

Original Sin

by Dementor Delta

Leave it to Harry Potter to interfere with every aspect of Severus Snape's life--and death.

Beta read by Isidore13, based on a prompt given by Accioslash.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Severus Snape had never expected to go to heaven.

Even if he'd ever set any store by the droning of the church's teachings he'd been subjected to as a boy, he'd seen too many things as a man that had convinced him that rather than a Supreme Being in charge, there was no one stirring the cauldron of humanity.

Should such a Being manifest in the afterlife, Snape did not expect to meet him at the rumored Pearly Gates. His soul had been fractured and mended too often to have hope of gaining admittance to that realm even had he desired it. Heaven sounded dead boring anyway. Probably nothing but endless harp playing and halo polishing. Gryffindors perhaps would find such an afterlife satisfying but no Slytherin worth his school tie ever could. Besides, Snape knew he looked dreadful in white.

Why, then, did Heaven smell like a train station?

Something wafted across the tip of his nose, making it twitch. Why did death have to be so ruddy ticklish?

"Ah, Severus," said a voice that sounded suspiciously like--

"Albus?" Snape's eyes flew open. The old man squatting beside him looked well for being a year in the grave. He twinkled even in death. "I never thought we'd end up in the same place." Snape pulled himself up from whatever concrete he'd wound up on. Aside from the vapor of invisible trains, the place reeked of blood. Snape looked down at himself. Oh, all that blood belonged to him. "Where the devil are we?"

Albus Dumbledore looked around the cathedral-like place with childlike glee. "Apparently in King's Cross Station." His beard dragged along Severus's blood-stained coat as he looked up at the skylights. "A bit after my time though. I suppose if you'd arrived here first it would look like a dungeon."

Snape had put a hand to his ruined throat. His fingers came away crimson but it appeared that the bleeding had stopped. Considering the amount of blood on his clothes, it looked like he had rather more outside than inside.

"First?" he asked with a frown. "Who else--?"

"You've just missed Harry," Dumbledore replied, looking not at all put out that Potter...for whom they'd both sacrificed so much--was as dead as Severus and himself.

"Potter? But I just saw him!" exclaimed Snape. The idiot boy had...providentially...shown up right when Severus wanted him to pass on the memories Snape thought he needed. Potter had always had the devil's own luck, but it seemed that luck had run out. "He was fine!" Snape protested, wiping gore off his hand, trying to find a place on his clothes that wasn't already wet with it.

Albus looked sad and a bit concerned, offering a bit of his own spotless blue robe. Snape shook his head and found a relatively dry spot on his trouser leg to wipe his hand though blood still clung to it.

"You were a long time dying, my boy," said Dumbledore, looking sadder.

Disgust rose up in Snape's stomach, bile so fetid it would surely have poisoned him if he weren't currently deceased. "Then it was all for nothing. The damn fool boy went and got himself killed despite all we--"

But Albus was twinkling again and this time, rather than being confined to his eyes, Snape was alarmed to note that it was more of an all-over twinkle.

"Harry very wisely chose to go back and finish the nearly impossible task we set him," Dumbledore said, "I imagine he'll come out all right. It is *your* fate we're here to discuss."

"My fate?" Snape said, startled. Even the reassuring presence of his old friend couldn't keep away the cold shiver of dread at what awaited. Surely this railway apparition of Potter's wasn't his final destination? Snape was certain he was not bound for any fate that included harp music. "My fate was sealed when I--" He glanced uneasily at Albus, grateful that the Killing Curse left no traces to accuse him now.

"You still haven't forgiven yourself," Dumbledore said, shaking his head.

Snape's head jerked up. "Or you for making me do it," he sneered, glad to be on familiar footing.

"I assure you, it was quite painless," replied Dumbledore, as though Snape had merely trod on one of his feet. One long-fingered hand reached out...his wand hand...miraculously restored and whole from the blackened ruin it had been the last year of his life. He reached over and touched the blood at Snape's throat. "Unlike your own near death."

"Near?" Snape asked, disconcerted when the blood that came away on Albus's fingers turned silvery and vanished.

"Very near," Dumbledore replied, rubbing his fingers together where the blood had been. "Another few minutes and I doubt anything could be done."

Snape's eyes narrowed. Had this place, wherever it was, for Snape knew quite well that it was not a train station, turned Dumbledore or his shade, barmy. Or at least barmier? "Done?"

Albus nodded as if it was all perfectly clear. "Done. I only wish I had the power to send you back hale and hearty, but no man can do that."

"I'm not going back," Snape said, pulling himself up straighter, though his fingers got bloody again when he rightened himself. "I deserve whatever--"

"Well, not back exactly, but...on." Dumbledore's eyes were kindly again and Snape remembered what power they had to make the world seem cozy and warm and every problem solved with tea and a sherbet lemon. Albus patted Snape's arm. "I only wanted to see you again, Severus, to thank you for all you did for me. And for Harry."

There was another smudge of blood on Albus's hand that seemed to twinkle itself before vanishing while the blood soaking Severus's clothes was as clammy and wet as ever. "I'm not selfish enough to keep you from what must be," he said, and again Snape felt coldness grab his spine.

"Where are you sending me?" he asked, determined not to show the fear that was chilling his insides.

Albus smiled and at least his twinkle was confined to his eyes alone. "Oh it isn't where I'm sending you, dear boy, but where you are being taken."

Snape's nose itched again and he realized the mist had gotten heavier, wafting between himself and the old man, obscuring Dumbledore from sight. His last thought, as the mist seemed to flow inside him, was that he could not shake the feeling that this was, somehow, Potter's fault.

Snape knew, before opening his eyes, that he was flat on his back and naked. Not the curse-the-first-nurse-who-comes-in-to-check-on-him sort of naked but grass-prickling-on-arsecheek sort of naked.

Had he dreamed Albus and that infernal train station up? Had it all been some sort of trauma laced with guilt dream and he was now truly about to begin servitude in the fiery pit of the underworld? He drew in a deep breath. The air did not smell of sulfur and brimstone. It smelled of...Snape sniffed again. Hyacinth. And roses. There may even have been some tropical orchids.

He kept his eyes firmly closed. A trick then, to lull him into complacency before the gates of the fiery furnace were cast open and--

Someone groaned.

Someone who wasn't Snape.

Snape's eyes flew open. Overhead was a painfully blue sky. He...they--were lying face up in a lush meadow. Three feet away lay the prone...and utterly naked...form of Harry Potter.

"Fuck," Snape said aloud, hoisting himself upright.

Potter too was stirring, pushing up off the grass, looking down at his unclothed body. "Not again," he murmured incomprehensibly, pushing his glasses back up on his nose. He started to fall back when he caught sight of Snape. "Not you too."

Potter's hair was in a ridiculous disarray, the glasses askew again as he pushed up to his feet, buried ankle-deep in white asphodel flowers. Resolutely Snape kept his gaze from lingering anywhere it shouldn't, which was just about everywhere since the only thing on Potter was those dratted glasses. Snape was having a bit of a struggle getting to his feet while trying to keep his back to Potter. "Prof--" Potter began then he broke off, staring at something coming through the trees at the edge of the meadow.

Something large. And darker than Voldemort's heart.

At first it looked like the shadow of one of the trees, its movements like a ripple of sunlight over shadow. Then it detached itself from the trees, moving through the field in an ominous glide that seemed to leave the swaying flowers untouched. It cast no shadow. Snape forgot his own unclothed state, his own deceasedness and the fact that he had no wand, grabbing for the staring boy.

"Get behind me, Potter," Snape commanded sharply, jerking Potter and his nakedness behind his back. The thing seemed to trail darkness behind itself, like heat distortion off a road.

Potter's arm rose straight up, fingers stretched out as if there was a wand clenched in his fingers. "*Expecto Patronum*," he cast. Even though he had no wand, a silvery light burst from Potter's outstretched hand, forming into a silver stag that charged the flowing darkness.

"That's no Dementor," Snape said, trying to keep himself between Potter and the man-shaped darkness.

"Of course it--" began Potter just before his mouth dropped open. Snape turned to see the silvery stag slowing its charge directly in front of the dark form. One bone white hand reached out of the black robes to stroke the top of the stag's head. The stag shivered and disappeared in a burst of silver mist.

"Those don't work on me," the thing said, closing the space between them in several long strides over the softly waving asphodel. "Cute though." It was holding something in the other hand, something that seemed at once a part of the swirling vapor-like robes, yet solid on its own.

A scythe.

"Dementors can't talk," Potter said, trying to wriggle out of his grasp, peering over Snape's bare shoulder to get a better look.

"This *isn't*--" Snape began.

"There has never been a Dementor here," the creature said, waving the scythe. Three armchairs appeared in the middle of the meadow, green with hyacinth blossom embroidery. One was much larger than the other two, since the creature towered over them. The creature seemed to re-form backward, filling and spilling out of the largest armchair, the long black robes pooling over the grass and flowers. The grass did not wither, nor did the cheerful white blooms darken and die.

