

# Behind Every Good Man

*by juniperus*

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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There it was again, that same low *ho-ho-hoo hoo hoo* from above the house. Harry headed up the stairs past the bedrooms and library, pausing to listen, again, before cutting over to the window at the attic landing. 'Odd,' he thought, as he reached for the latch, 'why doesn't this owl just go to the regular delivery perch in back?'

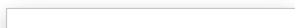
"Hey!" He quickly ducked as the window flew open and a mass of dark grey shot into the house and landed on the banister. His eyebrows shot up as he straightened and looked at his guest. "Merlin, you're *huge*!"

The owl looked at him with indifference, the only indication that it heard and understood Harry was the movement of the enormous tufts of feathers on either side of its head.

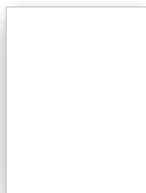
"You're not from around here, are you?" Harry said and smiled. He'd never seen this kind of owl before, but it was impressive. Of course, anything with a five-foot wingspan and the look of a great horned grey demon was likely to inspire no small amount of awe.

It held out one foot and waited patiently while Harry untied the string that secured the letter. Beating its enormous wings, it took off toward the still-open window with a great rush of air. *Ho-ho-hoo hoo hoo* Harry heard once more; then it was gone.

"Well!" Harry pushed his glasses up his nose and latched the window. He inspected the letter first with his wand, then squinting as he tried...and failed...to recognize the handwriting on the envelope.



He turned it over and puzzled over the rune...he was pretty sure it was one, he'd seen them in Hermione's notes before...impressed in the wax, then cracked the seal.



The scratching of the quill stopped as she paused to take a breath. This was already more difficult than she thought it would be, but she'd committed herself to the task.

Her eyes closed as she remembered him sidling up in the library...

"I saw wha' they did te you."

I colored as I turned to gape at the scrawny Slytherin leaning against the bookshelves. From his smirk it was clear he had, indeed, seen ~~everything~~ everything. "So? Are you here to inform me that I'm even less attractive naked than I am in my school robes? Sorry, the Hufflepuff Keeper beat you to it."

He gaped. "Wha'? No! Wait... he *said* tha'? Hufflepuffs are such lying pigs, a'least the Gryffindors can' hide tha' they're wankers," he spat. "Especially th' swine wha' tossed you into th' lake after Banishing your clothes."

I snorted.

He looked around before continuing, "Listen, I know it's not the first time Potter and Black 'av made you the butt of their jokes... tha' is, when they need time off from finding new ways to attack *me*." He stiffly thrust out his hand. "You're Batty?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "My *name* is Bathsheba."

He blinked. "Really!? No wonder you call yourself Batty!"

"I don't, *they* do!"

He looked at his shoes and stuck his hand back into his pocket.. "Oh. Right. I'm Severus. And, er... so wha' do you want me te call you?"

I glared. "My *name*."

"Th' whole thing?!"

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "You've never spoken to me before. What do you want?"

If he was surprised by my directness, he didn't show it. "An alliance. It'll be harder for them te ambush us if we aren't alone, and it'll be easier te, ~~ah~~ *retaliate*. And since you're a Ravenclaw, they can nowt blame Slytherin and get away with'i, like usual." He looked guardedly hopeful. "You know tha' won't be th' last time they strip you and throw you in th' lake, don't you?"

Well, he was right about that.

I offered him my hand. "Fine, then. An alliance. But this had better not be a trick..."

He grinned before skittering off. "The only tricks I av in mind are for those Gryffindor arseholes."

I stared after him. 'Manc out of the mouth of a *Slytherin*?' This *had* to be a trick...

## Joy

"Merlin, Bats, tha' was *brilliant*!" Severus exclaimed as he ducked under the canvas covering the Slytherin Quidditch stands. It had become our regular meeting place, away from the prying eyes of any who wondered why two students of two different Houses from two different years were spending so much time together.

I grinned. "You came up with the plan, Severus, I just charged the runes."

He threw himself down on the ground next to me and laughed. "You should av seen Black's face when he triggered your spell! I bet he can't use his wand hand for days, and th' pustules on his face!" He hugged his torso as he snickered. "And th' runes disappeared from my robe, just like you said they would...not a *trace* by the time Flitwick got there. I didn't believe you when you said you could combine runes and spell work like tha', Bats...you're *brilliant* I tell you! Remind me to stay on your good side!"

