

# The Four-House Tournament

*by The Snapettes*

Four unsuccessful Triwizard entrants arrange their own tournament. The prize:  
Snape.

## The Goblet

*Chapter 1 of 9*

Four unsuccessful Triwizard entrants arrange their own tournament. The prize: Snape.

The Goblet of Fire was a sentient artefact.

Created for the sole purpose of identifying the most worthy champion from each school, the Goblet had the ability to read the thoughts and sense the feelings of each applicant as they dropped their slip of parchment into its whitish-blue fire.

The Triwizard Tournament would test the champions' magical prowess, and they would be required to cope with dangerous situations whilst maintaining their powers of deduction. But the Goblet searched not only for a candidate with sufficient daring and skill, but also for the entrant most worthy of representing their school.

Unaware of the Goblet's method of identifying champions, the contenders were oblivious to the importance of their thoughts and feelings as they placed their names into the wooden chalice. They believed the act of submitting their name, alongside the name of their school, to be the only part of the selection process. This gave the Goblet an advantage.

But the Goblet was fallible; it had been enchanted by wizards who, like all human beings, were prone to error, and its sentience was not as complex as that of the Sorting Hat, which could make judgments by analysing information and recognising patterns.

As such, the Goblet did not notice a recurring theme in the thoughts of four Hogwarts hopefuls, each from differing Houses, as they entered themselves into the tournament; however, it judged each of their motives fairly on individual merit.



*Angry and feeling maligned, the Ravenclaw has entered to*

*prove a point to her boyfriend, Percy. She wants to regain his respect.*

*And there is something else. Penelope hopes Professor Snape will see her in a different light...*



*Diffident, and something of a loner,*

*she wants to make her mark as a Slytherin.*

*Moreover, Georgina wants to be noticed by her Head of House...*



*Bored, and disappointed by the cancelation of the inter-house Quidditch Cup;*

*the Gryffindor's unusual obsession with the Potions master is growing,*

*and she hopes to impress him by becoming a Triwizard champion...*



*Hurt by a recent break-up with his boyfriend,*

*Hufflepuff Luca wants to cure his heartache by ensnaring Severus Snape.*

*He hopes becoming a champion will place him in the limelight...*

The Goblet was unaware that these students were involved in a dare with their House reputations at stake. Nor did it know they had been sneaking around and meeting in the Boathouse for weeks, buoyed by the revelation that their Houses had something in common: each of the aspiring champions were consumed with lust for the dark, brooding Head of Slytherin.

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"I can't believe that stupid Goblet chose Cedric Diggory instead of me!" Luca ranted, shivering slightly in the cool evening air of the Boathouse.

"I thought you'd be pleased!" Georgina replied, bemused, trying unsuccessfully to warm her hands on the dim flame from her oil lamp. "After all, he's in the same House as you. How do you think I feel, knowing that Hogwarts have two champions and neither of them are Slytherin?"

"The whole thing is a fix." Luca pouted at his childhood friend. "We've got an attention-seeking, speccky-eyed fourth-year, who happens to be Dumbledore's favourite, and pretty-boy Diggory."

"For a Hufflepuff, you're not very loyal, Luca."

"Yeah, well, I don't see the point of being loyal at the moment. Look where it got me with Oliver Wood."

Luca and Oliver had split up during the summer, due in part to Oliver's move to Puddlemere United. In Luca's eyes, Oliver had changed since he'd left Hogwarts to become a professional Quidditch player. But Luca was glad he'd had his oldest friend, Georgina, as a shoulder to cry on during the holidays. From the outside, a Hufflepuff and a Slytherin seemed an unholy union, but both were matched by a razor-sharp sense of humour and a shameless eye for the boys, not to mention a shared lust for their Potions master.

Their conversation died as they heard rusty hinges creaking on the portrait of Percival Pratt, and the pair turned to see Penelope and Alicia stepping through the secret passageway into the Boathouse, wearing expressions just as sullen as Luca's. The new arrivals pulled up a wooden bench, and the four unsuccessful Triwizard entrants huddled by the light of Georgina's lamp.

"Bit of an anti-climax, then," Alicia said, breaking the silence.

Georgina nodded.

Penelope ran her fingers through her mane of wavy blonde hair, and her large blue eyes appeared preoccupied. Her plain, pale face would often light up with a dazzling smile, but when she was pensive or serious, she conveyed the requisite firmness of a stern Hogwarts Prefect.

The air in the underground harbour felt cold and clammy, and light flickered menacingly around the walls, casting shadows from the upturned boats hanging from the ceiling above. The group had chosen this meeting place for its privacy; very few students wandered down this far after dark, preferring the relative warmth of stairwells and alcoves inside the castle.

"What happened in Gryffindor Tower when Harry Potter turned in?" Luca asked Alicia.

The pretty, dark-skinned sixth-year raised her eyes from the floor. "Oh, there's a party going on up there tonight," she said in a voice which lacked enthusiasm. "Everyone's pleased to have a Gryffindor in the tournament."

Luca snorted derisively.

"What do the Hufflepuffs think about it all?" Alicia asked.

"That Potter is trying to steal Diggory's thunder," Luca replied, his concurrence evident in his soft brown eyes. "I don't think he'll get any support from our House."

"Nor from Ravenclaw," Penelope agreed.

"I think we all know which champion Slytherin will be rooting for," Alicia chipped in before Georgina could speak.

"And it won't be a fourteen-year-old who constantly craves the spotlight," Georgina muttered loud enough to be heard, flicking her long, dark brown hair, and narrowing her olive-green eyes at the Gryffindor girl.

Alicia bristled, but felt too glum to care. She didn't know the Slytherin seventh-year very well, and now that their inter-house bet was off, Alicia had no interest in sizing up her competition. None of them had been chosen to represent their school, and their chances of impressing Snape had slipped away. There was no need to continue meeting covertly in the bowels of the castle.

"Well, I suppose that's it, then," Alicia said eventually, after the foursome had sat in silence for a moment or two.

"Yep," said Luca, and his lean frame straightened.

Penelope stood up, and Alicia moved to help slide the wooden bench back into its original place.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" Alicia asked the Ravenclaw Prefect. "It's your eighteenth birthday, isn't it?"

"Percy is coming to Hogwarts and taking me to Hogsmeade for a meal," Penelope said, brightening a little.

"That's nice of him," Alicia commented. She'd never liked Percy Weasley, and if it hadn't been for the Weasley twins' presence on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, she would have chosen to have nothing to do with him. Nevertheless, Alicia was fond of Penelope and glad they'd become friends through their shared interest in Quidditch.

The four students walked towards the entrance to the secret passageway, guarded by a portrait of an erstwhile poet. Georgina held up her lamp to illuminate the red-robed wizard sitting at his writing desk, watching them intently and surprising them with his sudden interest in their little gathering. He cleared his throat affectedly.

"In days of old, when knights roamed the land,

They had to face trials to win a lady's hand.

Dragons to slay, demons to face,

Treasure troves searched for a trace

Of jewels precious and priceless

To win their heart's desire...

But, I daresay, your goal is worse than dragon's fire!

Yet why not follow the old tradition?

You could make this your joint mission!

You need not the Goblet to help you start,

You can still compete for the Potions master's heart!"

Percival Pratt leaned back in his painted chair and smiled smugly. He'd taken the four students completely unawares; the portrait hadn't spoken to any of them since their initial visit to the Boathouse, when he'd encouraged them to speak in rhyme, and then told them he had no interest in further discourse.

"That guy is almost as big a prat as Percy Weasley," Georgina muttered from the back of the group.

Luca elbowed her quietly in the ribs.

"Daft old coot," said Alicia as she looked away from the poet's portrait. "There's no point trying to get Snape's attention now! He's not going to care about us when there are two Hogwarts champions competing in the Triwizard Tournament."

Penelope assessed the oil-painted canvas, an expression of piqued interest on her face. "He's just encouraging us to think creatively, that's all."

"What do you mean?" Alicia asked.

"He's suggesting we have our own competition, outside of the Triwizard Tournament," said Penelope.

"Now that *is* an idea," Luca said sarcastically.

"Yeah, why don't we compete to see which one of us gets closest to Professor Snape?" Georgina suggested with a smirk.

Her remark made them all laugh.

"That's the funniest thing I've heard all day," Luca said as he stepped through the portal.

They made their way through the passage to the Grand Staircase inside the castle, and then parted for their dormitories, smiling at the absurdity of Percival Pratt's

suggestion.

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Georgina waited for Penelope outside the Prefects' room as their Monday-morning gathering dispersed and the Hogwarts elite made their way down to breakfast. Penelope had appeared tired and disinterested throughout the meeting, and Georgina had tried to catch her eye on several occasions.

"Pssst!" she hissed as the slim, blonde-haired Ravenclaw stepped through the doorway with her head facing downward.

Penelope glanced sideways at the Slytherin Prefect, taking in Georgina's voluptuous figure and her relaxed, almost provocative poise. Envious of Georgina's assured, sensual air, Penelope reluctantly followed her to an adjacent corridor, wishing she had inherited her Muggle mother's hourglass shape, instead of her Muggle father's whippet-like frame.

The pair ensconced themselves in an alcove and waited for the line of Prefects to disappear from earshot. In the silence, Georgina admired a new silver bracelet gracing Penelope's right wrist. The jewellery was ornamented with three plain quartz beads, roughly the same size as holly berries, threaded onto a simple silver wristlet. Georgina deemed the piece quite elegant, although evidently inexpensive.

"Do you like it?" Penelope asked, noticing Georgina's interest in her bracelet.

"Yeah, it's quite nice," Georgina replied.

Penelope removed the wristlet and presented the piece to the Slytherin. "You can keep it."

Georgina's eyebrows rose at the offering, confused by Penelope's obvious indifference towards the jewellery. "No, it's alright, thanks."

Penelope sighed and re-hooked the clasp around her wrist. "It was from Percy," she explained, "which would have been nice, if he'd actually given it to me on my birthday. Instead, he stood me up. An owl arrived with the bracelet and a note saying the Department of International Magical Cooperation had been inundated with Howlers, and Percy had to spend the rest of the weekend clearing up the Triwizard mess for Mr Crouch."

"I really don't know what you see in him, Penny." Georgina's words were out before she'd even finished forming the thought. She inwardly cursed her free-speaking habit.

Penelope squeezed the bracelet and stared along the deserted corridor. "We've been together for a long time. And he's a brilliant wizard. I just wish I'd been made Head Girl this year. Maybe then I wouldn't feel so... inadequate."

As usual, Georgina couldn't hide her distaste. "You shouldn't try to be someone you're not, just to impress your boyfriend."

"That's easy for you to say," Penelope retorted, holding back further comment on her Slytherin companion's solitary nature. This Ravenclaw was not the sort of person who would intentionally wound, no matter what the provocation.

"I've been thinking about our bet," Georgina ventured, changing the subject abruptly, "and I've had a few ideas."

Penelope frowned at her pureblood companion.

"I think that portrait in the Boathouse was onto something the other night," the Slytherin continued. "At lunchtime, I want to meet you back down there with Alicia and Luca."

Penelope considered the request. "If it's important, I can wander over to the Gryffindor table and ask Alicia."

"Great. I've owed Luca; he'll be there." Georgina stood up, preparing to leave for breakfast in the Great Hall.

"What are you planning?" Penelope asked.

"Wait and see."

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"Are you actually serious?" Alicia asked disbelievingly, pulling her cloak around her shivering body to emphasise her chagrin at being dragged back down to the underground harbour.

"Yeah. Why not? The four of us have nothing spoiling for the rest of the year. We can have our own fun whilst Diggory and Potter get interviewed for the *Daily Prophet* and hobnob with Victor Krum," Georgina reasoned, unsure why her companions were so reticent about her idea.

"I could use some excitement," Penelope joined in, rubbing her hands together to keep them warm. "Doesn't look like Percy's going to be around much, and while the cat's away..."

"The mouse flirts with danger and makes a pass at Professor Snape?" Luca finished sardonically.

Penelope narrowed her eyes and assessed the cute Italian boy. She had previously marvelled that the Hufflepuff had maintained his long friendship with Georgina, but now she saw that his quick-witted manner easily matched the Slytherin's biting, outspoken temperament.

"No-one's going to make a move on the professor," Georgina cut in. "We're going to compete for his affections: try to impress him and curry his favour."

"I like the sound of having our own tournament," Alicia said, a bubble of excitement rising in her chest.

"Me too." Penelope smiled despite herself.

"What would be the point?" asked Luca, lagging several steps behind the girls.

"The point?" Georgina rejoined. "Have you not had a crush on Snape since I don't know your first day at Hogwarts?"

"Yes," Luca replied impatiently.

"Well, this is your chance to get him!" Georgina said, rolling her eyes for effect.

"We can organise our own tournament, Luca," Alicia clarified, "for the sole purpose of attracting Snape's attention. Think about it. You're in Hufflepuff, I'm in Gryffindor, and we've got Prefects from Ravenclaw and Slytherin. We could have our own inter-house competition!"

"You girls are crazy!"

"If you're not going to be in it, then that's better odds for me to win," Georgina remarked.

Luca assessed his friend cautiously. "You're really serious?"

"Yes, I am. Why the hell not? I've got nothing to lose."

For a handful of heartbeats, Luca considered his position.

Penelope stood with her hands resting on her hips, awaiting his decision.

"We haven't got a trophy like the Triwizard Cup. So what's the prize?" Luca asked eventually.

Alicia smirked. "Snape, you dimwit!"

At that, the contestants of the Four-House Tournament laughed together for the first time since their rejection by the Goblet of Fire.

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They met again in the Boathouse the same evening, having spent time thinking about how they might organise their competition. Georgina had already ruminated over the possibilities at the weekend, and she offered them to the group. "I thought we could have three tasks, just like the Triwizard Tournament, but the deadline for our challenges could be the day before the actual Triwizard task. That way we can enjoy supporting Hogwarts in the real tournament."

"I like that idea," said Penelope.

"And we could adopt the rules of the tournament too. We stand alone in our competition with no outside help from anyone," Georgina continued.

The foursome considered this proposal. Alicia immediately saw a problem.

"We should also agree not to sabotage each other's efforts," she said, eyeing the Slytherin deliberately.

"What kind of sabotage did you have in mind, Alicia?" Georgina asked pointedly.

"You know, getting each other into trouble, or trying to get someone expelled."

"Or injuring each other," Penelope piped in unexpectedly.

"Or making someone disappear," Luca said, as if he'd been mulling over that very scenario all summer long.

"Wow," Georgina said in astonishment. "Who'd've thought so much pent-up cunning lurked behind your polished veneers?"

"When in league with a Slytherin, think like a Slytherin," Luca replied slyly.

His remark caused a ripple of laughter.

Georgina reluctantly agreed.

"I'd like to suggest two more rules," Alicia continued awkwardly.

Luca groaned, but Alicia remained resolute. "First of all, no Felix Felicis."

Penelope's eyes widened. "Makes sense."

Georgina reluctantly agreed. "And second?"

"We keep this a secret," Alicia said seriously. "We can't tell anyone about our tournament, or let anyone find out we fancy the Potions master."

"Snape would have our guts for garters if he discovered what we were up to," Georgina realised out loud.

"Yes, he would. And he'd never let us forget it," Luca chimed.

"And if Gryffindor House find out I've got a crush on the Head of Slytherin, I'll never live it down," Alicia pointed out.

"I always thought it was strange for a Gryffindor to have the hots for Snape," commented Luca. "When Penelope told Georgina about your little infatuation, I thought she was off her rocker."

"Yes, well, when Penny told me about you two, I couldn't believe there were three other people who were sweet on the professor. I mean, he's not exactly Prince Charming or conventionally handsome."

"But the man certainly has a way about him," Luca mused. "So mysterious, so assured, so very, very sexy."

"His sex appeal isn't in question, Luca, but none of us can breathe a word about the object of our affections."

"It's okay, Alicia," Penelope reassured. "We were all sworn to secrecy when we entered ourselves for the Triwizard Tournament. The same applies to this new Tournament."

Alicia seemed appeased.

"So, what are we going to do for our three tasks?" Luca asked.

"We've not got very long for the first one; it takes place in three weeks' time," Georgina commented. "So how about we each try to win praise from Professor Snape during our Potions lesson?"

"That's an easy one for a Slytherin to win," Alicia remarked.

"Possibly," Georgina replied, "but we could think of two more tasks which might be harder for a Slytherin to achieve."

"Yes, like it would be harder for Georgina to get a detention," Penelope commented.

"Fair enough," Alicia agreed.

"That's two tasks then," Luca said. "Win praise and get detention. We should think of something a bit trickier as well, something we'll have to work hard for."

"I'll leave that to you, Luca," Georgina smirked.

"How are we going to measure success and decide who wins each task?" asked Alicia. "I'm in Potions with Luca, and Penny and Georgina are together in their Potions class, but it's going to be difficult to provide witnesses. We can't rely on vouching for each other."

After pondering the conundrum for a while, Luca remembered a family member who might offer the solution. "I've got a cousin who runs a wizarding bookmaker's... I'm sure they use charmed objects to monitor the outcome of bets. I reckon I could get him to charm something for us."

Alicia felt a smile creep across her face. "That would be great. We could each carry something around which records our scores. What could we use?"

Penelope fiddled with her bracelet, running her fingertips over the three quartz beads. "That's it!" she realised. "We could each wear one of these. They're pretty cheap. Percy bought this from *Garnett and Trump* in Diagon Alley."

"I bet they'd deliver three more bracelets directly to Hogwarts by owl," Luca considered. "Then I could get the gemstones bewitched to change colour or something. I reckon we'll be ready for lift off by next week."

"You'd wear one of these?" Penelope asked.

"Yeah, it looks unisex, and it's not like anyone would be surprised to see me wearing jewellery."

"Then, we have a deal," Georgina said, grinning. "Starting next Monday, we'll have two weeks to win praise from our Potions master."

The four contestants shared a smile, and then wrote their names down on an enchanted piece of parchment, binding them to the Four-House Tournament and agreeing to its terms.

And so the games began.

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#### Authors' Note:

Please see our author page for full details of the round-robin writing team.

This chapter was written by [Agnus Castus](#), with a poem by [bluerain1984](#) and a sprinkling of fairy dust from [star\\_girl](#). Thanks to Neko Mata for the slips of parchment and hexgirl for her helpful feedback.

The Snapettes would be delighted to receive your review!

## The First Task - Part One

### Chapter 2 of 9

Four unsuccessful Triwizard entrants arrange their own tournament. The prize: Snape.

The dungeon was filled with idle chatter as students shuffled along to their class. One student in particular stood apart from the crowd in her own way Georgina Smyth. The amply curvaceous brunette sauntered through the corridors, her full hips swinging hypnotically, to the delight of the hormonal young men and the vexation of the young women in her midst.

*Boom. Chicka-boom. Chicka-boom-boom.*

One wily student undoubtedly a Ravenclaw had cast a musical charm whose sultry beat kept perfect time to Georgina's gait. After a few moments she idly swished her wand, ending the spell, and she smiled inwardly at the audible groans of disappointment elicited by this simple action. As she continued on, she noticed Cedric Diggory passing by at a somewhat faster pace; he slightly turned his head and grinned at her. *That was interesting*, she mused. *Now, if only she could turn the Potions master's head.*

"Ugh, double Potions on a Friday morning," someone lamented. "This day will never end."

Georgina had a natural affinity for Potions, making it her favourite class. Double Potions also meant double time with her favourite dark-eyed professor. Taking her usual seat beside Penelope, she reached into her bag to pull out her textbook, only to discover it was missing. There wasn't enough time to return to her room retrieve the book, and a feeling of dread washed over her.

"Bloody hell, I forgot my book," she grouched.

"You really ought to be more organised," Penelope replied off-handedly.

"It's said that hindsight is twenty-twenty," Georgina mumbled.

She was a Slytherin, damn it, and she would make the best of the situation. Taking a deep breath, she pasted a mask of indifference onto her face as Professor Snape walked through the door.

"Your latest essays were abysmal with a few notable exceptions," Snape said, returning the red-marked parchments. "I expect much more from my NEWT-level students. To that end, you shall be brewing the Elixir of Enlightenment. Perhaps then you may be able to better utilise that mass of lumpy gray matter between your ears and perform to your full potential." As he finished handing out the parchments, he continued, "Mr Crenshaw, please explain the theory behind this potion."

"Um, it enlightens... sir?"

The boy's tentative tone and insipid answer caused Snape to halt in his tracks and close his eyes in exasperation.

"Your ability to state the obvious is astounding," said Snape, a sharp edge of irritation evident in his voice. "However, your answer is decidedly lacking." He turned to face the class. "The stimulant alkaloids present in the Elixir of Enlightenment dispel fatigue, thus allowing clarity of mind and introspection. The leaves of the Maidenhair tree contain a property which enhances memory. It bears mentioning that caution should be exercised whilst brewing this particular potion. Any missteps could result in rather unfortunate side effects. You would do well to keep that in mind when it comes to testing your endeavour at the end of class."

He paused for a moment to look about the room. "The instructions for this potion are located on page two-hundred-and-ninety-four. No working in pairs; I want to see your individual efforts. Begin."

As the quiet rustling of turning pages filled the room, Georgina approached the front desk. "Sir, I seem to have forgotten my book," she said. "Do you have a spare I may borrow?"

A pause fell. Georgina waited. Snape had never lent out one of his books, not even to one of his own den of snakes; most Slytherins weren't foolhardy enough to make such a request. He drummed his fingers upon his desk as he appraised the young woman in front of him. She was aloof, unconventionally alluring, had a small, albeit tight circle of friends, and well, there was no other way to put it was quite cunning when she put her mind to something. In short, Georgina Smyth was a consummate Slytherin. Aside from that, she had a knack for Potions and had yet to melt a cauldron. He nodded his head and curtly pointed to the small bookshelf behind him. Georgina released a small sigh of relief.

She dragged her fingers across the book spines until she came across a battered copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. She removed it from the shelf, returned to her seat and flipped to the appropriate page to skim over the potion's directions. She was surprised to find that the entire book was thoroughly marked with notes, annotations and what appeared to be experimental variations to many of the potions, including the one she would be brewing shortly. There was something vaguely familiar about the spiky scrawl which she couldn't quite wrap her mind around.

After she had selected her ingredients, taking care to choose a slender piece of Ashwagandha root and a healthy, bright green sprig of rosemary, she took a closer look at the hand-written adaptations to the formulae. The alterations seemed minor enough, and she wondered if it would result in a superior final product. Yes, she just might have the advantage needed to gain Professor Snape's hard-won praise and succeed in accomplishing the assigned first task of the tournament. She glanced slyly at Penelope, and her lips curled in a slight grin as she lit a moderate flame beneath her cauldron.

The dull sound of knives thudding against wooden cutting boards and faint whispers were the only noises to be heard. Penelope frowned as she watched Georgina slice the fresh khat leaves into a chiffonade.

"The khat should be minced," the Ravenclaw said softly.

"Believe it or not, I know precisely what I'm doing, Penny."

Penelope caught a glimpse of her friend's book page, thoroughly covered in writing, and noticed that changes had been made to the instructions.

"You're making alterations to your potion based on some stranger's notes?" she whispered, clearly mortified. "Have you gone mad?"

"Let's just say I'm making minor adjustments, and I assure you I'm of sound mind." Georgina tossed the leaves into her cauldron with a flourish and watched the potion shimmer to a clear lavender hue.

It was obvious that her table-mate had a clear advantage. Penelope narrowed her eyes and craned her neck to better view the handwritten script. "Let me see that book."

"No."

"That's not fair!" she hissed.

"This is a competition," Georgina smugly replied, jingling the charmed bracelet on her wrist. "All is fair in unfettered infatuation and war."

Penelope opened her mouth to reply, but quickly shut it again as she noticed Snape making his customary rounds to observe their work. Clearly, she would need to find another way to gain the professor's praise. Penelope faintly smiled as an idea quickly formed in her mind.

"Mr Blair," Snape hissed as the boy's cauldron started spewing orange bubbles. "How many times do you have to be told that anticlockwise is the ~~other~~ direction? The devil is in the details. Five points from Gryffindor."

Once more, he moved on to the next table to continue his critiques. When he approached their table, he quietly studied Georgina's potion. Snape cocked his head as he recognized the variation as a concoction of his own devising. She had obviously picked up his old Potions book from his student days and used his improvements to her advantage. He found her Slytherin guile inwardly amusing. Picking up her ladle, he dipped it in the cauldron and made a show of closely scrutinizing her potion.

"The clarity and hue of your potion is exceptional, Miss Smyth," he said wryly as he looked her in the eye. "Five points to Slytherin."

Georgina tried to keep her gaze even; however, Snape was able to discern brightness in her eyes, revealing her duplicity. He gave her a slight nod before moving his attention to Penelope.

The seventh-year Slytherin quickly glanced at her wrist and noticed the first bead of her bracelet had changed colour in achievement of accomplishing the first task of the Four-House Tournament. Georgina smiled at her success.



Outside the Potions classroom door, Penelope had been lost deep in her musings, waiting to get inside to begin her attempts to earn her teacher's praise. Thoughts of what she could do to prompt Snape into giving her potion more than just a silent, emotionless glance, which in itself was a form of praise, were interrupted by her angry, recurrent thoughts about Percy. The stupid prat had not only stood her up on her birthday, but he hadn't even chosen the bracelet himself; Penelope didn't have the nerve to tell anyone that particular aspect of the debacle. Clearly, Percy hadn't opened the box for more than a second to see what was inside; he had missed the note from the saleswoman at *Garnett and Trump*, which had been placed inside the lid.

Percy,

*Based on the five Galleons you sent us and a description of what your friend might like, I find this bracelet suitable enough. The bracelet is only three Galleons, so I am returning two Galleons. I do hope you will stop by again sometime. I enjoyed our chat, and I'm eager to learn more about the Department of International Magical Cooperation.*

Audrey

Penelope's first thought had been to chuck the bracelet and keep the money. She was incredibly angry that he hadn't bothered to choose the bracelet himself. However, being the good Ravenclaw that she was, Penelope decided to sit down and think about the situation logically before doing anything rash, and in the end she felt a little guilty for being annoyed with Percy, since he was extremely busy with the Triwizard Tournament. Nevertheless, Penelope was determined to discuss the situation with him when he next came to Hogwarts, and she had not sent him a thank-you note.

*Let him suffer a little*, she had thought with a smirk.

Penelope was brought back to reality when Snape threw open the classroom door with a bang, allowing the seventh-year NEWT students to enter.

As Penelope walked past Snape, she drew in his scent of herbs and spices and shuddered slightly at the intoxicating effect it had on her. She intended to recall the aroma later that evening, in the privacy of her curtained bed. While a couple of students groaned quietly about today's double period timetabled for Potions, Penelope inwardly relished the extra time. It allowed her to not only gaze at her sexy teacher, but to study his attitudes and methods. She admired how his strong hands and his long, thin fingers had tenderly chopped roots into fine pieces or roughly torn apart a nut shell without magic. Images of his dextrous fingers alone had already been enough to send Penelope into alarmingly good orgasms during the first few weeks of the school term. She sometimes felt guilty that it was not her boyfriend who fuelled her desires, but her self-reproach had lessened somewhat since her birthday.

Taking her seat, she began pulling out her book, quill, parchment and scales from her brown shoulder bag. Within moments, Georgina sat down next to her and began removing the same items from her own bag, moaning about having forgotten her own textbook. Penelope, who was still preoccupied with thoughts of Snape's beautiful hands exploring her body, commented distractedly that Georgina needed to be more organised.

Penelope forced herself to pay attention whilst at the same time taking enjoyment from Snape's deep voice as he began talking about the properties of the Elixir of Enlightenment. Within minutes, however, she was compelled to focus on the practical job at hand, gathering the necessary supplies to brew her potion to a degree sufficient to earn his praise.

Or so she hoped.

While Georgina strutted off to ask Snape if she could borrow a copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, Penelope set to work, bringing the water in her cauldron to a boil. She intended to follow the directions precisely, triple checking them if she must, in order to brew the best potion in the class. A quick perusal of the text showed the elixir was just as complicated as Snape had described.

She had just started mincing her khat leaves when she noticed that Georgina was chopping her own khat leaves incorrectly. Penelope's eyes wandered over to the book which Georgina had borrowed and saw that the pages were covered in writings; someone had crossed out portions of the formulae and amended the instructions. Penelope shook her head; Georgina had obviously lost the plot. While she was likely to get praise regardless of what she did, just by being Slytherin, Penelope still thought Georgina was taking a huge risk.

However, when Georgina added her khat leaves, her potion changed to the precise hue of lavender that the text described. Penelope immediately wanted a part of the action. *Never doubt a Slytherin*, Penelope told herself as she began to beg Georgina to allow her access to the book, only to be swiftly rebuffed.

Penelope realised she needed to think on her feet; if she couldn't use these new and better instructions, she would have to think critically about the ingredients' properties and how to improve efficacy. She decided refine her strategy by observing what other students were doing wrong. At the next table, a girl was stirring her potion in the anticlockwise direction, as instructed, and the liquid was the correct hue of lavender. When the girl stopped to check her Potions book, she recommenced stirring in the wrong direction. After one stir, the lavender became even brighter, but after another stir the potion turned black.

Penelope recalled that anticlockwise stirs were best for herbs originating near the equator or further south, especially when the potion was brewed in the southern hemisphere. She hypothesised that the gravitational pull of the northern hemisphere might be a hindrance, so perhaps an occasional clockwise stir would improve the potion. Holding her breath, Penelope added one clockwise stir, and to her delight, the lavender hue brightened.

Gaining in confidence, Penelope continued to make minor changes to the instructions, deciding to grind the Ashwagandha root into a powder instead of chopping the tuber into slivers. She hoped this would speed up brewing time and form a better suspension.

When Snape approached their workbench, Penelope held her breath, grinding her root with extra force as she heard the Potions master complimenting Georgina's work.

*Bloody cheat*, Penelope thought savagely.

She failed to notice Snape moving to admire her own work with a smirk. She added the Ashwagandha root and began stirring twenty times, the potion turning more blue than purple, as the instructions stated. Once again, she added a clockwise stir after her twentieth anticlockwise, causing her potion to become the exact shade of deep blue described.

"Miss Clearwater," Snape began, an expression of mild surprise on his face, "why would you deviate from the instructions so greatly when I plainly informed the class of the difficulty of brewing this potion and the potential for irreversible error if the instructions were not followed precisely?"

Penelope started at his voice and looked up into Snape's black eyes, which seemed to bore into her. It was almost as if he were attempting to read her mind.

"Well, sir, the Ashwagandha root infuses into the potion better if it's not in big pieces, but added as a powder instead. The brewing time should be cut in half for that particular ingredient," she said, her heart pounding in her ears.

"And the additional clockwise stir?"

"After working against the northern hemisphere's gravity, it's better to go with the pull and add one clockwise stir to help combine these ingredients. However, more than one stir has a negative effect on the potion."

Snape watched her for a moment, his expression indecipherable. Finally, he nodded and walked off, resuming his scolding of those who had failed. Penelope let out a sigh of relief before moving onto the final two ingredients: rosemary and Maidenhair leaves. She peeked at Georgina, who was happily following the directions from the textbook, her right sleeve rolled up just enough to show Penelope that her bead for the first task had turned green. Penelope quickly checked her own bracelet, whose beads were still white. The last bit of motivation she needed kicked in as she set to chopping the rosemary and Maidenhair, determined to beat Georgina.

Twenty minutes later, Snape was making his rounds of the class to examine everyone's final products. One boy had already been sent to the hospital wing after his potion blew up and covered him, causing angry boils to arise all over his body. Three people had large vats of orange paste, and one girl had a black substance resembling tar. Georgina, Penelope and two other students were the only ones with Elixir of Enlightenment close to the shade of blue described by the textbook. After giving the two successful Gryffindors a quick glance and a sarcastic comment expressing amazement that they had made the potion correctly, Snape moved on to Georgina, who was smirking with delight at her excellent brewing.

"Well done, Miss Smyth. Ten points to Slytherin for an exceptionally well-brewed Elixir of Enlightenment and for taking the initiative to be creative," Snape said, making sure his comment was pronounced loud enough for the classroom to hear.

The two Gryffindors rolled their eyes and made gagging sounds. Slytherin had now gained a total of fifteen points from Georgina's potion, and Snape's second offering of praise had been even more voluble.

Penelope's knees were shaking as Snape moved on to her own elixir, whose blue was slightly brighter than Georgina's. Penelope wasn't sure if this would be good or bad news. Snape scooped up part of the liquid, sniffed it gently, and then slowly poured it back into the cauldron.

"What did you do with the rosemary, Miss Clearwater? The scent is much stronger than normal," Snape asked, crossing his arms over his chest and looking down at her with mild interest.

Penelope looked down at her potion instead of her professor, afraid of what he might see in her expression.

"I chopped the rosemary, sir, rather than putting it in whole. It dissolved better, and then there was no need to strain it out. I did the same for the Maidenhair leaves, sir."

Penelope lifted her gaze to meet Snape's own, and he assessed her for what seemed like an eternity.

"I must admit," Snape began, getting closer to Penelope's desk and speaking softer than he had when praising Georgina's brew. "This is the best Elixir of Enlightenment I've seen in my thirteen years of teaching. Twenty points to Ravenclaw, and you will be excused from the essay I am about to assign, as you clearly understand the properties of this potion."

Penelope thought she might faint on the spot. She couldn't believe it. Snape had praised her *more* than Georgina. Trying not to look too thrilled, Penelope thanked the professor and smiled over at Georgina, who was noticeably miffed.



"Professor? Do I need to write the essay? I mean, I did adjust my potion as well." Georgina attempted a sly smile and tossed her hair behind her shoulders.

Snape walked over to Georgina and spoke in a voice that was barely audible to Penelope.

"You will write an essay to explain why the directions you followed were superior to the original instructions from the textbook's author."

Georgina's smile faded immediately, and she grew slightly pink in the cheeks.

Snape picked up their phials of freshly-brewed elixir and the textbook which Georgina had borrowed, and then walked to the front of the class, placing the four correctly-prepared potion samples on his desk, ready for testing. He then addressed the students, instructing them to write two rolls of parchment on the properties of the Elixir of Enlightenment, to be handed in at the next class.

While everyone groaned and began packing away their supplies, Penelope peeked at her bracelet. The first bead was a bright shade of blue and seemed to sparkle. Penelope noticed Georgina looking at her own bracelet. The first bead was still green, though the colour had lost some of its intensity.

"Well done, Georgina. That was a serious competition, though I do feel you cheated," Penelope whispered.

Georgina snorted under her breath, but said nothing as she wrote down the assignment from Snape. The Slytherin might have assumed she'd be the winner of the first task, but Penelope realised her own victory was not guaranteed; Luca and Alicia still had the opportunity to earn even more lavish praise from Snape.

Secretly, Penelope felt they didn't stand a chance.



"Wait a minute. Let me get this straight," Luca said. "You forgot your Potions book, and by the grace of Merlin, managed to borrow a spare from Professor Schadenfreude?"

Georgina glared at her friend and reluctantly nodded her head.

"And this book contained experimental alterations which you chose to blindly incorporate in your potion... successfully?"

"Yes," she bit out.

"So, what's the bloody problem?"

"The bloody problem is that the potion in question was the bloody Elixir of Enlightenment," she replied testily. "The variation of which was brewed so successfully as to be deemed '*exceptional*' by our dear professor. He awarded Slytherin House fifteen points."

