

Dracpunzel

by dracontia

Once upon a time, Lucius Malfoy decided to execute a tediously convoluted scheme that went (from his perspective, at least) ridiculously wrong. That really narrows it down, doesn't it?

Prologue: In Which Ideas are Hare-Brained

Chapter 1 of 17

Once upon a time, Lucius Malfoy decided to execute a tediously convoluted scheme that went (from his perspective, at least) ridiculously wrong. That really narrows it down, doesn't it?

Disclaimer: JKR & other wealthy letters own the HP characters. Rapunzel is public domain, at least until Disney figures out how to sanitize it sufficiently. Good luck with that once I'm done with it... (You can tell how long ago I started this one, can't you?)

WARNING: Reading this fractured fairy tale at work will potentially threaten your professional demeanor. Please think carefully before eating, drinking, or pretending to write reports while reading.

Once there lived a disgustingly wealthy couple who had everything they could possibly want with the exception of coronets of the peerage and a child of their own. For a time they amused themselves with expensive and exotic pets: miniature Crups, white peacocks, and a rare albino anaconda which neither of them was willing to touch and which they summarily disposed of when the Crups abruptly vanished. Their secondary and slightly more successful avocation was interfering in politics and lording it over the local populace, despite scarcely rating as Esquires.

Then one day, the wife (we'll call her Narcissa) started sicking up like a particularly foul fountain each morning. The house-elves having been harshly questioned, it was determined that no food poisoning had occurred and they rejoiced that they were finally to get, well, one of their fondest wishes.

Now, Narcissa was subject to the most remarkable cravings while pregnant. In particular, she was incredibly desirous of chewing on some dragon's blood resin from the tropical potions-ingredients conservatory owned by the surly potion-maker next door. Said master of his craft (rather appropriately named Severus) was cranky, contrary, misanthropic, something of an ascetic, and in possession of the most incredible library and laboratory known to wizard-kind. Being in possession of such a sweet setup, he was remarkably resistant to bribes. He was also a dab hand with curses, so threats would only suffice to provide him with a few seconds' sardonic amusement.

With sufficient time and effort, an inducement may have been found that could have moved the sarcastic bastard to part with some of the resin; but Narcissa's husband (for the sake of brevity, we'll call him... oh... Lucius) had a different plan.

"My dearest, I simply can't see you suffer like this. I'll just slip over to that lovely conservatory and... borrow... a bit of resin for you," Lucius said with a degree of solicitousness that Narcissa immediately found suspect.

"There is only so often you can 'borrow' things and claim the Imperius Curse," Narcissa said doubtfully. "Oughtn't we simply find some way to take possession of the entire conservatory—perhaps some manipulation of the tax rolls?"

Lucius shuddered. "Please, dearest, do not mention the 't' word. We have addressed this before." He took a breath to steady himself. "Getting caught is the entire idea. You

see, these brilliant recluses are inevitably prickly in temperament and inclined to request outlandish repayment for any slight. Having caught me, he will make dire threats. I will plead your dire cravings as my motivation and beg mercy. He will decide that the only fit payment for the theft is our child, whom we will turn over to him once—"

"Dearest... I do hate to interrupt, but... You stepped in WHAT? Clear up to WHERE?"

It occurred to Lucius that if his wife really wanted some of that resin, she would likely get excellent results simply by turning her current facial expression on their recalcitrant neighbor. Still, he was unwilling to abandon his scheme quite so readily.

"My love, do not fret. Our precious could be left in your care until she is old enough to make a suitable apprentice to our surly neighbor. I rather doubt that child rearing interests him, but fellows like that are always keen to have someone to learn their art so that their cleverness will survive them. She shall go and acquire all of his secrets—all the while being right next door, so that you need only look out the window to see how well she is."

"Insist on that part in writing," Narcissa said, in the same forbidding tones as before.

Lucius breezed on as if unperturbed. "Then, we shall simply wait until our little darling's unearthly beauty and sad captivity become common knowledge." Husband and wife became distracted for a moment by their own reflections in nearby polished surfaces before Lucius continued. "Up will ride a suitable prince on some grand and very expensive-to-maintain creature like an Abraxan or an Aeolian or possibly even a white Hippogriff—which would be particularly impressive, given pure white ones are about as rare as phoenix guano—" Lucius was lost in contemplation for a moment with the idea of the amount of money and power required to obtain and keep such a creature, "save our precious, and be so utterly taken with her charms that he marries her. Voila! Instant royalty in the family, with all attendant ribbons and honors and so forth."

"I foresee one problem already; we don't know whether we're having a boy or a girl," Narcissa said, notching her tone of voice down from 'frozen steel' back to 'doubtful.'

"In any case, gorgeousness is a guarantee for any child of ours." He took a moment to smooth back a stray strand of gossamer hair, while Narcissa discreetly checked the 'glow' charms on the apples of her cheeks. "At worst, he could become the prince's trusted companion and make himself irresistible to one of the prince's sisters. Truly, though—what are the chances we should have a male heir on the first go?"

Which just goes to show how very little value a purchased 'O' in Divination confers on the buyer.

Note: Of course the chapters are short. This bedtime story needs to last all week, at least.

Chapter the First: In Which Unwise Incursions are Made

Chapter 2 of 17

Lucius endeavors to appear as if he knows what he is doing.

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The very next day, Lucius set out on a leisurely stroll about the east gardens which gradually brought him near the formidable wall separating them from their formidable neighbor's property. Narcissa watched from the window with grave misgivings and a much-put-upon house elf. Well aware of his wife's eyes upon him, Lucius endeavored to appear as if he knew what he was about.

This was no mean feat given that three passes around the perimeter left him none the wiser as to how one might enter. It appeared that whatever gates had once existed had been bricked over, and no amount of frantic and foolish wand-waving on Lucius' part managed to reveal any hidden doors. He toyed with the idea of climbing over a low spot, but climbing walls seemed proper only to the most plebian (and almost worse, Muggle) sort. There was nothing for it; he would have to Summon a broom and attempt to fly in... casually.

After having his broom ripped out from under him by a Whomping Willow sapling, landing headfirst in a Peeved Privet hedge and rolling three times before coming to a stop against the wall of the greenhouse, Lucius decided that if he had to choose between 'survivable' and 'casual,' he might do just as well to climb the wall like a plebe.

"This is all very vexing." Lucius addressed his remarks to the soiled cuffs of his robe. "One might suspect that this chap doesn't want the sort of opportunity that comes with the occasional genteel incursion into his garden." He worked the door open, still quietly fretting about his damaged couture. This may very well have been the reason he did not notice that he had company in the greenhouse until ropes whipped around him and caused him to crash to the ground for the second time that day.

"What the devil...Malfoy? Don't tell me you're so blond you can't tell the difference between my property and your Manor." Severus stepped out from behind a potted Palmquist, his wand trained on Lucius' prone form. His lips thinned in a frown (though this was scarcely distinguishable from his usual expression) and his forehead creased with two vertical lines that made angry checkmarks of his eyebrows.

Lucius sniffed. "I say, you aren't going about this correctly..."

"This, from the man trespassing in my greenhouse," Severus interjected. A third line joined the two between his eyebrows and his lips seemed to vanish completely.

"...at all. You're supposed to rave and threaten and present me with the opportunity to offer you some sort of compensation."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Let's say I've done all the threatening and raving. Offer me the damned bribe and I'll decide whether it's worth not turning you over to the authorities, such as they are...or to my giant pitcher plant. It was looking a little peckish this morning."

"As much as it pains me to do so," Lucius tried to place a hand over his heart, but was hampered by the magical ropes. He settled for sighing heavily. Severus narrowed his eyes at the other wizard, causing Lucius to speed it up a little. After all, Severus now resembled nothing so much as a scarecrow with a face made of punctuation marks, and Lucius feared that he might be losing the plot at this rate. "My heir. The child Narcissa is carrying, the source of her craving which has served me so ill."

Severus' head tilted to one side in the manner of a man trying to hear something. His frown deepened into such sharp relief that it emphasized his already significant nose

to an alarming degree. His shoulders dropped, taking his lower jaw along for company. What issued from the open mouth were the incredulous words, "You stepped in WHAT, clear up to WHERE?"

Lucius blinked. "What a remarkable coincidence," he murmured to himself.

"I'm not sure whether to feed you to the plant or use you to test insanity cures," Severus continued, in serious danger of being permanently trapped in an advanced state of 'aghash.'

"Well. That was...rather rude," Lucius said, feeling much put out (and not just because he was beginning to lose feeling in his left arm.) "Here I am, offering you that which I treasure most...next to, well..." Lucius drifted off for a moment, mesmerized by the play of light on his hair. "Where was I? Oh, yes. I say, when someone offers you their firstborn child, I really think you ought to respond with a little less incredulity and a fair bit more gratitude."

"But I don't WANT a child!" Severus forgot to maintain his menacing stance while waved his arms frantically...also somewhat worryingly given that he was still holding his wand and it was beginning to spit sparks. "I don't care what sort of rumors you may have heard, I don't use them as potions ingredients!"

"Who would give up their child to be used as potions ingredients? And he had the audacity to call me insane," Lucius added that last *bisotto voce*. "No, there will be no putting children into potions. The child is to be your apprentice, don't you see? Honestly, man, have you never read fairy stories?"

"I don't know what you're getting at, but those magazines were delivered entirely by accident and I disposed of them as soon as I determined what they were," Severus said waspishly.

Lucius decided to regard everything that was not a product of his own vocal cords as a sort of non-sequitur for purposes of the remaining discussion. "If you can't make sense, do try to listen to it. You have no heirs and as you so emphatically indicated, you do not care to have any. But at least you should have an apprentice, else all you have worked for...your greenhouses, your laboratory, your innovations and knowledge...will simply revert to the Principality when the inevitable eventually occurs."

The forehead lines which had disappeared during Severus' panic attack returned with a more thoughtful cast. Lucius pressed on, sensing he was making headway. "And what of the Principality... why, it is the very definition of 'in shambles' these days. Who is to say which of Slytherin's heirs will take charge? The half-witted Marquise of Gaunt, or the easily bemused Baron Bulstrode? Perhaps Riddle's Bastard, the smarmy little antique hunter, will appreciate your accomplishments?"

"Dear God," Severus murmured, "That Gaunt beast would tear the wings off my Flying Freesias for sport, and that fool Bulstrode would use my lab notes to paper train his Crups." He turned a shade paler...no mean feat for an already rather fallow man.

"Precisely," Lucius continued his appeal in a somewhat distracted manner, given that his limited attention span was mostly occupied with relieving the pressure on his wrists. "But if you were to train your own apprentice to suit, you could ensure that your achievements were properly appreciated for posterity." He sighed. "I daresay this conversation would proceed more smoothly if I could feel my arms."

"Hmm." Severus did not end the spell altogether, but he did loosen the ropes slightly. "What's in it for you, Malfoy? Why not simply throw money at me? It appears to be your preferred solution to any problem."

Lucius performed a rapid mental calculation regarding how much bullshit Severus would tolerate, and concluded that said tolerance would be dangerously low. "Anyone with a passing awareness of your abilities and possessions would know that an offer of money would merely insult you." Severus seemed to be weighing the words just as he had Lucius' earlier intimations about the disarray of the kingdom. Inspiration bloomed in the vast expanse behind Lucius' eyes and he knew how he might seal the deal. "And I admit... it wouldn't hurt for my child to have an additional protector, as it were, in these trying times." There. He had presented Severus with both a tempting offer and a motivation plausible enough that Severus would be convinced of Lucius' sincerity. It had the advantage of not being a lie, per se, should the surly wizard happen to have any skills as a Legilimens.

"I would be willing to entertain a contract in the matter," Severus finally answered. Almost as an afterthought, he loosened the ropes enough for Lucius to fumble out of them.

Showing the same lack of judgment which had characterized his conduct throughout the debacle, Lucius chose to press his luck. "This sort of thing is always dealt with verbally. It's a matter of honor."

"Which is precisely why I want it in writing," Severus said. Lucius thought his dry tone very poor form, indeed. However, his arms were too full of pins and needles to dispute it with his wand.

"I have suitable parchment in my study," Lucius said with a sigh. "Bring the first installment of the Dragon's Blood resin and we'll work it out."

"I have perfectly suitable parchment in my tower," Severus countered.

Just then, an owl swooped through the open greenhouse door. It dropped a Howler on the ground between the two men, and before Severus could aim, Narcissa's voice shivered the glass.

"SEVERUS SNAPE! IF YOU HAVE DONE ANYTHING UNTOWARD TO MY EQUAL PARTS CONNIVING AND RIDICULOUSLY BUMBLING SPOUSE, YOUR DRAGON'S BLOOD RESIN WILL BE THE LEAST OF YOUR BELONGINGS THAT I WILL BE CHEWING TO A BLOODY PULP!"

They contemplated the exploded, smoking, red parchment on the floor of the greenhouse. Or rather, Severus did; Lucius was cowering quite as much as the unhappy sentient plants around the Howler's epicenter.

"Your study it is," Severus conceded.

Thanks to Sunny33 for reminding me of the necessity of warning labels. :D

Chapter the Second: In Which Hare-Brained Ideas are Committed to Parchment

Chapter 3 of 17

Severus may fail to read some of the fine print.

Disclaimer: I own neither HP characters nor fairytales. Please refrain from penalizing my impoverished self for playing with them.

WARNING: Reading this fractured fairy tale may prove hazardous to your health. You may want to set that bag of crisps aside until after this chapter—it's only about a thousand words!

Which was how a gloomily black-clad Severus came to be standing on one side of Lucius Malfoy's absurdly oversized desk—seriously, the man could field a house-elf Quidditch team over that thing—looking drastically out-of-place in the heavily gilded and malachite-paneled room and feeling deeply disturbed at the animalistic noises that issued from Narcissa's mouth as she chewed on the Dragon's Blood resin.