I grinned, again. Severus Snape wasn't given to empty praise, and I intended to enjoy this.

"Did you get your essay back from Slughorn?" he asked slyly, already knowing the answer. He wasn't above fishing for praise himself when in a particularly good mood.

"An E, of course, thanks to you!"

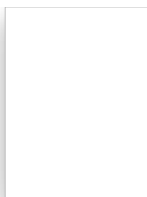
He leaned back and crossed his long legs in badly-feigned casualness before loftily responding, "All thanks to me, your personal Potions master an' savior!"

He certainly looked surprised when I transfigured a handful of dirt into a snowball and got him square on the side of the head.

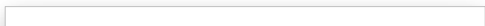
I was *much* better with wand work...the most he could manage was slush.

After a very silly and very wet not-quite-snow fight, we agreed to meet in the library after dinner.

He had an assignment due in Ancient Runes, and Ogham was, at best, a blistering bugger of a script.



## Grave



"She hates me, Bats. She *should*." Severus hung his head so the sheets of his hair hid his tear-streaked face. I pretended not to notice that he'd been crying when I joined him under the stands, sitting next to him silently as he sniffled.

I'd seen Severus upset over news his mum was in hospital after 'falling' during a fight with his da, but he had never once cried.

And the more time his *perfect* friend Lily spent with our sworn enemies...and less with him...the more conversations we had about how they'd been best friends when they arrived and Potter and Black were to blame... I never understood why he was so hurt that she hung out with Potter and his Merry Band...they were her Housemates, after all. And if she took the side of bullies over his, well, she obviously no longer cared much for his company or friendship. And I wondered how much she ever did, though I never said it...liked being popular, that one... Nice enough on the face of it, but she enjoyed being fawned over, and as much as Severus obviously liked her, he was no good at fawning. Smart, that Lily... but so were the girls in my House who were the same way. And I didn't like *them*, either.

But he was right... if she still considered him a friend before today, she surely hated him *now*. Not that I'd blame her...it's a terrible, deplorable thing he called her...but I think I'd have listened to his apology, at least. I mean, if they were such good friends for so long, and all. Maybe only *he* was... but I won't say *that*, either.

Of course, what do I know...before this afternoon he had exactly one friend more than I did.

"Yeah, she hates you right now, Sev... but she *hated* Black for turning her hair puce and refused to even look at him for a week. And you told me how much she *hated* that other one, the rat-faced boy, after he and Potter contaminated her Bubotuber pus with Vodianoi slime and her potion exploded." She didn't seem to *hate* Potter even *before* she was released from the infirmary, but it's best not to say a word about *that*, too.

"S'different."

"Well, yes. But she's still friends with *Black*...and *you've* been her best friend for *years and years*. We'll leave on the train in a few days...she'll have time to cool off, and you can tell her how sorry you are after you've been home a tic, when there won't be any Gryffindors there to tell her otherwise.

He leaned against me. He'd never once done *that* before, either. I put my arm around his thin shoulders.

"You think it'll work, Bats?"

"Well, *no*." "I'd not let you get away as a friend so easily, Severus Snape, even if you called me all of the names that both Slytherin *and* the rest of the houses do." *That* was true, at least.

He gave me a weak smile after fishing out a handkerchief and scrubbing at his face. "You're th' best, Bats."

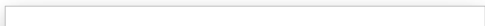
I felt my face heat and picked some lint off my skirt, hoping he wouldn't notice. "You'll, uh, write me this summer? Tell me how it goes?"

"Of course..." I pulled my arm back as he straightened, then he scooted away. I renewed my interest in the lint, suddenly feeling bereft and not at all sure what to do with that disturbing information. "I *av* te get them back for what they did! You'll help me, won't you?"

Always. "Yes, Severus."