"Where exactly is *here*?" Snape asked, releasing Potter's arm, pointedly not sitting down. The black sleeve stretched out over the arm of the largest chair and a hand, all bone and no flesh appeared, twice the size of a man's.

No one spoke for a moment. Potter seemed to have gone mute, which seemed like such an improvement Snape himself was loathe to break the quiet.

"It's the only place I could think to bring both of you," the creature said, its voice like the echo of an ancient spell. It gestured again toward the two armchairs facing his own.

"Sit down while we sort this out."

Snape took a step closer to the chairs, suddenly uncomfortably aware of his lack of formal...or informal...attire. "May we have some clothes, please?" he asked stiffly.

"Oh, right," the creature said, sounding a bit apologetic. A pass of the scythe and trousers and simple cotton shirts appeared on them both. Snape tugged down the hem of his shirt and saw a leafy design. He frowned. A fig leaf.

"Most amusing," he said, glancing at Potter now that they were both decently clothed. There was no leaf on Potter's shirt but a jagged lightning bolt.

"Sit down, please," the creature said, "you've both had a hell of a day."

Keeping his eyes on the creature, Snape sat down. Once he was in it, he thought the armchair might be the most comfortable thing he'd ever sat in, should he let himself relax back into it.

Potter followed suit, looking as uneasy as Snape felt. "I'm dead, aren't I?" he said, slumping in the chair. "Again."

The certainty of the boy's despair hit Snape forcibly. He wanted to go back to that wretched train station and strangle Albus's shade or spirit or whatever he had been. Snape didn't want all of it, all the sacrifices beginning with Lily's, to have been for nothing.

"Not...exactly," said the creature, moving two bone fingers negligently over a piece of hyacinth embroidery. A deep black cowl obscured its face, or whatever lurked beneath the flow of darkness that was its robe. "I know, crazy right? You're either dead--" The skeletal hand lifted and drew a line straight across its own throat, "Or not. Usually." It shrugged.

Snape and Harry shivered at the same time. It was Snape who recovered first. He leaned forward in his chair. "You already have me. Let Potter go."

"What? No!" cried Potter with unnecessary vehemence.

"I've already let him go once," said the creature, making another of those negligent gestures with a bony finger. "Right, you were out of it, Severus, unconscious, life ebbing away, lying in a pool of your own blood for all that time--"

"Stop it!"

Potter's outburst startled both Snape and the creature. He'd gone pale, fingers gripping the arms of the chair. Potter had always been a bit squeamish but even Snape didn't want to hear the rest of the details of his death himself. He remembered the amount of blood soaking his robes in the train station.

"It was supposed to be me," Potter ground out, "let the professor go."

The shadowed cowl swerved back toward Severus. "You see my problem."

"I don't see anything of the sort," said Snape, hoping his glare would keep Potter quiet. "I was mortally wounded--"

"Technically it's only mortal when I say it's mortal," the creature pointed out.

"I took a Killing Curse," Potter put in, unhelpful, even in the afterlife.

The bony finger shifted toward Potter. "You faked that."

"Then why is he here?" asked Snape wishing Dumbledore had spent a bit less time apologizing and a bit more filling him in on what happened after the snake Nagini had attacked Snape.

"There's been an interdiction," came the sepulchral reply. "I'm not allowed to take either of you until this is settled."

Snape frowned. "A what?"

"I know, crazy, right? Been a while since I've had one. I had to look it up myself."

Beside him, Potter leaned over and spoke quietly to Snape. "Death has books?"

Until then Snape had been avoiding thinking of the creature by any sort of name. "Harry offered up his soul in exchanged for yours," Death explained.

"What? He most certainly did no--" In his outrage, Snape had jerked his face in Potter's direction. Potter's head had dropped and he was avoiding Snape's gaze.

"Not." Snape sighed. Of course he had.

"Very noble, really," Death said, as if in consolation.

"He's like that," Snape said, watching Potter's mouth thin in anger.

"It wasn't fair what happened to you," he burst out.

Snape snorted. So did Death.

"There isn't anything fair about what happens to any of us," said Snape in only slightly less withering tones than he'd intended for the image of Lily had sprung into his mind.

"Fair or not, I let Harry go and I can't claim him again until his time is up. Again. And I can't claim your soul, Severus, because Harry interdicted for you." The flowing shroud rippled in a shrug. "Crazy, I know."

"I didn't mean to," Potter mumbled. "I mean, I did tell you...your body...that it wasn't fair and that my mum wouldn't have wanted you to end up that way."

God, the boy was thick. Snape turned back to Death. "Everyone says ridiculous things like that." He clasped his hands together, laying them on his chest in a dramatic pose, rolling his eyes heaven-ward. "Oh, if only it had been me," he wailed in patently false tones. He flung his hands apart in a disgusted gesture.

"Not everyone means it," Death said solemnly, "And hardly anyone has also been dead and come back once already." He sighed, like wind through a graveyard. "And not everyone is kneeling over you right as I've come to collect your soul. So I had to take you both until we get this sorted out."

Death stood up. Snape too scrambled to his feet. Beside him Potter followed suit, looking wary. Or confused. On Potter it was difficult to tell.

"How do we sort it out?" Potter asked. The armchairs had vanished as soon as they stood up. Fortunately the clothes remained.

"You stay put," said Death, as its long pale fingers wrapped around the scythe. "You'll be safe here."

"Safe from what?" Snape asked, though he suspected Potter was about to ask the same question.

The cowl shifted and for a moment there was the bone-white flash of a fleshless skull. "From me."

Without another word, the creature vanished. Snape wasted no time whirling on Potter. "What were you *thinking*?" he snarled.

Potter seemed to appreciate neither his whirl nor his snarl. "You're alive," he said, his smile toothily similar to Death's.

"No, you idiot, now we're both dead," replied Snape, willing his gaze to lift from Potter's seemingly boundless cheer.

"I don't feel dead. I feel great." He was stretching, looking around at the endless expanse of meadow and trees. "Bit hungry though."

Snape had to admit the boy looked half starved. Wherever he'd been the last year had obviously not had the benefits of Hogwarts's kitchens.

"Where are we, do you reckon?" Potter asked, looking around.

"What matters is how we get you back," said Snape, studying their surroundings with more care. The meadow seemed to stretch as far as they could see, with a forest easily larger than the Forbidden Forest to one side. Further away there seemed to be a long row of bushes stretching out in either direction, paralleling the forest.

"Which way?" Potter asked, studying both their options, as it seemed unwise to remain out in the open where it was certain there was no shelter or food.

He was by no means finished with the subject of Potter's ridiculous sacrifice but it seemed prudent to get the boy out of sight before he caught the attention of some other universal entity.

Potter sighed as they both swung their heads, reviewing the, to Snape, equally desolate options. "Wish he, um, Death, had been a bit more specific."

"Considering he is contemplating how best to harvest our souls without destroying the balance of the universe, I would not be too keen to see him return," Snape returned.

"Did he say all that?" asked Potter, blinking. Snape merely glared at him. Trust him not to understand the nuances of their predicament.

"This way," Snape decided, turning toward the forest. He took a few steps before he realized Potter hadn't moved. He stopped and turned around.

"Why that way?" Potter jerked his head toward the hedge. "That way looks closer. And hedges might mean other people."

Snape had not even considered that there might be other people--or souls...near. Having got used to being dead, he wasn't sure he wanted to meet anyone in a similar state.

When Snape didn't say anything, Potter spoke again, "People might mean food, and I'm hungry."

Snape too was feeling peckish though he would never admit it because he was fairly certain dead people didn't get hungry and he wasn't ready to face the fact that they might both be alive and stranded wherever this was. Before he could reply, however, there was a low rumble, almost as though the earth was trembling, though he felt no vibration. He started to tackle Potter to the ground but before he could take more than a step something shot out of the ground between them. It was so close to Potter that it knocked him off his feet. The silence that followed was full only of Potter's cursing as he felt in the grass for his glasses.

Where there had been only level ground--and briefly three armchairs--now bloomed a thick leafy bush, no taller than Snape's waist.

"Don't touch it," Potter cried out as he jabbed his glasses back on. For Snape had indeed reached out to touch the closest branch--a branch that was heavy with fruit.

"Do you like peaches?" Snape asked, fingertips brushing the fuzzy fruit, confirming what his eyes told him were perfectly ripe peaches, despite the fact that they were on a bush and not a tree.

"Love them," Potter replied, brushing himself off as he got back to his feet. Before Potter could protest further, Snape plucked one and bit into it. "Don't eat that!" Potter called in alarm. Juice exploded over his tongue, so delicious it would have made him feel glad to be alive if indeed he had been alive. He waited to see if he would fall over dead.

Potter too was staring at him in anger and alarm, until Snape tugged another luscious peach loose from the bush and held it out to Potter. "I believe you were hungry," he said, tossing Potter the peach when the boy simply stared at it. Potter lifted it to his nose first--ha! as if that nose could detect half the poisons Snape's could--then bit into it. His must have been as ripened to perfection as Snape's had been. Snape finished one and two more besides. Potter's moans of culinary satisfaction were nearly obscene.