"And this is a problem because...?"

"It is a problem because I was one of three students selected to demonstrate the damned thing," she huffed.

Luca merely arched his brow at her outburst and silently waited for her to continue.

"Cedric managed to brew a standard sample, and his demonstration was used as a baseline for Benny's and mine. Cedric's reaction was splendid, and he became thoroughly enlightened on a transfiguration issue which he'd been struggling to understand," she explained. "Let's just say, when it came time for me to test my sample, it worked *exceptionally* well. So well, in fact, that it only took a matter of seconds for the potion to take effect."

"And?"

"When I'd first opened the borrowed book, it was covered front to back with scribbled notes, ideas and experimentations." She sighed. "There was something about the writing that seemed familiar, but I was unable to put my finger on it. However, the second that the potion cleared my mind, it hit me. The handwriting was familiar because I had been staring at it on a regular basis on a blackboard for over six years. It was Snape's student book!"

"You're joking!"

"Oh, how I wish that were the case." She could scarcely raise her head. "Not only was it Snape's book, it was *this* variation of the potion I brewed, and he bloody well knew it."

At this revelation, Luca doubled over in glee. When he finally stopped laughing and caught his breath, he asked, "Does he know you know?"

"He's the Potions master," she cried. "Of course, he knows. I could see it in his eyes when he asked me if there was anything in particular I was enlightened upon, and I blushed like a schoolgirl."

"You *are* a schoolgirl!" Again, Luca laughed, this time to the point of tears.

"Oh, shut up, you ponce," she said while smacking his shoulder. "It gets worse."

"There's more?"

"Benny's potion was too strong. So strong, in fact, that when he downed his sample he immediately started blathering like an idiot."

"Oh, pray tell! All the juicy details!"

"Benny turned towards me and dropped on bended knee," she stated matter-of-factly while examining her fingernails. "Then he loudly proclaimed that I was his 'bovine beauty' and an 'ox-eyed princess'."

Luca stared at her incredulously. "He called you a pretty cow?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes," she replied. "He then went on to declare that odes should be composed in honour of my *creamy, ginormous breasts*' and attempted to compose a limerick, on the spot, glorifying that particular part of my anatomy. It seems his talent for metric prose doesn't quite stretch that far. He couldn't find a word that rhymed with '*milk*'. Needless to say, the class were in uproar over his lack of eloquence, and the good professor only managed to silence the room after docking nearly a hundred points across the board and assigning poor Benny a month's detention with Filch."

"Bloody hell," Luca stammered. "Are you alright?"

"Yes and no. If I hear one more person '*moo*' in my general direction, there will be hell to pay. On the bright side, I was able to salvage one positive thing from the entire fiasco." She lifted her wrist and jingled her bracelet with its newly coloured, charmed bead. "I won Snape's praise."



Luca awoke from a rather vivid dream, prominently featuring his ex-boyfriend, Oliver Wood, resplendent in all his Puddlemere United glory *Bastard*. Tuesday morning had rolled around, and the rain was cruel, relentless and unwelcome. The poor weather only served to further add to Luca's grey mood. He tried his best to push Ollie out of his mind, but some things were easier said than done. Ollie still sent the occasional letter; however, they hadn't crossed paths in person since their breakup over the summer holidays.

"I'll just have to learn to find some other way to entertain myself... Some other man to amuse me," Luca muttered under his breath.

He didn't have to be at breakfast for another hour, so he closed his eyes determined to chase away the bittersweet dreams with his one of his more recent fantasies...

*He was standing in the middle of what he imagined to be his obsession's private potions laboratory. The room was dimly lit, except for the empty worktable directly before him. A silky voice from behind him drawled, "Mr Caruso, it seems to me that your technique for preparing potions ingredients lacks finesse. What do you have to say for yourself?"*

*"I humbly beg your pardon, sir," Luca replied. "I would do anything to improve my technique, if only to please you."*

*"Anything?" He subtly asked with a hint of insinuation. "Well, in that case, remedial lessons are in order."*

*A moment later, the table in front of him was laden with all manner of raw plant material. Luca could feel the heat of the Potions professor's chest pressed against his back and watched in anticipation as an elegant, pale hand reached around him to pull forward a peculiar-looking root. "Do you know what this is?" Professor Snape asked quietly. Luca stood silent as the rich voice washed over his senses in a heated wave. The professor leaned in closer and whispered against his ear, "This is ginseng, also known as man root. It has several medicinal properties, chief among them, those as an aphrodisiac." He took Luca's hand in his own and stroked it slowly along the length of the tuber. "Tactile sensation is also important when determining the proper preparation of this ingredient. Notice the somewhat smooth texture of this root. The moisture content has kept it hard, yet supple. If it was overly dried, it would feel coarse and callous to the touch."*

*"Touch seems very important, sir."*

*"Touch is extremely important," Snape replied hoarsely, his lips grazing Luca's neck. A strong set of arms embraced him as...*

"Mr Caruso!"

Luca snapped from his reverie and mentally groaned, realising his cauldron was on the cusp of boiling over. He knew better than to daydream in class, especially Potions. Lowering the flame, he steeled himself for the professor's wrath.

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Attention is pivotal during the brewing process." Snape looked at him levelly and continued, "Such carelessness is the primary cause of fatal brewing accidents. Ten points from Hufflepuff for your lack of concentration."

Luca sighed and wondered how he was going to manage to win the professor's praise if he couldn't even manage the simple task of remaining focused on his work. It appeared his obsession with Snape was driving him to distraction in more ways than one. He really needed to get laid and soon. That was all there was to it.

As the class wore on, he turned his attention back to his potion and feebly attempted to salvage his work. Luca added the ground willow bark and continued to stir until the potion turned a sickly shade of green. It quickly became apparent that his work was ruined, further lessening his chances of completing his first task. Disappointed, he set aside his stirring rod and turned toward the next workstation to check on Alicia's progress, only to notice that her table-mate's cauldron was bubbling dangerously; Jared Simpleton seemed oblivious that his potion was on the verge of exploding.

"Get down!" Luca yelled. Without a second thought, he ran towards their table, tackling both students to the ground and shielding them with his body. A moment later, the cauldron exploded with a dull boom that slightly shook the room, sending the students screaming and scurrying for cover.

In an amazing display of damage control, the Potions master had successfully cast a containment shield around the workstation mere seconds before disaster had struck. "Enough!" Professor Snape raised his voice to cut through the din of panicked students. "Return to your seats and resume your work."

The students gathered themselves from their places of shelter and proceeded to talk in hushed tones while they returned to attend their cauldrons. On the stone floor, Luca extended his hand toward Alicia and helped her up. "I hope I didn't bruise you up too terribly," he said with concern. "Are you alright?"

Alicia ran her hands down the side of her arms in a slight daze. "Yes, I think so. Thank you, Luca."

"Hey, mate," Jared groused while dusting off his robes. "There was no need to knock us about like that."

"On the contrary, Mr Simpleton, you should be thanking your classmate." Professor Snape had silently approached the table the sharp edge in his voice belied its quiet delivery. He shrewdly assessed the remnants of the young man's cauldron which was caked with a brittle, yellow substance. The table, which was littered with shards of twisted metal, attested to the strength of the blast. "If I had not been able to properly contain this explosion, you and Miss Spinnet might very well be dead if not for Mr Caruso's heroic, albeit foolish, effort."

Luca felt a small surge of satisfaction at the professor's backhanded compliment.

Jared trembled beneath the professor's glare as the severity of the situation began to dawn on him. With a deft flick of his wand, Snape caused the caustic mess to vanish from the workstation. "Thirty points from Gryffindor for nearly blowing your fellow classmates to smithereens, four feet of parchment detailing the properties of each ingredient in this potion along with any adverse reactions that may result from the use of improper ratios, and one week's detention."

The young man faltered at this pronouncement. The professor then turned his attention toward Luca.

"I'm surprised the Sorting Hat didn't place you in Gryffindor, Mr Caruso." Snape drawled softly. "That was the most absurd display of gallantry I've witnessed in a long while. Ten points to Hufflepuff for remaining level-headed under a volatile situation, and twenty points for placing the wellbeing of others above your own. You have proven to be a true testament to your House."

"Thank you, sir." Luca flushed at the unexpected praise. Professor Snape slightly nodded his head in acknowledgement and returned to his front desk.

"Dear Merlin," Alicia whispered, touching his wrist. "You've done it, Luc!"

Both students watched breathlessly, Luca's eyes blinking in disbelief, as the quartz bead on his bracelet turned a vibrant shade of amber.



**Authors' Note:**

## The First Task - Part Two

### Chapter 3 of 9

Four unsuccessful Triwizard entrants arrange their own tournament. The prize: Snape.

Alicia was desperate. And frustrated. And angry. Time was running out: Monday was the deadline to achieve the first task. Or not. The four champions had agreed to meet at the Boathouse after the evening meal and toll up who had succeeded in gaining Snape's praise. Or not.

The Gryffindor Chaser left the common room wearing her Quidditch practise robes, her face scrunched up and her lower lip bitten almost to the point of bleeding. She knew that when the deadline expired, the Protean Charm would automatically activate, and the winner of the task would be revealed when their bead turned black. Alicia's bead remained as white as ever.

She had tried. Truly, she had. She had been so close to brewing a perfect, praiseworthy potion, but the carelessness and ineptitude of the idiotic Jared had caused that horrible cauldron explosion. Alicia felt sure that Snape had tarred her with the same brush, as she had been beside Jared, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Thankfully, Snape's and Luca's instinctive actions had saved both her and simple-minded Simpleton.

Alicia sighed as she navigated the ever-moving stairways down to the Entrance Hall. She couldn't begrudge Luca's success; besides many things, Luca was becoming a friend. Because of this wonderful, clandestine tournament, Alicia was able to experience great release and joy in sharing her long-held infatuation for Professor Snape.

There was no one in Gryffindor she could share her secret with; if anyone in her House ever found out about her obsession, she would definitely be labelled mental she could just imagine the unceasing badgering from Fred and George Weasley, and what would Angelina Johnson think?

There was great freedom in her evolving friendship with Luca. He was Hufflepuff, gay, and therefore utterly *safe*. Alicia felt she would be able to confide in him and share some of her most intimate disappointments and insecurities regarding Snape, and she hoped Luca might mutually confide in her as well. She had already confessed the details of the anonymous Valentine she'd sent to her Potions master two years ago, and her shocked disappointment when he tore it up right in front of her.

Alicia had always looked forward to Potions not so much for the subject matter, but to bask in Snape's presence. But now, able to share giggles and gossip with such a kindred spirit as Luca, Potions class was beginning to mean so much more.

Luca's bead had changed colour; she knew that, of course, but with all the excitement of intermingling Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students, Alicia hadn't yet caught up with the other two contestants. Georgina had been busy fraternising with the Durmstrang students; the Slytherins had completely consumed them, snubbing all attempts for the Durmstrang guests to interact with any of the other Houses, and Georgina, in particular, revelled in the fresh attention from the tall, dark and surly males, thoroughly enjoying herself. The Durmstrang visitors were all male, except for one token wallflower of a witch, and now they'd been given opportunity, they were quite skilled at flirting.

Penelope's free time had been spent chatting with the Beauxbatons boys and girls, who had chosen to sit at the Ravenclaw table for their meals. The Beauxbatons students always seemed to congregate around the Ravenclaws, apparently intent on showing off their magical skilfulness. Alicia had often seen Penelope surrounded by a flock of blue-clad Beauxbatons students, appearing flattered by their myriad questions and requests. There was no doubt in Alicia's mind that the attention had stroked Penelope's ego, and she had responded by voluntarily giving the foreign students tours and lectures on all things Hogwarts.

*Well, she needs all the boosts and distractions she can get anything other than thinking about Percy* decided Alicia, when seeing Penelope occupied with Beauxbatons students. *Good for her!*

Alicia headed out of the castle, tucking her broomstick under her arm and putting on her Quidditch gloves. Professor McGonagall had reserved a slot on the Quidditch pitch for each Gryffindor team member their own private hour for individual exercising. Today was Alicia's allocated time, and she was determined to focus on her technique for the Hawkhead Attacking Formation, a strategic defence position for Chasers, especially useful against Slytherins who were well known for their dirty tactics and fierce formations. Usually, Alicia loved Friday mornings; it was her private time to forget about everything except her vital role in Quidditch, which none could take away from her, and just be one with the sky and her broomstick.

But this morning, trekking down along the grounds, Alicia frowned, unable to stop brooding over how she might gain Snape's praise this afternoon was her last Potions class of the week her last chance for the first task. She meandered slowly across the grass, ruminating... *It all depends on which potion will be assigned in today's lesson...*

Alicia inhaled the sweet morning air and continued onward, speculating on the upcoming lesson. *First of all, I'll make sure I'm nowhere near that wally, Jared, so if his cauldron explodes again no, wait, better to be near him, I can intervene or be prepared to jump in and save him again, like Luca, or* she stopped, disgusted with herself. *What is wrong with me? I sound like a Slytherin wanting to turn someone's misfortune to my advantage. Arggh! I'm getting too stressed about this...*

She arrived at the Quidditch pitch. *Some physical relief is just what I need...*

Decisively putting aside the memory of the exploding cauldron which had prevented her from winning Snape's praise, she mounted her broomstick, determined to demonstrate Chaser manoeuvres of which any Holyhead Harpies player would be envious.

Taking a deep, calming breath, Alicia forgot all about the tournament, forgot about her Potions lesson, forgot about everything, until it was just her, the turf and the sky. She flew upward, soaring, forgetting all her worries. In that second, flying for pleasure was her greatest treasure...



"Severus!"

Snape halted in the Entrance Hall, wincing as he recognised the voice addressing him. Gritting his teeth, he braced himself for the inevitable and slowly turned to face the undesirable presence.

"Karkaroff?"

But Karkaroff was not alone. Severus's eyes darted to the figure beside Igor; it was his young protégé, Viktor Krum. Ever since the arrival of the Durmstrang Institute, Severus had avoided Karkaroff. Scowling, Severus waited, curious as to why Karkaroff was approaching him so assuredly in the broad morning light, in the midst of the Entrance Hall hubbub. *Of course, the perfect time to catch me*, he grimly noted. For it was just after breakfast; the students, having finished their morning meals, were hurrying and scurrying to and fro in the hallways.

In the hustle and bustle, the two estranged acquaintances gazed pensively at each other. Karkaroff was the first to break the silence.

"Of course, you know our Durmstrang champion," he bragged, his yellow teeth showing.

Again, Severus glanced quickly at Krum and back to Karkaroff.

"I know *of* him," pointed out Severus, unimpressed.

Krum shifted his weight to lean on his broomstick, enabling himself to slouch more as he frowned, confused at the uncomfortable tension between his Headmaster and the standoffish Hogwarts professor.

Karkaroff gave a forced smile. "Well then," he intoned unctuously, "besides being Durmstrang's Triwizard champion, you know he is also a world-class Quidditch player. Viktor is in dire need of a proper, rigorous physical workout; as such, we are in need of Hogwarts' Quidditch facilities."

"And what has this even remotely to do with me, Professor Karkaroff?"

"I understand that you are free at the moment; you can show us around the pitch. Viktor may get his workout, and you and I, old friend, can catch up on things old times, yes?"

Karkaroff's attempt to get him alone provoked Severus's belligerency. Now wasn't the time or place to talk about 'old times'. Moreover, he had nothing to say to Igor nothing that hadn't already been said many dark years ago.

Severus knew Karkaroff had named him as a Death Eater at the Wizengamot trials; Karkaroff had hoped to secure his own freedom, or at least escape incarceration with the gluttonous Dementors waiting to exact retribution.

Even though Severus understood *why* Igor had betrayed him, Karkaroff's spineless exploitation of the Dark Lord's inner circle still left a bitter taste in Severus's mouth. *How dare he?* Even now, the question resounded irrationally through the dark caverns of Severus's mind, haunting him with the question, *Would I have done the same?*

"No."

Karkaroff's face fell in disappointment. "It would be wise, my old friend, if we did catch up *on matters* as soon as possible," insisted Karkaroff.

"I don't know to whom you've enquired of my schedule; however, you have been misinformed. Unlike you, I am needed elsewhere. May I suggest that you inform Dumbledore of your needs, I'm sure..."

"He is precisely who I asked." Karkaroff's cold smile broadened. "And Albus has assured me that you *are* available and at leisure to assist me."

"You'll discover, as with many things, Dumbledore is mistaken."

Krum's thick black eyebrows clustered together, and his eyes darted between the Hogwarts professor and his Headmaster, realising that Quidditch practise was not the reason for their confrontation.

"Is he?" challenged Karkaroff. "Perhaps we should consult him together. We can talk on the way."

"Spinnet!"

Alicia stopped in her tracks, catching her breath. It was Professor Snape. She hesitated for a split second she was running late, having lost track of time in the physical abandonment of flying, and was hurrying to change her practise robes and attend McGonagall's Transfiguration class. Even though her Head of House had given Alicia special permission for Quidditch training, it wouldn't do if Alicia were late; McGonagall would not tolerate tardiness and made no exceptions.

*Maybe I can pretend I didn't hear...*

"Miss Spinnet, come here!"

She groaned to herself, suddenly more self-conscious than usual. *Oh, he's going to see me all hot and sweaty; he must think this is all I do in my free time... Well, it is all I do in my spare time...* There was nothing like a good workout on a broomstick to get Alicia's adrenaline going, and now her endorphins rushed straight to her erogenous zone. *Hmmn, maybe he'd like me all hot and sweaty...*

Dodging scurrying students, confused, but definitely intrigued, Alicia crossed over to the beckoning figure of her Potions master. *What could Professor Snape possibly want? Potions isn't until two o'clock!*

"Sir?" she said shakily.

The morning light lit Snape's lean, chiselled features, accentuating his distinguished frame. Curtains of long hair crowned his sculpted form, his black attire flowing breathtakingly down his tall body. *God, he's so 'crisp', so contained, so unconventionally alluring...* She looked up to meet his eyes, but was unable to hold his intense gaze. Alicia looked away, bashfully focusing on a crack on the stone floor.

Snape said nothing, but after a second of peering at her, he gave a superior smirk and stepped back, turning to speak to the two people behind him.

Alicia gasped as she recognised the looming, tall but thin Durmstrang Headmaster. However, even more impressive was Durmstrang's golden boy.

"Viktor Krum!" Alicia squeaked.

Snape frowned. *Typical*, he thought.

Ignoring her reaction, Severus informed Karkaroff, "As I told you, I'm unavailable. However, may I offer one of Hogwarts' finest Quidditch players to assist with your immediate needs? I present, Miss Alicia Spinnet."

Alicia froze in delirious shock. *I couldn't have heard him right...*

"A Quidditch player? But, she is a girl!" Viktor blurted.

Snape raised a curious eyebrow at the renowned Bulgarian. "Yes, Mr Krum, you are quite correct in your observation. She is indeed a girl."

Viktor blustered, "Girls do not play Quidditch!"

The outrageous remark caused the Gryffindor Chaser to see red. "What?" Alicia exclaimed, forgetting to whom she was speaking. "Since when do women not play Quidditch?" She bristled with anger; the international star had suddenly transformed in her eyes to an even lower worm than that nasty weasel, Draco Malfoy.

"Since always!" rebuked the famous, slouching Seeker.

"You're... That's, that's ridiculous!" sputtered Alicia.

"Girls haf nothing to do vith Quidditch," repeated Krum stubbornly.

Karkaroff appeared quite pleased with his protégé, spouting off his indoctrinated propaganda.

"Maybe in *your* part of the world," insinuated Alicia, unable to restrain herself. "But in England where Quidditch *originated* many rules and customs were invented by witches..."

"Vat? Everyone knows that Sweden's annual broom race, vich dates back to tenth century, is still the world's biggest celebration of the beginnings of Quidditch it vas not in England..."

"Gunhilda Kneen of Yorkshire?" Alicia interjected, her voice climbing higher and louder. "In the twelfth century, she was the first recorded Catcher, or what's known nowadays as a Chaser. And there's also Elfrida Clagg of the Wizard's Council; she made the Golden Snigget a protected species and outlawed its ritual killing in Quidditch, leading to the Golden Snitch being invented by Bowman Wright, all right a *wizard*, but an *English* wizard..."

"Excuse me," Krum cut in, "but the eleventh-century painting of Gunther the Violent shows that the ancient German game Stichstock is the true precursor of vat is now Quidditch."

"You you're outrageous!" Alicia suddenly implored, "Professor Snape?"

All turned to Snape's taciturn persona for the final verdict.

In the uncomfortable silence which followed, Alicia tried to regulate her racing heart by breathing deeply. She was not going to be belittled by a Durmstrang he-man, no matter who he was.

A neutral suggestion was offered by the Head of Slytherin. "Perhaps you and Mr Krum, with Professor Karkaroff as chaperone, could continue this enlightening debate whilst escorting them around the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch? Think of it as an opportunity to inform them of England's as well as witches' contributions to the noble sport, Miss Spinnet."

Tightening her grip on her broomstick, Alicia stubbornly refused to give consent by not responding.

"You are the brightest of your lot," Snape subtly coerced. *Not that that's saying much*, he wanted to add, but didn't. "One would think that you'd be proud *honoured* even, for an opportunity to show Hogwarts in its best light, in the interests of international magical cooperation, Miss Spinnet?"

Barely coherent from the plenitude of compliments, Alicia quietly remarked, "With all due respect, Professor Snape, I think Mr Krum would be more comfortable with a male player; he doesn't seem capable of respecting that I'm a Chaser."

Unexpectedly, with an apologetic tinge, Viktor piped out, "But you must understand... Ve haff no girls playing Quidditch at Durmstrang."

"Why not?" demanded Alicia.

Krum was at a loss. His surly look became pronounced as he looked to his Headmaster for an answer.

Karkaroff's forced smile did not extend to his eyes, which were cold and shrewd. "My girl..." he started, condescendingly.

"I'm not *your* girl!" Alicia blurted.

Already riled by Krum's outrageous claims, Alicia's aversion to Karkaroff intensified. Durmstrang was synonymous with chauvinism and discrimination; Muggle-borns were not admitted into the school, girls were not allowed to play Quidditch, and Alicia had noticed that females were generally disregarded: the solitary Durmstrang witch always seemed miserable at the Slytherin table, ignored by her male counterparts. Undoubtedly the poor girl had been brought along as part of some 'token' gesture and that made Alicia's blood boil. "My name is Spinnet Alicia Spinnet, Professor Karkaroff!"

Karkaroff's smooth demeanour flinched, shocked at the girl's brazen impertinence.

However, Viktor's sullen expression changed to one of inquisitiveness and appreciation never in his life had he witnessed a witch speaking to his Headmaster as this one did.

"That will do, Miss Spinnet," remarked Snape; however, he didn't further reprimand her, having secretly enjoyed her little display of outraged injustice against the world.

But Karkaroff wasn't about to let her brazenness go without further reprove.

"We don't have female Quidditch players, *Miss Spinnet*," he said, with a sneering smile, "because witches are the weaker sex." Karkaroff's smile reached his eyes, making his beady eyes more grotesque. "Witches are physically, mentally, and magically inferior."

Alicia mouthed dropped open at his blatant statement.

"That will do, Professor Karkaroff," Severus remarked coolly. He wasn't about to allow Igor to continue his sexist Death Eater diatribe.

"What, Snape? Surely your sentiments, your principles, are the same as mine?" Karkaroff had a strange, sinister glint in his eyes. "After all, there are no females on Slytherin's Quidditch team." Igor's smile broadened once again, leering at Alicia.

Severus inhaled slowly. He had only hoped to pawn Karkaroff and Krum onto the first Quidditch player he spotted. He hadn't wanted an antagonistic dispute of the sexes to break out, and he certainly wished to ignore the inference that he was, in any way, the same as Karkaroff. The Dark Mark branded into his left arm was enough of a reminder as it was.

Ever since he'd lost Lily to the 'big Quidditch hero', James Potter, Quidditch had held little interest for Snape. But then he became Head of Slytherin House, and he came to view the wizarding sport as an important point-scorer. Snape was determined to win the House Cup and prove Slytherin's worth. So, were his principles the same as Karkaroff's? He could not deny that he had once been guilty of the same weaknesses...

As he remembered his resolution when he became Head of Slytherin, Snape hated himself. Yes, he was like Igor *No females allowed; the fewer around him, the better minimise the pain...* He had silently vowed he would make his Slytherin team brutal, unsportsmanlike and infamous; the antithesis of everything James Potter supposedly symbolised. Slytherin's underhand tactics made the other Houses wary, dreading matches against the team in green and silver, and Slytherin became a true nemesis;

there had never been a game without injuries, penalties and ill-will abound.

Standing across from him, Alicia couldn't believe what she had just heard. She was well aware that Slytherin were an all-male team, but she'd never given the matter much thought. Meanwhile, Krum looked at Alicia with the most reverent gaze, now keenly curious.

It was Snape's turn to assert himself. "If Slytherin had, then Miss Spinnet would be our number-one Chaser, without a doubt. Reiterating myself yet again, I daresay she is the ideal guide for your Quidditch needs; she is abundantly knowledgeable in all things Quidditch, and impudently fearless of you, Karkaroff, which is worth all the gold in Gringotts; for though you may not value the assets of her gender, Igor, I do believe Mr Krum does."

Karkaroff swerved, catching Krum gazing appreciatively at Alicia.

With eyes wide open, Alicia gave her full attention to Professor Snape. *He's said that I'm ideal, the brightest, the finest Quidditch player...* Almost in a trance, completely mesmerised by all of Snape's descriptions, Alicia was at his mercy; she'd agree to do anything he wished.

"I have no doubt that you're in the best hands, Karkaroff." Snape locked eyes with Alicia. "I'm sure you'll make Hogwarts proud, Miss Spinnet, and see to Mr Krum's needs?"

Alicia put her differences to one side, hoping to prove to Professor Snape that she was indeed bigger and better than her emotions and brave enough to stand up to anyone. She would make Professor Snape proud. And Snape would praise her efforts this was an unexpected opportunity a final chance to gain his praise in Potions class. If she could make it last until this afternoon, and brew a correctly-made potion, she could almost hear him saying *"Along with your Quidditch playing, your potions abilities are the finest I'm quite impressed by you, Miss Spinnet I really, truly am..."* And so the first task would be accomplished, and her bead would finally change colour... Invigorated and hopeful, Alicia felt a thrill of energy course through her.

"Absolutely, sir! I'm agreeable, if Mr Krum and Professor Karkaroff are, that is." To seal the deal, Alicia forced herself to address Karkaroff, "I'm sorry if I've said anything to offend; it's not my intention I'm just a very passionate, very proud, British, *female*, Quidditch player."

Eagerly, Viktor took a lively step forward and actually clicked his heels while offering his free arm to her, "I would be most honoured, Miss Spinnet."

Alicia took Krum's arm awkwardly and started to guide him towards the open doorway. Suddenly, she gasped. "Professor McGonagall!"

Snape looked around. "Where?"

"No, sir I have Transfiguration! Professor McGonagall's expecting me; I'm already very late. She'll deduct points!"

Seeing his final chance, Karkaroff insisted, "It'd be prudent to not force the girl to miss her class, Severus."

"Your concern is noted, Miss Spinnet," assured Severus. "I'll take care of Professor McGonagall for you."

Enthusiastically, Viktor followed Alicia outside, heading for the Quidditch pitch. "So, you are on Gryffindor team? Vat is it like with so much support for sports as well as studies? Ve haf very little time..." Krum and Alicia's chatter faded as they walked further away.

Karkaroff took one step towards Snape, stopping him from gliding away, and whispered, "Very well, Severus, but you won't slip away from me next time." He then turned quickly to catch up with his wonder-boy's new companion.

Severus watched Karkaroff scurry away. For a few seconds, he stood deliberating something before proceeding directly to Dumbledore's office.



"I urgently request that you not encourage Karkaroff, and refrain from giving him reason to approach me. I have students to teach, Headmaster, and my image to maintain."

Dumbledore softly chuckled. "Yes, Severus, but never fear, your image is quite intact."

"This is no laughing matter, Headmaster. Karkaroff is insufferable: constantly hounding and stalking me. And whilst we're on the subject, what on earth possessed you to hire Moody for the Dark Arts post? The man is utterly mad!"

The hinges of the Headmaster's office door creaked, and the distinct lilt of a commanding brogue called out, "Hold your horses, Severus, and give an old cripple a second to meet you face to face!" The voice was followed by a steady *clump, clump, clump* sound.

*Moody! He must have had a Silencing Charm around him!* thought Severus, grimacing. *The sneaky blackguard...*

"I prefer attacks face-to-face, verbal or physical," continued Mad-Eye Moody, now in full view, limping heavily towards them, "rather than behind my back. Surely you understand, Snape? An Auror's old habits... They die hard, don't they? Old habits, that is."

Severus remained silent, watching Moody's roly-poly, deformed lump of a body come to a halt. Moody's lopsided leer caused Severus's stomach to lurch.

Mad-Eye softly addressed him, "Now, what do you have to say to me wee face?"

Severus blinked, tongue-tied, but not by magic.

"Well, Snape?" Moody's tongue darted out like a lizard, licking his lips. "I believe you used the word 'mad'? I'm flattered..."

Severus weighed up the possible consequences of responding. *The only thing to do is to excuse myself*, he thought. Turning to Dumbledore, he said, "I shall be late for my class. Headmaster, if you'll excuse me?"

Severus turned to leave, only to find Moody blocking his path. "Moody, if you will?"

Alastor shuffled slowly to allow him passage, saying, "By all means. You're a free man, Snape. Always have been, haven't you? Free to come and go wherever you please... Foot-light and fancy-free, as ever, aren't you?"

Severus clenched his teeth, wishing to appear unruffled by the goading Auror. Silently, he walked out of Headmaster's office, hoping his day would soon improve.



"I can't believe it!"

"But it's true, Luca! I swear it!" insisted Alicia, earnestly.

Luca sighed, and then paused to stir the ingredients in his cauldron ten times anti-clockwise, a little disgruntled that the liquid wasn't as deep a purple as it should be.

"Alicia, it just doesn't sound like him."

"I know, not usually, but it was an unusual situation!" Alicia's excitement exuded like the juice from the Sopohorous bean which she was crushing over her cauldron. "Isn't it true that in extreme circumstances, a person's hidden feelings can be revealed?"

Using an Italian term of endearment, Luca delicately pointed out, "Ciccio, you're not making sense. Whether a man is straight or gay, a compliment may not always mean what you think it means." He glanced doubtfully at Professor Snape, who was sitting at behind his desk, wearing a particularly grey, morose expression.

"Oh, Luca, you weren't there," laughed Alicia, high as a kite from lecturing Karkaroff about witches in Quidditch history until he was red in the face. Krum had been thoroughly captivated, Karkaroff infuriated, and it had turned out to be a wonderful morning. She couldn't wait to tell Professor Snape how successful she'd been; she just had to catch his attention at the right time. *When I've finished my potion Luca and I can be the last, and then Luca'll see what Snape really thinks of me!*

Alicia was delighted that the Draught of Living Death brewing in her cauldron was releasing blue steam, increasing her confidence further. "You didn't see how proud he was; he told Karkaroff and Krum that I was the finest Quidditch player, the brightest, a witch of the highest calibre." She giggled. "Me!"

Luca glanced again at the uncharacteristically static figure of their Potions master; he appeared busy, quietly looking through parchments, but the Professor's eyes didn't seem to be moving. Luca frowned. Snape usually walked around, lurching over students' backs, startling those he knew he could unnerve and reprimanding others at the slightest opportunity. Luca had an odd feeling which he couldn't quite pinpoint.

"Ciccio, look, we're talking about Snape..." Luca didn't want to hurt her feelings, nor did he want Alicia to get hurt by Snape. Alicia was naive about men, but their Potions master had a lethal edge that could be detrimental to anyone's self-esteem. He liked seeing Alicia so euphoric and sure of herself, but something definitely didn't feel right... "I don't know; maybe you shouldn't push it, Alicia. Don't get into a tizzy, but... I want you to take this the right way: you're acting like a girly-girl." He teased her, hoping a lighter approach might convince her to think things over. Before Alicia could protest, he continued, "I mean, you're sounding idealistic, romantic, you know, like a Gryffindor it may be blinding you to..."

"No, Luca, I'll prove it to you! Just wait today's my lucky day!" She jiggled her bracelet upward. "Just on time! You see, even my potion is agreeing everything's going perfectly!"

Luca couldn't help himself; Alicia's happiness was infectious, and he found himself laughing softly at her silly giddiness. Alicia had a great smile and warm laughter; she was passionately loyal and recklessly brave; some guy was going to be bloody lucky to have her one day... if he were straight *che bella fortuna* but Luca wasn't, which was actually a good thing; they were fortunate to have each other, they could relate and share their experiences of men, or the lack of in Alicia's case. Luca was beginning to feel like her brother, needing to guide her, wanting to protect her.

"Look at the lovely lavender colour my potion is becoming. Now it just needs to turn clear." In her euphoric state, luck was actually on her side. Alicia had inadvertently crushed her sliced Sopohorous bean more vigorously than stated, producing abundant juice to the potion's benefit. Her improvised anticlockwise stirs, with a clockwise stir every seventh turn, blended nicely towards a perfectly-brewed potion.

Suddenly, there was an unusual sound echoing around the dungeon: a heavy, repeating thud. All eyes turned, and the cause was soon revealed; Professor Moody had entered the Potions classroom. His unexpected arrival caused mordant apprehension amongst the students; when placed in close quarters, the two Hogwarts professors shared combustible chemistry, and the air filled with unspoken, breathless speculation.

Mad-Eye Moody clumped along, heading for Snape's desk.

"And to what do I owe this inappropriate visit in the middle of my lesson?" softly enquired the Potions master.

"All in a day's work, Professor Snape, all in a day's work," quipped Mad-Eye.

"I don't see what my classroom has to do with your work, Moody." Giving a heavy look around the room, Snape growled at his students. "Back to your potions!"

One magical and one real eye bored relentlessly into Snape. "No, I wouldn't imagine you would, would you? But then, that's for me to know and you to find out, see?"

"I doubt that."

"I don't," snarled Moody.

Baneful silence ensued, broken only by the chopping of knives and the bubbling of cauldrons.

"You see," Moody eventually continued, "it's remarkable, the things that appear and disappear when an Auror is around."

Snape's eyes glittered dangerously. "Indeed?"

"It's truly wondrous, as well, the things which can *reappear*," Moody commented portentously. "Truly amazing... Years and years go by, then, faster than you can say 'Dementor', *'it'* resurfaces. The unspeakable!" The Auror grimaced a little bit.

Severus rose calmly, and ever so quietly, warned, "There are students requiring my attention. Perhaps you can tell me what you want, or leave!"

"If I didn't know you better, I'd be offended; but it takes one to know one..." Moody's tongue flitted out, darting around. "Who would've thought you'd be a defender and caretaker, protecting and guiding these young minds? Your reputation doesn't do you justice, does it?" Moody had a good gander around the dungeon. "It's now my job to train impressionable young minds to defend themselves, know how to attack, and think like a Dark wizard."

Exasperated and a little bit unnerved, Snape lashed out, "Is it, Moody? Teaching fourth-years the Unforgivable Curses? Using the Imperius Curse on them is in your job description?"

