

Exitus Acta Probat

by cmwinters

A near life-long biography of Severus Snape and how he became the man he is today.

Chapter Summary

Young Severus' first display of magic is a cause for consternation for a member of the Snape household and forces a discussion that brings up some very unpleasant topics. Later, the family finds out exactly how precarious their situation is.

The Beginning of the End

Chapter 1 of 6

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PLEASE BE ADVISED THAT THERE IS TORTURE AND A CHARACTER DEATH IN THIS CHAPTER

The small dark haired boy glowered at the book on the shelf. Bound in what looked like black leather but wasn't precisely, it was one he hadn't read, and he wanted it, badly. Mother had put it on the top-most shelf of a rickety chipboard bookcase; he knew it was his mother that had done it, even though he didn't see her do it, because his father never went near the bookshelf.

He was four and a half and had already been reading for six months. Mother's cousin Broderick had just gotten his Hogwarts final letter and been given the position of Head Boy, and Mother's family had an unseasonably early party to celebrate. Father hadn't attended the party, likely owing to his need to be at work, and nobody in Father's family even knew about Hogwarts anyway. For that matter, he wasn't sure Father did ... Mother had made reference to a special school he would be attending, but Father never called the school by its name. And since he knew he'd be going to Hogwarts, he wanted to be Head Boy when he was in his final year too, and Mother's family told him to do that he had to study, study, study. He'd be in Ravenclaw house, like everyone else, and he wanted to make them all proud.

But to study, he had to have the book. And he couldn't reach it. Last week, he'd spent two hours bodily wrestling Father's armchair across what had once been an expensive new carpet, over to the bookcase to get a book he wanted, only to have his mother walk in on him when he was still on the first chapter. Mother had laughed her delighted laugh, and after checking for Father, used her wand to secure the furniture to the floor in its original spot. "We wouldn't want you to get hurt, now!" she'd said, then gone off to tell his father the trouble he'd gone to to read. Father had grinned proudly at him. "Your mother's brains you've got, and good thing!" he laughed, like he always did. Father was quite disparaging of his own intellect.

He'd seen Mother use her wand before; Father didn't have one and was never around when Mother used hers. HE didn't have a wand either . . . not yet, anyway. Mother always told him he'd get his first wand when he got his Hogwarts letter, but that was . . . he stopped and counted on his fingers . . . seven years away! He couldn't wait

seven whole years to read that book!

He closed his eyes. He KNEW Mother wouldn't give him the book, and Father didn't seem to ever understand which book he wanted. It was almost as if, for some books, Father couldn't see them properly. Scowling to himself, he thought hard about that book, trying to will himself to figure out a way to get it. He was concentrating so hard that he missed the sound of Father coming into the room. His oblivious look of concentration confused the older man, and he stood quietly, observing. The boy was also concentrating so hard that he missed the quiet scraping of the cover against the wooden shelf, and didn't realize the book had moved until it thunked him in the head.

"OW!" he yelped in surprise, his eyes flying open. His look of annoyed shock changed to delight when he realized the book he wanted was in his very hands.

"Get o'er 'ere!" his father yelled. "Look at wot yer son did!" Father hollered over his shoulder into the kitchen, presumably to Mother.

Afraid of having the book confiscated, the boy scurried off to the corner, hiding the book behind his back.

"Yes, dear?" Mother asked absently, walking to the room and frowning sullenly over a parchment, her pale skin in sharp contrast to her dark hair. The boy recognized that parchment . . . it was the wizarding newspaper, the *Daily Prophet*. Father never read the *Daily Prophet*. In fact, Father never seemed to SEE the *Daily Prophet*.

"Look at wot lad did. Took that boohk off shelf an' all, and weren't touchin' it neither!"

Mother looked up and apparently recognized the book. She glanced at the shelf on which it belonged, spying the empty slot. "He Summoned that to himself? Without a wand?" she asked, incredulous.

"Summon'? Wot yer on about? And wot d'yer mean, wand? I come in 'ere he's all scrunched down. Then the boohk comes flying 'cross the room at 'im."

Mother smiled. "Was that your first display of magic?"

The boy nodded, his inky black eyes wide inside his pale face.

"Magic? Wot yer on about, 'magic'?" Father demanded abruptly.

Mother started. "Oh, um. Well ... um ... you see, Tobias, it's like this," Mother said, withdrawing her wand. "I'm a witch."

"Yer wot?!" Father whispered, his sallow skin turning to a shade reminiscent of rotten milk.

Mother looked aghast. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Tobias, but I couldn't ... there's a wizarding law!"

"Wot yer talking about 'Wizard Law'?! Wot wizard? Wot d'yer mean, you're a witch?"

"I can do magic . . . " Eileen hedged, obviously not quite sure how to respond.

"What kind of magic?"

She cringed, but waved her wand and ran through a couple of spells for effect. Tobias gawked at her and then turned, pointing at his son. "And lad ... 'e made that boohk come t'im. 'e's got it too?"

Eileen nodded mutely, eyes wide.

Father collapsed into the armchair, shaking his head. "ow long 'ave yer known?"

"About Severus? A few minutes, but I suspected he'd be magical, like I am ... like my whole family is."

Tobias took a few deep breaths, trying to digest that, while Eileen turned back to her son.

"Dear, I'm very proud of you, but you can't read that book."

"Can TOO!" he insisted stubbornly. "WATCH! Gla - gol - go-Golpalott? Golpalott's Third Law states that the an . . . ant . . . antidote? of a blended poy..." he recited dutifully, and here he was interrupted, because Mother had swooped down from across the room and whipped the book bodily from his hands.

"Let me restate that, then. You MAY not read that book. It is too much for you at your age."

He pouted.

"Yer doin' better'n me, my lad. . . I couldn've accomplished that much!" his father consoled indulgently, still looking slightly peaky, and he smiled at Father.

He noticed Mother, having put the book back on the shelf, had turned her attention back to the paper. She looked unhappy about something.

"Wotsit?" Father asked, following her gaze.

"Well . . . it says here . . . there's been a rising of a new Dark Wizard. Only, this one is in Britain ... the last one was in Germany ... and apparently has it in for Muggles and those who marry them."

Father frowned for a moment in concentration then demanded incredulously, "Yer wot?"

"Hm . . . it says here that the other night, he killed . . . or rather, his followers - killed a wizard who married a Muggle."

"Wot's a Muggle?"

"Oh!" Eileen said. "It's ... um ... it's the Wizarding world's word for a non-magical person."

Tobias thought about that for a moment, then scowled. "And this, this, this 'Dark Wizard', you called 'im . . . he's killin' Muggles, killin' families, right?"

"Um, well ... yes ... well, not really. There's not much information, actually," Eileen said in a distracted voice, looking at the paper. "Some Muggles have died under suspicious circumstances, but so have some of the Wizarding populace. But ... " she paused, her eyes flitting across the parchment rapidly, "it seems most of them were married to Muggles or Muggle sympathisers, or somehow associated with them . . ."

"Muggle' . . . that's me, right? RIGHT?" shrieked Father as he rocketed out of the chair to advance on Mother, who looked up in alarm.

Mother blinked. "Oh. Well, yes. . . you're a Muggle. . . " Eileen cringed as she realised the implications, which seemed to only serve to enrage Tobias more.

"HOW COULD YER DO THIS T' ME? HOW COULD YER TROUBLE ME LIKE THIS? HOW COULD YER TROUBLE **SON?**" Father shouted.

"I . . Tobias, I . . I didn't think . . . !"

"YOU 'DON'T **THINK**'? WOT THE DEVIL ARE YER TALKING 'BOOT, WOMAN? ALL Y' BLOODY *DO* IS THINK! Y' THINK MORE IN A DAY THAN I DO IN A BLOODY YEAR! YOU THINK ENOUGH FOR FIVE PEOPLE! HOW COULD Y' NOT THINK 'BOOT THIS!"

Mother collapsed onto the floor cowering, just as the teakettle in the kitchen started shrieking. Severus, still in the corner, started to cry. His parents never shouted at each other like that. He'd never, not once, seen his father tower over his mother like he was doing now, and he was terrified. Instead of the loving, warm, gentle man he knew, who played games with him and pulled coins out of his ears, his father suddenly seemed a horrible monster. He backed himself into the corner as far as he could, trying to melt into the paneling, wishing he could disappear. He suddenly felt cold all over and shivered, although whether from fear or the old house's poor insulation, he couldn't tell.

Whimpering softly to himself, he noticed that Father's toes were next to mother's bent knees, and Father's voice seemed to get progressively louder. "WHAT. Y'GOING. TO. **DO**! 'BOOT. THIS?!" Father demanded, nearly incandescent with rage.

"I . . . I suppose I could put up some defensive enchantments . . . around the house . . ." Mother muttered lamely from behind her hands.

"**WOT!?**" Father shrieked. "OUSE I'N'T PROTECTED? ARE YER COMPLETELY DAFT! YES, F' THE LOVE OF GOD, PUT THE BLOODY ENCHANTMENT UP! Don't tell me yer expect ME to do that?!"

"No, I . . . of course not."

"My God, Eileen. For all y' brilliance, sometimes yer got no common sense!" Tobias spat, storming out of the room and kicking the door in a fury on the way out.

A few moments later, Eileen raised her head, and glanced around, gazing out the door her husband had stormed out of and then at the hole he'd kicked in the door. Picking herself off the sitting room floor upon which she had been cowering, she shook her head. Tobias was right, really ... she should have thought of that herself. Out of habit she walked into the kitchen to take the screaming teakettle off the heat and, spying Tobias out back smoking, asked if their son was out there with him.

"No . . .!" Tobias spat, still fuming from their argument.

Eileen frowned and went back into the sitting room, looking at where she'd seen her son last. She didn't see him, so she waved her wand. The blue light that surrounded the windows and doors made her frown. At least he hadn't gone outside.

Meanwhile, Tobias had come back inside. "Wot now?" he snapped, noting the look on her face.

She scowled at him, but answered. "It's Severus. I can't find him, but he hasn't left the house."

A look of alarm flitted across Tobias' face. "I'll check t'bedrooms," he said, before dashing up the stairs.

She went back into the sitting room and called for him, concern evident in her voice.

Severus, who by this point had stopped crying, looked at his mother, fear mounting. She was looking right at him. Why was she acting like she couldn't see him? He started crying louder. Surely she could hear him.

"I'm right here!" Severus squalled disconsolately, having gone to the couch to bring himself out of the shadows provided by the bookcases. His mother frowned, looking around the sitting room, and tried homing in on the sound of his cries, a frown on her face that didn't match the terror evident in Tobias' shouting voice upstairs. She walked to the couch slowly, her feet dragging the ground in front of her, and sat on the couch, edging toward her son. When she collided with his body, she traced her hands up his back to the top of his head, and tapped her wand on it.

Severus felt as if someone had just poured warm water over him. Eileen shook her head at him and then called her husband. "Tobias! I've found him!"

Tobias pelted down the stairs and flew to Severus' spot on the couch just as Eileen kneeled down next to him. "Did you Disillusion yourself love?" she asked, gently wiping the tears from his face.

"I dunno . . ." he sniffled, grateful that his parents could see him finally.

"Did you feel cold, then warm, like if someone broke an egg on your head?"

"Mm hmm!" he sobbed, worried about everything that had happened this afternoon.

Eileen sighed. "There's nothing for it," she said, turning to Tobias, whose earlier anger seemed to have evaporated. "That's twice in an hour, Tobias. I'm going to have to start teaching him. If I don't, he'll keep doing things uncontrollably." Tobias just nodded then climbed up on the couch to cuddle his son.

"Aye now, there's no need for that. I'm sorry if I scared y' with yelling, little man. You're still best little lad, al' reet?" Severus just nodded and rested his head on Father's chest, and cried himself to sleep.

* * *

Later that night, after Severus had gone to bed, long since mollified about the scene he'd witnessed, Tobias and Eileen were still awake talking quietly by firelight, when there was a soft tapping at the door. Tobias' eyes flashed with defensive fury as Eileen rose and, extracting her wand from her sleeve, waved it. "It's an ally," she said, striding to the door with confidence.

"OLD UP!" Tobias commanded, unwilling to take any chances. "I'll open."

Eileen acquiesced to her husband's wishes and stood aside while he opened the door a crack.

"Ah. You must be Tobias," came a genial voice from the other side of the crack. "I am Albus Dumbledore. Your wife Eileen should know me. May I come in?"

Tobias closed the door to remove the chain and glanced at his wife ... she nodded in recognition of her old teacher's name. The door was reopened, and the man stepped through.

Eileen conjured three crystal goblets and a bottle of mead and served the sweet liquid to her guest first and then her husband. Dumbledore smiled pleasantly, noting both Tobias' slight discomfort at the action and his acceptance of it. His knowing about the Wizarding world was going to make things much easier on him. Pleasantries and small talk were exchanged for some time before Dumbledore got to the reason behind his visit.

"Eileen, I know you took Divination in school ... I also know that it wasn't your favourite subject. Yet, there are true Seers in the Wizarding world, and I have recently encountered part of a prophecy I believe pertains to your son."

"Part'?" asked Tobias doubtfully.

"Yes . . . unfortunately, only part. Humour me, and allow me to display it for you," Dumbledore asked, pulling a small stone from the left pocket of his robes and a small bottle from the right.

A wave of his wand later, and the stone transfigured into a basin, over which Dumbledore held the bottle. "This is a Pensieve, Tobias . . . and this . . ." Dumbledore said, holding up the bottle, ". . . contains a memory, which I can display by emptying it here." A thick, viscous, silvery substance poured from the bottle into the basin, and the old

man waved his wand. A translucent, silvery shadow of a woman appeared, reciting, "... Janus' man has the power to turn the serpent's head upon its tail. Arriving before the Ides, he stands between two worlds . . .," repeatedly.

"Tha's it?" Tobias asked, clearly confused.

"That is, in fact, 'it'," Dumbledore said sadly. "Obviously, there is more, but I haven't recovered it. However, I believe, and I may well be wrong, that this could be a significant turning point in our battle against darkness."

"ow d'yer figure tat applies to my son?" Tobias demanded.

"Severus was the only half-blood wizard boy born in the month of January, but before the fifteenth, in the year this prophecy was made. Also, in ancient times, January ninth was the Feast of Janus, so it seems easy to conclude that Severus could be 'Janus' man'."

"ow d'yer figure rest of it applies?"

"I think this means that Severus, as an adult, will have a very significant part in the war." Here, the old man sighed. "Unfortunately, that means I think the war will go on much longer than we wish it to."

"He must be protected," Eileen declared.

"Indeed, that appears true."

"Protected?" Tobias asked. "O'course he must be 'protected', he's bloody child!"

"No, no . . . you misunderstand, Tobias . . . 'protected' at all costs. No matter what happens he can't be allowed to come to the attention of those who follow the one who styles himself as 'Lord Voldemort'."

Tobias frowned in confusion and turned to his wife for clarification.

* * *

A year and a half later, Tobias and Severus Snape were visiting the home of Tobias' family in the dusky, dust-ridden streets of north Huddersfield. But as the sun sank lower on the horizon, Tobias beckoned to his son.

"Pa! Goin' 'ome now?"

"Aye, we're 'way son ... you get yer stuff together."

The boy scampered about to his grandparents and cousins, making his goodbyes and gathering his belongings. Excited, he ran to a beat-up old coupe parked at the kerb and pulled with all his weight, trying to budge the stubborn and rusty door. But the recent rains had made the handle slippery, and just as he wrenched the door open, he was smashed in the face by the door and thrust backward into the gutter. As he lay scared, bleeding and crying in the runoff, his father rushed to his side, brushing his hair aside gently and crooning sympathetically.

"ey now, nowt need to cry, it's nowt but a scratch an' head wounds bleed like owt. We'll take you to yer mam an' she'll see you right. Mebbe she'll even let you do it y'sen, now, wouldn't that be fun?"

Mollified, the six year-old boy nodded but continued to snivel slightly ... "nowt but a scratch" or no, his head HURT and the blood was flowing steadily into his eyes.

A short drive later, most of which was spent navigating the labyrinthine passages of a foul-smelling riverside town, they pulled into an alley behind a small home.

Severus twitched ... something was amiss. Something Tobias couldn't sense.

"Summut's wrong . . ." Severus muttered.

"Wot like?"

"Dunno ... someone's here."

"Shite," Tobias hissed and pulled his son up against the wall, where both of them tilted their heads to listen. They shook their heads to clear their ears ... somehow they'd popped.

The scene they looked into through the grime-covered window was gruesome. Three men loomed over Eileen Snape, educated voices laughing and harsh with derision. "This is how the Dark Lord pays respect to those who defy him!" one declared as the two others cackled with sadistic mirth. The one who spoke hissed, "Accio Eileen Prince's Wand!" just as another voice said something that, to Tobias' Catholic mind sounded like, "More Crucify, then, Lestranger, and if she doesn't tell us after that, kill her."

At this, Severus gasped, eyes wide with horror, and he turned to bolt to the door, convinced his appearance would spare his mother. Tobias held him back, as the man inside continued. "The half-blood whelp won't be a bother to us, and it's her we really have exception to anyway!" At a whispered word, Eileen screeched in pain and horror.

Tobias yanked his struggling son into the small lavatory that sat behind the main building, hand clamped over his son's mouth.

"Laddie, SHUSH! They'll 'ear us!" he'd said, and the boy, too confused and frightened to protest, complied.

Although hidden from sight, they could hear the taunting voices of the men and the hysterical screams of Eileen.

"Oi, Rosier. Here, use her own wand. Don't want the Ministry to come after you," one of them advised, sniggering.

Tobias and Severus stared at each other wide-eyed and horrified in the dank shed behind the building, but didn't miss the vicious snarl of who was presumably the one called Rosier. "A Muggle punishment, then, for a filthy blood traitor and Muggle lover! INCENDIO!"

Eileen shrieked so loud that in retrospect it amazed Tobias the authorities hadn't come. The smell of fresh bacon, so out of place at this late hour, wafted across the breeze into their noses. Tobias retched into the toilet and backed firmly against the door, helpless tears of hot rage coursing down his face as the screams eventually died down. If the visitors wanted to get into the shed, they'd have to go through him first, but in his heart he knew he stood no chance if they really wanted in.

Father and son stayed in the shed for several hours, long after the laughing voices departed, having declared Eileen dead even beyond the abilities of magic to revive her. When they finally emerged under the cover of the darkest night, Severus was dizzy. Tobias picked him up to carry him and walked cautiously into the back door, sucking in an indrawn breath and turning abruptly as he navigated around what Severus later found out was the body of his dead mother. Tobias took his son upstairs, tended to his head wound and cleaned his face, and put the boy to sleep in his parents' bed, then went downstairs to deal with more adult matters.

The sickly green tint of a skull and snake was still visible in the sky as dawn approached.

* * *

"How terrible, ol' chap, terrible indeed. Your wife's not the only one ... got a nasty case three months ago down in Surrey, terrible case. Chap murdered most nastily, Muggle wife left with three kids and not the foggiest how to raise them ... no offense meant, Snape . . ." said a pompous official, who'd declared himself to be Egbert Weatherby and a representative of the Ministry of Magic. Weatherby had arrived at the crack of dawn ... Severus still slept the sleep of the innocent, but Tobias had been roused out of a restless sleep by the pounding on the door.

Tobias glared at the man who was staring around his house in wide-eyed wonder as he proceeded to the fireplace and started waving his wand. "Wot yer doing?" he demanded.

"Well, see here now, Snape, the Statute of Secrecy prohibits a Muggle household from having an active Floo connection. See, you're sort of in the Wizarding world, but not really. A live Floo connection is a security risk for you because you can't ward it properly. And it's a security risk for us because you can't ward it properly".

"And 'ow d'yer propose our Severus contact his muther's family?" he asked icily.

"We've already contacted them ... they should be here shortly," said another man, walking into the house without bothering either with introductions or the simple courtesy of being so beckoned. This second man looked around blithely and without further preamble made his way to the bookshelf, where he began calmly sorting the contents of the bookshelf into boxes.

"scuse me, but wot exactly d'y' think y' doin'?" Tobias demanded in a voice so full of venom both men looked up in alarm, and a knowing glance passed between them.

"Ah, yes, Mister Snoop," began the second man, as yet unintroduced and without bothering to cease his behaviour.

"SNAPE!" Tobias hissed through clenched teeth.

"Yes, yes, whatever you say," he said, waving his hand dismissively and rolling his eyes. "Anyway, the Statute of Secrecy provides that in a case like yours, where there are magical relatives, the magical relatives hold the belongings in trust in the event your descendants ... you have a child, don't you? ... turn out to be magical."

Tobias seethed, but at least they weren't seizing the belongings to take them and he held his tongue.

Presently, a man in flowing royal blue robes arrived on the scene, and Tobias turned to him. "Kennel! These folk are takin' Eileen's things!"

Kenelm, a man with pale skin and a sad face, held up his hand, eyes flickering understanding to Tobias. "I have it from here, Smythe-Wise," Kenelm said to the man directing books into the boxes haphazardly. The other man frowned derisively, but went to join his comrade. "You're taking the home off the Floo network?" he asked.

Egbert turned around. "Yes, security reasons, you see." Kenelm nodded solemnly and turned to Tobias.

"Where is Severus?"

"Still sleepin'."

"And . . . what of Eileen?"

"I rang undertaker last night. Couldn't leave 'er there . . ."

"Perhaps, Mr Smythe-Wise, you can attend to that for us?" he said in a tone that brooked no argument. "And you'll be leaving, Weatherby, after the Floo is disconnected? We could use some family time."

Neither man looked happy about this development but both acquiesced and left. Kenelm sighed and beckoned a dazed Tobias into the kitchen, nearly recoiling from the stench of burnt flesh, to say nothing of the foul energy signature still left in the room. Serving some conjured tea to Tobias, he sat at the table and rubbed his face.

He was silent for several moments before finally addressing Tobias. "I am sorry, Tobias, not only for your loss but also what you've had to go through this morning. As you may have gathered, the Wizarding world doesn't think terribly highly of Muggles. I'll get you an owl ... Severus can send us notices, and we'll push through a long-term Portkey both here and at Prince Hall."

"Dinni know wot Portkey is lad," Tobias mumbled dully.

Kenelm looked at him, pondering how to explain. "It's like ... a shoe, for example ... any inanimate scrap object ... that will instantly transport you somewhere. If we put one here, it will take you to our house ... if we put one there, it will take you here, without having need for the Floo or Apparation. And the owl will allow you to send post to us."

Tobias nodded, thinking he understood most of it and what he didn't probably wasn't important. "Wot about Sev?" he asked desolately.

"What about him?"

"Well, Eileen stayed home wi' him all day," he said, his voice breaking. He paused to regain his composure then continued. "I 'ave to work. He can't stay 'ere all day on 'is own, but I don't think he'd fit in comprehensive school. He's too clever, and he's too . . . 'different'."

Kenelm nodded. "I'll bring it up. My parents, or my brother, or someone, should be able to care for him when you're at work. We'll figure something out. Can he read?"

Tobias grunted wearily. "Two year, almost."

"Then I'll leave the books here. Go back to bed. You look like you're nearly dead on your feet. I'll try and get some things taken care of while you're sleeping and I'll be here when you wake up, and we can talk more when you're rested."

Tobias merely nodded and staggered up the stairs.

Author's Notes:

TWO YEARS worth of chocolate, catnip and caffeine are in order for (in no particular order) Beki, Dominique and Bridgetester and for plotting with me, listening to me rave, plotting with me, going over characterisation and likely scenarios, plotting with me, giving me encouragement and the occasional well-deserved smack in the noggin, and occasionally plotting with me. This fic WOULD NOT exist without you!

Also in the above, as well as giving me Eggbert Weatherby's dialogue, to AzureLunatic! *smooch*

Beta thanks to all of the above as well as:

PauAmma and Lacey, for reading this fic as well as some others, and helping me put things to rights. How I want things to come across doesn't always work in how it's written.

