

Ball is a Four-Letter Word

by juniperus

An unexpected guest attends a charity event... with very unexpected consequences.

Ball is a Four-Letter Word

Chapter 1 of 1

An unexpected guest attends a charity event... with very unexpected consequences.

It was a circus (not that Harry'd ever been, but Hermione had told him about them once in a fit of pique when she was still going on about S.P.E.W. ~~He~~, at least, felt like a caged animal on display.

It was a year ago, very nearly, that the Battle of Hogwarts had been fought. A year ago, very nearly, that the fallen were collected, the repair of the castle and grounds begun, and the wizarding world let out a collective sigh of relief.

It was a year ago, very nearly, that the Ministry began its attempt to take credit for the end of Voldemort's reign of terror while simultaneously avoiding responsibility for the myriad details of recovery that needed attention.

And that was why Harry Potter stood in the drawing room of Malfoy Manor in a waistcoat of emerald silk brocade, a wasp-waisted frock coat, and trews. Oh, and a half-mask with mother-of-pearl sheen and peacock feathers...mustn't forget the peacock feathers.

Harry rolled his eyes for what had to be the hundredth time as a team of house-elves, under the direction of one Draco Malfoy, put the finishing touches to what had to be the second most ostentatious costume he had ever seen. Draco's edged his out for the win.

Draco had been a real surprise, and not only because he seemed to have a penchant for breeks, frilled cuffs, and powdered wigs. Although the summer after the battle had been difficult (for everyone), when he returned to school this past September to cram for his exams with Harry, Neville, Hermione, and the rest of the raggle-taggle '8th Year', Draco was wary but calm, focused, and pleased to stay away from the Manor to lick his wounds far from the reparations, explanations, and machinations there. It had taken time, but eventually he opened up and began to converse and interact.

He even volunteered...*volunteered!*...to help Neville plant the beds around Hogwarts' war memorial just a few weeks earlier.

"Enough!" Draco snapped, and the house-elves skittered away in a fit of bowing and apologies. He eyed Harry up and down and then shrugged. "You'll do."

Harry rolled his eyes for time one-hundred-and-one before he snorted in both amusement and irritation and walked to the window. "Hermione and Susan are nearly to the front courtyard. And it looks like Morag, Tracey, and Anthony just arrived at the Apparition point," Harry commented.

"What are they wearing?" Draco asked, as he hurried to the window. "Granger, do you not know what *masked ball* is?" He shook his head and headed toward the front foyer. "I'll have to Transfigure her something. Smartest witch of her age, my arse."

Harry snickered. She did look rather like she was playing a jewel thief on one of the old-time detective programs Uncle Vernon sometimes watched on the telly. And it was hardly a good look for her, either.

Once the memorial was well-and-planned for (and Hermione and Ernie quickly got fund-raising down to an exact science) conversations drifted to 'what next?' It was Tracey Davis' idea, actually, since she was friends with both Daphne and Astoria, and therefore heard first-hand what happened to the Greengrass family. And quiet, unassuming, Hannah Abbott knew a lot more about what happened to many more of the half-blood families than anyone could have guessed she would. There were a lot of Hogwarts students who had not returned, not (as some had believed) because of fear or prejudice, but because they could not afford to continue or could not leave younger siblings at home, alone.

Which was, again, why Harry Potter looked like a refugee from a cover of Hermione's beloved Jane Austen novels and stood in a pretentious parlor that could have been co-designed by the designer of *The Fountain of Magical Brethren* and Louis XIV.

A Masquerade Ball.

That had been Draco's idea. He became more interested in the plans after Tracey explained why neither Greengrass sister returned to school, and somehow he appointed himself Head of Operations. More than a few of the group were suspicious when his parents agreed rather too readily to volunteer the Manor for the event, not to mention the rather awkward circumstances of the last time the trio had 'visited'. The fact, however, that Lucius Malfoy was still being watched 24/7 combined with Draco bitterly admitting that the Malfoy family could use a little positive press helped settle most of the dis-ease.