## Gift



*Again the quill paused. Memories of seventh year...his sixth...were a scattered mass of images, frustration, and confusion. So much confusion... she remembered seeing him on the platform, how much he'd changed over the summer... and not just because of the self-inflicted torture of endless overtures of apology to Evans (detailed accounts of which he owed with maddening regularity, interspersing prosaic descriptions of her perfection and his imperfection with brief answers to all attempts to be conversational) and fights with his father...and eventually mother, about his father.*

*She remembered the way her heart stopped when she spied him, leaning to give a nervous, worn-looking woman a kiss on the cheek. He'd grown taller and broader in the shoulder, if still a bit scraggy. All summer she'd told herself that she didn't have feelings for him, no... they were just friends. It was ridiculous, really, no one liked her that way... and really, except for Severus she wasn't much liked at all. That was it... she'd just been a bit lonely, what with what seemed like the entirety of Ravenclaw pairing up as spring progressed. She certainly wasn't planning on ruining a perfectly good friendship on folly.*

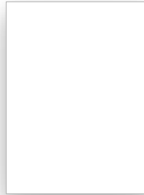
*Except... ceasing to breathe as he approached her with a wicked grin could only be the result of an acute case of folly.*

*As she remembered that moment...what he looked like as he stalked toward her, and how she desperately wanted to forget that he was, in fact, male and she, despite continual jibes to the contrary, was very much female...her breath caught, again. His nose was no smaller than it had been, and his hair no less lank, but she didn't think she'd ever seen a better looking man.*

*A man who still pined for a thin, pretty witch with long coppery hair whose hips moved just so when she walked.*

*And she felt the sharp anguish of her seventeen-year-old self as she fought to school her features into a placid...platonic...smile.*

Only after several deep breaths could she continue writing.



**Thorn**



I paused to consider what he'd just told me before scrawling, *Severus, are you sure? Something seems not-right here...*

*Of course it's not right! They're doing something against the rules in there, and they accuse me of, of...*his message trailed off, his handwriting growing more spiky and wild with each sentence.

I know how much he still wanted his revenge for what they did, especially after they somehow caught wind of our plan and trapped Severus into two weeks detention after the four of them hexed him seven ways from Sunday...none of them receiving even the mildest of reprimands, of course. I wish he would have let me go to the headmaster so he didn't take *all* the blame, it was my idea...

There would be no talking him out of this. *Severus*, I wrote, *please be careful. I don't trust Black one bit, and I think this is another trick to get you detention*No, this definitely didn't feel right. *I wish you would...*

*NO* he interrupted, the line of his quill heavy, aggressive.

*When?*

*Tonight.*

I resolved to follow him...this really, *really* didn't feel right.

As it so happened, Professor Flitwick stopped me in the corridor as I tried to slip out.

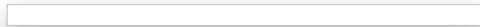
Severus wasn't allowed the journal nor visitors in the infirmary...Madam Pomfrey insisted he needed peace and quiet, even though I could see no injuries from where I stood in the doorway...and later he told me couldn't speak a word about what happened.

I wasn't sure how to take his suddenly becoming *very* social with some of the nastiest specimens in Slytherin, but I missed his company. And worried. The dread I had felt as he described what he had heard about the Whomping Willow from Black was nothing compared to what I experienced every time I saw him in Hogsmeade with the monstrous brothers Lestrangle.

His written conversations with me changed from conspiratorial and chummy (if not occasionally oddly flirty, much to my confusion) to guarded and sparse. He assured me I'd not offended him in any way, but...

At least he stopped talking about Lily.

It was my NEWT year, so I threw myself into my studies (as I'd always done). Severus had met...although not beat...my OWL scores, and he'd often joked he was going to top my NEWTs. If I couldn't have his company, right now, at least I hoped to have his irritation when he saw what scores he had to better next year. What are friends for, after all?

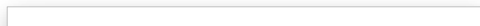


*Best not to mention how despondent I was, how much I missed my best friend (who still considered Evan~~s~~his best friend, even after everything), how I turned down an apprenticeship at the Ministry to escape the country and any temptation I might have felt to take lunch at the Three Broomsticks every Saturday in hopes of accidentally running into him. I knew my capacity for pathetic displays, even if I'd never succumbed to it...in a House like Ravenclaw it's better to keep any hint of a soft underbelly (pun intended) hidden.*

*Severus couldn't ever know how I felt about him. It was better that way.*



**Man**



It took several months, and a half-bottle of brandy on a particularly cold weekend eve, before he said a word about what had transpired on and since the evening of the Whomping Willow Incident, as he called it.