As Moody's real eye grew wide, his tongue darted out more rapidly than usual, and he whispered to evade curious ears, "You yourself were quite young when you had not only a theoretical knowledge, but practical experience of the Unforgivables. Remember Mulciber?"

Severus stared at Moody as if petrified into stone.

"My memory usually serves me correctly. Do you remember? Oh, yes, I can see that you do. You must understand something, Snape: I don't ever forget. Nor do I forgive. Nor do I trust. Anyone. Ever. I'm not Dumbledore."

Severus's eyes narrowed, and he remarked, "No... You are not Dumbledore."

"Good," Moody said, his voice returning to normal volume. "Now we've cleared that up, if you'll be so kind as to move aside and open your charmed-sealed drawers and cabinets for me; I'd be mighty grateful."

Severus knew there was only one way Moody could know his cabinets were charmed-sealed; evidently, he had tried to open them already and had been unsuccessful.

Thoroughly peeved, Severus informed him, "You should come back later, when there aren't any students... in harm's way."

"Apparently, you weren't listening closely enough. Things have a habit of disappearing from where before they existed. Now, do oblige me, or I'll force you to open them,



one way or another." Mad-Eye's lopsided leer at Snape twitched. "Auror's privilege, you understand."

"Don't you dare threaten to Imperius me, Moody!" hissed Severus. "You'll regret it!"

"Now, now, don't get your feathers in a ruffle. I can blast them open, all good and well, but you'll have shrapnel flying about if I do that in front of the kiddies here, not to mention the damage to the cupboard contents... and I know you wouldn't like that, your precious ingredients harmed in any way, would you, Snape? One way or another, they have to be opened. I'm not leaving until it's done. It's your choice: you or me."

Snape's face had turned a pale ash colour. Staring at Mad-Eye, he didn't speak; but then, with a swift turn and flick of his wrist, several drawers and cabinet doors magically opened.

"Think of this as a kind of emergency inventory, all for the greater good, you understand that, Professor Snape, don't you?" Moody's magical eye stayed on Severus as he lumbered across the classroom, and he proceeded to open each drawer and cabinet and plundered the contents. A few minutes later, the Auror appeared satisfied with the outcome of his search, and he gruffly announced, "Your cooperation has been duly noted. Enquiring minds'll know that you've been quite accommodating and cooperative. Always keep them guessing, eh, Snape? Clever strategy, but you always were a clever one, eh? Yes, just as you've always been."

With one last leer, Moody limped out of the classroom.

Severus stood deathly-still until the Auror left the room. Then in a flash, he swirled around and called out, "Potions! Bring them to me, one by one!"

The students snapped out of their trance and slowly brought their samples to be inspected. Alicia and Luca held back to be the last.

When Snape tersely snatched Luca's sample, he poured the contents into a small cauldron. He only took a second to sniff and assess it before vanishing the substance, commenting, "Passable, but *not* exceptional. Next!"

With overflowing optimism, Alicia bounded forward and with flourish offered Professor Snape her phial.

Noting the radiant look on Miss Spinnet's face, as well as the clarity of the liquid she presented, Snape poured the solution into the cauldron. This time, he summoned a small dropper and suctioned a sample of Alicia's potion. He then placed the dropper in a little bottle, simultaneously releasing the fluid and sealing the vessel closed. He shook the contents rapidly, holding it up to a candle's light. Snape gave Alicia a dubious look before releasing the sample into the testing cauldron.

During Snape's prolonged purity testing, Alicia impulsively initiated, "Professor Snape, the most wonderful thing happened today after we arrived at the Quidditch pitch!"

She paused to allow Snape to comment, but his gaze was fixed on the potion phial, so Alicia continued, "Sir, you know how Professor Karkaroff was quite ignorant of English Quidditch history?"

Again, Alicia waited. Again, there was no comment. "And also how he was unaware of witches' importance in our history? Well, you'll be *proud* of me, sir; I informed him all about Agatha Chubb, the expert on ancient wizarding artefacts, and also Madam Rabbott, Gertie Keddie, and Daisy Pennifold, the witch that the 'Pennifold Quaffle' was named after..."

Suddenly, Snape's head whipped up.

"You silly girl," hissed Snape with as much condescending venom as he could muster. "Do you really believe that throwing the remnants of a dead animal through hoops the size of castle doors is even remotely significant, compared to the important lessons taught in my classroom?"

Alicia blanched, shocked and fearful of the Potions master's fierce demeanour.

Luca could only stare in dismay, knowing his instincts about Alicia's misinterpretation of Snape had been spot-on.

"Well, Miss Spinnet, do you?" hissed Snape. "It seems, after five years in my class, your little Gryffindor brain remains incapable of recognising the virtues of wisdom. Perhaps your thick skull has been hit by one too many Bludgers?"

The young woman stood in chastised silence, and Snape continued, "If I had wished to know these titbits of Quidditch nonsense, I would have asked to hear them. Suffice it to say, you'd be waiting a very long time for such an enquiry. It takes brains over brawn, Miss Spinnet: any Slytherin knows that don't dare bother me with your Quidditch dribble ever again! Now take this sorry excuse for a potion and pour it down the sewage drain before it eats into the cauldron lining."

Alicia remained staring at the dungeon floor, devastated.

Luca summoned enough nerve to step forward and peer into the testing cauldron, and he saw there was nothing wrong with her potion; Snape was simply being vindictive in the extreme. Luca also knew that pouring the contents down the drain would tranquilise every living thing in the Black Lake.

Luca pulled his wand out of his back pocket and Vanished the potion.

Snape sneered as the young man helped the comatose Alicia gather her things and leave the dungeon.

At the end of her Potions lesson, the first quartz bead on Alicia's bracelet was as opaque as ever.



Rusty hinges creaked on the portrait of Percival Pratt as it swung open into the small, dimly lit Boathouse. The poet was wearing a white nightshirt, and the candle at his desk illuminated his drowsy features. Quickly realising what the late-night meeting signified, the portrait shook himself to full alertness.

"Finally, you two! It's almost midnight!" remarked Luca.

Penelope entered first, followed by Alicia. The Ravenclaw Prefect looked tersely at Luca and Georgina.

"This hasn't been the easiest manoeuvre to accomplish," said Penelope. "Sneaking Alicia here after the night-time curfew: just for the record, it goes against all my principles..."

"Save it, Penelope: Prefects' privilege! I mean, what's the point of having power if we can't flex our muscles every now and then?"

"I think you mean *bend the rules*, Georgina: and that's a Slytherin argument, not a Prefect one."

"Lighten up, Penny, you're sounding like Percy."

At this comment, Penelope frowned.

"And, need I remind you, you've been a willing participant: once a Four-House champion there's no reneging," Georgina pointed out. "Unless you want to forfeit and give up already..."



"It doesn't matter at this point," jumped in Alicia. "It's beyond any of our control look at the time!"

There was a dull echo of a distant clock tolling out the strokes of midnight the witching hour had arrived. The four champions gasped in unison as an emanating light on each one's bracelet let forth, the Protean Charm activating a soft wispy glow from the first bead. They all stared at their bracelets, transfixed. Several seconds passed until, with a poof and final crackle, the luminous light faded.

Each champion examined their beads, each one reacting differently.

Alicia was not surprised. Her bead was as opaque as ever, meaning she was placed last in the first task. With stubborn resolve, she bit her lip, not wanting to show her down-hearted emotions or let the painful memory of the Potions master's fierce demeanour discourage her from participating further. *I will not be defeated. I'm sure to win the task of getting detention.* This thought gave her a renewed burst of hope.

"I don't understand Snape praised me! He praised me!" complained Georgina, shocked at the unaltered light-green colour of her bead. "Why hasn't mine changed? Maybe there's something wrong with the charm?"

"No, there's nothing wrong with the charm," cut in Penelope. "Look at mine; it's changed colour!"

All turned to her, staring at the silver bracelet on her wrist.

"It's gone even darker!" squealed Penelope in delight. "Oh my God! I've won, I've won! Snape's praise of me was superior to yours, Georgina!"

"That can't be, I'm Slytherin I used his own instructions! How could I not have won? My potion was perfect!"

"But your understanding of it was not," reasoned Penelope. "Snape recognised my true comprehension of the ingredients' properties... He was impressed by my intelligence and aptitude. That must be why my bead has turned black."

"No, it's midnight blue, Penny *almost* black," pointed out Alicia awkwardly. "Look look at Luca's!"

They turned to a quiet, immobile Luca, blinking with disbelief at his charmed bracelet. The three young witches' mouths dropped open in awe. Luca's first bead was blacker than the midnight sky: as black as their Potions professor's eyes.

"I I don't understand... I mean... It's unbelievable," whispered Luca. "I've won the first task!"

"That's not fair! You didn't even finish your potion," grumbled Georgina.

"It's more than fair," remarked Alicia. "Luca saved mine and Jared's lives. Perhaps the charm's criteria for Snape's praise are based on something more than his words. Maybe it's about the nature of the actions and how genuinely impressed Snape was... or how sincerely he gave his praise."

Penelope was perplexed, unable to understand why her inventive potion-making skills had not been enough to secure the first task. "This doesn't make sense," she complained. "Professor Snape values brains, not brawn!"

Georgina was also brooding. *He admired my cunning; I could feel his admiration, and the results I got from it.* She couldn't help but feel a tinge of betrayal from her Head of House, but she kept her opinions private.

Eventually, Penelope responded, "Perhaps Alicia's right... This Protean Charm seems to have a spirit of its own. I wish I'd known its criterion from the start."

"I still can't believe it," Luca repeated, an uncontrollable smile broadly spreading across his face.

"Congratulations, Luca!" Alicia was the first to forthrightly congratulate him. Then she added sheepishly, "And thanks for the other thing you know saving my life."

"Yes. Well done," chipped in Penelope, swallowing her sour grapes and rising from her reverie.

"All right, I can be as gracious as any of you well done, kid!" Georgina smiled demurely.

Alicia was sitting closest to Luca and patted him on the back. He smiled at the three witches and self-consciously muttered, "Thanks."

"So, has the champion of the first task chosen what the other task is to be?" Georgina asked him. "We know we've got to get detention, but what about the other task, Luca. Have you decided yet?"

Luca appeared faintly embarrassed. "Um, yeah, I have."

"Well?" Georgina prompted.

Luca was reticent. "I wanted to make it a bit trickier, you know, for it to be a real challenge..." He glanced apologetically at Alicia, knowing how her defeat in the first task would make this task seem hopeless.

"Out with it, Hufflepuff!" Georgina said, exasperated.

"Get Snape to smile," Luca said hesitantly. He cleared his throat and clarified, "The task will be to make Snape smile."

The Boathouse was completely quiet for a few moments, save for the lapping of the waves at the harbour walls. Luca watched the witches' faces carefully as each one digested the news.

Penelope's eyes were wide. Alicia's mouth had dropped open slightly.

Georgina sighed heavily and sat back against the wall. "Now, *that's* going to be hard," she remarked, with a degree of reverence in her voice.

"More like *impossible*," Alicia tried hard not to sulk.

"No," Penelope considered, "it can't be. I've seen him smile before. Granted, it's usually been a smirk of schadenfreude... I bet that Protean Charm is going to want a genuine smile from Snape."

"Like I said," said Alicia, pouting, "impossible!"

"Well," Georgina said, sitting up straight, "it takes a Slytherin to know how to make Snape *truly* smile."

At this Penelope sighed. "You have a point; however, who knows what could happen? Look at the first task: Snape's full of surprises! Look at Luca, he's a Hufflepuff..."

"If a Hufflepuff can win, then there's possibility for all," teased Georgina.

"Thanks for that," remarked Luca, basking in happiness from being the first task champion.

"I think Luca's suggestion should be our next task," Penelope said. "It makes more sense to make Snape smile ~~before~~ our quest for detention."

Georgina nodded her agreement. Luca grinned.

Alicia sat on the Boathouse bench, quietly observing her classmates. Then, one by one, Luca, Penelope and Georgina noticed her withdrawn nature. Penelope put an arm around her shoulder. "Better luck next time, maybe?"

"I doubt that very much," replied Alicia, trying to keep a stiff upper lip. "But there's always the third task getting detention; I'm a sure shoo-in for that. Just have to endure making it to the spring."

"True enough." Georgina smirked. "There's hope for us all."

Pensively, Penelope pondered aloud, "I wonder how a Slytherin Prefect might get detention?"

"I'll have to be a very bad girl, Penny, that's how," smiled Georgina coquettishly. "I already have a few ideas... There's plenty of time to think about which one will be, um, most *effective*."

"Oh, yeah! Ditto on that," agreed Luca, his brown eyes sparkling.

"Well then, here's to the second task! To make Snape smile!" revved Georgina.

Alicia couldn't help groan at how ludicrous and unattainable the prospect of this task was for her.

Penelope noticed the Gryffindor's discomfort. "There's still the first Triwizard task tomorrow, and then the Yule Ball to look forward to, Alicia. Just imagine, Professor Snape in dress-robos, swirling on the dance floor!"

Georgina scoffed. "That man does not dance!"

"How do you know?" Penelope asked.

"Just do," Georgina replied bullishly.

"Maybe I can make Snape smile at the ball, then, with my legendary dance-floor moves," Luca said, grinning broadly.

"The second task doesn't start until the first day back after Christmas, Luca," Penelope reminded him in customary Ravenclaw fashion.

"All right then, I'll get our winner safely back to Hufflepuff House, using Prefects' privileges, if needed," announced Georgina.

"And I'll take care of our brave but discouraged little Gryffindor, here," teased Penelope gently, half-helping Alicia up from the bench.

Luca and Georgina, along with Penny, couldn't help but be amused by Alicia's poorly-concealed dismay.

"Ciccia, you up to putting a smile on Snape's face?" joked Luca, putting his arm around Alicia's shoulders and giving her a playful squeeze.

"Only in my dreams," said Alicia softly, smiling.

"In *all* of our dreams," agreed Luca.

"That's the spirit!" rallied Penelope good-naturedly.

"Gotta hand it to you, Gryffindor; you've a lot of chutzpah." Georgina grinned. "And you, lucky Hufflepuff, follow me!"

"I just hope Filch and Mrs Norris aren't out and about tonight," Penelope said as they approached the portal.

"Nothing that a good Confundus Charm can't fix," suggested Georgina. Seeing the looks on everyone's faces, she added, "*Just* a suggestion. Come on, everyone. I'll light the way."

Led by Georgina's lamp, the four champions lit their wands with a Lumos Charm and walked towards Percival Pratt's portrait. The poet was scribbling furiously at his desk and looked up at the four champions as they approached. He seemed taken off-guard, and he raised his hand and cleared his throat theatrically.

"House colours of black and yellow

Win the first task for your sombre fellow

A loyal heart and feats most brave

Gain truest praise from our sullen knave."

Luca groaned in embarrassment whilst Alicia and Penelope sniggered.

"There you go, Luca!" Georgina teased, clapping him on the shoulder. "You wanted to know what the tournament's prize would be... It's a poem composed in your honour!"

Alicia covered her mouth to contain her giggles. Percival Pratt seemed a touch put-out by their underwhelmed reaction to his off-the-cuff creation.

"Are you going to let us through?" Penelope asked the portrait.

The poet folded his arms, and his pointed beard rose into the air. "Take time every day to rhyme what you say."

Penelope held her temper and bypassed the pedantic request by uttering the secret code required for passage. *This password is absurd.*

The hidden passageway to Hogwarts opened, and the troop climbed out of the Boathouse to return to their dormitories, where each one would dream of Yule Ball partners and their second task to come: to make Snape smile.

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#### Authors' Note:

Written by [nagandsev](#) with a poem by [bluerain1984](#)

The Snapettes would love to receive your review!

# The Yule Ball - Part One

## Chapter 4 of 9

Four unsuccessful Triwizard entrants arrange their own tournament. The prize: Snape.

"Did you hear the rumour that Madam Rosmerta has sold Professor Dumbledore eight-hundred barrels of mulled mead?"

Angelina Johnson's voice interrupted Alicia's thoughts as they studied together in the Gryffindor common room. She looked up at her friend and smiled.

"Yeah, George Weasley told me yesterday. It doesn't take a genius to work out that one's a whopper." Alicia grinned at Angelina's reaction; apparently she'd been hoping that particular piece of gossip was based in truth.

"I was hoping Professor Dumbledore would allow some of us older students to enjoy a little tipple at the Yule Ball..."

"Well, we might be 'of age' now, Angelina, but I don't think Hogwarts is about to start serving alcohol. Remember, fourth-years are invited too, plus some younger kids might come along as guests."

"I suppose," Angelina murmured.

"I heard Neville's taking Ginny Weasley."

"He's a good lad, Longbottom; I'm glad he's giving Ginny a chance to dress up and go dancing."

"So, what are you wearing?" Alicia asked. "Got your outfit yet?"

"I've got two dresses to choose from. Can't decide. I think I like the purple one best, but it might be a bit too... skimpy," Angelina replied, laughing.

"I bet you look fantastic in a cute little dress," Alicia assessed, looking at the dark-skinned young woman with new appreciation. "You'll be the belle of the ball!"

"Hardly." Angelina scoffed. "Alicia, have you looked in the mirror recently?"

Alicia laughed, and then noticed Angelina's earnest expression. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope," Angelina said. "Haven't you noticed the way boys stare at you in the corridor?"

"They stare at both of us," Alicia replied dismissively. "We're on the Quidditch team, remember? We live in a goldfish bowl. Everyone knows who we are."

"I'm telling you, that's not why they're looking at you, Alicia. You're a babe."

"Don't be daft," Alicia snapped defensively; she was finding Angelina's comments difficult to believe.

Alicia had always thought of herself as a bit of an ugly duckling: a chunky girl who hardly ever smiled. She'd never invited much interest from the opposite sex, and boys seemed to think her formidable. Over the last year she'd lost some puppy fat, and her face had changed from that of a surly girl into a mature young woman, but she doubted this made her good-looking. Not to mention the fact that looks had never been high on the list of her priorities when admiring men... Or rather, one man in particular.

"I'm not daft," Angelina continued. "You just can't see it. You come across as confident, and you've got a sultry thing going on as well. With the right dress robes you'll be a stunner," Angelina said sincerely.

"Maybe you can help me find something to wear, then?" Alicia asked, tentatively feeling her way into the alien world of femininity which she'd avoided for so long.

"I'd love to!" Angelina grinned. "And what about your make-up?"

Alicia leaned forward in her chair and was about to speak when Fred Weasley called out across the common room.

"Oi! Angelina!"

Angelina cursed lightly under her breath and turned to face him. "What?"

"Want to go to the ball with me?" asked Fred.

Angelina looked at him for a moment, wondering if her purple dress would clash with his red hair. Deciding she could wear her long, black gown instead, she replied, "All right, then."

When she turned back to Alicia, Angelina was grinning.

"Oh my God!" Alicia exclaimed. "You've already bagged your date! Nice one."

"Yeah, well, I kind of saw it coming, if you know what I mean? Fred's a good laugh, anyway, and I know I'll have fun with him. What about you? Anyone asked you out yet?"

"Nah, and to be honest, I think I scare them off."

"Why?"

"I dunno. Boys just don't seem to know what to say to me."

Angelina laughed. "That's because you're gorgeous! They're nervous and worried you'll say no!"

Alicia rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I don't know which planet you're living on, Ange."

"I think *you're* the one on a different planet. Loads of boys have got the hots for you. I know at least two in our Charms class who want to ask you out, and there's four

Gryffindor seventh-years who've made a bet on which one of them will be your date." Angelina paused for a moment then grinned slyly. "Best of all, there's Brent Armstrong. He's had a crush on you for ages."

"Brent? That looker from Ravenclaw? In the year above us?"

"That's him."

"But he's... He's so... fit!"

"Yes, he is, Alicia. Gorgeous boy. Man. Whatever. I'll bet you ten Sickles he'll have asked you to the Yule Ball by this weekend."



Penelope Clearwater descended the staircase to the Entrance Hall, taking the greatest of care, owing to her elegant high-heeled shoes and her long, flowing Georgette-crêpe dress. She usually didn't pay much attention to the marble structure, hastily navigating the stairway every day, yearning for a full stomach. Only now did she appreciate its ostentatious length; the Marble Staircase enabled a girl to properly flaunt her attributes.

Pierre was waiting for her at the bottom of the staircase, standing erect and wearing beautifully-tailored dress-robos. As she stepped down the last marble stair, the young man from Beauxbatons took her hand, placing a gracious kiss upon it. Penelope's silver bracelet slipped back along her arm with a tingle.

"*Tu es vraiment magnifique!*" Pierre said, forgetting to speak in English and appearing slightly embarrassed about his oversight.

"Thank you," Penelope replied, and she blushed, flicking her long, blonde hair over her shoulder in excitement. Oh it felt good to be pampered! And by a Frenchman no less! Pierre was absolutely charming, even though he was a bit younger than her.

Penelope had become acquainted with Pierre whilst performing her Prefect duties, escorting groups of foreign students around Hogwarts. He had been so charmingly unobtrusive when he'd asked her to accompany him to the Yule Ball, so she had quickly said yes without any real hesitation; Percy had not been invited by the Ministry, after all. Everything seemed so natural and relaxed. Nothing was forced, nothing expected, and she was free to show off her slim figure, clad in light-blue dress-robos, to anyone she wished: to the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students, as well as to a certain dark professor. It couldn't hurt to be noticed, could it?

Pierre offered her his arm then slowly led her through the crowd, entertaining her with a light conversation in his heavy French accent, and Penelope felt as though she were walking on air. Everything was going perfectly until something completely unexpected caught her eye.

"Oh, no," she murmured as she laid eyes on the person she least expected to see.

Percy Weasley had just entered through the antechamber's oak door and was looking around smugly. What the hell was he doing there? Why hadn't he bothered to tell her he was coming? Then again, judging by his minimal effort when purchasing the cheap bracelet, she wouldn't be surprised if he'd simply forgotten that he actually had a girlfriend at Hogwarts.

A hot, twisting knot burned in Penelope's stomach as she contemplated the implications. Had he come alone? She couldn't see his date anywhere in his vicinity. Did this mean he expected Penelope to be his dance partner? She had to find out what he was doing here.

Penelope cut through the crowd with fierce determination, Pierre trotting behind her.

"W'at eez it, Penelope, w're aare you goin'?" called Pierre after her.

"We are going to meet my long-forgotten boyfriend," she replied nonchalantly. By the time she reached Percy, her face was flushed, and she felt as though her throat had caught fire.

"Ah, Penelope... I see you've been expecting me..." said Percy patronisingly as soon as she came into hearing distance.

Penelope halted several feet away. "No, actually, I haven't been expecting you," she said, crossing her arms defiantly. Did he really think she would be eagerly waiting for him, just like that, as if nothing had happened? Had he expected her to attend the Yule Ball all alone?

Pierre joined Penelope and courteously offered her his elbow, which she took with a deliberate sweet smile. He clearly had little conception of what was going on.

"What is the meaning of this?" Percy asked slowly, his eyes darting from Penelope to the handsome French boy next to her, a little pink colouring Percy's pale, freckled cheeks.

"The meaning of what, exactly?" she asked innocently, smiling sweetly again.

"What are you doing here, with... with... Why are you with someone else?"

Penelope felt a fist of steely triumph unfurl in her stomach. "Unlike you, I am still a Hogwarts student, and this is a school dance. It just so happens that you need a partner to attend it," Penelope replied. "I should be asking you what you are doing here, I thought..."

"Who is this?" Percy cut in, looking past her and measuring Penelope's dance partner up and down.

Penelope turned to her forgotten date, noticing the young man appeared quite uncomfortable. Unfortunately, her indignant rage prevented her from tending to the needs of the boy's ego. She looked Percy in the eye, relishing the moment.

"Pierre, from Beauxbatons. I've been showing him arou..."

"I don't care what you've been showing him," Percy said harshly.

Penelope raised her eyebrows, surprised by his unfeeling demeanour, and released Pierre's elbow. Maybe she had gone a tad too far; Percy had never been this cold with her before.

She sighed heavily, realising their relationship was long past the point of no return, and she'd simply been hiding from the truth for four long months. She decided to take the matters into her hands and finish this whole mess, once and for all.

"Percy, look, I have something to tell..."

Percy interrupted, mid-flow. "I don't want to believe this! The moment I turn my back to you..."

"Excuse me?" she asked perplexedly, the wind dropping instantly from her sails.

Percy noticed her hesitancy and made his move. Penelope watched his tall, svelte form moving closer to her, and a hollow formed in her stomach as a new notion formed in her mind. Perhaps she'd succeeded in making Percy jealous, and he was about to offer his heartfelt apology for abandoning her, sweeping her up in his arms and kissing her in front of the whole school... The possibility made her swoon, rendering her incapable of heeding her own thoughts about this potentially imminent reunion.

Percy stopped just a few inches away from her face, wearing a diffident expression. Penelope's stomach flipped in anticipation. "What are you doing here, Percy?" she asked carefully.

"I've recently been appointed as personal assistant to Mr Crouch, and I'm here to take his place, representing the Ministry's Department of International Magical Co-operation."

Percy's coldness shattered Penelope's crystal bowl of delusion into a thousand pieces in the blink of an eye.

"You You've been promoted," she stammered.

"Yes, I have," Percy replied, his pomposity becoming evident once more.

She couldn't believe how much he had changed. Where was the boy with whom she fell in love? The boy who wrote all those long letters and adored her almost to the point of worship? That boy was gone, she realised all of a sudden, finally seeing things with clarity. Percy's neglect of his girlfriend was not merely because he'd committed all his time and energy into the Department of International Magical Co-operation. It was because he'd become a conceited, arrogant toady.

Penelope took a deep breath to prepare herself for what she was about to say, for it seemed their relationship had reached another important milestone: the one which read 'THE END'.

But before she could utter her first sound, Percy gazumped her.

"I'm just glad I've realised what you're made of, Penny, before it was too late."

Penelope frowned with confusion, unconsciously taking a step backwards. She opened her mouth, intending to retort, but she couldn't find words strong enough.

Percy held both hands behind his back and lifted his chin. "It's over."

His words hit Penelope in the stomach like a body blow, and for a moment she seemed to have no air in her lungs. She could barely comprehend the sequence of events, and she watched as Percy strode away, towards the crowd assembling in the Great Hall, awaiting the arrival of the Triwizard champions and the commencement of the formal dance.

"Oh, yeah?" she yelled after him. A few people turned to stare, but Penelope didn't care. "You know, you took the words right out of my mouth!" She should be the one dumping him, not the other way around, and she wanted the whole world to see that.

Percy didn't acknowledge her in any way, making her even angrier.

"Hey, I'm talking to you!" she yelled again and hurried after him.

But Percy had disappeared into the crowd as surely as if he'd slipped on a Cloak of Invisibility.

Belatedly, Penelope looked behind her, hoping to grab Pierre by the hand and lead him into the Great Hall and onto the dance floor. She would show Percy what she was made of and what he would be missing!

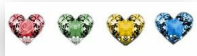
However, Penelope soon realised that Pierre was long gone; her beau from Beauxbatons had abandoned her too.

She came to a standstill amongst the flow of happy couples entering the sparkling, glazed Great Hall, feeling all alone, dumped and neglected, as though a bucketful of misery had been splashed over her head. She wished the ground beneath her would open up and swallow her. She hesitated for a moment, but soon decided she did not dare to enter the Great Hall alone. She did not trust her suspiciously moistening eyes, and she would not give Percy the satisfaction of seeing her cry. So she staggered through the crowd, holding back her tears.

Penelope didn't know where to go; she just wanted to hide from the world. She furiously wiped the first telltale tears from her rosy cheeks, Percy's wretched bracelet slipping along her arm with a soft tingle again, just like when Pierre kissed the back of her hand.

She ran up the Grand Staircase until she was out of breath, and then stared at the worthless piece of jewellery and discovered she couldn't stand the sight of it anymore. Pulling off the wristlet furiously, she scratched her wrist in the process, and then threw it on the floor with vehemence.

Realising she had stopped near the portal to the Boathouse, she deliberately stepped on the silver bracelet, heard a satisfying snapping sound, and stepped into the secret passageway without looking back.



The sound of rippling water lapping around the Boathouse hypnotised Penelope until she lost track of time. The cold night air bit at her skin, so she cast Bluebell Flames and sat huddled in a corner, trying to keep warm.

After fleeing the opening dance of the Yule Ball, she had been greeted by the portrait of Percival Pratt how that name seemed so fitting! and now the fretful poet leaned against the edge of his frame, offering her a handkerchief, seeming to forget he was merely oil and canvas.

Eventually Penelope picked up her wand and conjured a hanky out of thin air. Blowing her nose, she resolved to hide herself away until the end of the formal dance. Maybe she'd return afterwards for the Christmas Day feast. Or maybe not.

The portrait cleared its throat, and Penelope rubbed her eyes, smudging black mascara stains down her cheeks. She then turned to the poet who had granted her access to the underground escape, and he straightened out his parchment and began to read.

"Some believe the loveliest of sights

Are those of a maiden's tears.

Whether they are from joy or mirth,

Or emerge from grief or fears.

But my heart is not roused by your tears this night

As you hide here without a friend

Oh wise and gentle heart, do not despair,

Everything will work out in the end."

Penelope smiled weakly at the well-meaning poet, whose painted, pale face was a picture of perturbed sadness, and she felt another crippling stab of pain deep in her abdomen.

She continued to be surprised by the strength of her emotional reaction. Penelope was unsure if she felt heartbroken about Percy ending their relationship or angry with him for pipping her at the post, humiliated by being so publically dumped or annoyed with herself for losing her charming Beauxbatons date, Pierre. The twisting knife in her stomach, plus her clenched fists and sore eyes, suggested she was feeling all of these things, all at once.

What would Professor Snape think of her, hiding away like a great big wuss, crying over spilt milk? No doubt Snape would have been clear-headed enough to think of a suitably biting response to Percy's declaration, outwitting the jumped-up little twerp in a fraction of a second. A small smile crept across Penelope's face as she imagined her Potions master coming to her aid and hitting Percy with a choice curse, and then lifting her up in his arms and carrying her to his private chambers in the dungeon...

Her fantasy was cut short by the sound of creaking hinges, and she turned to see Georgina and Luca stepping through the entrance to the Boathouse, both wearing expressions of concern, carrying her discarded bracelet.

"Oh, Penny," Georgina began awkwardly, taking in the Ravenclaw's red eyes and mascara trails. She quickly *Scourgified* the sodden handkerchief and began wiping Penelope's face.

"What happened, Ciccio?" Luca asked, conjuring a blanket and wrapping the warm material around Penelope's frozen shoulders.

Penelope gasped for air, hoping to curtail the sob clawing at her throat. "P-Percy d-dumped me!"

"Oh, love," Luca said, kneeling down and putting his arm around her. "Are you alright?"

Georgina firmly held Penelope's chin, rubbing the black stains from her cheeks. "Of course she's not alright, you daft moron!"

After a brief moment of discord, the three students began to smile.

"I'm angrier that he dumped me before I could dump him!" Penelope stated emphatically. "The stupid prat humiliated me in front of everyone..."

Luca squeezed her shoulders. "I don't think anyone really noticed, Ciccio."

"We only realised you'd disappeared when your seat at the Prefect's table was empty," Georgina explained. "No-one knew where you were, so as soon as the meal finished, Luca and I came looking for you. Then we found this at the entrance to the secret passageway."

Penelope observed the bracelet in Georgina's outstretched palm had been repaired, and her face crumpled.

"I wasn't thinking about the tournament," she confessed. "I was furious with Percy. And myself."

"But you're still in? I mean, you can't drop out now; you did so well in the first task," Luca encouraged.

"Of course she's still in, Luca; she signed the parchment, remember? No dropping out for any of us!"

Penelope accepted the proffered bracelet. "I'm sorry I took it out on the jewellery. Thanks for repairing it."

"No problem." Georgina took a seat next to Penelope and dipped into her handbag, finding eyeliner and mascara then skilfully applying both, covering up Penny's red and swollen eyes.

"You've missed the Christmas feast," Georgina told her as she worked on Penelope's make-up. "But Luca and I saved you a bite to eat." Georgina nodded in the Hufflepuff's direction, and he quickly produced a squashed turkey sandwich from inside his robes.

Penelope accepted the food gratefully, and Georgina paused to allow her to take a bite.

"It was Georgie who suggested you might be down here," Luca continued.

"I don't know what I was thinking," Penelope offered, in between mouthfuls of turkey. "I just had to get away, and this was the first place that popped into my mind."

"I can think of warmer places to unburden a broken heart," Luca commented with a smile.

"Yeah, I wasn't really thinking straight," Penelope replied. "But I'm glad you found me."

Luca gave Penelope's hand a gentle squeeze.

"No need to get mushy," Georgina said with a grimace. The Slytherin rose to her feet. "I'm going to get you something to wash down that turkey booty."

"Fancy something stiff?" Luca asked with a smirk.

"Definitely." Penelope smiled.

"I'll get you the stiffest drink I can find." Georgina lifted her illuminated wand tip to inspect the Ravenclaw's make-up. Satisfied, she turned to leave. "Meet you at the bottom of the Marble Staircase in five minutes' time?"

Penelope nodded, heartened by the caring of two unexpected allies.



"Well, I suppose this means I'm free to pursue Snape, now," Penelope said, attempting to be cheerful as she sat down on the staircase to feel the coolness of marble through her dress-robos.

Luca smiled, sitting down next to her and playfully nudging her in the ribs. "You're assuming, of course, that Snape is *interested* in the opposite sex."

At that, Penelope laughed, appreciating Luca's kindness and humour. "Why do you believe Snape is gay, anyway?"

Luca leaned back on the Marble Staircase, his manner easy and confident. "You must've noticed the way he billows around the castle, his cloak flapping around, drawing everyone's attention. And the way he minces his words."

"That doesn't mean he's attracted to men, Luca. That just makes him sexy!"

"Maybe. But he also has this haughty, upper-class style. I've seen it on dozens of gay wizards, especially Slytherins."

"He does speak beautifully, and he can be supercilious. But I think that's because of his intelligence, not because he's gay." Penelope turned to face Luca, whose eyes were drifting across a swathe of couples as they left the Great Hall and passed the bottom of the stairs. "Really, Luca, your argument is based on nothing more than wishful thinking!" She softened her statement with a little giggle.

"Laugh all you like, Pen. But you can't deny this: Snape isn't married, and he doesn't have a girlfriend. In fact, if you ask around, nobody's ever seen him in the company of

a woman. I'm telling you: he's gay."

"You're saying he's in the closet?"

"Totally."

"And you're going to be the one who entices him out?"

"Got it in one!"

Luca and Penelope shared a chuckle, and then Luca noticed Professor Moody hobbling out of the Great Hall. As the gnarly-faced man walked past them, his mad-eye swivelled in their direction, bringing an instant end to their mirth. They watched the eccentric professor walk through the Entrance Hall and out into the snowy night air.

Penelope shivered.

"There's one other thing," Luca said quietly.

"Oh yeah, what's that?"

"Dumbledore."

"What about him?"

"Well, you must have noticed how much time Snape spends with him more than the other professors. They always seem as thick as thieves." Luca smiled conspiratorially.

"I really don't see what that has to do with anything," Penelope replied.

Luca frowned, perplexed. Suddenly, his features brightened. "Oh my God, Pen, don't tell me *you don't know?*"

"Know what?"