FocusF1 for seeing my hysterical whangsting and not only forbidding me to give up on the entire idea but also relentlessly combing fandom for help that not only got me out of my rut but convinced me that, at least among fanfic writers, I'm not horribly abnormal.

Jean for her "mad hatter plotting" that discovered two ATROCIOUS (!) plot problems!

Whitehound for giving me a well-needed dose of reality as well as tons of education on Yorkshire and industrial England. You've bettered chapters I haven't even *written* yet! And z0mg that part about the feast of Janus!♥

Ellie and Dee for fixing Tobias speech for me ... y'all just don't KNOW! *heart*

The bit about Tobias being from Yorkshire at all was shamelessly stolen from Azazello (and the pictures she posted!) *shifty look*

The opening scene (young Severus wordlessly and wandlessly summoning the book to himself, and Tobias walking in on it) was inspired in whole by a short fic I read on LJ in late 2005 if memory serves, but I either was too stupid to note where I got it from or lost the notes. If you're the author of this fic, please knock me in the head. I distinctly remember asking for (and being granted) permission when I read it, but I'd LIKE to credit you!

* * *

Yes, I am deviating slightly from the canon "norm" about Tobias, and yes, I am doing so deliberately. I prefer to try to stick to canon if possible, but I'm taking poetic license with a couple of things, and this is one of them.

This will, eventually, be an SS/HG fic, but that's a LONG time coming! Hermione isn't even born yet, and she'll still have to grow up!

In case anyone is wondering, the story title roughly translates to "The end justifies the means". A Slytherin saying if ever I heard one.

Descent Into Darkness

Chapter 2 of 6

Life goes on without Eileen, and the shrewd Tobias comes up with some plans for his son's continued survival.

Not quite two weeks after the funeral of Eileen Prince Snape marked the first time her only child made it through the day without having a crying jag. To be sure, he was despondent throughout the day and crumpled into sniffles on more than one occasion, but in the end managed to make it through without a full-blown meltdown. Tobias, for his part, felt like this was cause for an informal celebration of sorts.

He'd only managed to get three days off from the mill. Thankfully the Prince family had managed to push through that transportation thing Kenelm had told him about. Not long after, the Snapes got a rather nasty missive from the Ministry decrying the use of magic at Spinner's End. As a result, the Prince family had felt obliged to go to the Ministry to explain that the cleaning charms were being performed by Kenelm's wife while Tobias was at work. In any case, they argued, Tobias was well aware of the Wizarding world, so the Statute of Secrecy should hardly apply. However, Severus had spent most of the last week with his mother's family. They'd all originally planned to have Severus stay at home, as he had with Eileen, but the Prince family had a respectable if not extravagant home with property, and it was a much better environment for a six-year-old boy to spend his time in than in a filthy mill town. They also had an extensive collection of books that bordered on extravagant...a whole room...the largest in the house, in fact...dedicated as a library, and every room in the house, save the bathrooms, had at least one shelf buckling under the weight of books on every topic imaginable and frequently more than one shelf. By all accounts, Severus had spent the last several days reading, although Eileen's cousin Broderick had promised to teach him to play chess.

In any case, tomorrow was Monday, and Tobias had to go back to work the next morning, but as his son had begun defeating his demons, Tobias wished to reward him. Kenelm had told him after the Ministry letter fiasco that underage witches and wizards weren't allowed to practice magic, which is what had precipitated the letter. However, Tobias had also found out that the wizarding community was not allowed to practice many of the things he'd seen and heard in the past couple of weeks, not the least of which was torture, killing and conjuring snakes into the sky. He didn't believe for a moment that any witch or wizard capable of so doing would adhere to something as foolish as this underage law, either. He sighed and walked down the stairs. Reaching the door that separated the kitchen from the sitting room, Tobias knocked on the jamb and, after giving his son a few seconds, opened the door.

Not yet having reached the age where modesty and embarrassment were an issue in front of his father, Severus, who sat in a few inches of rapidly cooling water, looked dully up at his father.

"I'll scrub yer back, an' did yer wash yer 'air?"

The boy shook his head and obligingly turned in the tub so that his back faced his father. Tobias fished the flannel and bar of lye soap out of the water and rubbed them soothingly over his son's back and soaped up his head.

Bath finished, Tobias wrapped a towel around his son and dried him off as the boy sat passively, staring at an indistinct spot on the wall, staggering as his father toweled him off and barely staying upright.

"Come on then, lad, let's go an' get a book," Tobias coaxed, and Severus was only marginally taken aback by this slight change of topic and dutifully padded after his father, following him back into the house and into the sitting room.

"Severus?" Tobias asked gently, and his son turned nearly unseeing eyes on him. "What's on t'bookshelf, son?"

Severus's expression flickered slightly into a frown of confusion, but he turned and looked at the bookcase. "Books," he replied after a minute, then scrunched his face up. "Her books..."

"Hey, 's'all righ' now, which books?"

Severus sniffled and rubbed his eyes harshly, desperate not to break down entirely. "Al-all of them," he stuttered.

"What's they called, Severus?" Tobias prodded, and that was so not what the boy expected that he looked back at his father in bewilderment before turning to them to examine them. He dutifully recited off the names.

"Numerology and Gramatica. The Monster Book o'Monsters. Hogwarts: A History. T'Standard Book of Spells . . . grades 1-7 . . ." and here he was interrupted.

"Tha' one," insisted Tobias. Severus turned and blinked at his father, and Tobias clarified. "T'first one."

"Numerology and Gramatica?" Severus asked, after looking back at the books.

"No, t'first level one."

Severus turned back to the shelf, trying to figure out what his father was talking about. "Oh. Standard Book of Spells, Grade One?"

"Aye. Get tha' one."

"It's on t'top shelf, and I haven't a wand," the boy mumbled forlornly.

"Yer've done magic before wi'out a wand Severus...I seen yer do it," Tobias chided gently.

"Tha' was before," Severus muttered.

Rather than push the point, Tobias changed the subject. "S'all right, I'm still strong enough to pick yer up!" Tobias said with false cheerfulness and scooped his son up and carried him over to the bookcase, from which Severus plucked the desired book and moved to hand it to his father. "No, that's yours now. Come on, up ter bed wi' yer," Tobias said, setting his son down and stifling a cough with some effort.

Severus climbed up the stairs after his father and settled into bed. He was surprised, however, when his father gave him the directive to read and looked at him blankly.

"Read t'first chapter in t'book. Or mebbe not t'whole chapter, but . . . just read."

Severus shrugged and began. "The ability to levitate an object is one of the most basic of wizarding skills, and it is one of the first ones taught to young witches and wizards, due to its practical use and its ease of casting. Until control is established, however, it is recommended that new students practice on relatively harmless objects, such as cotton wool or feathers. The wand movement required for a levitation spell is a distinct swish-and-flick, as demonstrated in figure A. Like many Latin-based spells, the verb in its appropriate conjugation follows the object; for example, when levitating a feather, the incantation is 'Wingardium Leviosa'," Severus concluded, and looked at his father.

"All right, so tomorrow I'll bring 'ome a feather. Does t'next spell ask fo' anything special?"

Severus glanced through the writing and shook his head.

"Yer can stay up for ten minutes practicin' t'movement but after that you sleep. And tomorrow when I bring 'ome t'feather yer can actually try, al'right?"

"I don't 'ave a wand," Severus repeated desolately and turned away as angry tears welled up in his eyes again.

Tobias pulled a nine inch polished hawthorn twig from under the bed, where he'd hidden it earlier. "Will this one work?"

Severus turned and, recognising his mother's wand, stared at his father, wide-eyed. "But . . . how?"

"It was out back. They must 'ave... left it. I suppose we're lucky they didn't take it," Tobias said. "Or break it," he concluded under his breath.

Severus nodded but took the wand and held it wonderingly in his hands for a few moments before smiling slightly at his father.

It was the first time the boy had smiled since the day his mother had been murdered.

And so it was. During the week, Severus would take the Portkey to his maternal grandparents in the morning and return in the evening. In an odd twist, his wizarding grandparents were ostensibly supposed to be teaching him all the things a six-year-old boy would learn in a primary school while his Muggle father was surreptitiously, informally and indirectly teaching him magic. But Severus was academically very advanced for his age, and apart from maths, he preferred to study the material himself and then be tested on it later. Much to his delight, the Prince family library was well-stocked, although not organised in any discernible fashion. He burned through his requisite schoolbooks in a very short time, and while his grandparents would have preferred that he go out to play more often, they were in England, and it rained quite a lot after all.

So Severus spent quite a lot of time absorbing all the information he could from all the books he could get his hands on. But he was young, and even for a voracious reader such as himself, there was enough reading material to keep him occupied for decades. As it turned out, it was something his father said...or rather, recommended he do...that led him to pointed research.

Nearly two years had gone by since the death of Eileen, and as children his age are wont to do, Severus had unconsciously blocked out most of his memory of her death. He still had occasional nightmares of educated men with mocking voices in unnatural lighting and a screaming woman, which he never remembered when he woke up, although such dreams invariably left him in a state of great emotional distress for several days.

Severus still spent days with his grandparents and nights with his father. Every other weekend, he'd sleep at his father's parents' and spend time with his cousins. Tobias, mindful of the Ministry restrictions, had forbidden Severus to take Eileen's wand with him, explaining that he didn't want to see the wand confiscated by bumbling government officials with an over-inflated opinion of their own self-importance. The first trip after getting the wand Severus did leave it at home, but he was so terrified without it that thereafter he made a point to hide it in his hold-all and slept with it under his pillow no matter where he was.

On a Thursday evening before such a trip, as was their custom, he read the next spell on the page to Father. "'Incendio' creates a waterproof, smokeless fire that can be contained in an air-tight environment and which requires no fuel. If it encounters fuel, however, it will burn like any fire. It is also used for communication and travel, as with the Floo. Once Incendio has been cast, the fire cannot be extinguished by other than magical means." Severus looked at his father, who had a strange, tight look on his face.

"So 'ow d'yer put it out?" Tobias ground out through clenched teeth.

"I dunno...it doesn't say. I mean, it says it must be magical means, but it doesn't say which spell or whatever."

"Yer find tha' out first," he said, pausing to cough before continuing. "And when yer do, we'll go an' practice down by t'river."

* * *

The next morning, Severus abandoned his "normal" reading and scoured the library for every mention he could find of water-based and smothering spells...anything he could think of that would put a fire out. He didn't find it that day, which was just as well, as he wasn't sure he could have constrained himself from experimentation otherwise. Nor did he find it the following Monday, Tuesday, or even Wednesday, despite his intense searching.

In fact, it wasn't until the middle of the afternoon on Thursday that he encountered the spell in a sixth-year spellbook. Severus looked around, frowning, to ensure that he was not being closely watched by his grandparents. He tucked his wand in his the leg of his trousers, grabbed a book he hadn't yet read, and ran off to find his grandfather, saying he wanted to enjoy the weather and go out to read. Grandfather genially waved him off, and he dashed behind the garden shed where he was sure nobody could see him. Convinced he was safely hidden from prying eyes, he practiced the flick-and-jab motion required for the Aguamenti and was shortly rewarded by a trickle of cold, clear water spouting from his wand.

Now came the moment of truth. Thankful that he was small, he cast about again to ensure nobody was watching and then eyed the flat bluish grey stone upon which the gardening shed sat. He had only a moment of guilt...were he to set fire to the shed surely his grandparents would be devastated...therefore he'd just have to not do it, and should that happen, he'd have to not get caught. Taking one last practice at the Aguamenti, he steeled himself and called forth a smokeless, fuel-less blue ball of flame

which burned right where he'd wanted it. He grinned victoriously to himself and then cast the Aguamenti again to put it out. It worked, and victorious, he flopped down behind the shed with a new book, entitled The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection.

* * *

That night, he climbed into bed and waited for father to join him for his daily reading and informal magic lesson. "Aguamenti" he announced, when Father took his seat, and Father looked at him in confusion.

"Wha'?"

"Aguamenti."

"What's tha' mean?"

"Aguamenti is a grade six spell, and it is the magical counterpart to Incendio. It will extinguish a magical fire."

Tobias sat back and regarded his son with a shrewd look and calculating look on his face. "They teach yer ter start a fire in't third year but don't teach yer 'ow ter put it out 'til sixth?" he asked quietly.

Severus' eyes narrowed slightly, worried that father was displeased. "Apparently," he said softly.

"Not very smart, tha'. Yer could do a lot o'damage in three years, startin' fires you can't put out..."

Severus nodded solemnly.

Tobias looked down at his hands, which were clenched tightly in his lap, inhaled slowly, and looked at his son. "So yer found this spell in t'sixth level book...did yer learn all t'spells in between?" he asked in an oddly tight voice.

Severus shook his head. "No...I just looked for the spell," he mumbled, abashed.

Tobias visibly relaxed and in an inexplicably cheerful voice said, "Ah...well, that's all right. We'll practice tomorrow when yer come 'ome, but what's t'next one?"

The next morning, Tobias was putting the breakfast dishes away, and Severus was scampering about, getting ready to go to his grandparents' house when Tobias called him back into the kitchen.

"Tell yer uncle, or yer grandfather, or someone that I'd speak with them when they get a chance," he wheezed.

"What's wrong, Da'?"

"It's nowt, son. Don't worry yerself 'bout it."

"All right."

After he saw his son off with well-concealed fear in the pit of his stomach and a shake of his head...Tobias didn't ever think he'd get used to the idea that grabbing a ceramic figurine would somehow transport a human being anywhere...Tobias headed off with a determined look on his face.

All day, he kept an eagle eye out for the foreman, which was complicated by the fact that the jenny jammed. He was actually half-inside the stupid thing and swearing viciously around billowing blue smoke when the foreman walked up to see what had caused such a protracted halt in production. Tobias extricated himself from the machine and paused to recover his breath before turning to his supervisor. "You can fix those?" the man asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Good to know, Snape."

"Sir, is there...tha' is, if it's convenient to yer...is there anyway I can pick up some extra shifts, mebbe on t'weekends? Yer know, for a while?"

The foreman frowned. "We've only got openings on second and third shifts," he said.

"Tha'll be fine, sir, wha'ever yer can work out."

The foreman frowned deeper. "Night work isn't for the likes of you, Tobias."

"I know sir, but...it's Christmas soon, an' my wife died, so I'd like ter get something nice fo' my son."

The foreman narrowed his eyes for a moment. "You want Friday, Saturday and Sunday?"

Tobias pursed his lips. "I'll 'ave to arrange for someone to sit wi' 'im. Can I let yer know tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Just until Christmas, right? Or two weeks before...he'll be out of school, right?"

"He's, uh...oh, right!" Tobias said nervously. "But 'is grandparents will take 'im during the day so I can work," he said quickly to cover up that he'd almost said his son wasn't in school.

"All right, Snape. I'll need to know soon though because we need to fill the shifts."

"Yes, sir, o'course. I'll try to let yer know tomorrow. Monday at t'latest."

* * *

Fortunately for Tobias, the Princes were happy to take Severus on alternate weekends, and Severus himself took agreeably enough to the change in schedule, especially as it gave him additional time with the books in the library. His father's reaction to the Incendio Spell had awakened a memory of his mother in him, and his nearly unfettered access to the impressive library provided him an opportunity to pursue an increasingly dark interest in the offensive and defensive spells in some of the books. The more he read about the Dark Arts, the more he realised that a truly adept witch or wizard could be at a significant advantage in a duel, which was apparently still a well-respected way of settling grievances in the wizarding world. It was during these long weekends, where he'd arrive on Friday morning and not leave until Monday night, that he discovered that it was possible to cast spells on inanimate objects. He threw himself into the study of such things with abandon.

Unfortunately for Tobias, working a full week at the mill, plus double shifts on the weekends, he got very little rest and found himself consuming what would surely be considered unhealthy amounts of coffee by anyone in the know had they dared ask. On several occasions, Severus caught Tobias snoring outright in the middle of their nightly reading sessions. After the third consecutive night that Tobias had jerked himself violently awake mid-snore, Severus began surreptitiously testing the Mobilius Spells at his grandparents' house, and managed to levitate the slightly wheezing Tobias into bed one night without waking him, an accomplishment he was quite proud of.

Whatever else he was, Severus was not a foolish boy, and he seized his chance. With his father safely sleeping, the boy tiptoed down the stairs, avoiding the creaky spots.

Standing in the sliver of pale light cast by a waning crescent moon that filtered through the small and dirty window in the sitting room, he took a deep breath and raised his mother's wand. Flinching at the sound of a neighbor's car door slamming, he closed his eyes and waved the wand in a full circle, then raised it as high as he could and jerked it down toward the floor while mumbling a Latin incantation. He saw a flare of metallic purple light settle around the walls before disappearing into them. He performed a similar process for several other spells, and after about half an hour, utterly exhausted, he crept back up the stairs and collapsed into bed, asleep before his head hit the pillow.

Severus was smugly proud of himself the next morning when he got to his grandparents' and made for the library to immerse himself in the books some more, but was intercepted by his grandmother. A pale and fragile looking woman with completely white hair, she beckoned him into the kitchen which was emitting tantalising smells.

"It's almost Christmas, now, Severus, and what're you gonna get for your Da', hm?" Dorian Prince asked him.

Wide-eyed, he blinked at her. "I dunno," he said, not having spared a single thought to it.

"Leave the books for now. Come learn something practical," she urged, waving him to the steaming stove.

Severus, who knew very little about cooking and food preparation, learned a great deal, and helped with the preparation of breads, biscuits, puddings, and many of the main courses the family consumed over the next couple of weeks. However, his grandmother would not let him leave the kitchen almost the entire time, and he grew restless and bored. The only reading material that was available in the kitchen was the newspaper left there by his grandfather, so Severus took to reading it during idle times in the cooking process, which typically occurred while his grandmother was cleaning up.

On December 23rd, Severus bade goodbye to his grandparents and cousins, and Dorian handed him a satchel full of treats and some delicious, fresh-baked bread for Severus to give to Tobias with their love, covered by a Stasis Charm set to expire in intervals and a Concealment Charm set to expire on Christmas morning.

Christmas morning dawned clear and cold in Huddersfield, and Tobias' nose, which wasn't entirely destroyed despite many years worth of exposure to the caustic mill chemicals, twitched as the scents of mince pies and gingerbread filled the house. Concerned that Severus was cooking without supervision, Tobias raced down the stairs without his slippers, and his feet protested when they struck the cold floor.

He found the kitchen empty, the stove off and his son in the sitting room, rather predictably on the couch with his nose in a book and his presents untouched. So engrossed in his reading material was he that he hadn't even heard his father come down the stairs. Tobias shook his head and chuckled, then went upstairs to put his slippers on his now aching feet. He returned downstairs with a happy smile...he'd managed, only just...to get the one gift he really wanted to get for Severus late yesterday, and he was sure the boy would like it.

"appy Christmas, son," Tobias said, slightly startling his son, who looked up and beamed at him.

"Happy Christmas, Da'," the boy returned and handed him a biscuit that had all the appearance of just having come out of the oven.

"Where'd yer get that, hm?"

"Gran and I made 'em!" he said happily. "For you, for Christmas. There's bread, too...for your sandwiches, for work," he said, pulling out a loaf as if to prove it.

"Ohhhh," Tobias said, groaning appreciatively. "Now I 'aven't 'ad bread like that since yer mam died. Thank you! And tell yer grandmother thank you too. Now let's see wha' Father Christmas has brung fo' yer, eh?"

Severus cast his father a sidelong glance, but grinned.

"Hey, wha's tha' now? Yer don't believe in Father Christmas, and yer can do magic? Did yer make these biscuits wi' magic?"

"No, but they'll stay fresh wi' magic!" the boy replied cheekily.

"C'mon now, get to yer presents. We're due to yer Nanny's house for Christmas dinner."

Severus opened his gifts, deliberately saving the largest parcel for last. When he opened it, he turned to his father with a slightly confused look on his face. The console radio was an extravagance Severus knew they could ill-afford.

Tobias looked at his son seriously and spoke in a frank tone. "I know yer don't get to spend much time wi' me, 'cause I'm at work so much, but now tha' it's Chrstimas I'll be 'ome more. But yer off to school soon, son, and yer sound like me when yer talk. I don't gather tha' most of t'people like yer mam talk like me...those men didn't...an' you don't need to neither. Yer listen to the news, son, an' learn to talk like they talk, or yer might 'ave problems when yer start school."

Severus nodded, gave his father a grateful hug, and went to get dressed.

Author's Notes:

A million thanks to Whitehound who spent countless hours educating me on Huddersfield in particular, Yorkshire in general, working conditions in mills, industrial towns in England and the British healthcare system, discussing the intricate details of the architecture of mill house, bathing and toilet habits of mill workers, and explaining to me about Christmas foods. This chapter is a bazillion times better for your input.

Another million thanks to Jean, who took my chapter of hate and frustration, and whipped it into shape for me, and managed to do so without harming my fragile ego! Mad-Hatter plotting FTW!

Lacey, who beta'd this for me without even having read chapter 1 yet, and was able to point things out.

Ellie and Dee (the latter who I don't even KNOW!) for fixing Tobias' speech for me. ♥♥♥

Azazello wrote "The Shipping Forecast" (as well as posting some theories about Severus' ludicrously formal enunciation which had the benefit of edjuncating me on Received Pronunciation) from which I had Tobias give Severus the radio. The story is currently available on Occlumency.

Amsev spent an inordinate amount of time trying to educate me on compound sentences and commas, a lesson I just can't seem to make stick. :S

And if I forgot anyone, smack me in the head. It wasn't intentional.

References:

<http://www.hp-lexicon.org> (of COURSE!)

<http://www.fingerlakes-yarns.com/makingyarn.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>

<http://www.behindthename.com/php/view.php?name=doireann> Eileen is described in the newsprint Hermione finds as sullen and cross. :)

Birthrights and Bank Accounts

Chapter 3 of 6

Severus' Hogwarts letter is delivered and Tobias accompanies him to Diagon Alley. They get a VERY rude surprise, but Severus manages to make a new friend.

With a barely audible "pop", a tall but wizened man appeared on the rubbish-covered bank of a dirty river. Dressed in a baggy pair of trousers and a shirt so long it could only properly be called a tunic, he rustled by unnoticed by any eyes, human or otherwise. Although the industrial area in which he'd arrived was in the middle of a sudden spectacular mid-summer thunderstorm, the man didn't seem bothered. A casual on-looker, had they been able to see him, might have decided his red-and-gold horizontally striped attire was made of a new, technologically advanced fabric as it didn't seem to be affected by the deluge, save for the fact that neither was the man's long white hair and beard. And despite the fact that he was strolling through mud and the detritus of a town quickly on its way to being forgotten, his clothing wasn't getting encrusted in dirt either.

At the top of the bank, the man paused for a moment and withdrew a very straight stick, which also appeared to be very aged (in fact, nearly as aged as the man) from the inside of his sleeve. Peering over his half-moon spectacles, he murmured something, twirling the stick fancily in his fingertips, almost as if he were trying to decide in which direction to head. Presently, he tucked the stick back into his sleeve and strode purposefully toward the narrow cobbled street, passing so skillfully through the rusted old railings that it appeared he'd walked through them. Passing the row of houses closest to the bank, he crossed a narrow alley and came out onto a second street, neatly dodging glass that had spilled from the broken lamps perched above then paused again to repeat the trick with the stick. Satisfied, he wove in and out of the streets and houses, resembling nothing so much as a cat weaving between fence posts, although the tingle of magic about halfway up the street surprised him. He finally came to rest in front of a house on a street called Spinner's End, a tribute to the mill just in the distance lazily belching smoke into the sky. Taking a last look around at the dilapidated state and occasional boarded window of some of the adjacent houses, he looked carefully at the door with the crooked number 49 nailed to it before raising his hand to rap on the door.