Harry's discomfort returned when it was revealed that *he* was the big draw of the event (well, and the opportunity to see the inside of the illustrious and newly-restored Malfoy Manor), but by then, everyone else was excited about the event and divvying-up responsibilities. Draco worked on special, personalized invitations to the height of Wizarding society with an offer to attach their name to the cause of the 'suffering orphans' in exchange for an impressive donation. Ernie MacMillan and Susan Bones arranged for ads to be run in both the *Daily Prophet* and *Quibbler* listing the proud 'sponsors' and advertising the event date and price-per-head for attendance. Hermione and Hannah researched the attacks on Muggle-born and half-blood families to get information on the extent of the problem, while Anthony Goldstein and Morag MacDougal arranged the legal paperwork to create a proper Fund complete with Board of Trustees and a Gringott's account.

Neville brought Narcissa Malfoy a lovely bouquet of *Narcissus jonquilla*.

And Harry? Harry had to show up and be ogled. And glad-handed, and back-slapped, and chatted-up. And he was immediately informed by a very brusque, newly-arrived Hermione Granger that he *would* be dancing, thankyouverymuch.

Harry recalled the Yule Ball. He didn't expect this to go any better.

Harry wasn't sure how many guests had already arrived, but the ballroom was filling rapidly, and the line up to the Manor's ostentatious 12-foot-tall double doors looked like it held nearly twice as many more. He groaned inwardly when he spotted Rita Skeeter in a bright red comedy mask that matched her garish lipstick (her photographer wore a tragedy mask in black, to match her skin-tight dress) in a corner with a rather stern-looking Hermione, who was obviously giving her explicit directions.

He didn't recognize most of the attendees and doubted he would even without their masks, but cheerfully waved with a smile when he spotted Headmistress McGonagall in a tartan hand-held mask with matching tam...not just anyone could pull *that* off. Minister Shacklebolt had already greeted him wearing a fierce tribal mask that covered his whole head and most of his torso, and he could guess well to which family the gang of masked redheads belonged.

Harry nervously stood to the side, glad that his mask covered his scar and he hadn't yet been spotted by the chattering throng already half-lit on Ogden's Finest and Malfoy Reserve. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was being *watched*, but given the sheer number of costumed guests, he wouldn't have been surprised if someone was staring...he was wearing *the* second most ostentatious costume he had ever seen, after all.

In an attempt to wedge himself even further in the corner behind a potted cypress Harry stepped backward right into a tall man in a long, high-collared black coat and white half-mask that looked like the enormous curved beak of a bird.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't see you there, Mr., er..." Harry peered up at the gentleman, trying to place the long, thin face and faint scent of sandalwood that seemed oddly familiar.

"Schnabel. *Herr Professor Doktor Schnabel*," the man rasped, with a slight bow. "But that ist foreign-zounding to the British ear, zo I prefer the zimple *Professssor*."

Ah, clearly he was mistaken. Harry responded with the same old-fashioned formal bow and said, "Harry Potter. Pleased to meet your acquaintance, Professor Schnabel."

"Ah, Potter." The Professor mused. "Zo this ist *your* party, ya?"

Harry blushed and looked decidedly uncomfortable. "No! Er, I mean, yes. Uh, well, not exactly." Schnabel's beak turned downward and the dark eyes behind it stared at Harry unblinkingly. "It's complicated." Harry sighed. The dark eyes had still not left his face.

"A small group of students at Hogwarts, all from the class returning to finish our exams interrupted by the last year of the war, spent the majority of this year planning and fund-raising for a memorial that would..." His eyes drifted in the direction of Minister Shacklebolt. "...honor the fallen with more accuracy and respect than the Ministry Memorial. Once those plans were well underway, we shifted our attention to other matters we perceived lacking in appropriate Ministry attention." Harry concluded and looked up to see the eyes still fixed upon him.