Luca was almost beside himself with delight. "Dumbledore is *gay*."

Penelope's eyes shot wide open, and her breath caught in her throat. "No way!"

"I'm serious."

"No, really? Dumbledore?"

"Yes, Dumbledore. Have you not noticed his flamboyant purple robes and his predilection for showiness and ostentation? The man is as camp as a row of tents!"

"Oh my God, Luca, you're right. I can't believe I'd never noticed it before!" Penelope turned the information around in her mind. "Wow. Dumbledore's gay... And, wait a minute, you're saying that Snape spends a lot of time with him..."

Luca smirked.

"Oh, that's just..." Penelope's face screwed up. "Eww!"

The pair erupted into fits of laughter, and Luca was pleased to note that Penelope had all-but forgotten her break-up with Percy.

Georgina arrived, carrying three hot foaming tankards of Butterbeer. "This is the best I could do," she said, handing over the drinks and sitting down on the other side of Penelope. "Did you see Alicia leave the Great Hall just then, with Brent Armstrong on her arm?"

"No," Penelope said, curious. "I must've been distracted by Luca's unique sense of humour."

"Oh, no, what've I missed? Luca's not told you that one about the troll, the hag and the leprechaun? The one that Dumbledore started telling at the start of term?"

"No," Penelope said, taking a sip of warming Butterbeer. "Luca was telling me why he thinks Snape might be gay."

Georgina smiled knowingly. "I've heard *those* theories a few times."

"Can you believe Penelope didn't know Dumbledore was gay?" Luca asked.

"You're kidding!"

Penelope blushed. "I'd just never really thought about it. But now that Luca's said it, I can see it clearly. However, there's no way that..." She couldn't finish the sentence.

"What?" Georgina asked.

"I insinuated that Dumbledore and Snape were having it off," Luca said, smirking with self-satisfaction.

Georgina snorted inelegantly, seeing the remnants of hilarity in Penelope and Luca's eyes. "Always the comedian," she said with a hint of affection.

"Sssssh!" Penelope gestured towards the door of the Great Hall.

Professor Snape was leaving the room with the Durmstrang headmaster. His glittering black eyes cast over the three students sitting on the Marble Staircase, but before he could make comment, Igor Karkaroff leaned in and distracted him with a question. Snape stalked out of the Entrance Hall with Karkaroff at his heels, only stopping to reprimand a canoodling couple as he passed through the antechamber to the courtyard outside.

Penelope watched the shamefaced couple shuffling back into the Great Hall, and she heard the Weird Sisters begin the thumping bassline of 'Do the Hippogriff'.

Luca, however, was staring at the closed door of the antechamber. "I'd never really noticed that before..." he pondered out loud.

"What's that?" Georgina asked, sipping her Butterbeer.

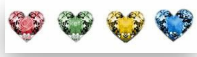
"Snape and Karkaroff."

"Oh, come off it, Luca, you're obsessed!"

"Aren't we all?" Luca laughed, and Georgina grinned.

"Come on, you two," Penelope said, standing up and taking a few steps down the stairs. "Let's go and have a dance!"

Relieved that Penelope seemed to have cheered up, Georgina and Luca followed her into the Great Hall, leaving their tankards on the nearest table, and shouting "Ma ma ma, ma ma ma, ma ma ma!" into the gyrating crowd.



Brent Armstrong led Alicia by the hand as they escaped the stifling hot air of the Great Hall. They passed the Entrance Hall and stepped through the antechamber, where a Durmstrang boy and a fifth-year girl were lurking in the shadows, kissing. Alicia let out a giggle as she stepped out into the cold winter air, then her bare arms chilled instantly as snowflakes caressed her skin and melted to trickles of water.

Her date raised his wand and Transfigured her silky stole into a large, woollen pashmina. Alicia thanked him for his thoughtfulness and followed him into the snowy courtyard. The carriages which had brought the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students to the Yule Ball were lined up in rows, looking pretty with their snow-capped roofs, and Brent sneaked a peek inside one of the coaches, checking if it were occupied.

With a flourish, he opened the carriage door. "Shall we?"

Alicia gasped, looking around her shoulder for witnesses. "Are you sure?" she asked worriedly.

"Of course. You said you wanted to get some fresh air, and I've been dying to talk to you properly all night. This way we can do both, without freezing to death."

"What if we get caught?" Alicia asked, assessing the gorgeous young man in front of her and wondering why she was acting like such a prude. Half of Ravenclaw would give their wand arm to be alone in a hansom cab with this boy, yet here she was feeling nervous at his sudden gesture.

"We won't," Brent answered assuredly. "Come on, Alicia, you're shivering! Get in; it'll be warmer inside the cabin."

Alicia gritted her teeth, gulped, and then smiled timidly. "Okay."

She lifted the front of her ruby-red robes and climbed into the cab, sitting down on the comfy padded seat and rearranging her dress to cover up her legs. Brent hopped onto the seat next to her and closed the carriage door. Within moments he'd conjured an oil-lamp out of thin air, lighting it with a Lumos Charm. Alicia was very impressed by his magical ability; he seemed so confident... so practised.

Brent ran his fingers through his tousled mousy-brown hair then searched underneath his cloak for a small hip-flask, much like the one Professor Moody carried around. He opened the bottle and took a swig, then offered the drink to Alicia.

"Try it," he suggested. "It's Firewhisky."

"I've never liked the sound of Firewhisky," Alicia remarked, taking the flask from him and sniffing its contents warily.

"It'll warm you up in no time," Brent said, his eyes glittering.

Alicia took a small sip. As soon as the liquid hit the back of her throat, she began to cough uncontrollably, and she felt very foolish.

"There, there," Brent said, rubbing her back with the palm of his hand. "A bit much for you?"

Alicia nodded with embarrassment.

"No problem." Brent tucked the hip-flask back in his robes and took out a smaller crystal flagon. "You might like this one. Tastes like peaches and lemonade. It's my mum's favourite drink."

She accepted the small bottle from him and toyed with the crystal stopper, suddenly feeling out of her depth. Brent's arm had wound its way around her shoulders, and his breath was warm and heavy on her cheek.

"What do you think of the Weird Sisters?" she asked, hoping to divert his amorous attention.

"They're good," Brent answered, his voice barely a whisper.

His lips appeared to have moved closer, and his nose tickled her hair; Alicia's heartbeat thrummed rapidly, and her breath seemed to have stalled in her chest. She realised that Brent hadn't wanted conversation after all, and now she was alone with him, she felt nervous, inexperienced and ever-so-slightly at his mercy. Glancing down at the crystal flagon in her hands, she unstopped the cork and sniffed the liquid, distrustful of its origin. She almost laughed with relief when the strong aroma of peach schnapps assailed her nostrils. Brent appeared nothing but chivalrous and considerate of his date; he seemed the perfect gentleman.

Alicia lifted the bottle towards her lips and took a small mouthful of the liquid. The strong taste of peaches mingled with the fizz of lemonade, and she could feel the warming effects of the alcohol in her mouth. Pausing to swallow, she hoped the drink would relax her enough to allow Brent to kiss her...

However, seconds later she found herself choking on the liquid with a burst of light the carriage door had flung open, and she was staring into the triumphant features of her Potions master. She gulped down the peach schnapps as quickly as she could, trying to appear demure whilst at the same time coughing from the burning sensation in her throat.

"Ten points from Ravenclaw, Armstrong!" Snape pronounced.

Brent jumped from the carriage like a rabbit scampering away from a farmer's gun, leaving Alicia behind, gagging and retching from her misappropriated drink.

"And what do we have here, Miss Spinnet?" said Snape, revelling in her discomposure.

"Ss-sorry, s-sir," Alicia stuttered, embarrassed.

Snape assessed her for a moment, and Alicia took the opportunity to gaze into his bottomless black eyes, noticing an ounce of concern appear within. She became vaguely aware that she was starting to swoon, as though the courtyard had tilted on its axis and the carriage had begun to slip inexorably towards the wall. Yet her professor had remained upright... Perhaps she was the one who was tilting...?

"Miss Spinnet, can you stand?" asked Snape, offering his hand to help her step out from the cab.

After noticing the dusky timbre of his voice, and the pale fingers poking out from his long shirt sleeves, she mumbled, "I'm not sure, sir." The professor was holding out his hand for her to take... This was as though all her dreams had come true... And here she was, delaying contact!

With a deep breath of Gryffindor resolve, she placed her hand in his, noticing the coldness of his fingers as they wrapped tightly around her own, and she climbed out of the hansom cab and onto the snowy ground, trying her best to appear poised and what was the word Angelina had used? sultry. Unfortunately disaster struck as her second foot made contact with the floor, and her knees buckled, as though her joints had turned to rubber.

Snape caught Alicia adeptly before she hit the floor, and with one heaving growl he swept her up in his arms. Her head thudded against his body, and she could feel the heat radiating from him, as if he were protecting her. The thought was enough to make her dizzy. Her head lolled backwards for a moment, and she caught sight of the



Durmstrang headmaster a couple of paces behind, looking very annoyed.

"Make yourself useful, Igor," Snape addressed Karkaroff. "Search that carriage and bring anything you find to the Hospital Wing. I'll meet you there."

Karkaroff grunted his compliance, and Snape began to walk briskly towards the antechamber. Alicia noticed the snogging couple had already been displaced from their alcove, and the Entrance Hall was deserted. The Weird Sisters' song 'Do the Hippogriff' was pulsating from the open door to the Great Hall, but Snape carried Alicia away from the crowd towards the Hospital Wing, kicking open the double doors to an otherwise empty ward. Madam Pomfrey was nowhere to be seen, and the lights were dim.

Snape placed Alicia on the nearest hospital bed and disentangled himself from her arms to extract his wand and utter the word *Lumos!*"

Alicia squeaked her alarm when the lights changed to full intensity, and her Professor left her side to cast a spell on the Matron's on-call bell.

"Sir!" she cried, overwhelmed by a feeling of utter rejection now that he had left her bedside.

Snape turned on his heel and paced back to her bed, placing his hand on her forehead to gauge her temperature. Calmed by his touch, Alicia sat up again so she could lean into his chest the only place she felt safe. She heard him curse under his breath, looking fretfully around the ward for help of any kind.

"What is it, Severus?" Madam Pomfrey called, running through the double doors in her dress-robos. She quickly assessed the sixth-year girl sitting on the bed, unwilling to let go of the Potions master.

"I found her in a carriage with Armstrong, but she collapsed as soon as she stood up. I can smell alcohol on her breath."

"She doesn't look drunk," Madam Pomfrey remarked wryly.

"Indeed," Snape replied with heavy sarcasm.

At that moment, Karkaroff reappeared with Alicia's pashmina and a small crystal bottle in his grasp. He handed the liquid to Snape without delay. Alicia watched her professor unstop the cork and hover his hooked nose over the neck of the bottle.

"It's peach schnapps, Professor," Alicia said, hoping to be excused for her illicit alcoholic drink.

"It's more than that, Miss Spinnet," replied Snape brusquely.

He tried to move away from the hospital bed, but Alicia squealed her protest and grabbed the buttoned seam of his frockcoat and yanked him back. Her arms clung around his waist possessively, and she nestled in the crook of his arm once more.

Karkaroff snorted under his breath.

"Severus, allow me," offered Madam Pomfrey.

She took the crystal flagon to her workstation and cast diagnostic spells upon the liquid. All the while, Snape kept his hands clasped around his back, determined not to touch the girl and encourage her further.

After what seemed like an eternity to Snape, Madam Pomfrey gave her verdict. "Two different variants of Love Potion mixed with peach schnapps and a twist of lemon. Armstrong did a good job of disguising the Amortentia."

"But failed to understand the consequences of mixing different Love Potions," Snape remarked to himself.

Karkaroff stepped into Snape's line of sight, his goatee partly hiding his smirk. "But his timing was impeccable; one more second and the girl would have imprinted on him. Instead she chose the ever-popular Potions master!"

"Shut up, Igor," Snape hissed.

The Matron ignored them and shuffled over to her potions cabinet to retrieve a bottle of antidote.

"Please don't go anywhere, Professor Snape," Alicia whispered dreamily. "I feel safe with you."

Karkaroff couldn't contain himself and let out a mocking peal of laughter. Snape tried not to squirm in the young girl's embrace and craned his head to check on Madam Pomfrey's progress. When the nurse offered her patient the antidote, Alicia was reticent and had to be coaxed.

"Now is a ridiculous time to become suspicious about accepting a drink," Snape observed sardonically, hoping to shame her into taking the treatment.

Unfortunately for Snape, Alicia didn't have the mental faculties to understand his meaning. All she knew was that she didn't want to let go of her Potions master, and she strongly suspected the Matron was trying to steal him from her.

Snape snatched the bottle impatiently and held it in front of Alicia. "Take this!" he ordered.

Alicia looked up at him, her eyes wide and her hands trembling. "Why?" she asked.

"Take this," Snape repeated, this time more softly. "Take it... for me."

She would do anything he asked of her, so she gulped down the contents of the bottle immediately.

Very quickly her countenance changed, and Alicia was hit hard by a terrible feeling of desolation, as though her stomach had been sucked out through her belly-button. She realised her arm remained wrapped around Professor Snape, and as the gravity of the situation slowly dawned upon her, she removed the offending appendage with great care.

"Professor Snape," she said quietly, "I'm so sorry!"

"Apologies are not necessary, Miss Spinnet; you were under the influence of Love Potion. Let this serve as a lesson to you. Never accept a drink of unknown origin. Pretty young women like you must be on their guard around hormonal teenage boys."

Snape stepped away from the hospital bed with an air of relief and walked out of the ward with Karkaroff at his side.

"Are you not going to deduct points from the girl's House, Severus?" the Durmstrang headmaster enquired on their way out.

"No. That young lady has been through enough for one evening."

Alicia watched the two men exit the room and then lay back into her pillow. Three words swirled around in her mind like pirouetting ballerinas, making her giddy with excitement.

Snape had called her a 'pretty young woman'.

And he had protected her from harm.

She glanced at the Charmed bracelet on her arm, eager to relate her experience to the three other champions.

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Authors' Note:

Where we have quoted dialogue from the original Harry Potter books, we have marked it with an asterisk.

This chapter was written by [WhiteGray](#) and [Agnus Castus](#).

The Snapettes hope you will leave a review!

## The Yule Ball - Part Two

*Chapter 5 of 9*

Four unsuccessful Triwizard entrants arrange their own tournament. The prize: Snape.

Held aloft by the gambolling crowd of students, Professor Flitwick was bodysurfing across the dance floor when Luca, Georgina and Penelope entered the Great Hall. They caught sight of the diminutive wizard escaping from a sea of legs, relieved that his feet had made contact with solid ground.

Gone was the well-mannered frivolity of the estimable Yule Ball; within a few bars of the Weird Sisters' drums and bass guitar, the icicles adorning the ceiling were in danger of melting from the flow of rampant adolescent hormones. The threesome became giddy with excitement as they threw their hands in the air and bounced their way into the centre of the crowd. Red-cloaked Durmstrang boys danced with enthusiastic Hogwarts and Beauxbatons girls, captivated by the flamboyant all-male band.

As the first song ended to screams of adoration, Luca noticed one of the Nordic boys glancing his way, and to Luca's delight, the boy returned a coy smile. He lost sight of him when the next tune exploded into life, and he became encircled by the horde of students. Luca danced with Georgina and Penelope until the young man slipped into view again, surrounded by a group of girls enraptured by his dance-floor prowess.

Georgina, it seemed, hadn't missed a beat. By the end of the second song, she had traversed the dance floor, led the gorgeous young man back to their group and introduced him to Luca. His name was Nikolai, and he had been gifted with short, dark wavy hair and compelling blue eyes. He stood just a tad taller than Luca.

Over the delirious roars of the crowd, he shouted, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Luca!" They shook hands a little longer than necessary, and Nikolai flashed him a devastating smile which carried a hint of mystery.

Penelope yanked Luca's head out of the clouds with an elbow in the ribs, and then the blonde Ravenclaw stepped forward and bellowed, "Penny!"

Nikolai took her hand, kissed it politely, and then quickly stuffed his hands in his pockets. Georgina slipped Luca a sly smile. Bagpipes launched the next tune, and before long, Luca and Nikolai were carving their own space on the dance floor, to the claps and cheers of an admiring audience.

Georgina and Penelope were sharing a discreet nudge and wink at Luca's antics, acknowledging the obvious chemistry shared by the two boys, when Alicia reappeared, looking as though she'd been wandering around in a daydream. Penelope squeezed her hand, and Alicia awakened, her eyes sparkling with a smile of pure joy.

The girls noticed she had returned without Brent Armstrong, and they began to wonder what had become of her date. Alicia beamed at the sexy lead singer and was soon moving her hips seductively to the music. Whatever had happened to Alicia seemed to have unleashed something previously repressed, and in a short time she was holding several male students in her thrall.

Luca made the most of the distraction, whispered a suggestion into Nikolai's ear, and steered him out of the Great Hall into the cold, snowy night air.



Even though Nikolai was a year older than Luca, he was much less experienced. The young man was shaking with nerves as Luca took him by the hand and walked away from the castle, towards the footpath which led to the Gamekeeper's hut. Arriving at one of the huge stone monoliths, Luca cleared its base of several inches of snow and was about to lay his cloak on the frozen ground when Nikolai pushed him against the frost-covered block, his lips urgent and hungry.

What followed was fast, fervid and mind-blowing. Having been sexually frustrated for the entire school term, Luca was appreciative and responsive, and also glad that he'd taken Nikolai to one of the remotest places in the castle grounds. Afterwards, they slouched on Luca's magically-warmed garment, with Nikolai's red cloak wrapped around them.

Feeling peacefully contented for the first time in months, Luca was intrigued by the mesmeric young man lying in his arms, whose naivety seemed almost child-like. He wondered how he had managed to overlook him before tonight. The Durmstrang boy seemed a contradiction: handsome yet awkward, intense but also inhibited, and eager whilst in some ways constrained. Luca considered this conundrum whilst the thin bluish light of Nikolai's wand glimmered in the freezing night air, illuminating the pleasing contours of his face.

"Vot is it like for you at Hogvarts?" Nikolai whispered into Luca's neck.

"What do you mean?"

"How is the students and teachers getting on vith you?"

"Fine. Why?"

"But, you are... gay?"

"Oh, you're asking if I get picked on... No, not really. Not anymore. When I first came out, I got the usual jokes about the poof from Hufflepuff, but that was all."

"So... nobody opposes you?" Nikolai's voice was disbelieving.

"Opposes? No. Or if they do, they don't have the nerve to say so. Of course, it helps that Dumbledore's gay. Not that it's widely known... But he wouldn't stand for that kind of harassment."

"Your Headmaster is like you?" Nikolai's eyes were wide with shock.

"Yes." Luca looked at his companion earnestly. "Why do you ask?"

Nikolai sighed sadly. "I am wishing it was the same at Durmstrang."

Before Luca fully understood the implication, Nikolai's lips had found him again and they became engrossed in another long, heated embrace.



At the other side of the castle, Professor Snape scoured the perimeters for trysting couples, blasting apart rosebushes and feeling increasingly agitated. Karkaroff trotted at his side, pestering him with oblique references to his Dark Mark, testing Snape's patience to the limit of endurance.

Knowing Karkaroff had blown the whistle on dozens of Death Eaters, Snape could understand the man's current predicament, but he remained wholly unsympathetic; Karkaroff had squealed about Snape's own affiliation to the Council of Magical Law, and although this had done nothing to alter the course of Snape's life, he knew the transmogrified Durmstrang headmaster to be utterly untrustworthy.

"I really don't see what there is to fuss about, Igor." Snape told him curtly, nearing the corner of the winding pathway. The snow under his feet compacted with a pleasing muffled sound.

His auditory experience was ruined by Karkaroff's insistent undertones. "Severus, you can't pretend this isn't happening! It's been getting clearer and clearer for months, I am becoming seriously concerned, I can't deny it..."

"Then flee," Snape replied, barely caring. "Flee, I will make your excuses. I, however, am remaining at Hogwarts."

They rounded the corner and jettisoned another young couple from a dense rosebush whilst also upsetting a herd of buzzing, living fairies. The Potions master was on the verge of capturing the vacuous creatures and cutting off their wings for his next Potions lesson, when he caught sight of the very reason he needed to remain at the school: Harry Potter.

Lily's son and his red-headed sidekick were ambling along the pathway, eyeing the professors suspiciously. Snape almost lost his temper.

"And what are you two doing?" he snapped. In the corner of his vision, he saw Karkaroff twisting his ludicrous goatee around his finger once more.

Snape wouldn't have lasted two seconds as a triple agent if his body language were as transparent as Karkaroff's. Should the Dark Lord return to corporeal form, the security of Snape's world would alter irrevocably, and he would have to stage a web of deceit more complex than any which had gone before. By comparison, Karkaroff's dilemma seemed almost trivial.

"We're walking," Weasley said tersely. "Not against the law, is it?"

"Keep walking, then!" Snape growled and pushed past the two boys, wishing he could tell Karkaroff to take a walk, too. Unfortunately, the Durmstrang headmaster was stuck to his side like Bubotuber pus.

Snape pulled the hood of his cloak over his head, and the two men walked further away from the castle, checking nooks and crannies for signs of rule-breaking and secret rendezvous. They searched the snowy grounds in silence; their last verbal exchange seemed to have mollified the Death-Eater blabbermouth. Before long, Snape noticed a bluish glimmer in the distance and headed towards the wandlight, wondering what clandestine activities they were about to thwart.

He was not prepared for what he was about to witness.

"Mostovoi!" Karkaroff shrieked, hoisting a young man up by the collar and dragging him away from his companion.

Sitting on the ground was a dishevelled sixth-year boy, who, moments earlier, had been in a passionate embrace with the Durmstrang student. Luca Caruso gasped at the sight of the two professors bearing down on them, and he looked helplessly at his erstwhile suitor's agonised expression.

Snape found himself lost for words, but Karkaroff was all over Nikolai Mostovoi like a Niffler on a cache of Galleons.

Nikolai stumbled as Karkaroff shoved him forcefully away, as though touching the young man would somehow contaminate him.

"Professor Karkaroff!" the young man stuttered, the blood draining from his already pale face.

"Mostovoi!" Karkaroff snarled. "You are a disgrace to my school! What do you think you are doing with this... this...boy?"

"I I I'm sorry, Professor! I I wasn't thinking straight... I..."

"Enough!" shouted the Headmaster. "I have seen and heard enough!" Karkaroff snatched Nikolai's wand and pressed the illuminated tip into the boy's chest. "You know the punishment for this!"

Real fear crossed Nikolai's face now. Luca leapt to his feet, his wand at the ready.

"You're not going to hurt him, Professor Karkaroff!" Luca warned. "He's done nothing wrong."

"*Nothing wrong?*" Karkaroff repeated incredulously. "You really are *priceless*, aren't you? You disgusting little freak!"

Luca's eyes narrowed dangerously, and he raised his wand directly at Karkaroff's face, sparks issuing from its end.

Snape finally intervened. Stepping forward, he shielded Karkaroff and flicked Luca's wand away. "Put it down, Mr Caruso. No-one's going to get hurt."

"But he's going to torture Nikolai!" Luca's voice sounded shrill.

"No I am not, you stupid boy!" Karkaroff spat. "Mostovoi knows the punishment for fraternising with other...boys..." He said the latter word with undisguised distaste and then turned to face his student. "Expulsion!"

"What?" Luca almost screamed.

"You heard me, Nancy-boy. Nikolai Mostovoi will be expelled from the Durmstrang Institute!"

With that, Karkaroff dragged Nikolai away into the darkness, leaving Snape's black eyes staring into Luca's shocked face.

"Sir," Luca began. "I'm so sorry; I didn't know..."

"That Professor Karkaroff is a homophobic despot?" Snape finished for him.

Luca swallowed. "Is he really going to expel him?"

"I expect so."

"Oh, God."

"There's no point praying to your deity, Caruso. That boy's magical career is about to end in tatters. If you want to help him, give me your wand."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Give me your wand, and I shall attempt to intercede."

"But, how?"

"It will cost you thirty House points and a detention with Mr Filch."

Luca groaned. "Filch? Really?"

"Yes. There is no time for indecision. Give me your wand now, or stand by and watch your friend be expelled in disgrace."

Luca handed over his wand without further delay. Snape aimed at the ground and executed a graceful swish. *Confundo!*

"What's that for?" Luca asked, bemused.

"Wait for me here, Mr Caruso."

With a dramatic billow of long black robes, the Potions master left Luca standing in the dark. The frozen monolithic stone was his only solace.



Half an hour later, Professor Snape retraced his steps to find Luca Caruso waiting for him in total darkness, shivering in the cold night air. *At least the boy had sense enough to follow my orders*, he thought.

Luca was huddled in the shelter of the ice-covered stele, wrapped in his cloak, conserving as much body heat as possible. Snape realised he'd left the boy without his wand, and his dress-robos would have provided little comfort from the freezing conditions. He considered that House points might not need to be deducted after all.

"Pprofessor!" Luca stuttered.

"Mr Caruso," Snape intoned.

"Wwhat happened?"

Snape handed Luca his sequestered wand, gesturing that he should accompany him back to the castle. Luca fell into step at his side, quickly casting a Warming Charm upon himself.

"Mr Mostovoi has escaped expulsion," Snape informed him.

Luca heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Professor Snape."

"But he shall be sent home tomorrow morning, never to return to Hogwarts."

The sick feeling in Luca's stomach returned, although not as pronounced as before. "But that's not fair, sir!"

"Consider it the best possible outcome. Professor Karkaroff would have hung, drawn and quartered the boy, if left to his own devices. Suffice it to say, Mr Mostovoi will now be punished for letting his defences down and finding himself in a compromising situation."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"I performed *Prior Incantato* on your wand, demonstrating that you had Confunded Mr Mostovoi into accompanying you outside, leading the Durmstrang headmaster to surmise that you had taken advantage of him."

Luca's jaw dropped at the implication.

"That's not what happened! I'd never do such a thing!"

"I should hope not, Mr Caruso."

"So why did you...?"

"It was necessary to provide Mr Mostovoi with an alibi of sorts, so he could escape the not-unreasonable assumption that he is gay."

Luca kept pace in silence for a few moments.

"It's hard to believe that someone can be punished so severely just for their sexuality, sir. Can Karkaroff get away with such blatant discrimination?"

"*Professor* Karkaroff can do whatever he pleases. He is the Headmaster; he sets and enforces the rules. You must know already that Muggle-borns are refused entry to the Durmstrang Institute?"

"Yes, I knew that sir, but I thought..."

"That Karkaroff's prejudices didn't extend to sexuality?"

"Um, yes, I suppose so, sir."

"Then it is time for you to wake up and smell the Veritaserum, Mr Caruso." Snape stopped walking, halting them just outside the extent of the castle's illumination. "Hogwarts is a model of tolerance and discretion compared to some of the other wizarding schools."

Luca assimilated this information slowly, admiring the Professor's masculine silhouette contrasted against the chiaroscuro of the castle lights.

"You would do well to value your liberty and appreciate your freedom." The professor's tone darkened as he continued, "Others are not so... fortunate."

Professor Snape dropped the hood of his cloak, preparing to re-enter the castle. Luca was lost in the subtext of what had been said and felt unable to reply.

"Detention with Mr Filch, seven o'clock tomorrow evening in the caretaker's office. Do not be late."

"I'll be there, sir."

Snape nodded once and set off towards the Great Hall.

"Oh, and sir?" Luca called.

Snape turned mid-step.

"Thank you, sir."

The Potions master waved his hand in dismissal and stepped into the glowing luminosity, sweeping away like a black spectre and disappearing from sight.



"Where've you been, lover boy?" Georgina hooked her arm through Luca's and led him towards the drinks table. "What the hell? You're freezing cold!"

"Freezing cold and thirstier than a Grindylow," Luca said as he helped himself to a large glass of punch, glugging the contents down and pouring himself another measure. "Merlin, there's no alcohol in this stuff either," he grumbled.

Georgina frowned. "Move over," she said, jostling him to one side. "Looks like I'm going to have to serve myself yet another drink. Perhaps I should have found myself a gallant Gryffindor to keep me topped up for the evening..."

"I hear Percy Weasley is available."

"Very funny, superstud."

"Don't, Georgie. It's been a disaster."

Luca's sorrowful expression caused Georgina to take him by the hand and guide him to an empty table in the corner of the Great Hall. "I saw sexy Snape a moment ago, just ten seconds ahead of you. He seemed quite... chuffed with himself." Georgina paused, tracking Luca's reaction. "Well, perhaps not chuffed, but he'd stopped looking like he'd sucked on a wasp."

"We had a little... chat," Luca said. "Actually, he was as kind and considerate as I've ever known him."

"Sounds interesting," Georgina coaxed. "What did you talk about?"

"Sexuality." Luca almost smiled when he saw her expression.

"No, never! You didn't... ask him?"

When Luca snorted, Georgina let out the breath she'd been holding.

"No, I didn't ask him. But Snape seems very... sympathetic... You might even say *sensitive*. He understands what it means to be gay."

Georgina's eyes widened. "So you're saying..."

"I don't know what I'm saying. I just know that he really helped me out tonight."

"Helped you with what?"

Luca sighed. "Oh, it's such a mess. Karkaroff and Snape caught me and Nikolai making out. Nikolai's been sent home in disgrace, but it would've been much worse if Snape hadn't intervened."

After a detailed description of the events, Georgina leaned back into her chair and cast her eyes around the room. "We'll have to nip any rumours about Nikolai in the bud. People are bound to talk."

"Yeah, but what if they talk about me? What if word gets out that I Confunded him?"

"But that's not true!" Georgina exclaimed.

"That won't stop the gossipers," Luca said glumly.

Georgina gave his hand a squeeze. "I shall personally apply the Tongue-Tying Curse upon anyone who breathes a word against you, and I won't let the Durmstrang gang muddy your reputation, even if it means I have to *Imperio* Karkaroff."

"Professor Moody would be proud of you," Luca commented.

"You bet." Georgina flashed him a smile. "So, anyway, enough turmoil. What was he like?"

"Who?"

Georgina slapped him on the arm. "Nikolai, you nincompoop."

Luca smiled suggestively. "Hotter than a Hungarian Horntail."

She bit her lip. "Spill! All the details. Was he a virgin?"

"If he was, he isn't now."

"Luca! You jammy git!"

Luca laughed, knowing she wouldn't begrudge him, despite her envy.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm the only virgin left at this school," Georgina said wistfully.

"I wouldn't say that," Luca replied. "I'm fairly sure Alicia is as pure as the driven snow."

"I stand corrected," she bit back. "I'm one of *two* virgins left at this school."

"You realise that if I swung the other way, I'd only have eyes for you, love."

"Oh, yes. That makes me feel loads better."

"Sweet Merlin, I would never have pegged you with self-esteem issues." He rolled his eyes, leaned over and whispered in her ear. "You're what, all of seventeen years? That's much too young for a mid-life crisis, my dear."

"You're not helping."

"Georgie, you're sporting a great set of tits and have an arse to die for," Luca remarked. "Trust me, you're a drag queen's wet dream."

"Truly?"

He nodded his head, eliciting a grin from her. "I love you, too, darling."

"You'd better." He grasped her about the waist and led her towards the main floor. "Now shut up and dance with me, you virgin tart."

The Weird Sisters started a slow number; Georgina clasped his hand and wrapped her arm about his shoulder.

"So, what do you think about Viktor Krum?" Luca asked.

"Well, he's a lovely dish. Tall, dark and brooding," she replied. "Sort of like our dear professor minus the biting sarcasm, rich voice and undeniable masculine grace."

"You forgot the billowing."

"Ah, yes. How could I have forgotten the billow? It's one of his most distinguishing features," she said with a sigh.

"Utter bullocks! We all know his most distinguishing feature is his nose."

"You are such a cad." She giggled.

He twirled her around and abruptly pulled her back to his chest. "You know what they say about noses." He wagged his brows suggestively. "The man must be hung like a centaur."

"I thought that was just a myth?"

"Let's just say that some myths are rooted in truth," he replied. "Now our dear professor bears three spectacular indicators of an impressive todger: he has long, elegant fingers, what appears to be an impressive shoe size and a distinguished conk."

Georgina buried her head in Luca's shoulder in an attempt to stifle her laughter. "I cannot believe we're actually discussing his dick."

"My love, if there's ever a part of anyone's anatomy that deserves to have odes composed in its honour besides your succulent breasts, that is it's definitely Snape's manly bits."

"You're going to go there, aren't you?"

"You know me all too well, Georgie." He pulled her close, nestled his face alongside her ear and salaciously murmured, *There was a Potions master of exceptional merit, who was blessed with a massive todger along with the ego to bear it...*

To the casual observer, Luca and Georgina seemed to be a couple happily caught in the early stages of love. Perhaps they were, to a certain degree, as their behaviour was a testament to the strength of their friendship. The couple continued to swirl around the dance floor, oblivious to a set of eyes watching them curiously from the shadows.

"Dear Merlin, can you imagine a younger Snape?"

"Can I ever?" Luca replied with an exaggerated leer. "The mere thought sends my heart, amongst other things, racing."

"It's too bad we can't play out our academically-inspired fantasies upon Viktor."

"And, why ever not?" he asked. "If we were to dress him in elevated boots, black robes and cast a Silencing Charm to hide that heavy accent, he'd be a rather convincing substitute."

"Don't bother," she said. "He apparently tried to show some interest toward Alicia, but after that little Quidditch debacle she wouldn't take the bait. Besides, he decided to chase after Potter's little frizzy-haired friend."

"The swot? Oh, that's bound to be interesting. I bet ~~he~~ doesn't get lucky tonight," Luca replied with a laugh.

The last song of the evening came to an end, and Luca led her off the dance floor while the room thundered with applause.

"Well, speak of the devil." Georgina nudged Luca and tilted her head towards one side of the Entrance Hall.

There stood Viktor Krum, alone, having already bid Hermione Granger goodnight. As they made their way towards him, Viktor turned and cast Georgina a broad, slightly goofy smile.

"Hello, Viktor!" Georgina greeted him with a fond hug and then introduced Luca.

Viktor nodded politely, saying, "I haff observed you and Georgina carry yourselves very vell on the dance floor."

"You noticed," Luca replied with a smirk. "Our families are close friends, and as a result we were forced to endure formal dance lessons together during childhood."

Georgina flashed a smile at Luca which bore an unspoken request. She knew Luca would instantly decipher her intent years of friendship had oiled the wheels of non-verbal communication.

Luca nodded briefly and said, "Goodnight to you both, and Happy Christmas!" He then embraced Georgina and whispered in her ear, "I expect all the juicy details tomorrow!"

As Luca headed for the stairs, Georgina turned her attention towards Viktor. "It's been such a pleasant evening. Won't you be a dear and escort me back to my House?"

"It would be my pleasure," he replied.

Viktor offered her his arm, and she readily accepted. They slowly made their way towards the dungeons engaged in light banter.

"There is von thing I haff yet to understand," Viktor said.

"Oh, what would that be?"

"You are vithout doubt von of the most attractive girls at Hogvarts." His mouth curved in a brief smile. "Vhy is Luca the only male I haff seen you vith tonight?"

Caught by surprise, Georgina blushed at the compliment. "In all honesty, I'm not quite sure how to answer that. It's just happens to be the way things turned out."

He softly chuckled at her response. "Sveet Georgina, you seem to haff every boy at this school chasing you."