"I'm going to need copies," Severus said. He tried to read over Lucius' shoulder. It *albeemed* to be in order, but he couldn't escape the feeling that he was missing something...

"Yes of course," Lucius said distractedly. "To wit, pause," he whispered, the words mingling with the scratching of his quill. Severus suppressed a groan. Lucius *would* be one of those who couldn't write without dictating to himself.

"Don't forget that you promised me a proper amount of time with my precious!" Narcissa managed to make herself heard through a mouthful of resin. Lucius shuddered delicately as a few reddish drips sprayed from between her lips. Even Severus felt a trifle disturbed.

"There is no way in hell that I am taking charge of that thing before it's properly housebroken," Severus added.

"Oh, very well!" Lucius scratched, scribbled, whispered, and indignantly initialed bits of the contract. "You do realize this is all highly irregular. Does no one study mythology anymore?" Neither of them bothered to answer. Lucius, apparently sensing he was outnumbered and out-wanded, refrained from belaboring the point. "Will seven years do, dearest?"

"I suppose," she sighed. "I can still see my little darling from here, can I not?"

"My tower is visible from this window. The br—child—can take the entire top floor for all I care, so long as I still get to use it for astronomical observations," Severus said. "Just don't get any dunderheaded ideas about traipsing around my grounds for a visit."

"And I'll write daily." At least, that was what Severus thought she said through the chewing.

"*Weekly*, there is no point to any of this if I don't allot sufficient time for training," Severus folded his arms across his chest in what he deemed a fine gesture of implacability.

"Visibility, correspondence, traipsing or lack thereof, it all seems to be in order," Lucius said under his breath. "Sign here, here, and initial these pages here."

Severus wondered if he should have a solicitor look it all over. He ultimately refrained from fear that the dual blond menaces might decide to renege if he delayed, leaving him with nothing but the hollow satisfaction of whatever revenge he could manage as payment for his precious resin. It didn't hurt that the idea of having an apprentice had considerable appeal. He took up a quill and read everything twice, signing as he went. However, his suspicions spiked when the print started to become, well... miniscule. "What is this, Lucius?"

"Hmm?" Lucius contrived to look innocent, which made Severus's hand jerk convulsively around his wand which he somehow now held in place of the quill.

"This fine print—the bit mentioning princes and rescues?"

"Ah. That, my good man, is in deference to these difficult times. I know that you don't want your apprentice wandering out into the world and inadvertently sharing your proprietary secrets. I think you would agree, however, that should the political situation become... well, less political and more, shall we say, rambunctious—the child should have a fighting chance to escape. Hence phrasing it as 'rescue' rather than 'permission to leave.'"

It was Severus's turn to "Hmm." After some thought he could find no obvious flaw with that, so he duly finished initialing. "I suppose that is that." He hit the document with a Duplicating Spell before Lucius could move to do so—just in case. It was very distracting with Narcissa still chewing in the background.

"Quite." Lucius packed off the original parchments with a house-elf for filing. "Well, we shall see you in seven months, more or less, for the Naming. Until then, have your house-elf make arrangements with one of ours for delivery of the resin."

Severus hastily shuffled through the contract even as Lucius was escorting him to the door and found the relevant passage. He wondered how the hell he had missed it before and had the unpleasant feeling that he may have missed something else.

"Cheers!" Lucius said with land-shark smile that was Severus's last, not-at-all reassuring sight of him before the massive double doors at the back of the Manor house closed. Severus was left standing on the steps with a sheaf of parchment and a Very Bad Feeling About All of This.

Capitalized, no less.

Chapter the Third: In Which Childbirth Transpires

Chapter 4 of 17

Do you really want one, after that title?

Disclaimer: I own neither HP characters nor fairytales. I don't even own a house-elf. Please refrain from penalizing my impoverished self for playing with them.

WARNING: Any consumption of edible substances while reading is undertaken at your own risk.

Note: I have a day off from sickroom duties, an available computer, and a couple of unposted chapters in reserve. Enjoy or forgive the results, as appropriate.

Severus was minding his own business, as per usual, and stirring a potion (also usual) when his lone house-elf popped into the laboratory. This was highly unusual, as the laboratory was a no-elf zone. Severus would have preferred to live with only the company of his pets and a few of his more sentient plants; but when he inherited the tower, it quickly became apparent that maintaining such a structure was not a one-wizard job.

"You know my standing orders, Wormy. Unless the tower is collapsing, I'm not interested," he drawled. He removed the stirring rod after the final half-turn and set it on the ceramic rest.

The elf did not leave immediately, which was likewise unusual. Severus glanced about the room, making a quick check of its structural integrity.

"But, Master Severus! The Malfoy house elves is calling you to the Manor! The Young Master is being born and Master Severus needs to be at the naming."

It took him a good few moments to realize what the elf was on about. Somehow, he'd lost track of the time, and now it appeared that...well, the brat was about to appear.

"Bugger all," he muttered. His mood stabilized upon seeing the potion turn the appropriate color for this stage. "Hmph. I suppose that I can afford an hour, but no more. This will want stirring again."

"Wormy can take Master into the Malfoy's home to save time," Wormy offered. This constant solicitousness on the part of house-elves unnerved Severus rather thoroughly, since he himself devoted so much of his life to not giving a flying fwooper what anyone else wanted. There was also something innately appalling about a creature that could nonchalantly move through protective spells. Still, he did have to get back to stirring sooner rather than later...

"Are you sure I will arrive there with everything I had to start?" Severus asked.

"Wormy is being very good at moving people through the space-time continuum," the elf asserted.

Severus was so taken aback at the term 'space-time continuum' juxtaposed with elf grammar that he didn't notice he was in the Manor until he heard screaming. He could not muster any particular surprise upon discovering that it emanated from Lucius. A Stunning Spell from the hip put paid to that.

The harried midwife stepped over Lucius' prone form. "Thanks for that, Mr...."

"Snape." Severus backed away from the bed, taking care to stay away from the... business end... of the highly medicated witch lying upon it. Even with all of the house elves and at least two midwives clustered around, he really didn't want to risk seeing anything. It had been bad enough happening upon his greenhouse cat having kittens.

"You're here because...?" the second midwife, a woman with entirely too much hair, ruffles, and...well, frankly, everything...questioned him.

"sababbees godfaer," Narcissa slurred.

The other midwife shushed her companion. "He got the father out of our road, don't ask too many questions. Being the godfather, would you care to h..."

"I'll just be out here," Severus said, shutting the door to the room by way of punctuation to that statement. He leaned against it for good measure. He somehow doubted that Malfoys handled birth with the same aplomb as domestic cats.

Severus checked his contract to confirm that he had indeed missed another clause and was in the awkward position of not only being the child's future guardian but also godfather. He hoped that this would not entail any sort of obligation beyond an appearance at the child's baptism. Severus never could quite shake the feeling that, despite appearing to be a quite genial-looking Squib, the vicar could discern by looking at him exactly how many Christmases it had been since Severus had attended any sort of service.

He fumbled his way through a silent prayer that all would go well behind the door upon which he was leaning before giving it up as a bad job. Rather more appealing was the convenient sideboard with an even more convenient decanter on it. Severus thought that he might have figured out a way around the owner's seal on the stopper when a petulant cry issued from behind the closed door. He turned just in time to avoid being caught with his hands on the glass.

"The young Master is born now," the creature announced. "Mister Severus is to please be viewing him."

"Oh, joy," Severus said. He hoped that a good, stiff belt was part of the viewing and wondered why he hadn't the foresight to put it in the contract.

Someone had wakened Lucius, and Severus quite wished they hadn't. By the look on the more sensible midwife's face, he wasn't the only one.

"I say, are you quite sure it's a boy? Oughtn't he be a bit more pale and handsome? At least a bit willowy? And where ever is the child's hair?"

"He's a baby, Mr. Malfoy. They're all a bit bald and red to start," the midwife explained.

"He's perfect," Narcissa said. This would have been rather nauseating had she cooed it to the baby. As things stood, she addressed her comment to the room in general and her husband in particular. Severus thought, quite frankly, that had she brought that glare and that tone of voice to his gates a few months ago, there would have been no need for contracts.

"I've seen him. Am I done here?" Severus asked.

"He needs to be named first," Lucius said. "We've the vicar standing by in the family chapel."

"Well, get on with it." Severus punctuated his remarks with a gesture in the child's direction. The child replied with more sulky mewling. The uneasiness Severus had felt earlier grew into a distinct foreboding.

"He ought to be named for the plant at the center of all this," Lucius said. He had that air of expertise that had been present from the start of this mess, and Severus wanted nothing more than to punch him in the face, magic be damned.

"No child of mine is going to be called Palm Tree!" Narcissa and the baby both seemed quite adamant on that point.

"It is a most dignified specimen of *Dracaena draco*, Madam, not some mere tropical lawn ornament," Severus said. He felt rather put out on behalf of his plant. It had provided a great deal of fine potions ingredients over the years.

"I suppose we could call him Draco," Narcissa said.

Severus turned and let his forehead fall against the nearest wall. "Call the little br-boy-Draco, then. But name him so I can get back to my tower already, I've a Draught of Living Death that needs stirring in ten minutes!"

"Begging your pardon, Ma'am, but the vicar will also want a Christian name for the baptismal certificate," the second midwife said. Severus by now had a particular dislike for that midwife which threatened to extend to red-headed persons generally.

"Bloody hell!" Severus was very near the end of his patience, and felt a definite foreboding, verging upon the ominous. Why, again, was he agreeing to take on an apprentice whose only qualification to date was a rather vapid father and a mother with exceedingly poor impulse control?

"No such language around my little sweetling," Narcissa glared ice daggers at Severus. "Obviously we name him after..."

"...my father," Lucius and Narcissa said at the same time.

"Why not name him after his godfather and save an argument?" the first midwife suggested, very sensibly to Severus' mind. He resolved to brew something nice for her, perhaps an unguent to deal with her unfortunate acne.

After a few moments of hedging and gaping, neither adult Malfoy could summon a better idea. (This gives one an unfortunately apt picture of the quality of the Malfoy thought process.) So everyone Apparated to the chapel and the little baby was named Draco Severus Malfoy, a fact about which he seemed particularly displeased if his vocalizations were at all meaningful. The contract glowed to indicate that it had taken effect. Wormy obligingly took Severus home...nowhere near in time to save the potion, of course.

Years passed; and Severus realized, to his dismay, that his foreboding wasn't going anywhere.

At least the vicar hadn't asked any awkward questions.

Chapter the Fourth: In Which Severus Gains an Apprentice...

Chapter 5 of 17

You know where this is going.

Disclaimer: Don't own the characters. Don't own the approximate plot. Only the insanity is mine.

Warning: Multitaskers need to consider whether their secondary activity of choice is compatible with giggling. Just sayin'.

Little Draco spent the next seven years being spoiled to the point of extreme rottenness by his mother and a group of harried house-elves. His father looked in periodically to adjure Narcissa to teach the boy the sort of things that would make him a fit ornament for a royal drawing room and tacitly wonder if he oughtn't check to see if the prissy child actually was a girl, after all.

Draco was a rather pretty child, it must be said; his eyes were silver, touched by a soft breath of blue, and all of his features were quite as dainty as if they were sculpted from finest alabaster. His crowning glory was his hair, a river of moon-pale silk—implausibly soft to the touch and warmed with only the faintest kiss of gold. And it was prone to grow very, very quickly. The house-elves trimmed a great length of it every second month and span it into embroidery floss for Narcissa. With it she worked intricate patterns on the blue robes that so flattered her son's coloring and hers.

Sadly, he was not what one could justifiably call an attractive child, as those features were too often pinched into a pout or frown, except when he was sleeping. If anyone happened to suspect the frazzled house-elves of spiking little Draco's warm milk to ensure that he remained at his best as long as possible, they refrained from mentioning it. They also refrained from mentioning that Draco was not destined to remain at home with Mummy much longer. This may well have been an error on someone's part.

And so it came to pass, at the end of his seventh birthday party, while little Draco was busily picking over his toys to calculate which ones he would tire of first, in swooped Severus in all of his black-cloaked glory. Or at least as much glory as he could muster, having once again been spirited away only semi-willingly by a house-elf.

"Bloody elves," he muttered, looking over his person to ensure that everything he began with was still there. "At least it was only the gardening they interrupted this time. If they ever catch me in the loo, it's clothes."

Narcissa clasped her hands together and almost began to wring them before she remembered wrinkles. "Oh dear. Has it been seven years already?" Draco hid behind her skirts, one silver eye peeking out at the imposing figure of their neighboring Potions-genius.

"My thoughts precisely," Severus said. "Frankly, madam, I am in no particular rus—"

"Ah, there you are Severus!" Lucius breezed into the room, land-shark smile gleaming as if fresh polishing charms had just been applied. "Not a moment too soon, either."

"I still fail to recall when we got on first name terms," Severus grouched. "Truly, if this moment is inconvenient for you, I can wait. It's certainly inconvenient for me."

"Nonsense! Dilly! Pack Draco's things and take them over to Severus' tower," Lucius ordered the nearest house-elf.

"Hold your Thestrals, Malfoy—I haven't prepared the top floor yet," Severus protested.

"Dilly and your elf will see to that." Lucius turned his rather unfortunate smile on Draco. "Go on, son—you're to join Severus in his tower and become his apprentice. Won't that be advantageous?" Lucius said this all quite merrily, as one might expect a sane person to tout the fun to be had at an amusement park.

Draco, being perhaps inoculated somewhat by exposure, was unconvinced by Lucius' bullshit. He buried his face in the skirts of his mummy's robes.

"Mummy, I don't want to go with the big, bad man," little Draco whimpered.

"I am NOT bad. I am simply misunderstood," Severus said. He made a face that looked every bit as sulky and pinched as the best (or one might argue, worst) efforts of his would-be ward.

"Draco... precious..." Narcissa knelt and placed a dainty finger under her son's chin to tilt his head up. "Remember all the stories I told you about the prince only coming to play with a good little student who lives in a tall tower defended by many obstacles?"