"That was really stupid, you know," Potter said, sucking his third pit before tossing it over his shoulder. "Eating one like that. What if it had killed you?"

"We're already dead," replied Snape, turning back toward the line of trees. This time Potter trudged alongside him without protest. When they looked back, the peach bush had vanished.

The forest was much closer than it appeared, more a series of sylvan glades than a true forest. The air smelled lush and alive, scented with the acres of flowers blooming beneath their feet. There were streams and waterfalls winding through the trees and expanses of soft grass and moss bordering the hedgerows.

"It's the most beautiful place I've ever seen," Potter said, quite unnecessarily for this was easily the most beautiful place on earth, looking both virginal and unspoiled, yet designed seemingly to be admired. Potter had stopped, closing his eyes. "I smell strawberries," he said, taking deep breaths.

Snape smelled them too and the scent made his stomach clench in hunger despite the feast of peaches.

"And honey," Potter went on, his lashes resting against his cheeks.

"We mustn't let our guard down," Snape warned, scanning the landscape for signs of habitation.

"I never had mine up," Potter said, opening his eyes. "Let's see if we can find those strawberries. I'm hungry again."

He was off before Snape could issue any warnings about staying together but not far as there was a patch of perfectly ripened berries around the next bend of the stream. "I'll test them this time," Potter offered, biting one so juicy that it dribbled down his chin. The rapturous look on his face was definitely not mesmerizing. Then, without warning, he made a choking noise and clenched at his throat, cheeks puffing out as though he was about to be sick, eyes bulging wildly.

Automatically Snape reached where his wand would be inside his robes, if he had a wand, or robes. His heart was racing as he tried to think what to do---and then Potter burst out laughing, no longer looking like he was about to expire at Snape's feet.

"You should see your face," he said, finishing off the apparently non-poisonous berry.

"Oh, very amusing," Snape growled, sitting down rather suddenly in the soft grass, turning his back to the still chuckling whelp. "Good thing I didn't waste my life trying to protect you."

The chuckling ceased but Snape didn't turn around. He could hear Potter moving behind him, polishing off the entire berry patch no doubt while Snape worked up a really first-rate sulk. A shadow crossed over him and there was Potter, his t-shirt stretched out in front of him like a basket, laden with strawberries.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, plucking up the fattest berry and offering to Snape.

Snape huffed, thinking of refusing, but it would be mad to refuse food when they had no idea if this lush bounty would continue. Between them they ate every single strawberry, leaving Potter's shirt spotted with juice. "I think you should tell me everything that happened after I--" Potter's face looked bleak but Snape forced himself to continue. "After I died."

Potter had drawn up very close to him in order to share the strawberries. He nodded in agreement but it took him a moment before he started speaking. Parts of it Snape could have predicted but most of it was as wildly improbable as fiction, so of course it must be true. He tried to picture Hogwarts as it must look now but found that somehow more difficult to accept than his own demise.

"I didn't want to leave you like that," Potter said, after recounting the horrific events that followed. "But I had to finish--" His nervous gaze found Snape's.

"Yes, yes, carry on," he said gruffly. The tale was more harrowing than Snape had expected. No wonder Potter was hungry.

"You say you saw the headmaster?" asked Snape.

"In King's Cross Station," Potter said, sounding wistful. "I thought for a moment about...about going on but there was still so much to do."

"I had a similar experience," admitted Snape. "Just after you left, apparently."

"It was good to see him again, wasn't it?" Potter asked, staring out across the emerald green hillocks.

Snape nodded wordlessly, not certain Potter would notice. A strand of hair blew into his eyes.

"I wanted to bring you back myself," Potter went on, coming to the end of his tale. "I didn't want the Aurors or the Death Eaters touching you, not after everything you'd been through." He shifted beside Snape, nearly brushing his shoulder, and looked down at his hands. "I heard someone moving upstairs," he said. "I thought it might be--" He cleared his throat and shook his head. "Well, of course it couldn't have been you. I ran up the stairs but I didn't see anyone. Just..."

"My body?" Snape concluded, when it appeared Potter, who could recount besting the most powerful dark wizard in a century with a breezy recitation of blithe facts, choked on seeing the condition of Snape's corpse.

Potter nodded. "I kneeled down beside you, and took your hand. It was cold. I tried to tell you that it was all right, that we'd...we'd won. But it didn't feel like we'd won, not with you--" He jerked angrily. "It wasn't fair! That I got to come back, to make a choice there in King's Cross but you didn't."

Snape didn't bother to point out that life, and apparently death, was never fair.

Potter rubbed the back of his neck, leaning against Snape's shoulder now. It should have been hot with the sun out, even down here amongst the leaves but it wasn't. The grass was cool and a gentle breeze blew across their faces. "It wasn't fair," Potter murmured and he grew silent. After a while Potter leaned more heavily against his shoulder and Snape realized he'd fallen asleep.

"So, you see my problem," came a voice at Snape's other shoulder. He started hard enough to wake the young man but Potter slumbered on. Death was sitting beside Snape, its long black robes stretched out against the turf. The cowl was angled so that it appeared empty and full of shadows. Death waved the scythe vaguely. "He's got this saving people thing. I know, crazy, right?"

"I don't see the problem at all," Snape growled, resenting having to be still enough not to wake Potter and having Death be so bloody difficult. "Send him back."

"I did. He came back...for you." The cowl shifted as though Death was rolling whatever passed for its eyes. "Stubborn."

"He always was," agreed Snape. The untidy head on his shoulder sighed in sleep.

"I'd come to collect you," Death explained, taking up Potter's tale. "He rushed in--"

"He's always doing that," put in Snape, brushing the hair away from Potter's forehead, purely so it wouldn't tickle his nose and wake him up at an inopportune moment.

"Started going on about how unfair it all was."

Snape and Death shook their heads at the foolishness of the young.

"Send him back while he's sleeping," suggested Snape.

The cowl shook, a clear negative. "Said he didn't want to live if you were dead."

"He says stupid things like that all the time," Snape huffed in exasperation. He thought a moment. "All right, send me on then. Wherever I belong. Once he realizes I'm gone, he'll go back willingly enough."

There was a rippling beneath the ebon robes as Death stretched out its legs. "If I send you on, he's vowed to go with you. Once your souls leave this realm, there's no going back."

"But I'm dead," protested Snape.

"Technically you were very, very close to death." Another roll of the cowl. "Little dee death. Makes all the difference. I know, crazy, right? But that's how it works."

Potter mumbled in his sleep, his temple rubbing against Snape's shoulder.

"We--" Snape began, aware of how galling it was to be a 'we' with Potter. "We can't just...just stay here? Wherever we are?" It came out as a question despite his intentions.

"Mmmm." The non-committal noise was, in its own way, more troubling than a refusal. "You'll be taken care of here." Death said, not taking the hint to tell Snape where 'here' was. Death waved toward two nearby trees. Vines and branches grew and entwined, stretching, shifting, forming a hammock. Leaves fell onto it, fusing to make a blanket and pillows. Another wave of the scythe and Potter shifted beside him, raised up on unseen hands, drifting over as if under the Mobilicorpus spell, settling gently into the hammock. "Fed, cared for and safe," Death went on.

"But?" asked Snape impatiently, belatedly aware of the folly of becoming impatient with Death.

"Well, it's not really living, is it?"

As silently as he had come, Death was gone, leaving Snape bereft of both Potter and Death.

"He doesn't look much like me."

The voice, a woman's, startled Snape so much, he realized he must have fallen into a doze. "My God," he said, as though actually in the divine presence.

The woman standing over Potter's hammock laughed merrily. "Not God. Just Lily."

Snape scrambled to his feet, never taking his eyes off Lily lest she too vanish as creatures did here. "He--he has your eyes," he admitted grudgingly as she reached out to stroke the hair off Potter's forehead, much as Snape himself had done earlier. She frowned at the scar. Snape stopped on the other side of the hammock. "God, *Lily*," he said again because there was something reverent in the moment. "It's good to see you."

She looked up, her hand still stroking through Potter's hair. Her smile went through him like a sword.

"I don't...deserve to see you," he said, suddenly ashamed of nearly everything he'd done in ways he'd never imagined before. He turned his face away, telling himself he deserved it if she vanished.

"Oh, Sev, you're still such a drama queen!"

His chin jerked back around, mouth gaping too much to form a reply. He was saved the ignominy of a reply by Potter's sibilant sigh.

"You protected him, didn't you?" she said, ignoring his proclivity to sputter, gazing down at her son. "I bet you didn't want to." Snape turned his face away, hating that he couldn't face her again. "You never could lie to me."

"I never had to before," Snape replied.

She reached out and tugged his hand into hers. He could feel an urgent pulse in it. "You'll take care of him, won't you?" she asked, searching his face. "Here, and wherever else you're going?"

He started to explain that wherever else they went, it would not be to the same place, but she went on. "I can't stay long, not in this form."