He cleared his throat. "So, er, since we personally knew, or closely knew of, the situations of the children orphaned and were well aware of the lack of support they were receiving from the Ministry, especially those with family members who supported or were thought to have supported Voldemort..." Harry startled as Schnabel flinched. "Er, sorry."

"Orphans like yourself?" Schnabel asked pointedly.

Harry stammered, "Yes. Er, no." He shook his head. "Yes, I am an orphan, but no, I'm not one of the orphans who will benefit from tonight's proceeds. I'm not a child anymore, and I was fortunate to have means left to me by my parents to attend Hogwarts when the time came. Many of the affected children are Muggle-born and have to navigate both worlds with little guidance, half-bloods were also targeted, and some children are not only orphans, but also destitute because the Ministry confiscated their families' vaults for 'reparation'," Harry continued, now feeling more than a little uncomfortable.

"No, not a child anymore. I zee that." Schnabel murmured.

Harry felt his face heat, and quickly concluded, "Uh, well, we thought all Hogwarts students should be able to return to finish their educations and not have to worry about school costs. So the group planned this ball, and..." He looked around nervously, trying to sight Hermione. "...uh, they thought my being here would draw more people to the event." He looked back up at Schnabel, who was nodding to himself.

"Ah. I should think a hero like you would... enjoy the attention."

Harry grimaced. "No. No, not at all. I've had enough attention I didn't ask for, nor want in the first place, to last me a lifetime. And there were much bigger heroes than me. I don't think being connected with some prophecy and reacting to situations I was placed in instead of choosing to act is heroic at all." Harry looked down at his feet. "Not at all. If you will excuse me, Professor, I'm certain our hosts will want me to make an appearance soon...the band has finished setting up."

Schnabel's eyes narrowed behind his mask, and a smile flitted past his lips before he stiffly bowed and looked down his beak at Harry. "But of course. Thank you for the discussion it was very... enlightening." He then turned abruptly and strode into the crowd, cutting through the milling revelers like a prow through the sea.

Harry stood agape for a moment, staring after the man. That initial feeling he had that he knew the man from somewhere was back and difficult to ignore, despite the foreign accent and weird titles.

There was a point at which Harry thought back to the Yule Ball with considerable fondness, his perspective irreparably altered in the face of the spectacle of all spectacles in which he was currently trapped.

Draco, wig and all, and Hermione, wearing a dress with the largest, er, arse he'd ever seen, were surprisingly brilliant Emcees. Draco could, Harry admitted grudgingly, put on the charm like a pro, and when the factual portions of the program arrived he graciously shifted attention to Hermione. She, to her great credit, was more succinct than he'd ever witnessed before, and she even smiled as she thanked the *generous* sponsors by name (beginning with the Malfoys themselves), and then all and sundry for attending what was sure to be a (and he should have understood the dire warning implicit in her words) 'night to remember'.

Soon enough, Draco dramatically described the plight of the orphans and called for the opening notes of the ball be played. And then, as Harry was suddenly apprised of a key portion of the plan they had somehow failed to mention, he understood what the phrase 'a night to remember' meant.

"I won't do it," Harry stated, firmly, once they had *Finite'd* the *Sonorus*. He glared at Hermione and Draco. "It's demeaning, degrading, and, might I also point out, *demoralizing*. I thought you were my friends!" Draco rolled his eyes and turned to face the crowd, asking for patience while everyone "takes their place."

Hermione, hands on hips, glared at Harry. "You will do it, and you will smile and be polite, and you will do *it*ow, Harry Potter! Everyone who pays will have a mark charmed to stay on their hand until after you dance, so there will be no confusion." She looked Harry up and down, and sniffed. "At least Draco put you in *Regency*...I got stuck in puce satin and a bustle to match his sodding wig! Now, get out there on that dance floor!" She huffed, spun, and stormed off to a table set up next to the dance floor, in front of which stood a very, very long line of witches and wizards, all smiling, some waving, and one short wizard in chartreuse robes actually *blew him a kiss*.