"Yes," Draco wibbled.

"Well, you must go to live in Severus' tower—" Narcissa began.

"—and bl-better well pay attention and learn something," Severus interrupted.

"—if you are to be part of one of those stories. Your father knows about these things and has arranged it all. Go on." Narcissa kissed him soundly on the forehead and

allowed him to cling to her a moment longer, stifling his whimpers in her robes, before she handed him over to Severus. Little Draco reluctantly took hold of Severus' hand. Severus reluctantly refrained from slapping Draco's small hand away.

"Take good care of him," she said. Severus couldn't tell who was more shaken by the steel in her voice—himself or little Draco. At least, he couldn't tell which of the two of them had shuddered slightly.

Still, Severus' waspishness won out. "Of course—what do you take me for?"

"Someone with no experience raising children," Narcissa said.

"His robes smell oddly," Draco whined.

Severus ignored this in favor of seething at Narcissa. "Pot, cauldron," he hissed out of the corner of his mouth.

Narcissa fortunately did not hear him over Draco's protests. "If you need any aid, our elves—"

"—Will not be wandering about my property without my express invitation, as per the blo—bothersome contract. Wormy is more than able in matters of child care," Severus said, with perfect veracity. After all, they'd never lost a kitten or Thestral foal yet. He gripped the tiny hand of his charge somewhat gingerly. The child appeared no more substantial than a moonblossom, an appearance that was belied by his surprisingly forceful attempts to pull away.

"None of that, Draco," Lucius admonished. Narcissa, more practically, pushed a new plush dragon into his arms to distract him.

"Come on, then," Severus said gruffly. "Wormy! Where the devil is that—"

Before Severus could say something to which Narcissa would almost certainly object, Wormy arrived. Without further ado (in the elder Malfoys' presence, at least) little Draco was spirited away by Severus to live in his tower and train as the Potion master's apprentice.

At least, that was the plan.

Chapter the Fifth: ...and Begins Losing his Mind

Chapter 6 of 17

Yes, Severus, that really was as bad an idea as you thought.

Disclaimer: I don't get paid for this, so please don't charge me.

Warning: You never know when a chapter may be nominated for the Tomato Soup Award. (Somewhere in my body of work is an explanation of that reference, but suffice to say 'tis better to eat AFTER reading.)

Things had gone about as well as could be expected at first—which is to say, rather poorly.

"Well, boy, this appears to be your room," Severus said when Wormy landed them safely at home. He had to peer out the window to confirm by the view that this was, indeed, the top floor of his tower. It now resembled nothing so much as a magical toy store.

"Tisn't my room. My room is at home with Mummy," Draco sulked.

Severus sincerely hoped that was a general reference to sharing a house with Mummy and not a room—or worse, a bed. He then proceeded to have a silent panic attack lest the child would decide that he needed company in order to go to sleep. *If that were the case... would Wormy suffice?*

"Would that were still true. As things stand, you are contractually bound to remain here until you are a fully qualified master of the art of Potions-making," Severus said. He even quelled his anxiety enough to keep his voice in the proper octave.

"When will that be?" Draco asked. He craned his slender neck to look at an animated clock literally crawling with unicorns, dragons, and other gilt-and-enamel figures. Severus made a mental note to have the thing relegated to some distant store room at the earliest opportunity, unless he could successfully hock it.

"You may not stand for examinations until you are one and twenty years of age. If you are a quick study—"

"YEARS? How many is that from now?" The child's voice changed from a sulk to shrill panic in an instant.

"Fourteen," Severus answered. He immediately managed to wonder three things simultaneously: one, what manner of maths had the boy been taught; two, what manner of insanity-producing substance he had been brewing when he had agreed to take on an apprentice for a minimum of a decade and change; and three, whether he would ever regain his hearing.

Draco's screech set the windowpanes quaking in their frames. Severus felt certain that the crystal animals in the spinning mobile cracked, along with his eardrums. "No! No no no no no no no no! I want to go HOME, NOW!"

"SILENCE!" Severus roared, quite a bit more loudly than even Draco at the whiniest height of his vocal powers. Draco cowered, sobbing. Severus felt a slight twinge of guilt—but mostly of laryngitis. He wondered how the brat managed to scream so without splitting his own throat. "Ahem. Believe me when I say that nothing would please me more. However, your father and mother prevailed upon me to enter into a binding contract, and we must both make the best of it."

"M-mu-mummy w-wanted to send m-me away?"

A softer being would have broken down at the wibbly, blotchy face and plaintive tone. Severus manfully resisted the urge to do something ridiculously sentimental (like actually patting the child on the head, or some similar inanity) and summoned all the cunning of a native Slytherin. "She wanted you to become an accomplished wizard—a brewer of glory, a bottler of fame! Come now, boy—only a dunderhead would turn down the opportunity to learn to stopper Death. I can teach you all of this, and more." He attempted to rearrange his features into a winning expression despite his suspicions that it was a vain effort.

Draco whimpered, blew his nose on the trailing sleeve of his robe, and squeezed his stuffed dragon. Severus wondered if it was his imagination, or if the child's already long hair had grown visibly since they'd begun this discussion.

Apparently another tack was called for. "Don't you wish to make astonishing things from the most virulently poisonous plants on earth? Unlock the secrets of Dragon Blood? Shred the wings of flies and mince wonderfully slimy insects and animal parts?" Severus tried to recall all of the major attractions of the potions-making process that had impressed him as a small boy. He managed a more sincere smile of nostalgia this time.

Draco's tiny, pointy nose wrinkled in disgust. This was going to be even more difficult than Severus had feared.

Severus cast about the room for inspiration and was nearly blinded by the gilding on the massive toy chest. "Eventually, once you have mastered the essentials of the craft, you will learn to make costly and rare potions. You will grind gemstones into fine, glittering powder with a mortar and pestle. You distill a thousand roses into a single, tiny vial of purest fragrance worth more than its weight in gold. Someday, you will even make potions that must be stirred with a silver rod and simmered in a golden cauldron."

Draco cocked his head. He sniffled, but it seemed almost an afterthought. "Is it a real golden cauldron?"

"Half an inch thick at the bottom," Severus promised. *As soon as I write to your parents and tell them you require it* He even managed a slight smile, having realized the potential—literal—silver lining to this living raincloud. While Severus made a respectable living, it was by no means a luxurious one. *I'll wager I can squeeze a set of crystal alembics out of them for the brat's Christmas. Fourteen years, at least, of birthdays and Christmases... Hmmm...*

Draco heaved a sigh all out of proportion to his small size. Severus was shocked to notice that the boy's hair grew another visible fraction with the sound. It now reached the middle of his back. "Is it tea yet?" a small voice came from behind the platinum curtain. "I think I should very much like tea. And a nap."

With a sigh of his own, Severus summoned Wormy. *Would a dose of Calming Draught in the tea be out of order?* "That makes two of us," he said.

Wish me remarkable writing luck if I'm to find time and inspiration to complete this long-neglected fractured fairytale... :-\

Chapter the Sixth: In Which it is Established that This is a Hairy Situation

Chapter 7 of 17

Returning to the root of the source material...

Disclaimer: Any resemblance to fictional characters owned by other, wealthier entities is purely unremunerated.

Warning: Warning: Ladies and gentleman, I don't put laugh-warnings on these chapters out of some sort of comedic hubris. This is a response to comment along the lines of, 'I spat tea all over my keyboard laughing at this.' Please use your best judgment when reading.

These were the times that tried Severus' soul. (Contrary to popular opinion he had one, albeit a bit worse for wear.)

Draco's mother had been so busy having tea parties with her little darling that she rather neglected his education beyond rudimentary reading and penmanship. Aside from counting, Draco knew practically nothing of arithmetic. Severus left that particular bit of education in Wormy's seldom-ironed hands, reasoning that any elf capable of using the term 'space-time continuum' in a sentence could teach addition, subtraction, the multiplication table, simple division, and fractions—arithmetic for potions-makers, as it were.

The less said about Draco's social skills (or the qualifications of any of the adults in his life to teach same) the better. Severus' chief acquaintances were his thestrals, his elf, his cat, and possibly some of his more sentient plants. He was still dodging the vicar, reasoning that the bit in the contract about Draco not leaving the grounds was quite firmer than that about Severus being his godfather, and viewing the occasional Christmas or Easter service through an enchanted window was better than forgetting about them altogether.

Fortunately for Severus, Draco was not—as the Potions master asserted on any number of occasions—an irredeemable dunderhead. In fact, Draco was rather clever; so it was not long before his mathematical skills caught up with his reading well enough that he could study texts, sort labeled jars, count out and measure ingredients, and perform other menial tasks. Of course, being a Malfoy, he cottoned on fairly quickly that such tasks were menial and protested accordingly.

As months turned into years, Draco grew tall enough to reach the counters with a minimum of standing on step ladders or chairs, learned the names and uses of all the bits of equipment and ingredients, and generally whined about not really DOING anything, until Severus had no further excuse to refrain from teaching him procedures. Draco also took to quite handily to these, with a particular fondness for mincing. Severus convinced himself that once he could watch the boy use a sharp object without gritting his teeth, he would allow him somewhere near an actual cauldron over open flame.

Severus even occasionally conceded that the child might not be entirely intolerable. Like most spoiled children, a part of Draco secretly yearned for a bit of structure and discipline, and Severus was more than pleased to provide that. When the child wasn't being sullen or fragile, he could be almost flatteringly unctuous, and after token protests and excessive whining, obedient. The pointy little brat even managed to call him 'sir' with no apparent irony.

But for all the challenges Severus' new ward presented, one proved especially... hairy.

The child's hair had been growing faster and faster every month since he'd arrived. At first it needed cutting twice a month, then once a week, then three times a week. Of late, as long as Wormy gave the child a good shearing before bed each night, his hair stayed out of the cauldrons.

Then one morning, as Severus sat down to breakfast and his list of pawnshops (he had been hocking little Draco's most obnoxious and least-played-with possessions discreetly and profitably for nearly four years) he noticed something about his breakfast was not quite right.

"Phwaugh!" He spat out a mouthful of what he'd at first imagined was shredded wheat but in fact was Draco's hair. Said substance was twining around the chair and table legs and draping over the dishes on the table. "Wormy! Did I or did I not tell you to cut the brat's hair last night?"

"Not a brat." At least, that's what Severus thought he heard. It was difficult to tell, what with Draco's sulky tone and the fact that the boy was already so engulfed that he

couldn't even locate his oatmeal through his fast-growing tresses.

"Wormy has cut Apprentice Draco's hair last night and this morning," the elf fretted. "Wormy cut Apprentice's hair so short, Apprentice screamed bloody murder. Does Master wish Wormy to cut it again?"

Various obscenely expensive presents—including a wand, which Severus had confiscated with a remark about the silliness of wand-waving to hide a stab of raw fear at what havoc the boy might wreck—had arrived last week, signifying the vexing spawn was now aged 11 years. Severus had an unfortunate suspicion that might be connected with the current debacle.

"Get it off the table at present, Wormy," Severus said. He tried and failed to suppress a groan. "I need to consult a certain vile bit of parchment."

Sure enough, crowded into the fine print that Severus was quite certain had multiplied every year since the evil contract had first darkened his doorstep, he found yet another dreaded subclause in the Rescue section:

To ensure that princes attempting a rescue meet certain minimum standards of suitability, no fewer than three traditional types of obstacles must be employed to impede their efforts. Master/Godfather/Captor specified in Section 1, Paragraph 2 having stipulated to owning at least two such obstacle types (Dangerous Beasts and Obstructive Plants) only the Curse type is lacking, to be duly activated upon the child's first signs of physical maturation or by the eleventh birthday, whichever comes first. As the usual curses (enchanted sleep, amphibiform transfiguration) would prevent the child from fulfilling the conditions of apprenticeship specified in Section 2, Paragraph 5, the Rampion Curse will take effect until the child's hair is of sufficient length to serve as the sole means of ingress and egress to the residence (rendering it an Impregnable Tower, specified in Section 1, Paragraph 3, subheading: Definitions.) The correct password for requesting entrance to the tower must include, but need not be limited to, some combination of the child's name and the phrase 'let down your hair.'

After saying a great many words which Narcissa would not be at all pleased to hear, Severus returned to the dining room and surveyed the platinum flood which by now was infiltrating the kitchen and the stairs. In the absence of further instruction, Wormy had been holding the unruly locks at bay with elf magic so that young Draco could finish his strawberries. There was really only one question Severus could ask.

"Wormy, what does an elf acquainted with the space-time continuum possess in the way of plaiting skills?"

Chapter the Seventh: In Which 'Dracaena Draco,' etc. Becomes a Household Word

Chapter 8 of 17

We can imagine what sort of words Severus WANTS to use about the house...

Disclaimer: Not my wizards, not my elves, not my hair, not for profit.

Warning: I apologize if this one isn't funny enough to warrant a warning.

It having been established that Wormy was, in fact, an accomplished hair stylist, life was poised to continue with a minimum of inconvenience.

Minimal if you disregarded the annoying detail that Draco rather demanded to know what it was all about.

"Why is this happening to me? Can't you make a potion to stop it?" Draco whimpered as Wormy combed. His hair now trailed all the way from the kitchen to the library, where Severus had gone to look up hair tonics and related topics.

"Blame your ruddy father for this mess," Severus grumbled. "He got it into his head that you need to be protected by an 'impenetrable tower' and that your hair has to be long enough to serve as 'the sole means of ingress and egress.'" To his great relief, Severus discovered instructions for several useful hair care products in a reputable Potions journal, and immediately recognized that he possessed sufficient ingredients to produce them. Though he himself had never seen the need for such fripperies, he supposed they might be of some commercial value, come to think of it...

"What does that mean?" Draco interrupted his train of thought.

