

Masters and Friends

by janus

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Severus turned the note over in his bony fingers, stopping just short of twisting it into creases. It was a summons to Dumbledore's office. He tightened his lips, hesitating as he was called there on this night, of all nights. Sometimes he lay hoping for such an invitation, daring himself to expect it. Sometimes he dreaded it. He well knew that random reward created nervous anticipation - an addiction to hope. He monitored his internal responses, carefully judging his feelings before he committed to them.

The man should have been a Slytherin, Severus thought a little bitterly with a slightly twisted lip. It was true. It was unfathomable that he could ever have been sorted otherwise, unless he had used subterfuge on the Sorting Hat at the age of eleven, disguising himself as a Gryffindor for fun and profit. As they put it. But really, it had to have been for fulfilled ambition; for the setting of a precedent for goodness and innocence; for establishing an alibi of misplaced nobility and Quixotic schemes. His real motivations must have remained perpetually obscured. The man was brilliant.

Dear Severus,

Please humour an old man by joining me for refreshments and cakes in my study at 6:30 after tea in the Great Hall. The password will be 'ice lollies.'

Sincerely,

Albus.

The day crawled by, but for the most part it consisted of Potions class for the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. The former could be generally relied upon not to create conflagrations. The latter could generally be squelched in their pursuit of self-destruction with a vigorous frown. Severus was grateful for the reprieve. On the alternate days he spent hours attempting to prevent the damnable Gryffindors from searching and seizing opportunities to kill his Slytherins, one another, or their teacher. Despite himself and the foolishness of superstition, he looked for signs of small favours from the universe, even if they were not really signs.

Eventually the time came for the meeting. He dressed carefully, donning his favourite robes with the greenest buttons all up the front. This was his day, and he had always saved something special for himself - some book he had been wanting to read, or a special food he never seemed to have time to appreciate normally. His clothing was a part of this studied self-indulgence.

The other professors had passed him in the halls with customary polite nods all day, with nothing less than courtesy, but nothing more either. It was all up to him. There was a shadow of a wish that maybe, just maybe, there would be some small celebration - a cake at dinner, a bottle of ink with a small card, a new handkerchief tucked into his hand. It was always possible, wasn't it?

He remembered one year, long ago, Regulus and Rabastan pouncing on him, startling him and causing him to draw his wand in panicked defence. But they had laughed, and happy (*happy*), had dragged him back to the common room, a Slytherin, *a friend*. Lucius had sent a package of food and favours for his house-mates and his father's

protégé. He had not expected it then, but it had changed the day forever, opening a small possibility of comradely recognition.

Immediately he felt sad. He tried to keep the memory sweet, to keep back the bitterness of loss for those boys. Instead he tightened his lips, brusquer, more forbidding still as he swept through the hallways. If anyone noted him, though - and none did - he wore his multitude of green buttons, and a Slytherin scarf.

"Ice Lollies," he intoned at the closed door. To counteract his sense that he sounded ridiculous, he frowned, which served to make his voice sound almost accusatory.

There was Albus, soft purple robes of velvet brocade, carpet slippers on old feet, his hair and beard fresh and fluffy, his glasses brightly clean. He held a knitting bag in his hand, but embraced the younger man with the other arm in a fatherly way. "Thank you for coming, Severus."

"Thank you for inviting me." Severus spoke evenly with the correct words. But he was grateful for the attention, and wished again there was something warm to say - something that was not stiff or pre-programmed after all these years. Nearly twenty years. But everything true was dark and would disturb whatever good feeling there was for him. It was not that there were no questions, but they were not for the asking. He had learned that. They would come as they fit Dumbledore's purpose.

The blue eyes looked back at him, as if they could read every awkward idle thought from his eyes into the back of his skull. "Come, sit. I'll pour the tea." He fussed with the teapot, fumes of bergamot rising. "Lemon, no sugar. Is that right?"

There was the school chair, plumped with comfortable pillows. There was a small table with cream-puffs and golden steaming scones melting with butter and spread with grape jelly. Of course the tea was right, just as he liked. Everything was exactly as he liked. Dumbledore was shaky, with his poor blackened hand. It had horrified Severus. The *Horcruxes*. Oh yes, he remembered. They had all known, but if they had not forgotten, it had slipped back from the fore of their consciousnesses with the Dark Lord's absence. Lucius had told him that he had chided them for this laxity at the graveyard in Little Hangleton. Now here was the visible curse, triggered in his Headmaster's hand, spreading like a network of... of death-tendrils, eating him, through his body. Severus had done what he could. Potions, DADA genius as he was, he was no match for this spell of his one Master. He had been able only to mitigate the creeping horror within the other. "Allow me."