"You've only just--" Snape started to protest, clasping her fingers more tightly.

"This place is for the living," she explained, looking more urgent when he didn't reply. "Promise me you'll take care of him."

His mouth parted, to give what answer he knew not, when his fingers clutched at nothing. Lily was gone. He glared down at the blissfully unaware Potter, his lips slightly parted in slumber, wondering what he would have told his mother. After a moment, he cleared his throat, addressing the trees. "I would like a hammock too, please," he began, "And not--"

As before vines and leaves swirled, weaving together to form a hammock between two trees, practically touching Potter's hammock. "Not too close to Potter's," he finished futilely. He crossed round to it, testing the hammock vines with one finger. "I'll need a pillow," he said. Leaves fell. He crawled in and tried to think of Lily's face but it would not come into focus before he fell asleep.

He and Potter were still dead when he woke up. Unfortunately they were also entwined in one hammock. Snape jerked awake, looking down to make sure the treacherous trees hadn't stripped them both naked in their sleep. His movements woke Potter.

"What are you doing?" he asked, peering up owlishly at Snape. "I mean, I don't mind, of course, but I never thought you--"

"Of course I didn't," Snape sputtered, glaring overhead and the quiescent trees. "It was the bloody trees."

Potter had the cheek to laugh. "The trees, right." His hand slid off Snape's fig leaf design, stretching in the magically expanded hammock. Before Snape could sputter any further, Potter was disentangling their limbs. "I'm starving."

By the time Snape slid out of the extra-wide hammock, Potter was making a mess of himself with another patch of strawberries that most certainly had not been there the night before.

"My God, you have got to try these," insisted Potter, when he noticed Snape maneuvering out of the hammock. He held out a strawberry the size of a small apple. Snape took it, sniffing it cautiously.

"I've been thinking," Potter said, an activity that never boded well for Snape's peace of mind. "Since we're sharing the afterlife and everything, whether I ought to be allowed to call you Severus."

Snape's glare was his only reply. Potter blanched at the force of it that at least assured Snape that some things never changed, despite being deceased. Snape bit into the strawberry and nearly expired again from sheer deliciousness.

"Right, Professor Snape it is," Potter babbled.

Snape managed another glare, but not before he had another bite.

"Professor Snape, *sir*," Potter said, handing him several more berries from the pile he'd plucked. The both glugged themselves on the plump berries then explored the crystal clear stream to drink. "Which way?" asked Potter, scrabbling back up the mossy bank, and dusting off the backs of his trousers.

Snape stared at him blankly. Conversing with Potter was always like being dropped onto the other side of the looking glass. "Way?"

"To go exploring," Potter explained, looking both right and left as if looking for a signpost to the Emerald City.

If Snape hadn't been thinking nearly the same thing, he would have suggested a direction. He didn't like having Potter a step ahead of him so he wrinkled his nose and did what he did well--he balked. "Why should we do that?"

Potter laughed, loud enough to compete with the rushing waters of the stream at their feet. "What else is there to do? Sir? Unless you'd rather spend all day in the hammock?"

Damn it, did being dead give Potter some sort of wisdom he had lacked in life? Snape got to his feet, dusting of the backs of Death's idea of comfortable trousers and looked first toward the thickets then toward the unvaried open field from whence they had first appeared yesterday. "This way then," he said, as if he'd meant to go exploring all along. Since they hadn't penetrated very far into the orderly brush, the field was quickly under their feet. Now that Snape wasn't distracted--or as distracted--by being dead, he noticed that the grass was interspersed with white and yellow asphodel blooms among the other flowers. Something about that stirred in his memory, but he couldn't quite place--

"How far do you think it is?" asked Potter, bending to sweep up one of the white blossoms between his fingers.

"Where what is?" Snape growled, the thought skittering away before he could grasp it.

"Whatever's out there," Potter said, twirling the bloom between his fingers. "Heaven or, I don't know, hell, I suppose."

"You aren't going to hell," Snape replied, scanning the unbroken horizon. What looked like a low row of hedges ran in both directions as far as they could see. Instead of talking, he kept walking. For some inexplicable reason Potter kept bending over to pick an occasional flower as they walked, twisting the stems together. They were in an open field and the sky was lit, yet no sun shone overhead, just a layer of brightness that never quite faded, even under the trees. More flowers joined Potter's erstwhile daisy chain, long enough now to dangle from around his shoulders, trailing into the grass.

"What if this is heaven?" asked Potter, after plucking up a long stemmed carnation. Snape stopped so abruptly he caught the end of Potter's flower chain.

"This is not heaven," he replied, glaring at Potter before they started walking again.

"How do you know?" Potter asked, skipping several steps to catch up to Snape. "I mean, it could be. It's nice."

"Because it isn't heaven," Snape repeated, even less patiently. He waved one hand vaguely at the vast empty space. "Heaven would be more crowded."

Another flower joined the foliage rainbow while Potter digested this. "What if heaven is whatever you want it to be?" he asked, looping the ridiculous flower chain around his neck.

"I doubt either of us would choose to spend eternity with the other," snorted Snape. He stopped again and spun to face Potter. "The main reason it cannot be heaven is that I am in it."

Even Potter's mental facilities could follow that logic. He frowned, something he did with nearly his entire body. "Why don't you think you're going to heaven?" he asked.

"The things I've done--" began Snape.

"For the right reasons," argued Potter. Even in the afterlife Potter was going to argue with him.

"Not everything," Snape countered, surprised by the young man's vehemence.

"Oh, so, you drowned kittens just for fun or something?"

"I can't believe I'm arguing theology with an idiot!"

Potter's outrage was palpable. "I am not an idiot! I saved you, didn't I?"

"My point exactly."

They had stopped walking during their row, ankle deep in flowers. Potter was huffing at him, blowing his fringe over the infamous scar. Just as quickly, his gaze veered off over Snape's shoulder. Snape feared the prickle of awareness that preceded another appearance by Death. When he followed Potter's gaze, however, they were quite alone among the flowers.

"Does it look like we've walked any closer to that hedge?" Potter asked, when Snape scowled at him.

Snape turned around in an entire circle. The hedge appeared just as far away on the horizon as it had when they'd begun their walk. The forest too, looked just as nearby as it had when they'd first appeared here. "We've walked--" Snape began with a frown.

"Hours," Potter took up, fingering the flower chain. "I did one flower about every twenty paces and there are--"

"Hundreds of them." Grudgingly he looked at the flowers curling over Potter's fingers. "Perhaps not such an idiot as all that."

Potter huffed again but the sound carried typical Gryffindor mockery--that is, not much. "Thanks. Looks like we aren't meant to leave. At least not this way." They turned back toward the trees by unspoken mutual consent and were back where they started within half an hour.

Feasting on peaches so sweet Snape did not mind swiping up the juice that dripped down his chin, he sucked his sticky fingers clean. Ever restless, Potter was coaxing nuts to fall from a tree, which here, required no more magic than a wish. The shells even fell away as he shared the bounty, once more washed down by the purest water Snape had ever tasted.

Not unexpectedly, they quarreled after lunch.

"Through," Potter insisted, pointing deeper into the forest.

"Around," countered Snape, gesturing to the visible demarcation between field and forest.

"We've already seen that this place could go on forever," argued the brat. "If we go through it, at least we might see where we are."

"With no way to find our way back," retorted Snape.

"Back to what?" Potter flailed a bit but must have sensed that Snape was wavering. There was something about that field he didn't like, and walking around the forest line would keep it forever in view. "You know Death can find us, no matter where we are."

Snape was certain it was a coincidence that a chilly wind swept through the glade just then and made them both shiver. "We follow the stream," he insisted and Potter, looking ridiculously pleased, nodded. He made no more flower chains while they walked.

"Do you think it's weird that we haven't seen any animals?" Potter asked, as if the conversational void needed filling. "No chipmunks or birds. Not even any lacewings or bees."

To keep Potter from reciting the entire catalog of entomology, Snape said, "Animals have no souls."

The scrambled down a hillock, following the course of the meandering stream as it widened deeper into the forest before Potter replied. "Is that what you think we are? Souls?"

The stream dipped again before starting to rise again. Ahead, Snape could hear the sound of water rushing. "I died. You, well, I don't know what happened to you, but somehow your soul ended up here."

Potter laughed. "With yours. I gave it all up for you," he said, ducking under a low-hanging branch as they climbed up the mossy hill.

"Idiot," Snape muttered.

"You're welcome." Snape was about to berate him anew for this foolishness when Potter's softly murmured, "Wow," stopped him. Scrambling up the rise he stood beside Potter on the top. The stream had widened into a pool, with water so clear they could see the glistening sandy depths. Along one side of the pool, trees grew right up to the edge, branches dipping into the pool like grazing gazelles. Across from their vantage point was the source of the water sound, a fall of water just tall enough that they couldn't see what lay above it. A narrow beach crested away from the falls.

"I'm going in," said Potter just as his shirt hit the grass at Snape's feet.