"I'm going to have to climb your hair on the way in and out of this bloody damned tower—incidentally, forget I said that when you write your mother next—and say some such rot as 'Dracaena Draco, let down your hair' each time." As soon as the words left Severus' mouth, he felt a sort of shiver of magic. He cursed under his breath as he scrambled for a bit of parchment. It wouldn't do to forget that carelessly uttered phrase and be stuck in the tower with the brat for all eternity (or trapped outside of it.)

"Will your hands be clean?" Draco asked, eyeing the appendages in question.

"Oh for—clean enough, you terror," Severus said. He mulled the mechanics of this new situation and decided that he would be very much in violation of the contract if that twig of a boy broke his neck trying to support Severus' weight, and that a stout hook in the window frame would be preferable to mixing charms with cursed hair.

"I want to go home," Draco complained, for neither the first nor last time.

"Nothing would please me more. Once again, your father put paid to anything so easy. The only way out of here before you're twenty one is if some prince or another rescues you."

"When will that happen?" Draco asked eagerly. There was something odd about his keenness on the topic, though Severus couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"I'm sure I have no idea." Severus pushed his way past apprentice, elf, and hair and set to pottering about his storeroom, searching for a suitable hook. His efforts were suddenly hampered by a blond wave. "Good lord! Wormy, plait faster!"

Time passed. It became second nature for Severus to kick the coiled mass out of his way when walking about the tower, and he developed some rather impressive biceps. His disused front door became something of a repository for disused articles. He discovered (the hard way) that the curse somehow negated the flying spells that allowed brooms to work, effectively preventing anyone from flying in the tower window. And he grew more or less accustomed to Draco (and Draco's hair) always being underfoot.

Had Draco's mother not continued to spoil him by proxy and influence him through their correspondence, he might have shaped into a fairly solid citizen, insofar as was possible for a Malfoy (and a Malfoy with cursed hair, at that.) Being a Malfoy, the best he could do was to escape the gravitational pull of his congenital indolence and the aforementioned hair often enough to become competent.

Outside of the potions laboratory, Severus ignored Draco's thousand-and-one pouts, sulks, fits, and gripes. Inside the lab...

"I hate smelly animal parts. Why can't we make nice potions? I think Father would insist upon it. I quite like the Tincture of Chamomile compound you make for my hair. When will—"

Severus dropped his pestle into his mortar with a quelling CRACK. He pushed into his charge's personal space and punctuated every angry, hissed word by jabbing the air with his beak of a nose.

"You will confine your speech within this laboratory to asking for essential clarification, informing me of hazards, or requesting to take your leave. Is. That. Understood?"

Severus had four score and nineteen problems, but intimidating an apprentice into obedience was not one.

So inside the lab, Draco confined his complaints to making faces and occasionally sniffing. Outside the lab, Severus learned to effectively tune out his thin whine. In this fashion, they lurched along for almost four more years more or less comfortably—even roomily, one might say, since Narcissa insisted that Draco was getting peaky and had a conservatory added to the tower (at Lucius' expense. Severus determined to remain very much on Narcissa's good side.)

Severus still looked forward to any rumors of a visiting heroic prince with a certain eagerness; but he gradually became resigned to coaching his protégé for a Master's Exam and someday making arrangements to bequeath him the tower. It wasn't an entirely odious thought. Draco was not a completely useless child, and might yet make a passable adult.

Severus had forgotten the small detail that between childhood and adulthood lies puberty.

Chapter the Eighth: In Which There are Queer Developments

Chapter 9 of 17

Teenaged, restless, and blond. You can hang on to that foreboding a bit longer, Severus.

Disclaimer: Not profiting—just exploring the implausibilities.

Warning: How funny you find this chapter depends on how amusing you think it is for—oh, never mind, that would be a spoiler. Just set the coffee aside to be safe.

There were inklings that worse troubles were brewing than cursed hair, spilt ingredients and epic pouts.

They were small inklings at first. Severus almost didn't notice them, given that his charge had just received a rather handsome haul of birthday gifts, including the long-ago promised solid gold cauldron. It was impossible to ignore, however, that 14-year-old Draco was not progressing as quickly as 10- or even 7-year-old Draco.

For a time Severus chivvied him along with promise of teaching a spell or two. He managed to eke a year of productivity from Draco by dangling the various carrots of basic levitation, simple Summoning, a few Cleaning Charms, and the convenience of *Lumos* and *Nox*.

15-year-old Draco was not as easily pleased by learning how to cast streams of bubbles or colorful sparks at will, however (though he was placated for at least a few weeks each by roses and ribbons); and Severus was unwilling to teach anything that might give the boy more offensive capabilities than his attitude provided. So Draco's apathy mounted, along with resulting errors, making Severus irritable. Then again, the struggle for Slytherin succession was becoming less a chess game and more of a bar room brawl by this point, and Severus had ample reason to be irritable without an uncooperative apprentice underfoot. It was fortunate that the 'Dracaena Draco' spiel acted as the Imperius curse, obliging Draco to either drop what he was doing to make his hair available or allow Wormy to move it for him. Severus had no doubt that, were Draco capable, he would to refuse access to his hair.

By the time Draco was 17, he was not only atrociously apathetic and wearisomely whiny, he had developed an unholy fixation on being rescued.

"Father thinks it's only a matter of time before word of my sad captivity and beauty gets out. That ought to stir up a prince or two," Draco said. Severus would not swear to it, but he suspected that the boy was studying his reflection in the polished side of the teakettle.

"I don't know what fantasy world your father lives in, but I feel it is only just to tell you that your so-called captivity is unlikely to be noticed. Current events are a little more pressing in the minds of royalty." Severus shook the newspaper in his hands for emphasis. Even at his blondest, Draco could scarcely fail to notice that every other headline pertained to ludicrous prophecies about one hero or another or the ever-inane speculation on how the Riddle bastard had managed to give himself both a trumped-up title of Lord something-or-other *and* the head of a snake (when the real question should have been how such an obviously desperate douchebag managed to successfully swallow up most of the principality of Slytherin.)

Draco pushed his food about his plate sullenly in response. Severus deemed it fortunate the boy had a meager appetite and a penchant for running up six flights of stairs to his room every time something vexed him. Otherwise the tower stairs might need widening.

On the other hand, it wouldn't do to let Narcissa get it into her head that the boy was starving. "While you may not be welcome in a royal castle as a noncombatant—IF you have the qualifications—someone might be inclined to take you on as a potions maker," Severus said. Inspired by a flashback to the traumatic occasion of being forced to take custody of young Draco, he added, "In fact, if memory serves, your mother said something to that effect once."

A huff of breath and a bit of dispirited toast-nibbling were all the reply Severus received. He decided to call it a victory based on the absence of broken plates or tears.

The last straw was when *Quidditch Illustrated* and the fashion magazine *Robes With Flair* were mistakenly delivered to the tower along with the usual potions journals and the usual newspaper full of the usual bad news about the usual warring kingdoms. These particular issues (of the magazines, not the newspapers or Potions journals) featured lots of wizards... some of them modeling very little clothing. Which caused Draco to begin spending far more time in little room at the top of the tower, especially in

his bath, followed by asking very unacceptable questions of Severus. This led to Severus getting into a very nasty argument with the Owl Post People, who WOULD insist on misdirecting dodgy publications his way.

From that day, the already tiresome topic of princes took an even odder bent. Draco's fixation narrowed from rescue in general to the potential rescuer.

"Do you think the prince will be married?" Draco asked. He was supposed to be marking his star chart to determine if the constellations were positioned optimally for the production of healing potions, but the only marks on his chart looked suspiciously like Valentine hearts.

Severus looked askance at his apprentice, whom he supposed would technically be a journeyman were he allowed to go anywhere. "I cannot fathom how that is relevant, but I suspect that unwed princes have the most leisure to go about rescuing people."

This seemed to cheer Draco, who actually took up his quill. Severus dared hope that he would complete his assignment.

"Will he be a handsome prince?"

It was a near thing, but Severus did not quite hit himself in the eye with his own telescope. It wasn't so much *what* his apprentice said, but the eerily dreamy way he said it. "What on earth does it matter? You'll be just as rescued if the prince looks like a bloody toad."

Draco's face crushed into a truly epic sneer. "I don't like toads," he murmured, "except for their colors." Still, that seemed to quell him enough that he returned to dutifully marking his chart. Once again, Severus hoped in vain that the absurdity was done for the night.

"Am I very beautiful?" Draco asked.

Severus contemplated smacking the boy with the nearest blunt object (which would be detrimental to his poor telescope) or sending him to his room (which would be redundant, since the topmost bit of the tower was Draco's room.) Severus decided on a non-answer. "Men are supposed to be handsome, not beautiful," he said.

"You—you're just jealous!" Draco punctuated his accusation by throwing his quill to the ground, which was not exactly a gesture that looked either threatening or impressive.

"I find temper tantrums ugly," Severus managed to reply coolly. He turned his attention away from Draco's sniveling (the words 'terribly cruel' and 'my prince won't be like that' were distinguishable amid the sobs) and back to the sky. Really, this was more drama than Severus would have expected from a lovestruck teenaged girl—

When the knut finally dropped, Severus almost clocked himself with the telescope again. He spent the rest of the evening hoping there was nothing in the contract that said he had to break the news to the parents.

Chapter the Ninth: In Which Draco is Blond

Chapter 10 of 17

Among other things.

Disclaimer: The fanfiction writer does not profit from this exercise in creative demented writing.

Warning: If you find fandom one-liners amusing, you may want to put down the refreshing beverage until the end of the chapter.

Draco arrived at breakfast the next morning dressed in soft lavender robes with pink velvet collar and cuffs, every hair fixed in place with scented gel (that also served to keep the entire business clean, since even with elf magic, washing and drying was a massive undertaking that Wormy could only manage once a month at best.) He ate peacefully, if somewhat sparsely, sighing over his favorite strawberries (dipped in rather terrifying amounts of sugar.) Between bites, he checked his reflection in the teapot, pinching his cheeks in a somewhat hopeless attempt to impart some color, (mostly) playfully fired brightly colored ribbons and soap bubbles at Wormy, and prated about which Quidditch players looked most like princes, not really caring that Severus answered in noncommittal monosyllables.

Apparently, certain things cannot be unseen. Really, Severus could have kicked himself for not realizing it sooner.

The boy was only a few minutes late to the laboratory for his day's work, having taken the time to change into a relatively conservative blackwork-embroidered olive green robe, which he seemed to admire in conjunction with his rust-colored lab apron. Severus made no comment but kicked some trailing coils of braids out of his way, noting with grim satisfaction that the platinum cable was at least good for dusting the laboratory floor.

"As the stars are not well aligned for the production of healing potions, we shall have to find another subject," Severus announced, "preferably one that is almost as lucrative." Light eater or not, Draco's upkeep wasn't free.

"Can we make Beautification Potions?" Draco asked eagerly.

"No." Severus refrained from berating the boy. Last night's incident was still quite fresh in his mind, and he wanted to stay as far away from related topics as possible. (Which was a damn shame; Beauty Potions were fairly reliable sellers, even in a meager wartime economy.) Now that he knew Draco's roundabout inquiries regarding the birds and the bees actually concerned the bees and—well, other bees—he was even less inclined to answer them. Clearly, his standard response of 'write your parents' had been ignored, as the tower was not besieged with Howlers from either of the elder Malfoys.

"What about Felix Felicis?" Severus didn't trust those bright, hopeful gray eyes for one minute. Especially not when the little twit fluttered his lashes like that.

"If you were ready for that, I would send you for your exams today," Severus spoke more wistfully than sarcastically. Some noble would doubtless pay through the nose—both nostrils—for Felix Felicis. "Prepare a cauldron for Unctuous Unction, and tell me to whom its invention is traditionally credited." They could still squeeze a few galleons out of noble purses with a little bottled flattery.

Draco mumbled his way through the correct response and set up the workspace in an unenthusiastic, albeit more or less proficient, manner. Soon, all was quiet chopping, stirring, and simmering. It lulled Severus into quite the false sense that all would not go to shit that day.

Cauldrons were bubbling and colors were changing quite nicely when Draco just had to open his mouth.

"Sir, is today's potion suitable for use as a sexual lubricant?"

Severus dropped the stirring rod—right into the cauldron—for the first time in his potions-making career. "GO. Go to your room, this instant! And don't come back until you have written, 'I will not ask my Potions Master'—THAT question—five hundred times!"

Draco threw his cutting board across the room. "NO! I won't write lines, and I don't want to go to my room, it's BORING there! You won't teach me any useful spells or fun potions, and if I have to be stuck in this rotten, cramped, claustrophobic tower all the time, I want to do something INTERESTING."

"Ungrateful brat! There is no better laboratory in this kingdom or any other in which to learn the exact art and subtle science of potion-making! You may practically do without spells if you master it as I have! And since it seems to have escaped your notice, this is a two-bath, two-bedroom (at the expense of my observatory, I might add), seven story FULLY EQUIPPED wizard's tower! All the elves at Hogwarts could inspect the kitchen and find nothing wanting! The library alone would keep a wizard of any decent intelligence engaged for YEARS! To say nothing of the bloody two-story conservatory! We're practically rattling about! There are wizards who would kill to have a tower like this one! In fact, if I'm not mistaken your father—Well, that's neither here nor there. All events, you are stuck here either until you are qualified or until some prince rescues you, and that is that!"

"Then I want to be rescued RIGHT NOW!" Draco fled the room, slamming the laboratory door shut behind him. Sounds that bore a suspicious resemblance to sobs accompanied the rapidly receding sound of feet on stairs.

"That makes two of us!" Severus shouted at the closed door. A sudden gurgling sound caught his disaster-tuned ears. "Bollocks!" He extinguished the fire beneath the cauldron and contemplated the ruined mess that was now, indeed, probably only suited to be a lubricant of some sort. He took a deep breath rather than commence a profanity-filled tirade, however warranted. At the rate they were going, Severus would exhaust his supplies of exclamation marks, capital letters, and sanity long before he could fashion a reputable potion-making professional from that heap of hair and hormones.

