

For the Greater Good

by peskipiksi

Snape and Malfoy make a difficult decision when Dumbledore is made Minister for Magic.

The New Minister

Chapter 1 of 10

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DUMBLEDORE FOR MINISTER?

The Daily Prophet has received intelligence that Albus Dumbledore, illustrious Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, is to be offered the post of Minister for Magic in a specially devised ceremony at the school's traditional Halloween feast tomorrow.

The Ministry has been in disarray since the fall six months ago of He Who Must Not Be Named, when it was discovered that the present Minister, Pius Thicknesse, had been operating under the Imperius Curse for the past year. Mr. Thicknesse is continuing pro-tem in the post, but is said to be keen to retire.

Albus Dumbledore, who was heavily involved in You Know Who's defeat by "Chosen One" Harry Potter, has three times previously been offered the Ministry's top job, but has refused, citing loyalty to his teaching role as the reason.

Rumours will no doubt fly, however, concerning the worrying revelations unveiled in Rita Skeeter's biography, published last year, which cast doubt on Dumbledore's suitability for such a high-profile post.

Albus Dumbledore: Leader or Loony? Page 6

The piece of bacon Harry had been in the process of conveying to his mouth fell from his fork as he stared, open mouthed, at the front page of the newspaper, which one of the school post owls had just delivered to him at the breakfast table.

'Dumbledore's going to be Minister for Magic?' asked Hermione, who had just finished the article in her own copy of the Prophet.

'Excellent!' said Ron enthusiastically. 'He'll be brilliant!'

Harry wholeheartedly shared Ron's view of the situation. How many times had people said this summer, in the chaos which had followed Voldemort's downfall, that the Ministry needed a strong leader to get it back on its feet? In Harry's opinion, there could be no better man for the job than Albus Dumbledore.

Harry was delighted, after the stress and terror of last year, to be back at Hogwarts. Dumbledore and the Ministry had decreed that last year's fifth and seventh years, whose exams were interrupted by the Great Battle, should return to the school to retake their OWLs and NEWTs in the first term of this new year. Harry, Ron and Hermione were being allowed to return for the whole year. It felt weird, although very enjoyable, reflected Harry, reaching for more toast, to be sharing classes with Ginny. Harry missed having lessons with Neville, Seamus, and even pompous Ernie Macmillan, but the definite upside was that he didn't have to sit through any more Potions lessons watching Malfoy fawning on Snape.

Dumbledore had vacated his seat at the High Table and was now being besieged by students as he tried to make his way down the Great Hall.

'Sir,' called Ernie Macmillan from the Hufflepuff table, 'is it true? Are you really going to take the Minister for Magic job?'

Dumbledore smiled indulgently. 'We shall see, Macmillan, we shall see.'

'I'd vote for you, sir!' bellowed Seamus. 'If we had elections, that is.'

'Thank you, Mr. Finnigan; that is most gratifying. I would be much obliged if you would show the Ministry your support for me tomorrow.'

'You wouldn't leave Hogwarts, though, sir, would you?' cried Neville Longbottom, in alarm. 'We might get Professor Umbridge back!'

Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled. 'No, no, Mr. Longbottom, I will never leave Hogwarts, I can assure you.'

At this, the Gryffindor table burst into a storm of clapping and cheering, but they were silenced almost immediately as the doors to the Great Hall burst open with a crash.

Professor Trelawney came haring down the Hall, all shawls and bangles, looking quite deranged. She skidded to a halt in front of the Headmaster and stared up at him through her huge spectacles.

'Professor Dumbledore,' Trelawney gasped, clutching her heart. 'The portents! The omens! Again and again, no matter how I deal the cards they show calamity! Catastrophe is stalking you! Do not go to the Halloween feast, Headmaster, I beg you!'

Dumbledore gazed down at her with the look of resignation he had taken to wearing when he spoke to her. 'My dear Sybill,' he said patiently, 'you are tired. Go to your rooms and rest.'

Shaking Trelawney off, Dumbledore managed to reach Harry, Ron and Hermione, and, stooping to their seated level, he said in a low voice, 'Harry, could I have a private word with you, please?'

Harry was used to this by now. Since his return to school, he had noticed that Dumbledore had taken him even further into his confidence, as if the events of last year had placed Harry beyond the rank of an ordinary student, more in the nature of a lieutenant.

'Have you noticed Mr Malfoy looks a little ill?' Dumbledore asked quietly. 'I worry for him; he looks as if his father's recent incarceration has hit him hard.'

Harry laughed. 'Oh, don't worry about him sir, Malfoy's always been pale it comes of spending all his free time down in the Slytherin dungeons.'

After Dumbledore had left, however, Harry shot a covert glance at the Slytherin table. Malfoy was glowering over a copy of the Daily Prophet someone had left behind. He didn't look ill to Harry. He looked livid.

Draco Malfoy hung back at the end of his Potions revision class, waiting for Professor Snape to notice he was still there. He didn't want to interrupt what he knew to be Snape's usual cathartic process of methodically tidying the classroom. What he had to say was important and had to be approached carefully. It would ruin everything if an ill-judged remark should provoke the sort of sarcasm Snape usually reserved for the Gryffindors. Draco needed his Head of House on side.

The thought of Gryffindor house made Draco profoundly grateful, for the first time since term started, that he was in this revision class. At least he was free of Potter. Draco hadn't wanted to come back to school at all, but after the harrowing events of last term, his parents had insisted. And with this ridiculous new Law of Graduation Dumbledore had got past the Ministry, he hadn't had any choice. Well, at least he wouldn't have Potter snooping around trying to eavesdrop on this conversation.

Snape had finished rearranging his desk, and turned round to find Malfoy hovering uncertainly.

'Well, Draco?' he snapped, 'what do you want?'

'I wanted to talk to you, sir, but...no, it doesn't matter,' Malfoy stammered convincingly. 'I can see you're distracted, sir. Is everything all right?'

'I have things on my mind, Malfoy, matters I would not expect a student to understand.' He relented slightly at the crestfallen expression on Malfoy's face. 'I am not angry with you; you have always been one of my favourite students.'

'I'm glad to hear you say that sir, because you're the best teacher here.' Snape waved an impatient hand and Malfoy hurried to press his advantage. 'No sir, it's true, loads of people say so. Honestly sir, I'll tell you what my Dad says at home about you if you like.'

The mention of his father made Draco suddenly, properly, sad. He didn't know if he'd ever see him again. At least, when he was thrown in Azkaban two years ago after the fiasco at the Ministry, the Dark Lord had been around to free him. Now Dumbledore had finally got his way and locked Lucius up for good.

Snape noticed the fleeting look of misery, which crossed the boy's face. He had never been much good at offering words of comfort, but felt beholden to Lucius to try. 'Draco, your father was acting under duress. The Ministry cannot hold him in Azkaban under such circumstances.'

Malfoy's pale face flushed with anger. 'But they will sir, if Dumbledore gets elected! Dumbledore hates my father, sir. He never believed he was Imperiused last time the Dark Lord fell! And he's not going to want to set the Death Eaters free when he's Minister, is he? He's going to want to show everyone he's got the power to do whatever he likes with anyone who upsets him.'

Draco stopped. He'd have to get a grip on himself if he was going to steer the conversation the right way. He took a breath and tried to recall all the arguments he had sketched out to put to his teacher.

'I wanted to go into the Ministry, sir. Father knows people who could have helped me. But that's not going to happen now, is it? It'll be all Precious Potter, Weasley and Granger. It's always been the same: blatant favouritism. Potter can do no wrong.'

'First year: I was the one who exposed that oaf Hagrid's illegal dragon dealing, yet I got detention. Second year; Potter flies that car; breaking the Reasonable Restriction for Underage Sorcery, and Dumbledore stops him being expelled. Third year: he sneaks into Hogsmeade, you and I uncover his deception, and he gets away with it. He attacked his aunt, but Dumbledore stopped any charges being brought against him. Fourth year: he gets to compete in the Triwizard Tournament he got round the age line somehow and Dumbledore *still* let him compete. Perfect Potter. Constant favouritism!

'The whole Ministry'll be like that if Dumbledore gets in. It'll be a clique of Potter's cronies. They've broken school rules, Ministry laws and the International Statue of Secrecy, and he lets them get away with it. Do you want to live with people making the laws who break them themselves? Dumbledore'll put us all in danger, sir he encourages Potter's criminal behaviour.'

Snape nodded, almost to himself, looking thoughtful and worried. Everyone knew Professor Snape thought the Headmaster allowed Potter too much leeway. This was going exactly the way Draco wanted. He continued his list of grievances while he had the upper hand.

'I'm scared, sir. What if Dumbledore starts up the DA again? He started a vigilante group, just because he didn't like Professor Umbridge being High Inquisitor. I was trying to help the authorities maintain order in the Inquisitorial Squad, and *he* was training students in combat, in duelling, to undermine that authority. Cornelius Fudge was terrified Dumbledore was forming an illegal army, and that's exactly what he was doing.'

Malfoy regarded his teacher slyly. 'And he's stopped you getting promotion too, sir, hasn't he? He keeps denying you the Defence Against the Dark Arts job. You're just as good a teacher as Professor Slughorn, you're far better than that Lupin, and yet Dumbledore picked them over you.'

'Now, now Draco,' Snape said, sharply. He didn't like to be reminded of Remus Lupin, even if the man was dead. 'I have no personal axe to grind against the Headmaster. That is neither here nor there.'

'But it is, sir! Dumbledore hired a *werewolf* for God's sake! A werewolf who ran amok in the school grounds. He could have killed any of us! Dumbledore thinks it's OK to put our lives in danger so he can give his old friend a job.'

'And the next year he brought in Moody the Maniac! Did you know he did the Imperius Curse on us, sir? And Dumbledore allowed it! He allowed a teacher to perform an Unforgivable Curse on his students. We were terrified, sir. We never knew *what* he was going to do next.'

'Moody turned out to be a Death Eater in disguise.'

'Mad-Eye Moody's like that anyway! Disguised or not, Dumbledore didn't stop him using Transfiguration as a punishment and doing banned curses on us. He knew what Moody was like and he was quite happy to subject us to him. What's life going to be like under a Ministry run by someone who can do that?'

'Dumbledore will use the Imperius Curse on any Ministry employee who won't do exactly what he says. Who's to say he won't make the Cruciatus Curse a legal form of punishment?'

'Do you think he'd be a good Minister, sir?'

'The idea makes me uneasy Draco,' said Snape slowly. 'I do not think it a good idea for one man to have so much power. Professor Dumbledore has been good to me over the years, but I will admit to you I am deeply uneasy about how the Headmaster may react to the lure of such power. And I am very worried what that will mean for the community wizard and Muggle alike. I will tell you this I do not relish the idea of life under Albus Dumbledore's Ministry.'

That was an understatement. Part of Severus thought he would rather live as a Muggle than under the government of such a capricious, dangerous old man who seemed to believe rules were there specifically for him to ignore.

Draco seized on this eagerly. 'Dumbledore always has to be right, doesn't he? Whatever happens, we all have to kow-tow to Dumbledore. He's going to fill the Ministry with criminals, werewolves and lunatics, and the whole community will be subject to his whims.'