After a few moments, the door opened to reveal a dark-haired man with a hooked nose. Confusion flickered across his face for a moment, then as comprehension dawned on him, he stood aside to allow the other, older man entrance, apparently unfazed by the perpetually dry state of the older gentleman who, by the obvious absence of a taxi or other vehicle, had clearly spent some time in the rain.

"Ah, Tobias! I'm so gratified you remember an old man; I've come to speak with you about the secondary education of your son."

The old man stepped inside, and turned to face the resident. As he did so, a shadow in the corner flickered ever so slightly, and he turned to see a skinny, pale boy of perhaps ten or eleven, glowering at him from behind onyx eyes, his hands hidden stiffly behind his back. *His father's eyes*, thought the old man. *And his father's nose, and hair, but definitely inherited Eileen's skin.* "Ah! And you must be Severus!" he said, smiling pleasantly. "I am Albus Dumbledore . . ." and here he paused slightly, as if unsure what to say next, but recovered quickly. "I do not know if your mother or her family ever mentioned me to you?"

The boy gave no sign of recognition, but instead flicked his eyes to the man who still stood at the door, who shrugged slightly. Narrowing his eyes slightly, he looked back at the old man, and said softly "Headmaster, isn't it? And before that, Transfiguration?", in a practised, cultured voice that held none of the heavy Yorkshire accent Dumbledore knew Tobias to have.

Dumbledore beamed. "Yes, yes, I was your mother's Transfiguration professor at Hogwarts. I beg both of your pardons for barging in like this...have I interrupted anything?"

The boy didn't answer, but glanced slowly back at his father. "Nowt tha' can't wait" drawled Tobias, waving his arm in the general direction of the sitting room.

"Ah, excellent. Then we can get right to the good news!"

Severus hadn't moved a muscle except to breathe and his eyes, which looked at the old man sceptically.

"I was sorry to hear of Eileen's death," Dumbledore began formally, taking a seat on a threadbare sofa. "She was a bright student," he continued, shaking his head sadly. "I wish I could say I were surprised, but I am not."

Severus, still in the shadows in the corner, scowled. This didn't sound like good news to him.

"However!" the old man continued, when it became obvious that neither of the Snapes wished to be commiserated with. "I've come to offer Severus a position at the same school Eileen went to; although I no longer teach, I am now headmaster of that same school."

Tobias closed his eyes for a moment and wheezed. "Wha's tuition cost? A fancy place like tha', I'll not be able ter afford tuition."

"That's actually why I was sent. You see, normally, it would be the Deputy's job to come to a student's house. I don't know, Tobias, how well you knew Eileen's family?"

"Not well," Tobias answered neutrally. "Quiet lot, them. They took care o'Severus durin' t'day an' weekends, though, after Eileen died an' all."

"Ah . . . yes, they always were very modest. Hard-working, though, brilliant, and studious. Some of the best academics we've ever known."

Tobias snorted. "Airy lot, them . . ." he said contemplatively, then fell into a fit of coughing. Severus glanced at his father, and frowned nearly imperceptibly.

Dumbledore chortled. "Yes, they can be that, too. But that's not what I've come to discuss. Eileen's great-grandfather, Everard...he presided at your wedding, I believe?" Tobias merely grunted in reply. "Well, he was headmaster of Hogwarts...in fact, we became quite close as he was headmaster early in my teaching career. Therefore it falls to me, as the current headmaster, to deliver the invitation."

"I will not take charity," insisted Severus from the corner, his chin lifted in defiance. "I have been raised better than that . . . by my father...and by my mother."

Dumbledore wondered at the difference in speaking styles of father and son. Eileen, while never sloppy or unintelligible in her speech, hadn't spoken with nearly such a pronounced properness. It was as if this boy were afraid to be associated with his father, although he could not detect any untoward bad feeling between them. "I have, perhaps, not made myself clear, my dear boy. There is, indeed, a Hogwarts general fund for students who cannot afford to attend; however, that is not what I am offering you. Your great-great-grandfather, who is from a long line of very respected wizards, left a trust for all his descendants to ensure they would be able to attend Hogwarts. This is not charity...this is yours by birthright."

The boy's eyes flitted back to his father. "Wha's it pay for?" queried Tobias from the ragged armchair in which he sat.

"I beg your pardon?"

"What. Does. The fund. Pay. For." Severus interpreted, his enunciation so precise one might have thought he was teaching English to a foreigner. The boy's face was inscrutable, and although Dumbledore was taken aback by the boy's meter, his tone was not disrespectful.

Dumbledore smiled. "Well . . . everything. Uniforms, supplies and books...the school is funded by the wizarding government so there is no tuition or room and board to pay for."

"If not, Eileen said she 'ad some bank somewhere, but I 'aven't bin able ter find it."

"Ah, yes, Gringotts. I can take you there; we will need to go there anyway to withdraw money from the trust. Fortunately, it's also on Diagon Alley, in the same place as all the shops where Severus will need to buy his school supplies. I don't suppose you happen to know where Eileen kept the key?"

Bewildered, Tobias looked blankly at Severus, who nodded curtly and then slipped silently behind a door. The creaking of the old wooden architecture gave his position away as having scurried up the stairs. Dumbledore looked at Tobias, and said quietly, "If your financial situation is of concern to you, my brother runs an inn, in the village just outside where Severus will be going to school. He's recently begun looking for help...if you'd like, I can arrange a meeting between you."

"Tha's very kind o'yer, but me son's right; we don' take charity."

"It is an open offer, if you wish to consider it," Dumbledore said pleasantly, his benevolent smile not at all offended at the outright refusal.

Severus came back into the room, blanched and with a fine sheen of sweat across his brow. "It's gone, sir. . . . They, they must have taken it!" he blurted out, clearly distressed.

A look of alarm flickered briefly across Dumbledore's face. "No matter. They will have records at the bank." He turned to face the young boy, whose lips were pursed in an obvious bid to get a hold of his emotions. "Severus, why would you have refused schooling without the Prince trust? How would you have learned?"

The boy looked up sharply, his eyes darting back and forth across the old man's kindly face. "I would have taught myself. Like I have been doing," he said, scowling. "I obviously need to teach myself more, if you were able to approach the house," he spat, apparently disgusted about something.

Dumbledore's eyes widened in surprise. "*You* put up those enchantments?!" he asked.

"Of course I put them up! My father cannot, my mother is not here. What was I to do, invite them to come back!?" the boy nearly shrieked in hysteria. There was no question who "they" were.

"Severus," Dumbledore said calmly and chalked the aberration up to a reasonable use of under-age sorcery. "I do not believe you are a target of Tom or his followers."

"Tom?"

"He styles himself 'Lord Voldemort' now, but he himself is a half-blood. He may have gone after your mother, but I do not believe he will go after you."

Severus' eyes, far too advanced for his years, glittered slightly in relief and triumph, but he appeared calmer.

Dumbledore turned back to Tobias. "Will you allow me to take your son to Diagon Alley? I can only safely Side-Along Apparate one person at a time. I will bring him to a safe place and then return for you immediately. Once we are there, I will show you how to get there yourselves, but I want to get to the bank before it closes." Tobias simply nodded. Dumbledore then turned back to Severus. "Have you ever Apparated before?"

"Once," he said, in a very small voice. "When I was little . . ."

"All right, then I won't need to explain it to you," he said, offering his arm, which the boy gripped tightly. And with a slightly louder "pop!" they disappeared into mid-air.

* * *

Severus opened his eyes and looked around apprehensively, taking in the sunlight-dappled bazaar, so different from his home town, with flickering black eyes. As relieved as he was to be in the wizarding world, he was more vulnerable than he cared to think about, but he could think of no alternative. His best hope for the future was to go to Hogwarts. To go to Hogwarts he needed supplies and money, and for that he needed to be in Diagon Alley.

Dumbledore looked askance at the boy who was trying desperately to quell his trembling. Although he was gripping the old man's arm tightly enough to cut off the circulation, his face was impassive. He knew some of the boy's history, but apparently not all of it. He missed whatever made this boy so afraid. He beamed down at the boy, gently guiding him down the street, wincing silently at the boy's tight grip. "Ah, Severus! Do you see that shop on the corner there?" The boy nodded once, sharply. "That is our destination," he said pleasantly, steering the boy to an umbrella-covered table. The boy's eyes roamed about, and he paused. Finally, he tugged the table closer to the wall and sat with his back to it, ramrod straight and hands tightly clenched over the arms of the chair.

"Will you be all right here for a moment, Severus?" Dumbledore asked kindly. Eyes wide, the boy nodded curtly. Dumbledore smiled and stepped inside...Severus followed him with confused eyes; that wasn't the direction he'd expected the man to head in.

Dumbledore reappeared momentarily, tailed by a portly wizard with rosy cheeks who was bearing two large ice creams. Severus flinched slightly at the sight of the man and backed as far as he could into his chair, eyeing the newcomer warily as he placed one of them in front of him. "Severus, this is Florean Fortescue. His great-great-grandfather was also a Headmaster at Hogwarts. I thought you might like to hear more about the school, but you must promise me one thing?"

"What is that, Headmaster?" the boy inquired formally.

Fortescue's eyes darted to Dumbledore in question...Dumbledore waved him off. "You must finish that ice cream before I return with your father. I'm afraid he'd have my hide if he knew I was feeding you dessert before the main course!"

"Main course? Headmaster, I could not possibly. . . ." the boy began, but Dumbledore interrupted him.

"Nonsense! I haven't had lunch yet and I'm famished. Nobody but you, me, and Florean here need be the wiser! Florean, do refrain from telling him about the secret passages in my absence, will you? I must be able to maintain some semblance of order." And with a wink at Severus, Dumbledore swirled off, confident that the boy would be safe in Florean's capable hands despite the boy's disquieted look.

* * *

Dumbledore gave Severus enough time to eat his ice cream, but not much longer because he was concerned the boy would become alarmed at a protracted absence. He wanted to ask Tobias why the child was so on guard, but figured it was Severus' story to tell and refrained. Instead, he took some time explaining the sensation of Apparition to Tobias and brought them to a point further down the street than he'd arrived at with Severus. He took his time on the walk to the ice cream parlour, pointing out shops and telling Tobias some of the tales of the owners or patrons that he had collected during his years at Hogwarts. Tobias was gracious but reserved, although Dumbledore remembered the man to be reserved from their previous meeting.

They arrived to find Severus enthralled in a discussion about the medieval antics of Muggles and the wizarding populace of Britain, which garnered a small smile from Severus. *He looks like his mother when he smiles* Dumbledore thought silently. "Florean, this is Tobias Snape, Severus' father."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, sir," Florean said amiably, standing and offering his hand for all the world as if Tobias were a respected dignitary and not an unemployed industrial-working Muggle. "I don't suppose you three gentlemen have time for an ice cream?" he said, with a wink at Severus, who smiled and looked down.

"I'm afraid not at the moment, Florean," Dumbledore said solemnly, for all the world like he hadn't just ensured Severus had had one. "We've got to get to Gringotts, and I expect they'll close soon, and while I am famished, I'm too old to have dessert first. I'm afraid we'll have to settle for sandwiches."

"I'll be here when you're done," Florean offered with a smile. "Please don't tell me you mean to deprive this intelligent young man of an ice cream after you made him sit at the parlour all this time!" the proprietor protested in mock indignation. Severus snorted softly and shook his head at his father's questioning eyebrow, trying to conceal his smirk and mostly succeeding.

They proceeded down the cobbled street to a small shop filled with the smell of freshly baked bread and hearty spices and picked a table in the corner. Dumbledore waved his arm, indicating the two should sit first, and watched with interest as the boy immediately claimed the corner seat.

Taking his cue from his father, Severus didn't open his menu. Severus knew they could not afford such extravagances, but he could hardly complain, having just eaten an ice cream, for which Mister Fortescue had refused payment, insisting he gave one free ice cream to every child. This turned out to be a good thing since Severus hadn't any money on him anyway.

After they'd settled themselves at the table, Dumbledore looked sharply at both Tobias and Severus and then with a mischievous grin declared that this particular shop was renowned for its produce...particularly the tomatoes and pickles. Tobias turned sharply to Severus, a warning look flashing across his face, which disappeared immediately as he saw Severus' narrowed eyes, which were raking over the older man in shrewd speculation.

"... since none of the vendors on Diagon Alley take Muggle money, and of course we haven't been to the bank yet, I shall, of course, pick this up," Dumbledore was saying, as if nothing were amiss. "The stipend does assume an entire day will be spent shopping, and therefore a meal is an expected expense. So order whatever you like!" he urged.

At that moment, the shop proprietor came to take their order. Dumbledore introduced them, then ordered a roast beef for himself and looked expectantly at Tobias and Severus. Tobias, with obvious reluctance, ordered a cheese sandwich with extra pickle, and Severus ordered a ham sandwich with extra tomatoes and no lettuce, frowning slightly.

Severus was slightly discomfited. He'd spent the last couple of years reading all of his mother's old schoolbooks and all the books he could get his hands on at Prince Hall, memorising spells, charms, jinxes, hexes and curses, and the wand motions that went with them. He'd devoured Hogwarts...A History and regularly read the *Daily Prophet*, and without any friends or cousins his age to play with, began experimenting with Potions. Mindful of his mother's fate, he'd studied the most complicated and secure house defensive charms he could find, reading them repeatedly until he was confident he'd get the casting right, and used his mother's wand to cast them while his father slept. Even though the response from the wand was a bit sluggish, he'd been particularly proud of himself for mastering the skill at such a young age and with so little training, and had relaxed slightly when the Department of Magical Law Enforcement didn't appear again. He felt marginally more secure behind his locked and now warded doors, and slept more soundly than he had since his mother died.

But he couldn't shake the feeling that his very *thoughts* weren't secure, and if that were true, everything he'd learned was for naught. He made a mental note to try to find out what if anything, had happened, so he could prepare himself and prevent anything untoward from happening to him later, and he tucked in to his sandwich when it arrived, thinking silently to himself.

Dumbledore watched the boy eat, comparing him to his father and what he remembered of Eileen. His back ramrod straight, he ate slowly and precisely, taking small bites, picking his utensils up very formally and chewing deliberately and carefully (an exact 100 times per bite, Dumbledore noticed). It almost appeared as if the boy had spent his entire life learning how to eat like privileged gentry under constant threat of severe corporal punishment if he put so much as a toe out of line. He glanced at Tobias, who was devouring his meal like an industrial worker on a short break...not sloppily, but neither was he proceeding with such forced formality as his son. Severus thus far hadn't appeared to be afraid of his father or ashamed of him, but he was clearly uneasy about something. Maybe asking him questions would yield some answers? "So, Severus... what do you like to do?"

Severus' head snapped up and after he finished chewing (the prescribed 100 times, Dumbledore noticed), swallowed slowly, reached for his drink and took a small swallow, and wiped his mouth carefully before placing his hands in his lap. "I read, sir," he said simply. Dumbledore glanced at Tobias, eyebrows raised slightly.

Tobias shrugged slightly and bestowed a smile on his son. "His ma's brains, he's got, an' thanks for that an' all!" Severus returned the smile shyly. "Always got 'is nose in a book, he 'as..."

"What do you read?" Dumbledore continued, noting that the boy hadn't returned to his meal, but he had the feeling it wasn't because he was full from the earlier (illicit) ice cream.

"Everything, sir," he replied evenly.

"Such as?" Dumbledore asked with a raised eyebrow.

"At home I read my mother's books as I am not attending school currently. When father is at work, I go to my grandparents' house, and they have an extensive library."

"Your mother's parents, or your father's?"

"My mother's, sir."

"Ah yes, the Prince library is known to be well-stocked. How did you find the books there?"

"Fascinating, sir."

"Do you have a favourite topic?"

"Yes sir. Defence, sir... and Dark Arts," he replied coolly.

Dumbledore blinked. "Two separate topics? Your mother had Dark Arts books?"

"Not very many, sir. There are some at Prince Hall, though."

"What interests you about Dark Arts? Defence and Dark Arts isn't a typical combination for someone to like...they usually prefer one over the other."

Severus was silent for a minute, as if he were choosing his words carefully, and cleared his throat before he began. "Dark Arts, it seems, are frequently used to control others in some way. To understand how to properly defend yourself, I believe you need to understand the basic application of the offensive measures. However, the Dark Arts appear to be easily mutable, so a constant study would be in order."

Dumbledore blinked. "And what are your thoughts on this field of study, Tobias?"

Tobias shrugged. "I dunno. I don't e'en understand wha' he jus' said. I told yer, he's got 'is ma's brains. God knows wha' she saw in me..."

Severus turned to his father. "Brains are not everything, father. Brilliant though Mother may have been, it did not help her." Tobias just nodded sadly.

Dumbledore frowned slightly. They seemed to keep coming back to this. He'd have to address this at another time. "Have you finished your meal, Severus?"

"No sir."

"Please don't let me stop you," Dumbledore said, then turned to Tobias to talk to him about Hogwarts so Severus could finish his meal.

When the boy was done, Dumbledore laid some large gold coins on the table and rose from his seat, beckoning the two others to follow him. Severus eyed the coins carefully as he rose to follow his father and the Headmaster.

They walked toward a large, white, marble building. "This is Gringotts...the wizarding bank," Dumbledore explained for Tobias' benefit, as he was quite certain Severus had already read everything he could put his hands on, judging by his manner of speech and the earlier interview. "It's run by goblins...quite clever creatures, goblins. In fact, Hogwarts' current Head of House for Ravenclaw house, Eileen's old house . . . and Everard's, come to that," he said, with a smile at Severus, "is Professor Flitwick, and he is part-goblin."

"Is tha' safe?" questioned Tobias with a protective glance at his son.

"Yes, of course. Goblins are very trustworthy and quite capable."

Tobias just nodded, but looked unconvinced.

"This is the most secure bank in Britain. A number of Muggles keep their money here as well."

"How do they find out about the bank, sir?" enquired Severus, curiosity piqued.

"All of the ones I know about have some family member or other who is a wizard." In an unconscious imitation of his father, Severus nodded.

"Good afternoon, Griphook!" Dumbledore said pleasantly to very ugly being behind a desk. "Allow me to introduce Tobias and Severus Snape. They are Eileen Prince Snape's next of kin and would like to get into her vault. We'll also need to make a withdrawal from the Prince Family Hogwarts trust."

"I see," said Griphook, eyeing the two coldly. "And do they have Eileen's key?"

Severus glanced at Dumbledore in alarm. "Ah, no, Griphook, they do not. The key appears to have been lost. I'm sure I can provide whatever documentation you need."

"That won't be necessary," the Goblin called Griphook replied, waving his wand over father and son, eyeing Severus coldly as he flinched visibly. Apparently satisfied with whatever he found, he directed the boy to sign and fingerprint a document, which he did after a nod of approval from both his father and Dumbledore. When Griphook turned to summon a dark-skinned, bearded and very pointy goblin in unintelligible gibberish, Severus turned to Dumbledore. "Please, sir, my father needs to be able to get to the vault, too. Is there anything you can do?"

"Certainly. Griphook?" Dumbledore enquired politely. "We will need to ensure that Tobias has access to the vault as well."

"He's a Muggle, correct?"

Severus gasped and cringed, causing all three to look at him in consternation. His eyes flashed defiantly he stepped between the goblin and his father. "He is, but my mother was NOT, and he is my father and needs to be able to get into the vault!" he snapped angrily.

"His access to the vault is not in question, only we cannot take signatures, wand weights or magical signatures from Muggles. Provided he can get here, all he will need to do is walk into the bank and come to one of us for access to the vault," the goblin replied coldly, as if unaccustomed to such an outburst.

"That will be fine, Griphook. I think the boy's concern was well-warranted," Dumbledore said. "And now, I believe Mister Ragnok is waiting on us."

The three followed the swarthy-looking goblin past several doors, finally crossing the threshold of one which led into what appeared to be a mineshaft. Father and son watched somewhat uneasily as Dumbledore gracefully climbed in what, for all the world, appeared to be a mine car and eyed the old man with open alarm when he exulted in a delighted voice, "These rides are always SUCH an adventure!" Clearly, neither one were in the mood for any more adventure than they'd already had.

They found very quickly that "adventure" was putting it mildly. Tobias resolved under his breath to never go to the bank after having eaten...preferably in the last week. Severus mentally agreed and was mortified when Dumbledore offered "wait until you learn to fly on a broomstick, Severus...the broomsticks can do all this and more!"

The old man laughed and whooped, then turned around to the other human passengers, both of whom were looking distinctly green around the gills. "Oh dear," the old man said, waving his wand and casting an anti-nausea spell, for which his two companions were immediately grateful. "Well, the ride up isn't usually so . . . *wild*," he offered.

"Those coins you laid down, sir . . . the gold ones? What were they?" Severus asked, once he was brave enough to speak.

"Ah, those were Galleons. The silver ones are called Sickles...there are 17 Sickles to a Galleon, and the bronze ones are Knuts...there are 29 of those to a Sickle."

"How much is a Galleon worth?" asked Tobias, a little less bravely.

"Hm . . . the exchange rate varies, but if I recall correctly, it's typically about three to five pounds sterling," Dumbledore answered just as they slowed to a stop.

"Vault 652," intoned Ragnok nasally.

"You'll both need to remember the vault number," Dumbledore whispered to them. They nodded.

Severus watched carefully as the goblin dragged a finger down the door. "We will have a new key cut for you in a few minutes," he said as the door unlatched.

"Go on, lad," Tobias told his son with a smile. "It's yer money." Severus pulled back the vault door . . .

. . . and a mostly empty vault was revealed.

There were very few coins inside: a single silver Sickle and two bronze Knuts, (*and no gold ones*, Severus thought bitterly), and Severus' head whipped around, quickly enough to catch Dumbledore's fleeting look of alarm.

"Wha's tha' ?" Tobias said, pointing at a piece of parchment that Severus' glance into the vault had missed.

Severus spun around and grabbed the old paper, studying it intently. He took a deep breath, clenched his eyes shut trying to suppress the bitter sting of tears that threatened to break through, and crumpled the parchment in his hand, shaking his head angrily. "Nothing," he said bitterly. "It's nothing," he insisted.

"Severus, may I see that?" Dumbledore queried kindly. Severus shook his head, both fists and jaw tightly clenched. "Please, may I see it?" he insisted.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, the boy looked up at the old man. Lower lip quivering, he slowly handed the paper to him. Tobias looked at his son in alarm and strode over to him. "Wha's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's nothing," he repeated, burying his face in his father's chest, and resolving to make the bastard pay.

Dumbledore glanced at the two of them, then, satisfied that the boy was in the best hands, uncrumpled the parchment.

No wizarding gold for blood traitors, Muggles and their ill-begotten half-blood spawn!

Dumbledore sighed and shook his head sadly. "Thank you, Ragnok," Dumbledore said. "Do we need to be upstairs to make the withdrawal from the Trust, or do we do that at another vault?"

"Withdrawals from trusts are made in the office," Ragnok replied in a bored voice, heading back to the car and indicating they should follow.

Dumbledore waved his wand and the vault door slammed shut, and clambered into the car after Severus and Tobias.

"Wha' jus' 'appened there?" Tobias asked when the cart started moving.

Dumbledore sighed. "It would appear that the men who killed your wife took her key and raided the vault. I will see what I can do about getting the money refunded to you, but it is frustrating and upsetting." Tobias just nodded solemnly and shot a look of sympathy at his son, who looked utterly miserable.

"No 'fense, sir, but yer know I 'ave ter ask. Is't safe for me son ter go to this school o' yours?"

Severus' head snapped up in alarm. "Da', I HAVE ter go!" he pleaded, slipping into more familiar speech. "Don't . . . " he said, before Dumbledore held up his hand to stall him.

"You ask a good question, Tobias, and I would have thought ill of you had you not asked. To answer honestly, I must tell you that a school like Hogwarts does, indeed, have its dangers, but I honestly believe that it is in Severus' best interest to be schooled there. As well you know, the wizarding world is in the middle of a war. Hiding from that fact will not protect you or your son, and his greatest chance for success within the wizarding world is to be educated, and he will have the opportunity to make friends."