"In? In where?" Snape sputtered. Potter, in the process of divesting his jeans, merely pointed toward the crystal pool. "Have some decency," Snape managed, as the trousers slid down the boy's legs.

"But it's just my soul," Potter said with a laugh, striding down the rise toward the clear water. Snape got a glimpse of a lean back and pale arse before Potter was splashing into the water.

"Are you daft?" Snape sputtered when Potter's head surfaced. He tried hard not to be aware that the water was clear enough to see Potter's nakedness quite plainly.

"What? Not shy are you?" Potter said, his grin making him look more like the student Snape had known in school and less like the careworn young man who had joined him here. He flung the hair away from his face, sending drops skittering behind him on the nearly smooth surface of the pool.

"Sensible," Snape retorted, slipping down the rise to get a more distorted view of Potter's cavorting since he could see quite perfectly from the top of the hill.

"Fish don't have souls, remember?" Potter dove again, though Snape wasn't sure how much he could see with his glasses back on top of his clothes "No sea monsters either as far as I can tell," he continued once he surfaced. He wagged his eyebrows in a lewd fashion. "Unless you count my--"

"Potter!" Snape barked.

Laughing Potter rolled onto his back, squirting a mouthful of water over his glistening belly. "Look! My soul has a willie!" His laugh reverberated off the slope of the glade's hills, easily drowning out Snape's snort of non-amusement. "You should come in." He wiggled like a seal. "Don't you know how to swim?"

"All Hogwarts' instructors are required to know the basics of swim and rescue, magical and otherwise," Snape said, squatting on the spit of sand. At least from this angle, he could only see Potter's head and shoulders.

"What? In the lake? This is much warmer than that," he said coaxingly. "You aren't shy are you?" he asked again, "I've already seen your, um, soul. We arrived here naked, remember?"

Snape was glad he was far enough away to hide the prickle of heat that rose in his cheeks. "You didn't...look?" he asked, aghast.

Potter did a slow roll in the water, like a cavorting dolphin. "Of course I looked! I bet you did too." His glee made Snape want to throttle him but he was conveniently too far out in the water.

"Certainly not," he harrumphed, certain enough of his abilities to lie through his teeth.

Somehow Potter did not look convinced. "What if I promise not to look?" He made a show of laying his hand over his eyes, his smile very much in play. "I don't have my glasses on anyway."

Really, he was such a child. "We are not discussing this," Snape said aloud.

Potter dove again, his ankle lingering above the waterline before he surfaced. "Well, you don't want to discuss theology," he pointed out, stroking lazily to keep afloat.

Snape rolled his eyes. "There are other topics of conversation besides religion and penises."

That made Potter laugh again. Snape merely sniffed and crossed his arms over his knees. He looked away from Potter's cavorting, trying to convince himself he did not feel a trickle of sweat down the back of his neck, and besides sweat was healthy when they were out of doors. Then an idea struck him. Very clearly he said aloud, "I would like some trunks, please." He did not have to wait long to see if his experiment succeeded. Tendrils shot out of the ground right beside him, quickly forming a leafy bush. Next leaves knotted and spun into a perfectly serviceable pair of trunks. They were even black.

Potter stood waist deep in the water, scrubbing his wet face at the sight.

"And a towel," Snape added, more in mind to keep the bush busy while he stepped behind it to shuck out of the suddenly unbearably hot clothes.

"That's...really weird," Potter said, still staring. Snape took the green towel when a branch extended with a towel on it.

"One more for Potter, I suppose," said Snape, sliding the trunks up his bare legs. While the bush was still rattling leaves in the process, Snape stepped out and waded into the cool clear water. He waded past Potter who was still gaping at the bush.

"Think it could do some clean clothes?" he asked, watching as another towel dropped onto the sand beside the first one.

As he spoke, the bush shook as though a small woodland creature was preparing to burst out of it. Puffy white balls appeared among the leaves. Cotton, Snape realized, though the bush itself looked nothing like a cotton plant. Several puffs began stretching and thinning until the outline of a t-shirt was clearly evident. When the bush was done, two fresh shirts as well as trousers and pants had been created. Snape had even gotten a shirt in black, watching one of the cotton puffs darken at his request.

The bush's activity had the added benefit of temporarily shutting Potter up except for the occasional muttered, "Weird." Snape sank into the water until his hair drifted around his head. Snape preferred to float while the brat frolicked, and at least hadn't dared splash him yet. Looking up at the waterfall, Snape reflected that the afterlife wasn't so bad, even if he had to share it with Potter.

Another large hammock awaited them when they emerged, strung between trees Snape was certain hadn't been there when they'd arrived. Exhausted from all his cavorting, Potter crawled into one side and fell asleep at once. Snape lay awake, staring into the night sky that held only velvet blackness and no stars. He told himself he wasn't listening for Lily before he fell asleep.

"Magic," Potter said, when Snape tried to keep his eyes closed a few moments longer and pretend he'd had a dream about waking up in a strange garden with Potter that had all been the result of a particularly bad essay by Longbottom.

"What?" Snape said, feeling Potter leaning over his chest, all right, on his chest in his haste to explain whatever passing thought had brought him awake.

"We haven't even tested our magic," Potter said, raising his eyebrows significantly, a fact Snape could not fail to notice, since Potter's face was leering over his own.

"We don't have wands," Snape replied, closing his eyes again, as if that had ever made Potter go away.

"We could make wands," Potter said, clearly expecting Snape to congratulate his dazzling conclusions.

Snape opened his eyes again. As he could tell from the dip in the hammock, Potter had not gone away. "Have you ever made a wand?"

"Well, no but--"

"And you may only now be thinking like a wizard but I have tested my own several times since we've arrived and the only thing that works is the magic of this place," Snape said, wanting to push Potter away, but unwilling to put his hand up and push the young man away.

"Oh," replied Potter. Instead of flopping back over onto his own side of the hammock, he let his head fall, right onto Snape's chest. "We could still try--" he began, words muffled by the fabric of Snape's bush-crafted shirt.

Really, considering they had only been stranded here a few days, Potter was awfully familiar with his person. Snape had a flash of memory of Potter's pale arse diving beneath the water and moved rapidly to dump Potter lest the effects of that become evident to them both. "Do you really think Death would let us do magic? Or let us make wands?" Potter, blinking stupidly, shrugged. "And yes, I know you are eager to try, and I have no objection to it, but I intend to continue our course of action from yesterday. If I'm to spend the afterlife here, I want to know exactly how much here there is."

"I'm coming too," Potter persisted, and Severus sat up.

"Lovely," he said.

After a few lingering glances at the pool, they set out the next morning, still following the stream though it had broadened into a narrow river atop the falls. The trees thinned out as soon as they were over the rise and they didn't have to go far before the next marvel came into view. Just ahead, as soon as they climbed over the falls, two enormous trees lay on either side of the river. Both were taller than the forest around them which had retreated as in some form of deciduous homage. Their tops intermingled, forming a bower across the river.

Even Potter got quiet as they approached the tree on this side of the river. The trunk was nearly smooth but even he and Potter with their arms outstretched couldn't have broached it all the way around. They approached in rare solemnity, entering the circle of shade cast by the huge crest of branches. No single branch was low enough to climb even had he or Potter been tempted. There was something about the trees that felt ancient, as if their garden retreat had sprung up around this very point.

"Wow," Potter said, with a typical lack of appropriate verbal skills. He was gazing overhead, his head dropping back onto his neck. Snape found himself imitating him, enraptured by the endless green carpet overhead.

"Hey," Potter said, now gazing at the trunk of the tree. Since he doubted that Potter's botanical expertise extended much further than Sixth Year Herbology, Snape stepped closer to see what had caught Potter's interest. Snape saw it immediately. On the nearly smooth trunk, just at eye level, the bark was scarred, and like another scar of Snape's acquaintance, bore the jagged shape of a lightning bolt.

They stared at it for a moment in shared wonder, though Snape doubted whether it was of the same origin.

"It doesn't mean anything," Potter said as though relearning the elements of speech. "Does it?" He looked over at Snape with the expectancy of a child waiting to be told the world is safe from monsters.

Snape, however, knew they both knew monsters existed. "Of course not. This tree must be ancient. The sort of magic that formed your scar isn't confined to rebounded killing curses."

Potter was nodding, obviously eager to accept Snape's explanation for what it was...a guess, a reassuring guess or not. Before Snape could expound further, Potter's fingers reached out as if to trace the outline on the bark. Snape's grasp halted his hand.

"If it's safe..."

"Let me touch it first," Snape said, knowing full well Potter would object. Fortunately Snape's arm was longer. The bark felt exactly as it appeared...bark that had been damaged and healed. Before he could remove his hand Potter had stepped closer, laying his fingers nearly over Snape's, visibly relieved that nothing untoward happened than their fingers brushed.

"I wonder if there's anything on the other one," Potter said, obviously unwilling to trust fate, or luck, or whatever overworked gods looked out for Gryffindors. "Maybe it's a snake," he went on, positively glinting with ghoulish glee.