'This isn't like getting a new Headmaster, sir. We can't get the governors to sack him; we can't get a vote of "no confidence". This is going to have to be *permanent*, if you understand me. We...someone needs to get rid of him; if we don't, the Ministry will just keep going on about him, trying to recruit him. And it'll need to be done before he gets the job; it can't be left any later than tomorrow.'

He glanced sideways at Snape to see if he had understood exactly what Draco meant. One look told him he had, and that Snape was not horrified at the idea; his jaw was set and his face was motionless, but something told Draco his teacher was considering his words. Something in Snape's eyes told Draco he had been thinking about this himself, that this was what had been preoccupying him earlier.

'We don't have those "election" things Muggles have, sir. We have no say in this. We're just pawns, nobodies, servants of Dumbledore's great plan. Voldemort was the most famous wizard ever, wasn't he? My dad reckons Dumbledore would've done *anything* to be remembered like that.'

From somewhere high above the Potions dungeon the bell sounded for the end of break.

'We have no time to continue this discussion, Draco. Come to my office later. We will discuss it further when I have had a chance to think over what you have said.' And with that, Snape swept back into his office and shut the door.

Back in the Slytherin common room, Draco stretched out luxuriously on one of the green leather sofas. He was delighted with himself. Now all he had to do was recruit others to his cause. Goyle would join: his father was in the cell next to Draco's. Blaise Zabini's whole family was in Azkaban; he could be persuaded to do whatever was needed. Draco thought, briefly and sorrowfully, of Crabbe and Nott. He would get revenge for their families too. Dumbledore thought he could do whatever he liked without there being consequences; he thought he was invincible. Well, he was about to find out *no one* was invincible. Not the Ministry and certainly not Albus Dumbledore.

Draco sucked the end of his quill thoughtfully. Snape was nine-tenths convinced, he was sure of it. If Draco recruited as many others as possible to his cause, they could all go to Snape early tomorrow morning and persuade him further. Snape had said he wanted to continue the conversation.

People went on about Snape being high-minded and honourable since it had come out about his career as a spy, but Draco didn't believe anyone was so incorruptible he couldn't be persuaded. And Dumbledore trusted Snape. That would be very useful to Draco's plan. Just a few letters, anonymous of course and in a disguised hand, reminding the Head of House of his duty to the school should tip the balance.

Draco began to write.

A/N: Many thanks to Kyone on Sycophant Hex for the idea. This is a Harry Potter version of a classic play I'll tell you which after the final chapter (if you know, please don't let on; it'll spoil the story!). The world and characters belong to J.K. Rowling, the plot and OCs to the original playwright.

The story takes place in an Alternate Universe (non-HBP and DH compliant) after the death of Voldemort (on 2nd May 1998). Snape and Dumbledore have both survived the Final battle. Snape is still Potions Master, never having secured the DADA post, and he was not Headmaster last year. Horace Slughorn teaches DADA, the curse having been broken by Voldemort's death. Malfoy spent his 7th year at school and only Alecto Carrow was at Hogwarts last year teaching Muggle Studies (Charity Burbage was still murdered by Voldemort, but Snape and Malfoy were not present).

Harry has not seen Snape's memories in the Pensieve and therefore does not know about Snape's feelings for Lily.

When the Wicked Rise to Power

Severus couldn't sleep. It was that damned conversation with Malfoy.

Severus couldn't sleep. It was that damned conversation with Malfoy. He'd lain awake for hours staring at the ceiling, turning it over and over in his mind. At three o'clock he gave up on trying to get to sleep. He slipped out of bed as quietly as he could and went to pace his office.

The problem was that he had seen this happen before. He knew exactly what happened when a man seized too much power. It went to his head. And then people ended up living under a tyrant. Worse, people ended up dead.

Of course, he knew he couldn't compare Dumbledore to Voldemort. Dumbledore had fought against the Dark Lord for years, had given him, Severus, a second chance, even protected him against the Ministry.

But the Headmaster had already flaunted his influence over the Ministry when Severus was trying to get Potter and Weasley expelled for flying that ludicrous car. He could still remember the taunt perfectly. *'I am well aware of our by-laws, Severus, having written quite a few of them myself.'* Insufferable.

And Severus was worried, no, frightened, honestly frightened, by some of the things Dumbledore had done in the past. The man was a renegade, and renegades were dangerous in power.

Time and time again he had encouraged Potter in criminal behaviour, encouraged him to break rules and even laws. It had been Potter who had formed the illegal defence group in Dumbledore's name, but Severus couldn't believe Dumbledore hadn't known about it. In fact, he definitely knew about it through Mundungus Fletcher, who had overheard the original meeting at the Hog's Head, and yet he let a child go on teaching dangerous spells to other children.

Draco was right: "Whatever happens, we all have to kow-tow to Dumbledore." Everyone was supposed to trust Dumbledore's judgement. And yet Dumbledore's judgement was flawed. He *had* employed a werewolf. He *had* failed to spot a rabid Death Eater in a teaching role.

And worst of all, Severus had told Dumbledore over and over again that he should tell Potter about the prophecy, but no, in his *wisdom* Dumbledore had kept Potter in the dark and, as a consequence, a man had died in a completely unnecessary showdown at the Ministry. Merlin knew there was no love lost between Sirius and Severus, but the fact was, a man had *died* because Dumbledore would not be told.

How many more would die if this promotion went ahead?

Dumbledore seemed to be unassailable within the magical community, and this had led him to believe he could do whatever he wanted. He was already Chief Warlock, Supreme Mugwump and Headmaster of the only school of wizardry in the country now Minister for Magic. He seemed intent on gathering as much influence over wizardkind as possible. And Draco was right; they'd all be pawns in Dumbledore's great drive for power.

Severus had always had a sneaking suspicion that Dumbledore enjoyed his position as head of every council, every court, every quango going. Part of him had seemed to revel in those unofficial titles people assigned him: "The Only One Voldemort Ever Feared", "The Greatest Sorcerer in the World".

While he in no way agreed with Lucius Malfoy's suggestion that Dumbledore had taken Voldemort down out of jealousy, Severus did wonder whether he had worked so hard so that he (and Potter, *of course*) would be remembered forever as 'The One Who Defeated the Dark Lord'. And he would use that fact against the opponents of his new regime to justify whatever he wanted to do.

And yet, was Dumbledore really so different from Voldemort?

What had come out about him in Rita Skeeter's biography last year was nothing short of terrifying. While Severus knew you couldn't believe half of what came out of the objectionable woman's venomous quill, what was worrying him most was that Dumbledore hadn't denied any of it. It all seemed, for once, to be true.

Quotes from the book flashed before Severus' eyes. *'He learned secrecy at our mother's knee,'* Albus' own brother had said. *'Secrets and lies, that's how we grew up, and Albus...he was a natural.'*

He had been in league with Gellert Grindelwald (by all reports the Voldemort of his day), and intent on the supremacy of wizards and the subjugation of Muggles. Dumbledore's dreams had been of Muggles forced into subservience, of wizards triumphant, of himself as the glorious leader of the new "Magic is Might" order. Nothing mattered to him while he was hatching his plans with Grindelwald he'd even neglected and abandoned his own sister. This was what happened with ambitious men. They used their popularity as a ladder to power and then ignored and abandoned those they were supposed to care about.

Aberforth had said Albus was more concerned with making speeches and counting his prizes than caring for Ariana *Bit of a comedown for Mr Brilliant, there's no prizes for looking after your half-mad sister...*

'He was selfish,' Aberforth claimed, *'more selfish than anyone could possibly imagine. He didn't want the responsibility of a damaged sister. He resented her for trapping him, for wasting his life.'*

What if this promotion brought about a resurgence of his supremacist views? Grindelwald had wanted Muggle-borns incarcerated, stripped of their magic, or worse, simply wiped out.

Severus considered last year's Muggle-born Registration Committee an abomination. His nights had been plagued by dreams of Lily Evans up before the Committee, pleading for her life. He had woken night after night, in a cold sweat, having failed to save Lily again. Having condemned her to death. Again. When they were children, he'd told her being Muggle-born didn't make her any less of a witch. How could he sit back and allow the appointment of a man who might undermine that, reinstate the Committee and start the nightmares again?

The biography did say that the death of his sister had changed the Headmaster's views and had led to his famous duel with Grindelwald. If that were true, then Dumbledore's circumstances were not incomparable to Severus' own, but the Headmaster didn't trust *him* in a position of responsibility, did he? It was well known that the reason Severus had never got the Defence Against the Dark Arts post was that Dumbledore believed it would bring about a renewal of his Death Eater propensities. Well, Severus believed the absolute power of the Minister's post would cause Dumbledore to return to *his* old ways. Dumbledore had refused the Minister's job before. Several times. Could it not be that he had learned he was not to be trusted with power?

He had seemed very keen on the idea this morning though, asking Finnigan to recommend him. Clearly the lure of absolute power had won out. And he had proved as a youth that power was his weakness and his temptation.

There were even rumours (and this was what made Severus feel truly sick with dread) that Dumbledore had been searching for a way to cheat death. Every wizard knew 'The Tale of the Three Brothers' as a story, a childhood fairytale. But the rumour was that Dumbledore and Grindelwald believed it, that they were searching for the Deathly Hallows to give them mastery over death. Of course, it was only a rumour, but terrifying nonetheless. The entire community had lived in terror of Lord Voldemort for decades a wizard who had sought to make himself invincible, who had stopped at nothing to achieve immortality. That could not happen again. Severus could not allow it to happen.

Severus had spent years risking his life to bring down Voldemort. After all that, he could not afford to let another with the same intentions take hold.

There was a tap at the window. Several post owls sat on the windowsill. What the hell were they doing delivering mail at this time of night? He opened the window, took the

letters and ripped them open impatiently.

Once he had lit his wand, he could see they were all, in essence, the same. They were all reminding him of his position as Head of House at Hogwarts and urging him to take care of his students. He crumpled them up with a snort and was about to throw them into the fire, when he stopped and smoothed them out again. What if these letters had been sent by the governors? Or parents? They were right; it was his duty to protect his students. He had to act in the best interests of the school.

And the best interests of the school were the best interests of wizardkind as a whole: stop another tyrant coming to power. Which meant that Dumbledore could not, under any circumstances, be allowed to take up the Ministry's offer. It was up to him, Severus, to do *anything* necessary to prevent that. And if that meant Severus had to go along with what Draco suggested, if that meant the Headmaster had to die and Severus himself had to kill him, so be it. It was, after all, for the greater good.

A/N Dumbledore's line about the by-laws comes from the Chamber of Secrets film.

The quotes in Rita Skeeter's book come from DH Ch 28 & 35

The chapter title is a biblical quote from Solomon 28/28: 'When the wicked rise to power the people go into hiding, but when the wicked perish the righteous thrive.'

Conspiracy Theories

Chapter 3 of 10

'Malfoy, what are you playing at? It is four o'clock in the morning! You had better come in. All of you. Hurry up.'

A soft, tentative knock on the door jolted Severus out of his musings. Malfoy, Goyle and Zabini were standing there, faces hidden by their cloaks. Behind them stood at least a dozen other students, most of whom, Severus was dismayed to notice, were in the fifth and sixth years.

'Malfoy, what are you playing at? It is four o'clock in the morning!' Opening the door a little wider, he sighed resignedly. 'You had better come in. All of you. Hurry up.'