Severus Summoned the document responsible for this massive cock-up and began to read frantically. "There has got to be a loophole in this contract."

Anyone remember those LJ icons blazoned with 'Things I am no longer allowed to do at Hogwarts'? Yeah, I could only remember one that pertained to potions.

Chapter the Tenth: In Which Loopholes are Sought

Chapter 11 of 17

I'll bet you can guess how well this will turn out.

Disclaimer: My modest circumstances should make it abundantly clear that I do not profit from the use of these characters (or indeed, from any form of writing.)

Warning: It is recommended that you refrain from eating or drinking (including, but not limited to) porridge, tea, toast, soup, coffee, hair (cursed or otherwise) while reading humor.

After an hour of fruitless perusal, Severus gave it up as a bad job and decided to take a more direct approach: storming the castle. All the arsehat's house-elves and all of his pets couldn't stop Severus from stomping through Malfoy Manor until he located the bastard responsible for his prematurely graying hair.

"Take back your brat, Lucius!"

With a nonchalant expression and cool tone considerably belied by the fact that he scurried to the other side of his desk as soon as Severus burst into his study, Lucius replied, "Not a chance. You signed the contract."

"If we both agree, it can be revoked! There must be a better way to ingratiate yourself with royalty than this half-arsed, hare-brained scheme."

Lucius fingered his copy of the scroll lovingly. "It scarcely matters if there is or not. It's all here in black and parchment. If you want quit of him, find a suitable royal rescuer. If you can't locate a prince with a few available sisters, I've heard that even princesses do that sort of thing these days. Though Narcissa would be quite put out to have such a hoyden for a daughter-in-law, I see no reason to turn down a perfectly pedigreed royal on the grounds of mere eccentricity." He dodged around Severus in a swirl of ostentatious robes and pretended that he always left the study as if fleeing an angry manicure.

Severus glared at Lucius' rapidly retreating back and made a genuinely impressive robe-swirl of his own, with a slightly villainous billow for good measure. "Good thing; given your son, an... *eccentric* prince would be far more to his liking." Severus muttered at his adversary, with an entirely wasted smirk thrown in for good measure.

His smirk dissolved into disgruntlement two steps beyond the study door at the thought of facing a put-out Narcissa. "Still, she is my best hope at getting around Lucius' ironclad magical contract," he mused out loud. He seriously doubted that Lucius, contract or no, had any sort of power equal to overriding his wife's veto.

Severus chose to knock before entering Narcissa's drawing room. This was partly out of respect for all the loot he'd acquired as a result of her intervention and partly because, of the two elder Malfoys, Severus was pretty certain which would be the dangerous one to surprise.

A house-elf opened the door, quite unnecessarily announced him to Narcissa (unnecessary because only a deaf houseplant could have been unaware of his presence after his irate entrance,) and showed him in. "Good day, Severus. I trust my darling little dragon is well?"

This was clearly more bullshit, as Severus was fairly certain he had been heard shouting 'take back your brat' as far away as the Kingdom of Hufflepuff. He decided to play the hand as dealt. "Truth be told, Narcissa, I do not believe that apprenticeship really suits Draco."

"Well, of course not," Narcissa said, achieving a level of arrogant nonchalance Lucius could only dream of. "His impeccable breeding suits him only for exceptional things."

At this point Severus heroically restrained himself from attempting an exceptional Unforgiveable curse. "I believe the problem may be less of 'breeding' and more along the lines of a temperament unsuited to the academic rigors of achieving mastery," Severus said. He was no slouch at pompous doubletalk either. "I have therefore come to relinquish any claim I might have to him, and return him to your care and keeping. I'm sure you are absolutely perishing to spend some quality time with him after all these years."

The words scarcely left Severus' mouth before Narcissa replied. In point of fact, she all but cut him off with unseemly haste. "I have given it considerable thought, and I truly

believe that my darling is safest with you, Severus. I cannot trust that Lucius will not attempt to gain some sort of leverage with or against the Terrible Lord—er... oh, bother his name—by any means available to him. So long as Draco remains unavailable..."

"But, Narcissa..." Severus trailed off weakly. There wasn't really anything that he could say to that, short of lying outright. Severus had wondered if the snakes-on-black motif on Lucius' robes had been an indication of allegiance or merely a horribly misguided fashion statement. Narcissa's remarks seemed to suggest that, if Lucius were not already in the snakey posers' camp, he was ready to jump in with both expensively shod feet if it became advantageous.

"Indeed, depending upon who prevails in this struggle, my sweetling will be better off to stay clear of royalty altogether. In that case, he will simply remain in your tower until he attains Master status; and he may cling to the relative safety of the grounds until such a time as he inherits." Narcissa sniffled daintily into her handkerchief. "I grieve that I have lived to see the day. My only child's only hope may be to—to be in trade."

Much to his dismay, Severus judged that the nearest wall was too distant to conveniently beat his head against.

"Of course, if my precious baby were rescued by a strong prince, a protector powerful enough to successfully oppose this Dark force, then I shouldn't have any worries," she mused to the embroidery in her lap. "And neither would you. Good day, Severus."

Severus took his leave with as much good grace as he could muster at the moment, which was to say none at all. Many doors were slammed on his way out of the manor and much stomping accompanied his walk home, to very little satisfaction on his part. He took his time climbing up the familiar blond chain, trying to figure out how to break the news to the much-manipulated little snot.

"Did Mummy make it all better?" Draco asked eagerly.

Severus' flicker of sympathy sputtered and died. *The nerve of that brat—as if anyone but ME has been 'making things better' for him this last decade!* The only bloody thing that will make it all better is 'A strong, princely hero that can oppose a Dark Lord,'" Severus quoted. "Last I checked, your mummy didn't qualify, and she can't protect you even if your father WOULD let you go home—she said as much."

Given the harshness of that last bit, Severus really should not have been surprised when Draco burst into tears.

"Sod it all—boy, dry up and put on your traveling robes. I'm not coming back until I've found you a damned hero, and you need to be ready for a rescue," Severus said wearily. Draco hastened to obey, even tethered as he still was to the hook on the wall.

Severus gave the braid a cursory tug and levitated to the ground. For all he inveighed against foolish wand-waving, he'd developed a couple of handy spells for those days when his arms were just too tired to make the climb. "A strong, royal hero that can oppose a Dark Lord... Bloody hell," he moaned. There was nothing for it. He retrieved his broom from the shed and took off in the direction of Hogwarts Castle.

Chapter the Eleventh: In Which Desperate Measures are Taken

Chapter 12 of 17

Not quite that desperate.

Disclaimer: The only character I own is the one writing this nonsense. Well, and the elf, but he can't leave the story to help tidy my house, so phooey. All others are on unpaid leave in my imagination (and probably wondering what they ate before bedtime to cause this.)

Warning: If you've been following the story to this point, I probably don't have to tell you that drinking and chuckling don't mix.

Severus bypassed the usual entry procedures for Hogwarts Academy of Heroic Arts and Princely Pursuits and Past-Times (HAHAPPPT), landed directly on the balcony of the Headmaster's private tower, and could not be compelled to give a single damn that he would set off alarms eight ways to Sunday by so doing. A tabby cat on the desk leaped up and promptly changed into a tall, severe-looking witch wearing spectacles and an abundance of tartan (including a tartan Cap of Maintenance under her thistle-decked tiara.) Severus dared to hope that Lady McGonagall had replaced Lord Dumbledore. If he must deal with Gryffindors, he preferred interacting with sane ones.

"Have you reconsidered, Severus? I know you want to start a proper curriculum for Anti-Heroes, but until there's more demand, Albus would love to have you teach Practical Potions for Precocious Princes," said the witch. (We really ought to call her Lady McGonagall, as we've no permission to use her given name. But we'll likely forget in a few paragraphs.)

"Never mind that, Lady McGonagall! Where's Lord Dumbledore? I need a prince, and I need one NOW." Not only was the old barm-pot still in charge, Severus had forgotten the general preoccupation with alliteration and demented acronyms that plagued Hogwarts. Five minutes within its precincts and he could already feel a headache coming on.

"Now, see here, laddie..."

"Quite all right, Minerva." A door covered in arcane symbols opened to reveal an elderly man with a long beard. A coronet of gold and ruby bees rested upon his flowing white locks. "Severus, my dear boy, how good to..."

"Save it for the naïve children." Said in unison, with Severus' voice a near-groan and Minerva's more of a sigh, it came out in a sort of harmony.

The old wizard looked put out. "Oh, very well. What brings you here?"

"Absolute desperation. If I do not rid my tower of that irritating little Malfoy, I refuse to be responsible for the consequences." Severus summarized his circumstances, handing over the cursed parchment at the heart of it all, and gave an idea of the trouble his young apprentice caused...leaving out the specific details of the precipitating incident, of course.

No power on earth could compel him to say 'sexual lubricant' in front of a pair of his former teachers.

Lord Dumbledore adjusted his spectacles and perused the contract. "Oh. Oh, my. You've screwed yourself rather royally. It's very specific: the young Malfoy must be

rescued from the tower by a suitably powerful prince, and the hair must be climbed."

"We canna just send any prince," Minerva had been reading over Albus' shoulder and disbelief enhanced her brogue. "You're in up to your simmet and no mistake, lad."

"Indeed. Who are our best climbers, Minerva?"

"The absolute best would be the Orphaned Prince, H..."

"What about the Earl of Westham?" Albus interrupted.

"He's agile, but he's finalizing his betrothal to Lady Ginevra this afternoon and can't be spared. Besides, it sounds as if the lad's parents insist on major royalty, and Earl Dean has only a standard castle. No, for sheer heroism, magical ability, royal blood, and secure residence, ye really need Prince Har..."

"Longbottom! Longbottom Keep is secure. We could send Duke Neville. He's sole heir of the House of Harfang, he should rate," Albus stepped on her comment again.

"Neville is a valiant young man, but a poor climber. Longbottom Keep is not as secure as Castle Grimhold, which as you know was inherited by Pri..."

Albus cut her off. "There are a good half-dozen Royal Weasleys, I'm sure..."

"Stop interrupting! Castle Grimhold is supposed to be more impregnable than Hogwarts itself. Which of the Blacks has that bit of real estate?" Severus asked, not-so-subtly flaring his robes in an attempt to block Albus' frantic gestures.

"Harry, the Orphaned Prince of Gryffindor!" Minerva finally managed to yell.

"The Prince-Who-Lived is real?" Servus asked, aghast.

Minerva ignored the forehead-slapping sound from Albus' direction and cleared her throat to remove the taint of unseemly shouting. "Ahem. Yes, the papers have it right for once. He is quite genuine, and a valiant (if academically average) student at this very Academy. In addition to being the last Prince of the Blood Royal for the Kingdom of Gryffindor, he is a remote relation to the House of Slytherin and could legitimately unite both kingdoms in his person. He dealt handily with the basilisk we had some years back, so your defenses should pose no problem. He inherited Castle Grimhold from the last of the legitimate Blacks, the Slytherin side of his family. He rescued one princess that wasn't even on the curriculum, and saved one of our minor barons who got into a bit of..."

"You know very well that there are **plans** for Prince Harry," Albus said. "I didn't scour his mother's family tree for peasant pig-farmers to serve as his guardians just for him to turn out a common knight-errant. All of that rags-to-riches privation is the stuff of which **mythic** heroes are made."

"I'll bet," Severus muttered. All this trouble so old Bumblemore would have his hand on the shoulder of the king of all...what would they call it, anyway? Some sort of... united kingdom? Severus barely contained a snort.

Lady Minerva turned to Severus with sympathy. "Oh, Severus. Did I nae tell you no good could come of such things?"

"I gave up 'good' when I was obliged to quit this place and make my way based on raw talent and a small inheritance," Severus said. He looked remarkably like his student-self with his arms crossed petulantly before him and a Heathcliffe-worthy glower plastered on his face. Life as an unacknowledged royal bastard quite frankly sucked. "Just because I'm not a stereotypical prince on a suitably outlandish steed does not bar me from performing great deeds," he added, hoping to strike the right reluctantly heroic note.

"Bide your time, my boy. There are some popular leanings that way; in a few years, we may be able to justify an anti-hero elective in the curriculum," Lord Dumbledore said. Severus rifled through his mind to make sure the sneaky old shit hadn't somehow snuck around his Occlumency. "As for Prince Harry, I'm afraid I simply couldn't let him go." A gleam came into his eyes. "Though I might be able to loan him out for an afternoon if I had a Potions instructor in return..."

"I'm desperate, not insane." Despite his coolly defiant response, Severus realized that concessions on his part were imminent. *Sod it all for a game of soldiers. Why do I always wind up playing 'Let's Make a Deal' with the barmiest wizards in the land?* "A symposium...three weeks in the fall term. That's more than generous."

"Severus, dear boy, I'd simply love to help you. But truth be told...and this is in the strictest confidence, you understand...Prince Harry is fated to defeat the Evil Snake-Face," Albus said. He stared solemnly at Severus, willing him to grasp the gravity of the situation or swallow the Kool-Aid, damned if Severus knew which. "You must see that I couldn't loan him out for less than a full-time instructor."

"Bugger that!" Severus sensed this was not to be one of his better bargaining days.

Dumbledore shrugged as if to say, 'your funeral.' Verbally, he added, "Ah, well, I'm sure you'll think of some use for the young Malfoy."

"Six weeks with a weekend practical and not a moment longer...ONCE! And I expect you to provide me with a fully-stocked teaching laboratory for the duration." He tapped his wand against his hip while awaiting Lord Dumbledore's response. A few angry green sparks shot from the tip.

"Och, be reasonable, Albus," Lady McGonagall contributed her two sickles. "How much Potions-making skill do the lads need? I agree that it needs doing each year, but Fall-term and a practical examination should suffice to teach them the difference between poison, a love potion, and sundry sleeping draughts."

Severus silently cheered Minerva and resolved to provide her with his very best Draught of Doddering if she ever wished to hasten Dumbledore's retirement.