Dumbledore gently repulsed him. "If I cannot do such a small thing for myself, I should ask you to kill me right now." The joke was macabre.

Severus blanched slightly at the reminder. "You know it is not that simple. I will be there at the *right* time. Whenever that may be."

"Forgive me. Look, here is your birthday gift. It *is* your birthday. Thirty-seven, if I am correct. Something small - a token." This with a smile, crinkly at the edges, and again with that incisive look over the tops of the half-glasses. Of course he was correct.

Severus delicately wiped the (possibly non-existent) chocolate remnants from his fingers on one of the paisley napkins (not serviettes, he remembered from perusals in some long-ago library.) He took the little box in its wrapping paper with the yellow balloons and its blue bow. This says nothing about me, he thought. It is Dumbledore.

It was a pair of socks - dark green with light grey worked into the tops and a single stripe of purple running the length of them. "Slytherin, of course. And purple simply because I like it. Purple for me. I make Minerva red ones. Filius receives blue; Pomona yellow."

Severus smiled. They were a present, made for him. Just for him. "Thank you very much."

"Go ahead. Put them on. I'll not be embarrassed by bare feet, not at my age."

He was reluctant, always reserved, always more than fully dressed, with not only socks and boots, but gaiters. Not wanting to seem ungrateful, however, he obliged and indeed felt a small pleasure, moving his toes in the new stockings, feeling the soft wool.

"Another scone?"

"No, I..." Severus' Mark flared burning, demanding attention, demanding he follow. It was beyond distracting. His cheeks reddened at the apology he must now offer. This was always awkward. "...I have to go. I'm sorry."

"So soon?" One eyebrow raised, though he surely knew. He knew everything.

"My Mark..."

"Of course. Here - your shoes. Please come back to me directly afterwards. The same password. We can talk about the doings of your... compatriots. Remember, the smallest things could count. Their mental states, their tics and habits. Any weaknesses. Plans, of course. But, you know that."

Yes, from one master to the other. He touched his Dark Mark and it spun him, swinging him on its fulcrum. He landed, trying to hide the slight stagger. His features automatically assumed mild neutrality. That would change the instant he was able to divine the reason for the summons.

He recognised the Great Entrance Hall of Malfoy Manor at once, but the room was empty. This was odd, as he had taken the few seconds to speak to Dumbledore. Others should have arrived before him and should have been touching down as he established his own presence. A private audience? He wondered if he had been set a task or if he had displeased his Dark Lord. There was also the possibility that he was merely expected to report matters at Hogwarts, or perhaps some of his earlier reports had born fruit. He took a hesitating step forward. "My Lord?"

The door opened before him, and the Dark Lord stood beneath floating black letters, edged in shining silver and a twisting vine of green snakes. "I thought, this evening, that I would merely observe my children at their play. A party. For a faithful servant." Even as Severus bowed and knelt, he melted back to the throne that he had installed at the head of the Malfoy dining table room.

The spell of darkness receded to reveal a buffet laid upon the table. Those of his friends who yet lived thronged the sides of the room, smiling. They were his friends, his Housemates, his comrades in arms, even those who had been lost so many years. The smiles seemed genuine, and the banner read: "Happy 37th Birthday" and below it: "Severus Snape."

He went to Rabastan first, who managed a small self-conscious smile, just for him and his heart thudded with pleasure as he embraced him. The decades of privation and assaults upon his soul had made him shaky, weak and hesitant. A smile was a gift, and Rabastan had been his favourite in school, along with Regulus who was lost to them. Severus kept his arm about him as he greeted the others, showing him he was precious, showing him he had worth, even as he had been taught to doubt everything about himself. Rodolphus had Bella, and Severus greeted him warmly as well, wary as he always was of his wife. He had fared better than his brother, sheltered by the contagion of her fanaticism.

Severus looked around at the faces, all smiling for him. Proud beautiful Lucius was recovering from prison, still pinched about the face, yet still there was welcome in his eyes, and appreciation. Narcissa kept her fingers on her husband's arm, protective, possessive, stealing warmth and contact in case his presence was snatched from her again. She was grateful to Severus, of course, and her eyes were warm. Draco was missing, still at school, and Severus nodded to his mother with a special smile.

