond correctly to his obviously foul mood. Fortified by the tea, and grateful that the giggling morons hadn't changed the music (from insipid...but relatively quiet...folk to something with both guitars and vocalists screaming incoherently) the moment he exited the store, he took one last longing look in the direction of his flat before making his way towards (*my doom*) the Post Office.

He made it down the street without incident. Packages mailed, and orders retrieved from his box, he allowed himself a glimmer of hope that the rest of his errands might run as smoothly.

He should not have done. As he exited the grocer (still waiting on the lemon curd, but the Twinings had come in, Circe be praised! He ordered another three boxes immediately, *just in case*) his waist was suddenly enveloped in a vise grip belonging to a brown-haired force of nature.

"Simon!" he grunted. And glared.

His glare was met by a huge smile. "Severus! I missed you! I've looked for you in the park, but you haven't come."

Momentarily taken aback by the enthusiasm of the greeting, and Simon's refusal to take seriously a perfectly serviceable stern glare, Severus responded, "I've, er, been busy. With important things." He cleared his throat before continuing. "Is there some *reason* you've been looking for me?" he asked, sternly. Perhaps *too* sternly.

"Oh, no. No reason. I just wanted to say hi," Simon muttered, staring at his shoes. He looked up at Severus through the fringe of his hair. "Well, um, I guess I'll go to the park, then." He turned to leave.

Severus sighed. He had not only lost his touch, he had clearly lost his mind...well, there was nothing for it. "I was planning to take a walk in the park, ah... would you care to join me?" he asked, mentally kicking himself for going so sodding *soft*, so sodding *quickly*.

Simon perked up. "Yeah!" He eyed Severus' bags, and held out his hand. "You have a lot of bags...want me to carry one?"

Severus eyed the hand and the boy before his control over his quivering lip failed and he found himself coming disturbingly close to a smile. He hung the lightest of the bags on Simon's outstretched hand, and started down the pavement with a flourish sorely diminished by a lack of appropriately swirling robes. "Come, my gallant knight."

Simon bounced on the balls of his feet and grinned before falling into a measured trot beside the long strides of the leggy man. "To the park, my liege!"

Severus snorted. It was good to be king.