Tobias nodded. "Well, 'e's got such a talent, such brains...it don' seem fair ter keep 'im from going to the school, 'specially seein' as 'e wants ter go, an' it's paid for, an' all..."

His father's assurance of schooling given, Severus relaxed slightly and sniffled.

They arrived back in the bank and made the arrangements for the withdrawal from the trust in the amount required for Severus' first year expenses, then made their way back out to Diagon Alley.

"Now, Severus," Dumbledore smiled, "I know you said you like to read, so let us go to Flourish and Blotts first to pick up your schoolbooks." Despite the unpleasant happenings of earlier in the afternoon, that was able to garner a small smile from the boy. They arrived at the bookstore, and Dumbledore deftly selected the books the boy would need under the boy's watchful gaze. He picked up a few of them and thumbed through them rather deliberately, then put five of them back on the shelf.

"I already have these," he said to Dumbledore's questioning glance.

"Don't you want new ones? You can afford it."

"No . . . my copies are fine, and this one," he said, holding up Elementary Potion Making by Libatius Borage, "has fewer recipes than my copy of the same book."

"How do you know that?" Dumbledore asked.

"Because I have already memorized these books," the boy replied simply. "May I get another book instead?" he asked both the headmaster and his father. Tobias shrugged, and Dumbledore nodded. Severus walked to the front of the store to pick out his book, then returned with Compendium of Common Curses and slipped it in the cauldron Tobias was carrying.

They continued shopping, making Slug and Jiggers their second-to-last stop. Once again, Severus astonished Dumbledore with his exacting scrutiny of the ingredients, returning two objects to the shelf and exchanging them for what he deemed to be more acceptable substitutes.

Their last stop at Diagon Alley was Ollivander's. Severus initially protested, saying he had his mother's wand, but Dumbledore would hear nothing of it. "It is not unknown to have a wand passed down, and you may well find that your mother's wand is best suited for you, but it is much better to have your own wand," he explained, guiding them to the door.

"Makers o'fine wands since 382 BC'," recited Tobias from the sign hanging above the door. "Yer sure they got t'process down? Seems like they migh' need s'more practice..." Dumbledore laughed, and even Severus grinned.

"Ah, Professor McGonagall! What a delight to see you here!" Dumbledore said jovially as he entered to see a tartan-clad, severe-looking witch with her black hair wound tightly into a bun. With her were two adults clad in Muggle attire, looking proud but thoroughly overwhelmed, a pale girl of perhaps fifteen with dark hair and a scowling face that could only kindly be described as equine, and a pretty, younger girl with flaming red hair and almond-shaped, emerald eyes, who could not possibly have a happier look on her face.

"Headmaster Dumbledore, what a pleasant surprise," the woman drawled in a deep Scottish brogue. "This is the Evans family...their daughters Petunia and Lily . . ."

Severus lost track of the conversation as the red-haired girl turned to him and smiled delightedly at him. "Hi!" she chirped delightedly. "Are you going to go to Hogwarts this year?"

"Um . . . yes."

"I'm so sorry, I didn't get your name."

"Severus . . . Severus Snape, and you are Lily Evans?"

"Yeah, it's my first year at Hogwarts, so I just got my wand!" she chirped again, producing the wand as if he needed proof.

"It will be my first year at Hogwarts as well, so I too am here for my wand," Severus replied *stupidly*, he thought to himself. *Why else would he be in a wand shop?*

"Is that man your father? You look just like him!" Severus nodded. "Where's your mum?"

"She's dead," he replied dully.

"Oh no!" Lily said, whipping around and laying a compassionate hand on his shoulder, which Snape looked at in alarm. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

"It's all right . . . you didn't kill her," he replied.

"Who is that other man?"

"Albus Dumbledore...he used to teach Transfiguration, before Professor McGonagall did. He's Headmaster now."

"Wow," Lily replied, with a look of respect to her new friend. "And I thought I was special, given that I got a visit from the Deputy Headmistress. *You* warranted a visit from the Headmaster himself!"

Snape snorted. "Not for anything I did, I assure you. My great-great-grandfather was headmaster of Hogwarts, and apparently a friend of the Headmaster's. So it fell to him to deliver the message."

"Oh," Lily said, "Oh, no . . . my parents are leaving; I have to go. See you at school?"

"I look forward to it," Snape replied with a wistful look as she scampered after her parents and sister. His attention on the retreating girl, he missed his father's look of amusement entirely.

"How may I help you, young man?" said a grey-haired man with sharp silver eyes, stepping into Severus' field of vision, as the boy had been oblivious to his earlier requests.

Severus shook his head sharply as if to clear it and blinked several times to focus his eyes, coming to rest on the man's wizened face. Behind him, Tobias laughed silently, and Dumbledore looked on with a grin. "Oh. I, uh . . . I need a wand."

"Your mother was Eileen Prince, correct?" the man said, setting his magical tape measure to its task.

"Yes sir."

"Ah yes. 9 inches, hawthorn and unicorn hair. Let's see, here I have an ash and unicorn hair, 10 inches. Give it a wave."

Severus obligingly aimed the wand at a chair in the corner, intent on flipping it over. It burst into splinters. He scowled. The next wand he tried, he tried to sweep the resulting mess into a pile; instead, the shards flew directly at him. Dumbledore hastily cast a *Protego* to prevent the boy from becoming impaled. This went on in a similar vein for some time with Mister Ollivander finally frowning and bringing a wand out from under the counter. "Try this," he said. "Ebony and dragon heartstring, 13 and a quarter inches. Good for defence, dueling and . . . dark arts" he said with an almost inaudible whisper.

Severus reached forward to grasp the wand and immediately felt the difference. This wand vibrated in his hand. He gave it a short flick, and the splinters flew back into a fully formed chair, as if it were brand new. He turned to face his father and the headmaster with a triumphant smirk.

"That will be nine Galleons," Mister Ollivander intoned from behind the counter with an indecipherable look on his face. Tobias fished nine of the golden coins out of the money bag he was carrying and handed the other man the money.

"Now, I will show you the two entrances to Diagon Alley from the Muggle world," Dumbledore said as they exited the shop. He took them through a brick archway to the Leaky Cauldron. "There's also a Floo stop at Diagon Alley and at the Leaky Cauldron."

"No!" Severus said in alarm.

"No?" asked Dumbledore, confused.

"The Floo . . . anyone can get in, correct?"

Dumbledore frowned. "Generally, yes, but restricted ones are not unheard of."

"I don't want a Floo connection," Severus insisted. Dumbledore looked at Tobias, who just shrugged.

"Floo...tha's t'fire thing, righ'? T'Ministry took us off it after Eileen died...summat 'bout a security risk. But as I'm not goin' ter use it, do wha' he says."

"Very well. I think it will be better for you to have the Floo connection, Severus, because you will need to come back to London to take the school train."

"I'll get here some other way."

Dumbledore shrugged, but nodded.

Dumbledore showed them the exits, or more properly, entrances, to Diagon Alley from Muggle London...the one at the Leaky Cauldron as well as the one at the bank. "Now, Severus, the Hogwarts Express leaves from Kings Cross Station on September the first at eleven A.M. sharp. If you prefer to come to Diagon Alley first, as long as you are at the Leaky Cauldron by 10:00 A.M., the Knight Bus will bring you and any other students that arrive here to the station." Severus just nodded. "Now, before we go, I fancy an ice cream!" Dumbledore declared, heading back towards Fortescue's. They sat inside this time, following Severus to a corner table where he predictably took the corner seat, and Florean brought three sundaes for them. Severus eyed his warily, but, with a glance to both his father and the headmaster, dutifully began eating it. When he finished, he sat back, feeling distinctly queasy from the sugar overload, and fervently hoped they wouldn't be headed back to the bank, as he was quite certain he'd completely lose control of his stomach if they did.

Tobias raised a knowing eyebrow to his son, who returned his gaze frankly without the smallest shred of guilt. The older man snickered at his son. Dumbledore smiled genially at both of them, then waved Florean over. "Will you keep Severus company until I return?" Florean looked delighted and sat down to resume their earlier discussion, while Dumbledore waved his wand to shrink the purchases for the day, then took Tobias' arm and Disapparated with the man. When he returned, he asked covertly "is there anything else you would like to get while you are here, Severus?" The boy shook his head solemnly and rose, thanking Mister Fortescue formally for his hospitality. Turning to Dumbledore, he grabbed the older man's arm, and closed his eyes for the Disapparition.

When they arrived back in Yorkshire, Severus immediately glanced around, visually inspecting all the doors and windows in his immediate area. "Nothing is here, Severus, that should not be. Would you like me to reinforce your security for you?" Dumbledore asked kindly.

"Yes, please," the boy said simply, then watched intently as the old man performed the spells, committing them to memory. When the old man completed his intricate magic, he turned to the boy and his father.

"If you two won't be needing anything else, I will take my leave," he asked politely, then replied to their twin shaking heads, "Very well. I will see you on the first of September, Severus. Do you have any questions before I go?"

Severus shook his head, and in unison with his father, moved as if to walk the old man to the door. "Ah, that won't be necessary, I can leave from here," Dumbledore smiled. "Until we meet again, then!" he said and disappeared with a soft pop.

* * *

Author's Notes:

Jean helped me out of a bind with some major plotting here, as did Whitehound. Whitehound also gave a lot of effort to betaing this and general Yorkshire education. This chapter would be about a tenth of the quality without the two of them.

Kay went through and "Northern'd" the accent for me, and then Ellie went through and narrowed it down to Yorkshire! Someone send that poor woman some wood...they've been under so much rain lately that I fear she needs to build a boat!

Amsev deserves to be canonised for putting up with my complete lack of comma comprehension (which only gets worse the more I try to understand it). *facepalm*

I'm quite positive I'm forgetting someone...that's what I get for failing to take notes as they happen. *headdesk*

Arrivals and Departures

Chapter 4 of 6

Severus arrives at Hogwarts

Author's Note: This chapter and the next are really like two parts of the same chapter, but most of the archives get a little glitchy when you go over 10,000 words in a chapter, so I've split them up. (Plus, I, uh . . . haven't written the other half yet . . . >_>)

And I'm terribly sorry about the delay but I completely fail at commas.

Severus Snape yelped and fell backward over his trunk, slamming the back of his head into the hard train platform. He lay there for a moment, dazed, before shaking his head to clear it and scrambling unsteadily to his feet. Taking aim at his attacker, he let loose a vicious Blasting Hex which hit true, but his attacker's friend let loose a Jelly-Legs Jinx that caused him to trip again. He fell forward over the trunk this time and slammed his face into the platform, managing to break his nose, give him a fantastic black eye, knock two of his teeth loose and split his lip for the trouble. His eyes watered from the repeated blows to his head. His nose and mouth dripping blood and tears streaming down his face, Severus leapt up fired off two Jelly-Fingers Jinxes followed by two Sponge-Knee Jinxes and was just about to bind the hapless miscreants to the rail when he heard a surprised voice shout, "I say! Did that first year just cast that spell?"

His head reeling, he spun around, glaring from between his puffy and watering eyes to face the new threat. He held his wand at the ready, spitting blood out of his mouth and sniffing in a vain attempt to reduce the blood flow from his streaming nose.

"What . . . is going on here?" drawled a much older boy in shiny and flowing black robes with very detailed green and silver embroidery on them. He was tall, with blond hair and a very pointed face, and spoke with the authority of one who is used to being obeyed. He had a green and silver badge pinned to his chest which bore a large "H".

Severus turned his head to the side to spit out another mouthful of blood and sniffed fruitlessly again.

"Lookit 'im, James, the pathetic crybaby!" laughed a dark-haired boy lying on the platform, who was pawing uselessly at his wand. Severus whirled around to scowl at him again, his own wand still raised.

"There will be no dueling on the station platform; put down your wand," the older boy ordered. "And five points from all of your houses for each of you once you get Sorted."

"Sirius!" snapped a beautiful blonde girl to the immediate right of the older boy. "Get off the floor! And stop starting trouble. You've already lost points for Slytherin house, and you're not even IN it yet!"

"He started it?" the older boy demanded. "You are certain, Narcissa?"

"Yes...I saw the whole thing. And who is this one, Lucius?" the girl called Narcissa asked, indicating Snape. "He is quite talented, but he doesn't look familiar."

Snape spat again; his mouth kept filling with blood. He didn't speak, figuring that saying such a sibilant name with a mouth full of blood would probably be considered rude.

The boy called Lucius, no longer distracted by the dialogue, aimed his own wand at the bleeding boy in front of him. Alarmed, Severus stepped back (mindful of the trunk this time) and, with a precipitous glower, raised his own wand and conjured a shield. "I am *going* to heal your face, silly boy," the older boy said, lowering his wand all the same.

Snape looked at him for a few moments, eyes darting across the blond boy's face. Turning to spit out yet another mouthful of blood, he lowered his wand and his shield. Taking that as assent, Lucius raised his wand again and cast a double-strength *Episkey* at the younger boy. Shaking his head and spitting a final time, Severus looked at him and mumbled a thanks.

"Since you did not start this, you will lose no points for your house. My name is Lucius Malfoy, and I am Head Boy. This is my girlfriend Narcissa Black. Narcissa, take him to our carriage while I deal with these other miscreants," he said, wheeling off with fire in his eyes.

"Come on," Narcissa said kindly.

"I do not wish to intrude," Snape said, feeling incredibly uncomfortable.

"Nonsense," she said, smiling broadly at him. "Besides, I have to help you clean your face. I'm sure Lucius would like to speak with you, as well, as soon as he's done with his duties."

Severus saw no alternative and certainly none that was attractive. Shrugging, he followed the blonde and dragged his trunk behind him.

"Hang on," she said, chanting "*Locomotor Trunk!*" The trunk levitated into the train and onto the luggage rack which hovered above the upholstered seats.

They took seats in the car. "Will you let me clean your face?" Narcissa asked, and Severus just nodded. He watched silently and not a little apprehensively as she raised her wand, softly casting *Tergeo* on his soiled skin. It was warm and soothing, and he closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation.

"Thank you very much," he said, speaking slowly and carefully around his loose teeth.

"Is there something else wrong?" she asked, frowning at him. He shook his head no, truly not wanting to draw any more attention to himself.

"Why are you holding your mouth like that, then?" she frowned.

"My teeth are loose," he mumbled.

She made an angry clucking noise with her tongue but raised her wand again, and he felt his teeth firmly cement themselves back into his jaw. He prodded them a bit with his tongue and then gave her a small smile. "Thanks."

"I apologise for my cousin. His parents were far too lenient with him, I believe," she replied.

"Your cousin?" he asked, confused, but grateful for the conversation because it gave him something besides his relatively opulent surroundings to focus on.

"The boy who attacked you. Sirius Black," she said with an eye-roll, "is my first cousin." She sighed. "So much for superior breeding," she said with a grin.

Snape smirked slightly.

"I didn't get your name?"

"Severus Snape, miss," he replied formally.

She laughed, a beautiful trill. "You don't have to be all that formal, silly. Just call me Narcissa." Snape nodded, not really wanting to speak. He'd seen more people in the past hour than he'd seen in the past two months and was feeling a bit overwhelmed.

At that moment the refreshments cart came by, pushed by an elderly witch sporting a pointed hat. Severus thought she looked ridiculous. His wizard relatives never wore those hats. "Anything from the trolley, dears?" she asked in a tone that made want to him grind his teeth.

"Yes, please. Pumpkin Juice, Pumpkin Pasties and Cauldron Cakes, please," Narcissa replied.

"Two?"

"No, three . . . Lucius will be joining us soon."

"No, no, I am fine, thank you," Severus protested. He was unwilling to be in the debt of people he didn't know any more than he already was, and he didn't have money to squander.

"No, it's all right, this is a tradition for us," Narcissa said, turning to him in obvious alarm. "Please . . . ?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you, though," he insisted.

Narcissa turned back to the witch pushing the trolley. "Two, then, I guess," she shrugged, paid the witch a whole Galleon. It was far more than the quoted price, yet Narcissa waved off the change. Severus looked on, trying to suppress his jealousy.

Not a minute later, Lucius Malfoy walked in. "This is Severus Snape, Lucius," Narcissa said, delighted at his appearance. Snape rose to greet him, but Lucius indicated he should be seated even before he started to rise, giving Severus the impression people frequently leapt to their feet when he entered a room. The older boy's cold grey eyes took in the scene in the compartment, and he turned to level a demanding glare at Narcissa. "He didn't want anything, Lucius...I DID offer. I'm not completely unmannered, you know," she admonished.

Lucius turned to him and fixed him with a quelling look. "Ridiculous. You'll eat with us," he insisted and swept from the cabin after the trolley, returning shortly with another round of refreshments. As they were already paid for, Severus could hardly protest.

"So," Lucius began as they sat to eat, "Do you know which house you'll be Sorted into?"

"My family tradition is Ravenclaw," Severus hedged, hoping that would not offend his two new friends. He'd guessed by the older boy's attire that he was in Slytherin, and the girl had intimated that she was as well. "My cousin Broderick Bode was Head Boy," he offered, trying to distract them from his half-Muggle parentage. He remembered little of his mother, but that she had married a Muggle was obviously not well-thought of in some circles, and he dared not jeopardise his standing so soon.

"Ah, I remember him," Lucius replied with a pleasant look on his face. "That was my first year at Hogwarts. They always give us a run for our money, the Ravensclaws. In fact, this year the Head Girl is a Ravenclaw. It's a good House to be Sorted into. You certainly appear to have the intellect for it, although I obviously prefer Slytherin, and we'd be delighted to have you," Lucius replied with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. Severus smiled politely back.

"The classes are set for the first three years, right?" he asked, knowing the answer but desperate not to fall into an awkward silence.

"Two," Narcissa offered. "Then you can start taking electives, or drop classes you don't like, at least to a certain extent. Although, dropping classes that early on means you have to have a fairly good idea what you want to do after you leave school. It's better to take more classes; that way you have more options."

"I'm taking almost all of them," Lucius said. "Except," he said with a sneer, "Muggle Studies."

"Are there any classes that I shouldn't take?" Severus ventured cautiously.

"That depends entirely upon your interests. Divination can be pretty stupid, but it's usually an easy grade, at least up until the OWL and NEWT testings," Narcissa replied. "By that point, you have to have actual talent, but in the beginning, just being able to recite the basics will work. History is a complete bore. It's taught by a ghost, the excitement of which you will get over in the first ten seconds of his opening lecture." Lucius snickered appreciatively. "Nobody but the most devoted take that after fifth year. Honestly, a number of us make it a habit to skive off the class because we learn more when we teach each other than we do in the lectures. Astronomy is all right if you're into that sort of thing. It has some interesting practicals even if it does mess up your sleep and study timetable. Care of Magical Creatures and Herbology can be very interesting, but," she said with a frown, "they can also be very messy. I don't like Potions, because they are noxious," she said with a wrinkled nose. "Defence is a joke." Severus raised his eyebrows at this. This pronouncement went completely contrary to his own opinions of the topic. "Well, there's a new teacher every year, each less competent than the last. To make matters worse, there's absolutely no continuity to the curriculum. Merlin only knows how any of us pass our OWLs," Narcissa explained.

"Dumbledore should learn to accept qualified teachers when they offer for the position," Lucius muttered derisively. Snape's eyes flickered to him . . . This sounded like an interesting story.

"Charms and Transfiguration are required courses till the end of fifth year and are fairly interesting and very useful. I'm not taking Arithmancy or Ancient Runes, but Lucius is," Narcissa concluded, ignoring the interruption.

"And how do you find them?" Severus enquired of Lucius politely.

"Interesting, but very challenging. I'll show you my textbooks if you like."

Severus shook his head. "Thank you, but there will be no need...my mother took both of those classes, and I have seen her books." The couple exchanged an impressed look.

"Are you planning on taking them, then?"

"Hm." Severus thought about how to respond to that for a moment while he sipped at his pumpkin juice. He wasn't used to drinking anything so cold. It hurt his teeth, and he

wasn't sure he liked the flavour all that much. "I haven't decided yet. I don't want to make decisions about a curriculum I'm unfamiliar with."

"Are you sure your family are Ravensclaws, Severus? That was *avery* Slytherin answer," Lucius laughed in appreciation as the countryside raced by outside the window. Severus merely shrugged, wishing neither to commit himself nor to offend.

"You must tell me," Lucius said engagingly. "Where did you learn to duel? Did Bode teach you? I remember him being more the academic than exceptionally athletically gifted, and you have good reflexes."

"Ah, no . . . We are not close. My father taught me the spells, but I taught myself to duel," he hedged.

Lucius' eyes widened in appreciation. "We'll make a Slytherin of you, yet!"

"I was wondering if you could explain something to me, please?" Severus asked, his casual tone belying his nerves. Lucius nodded. "If Slytherin is the house of the pure-bloods, then why wasn't Broderick sorted there?"

"Slytherin is the house of *ambition*. There are pure-bloods amongst all the houses, and not every Slytherin is a pure-blood . . ."

"Don't tell my sister that!" Narcissa interrupted with an eye roll.

". . . although I am fairly certain Mud..*ahem*, excuse me, 'Muggle-borns' are precluded from being sorted into Slytherin," Lucius concluded with an eye-roll, ignoring Narcissa's interruption.

"You have a sister that goes to Hogwarts?" Severus asked her politely.

"Well, my sister Andromeda is in Lucius' year, and my sister Bellatrix graduated two years ago. But I was talking about Bellatrix...she's a zealot."

"Now, now, Narcissa . . . It is not nice to talk about . . . your sister . . . in that way . . ." Lucius admonished, although it appeared from his expression that he really wished to say something else.

"Well. She IS! She won't even speak to Andromeda, Lucius, her OWN blood!" Narcissa insisted, a flush climbing her pale cheeks.

"Andromeda is disgracing herself...and her family...by consorting with that Mudblood...and a Hufflepuff to boot! And since when has the Noble and Ancient House of Black approved of such behaviour within its ranks?" Lucius demanded. The couple seemed to have forgotten Severus utterly in their argument.

Narcissa rolled her eyes again. "We played together when we *were* children, Lucius. When Mother and Father went on holiday and left Bella in charge, Bella got sick, and Andi nursed her back to health AND took care of me and never bothered Mother or Father about it. I just think that should count for something! Let her use the Mudblood for fun...it's not as if she's going to *marry* him!" she said defiantly and turned to look out the window with a derisive sniff.

"So," Lucius continued, turning back to Severus as if nothing were amiss. "Sirius Black tells me that the altercation on the platform started because you were defending the honor of that Mudblood."

"Mudblood?" Severus asked in abject confusion, wondering how on earth Andromeda's boyfriend got dragged into the conversation. He wouldn't even recognize the boy on sight. Nor, for that matter, would he recognize Narcissa's sister. Either of them.

Lucius affixed him with a severe glare. "The redheaded girl, with the green eyes?"

Oh. Lily. "Yes?"

"She's a Mudblood. Born to Muggles. No wizarding blood whatsoever," Lucius explained with a scowl on his face as if every word were a disgrace.

Snape blinked. "Oh. I, ah, I didn't know. I met her on Diagon Alley, and she was quite nice to me, unlike those two boys. Although I confess, I only spoke to her for a minute or so. Her ancestry didn't come up at all."

"Was she with the Deputy Headmistress?" Lucius demanded.

Snape thought about it, forcing his mind to remember walking into Ollivander's and the subsequent introductions. "Come to that, I believe she was. Why?"

Lucius made a noise of disgust. "For future reference, only the *Mudbloods* are escorted to Diagon Alley by the Deputy," he sneered with a derisive look.

Snape thought fast. "Ah. I did not know that. I was there with the Headmaster and so thought nothing of it."

Narcissa's head whipped back to him, belying her assumed indifference in the conversation. '*Dumbledore* went to Diagon Alley with a student?!"