The students stumbled into Severus' office, cloaks pulled up around their faces as if they thought that could disguise them.

'Oh, well done,' Severus sneered, looking them up and down. 'This is your romantic idea of how spies and conspirators dress is it? You do realise that you will not be able to skulk around tomorrow? We will have to smile and pretend nothing is amiss or we will be detected instantly.'

He stopped abruptly. He had just realised what he had said. He had just committed himself to the plan. Well, he had known what Malfoy wanted him to do when they talked this afternoon. He had known when he got up an hour ago, that he was going to agree to it it was just that he had only now admitted it to himself.

Draco was delighted. He had thought he would have to talk Snape round again, but the professor seemed to have done that himself.

'Draco, a word.' Severus took hold of Malfoy's arm and steered him, forcefully to the other end of the office. He gestured to the fifth and sixth years. 'You expect me to work with children?'

'I expect you to work with whoever I provide seeing as I've done the recruiting.'

Severus' eyes narrowed. 'May I remind you, *Mister* Malfoy,' he spat, 'that while you may be overage, for one more term I am your teacher, and you will show me some respect. Without me to give your plan some credibility, you and your little friends will find yourselves heading straight for Azkaban.'

Draco looked suitably chastened. 'They'll help us, sir. All their families are in Azkaban. Despard Mulciber's brother was expelled by Dolores Umbridge, sir. I thought we could use him as an excuse to see the Headmaster tomorrow... you know... ask for Ruthven's expulsion to be overturned at the feast.'

'We should swear an Unbreakable Vow, sir,' suggested Goyle. 'So none of us can back out.'

Severus' expression darkened. 'Do not be ridiculous, Goyle. You have no idea of what such a vow entails. If any one of you is insufficiently committed to this enterprise, then leave now. Only those who cannot be trusted need swear vows. Our motives are for the best and I, for one, need no other incentive.'

'Are we only going for Dumbledore, sir?' asked Zabini. 'What about Harry Potter?'

'Good idea, Blaise,' Malfoy agreed. 'Get rid of Dumbledore's pet at the same time. He might be dangerous otherwise got ideas above his station after his *triumph* last year.'

'No,' Severus said sharply. 'We will have enough blood on our hands, Malfoy; I will not take part in a bloodbath. Believe me, I take no pleasure in this. We are doing this for the good of the community, not for revenge. Killing *The Chosen One* will hardly be considered compatible with that. Besides, Potter is just Dumbledore's henchman. He will be no use to anyone once Dumbledore is gone.'

Malfoy didn't look convinced, but knew better than to start another argument with his Head of House. 'Tomorrow then, sir. We'll meet just before the feast and go to the Great Hall to ask Dumbledore to pardon Ruthven Mulciber.'

Severus nodded. 'Go now, all of you. The last thing we need is for you to be caught out of bed tonight.' As a precautionary measure, he performed Disillusionment Charms on all of them before ushering them out of his office and breathing a sigh of relief.

A creak of wood behind him caused him to turn round sharply.

The door to his living-quarters had opened to reveal his wife, Alina, looking pale and scared in the candlelight.

Alina had come back to Hogwarts four years ago as a research student. As her main subject was Potions, she had been assigned as assistant to Professor Snape. Unlike most people here, she had the same wry sense of humour as him. This, coupled with a far calmer, less volatile temperament than his, had enabled her, gradually, to become his confidant, but never anything more.

She had been astounded therefore, when, immediately after the final battle, he had suggested they get married. He had said it was time he made a decent woman of her, that the students (and probably some of the teachers) were gossiping. There was nothing to gossip about, but you couldn't convince teenagers of that. She had thought

there was nothing more to it than an overdeveloped and slightly misguided sense of honour, but surprisingly he really did seem to care for her.

'Severus?'

'Alina! Go back to bed. You shouldn't be wandering around at this time of night.'

'Nor should you.' She shut the door behind her, crossed the room to him and put her arms around his neck. 'I'll go if you come back with me.'

He shook her off impatiently and went to sit at his desk.

'What's wrong with you, Severus? You were like this all yesterday; I couldn't get a word out of you, and now you won't let me near you.'

In fact, when she'd tackled him about his behaviour last night, he'd ignored her and eventually walked out on her. There had even been one heart-stopping moment when she'd thought he was going to hit her. She was well aware that her husband terrified the students, but he had never given *her* cause to be afraid of him. Of course he could be moody and taciturn, but she'd always been able to coax him out of his bad moods.

He had had secrets before; she'd known early on that he was doing some specialised work for the Order and had found out pretty quickly what, after the tragedy at the Triwizard Tournament. He had also, eventually, explained about Lily Evans, an explanation that had involved a highly uncomfortable trip into the Pensieve. She knew all that, and she'd accepted it, but she couldn't cope with the prospect of him shutting her out for days on end. Suddenly, she was hit by the overwhelming feeling that she did not recognise him at all.

'You're not normally like this with me, Severus. Please talk to me. Tell me what's wrong.'

He put his head in his hands. 'I am not well. That is all.'

She pulled up the chair opposite his desk, the one he normally reserved for misbehaving students on detention, and leaned over the desk towards him.

'I can't believe that, Severus. You're the Potions Master. If you were ill, you could heal yourself.'

He raised his head and glared at her. 'That is exactly what I am trying to do. Now leave me alone.'

'You're not ill, Severus. I know you. If you *are* ill, then you're ill with worry. I heard you talking to people in here just now. Who were they? If you tell me what's going on, I can help you.' She took his hands and pressed them to her lips, willing him to open up, to confide in her. 'Severus, I'm your wife. You can talk to me. It's my job to help you.'

He simply glared at her, and suddenly something inside her snapped. She was at the end of her tether with him, and she felt a childish urge to lash out, to hurt him as much as he was hurting her.

'Or am I just here to do what you want in bed? Is that why you married me? Well, if that's the case, you might as well have taken up with Bella or Cissy or any one of the Death Eaters' whores!'

He stood up abruptly, knocking the chair over with a resounding crash. 'Do not be vulgar, Alina. You are my wife, and I love you.'

It was a rebuke, not an endearment, but he said it so rarely that she decided to take it on face value and use it to her advantage.

'Confide in me then! I may not be as clever as you; I may not be a professor of anything, but you can trust me. You know you can. I've kept your secrets before.' She looked directly into his eyes. 'Severus. Please.'

He seemed to be fighting some sort of internal battle, but eventually he nodded curtly.

'All right. I will tell you everything.'

He put his arm around her and led her back to their rooms, hoping to Merlin he was doing the right thing.

A/N There is no record of Umbridge expelling anyone. Nor of Mulciber having children, but I needed a Slytherin name for Umbridge's victims. Ruthven and Despard are the names of the evil Baronet brothers in Gilbert & Sullivan's 'Ruddigore'.

The Darkening Sky

Chapter 4 of 10

It was as if the castle knew what they were planning, as if it were trying to warn the school.

'For goodness sake, Albus, listen to me!'

Professor McGonagall's voice echoed through Draco's pounding head as he and the other Slytherins made their way, bleary eyed, down to the Great Hall for breakfast. They hadn't slept last night after their meeting with Professor Snape. Draco wasn't sure if that had been due to excitement or fear, but whatever it was, it was certainly making him unable to face breakfast this morning. However, Snape had told them to act normally, so they had to show willing.

Dumbledore was quite calm, but McGonagall's voice was rising in panic.

'Albus, you're not actually going to go to the feast tonight?'

'I am Headmaster of Hogwarts, Minerva,' replied Dumbledore, placidly.

McGonagall had caught up with the Headmaster in the Entrance Hall and was trying to block his way into the Great Hall. 'Albus, please. There are more important things than protocol. You haven't heard what people are saying. The house-elves are distracted; even the ghosts are worried. I've never seen the Bloody Baron worried before, Albus. It scares me.'

She had a point, Draco thought. Ever since the announcement of Dumbledore's promotion in yesterday's *Prophet*, the castle had been behaving very oddly. The weather outside was beautiful; blue skies and autumn sunshine, but the ceiling of the Great Hall had remained resolutely grey and rainy. And today it appeared to be getting even worse; thunder sounded and streaks of lightning were illuminating the Hall, making some of the first years scream. It was, Draco thought, panic coursing through him, as if the castle knew what they were planning, as if it were trying to warn the school.

'What do you imagine is going to happen, Minerva?' Dumbledore asked. 'Do you honestly believe Sybill Trelawney?'

'I don't know, Albus. Goodness knows I have very little time for Divination, but still...'

'Minerva, cowards die of fright many times over, dwelling on their own deaths. Brave men die only once. *To the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure.* But if it will put your mind at rest, I will ask Harry to tell the students I am unwell.'

Draco felt sick. If Dumbledore stayed away from the feast their whole plan would fall apart. He gave Blaise Zabini a none-too-gentle shove in the back. 'Do something!' he hissed.

Zabini stepped forward and cleared his throat reverentially. 'Sir, you are going to be there tonight, aren't you?'

'Ah, Zabini, send a message to the Great Hall. Tell the students I will not be able to attend the Halloween feast.'

'Tell them Professor Dumbledore is ill,' McGonagall added urgently.

'No, Minerva, I will not send them a lie.'

McGonagall's eyebrow rose. A minute ago Dumbledore had offered to tell the students he was unwell to make her feel better, now he was refusing to. He would call it an old man's whim; she called it being stubborn.

'Tell them Professor McGonagall has requested I stay away because of the strange rumours circulating in the castle,' the Headmaster continued.

'But, sir, you've got to come,' persisted Zabini, catching Malfoy's urgent "get on with it" gestures out of the corner of his eye. 'The Ministry is going to be there. If you don't come they'll change their minds. They'll say they'll hold the ceremony another time, when the Deputy Headmistress feels up to it. They'll say you were scared, sir. Sorry, sir, I just don't want you to miss out.'

Dumbledore drew himself up to his full, and considerable, height. Zabini's words appeared to have had a profound effect on him. 'Minerva, I am Headmaster here, and I have decided I will attend the feast.'

Draco heaved a sigh of relief.

Up in North Tower, Sybill Trelawney had chewed the end of her quill to a sticky, foul-tasting pulp and she still didn't have any idea how to phrase what was probably the most important letter she had ever had to write.

Ever since she had been so unceremoniously sacked by that awful Umbridge woman and Professor Dumbledore had allowed *the horse* to insinuate himself into *her* classroom, the Headmaster seemed less and less inclined to talk to her, making excuses when she tried to book appointments with him and, as happened yesterday, avoiding her if she approached him.

But there was no denying the warnings Fate was sending her. She had consulted her crystal ball, read the tealeaves, and dealt out the tarot cards, and they all said the same thing.

Exchanging the ruined quill for one that worked, Sybill wrote:

Professor Dumbledore,

Since you will no longer allow me to speak to you, I must write, and I beg you will not dismiss this letter.

Severus Snape is not to be trusted. Beware of Draco Malfoy; keep away from Gregory Goyle; watch out for Blaise Zabini. You have wronged Despard Mulciber. The Slytherins are united against you.

If you value your life, you will not disregard my warnings. If you heed them, you may yet live. Otherwise, the Fates are in league with traitors.

Your Colleague and Friend,

Sybill Trelawney.