Wrinkling his nose, Snape said, "I'm not overly fond of snakes at present." He touched the place where he was fairly certain he'd bled to death recently, earning Potter's immediate contrition.

"Right, sorry," he said, "I forgot for a moment." They waded across the shallow river, rolling up their trousers before starting across. No matter how much they inspected the bark, this tree appeared unmarked, at least at eye level and below. Again, the branches were far over their heads, leaves rustling slightly in counterpoint to the soft ripples of water.

As intriguing as the trees were, they waded back across and put their shoes back on, still following the lazy course of the river. It didn't take too long, however, before they came to an overlook very much like the one they had climbed over when they'd left the waterfall pool. There was, in fact, a similar waterfall at this end and a pool as sparkling and inviting as the one they'd camped beside last night.

"Odd," Snape commented, his gaze sweeping the scene with a pricking of...something.

"Are you sure we didn't double back?" Potter asked uncertainly, looking back the way they had come.

"Of course I'm--" Then his lips closed and he started. Potter saw it too. The bush, from whence their new clothes had sprung, was in exactly the same place on this narrow strip of beach.

"We did double back!" Potter said, looking behind them again in confusion. The towering trees were still clearly visible in the middle of the plain.

"We couldn't have," huffed Snape, but there was no denying the bush's placement. Now that he looked, he could see imprints on the sand from where they'd started out this morning, and the two trees that had sprung up to anchor their hammock.

They stared at each other. There was no help for it; they turned and started back, passing the enormous trees again and following the river to where it narrowed and fell over a waterfall--

The same waterfall they'd just left. In front of them was the same overlook, same falls, same gods be-damned bush.

"It can't be," Potter wailed, staring at the scene as if searching for something out of place. But it was identical in every detail. The bush even seemed to quiver with happiness to see them when they clambered down the hill, offering up bananas then fat blueberries. Snape had never considered himself a vegetarian but he did not find himself missing roast chicken with food like this at their command.

"The only way to make certain we are not going mad is to separate," announced Snape.

Potter looked horrified, or as horrified as a person could look with blue lips and a banana peel on one trouser leg. "I think we should stay together. Splitting up won't prove anything."

"Nevertheless, I wish to know," Snape said, getting to his feet and dusting himself off. "It isn't as though I have any pressing engagements."

Potter too stood up as though they were taking formal leave of each other. "What shall I do if you don't come back?"

"Death will know where to find me," Snape replied, trying not to notice Potter's determined chin.

He climbed out of the ravine, aware that Potter was still rooted to the spot, unabashedly watching as Snape left.

There was an expected sense of déjà vu as he followed the now familiar course of the river, past the massive pair of trees. He was tempted to pause and rest a moment, but for the sake of not getting turned around and negating the experiment, he pressed on. He made sure to stay close to the river bank until it began to slope, just as before. Ahead he could hear the rush of water where the falls descended into the identical glade.

Except it wasn't identical. As he crested the rise, he saw Potter's face break into smiles. It was the exact same glade. Complete with Potter. "Impossible!" He looked over his shoulder at the pair of trees he was certain he had passed. Beyond their clearing the ordered forest stretched in all directions.

With a sigh he skidded down the rise. Potter was heading up to meet him, looking as though he'd transformed into Godric Gryffindor himself. "You've been gone ages," Potter said. For one terrible instant he thought Potter might embrace him. For an even more terrible one, Snape thought he might want him to.

Then they both got a hold of themselves and compared notes. "That's it then," Potter said, "this is where we're meant to be."

Snape gaped at him. "Then why weren't we just put here?"

"To make us find out for ourselves," replied Potter as though that made any sort of sense at all.

Still staring in disbelief, Snape said, "What sort of self-actualized bullsh...er, nonsense is that? Has Granger been making you read ladies periodicals?"

"No!" Potter shouted, with such vehemence, Snape knew he hadn't been far off the mark. "Well, it isn't bullshit, which you can say, by the way, you aren't my professor any more."

"You worry about your own vocabulary," Snape returned with a scowl.

"Look, we've been able to go anywhere we like, right? Except out, which is probably past that field of wildflowers," Potter said, waving away Snape's advice.

"Asphodel," Snape corrected automatically. Then something that had been niggling at his brain demanded attention. "Field of Asphodel," he said slowly. "Elysian Fields." He stared at the lightning bolt shape on Potter's forehead. "The lightning struck hero. We're in Paradise."

"I've noticed," said Potter, not sounding in the least impressed.

"Capital P Paradise. The one place we are safe from Death."

That evening Snape found sleep much more elusive than Potter who did not seem to mind sharing Paradise with Snape. An though silently Snape could admit he didn't mind putting off the fiery pit as long as he could, he couldn't help feeling he didn't deserve Paradise. Not with Potter.

He tried to let the soft distant rush of water over the falls lull him to sleep but he felt the weight of his sins more keenly in the early hours, even if technically they had no sense of time here. Each sin seemed to call him, as if by name--

"Severus!"

The whisper nearly sent him spinning out of his hammock. From the water's edge, Lily beckoned. Glancing at Potter Snape disengaged Potter's clinging arm and slipped down to meet her. All the vague guilts about not telling him about her disappeared with her smile.

"What were you thinking about so hard?" she asked, sliding one hand over his shoulder and down his arm. "I've been calling for ages."

"Sin," he admitted, unwilling to compound them by even such a slight lie.

"Here?" She laughed, leading him down the narrow beach. "Only you."

"This is Paradise, isn't it?" he asked, trying not to be distracted by her laugh.

"It could be," she said, looking at him through the fall of hair over her shoulder.

"Man was never meant to stay in Paradise," he pointed out.

She turned her head, gazing across the dappled water. "Don't you like it here?"

"Potter..." he began, then made a face. "Harry does."

"He must care for you a great deal," Lily said, sitting down on the grassy bank.

Snape made a rather loud noise of disbelief, nearly forgetting the sleeping man nearby. "He loathes me." He didn't add, "As you did" because he didn't want any reminders that they'd fallen out.

"He's willing to give up his life for you," she pointed out.

He stared down at her before lowering himself onto the bank beside her. He'd neglected to put on his shoes when he'd nearly tumbled out of the hammock. "Seems to be a family trait."

"Is that why you hate him? Because I died to save him?" She looked genuinely curious.

Again Snape could not lie. "I don't hate him."

Her expression was unreadable, though Snape thought if they'd still been close he could have. "I'd do it again, even though it meant not seeing him grow up, not being there when he falls in love."

"I don't understand any of this," said Snape, giving voice to his frustration. "Why were we brought here, why Potter...I should be dead. I *am* dead!"

She put her hand on his arm but he shook her off. "Even death has rules."

"Then how have I broken them?" Unanswered questions rose into his throat.

She didn't accuse him of being a drama queen this time. Instead she gave his hand a squeeze. He was, however, in no mood for her kind smile.

"Why do you only come here when Harry is asleep?" he began, but Lily gasped, staring over Snape's shoulder toward the hammocks. Potter lay, still tucked up in his hammock, but the glittering angry gleam in his eyes was clearly visible. Snape leaped to his feet. Beside him, he sensed Lily moving as well.

Potter had untangled himself from the hammock with a grace born of anger. He stalked toward them as soon as his feet hit the sand. "What are you doing?" Potter huffed, anger radiating off him like steam off a cauldron, "talking to that snake?"

Snape gasped in indignation. He whirled to offer Lily the dubious protection of his out flung arms, only to see a wavering motion through the grass behind them and no sign of Lily. "You--you saw a snake?" he asked, staring between the place where Lily had been and Harry's furious face.

"I saw a snake because you were talking to a bloody snake!" Potter shouted, running his hand through his sleep-mussed hair. "God, for a moment I thought it was...was--" For a ghastly moment it looked like he might faint. He was pale and sweat dewed his forehead when he pushed his hair away. "But it was too small to be...that snake."

Snape had spent too many years dealing with students not to recognize the symptoms of incipient hysteria. "Potter!" he cried out, voice like a whip-crack. "Pull yourself together!"

Potter's shoulders squared and color rushed back into his cheeks. He nodded once to show he wasn't going to faint. "We should find that snake."

"I'm certain the, er, snake is long gone," Snape said, before Potter asked their helpful bush for a pith helmet and started off on a serpent safari.

"Why were you even talking to it?" Potter asked, clearly frustrated. "What if it had--" He glanced at Snape's neck.

"It wasn't venomous," Snape said, still reluctant to reveal the snake's other form.

"This isn't Hogwarts," Potter said, his anger rising now that his panic had been mastered. "It isn't even England. You don't know what can and can't hurt you here."

Potter's shouting wasn't doing anything to alleviate Snape's agitation at finding out Lily was a snake. Or a snake was Lily--either way he needed non-being shouted at time to puzzle it out. So he shouted back. "I don't care what hurts me. Without your ill-timed intervention back in the shack I'd already be well on my way to my eternal reward." He took advantage of Potter's outrage. "What? You expected me to be grateful you saved me?" He sneered. "Saved me for what?"