I had nightmares about werewolves for weeks.

The terrifying dreams about Death Eaters continued much, much longer.

But before long we fell into comfortable camaraderie as easily as when we were students.

"Woodhouse," he whispered. "Watch him today...he looked altogether too cheerful at breakfast for having *you* first period."

I had stopped in the corridor when I heard his steps behind me and now attempted to get some control over my urge to grin.

"You are too kind, Professor. It's heartening that the stories of floggings have been so effectively communicated. Who would have guessed runes were *sa*dangerous?"

"Your viciousness is legendary, my dear." He smirked and ducked his head lest one of a set of approaching second-years see him looking pleasant.

"You can't have *all* the fun you know," I countered. It was a much-replayed (and freely embellished) script.

His only response was to raise an eyebrow at me and hrrumph.

I did *not* consider that the last word.

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"I forgot to ask, what did Woodhouse attempt to perpetrate in your classroom yesterday? I noticed he lost us points."

I smiled as I sipped the heavily-spiked punch we had been told the year before was Albus*tradition*. I suspected he simply enjoyed seeing his colleagues half off their arses.

"Fireworks." I grinned at his dumbfounded look. We hadn't expected creativity out of young Mr. Woodhouse, so it was quite an occasion. "Runes, amusingly enough, that he thought would get him...and the rest of the class...out of taking their exam. Alas, my reflexes are much quicker than he expected. I made a point of grading him first...a 'T', unsurprisingly."

Severus cringed.

"But enough of that...I've pointedly gotten my cheer on, and I'll not have you reminding me that fully half of my students are, as you say*lunderheads*."

"But of course, my dear." He raised his glass in a toast before draining it and attempting to stand. I followed suit, swaying ever so slightly. Damn the man, even three sheets to the wind he was graceful. I admired that grace as we slowly made our way down the corridors to my quarters from the staff Christmas party.

As I released the wards, he reached up to run his fingers through my hair. This was new.

"Ah, my Bats... I was so sad when I saw your hair. Why did you cut it off?" he rumbled, slurring ever so slightly.

"It was in the way." *I knew you liked it, and I was so very, very angry when you broke off all communication.*

Where was this going?

"Invite me in," he whispered.

Oh.

Oh!

Oh, please, Sweet Circe... *please*.

Clumsy fumbles to the chaise. Lovely, deep, kisses... and he held me close, laying his head on my shoulder as I began to loosen his collar and unbutton his coat. And then...

And then he snored. Too much liquid courage *forhim*, and...based on the sharpness of my disappointment...not enough *forme*.

Nothing to do about it, I suppose.

I smoothed his hair from his face as I carefully lay his head on a pillow, then pulled his legs into a more comfortable position. As I tucked a blanket around him he stirred, muttering.

"Lily..."

My breath caught.

You are a *fool*, Bathsheba.

The depth of his drunken stupor was fortunate...not even the noise of a dozen rampaging Hippogriffs could have woken him...as I none too quietly cried myself to sleep.

"I refuse to be pushed aside while that crazy old man drags you back into spying, Severus! *tefuse!*" I yelled. "It's bad enough that you already agreed to put yourself in danger, but I will not stand here and witness this with a smile on my face and pretend it isn't happening! And you bloody well know better than to ask me to do that!"

He continued the pacing that had kept him moving back and forth across his office for the past half-hour, after I pressured him to come clean about all of his 'meetings' with Albus. "Bats, I..."

"No excuses, Severus Snape...no sentiments, no softened explanations, and no nonsense! If we're friends then we're friends through*everything*, and I have *no* intention of losing you or your friendship over his machineering!" I must have had the look of an enraged Valkyrie about me because contrary to his usual need to be in control, he backed down.

If I hadn't been so bloody *angry*, I might have commented on the sheer miraculousness of it.

He stopped. "Bats... are you sure? It will mean keeping silent...truly, absolutely silent...and pretending none of this is happening around the rest of the teachers...and *especially* Albus."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not close to anyone but you, I have no one to tell. You're my best friend, you stupid man.*of course* I'll do whatever it takes. It's us against the rest of them, just like in school...and we'll have each other's back, just like in school," I said, somewhat calmed.