She would follow him around all day if she had to, for as long as it took to force him to read the letter. After that, she would have done all she could, and the Headmaster's life would be in the hands of the gods.

Professor Trelawney was not the only person at Hogwarts who was agonising over the composition of an important letter. Draco Malfoy had had a moment of panicked clarity during breakfast. The Ministry were coming this evening to offer Dumbledore his new promotion. If they caught wind of what the Slytherins were planning, Draco and his friends would all be sent to Azkaban without trial, regardless of whether Professor Snape was on their side.

It was McGonagall who had, unwittingly, given him the idea. He was going to write to the Ministry to tell them Dumbledore was too ill for the ceremony to take place tonight, and to request it be rescheduled. Enough of the Slytherins had been sent to see the Headmaster for Draco to obtain a sample of, and learn to copy, Dumbledore's handwriting. Really, he thought, dipping his quill in the inkpot, after the letters he'd sent Snape, he was getting quite good at this forgery lark.

Alina hadn't gone down to breakfast. She had told Severus last night she thought he was ill with worry. Now she knew what was worrying him, it was she who was ill.

She hadn't seen him all day, and by mid-afternoon was going frantic. Lessons finished early on Halloween, and the rest of the school had gone to get ready for the feast, but he hadn't come back to her. She looked in his office and classroom, wondering if he was sitting brooding again, but no. She ran up to check the staff room; it was empty. Evidently all the teachers were getting ready too. In the corridor outside the staff room, she stopped to gather her wits and then called the only person she thought could help: Winky the house-elf.

Dobby's death, last year, had hit Winky hard and, for a while, she had subsided into even more than her usual despair. Alina's marriage, however, seemed to have brought new purpose into her life. Slowly, Winky had pulled herself out of her depression and attached herself to Alina as her new mistress. Alina was delighted to have been, indirectly, instrumental in bringing Winky back to health and now regarded the elf as a sort of tiny, wrinkled, lady's maid.

With a crack Winky appeared, wearing a new, clean skirt suit and an expression of acute devotion. 'Mistress called me?'

'Hello, Winky, yes, thank you,' Alina gabbled, 'go to the Great Hall for me. Go on, quickly! What's keeping you?'

'Winky is not knowing what Mistress is wanting her to do.'

Alina tried to get a grip on herself. She felt faint. She'd told Severus last night he had her confidence, but she wished she had his courage. She took a deep breath and tried to calm down. 'Sorry, Winky, I need you to find Professor Snape.'

Winky paled. Devoted as she was to his wife, the thought of Professor Snape still made her want to reach for the Butterbeer.

'You don't have to talk to him!' snapped Alina in exasperation. Then she caught sight of the elf, whose huge brown eyes had filled with tears at her beloved mistress' sharpness.

Alina dropped to her knees. 'Oh, Winky, I'm sorry. I just need to find out how he is. He...wasn't very well this morning, you see, so I just want to make sure he's OK.'

Winky was just about to Disapparate when around the corner came Professor Trelawney, bringing with her a strong smell of cooking sherry and nearly tripping over them both.

'Oh, my dears, I'm so sorry,' she gasped, flailing her arms wildly in an effort to right herself. 'I was looking for Professor Dumbledore. I have a most important letter for him. Do you know if he is in the staff room?'

'No, there's no one in there. I was looking for Severus.'

Sybill Trelawney regarded Alina soulfully. 'If you don't mind me saying so, my dear, you would do well to distance yourself from Professor Snape.'

Alina's mouth went dry. 'Why?' she managed, eventually. 'Do you know something? Something I don't?' she added quickly.

'Nothing definite, but there are certain events I fear may come to pass. That is why I must find the Headmaster and give him my letter. If you will excuse me.' Trelawney drifted off.

Alina rose from the floor and leant against the wall, trying hard not to pass out. 'Oh, Severus,' she whispered, 'may the gods protect you!'

'Mistress?'

Alina started. She had forgotten Winky was still there and had overheard everything Trelawney had said. 'My husband has a request which we are afraid the Headmaster will not grant,' she improvised hurriedly. It wasn't a lie; after all, they *were* going to ask for that boy's expulsion to be repealed. 'Go and find him, Winky, and see how he is.'

With another crack, Winky Disapparated, leaving Alina alone in the corridor and feeling more scared than ever.

A/N 'To the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure' is from PS/SS Ch 17

When I refer to Dobby's death as 'last year', I mean last academic year. My teacher relatives think in academic, rather than calendar, years. I must get it from them.

A Breach of Trust

Chapter 5 of 10

'I trusted you, Severus.'

The Halloween feast at Hogwarts was always keenly anticipated and, by half past six, students were milling around the corridors, looking for friends from other houses. Since this year's feast was supposed to be, in part, a celebration of Professor Dumbledore's achievement, dress robes were permitted, and groups of giggling girls could be observed dashing into bathrooms to check their reflections, compare outfits and share the contents of their make-up bags.

Everyone knew that the Headmaster liked a clear half-hour alone in the Great Hall to compose himself and to look over his speech. This was particularly acutely felt today, as everyone was expecting him to make an acceptance speech for his new post, and no one wanted to disturb or distract him as he made his way down from his office on the second floor.

Sybill Trelawney, however, had more important matters on her mind than the Headmaster's speech. Since her conversation outside the staff room with Professor Snape's wife, she had become increasingly uneasy. Alina's behaviour had struck her as more than a little suspicious, and she was determined to force Dumbledore to read her letter of warning.

Albus Dumbledore prided himself on the fact that his door was always open, at any time, for staff and students alike to seek advice or assistance. The one person he wished he could make the exception to the rule was Sybill Trelawney. It was only the fact that she had made two catastrophically accurate predictions about Lord Voldemort that stopped him removing Divination from the timetable completely.

He had always had the feeling that she was really far more trouble than she was worth, and in recent years had become increasingly irritated by her erratic behaviour. The last few days were a case in point. While he was quite used to her hysterical outbursts, he thought he had made it perfectly clear that she was to speak to him in private to avoid alarming the students. She had, however, taken to following him around the castle, and when he saw her hurrying towards him, waving a sheet of parchment, he felt really quite disinclined to humour her latest bout of histrionics.

'Well, Sybill,' he said with forced cheerfulness, 'the Halloween feast has come.'

'Yes, Headmaster,' she replied, 'but not gone.' She regarded him with massively magnified eyes. 'Headmaster, I beg you to read this letter. Do not delay, for the omens all point to...'

Albus' attention wandered. He really did not have time to be drawn into yet another of her fortune-telling sessions, and was extremely relieved when Professor Snape and a number of his house emerged from their basement corridor. He felt, as he often did when confronted by Trelawney, that he needed rescuing, and Severus was just the man to do it.

'Good evening, Severus. Ready for the feast?' Dumbledore asked amiably.

'Yes, Headmaster.'

Malfoy stepped forward. 'Professor, we've got a request for you. Read this deposition, please.'

'Headmaster,' Trelawney insisted, 'read this first. It concerns you most closely.'

'That which concerns me, Sybill, I shall leave until last. Come, Severus. Let me hear your house's petition.'

Dumbledore moved off towards the Great Hall, but the Slytherins were prevented from following him by Horace Slughorn who rounded the corner at that moment and hailed Malfoy genially.

'Draco, my boy! The best of evenings to you. Good luck tonight. I hope your venture will succeed.'

Malfoy turned to Snape, an expression of panic on his pale face, and spoke in an agitated whisper. 'He knows, sir, I'm sure he does! What do we do now?'

'We carry on as planned, Draco,' Severus hissed. 'Control yourself.'

Slughorn had heard none of this. 'Awful woman, Dolores Umbridge. Never could understand how she got to teach here. And I know I shouldn't show favouritism towards my own house, but I wasn't at all happy to hear she had expelled young Mulciber. I taught his father, you know. Great student. Good luck! Confidently expect Ruthven to be back amongst us next year!'

He moved off towards his office and Severus raised an eyebrow at Malfoy, who sagged against him in relief.

'Where's Mulciber? We need to get this over with.' He pushed Malfoy roughly away, and led his students into the Great Hall before any of them (including him) could change their minds.

Professor Dumbledore was organising the pages of his speech on the great gold lectern before the High Table.

'Go on, Mulciber,' Severus urged. 'Put your petition to the Headmaster.'

Dumbledore had stepped out from behind the lectern now, and was regarding the trembling boy attentively.

Suddenly Mulciber dropped to his knees. 'Professor Dumbledore, sir, my brother, Ruthven... Please let him come back, sir. Please overturn his expulsion.' Despard looked up at the Headmaster with what he considered to be convincing tears in his eyes. 'Please, sir. I miss him.'

'Well, you see, Mr Mulciber, I do not think I can do that. Your brother was expelled under Professor Umbridge's regime, and I cannot overturn his sentence.'

'If I might speak, Headmaster.' Severus shouldered his way between Goyle and Zabini. 'Ruthven Mulciber's offence was, as you say, committed under Dolores Umbridge's old regime. The actual crime was, if I remember correctly, reading a certain edition of "The Quibbler". An edition that, everyone now knows, was accurate in every detail. Surely such an act of mercy as we are proposing would look well on your first day as Minister for Magic.'

'As Minister for Magic, Severus, how would it look if I were to undermine the authority of one of my predecessors at Hogwarts? Especially a woman who holds an important post in the Ministry. If I appear unable to trust the judgement of my staff, how am I to enjoy the confidence of the public?'

"He would rather side with the originator of the Muggle-born Registration Committee than a child in his own school," Severus thought, and the realisation brought him to his knees beside Mulciber.

'Do not kneel to me, Severus. You have not done that in seventeen years,' Dumbledore said, but his voice was not kindly, and Severus was reminded of the words that had pierced his soul on that windswept hilltop, when he had been pleading for help, for protection, for *her*: 'You disgust me.'

His head bowed, his expression masked by curtains of black hair, Severus gave an almost imperceptible nod.

With the lightning-quick reactions born of five years' Quidditch training, Malfoy twisted Dumbledore's wrist, flicking his wand out of his hand and out into a wide arc across the Hall. He and Zabini wrenched the old man's arms up behind his back, and Goyle pulled the long white hair so that his head was forced back.

It all took less than a second and, before he knew what was happening, Dumbledore was wandless, helpless and pinned to the golden lectern. His eyes widened in shock as he realised what had just happened, what was about to happen; as Severus raised his wand. The pale eyes met the dark ones, just for a second, but offered no resistance.

'I trusted you, Severus,' Dumbledore breathed.

There was a tumultuous expression on Severus' face as he pointed his wand straight at Dumbledore's heart part revulsion, part fear, part utter conviction.

'*Avada Kedavra!*'

A flash of green light and the Headmaster's body sagged against his captors, who staggered under the weight and just managed to lower it to the ground. Severus had struck before he lost his nerve, before the others were ready, and had caught them off guard.

Pages of Dumbledore's speech fluttered down around him.

The students stood transfixed, staring, horrified. Only their tutor was in control of his wits.

'*Out of here, quickly.* Back to your common room. Divert anyone coming this way. Go! We have very little time.'

Most of the Slytherins turned to obey, but Malfoy was still rooted to the spot, eyes glazed.

'What happens now?' he whispered. 'They'll find us, catch us. We're going to die too, aren't we?'