Draco smirked at Harry, nodded to Hermione, and motioned to the band. Harry closed his eyes and sighed as his shoulders sagged in defeat. When he opened them and raised his head the wizard in chartreuse was walking his way and a few couples, including Arthur and Molly Weasley, had taken to the floor. He saw the Minister sitting to the side, eyes crinkled in amusement, and he noticed the dark form of Professor Schnabel leaning against the far wall, *watching*.

It was going to be a long night.

Neville saw the look on Harry's face just before he stormed out of the ballroom and quickly followed him to the rear garden.

"Of all the utterly fuckwitted ideas they could have fucking used to fuck up my already bloody fucking pathetic excuse for a life *this* takes the cake," Harry spat as he paced back and forth in front of an ornate bench looking over the hedge maze. Neville took a seat and watched patiently as Harry lost his temper and control over his vocabulary in one fell swoop.

"Do you know what they did, Neville? In addition to charging by the head at the door, they took galleons from every boot-licker who came to this thrice-damned poor excuse for a charity ball to *dance with me*. For a *private audience* and the *possibility of a grope*...which, I might add, they *all* tried...with the Savior of the Wizarding World!" Harry gesticulated wildly, punctuating each phrase with a snarl and an obscene salute directed towards the Manor.

"And when I cornered Hermione about it she wouldn't look me in the eye, just muttered some jackassery about how..." He raised his tone a few octaves and put a hand on his cocked hip. "...*it's for a good cause*' and *'it'll be over soon enough*' and *'no, you're not cheap...we're charging quite a price for you*' and, my favorite, *'are you or are you not a Gryffindor?'* I think that bushy hair of hers has grown inward!" Harry turned towards Neville and took a shuddering breath.

"Merlin's big blue bollocks, Neville, they're treating me like a Knockturn Alley whore! When," Harry choked, "Ginny asked whether Draco would let me give her a 'free tumble' later I just... I just couldn't take it anymore." His shoulders slumped.

"I noticed you avoiding Ginny," Neville commented as he crossed his feet at the ankle and leaned his head back, looking at the stars. "I take it on-again-off-again is off-again?"

Harry sighed and joined Neville on the bench. "It's been off for more than a little while, Neville. I don't know how I feel about her anymore, and I just can't take the... the *faces* she makes at me...like the way Hermione used to look at Lockhart, remember? At least when Ginny was mad at me all last year for leaving her behind while we searched for the Horcruxes I was *Harry*. Now it's just like it was when she first met me and just *stared* at me, only now she can actually speak when I'm in the room." He shook his head sadly. "Not that that's an improvement, mind."

"*Harry Potter, our new celebrity*." Neville mimicked.

Harry looked at him, astonished. "Hey, that was pretty good, Neville." Harry then looked down at his hands and took a deep breath. "I wish he..." Harry cleared his throat. "*He* never treated me like I was special for surviving the first time, and if he were here *now*he, at least, wouldn't act like those..." Harry jerked his head backward in disgust, "*Aberforthing fame-chasers*."

Neville snorted. "That's an interesting spin on '*dunderhead*!' and '*Potter! Saturday...Detention!*' and '*idiot Gryffindor!*'" Neville mimicked, again. "But you're right...Professor Snape *never* looked at you the way Hermione looked at Lockhart."

Harry snickered. "Probably a good thing, too, or he would have done Voldemort a favor...I would have collapsed from the shock!" Neville chuckled. "Seriously, Neville, this is out of hand. I'll never be 'Just Harry', never have a family..." He raised the back of his hand dramatically to his forehead and drawled, "I'll die a lonely virgin, hiding for the rest of my years from everyone trying to get close to *The Boy Who Lived, Got His Arse Kicked A Few Times, Then Finally Killed The Bastard*."

Neville grinned and bumped his shoulder against Harry's. "You're 'Just Harry' to me, Harry."

"I know, Neville, you're a wise and true friend." Harry gave Neville a sidelong glance. "And not bad looking, besides. But if I asked you to marry me and start a family I think Hannah would hex me six ways from Sunday...I've *seen* how she's been looking at you!"