Snape nodded and sipped his juice again with an air of assumed casualness. "Yes. My great-great-grandfather was Headmaster of Hogwarts early in *Dumbledore's* career, and, apparently, it was a personal favour," he said, shrugging and leaving the part about the Prince trust out of it entirely.

"A completely understandable oversight, in that case," Lucius conceded with a new look of respect for the younger boy. "She is, at least, easy to look at."

If looks alone could kill, Lucius would have been a smoking hole in upholstery of the seat after the glare Narcissa turned on him. "Narcissa, darling," Lucius drawled with an amused but condescending smirk. "The girl is *eleven*. So is he. I simply am approving of his visual taste in women. She IS pretty," Lucius consoled charmingly.

Barely mollified, Narcissa turned back to the window with a snort, her long hair swaying slightly with the rocking motion of the train.

* * *

Under the protective eyes of Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black, Severus Snape stepped confidently off the train once the bright red Hogwarts Express arrived at Hogsmeade station, following Lucius' detailed instructions to do so given to him inside the compartment as he changed into his robes. Narcissa and Lucius had glanced questioningly at his second-hand robes but kept silent, and Severus had offered no information, not wanting to damn himself. A fog so thick Severus couldn't see more than a hundred feet ahead of him blanketed the area.

Severus hovered near Lucius until he saw his pair of tormentors clamber into a boat with a sickly looking boy with light brown hair clad in robes even shabbier than the ones Severus was wearing. That boy was followed by an uneasy looking, chubby boy with a pointed yet snub nose, mousy hair and buck teeth. Satisfied that he'd be able to choose a seat unmolested, he settled himself in at the back of a boat at the rear of the haphazard formation and was surprised and not a little alarmed when the red-haired girl he'd met on Diagon Alley joined him. "I looked for you on the train," she said, gazing at him with a mixture of concern and admiration. "Thank you for sticking up for me. You clean up well," she said, smiling at him.

He snorted. "Of all the spells I know, household spells are not among them. The Head Boy's girlfriend used magic to clean my face."

"Did you see that man?" Lily whispered in a scandalised voice, pointing to the boat in the lead. "He's HUGE!"

Severus nodded. "He's the groundskeeper and part giant, my mother said," he replied then flinched when an enormous tentacle lazily broke the surface of the lake and uncurled, resembling nothing so much as an enormous, stretching octopus.

At that point, there was a gasp from the boats ahead. They turned to look and gasped themselves. The castle loomed into view: dark, majestic and mysterious. With all of the new students lost in their own reverie, the rest of the trip to the castle was silent.

The severe-looking Deputy Headmistress awaited them on the other side of the heavy oak doors and gave them a brief introduction then bid them all to wait quietly. Severus made a point to keep to the back and close to the stone walls lest he be surrounded by his tormentors, who he could tell, were actively searching for him. For the second time in his life, he found himself thanking the powers that be that he was relatively small, making it was fairly easy for him to hide behind the other students.

Thankfully, at that moment Professor McGonagall returned and summoned them all into the Great Hall which was even more breathtaking than the descriptions and pictures in Hogwarts: A History had indicated. And nothing could have prepared him for the sheer length of the tables lining the Hall.

Severus listened carefully to the song from the Sorting Hat, not at all alarmed that an old, ratty, wizarding cap proceeded to sing. Once the Sorting began, he observed his surroundings carefully. Someone named Avery was sorted into Slytherin house, to the raucous cheers of the table on the far left, at the head of which Lucius Malfoy sat with his girlfriend to his right.

"Black, Sirius . . ." called Professor McGonagall, and in response there was a resounding hiss in the Hall. Severus noticed that Lucius waved his hand in a way that indicated that Avery should make room for company. *Black's Sorting is a foregone conclusion, then*, Snape observed, suddenly quite glad that his family tradition was for Ravenclaw. He didn't want to deal with the . . .

Suddenly, the entire Great Hall suddenly rang out with a scandalised gasp that seemed to come from everywhere at once. It was followed immediately by a silence so loud it hurt the ears. Snape blinked and looked around, trying to figure out what happened, and ran through the last few moments of what he'd heard but not been paying close attention to. *Hm . . . Avery had been sorted into Slytherin, then Black had been called to be Sorted, then the Hat had called out . . . Oh wait, that was it, wasn't it?*

"Gryffindor," the Hat had said. Yet Narcissa had thought her cousin would go to Slytherin house. Snape raised his eyebrows and watched as Black sauntered off the chair haughtily to the table on the far right with a self-satisfied smirk on his face. Turning his gaze to the Slytherin table, he casually observed Narcissa's ashen face and Lucius' angry glare of shock. Another girl, who looked a great deal like Narcissa, but with dark hair, also looked very nearly ill. *Well, well, well.*

It wasn't long before Lily Evans was called. Snape noted a hissing coming from the Slytherin table as her name was announced. She, too, was sorted into Gryffindor, as were the three boys that were in the boat with Black. Snape felt bad for her, but there was little he could do about it himself.

A smirking boy with deep blue eyes, dark brown hair and an angelic face by the name of Evan Rosier made his way to the stool next, making Snape's blood run cold. Grinning knowingly at Snape, he placed the hat on his head as if it were a crown. Announced for Slytherin, he grinned triumphantly.

Then McGonagall called his own name, and the response from the table on the far right mortified him. "More like 'Snivellus!'" Black cackled to his new friends, who had all joined him around the table and guffawed appreciatively at the joke. Casting him a hateful glare, Severus sat upon the rickety stool and adjusted the flimsy hat so he could see. The two tables in the middle looked supremely unconcerned, but he knew the one with the blue and bronze was the Ravenclaw table. He was a slightly miffed that they had so little apparent interest in him, even if they were unlikely to know his entire family had been Ravensclaws from his surname which was, of course, his Muggle father's name. The table on what was now his far left held Black and his cronies, and the table on what was now his far right held Lucius Malfoy and the other Slytherins, who were alternately looking at him with great interest and looking at the Gryffindor table with great disgust.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes, sat up straight, placed his hands stoically over his thighs, and exhaled slowly, the very picture of reserved calm. He almost twitched when he heard a voice in his ear. *"My, my, my, what have we here? Old tradition of Ravenclaw, yes, and certainly the intellect for it.* Severus couldn't help but smirk slightly at this. *"An almost blinding loyalty, how interesting. And bravery, my goodness, nearly unsurpassed."*

He flinched, probably visibly at this and found he didn't care. *"NO!"* he thought, insistently. *"NOT GRYFFINDOR. ANYTHING but Gryffindor! I'd rather Slytherin before Gryffindor!"* he declared mentally, thinking fervently of Black and company.

*"Not Gryffindor, eh? **Slytherin**, you think? That might not be wise, you know. It will put you right into the nest of snakes . . ."*

"I don't care. Besides, it will be easier for me to learn about them that way"

*"Hm, well, if you're sure, then you might do very well in**SLYTHERIN!**"*

He opened his eyes slowly and allowed a sneer to cross his face. He rose from the stool carefully and turned his attention to the Slytherin table. Lucius Malfoy was eyeing him with a satisfied look and motioned him over. No fool he, Severus accepted the invitation and sat with his chosen group, taking note of those who scowled at the state of his attire. "Severus here has quite the proficiency of the Dark Arts," Lucius announced as the last boy, Wilkes, made his way over to the table. "I do believe he could teach most of you a thing or two. We shall have to ask him for a demonstration when we get to the common room."

He cast a shrewd look at Lucius and thanked him politely for the compliment. Quite aware that he was on display and that his very life might depend on his behaviour over the next several hours, he was on his absolute best manners, careful to not make a *faux pas*. He also observed everything vigilantly, carefully, but slowly, absorbing the behaviour of others.

By the end of the meal, his nerves were on absolute edge, and he had begun to second-guess his choice. He'd eaten very little, as a result, despite the delicious offerings at the table. He didn't know if he'd last seven more hours like this, much less seven more years. But his decision had already been made. By the time they arrived in the Slytherin common room, he was so agitated that he was desperate to curse or hex anything just to blow off some steam. For all the irony, he was at once thankful to Lucius for arranging the demonstration, as he was apprehensive about his performance. He'd had little opportunity to test his skills in combat and was worried about how he'd perform.

He was right to worry. The Slytherins were a ruthless bunch, and they surrounded him in the green-hued common room with predatory looks on their faces. Lucius declared that none of his own classmates could compete against him, and a boy named Yaxley who was much older than Severus argued this point so vociferously that Lucius finally instructed them to duel each other. Severus held his own, barely, up until the point where the older boy Summoned a statuette from the mantle over the fireplace, cracking him in the back of his head and making him fall to the floor. Yaxley laughed, dropping his guard, which provided Severus the opportunity to cast a string around his feet and yank on it, bringing the boy down next to him, to the sincere amusement of everyone around them.

Snickering, Lucius then dispatched the Carrow twins at him. By this point, Severus was feeling greatly beyond his depth. His expertise was almost entirely in combat and defensive spells; the older students were far more capable in Transfiguration and non-combat charms which could be modified. By the time he was done with the twins, his exhaustion was taking its toll. His responses were slower, and he was getting hit more frequently than not. When a few seventh-years joined in, he was in serious trouble. He was running out of curses, hexes and jinxes to throw, and he'd already exposed his strengths. He was beginning to feel distinctly singled out for ridicule. His oaths to his family, taken in silence, were the only thing that kept him standing. In another circumstance, he would have allowed himself to feel proud for getting in even a few jabs against the seventh years, much less for remaining in a posture that might have passed for upright.

When the ordeal was finished, he was entirely too exhausted to see the looks of renewed respect the sixth and seventh years were casting upon him. The fourth and fifth years were sneering at him with cold indifference, and the first, second, and third years with outright hostility. Trying to quell his shaking, he excused himself to the lavatory and promptly threw up the entire contents of his stomach. He dry-heaved for ten minutes more before he finally collapsed on the cold and damp tile. The exhaustion, energy expenditure, adrenaline overload, and fear had taken their toll on him, and he lay there shivering for an hour before he could summon the energy to haul himself off the floor.

He made it to his dormitory and into his bed by sheer willpower alone.

* * *

Severus Snape woke the next morning very slowly. In fact, once he realized he was partially conscious, he had a great deal of difficulty rising to full consciousness. Panic set in early, preventing him from drifting off again although it took a great deal of effort not to.

Once he woke up, he wished he hadn't. He felt absolutely horrible. His head felt as if it were going to split open, even his own breathing hurt his ears, and with his eyes closed and the curtains pulled round his bed, the dim light felt like it would liquefy his eyes. He also felt horribly nauseated...he panted shallowly since he knew he hadn't anything in his stomach. He couldn't begin to imagine the sheer agony dry-heaving would cause, and he didn't want to find out.

He inadvertently groaned in agony and began shaking again. Although he was under several warm wool blankets and a down-filled duvet, he felt like he was freezing. He had no idea what was wrong with him, and there was no way he could get out of bed. He suddenly realised he was going to die there and wished he knew a spell to hurry it along.

"Snape, you all right?" he heard one of his new classmates call. Which one it was, he couldn't tell. The noise was deafening, and he whimpered.

His dorm-mates murmured amongst themselves before one of them spoke loud enough for him to hear. "I'm coming over there, Snape, so get decent or whatever."

The curtains were yanked back, and the sudden invasion of light and sound were excruciating. Snape screamed and recoiled, but the rapid motion upset the delicate balance he was trying to maintain over his stomach and he retched. "Merlin's beard, Snape, you're looking peaky! What the devil's wrong with you?" Rosier gasped, dodging out of the way of Snape's heaving.

"I'm going to get Malfoy," Avery chimed in before scuttling out the door.

Snape collapsed back onto the mattress and waved his hand weakly. He desperately wanted the curtains closed, but lying there panting, he couldn't convey that to Rosier. Desperate, he flailed weakly about until he managed to grasp the pillow which he promptly dropped over his face. *Maybe I'll suffocate*, he thought to himself. *Good. I hope it's quick.*

At that moment Avery returned, with Lucius Malfoy in tow. Snape groaned again at this new invasion of noise.

"Take the torches out of here," Malfoy commanded in a harsh whisper. "All of them but one. And for Merlin's sake be silent about it!"

Snape felt the side of his bed buckle, bringing forth a fresh wave of nausea. Taking the path of least resistance...he hadn't the energy to fight it anyway...he rolled towards whoever had sat on his bed. His head dropped over the edge of the bed which was fortuitous because at that moment he could no longer prevent his stomach from heaving in protest once again. Something in the back of his mind wondered vaguely if his retching would disgust his companion enough to jump away which would likely result in Snape's falling to the floor. He reasoned that at the very least this would likely knock him unconscious, and if he landed just so, it might even kill him. The fact that he'd die with his face in a puddle of vomit only marginally concerned him.

At least the pain will stop that way.

He lay there gasping helplessly. Some of the acid in his stomach had found its way into his sinuses, and the pain was excruciating.

"Go get Narcissa or Andromeda," he heard Lucius whisper commandingly.

"Black?" he heard a voice, which he recognized as belong to Rosier, ask. Some consensus was apparently reached in silence because Severus heard the door slide shut as loudly as if it had been slammed on his head. His eyes were clenched shut, and angry tears of pain leaked out of the corners of them, hot and unbidden.

Strong arms embraced him and pulled him to something resembling a vertical position, leaning him against the frightfully damp and frigid stone wall against which his bed was pushed. "No . . . " he rasped weakly.

"You need to sit up, Snape," Lucius commanded.

" . . . No . . . " he protested, forgetting for the moment what he was protesting and panting shallowly again to stave off his rapidly coalescing nausea. He started sliding weakly down the wall, unable to support his own weight.

"Snape, listen to me. You need to eat, and you need to drink."

His eyes flashed open in astonishment as he waved his hand weakly dismissing this pronouncement, cringing at the stabbing pain of the single low torch that barely illuminated them from clear across the room. Food was the last thing he wanted. He yelped in agony at both the rapid movement and the pain and recoiled...slamming his head into the wall once again.

"You put up a good fight last night, but you have no resources left," Lucius insisted as the door scraped open again. "Andromeda, do you have a Headache Potion and a Rejuvenation Draught?"

"Of course. What happened to him?" asked a feminine voice that Severus presumed belonged to Andromeda and realised vaguely that might well be Narcissa's sister.

"Go get them. Hurry!" Lucius ordered, ignoring her question. After a few seconds, there was some very slight movement of the bed. Lucius spoke again. "He must have completely depleted himself last night. Thank you."

Snape recoiled vigorously as something was touched to his lips. "DRINK THIS, Severus, it will help. My word, that's the fourth blow to the head I've seen him take in eighteen hours," Lucius commented. Snape shook his head weakly, refusing the potion. "Listen, you foolish boy! We aren't allowed to duel in the common room, and you are not going to make it to class today if you don't buck up. Now take this potion, or **I will make you!**" Lucius commanded threateningly.

"Lucius, you *mustn't!*" protested the voice Severus thought belonged to Andromeda.

"I *can*...and I **WILL**...if he doesn't drink this! After all, I am only trying to help him!"

Snape simply had no more ability to refuse, and when the bottle was pushed back to his lips, he didn't recoil. Nor, however, did he any longer possess the ability to help himself, and the potion sat, unswallowed, on his tongue.

"Out," commanded Lucius after observing this for a few moments. "Everybody out."

"Lucius! You **CAN NOT!** Take him to Madam Pomfrey!" Andromeda gasped.

"Get. Out." Lucius insisted in a tone that left no room for argument. "And shut the door behind you."

Dimly, Severus realized the door had clicked. The last thing he heard before being overcome by a feeling of bliss and contentment was the word *Imperio!*

"Swallow!" Lucius commanded, and Severus did. "Take this," Lucius ordered, offering a second bottle. Severus took that one, too, completely ignoring the wand pointed in his face. "Swallow the contents of that bottle." He did. The wand was lowered, and the feeling of bliss left him.

Snape blinked...his headache was gone, and while he still felt weak, he had enough energy to move. And he was very, very hungry.

He frowned. As grateful as he was to be feeling better, he realized he'd completely lost control of himself. He blinked at the Head Boy. "Get ready for your classes, and meet me in the common room. Tell no one what happened here. NO ONE," he said, waving his wand to clear the evidence of Snape's upset stomach before sweeping from the room.

Snape pondered what had just happened as he slowly got dressed and gathered his books. Perhaps the Hat was right, perhaps being in Slytherin house was a bad idea. He'd have to avoid the common room for a while if this was how things were going to be. He had high hopes, however, that the school library had a great deal to offer in the way of academic knowledge and thought he'd spend his time there.

He ascended the stairs slowly, leaning carefully on the walls, still feeling weak and unsteady. Lucius Malfoy was waiting at the top of the steps for him, surveying the empty room regally. He had apparently already shooed everyone from the room.

"What did you do to me?" Snape asked quietly, his quickly escalating apprehension nearly making the nausea return.

"You mean to get you to take that potion?" Lucius asked in a voice of supreme unconcern. Snape just nodded. "I put you under the Imperius Curse, and as it is one of the Unforgivables, I would rather you not allow that information to circulate. I'll Obliviate you if I must." Snape nodded again...he had no desire to have his memory erased. He hadn't come across "Unforgivable Curses" in his private research yet, so he wasn't entirely sure what they were. But the name was a good enough hint. At least now he had something to go on.

They made their way to the Great Hall, and Lucius indicated Snape should sit near him again. Narcissa gave him a weak smile, but Andromeda looked at Lucius with angrily pursed lips. His roommates still looked pale and frightened. "You need to eat," Lucius drawled, "or you will get sick again. That potion will only last a little while."

Snape found no problem with this declaration now as once his headache and nausea had subsided, he found he was ravenous. Of course, everything he'd eaten the day before, he'd thrown up. He put away twice the food he would normally eat in a day, relieved that nobody thought this odd.

The bell rang, signalling the end of the meal, and as politely as he could, Severus stuffed the last quarter of a roll in his mouth and chased it with half a cup of pumpkin juice before dashing to the door.

One of the Slytherin prefects was standing at the door, handing out a parchment to all the first years. Confused, Severus regarded the hand-out with a scowl, then raised his eyebrows in surprise. It contained directions to each of his classes. Although it didn't include a map the instructions were helpful, and he was able to make it to his first class of the day with little difficulty.

He frowned as he entered the Charms classroom. The tables were arranged in pairs, and his dorm-mates were already paired up together, leaving no room for him. He sighed and sat down at the empty table closest to them; eventually one of the Hufflepuffs joined him and happily introduced himself as Tilden Toots.

For the first half of class, an unbelievably tiny Professor Flitwick droned on endlessly about a levitation spell. Severus propped his head in his chin and looked intently at him, at least trying to feign interest...his classmates looked alternately enthralled and confused. *Don't these idiots ever read?*

The last half of class, Professor Flitwick bade them to attempt the levitation. Severus didn't bother, having mastered the spell when he was six, although he did spare his partner an alarmed glance when the boy was wildly waving his wand about.

"You're so smart, you do it then!" the boy challenged in frustration. Severus scowled but levitated his feather with a look of bored indifference as he made the feather do a loop-de-loop.

"WOW!" exclaimed his wide-eyed partner. "Who taught you to do that?"

Severus noticed that his dorm-mates were glaring at him as he took in Toots' admiration with a speculative glance. "My father," he said after a few moments.

"But we're not supposed to do magic outside of school! It's one of the school rules!" the boy protested, using his wand to prod his feather as if so doing would make it float.

"My father didn't go to Hogwarts," Severus said with a dismissive shrug and changed the topic. "Look," he said. "You're moving your wand wrong."

At the end of class, Severus and one of the Hufflepuff females were the only ones who had managed to consistently levitate their feathers, earning Severus effusive praise and five points from his professor and yet another round of hateful looks from the Slytherins, most of whom hadn't managed to do it at all.

There was a short break before the next class which was History of Magic, a class which was about as exciting as watching paint dry. Severus had originally thought Narcissa was joking with her declaration that most of the Slytherins had a self-study group...less than ten minutes into the class, he realised she was...no pun intended...dead serious. The novelty of having the class conducted by a ghost lasted no longer than it took for the ghostly Professor Binns to start droning on in his nasal, weedy voice. By the time lunch rolled around, Severus had never been so glad to see a break in his life. He was thoroughly grateful the class was a single session.

However, this offered little solace for him. His dorm-mates were still HIGHLY put out at him outperforming them in both Dark Arts and Charms, and despite his selected seating at the right hand of Lucius Malfoy, he felt isolated. By the time his first afternoon class of Potions rolled around, he was feeling distinctly disliked, which was not eased by the fact that once he arrived in the classroom, he discovered he was once again the only Slytherin without a partner.

This, of course, presented the perfect opportunity for Lily Evans to plop next to him with a delighted look on her face. He suppressed a mental groan and ignored the girl next to him utterly.

At least until she scribbled a note on her paper, and "slipped" and nudged his right elbow.

Are you ignoring me on purpose? read the note meant for his eyes alone.

He propped his chin in his left elbow and gazed unseeingly at the Potions instructor, nodding blankly at some nonsensical and worthless thing the idiot said when the girl was glancing toward him.

Why? she scribbled, frowning at Professor Slughorn as if taking notes.

He scowled likewise at some completely false thing the man was spouting and, with a shake of his head, scribbled "It's complicated. I'll tell you later."

At this point, the girl's hand shot up. "Professor, I'm not sure I understand. I know that nettles have an anti-inflammatory property and porcupine quills an antiseptic quality, but why snake fangs?"

"An excellent question Miss...uh..." the corpulent man said, consulting his register, "Evans! Yes! Miss Evans! Evans...ah, was your father a Muggle?" he asked abruptly, obviously at a loss for how to place her.

"Yes, sir, and my mother as well," Lily said unapologetically.

"Ah. Yes. Well, ah . . . yes!" sputtered Slughorn, in an obvious bid to cover up his mistake. "Yes, well...*magically*," he said, with unnatural emphasis on the word, "snake fangs are known to lance boils and the like, leaving an opening for the infection to escape," he said in an utterly patronising voice. "Since snake fangs are crystalline, even when finely ground they have a puncturing quality, leading to boils being microscopically lanced and enabling expulsion of the infection."

Severus held his head in his hands and shook it nearly imperceptibly, resolving to send the girl an owl at the nearest opportunity.

Later that evening in the Slytherin dorm, Severus tried to extend the hand of friendship to his roommates. "Who was that idiot teaching Potions?" he asked.

"Professor Slughorn," Wilkes snarled at him. "And if your father had gone to Hogwarts, you'd have known that."

Severus crooked an eyebrow at them. "Oh really?"

"He's Head of Slytherin house and taught our fathers," Avery ventured with a sneer. "You should show proper respect."

"Did your father go to Durmstrang or something?" Rosier demanded, obviously having overheard the conversation Snape had had with the Hufflepuff in Charms.

"Something like that," Severus said haughtily, turning his attention to his homework and blocking out the scowls and muttered undertones of his dorm-mates.

* * *

Author's Notes:

z0mg!THANKS to AzureLunatic, who, despite having eleventythree gabillion things going on in her own REAL life, at two in the bloody morning bailed me out of a 'z0mg plot hole!' problem, with good cheer, and even better reason. (A plot hole which honestly probably wasn't worth one tenth of the energy I devoted to panicking hysterically about it "rolls eyes at self" but she came up with an EXCELLENT reason for me not to have it, because yes, people with common sense!=me. >_>)

Of course, Jean is perpetually picking me out of stupid plot corners I back myself into.

Shanae is nearly the sole reason this chapter passed commas. You must all go glomp her for getting to see the chapter at all!

Claire is my Brit-picker extraordinaire in this chapter. She's also a real canon stickler. Yay for both!

Dace seriously deserves a medal for putting up with my sheer inability to comprehend the proper use of commas.

Just so you know, when you leave those lovely reviews for my betas and Brit-pickers and canon sticklers and plot angels and comma conquerors, ~~do~~ pass them on!