It was Georgina's turn to laugh. "They may glance my way on occasion, but I'd hardly refer to that as chasing."

"I haff a secret to tell." He lowered his voice to a stage whisper, leaning his head towards hers as they walked. "Ve look at girls like von views dessert. Some are pleasantly sveet, like a simple biscuit served vith tea. Others are pretty, like iced petit fours, but they lack substance. A few are decadent like rich chocolate truffle."

She snuggled closely against his arm while giving him a coy glance. "Pray tell, which category do I fall under?"

In a swift motion, Viktor captured her in his arms and spun into a darkened alcove before she had a chance to react.

"You, my dear, are the epitome of decadence." He cupped her face in both hands. "Pure. Rich. Decadence."

Before she could respond, his lips pressed down adamantly upon hers. Her mouth slowly began to soften as he caressed her cheeks with his thumbs. Viktor slid one hand around her neck, and he raked his fingers through her hair. As he ran his tongue along the seam of her lips, she gasped. He slipped his tongue between her slightly parted lips and drew her body closer as he wrapped his arm about her waist. He was able to elicit a small moan from her, and he deepened the kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck, leaning into his body without thought. Her knees seemed to give way, and she hung onto him.

It was much too easy for Georgina to lose herself in the fantasy that she was in her professor's arms. As his kisses became more heated, his hands began to explore her body and she was utterly lost.

"Georgina, I haff never vanted a girl like I vant you," Viktor murmured hoarsely against her temple.

Her reverie was broken by the sound of his voice. His fingers brushed across her nipple before she realised he had worked his hand beneath the bodice of her gown. She gasped at the compromising position in which she found herself, acutely aware she was out of her depth.

"Your body is nothing but delicious curves," he said, palming her breast and gently squeezing it.

"Please stop," she managed to stammer. As she attempted to pull away from him, he pressed his full length against her body, effectively pinning her against the wall.

"Sveet Georgina," he crooned in her ear. "Close your eyes and relax." His free hand ran down the length of her thigh and began lifting the hem of her dress. Georgina momentarily stiffened before she began pushing and thrashing in earnest. She managed to break free, wheeled about and ran from the alcove, with Viktor following close behind. He managed to reach out and grasp her arm, only to be met by the end point of her wand.

"Georgina." He sighed heavily, raising his hands in supplication. "I am sorry. So terribly sorry!" He ran his hand through his hair in exasperation and cursed beneath his breath.

"You are nothing more than a toad-licking scoundrell!" she indignantly spat, unaware of the tears streaming down her face. She inwardly berated herself for stupidly succumbing to an adolescent fantasy, all the while verbally casting aspersions on the propriety of Viktor's parentage.

"Do I detect a problem, Miss Smyth?"

The rich, smooth drawl visibly startled both students.

A keen observer, Professor Snape stepped into view and assessed the scene before him with a cool, albeit calculated detachment, noticing Georgina's dishevelled appearance and angry stance in contrast to Krum's guilty and apologetic deference.

Drawing a deep breath, Georgina momentarily closed her eyes in an attempt to regain her composure. "No, sir. I believe Mr Krum and I have come to a mutual understanding," she icily bit out.

"Is that so?" He pulled a linen handkerchief from thin air and presented it to her. "Then perhaps it would be prudent if you lowered your wand."

Georgina slowly complied and quietly accepted the handkerchief, turning away from both men to dry her eyes. Somewhat calmer, she returned the damp cloth to the professor with a murmur of thanks.

"As this situation appears to have reached a certain degree of resolution, I suggest you return to your room, Miss Smyth."

With a curt nod, she strode down the dungeon corridor and quickly out of sight. Professor Snape then turned to scrutinize the lone young man.

"If that vill be all, Professor..."

"I don't believe you've been dismissed, Mr Krum." There was a steel edge to his dangerously low voice. He slowly circled the boy much like a predator ready to strike. "This situation has yet to be resolved to *my* satisfaction."

Krum stood straight-backed, eyeing the Potions master warily. As he didn't know how much the professor had witnessed, he chose to remain silent.

"Cat got your tongue, Mr Krum?" Snape continued to stalk around the international Quidditch star, baiting him to speak, and then stopped directly in front of him to look him in the eye, surreptitiously probing his mind wandlessly, hoping to catch a glimpse of what had transpired.

The Bulgarian seemed to realise his ploy and dropped his gaze to the floor.

"Assaulting a student is a very serious matter, Mr Krum. One would have thought you'd have something to say for yourself."

"I did not assault Georgina!"

Krum's eyes met Snape's again, and this time, Snape saw a flash of Miss Smyth's bodice and bosom being fondled by Krum. Any amusement he might have felt about the teenage fumble was drowned out by his fury. The Bulgarian Bonbon had obviously used his celebrity credentials to entice an attractive young woman into his lair, and Snape was not about to let Krum manhandle his way through the female contingent of the House of Slytherin.

"I wonder what Miss Smyth would have to say...? Perhaps I shall question her in the morning." Snape smirked when he observed a crack in Krum's composure. "I daresay Professor Karkaroff will be interested to hear about this little episode."

"Professor Karkaroff vill understand. I will be excused."

"Oh, really? So certain, are you?"

"Yes," Krum replied churlishly.

"Well, we'll soon see about that. I shall meet you at the Durmstrang ship in ten minutes' time, and we will discuss this incident with your Headmaster."

Krum's features were resolute, confident that he would be acquitted.

His cockiness irked Snape. "Whatever the outcome, I assure you, if you so much as breathe upon another Slytherin female, I shall personally pack your trunk and escort you back to the Durmstrang Institute."

The Triwizard champion raised his eyebrows, nodded once, and then headed quickly for the steps out of the dungeon.



Snape found Professor Dumbledore at the top of the staircase. The Headmaster was watching the last stragglers leave the Great Hall and make their way back to their dormitories whilst humming under his breath and rustling an empty sweet wrapper in his hand. His breath smelled of mint humbug.

"Headmaster, I am glad I have found you."

"Severus, I trust you have had an enjoyable evening?"

Snape nodded brusquely without listening. "I need to speak to you about Viktor Krum."

Dumbledore rolled the toffee around in his mouth. "Durmstrang's champion? Why?"

"I have just witnessed him forcing himself upon a seventh-year girl in a deserted corridor. I don't care if he's a Triwizard champion he must be disciplined."

"And you do not trust Professor Karkaroff to mete out the appropriate punishment... Have you informed Durmstrang's headmaster?"

"Not yet. I've sent Krum back to the ship, and I'm going to speak to Karkaroff presently. But I have doubts..."

"Doubts?"

"Yes, Headmaster. I have already witnessed the near-expulsion of one Durmstrang student due to his ill-advised liaison with a Hogwarts boy. Karkaroff is a misogynist; he won't care about Krum's behaviour... If anything, he'll applaud it."

Dumbledore scratched his crooked nose thoughtfully. "You may well be correct, Severus. It's unlikely that Karkaroff will penalise Krum with any degree of fairness. Such is the way of things."

"I have no intention of standing by whilst Karkaroff demonstrates prejudice and favouritism."

"An interesting statement, coming from you, Severus."

"I've never been a male chauvinist, Dumbledore. I do not share Karkaroff's... values."

The Headmaster considered this for a moment. "By all means, tell the Durmstrang Head about his recalcitrant champion, but don't expect it will achieve anything."

Snape's nostrils flared as he processed the information.

Dumbledore hushed his voice. "I assume you have talked to Karkaroff about other matters?"

"Yes," Snape replied crisply.

"Well?" Dumbledore prompted gently.

"Karkaroff's Mark is becoming darker too. He is panicking, he fears retribution; you know how much help he gave the Ministry after the Dark Lord fell. Karkaroff intends to flee if the Mark burns."

"Does he? And are you tempted to join him?"

"No," Snape replied, watching Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies walking up the stairs, and feeling grossly insulted by the question. "I am not such a coward."

"No," Dumbledore agreed. "You are a braver man by far than Igor Karkaroff. You know, I sometimes think we Sort too soon..."

Dumbledore walked away, leaving Snape feeling as though he'd been kicked in the stomach. In two sentences, the Headmaster had praised him for his bravery, and then stupefied him with the suggestion that he may not be a true Slytherin. His courage might have earned him a place in the House of Gryffindor. Lily's house. The revelation was as far-reaching as it was unwelcome.

Snape strode out of the Entrance Hall and through the courtyard, lost in contemplation of the choices he had made at the age of eleven.



At half-past-midnight, the Potions master hiked back to the castle. His fists were clenched as he climbed the gradient through a fresh flurry of snowflakes, his errand having ended in failure, just as Dumbledore had predicted. Krum escaped meaningful punishment, but Snape won two concessions: Krum was not to approach or speak to Georgina Smyth during the rest of his stay, nor was he allowed to start or perpetuate any rumours which might sully the girl's reputation as a result of the incident. The outcome was far from what he'd hoped, and the injustice lined the pit of Snape's stomach with bitterness.

He had witnessed sexism in a league of its own during Voldemort's reign, but not because this brand of bigotry was instigated by the Dark Lord; the heir of Slytherin openly welcomed women into the fold and had even offered to make an exception for Muggle-born Lily Evans. The Dark Lord's interest lay purely in magical talent what people could do for him. In Snape's experience, men outnumbered women in their ranks purely because fewer women had the requisite thirst for power.

The downside to Dark Lord's strategy was his lack of interest in ethics and morals. Death Eaters openly practiced their prejudices and persecuted those who failed to comply with their narrow-minded view of the world without fear of punishment by their leader. And so, a homophobic man like Karkaroff could get away with worse than murder and believe his behaviour justified.



Snape had seen two unfair punishments at the hands of the Durmstrang headmaster that very evening. Nikolai Mostovoi had nearly lost everything after a consensual liaison whilst Viktor Krum had almost been congratulated for forcing unwanted attention upon a girl, all because of Karkaroff's warped principles.

And so, trudging his boots through the deserted grounds and pushing his bitterness to one side, Snape resolved to find a way to regain his sense of equity.

He re-entered the courtyard which, earlier that evening, had been full of carriages, and he recalled the embarrassing incident with Alicia Spinnet. Snape was satisfied he had prevented the situation from turning ugly, by helping a vulnerable young woman escape the clutches of a smart-aleck Ravenclaw. As he passed by the spot where he had apprehended the couple, he reappraised the matter, realising he had only deducted ten points from Brent Armstrong's house because, at the time, he had not known the conceited libertine had spiked Miss Spinnet's drink with Amortentia. In hindsight, ten points didn't seem nearly enough.

Snape passed through the antechamber to find Argus Filch waiting for him inside the doorway with Mrs Norris curling around his feet and mewing at the dark cloaked figure.

"Mr Filch. Just the person I wanted to see."

"Evening, Professor Snape. What can I do you for?"

"How are you fixed for student detentions this week? I have a seventh-year Ravenclaw in desperate need of... rehabilitation. Seven evenings should suffice."

"Rehabilitation, you say?" Filch replied. "It'd be my pleasure, Professor."

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Authors' Note:

Where we have quoted dialogue from the original Harry Potter books, we have marked it with an asterisk.

This chapter was written by [Agnus Castus](#) and [rosewood](#).

The Snapettes would be pleased to receive your review!

## The Second Task - Part One

*Chapter 6 of 9*

Four unsuccessful Triwizard entrants arrange their own tournament. The prize: Snape.

After the events of the Yule Ball, each of the Four-House champions left the castle and spent the Christmas break with their respective families. Penny tried to put a brave face on things, but she was still angry and upset with Percy, feeling utterly humiliated. Shaken by her experience with Krum, Georgina was glad to leave Hogwarts and be doted on by her parents, if only for a short time. Luca's extended family came over from Italy, and he had a boisterous and fun Christmas, whereas Alicia's sporting talents were recognised with lots of brand-new Quidditch equipment waiting for her under the Christmas tree.

But all too soon, January rolled around, and the Hogwarts pupils once again boarded the train that would take them back to school and the hum-drum and grind of lessons.

On an especially bitter, windy afternoon, Alicia and Luca had their first Potions lesson of the term, and Professor Snape entered the classroom in a foul mood.

Invariably, Snape was cantankerous at the start of term, but this year his irritability reached new heights. Perhaps it was due to his Mark growing darker, causing a raw sensation of tingling and dull burning to creep through his left arm, or maybe simply because he was peeved about some precious Boomslang skin being stolen from his personal stores on the first night of term. He resolved to find the culprit of this thievery. They would pay dearly. There also remained the irascible Moody and the incessant hounding of Karkaroff to be avoided, adding to Snape's general grumpiness.

"Open your books, page sixty-nine," he snapped. Giving a heavy, portentous look to each and every student, Snape then informed them, "Today we shall revise the identification of magical creatures' valued properties and categorise their uses in potion-making."

Snape's attention was drawn to the Hufflepuff, Mr Caruso, and Gryffindor, Miss Spinnet, who had recently started sitting together in the front row. Normally, he wouldn't have given them more than a second's notice, but the sparkle of one black gemstone from a bracelet on Luca's wrist caught his eye, distracting Snape for the briefest second and spontaneously drawing unwonted attention to the pair. Slowly, he walked over to stand directly in front of them.

"Mr Caruso, would you be so obliging as to elaborate on the habitat and relevant properties of the Lobalug?"

Luca's eyelashes fluttered as he looked into his handsome Potions master's black eyes, and his mind went blank. Unnerved by the odd leer on the professor's features, Luca had heard nothing.

"Could you please repeat the question, sir?"

"Lobalugs, Mr Caruso pray tell, where would one find them?"

"Uh, uh, um, the North Sea, sir!" Luca flashed Snape his most debonair smile, hoping his carefree charm might impress his teacher. It was worth a try.

Unimpressed and undeterred, Snape stoically pressed, "And the relevancy of any particular property thereof, Mr Caruso?"

Luca blinked, distracted now by the sultry timbre of the professor's low voice, and once again, he drew a blank.

"Please, could you repeat the question, sir?"

Snape scowled. This generation of students had to be the thickest of all he had ever taught. He glared around the room in disdain before swooping towards Luca.

"Don't ask me to repeat myself, Mr Caruso. Five points from Hufflepuff, for not paying attention. Be warned, I'm not in a generous mood today."

There were muffled sniggers throughout the class; their Potions master had never, under any circumstances, been in a generous mood.

"Amusing, is it?" quipped Snape, casting a surly look around the classroom. "Two extra rolls of parchment on all the magical creatures covered today, due by the next lesson. That should keep you sixth-years thoroughly entertained."

No one dared voice a protest or even raise a groan; things could only get worse.

And Snape wasn't letting Luca off quite so lightly, either. "Perhaps your challenged wits can at least reveal the relevant property of the Lobalug, Mr Caruso?"

Again, Luca couldn't pull anything out of his memory regarding the Lobalug, not even to save his life, and his mouth gaped open, unable to utter anything intelligible.

Snape turned his piercing gaze to Luca's classroom neighbour, Alicia Spinnet, but paused briefly before starting his interrogation.

Ever since the Yule Ball incident, Snape had found cause to reappraise the young woman. Nevertheless, she still reminded him of the myriad idiocies and foolish predicaments in which these dunderheads frequently placed themselves, and he frowned, ruminating on the girl's seemingly sincere naïveté... But, ignorance was no excuse, and he would not allow himself to go soft on the girl.

His employment of calm superiority a quality in which he prided himself made the next cross-examination particularly enjoyable.

"Miss Spinnet," he began, only to stop as he noted Alicia had an almost identical bracelet to Luca's, and its three quartz beads caught the candlelight, sparkling *Good God, from potential date-rapist to plainly one of the most openly gay pupils in the student body, is the girl as daft as she is deluded?*

Having rescued Alicia from the potential carnal clutches of Brent Armstrong at the Yule Ball, Snape let out an exasperated breath through his nostrils, and then smirked at the incongruity of it all. *Stupid girls... won't they ever learn? Now she has a Nancy-boy courting her won't she be surprised when he asks to borrow her lingerie for his own use?* Severus almost smiled.

"Perhaps you can enlighten us, Miss Spinnet, where Mr Caruso cannot? The two of you do seem attached to one another of late, but hopefully you are the brighter part?"

Silence ensued as Alicia became flustered by Professor Snape's unexpected observation regarding her and Luca. *Surely he doesn't think that we're...*

"Well, Miss Spinnet?" demanded Snape.

"Sir?"

"The relevant property of the Lobalug?" he clipped out with a pronounced edge.

"The venom sac, sir," Alicia blurted. "Wizards extract its poison for use in potions."

Snape raised an eyebrow to suppress his sudden surprise.

Alicia gulped as Snape took one step closer to her side, his black eyes glittering with unreadable intent.

"Which other creature's venom may be extracted for rare pesticidal purposes?"

Luca groaned, and Alicia sighed from the tension of being put on the spot, unable to answer.

"Your luck has run out so soon, Miss Spinnet?" Snape smirked and swivelled around. His students were truly bereft of real intelligence. However, there was something to be said for their stupidity; he was feeling a bit better, as well as momentarily distracted from the irritation of Karkaroff's unceasing stalking.

As he made his way to the blackboard, Snape heard the faint, but correct, answer. "The Streeler, sir."

Severus swirled around to stare directly at Alicia. "What did you say, Miss Spinnet?"

"The Streeler, sir," she repeated. "Its venom is one of the few substances known to kill Horklumps, sir."

A dangerous glint flashed across Snape's eyes. "Indeed?"

Then his eyes narrowed as he zeroed in on her. "Perhaps you can also enlighten us, Miss Spinnet, for which use Ashwinder eggs are most prized?"

Mesmerised by his black fathomless eyes, Alicia could only blink.

"Miss Spinnet?" His lips curled, bordering on an amused smile, but his caustic tone belied it when he offered, "Perhaps a secret ingredient combined with let us say peach schnapps?"

Alicia felt her face flush red. Around her, she heard titters and muffled sniggers throughout the classroom. Even though she had tried to put the incident behind her, Brent Armstrong had not, and the condition in which he had left Alicia inside the coach had been depicted by the randy seventh-year with swaggering vulgar exaggeration, resulting in her being tagged an 'easy' drunkard. The gossip had spread like wildfire throughout the sixth and seventh-years. Alicia hadn't minded the snide remarks; anyone who really knew her, or was a true friend, knew it wasn't true, and her Quidditch mates and close friends had supported her through the nasty tittle-tattle.

But Alicia had not been prepared for Professor Snape's intentional cruelty, blatantly reprising the sorry saga for all her classmates to hear.

*Why am I surprised? He thinks I'm a silly ninny. I'm an idiot to think he sincerely thought I was pretty. Just more of his patronising treatment.* Alicia realised she had fooled herself into thinking he had truly complimented her, and she felt overwhelmed by the reality of the opposite being true. Tears welled in her eyes, and she stared down at the floor and mumbled, "Amortentia, sir."

Knowing all too well how ostracism and humiliation felt, Luca forgot himself and impulsively covered Alicia's hand with his, giving it a supportive squeeze.

"Louder, Miss Spinnet, I'm sure all of the class is interested in hearing about this particular potion."

"Amortentia," she repeated in a raised voice, her lower lip starting to tremble.

"Hands to yourself, Mr Caruso! Ten points from Hufflepuff for improper behaviour, fifteen points from Gryffindor for encouraging it." Snape wasn't about to overlook or tolerate adolescent fawning and pawing, not on his time, and definitely not when it was patently displayed right underneath his hooked nose.

Contented with their shocked silence, he continued, "As you may then deduce from personal experience, the genus is commonly referred to as 'Love Potions' is that not so, Miss Spinnet? Although mixing them is highly inadvisable, as I'm sure you'll agree, as well as attest to?"

Alicia gasped, and then nodded her head in ashamed affirmation.

Satisfied he had finished with Alicia and Luca for the day, Snape crossed slowly to the right-hand-side of the room in search of new victims.

"The Ashwinder's as well as which other creature's eggs are of immense value? And in which manner?"

As Snape scanned leisurely over the room of big-eyed and startled students, he relaxed, thoroughly pleased with himself, having set questions that even the most bookwormish Ravenclaw couldn't answer in the space of an hour. He remarked, "No one? What a pity."

Content, he turned back to his desk, from where he intended to instruct the class to copy half of the book longhand, just like Muggles. When he reached the front desk he was utterly astounded to hear Miss Spinnet squeak out, "Runespoors, sir."

Snape halted on the spot, blinked once, and then turned to face her again. "Inform us further, Miss Spinnet, of the specific use of Runespoor eggs?"

"The Runespoor egg is important to stimulate mental agility, sir."

*First Granger, now Spinnet, what was going on with these Gryffindor witches?* He wasn't about to be upstaged in his own classroom by annoying know-it-alls. Snape strode to the front and ordered, "Turn to page sixty-nine, class! Begin copying, verbatim, the uses of the Lobalug."

Everyone began scribbling immediately, no-one daring to ask at which page they should stop.

"Miss Spinnet, come here," Snape called out.

Alicia felt her stomach lurch, bewildered by what she had done wrong. She gave a drowning look to Luca as she shuffled slowly towards Professor Snape's desk. *He must be really angry with me for behaving as I did at the Yule Ball in the Hospital Wing...*

As Alicia stood directly in front of him, Snape flicked his wand, surrounding the two of them with a Silencing Charm.

"During all your years in my classroom, Miss Spinnet, you've rarely provided more than one correct answer at any given time, and yet today, for some incomprehensible reason, you have exhaustive knowledge of an allusive branch of Potions. Surely between your Quidditch training and common-room cavorting, you haven't been spending your precious free time reading Libatius Borage's *Advanced Potion-Making*?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then? How do you come to know such obscure yet vital facts? I needn't warn you about lying to me, Miss Spinnet tell me the truth!"

"My Aunt Cecily and Mr Lovegood..."

Snape cut in. "Xenophilus Lovegood?"

"Yes, sir."

Snape winced, bracing himself for a variety of ludicrous scenarios worthy of publication in *The Quibbler*. Beginning to wish he hadn't asked, and with no toleration for further nonsense, he warned, "Please, Miss Spinnet, I do hope, for your sake, that your association with Mr Lovegood is relevant to your knowledge of the Lobalug?"

"Not the Lobalug, no, sir."

Snape sniffed impatiently, and before he could deduct any more points, Alicia blurted out as quickly as she could, "My aunt accompanied Mr Lovegood on some of his expeditions one of them in search of the Crumple-Horned Snorkack..."

Snape raised both eyebrows.

"And she helped set up a colony of wizards who study and protect the Nundu, Fwooper and Erumpent species in Africa; but the colony's base is in Burkina Faso..."

Losing patience, Snape growled, "Get to the point, Miss Spinnet!"

"I visited Aunt Cecily in Burkina Faso last summer and stayed in the colony for three weeks. Runespoors live there in designated forests where wizards try to protect them from..." Alicia hesitated, then sheepishly offered, "Well, I'm sure you know all about the high demand for them on the black market, sir..."

"And why would you assume that I have anything to do with the black market, Miss Spinnet?"

"I don't, sir, I thought I meant..." Thoroughly flustered, and fearing she might be making things worse, she continued, "There's a great demand for Runespoor eggs on the black market, so you'd know all about their high value." Digging herself deeper in the mud, and feeling ready to burst into tears of embarrassment, she hurriedly continued, "One day, I was in the forest with my aunt, cutting milk thistles and Rooibos plants, when Aunt Cecily accidentally tripped and stepped on a hidden Runespoor. All three of its heads lunged to bite her, but just before the poisonous right head struck, I lashed out and cut off its head. The serpent survived; I mean, the remaining two heads of the serpent survived. They seemed quite happy and were able to slither back into the thistles..."

"Indeed? A happy two-headed Runespoor serpent?" He smirked dourly.

"It the two remaining heads seemed healthy enough... Everyone says it was my Quidditch instincts that helped me to react so fast..."

"And save your Aunt's life," Snape finished.

There was a sudden solemn moment about the girl's precarious story.

"Yes, sir." Alicia swallowed hard, praying this would abate and satisfy Professor Snape's suspicions.

It was perhaps one of the very few times that Snape had been truly impressed by anything a student had disclosed, and he'd heard quite an earful through the years. He sighed, reflecting that, of course, such a tale *would* be told by a loyal, brave Gryffindor. "That was a very quick response indeed," he had to admit. Tersely, he added, "Very brave of you. You are a true Gryffindor, aren't you, Miss Spinnet?"

"It was just luck, sir, being in the right place at the right time." Then shyly, she added, "Rather than, say, being in the wrong place at the wrong time: in a carriage drinking Amortentia-spiked peach schnapps from, basically, a stranger." Her throat constricted self-consciously. "I'm so sorry, sir. Really, truly sorry. I never meant to grab you or embarrass you, Professor Snape."

Snape's eyelashes flickered fleetingly. He realised the adolescent girl had been obsessing about the unfortunate event. Remembering his own pubescent discomfort and angst, his disdain momentarily softened. *Silly girl. So much potential, yet so much adolescent confusion.*

Despite his nerves, which were strained by the ever-present soreness of his Dark Mark and its unwelcome reminder of inescapable turmoil, Snape was undeniably impressed by Miss Spinnet's deeds. Her summer holiday had equipped her with valuable life experience, and she had acquired useful, relevant knowledge for her studies. He smiled at the notion of a world so refreshingly simple and devoid of duplicity a world without Dark Marks evoking a sense of impending darkness and eliciting fear of a Dark wizard's revival. If only three-headed serpents were one of the worst worries to plague the planet. How simple life would be.

He sighed again, suddenly so very tired, and he allowed himself another amused smile at life's quaint paradoxes as he looked at the young witch who reminded him of an earlier time in his life, a simpler time, with all its trivial concerns...

Snape's contemplation was soon followed by a characteristically sardonic response. "Again, how very *Gryffindor* of you, Miss Spinnet. The lethal venom of the Runespoor's right head could have ended your curiosity, and your *life*, as well as your aunt's. She's fortunate to have an attentive and brave niece, such as you."

"It was just luck, sir," she replied bashfully.

For a short moment, Snape smiled bittersweetly at the young woman. "There's no such thing as luck, Miss Spinnet." He then disdainfully pointed out, "*Justbportunity*. Heed that; I tell you it not only as your Potions professor, but as the Head of Slytherin."

"Yes, sir, I will," whispered Alicia, her eyes wide with awe at Snape's sudden intensity.

Snape's gaze lingered on her. Alicia did not trick herself into thinking her Potions master had attached anything more to his words or gaze, but a warm feeling of pleasure surged through her. She took pride in her bravery and was glad she'd had a life experience relevant to Snape's Potions class, but more than anything, she was pleased that the object of her affection acknowledged the purity of her selfless act. *It is the little things in life one can be happy with and grateful for.*

In a flash, Snape cancelled the Silencing Charm and snapped up to standing. He nodded to indicate his wish for Alicia to retake her seat.

Alicia walked back to her desk, lost in thoughts and musings of what had transpired. Even though the encounter had been brief and curt, Snape's manner suggested he acknowledged her strength of character. She saw Luca waiting for her, eager to hear what Snape had said. But before she could speak, Luca whispered, "Alicia, look!" He was pointing at her wrist.

Alicia gazed at her bracelet and then gasped in surprise. They stared in amazement: her second bead had turned a dark shade of red. Snape had, genuinely, smiled.



Georgina soon got wind of Alicia's success and heard all about the tale of bravery she had told during the very first Potions lesson of the term, and she felt snakes of envy writhing in her stomach. If she were honest, it felt like a betrayal. How could Snape smile about anything a Gryffindor had done? Snape was always sniping about show-offs and quixotic recklessness from students in that particular House, so how could Alicia's haphazard attempt with a Runespoor have possibly impressed him?

She was doubly annoyed because she couldn't use the first idea she'd thought of to make Snape smile, either. Originally, she had planned on using Elixir of Euphoria, but after the first task, when it became clear that the Protean Charm's criteria for Snape's reactions during this tournament were based on them being genuine, she had to discard the idea. Plus, after her Head of House had stepped in so graciously after her unfortunate incident with Krum at the Yule Ball, ensuring the Durmstrang student kept far away from her thereafter, it would have felt spiteful and ungrateful to use such underhanded tricks, even to a Slytherin such as herself.

This left Georgina with precious few options from which to choose. She considered a Tickling Charm, but decided that too could contravene the Protean Charm's rules. Plus, she didn't want to think how much trouble she'd be in for firing a spell at a teacher. She also thought about buying him a gift, but knowing Snape as she did, he would probably call it 'highly inappropriate,' and it would probably let slip her little crush on him once and for all. Georgina didn't think she could take the embarrassment.

In truth, she was still smarting from her perfectly-brewed potion losing out to Luca's idiotic heroism in the first task. Luca was her best friend, and of course she was happy for him, but it touched on her competitive and ambitious Slytherin nature; she just had to win this task in order to save face. She had a clear advantage; after all, Snape favoured his own House. If she didn't win this time, then she might as well go and jump in the Black Lake.

It was late January by the time she'd thought of something plausible with which to win the task and even that was looking like a challenge. A genuine smile could come from telling him a joke, but how likely was it that he would actually find it funny? For inspiration, she went to visit the Comedic Female Gargoyle a talking gargoyle located on a stairwell on the third floor, just outside the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom one rainy Sunday afternoon. The Gargoyle loved to tell jokes to anyone who would listen, and Georgina presumed the gargoyle was not short of material.

She wasn't wrong. Within the first five minutes of greeting the gargoyle, she was bombarded with a stream of jokes.

*"How many house-elves does it take to feed a dragon?"*

*"That depends how hungry it is!"*

*"Did you hear about the Squib who won a million Galleons and asked for it all in small change?"*

*"He was completely Knuts!"*

*"Why did the wizard take his housekeeper jogging with him?"*

*'Cos it was good for his elf!"*

*"Did you hear about the Hufflepuff who gave his Kneazle a bath?"*

*"He's still trying to get the fur off his tongue."*

These and many more made Georgina groan. The jokes weren't even good enough to make her laugh, let alone Snape. She lasted twenty minutes listening to the gargoyle's juvenile gags before turning on her heel and stomping back down to the dungeons in frustration. This just wasn't going to work. She would have to think of something else.



February arrived, and Georgina's frustration mounted as the deadline for the second task grew ever closer. The only comfort she could take was that neither Penny nor Luca had succeeded in their own tasks yet, meaning there was still hope for her.

However, when she went to meet with her Head of House for Careers Guidance one chilly but bright Wednesday afternoon, she remained out of ideas.

"Enter," drawled Snape's rich baritone after she rapped politely three times on his office door.

Georgina slipped inside carefully and cordially greeted her professor, who responded in turn. She closed the door behind her and perched on the precarious stool opposite his desk. She didn't feel nervous, but she was unsure what this meeting would bring. Snape's one-to-one sessions with his House members were usually short, perfunctory affairs, unless there was some serious grievance that needed escalating, so she wasn't at all sure what to expect.

"Your future starts in just four short months, Miss Smyth," Snape began, looking carefully at his student across the desk. "You will be leaving Hogwarts and beginning to forge your own way in the world. As such, you need to decide what kind of career path would be suited to your skills."

He paused to flick through a pile of parchments on his desk.

"Your predicted NEWT grades fall between O and A, so there is no need for concern in terms of your academic achievement. Although I should warn you not to be

complacent; these next four months are critical, and I expect you to study at every available opportunity."

Georgina nodded eagerly. She couldn't stop the flash of pride that swelled within her at Snape's backhanded compliment. *No need for concern* in Snape-speak translated as a prediction to pass all her subjects comfortably. Whilst that thought made her smile, she also hoped she would not let him down.

"So, Miss Smyth, have you any thoughts on what line of work you will be pursuing after school?"

Georgina looked down. No, she had not considered what her future plans might be. Why would she? She was a pureblood Slytherin from a wealthy family, and she'd planned on spending the next year travelling around Europe, paid for by her mother and father. She'd think about trivial things such as work after seeing the sights and then going to visit some of her ancestry's settlements in the Dordogne. Even then, work would probably involve some placement in the Ministry, organised by her father by pulling some strings from his own well-placed connections. After all, it would make the family look good to have another Smyth at the Ministry.

"I was planning on travelling for a bit after school before deciding on a career path, sir," she admitted.

Snape merely quirked an eyebrow. "Even so, Miss Smyth, you must have some idea of which career path you'd wish to follow?"

Georgina shrugged noncommittally. "I really haven't thought about it, sir," she confessed.

Snape's eyebrows knotted together in annoyance. "You really haven't thought about it," he repeated slowly.

*Uh-oh.* Georgina felt the temperature drop several degrees and realised she had strayed onto dangerous ground. Of course she'd thought about her career, but her life was mapped out for her by her parents. What she wanted and what she had to do were two different things.

"You are one of the brightest students amongst the seventh-year Slytherins, and you tell me you haven't even thought about what you are going to do with the rest of your life?"

Georgina's breath hitched in her throat. Had he just complimented her? Why couldn't he have said that before? She would have easily have won the first task!

"I don't know where to start, sir," she replied, not untruthfully. "There're so many careers to choose from; I just don't know how to narrow it down."

"Such as?"

"Well, following in my father's footsteps at the Ministry seems logical. But then, that's more what he wants me to do, not what I really want to do."

"And what exactly do you want to do, Miss Smyth?" he pressed.

Once again, Georgina looked down. Surely, if she admitted this to him, Snape would mock her.

"Well?"

"I'd like to be a Potioneer, sir. For St. Mungo's."

To her utter surprise, Snape's lips quirked into a brief, crooked smile. "An admirable vocation. It certainly plays to your strengths; you are a fine potion-maker. I can give you some contacts should you like to investigate this avenue further."

Shocked to have accidentally brought a smile to Snape's face, Georgina managed to reply, "I er, yes please, sir."

Unconsciously, her eyes flicked to the bracelet on her wrist. The second bead glowed bright green. She suppressed the urge to punch the air in victory.

The rest of her meeting passed by in a bit of a blur as Snape provided her with various leaflets and pamphlets, as well as information on the next St. Mungo's open day. By the time they'd finished, Georgina was seriously considering cutting the apron strings and pursuing an illustrious career treating magical maladies and injuries.

Once she had finally left Snape's office, she allowed herself a triumphant hiss of celebration. She'd done it! She'd made Snape smile! And without even trying!

With renewed Slytherin confidence, Georgina sashayed back down to her common room. She felt she'd nailed this task for definite, beating the Gryffindor usurper and impressing Professor Snape with her passion for Potions.

Who needed two-headed Runespoors?

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Authors' Note:

Written by [nagandsev](#) and [star\\_girl](#).

The Snapettes look forward to receiving your review!

## The Second Task - Part Two

*Chapter 7 of 9*

Four unsuccessful Triwizard entrants arrange their own tournament. The prize: Snape.

Valentine's Day had come. And gone.

Technically, it was still the 14th of February, but the evening meal had finished, and the subsequent witnessing of couples exchanging cards, flowers, chocolates and kisses all around had caused Penelope to hurry out of the dining hall in a state of unbearable anguish. Since the Yule Ball, all Penelope could think about was Percy and the cruel, humiliating way he'd dumped her. She would sway from white-hot anger to floods of tears at the very thought, and wherever she went she seemed to be dragging a stone around in her stomach. Not even the Four-House Tournament could raise her spirits; in fact, she'd hardly thought about the second task at all. When she couldn't even muster up a smile herself, making Snape smile seemed very trivial indeed.