Neville's head whipped in Harry's direction, and his jaw dropped as he blushed furiously. Then he threw his head back and laughed. He and Harry both laughed long and hard, ending up gripping their bellies and leaning against one another on the bench.

After their guffaws subsided Neville sat up straight and turned to Harry. "You really think she likes me, Harry?"

Harry launched himself off the bench and looked back with a snort. "Go ask her to dance...are you or are you not a Gryffindor?" As he stalked forward towards the entrance of the maze he called back, "If Draco or Hermione are looking for me, I'll be back after I get some air. If anyone else asks about me...make something up!" Harry heard Neville chuckling as he passed into the hedges.

As Neville made his way back up to the Manor, he continued to chuckle, "Poor sod. I've never been *soglad* moldy old Voldy chose him over me!" Lost in his reverie, he didn't notice a dark figure step out of the rose bushes behind the bench and slink toward the entrance to the hedge maze.

Harry relaxed more with each step. The further he moved into the maze, the fainter the infernal music leaking from the Manor. The moon was near-full; there was just enough light to sight the hedges without using additional illumination, and the rustle of the uppermost leaves shifting in the slight breeze was peaceful. After walking a while he stopped and took a deep breath. He smelled the grass under his feet, the hedges surrounding him, and... sandalwood?

"Who's there?" He called. He should have noticed footsteps...it'd not even been a year, had he already lost his survival instincts? He waited, breathing shallowly and straining for any sound. "I can smell you, Professor." Then it hit him. Tall. Bony. Graceful. *Sandalwood*.

"I know you're here, Professor... *Snape*," Harry said quietly. He knew he would be heard.

A rustle to his left. Harry turned and lit his wand in time to see a black shape leap back about twenty feet away. "Nox," Harry whispered and quietly toed off his ankle-high boots. He began slowly moving forward. After each step he'd pause, listen, and scent the air. After twenty-five feet of this he pondered lighting his wand again when he was suddenly airborne until he hit the hedge at the end of the dead-end to his right. Before he could drop to the ground, he was held aloft by his collar, the beak pressing painfully into his collarbone as those dark eyes glared down at him.

"You are a fool, Potter, to think you could best me at my own game. Always stay downwind of prey once you've scented them!" he rasped harshly, then slackened his hold enough to allow Harry's bare feet to touch the ground. He looked down at the bare toes wiggling in the cold grass and smirked. "Impressive. Perhaps you *are* teachable, after all." Snape unwound his long fingers from the front of Harry's shirt and allowed his hand to drop to his side but remained where he stood, toe to toe with Harry.

"You're *alive*," Harry whispered thickly as he fought back tears. "I...I... I'm so happy you're alive!"

"Spare me, Potter," Snape spat.

"I *am* happy you're alive. And I'm *sorry*. I'm sorry for everything I *should* be sorry for. I'm sorry for anything you *needed* me to be sorry for." Impulsively, he reached out and placed his hand flat against Snape's chest, felt for the beating heart. His own heart constricted in his chest as he heard Snape gasp at the contact.

"How? What?" Harry mumbled, his words tumbling together as he tried to ask all his questions at once.

"It's better I not tell you. I shouldn't have come here at all..." Snape said, quietly, looking away.

"No! You're *safe*! You were exonerated, I made sure of it. I, I, uh... testified." Harry said, his fingers curling in the fabric under his palm in fear that Snape might bolt. "They've finally agreed to give you your Order of Merlin," Harry finished weakly, worried that he might inadvertently offend the man at any moment.

"I know."

"You... *know*? Then why?" Harry asked, confused.

"It's... *better*..." Snape trailed off and sighed. "I am hated somewhat *less* dead."

"I don't hate you," Harry whispered. The more he noticed the heat emanating from the man before him, the more he realized *just how much* he didn't hate him. He took a deep breath of sandalwood and his other hand raised, seemingly of its own volition, fingertips gently searching the shadow cast by the beak to softly graze the edges of Snape's mouth. Emboldened by a sharp intake of air and the sudden lift of Snape's head, Harry ran them across his thin lips as he searched those dark eyes for... for permission? Rebuke? *Guidance*?