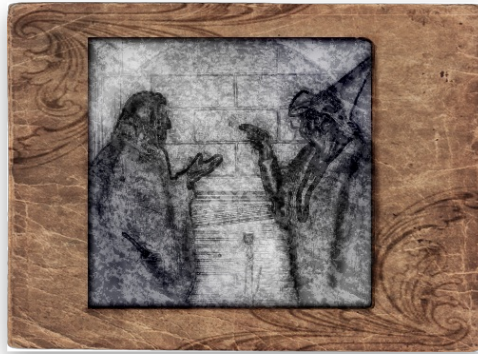
He looked at me, like he was trying to tell whether I was serious. I put my hands on my hips and stared back.

"Stubborn witch."

"Incorrigible, *infuriating* wizard."

He sighed and hugged me tightly, resting his chin on my head. "How could I make it without you, Bats?"

"You can't...don't even think about it, Severus Snape," I muttered into the folds of his robes.



No one but myself witnessed the frequent arguments he had with Charity Burbage towards the end of your sixth year. When she failed to heed his advice... there was nothing he could have done to save her once she was captured, but he still blamed himself for failing her.

Severus returned to Hogwarts two stone lighter and looking at least a decade older. The staff had all turned against him—all but myself, for I had been his confidant unbeknownst even to Albus—and the Carrows... Harry, it is hardly an understatement to describe them as so vile, so evil... truly demonic; he did all he could to protect the students. Our journals, too, were brought back to life that year—and we collaborated as we had as school children, using his skills and mine to keep watch on the Carrows, to thwart their efforts against the students, even to keep their memories sufficiently muddled that the majority of detentions given were forgotten.

"I hear you had another close call." I jumped at the sound of his rumble in my ear. Damn that man and his ability to move silently!

"Severus!" I hissed. He continued to loom. Oh, he must have heard quite a bit, indeed. "Well, they had a hold of those Gryffindors who disappeared into the walls... I made several suits of armor fall, but it wasn't enough to stop the Cruciatus they were inflicting...in tandem, might I add...on poor Mr. Longbottom, so I hit them both with light stunners and helped him to the Prefect's bath, where he assured me he could escape unseen. I however, wasn't unseen leaving the bath, so a wee Confundus was necessary." As was another stunner, when Amycus grasped me by the neck and picked me...me!...up and slammed me against the wall.

But it's best not to mention that, I think.

He growled... He was obviously well-informed by the portraits. Damn that Albus and his spying; he's worse now than he was in life. And Severus hardly needed more to worry about!

"I'm fine, Severus," I quietly said.

"You were very nearly *not* fine! And I know you're talented with Confounding and Memory Charms, but if He notices, we're both dead."

I knew, that's why I'd gotten so very, very good at Memory Charms. "I'll be more careful not to be seen," I whispered. The point of all this was to make sure ~~he~~<sup>he</sup> wasn't killed, after all.

He sighed and pulled me into one of the unused classrooms he'd warded against the Carrows.

"Bats, you know I need you. And the children need you, as well...you must stay safe."

"But Longbottom! Simultaneous Cruciatus can leave permanent damage... or worse!"

"I know, *believe* me. And I realize this circumstance was extenuating... but in the future..."

I nodded. There was no argument to be won. "Of course, Severus."

He slumped against the wall. All of this left him exhausted...the subterfuge, extra patrols...and ~~know~~<sup>know</sup> he wasn't sleeping or eating properly.

"I will take the late patrol tonight. You, my dear Headmaster, will rest." I laid my hand on his chest when he began to protest. "No excuses. I need *you*."

He pulled me toward him and kissed my forehead in the sweetly sentimental way he'd taken to. All that pressure had wrung a need for contact from the normally non-demonstrative man, and...as much as I enjoyed it...it worried me, too.

"He has finally divulged the next step for Potter, Bats. I need to leave the castle to deliver him Gryffindor's sword, and I... I need you to cover for me. I need you to remain in my office tonight. If the Carrows approach, the portraits will warn you, and I need you to loudly discuss... whatever, just nothing so interesting that they'll be tempted to stay and listen. Can you do that?"

My stomach lurched. "Y-yes, Severus. Between patrols, then?"

"Yes."

"The Gryffindors have detention, don't they? They won't be wandering the corridors or trying to break in, again?"