Dolohov approached. "The Birthday Boy has arrived and now the party may begin." He tied a large crepe bow around Severus' neck. "Quite the young gentleman now, I see. Anya sends her best regards of course. She was emphatically *not* invited to the feast."

Dolohov gestured to a brown owl tapping almost frantically at the window and started to glare towards Lucius. He recovered immediately. "But we must not be ungrateful, my dear boy. The Dark Lord permits us tea under his exalted and watchful gaze. I may pour, I have been told. You must not underestimate me."

"Antonin, old friend. It is good to see you again." Severus humoured him. Azkaban had stolen so much. It treated each differently, and he looked at Rabastan next to him,

wrapped in his arm. A picture from happier, more... lucid days with Dolohov played quickly through his memory. The two of them had sat across the table, heads bent eager, their speech quick, books between them and around them as they compared spells. Now the older man moved to the table and began fussing with the teapot.

Severus looked around at them all, wanting to touch their faces, confirm their existence, their lives. They would be gone so soon; had already been rendered so frail. They had been nearly ruined at the ministry. How could they storm the citadel itself? How could they be expected to face even a Dumbledore crippled by the Horcrux? He was the only one whole, still standing. It had been himself and Lucius who had been free and untouched, and now even his old friend had become washed by darkness. There had been others, of course - Avery, Mulciber, the ones who had put their Slytherin children under his care, and new additions like the Carrows and Rowle. But they had not been the close ones in the early days, and they were not here now.

I love you. But he could not say that out loud. It was still a Malfoy function, proud, beautiful and with all the manners expected of old. He was led to a seat at the centre of the table. Antonin poured his tea as promised, and they all passed him small tokens. They were family trinkets and toys of the type he had not received from his own mother. All were given graciously save Bella's. Only Bella was jealous. These tokens of esteem were given to show him worthy of their company. They were given to preserve the items themselves, lest family homes be ransacked and burned and precious possessions destroyed in retaliation for their owners' affiliations.

Severus looked back at their eyes that sought his. Each wanted to say so much. None was permitted, either by pride or by fear of offending the Dark Lord at the head of the table. He tried to answer silently. When wine was poured he stood.

"From this day to the ending of the world,

We in it shall be remembered-

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;

And sisters, of course. I thank you for your kind regard and congratulations. I will always remember and cherish you all." He lifted his glass. "To our Dark Lord and a New World."

He knew it was an ending, not a beginning. Perhaps it would be the last time he would see these faces, smile into these eyes that had formed his youth and his happiest days. Their master must be recognised, however. Hope must be maintained. To go into battle with one's name already carved into a headstone was a terrible way to die. He *would* erect headstones, for every one of them. He would lay flowers and kneel with love and loss. He would set one for Regulus as well, and Evan, poor young Barty Crouch, Wilkes - each of the fallen. Whatever they had become, they had once been his friends, his brothers.

The toast was the signal to begin the meal, and the House Elves arrived with platters loaded with beef Wellington, Yorkshire puddings, potatoes, vegetables glazed with almonds, garnished with rare mushrooms. The wine was the best from the Malfoy cellars, the taste rich yet clear with overtones of cherry and chocolate. They all waited until their Dark Lord had begun. The feast was for him of course, at his pleasure, but it recognised Severus, showed the others the regard in which he stood. Beyond all that, the fondness in their eyes was genuine. *The last good day*, he thought, each time he saw them.

What would he report to Dumbledore? There was no information he could offer that would not destroy his friends. This was not an army elite but a gathering of brave survivors, standing in the tide, wading towards slaughter on the beach, battling the undertow of expectations under which they would surely be dragged to their deaths. Tactics and strategies against them were unthinkable. He would tell the Headmaster that he had been feted, that he had been favoured, that confidence was high.

He would keep to himself Rabastan's dear papery frailty, Antonin's disordered mind, the sleepless bruises under Lucius' eyes, Narcissa's fears for her loved ones. He would keep his loving sorrow within his own heart, revealing it only to those to whom it belonged. These small sad facts were not useful and so were not demanded by the vow he had been required to make to Dumbledore so long ago.

"Thank you," Severus said. "Thank you all for your presence in my life, continuing to enrich it. Thank you for your kindness and generosity of spirit on my birthday." It was simple; it was humble; it was genuine. It was exactly what his friends needed to hear from him, and he wore no mask to offer them his blessing.

Autor's Notes: This was written for the Severus' Shorts festival for Snape's 50th birthday. My assignment was to write a piece for one or more of Severus' 31st to 40th birthdays.