Perhaps it was because Snape had just been talking to Lily, or the creature that took her shape, that put all his memories of her to the forefront. Her child, Potter, who had ever reminded anyone who ever saw him of his father, suddenly looked more like Lily in a high dudgeon than Snape would have thought possible. Potter in his rage was Lily reborn, green eyes turning to flint. Snape had faced James' juvenile anger many times without flinching. He had faced Lily's only once.

Snape took a step back, calling on some not quite buried instinct for survival. Potter was suddenly too close, too very much like his mother--

--who had never kissed him the way Potter was doing now. His mouth was quivering, hot and needy enough not to even be trying to coax a response before it was over and Potter was pulling back, panting again. His eyes were wide as if he hadn't meant to go this far.

"Fuck! I'm sorry!" Potter yelped, turning and bolting out of the clearing.

Paradise, Snape thought, was suddenly anything but.

~**~

He found Potter the next morning slumped beneath one of the great trees, the one with the lightning bolt marring its bark. His knees were raised, head bowed, the very picture of dejection when Snape approached. "Go ahead and yell," he said, "I know you're dying to."

With a smirk Snape settled down beside him. "Why don't you do it for me?"

Nodding Potter recited, "I was foolish and reckless and--" He glanced up at Snape before returning to his diatribe, "Probably driven by teenage hormones that I had no business inflicting on you no matter how much I think I might...might fancy you." He heaved his shoulders, possibly to shift the no-doubt crushing weight of self pity. "Is that about right?"

"I would have left out the bit about fancying me and mentioned 'inappropriate' but as you've already pointed out, I am no longer your professor, living or dead, I think that will be sufficient."

Potter looked up, obviously trying for an expression more worldly than the leap of hopefulness in his eyes. "You don't seem as angry about this as I thought you'd be," he pointed out.

"By 'this' do you mean taking flight after an admittedly minor difference of opinion, your objection to my discussion with a serpent, or..." He found his gaze drawn to Potter's mouth.

"Or."

"Ah."

"It wasn't hormones," Potter said, color flirting with his cheeks. "I mean, it isn't just hormones. I have a--"

"Saving people thing. I've heard."

"Bit of a crush," Potter countered.

Snape gave this due consideration. "I'd just use you for sex and trample on your tender emotions," he concluded.

Potter appeared to be giving this equal consideration. "That would be all right. I've had them trampled on before." He shifted closer to Snape, close enough that their upraised knees brushed.

He looked over in astonishment. "You aren't seriously suggesting--" The way Potter's mouth found his suggested he was. "Death could appear at any moment," protested Snape, though even he realized having a lapful of Potter somewhat weakened the impact of his protest.

"That could happen even if we weren't in Paradise," pointed out Potter, sliding his hands up the front of Snape's shirt, in obvious expectation of another kiss.

Damn the boy for choosing this moment to use his brain. He didn't like appearing discombobulated in front of the young man so he gave into the urge to kiss him again. He was sure no fruit in Paradise tasted as good as Potter's mouth. Then all thoughts of things sacred gave over to thoughts more profoundly profane. Potter was clinging to

him, moaning against his mouth, chest flush with Severus's, so close he could feel the shape of his cock against his own.

Snape literally felt the earth move--the ground around them shifted, stretching out to form a platform--easily the length of one reclining body and as wide as two.

"Even Paradise wants us to--" Leaves fluttered down as if dropped by swallow's wings, twisting, quilting themselves into a blanket while the lush grass rippled and meshed into sinfully soft sheets below them. "To, to--"

Since Potter seemed to have developed a stutter, Snape distracted him, tugging the shirt over his head. "This has less to do with the desires of the divine," he speculated, "and more to do with nature...ours." He'd forgotten for a moment that he no longer had the protection of a row of buttons but a simple cotton shirt which Potter had already grasped. Obediently he lifted his arms only to hear Potter's chuckle as it came away.

"This is a fig leaf, isn't it?" the young man said, before tossing the shirt off their earthly bed.

"Apparently Death has a sense of humor," said Snape, more grateful that the chuckle had been over his clothes than at the sight of him unclothed.

"I guess he had to," mused Potter, "in his line of work."

Snape silenced him with another kiss. "I don't want to talk about Death," he said, shivering at the sudden breeze that chilled them, sending them both diving under the covers. Mutely Potter nodded, confirming his own vitality by kissing Snape again. Snape dragged his hands down the sides of Potter's face, his jaw smoother, he suspected, because neither of them had had to shave since they'd...arrived. He didn't want to think about what that meant, didn't want to think about anything but the way Potter felt rutting against him.

"You saved me," he said, his voice more breathy than usual. Potter nodded again, as if doing something so ridiculous made perfect sense.

"Knew you wouldn't save yourself," Potter replied, heat that had nothing to do with arousal creeping up his neck. "Couldn't let you--"

"Shh," Snape said, enforcing their earlier vow of silence about certain matters by dragging his fingers across Potter's mouth. Potter--Harry moaned.

"Just say you'll stay with me," Harry said, nuzzling his fingertips. He'd lost his glasses somewhere during the bed's shifting and the progression of kisses.

It was a foolish promise but surely not as foolish as wrapping Harry around himself and sharing more kisses that tasted of the heaven they had been denied. His doubt must have been reflected on his features because Harry fondled his lower lip just as Snape had done to him. "No matter what happens," he agreed, "I'll stay with you. As long as you want me." It was just as solemn as a vow, and despite both of them being naked from the waist up, drew a nod from Harry. "We appear to be in this together," he acknowledged then there was nothing to do but seal such a promise with a kiss.

It was both heaven and hell to feel Harry's cock against his own when they were entwined as closely as grape vines, both still in their trousers. "Lean back and let me--" he began, but it seemed Harry didn't need to know what Snape needed to do. Arms still locked around Snape's neck, he rolled backwards, pulling Snape on top of him. It wasn't what Snape had been planning but it felt so bloody good he simply covered Harry's body with his own.

Harry's wail would have made the leaves overhead flutter if either of them had been looking. "Need--need--need," Harry cried.

Snape knew perfectly well what he needed but he wanted Harry's trousers off when he gave it to him. He peeled them away, certain their helpful bush would not mind the hurried mistreatment of its creation. Harry was still chanting but Snape only half-heard, focusing instead on the ripe plum of Harry's cock. It begged to be savored and Snape indulged himself for a moment before Harry's tremors sent his mouth plunging down. Harry bucked and wailed, coming like a teenager with his first--

Well.

Snape could grant that Harry had been a bit busy this last year and sex had probably been the last thing on his mind.

He kept his mouth around Harry's cock, gentling him with hands on his thighs, Harry's breathing still rapid, carrying over even the soft rush of water over stones from the river just beyond their bower. Finally he let go, once it was very nearly soft enough to slip out on its own. Harry was watching him when Snape looked up, and even from here he could see a bit of wariness in his gaze.

Perhaps gratitude was beyond the whelp but surely--

"I've wanted that for so long," Harry said, still panting. "Well, not the coming as soon as you touched me part, but the other--"

"The blow job part?" Snape asked, watching Harry's blush deepen in interesting places.

"The...making love part," Harry insisted, with the adumbration of the young.

"Lusted over your professor in detention, have you?" Snape countered, quite willing to believe Harry had been horny enough to beg for it, even from Snape.

"Complaining?" replied Harry with a sultriness that made Snape's still-hopeful prick twitch.

Never one to accept any sort of gift without examining the ramifications, Snape eyed him dubiously. "You aren't seriously...offering?"

Harry wiggled upon the leafy bed. "Offering? I'm begging."

Possibilities, undreamed of and yet not unimagined, found purchase and took root, blossoming in this place where even the air seemed fertile. Yet for all the bursting fruit and pure clean water, there was one thing he would need to accept Harry's offer Snape didn't think they could duplicate in fruit.

"I'll--I'll hurt you," he said, with the desperate urge to not even speak of the possibility. There were other ways; they would be enough.

A tendril of some plant tangled beneath their elevated bed detached itself and wove up, like a snake being charmed out of its basket. Both Snape and Harry turned to look at it, as the tip cracked and began to drip a viscous clear fluid.

"Okay, now that's kind of weird," Harry said, reaching over to rub the fluid between his fingers. "But I bet it will work."

When Snape tested it on his own fingers--and tongue to be doubly certain--it certainly felt like as fine and slick as anything he could brew. The verdict was sealed when Harry sat up, his legs still spread to either side of Snape's, and tasted it from Snape's mouth.

"Tastes a bit like apples," he said, laying a tentative hand over the fronts of Snape's trousers. "You can't say no now. Please don't say no." Snape didn't think no was even in his vocabulary any longer. His permission was a silent nod, but it was all Harry needed. He had Snape's trousers undone within seconds and Snape himself undone a moment later. Clearly Harry knew how to stroke a cock even if the only one he'd practiced on had been his own.