"That is correct. I have Filch taking them up to an unused tower to clean it by hand so they'll be nowhere near the Carrows' usual routes. It should take them hours."

"Do I need to be nice to Albus?" I managed to hold my tongue with Severus present, but without his tempering...

He chuckled. "No, Bats. But I will require a full accounting upon my return."

"But of course!" I smiled to myself. The old bastard had no idea how livid I am...and have been for years...at the way he has treated Severus... but ~~he~~*will*.

I held the small mirror he'd charmed and waited. And waited.

At last, just before true panic set in, a blurry image appeared. "My office, ten minutes."

I watched the clock. One minute... two minutes... at three I would leave. It took precisely seven minutes to walk from my quarters to the headmaster's office, and it would not do to be seen loitering by the Carrows.

I walked quickly, staying close to the walls. The stair was waiting for me.

Merlin! He looked so tired, so hollow. I watched him unclasp his cloak and drop it before crossing the room to stand at his side. He took my hand in his and led me to the window.

"Everything is in place; he'll strike soon. I've seen what he has over there. It's... monstrous. I..." I watched the look of revulsion on his face reflected in the glass, and he shifted his focus to me. "You've always been here for me, Bats. For twenty-three years I've trusted you...to be my friend, keep my secrets, make me laugh, improve my plans, guard my back... I couldn't have made it through this year without you. Do you have any idea how dear you are to me?"

'I know how dear I wish I *were* to you...'

"I know, Severus, and you are the same to me," I whispered. The same and more... but I couldn't say that. "I'll always be here for you."

He squeezed my hand once before turning from the window and crossing to the fireplace. He slumped against the mantel and brought his hand to his eyes as if to shield them from the light of the fire, before whispering, "I left everything to you, Bats. I put a copy of the document in my Gringott's vault, and the original is here in the desk."

"No! I can't... You're *wrong*, you must be! I've woven protective runes throughout your entire wardrobe, Severus! You've been preparing yourself for poison and venom, you're still carrying the emergency kit, aren't you? We can..." I pleaded.

"Bathsheba! Stop!" he snapped, then quietly continued. "It's unlikely I'll survive this...in fact I think it's safe to guarantee my demise. It's ~~over~~."

And I stared at him, unseeing. I felt as though all of me was centered on the ache in my chest, and all I could think was ~~I can't~~ lose you! I *love* you! I love you, I love you, I love you, I...

His gasp tore me from my shock. He gaped at me.

*No!*

He knows. He *knows*. Breathe. Die later, Bathsheba...breathe *now*. "It's impolite to perform Legillimancy without consent," I said. I scarcely recognized my own voice.

"Bats..." His voice was low, but I felt it pass through me as if he'd used *Sonorus*. Nononononono...

The pain behind my eyes at the thought that my inability to Occlude my deepest secret...my humiliating foolishness...was blinding.

He took my arm and turned me toward him. "How long?" His voice was strained. "Bats!"

"Since my seventh year," I whispered. I looked up to see his eyes grow wide, then dropped my gaze.

Oh, God.

"I'm sorry, Severus. I..." He put two fingers against my mouth; then he dipped his head and brushed his lips against mine.

He was kissing me. He was kissing *me*.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he breathed in my ear.

Why, indeed.

"I'm quite accustomed to having a dearth of admirers, and I've never suffered under any illusions why that would be..." I mumbled. "I didn't think..." I met his eyes as he pulled back to look at me, clearly confused.

'Please, for once in your life, Severus...*please* understand an emotional subtext.' "You'd already given your heart, what hope did I have?"

He blinked.

Damn him! Fifteen years of anger and humiliation broke over me like a cold wave. "How in buggering Merlin's name could I have competed with ~~a~~*lead* woman?"

His head jerked back as if I'd hit him.

I might as well have done. "I'm sorry, Severus," I choked out, barely a whisper. "I shouldn't have... I... I should go."

His grip on my arms tightened, and he shook his head. One, two deep breaths and he rested his forehead against mine, grimacing.

"How did you know?" he choked out.

"Do you remember the night you spent in my quarters years ago? After the Christmas party?"

He snorted. "The night I passed out from drink instead of seducing you?"

'Oh, you seduced me, Severus Snape, never doubt that.' I sighed. "You talk in your sleep when you're pissed. It was... clear who you would rather have been with."