Awful Boy

Chapter 5 of 6

Severus' education continues.

Author's Notes: Just so you are all aware, I have set up a "tag" on my LiveJournal for "news" updates (such as what chapter I'm writing, any difficulties I'm having) regarding this story. It may be found here: <http://cmwinters.livejournal.com/tag/eap> . All updates will be posted publicly, so there's no need to "friend" me (and thus be subjected to my other nonsensical drivel) or create an LJ account, although should anyone wish to comment there, I will be happy to chat with you!

I am aware that the political situation regarding the fandom on LJ is very precarious at this point. Therefore, I have created accounts on GreatestJournal, InsaneJournal, DeadJournal and JournalFen, all with the same username (although I am not yet using those for anything other than exchanges and backup). If it becomes necessary to leave LiveJournal altogether, you will still be able to find updates on the story on the other sites.

Please be advised that the story arc for this chapter was already planned out before the publication of Deathly Hallows. As a result, while there may be parts of DH that I incorporate because they conveniently fit with this story, this story is not compliant after HBP.

This is mainly a continuation of the last chapter. Sorry it took so long to get out...between utterly failing at commas the last chapter and my muse moving out on me for this one, it was tough. Fear not, the next chapter is already complete (although after that . . . well, I am actually working on chapter 7, honest!).

Severus' second day of school was significantly better than the first which gave him some measure of hope. After a normal morning and uneventful breakfast, he had an exhausting trek across the grounds to the greenhouses for his first Herbology class. As if traipsing across what felt like all of northern Scotland weren't enough, being Scotland, it was of course raining, and he got completely drenched. His cotton and wool blend cloak did not provide much protection from the elements, and it was only early September. He resolved to dress in layers from this point forward lest he turn into a human icicle later in the season.

Once he made it to the greenhouse, however, Professor Sprout greeted them at the door, casting drying charms on all the shivering students. She came across as maternal and sympathetic, and Severus took an immediate liking to her. Although he knew the answers to several of her questions, he nonetheless remained silent throughout the class, not yet understanding why his classmates resented it so thoroughly when he earned them points by answering questions correctly.

After lunch, he had a protracted break as his first Astronomy class was that night. Not yet tired, he decided to investigate the school library which he found even more impressive than the Prince family library. Severus was delighted and spent the entire afternoon there, eventually checking out the maximum number of books allowed. He immediately regretted the decision when he had to lug all of them back to the dungeons. If he had been getting on better with his dorm mates, he'd have been able to ask them for help.

After he returned from dinner, he went back to the dungeons for a nap. However, his excitement about his first Astronomy class prevented him from sleeping, and he ultimately chose one of his books to read. His parents had met at a neighborhood gathering to view a meteor shower, and his father had retained a casual interest in stargazing after Eileen died. Tobias had taken Severus out to a local park on occasion to point out some stars and the few planets he could recognise. And for the last several years, he made it a point to take Severus to the park when a meteor shower was anticipated and the weather was cooperating. Nobody in the Prince family except his mother had ever had more than a passing interest in Astronomy, and Severus was looking quite forward to studying the subject from a wizarding perspective. He'd taken his collapsible telescope out many a night, looking for the comet his father had dragged him out of bed one ridiculously early morning to see, but he hadn't been able to find it on his own and was absolutely delighted at the opportunity to ask the professor about it.

He went to bed that night in a much better mood than he had the two nights previous, excited to send a letter to his father the next morning during his break.

He shouldn't have been surprised the next morning when everything became significantly worse. Breakfast was fine, but the first class of the afternoon was Double

Transfiguration which, to his dismay, was shared with the Gryffindors. He took a seat in the back of the room and tried to make himself inconspicuous when Potter and Black walked in, but they spied him immediately, eying him hungrily. He sat at an unoccupied table, looking warily at them and vaguely wondering about the amount of damage they could all do with the non-descript matchsticks that were lying on their desks. They sat in class for a few minutes, wondering where their instructor was. Not long after they all sat fidgeting, a tabby cat leapt off the deputy headmistresses desk and turned into the woman herself. She explained the process of transfiguration to them before instructing them to attempt to turn their matchsticks into needles. Severus tried, but no matter what he did, he couldn't get his matchstick to even change colour, much less change shape. He sat back to regard the matchstick in frustration, and suddenly something very sharp hit him in the eye.

Instinctively, his hand shot up to protect himself, and he felt something foreign in the side of his eye. He withdrew something small and cold and metallic, and through teary eyes he regarded what was undoubtedly a needle.

"DETENTION MISTER POTTER, MISTER BLACK!" snapped a furious Professor McGonagall.

"Sorry Professor, I just lost control of the needle!" pleaded an absolutely uncontrite Sirius Black as James Potter sniggered helplessly next to him.

"THIS is a Transfiguration class, Mister Black...levitation is done in Charms class. And five points from each of you! Miss Evans, will you kindly escort Mister Snape to the hospital wing? He needs to have his eye looked at."

"Of course, Professor," Lily said from next to him, quickly gathering up their books and grabbing his arm to guide him down the hall.

Madam Pomfrey excused Severus from classes for the rest of the day, and Lily sat with him until the end of her free period. He hadn't written the letter he'd meant to write to her, so she was still confused about why he was ignoring her and demanded an explanation. Cornered, he explained about his roommates beliefs and Lucius Malfoy's lecture. She frowned at the obvious rampant prejudice, but decided to drop it for now. Lily was reluctant to forgo his friendship based on the prejudices of a few people she didn't like and recommended they just send owls to each other before she left for her next class.

Severus spent the next couple of hours writing: one letter to his father and one to Lily. After a dinner tray was brought to him, he spent the rest of the night with his nose in The Compendium of Common Curses.

* * *

His second week of school went much the same as the first, with various minor changes and the somewhat major addition of his first flying class: yet another thing he discovered he was absolutely abysmal at and at which Potter was, of course, absolutely fantastic. This was exacerbated exponentially by Black casting an horrific jinx on the broom that Severus was supposed to be trying to ride. The broom bucked up right as he was trying to sit upon it, which had the result of it hitting him in an incredibly unfortunate spot. For what felt like the thousandth time since his passing through barrier at platform 9 3/4, his eyes watered, although he managed to remain standing. However, the pain was excruciating, and he was once again escorted to the hospital wing, this time by the flying instructor. After being treated by the clucking school matron, he laid down on his cot and read Jinxes for the Jinxed with fervour. He committed the counter-spell to memory before dinner.

The rest of the school year proceeded in much the same way, with Severus becoming increasingly hostile toward Potter and Black's escalating aggression, until they were close to all-out war in the corridors and classrooms. Severus' only solace was that while he attacked just as often and, truth be told, just as viciously, he was rarely caught by the faculty. As a result, he rarely received detention or lost house points. The same could not be said for his antagonists. He'd hoped that as his expertise in defending himself increased, their interest in him would decrease, but it only seemed to inflame them, Potter most especially.

By the time the school year had drawn to a close, Snape was exhausted and looking quite forward to seeing a friendly face without the constant threat of an unfriendly one around the corner. After the Leaving Feast, he managed to make it back to his dorm unmolested, a fact which genuinely surprised him. He slipped into the dorm unnoticed, heaved his trunk onto his bed, and emptied his wardrobe, haphazardly tossing his clothing onto the bed. With a half-relieved and half-weary sigh, he climbed onto the bed, drew the curtains, and began packing.

The morning dawned still and calm, an illusion which was nearly immediately broken by the horrified screech of Narcissa Black. Andromeda had eloped with her Hufflepuff Muggleborn boyfriend in the middle of the night, and by the time Severus got to breakfast, the entire school was abuzz with the gossip. He noted with no small satisfaction that Sirius Black appeared slightly greenish; he was obviously not keen on returning to the Most Noble and Ancient House of Black with such news on everyone's minds. Lucius Malfoy, now officially no longer a student, had arranged for his belongings to be picked up from the gates by his myriad of house-elves the night before and received special dispensation from the Headmaster to Disapparate the distraught and hysterical Narcissa directly to her parents home as per their urgently owed request. Severus found the distraction made it easy for him to slip into the train unmolested and secured a compartment near the back of the train, allowing a small glimmer of hope to persuade him that he'd been unnoticed.

He was relishing the relative peace and quiet and rocking slightly back and forth with the motion of the train when the door to the compartment slid open. He was on his feet in a defensive stance, his wand thrust forward and a curse forming on his lips before he recognised the visitor. "Oh. It's you," he said, but Lily wasn't able to discern if his tone was relieved or disappointed.

"You could just ask me to leave, you know," she said, tears welling up in her eyes.

"NO! No, please don't!" Severus insisted, the rush of adrenaline making him weary. He collapsed back onto the seat and waved at the one across from him. "Please. Sit down. I thought you were someone else."

The rest of the ride passed pleasantly enough, and as their distance from Hogwarts increased, Severus' tension decreased. Since his mother had first begun to train him in magic, he'd looked forward to attending Hogwarts. Yet his first year had been such an unmitigated disaster that he couldn't help but feel disappointed. He'd never have thought that he'd be looking forward to going to live in the Muggle world over the summer.

But at least he had his friendship with Lily to look forward to, and in the summer months, they'd have unrestricted time to spend with each other, he thought as the train was pulling into the station.

Spirits thus lifted, he levitated Lily's trunk off the rack for her and bade her to go ahead, as she was obviously excited to see her parents. He pulled his own trunk down and stepped off the train . . .

. . . straight into the cross-hairs of Sirius Black and James Potter.

Black apparently had a chip on his shoulder regarding his cousin's defection as he was in a towering temper. He flung a series of such vicious curses at Snape...who was caught entirely off-guard...that even Potter looked askance at him and grabbed his so-called best friend to restrain him. Black yanked himself away and stalked over to Snape, who was lying on the platform, bleeding, bruised, and covered in boils. "Don't you DARE get any ideas about Evans, you slimy bastard!" Black literally spat in his face before storming off in a red-faced huff.

Severus laid there a few moments, willing the world to stop spinning before gingerly hauling himself to his feet. He rose slowly and stood unsteadily, leaning hard on his trunk as he made his way to the barrier. Doing so made it rather difficult to walk. As he crossed through, he saw his father's worried features darken. "Wha' happen'd t'you?"

Severus just shook his head, and Tobias, recognising that the Muggle platform was neither the time or the place, grabbed his son's trunk and wrapped his free arm around him to help him back to the car.

For three hours of the four-hour drive home, Tobias let his son sit in a brooding silence, hoping Severus would explain. The language in the last letter he'd gotten from his son had sounded excited, yet his demeanour was a far cry from that. Although the boy had been reluctant to talk, Tobias needed to know what was wrong.

"Severus, I wan' ya ta tell me wha's happen'd."

"It doesn't matter," Severus replied sullenly after a long pause.

"It matters to me!" Tobias insisted, tearing his gaze away from the road for just a moment to fix his son with a severe glare.

"I got in a fight," Severus mumbled reluctantly.

"With who?"

"Some boys from school."

"About what?" Tobias demanded.

"I don't know," Severus muttered.

"About WHA', lad?"

"I don't know, okay? I stepped off the train, and they attacked me. I don't KNOW!" Severus insisted and turned to look out the window.

Tobias eyed him for a moment before turning his attention back to the road. "It's not the first time, eh."

"No. It's not."

Tobias sighed and navigated the car around the traffic circle from Market to High Street. The silence in the car deepened to a near suffocating presence as Tobias parked the car. He gave the housekey to Severus and wrangled the trunk out of the boot, then dragged it over the cobbled stones.

Severus had gone to the couch and was sitting down, staring at the filthy carpet in a daze. Although it had been many years since he'd seen it, Tobias recognised that look, and he didn't like it one bit. He knew he had to intervene, sooner rather than later.

"Severus, tell me what happened."

The boy sighed and crumpled. "It's nothing, Da," he insisted wearily.

"It's SOMETHING; yer upset. And I want to know why."

"They just . . . there's four of them, and they're always picking on me. I got a black eye, loosened two teeth, and I think I broke my nose on the train platform the first day of school. It's been like that since."

"Do you KNOW 'em?" Tobias demanded after gaping at his son in shock for nearly half a minute.

"I know who they are . . . Potter and Black, they're purebloods; and Lupin is a half-blood and Pettigrew's a Muggleborn," Severus said with a defeated sigh.

"But they're not like . . . yer mam's cousins, or something like that?"

"Oh. No," Severus mumbled, curling into a ball on the couch and resting his chin in his hand.

Tobias processed all this for a little bit and continued to question his son. "So what started it then?"

Severus' eyes flickered to his father. He sat up straight. "You remember that girl we met at Diagon Alley? At the wand shop?"

Tobias considered for a moment, trying to replay the scene in his head. "Pretty girl? Red hair?"

Severus nodded. "Her name's Lily. She's Muggleborn. Someone insulted her, and I jumped to her defence. That set them off." He sat for a few moments without saying anything. "It went downhill from there."

"I thought you were good at magic?" Tobias asked, genuinely confused.

"I am . . ." Severus agreed.

"Then what's the problem?"

"Well they're purebloods, and . . ." Severus began petulantly. Tobias interrupted.

"Are you honestly telling me they can out-magic you by virtue of your ancestry?"

"No, but . . ." Severus protested before stopping himself. "There's four of them," he ended lamely.

"So they can best you in a fight 'cause there's more of 'em?"

"No, but . . ." Severus started again but couldn't really understand what he was trying to say. "It's complicated."

"I can't do magic, Severus; I need you to explain it to me."

Severus huffed in annoyance, more at his inability to articulate himself than at his father's demand for information. "It's like . . . if I cast a spell, then there's always someone to block it or trip me up or something."

"How?"

"What?" Severus said, turning confused eyes to his father. "What do you mean, how?"

"How are they blocking you?"

"With a shield, or more often a trip jinx or something . . ."

Tobias stared at his son, pondering. "But how do they know when you're going to cast a spell?"

"It doesn't matter, they do it anyway, Da!"

Tobias scowled. He could tell there was a communication difficulty but without knowing the material, he couldn't isolate it. In annoyance, he issued an order. "Cast a spell at the wall."

"What?"

"Cast a spell at t'wall. Or at t'books, or something."

"What spell? Why?"

"Doesn't matter. Just cast one."

Severus frowned in confusion, but obediently made one of the books dance across the bookcase.

"There's yer problem," Tobias said, having seen it. Severus blinked, not following the logic at all. "You say t'spell, and ya move your wand in front of your body for the whole bleedin' world t'see. Yev gotta stop that. Don't tell 'em what yer gonna do to them, and don't let 'em see ya do't."

Severus slouched in defeat. "It doesn't work like that," he muttered.

"Then make it," Tobias insisted as if that settled the matter.

The next morning at breakfast, Tobias made a new request. He wanted Severus to prepare all the meals and set the table with magic. Severus protested that he wasn't supposed to be doing magic outside of school, but Tobias was unrelenting. Severus felt he had no choice but to oblige, so he set the table. He'd just finished levitating the plates from the cupboard to the table when he noticed Tobias staring at him intently. Severus set the plates down carefully, glancing apprehensively at his father, feeling unaccountably like he'd done something horribly wrong.

"How did you do tha'?"

"With magic?" Severus answered hesitantly.

Tobias frowned for a moment. That hadn't been the answer he wanted...they were back to their communication barrier. "Pick up t'dishrag," Tobias instructed, and with a muttered incantation and a swish and flick of his wand, Severus did and looked at his father. "Bring it over here," Tobias said, indicating the space above the table. Severus complied, a questioning look on his face. "Drop it." Severus moved to set the towel down, and Tobias thrust his hand in between the table and the rag. "NO! I didn't tell ya to set it down. I said ta *drop* it." Severus obliged, by now thoroughly confused. "How did you do tha'?"

"With magic?" Severus repeated, obviously confused. Tobias shook his head in frustration, and Severus chewed his lip. "I don't think I understand the question, sir."

"You said somethin'," he said, pointing over at the counter where the rag had originally lay, "and ya moved your wand. Then you brought it over here, an' when I told you to drop it, you just did. Ya didn't say anything, ya din't move the wand, ya just dropp'd it."

Severus blinked, then looked from his father to the rag and back again.

"Tell me again you can't do it," Tobias declared before tucking into his eggs.

Severus frowned at his father pensively, and the next time he went to Prince Hall, he made it a pointed mission to ask his grandparents about casting spells without speaking.

* * *

The morning of August thirty-first dawned, and Severus awoke earlier than usual. He wasn't particularly excited to get back to school and had had difficulty getting to sleep. Although once asleep, he usually slept soundly, this night he'd tossed and turned. He stared blankly at the wall for a moment, wondering what had woken him, when he was startled by a horrible strangled, gurgling sound.

Horried, he grabbed his wand and dashed to the darkest corner of his room where he hid, trembling and straining his ears. There it was again...weaker this time...followed by a stifled moan in a voice that sounded frighteningly familiar. Torn, he crept to the door and pried it open carefully, willing the hinges not to squeal.

The hallway was dark, as was his father's room and the stairs, but a suspicious light shone weakly from underneath the kitchen door. The noise came again; to Severus, it sounded as he imagined it would if someone was sitting...no, bouncing...on the chest of an elderly dragon. But dragons weren't allowed, especially not in Muggle areas.

Still somewhat small for his age, Severus carefully tiptoed across the hall to the far side and grasped his wand in his left hand. He carefully placed one foot in front of the other, knowing where all the creaky floorboards were. Hugging the wall as much as he could, he stretched his right arm out to the opposite wall for balance. In this awkward position he was able to creep down the stairs and avoid the noisy steps.

He heard the sound again; it sounded more intense, more desperate, and not just by virtue of his closer proximity. And then again, there came the strangled moan. Someone was in grave trouble, and by the sound of that moan, it was his father.

Severus steeled himself on the far side of the door and ransacked his brain for the most damaging curse he knew. He listened at the door, desperate to discern the noise of whoever was clearly torturing his father, but heard nothing, not even any desperate pleas for mercy from Tobias, and that spurred him on. He pushed the door open, his shaking wand leading the way.

What he saw in the kitchen astonished his adolescent mind. Alone, Tobias Snape hunched over the kitchen sink, his legs shaking and obviously on the verge of giving out, his skin a sickly greyish-blue colour.

"Da?" Severus ventured tentatively, his own voice still clouded with sleep, despite the fact that he was wide awake.

"Sorry," Tobias wheezed. "I normally . . . make it . . . outside . . ." he gasped, his knees buckling. Severus barely managed to thrust the chair underneath him before he collapsed into it, too weak to even hold his head up. His head lolled dangerously to the side as he panted shallowly, and Severus had a moment of panic. If his father collapsed onto the floor, Severus wasn't strong enough to raise him again.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothin'. . ." Tobias wheezed.

Severus gawked at him and at the heavily discoloured phlegm Tobias had hacked into the sink, then back at his father. Something was clearly wrong. "Why are you sick?" he asked, beginning to panic.

"Mill fever," Tobias wheezed, seeming to have to gasp twice as long after for every syllable he uttered. "Or woolsorter's. It's always like this in t'morning. I'll be fine," he insisted weakly.

Severus glanced at the clock and did some quick mental calculations. He needed to be on the train by eleven, which meant they had to leave by seven, and it was five-thirty. Confused, he lowered his wand. "I can take the bus," he offered hesitantly, entirely unconvinced that his father was going to be in any condition to drive him to London in the first place, and completely unconvinced the man would survive the trip there and back.

"No," Tobias protested feebly. "I'm fine. I'll be fine," he gasped. "Jus' . . . make some tea."

Severus did, but four hours later found him dragging his trunk onto the cobbled stones in front of number 49 Spinners End and raising his wand hand.

* * *

Severus' first day of the second year of school went much the same as the first with the minor addition of one of the first years asking him if he was "from the Yorkshire Snapes." Severus scowled at him, thinking this was none of the boy's business, but agreed...a response which had all of Slytherin house gazing at him with renewed respect. "Wow," breathed another first-year. "I didn't know any of that line survived!"

"Well, now you know," Severus sneered and stalked off to his dorm.

The rest of the term proceeded much like the previous one, and one day just after the Christmas holidays ended, Severus was leaving Professor Flitwick's office when he heard the voice of James Potter echoing down the hall. He immediately spun about and dashed down the corridor, in no mood to confront the fearsome foursome, but as he was headed away from Potter, he heard Black's voice coming from the new direction. Doubling back again, hoping to make it to a side corridor, Severus backtracked, but as he peered carefully around the corner, he saw Potter and Lupin were too close for him to avoid. Frantic, he turned back the way he came, fearing he'd be in the middle of both Potter and Lupin, and Black and Pettigrew, when the wall next to him dissolved.

He'd been in this corridor countless times and had never seen the door which now appeared. Black's laughter, close enough to sound as if he were about to round the corner, spurred him on, and he darted through the door without a second thought.

The door sealed behind him, and he found himself in a room even larger than the Great Hall with windows near the ceiling bearing witness to the cloudy skies outside. The room was full of teetering and unstable labyrinthine columns of mismatched objects that clearly spanned the gamut of Hogwarts' long history.

"Wow," he breathed and turned around, taking in the spaciousness of the room. "A place to hide! Now all I need is to be able to see when the coast is clear," he muttered to himself, and stared in astonishment as the wall shimmered and seemed to fade, but the veins and imperfections in the wall were still there.

It resembled nothing so much as a ghost of a wall. Quite frankly it reminded him of the fairy tales his mother told him about the perfect Invisibility Cloak.

He blinked.

Lily was going to LOVE this!

He sent her an owl as soon as he left the room.

* * *

The end of his second year dawned, and Severus was none too glad to see it. As he piled all his belongings onto his bed and leaned back against the wall to start stowing them into his trunk, he thought back to a conversation he'd had with Lily only two weeks before, during a study session in the disappearing room.

"How are you getting home?" she'd asked him with no preamble.

Feeling awkward, he'd tilted his head. "From King's Cross?"

"Yeah."

"Last year, my father came to get me," he'd said, realising as he said it that as ill as Tobias was at the beginning of the year, he wasn't likely to be able to make the trip again. The whole conversation reminded Severus of the need to owl his father to tell him he'd take the Knight Bus home. He'd also have to ask his grandparents about setting him up a Portkey or some other method of transportation.

"Yeah, but I didn't see him at the beginning of the year," Lily had said, looking at him intently, interrupting his thoughts.

"The foreman wouldn't let him off," Severus had said, looking her square in the eye, the lie rolling as smoothly off his tongue as if he'd practiced it.

"Oh," she said, sounding sad. "Well, my parents are coming to get me and I don't live far from you, so I'll ask them if they can bring you, too."

Severus had perked at that. The Knight Bus was to be avoided at all costs and whenever possible, he'd thought to himself, turning slightly greenish at the memory.

"I'll ask," she'd assured him with a beaming smile, "but I'm sure it won't be any trouble."

His reverie was interrupted when Rosier and Avery stumbled in, murmuring to each other.

Severus had grown up in a fairly quiet environment, and as such his hearing was attuned to minor differences. He'd learned the variations of all his classmates' voices within a week, and his own dorm mates had long since been committed to memory. Although he hadn't initially made it a point to eavesdrop, he quickly discovered it was a useful means of obtaining information and listened more out of habit than curiosity.

"So, what do you know?" Avery asked.

"Nothin'," but you know dad won't let me join HIM yet," Rosier said petulantly. "Says I'm not old enough. Load of tosh if you ask me; they were together at our age, you know!"

"Yeah," Avery muttered. "Mine either. You think they'll let us tag along for anything?"

"I dunno...mine probably won't. Dad said the last time he offed a blood traitor, they were in some horrid Muggle *mill town* of all things, and that even being there made him sick!" Rosier's voice was muffled, as if he were rummaging through his wardrobe.

"MILL town?" Avery gasped, horrified, as Snape, even more horrified, froze where he sat, not even daring to breathe. "Why would they go there?"