"I get to re-negotiate after two years, and I insist on a title." Severus re-folded his arms.

"I really don't see how that's possible for only two y..."

"Look, you daft codger, I refuse to set foot in a classroom where I have to give way to every poncing prince just because I'm only 'Honorable.' I've no wish to revisit the vexations of my student days, and I'm sure that you would rather I not earn my title the same way you did yours," Severus hissed.

Barmy or not, Dumbledore had his wand out just as quickly as Severus did at that last bit. It was common knowledge that Lord Dumbledore was no more royal than an old boot heel; his title was 'inherited' by ridding the land of the previous Lord High Wizard of Hogwarts (who had gone barmy in a decidedly malevolent manner.)

Lady Minerva, having no shortage of will to rush in where angels fear to tread, stepped between them. "GENTLEMEN. If you please. We're short few nobles after that last battle; 'twill do no harm to pass along a spare title. I've 'Earl of Thanestribe' to dispose of as I will, if that would suit."

If Severus hadn't been busy staring down a barm-pot whose loopiness did nothing to impede his dueling skill he could have kissed Minerva. "Call me 'Lord Thanestribe' and, against my better judgment, you'll have a deal. I will write the contract," Severus hastened to specify.

"Oh, very well," said Albus. "But Prince Harry must get back to me in one piece. I can't afford to have him damaged." Both wizards grudgingly stowed their wands.

"I'll give him the usual instructions for surmounting the obstacles. If he is as good as you claim, it will suffice." With a much more courteous attitude, Severus turned to Lady Minerva. "Where might I find Prince Harry?"

Note: the use of titles in this chapter (Lord, Lady, Duke, etc.) bears no resemblance to the correct manner of addressing peers in modern day (or any day) Britain. If you

guessed that their liberal sprinkling through this chapter is chiefly an exercise in cramming in canon references, register a point to the House of your choice. Minerva's coronet also defies the conventions of the Scottish peerage, but go right ahead and see how far you get by telling her that.

Chapter the Twelfth: In Which Severus Sees More Than He Would Have Preferred

Chapter 13 of 17

Because in the unexpurgated versions of the old fairy tales the rating goes up the closer one gets to the final act. Yes, that kind of 'act.'

Disclaimer: Herein please find even MORE characters that are not mine (including unnamed ones whose identity should nonetheless be apparent) and for use of whose likeness I receive no compensation.

Warning: I considered incorporating 'morally bankrupt' somewhere in the title but (a) after reordering it is no longer Chapter 11 and (b) I have beaten that nag to death elsewhere. Also, nudity.

It took Severus time to get his bearings after leaving the Headmaster's office. In part, this was because he'd forgotten the quickest way to the Quidditch Pitch, where Minerva assured him that Prince Harry could be found. In larger part, it was because Lady Minerva had not been content merely to relate this intelligence, but had *winked* at him and...in case he'd mistaken the gesture for a spot of lint in her eye...petted his broom handle a little too familiarly. In largest part, he was disoriented because he was actually contemplating taking up the implied offer from a woman old enough to be...hell, she HAD been...one of his teachers. It wasn't like he had anything else going and she had just handed him a coronet.

Still in a somewhat defensive mood from the argument with himself, he may have been a bit brusque with the youths who were dutifully flying drills at the Quidditch pitch. A gangly ginger whose gear proclaimed him the Keeper and whose arm span looked more than equal to blocking all three hoops at once, informed him that Prince Harry had left practice early, claiming a scheduled tutoring session in the library. As Severus stalked away, he was sure he overheard a mumbled 'tetchy git' from behind him.

At the library he had a rather pedantic encounter with a young woman of barely-noble stock with a chip on her shoulder the size of her under-appreciated ability. (He knew the type, having to confront it in the mirror when shaving.) On that account and because she seemed authoritative in her assertion that the prince was 'loafing about his quarters, almost certainly neglecting his studies and by extension his duties to the kingdom,' etc., he refrained from hexing her.

After a series of wrong turns, Severus finally located the room the girl had described. Completely out of patience, he gave one perfunctory knock before bursting through the locked door with a spell.

He really ought to have recalled that one usually locks doors for a reason, and one possible reason a young man might lock a door is that he is not alone in the room.

"Merlin's hairy balls! What the merry hell?" Severus had a moment's difficulty registering the situation. His brain was rather stuck on the youth and nudity of the young female (who otherwise bore an uncanny resemblance to his recalcitrant charge) and the fact that the young male hadn't the decency (or patience) to close the curtains on either the bed or the window. In the middle of the day, no less!

"Not Merlin's, just Harry's," the girl said placidly.

"Who the hell are you?" The young man took a rather more alarmed view of things. He had a pillow over his bits and a wand in his hand before he was done speaking, and managed to at least partially position himself in front of his bedmate. Chivalry wasn't entirely dead.

"Lord Thanestribe, if that matters," Severus said boredly, as if it should have been common knowledge. The accompanying bizarre happy dance was completely internal. "Lady Minerva told me to find Your Highness if a princess needed rescuing, but under the circumstances I wonder," he glanced down and quickly looked up at the bed's canopy again...he really needed to get out more, if his response to that underfed girl-child meant anything... "if that's a good idea." In lieu of relating the whole sorry tale, Severus opted to promote Draco to 'princess.' If the rescue was quick, the prince might not notice the difference.

"Oh, that's what Harry was doing...rescuing me," the girl said.

"I'd love to know how you convinced her of *that*," Severus said. Slightly to his chagrin, he really did want to know.

The barely-covered prince sputtered an attempted rebuttal, but the girl interrupted. "I need to be 'damaged goods' so I'll be off the marriage market and free to pursue my cryptozoological studies. Harry needs an heir so he can tell Dumbledore to push off if he tries to arrange a political marriage. We're friends, so we came to a mutually beneficial arrangement," the blonde said, making no effort to re-arrange the sheets.

"Child, put some clothes on! At least the Prince-who-lived-to-hump had the decency to cover his bits," Severus said, trying to look somewhere other than at the blonde's modest...if immodestly exposed...endowments, or at the prince who was fumbling into clothes and... **spectacles**? "I would expect that conniving old queen to be having me on, claiming that he was the best of the lot, but I hoped that Lady Minerva had the decency not to hand me a load of Abraxan shit."

The Prince sighed in frustration. "I know that Lord Dumbledore considers me a malleable little pawn, but I'm well aware I'm meant to unite the whole bloody mess. Luna's a Princess from one of the most prominent families in Ravenclaw, so... Well, the child's not a bastard if I acknowledge him. One of the perks of being the future king of everything between the coasts, if I live that long."

"If that was more articulate and less apologetic, it might be worthy of Slytherin," Severus granted him begrudgingly. He figured having got the initial 'Your Highness' out of the way, he could skip a few. "Do you plan to get a Princess of Hufflepuff up on the duff as well?"

"No need; I'm godfather to the orphaned Duke of Hufflepuff, and his dowager grandmother claims my protection. The Hufflepuff-Gryffindor alliance is secure." Prince Harry sighed tragically. Princess Luna (at last holding a sheet to her bosom, to Severus's relief) put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Severus was curious now. "You know what Dumbledore intends, yet you still go through with it?"

Prince Harry shrugged, which had the added benefit of seating his Gryffindor-red cloak on his shoulders. "He's better than the self-styled Lord Voldemort. And he doesn't need to know until after I'm king that I'll only heed his advice if I like it."

Severus felt begrudgingly hopeful. "Well, shift your arse, then, Highness, you've a rescue to attend to."

"Is it urgent?" The prince picked up a late model broom and an old-fashioned sword from the chest and the foot of the bed and fumbled into the sword belt, a task made needlessly difficult by holding the broom.

"Urgent? Look, you dunderhead, the Sinister yet Dashing genius who owns the tower will only be away for..." Severus consulted his watch "...four hours before he must return to feed his favorite pitcher plant. There are a Devil's Snare, two mature Whomping Willows, and small yet irritable flock of Thestrals to pacify before you can reach the tower...and you'll still need to climb the princess' hair to get in the topmost window since the curse nullifies the spells on brooms. So you'll bloody well get on it NOW."

"All right, all right, don't get your knickers in a twist," Harry groused. He glanced at Luna wistfully. "You sure you're going to be all right?"

"Quite certain," Luna assured him. "No need to get married or anything, unless we're both kind of bored."

"Right." Prince Harry sounded disappointed. "Well... Take care. Let me know if you need anything, yeah? I've got loads of room in Grimhold Keep if your dad puts you out," he yelled over his shoulder as Severus hustled him out of the room.

"Sure, Harry. Have fun!"

"Have fun,' she says," Severus groused. "This is serious business. To get past the Thestrals alone..."

"It's a small herd, you said? I'll swing by the kitchens on my way and pick up a couple of legs of mutton to keep them busy. I can see Thestrals, so they won't get the drop on me."

"You can't distract the Whomping Willows with meat."

"No, but there's an angry, ancient Whomping Willow on the Hogwarts grounds, and my former Quidditch captain was a bit... obsessive. I've been flying around and under it for years as part of practice drills."

Severus blinked. "That's not obsessive, that's sadistic," he murmured. More loudly, "Well enough, but there's still the matter of the Devil's Snare."

Prince Harry drew his wand and sent a plume of fire into the air with a nonverbal spell. "It ought to shrink away from flame." He threw his leg over the broom handle.

"When you get there," Severus said through gritted teeth, "you need to speak the correct words, else the princess won't let down her hair. There is no other way to avoid the spells on the tower except to climb the braid."

Prince Harry finally paused. "What are the words, then?"

"Draceana Draco, let down your hair," Severus said. "Repeat them."

Prince Harry did so dutifully, having had to say stranger things in the name of magic over his brief lifetime.

Severus huffed. "All right. I suppose you might do, at that."

"I usually manage," Harry said. With no further ado, he kicked off and flew towards the kitchens.

"That'll put old Lucius right out of countenance when he sees a short-arse ragmuffin on a broom instead of a prince in purple on a white hippogriff rescuing his 'princess,'" Severus murmured in a show of schadenfraude.

"Oh, Harry has one of those...a white Hippogriff, that is," Luna said. She toddled up beside Severus, apparently unmindful of the fact that she was in the corridor wearing only a bedsheet. "He just knows better than to take it near a Thestral herd. Frankly, he's quite the superior flyer...just don't tell the hippogriffs. And I think Dumbledore overdid the whole early privation thing. Challenges are one thing, but stunting someone's growth is quite another." Severus wouldn't have thought the apparently ditzzy princess could sound so disapproving. His opinion of her nudged slightly upward.

"Well, make sure you tell that rich little tosser to keep you at least as well as..." Severus turned to offer his opinion, and immediately looked away. "Young lady," he asked in a strained voice, "have you no modesty? Never mind, I think I know the answer; more to the point, have you no **robes**?"

"They're around here somewhere." The sheet rustled as she meandered. "Unless they went out the window, of course. There's one thing about Harry; he gives everything his all."

"And with that nauseatingly gratuitous bit of information, I'm off," Severus said. He only had four hours to hit the major distilleries and stock up for a private party...to celebrate the eviction of his resident brat, and to bemoan the execution of his impending teaching sentence.

Chapter the Thirteenth: In Which Draco is a Princess

Chapter 14 of 17

Summary: See reasoning cited in previous summary.

Disclaimer: They don't do anything like this under the supervision of their rightful owners.

Warning: Friends don't let friends drink and read.

Draco, of course, had no notion of Severus' mastery (or lack thereof) regarding the rescue situation. He lacked the least idea of how many hours (or minutes) he had to prepare. Most of all, Draco had not the wee-est clue what sort of robes one might travel in, as he hadn't left the tower in ten years.

Not knowing what to wear was intolerable.

Draco uttered a heartfelt cry for help. "Wormy! Oh, wretched elf, where are you?"

"Wormy is right beside young Draco," the elf said, in the tone that bespoke extraordinary long-suffering.

"Severus says I am to be rescued today..."

Whatever else Draco meant to say had to wait while Wormy emitted an unearthly howl and danced about the room in a manner somewhat disturbing. It took the elf some moments to, well, return to the moment...where Draco was waiting for him with arms crossed and a glower worthy of his guardian.

"Wormy apologizes for his unseemly show of grief," the elf said convincingly. "Please, Apprentice Draco, to stop frowning if appearance is important, and tell Wormy what is required."

Draco's face immediately assumed a wide-eyed blankness to relax any lines from his features. "I must be ready to receive my rescuer when he arrives," he explained. "I daresay that ought to have been obvious."

"Begging young Apprentice's pardon, but Wormy is not familiar with rescues. The closest Wormy has got is when Master Severus won Wormy from his old Master in a card game," the elf apologized. "Apprentice Draco must be more specific."

His pointy nose all but twitching with the effort of not frowning, Draco endeavored to think. "Severus said I ought to wear traveling robes. Have I such things?"

Wormy pushed his floppy ears back with one hand as a man might run his fingers through his hair when contemplating a daunting task. "Apprentice Draco has a great many clothes," the elf said, casting a despairing look at the magically-expanded space in the top of the tower, fully one fourth of which was closet. "Wormy will search for something appropriate."

Meanwhile, Draco turned to his best source of information about princes and rescues: his collection of owl-order romances from Sycophant Press. He had to pay more attention to what the rescue-ee was wearing. Draco usually skipped those bits in favor of descriptions of the rescuer...

The elf's voice broke Draco's reverie just as he was getting to the details of the princess' clothes, which the prince apparently had to discuss in order to remove. "Wormy thinks these is flying robes. Also, here is a good cloak, in case the rescue is getting on evening." Wormy laid out a plain, green robe with turned-back brown leather cuffs and a medium-weight black wool cloak on the bed.

"Those won't do at all, Wormy!" Draco exclaimed. He shook his head at the robes, hands on his hips with one thumb stuck in the book to keep his place. "They're... plain and drab! Even...ugly! Are you sure they don't belong to Severus?"