Harry didn't have time to think on it further as the body in front of his pressed forward with a groan, trapping him against the sharp branches of the hedge and making clear to *both* men how much hate was *not* involved for *either* of them.

"You don't want this," Snape whispered hoarsely as he tipped his mask up and uncovered his oft-derided features.

"I *do*. Do... do you?" Harry asked and reached up to pull the peacock feather confection from his own face. He paused and waited for an answer.

Snape's cool hand cupped Harry's cheek and he ran the work-roughened pad of his thumb over Harry's eyebrow and across his cheekbone before tilting his head to the side. "It's... I..." Snape murmured before dipping his head and closing the gap between them. He chastely kissed Harry's soft lips, then shuddered and took Harry's full bottom lip between his own, hungrily.

Harry tried to stifle his moan as he melted into the kiss, and he ran the tip of his tongue along the edge of Snape's parted lips.

Snape growled and all pretense of chasteness disappeared as he thrust his hot tongue into Harry's mouth, grinding his hips forward at the same languid pace. Harry pushed his tongue forward to entwine with the bold invader, and his own hips responded in kind. The hand on Snape's chest gripped tighter as the other snaked around to entangle fingers in the long hair gripped in a thong at the nape of his neck. The men moved against each other sinuously, tongues sliding and caressing, and Harry was certain, *certain*, he had never felt *this good*, felt anything *this amazing*, before. And he was just as certain he never wanted it to stop.

That is, until Snape's hand worked its way between their bodies and his long fingers sneaked between Harry's waistcoat and trousers. After deftly unfastening buttons and pulling free the shirttail, Snape slid his hand down to cup Harry's cock and give it a possessive squeeze.

And, *Oh!* Harry was *certain* that *this* was what he didn't want to stop. "Yes! *please!*" he gasped into Snape's mouth. The hand with which he gripped the overcoat relaxed and began loosening the fastenings down, down until he could feel that Snape was following old wizard custom that evening. He tightened his fingers around Snape's large, unfettered cock and worked his hand in long pulls with a little twist at the end that elicited a deep moan that vibrated through them both with each stroke.

"Turn around," Snape rumbled as he stepped back slightly and finished unfastening his coat. Harry's trousers dropped as he moved to turn around, so he stepped out of them and quickly divested himself of his underwear. Snape's hands reached out to glide over Harry's buttocks, down the inside of his thighs, and back up to grasp his hips. He knelt behind Harry and rubbed his cheek against Harry's arse with a sigh.

Harry squeaked as Snape's tongue licked a stripe from spine to bollocks and back up again before he placed his hands on each buttock and his long fingers gently held Harry open before him. The next trip of his tongue included a stop to circle Harry's tight pucker, and up, and back down, circle, ending with a thorough lavage of his bollocks. Harry squirmed and gasped, squealed (in a completely undignified fashion), and finally he fell to whining moans as that tongue stopped its travels and stayed to circle his pucker once more before slipping past the tight ring of muscle and repeating the maddening motions of their earlier kiss.

Harry whimpered when that hot tongue left him and the cool night air met the wet trail of saliva in its wake.

"Reach up, both hands on the hedge," Snape rasped, "hold on." He fumbled in his pocket a moment and brought out his wand. He pointed it at Harry's hole and mumbled a few words, nodding when he heard Harry gasp at the odd sensation as those tight muscles suddenly relaxed and well-lubricated, and tucked it back away.

"You're sure you want this?" Snape ground out with effort as he held Harry's hip with one hand and ran the head of his cock up and down Harry's arse crack with the other.

"Yes!" Harry cried out, "Merlin, yes!" He pushed back against Snape and wiggled slightly. Snape's answering growl turned into a low chuckle as he rumbled, "Patience, Potter. It does not do to rush," he groaned as he gently pushed the head of his cock in slightly, firmly holding Harry's hips still with his other hand. "Especially... not... *this!*" Having given Harry a moment to adjust to the intrusion, he slowly slid further with a shudder, releasing Harry's hip and allowing him to push back and take it all in one stroke.