'Everyone dies, Malfoy.' Severus swung the boy round to face him by the shoulders. 'We are in the hands of Fate. You knew that when you suggested this.' He gave a mirthless, unpleasant laugh. 'Everyone dies. It's just when, and how to ward it off, that concerns us.'

Blaise Zabini put his hand on Malfoy's shaking shoulder. 'If that's true, then we've done Dumbledore a favour. We've stopped him worrying about it haven't we?'

Malfoy gulped and nodded. It was a slender reed on which to lean, but he clutched at it and hung on. 'Then that's what we'll tell the school, sir.'

'Tell them the school is safe. Tell them the students are free. Tell them *it's over.*'

A/N Snape's recollection of the events on the hilltop (DH Ch 33) is not accurate, (Dumbledore was disgusted not by his pleading, but by his willingness to sacrifice Harry

and James), but in its turmoil, his mind has reorganised events.

Snape's lines: 'Out of here, quickly' and 'It's over' are from HBP Ch 28.

Fraternising with the Enemy

Chapter 6 of 10

'I'm going to get revenge for you, Professor Dumbledore, and for my mum and dad and Sirius!'

'They're letting *Snape* speak at Dumbledore's funeral?' said Ron incredulously. 'No way! Why is he even still here? Why hasn't he been carted off to Azkaban?'

It had been five days since Professor Dumbledore's murder, and the school was in shock. The Gryffindor common room was packed, but Harry had never known it so quiet. People were talking in hushed, respectful voices, or staring out of the rain-lashed windows, unable to concentrate on anything.

'The Ministry's in chaos,' said Hermione tartly. She didn't look up from her book. Harry knew she read when stressed or miserable and although she maintained she needed to keep up with her studies, he strongly suspected she was simply trying to find a shred of comfort in any way she could. He envied her having some way of at least searching for comfort. Since Dumbledore's death he had been unable to think of anything but Snape and Malfoy and how to bring them to justice.

'So what?' Ron roared, his voice echoing in the silence and making many people look up in alarm. 'They've got Aurors, haven't they? What the hell are they playing at?'

'I agree it's unforgivable,' Hermione continued wearily, 'but they haven't been able to get back on their feet since being infiltrated by the Death Eaters. They were counting on Dumbledore for Minister and now he's...' she swallowed, '... gone, they've no idea what to do.'

'Yeah,' Ron said, more quietly, abashed by his previous outburst. 'Dad said in the summer that Pius Thicknesse has had some sort of nervous breakdown. Never really got over the Imperius Curse they put on him. Gone totally doo-lally, apparently.'

'Ron!' Hermione said reproachfully, looking up. 'Harry, where are you going?'

Harry had started from his chair and strode over to the portrait hole. 'To see Snape. If the Ministry won't do something about him, I will.'

Harry made his way down to Snape's dungeon feeling sick. He was repulsed at what he was about to do, but he had no choice. He had at last thought of a plan and this, although it went against all Harry's instincts, was the first tactical step. Snape was going to use the funeral to try and justify himself, and if Harry could just get Snape to let *him* speak too, he was sure he could destroy Snape's defence.

'I must just lie, like I did to Quirrel with the mirror,' he told himself, and knocked at Snape's office door.

'Come,' came Snape's cold voice.

Harry opened the door and walked towards the Potions Master, trying to keep his legs from shaking. He had always hated Snape's dark, cold classroom with its nauseating décor of pickled animals in glass cases, their torsos ripped open to expose their entrails. It all seemed horribly appropriate for the abode of a murderer.

'Ah, Potter. And what can I do for you? Come to ask me to nominate *you* for the Ministry? I dare say they'd be delighted to have The Boy Who Defeated the Dark Lord working for them.'

Fighting the urge to punch the smirk right off Snape's smug face, Harry held out his hand. 'No, Professor. I've come to say I understand why you did what you did. I know you must have had good reason, and I'd like you to shake hands with me.'

Snape looked astounded. The self-satisfied smirk had completely gone, Harry was pleased to note, but after a moment Snape took Harry's hand.

'Very well, Potter. I am glad to see you are being sensible about this. This is a time for Hogwarts to stand united.'

'Yes, sir. I just need to ask, sir; I need to know... Why was Professor Dumbledore dangerous? What had he done to you?'

Snape's eyes narrowed. 'I have no intention of justifying myself to you, Potter. I have already made it clear that I will speak to the school at the Headmaster's funeral.'

'In that case, sir, I've just got one favour to ask you. I'd like to speak at the funeral too.'

Snape seemed to consider the request. 'I see no harm in that, Potter. Not now you have decided to abandon your usual heroics. But you will speak *after* me. I will allow you to speak only after I have put my case, and you will make it clear to the school that you speak only with my permission.'

'Thank you, Professor.' Intensely glad Snape was not trying to perform Legilimency on him Harry shook Snape's hand again and left the office. It was all he could do not to run until he got around the corner out of Snape's earshot.

Harry didn't slow down until he got to the spiral staircase at the bottom of Dumbledore's office. He didn't need a password. The protective enchantments had broken at the moment of Dumbledore's death.

The Headmaster's office was quite empty: Professor McGonagall had not been able to bring herself to move up here and had insisted on keeping her own office in the Transfiguration Department. In fact, Professor McGonagall didn't seem able to do anything at the moment. She had spent more time up in the hospital wing dosed up on Dreamless Sleep than in her office, although as all lessons had been suspended this hardly mattered. The entire castle seemed to be existing in a sort of bubble, all feeling numbed, suffocated by the terrible weight of grief and shock.

The only person who seemed able to cope, reflected Harry, was Snape. He had taken over as a sort of unofficial Headmaster, and it had been he who had organised Professor Dumbledore's funeral. The thought of that made Harry's blood boil.

As Harry looked around the office, he spotted what he had been both dreading seeing and hoping to see. There was a new portrait on the wall. Professor Dumbledore was asleep in a high-backed armchair, but he did not look at peace like the rest of the Headmasters' portraits. He tossed and turned in his sleep and his face was contorted, as

if he were in pain.

As he looked at the portrait, Harry felt a savage rush of hatred for Snape and Malfoy. Dumbledore, the greatest wizard Harry had ever known, the greatest wizard in the world, was dead. Everyone Harry had ever loved: his mother and father, Sirius (the closest thing to a father Harry had ever known), and now Dumbledore, whom Harry had always regarded more as a surrogate grandfather than a teacher; they were all gone, and every one of their deaths was the fault of Severus Snape.

'I'm sorry, sir,' he whispered, gazing up at the gold-framed portrait, his heart beating painfully against his chest. 'I didn't mean what I said in Snape's office. I'd never join with him against you. Trust me, sir; I won't let him get away with this. He won't be able to stay here forever, and then I'm going to hunt him down and kill him, and Malfoy. I'm going to get revenge for you, and my mum and dad and Sirius; I swear it, sir.'

And he left, feeling better about what he had to do.

Defence and Attack

Chapter 7 of 10

One wrong move, one misplaced word, and the whole school would turn on Harry as surely as they had turned on Dumbledore.

The day of Professor Dumbledore's funeral dawned bright, clear and surprisingly warm for early November. Harry felt that Nature was mocking them, but since the ceremony was to take place outside, perhaps Nature was taking care of them.

Some students had been taken away by their parents in the intervening days. Many parents were incensed at the Ministry's lack of involvement and the fact that Snape was now more or less running the school they hadn't wanted their children anywhere near him.

Those Slytherins who had been linked to Dumbledore's murder were absent too, Harry noticed as he took a seat on the front row next to Ginny. Ron was on Ginny's other side with his arm around Hermione's shoulder. Snape was on the extreme left of the front row, beside Slughorn, and Harry covertly shot him a filthy look as he sat down.

In fact, although Harry didn't know it, Severus had forbidden Draco and the others to attend the ceremony. They had been the victims of several jinxes and hexes already. The other houses knew they couldn't do too much under the watchful eye of the Slytherin Head, but Severus had had to rescue Blaise Zabini from a group of Gryffindor seventh years just this morning, and he felt they were better off locked in his office for their own protection.

Professor Slughorn made his way slowly, ponderously, to the platform in front of the rows of chairs. Professor Dumbledore's body lay on a table beside the podium, covered by a purple velvet cloth.

Slughorn began to speak, but after listening to a few phrases: '*Nobility of spirit*'... '*intellectual contribution*'... '*greatness of heart*', Harry had to force his mind to switch off from Slughorn's voice and concentrate on the speech he himself was to make later. He felt sure Snape had censured Slughorn's speech (that was probably why Slughorn was speaking rather than McGonagall he was weaker and could be manipulated), and the thought enraged him.

Then several people screamed. Bright white flames had erupted around Dumbledore's body and the table on which it lay; higher and higher they rose, obscuring the body. Next second the fire had vanished. In its place was a white marble tomb, encasing Dumbledore's body and the table on which he had rested.

Once the cries of shock had died down, Professor Snape got to his feet and swept onto the platform. Now, Harry was all attention as fragments of protest were carried to his ears through the still autumn air.

'I don't care. I won't listen to him. He killed Dumbledore!'

'We'll have to listen to him.'

'Yeah, I want to hear what he's got to say for himself.'

'And Malfoy. Where is Malfoy, anyway?'

'Silence!' Snape shouted. 'I want you *all*, please, to listen to me. You say you want to hear me defend myself. Very well.'

'I know perfectly well that, for years, not one of you trusted me, because of my background. You know now that I was trustworthy, honourable, that I risked my life trying to keep you all safe. Respect that honour and listen to me with that in mind.'

'Professor Dumbledore was my friend. One of the few friends I have ever had. You ask, then, why did I kill him? I did it for you. For the community. For *your* future.'

'Dumbledore was ambitious. Too ambitious. Many of you wanted him as Minister for Magic. If he had achieved his aim, Hogwarts, and the whole of the wizarding community would be ruined.'

'I spent years working for the good of the wizarding world. You all loved Professor Dumbledore. Believe me, he was no less of a friend to me than he was to you, but I had to think of the magical community. Would you rather have Dumbledore alive and live at the mercy of the sort of Ministry we all suffered last year, or live free and happy under the present circumstances?'

'For Dumbledore my friend, I grieve as deeply as you, I honour his bravery, but because of his ambition, I killed him.'

'Is there anyone here who would prefer a return to last year's Ministry? If so, speak up and I will apologise for the wrong I have done you.'

There was complete silence. Harry longed to speak up, to yell out, to scream at the assembled students that they were being brainwashed, but he held his tongue. His turn would come.

Snape spoke again. 'Professor Dumbledore was my friend, but I killed him. For you. For the magical community. For the greater good.'

One of the Slytherins called out 'You know, I heard Malfoy say his father always thought *Dumbledore was the worst thing that ever happened to this place*.'

The Slytherins set up a chant. 'Snape for Headmaster! Snape for Headmaster!'

Zacharias Smith of Hufflepuff and several of his friends joined in. Harry felt his blood boil.

'Settle down, settle down,' Snape said coolly. 'I will leave you now. Potter has requested I allow him to speak to you, and I will leave you in his *capable* hands.' He tried, and failed, to keep a sneer out of his voice, then stalked back to the castle, his long, black cloak swirling out behind him.