Wormy sighed. "Wormy is not sure," he said. "There was a small washing accident last week, and some of Master Severus' robes may have shrunk. Wormy is sure these is travel robes, though. Is young Apprentice positive they won't do?"

"Quite, quite," Draco said. He consulted the book and pointed out the relevant passage to Wormy. "See, right here: 'The prince knew Lady Sophie was ready for him. In her finest robes of sensuous violet silk, layers of dainty pink lace accentuating the line of her heaving bosoms...'"

"Wormy does not recommend that Apprentice Draco attempt bosoms, heaving or otherwise," the elf said in barely restrained alarm. "Wormy suggests young Draco play to his strengths and focus on...hair and complexion."

"Oh, well said. I suppose you may forgo slamming your hands in the oven or whatever it is elves do, and put out my... hmm... dusty rose robes with the peach soutache trim. That ought to cast becoming color on my cheeks."

Wormy winced. "Wormy further suggests Apprentice Draco... how to say... some consternation might be happening if young Apprentice is looking too... princess-like at first, and the prince is feeling there is false advertising..." In the face of Draco's blank, stark puzzlement, Wormy gave up. "Wormy means to say, to be trying shades of blue. Blue flatters Apprentice Draco's hair and will not show as much dirt."

"Oh dear. Are rescues very dirty business?" Draco pressed his fingers to his cheek, though not so hard as to leave an unsightly pucker.

"Rescuing involves travel, and travel is being dusty," Wormy said. "Light colors, lace and other trimmings is likely casualties."

"Bother." Draco threw his book in frustration. "In that case, perhaps you ought to fetch something in French Blue or Periwinkle."

"Wormy commends Apprentice Draco's taste," the elf said with a sigh. He located a set of periwinkle blue robes with a darker cloak that were not wildly impractical, and averted his eyes while Draco simply tossed his current garments about the room to don the new ones. This was something of a recurring trial for Wormy, as Severus had not bothered to instill in Draco concepts like body modesty when it was far more pressing to drill proper laboratory procedures into the twit's head. Severus couldn't be arsed about what Draco did in his room as long as he was clothed outside of it.

"Wash and pack those with the rest of my things," Draco ordered as he stood before his three-way mirror, contemplating (despite Wormy's good advice) how to simulate a decollete neckline.

"Respectfully... Apprentice Draco's belongings cannot be packed in one day, even with elf magic," Wormy said, tugging on one droopy bat-wing ear. Just because Wormy was only obliged to obey Severus, it did not mean it was easy for him to refuse instructions from his Master's apprentice. "May Wormy suggest one trunk for now, with the rest to be sent for after?"

"I say, isn't that terribly irregular?" Draco asked.

"Is Wormy's impression that in a regular rescue, one leaves with the clothes on one's back," the elf said. "Also, the 'captor' does not arrange a regular rescue. Logic is dictating that this is an irregular rescue. But Wormy is only an elf, after all."

Draco sat down on his bed with a loud huff. "Oh, very well! But I do hate for things to be irregular! It's too much to bear... Father using me for his advantage...Mummy not wanting me home...at this rate, Severus will probably send an ugly prince, just to be horrid to me!" He (mercifully) forgot about tampering with the neckline of his robes and flung himself across his mountain of pillows, weeping.

"Crying will not help Apprentice Draco's eyes or complexion," Wormy said...gently, as he was a nurturing sort of creature and Draco had been rather shabbily used by the alleged adults in his life. "Wormy advises young Apprentice choose some favorite books and such while Wormy settles the clothes." Narrowing down which books and trinkets to add to the pile kept Draco occupied and tearless while Wormy stowed a week's worth of smallclothes, toiletries, and a handful of Draco's more practical garments in a trunk of modest size, which became a trunk of pocket-size thanks to elf magic.

An unearthly screech startled Draco into dropping a stack of monogrammed handkerchiefs.

"Oh! What is that?"

"That is the sounds of Thestrals feeding. Perhaps the prince is being clever enough to amuse them with food," Wormy said.

Draco gazed out the window in vain for a sight of anyone princely. "I say, what is that rushing sound?"

"That is being the Whomping Willows trying and failing to pluck someone from the sky," Wormy said, relieved that the prince had fed the Thestrals rather than become food. "The prince is being a skilled flyer."

A roaring sound met Draco's ears. "Whatever could that be?"

"That is sounds of a fire spell, to hold the Devil's Snare at bay. The prince is being powerful to cast it silently," Wormy said, actually impressed.

"Dracaena Draco, let down your hair!" came an unfamiliar voice...the first unfamiliar voice Draco had heard in ten years.

Draco clasped his hands together and gave a tiny squeal. Too overwrought to act, he let Wormy fasten the long braid over the hook. "Oh, Wormy! A real prince! Clever, and swift, and powerful, and is it really too much to hope he's handsome as well, with that voice?"

No answer did Draco receive; for Wormy wisely decided that there comes in every fairytale a point when the helpful, mysterious creature makes itself scarce...and allows the protagonists to settle affairs on their own.

Note: Thanks to Sycophant Hex, for having an archive name that lends itself to becoming one of the AU Wizarding World's premier publisher of romance novels.

Chapter the Fourteenth: In Which Harry is Awfully Short for a Prince

Chapter 15 of 17

Damn it, I've loved that line since 'The Big Sleep'—the original quote from the novel. (I've gone with the paraphrased film version for the title, since, short jokes.)

Disclaimer: Can I just say 'Standard Archive disclaimer here' and be done with it? I've been trying to come up with original disclaimers for something along the lines of 140 distinct chapters in roughly 65 stories over about seven years. I'm slightly burnt out.

Warning: This chapter... has its moments. Don't let one catch you with tea in your mouth. Also, nudity. (Get used to hearing that last bit.)

As Prince Harry climbed the (promisingly) blonde braid up to the distant tower window, he hoped that his phenomenally bad luck with the maidens was at last ending.

"Please, don't let her be underaged... or weepy... or look like my mum (may she rest in peace)..." he whispered. It belatedly occurred to Harry that he ought to have his wand in hand and a disarming spell at the ready in case this was a trap. He paused just beneath the windowsill to gather his wits, leg muscles, and a helpful physics-defying spell for a push-off-the-wall-and-leap that would take him up and through the window.

It would have worked, too, had the room's sole occupant not chosen that moment to peek over the windowsill. Harry barreled right into a narrow pillar of expensive silk-linen blend that shrieked. Both of them rolled to the floor in a red-and-blue heap.

Harry popped up like a shot, apologizing profusely and helping the other up at the same time. He was so embarrassed it took him a moment to register that (thankfully) the blue-clad figure was not Moldysorts. Depressingly, during those moments of close physical contact, Prince Harry also realized that there was one other eventuality he should have wished against during his climb.

"You... you're not a princess!" Damn it, this was adding insult to injury, being sent after a bloke. *Apretty* bloke. A pretty, dainty, *blond* bloke...with gray eyes nicer than Luna's.

At least when he'd rescued his best mate, there'd been no chance of finding him attractive.

"What do you mean, 'princess?' I'm Draco Severus Malfoy, damn it," the imitation princess said, still pink in the face and disheveled from their tumble, "and you'd better be a real prince, or my father will hear about it!" Draco folded his arms and stamped his foot for emphasis. "There's a *contract*, and I'm certain that Mummy included a clause pertaining to grooming. I shall have to insist that you at *least* do something with your hair, stop smelling of mutton, lose that garish cloak, and clean those godawful spectacles before I'll be seen anywhere with you! Oh, and STOP STEPPING ON MY ROBES!"

"I stand corrected," The Prince-Who-Lived said dryly. Maybe rescuing unconscious maidens was the way to go...

"You're supposed to be tall, dark, and handsome. All the stories say so," Draco insisted.

Being royal, Harry was not entirely immune to petulance. "Hey, two out of three's not bad," he protested. He also tried to stand straighter. "So, is this a rescue, or are you going to stand there being a prat all day?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Draco said with a sniff. "My mother taught me all the important points of etiquette."

"I'm guessing that your mother hasn't seen you in a few years," Harry pointed out. "She apparently didn't get around to teaching plain manners. Or that it's not all right to order people around as if they existed to do your express bidding. Unless you're really a prince or princess... and even then, it's kind of bad form to do it all the time." Harry, who had handled the obstacles with ease, was starting to break a light sweat and babble. This was not good. This was what usually happened around pretty girls.

"But... I thought Severus says that because he's foul-tempered and jealous of how young and pretty I am," Draco said, almost tearfully.

"Even if he is, it doesn't make him wrong," Harry asserted. He took in their surroundings in greater detail, frowning. "This looks awfully comfortable for a prison."

"Well... I'm more of an apprentice than a prisoner. There's a contract of some sort that keeps me here. I don't really know what it's about, except that I have to learn potions-making from Severus and I can only leave the tower if I'm rescued by a prince who is strong enough to protect me from Lord what's-his-name."

Harry contemplated this while he took off his glasses and cast a polishing spell at them, conceding that they could use a bit more care. It sounded as if he was once again up to his knees in Voldemort-related bullshit and manipulative adults. He put them back on to find Draco staring at him with an expression that, frankly, he was unaccustomed to seeing on another male. Harry recalled Luna once saying something about it being a shame that he hid his best feature. He hadn't realized at the time that she'd been talking about his eyes.

He cleared his throat, thinking that this whole carrying-down-the-tower business could get a tad awkward. "If you aren't mistreated, do you need to be rescued?"

"It's just... I'm so lonely! Mummy scarcely reads my letters...I can tell. Father wants me to make connections for him and doesn't care whether it's with a real prince or that horrid snake-faced fellow. Severus ignores me outside of the laboratory and is nasty and critical to me in it. He makes me test my potions on myself to be sure they work."

"What a git. I'm glad we don't have to learn Potions," Harry remarked.

Draco heaved a sigh. "The house-elf is nice to me, but I think they have to be. I want someone to like me." He bit his lip and did something distracting with his eyelashes. "I want you to like me." One of the (relatively few) charming things about Draco was that, owing to his neglected social training and lack of interpersonal contact, he tended to say precisely everything that popped into his mind, in precisely the words he thought it. As a result, he was both rather inappropriate and bizarrely honest. "So... I don't know how...since the only way out of the tower is my hair...but get me out... Please?" He said the last word as if he wasn't quite sure what it meant.

Harry figured there was probably something about this in the Code of Chivalry, but he hadn't read it lately and Lady Hermione wasn't on hand to remind him*He is about as screwed over by the adults in his life as I am... oh, why not.* "Not a problem. Nothing says the hair needs to be attached to your head." Harry whipped out the jewel-hilted sword that was one of the few items that had been saved from the massacre of the Royal Gryffindors, grabbed the long braid of Draco's hair, and sliced it off neatly above the shoulders. Perhaps it was something about the sword, or something about Harry; but at that moment, the Rampion Curse and everything connected to it...including Draco's unnaturally fast hair growth...ended.

Having been used to a considerable weight hanging from his head for the better part of a decade (even with lightening spells,) Draco stumbled at the sudden change in his balance. "What... WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?" he shrieked, clutching at his head as if he'd been scalped rather than merely had a long-overdue haircut.

"You said you wanted out of the tower and that your hair was the only way down. Well, there's the hair..." Harry gave it a pull to check it was secure on the hook, "...so let's..." Prince Harry stopped in alarm as Draco sank to his knees, sobbing. "Not another crier," he sighed. He'd thought the Weepy Duchess Chang was bad.

"Look, doesn't it feel good to be rid of all that weight?" He knelt beside Draco, placing one hand awkwardly on his shoulder. "Besides... besides, wasn't it nearly impossible to keep clean? I mean, it was trailing on the ground and gathering dust. I'm sure the only reason there aren't bugs on your head is because of this potion. It's probably a pest repellent." Harry touched a strand of the hair still attached to Draco rather gingerly, as it was weighted down with a heavy layer of thick, viscous gel.

"B-bugs?" Draco sniffled, turning to Harry with his gray eyes wide and normally pale cheeks blotchy.

"They're rather difficult to keep out of anything that drags on the floor." Harry held up the end of the shorn braid with the flat of his sword. Gray streaks of dirt clung to the greasy places.

"Oh, EW! THAT has been attached to my head all these years? How vile! I'll bet Severus has been deriving some sort of perverse pleasure from making me treasure that manky wig. Merlin! I feel filthy just thinking about it!" Draco backed away from the braid in horror. He could not bear feeling filthy.

Draco also did not think anything of stripping and marching into the bath starkers whenever the mood struck him, since as has been previously demonstrated, his mother had indulgently never bothered to disabuse him of his nudist tendencies as a small child.

As a result, Draco immediately dropped his robes right in front of Prince Harry and had a quick stretch and shuddering shake to release the lingering creepies before pirouetting on his toes and prancing off to his bathroom.

Prince Harry was, rather understandably, struck dumb. Prince-Who-Lived status notwithstanding, it was not every day that that a perfectly proportioned, alabaster-skinned, slim, delicate, toned-to-just-the-right-side-of-softness boy of his age stripped, shook his, ahem, frontside practically in his face, then treated him to an extended view of his even more shapely backside.

Indeed, it was an occurrence so singular that, with all the other evidence, it was enough to make Harry think it was less important whether his paramour of choice was witch or wizard than if said witch or wizard was willing and blond. Draco certainly was the genuine latter; and judging from the pouting, blushing, and shrieking, it wasn't outside the realm of possibility that he might be the former.

Prince Harry contemplated whether he might be going insane, checked his reflection in the mirror, tried in vain to impose some order on his hair, took a deep breath, and followed his... princess... into the bathroom.

We're coming to the climax, folks.

Chapter the Fifteenth: In Which Draco's Prince Comes...

Chapter 16 of 17

...as does Draco.

Disclaimer: Shhh... their real owner still thinks they're entirely straight.

Warning: Possibly not as explicit slash as you'd like, but I'm aiming for low comedy, not high passion.