"Cos she was holed up with some Muggle. Dunno what happened to *them*, though; Rab says they only got the blood-traitor, but . . ." Rosier's trailed off as its owner left the room with Avery in tow.

Severus didn't sleep that night...every time he drifted off he jolted awake to fresh nightmares that he was sharing a room with the children of the very men who had killed his mother. That those same men were continuing to search for him. By the time dawn rolled around, he was exhausted and so jittery he was ready to hex everything in sight.

Not trusting himself to break bread with his dorm-mates, he feigned sleeping in (with his wand clenched tightly in his fist under the covers) and ensured he made his way to the train unseen. He was standoffish and snappy to Lily for the entire train ride. As exhausted and overwrought as he was, the steady rumbling and rhythmic rocking of the train, and later the car, nearly put him to sleep on several occasions, only to have him jerk into a hyper-aware frenzy. By the time the Evans family dropped him off, he was bordering on hysterical, although he was doing a good job of hiding it.

That all changed the moment Tobias opened the door to greet his son.

"You animal!" Severus shrieked, pushing his way past his father and darting toward the stairs. "YOU COWARD!" he said, spinning about. "If you'd have defended her like a proper wizard father would have, she'd still be here!" Severus screamed, dashing up the stairs in a sobbing frenzy.

He didn't come down for two days.

* * *

Lily Evans lay sprawled over a bed in a brightly lit room. Hunched over the third year Defence Against the Dark Arts essay she was trying to write, she scowled at it as if it had offended her. None of the books she had held any information on Dementors, and it was information she required to complete this essay.

It was the first Saturday of the Easter holidays, and as she was at home instead of at Hogwarts she didn't have access to any more books, which were safely ensconced hundreds of miles away in the school library. Frustrated, she went downstairs and put on a jacket. "Mum, I need to talk to Severus about our assignment," she called out.

"All right, dear!" her mother said brightly.

Lily strode confidently to the front door, smiling sweetly in response to the suspicious glare of her older sister. Petunia was perched primly on the sofa, very stiffly holding a copy of *The Daily Telegraph*, in which Lily knew full well a copy of *The Sun* was hidden. Ignoring her sister's horrified gasp at her intended destination, Lily slipped outside and walked briskly down the cobbled street, weaving in and out of the streets with a decided purpose before coming to the end of a street and knocking on the door.

A hook-nosed man clad in dingy undershorts, a greying t-shirt and ragged white socks answered the door with a scowl. "Hullo, Mister Snape, is Severus home?" she asked. He grunted and waved her inside, then shouted "LAD! GET DOWN HERE!" before collapsing into a coughing fit.

Lily looked at Tobias with no small measure of concern as she stepped into a tiny, dingy, dimly lit sitting room, full of what appeared to be second-hand furniture scattered haphazardly on threadbare carpet. Once Tobias caught his breath, he summarily ignored her, reclining in a battered armchair and resting his feet carelessly on a fragile looking table. He paged negligently through a ragged newspaper, breathing shallowly with a rasping wheeze. Lily smiled when she recognised Severus' small, cramped handwriting on the crossword.

In the bedroom above, Severus started at the harsh call, which caused him to miss the fly he'd been aiming at. Instead of hitting the fly, the red jet of light bounced off the wall and rebounded into the mildewed ceiling, knocking a chunk of plaster down. Giving the lazily circling bug a glare, he sighed and rose from the lumpy bed he was lying on and made his way past a hard-backed chair. He slunk down the uneven stairs into the room below. "Yes, sir?" he asked, a cross look on his face.

"Don't take that sullen tone with me, y'ungrateful git. Yev a caller!" he said, gesticulating toward Lily with an angry scowl. "Teenagers," he wheezed under his breath.

Snape leaned his head forward to see around the edge of the staircase, and his expression lightened. "Lily! What a pleasant surprise!" he said, as if she didn't look entirely out of place in his home. Snape walked over to her, muttering an extremely insincere sounding "thank you" to his father on the way.

"Hi, Severus. Were you busy; did I interrupt anything?"

"Nothing that I cannot do later . . . Why? What do you need?"

"I was wondering if you could help me with my assignment."

Severus turned back to the older man in the recliner. "Sir, may I . . . ?" he queried formally.

Tobias only grunted again in response and waved his hand dismissively. He'd never taken his nose out of the paper. Severus shrugged and grabbed his travelling cloak from the hook by the door. He barely caught his father's derisive, "well, leas' he's got t'interest in girls thing straight. . . ." as he pulled the door shut behind them.

The two of them cast a wary glance at the sky which was threatening rain and hurried back to Lily's home. They arrived none too soon as it began spitting just as they turned the corner, and the deluge started in earnest just as they cleared the threshold. Lily turned a speculative eye on Severus, who just smirked.

"Good afternoon, Missus Evans, Mister Evans," he said politely. He nodded curtly to Lily's sister and was treated to Petunia burying her face in the paper after glaring at him as if he not only looked bad, but smelled bad.

Lily saw the look too and leaned over to whisper in her friend's ear. "Don't take it personally; she doesn't like wizards at all. She looks at me like that every time I wear wizard clothing, too. . . ."

He shrugged. He wasn't about to take anything personally when it came from anyone ignorant, particularly one so stuck-up and obsessed with her superiority that she was rude to her own family. His own father was uneducated but not rude to Severus' wizarding relatives like Petunia was being to Lily, and Tobias didn't even have the benefit of a good upbringing.

"You are having difficulty with something?" Severus asked, not wishing to overstay his welcome.

"Yes. I'm doing the essay on dark creatures, but I seem to have forgotten to check out a book which explains what exactly a Dementor is."

"Ah," he said. "You have a book; they are listed briefly in *Fantastic Beasts*. But in any case, they guard the wizarding prison, Azkaban," he said, following her dutifully to her room as he had every time they'd worked together over holidays. "They are somewhat like wraiths," he elaborated softly as they headed up the stairs.

"You mean, like a ring-wraith?" she asked, giggling.

"I beg your pardon?"

"A ring-wraith. You know, a Nazgûl from *The Lord of the Rings*?"

He shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about, sorry."

"Oh, well," she said, grinning. "It's a Muggle book."

"Ah, I see," he said, holding the door open for her politely. "The Dementors are considered to be the darkest and most dangerous of all magical creatures. They feed off human emotions, and their most deadly weapon is their Kiss, whereby they suck the soul of their victim out of the mouth."

"THAT'S HORRIBLE!" Lily shrieked, flinging herself down on her bed.

"It is."

"How do you. . . What do you . . . Yikes!"

"You can repel them with a Patronus, provided you are capable of casting one, but to kill one is another matter," he said and straddled the desk chair, draping his cloak over the back of it as he leaned to face her. He explained nearly everything he knew about Dementors.

About twenty minutes later, Lily's mother came in bearing a lunch tray with sandwiches and tea. "I made ham, cheese, and cucumber...will one of those do for you, dear? If not, I can make you something else," Mrs. Evans said with a pleasant smile.

Snape blinked at her, for a moment not understanding her. "Ah, yes, that will be just fine. Thank you very much," he said, finally, remembering his manners. He blinked at her as she retreated.

"What was that all about?" he asked Lily, bewildered.

"It's lunchtime, Severus!" Lily laughed. "Here, silly, have a sandwich. Which do you prefer?"

"I have no preference," he said, taking the sandwich nearest him and biting appreciatively into the fresh bread, which was still soft and warm from the oven.

"So, Severus," Lily asked him between bites, "where do the Dementors come from?"

"They are an accident. They are created when someone tries, and fails, to make a Horcrux."

"What's a Horcrux?"

"A Horcrux is an inanimate object, but, well . . . you encase part of your soul in the Horcrux, and it makes you immortal. But they are considered the darkest of all dark magic."

Lily raised her eyebrows, clearly captivated. "Why?"

"Well, you have to kill someone first," he said, thinking. "And after that, it's very complicated. There is a spell, but I don't know it. And there are some who believe that the spell may only be cast by a Parselmouth."

"Slytherin was a Parselmouth, right? It's the language of snakes?"

"Yes. But it's not a language that can be taught or learned; it must be passed down genetically."

Lily snorted scornfully. "Leave it to Slytherin to make a spell to ensure immortality that would eliminate Muggle-borns from the pool of eligibility."

Snape sighed. "Lily, that isn't fair. The original Horcrux itself was an accident; it was not originally dark magic."

Lily frowned. "That doesn't make sense. What do you mean? How is it dark magic now, but it wasn't when Slytherin did it? And anyway, you said you have to kill someone to do it. How is that not dark magic?"

"Slytherin didn't do it, his grandfather Ambrosius did. Ambrosius was conducting a lengthy and complicated experiment, and the experiment itself was interrupted by an invasion of the local Muggles who had been stirred up by the village priest. Unbeknownst to anyone, the priest was actually a Muggle-born wizard, but had some fanatical attitude that his magic was 'holy' and that traditional wizards were 'evil'."

Lily gasped in sympathy. "Sounds typical, though . . ." she said, remembering her History of Magic lessons.

Severus nodded before continuing with his story. "They succeeded in killing Ambrosius' mother-in-law. But apparently when they tried to kill Slytherin's newborn son, the infant's mother...who had not yet delivered the afterbirth...leapt in front of her son. She managed to invoke *abaskantos*, an ancient maternal protection, and it ensured the Muggles wouldn't be able to harm him."

"You can cast such a spell?!" Lily asked incredulously.

"Me? Of course not!" Snape blinked at her, his expression vacillating between astonished and offended. "I'll admit that I apply myself at non-verbal and wandless magic, but that's not a spell I will ever be able to cast. It's a women's spell, and even you would not be able to cast it unless you have already had a child."

"Really? Why?"

Snape nodded solemnly, and shrugged. "It's a women's spell," he repeated. "And you can only cast it on your own child. The caveat being, of course, that you lose your own life, but . . . in some cases, some people consider that to be acceptable."

Lily pondered that for a minute, then nodded. "So, back to how the Horcrux was an accident?"

"Ah, yes. Ambrosius arrived on the scene as his wife jumped in front of what matches a description of a primitive Killing Curse cast at his child, which sacrificed her own life in the process. In his rage he dispelled them, but the combination of the experiment he was conducting and his own revenge against the invaders created a completely accidental Horcrux. A piece of his soul was lodged in his wife's wand."

"And how did they find this out?" Lily asked.

"Years later, Ambrosius tried to take his own life and disappeared," Severus elaborated, scowling as if the very concept was repulsive to him. "But since he had created this Horcrux, however accidentally, he returned some time later in apparently perfect health. Salazar's father, and later Salazar, spent many years researching the issue with Ambrosius before they were finally able to determine what had happened."

"What did they do?"

"They destroyed the Horcrux, and Ambrosius was able to die in peace and stay dead, which is what he'd wanted to begin with."

"How did he die?"

"Ambrosius?" Severus asked, and when Lily nodded, he continued. "Salazar killed him, using Ambrosius' own wand and the Killing Curse, which Ambrosius had learnt from the Muggle-born priest who had attempted to cast it at his infant son," he said with a shrug.

"Slytherin killed his own grandfather? How horrible!" Lily shrieked in shock.

Snape sighed again. "Ambrosius was a broken man and had been since his wife had died. By all accounts, they were a loving and devoted couple. He had wanted to die when she did, but could not leave his infant son to fend for himself in an unfriendly world. Once his son was grown and able to fend for himself, Ambrosius lost all purpose. Salazar took pity on the old man and did him a favour."

"How do you know all this? I thought your whole family had been sorted into Ravenclaw until you came along?"

"They were. There was a book in my great-grandfather's library. He was Headmaster of Hogwarts, you know, so he had access to materials not commonly in circulation, particularly about the Founders. I'm not entirely sure how that particular story ended up in the collection, however, as it ended after Salazar left Hogwarts."

"So the Dementor, then . . . ?"

Snape flinched. "The Dementor . . . is the by-product of a failed attempt at creating a Horcrux, as I said. Since the sole way to create a Horcrux is to split your soul, which you may only accomplish by killing another, they are thought to be searching for the missing pieces of themselves. This is why they feed on the souls and emotions of others." He paused for a long moment, unsure of how to continue, or indeed if he even should, then continued slowly. "I believe . . . that there has been some reconstructionist history, as any text published within the last five hundred years or so specifically states it must be an act of pre-meditated murder to achieve the splitting of the soul necessary to create a Horcrux. However, this may be proactively discouraging in nature, as there is some evidence to indicate that it is simply the act of killing, even in self-defence, that splits the soul. Few wizards...even so-called 'dark wizards'...are willing to risk damaging their soul for any reason, including immortality. Granted, typically...although not always, and certainly not in Ambrosius Slytherin's case...the act of killing that accomplishes the soul-splitting is an act of murder. And it is in this spirit that the Dementor is created."

Lily gaped at him, face ashen. "Surely not so many people have tried to make themselves immortal that there are enough Dementors to guard Azkaban!" she whispered hoarsely. It wasn't a statement, though; it was a question.

He closed his eyes and, at first, wouldn't meet her eyes. His chin propped in his hand, he ran a long finger over his thin lips. "No," he finally answered softly. "But hate begets hate . . . and they have apparently figured out how to breed."

"URCK!" Lily yelped, hands flailing slightly as if to shake off a spider's web.

"It may only be a certain strain of Dementor that is breeding, though."

"Strain?" Lily yelped. "There are 'strains'?"

"Depending on how badly the attempt goes, it is possible to end up with the soul entirely outside the body...which may result in the Dementors that started the breeding."

"And the body then has no soul?"

Snape shook his head.

"So. . . the body dies? Right?" Lily sounded desperate when Severus didn't answer her immediately.

Snape shook his head again. "Not always." He took a deep breath and continued softly. "Sometimes, there is the breeding Dementor . . . and an Inferius. Although, that is not the only way to create an Inferius."

"I have the feeling I will regret asking this," Lily opined, swallowing hard. "But what is an Inferius?"

Snape paused for a long, tense moment before continuing slowly. "An Inferius . . . is a corpse that has been reanimated to do a dark wizard's bidding. Typically, when the Inferius is created, it does the bidding of the wizard that animated it. However, in the case of an Inferius that is created by a failed Horcrux attempt, it takes a great deal more to control them since the wizard that created the Inferius in question now has separated body and soul and cannot control either segment. It takes an exceptionally powerful wizard to control one of those at all. They're nearly indestructible. To kill them, they usually have to be burnt, more or less 'alive', although, as they are apparently lacking in any sentience, it is somewhat unlikely that they know the difference. It has been said that witnessing such an event is traumatic, however, because they scream quite convincingly. Salazar Slytherin cremated his grandfather's body to prevent just such an occurrence. And there are some who believe that such an Inferius can only be truly destroyed with Fiendfyre, which is notoriously difficult to control."

"That's disgusting, Severus! Why on earth would you want to KNOW about such things?" she said, her nose wrinkled with distaste.

"You've heard the phrase 'any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic'?" he asked, then continued when she nodded. "One of the things I've learned, Lily, is that if you do not learn about something, then you cannot control it. And if you cannot control something, then someone else can use it to control you. It is, after all, what the Ministry is doing, even as we speak."

* * *

"Ooooh! You should have heard that PRAT Sirius Black!" Lily raged as she stomped into the Room of Requirement in a fury. Severus turned a bemused eye toward her and watched her admiringly. Her fury always stirred up such fascinating passion in her.

"Hm?" he queried gently. For all that Lily was magnificent when angry, Severus didn't like her anger directed at him.

"WELL!" she said, flinging herself down on the sofa, her bag of books falling in a heap beside her. "We had our careers appointments with Professor McGonagall today . . . do the Slytherins do that too?" she said, suddenly broken out of her rant to look with concern at Severus.

"Of course," he replied mildly, wondering what got her into such a towering mood.

"WELL!" she declared again, as if she simply hadn't interrupted her own stride. "TODAY, Sirius Black decides *he* wants to be a **teacher**! Do you have any idea *why*, Severus?" she demanded, turning wild eyes on him so abruptly that tendrils of her flaming hair whipped about and slapped her in the face, which she appeared completely ignorant of.

"I cannot imagine. He doesn't seem to apply himself to his studies all that diligently . . ."

"Be *brilliant*, wouldn't it, Prongs? Could get all the girls to show me a little favour in exchange for good grades, if you know what I mean. Only the pretty ones though'," she mimicked in a sing-song voice. "GOD! I HATE him **so much**!" she practically shrieked in outrage through gritted teeth, her face having gone as red as her hair.

"If you are looking for someone to extol the virtues of Sirius Black, I am afraid you have come to the wrong place," Severus said with a wry smirk. "What did Professor McGonagall say?"

"Oh! Professor McGonagall didn't hear him, of course; she'd already closed the door to her office. Merlin only knows how I made it through my own appointment."

"So what did you decide on?" he asked, genuinely curious and also wanting to change the subject. He didn't like Potter OR Black and had no desire to discuss or even think about them if not absolutely necessary. He had quite enough of them when he couldn't get away from them.

"I'm not sure. Maybe curse-breaking!" she said with an excited gleam in her eyes. "Or . . . I dunno, there's always St Mungo's and the Ministry," she said, sounding not at all enamoured of the idea. Then, after a pause, she looked at him earnestly and asked, "You know what I'd really like information on?" He shook his head. "The *Unspeakables*."

He chuckled. "Well, that's not going to happen, but my mother's cousin Broderick is an Unspeakable. If you'd like, I can introduce you, over summer," he said, taking a sip of water from the glass at his elbow. "He probably won't be able to tell you anything about what he does, but you might get an idea of whether the field is right for you or not."

"Oh, Sev! That'd be great! Would you really?"

He shrugged. "Of course. There's a Portkey at my house that'll take us to my grandparents' house, and we can talk to him there. Or, you know, we could take the Knight Bus . . ." he trailed off, pondering. "I'll owl him."

She gifted him with a brilliant smile. "Thanks!"

He gave her a shy smile back. "Not a problem. Anytime."

Author's Notes:

There is a Snape castle in Thirsk, Yorkshire, not terribly far from Huddersfield. <http://www.ecastles.co.uk/snape.html> and <http://www.communicate.co.uk/ne/slhg/page2.phtml> . For the purposes of this story, the first-year student that asks Snape about his origins is of the opinion that Snape castle was built and/or owned by a pureblood wizard family with the same name, but the family is thought to have died out. Severus isn't really related, but he IS from Yorkshire, so . . .

Comet Bennet was a naked-eye (bright as the full moon!) dual-tail comet visible in the early morning in late 1969 and early 1970. I have Severus' first year being 1970 at

Hogwarts, and the comet was no longer visible with the naked eye in May, but I imagine it could still be seen with a telescope. <http://www.drsky.com/img/bennet.jpg>
(Thanks to GaryF for giving me the comet info!)

A couple of you have asked about Tobias' health. He's ill, and his illness is progressing. And the reason he doesn't know "what" he has is because he's actually got a mixture of two different ailments. Byssinosis, aka "Brown Lung" or "Mill Fever", is a respiratory illness caused by exposure to cotton dust at a cotton mill. However, as I understand it, Yorkshire is almost exclusively wool mills, and you don't get byssinosis at a wool mill. You get Anthrax, aka "Woolsorters" disease. The thing is, anthrax has an entirely different connotation in the US than it does in the UK. So . . . what we (*) decided was, Tobias was born and raised in Huddersfield and went to work in a cotton mill in Manchester, and then when that industry collapsed he moved back to Huddersfield to work in the wool mill there.

(*) - by "we", I mean Whitehound recommended it and I realised she's a bloody genius and ran with it. *ahem*

If you'd like to educate yourself for some strange reason on millworker diseases, here are two links from Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byssinosis>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthrax>

Rosier and Avery don't know the name of the witch their fathers killed because their fathers never mentioned it to them. Not exactly the type of thing you'd tell a four or five year old, you know. And by this point the fathers have probably forgotten, owing mainly to having no particular reason to commit it to memory.

Some of you may have seen parts of this chapter in one-shots I had up in various places; this was always going to be part of this story. I made some edits to it but the part about Petunia overhearing Severus talk about Dementors is a theory I had nearly two years ago.

As for the story of Ambrosius Slytherin, yes, that story is coming eventually, although I will likely do a great deal more to this story first. It's all planned out though. And I've a co-writer for that one. :)

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," copyright Arthur C. Clarke, 1961.

As always, thanks to my fabulous beta team, Ellie, Kay, Jean and Marnae, for making this chapter into something that doesn't have to drive the mods batty with errors, non-compliance, nonsense, bad plotting, bad Britspeak, and a complete lack of comma comprehension.

Apologies to the JRR Tolkien estate for the kidnapping of the Nazgûl. I gave them back unharmed, honest!

And to all my valued readers, I apologise most profusely for the delay. The third week of July I was entirely too hyped up about the Order of the Phoenix movie, and then I was hyped up about Deathly Hallows, which I was horribly disappointed with on many levels. I was in a severe state of depression for a month after that (over the book) before I could write again. Then one of my betas had a family emergency to deal with, and another had a lot of "real life issues" crop up. In fact, I haven't heard from one of my betas in almost a month, so I decided to submit without her. :(

And believe me, you don't want to see this unbeta'd!

Thanks for RobisonRocket for the final touch-up and many, many thanks to my reviewers.

The Break

Chapter 6 of 6

Story Summary:

A near life-long biography of Severus Snape and how he became the man he is today.

Chapter Summary:

Lily & Severus' friendship draws the attention of the wrong crowd, with disastrous consequences for both of them

WARNING:

This chapter is about 10,000 words, and rated NC-17 for content and plot. It contains: identity theft, *e-x-t-r-e-m-e-l-y* dubious consent, emotional blackmail, torture, gang rape, mind rape, drugging and all sorts of associated other unpleasantness, and not necessarily in that order. (Can I call a romance chapter, or what?!) It was difficult to write and is quite frankly very difficult to read. My adult beta readers were seriously disturbed reading this. It's a darkfic, angst and tragedy fic galore! But I've been told it's an interesting read . . .

None of it is graphic and all of it is plot-driven. If you find yourself unwilling or unable to read this chapter, rest assured I take no offense to it. If you need a synopsis (because as I said, it is plot driven), please contact me and I will be perfectly happy to provide it to you. One of my dearest friends isn't even reading the *story* because I warned her about this chapter; trust me, I won't be the least bit offended.

In the early Saturday morning darkness, a lithe figure with gentle curves, long, flaming red hair, and green eyes slipped through a door in the depths of the cold and dank dungeons of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, unnoticed by any of the four figures sleeping in warm beds. Shutting the door silently behind her, she padded directly across the room and pulled a heavy forest green drape aside, gliding into the body-heat warmed space within.

With a sinister smirk, she dropped to her knees and slipped the down-filled duvet over her head. With a nearly inaudible, "*Lumos!*" she illuminated the limbs sprawled across the surface of the bed and with two carefully placed and equally inaudible, "*Diffindo!*" spells, laid bare the young man beneath the blankets. Inching her way nearly imperceptibly up the bed so as not to disturb her target, patiently waiting for him to relax whenever he moved, she finally reached her target and lowered her head, mouth open.

* * *

Severus Snape stared in a panic at the text in front of him. He had to mix the Unforgiveable-blocking potion he was preparing with the utmost precision, or it would backfire

on him, causing the cauldron to explode. But unaccountably, the instructions had become utterly illegible, and at this stage in the brewing if he didn't figure out what he was supposed to do by the time he finished stirring this last time, the resulting explosion would condemn him to a lifetime of Cruciatus from which he could never hope to escape. It was one of the reasons why this potion was so rare...the shielding for each Unforgiveable had to be mixed separately, and doing it wrong caused whatever Unforgiveable that was being brewed against at the moment to be cast upon the brewer, in the cases of Imperio and Cruciatus, for eternity. The problem with Imperio was, because the curse wasn't being controlled by anyone specifically, the victim was openly controlled by anyone. The extremely rare recipe couldn't have picked a worse time to become unreadable.