Harry was so nervous as he ascended the steps to the podium, that he thought his legs weren't going to support him. This was his chance his one chance to get the students on his side, to get them to see the truth, and he was painfully aware that, in the present mood, he could not afford to make a mistake. One wrong move, one misplaced word, and they would turn on him as surely as they had turned on Dumbledore. He cleared his throat.

'My friends. Fellow students of Hogwarts. I haven't come to give a eulogy. I'm no good at making speeches; I'm nothing like as eloquent as Professor Snape. I'm only here because he was kind enough to let me speak to you.

'Professor Snape told you Dumbledore was ambitious. Snape says we would have returned to last year's sort of Ministry. But Dumbledore worked for years to free us from Lord Voldemort. He wouldn't have wanted a return to that sort of tyranny.

'I couldn't have done what I did last year without his help, and I admired him more than anyone I've ever known, but Snape says he was ambitious. Professor Snape is a Hogwarts teacher, and we have to trust our teachers, don't we?

'But when any of you had a problem, Dumbledore made time for you. Surely a truly ambitious man wouldn't have bothered with kids? Yet Snape says he was ambitious. And Snape is a Hogwarts teacher.

'Dumbledore has been offered the Minister for Magic job three times before. And three times he has refused it. Is that ambition? Yet Snape says he was ambitious. And Snape is a Hogwarts teacher.

'I'm not here to argue with Snape; I just want to tell you how I feel. I...I'm sorry...I can't...'

Harry stopped to blink back tears. They were partly for effect but he could feel real emotion welling up in his throat. He caught his breath. He couldn't afford to break down. Not here, not now. He almost had them. He could feel the tide turning in his favour, and he could hear snatches of muttered conversations. He wasn't going to get his hopes up yet, but he was fairly sure the reactions were in his favour.

Harry raised his hand. The muttering stopped, instantly. 'And there's another thing. I found Professor Dumbledore's will in his office. He has left everything he owned to the school. To us, and the students who will come to Hogwarts after us. Snape says Dumbledore didn't care about Hogwarts, and yet he's left everything to the school he loved.

'I'm sorry; I don't mean to make you hate Snape and Malfoy. I don't want to incite you to revenge. Because we can't take revenge against a Hogwarts teacher, can we? Dumbledore always trusted Snape and Snape must have had some terrible private reason for killing him. A Hogwarts teacher wouldn't murder another without good reason.

'But if I was Snape and he was me, do you think he'd leave this be? No, he'd take revenge, wouldn't he? WOULDN'T HE?'

There was complete silence. Then Ernie Macmillan's voice rang through the clear air. 'Traitors!' Everyone turned to look at him and he stood up, bright red. 'I'm with you, Harry.' He punched his fist into the air.

Dean Thomas stood up behind Ernie. 'Yeah, me too, Harry. Snape betrayed Dumbledore. He's a murderer!'

'I'll kill him! I'll kill them all!' That was Seamus Finnigan.

Then, quite suddenly, all hell broke loose. People were screaming, stamping their feet, yelling support. Ron ran up to Harry and slapped him on the back. 'You did it mate! That greasy git's as good as dead!'

Harry stared at the shouting, stamping crowd. 'This isn't a victory, Ron. It's just the start. We may have won the battle, but we're on the brink of another war. It's *not* over.'

A/N: Slughorn's words are from Dumbledore's funeral (HBP Ch 30). I have also used most of the paragraph from the same chapter about the fire and the tomb. I thought it was more fitting to use the original.

'Father's always said Dumbledore's the worst thing that's ever happened to this place.' is from CoS Ch 12. Malfoy actually said it to Harry and Ron, but it seems the sort of thing he'd say many times to whoever would listen.

'Settle down, settle down,' is Snape's command to his Potions class in PoA Ch 7.

In the Midst of Life...

Chapter 8 of 10

'What the hell are we going to do now?' 'This was your grand plan, Malfoy. You tell me the next step.'

"Oh, shit," Severus thought. "Oh, bloody fucking hell."

Tobias Snape had had a rich vocabulary of Muggle invective, and while Severus generally despised swearing as the last resort of an uneducated man, there were some things that could overcome his resolve and cause him to employ his father's choicest phrases.

Such as realizing he had made a monumental error of judgement and was now trapped. Why hadn't he foreseen that they'd have to make a run for it? He could only suppose he'd thought, in a moment of supreme overconfidence, that his speech at the funeral would have convinced everyone they were acting out of the best motives. Instead, and this was his second huge mistake, he'd allowed Potter to undermine all his good work and turn the whole school against him. Malfoy had warned him Potter was not to be trusted, and Severus had ignored him.

Which meant that he was now trapped in the Forbidden Forest with Malfoy, Goyle, Zabini and a dozen underage kids. Even if they made it to the edge of the grounds they

had no chance of Apparating to safety. Side-Along-Apparition was taxing enough at the best of times; with three kids each to take along it would be impossible. And the seventh years were of no use either. What with Voldemort running the Ministry last year and Alec Carrow at Hogwarts, ostensibly teaching Muggle Studies but in reality making everyone's life hell, Apparition lessons had been the last thing on anyone's mind. The seventh years were due to take their tests in April, and a lot of good that was to him now.

And he had a strong suspicion someone had put an Anti-Apparition Jinx around the Forest anyway.

They were well and truly trapped.

Up in Gryffindor Tower, Harry, Ron, Hermione and the rest of the Seventh and Eighth years were composing a plan of action. Ron, showing a bit of the old Fred-and-George spirit, had sneaked into Snape's office and stolen the Slytherin house-register. Admittedly, with Snape now in hiding, not a lot of actual sneaking around had been required, but Ron, not wanting to risk being caught by Filch or Peeves, had borrowed Harry's Invisibility Cloak.

'Fred would've been proud of me, anyway,' Ron said with a catch in his voice as he emerged from under the Cloak and handed over the list. 'He wouldn't have taken this lying down, would he?'

'Definitely not,' Harry told him quietly, taking the list. 'Thanks, Ron.' He began marking off those who had been implicated in Professor Dumbledore's murder. It wasn't difficult; they had been conspicuous by their absence at the funeral.

And he was pretty sure he knew where they were. Snape had fled the castle with his students immediately after Dumbledore's funeral, and Harry had gone straight to Professor Flitwick and got him to put an Anti-Apparition Jinx around the Forbidden Forest. Flitwick had said it would keep Snape there until the Ministry could get to Hogwarts.

Harry, however, did not trust the Ministry further than he could throw them. He was determined to keep the promise he had made to Dumbledore's portrait and, first thing tomorrow morning, the Gryffindors were going into the Forest to hunt down all those involved.

'Malfoy, Goyle, Zabini,' Harry recited, ticking off their names. 'Malcolm Baddock, Graham Pritchard, Patrick Connor...'

Seamus Finnigan looked aghast. 'Harry, no; he's my cousin!'

Harry considered. Part of him, a very small part, knew he was being unreasonable. None of Seamus' family was a Death Eater; Seamus had apparently been horrified when Connor had been sorted into Slytherin in their third year. The boy had probably just got dragged into this mess by Goyle or Zabini.

But most of Harry wanted to kill Snape and Malfoy and all those connected to them. Since Dumbledore's death it felt like a fire had been lit inside him, and he was possessed by a manic desire for revenge.

'No,' said Harry to Seamus. 'He was in it with Snape. He has to die.'

'What the hell are we going to do now?'

'This was *your* grand plan, Malfoy. You tell me the next step.'

Tensions were running high in the Forbidden Forest, and grievances were coming to light. Draco and Severus were facing each other in the twilight, a little way away from the others, and speaking in strained whispers. Draco's pale face was flushed with anger; Severus had gone very white.

'You're acting as if this is all *my* fault, *Sir*,' Draco said, putting as much emphasis on the last word as he thought he could get away with. 'I told you we should have got rid of Potter too! If we'd killed Potter as I suggested, we wouldn't be in this situation now.'

'Do you think I do not know that?'

'Instead of which we're stuck here, with no plan of action and no hope of getting out. How am I ever going to get into the Ministry now? All my prospects are ruined. This whole idea was pointless, just because you went soft on destroying The Chosen One!'

'Ye gods!' Severus exploded. 'You mean to tell me you did this for your own advancement? I thought we were acting for the greater good!' He began striding around the forest floor, his voice rising in incredulity as he struggled to take in the implications of Draco's admission. 'How could I have been so blind as not to realise you were thinking of your own contemptible future?'

'You are my Head of House. You're supposed to be concerned with my future. This is the way you treat the Gryffindors!'

'Perhaps if you had shown a little more Gryffindor philanthropy and a little less Slytherin selfishness, we would not be in this situation now.'

Severus didn't know what had made him insult his own house. Except that Dumbledore had once told him he had been sorted too soon, implying that a boy who could grow up to risk his own life for the good of others should have been in Gryffindor. And the portrait of Phineas Nigellus always said that, given the choice, Slytherins would always choose to save their own necks. Severus certainly didn't regret calling Malfoy selfish.

'Well, you're not my teacher any more,' Draco shouted, ignoring the slight on his house and changing tack at the speed of light. 'It's not like we're ever going to be allowed back in there.' He waved an impatient hand towards the castle. 'For us term has finished, so don't treat me like a child.'

'You are behaving like a child. We may not be in the classroom, but I still have a duty towards you. I am still *in loco parentis* seeing as your own father is hardly in a position to protect you.'

'Don't you have a go at my father! At least he stood up to Potter. At least he's not hiding from a bunch of kids like a coward!'

'How dare you call me coward?' Severus roared, his face contorted in fury.

'I'll tell you how I dare. I dare because I've had enough. I'm not going to put up with your sarcastic sniping anymore.'

Severus snorted. 'Go and find Goyle and the rest of your sycophantic little friends and vent your spleen on them. You think you have heard sarcasm from me thus far? Push me further, Mr Malfoy, and you will regret it, I assure you.'

Two pink spots appeared in Draco's pale cheeks. 'Don't you push *me*, Professor, or I'll do something I regret.'

Severus regarded him coldly. 'You have already done something you regret. If it had not been for me you would have lost your head completely and turned us all in to the Dementors. *You* are the coward here, Mr. Malfoy.'

'Me, a coward? I am of age; I've fought against the Order of the Phoenix and Dumbledore's own Army. I am just as good at duelling as you.'

'If you think you can take on the Famous Potter single-handedly, I will be interested to leave you to it and see how you fare. Do you know what the Dark Lord did to anyone who displeased him? Used them for duelling practice. Do you realise how many times I have had to fight for my life? And you think you are better at duelling than I?'

Draco was nearly in tears. 'I didn't say that! I said "as good". I can't believe you're being like this with me! I thought I was your favourite student! Our families are supposed to be friends!'

Severus sank down onto the forest floor, his head in his hands. 'Forgive me, Draco. I am not myself.'

Draco stared, open-mouthed. Professor Snape was saying sorry?

Wordlessly, Severus handed him a piece of parchment. It had obviously been read before and clumsily resealed, and was wrinkled in spots as if one of the previous readers had been crying. The original addressee's name had been scribbled out and, written in a hand that had obviously shaken so badly it could hardly form the letters, were the words: MASTER PROFESSOR SNAPE.

Draco unrolled it and read:

Dearest Winky,

If you are reading this it means I am already dead. I know Severus will not survive this battle Harry Potter is planning. How could he prevail against The Boy Who Defeated the Dark Lord? And I know you won't be able to understand this, but I can't live without him.