"Bats... I'm sorry. I..." He paused. "I *did* want to be with you. I wouldn't have planned that, otherwise. I..." He swallowed audibly. "I'd planned that, you know... it wasn't the punch, I had always...have always...found you attractive."

I gasped. 'Impossible!'

"Everything I've done... I lost her friendship and she lost her life, and all because of..." He trailed off. "She was my first friend, the only one who knew about my father... until you. And then I couldn't save her, and I swore to Albus I'd protect the boy, that I'd..."

He shook his head and began again. "I'll never stop caring about her, never stop wishing it had all been different... but it was never like that between us, she..." He broke off and took a deep breath.

"She loved Potter." He lifted his head and waited for me to look up. "I loved *you*."

'How could he... how could I... I couldn't speak. I couldn't breathe. I...'

"I pushed you away after your leaving feast to protect you from...*them*. Then after *that* night... I...I thought you weren't interested. And I wanted you, I knew I had to try, again... but when I saw the change in the Mark during the Tri-Wizard Tournament, I... I knew it was safer to keep you at arm's length. This year I've been weak...I've been selfish, I've put you in danger because I *need* you, Bats. I need..."

He clutched me to him so tightly it hurt. "...*this*." And again he kissed me. But not like before, this wasn't sweet or gentle... it was demanding, hungry*desperate*.

I understood. Merlin help me, I understood everything.

And as he pulled me through the door to his private rooms the knowledge of just how big a fool I'd*really* been pierced me through. Oh, Bathsheba... all of these years wasted on cowardice and sloth, too afraid to make a mistake, and too lazy to wonder if the insults you'd heard from your housemates all those years ago were *wrong*.

Then, then his hands and his mouth and his hot breath and the cool sheets and all thought vanished...'ohgodohgodohgod'. I was feeling, gasping, reaching, moving with him and moaning his name.

And he moaned mine.

We had waited *so* long for this. And after a forever that wasn't forever*enough* he held me, tightly, as if to loosen his grip would allow me to slip away.

I felt the same, and I clung to him for dear life.

He whispered, "I'm afraid, Bats. I've never been afraid before, not like this."

"Severus?" I *won't* let you get yourself killed...don't give up, damn you!

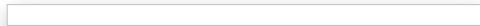
"Now I truly have something to live for."

I laid my head over his heart and listened to his heartbeat slow as he fell into slumber.

Then I quietly cried myself to sleep.



**Hero**



*As she sealed the letter a hand came to rest on her shoulder.*

*"Finished, then?" a deep voice rasped.*

*She rubbed her tear-dampened cheek against his hand. "Yes, my love."*

*He lifted his fingers to gently tug on her hair. "I'm for bed...will you come with me?"*

*"Always."*

Harry waited patiently as he watched Minister Shacklebolt finish the letter, one thumb sliding back and forth over the file pouch...marked, simply*Snake*... he held in his hands. "Well?"

Kingsley Shacklebolt looked at Harry consideringly before sitting back in his chair. "What *dyou* think, Harry?"


"I think..." he paused, "as hard as parts of it were to read, I think she's telling the truth. About everything."

"Yes."

"I tried to reply, but the owl came back." As Harry reached across the desk to retrieve the letter and return it to the pouch some of the contents slipped onto the floor. He tucked everything back into the file, pausing to look at a small clipping from the *Daily Prophet* before continuing. He'd had to freeze the photograph...the image of Professor Babbling had a stubborn tendency to turn her back to the frame, and he'd been uncomfortable with her obvious distress.



clipping on Babbling acquittal from Daily Prophet



"So, she's either living in a secret-kept location or nowhere in the UK... somewhere with very different owls." He looked up. "Or both."

Although Kingsley's face betrayed nothing his silence spoke volumes.

"You know, don't you? More than where she is..." He stopped. As, he suddenly realized, did he.

Harry stood. "I'll see you tonight, Kingsley...I need to give Luna Lovegood an interview for *The Quibbler* before the speeches start." He shrank the pouch and tucked it into his robes. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

As he reached the door, Harry paused, and quietly said, "If you have the chance... tell them I said thank you."

Minutes after the door latched behind him, Kingsley whispered a reply. "I will."