*This time last year, I was with Percy...reminisced Penelope wistfully.*

But then, it was replaced by another angry thought. *The tight git! He picked roses from behind the greenhouses for me then, rather than put his hand in his pocket and buy them himself...*

Angry, frustrated tears flowed down Penelope's cheeks silently as she made her way through the moonlit, empty corridors of the fifth floor, past the statue of Boris the Bewildered to arrive at the fourth door on the left: finally, the Prefect's bathroom. Outside its door, Penelope whispered, "Pine fresh" and entered.

The white-marbled room was lit splendidly by the magnificent candle-filled chandelier; the luminosity fell upon the myriad of golden taps around the rectangular pool edge, causing them to glisten and beckon her to use them.

*A steaming, perfumed bubble bath is just what I need...*

Penelope sauntered over and turned three of the jewelled handles, opening and allowing each one to pour forth bubbles, pink-coloured and perfumed waters respectively. Taking a fluffy white towel from the folded pile in a corner, Penny crossed to the edge of the pool, removed her gemstone bracelet and slowly undressed, her clothing falling absent-mindedly on a marble bench nearby as she ruminated further.

*Two years ago... Percy and I first kissed... on Valentine's Day...*

A forlorn wail escaped as she slid into the hot bathwater, her warm tears flowing down her face as the rest of her body immersed in the scented, sparkling waters frolicking around her submersed frame. She had loved him, once.

*I was only fifth-year, he sixth... We were both Prefects with so much in common... so happy... and now, we're complete strangers...*

As her muscles relaxed from the thermal, effervescent bath, Penelope started to bawl in earnest, feeling a cathartic release in the privacy of the Prefects' bathroom. Hurt, rage and sadness engulfed her as the memory of her relationship with Percy flooded her psyche in one violent wave of regret and unfathomable, incomprehensible guilt. She remembered their secret courtship and how they had tried to keep their relationship clandestine for as long as possible. Their first year together had been such an intense time, culminating with the strange, seemingly random Petrifications of Muggle-borns; she had been one of the victims...

She remembered how upset Percy had been regarding the whole Chamber of Secrets episode. Penelope had been attacked and Petrified, and afterwards, Percy told her again and again of his relief when the Mandrake root cured her, along with the other Muggle-borns who had been afflicted and how, even though he were from Pureblood stock, he deplored, despised and swore to uproot any inequity he ever came across especially if anyone ever referred to her in any derogatory way. Penny sighed deeply. *He was so noble, so sweet, so gentle back then... How fast things changed!*

Penelope sobbed to herself. *He never cared about my Blood Status. It never mattered... and now I don't even recognise him; he spouts Ministry doctrine and only seems to care about rubbing shoulders with the echelons of wizarding society, making contact and gaining acceptance with purebloods, in particular. How ironic, the hypocritical git!* thought Penelope bitterly. *I don't understand what's happened! How could he have changed so much?*

Thinking on the outcome of their relationship, their recent break-up, she summed up, *Since he got a job working for the Ministry... it's as if it never existed... as if 'we' never happened...*

Penelope exploded into tears again, blubbering, remembering the multitude of times she and Percy had sneaked into deserted classrooms, snogging wildly and exploring their newly-found love.

*What an unbelievable, Janus-faced git!* She berated herself, the anger once more bubbling through. *I wasn't any better, going along with everything he suggested...*

Penny took a deep breath, dunked her head under the water and surfaced again, settling her back against the wall in the sequestered comfort of the steaming swimming pool.

Believing she was now calming down and overcoming her sentimentality towards Percy, she wiped the bubble residue from her face with a soft towel from the poolside and settled herself on the underwater seating area. Then suddenly, a clear memory of Percy's sister, Ginny, catching them in a heavy embrace in an empty classroom caught her unawares. The subsequent relentless badgering and jibing which Percy endured from his brothers, Fred and George, had caused Percy to be even more cowardly, reluctant to admit they were a couple. Irrationally, she growled, "I hate Weasleys!"

Suddenly, a frail voice was heard asking, "Was it a boy?"

Penelope squealed a half-hearted scream. She looked up to see from where, or more precisely, from *whom* the voice originated. It was a female, ghost-like form. The silver-grey apparition was floating just above the jewelled golden taps, below the golden-framed painting of a blonde mermaid, fast asleep on a rock.

Penny recognised the glum-looking ghost as Moaning Myrtle, which surprised her as Myrtle usually haunted the girl's bathroom three floors down. Myrtle settled herself mid-air, lying on her side and hovering halfway between the diving board and the picture. With her phantom head propped up on her hand and her elbow bent, Myrtle looked curiously down upon the distraught blonde Prefect.

Embarrassed, Penny attempted to stifle further sobs. The ghost picked at a spot on her chin, raising her eyebrows in an askance expression of speculation.

"Was it a boy?" repeated Moaning Myrtle with intense curiosity.

"Pardon me?" Penny was taken aback by Myrtle's directness, never having been in contact with her so closely.

"A boy," the ghost repeated almost belligerently. Then, lowering her voice to almost a whisper, Myrtle pointed out, "They do that, you know ~~boys~~... They make girls cry."

Abruptly, the ghost whipped herself up to standing position then flipped backwards and plunged into the water. Resurfacing a second later in the middle of the pool, Myrtle moved closer to the now-startled Penny.

"My boy did," sniffled Myrtle, cosying towards Penny and sitting nearer to her. "He made me cry. All the time."

The shock of Myrtle's blunt confession helped Penny find her voice, and she softly enquired, "Your boy? You had a boyfriend, Myrtle?"

"Yes," hissed Myrtle. "Why are you surprised? You don't believe me?"

"No, no," denied Penelope. "It's just... I never knew."

"And why would *anyone* know? Who cares to ever know anything about me? Who dares to speak to me? They've only thrown things at me, called me names, and flushed me down the toilet to the Black Lake!"

Abruptly changing her hysterical tone, Myrtle whimpered softly, "Do you want to know?"

Tongue-tied, silently Penelope nodded in the affirmative.

"Do you *really* want to know?" pushed Myrtle, her voice starting to become strident.

Penelope gulped and again nodded, slightly more enthusiastically, in reassuring compliance.

Myrtle stared at Penelope through her heavy, pearly spectacles; the grey transparency gave her an unnerving, solemn gaze. "You have to ~~prom~~ise me something first."

"Yes?"

"You have to promise *never* to tell anyone. You must carry this secret to your grave. Or, if you die here, to the toilet cubicle." She giggled. "You can share my cistern, if you like!" In a sing-song voice, Myrtle quoted, "So 'cross your heart, hope to die, stick a needle in your eye!" Then, she pointed out emphatically, "If you tell!"

"I won't tell anyone, Myrtle," whispered Penelope, fearfully breathless and intrigued by the possibility that Moaning Myrtle would reveal such a preposterous secret. "Cross my heart, hope to die," she repeated reassuringly.

"Oooh, very good," said the squat ghost smugly, and then she peered through her thick spectacles at the Prefect, her eyes seemingly filled with tears. Myrtle sniffed and eyed Penelope suspiciously as if contemplating whether or not to believe her sincerity.

"Well," started Myrtle, gliding even closer to Penelope's side, her silver eyes sparkling. "He didn't know he was my boyfriend. He was tall, with jet-black hair, a school Prefect he was so yummy, but then," her voice changed to a sulky pout, "he became lost..."

"Lost?" Penelope was already confused. "People don't 'become' lost..."

"Yes, lost!" wailed Myrtle. "Another lost soul!" moaned Myrtle miserably, gliding and then slowly stretching her body out, floating upon the water. "Slipped away..."

"Slipped away? He died, Myrtle? I'm so... so sorry..."

"He *must* be dead, truly dead, because he never came back to me." Myrtle had erected herself, moving back in front of Penny. "And he promised me he ~~would~~ come back to Hogwarts... forever! He would come back to *me*, and now we've been separated... he's somewhere... lost... or gone forever..." Utterly dejected, Myrtle started picking at a spot on her face again. Gazing sullenly at Penelope through her lank hair, Myrtle sighed longingly. "So clever, so handsome... he became Head Boy in his final year at Hogwarts."

"Clever? Head Boy from Ravenclaw, Myrtle?"

"Oh, no." Myrtle giggled slyly, blushing silver. "He was a Slytherin."

Unexpectedly, Myrtle burst into anguished sobs and arose high in the air, somersaulting, before plunging once more into the bath waters. Effortlessly moving back towards the stunned Penelope, she excitedly continued, "He used to talk to me here... after I was dead, of course. No one ever talked to me when I was alive. I don't think he knew I existed then, either." She frowned morosely, and then in a split-second, she smiled mischievously. "But then, I died and came back as a ghost. The Ministry forced me to stop haunting and torturing Olive Hornby I made her sorry she'd ever teased me about my glasses and I found him here. We talked and talked and talked... He was fascinated by death. He said I was perfect. I was *dead* and *perfect*." Myrtle sighed contentedly. "And he wanted to know everything about me being a ghost, what I could do, what I couldn't do, *how* I could do things... What powers I had, what it was like living with other dead and undead beings: phantoms, poltergeists, the other ghosts in the castle. He particularly was interested in the ghosts of each House, especially our Grey Lady of Ravenclaw; he was so fascinated by the Dead."

She sighed deeply then suddenly demanded, "What do you think about him?"

"He sounds... he sounds..." Penelope was at a loss for words. "He sounds *lovely*, Myrtle."

"Yes, he *was*. He was very, very lovely," agreed the ghost emphatically. Behind the thick-framed glasses, her little eyes became misty. "But then, he went away. Like all boys." Silver tears welled in Myrtle's small, see-through eyes, and she gasped as tears flooded down her face. "I always hoped Tom would die here and share my S-bend with me forever. He actually told me he liked that idea; he really, truly did!"

Abruptly, Myrtle perked up. Smiling maliciously, she informed, "But now, I've got a new one; a ~~new~~boy, that is, and he's quite famous. No one'll ever ignore me again!" Confidentially, Myrtle revealed, "Although, he's only been *here* once." She gave Penelope an impish look from behind her lanky hair, half-hiding her face. "I first met him in the girl's lavatory on the first floor years ago, so it's been going on for quite some time," she disclosed self-importantly. Then, Myrtle giggled. "But he was *here*, just once, only a few weeks ago."

"He's a Prefect and has only been here once?" Penelope was confused.

"Oh, no, he's not a *Prefect*, but he does have dark hair. Which I like a lot!" Myrtle hummed to herself contentedly.

"Myrtle, only Prefects are allowed in here," insisted Penelope.

"Guess Cedric forgot to tell him that when he gave him the password." She smiled wickedly. "But then, Cedric is more brawn than brains Oooo, you should see his muscular, sculpted body what a toned torso, all the way down," she described naughtily. "*Have* you seen it?"

"I should say not!" denied Penelope adamantly.

Myrtle smirked at Penny's puritan response. Then, she smiled slyly and continued, "As I was saying, Cedric's not as smart as him, couldn't figure out how to open his ~~big~~ egg; well, it took him forever to discover how Cedric's rather thick that way, not as quick... not as clever as the other one." She pushed her glasses up on her nose. "My new boy is also a four-eyed. Like me. We have so much in common."

Penelope started fuming. *Dark hair, spectacles the Golden Egg Harry Potter!*

"Harry Potter, Myrtle? Your new boyfriend is Harry Potter? And he was here with Cedric Diggory?" asked Penelope carefully, needing to hear it from Myrtle's own lips. So, *Gryffindor's golden boy is up to some sneaky, underhand tactics with pretty-boy Cedric to win the Triwizard Tournament?*

"Yes! The one and only! You see, Cedric brought his golden egg to the bathroom first, played around with it, and then oops!" Myrtle purred, "Can't tell what happened next I'm sworn to secrecy!" She relished the flushed look on Penny's face before continuing. "Soon after, Harry brought in his egg. And well, let's just say, they're both in cahoots about winning this tournament!"

Penelope's blood started to boil. *It's a wizard's world! First, Percy, doing what he wanted, when he wanted, how he wanted, as long as he wanted, and now that he has something better ... the Ministry, being Cornelius Fudge's side-kick ... nothing else matters!* Penelope guffawed so loudly that Myrtle jumped. Bitterly, she contemplated, *Cedric and Harry they can just do what they want, break all the rules when it suits them, without obligation or consideration to the regulations rules are set to protect, to nurture, to love!* In her emotional state, Penelope's thoughts jumped back to Percy. *Why did you stop loving me? What was wrong with me? Was everything we shared just a lie?*

Overwhelmed and dwelling on all her feelings of betrayal, she thought forlornly *It is all so unfair!*

Penelope shot out of the water before she started bawling in front of the deluded ghost. What she really wanted to do was to find Cedric and give him a piece of her mind; she wasn't going to let him break the rules as a Prefect and get away with it.

As she rushed to dry and dress herself, she hurriedly explained, "I'm late for my Prefect duties, Myrtle. Very late. We can continue our talk next time this is my allotted private hour here, so I'll see you soon. All right? I very much want to hear more about your Tom, as well as Harry, any time you'd like."

Gazing wide-eyed at Penelope, the ghost was now sitting cross-legged, hovering on the poolside, the steam creeping through her translucent form. "You've forgotten your bracelet," Myrtle said, pointing towards the silver band shining on the tiled floor. "It's got one pretty blue bead. Why are the other two white?"

"It's a long story," Penny replied, picking up her Charmed bracelet with haste.

"You're not upset, are you?" enquired Myrtle suspiciously.

"No, no, of course not," covered Penelope, thinking quickly. "I'm just late for my Prefect rounds; it's curfew time." Fully dressed, she pulled out her wand and flicked it to dry her hair. *That sneaky Potter! How dare he? Whatever it is he's up to* she fumed. "You say Harry's nice to you, Myrtle?"

"Oh yes, we're ever so cosy. In fact, I'm going to offer to share my S-bend with him when he dies."

*Poor Myrtle*, Penelope thought, pitying her. She forced a smile on her face as she headed to the exit. "That's nice, Myrtle. I'm sure he'll like that." She chose not to comment on how the big-headed Gryffindor would probably say anything to humour the miserable, lonely soul.

As Penny's hand turned the handle, opening the door, she heard Myrtle warn, "Remember, you made a promise to me... not to tell anyone." More eerily, Myrtle pointed out, "Remember that I haunted Olive Hornby oooh, it was horrible!"

Penelope swerved around to reassure Myrtle, but the ghost had disappeared and only the faint trickling and hum of effervescent waters flowing slowly down the drain was to be seen and heard.

Slightly unnerved, Penelope walked back down the hall, deliberating how she could keep her promise to Myrtle but still penalise Diggory and Potter. She was infuriated by Diggory breaking the Prefect oath of secrecy and then plotting and cheating with another Triwizard champion. *That Potter! He shouldn't even be in the Triwizard Tournament! And now he and Diggory are conspiring together? Who would have thought Potter would be up to something so sneaky? Oh, it just makes my blood boil!* A flash of the stuck-up Percy's face, entranced by Minister Fudge, went through her mind. *Snobby, conniving Gryffindors!*

She manoeuvred the moving staircases down to ground level and was about to proceed towards the Hufflepuff area to find Cedric when she heard the muffled sounds of voices. She headed down a seemingly-empty corridor, turned the corner, and walked into the middle of anxious dispute. Both boys were wearing gold and burgundy House ties. They were none other than Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter.

Like a bull, upon catching sight of Ron, she saw red, and it wasn't because of his hair *Percy's stupid little brother ugh!*

"You, Potter! Come here!"

Harry looked up from his heated whispering to see the irate Prefect. "You calling me?"

"Yes, I'm calling you, a word now!"

Harry took a step towards her and asked, "Well, what is it?"

"Ten points each from Gryffindor, for being out after curfew!"

"What? That's outrageous!" protested Harry.

"Lighten up, Penny!" piped in Ron Weasley. "We just needed some private space for a bit of a, um, pep talk for Harry. Gryffindors, err, Hogwarts students, need to support their Triwizard champion."

In truth, they had been desperately brainstorming ideas on how Harry would be able to stay underwater for an hour for the second Triwizard task. In the precious time remaining, breaking into the library's Restricted Section had presented itself as one way to research and discover unknown spells, and they had simply lost track of time in their scheming and planning and had left Harry's Invisibility Cloak back at Gryffindor Tower. "You can understand that, can't you, Penny?" Ron gave her a goofy smile and a wink, thinking it endearing.

"Haven't you enough adoration and support for that big head of yours already, Potter?" blurted Penelope before she could stop herself. She turned and glared at Ron. "And *don't* call me Penny!"

"Oi! No wonder my brother dumped you," huffed Ron half-jokingly. "Never knew you had such a temper, Clearwater."

Penny's face turned redder than the Weasley's hair. "You you," she blustered, choked with emotion. "Everything's a joke for you Weasleys; meaningless, isn't it? How I ever cared for one of your idiotic brothers is beyond me!"

Turning her frustration back to Harry, unable to control her anger and forgetting what she'd promised Myrtle, she challenged, "Are you well-prepared for the second task? Are you telling everyone the secret of how you've arrived at your new-found confidence, Potter? Or, is that just between you and Cedric?"

Harry's mouth gaped open, and he blinked. *Bloody hell! How does she know?* Not knowing how to respond to the Ravenclaw Prefect's questioning, Harry remained silent.

"Nothing to say, Potter? Five points from Gryffindor!"

"You can't dock points from me for not answering you!"

Accusatorily, she lashed out, "I know what you've done, Potter! Just wait until everyone finds out!"

"Done? What are you implying, Clearwater? Spill it!"

"Yeah, spit it out! You've no proof Harry's done anything wrong!" challenged Ron.

"Is there a problem, Miss Clearwater?"

Everyone fell silent, and their gaze fell in the direction of the sound of the Potions master's voice. Snape had silently crept up behind them in characteristic style.

"No, sir," responded Penelope, barely able to address the professor. Her cheeks burned in embarrassment, hoping he had not just witnessed her atypical behaviour.

"No?" Snape gazed at the Gryffindor duo, his black eyes glittering. Only the deliberately portentous sound of his steps on the stone was heard as he walked slowly towards



them. "Let us see... Weasley being insolent to a Prefect that's worth another five points!"

Ron bit his lip, muffling a protest.

"And why, pray tell, are the two of you even here? What are you up to, one wonders?" He peered dangerously at Potter.

"They said they were trying to have a private moment with each other, sir," offered Penelope neutrally.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? A private moment?" He leered at the Gryffindor pair. "How very touching."

Remembering catching Potter and Weasley near the rosebushes outside at the Yule Ball, Snape gritted his teeth and then smirked. "Yes, you two are inseparable, quite the couple, in fact. Again, one wonders..." Pleased that both boys' faces flushed scarlet at his snide innuendo, he continued in hopes of goading them further, daring them to retort. "Is Gryffindor Tower so unruly that you are compelled to loiter around the corridors in search of a private moment together? Yes, life as a pint-sized celebrity does have its downside, doesn't it, Potter?" Snape gave a pointed glance to Ron, eyeing him up and down, before continuing with, "In spite of your stardom, all of your pictures, Rita Skeeter's interviews..." Snape looked as if he might spit. "Your tangled love life doesn't do the newspapers justice, does it? *Enquiring minds wish to know.*" Snape's sarcastic tone dropped, and with a hardened viciousness, he said, "I, however, do not. I know what I know about you, Potter, regardless of what's spouted in your press cuttings."

Harry bit the inside of his cheek, not responding, knowing that Snape was trying to provoke him. Ron eyed Snape with defeated, yet heated dismay, clenching his fists.

"Perhaps your overlarge head has clouded your sense of time, Potter," pointed out Snape quietly, egging him on, hoping for an excuse to take an easy ten more points from Gryffindor. "Or is it merely that you consider rules to be beneath you?"

"Exactly!" interjected Penny, so caught up with Professor Snape's scalding reprimand that she forgot herself. Self-consciously, she quickly apologised, "I'm sorry, sir."

Surprisingly, Professor Snape benignly replied, "Not at all, Miss Clearwater." Giving her an inquisitive, knowing look, he enquired, "Is there anything else you wish to add?"

Penny couldn't betray Moaning Myrtle. She wouldn't do it. Besides the fleeting thoughts of not wanting to suffer the same haunting as Olive Hornby ... who truly knew what Myrtle was capable of? ... she would never knowingly betray anyone's trust.

She offered, "Sir, if, let's say, someone were to catch Potter red-handed in a compromising position..." Snape raised an eyebrow. "Or, hypothetically speaking, catch him in an action which *could* be construed as breaking the rules of the Triwizard Tournament, wouldn't this be grounds for disqualification, sir?"

"Clearwater, you've no proof..." exploded Harry, unable to contain his indignation.

"No, but I've a strong suspicion, Potter!" *And much more!* She wanted to add, but didn't. Instead, she challenged him to admit the injustice of his actions. "What if everyone went through life doing underhanded activities to gain unfair advantages? It wouldn't be fair, would it?"

"Well, life isn't fair, Clearwater!" quipped Harry.

Snape's quiet voice cut in with a dangerous edge. "No, life *isn't* fair, Potter."

A deadly silence ensued; Snape's sudden intensified demeanour had mollified the three students for different reasons.

"I agree, Miss Clearwater, *disqualification*... amongst other things," Snape softly whispered, watching the delinquent duo, enjoying their barely-restrained anger. He then turned appreciatively to the young witch who seemed satisfied too, but was still struggling with suppressed emotion. "Again, is there anything more you would like to say?"

"At this time..." Penelope looked up into her Professor's eyes, her insides fluttering pleasurably. "Nothing else, sir."

Unexpectedly, Snape offered, "If something else should occur to you, do not hesitate to speak to me. Potter is in dire need of assistance to correct his arrogance."

*He hates Potter with a passion!* realised Penelope. Perhaps luck was on her side; she now had an excuse to approach Professor Snape outside of the classroom and discuss Potter's miscreant behaviour. If she squealed on Potter, she might have new opportunities to see Snape on her own and get to know other sides to her Potions master.

As Snape noted a soft blush on the Ravenclaw Prefect's cheeks, he turned to Potter and Weasley. He recalled the missing Boomslang skin, stolen from his office weeks ago, on the same night as Filch had found Potter's Golden Egg, along with the enchanted parchment which he had seen in Potter's possession once before. Mad-Eye had confiscated both items at the last moment, taking away the proof which Snape had needed to demonstrate to Dumbledore that The Boy Who Lived was nothing more than a nasty, indulged little git, unworthy of the pristine pedestal the Headmaster had placed him on worthy of protection, yes, but sainthood, *no*...

"I'm warning you, Potter, if I find you..." Snape gave a sharp glance again at Ron. "... or one of your cohorts taking a night-time stroll anywhere remotely near my office..." His eyes narrowed, and he gave a fleeting glance towards Penelope. "Even Mad-Eye Moody won't be able to protect you." Privately, he thought, *I will find out why and how you broke into my office. I'll make you pay!* The contemplation of various modes of retribution caused a pleasurable feeling to surge through him.

Controlling himself to not reveal further detailed accusations, Snape addressed the immediate issue at hand. "Well, Miss Clearwater, regarding the dynamic duo here they are indeed out of their dormitories out of hours, are they not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then, Prefect?" nudged Snape, demurely, his lips slightly curling.

"Weasley's insolence, and both his and Potter's loitering combined," summarised Penny, "I think we should make it a round thirty points from Gryffindor!"

Snape gave a satisfied smile, his eyes gleaming with soft malice.

Ron and Harry were shocked into outraged silence, barely containing the vehemence they were feeling. Seething, they waited in strained patience for any further sentencing; surely Snape would add on a detention or two, such as cleaning the toilets with toothbrushes, Muggle-style.

Snape softly added, "Miss Clearwater, as Potter has an unfortunate habit of wandering around after hours, regardless of the rules, escorting him back to Gryffindor Tower would be most prudent, for his own good, as well as Mr Weasley's. We wouldn't want either of them to wander off."

"Of course, sir, I'll take them."

"Miss Clearwater?"

"Yes, sir?"

"If either of these two dares to give you the slightest hint of cheek, you are to come to me at once! Detention might help deter and control their wandering ways as well as their mouths." The Potions master had an odd expression on his face: his lips seemed slightly turned up, not smirking, but as if pleasantly admiring something.

"Thank you, I will, sir." Penelope looked directly into Snape's eyes. "Professor Snape?"

"Yes, Miss Clearwater?"

"Thank you for *everything*, sir." For, indeed, being around Professor Snape caused her to feel useful, valued he was ever so courteous towards her in Potions class as well as any random encounters in the corridors when on Prefect patrol. *I feel like my old self again before Percy... Snape makes me feel almost like... a respected equal...* Penelope felt her face burning and quickly turned to guide Weasley and Potter away with her.

Snape watched as Penelope walked away, escorting the deflated and resigned Potter and Weasley. For the first time in a long while, he felt pleasingly calm with the revelation that Miss Clearwater was an unexpected kindred spirit regarding her opinion of the golden-boy Potter.

*Witches... he ruminated. Miss Clearwater is definitely full of surprises; her uncanny, delicate understanding of the fine properties of Potions, her unexpected alliance against Potter ... there is clearly more to her than meets the eye ... her placid façade and passive demeanour covers an impressive talent and keen intellect balanced with a passion for knowledge and justice. How naive, idealistic... What a shame she'll have to learn the hard way... like us all... life is indeed not fair...*

With his thoughts quickly turning dark, Snape sighed heavily and glided away. He needed to check his office, a recently acquired habit, in hopes of catching the thief of three-and-a-half weeks ago. A faint smile flickered across his face as he realised that tonight he could rest easy, as Potter was being bodily escorted to Gryffindor Tower. But, being a creature of habit, Snape compulsively completed his ritual.



After personally seeing Potter and Weasley to the Fat Lady's portrait, Penelope continued to patrol the corridors in a whirlwind, contemplating the revelation of Professor Snape's animosity and, yes, *hatred* towards Harry Potter.

When she returned from her patrolling to the comfort of her room in Ravenclaw Tower, she dressed for bed and snuggled under the warmth of her blankets. In the soft lighting of her bedside scone, Penelope relaxed and remembered Snape's guised, admiring gaze and smile. *He did smile, didn't he? Could it be...?*

She jolted upright, suddenly remembering about the second task, and brought her wrist towards the light. Warmth flooded her body as she saw the second bead had changed to blue, just like the first bead which Myrtle had noticed earlier. She sighed and lay down again. Snape *had* smiled, and she felt sure they had connected with each other on a deeper, more personal level. If that didn't satisfy the Protean Charm and win her the second task, then she couldn't imagine what would.

Extinguishing the candle and closing the four-poster curtains, she thought of Snape's fathomless black eyes, followed by the pressure of his lips on hers, and the slow weight of his body pressing into hers into the softness of her mattress. As she fell slowly into sweet slumber, her fingers traced gently over the second bead of her bracelet and she returned to dreamland to Snape, giving her full attention, body and soul to him...



When the weekend arrived, a fierce, wintry storm blew outside, and the howling gale wailed against the castle walls like shrieking seagulls at high tide.

After breakfast, Luca waited by the entrance to the Great Hall; Apparition class had moved indoors to avoid the unsettled weather, and Luca intended to claim a good spot in which to practise.

The first two Saturday-morning lessons had been conducted outdoors in February's crisp, chilly air, and the students had watched their breath freeze in wispy spirals as they laid their wooden hoops on the frosty ground, feeling wholly uninspired and deeply resentful of the repetitive and unrelenting mantra of 'Destination, Determination, Deliberation' delivered by the Ministry of Magic Instructor.

Luca had quickly realised that Apparition required an intense amount of concentration, and his progress was being prevented by the constant distraction of students screwing up their faces and pirouetting like novice ballet dancers. Today, he intended to find a quiet corner of the Great Hall, away from the chatter and commotion, and make a serious attempt to Apparate. If he could be the first student to accomplish this seemingly impossible feat, then perhaps he could make Snape smile. It was a long shot, but Luca was fast running out of options; weeks ago the second bead of Alicia's bracelet had changed colour, followed by Georgina's and Penelope's, and Luca only had four days left in which to complete his second task.

Luca heard Wilkie Twycross's arrival and hastily stuffed a crumpled copy of *Common Apparition Mistakes and How to Avoid Them* inside his robes. The diminutive Apparition Instructor walked through the Entrance Hall, accompanied by Professor Flitwick, and both straightened their hats, askew from the ferocious wind outside. The two wizards met the three other Heads of House at the bottom of the Marble Staircase, McGonagall and Sprout shaking Twycross's hand whilst Snape retrieved the key to unlock the Great Hall.

Luca felt a flutter of foreboding as the black form of the Potions master swept towards him like a nefarious phantom.

Jaded resignation was plainly written across Snape's ashen features; he knew the next hour would be one of hellish boredom and annoyance, intermingled with the ubiquitous possibility of mortal injury. There was nothing like Splinching to get the blood pumping on a Saturday morning.

"Good morning, Mr Caruso," Snape said as he placed the large brass key into the door's lock. He tilted his head towards the Hufflepuff whilst simultaneously turning the key, setting forth a succession of creaking hinges and clunking mechanisms within the door.

Luca shuddered at the combined sound and imagery, looking into Snape's dark, glittering eyes. "G-good morning, Professor."

"And what brings you here so promptly on a Saturday morning?" Snape asked, his voice bearing signs of mild interest.

"I wanted to bagsy a nice quiet spot to practise, sir," Luca said as the door opened, and he followed his professor into the hall. "I'd like to be the first student to successfully Apparate."

"Well, well," Snape said, turning to appraise the young man, "our heroic Hufflepuff now wishes to prove himself worthy of the House of Ravenclaw? I can't imagine who you're trying to impress this time..."

"N-no one, sir," Luca stammered. "I'm just *determined*, that's all. No pun intended." He looked sheepishly at the floor, expecting Snape's sarcasm at any moment.

Momentarily forgetting the young man was not from his own House, Snape slipped into a mentorship role. "Determination, Deliberation and Destination are crucial," he said, flicking his wand to light the candles in the hall. "If you pay close attention to Mr Twycross, the essentials are there; all that remains is to focus your mind. You must be determined to arrive at your destination and move with deliberate intent." Snape paused, looking down his long, hooked nose at Luca. "I daresay if you were in Slytherin, you would understand the value of ambition, and find Apparition easier."

"That's an interesting point, sir," Luca replied. "I thought the exercise simply required concentration, but you're right; ambition is very important too."

"Indeed it is, Mr Caruso. Perhaps today will reveal a little bit of Slytherin in you..."

*I would love to have a bit of Slytherin in me* Luca thought wryly, avoiding Snape's gaze.

Soon, the Great Hall was ringing with the sound of bustling students, lining themselves up with wooden hoops and preparing for another hour of tedium and frustration. Mr Twycross gave a brief lecture, restating the salient points of Apparition theory, whilst the four Heads of House spread themselves strategically around the room, poised to pounce upon students and reattach limbs and appendages at a moment's notice.

The first half hour ticked by slowly, and Luca remained in his quiet corner, staring at the circular piece of stone floor into which he was expected to Apparate. So far, he had perfected his twirl into a graceful movement, much like the one demonstrated by the Instructor, and so believed he'd mastered the art of Deliberation. Merlin knew he was Determined enough to Apparate; his wish to make Snape smile made that part of the exercise straight forward. But his yearning to reach his Destination was definitely lacking. There was nothing inspiring about a patch of flagged stone floor five feet in front of him.

Suddenly a scream echoed around the hall, and Luca turned, startled, to see Jared Simpleton standing inside his hoop, but with both of his arms missing. The two limbs lay yards away, leaking blood onto the floor like a scene from a horror film. Snape and McGonagall descended on Jared's hoop, and there was an almighty bang, followed by a thick haze of purple fumes.

The miasma gradually dispersed, revealing Jared with his arms reattached, staring at his hands as if they were not his own. McGonagall put her arm around his shoulders and led him out of the hall, taking him to Madam Pomfrey in the Hospital Wing.

It was the third Splinching in as many weeks. Usually, when the students witnessed the gruesome ordeal happening to one in their midst, they were unnerved, fast losing their appetite for learning.

But Luca could not afford to give up on his ambition. He watched Snape's impressive profile weaving its way towards the dais to adopt a new lookout post, and Luca's chest compressed in a sigh. There was only one destination worth risking his life for, and he was staring right at it. His yearning increased, summoning an image of elegant pale fingers intertwining his own, the Potions master's shallow, hot breath on his neck, his lips brushing his skin, sending rivulets of electrical current down his spine...

And then an idea came to him.

*Destination, Determination, Deliberation.*

Luca executed a stylish twirl, and everything went black.

The breath in his lungs seemed to have been sucked out, and his whole body felt as though it were being squeezed and pushed through a narrow hose, swirling in zigzags like a deflating balloon.

Suddenly, his feet found the floor, and he guzzled an enormous breath of air, his eyes streaming with tears. Luca blinked to clear his vision, and to his combined shock and delight, he found himself face-to-face with his Potions master. Nervously, he shook his arms to make sure they were still attached, and he found he was still in one piece.

Peals of applause and whoops of delight resonated around the Great Hall. Several students jumped up and down, clapping excitedly, their enthusiasm reignited. Luca remained glued to the spot, staring into the Potions master's shrewd black eyes, utterly transfixed by their bottomless depths. Gathering himself, he vigilantly watched Snape's expression, praying for the elation in the hall to reach Snape's lips, curling them upwards...

From the corner of his vision he saw Wilkie Twycross Apparate onto the dais, and Luca heard his offer of congratulations. Snape, however, merely raised one eyebrow and crossed his arms. His lips didn't even twitch. As the applause subsided, Luca's jubilation faded to despair, and he inwardly beseeched his professor for some kind of reaction. *Any* reaction.

"Come on, sir, not even a little smile?" Luca heard himself say.

"You may have Apparated successfully, Mr Caruso, but you missed your Destination by twenty yards. Another three yards and you'd have Apparated into a solid stone wall and your life would have been lost. This is hardly a cause for celebration." Snape turned on his heel to step down from the dais.

"But, sir!" Luca implored.

Snape did not reply.

Useless arguments constructed themselves in Luca's head whilst anger sizzled and spat in his arms and chest. He couldn't believe the object of his heart's desire could be so miserly... So *miserable*.

*One day I'll cheer him up...* Luca thought. *Cheer him up... Merlin, that's it!*

Before his rational mind could quash the insane impulse, Luca had raised his wand directly at Snape and he was shouting, *Letifico!*

The Cheering Charm flew from Luca's wand in a flash of brilliant white, but the spell crashed into Snape's instinctively-cast Shield Charm, inches in front of the Potions master's overly-large nose.

The entire hall fell silent.

Dozens of pairs of eyes focused on the dais, where Snape and Luca were standing six feet apart, horror unfurling across Luca's face. Snape was poised like a panther waiting to strike until Luca lowered his wand and dropped his head in shame. With three springing steps, Snape wrapped his vice-like grip around Luca's arm and dragged him out of the Great Hall. Spectators gasped with apprehension and muttered amongst themselves; no-one dared laugh. Not in front of the Head of Slytherin.

Luca stumbled behind Snape, feeling as though a stony fist had lodged itself in his throat. The doors closed behind them, and Snape led him away from the Entrance Hall, down the corridor which led to the dungeons.

"Please, sir," Luca gasped. "I'm sorry, sir!"