This is my only way out. I know from my training that an infusion of bloodroot and dragonroot will work. If you find this letter early, please do not try and stop me.

The enclosed pages are from my diary. Please use them to exonerate Severus. I can't bear the thought of everyone despising his memory.

Don't think too badly of me, Winky. Don't blame yourself. And don't be sad for me. This way I get to be with my husband.

With love and regret,

Alina Snape.

Draco felt nausea well up in his stomach. Bloodroot and dragonroot? Two of the strongest available poisons. Alina had been right; they were lethal. But they should never be mixed. Mixed together they would burn the skin. And drinking the mixture would be like swallowing fire. Draco couldn't imagine the agony Alina must have been in.

'Where did she get them?' he whispered, unable to look at his teacher.

Severus stared straight ahead, his eyes blank. 'From my private stores. She is... was... my wife. I saw no reason to deny her access.'

'It wasn't your fault, sir. You couldn't have known she would...' Draco stared at the letter again and his voice cracked. 'I still can't believe she's...'

'Enough,' Severus said in a hollow voice. He sounded as if every word was causing him pain. 'ENOUGH.'

Severus wished he hadn't had to tell Malfoy. Confiding the news made it true, somehow. When he'd first received the letter, Severus hadn't been able to take it in, now, Malfoy's grief made his own real.

He felt as if he had been winded. The pain hit him like a physical blow and, as if he had fallen into the Pensieve, an image of his twenty-one-year-old self, slumped in a chair in Dumbledore's office, flashed before his eyes. Half of him felt like his heart was being ripped out of his chest, and half was filled with the sense of bleak desolation he associated with Dementors. The same desperate, inhuman howl rose up inside him. He quelled it with difficulty and forced himself to concentrate on their current predicament.

'We need to sleep. We will be better able to plan a strategy tomorrow if we are rested.'

'Why don't we just sneak back into the castle under cover of darkness and finish off Potter and the others?'

Severus regarded Draco with contempt. 'How do you propose we overcome the extra security they will undoubtedly have put on the doors, get up to Gryffindor Tower, kill half the house and then get back here undetected? We will do better to stay here and let him come looking for us. His love of playing the hero will bring him to the forest sooner rather than later. If we are rested, we can meet them on our own terms.' His lip curled. 'If we are lucky, Potter might even meet the centaurs before he meets us.'

Draco looked suddenly terrified. 'What if the centaurs come across us in the night?'

'I will keep watch. Now for Merlin's sake go to sleep and leave me to think.'

A flick of Severus' wand produced a number of the squashy purple sleeping bags Dumbledore had conjured five years ago when the students had been sheltering from Sirius Black in the Great Hall. Draco dragged them over to the others and they settled down, leaving Snape on guard.

After a couple of hours on lookout, Severus wished he hadn't insisted the students leave him in peace. Even Goyle might have provided some measure of conversation irritating enough to distract him from thoughts of Alina.

He pressed his knuckles into his eye sockets, trying to ward off sleep. When he took his hands away, he saw something guaranteed to shake the composure of even a man who *wasn't* expecting a run in with a herd of angry centaurs. A silvery-white shape was drifting towards him through the trees literally *through* the trees.

With a leap of his heart, Severus wondered if it was a Patronus Alina's Patronus, coming to tell him the letter was a cruel joke designed, perhaps, by the Gryffindors to lower his morale.

As the figure drew nearer, however, it became clear that this was no Patronus, but a ghost.

Dumbledore's blue eyes, the only colour in an otherwise colourless face, burnt like ice.

Severus stared, drawn against his will to those eyes. This was wrong, very wrong. He couldn't believe Dumbledore would choose the strange non-existence of a ghost, an eternity in limbo. Not unless he had a *very* good reason. Severus tried to swallow. His mouth had gone very dry. 'What are you?' he managed.

Dumbledore smiled. It made Severus' blood run cold. 'Well, that is the question isn't it? I rather think I am your guilty conscience.'

'What do you want with me?'

'To tell you that you will see me again, Severus. We have unfinished business.'

And he vanished, leaving Severus wide-awake and very shaken.

A/N Botanical.com says of Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria Candensis*) 'in toxic doses it causes burning in the stomach', and of Dragonroot (*Arum Triphyllum*): 'a violent irritant to the mucous membrane, when chewed burning the mouth and throat'. In the original play, Alina's character commits suicide by swallowing hot coals.

Phineas Nigellus' opinion of Slytherins comes from OotP Ch 23, and Dumbledore's opinion of Snape's Sorting from DH Ch 33

Malcolm Baddock and Graham Pritchard are canon characters, sorted into Slytherin in GoF.

When I wrote, 'Severus generally despised swearing as the last resort of an uneducated man', I think I was channelling Oscar Wilde, who said, 'The expletive is a refuge of the semi-literate.'

Atonement

Chapter 9 of 10

Severus felt almost as if he had a duty to finish what they had started on Halloween.

Harry, Ron and Hermione set off into the Forbidden Forest at first light the next morning. They were accompanied by most of the overage members of the old DA (except Zacharias Smith whose behaviour at Dumbledore's funeral had placed him as firmly beyond Harry's forgiveness as Snape and Malfoy).

Kingsley Shacklebolt, who for the time being had taken over as Minister for Magic, had finally arrived at the castle half an hour earlier. He and his Aurors were staying up at the school to control the Dementors they had brought with them from Azkaban. Considering what had happened in Harry's third year when they had tried to finish off Harry as well as their intended target, Sirius, this was felt to be a prudent move.

Harry was trying to keep up his friends' morale, but they were all too aware of the enormity of the task before them.

'Snape's a superb duellist,' commented Justin Finch-Fletchley. 'Remember the duelling club in our second year?'

'Yeah,' scoffed Ron, 'but he was up against Lockhart, wasn't he? How hard can it have been?' He shot a pointed look at Hermione, who sighed theatrically.

'Oh, Ron! That was six years ago. Can't you let it drop?'

'You weren't so hot yourself, Ron,' snorted Seamus. 'You nearly took my bloody head off with that broken wand of yours!'

Ron went scarlet, and everyone else laughed including Harry. Ron and Hermione's bickering usually infuriated him (they had only been together six months and they already behaved like an old married couple), but today anything that raised people's spirits was OK by Harry.

Severus could hear them coming a mile off, laughing and shouting. They sounded as if they were off to Hogsmeade, for Merlin's sake! Then the voices stopped abruptly.

'Snape!' bellowed Potter. 'You can't escape. The Ministry's here. Kingsley Shacklebolt has given me permission to use any force necessary to round you all up.'

'See,' hissed Malfoy. 'You've got yourself and your Gryffindorish scruples to thank for this. I told you the Ministry would consort with blood traitors and Mudbloods.'

'Do not use that word!' Severus snapped. He was heartily sick of Malfoy whining about how he should have got his way over Potter. And not even in the face of another battle would he allow Malfoy to use *that* word. Not after Severus had confided in him about Alina. It wasn't just Lily's memory he had to protect against the pureblood faction now.

'Oi, Snape!' Weasley roared. 'Come out and face us, you murdering traitor! Or if you're too much of a coward, come out when you've worked up the bottle!'

Severus bristled, his blood pounding in his ears. Normally that sort of insolence would have earned Weasley a year's worth of detentions, but Severus had given up the right to discipline students on the night of Halloween. Besides, he was not going to be goaded into action. This needed careful thought. The appearance of the ghost last night had driven any thought of battle plans out of his head, and he could not afford to rush in like a fool.

The rest of the Slytherins seemed to have no such scruples. They hurled themselves at Harry's party with the enthusiasm of a good Quiddich match. Indeed, half the Slytherin Quiddich team were in the front ranks, and within seconds, Justin, Dean and Neville were locked in combat with Urquhart, the Captain, Chaser Vaisey and the reserve Seeker, Harper. Harry was pleased to see his friends were definitely getting the best of it. As he watched, Urquhart and Harper were felled by Impediment Jinxes and bound by Incarcerous Spells.

'Harry, look out!' Hermione's warning came too late. Harry was knocked backwards off his feet as Patrick Connor, Seamus' cousin, yelled '*STUPEFY!*'

'PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!'

Hermione let out a scream and ducked as Ron's spell whistled past her and hit Connor full on. Connor fell to the floor face down, and Ron gave him a kick in the ribs to turn him over.

'Take him up to the castle,' Ron panted at Luna Lovegood, who was hanging back from the fighting, her pale eyes wide. 'Spell's "*Mobilicorpus*".'

Seamus had been watching the exchange, ashen-faced and rigid, as if he too had been petrified. He was so intent on the retreating figures that he did not hear Gregory Goyle sneaking up behind him.

'AV '

Goyle didn't even have time to finish the word before Seamus' self-preservation instinct kicked in.

Whirling round, he screamed 'AVADA KEDAVRA!', and Goyle hit the forest floor like a tree being felled.

'That's for dragging my cousin into this!' Seamus roared. Even Harry, who had been baying for Connor's blood the day before, could understand Seamus' fury. Connor, who was in his sixth year, had turned seventeen the week before. While nothing had been said about the fate of the underage students, those of seventeen or above were facing a life sentence in Azkaban. Seamus, on the other hand, would be able to plead self-defence for Goyle's killing. He had the whole of his house as witnesses.

Blaise Zabini, meanwhile, was battling with Ernie Macmillan. Zabini was ducking and dodging Ernie's Incarcerous Spells, laughing mockingly and firing curse after curse at him. 'Sectumsempra!' he yelled.

The spell missed Ernie by a quarter of an inch and Ernie reacted with a speed he had not known he was capable of. His Killing Curse hit Zabini squarely in the chest, and the Slytherin died with the supercilious sneer still on his lips.

'And that's for Dumbledore,' Ernie said shakily, looking round for anyone else who wanted to take him on.

In fact, it didn't take long for the DA to round up the rest. Only the underage kids were left, and they had become separated from Snape and Malfoy in the fighting. Most of them seemed to have fallen victim to Ginny's Bat Bogey hexes and were desperate to get out of the forest and up to the hospital wing.

The Ministry, however, were interested in the ringleaders. Kingsley Shacklebolt's deep, slow voice, magically magnified by the Sonorus Charm, echoed through the forest. 'This is the Acting Minister for Magic. Those of you who give yourselves up now will be taken to Azkaban. Any resistance or refusal will result in the Dementors' Kiss.'

Draco blanched. 'The Dementors' Kiss?' he whispered. 'No. I can't stay here; I can't face that.' He was shaking uncontrollably. 'I'm going to give myself up. If I go to Azkaban at least I'll be with my father.' And he raced off in the direction of the castle.

'Malfoy!' bellowed Severus. 'Come back here and let me think what to do!'

But Draco, blinded by panic and deafened by terror, kept on running. He rounded the corner out of the forest and was lost to sight. Seconds later there was a blood-curdling scream followed by a sickening crack. Severus began to run, dreading what he was going to see beyond the trees.

Malfoy was lying, motionless, beneath the flailing, thrashing branches of the Whomping Willow. Bile rising in his throat, Severus grabbed a fallen branch and jabbed the knot on the trunk. The tree froze instantly. Severus knelt down under the branches, which were now swaying innocently in the breeze, feeling Malfoy's neck and wrists for signs of life. Nothing. He carefully turned the prone figure over. Blood oozed out from under the sleek blond hair. Severus gently wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of the boy's mouth with his robes and, with a leaden heart, carried the lifeless form back towards the forest. The boy's parents would want to bury him themselves.