"This simply isn't going as it ought," Draco said. He may have been sniffing, and he was definitely discouraged. "I have been altogether let down by Father, Mother, Severus, and my entire bookshelf." He sat shivering on the edge of the tub, trying to recognize his short-haired self as reflected in the iridescent domes of the rising mound of soap bubbles. "Oh, what am I, without my hair?"

"Um... you look a little cold," came the hesitant voice of the prince. "Otherwise, I'd say it's an improvement."

Draco gave a squeak and slipped into the half-filled tub. For all his criticisms, Draco felt distinctly fluttery around the other boy. His green eyes were much more intriguing than those of that robe model who posed with the hilt of his wand resting provocatively on his lips!

Of course, the effect was somewhat dashed by those clunky glasses and...what was that on his forehead?

"If you are a prince, why do you go about with a silly scar on your head?" Draco asked. "How did you get such a thing, anyway?"

The prince blinked at him owlishly and gave a disbelieving huff of laughter. "It's... a fairly long, stupid story, not worth dwelling on. I take it you don't get the papers," he said.

"We do; sometimes I read the society page, to see if there is any mention of Father or of Mummy. The rest is boring, all about war and Lord thingy and some prince that's supposed to have survived the Killing Curse..." Draco clutched a sponge to his chest. "You're... you're not..." He wanted to say something, possibly something witty and impressive. But all he could do was stare and squeak. He may have squeaked something that sounded like "The Prince Who Lived!"

In fact, judging from the prince's next statement, it was precisely that. "I prefer to go by Prince Harry...or just Harry. I'm not too particular," the prince...apparently *that* prince...said almost apologetically.

Draco spent a good thirty seconds just trying not to aspirate bubbles. In those seconds two flashes of insight dawned on him, possibly because his head was finally allowed to do something besides grow hair: one, he wanted Prince Harry to do to him all the lovely-sounding if confusingly-described things that heroes did to princesses in novels; and two, princesses were *girls*. Owing to his isolated upbringing, Draco did not fully grasp the parameters of 'girl;' but he was certain that Mummy and subjects of rescue in novels were such, and that he himself was not. In a third insight (Draco was having a banner day for mental activity) it occurred to him that Wormy had hinted this might preclude holding the interest of a prince.

It also registered that Prince Harry was addressing him. "Are you sure this can't wait?" he asked. By his gesture towards the tub, Draco gathered that he was referring to bathing. "I was told we have limited time."

Was there any way to convince Harry to do some of those things? "I can't leave this place for the first time in ten years without clean hair," Draco said. He bit his lip, remembering from somewhere that looking vulnerable was attractive. "Perhaps you could help? So I could be done quickly? I haven't ever washed my own hair. Mummy did it when I was small, and once it grew long, it could only be cleaned with elf magic."

Harry fidgeted indecisively. "Sure... Okay." He tossed aside the garish red cloak Draco found inexplicably offensive and rolled up the sleeves of his somewhat less unflattering flying robes.

Before he realized what was happening, Draco found himself practically ducked in the tub. He came up spluttering angrily. "I say, what was that all about? I..." the rest of his tirade stopped abruptly. Harry had grabbed one of the potions bottles on the edge of the tub, dumped some in Draco's hair, and began working it in with oh, such strong, gentle fingers...

"I hope this is the right one," Harry said. His voice was a little muffled through the lather in Draco's ears. "It looks like the stuff I used to get troll's snot out of my hair once, and that cleaned anything."

Draco did not give one damn if Harry was rubbing cold porridge into his hair as long as those delightful hands kept up the good work. If this was the 'laving' referred to in the steamier romances, Draco could see the attraction. "I... oh... isn't rescuing hard work? Could you use a wash as well?" Draco gasped. Harry in the tub could only be a good thing.

Harry faltered a little in his scrubbing, which was a shame. "I... right now?"

"I read that Quidditch Players bathe together after a match," Draco said.

"We don't quite...er, actually...why not," Harry babbled. He gave Draco's hair a quick rinse with deliciously warm water from the Erumpent's trunk-shaped tap and stood up.

Draco, never having been taught it was rude to stare...Severus encouraged it as part of the learning process...gazed at Harry expectantly, but he managed to fumble out of his robes fast enough that he was in the tub before Draco got more than a quick look. Glimpsed above the bubbles, he had a torso comparable to a professional Quidditch player's, Draco noticed giddily. It almost made up for the fact that he was scrubbing up at the other end of a very large tub, with his glasses still on.

"I...I could wash your back, if you like," Draco offered. Using the word 'please' and offering help in the space of ten minutes was as world-changing as having a prince in his bathtub.

Harry swallowed visibly. "Okay." He turned around quickly as if doing so before he could change his mind.

Before Draco could change his own mind, he scooted closer and took up the sponge. He tried and failed to gulp down the little whimpers that rose in his throat each time his fingers brushed slick, warm skin, and he squirmed in place...desperately wanting to do something about the rising desire in that part of him he identified from novels as his 'manly member,' but completely appalled at the idea of the results in the bath.

"Here, must be your turn now," Harry said. His voice was as uneven as his awkward attempt to turn around.

"Eep!" was all Draco managed to say, as he hastened to turn before Harry did. For a few perfunctory passes over Draco's shoulders and upper back, Harry kept his distance. Then he slid the sponge over Draco's shoulders, and, with an audible gulp, edged close enough that Draco was immediately aware that if his 'manly member' was in a state of excitement, Prince Harry's was likewise...and also, where that missing inch of height had been spent.

"Just washing your front," Harry said, though it was hard to tell, between the pounding in Draco's ears and the crack in Harry's voice. "I'm not sure how much experience you have...um...with brooms!...but we can't ride in this condition," Harry whispered. "We'll have to..." Harry let his fingers finish the sentence.

Oh, yes, ye...no! "Wait! Not in the bath, that's...that's disgusting," Draco protested, squirming.

Harry groaned with every wriggle. His hands changed course, though he was rubbing Draco's hip bones maddeningly...also with nervous speed, had Draco the experience to recognize it. "There are spells to take care of that, you know," Harry said pleadingly.

"Severus doesn't hold with foolish wand-waving," Draco protested weakly.

Prince Harry heaved a sigh. "If you insist..." Harry spelled the water away and rinsed them with the obligingly flexible Erumpent's trunk. With a casual display of wandless, nonverbal magic, he dried their hair and Summoned one of Draco's vast, luxuriant towels to wrap around them both. Draco shivered at the implied power. Harry cuddled him close, steering them both towards Draco's bed.

"Besides, we still need adequate sexual lubricant," Draco said. Harry froze so completely that Draco wondered if someone had cast a spell through the tower window.

"You... Are you sure? I...it takes a while to do...*that*...right, according to Viscount Seamus, and he ought to know. He claims it's easier to talk your way in the back with the peasant girls than do a Contraception Charm," Harry said, staring wide-eyed at Draco.

Draco blinked at Harry in confusion. "I don't understand," he confessed.

Harry dropped his end of the towel in favor of running his hands through his hair in consternation. "Okay... it's, ah..." Finally, he shook his head and pulled Draco a little closer to whisper in his ear. (Despite Draco's criticisms, there was only an inch or two difference in their heights.) Sadly, it was not sweet endearments, but a hasty explanation which caused Draco's cheeks to pink, drain of blood, and pink again, to say nothing of the somewhat quelling effect on his manly member. The idea that he'd asked Severus about *that*...well, the adverts in the back of Quidditch Illustrated had a lot to answer for.

At least he finally had a grasp on the whole boy vs. girl thing.

"But we don't have to do all that," Harry hastened to add, red in the face himself. "I'm kind of keen on, well, something quick. With hands. Hands would be great." He punctuated this with an emphatic nod.

Draco pulled the towel about himself coyly. That sounded decidedly less scary. "So... after that... you'll take me to your home? It's a proper castle, right? For living happily-ever-after and such?"

"Yeah, about that... whoever named it 'Grim' hold wasn't kidding," Harry said apologetically. "D'you think... if my elf would cooperate with you, he's a little... cranky... you could make it look nice and castle-y, like your room here? It's not like I've got a queen to argue with you about colors and stuff. I might have to marry my friend Princess Luna, since she's having my heir, but she's more the outdoor type. I think you'd have a title... Lord Chamberlain-of-the-something. I'll ask Lady Hermione if you need to be made a peer. That ought to make your dad leave off the Voldemort nonsense."

"Oh," was all that Draco could think of to say. It somehow didn't seem like a fairytale ending, though his reading material was vague in that regard.

"It wouldn't all be work... I mean, we could still do this sort of thing," Harry said, and gave Draco's bum a squeeze to make clear what sort of 'thing' he meant. "Luna won't mind. She's only interested in studying, and she... she might even want to join us, in the interest of science or something." Harry went a bit glassy-eyed. His hands also went wandering.

"That... sounds rather interesting," Draco gasped. He decided Harry's plan had merit, especially considered from a position on his back amid his myriad pillows. "I'll start... Oh!... decorating... by having my bed moved to your castle."

"Excellent idea," Harry said. He yanked the towel away. "How 'bout we stop talking?" By way of follow-through on that suggestion, he covered Draco's mouth with his own, constituting Draco's very first kiss. It was not as fresh as it could be and a little horse-after-the-cart under the circumstances; but for once in his life, Draco couldn't bring himself to complain.

Draco being Draco, he also couldn't completely refrain from talking once they came up for air. But he did limit it to 'Oh!' 'Yes!' and 'Harry!' for the scant minutes it took for them to arrive at the fabled 'moment of bliss.'

Fairytale or no, they were seventeen.

Epilogue: In Which Severus is Through With This Sh*t

Chapter 17 of 17

From Severus' perspective, those few minutes at the end of the previous chapter were very badly timed.

Disclaimer: I'm several initials and many, many millions away from being the owner of these characters. I'm just messing around with them for (hopefully) your amusement.

Warning: This one is short. Blink and you'll miss any chance of laughing at it.

Severus cruised cautiously around the perimeter of his property. His Thestrals were browsing peacefully on a dead deer. His willows were swishing softly in no breeze whatsoever rather than whomping. His Devil's Snare sulked quietly against the wall of the tower. The braid was hanging from the tower window with a strangely limp air that just screamed, 'Curse over; hair is down but no one's home.'

For the first time in about ten years, Severus cracked a thin, if genuinely happy, smile. "At last," he said with satisfaction. He pulled one of the lesser bottles of Firewhisky from his newly acquired stash and treated himself to a celebratory sip. It was more of a slug, really; but since Earls sip, drink, or occasionally quaff, we shall humor Severus by using a verb commensurate with his new station.

He swung by the greenhouse to toss some kibble to his giant Pitcher Plant. He considered trying the front door of the tower, but remembering the sheer amount of detritus he'd allowed to accumulate on the other side, he opted to fly up to the tower window instead. He took another swig on the way for good measure. A swig occupies a sort of middle ground, being more couth than a slug but still not something the average peer would acknowledge. Generally, only viscounts are sufficiently crass to admit to swigging. (We shall have to forgive Severus the occasional swig whilst he adjusts to his change in social status.)

He even felt a little more sanguine about what might await him at Hogwarts. He'd still have to 'Your Highness' anyone of actual princely rank, and dukes were still entitled to a 'Your Grace' from him, the little rotters. He hoped there weren't too many Marquesses lying about; he could never remember how they were supposed to be addressed. But there were an entire world of Earls and below he could slap with a surname and have done with. As to what else might be expected of him in return for his title... well, Lady Minerva was pretty spry for her age, and he felt fairly certain that not all of that figure could be accounted for by charms and corsetry. Her hair was even still (mostly) black, and a few white hairs were certainly not a deal breaker. Thanks to his erstwhile charge, he had collected an assortment of his own.

Had he held off imbibing just a minute more, had he been just a little less immersed in his musings, Severus might have registered the curious sounds issuing from the aforementioned tower window. As it was, he rose up high enough to see into the window just as a final "Oh, HARRY!" split the evening air—and found himself face-to-definitely-not-face with the aftermath of something that turned him an even more disturbing shade of deathly pale.

Worst of all, in his surprise, he dropped the bottle.

"I did NOT need to see that!" There was nothing for it. He'd send for Wormy to pack their things later. If he ever returned to that tower, it would not be until the top floor was demolished, rebuilding optional. He sped off in the direction of Hogwarts grumbling, "Once I've completed my indentured servitude to that daft old queen, maybe I'll sell the tower and buy myself a nice, defensible dungeon—WITH NO BLOODY NEIGHBORS!"

And if Prince Harry conquered the evil Snake-Faced douchebag sometimes known as Voldemort, united the island, and lived somewhat unconventionally ever after with his two, shall we say, most beneficial, blond friends; and if Lady Andromeda 'tsked' behind their backs while raising the next generation to be more solid citizens; and if Severus finally helped Minerva shove the daft old queen out of the way and she rewarded him with quite a handsome dungeon, among many other perks; and if Severus told Wormy to 'do as he liked' with the tower, and Wormy proceeded to establish the most profitable theme park in the land based on the almost entirely fictional story of one mostly imaginary Princess Dracpuzel...

Well... as Lord and Lady Malfoy will tell you between helpings of Firewhisky... that is most certainly none of your affair.

FIN

Eternal love to lux_astraea for creating the Potted Palmquist, the most wonderfully-named magical plant.

Once again, the use of titles here is gratuitous and not especially accurate.

On the balance, it was a good thing for Wormy that Severus is a mean Piquet player.

Can you tell that, once upon a time, a long time ago, I became sick, sick, SICK of having to read 'Rapunzel' to my children?

Fun fact: This story started out as a response to a Friday Truth or Dare challenge in the TPP chat room. When it became obvious that it would not be finished that night (or indeed, that year... or decade...) I quickly wrote 'Platinumlocks and the Three Gryffindors' instead and shoved this one on the back burner. Hopefully you enjoyed the resulting overdone yet paradoxically half-baked mess.

My record on providing promised sequels is only slightly better than the contents of the Cannon's win column, so I make no promises.