"HOW DARE YOU!" Snape shouted, pulling on Luca's arm until he was pinned up against the wall. Snape took a steadying breath, reining in his temper, but kept Luca firmly pressed against the cold sandstone. "How *dare* you," he whispered dangerously. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Luca had previously envisaged Snape asking him this question in an entirely different context. The feel of the Potions master's hot breath against his face was not quite what he'd imagined, but the proximity of his heaving chest was almost more than Luca could stand. He tried desperately to force his faculties into coherency.

"Casting a Cheering Charm on one of your teachers?" Snape continued, his eyes gleaming. "Casting a Cheering Charm upon *me*?"

"I-I'm sorry, Professor Snape! I... I didn't mean to!"

"You *didn't mean to*?" Snape repeated incredulously.

The Potions master's thin lips were unbearably close to Luca's own; his heart seemed to skip several beats, and his muscles became flaccid, like a rag doll being held up by the arms.

"Good day, gentlemen."

The voice came from behind them, and Snape's grip loosened immediately. Luca fought to stay upright. Snape stepped away to reveal Professor Dumbledore, wearing a calm, serene expression, as if he were stood at the side of a pond, feeding the ducks.

"Headmaster," Snape said stiffly.

Luca merely nodded; words were beyond him.

"To what do we owe this little quarrel?"

Snape clenched his fists. "Mr Caruso attacked me with a Cheering Charm, Headmaster."

"Attacked you?" Dumbledore asked mildly, peering at the Potions master with benign amusement.

"Yes," Snape stated, somewhat confused.

"Severus, you are the only wizard I've ever known who would deem a Cheering Charm a personal attack," Dumbledore said, smiling.

Snape scowled but remained silent.

"It seems Mr Caruso was unsuccessful," Dumbledore observed dryly, his blue eyes sparkling. "I shall take over from here, Severus. Please, return to the Apparition class; I believe Wilkie is missing two facilitators at present?"

Luca's face fell; his chances of making his Potions master smile dwindled ever further. He watched dolefully as Snape's black, billowing cloak flapped through the doorway to the Great Hall, and he felt like a wretched failure.

"I think you'd do better to return to your House, Mr Caruso, than to follow him back into the lesson."

Luca dragged his eyes away from the closed door.

"I shall deduct twenty points from Hufflepuff for casting a spell at a teacher," said Dumbledore, considering the young man carefully.

Luca opened his mouth, in an attempt to explain himself, but the Headmaster raised a hand, silencing him.

"Think yourself lucky that the punishment is not more severe."

Luca nodded glumly.

"Come along then; I shall escort you to the kitchens. I'm sure the house-elves will oblige with a slab of chocolate cake for the first sixth-year to successfully Apparate."

"But, sir how did you know?"

Dumbledore tapped his crooked nose with a long, bony finger and set off towards the stairs. "Just between us, young Luca, I would have relished seeing the effect of that particular charm on our Potions master."

The Headmaster smiled, gesturing for Luca to descend to the kitchens, and Luca reflected how much easier it had been to raise a smile from Professor Dumbledore. He fiddled with his bracelet. The second quartz bead glimmered pristine white; not a speck of mirth had registered on Snape's face.

"A word of advice," Dumbledore offered, preparing to leave Luca at the entrance to the house-elf domain. "You're barking up the wrong tree with Professor Snape."

With a tiny wink from his piercing blue eyes, the Headmaster turned and walked back down the corridor, leaving Luca dumbfounded.



The twenty-third of February arrived faster than any of the Four-House champions could have imagined. Once more, in the dead of night, when all of their Housemates were safely tucked up in bed, they each made their way to the chilly Boathouse down by the Black Lake for the winner of the second task to be announced.

Luca and Penelope arrived first and were huddled around a small gas-lamp for warmth, their breath fogging in the freezing air.

"I can't believe I've failed," moaned Luca miserably, jangling his bracelet for emphasis. "I didn't even get a grimace out of him. If anything, I just managed to piss Snape off even more."

"Well, you did fire a spell at him," Penelope reminded him, not unkindly. "No wonder he was pissed. I still can't believe you did that! That took some guts."

"It wasn't guts, it was desperation," Luca grumbled. "Perhaps I should have taken a leaf out of Alicia's book and sent Professor Snape a Valentine's Day card instead. Anything to crack that stoic composure of his."

"Alicia told you about the Valentine incident two years ago?"

"Yeah, that Gryffindor certainly has courage. Although I'm pretty sure sending a Valentine to the Potions master borders on stupidity." Luca folded his arms across his chest in an effort to keep warm. "Urgh, where are the other two? I'm surprised Alicia isn't here already, going on about the Runespoor incident for the millionth time."

As if on cue, the portrait of Percival Pratt swung open on creaking hinges, and in came Georgina and Alicia, the latter of which was smiling serenely.

"About time, you two," Luca chided, sounding just a little harsher than he'd intended.

"Oh, don't be such a sore loser, Hufflepuff," Georgina answered, batting him lightly on the arm. "This task was *our* idea, after all. Talk about falling on your own sword!"

"And hello to you," said Alicia, giving him her most dazzling smile before greeting both him and Penny with a hug.

The portrait swung closed on the freezing Boathouse, and Percival waved his quill with an almost regal flourish before greeting them all with a poem.

"Not every gent is prone to chuckles,

And not every man will grin.

To make this sort of person smile

Is certainly no easy win!

Some say personality is key,  
Others say your charm;  
But you don't need these things  
To receive a smile so warm.  
Sometimes the simple things  
Can be most pleasing to spy.  
Be yourself, show your wit;  
There is more to you than meets his eye."

The four champions looked around at each other, and Georgina raised her eyebrow sardonically at the poet's latest offering.

But no sooner had the portrait finished his rhyme than the distant, echoing chimes of the clock striking midnight began to toll ominously. The four friends glanced down at their bracelets, which had once more begun to emanate light as the Protean Charm activated the second bead. After a few moments, with a poof and final crackle, the luminous light faded.

Luca's bead stayed resolutely opaque. "No surprises there, then," he muttered.

Penny's bead had turned a vibrant light blue. Her face fell. This was not what she'd expected *at all*.

Georgina's bracelet, meanwhile, was shining with a bead of deepest, darkest green. She could not help but feel a swoop of disappointment in her stomach as everyone turned to Alicia, who was now holding her wrist out and staring open-mouthed at her own bracelet. Alicia's bead was jet-black, shining in the gaslight like the Black Lake.

"I... I've won!" Alicia couldn't quite believe it.

Neither could Penelope. Her face was thunderous.

"Well done, Alicia," Georgina said stiffly, unable to stop the snakes of jealousy writhing once again in her stomach.

She then nudged Penelope sharply in the ribs, and the Ravenclaw bit out, "Yeah, well done."

Luca was the only one who could put his disappointment to one side, and he congratulated Alicia warmly. "One each," he grinned, shaking his bracelet at her.

"Well, we still have one task left to go. This tournament isn't over yet!" Georgina reminded everyone.

Luca groaned. "Oh god, I've been dreading this one..."

"Get detention with Snape," Georgina clarified. "I wouldn't worry, Luca. If you fire another Cheering Charm at him, he'll have you cleaning cauldrons for a week!"

"Not funny, Ciccia," Luca replied, mock-pouting.

"I've been dreading this one, too," Alicia admitted. "At least we don't have to worry about it until the start of summer term."

Only Penelope remained silent, as though she were lost in thought.

Before they could ruminate on this any further, the portrait of Percival Pratt gave a polite yet firm sort of cough, and all of the champions looked up at him with surprise. After clearing his throat, he began to speak once more.

"And now all the players are evenly matched,

But that was given since the plan was first hatched.

Anyone now can win the prize,

Of affections from a teacher whom others despise.

Good luck, dear children,

Your goal is in sight.

But this poet has some last

Advice to offer, if I might.

It is a proverb so old,

Never mind who first said it,

But be careful what you wish for...

You just might get it!"

And with that, the poet laid his quill down on his desk, closed his eyes and began snoring gently in his frame.

"Blimey, I think all that hard work dreaming up those poems has tired him out," quipped Luca, to giggles from Alicia and Georgina. Penny was checking her watch anxiously.

"It's late! And if we get caught being out at this time, we'll all be in detention and that won't even count towards the next task! Come on guys, we need to get back."

And so the portrait again swung open, Percival Pratt still sleeping soundly throughout, once more revealing the hidden passageway to Hogwarts. The foursome climbed out of the Boathouse to return to their respective dormitories, curious about the Triwizard Tournament's second task tomorrow and pondering on their own third and final task: to get a detention with Snape.

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#### Authors' Note:

Written by [nagandsev](#), [Agnus Castus](#) and [star\\_girl](#) with a poem by [bluerain1984](#).

The Snapettes would be thrilled to receive your review!

## The Third Task - Part One

Chapter 8 of 9

Four unsuccessful Triwizard entrants arrange their own tournament. The prize: Snape.

Alicia came back from the Easter holidays feeling refreshed and still riding high on the buzz of winning the second task. It still seemed surreal that she, a Gryffindor, would be the one to make the surly Head of Slytherin give a genuine smile. Every so often, she would check her bracelet, admiring how the onyx-like bead sparkled in the light, as deep and unfathomable as the Potions master's eyes.

Although she felt confident that detention with Snape could be easily won, part of her didn't want to be successful. Up until this point, her record was spotless; she'd never received a detention from any teacher, and she was hoping to keep it that way. Plus, getting a detention would negate all the positive interactions she'd had with Snape so far and would certainly cancel out the effects of winning the second task, meaning that she would surely drop in his estimation.

Therefore, she was somewhat torn about how to approach the final task. Might there be a way to achieve detention without being labelled a dunderhead? Was it possible to be punished for doing something noble, such as displaying her Gryffindor valour? These thoughts and more were all she could think of once the summer term began.

Similarly, Luca was in the same kind of quandary. Since winning the first task and gaining praise from Snape completely by accident, his run-ins with the Potions master seemed to have been fraught with trouble. First there had been the incident with Nikolai Mostovoi, when Snape's quick-thinking saved the Durmstrang student from expulsion, but Luca had been left feeling about two-feet-tall. And then there was the hideous, embarrassing episode in the previous task, when in desperation he'd fired a spell at his teacher and felt the fiery edge of Snape's wrath. If Snape didn't already think he was as thick as a troll, doing something deliberately stupid in order to get detention from him would certainly change his mind.

Luca's predicament arose because he didn't want to throw Snape's help back in his face. He was incredibly grateful for the way Snape had handled the situation between him and Nikolai at the Yule Ball, and the discovery that the dark professor was not in the slightest bit homophobic had amazed him. So, despite Dumbledore's insinuations that the Head of Slytherin may be straight, Luca's admiration and desire for the brooding Potions master remained untarnished, and Luca was reluctant to fall further out of his favour. And yet, winning the Four-House Tournament would be in his grasp if only he could get detention in a way that wouldn't make him look as useful as a gnome at a Horklump convention...

It seemed like Catch-22 for both Alicia and Luca, and as the summer term raced by, the final task appeared to be increasingly impossible. However, the answer to both of their dilemmas came rather unexpectedly over a hushed conversation in the library one evening in the middle of June whilst the pair revised for their end-of-year exams.

"So, any new ideas for the final task?" Luca asked lightly as he rifled through his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* and searched for the chapter on Calming Draughts.

Alicia, who'd been scribbling away frantically on her parchment, narrowed her eyes at him across the table and put down her quill. "Do you think I'd really tell you if I had? You're my biggest threat to glory, you are."

Luca shrugged idly. "I'm certainly out of ideas," he said seriously. "I just hate the thought of Snape thinking I'm an idiot," he sighed, resting his chin on his hand.

Alicia smiled. "I think it's too late for that, love, especially after the infamous Apparition lesson incident."

Luca scowled. "Don't remind me. That's why I'm struggling with this last task. He already thinks I'm on the same intellectual level as a Flobberworm. I just wish I could get detention without having to do something really awful," he finished earnestly.

"I know exactly what you mean," Alicia confided. "After making him smile like that in the last task, the last thing I want to do is get in trouble and piss him off. I know I have an unfair advantage, being a Gryffindor; usually all I'd have to do is sneeze and he'd dock House points. But still, I just don't want him to hate me in order to win this." She blushed, releasing she'd just verbalised her biggest fear. But to her relief, Luca was looking over the table at her sympathetically.

"Me too, Ciccina, me too," he agreed before joking, "If only there were some way we could get detention together. That way, we'd share the pain!"

Alicia looked back at him as if she had been Petrified by a Basilisk.

"Ciccina?"

"Sweet. Merlin's. Beard!" Alicia cried, suddenly animated. "Luca, you're a genius. That's exactly what we should do!"

Luca looked puzzled. "I was joking, Leesh."

"No, seriously, think about it. We've both won a task each. If we pool our resources and get detention together for the final task, that way we both win *even if* Georgina and Penny succeed in this task! Because then we'd both have won two tasks each!"

Luca raised his eyebrows in amazement. "Oh my god, I really am a genius! Who knew?"

"You are!" Alicia replied. "By working alone, it's more difficult to win outright. If one of the others wins this task, it means three of us draw. But by us working together, not only do we have a better chance of winning this task, we also eliminate the competition if we do and therefore win outright."

"I never would have thought of that! This is your Quidditch brain going into overdrive!"

"Well, what do you think?" Alicia pressed. "Are you with me?"

Luca grinned impishly. "You're on."

And with a quick handshake, the pair sealed the deal.

Dreaming up what they could do to score a double detention, however, was a challenge in itself. Alicia suggested that they start quarrelling in a lesson, but after consideration they decided that maybe it wasn't severe enough to warrant their desired punishment. When she suggested a fight, Luca flatly refused. "I know you don't mind getting your pretty face smashed in during Quidditch, but this gorgeous visage stays intact," he told her flamboyantly. "Besides, you'd flatten me." Alicia couldn't help

but giggle at that.

It was only when Luca, off-topic, revealed that Nikolai had been sending letters weekly since the Easter holiday and was reminiscing how much better at kissing Nikolai was than Oliver Wood, that Alicia had a brainwave.

"Luca..." she said slowly, leaning across the table seriously and grabbing his arm. "I've got an idea."

"Another one? Has someone had Wit-Sharpener Potion for dinner?" Luca replied, a lopsided grin on his face.

"What if we get off with each other in class? Snape would shit in a cauldron with rage!" Alicia exclaimed.

Luca wrinkled his nose at his friend's rather crude turn of phrase. "Us? Kiss? I doubt Snape will fall for that. He knows I'm as bent as an eight-Galleon coin."

"You didn't see him patrolling the rosebushes at the Yule Ball," Alicia pointed out. "He was blasting snogging couples left, right and centre, a right sour look on his face too. If we did it in class, right in front of his deliciously large nose..." But then her face fell. "Sorry, Luca. That was really inconsiderate of me. Asking you to snog me is like asking me to snog Filch."

Luca said nothing to this for a few moments, thinking Alicia's idea through. "Well, well, Leesh, I think you've hit the jackpot with this one," he said eventually, turning to his friend and grinning.

Alicia looked stunned. "Really? You wouldn't mind kissing a girl? You wouldn't mind kissing... me? Or care what anyone else thinks about it?"

Luca assessed the young woman in front of him. "What's a little kiss between friends, Ciccio? But no funny business and don't get any ideas! This boy is not for turning," he answered, wagging his finger in the air for emphasis.

Alicia grinned. "Oh my god, this is going to be so weird! Do we need to practise, do you think?"

But Luca raised his eyebrow. "Now you're pushing it."

As time was of the essence, the pair decided to hatch their plan in their very next Potions class before either of them got cold feet and decided to chicken out. Sure enough, they were soon shuffling into Snape's classroom deep in the dungeons just a few short days later on a windy Friday afternoon.

"Are you sure you still want to do this?" Alicia hissed urgently as the other sixth-years noisily took to their seats amongst scraping of chairs and clanking of cauldrons.

"I'm not backing out now," Luca muttered in response, even though his heart was hammering in his chest at what he was about to do. "As soon as Snape comes in the room, remember?"

No sooner had he said this than the stern Potions master came sweeping past them in a flurry of black robes, expertly flicking his wand towards the door to shut it with a bang before turning towards the blackboard.

"Sit down and be quiet," Snape told the dawdling students as he waved his wand, effortlessly making rows of his cramped, spiky handwriting appear on the chalky black surface.

Whilst Snape had his back to the class, Luca seized his chance. Pulling Alicia towards him, he cupped her face with one hand and began kissing her softly. Even though they had planned it, Alicia was still surprised by the feel of his lips upon hers, but soon began to respond with a gentle kiss of her own as a ripple of shocked whispers started up around them.

"We'll be continuing with your revision for next week's exam. Today, we'll be looking at the potion known as..."

But the class never got to find out what potion they would be revising, for Snape had turned around to find two of his students locked in a passionate clinch, temporarily leaving him speechless.

Luca Machali Caruso, an open homosexual, sucking the face of naive Gryffindor, Alicia Spinnet, *in his class*? A flash of several emotions passed quickly over Snape's face as he observed the scene before him. He didn't know what emotion to feel first; disbelief at the scene he was witnessing, annoyance at Luca's deception and Alicia's gullibility, or anger that they had the sheer audacity to behave in such a way in his presence. His face became an inscrutable mask once more as his anger inevitably won the battle.

"Mr Caruso, Miss Spinnet!" he barked, causing them to jump and break apart, slightly breathless. They looked at him and saw that whereas Snape's face seemed calm, his black eyes were gleaming with barely-disguised rage.

"Never before have I witnessed such inappropriate behaviour in my classroom. To my office, now!" he instructed them, in a tone that left no room for negotiation. "The rest of you, turn to page two-hundred-and-thirty-five of your textbooks and begin reading chapter twenty. If I hear as much as a heartbeat when I return, I will deduct five House points from each of you. Do I make myself clear?"

The stunned sixth-years silently fished for their textbooks as Snape followed the terrified yet excited pair out of the classroom and into his small, rather claustrophobic office next door. He slammed the door forcefully, once more making them jump.

"What the hell were you doing in my classroom?" Snape hissed at Luca, his oily black hair jumping around his face in anger and his eyes burning into Luca's.

Luca swallowed, suddenly feeling out of his depth. "Kissing, sir," he replied shakily.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "I am aware of that, Mr Caruso. I am asking you why."

"W-why, sir?" Luca stumbled, not prepared for this line of questioning at all.

"Why were you kissing a *girl*, when your sexual orientation is known by the entire school?" Snape asked impatiently.

Luca was floundering, his mouth opening and closing, but before he could come up with a response, Alicia spoke instead.

"It was a bet, sir," she said, thinking on her feet, and it took all of her courage not to start crying when Snape turned his venomous gaze to her. "I bet him a Galleon he wouldn't have the guts to kiss a girl. And... And to prove it, he snogged me, sir."

Snape appraised the Gryffindor girl in front of him carefully. "You bet someone who is openly gay to kiss a member of the opposite sex?" he asked incredulously. He noticed the girl was fiddling with her silver bracelet, and his keen eyes noted that a matching piece continued to adorn the Hufflepuff boy's wrist.

"Yes, sir," she replied whilst Luca nodded emphatically. "It was just a silly joke."

"A silly joke that you decided to perform in *my* classroom?" he asked, turning his gaze once more to Luca.

"It was spur of the moment, sir. I... I wanted to get my own back by surprising her," he finished, his mouth now quite dry.

"Surprising her? Did you want to get her into trouble, Mr Caruso?" Snape seized on this new piece of information like a cobra striking its prey.

"N-no, sir, I just thought it'd be funny to kiss her instead when she bet me to kiss a girl."

Luca's heart was racing as Snape's eyes bored into his. He looked back resolutely, hoping their little alibi was enough to appease the Potions master. But it appeared they weren't off the hook yet.

"This does not explain why your little clinch turned into a spectator event, Mr Caruso. You seemed to enjoy everyone watching you. It was almost as if you wanted me to catch you. Do you deny it?"

"I got carried away, sir," Luca answered. "Alicia is a good snog," he mumbled.

At this, Alicia blushed and looked down.

Snape breathed heavily through his nose. Something about this didn't add up, even though their story seemed to hold water. He watched the pair as they both looked down at their shoes, uncomfortable and embarrassed, awaiting their punishment.

"Regardless of your motives, you both behaved extremely foolishly today," he said at last. "Brazen behaviour such as this is not permitted anywhere in the school, least of all in *my* classroom," he emphasised.

Luca and Alicia nodded forlornly.

"You leave me no choice but to set an example to the school. Twenty-five points each from your Houses and detention with me on Wednesday evening. Eight o'clock."

Luca and Alicia's mouths dropped in shock at the enormity of the punishment, forgetting for a moment that they'd actually achieved their aim, and as Wednesday was the final day of their tournament, their detention had been awarded just in time.

"But sir..." Alicia began, raising her hand to protest, but Snape cut her off.

"Do you want me to make it a round fifty points, Miss Spinnet?" he asked in a low, dangerous voice.

"No, sir," she replied, her gaze once more returning to the floor. The bracelet slid down her wrist and its gemstones twinkled in the candlelight.

"Very well." Snape drew himself up to his full height and crossed his arms. "Back to the classroom now, and don't let me hear another word from either of you."

As Luca and Alicia shuffled embarrassedly back into the classroom with all eyes upon them, they didn't even notice that the third bead on each of their bracelets had changed colour simultaneously: Luca's, a vibrant yellow, and Alicia's, dazzling scarlet.

Snape, however, *had* noticed.

And as he watched the pair shuffle out of his office, his keen and agile mind chewed over this new information like a hungry Hippogriff. There was certainly more to this story and more to those bracelets than met the eye, and he had every intention of uncovering the truth.



A short time later, one day before Luca's and Alicia's pending detention, Georgina and Luca made their way through the castle corridors after dinner. Walking towards the Marble Staircase, Luca nodded his head as he listened to Georgina ranting against their Ravenclaw contender.

"Can you believe the nerve of her? This morning, Penelope was complaining about the Protean Charmagain, saying she should have won the last challenge, just because Professor Snape happened to agree with her actions when she punished Potter and Weasley." Georgina huffed with frustration. "The second task finished four whole months ago, and she's *still* going on about it!"

"Penny may be in Ravenclaw, but it beggars belief that she might actually believe she's better able to judge the winner of any particular challenge than our Protean Charm." Luca chuckled. "It's ludicrous that she even considers herself unbiased in the matter."

"But that's just it," Georgina snapped. "We all have to interact with Snape in some form or other. Why should Penny consider herself better than the rest of us?"

"Don't work yourself into a snit, Georgie." Luca flashed a sly grin before winking at her. "We all know she was seeking revenge-by-proxy when she targeted Percy-the-Prat's brother. The second challenge has been decided months ago. Alicia won. Who gives a rat's arse at this point?"

They reached the start of the moving staircases that appeared to shift without rhyme or reason. Fortunately the pair had learned to extract reason from chaos, allowing them to navigate the stairs to the ground floor with minimal hassle.

"So, do you have rounds tonight?"

Georgina released an audible sigh of resignation.

"Yes, and with Penny, of all people. I really could do with revising for this week's Herbology exam." She rolled her eyes. "Merlin help me; if Penny starts whinging about the second task again, I just may hex her whiny arse into next week."

Luca put his arm around her shoulder as they made their way to the top of the stairs.

"Georgie, darling, I've no doubt you'll survive the evening no worse for wear. As for me..." He gave her a forlorn smile. "Detention with Snape tomorrow night has never looked so unappetising."

Georgina bade her friend goodbye, watching him make his way to the Hufflepuff common room for a few blessed hours before he had to face detention with Snape the following day. Oh yes, Georgina had heard all about that, and so had the whole school; Alicia and Luca had really set tongues wagging, but Georgina knew they'd done it deliberately. The Gryffindor and Hufflepuff had conspired to jointly win the final task.

At first, Georgina had been furious about being outwitted in such a way, but then she'd had to concede their plan was worthy of the most devious of Slytherins. Although Georgina was no longer in the running to win the tournament overall, her competitive nature wanted to get a detention so she might at least draw on this task and beat Penelope.

Taking a deep breath, Georgina made her way to the Prefects' meeting room before the evening rounds started. The Head Girl was waiting there to pass around the patrol rosters. A quick glance revealed that she and Penny would be patrolling the fourth floor.

As the two young women strode towards the staircases, Georgina noticed that Penelope seemed preoccupied, and despite herself, she asked, "Is anything bothering you? You normally aren't this quiet not that I'm complaining, mind you."

"It's the bloody tournament," Penelope replied.



Georgina groaned inwardly.

Penny didn't notice the expression on her companion's face, and she brushed a stray lock of hair from her face in agitation. "How on earth are we going to get detention with Snape without marring our school records?"

"The brightest mind of Ravenclaw can't figure a way to get detention?" Georgina snorted. "Whatever you decide to do, I absolutely refuse to snog you in front of my Head of House. Besides, you are *so* not my type."

"Georgina, I'm serious. The last thing I need is a blemish on my otherwise pristine record. Hopefully, Professor Flitwick will be willing to look past this momentary madness and still give me a letter of reference. Good grades alone aren't enough to land an apprenticeship in Charms, and our exams aren't called *Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests* for nothing!"

"You're blowing things out of proportion, Penny." Georgina rolled her eyes in exasperation. "You are practically Flitwick's pet student. There is no way this could end badly for you. Think about it for a moment. Your grades are top of the line. You have an otherwise clean student record. You've been a Prefect the last three years. Short of you destroying the school, chances are he is more than willing to look over one pesky detention."

Penny shook her head in frustration.

Georgina had little sympathy for the Ravenclaw's dilemma. "I don't know why you're getting your knickers in a twist. I'm in a tougher spot than you are at the moment. Not only do I have to get detention with my Head of House, but I am also relying on a letter of recommendation from him as well. Talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place. Plus, you're bound to ace your NEWTs, unlike me. Your situation is practically a walk in the park."

Penelope could not help but notice the lingering note of irritation in her friend's voice. Their circumstances were very different from Luca's and Alicia's who were only in their sixth year at Hogwarts. Both she and Georgina were final-year students, they were Prefects and they had much to lose if they didn't play the final leg of the tournament carefully. The stress of their NEWT examinations was clearly getting to both of them. In retrospect, the stakes almost didn't seem worth the risks involved, especially as neither of them could win the tournament outright now. Penelope's brow furrowed as she contemplated how to make the best of her situation.

They finally reached the fourth floor and began their usual route towards the library in contemplative silence. Georgina glanced at her friend who seemed lost in thought. Despite their differences, she was well aware of just how precarious a line they were treading. They were both on the cusp of leaving school and entering a different phase of their young lives. Embarking on the life adventure known as adulthood, yet here they were playing foolish games all for the brief attention of a man, and at the risk of jeopardising their exams and, therefore, their futures! What the bloody hell had they been thinking?

"Merlin, this whole tournament has turned into a right mess," Penelope said pensively as they turned the corner to the library.

Georgina nodded in agreement. "It wasn't supposed to be like this..."

Before she could finish, the massive wooden library doors opened, and Hermione Granger and Viktor Krum stepped through to the corridor. Caught off-guard, Georgina came to a sudden halt. Both she and Viktor had taken great pains to avoid one another since their clumsy, heated encounter at the Yule Ball.

Viktor stiffened as he caught sight of Georgina. A strange tension filled the air which left both of them staring awkwardly at one another. Krum's companion seemed oblivious to the strain.

"My apologies," Hermione said while adjusting the strap to her book-laden shoulder bag. "I lost track of time studying, and Viktor kindly offered to escort me to my House."

"Yes, well... Please mind the time in the future." Georgina stepped aside to allow them room to pass. Viktor met her gaze momentarily and opened his mouth as if to speak, only to close it again. Without uttering a sound he nodded his head in deference and allowed Hermione to precede him.

"Oh, my..." Penelope eyes widened as they watched the couple disappear around the corner. "What was that all about?"

Georgina took a deep breath, pulled herself together and tried her best to put on an air of indifference. "You act as you've never caught two students exiting the library after curfew."

"Slytherins may be renowned for the art of deflection, but you can't fool me, Georgina." Penelope cast a sly grin as her mind raced towards an obvious, though incorrect, conclusion. "You two have a thing going!"

"Don't be absurd."

"You have a secret romance brewing. I knew it!"

Georgina started moving briskly down the corridor with Penelope following close behind.

"And *you* have an overactive imagination." Georgina continued to deflect. "There is nothing going on. Now can we please drop it? *Do not* start grinding the rumour mill, Penny."

"This is too good to let go!" Penelope was practically dancing with glee. "I can't wait to tell Alicia about this."

Georgina stopped moving and turned around, her green eyes hard and defiant. She brushed her dark hair off her shoulder. "Get over yourself, Penny. This does not concern you."

Realising she'd hit a sensitive spot, Penelope continued her mock attack.

"The lady doeth protest too much, methinks."

Georgina finally snapped. "It's now become clear why Percy brushed you off. You just don't know when to back the bloody hell off!"

Penelope's face crumpled, and she spat, "Oh, shut up, will you!"

"Why should I?" Georgina replied nastily, clutching her wand. "You're the one who started this. You know nothing. You understand even less. I strongly urge you to keep your nose out of matters that don't concern you!"

"Are you denying that there's anything going on between you two?"

Georgina glared at her fellow Prefect indignantly. "Funny, you've never struck me as a hard-headed harpy. Whisper one word about this and you will regret it, Clearwater."

"Don't think for one moment you can threaten me, Smyth," Penny hissed, her own hand gripping her wand so tightly that her knuckles whitened.

Georgina's wand twitched upwards. "Who said anything about a threat?"

"Do I detect a problem, ladies?" Professor Snape's rich voice drawled just loud enough to catch their attention.

Both girls jumped, startled by his sudden appearance. Snape heard a tinkling of jewellery as the girls withdrew their wands, and in the flickering torchlight, the silver of the girls' bracelets sparkled. The items of jewellery were familiar, and Snape inclined his head, noticing two of the beads on each bracelet were coloured, blue for the

Ravenclaw, green for the Slytherin.

Georgina quickly regained her composure and smoothly replied, "I am uncertain, sir." She then turned her attention towards her companion. "Is there a problem, Penelope?"

"Um, no... There's no problem at all." Penelope cleared her throat. "We were merely having an animated discussion, sir."

"That's a rather distinctive way to describe a cat fight," Snape said, moving steadily towards the two witches. "Would you like to know what I think?"

Both girls tried their best to remain calm and hide their building anxiety. His lip slightly curled at their obvious discomfort. It amused him how quickly a couple of felines could retract their claws when need be. However, this was neither here or there. The fact remained there was a matter which needed to be addressed.

"I daresay the two seventh-year Prefects standing before me are being less than... forthcoming... with regards to the circumstances."

Penelope cast a quick glance at Georgina only to find herself caught once more in the professor's darkened gaze. She shifted her stance ever so slightly and then stared at the grey stone floor guiltily. Snape zeroed in on her nervousness, finding her to be the weaker of the two. He would get to the bottom of this curiously heated squabble one way or another.

"Miss Clearwater, I shall ask you once again. Is there a problem here?"

"Er, it was more of a difference of opinion then an actual problem, per se." Her voice trailed off with an utter lack of assurance.

"Do my ears deceive me, or is a Ravenclaw arguing semantics with the Head of Slytherin?" His sarcastic tone left no doubt to the quietly controlled anger lingering just beneath the surface.

Unable to disguise her distress, Penelope's face reddened at the implication.

Professor Snape turned towards his own student and studied her calm outward appearance. Never let them see you sweat the signature hallmark of any Slytherin worth his or her salt. He regarded her reply to his initial inquiry, inwardly smiling at how easily she was able to deflect the line of interrogation onto the other girl's shoulders. He expected no less from any of the students in his House.

"Miss Smyth, please clarify the situation for me."

"Certainly, sir." Taking care to choose her words, she continued, "Miss Clearwater and I did have a disagreement over a... personal matter that wasn't her concern. It had not yet risen to such a level as to be deemed problematic."

It was as diplomatic an answer falling from the lips of a Ministry official as he had ever heard. She would fare just as well with a career in politics as in Potions.

"I see. In that case, Miss Clearwater, please report to my office tomorrow afternoon so that we may discuss the terms of your punishment."

"That's not fair, sir she was fighting, too!" Penelope sputtering indignation was short-lived when she realised she'd stepped over a line which a Prefect should never cross. "Dear Merlin, I'm so sorry for speaking out of turn, sir. It won't hap..."

"Is that so?" He arched a single brow, daring her to challenge him further. "We shall discuss this matter in more detail tomorrow, Miss Clearwater. For now, I suggest you conduct your patrols separately this evening. Off you go, Miss Clearwater, I wish to speak to Miss Smyth now."

Penelope cast one final glance at Georgina before heading down the corridor quickly. Turning the corner, she felt an icy-cold shudder; Penny had accidentally walked through one of the Hogwarts ghosts, but when she turned to look, the apparition had vanished into the wall.

Snape, meanwhile, turned his attention to Georgina. "Miss Smyth, am I right to assume that this disagreement concerned a certain visiting Durmstrang student caught escorting another?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was anything untoward said or hinted to you by this visiting student?"

"No, sir. Both students went on their way without hassle."

"And, Miss Clearwater...?"

"She had jumped to the wrong conclusion regarding any association I may have had with the visiting student." Georgina flushed at this admission but continued. "I advised her that it would be best if she kept her opinions to herself and not start gossip."

"Thank you, Miss Smyth. I appreciate your frankness in this matter."

"You're welcome, sir," she replied with relief.

"We will discuss this situation more in depth at a later date."

"A later date, sir?" she squeaked.

"Yes. We shall also use the opportunity to discuss the terms of *your* punishment. You may have a valid reason for wishing to hex Miss Clearwater, but sadly that is something that cannot go unnoticed."

Georgina was suitably chastised. Yes, she was so angry about the invasion of her privacy that she had felt like jinxing Penny. But would she have had the nerve to go through with it? Suddenly, Georgina felt very ashamed. "Yes, sir."

Professor Snape nodded his head curtly, turned on his heel and disappeared into the shadows.

Partially relieved that she might get detention after all and remain relatively unscathed in the process, Georgina closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Now she had to deal with the small matter of her reaction to Viktor and Penelope's runaway mouth. She wondered if life could get any more complicated.

Fighting the urge to scream aloud, Georgina decided to walk off her frustration and ruthlessly patrol the fifth floor. As she picked up her pace, adrenaline surged through her body, and her ears hummed with anger. She wrestled with her emotions silently whilst listening to the staccato of her shoes upon the stone floor, livid with Penelope for insinuating she had been caught in some sordid love triangle with Viktor under the nose of his Gryffindor bookworm. And now the nosy cow was threatening to blab about it to one and all the Ravenclaw Prefect always did enjoy a chewy bit of gossip. Georgina sincerely hoped Professor Snape could put a stopper on any tittle-tattle that might arise.

Eventually she found herself at the door to the Prefects' bathroom. A quick spell revealed it was free for use, and she entered the room and cast the requisite Privacy Spell. After filling the pool-sized bath with a relaxing fragrance, she summoned the attending school-elf.

"Muffy, could you please bring me a clean change of night clothes, as well as my dressing-gown?"

A few moments later, the requested garments materialised on a bench underneath the large portrait of a mermaid languorously brushing her yellow hair. Georgina peeled off her clothes, left them in a haphazard heap on the floor, and made her way to the pool's edge. Carefully, she took off her bracelet and left it by the side of the bath before stepping into the foam, allowing the hot water to envelop and soothe the tight muscles in her back and shoulders. She closed her eyes and inhaled a long deep breath of steam and lavender, and soon the thoughts whirling around her mind began to drift into a state of calmness.