He thought of Narcissa, her husband in prison and her only son now dead, and of Lucius, guarded day and night by Dementors. When Lucius was told of this, it would be the only thing the Dementors would allow him to remember for the rest of his life. And it was all Severus' fault. "I have a duty towards you," he had told Malfoy. "I am in loco parentis." Well, he had failed in his duty, and in the worst way possible. He would never be able to forgive himself for this. For any of it. Lily, Alina, Draco, all were dead because of him.

Severus laid Draco on the sleeping bag the boy had been using only an hour ago. He resisted the urge simply to sink to his knees beside the boy and wait for Potter to find him. There would be time enough to grieve later.

Suddenly, Severus felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end and, looking up, experienced the same sickening jolt in his stomach as he had felt last night. Dumbledore's ghost was gliding towards him again, this time Severus had to clap a hand to his mouth to stop himself crying out accompanied by that of Alina.

Severus stood up and faced the Headmaster's ghost. 'Are you happy now?' he asked, with just a hint of a sneer. 'You still have the upper hand, have you not? Your defenders have picked us off one by one.' He held Dumbledore's gaze unflinchingly. 'I assume you have come for me?'

Dumbledore simply smiled. It wasn't a vindictive smile. It wasn't as if he wanted him dead out of revenge, Severus realised, but simply that Dumbledore knew it was the only way he would ever be at peace. Besides, Severus thought, he felt as if had a duty to finish what they had started on Halloween. Alina smiled and held out her hand, and Severus felt himself being drawn to her.

It wasn't that he was scared of Azkaban, and anyone who suggested otherwise would have been put right in no uncertain terms. It was the dishonour, the indignity of being paraded in front of the whole community by the Ministry that he couldn't bear. Few people believed he had been on the right side in the last decade, and most would be delighted to see him publicly tried, not only for Dumbledore's murder, but also for numerous resurrected charges relating to his time as a Death Eater. The thought of it turned his stomach. No doubt people would be quite happy to brave the Dementors in order to visit Azkaban and jeer at him.

He could give himself up and endure all the misery and ignominy the Ministry had in store for him, or he could die on his own terms and be reunited with Alina and Lily the two people he had been trying to protect with all this.

Merlin knew he valued his honour more than he feared death.

Severus picked up Draco's fallen wand. It would have been more fitting somehow, would even have had a sort of poetic justice to it, to use his own wand, the one that killed Dumbledore. But a wizard's own wand would not work against him; it would either simply refuse to work, or it would backfire, directing the spell away from its owner.

Alina was still smiling at him, her hand outstretched. He held her gaze and took a deep breath, seeming to draw confidence from her calm presence. Then his eyes moved to the ghost of the Headmaster.

'You can rest in peace now, Dumbledore,' Severus said clearly. 'I did not kill *you* half so willingly.' And he raised Draco's wand.

There was a flash of green light, the ghosts vanished and the dark figure of Severus Snape fell to the floor.

*

A/N: 'Do not use that word!' is from DH Ch 33.

A Man of Integrity

'Snape really thought he was doing the right thing,' Hermione said. 'He believed he was saving us.'

'Harry? Ron?' Hermione's voice, drifting towards Harry through the trees, sounded thin and strained. 'I think you ought to see this.'

The two boys ran towards the clearing and then stopped abruptly at the sight of Snape and Malfoy lying on the ground a few feet apart.

'Did they fight each other?' Harry asked, shocked.

'I don't think so,' Hermione said, kneeling down beside Malfoy. 'It looks like Malfoy fell and hit his head. And I think,' she moved to kneel next to Snape and eased Draco's wand out of the professor's hand, 'I think Snape killed himself before he could be taken by the Ministry.'

'Good riddance,' snorted Ron. 'At least he saved us a job.'

'I always thought Snape wouldn't let the Ministry take him,' Harry said, kneeling down beside Hermione. His eyes moved to a piece of parchment that had been trampled into the mud. 'What's that?'

'What's what?'

'That,' Harry said urgently, crawling over to the scrap of paper and brushing the moss and earth off it. He smoothed it out and held it up so Ron and Hermione could see it too.

All three of them read Alina's suicide note with mounting horror and disbelief.

'Oh, my,' Hermione breathed. 'The poor girl. They were only married five months.'

A school barn owl fluttered down onto Harry's shoulder and he thought, suddenly, of Hedwig, realising how much he still missed her. Only when the owl nipped him impatiently on the ear did Harry look down at the scraps of paper it had dropped in his lap. They appeared to be torn from a notebook, and Harry realised they were the pages of the diary Alina had mentioned in her letter.

"Please use them to exonerate Severus," Alina had written. That was the last thing Harry felt like doing, but he felt he owed it to Alina, an innocent victim in all this, to read what she had to say.

The first entry was dated **25th June**, and, written in different colour ink, as if it had been added afterwards, was the year **1995**. **Cannot believe what has happened. Oh, God, that poor boy! They said the Triwizard Tournament would be safe. But if it's true if You Know Who really is back then no one is safe any more.**

And Severus is in more danger than any of us. How can Albus let him do it, risking his life like that? He says it's necessary, but why does it have to be him? He disappeared early in the evening, but I waited up and made him tell me where he'd been when he returned. I know I'm just his colleague, but I'm the only one who seems to care what happens to him.

And I know Severus is a brilliant Occlumens, but spying on YKW, pretending he's still a Death Eater, convincing YKW he's spying on Dumbledore does that make him a double agent? Oh, it's all so complicated I can hardly write it down. All I know is it seems a sure-fire way of getting yourself killed.

Ron broke the shocked silence. 'Snape was on our side?'

Hermione took the page from Harry and studied it. 'But what made him switch?'

'I don't know,' Harry said, taking the paper back. 'I did wonder though. I accused him in my Occlumency lessons of making it his job to find out what Voldemort was saying to his Death Eaters, and he just said yes, it was. He never denied it, but he seemed almost pleased I'd worked it out.'

'That's in the diary too,' Hermione told Harry quietly.

5th April (1996). Awful row with Severus today. He's refused to teach Harry Potter Occlumency anymore. I feel so guilty I said some terrible things. Accused him of putting all our lives in danger because of a schoolboy grudge. Said I wasn't surprised Harry hated him if he called Harry's mother Mudblood.

It was scary first time I've ever been frightened of him. He yelled that I didn't understand anything, that I had no idea what his life was like and then he dragged me up to the Headmaster's office. Thought I was going to be sacked, but instead he showed me all his memories in Albus' Pensieve. It's so sad I was crying by the time we'd finished. He loved Lily Potter. Loved her almost all his life, ever since they were children.

He was devastated by her death. His reaction when Albus told him she was dead; I've never heard such terrible grief. That sound will haunt me forever. I really believe if Albus hadn't watched over him he would have tried to take his own life. To be with her.

And he still blames himself, yet he did everything he could to protect her. It was Severus who got Albus to hide her with the Fidelius charm. He's been protecting Harry ever since, repaying the debt, but he'll never forgive himself.

'That's why he turned spy for us.' Ron was looking down at Snape as if he had never seen him before.

Harry's hands were shaking. 'I didn't know,' he whispered. 'About Snape and my mum. I didn't know.'

Hermione was looking at the next page. '**And the worst thing is, I'll never be able to compete with Lily's memory**, she read. '**And I so want to.**' Her voice was choked with tears. The memory of Ron's all-too-public relationship with Lavender made Hermione feel for Alina. She could well imagine the pain of trying to compete with a long-idolised figure for the affection of the man she loved.

24th Sept. (1997). Heard Severus yelling in his sleep last night. Something about "Not her; don't take her." Surprised he didn't wake the dormitories. Tried to get into his rooms to make sure he was OK, but he'd warded the door and I didn't know the passwords. Plucked up courage to ask him about it today. It's ever since this Muggle-born Registration Committee was invented he's been dreaming about Lily being convicted and him being unable to save her.

What about me? Why doesn't he think about me? I'm terrified of the MBRC; they haven't come for me yet, but it's only a matter of time.

Maybe I'm wronging him, actually. I do have a feeling he's hiding me from them somehow. Fidelius Charm? Hope to Merlin I'm right.

Harry too was staring down at Snape as if seeing him in a whole new light. 'He did all this for my mum,' said Harry, stunned. 'Everything he's done in the last seventeen years, it's all been for her.'

'And Alina,' Ron added. 'I didn't know she was Muggle-born. Did you?'

'I never asked,' murmured Hermione. Her eyes were skimming the pages feverishly, reading ahead; then she gave a soft 'Oh!' of comprehension. 'No wonder Snape panicked. He believed his own wife was in danger. Look at this.'

31st Oct. (1998). Got so fed up with Severus' behaviour yesterday made him tell me what was going on. Wish I hadn't now. I'm either going to have to keep his worst secret yet, or betray him utterly.

The awful thing is he's doing it for me, protecting me because I'm Muggle-born. It's not just Lily this time, is it? I've spent years wanting him to think of me rather than her, and now he has... They say you should be careful what you wish for, don't they?

But the more he explained the more I can see he's right.

All three Gryffindors were silent as they read the six pages Alina had taken to explain her husband's actions.

'They were true then, all those rumours about Dumbledore and Grindelwald?' Hermione asked in a small voice.

'Yeah,' Harry replied, 'Dumbledore told me right after I'd killed Voldemort.'

'Snape really thought he was doing the right thing,' Hermione said, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. 'He believed he was saving us.'

Ron was looking thunderstruck. 'All that stuff at the funeral about the good of the community. He really meant it.' He ran a hand distractedly through his hair as he struggled to take it all in. 'The others - Malfoy, Goyle, Zabini - they all did this for themselves, for revenge. Only Snape was thinking of other people.'

'We'll carry him up to the school,' Harry decided, closing Snape's eyelids and folding his hands over his chest. 'Give him a proper funeral.' Harry picked up Snape's fallen wand and tucked it under his folded hands. 'He deserves that. Severus Snape truly was *the bravest man I ever knew*.'

THE END

A/N: The title again comes from Solomon; 29/10

The idea is from Kyone on Sycophant Hex Julius Caesar: Harry Potter style.

The casting specified was: Dumbledore as Caesar (a good man with a shady past or double agenda), Snape as Brutus (brave, stoic, willing to do anything for the good of others), Malfoy as Cassius (mean-minded, resentful, always trying to become Brutus' equal), and Harry as Mark Antony (rabidly pro-Caesar and refusing to hear any ill of him).

The rest of the cast (for anyone who knows "Julius Caesar") is:

Calpurnia: Minerva McGonagall

Artemidorus/Soothsayer: Sybil Trelawney

Casca: Gregory Goyle

Decius Brutus: Blaise Zabini

Popilius Lena: Horace Slughorn

Octavius Caesar: Kingsley Shacklebolt

Lepidius: Seamus Finnegan

Portia: Alina Snape (OC)

Publius Cimber: Ruthven Mulciber (OC)

Metellus Cimber: Despard Mulciber (OC)

Lucius (Brutus' servant) Winky the house elf