Harry rolled back down willingly, groaning his approval while Snape gathered the slippery stuff on two fingers. When Harry's cock stirred and rose at the attention Snape bent forward to encourage such youthful resilience with his tongue. He looked for and got permission before they went further than he could undo. Harry, it seemed, did not wish to hold back. With more confidence than he'd ever shown in class, he lifted his legs around Snape's waist.

Nothing seemed to stir around them, no leaf or vine, nor cold breeze nor whisper of a serpent's passing. Snape caught and held Harry's gaze, gaining the last permission he could, guiding himself inside Harry's arse as slowly as he could manage. Harry fit around him like an apple around a core, eager and not about to let Snape go as slowly

as this, urging with his legs, his arse, and those breathlessly needy moans. Almost shyly he reached for his own cock, as if uncertain whether it was proper to get hard again. Snape managed a nod and Harry's hand began moving.

Snape had never seen such wanting, not directed toward himself and the sheer bliss of it nearly took him over the edge. With a groan he held on, waiting until Harry's own bliss caught up to him, pulling Snape in, urging him to share it.

In a word, Paradise.

He had to close his eyes lest the joy of it be too much to contain in the sensitized vessel of his body. Harry's eyes were wide open, however, when Snape's shudders had ceased. He rubbed a foot along Snape's back as though it had been all right--perhaps even better than that--maybe even really good.

"That was brilliant," Harry said.

All right, better than really good.

Then an odd expression crossed Harry's features. Snape shifted around, following the gaze that had suddenly shifted upward. Or, in this case, tree-ward. Snape saw what had commanded Harry's attention at once. The tree above them was covered in fruit, red and ripe and surely not there when he had discovered Harry at the foot of the tree this morning. The branches were so heavily laden they bent low over their heads. Harry reached up and one of the glossy fruits fell right into his hand. Smiling in delight, he turned, holding out the prize to Snape.

Only to be halted by a discreet but nevertheless quite firm cough.

"You can't eat the fruit," Death said.

Snape and Harry were both naked, the fruit clenched in one of Harry's hands as they stared. Death was no longer alone. A snake twined up the scythe, its head resting on the arched curve of the blade. At Death's pronouncement it swept its head from side to side as if in agreement.

Harry looked at the apple in his hand. "But we've eaten lots of fruit here," he argued, before Snape could warn against arguing with Death.

One bony finger pointed up, into the red-dotted canopy of leaves. "Not from this tree." Death shrugged. "I know, crazy, right? But it's a rule." Death made a noise that might have been a chuckle or the cry of a soul in torment. "The boss is a little weird about this tree."

In what was clearly meant to be an undertone, Harry said, "Death has a boss?" But he lowered the hand holding the apple.

"Looks like it's time to send you back," intoned Death. The snake's tail was undulating slightly against the scythe. Dread clenched at Snape. He couldn't decide whether he was glad to have the memory of being with Harry to comfort him in the afterlife or sorry that he would have only the single memory of it to torment him for eternity.

"What? No," Harry said. "I'm not going back." His fingers clutched Snape's arm as if to pin him to the makeshift bed.

"You must," Snape insisted, though he knew Harry would ignore this admittedly half-hearted attempt to persuade him.

"I won't," Harry said, pulling himself up as if he could take on Death itself, naked and wandless. Snape wondered how his late master had ever thought he'd stood a chance. "We go together, we agreed."

"Of course," Death said, settling on the edge of the bed. Luckily it was a large bed. The snake still peered at them from the top of the scythe. "You'd be denying him Paradise."

"What? No," Snape said, taken aback. "I'm not going to heaven, I'm going to--"

The snake shook its head. "Not according to my records," Death said, tilting the cowl toward Harry, "And yes, Death has records."

"Absolutely not," said Snape, more forcefully. If there was one thing he could do with the gift he'd been given, it was ensure Harry's affection survived to be gifted on a worthier soul than his.

Death made a non-committal noise, or what probably was one even though it sounded like bats swooping over a graveyard. "It does have to be your choice, of course, but you could stay here..."

Both Harry and Snape looked at the end of the bed. "Here?" Snape asked, looking toward the snake. Even though snakes had no eyelids, this one seemed to wink at him.

Death pretended to examine its nails, though on the fleshless white hand the gesture looked a bit more contrived. "Sure, lots to eat as long as you don't miss roast chicken, lots of room, helpful bushes..." The large shoulders heaved into a sigh. "Of course Harry has to go back. It's not even close to his time yet and destroying the balance of souls in the universe could lead to rending of the universe sorts of cosmic cataclysms. Really don't want to get into that." The snake shuddered.

Harry was looking daggers at him. "You promised," he said with that stubborn set of his chin that came from neither his mouth or father but probably some distant Evans or Potter that had been difficult against impossible odds.

"Those aren't the only two options," came a clear female voice. Snape's chin jerked up, away from the all too enticing sight of that stubborn chin and at Lily, who stood just past Death's knees. "Tell him."

"Tell me what?" Snape asked, looking between Death and Lily. The snake, he noticed, had vanished.

"Who are you talking to?" Harry asked, blinking in his confusion but no less stubborn.

Snape turned to look at him. "Don't you see--"

But it was Death who answered. "He doesn't. He only sees the other form."

"The snake?" asked Snape, while Harry was looking more determinedly stubborn.

"Of course I see the snake," he insisted, "What I want to know is--"

Snape clapped a hand over his mouth. "Tell me what?" he asked again.

Heaving a great sigh, Death said, "I can, since Harry...and...and others--interdicted for you, send you both back. You weren't precisely dead, after all."

In his arms, Harry ceased his struggles and listened to what Death was saying. Only it was Lily who spoke up. "You can stay here, or go on. Or go back. Death gets your soul either way."

Sepulchral tones echoed from the depths of the cowl. "The when only matters to you, not to me."

Pursing his lips against Snape's hand, Harry finally got him to slide his fingers away. "Wait, you aren't going to send him back to just before he almost died, are you? With his throat--" He swallowed hard and pointedly did not look at Snape's bare throat.

"You have a very suspicious mind," Death said, managing to sound hurt and impressed all at once.

Harry shrugged, "Well, are you?" Snape had never seen him back down and he was not disappointed this time. "If you do, I'll...I'll do something drastic. Your boss won't like that after all the trouble you've been through about this."

Lily had gasped, holding her hand to her chest. She looked at Death, who said, "I daresay you're right." The cowl fluttered, moving between them. "You have to choose, Severus."

Snape looked at Lily, who looked a bit scaly in the light. And at Potter who looked as fierce and brave as ever. "I think I already have."

"Hang on, then," Death said, getting to its feet. The white hand tightened on the scythe. "I'm not used to sending anyone back." He seemed to find this quite amusing.

"Wait," Snape said, nodding toward their clothes. "May we at least get dressed first?"

Death, still sounding quite amused, shifted the scythe and they were back in the Muggle clothing Death had provided before, right down to the fig leaf. "Don't fancy playing Adam and Steve when I send you back to Hogwarts?"

"Back to--"

But the scythe was moving again and with a whoosh, the tree and the leafy bed and Lily disappeared around them. Harry was hanging onto him, arms clinging to his neck as air rushed around them as though they'd been swept up in a Portkey.

They materialized in the Great Hall...though from an angle Snape had never seen it from before. He realized they were standing atop the teacher's table, Harry's arms still wrapped around him. He realized too that he was not bleeding from a fatal snakebite to the throat and that their arrival had been met by a dreadful silence, then the distinctive noise of dozens of wands being drawn. Leave it to Death to force them to make an entrance.

Then whispers and soft cries echoed across the hall, of "Potter" and "Harry" and once even his own name in a tone softer than a whisper. It looked as though a terrible battle had raged through the school, which, Snape supposed, there had.

Something was pressing into his back, something clutched tightly in Harry's hand. The apple, he realized with a start. Harry had never let go of it. Slowly he slid his arms from around Snape's, though he kept one arm loosely on his hip as a veritable flock of his friends approached.

"We made it," Harry said, grinning up at him.

Instead of chastising him for his atrocious penchant for stating the obvious, Snape thought it more prudent to step away from Harry's hand on his hip, since, to judge by the expressions on not a few Gryffindor faces, Harry was about to be protected, whether he wished it or not.

Harry's glasses too had made it. He blinked at Snape through them, resisting Snape's efforts to pull out of his arms. "It looks like just a few minutes after I left," Harry said, glancing around the Great Hall, "I told them all what you did, what a hero you were...are."

Even the Malfoys had got to their feet, moving together as if afraid to let a family member wander off alone, heading toward the head table. Behind them, Minerva, looking dour and contrite all at once, too started toward the front of the Great Hall.

"I'm not a hero," Snape countered, feeling it might be too late to persuade Harry to let go of him. He did not even seem to be able to protest when Harry kissed him in full view of the entire hall.

"You are to me," insisted Harry. Mischief lit his eyes. "I know, crazy, right?" More whispers were building up around them but Harry hadn't let go. "You gave up Paradise for me."

Snape merely held on, as they prepared to face the gauntlet of Harry's friends and their friendly suspicion. He didn't bother to point out that no place was Paradise without Harry in it.