After a short time, Georgina sensed another presence in the room. Without opening her eyes she issued a warning. "Peeves, you bloody nuisance of a poltergeist, I shall alert the Bloody Baron if you're peeping into the Prefects' bath again."

Her words were met by the high-pitched giggle of Moaning Myrtle. Georgina groaned at the thought of her peace being shattered by an angst-ridden, boy-crazy ghost.

"Myrtle, dear, I'm not really in the mood for chit-chat at the moment."

"Oh, it's just you," the ghost replied sulkily. "I thought you were Penny. Did you know the two of you wear the same bracelet?" Myrtle remarked, pointing at the jewellery at the water's edge. "Does that make you *best friends forever*?" The ghost giggled.

"Definitely not," Georgina replied emphatically.

"So why do you wear the same beaded bracelet?" Myrtle pressed, intrigued. "Are they part of a set?"

"Our bracelets are none of your business!"

Myrtle raised a silvery eyebrow at Georgina's curt response, studying the coloured quartz beads curiously. "It's weird how they change colour like that... Penny's was blue, but yours is Slytherin green..."

Georgina, alarmed at the Ravenclaw ghost's perception, attempted to quickly distract her. "You weren't by any chance hoping to see Cedric, were you?" she asked, knowing that Myrtle's crushes on male Prefects were legendary.

"That pretty boy?" she exclaimed, looking away from the bracelet. "Merlin, no! He's cute enough, but his shortcomings leave much to be desired, if you know what I mean." The ghost let out another round of giggles. "No, I was hoping my boyfriend would drop by again."

"You have a new boyfriend?" Georgina wasn't beyond listening to a bit of gossip herself, she realised. "Oh, do tell. If it isn't Cedric, then that narrows the field a little bit."

"He isn't a Prefect," Myrtle whispered conspiratorially.

"Are you saying that a student, other than a Prefect, has been using our bathroom?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

"But, of course, now... Who aside from the Prefects has been using our bath?"

"He's not just any student he's a Triwizard Champion!" Myrtle flew a loop over the pool with giddy laughter.

Georgina's heart dropped as she absorbed the implications. Viktor Krum has been using the Prefects' bathroom. No, despite what had happened he would never stoop so low as to play peeping-tom in the bath. Or, would he?

"Myrtle, dear, does your boyfriend happen to be Viktor Krum?" She noticed her voice trembled slightly.

The ghost stopped her aeronautical acrobatics mid-flight and dived straight into the water, popping up beside Georgina.

"No, silly! Although, I wouldn't mind taking a peek at his package," she replied saucily. "It's Harry Potter he's so dreamy, don't you think?"

Georgina released a sigh of relief, thanking Merlin for granting small favours.

"I'm glad your other friend has kept quiet about it. I swore her to secrecy, too."

"You told Penelope about Harry being your boyfriend?"

The ghost happily nodded in affirmation.

Several thoughts started clicking into place inside Georgina's Slytherin mind. Revenge, it seemed, was hers for the taking, without even having to raise her wand.

"Dearest, if you don't mind me asking, when did you tell Penelope about this new boyfriend of yours?"

"It was Valentine's Day. She was crying so loud I heard her through the pipes in my S-bend! Why do you ask?"

"Oh. That's a pity," Georgina said ruefully.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Myrtle asked.

"I hate to be the one to break this, but I fear your trust was misplaced."

"What?" The ghost wailed loudly. "She wasn't supposed to tell. She swore she wouldn't breathe a word to anyone!"

"Calm yourself, dear," Georgina chastised. "It's not really anything that Penelope said. It's more what she *did* to poor Mr Potter."

Myrtle stilled for a moment, pouting. "What did that witch do to my Harry?"

"Well, how can I put this delicately...? Penelope insinuated to Professor Snape that dear Harry had been caught in a compromising position with another student a male student."

"That's outrageous! How could she lie like that?" Myrtle sputtered indignantly.

"Unfortunately, that's not all." Georgina cast a faux-sympathetic smile. "She also hinted to the Potions master that Harry might have been cheating in the Triwizard Tournament. He was nearly disqualified."

"Oh, that girl is a wretched, vile witch!" The ghost zoomed around the edge of the pool screeching at the top of her lungs. "How dare she? Penelope Clearwater will pay for this!"

Moaning Myrtle took one last look at Georgina's bracelet then gave a final cry before diving into the water and disappearing through the drain at the basin of the pool.

Georgina smiled at the thought of Penelope being haunted by the most vengeful of spirits. Feeling much better, she finished her bath in peace.

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#### Authors' Note:

Written by [star\\_girl](#) and [rosewood](#).

The Snapettes would be tickled pink to receive your review!

## The Third Task - Part Two

*Chapter 9 of 9*

Four unsuccessful Triwizard entrants arrange their own tournament. The prize: Snape.

The following afternoon, inside Snape's cramped Potions office, Penelope stared blankly at an unrecognisable amphibian, pickled inside one of the myriad jars on the Potions master's dusty shelves.

She'd hardly slept the night before, worrying how Snape might respond to the discovery of two Prefects arguing like cat and dog in the corridor, setting a bad example to other students, as well as her own subsequent slip of the tongue.

Sitting quietly in the chair opposite Snape's writing desk, she felt overcome with anxiety, torn between winning detention for the final task of the tournament and keeping her slate as clean as possible for her future career.

Penelope realised her mind had wandered when Snape impatiently uttered her name.

"Miss Clearwater."

"Yes, sir?"

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Nothing?"

Snape didn't continue. Not immediately. His gleaming black eyes bored through Penelope, and a pernicious tension, putting Penelope's nerves on edge, took over.

"Starting a fight in the corridors is one thing." Snape's onyx orbs gleamed dangerously as he meticulously clipped out his next words. "However, you should also be aware... I have observed the bracelets."

"The bracelets?" replied Penelope innocently.

He sharply whispered, "Yes... The gemstone bracelets which you four wear."

"You four, sir?"

"I advise you to stop parroting my words, Miss Clearwater," warned Snape softly. Noting Penelope's terror, he slowly listed, "Miss Spinnet of Gryffindor, Mr Caruso of Hufflepuff, even Miss Smyth of my own House of Slytherin..." His grimace caused his voice to break, but only momentarily, as the sharp contortion helped further express his contempt. "And then, there is *you*, Miss Clearwater, a Ravenclaw."

Snape inhaled slowly, deliberately, and then revealed, "All of you have the same gemstone bracelets. Why is that, one wonders?" His facial muscles flinched as he constrained his anger.

Striving against her growing queasiness, Penelope decided, *The partial truth might appease him*. "Percy, um, my ex-boyfriend, gave the original to me... Everyone liked the bracelet so much, so we... we had it duplicated."

"I doubt that very much, Miss Clearwater." An eerie, crooked smile crept around the corners of his mouth. "Percy Weasley giving you a cheap trinket of affection is no surprise to me. But a highly-charmed bracelet... that raises my curiosity. Again, Miss Clearwater, how could that be?"

Penelope's heart started racing, and she felt her forehead break out in perspiration, her palms turning clammy. *He knows! Oh, God, he knows they're Charmed!* Penelope struggled, her thoughts darting to-and-fro, trying to find a way to divert Snape away from the truth. She laboured to no avail and steadfastly refused to look him in the eye.

Snape enjoyed her deepening scarlet blush, no doubt a reaction to his dig at Crouch's pretentious sidekick, as well as her well-deserved squirming, and he pushed, "Why would Mr Weasley present his girlfriend with a *Charmed* bracelet? In particular, why should that Charm respond to *me*?"

Snape's eyes smouldered with slow, burning malice, accentuated by his smug smile, rendering Penelope utterly disorientated. Visions of being stripped of her Prefect privileges flashed through her mind, blemishing the honours she'd accumulated during her pristine record at Hogwarts. The Potions master's unflinching gaze prevented her from constructing any form of defence.

However, she realised she needed to say something, so she squeaked out a jumble of humiliated words.

"It wasn't, sir; it was just a stupid, cheap... *We* Charmed it, we..."

Abruptly, Penelope faltered and had to stop to control her trembling voice. Softly gasping, and unable to look Snape in the eye, she realised the jig was up and bowed her head. Her fingernails dug into the wood of the chair which she'd grasped tensely to steady herself.

Snape pulled out his wand and then he smiled slowly. Cruelly. He'd heard what he needed to hear. Now he only had to extract the sordid details. He would be nobody's fool. Least of all to this callow youth, the girl whom he'd foolishly perceived as different.

*She may have impressive talent and keen intellect...* He swallowed hard as a painful memory flitted through his mind, associated with another time, reminding him of

another clever Prefect, another very gifted witch, red-haired and green-eyed... *But this one's just another conniving know-it-all. I'll find out from her what she and the three others were hoping to achieve...*

"Take off the bracelet, Miss Clearwater. Place it on top of my desk, at once!"

Startled, and without the willpower to protest or question his authority, Penelope acquiesced to her professor's command. But then, suddenly, as if compelled by her strained nerves, she started wildly inventing, "They're cheap, joke-bracelets... A new Zonko product... They seem to have a mind of their own, changing colours to prank the onlooker, and such...." Snape raised an eyebrow in combined disdain and disbelief, and Penny continued hopelessly, "They're... They're quite common, sir, and as you've noticed, quite inexpensive."

Snape's eyes gleamed.

"I'm going to tell you what I believe, Miss Clearwater. I think that this bracelet, along with the other ones so cleverly duplicated, is not a Zonko product at all. I believe that they are sentient objects bewitched for dubious intent."

Penelope gulped, mesmerised by his deductions.

Snape's lips curled around the corners as an odd expression crossed his face, and he swiftly pulled out his wand and snarled, "Detention, Miss Clearwater!"

Penelope's heart sank as she watched Snape, for he had not addressed her directly; his focus had been aimed at the gemstone bracelet. His shrewd gaze fixed adamantly upon its individual beads. Penelope followed his intense line of sight and groaned despairingly as the third bead changed colour, turning a dark midnight blue.

"A Protean Charm of sorts," whispered Snape softly.

Penelope docilely nodded in the affirmative.

"Instead of lying to me further, Miss Clearwater, I would advise you to tell me the detailed truth." His voice altered to a guttural sounding, *Now*.

*Oh God, if he were to know all the details... The real meaning, the real reason behind all this...*

"It's a silly challenge... only a game... a joke... The bracelet was meant as..."

Infuriated, Snape's black eyes flashed. "A joke? The bracelets were merely for playing a practical joke on someone? *Fothumiliating* the chosen target?"

"No, no, sir," she protested meekly.

"Don't!" he cut in sharply, his jaw rigid with anger. "Don't lie to me, Miss Clearwater."

Snape's exacting gaze bore relentlessly upon Penny. "The details, Prefect! What is the full meaning of the bead turning blue?"

"It's the last stage... before..."

"Yes?"

"Before it may turn black. Or not. Tonight. At midnight."

"If it turns black, what then?"

"I win."

"You win?" Snape gritted his teeth in impatience at the incongruity of it all. *What the devil is the girl babbling on about?*

"Well, I'll tie for the third task, at least. I've got no chance of winning the tournament at this point." Penelope sighed. The cat was out of the bag now.

"The tournament?" scowled Snape, confused. "The third task? Of the Triwizard Tournament?"

"No, sir. The Four-House Tournament." Responding to the professor's strange leer, further information lurched out of Penny's mouth. "We weren't selected to be competitors in the Triwizard Tournament, so... so we created our own. One from each of the four Houses I represent Ravenclaw."

"Obviously." Snape blinked hard, sorting through the outlandish gibber. "The winner attains what?"

"Prestige, sir."

"Clarify, Prefect?"

Desperately concocting a story, she explained, "Whoever wins would be able to flaunt to everyone that they had won your..." Penelope faltered, dreading bending the truth in front of Snape's all-seeing, all-knowing eyes, and she steeled herself to offer up a white lie. "Your attention, sir. Your attention is what we wished to gain, Professor Snape."

Severus stared, unblinking, into Penelope's frightened blue eyes. After a painful silence, he hissed out finally, "*My attention*, Miss Clearwater?"

Penny nodded, panting shallowly and waiting for Professor Snape's wrath. She was unnerved to note that he had frozen, almost as if she'd hit him with a Petrificus Totalus hex.

After a couple of seconds his lips broke the illusion, and he clipped out sharply, "Wait here, Miss Clearwater."

Snape walked past her and left the inner chamber of his office.

Penelope remained seated, dazed and unable to move or even to think, other than to replay again and again the dreadful last ten minutes. She stared, stupefied, at the preserved, pickled specimens lining the stuffed shelves and began to count them mindlessly. Time passed excruciatingly slowly until Snape's office door swung open once more. A flushed Georgina entered. When Georgina saw Penelope sitting down, stunned and unresponsive, the Slytherin knew instantly that this was far more serious than the silly argument in the corridor last night. Before she could speak, the door opened again, and a bewildered Alicia and an apprehensive Luca entered, crossing over to their fellow Four-House champions. Penelope rose to her feet, caught somewhere between shame and panic.

Luca whispered frantically, "We were summoned by Snape! Me and Alicia, we thought he'd called us early for our detention!"

Alicia and Luca shakily pulled up chairs and sat down, sensing the enormity of what was about to happen.

Before Penelope could reveal any information to them, Snape swooped into his office, circling around the four students to stand forebodingly in front of them. Penelope slumped into her chair once more.

"What do you have to say for yourselves?"

All four were lost in a stupor of confusion and fear. They could only stare at Snape, wondering if he'd found them out, waiting for the axe to fall.

"Nothing to say? Not one of you? Perhaps this will help," suggested Snape as he whipped out his wand, pointed it at the newcomers, declaring, "Detention!"

Wide-eyed with astonishment, the three gasped, flabbergasted, as the third beads of their bracelets changed, Georgina's from white to a deep, murky green, and Luca's and Alicia's to an even darker shade of their respective House colours.

With the utmost satisfaction and an odd, ugly leer, Snape observed, "Curious reaction, isn't it? The bracelets do seem to respond when I give you detention. Why is that? Anyone?"

No-one could speak.

With a horrible smile, Snape ordered, "Take off your bracelets. One by one. Miss Spinnet, you first. Place it there beside Miss Clearwater's. Now you, Mr Caruso."

When Snape turned to address Georgina, he paused for the briefest second. "Miss Smyth."

Seeing the disdain etched on her Head of House's face, Georgina burst into a sob. *Why did I ever do this?* Overwhelming abjection washed over her.

Snape's biting command of "Silence!" hushed Georgina at once, and he continued to prowl behind his desk. Snape snapped his wand through the air a second time, fastidiously separating and evenly lining up the bracelets. He then gave a portentous look to the four students.

Snape took his time, reflecting over several possible reasons why these dunderheads would dare provoke and ridicule him with their preposterous games. A long time had passed since Snape had been an object of ridicule at Hogwarts. He had endured and survived the Marauders and their underhand tactics during his student years, and he was incensed to realise he had become a laughingstock once more. However, this time the mockery had been concealed, until now.

"Goading me with your pubescent stupidities for your own personal amusement?" he barked.

He scowled, taking a deep, controlling breath, and then chose Luca as the first target to be probed. "I've been told, Mr Caruso, that your reason for participating in this little game was to *goad* me? What should I do with the likes of you? Attacking me with a spell wasn't enough, I see." Snape snarled, remembering the embarrassing incident in the Great Hall earlier that year.

*The Cheering Charm... Merlin, what was I thinking?* Luca groaned as his mouth gaped open. He shot a fleeting glance of incredulity at Penelope, assuming she had fed Snape the 'goading' lie to somehow save herself from the severest repercussions of Snape's inquisition. *How could she have said that to Snape about me?* He looked back at his austere Potions master and spluttered incoherently. "No, sir, never... No, never..."

Snape turned and gazed starkly at Alicia. "And you, Miss Spinnet, wished to *mock* me? Not very original, but very *Gryffindor* of you."

Alicia, wide-eyed and startled, eked out, "Mock you? No, Professor Snape, never!"

"Enough!" He then paused, gritting his teeth as he turned, considering the betrayal of the next delinquent.

"Now, Miss Smyth, what have you to say for your shameful participation in this? You, of all people?"

Silently, tears had begun streaming down Georgina's proud face.

"One of my Slytherins intended to *humiliate* their very own Head of House?"

Under Professor Snape's harsh stare, her exterior crumbled completely and Georgina started blubbing. Pressing her lips together while wiping her face, she gave Penny a spiteful glance. "Your *attention*, sir," Georgina whispered. "I wished to gain your attention."

Snape's face twisted into a sneer. "I see. Being in Slytherin for seven years has not been enough for you." Suddenly, his eyes seemed to shoot hexes. "You dare accuse me of not giving you enough attention? The care and attention afforded to you this year alone has been more than most of my charges receive over seven whole years; are you oblivious to my intervention following the Durmstrang incident?" Snape winced as another thought occurred to him. Looking at Georgina as if for the first time, he quietly enquired, "You're not even seriously contemplating a career as a Potioneer, are you, Miss Smyth?"

With wide eyes, Georgina gazed up into his burning coal ones and pleaded, "Yes, sir. Please believe me, more than ever before! I love..." She jerked her head away from his gaze, catching herself in time. More controlled, she reassured him, "I love *Potions*, sir. There's nothing more in the world I'd rather do than commit myself to that noble and high profession."

Snape's eyes narrowed with intense suspicion before giving them all a contemptuous scowl.

"It seems you four not only require *special* detention, but also a life-lesson. One to be learned the hard way. One that you'll never forget... I believe a little manual labour is in order." Snape bared his yellowish, uneven teeth with satisfaction. "You can thank your Ravenclaw cohort for divulging the truth about your imbecilic game and for winning a fitting detention for all of you."

The three simultaneously cast looks full of gall and wormwood at Penny.

"Tomorrow morning, at six o'clock sharp, the four of you shall meet me by the entrance to the hedgerow maze, grown for the final task of the Triwizard Tournament. You'll be told exactly what you're to do then."

As an afterthought, he reassured, "You need not worry; I shall indeed grant a detention worthy of your Four-House Tournament, and you may flaunt the success of your endeavours to all your peers. The entire student body will bear witness and enjoy the fruits of your labour." Abruptly, Snape growled, "Now, get out of my sight before I change my mind and turn you over to Hagrid or Filch for extra detention duties!"

As the four stood up, they couldn't help but give impulsive glances to the bracelets on the desktop.

Menacingly, Snape confirmed, "The bracelets stay with me."

The defeated foursome shuffled one-by-one through the office door.

Once outside and out of earshot, Georgina was the first to lash out at Penelope, threatening, "Don't you dare speak to me again! You traitorous, lying... How could you?"

Luca could only stare through tearful eyes at Penny. Completely drained and too hurt to vent his deep anger, he simply said, "I've been loyal to you through and through. How could you have told Snape such lies about us?"

Penelope snapped out of her despondency when the pained timbre of Luca's voice struck her in the heart. "I didn't, Luca! I swear. Snape was just manipulating you to believe..."

"What?" attacked Alicia. "To believe that you'd betrayed us? Well, he succeeded, didn't he? Just as you've succeeded in turning us all in!"

"You don't understand somehow, Professor Snape already knew! I don't know how, but he'd already figured it out!"

Her explanation seemed to fall on deaf ears; Georgina, Luca and Alicia stalked away, ignoring Penny's plea.

"Not a very nice feeling, is it, Penelope?" jibed a familiar voice from behind one of the dungeon's ceiling arches.

The Four-House champions froze in place when they saw Moaning Myrtle floating midair with a reproachful, bespectacled stare. She addressed Penelope again.

"Did you *'hope to die'*, sitting there under Severus's nasty inquisition? Did you cross your heart, hoping you'd *bedead* soon?" The squat ghost glared through her thick, whitish glasses, demanding an answer.

Penelope stared at the ghost with horror. She had almost forgotten that she'd broken her promise not to disclose anything Myrtle had told her in the Prefect's bathroom, including the details of Potter's clandestine visit with his Golden Egg. Her contrition felt like a block of ice in her stomach.

"Doesn't feel very nice, does it? Having your secrets revealed? Being betrayed?" pushed Myrtle plaintively. Then, after a moment's contemplation, the apparition cackled and swooped to their eye-level. "Especially to *him*. He's very touchy about secrets and lies, that one." She motioned knowingly towards Snape's office. A malicious smile spread over her translucent face, and she crooned, "He's always been very sensitive, even when he was a student here... But as a Professor, he really has no tolerance for naughty nitwits such as you. I understand this about him; only I." Myrtle had a dreamy far-away look shining through her silvery orbs.

Luca was the first to utter, "What has Penny got to do with you, Myrtle?"

Smirking at Luca, Myrtle replied, "What, indeed?"

Abruptly, Moaning Myrtle whipped around to face Penny, frowned sulkily and then complained, "In all his time at Hogwarts, I've never been able to interest Severus in anything; he's always ignored me, just like the other boys." Her wistful expression face changed to smugness as she purred, "But he was *very* interested in the bracelets and in you, Prefect Clearwater. He was quite curious, seemed to think that you were involved in some covert, stupid little game; I bet he thought you were *different* from other witches... You've been quite clever, up until now, that is," teased Myrtle, and then she burst into hysterical laughter only to abruptly stop and eerily whisper, "But you broke your promise to me..."

"So, just imagine the look on Severus's face when I suggested he question *you* about the gemstone bracelets. He was peeved; I could just tell! Yes, he became deathly pale when I told him the Ravenclaw Prefect would know the little secret about why the sparkling trinkets involved him. Oh, his face was a death-mask." Myrtle swooped backward, gently swinging in the air, gushing, "I do appreciate a pale-skinned man... He was so deathlike... just like Tom was. Except Tom was more handsome!"

Myrtle giggled and then swooped even higher, humming dreamily to herself.

Penelope was dumbstruck, but soon Alicia bounded forward, saying what Penny could not. "It was *you*, Myrtle? *You* told Professor Snape about us?"

"Not about *you* who cares about you or the *pretty boy* over there." Myrtle snorted.

Luca raised his eyebrows.

"I told him about his Slytherin Prefect and the one from Ravenclaw." Myrtle wrinkled her nose in disapproval. "And the bracelets oh yes, Severus seemed to care a great deal about those."

"But how did *you* know?" enquired Georgina suspiciously.

Belligerently, the squat ghost tutted loudly. "I do have eyes, you know." She glared at Georgina. "I saw the way you took off your bracelet and didn't let it out of your sight when you stepped into the bath last night. Oh yes, and the Ravenclaw Prefect is always oh-so-careful with her bracelet, too. You didn't like me asking questions about your matching bracelets, did you, Georgie-Porgie?"

Penelope swallowed hard. *Georgina added fuel to Myrtle's fire, giving her the perfect ammunition.*

Myrtle suddenly shrieked triumphantly. "But Severus won't ignore me again! I've never managed to tempt him before with something juicy enough for his particular taste, even when he was a student being bullied and teased. Oh, how lonely he was just like me we have so much in common."

She looked hopefully towards the Potions master's office, and then, with a sulky shrug, Myrtle squinted nastily at Penelope. "You didn't realise it, but I'd heard you and the Slytherin girl wailing like banshees at one another in the corridor, and I visited the Prefect's bathroom to find out why. I could see how upset my poor, brooding Severus truly was, having to endure your pitiful tirade, so I seized the opportunity to make you pay... I spent the night composing a riddle to entice him I know how he appreciates intelligence and a good mental challenge and I went to visit him earlier today, hoping to rouse his interest.

"In secrets and trickery let bewitchment resound

Where four identical sparkling bracelets are found.

Four different House members are bound,

There too shall lurid mischief abound!"

Myrtle sniffed. "He didn't care much for my poetry. So I simply named names!" She smiled wickedly at Penelope. "I singled you out as the ringleader. Oooh, I feel quite nice knowing he was so brutal with you. Now you know how it feels to be utterly humiliated and rejected!"

With a hysterical sob and wail, Myrtle shot straight up in the air and then flung herself through the stone wall, giving a horrid moan and disappearing from sight.

Exhausted and numb, Penelope reflected on her broken promise and the price they had all paid for her indiscretion. *If I hadn't run into Potter, if Georgina and I hadn't quarrelled...* The memory of Snape's words *'life is indeed unfair'* came back to her. *Yes, life is unfair... but I won't settle for that; I won't give in!*

Penelope turned and looked to Georgina, Alicia and Luca for absolution. "I don't care about Snape I care about you!" she blurted.

Her emotional outburst snapped the three others out of their stupor. Myrtle's revelation had shaken them like a whirlwind, blowing everything out of place, leaving shock and astonishment in its path.

Penny continued to explain. "We said we were friends... A friend would at least listen to my side of the story before walking away."

Alicia was the first to challenge Penny. "Well? What promise did you break...?"

"Don't ask not unless you want Myrtle to haunt each of us for all eternity."

"Merlin, no," interjected Luca. "She's always given me the creeps, in more ways than one."

Still irked, Georgina finally spoke. "I can't believe Moaning Myrtle was pumping me for information!" She looked at her oldest friend, Luca, and then made eye contact with Alicia and Penelope. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, casting her gaze to the floor. "I'm as much to blame for this debacle as Penny is."

Luca moved to Georgina's side and gently touched her arm.

Penelope continued to process the sequence of events. "So that's how Professor Snape knew we were up to something before he called me into his office. Before he summoned the rest of you. Myrtle had whispered in his ear, and he made his own deductions. And then he played dumb, lied to each of you, manipulated you, to see how you'd respond."

"But why would he immediately assume we'd wanted to mock or humiliate him?" asked Alicia naively, still shaken by Snape's cross-examination.

Luca turned to Alicia. "Because he's *Snape*, Ciccio. A man like that it's his first line of protection to always be on the defence, from attacks at any time on any level... even from dunderheads like us. I mean, have you ever met a Slytherin who wasn't defensive?"

"We're not defensive!" Georgina rejoined. "We're just protective and sensitive to criticism... Slytherins are very much misunderstood. Snape just hasn't been appreciated enough his whole life!"

"Can't argue with that," Alicia said, smirking.

Luca laughed, and the tension seemed to ease a little bit.

"Did you really mean what you just said, Penny?" asked Luca carefully. "About not caring about Snape?"

Flooded with relief that her comrades had not rejected her, Penelope replied, "How can any of us not care about Snape? It's beyond our control." She smiled warmly. Looking steadily at her three peers, Penny confessed, "But I care very much about you three; your support and friendship have come to mean a lot to me. Even Professor Snape can't change that. Not ever."

Almost in a hush, Alicia commented, "What would any of us have done in your place, in the same situation, being interrogated alone like that by Snape? It must have been awful."

"Terrifying," admitted Penelope, shuddering.

Luca put his arm around Penny's shoulder and gave it a friendly squeeze. "Look, I'm famished. Why don't we all go down to the Great Hall and see if there are any leftovers? You can tell us in detail what happened."

"Sounds good," agreed Georgina. "Let's hope there're some desserts left; we'll need the comfort food."

As they all sauntered along the corridor and out of the dungeons, Penny gave Georgina a shy grin, and teasingly asked, "So... a Potioneer, eh? Surprise, surprise."

Georgina tossed her hair back and smiled demurely, "Yes, well, what'd you expect?"

"You almost slipped up there," reminded Alicia, amused. "I was going to die if you'd confessed that you loved him right in front of his face."

The recollection of the harrowing escape of revealing her feelings for the Potions master sent the four of them into a fit of giggles.

"Oh, God, what was I thinking?" wondered Georgina aloud.

"You weren't thinking... You were *under pressure*. Snape's pressure." The two seventh-year NEWT students gave each other smiles of true understanding.

Georgina genuinely burned to know something. "So, if not a Potioneer, then what are your career plans, Penny?"

Penelope gave a long deep sigh. "Well, if I survive tomorrow's detention, I think a career in Spell Damage at St Mungo's would be a very worthy profession. Although, I might have to be accepted there as a patient tomorrow morning, along with you three."

The foursome arrived at the Great Hall in better spirits, and found to their delight that there were still morsels of various dishes left of the evening's meal as well as a bountiful variety of desserts in which to indulge themselves. As the hall was largely empty of students, they huddled together and shared a meal.

"What do you think Snape'll do with our bracelets?" asked Alicia.

"Not wear them, that's for sure." Luca smirked.

"Incendio them, probably, if he hasn't already," commented Georgina.

Penelope blinked hard, frowning. "Watch them."

The other three looked at her for an explanation.

"I reckon Snape will stay up until midnight to see what the Protean Charm reveals."



Sure enough, once the foursome had departed his office, Snape was left to ponder the bracelets displayed in a neat line on his desk.

Miss Clearwater had told him that the Protean Charm would activate at midnight, and it was now past eight o'clock. He had plenty of time to mark some OWL examination papers and ruminate on the detention all four would be receiving tomorrow for their ridiculous, childish tournament. The punishment should fit the crime, in his opinion, and he'd devised a beautiful detention. Just thinking about it made his lips quirk. Oh, they would certainly get the *attention* they craved.

He could visualise the punishment in his mind's eye: the four challengers, tired and apprehensive after a sleepless night, waiting for him in front of the box-hedge on the Quidditch field at six o'clock on the dot. And he, Professor Severus Snape, gliding towards them in the early morning light, his footsteps making soft imprints on the dew-laden grass.

"Your wands," he would order, holding out his hand. Once he had confiscated each wand, he would then present the four small items held in his other hand and inform them, "I've also had an original Muggle object duplicated, one for each of you."

There, in the middle of his large palm, would be four ordinary pairs of fingernail scissors.

"Take one each," he'd command. They would do as they were told, naturally. "Now, turn around." He would observe their confusion when they stared, perplexed, at the mist-covered box hedgerows spreading endlessly before them, not knowing what Snape had in mind.

"In front of you is the maze for the third Triwizard task, which takes place this very evening," he'd explain. "The privet is in need of a meticulous trim, as Headmaster



Dumbledore wishes to show Hogwarts at its best. You will begin now. Start clipping."

He imagined their eyelids blinking rapidly as they processed the information, and he could almost hear their thoughts of disbelief *Surely, he's joking? At any moment filthy, rancid cauldrons might require cleaning, or rotting specimens dissecting, or something equally disgusting even something unthinkable involving Filch? Anything but this!*

He could picture them turning around for briefest second, incredulous, only to see his frozen glare confirming he was indeed sincere. The absurdity of their predicament would, for a short time, threaten to spill over into outrage, but the increasingly malicious glower of the Potions master's visage would fill them with fear so severe that it would halt any protestations.

Giving over to the inevitable, he envisaged Penelope would be the first one to step forward to the nearest hedge, feeling guilty about being the one to confess, and initiate the first 'pinch and clip' of the nail scissors. The others would follow one by one.

As the sounds of soft, unsynchronised snips would punctuate the still morning air, Snape's countenance would flicker momentarily, threatening to burst into an outright chuckle of mirth, but at the last second his control would prevail, and he'd allow himself the release of a sardonic grin as he relished the delicious punishment.

Snape felt sure that within the first hour, and definitely by the time the whole student body had finished breakfast, sporadic groups having seen and spread the news of the hideous detention awarded by Snape to two seventh-year Prefects and two six-year students would gather randomly throughout the morning to gawk and jibe at the miserable foursome, adding to their humiliation. Their fingers would be stiff, bloody and sore and their spirits broken. And they would have achieved the attention they'd so desperately craved.

When the marking of his stack of exam papers was complete, Snape put down his quill and stretched like a cat, stiff from being hunched over his desk for hours on end. Yes, he was very much looking forward to administering tomorrow morning's detention. Nevertheless, and much to his annoyance, he didn't quite believe the four students had simply competed for his *attention*; their true motive remained a mystery.

Glancing up at the old carriage clock on the mantelpiece, he realised that it was five minutes to midnight. He turned his attention to the bracelets lined up on his desk and waited patiently as the tick, tick of the clock sliced away the seconds, building his anticipation. Who would be the winner of the Four-House Tournament?

When the clock struck midnight, the bracelets began to radiate a bright white light as the Protean Charm activated for the final time. Snape stared at beads, part of him impressed at the Charms work involved. After a few moments, and with a soft hiss, the luminous light faded. All four bracelets now had a new shiny, black bead, indicating each of the students had tied for the final task. However, two of the bracelets carried a total of two black beads, signifying that two of the students had tied for first place in winning the entire tournament. And to his surprise, the bracelets belonged to none other than Alicia Spinnet and Luca Machali Caruso!

A Hufflepuff and a Gryffindor had succeeded in gaining his attention, he realised. And twice, no less! Snape's eyebrows furrowed as he tried to recall what the other instances might be. Of course, there was Mr Caruso's ridiculous stunt in the Apparition class. That certainly got him attention, although possibly not the kind he'd expected. Then there was the incident with the Durmstrang student... Had Caruso wanted him, Snape, to catch him *in flagrante*?

Then there was Miss Spinnet. She'd been ever so pleased with herself for educating Karkaroff on women's role in Quidditch. And that shameless behaviour of kissing Caruso in class... One could think that the pair were trying to make him jealous...

Suddenly, Snape's stomach dropped with a thrill of dread. Two years ago, Miss Spinnet had sent him a Valentine's card. Well, in truth, Snape wasn't completely certain that the card had come from her, but he would have bet his last Galleon on it at the time. And Luca was plainly homosexual... Could it be that they... they both *fancied him*? Snape winced at the thought, completely mystified.

But the more he considered it, the more logical his hypothesis seemed. Miss Smyth would always flick her hair in what she probably thought was an alluring manner during class. He'd always assumed this was for the benefit of her many male admirers, not for him! And Miss Clearwater... The way she'd blushed after their run-in with Potter and Weasley now seemed to hold a very different meaning...

So profound was Snape's horror, he felt as though his plummeting stomach might rip free of his body and take his heart and lungs along for the ride.

*Oh, God, No! This simply could not be! How could this happen to him, of all people?*

Snape placed his head in his hands, squeezing his eyes tightly shut. Never, in all his time of teaching, had he expected to be on the receiving end of one student crush, let alone four! His overt and deliberately poisonous personality should have been enough of a deterrent. And yet, despite his best efforts, four students from different Houses appeared to share an infatuation with their acerbic Potions master which had led to them to concoct a foolish competition in order to gain his notice. Snape didn't know whether to laugh or cry, or to bribe Harry Potter for the use of his Invisibility Cloak.

But one thing was certain: if his four admirers hoped for one moment that this newfound knowledge might make him go soft on them, then they had a nasty surprise awaiting them.

A painful life-lesson was in order, and he would do his damndest to squeeze out every ounce of affection from each and every one of them. Detention would go ahead tomorrow morning as planned, and he would relish every delicious moment of their torture. Perhaps even more so, now he knew the power he wielded over them.

By the time he'd finished with the foolish foursome, they would curse the ground he walked upon, forgetting that they'd ever been attracted to the Head of Slytherin.

Snape smirked with satisfaction as he locked his office. He made his way to his quarters in the depths of the dungeon, looking forward to a few hours' sleep and a taste of sweet revenge in the morning.

## THE END

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Authors' Note:

This chapter was written by [nagandsev](#) and [star\\_girl](#).

Please see our author page for full details of The Snapettes' writing team.

We hope you have enjoyed our round-robin story!

Our authors thrive on feedback, so please leave a review.