"Nnnnggg! Oh! It's so..." Harry babbled, with a gasp. "Yes! So...*perfect*... oh, oh, *there! Merlin!*" Snape stroked in and out, pulling back slowly before snapping his hips forward, each thrust calling forth another string of appreciative nonsense from Harry.

As his thrusts gained in momentum Snape's fingers clutched at Harry's hip bones tightly enough to leave bruises, and the air was filled with the soft sounds of panting and moaning and skin slapping skin, punctuated by the crack and rustle of Harry's desperate clinging to the hedge for support. All too soon Snape's thrusting grew erratic, and he reached around to grasp Harry's cock, tugging in time with each stroke; one, two, another, and...

"*Professor!*" Harry cried as his body jerked. Snape's hoarse baritone followed before Harry was through shooting strings of pearly white into onto the hedge and Snape's strong hand.

Snape's arm curled around Harry's waist, holding him up as he, himself, slumped forward to rest his cheek against the ever-tousled back of Harry's head. Harry could feel Snape's heart beating against his back, and then slowing in time with his own as their panting changed to breaths, and then, the man whose near-boneless warmth rested against him stiffened.

Snape stood and stepped back, wand again in hand, silently casting cleaning spells and quickly re-fastening his coat. Harry stepped forward slightly, again upright, and turned to sadly watch the change from lover back to *Snape*. He quietly *Accio'd* his underwear, then his trousers, and dressed slowly, never taking his eyes off of the man before him.

Snape watched the boy...*man!*...dress, emotions warring inside him. The old ache returned as he realized what he needed to do, and he looked away, not wanting to meet Harry's eyes. He feared both what he *would* see there and what, perhaps, he would*not*.

"I cannot stay..." Snape said flatly.

"I know."

Snape reached up and pulled his mask back down over his eyes. "Potter,*Harry*, I..."

"Will I see you again?" Harry asked, bravely trying to keep the desperation out of his voice as he fought against the tide of feelings of sadness and abandonment rising within him. Snape flinched. He kept his eyes off Harry's face now that it was clear what he would find there.

"I... I do not know." Snape answered honestly.

"I hope I will," Harry whispered, still staring at the man and willing him to look up. "I won't share your secret, not with anyone. And... and..." Harry's voice faltered. "I will miss you more now than I did before I knew..." His voice trailed off,

Knew you are alive, knew you are amazing, knew you are as attracted to me as I am to you, knew I could very easily care for you all left unspoken.

Snape grunted softly, afraid to open his mouth to speak lest everything he wanted to say and didn't want to have said, might slip out unbidden. He took a breath and raised his head, looking into Harry's eyes and hoping he would understand what couldn't happen, what couldn't be said, and *why*.

"It wouldn't *be better*, not for *me*, but it's your choice," Harry said.

Ah, yes, he *did* understand; at that moment Snape rather wished he hadn't.

Heroes choose to act.

Fuck.

Voices in the distance saved Snape from making the decision to change his choice, to change the future to which he had already resigned himself. "I must..."

"Go." Harry nodded, shoulders slumped. "I hope..." Harry started, then shook his head at how pathetic he must sound. "Be safe," he whispered.

Snape met his eyes once more and nodded his head once, slowly, before disappearing with a soft *pop*.

Harry bent to pick up his mask and ran his fingertips over it, following the path Snape's thumb had taken before placing it back on and moving forward, away from the hedge wall.

In the distance he heard voices carrying faintly over the hedges.

"*Potter! Your adoring fans await!*"

"Did you find him, Draco?"

"No. He wouldn't do a bunk, would he?"

"Harry? No! *Harry! Harry Potter!*"

With one last despondent look over his shoulder at the dead-end, he slowly trudged back through the maze to collect his boots and go back to the ball.