A sudden blast of cold air alerted him to intruders and utterly shattered his concentration. He whipped his head around in alarm and saw his four nemeses approaching him with predatory looks on their faces, urged along for some reason by his angel-faced dorm mate Evan Rosier. Rosier raised his wand and hissed a spell in Parseltongue, and the four were transfigured into slaving dogs which pounced on him. He leaped away, but one of them landed on him. He flailed hysterically, managing to nearly fight his attacker off when he saw to his horror Devil's Snare winding its way tautly around his thighs, wrists, and ankles, just as one of the dogs lunged at his lower body. He stifled a shriek and realised with mounting terror that the cauldron had melted and the mossy green liquid ("*NO, IT'S ALL WRONG!*") within was cascading inexorably toward him. Frantically, he tried to cast a wandless containment spell, but his magic seemed to have abandoned him in his panic.

He groaned and tried again, too terrified to struggle against the Devil's Snare lest it amputate his extremities, when a small and remote part of his brain chimed in with the out-of-place information that whatever else the dog was doing to him, it was NOT biting him.

"*Oh God no,*" he thought. "*Not now. The potion. THE POTION!*" he admonished himself, trying valiantly (and failing) to draw his attention back to the dangerous liquid. "ROSIER!" he screamed. "HELP ME! That potion will kill us all!"

But Rosier just laughed, and the dog continued to not-bite him.

* * *

It took a few moments before he realised he really wasn't dreaming, but the weight of another draped across his lower extremities, to say nothing of what that other was doing to him with its mouth, made it considerably more difficult than it should have been. Ultimately, it was the nasal whistling issuing from Avery's bed that alerted him to his conscious state, and once he realised that, he gasped in shock.

"SHIT!" he hissed and yanked his wand out from under his pillow, casting *Muffliato* before whipping the blankets away from his midsection. The sight of flaming red hair and alabaster skin spilled across his abdomen and thighs was the last thing he expected to see.

"Lily!" he hissed. "What on *earth* are you doing here?!"

She withdrew and grinned at him. "Isn't that obvious?" she queried before resuming her previous activities, this time with her emerald eyes glued to his.

Severus thought he was going to black out and inhaled sharply, forcing his hand between his waist and her mouth. "Lily! STOP!"

Lily pouted. "C'mon, Snape, don't you like it?"

"Bzuh! Of course I like it! Isn't that obvious?!"

Severus was so rattled that he noticed neither Lily's terribly out of character pouting nor the fact that she was calling him "Snape."

Lily NEVER called him Snape when they were alone.

"So why'd you stop me then?" she sulked.

Severus felt his skin grow hot. "Things're-about-to-get-messy," he muttered.

Lily licked her now swollen lips seductively and sat back on her heels. "Well, maybe we should do something else, then," she said with a suggestive tone that left no doubt as to what she considered "something else" to be.

He groaned. "We can't," he whispered.

"Why?" Lily asked, a look of confusion on her face.

Severus thought it wasn't possible to grow any redder than he'd been but was proven wrong. "I wouldn't . . . I wouldn't-know-what-to-do . . ." he whispered, wincing in humiliation.

Lily flicked her unusually dark and long wand, and her own clothes disappeared. Lowering her chest to his, she leaned over and whispered in his ear, "That's all right; I'll show you. You wouldn't really pass up the opportunity to land a bird like me, would you?"

Later, as he lay sated, Severus rolled over to cradle Lily's head in his arm. "I do love you, you know, Lily," he whispered. For even with the assurance of *Muffliato*, he was mindful of his four dorm mates sleeping soundly so near to him.

Lily's eyes gleamed strangely at this pronouncement, and Severus interpreted it as reciprocation intermingled with fear. "I just had no idea you felt the same way." He propped himself up on his right elbow and rubbed his left thumb lightly over her forehead. "I know your sister's been intolerable lately," he said softly, "but if you'd like . . . you can spend the summer, or part of it, with me. It's only me and my father, and I can work it out with him," he offered, lying back down and cradling her to him.

"Perhaps," she replied with a triumphant look on her face. With the sound of this promise on her lips, Severus drifted back to sleep.

* * *

When he woke up later, he was alone and about to chalk the entire thing up to a dream. But as he rose sleepily from his bed to attend to his morning routine, muscles he didn't previously know he'd had screeched in displeasure. He hissed in pain and licked his painfully dry lips, and the rather distinct taste of *someone else* jarred him fully awake just in time to prevent him from treating the dorm to the sight of a starkers Snape.

"Unmfh," he grunted and summoned his shredded nightclothes to him, eyeing them with alarm and disdain. A muttered mending spell made them presentable enough for a trip to the lavs, and he stumbled from his bed. Rosier's cherubic face was eyeing him intently, and Avery and Wilkes, who were huddled on Rosier's bed with him, whipped around and sniggered.

"Long night, Snape?" Rosier snickered at him, his bright blue eyes glinting with some amusement.

Snape scowled and proceeded about his business, nearly yelping when he saw the hands on the wall clock approaching noon. Good God, no wonder Rosier was giving him stick.

Still groggy, but mindful of the strong scent of sex still clinging to him, Snape stepped into the shower, hoping it would help wake him.

With OWLs only a few weeks away, he'd intended to spend the entire day studying, but due to his unexpected lie-in, he'd lost several hours of valuable time. There was nothing for it. Despite his loudly protesting stomach, he was going to have to skip breakfast...er, lunch...and study straight through until dinner.

He wondered momentarily if Lily would object, then reasoned that with her grades, she'd understand completely. Besides, they had the whole summer to spend with each other.

Decision made, he made his way back to his bedroom, threw his nightclothes haphazardly under the bed, changed into clean robes, gathered his books, and slipped off to the library, heedless of the predatory gleam in Rosier's eyes or the silent shaking laughter of Avery and Wilkes.

* * *

That night, Lily visited Severus again. He'd stayed up and was reading in bed when the heavy drape parted.

"Where were you today?" he asked after recognising her and lowering his wand. "I missed you at the library."

"Oh!" she said, looking alarmed. "Um, I was...I decided to stay in the dorm," she hedged, seeming unaccountably flustered.

Severus frowned at her expression. "You don't have to keep coming down here just because you've already done it once, you know."

"I'm here because I want to be," she assured him as she straddled him with a grinding motion.

He closed his eyes at his immediate physical reaction. "Lily," he groaned. "Look. This is all very well and all but don't you think it's a bit one-sided?"

"What do you mean?"

"Er...I can't help but feel like I enjoyed things last night...this morning, whatever...much more than you did."

She grinned at him. "Well, maybe a little," she admitted with a playful wink.

"I don't find that to be acceptable. If you know what you like, then I want you to tell me."

"Okay," she grinned...and did.

Severus found himself much happier with the results, and when she returned again Sunday night, he put his newfound knowledge to good use.

* * *

Moving silently and in shadow was something Severus Snape had started teaching himself to do at the age of nine after reading a Muggle novel of his father's starring a soldier in a guerrilla war, and having learned how, he did it instinctively. Although doing so occasionally alienated him from his peers, it had its usefulness sometimes. But he had yet to see a return on it the way he was about to.

As he turned the corner leading from his bedroom to the Slytherin common room, he heard the unmistakable voices of Rabastan Lestrangle and Evan Rosier speaking in conspiratorial tones, and what he heard them discussing horrified him.

"So...Snape went for it then?"

"Yeah, and get this! He said he loved her, and invited her to stay with him over the summer hols! Something about that filthy Muggle sister of hers. AND he wanted to know what to do to get her off."

Oh god, how did they hear that?

"Good," Lestrangle crooned, sounding quite pleased. "All is as we expected, then."

"Yeah."

Here, Lestrangle's voice turned husky. "So you were able to get more of the potion from Slughorn?"

Rosier scoffed. "Are you kidding? I could take the whole bloody cauldron and that idiot wouldn't notice."

Lestrangle snorted. "And the hair?"

"Yep. All over the Prefect's bathroom. Got more last night right before I went to Snape. Her hair's kinda hard to miss, you know."

"Good. Don't neglect the others, but these stupid exams have me all tied in knots. And I look forward to blowing off steam, if you know what I mean," he said suggestively, turning to walk off.

"Me too," Rosier agreed, following him. "You do know we're going to have to make accommodations so I can experience from the other side, though. I'm enjoying this and all, but . . ."

"Don't worry, I have an idea for that, too," Lestrangle said, but just what this idea was, Snape did not hear, as they'd moved out of earshot and he dare not follow him.

Oh no! Lily!

Severus suddenly discovered himself dreading Double Potions later that afternoon.

* * *

Having been stuck to the wall with Treacle Taffy courtesy of James Potter and Sirius Black, Severus slunk into Potions class exactly two seconds before the bell rang. He was aghast to realise the only empty seat was next to Lily Evans who was waving happily to him, much to the amusement of the remaining male (and not a few of the female) Slytherins. He slipped into the seat and hissed at her, "Put your hand down!"

As Slughorn prattled on pointlessly about Chinese Chomping Cabbages, the Slytherin laughter continued.

"What are they laughing at?" Lily whispered.

Severus, who was bracing his pale and horrified face in his equally horrified and splayed palm, shook his head nearly imperceptibly, then grabbed a quill and parchment and made as if to take notes. "Later," he scrawled in the margin closest to Lily, and after giving her precisely five seconds to read it, began scrawling a picture of the stupid vegetation over his note.

Lily nodded, as if in response to Slughorn's lecture, but Severus knew it was meant for him.

* * *

Later that evening, a very frustrated Lily Evans paced angrily in the Room of Requirement. Long experience had taught her and her lab partner that the Fearsome Foursome led by that prat James Potter and Sirius Black had no knowledge of the Room of Requirement, and as Severus was perpetually trying to avoid them, it was an

excellent meeting place. They'd spent many hours studying and experimenting in the Room, completely unmolested. Lily and Severus came to the room every Monday and Thursday, as those were the days they had Potions class, and had been doing so since second year. But right now, even with the OWLs looming, studying was not foremost in Lily's mind.

All bloody day, the Slytherins had been sniggering at her. And while that wasn't terribly unusual, it had been more vicious...more personal...than usual. Like they knew something she didn't know, or something very personal about her that she wouldn't have normally told them. Frankly, it was beginning to unnerve her, and by God, she was going to find out what was going on...*as soon as Severus deigns to show his face* she thought impatiently. It wasn't like him to be late, much less SO late. She crossed her arms and began tapping her foot in fury.

After what seemed an interminable length of time (but was probably closer to twenty minutes), the door opened and a freshly showered Severus Snape emerged.

Lily frowned. "I thought you normally showered in the morning?"

"I do," he sighed, absently setting his books down on a table that materialised next to him. "But I'm not normally splattered with Stinksap when I walk into the Great Hall, either."

"Peeves?"

"No."

When no further explanation was forthcoming, Lily rolled her eyes and shook her head. "What happened?" she demanded.

Severus looked at her strangely and offered hesitantly, "... Potter and Black ...?"

"No...why are all the Slytherins mocking me?"

Severus sighed and rubbed his face. Swallowing hard, he took a deep breath. "You...ah...might want to be seated for this," he hedged.

Lily flopped down on the couch against the wall and motioned for him to join her. He took the seat at the other end and chewed on his thumbnail for a moment. "I...ah...I'm not quite sure where to begin."

"How about at the beginning," Lily said sarcastically. He turned to look at her with a slightly confused expression...it wasn't like her to be snide.

"ALL. DAY. Severus, *all day*, people have been sniggering at me and behind my back. More than usual. I want to know what's going on!"

He took another deep breath. "Very well. Apparently, Evan Rosier procured some Polyjuice Potion and added a hair of yours to it that he obtained from the Prefect's bathroom. And then, rather convincingly disguised as you, he made his way around the Slytherin dormitories this weekend."

Had Lily gone any paler, he would have mistaken her for a ghost.

"Why?" she finally gasped.

"I'm ... not entirely sure. Because he could, maybe?"

"No...no...why would he do that? Is he gay? I mean, not that there's anything wrong with that, but ..."

Severus frowned as he considered his near six years association with Evan Rosier, then finally spoke slowly. "I don't believe that he's gay...but he's got the curiosity of a kitten and has never known a day of restraint in his life. With sufficient means and opportunity, the motive can present itself."

"And the others...do they know it was him?"

"Lestrage does...I heard the two of them talking."

"Is *he* gay?"

"I don't know. I don't think so...Rosier looked exactly like you, but Lestrage certainly knew who it was."

Lily pondered this silently, confusion and fear rippling across her ivory skin, before she was interrupted by her friend.

"There's more," he said quietly. "When he...ah...when he came to me," he offered, swallowing hard, "I, um...didn't realise that it was him...and thought it was you. And I invited him...er, you...to my house over the holidays."

"What do you mean, came to you?" Lily whispered, a dawning look of horror on her face.

Severus closed his eyes and rubbed his head. This was a disaster. "She...you...he ... whatever," he muttered, avoiding her gaze. "He...ah...came-into-my-bed. While I was sleeping. And ... well ... " He coughed, judging by the heat he felt in his face that he probably matched her house colours.

"Well WHAT?!" she demanded shrilly. She hadn't yet blinked since he'd mentioned Rosier's name.

"Lily...I'm sorry. I thought it was you. And he woke me up, in ... ah ... a very intimate way. And I was caught off guard, and I was sleeping. And I thought it was you, and I went with it. I'm sorry," he repeated, shaking his head and meeting her eyes. "But it...it gets worse." *Would someone just kill me now?*

"THERE'S MORE!?" she gasped, appalled.

He swallowed. "He, um, I...eh," *is there any way out of this?* "I...eh...hinted at ... emotional attachment, and, er, that's when I invited him...or you...over for the holidays. Only it wasn't you, it was him, and he heard it. And he told Lestrage."

"Oh God," Lily said, looking truly horrified.

"I...um...as near as I can tell...he, ah, 'visited' all the blokes in the dorms. Well, at least fifth year and up...I don't know about the others. It's not something I can properly ask, you know."

Lily goggled at him, finally finding her voice. "I...I would NEVER!" she squeaked.

"I know, Lily, I know. I'm sorry."

She stared at him for several minutes, her brain churning and trying to make sense of what she'd just been told. "When you...when he...but I ... !"

He turned and looked expectantly at her, not at all certain what she meant by that proclamation. "Hm?"

"I've never ... I mean ..."

Comprehension dawned as he saw her face had flushed. "Yes, well, neither had I," he shrugged.

"So how was that not...like...a disaster? I mean...nothing against you! But isn't that like, well, the blind leading the blind?"

"Hm. Well, yes, it probably would have been, except, er...as near as I can tell, Rosier retained all his own memories. HE obviously had more experience, and I strongly suspect that at least some of it was with Lestrage, judging by the conversation I overheard. I don't think I was...ah...the 'first stop.' I *know* I wasn't the last."

"Oh my God . . ." Lily said, huddling into a ball in the corner of the couch. "I need to think . . ." she said.

"Of course," he said, rising from the couch. "I'll give you some privacy," he said, heading for the door.

"NO! No, don't leave, please? I just...I just need some time. Okay?"

He looked around the room and back at her. "Um. Okay," he said, moving across the room to the furthest corner from her and setting up a makeshift potion lab. He tried brewing for a bit but was unable to properly concentrate on preparing his ingredients and gave up after Vanishing the fourth set. He turned his attention on his Potions homework but was likewise unable to concentrate on that and decided to try to study a Dark Arts manual he'd just received via owl post instead. However, when that couldn't hold his concentration any better, he gave up and just stared at the book morosely.

"Severus?" Lily called quietly.

"Hm?" he said, looking up at her.

"I need to ask you something."

"All right."

"Um, you said that because Rosier had been going to Lestrage, that Rosier wasn't as inexperienced as I am even though he was in my body."

"Er, well...right . . . ?"

"So does that mean that every time he takes new Polyjuice he becomes a virgin?"

Severus blinked. "Ah...hm. I do not know the answer to that, Lily. Nor am I quite certain how I could find out. I can't exactly ask, and if he is, he's not likely to make me the first visit of the night any time soon. He still thinks that I still think it's you, so that would rather destroy his disguise."

"Can he get pregnant?"

Severus cringed. "I don't know."

"If he did, what would happen to the baby when he turned back to himself?"

He shook his head. "I have no earthly idea."

"Would it get ME pregnant?"

Severus shook his head to try and clear it...this was all moving way too fast in directions he hadn't considered. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"Well, what if I got pregnant?"

"You have to be having sex to get pregnant, Lily," Severus pointed out in what he hoped was a perfectly reasonable tone, but the chaotic rapid-fire of her questions was making it difficult for him to hold a thought for longer than a few seconds.

"Yes, yes, I know that but forget that for a minute. What if I did?"

He furrowed his brow, trying fervently to concentrate on what she was asking and give her a realistic answer for a bizarrely unlikely possibility. "I, um...I'm not sure, to be honest. I think it would probably depend on when he harvested the hair or whatever other piece of you he's using in the potion. If the hair came before you got pregnant, I don't think it would make any difference. If it came from after when you got pregnant, it might...but then wait. He wouldn't have had the piece of the baby...I don't know, Lily. Why? Are you pregnant? Are you planning to become pregnant on Polyjuice?" he asked in alarm.

"No," she laughed nervously. "No chance."

"Okay," he said awkwardly, wondering where he was supposed to take the conversation from that.

"Well...what if you got HIM pregnant? Would the baby be his or mine?" she said very rapidly.

He gawked at her.

"Well, what if he was Polyjuiced as you, and he had sex with me and I got pregnant? Would the baby be yours or his?!" she said, hysteria creeping into her voice.

Astonished at the turn this already bizarre conversation had taken, he rose and strode to her. "Lily. LILY!" he said, shaking her slightly when she continued babbling on. "CALM DOWN."

She took a few deep breaths and looked at him.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he demanded. "What's *wrong* with you?"

There was silence for a few moments before Lily broke it. "I'm really afraid, Severus, that they're going to do something to me."

"That's understandable and not unfounded," he conceded.

"And I've given it some thought. You said Rosier knew what to do because he'd been with Lestrage?"

"Er...something like that."

"And he showed you because he knew. Right?"

"Well . . . yes . . ." Severus had no idea where this new conversation was going but was increasingly getting the feeling that he didn't like it one bit.

"So...does he know what to do because *he* likes it or because that's what *he* would like?"

"What?! I . . . I don't know, Lily," Severus protested, having to think that over twice to be sure he even understood the question. "Why?"

This caught her short, and she stared at him for a moment. "If you were with him and if he showed you what he liked, then it had to be what I would like because he's not in his body, he's in mine," she said determinedly.

"R-i-g-h-t . . ." he said slowly.

"So if you've been with him and if he showed you what he likes, then it has to actually be what I would like since you were with him and not really me but it was sort of me."

"Okay . . ." he said, brow furrowed.

"So . . ." she said and looked at him resolutely. "You know what I would like even though I don't know what I would like because you've sort of been with me even though it was really him."

Severus merely blinked, thinking this had already been established. "Yes?" he said hesitantly.

"Do you...do you think they'll do something to me? Directly?" she asked with fear evident in her voice.

He blinked. "I'm not sure. I hadn't thought about it, to be honest. I suppose it's not outside the realm of possibility."

She trembled. "If they do...will you help me?"

He looked at her. "If I know it's you, then yes, I'll endeavour to get you out of the predicament as quickly as I can. But if I think doing so would be more dangerous, then no, I won't."

She nodded and chewed her fingernail. "That's fair enough. I...um...do you think Rosier's going to keep it up?"

He nodded slightly. "Probably."

"And Professor Slughorn won't do anything because Rosier's consenting, right?"

He thought about that for a moment. "I wouldn't count on Professor Slughorn to intervene, no. Certainly not without proof, and at this point it'd be my word against theirs." He shook his head at the futility of that idea.

"Okay, well," she sighed resolutely. "If he comes back to you, then you have my express permission to do whatever you like. He wasn't hurting you, was he?" she asked with sudden concern.

"No," he snorted derisively. "No. He was certainly not hurting me."

"Well then. Okay. I'm going to, um, have an elf get Bertha for me, so she can escort me back to the common room since you can't do it."

He nodded. "Good night, Lily, and again, I'm sorry."

"It's all right. It would be unreasonable for me to hold you accountable for that, especially since you didn't do anything that actually HURT me, so . . ."

He shrugged and started packing up to leave. "Lily?" he said, turning to face her. "That offer...to come to my house for the holidays? It's...it's an open offer. No 'strings' attached," he said, the corner of his mouth twitching wryly. "We've only got a two-up/two-down, but I'll sleep on the couch...you can have my room."

She smiled faintly at him. "So noted. But Severus?"

"Hm?"

"How would you know it was me?"

"Mmm. Well, now that I know it was not you, I think I can tell the difference...I hope. He's quite a bit more forward than you are."

"Yeah, but that's assuming I came to you directly, which they might not let me do. What if I'm not that close to you?"

"Lily, I'll have to confess I hadn't considered that."

"We need a catchphrase. Something that only you and I will know. So that if I say it, you'll know it's me."

"That sounds wise. But what?"

"I don't know," she said, chewing on her lip. She glanced around the room for inspiration as he racked his own brain.

"I've got it!" she chirped. "If I say something about not being on The Pill, you'll know it's me."

"The Muggle contraceptive pill?" he asked. She nodded. "Hm. That's a good thought...none of the other Slytherins are likely to be familiar enough with it to even understand what you're saying."

"That's what I thought. I guess sometimes being a Muggle-born does have it's advantages . . ."

He finished gathering his things and trudged toward the door, pausing before he went through it. He turned back to her, and with a look of remorse on his face, bade her good night.

"Good night, Severus. Sweet dreams."

He snorted. *Not bloody likely!*

* * *

Rosier, disguised as Lily, did indeed visit Snape again, but with Lily's newfound approval, Severus had no compunction about playing the part. A bit of contemplating the situation left him with some rather interesting theories and far be it for him to discourage experimentation.

But Wednesday night as he disengaged himself to lie down, he thought it prudent to cast forth some misinformation.

"You know, EvanS," he said, placing an unnatural stress on the last letter. "This is all very interesting and all, and while you're certainly welcome to stay at my place for the holidays, don't think you can ingratiate yourself to me now and be dismissive of me later. If you come to my house this summer, I expect the same favours you're showing to me now."

Lily's eyes turned to him, narrowed. Even though he knew what was going on, Snape had to admit this was unnerving. "I'd never think such a thing, Snape. But we're going to have to discuss this later because I have to get back."

"Of course," he sneered. "Your *hour* is almost up."

"What?" Lily-who-wasn't-really-Lily snapped.

"You only ever stay for an hour. What, is there a timer on the dormitory door?" he asked with a cocked eyebrow.

"I just don't want to get caught out after curfew!"

"Mmm. Of course," Severus replied derisively. "Well, g'nite. Don't let the others see you on the way out. I think Rosier's jealous." And with an exaggerated yawn, he turned his back to his visitor and lay down.

* * *

"Xenophid," Severus breathed and watched the heavy wooden trap door to the Slytherin Common room slide into the wall. He'd spent the last half of the afternoon in the library waiting for Lily to show up and the entire evening in the Room of the Requirement, likewise waiting for Lily, but she didn't show up there either. But to be honest, he hadn't thought anything of it. This close to the exams, it was entirely possible she'd decided she needed revision on a different topic, one that she had another study partner for.

"Snape, Lestrage was looking for you," Regulus Black called from the favoured chair at the fireplace.

He nodded and glanced around the common room, noting absently that none of his dorm mates, or the sixth- or seventh-year boys were there, but thinking nothing of it. "Thank you. Do you happen to know where he is?"

"I'm not sure. You might try the dorms," he said dismissively, waving him off.

Severus didn't even take heed of this and headed to his own dorm room...which was empty. He thought that a bit odd but tossed his bag carelessly onto his bed and went in search of Rabastan Lestrage, heading off to the seventh-year dorms, wondering if Lestrage had called another upper-forms "conference."

This appeared to be the case, as all of the sixth- and seventh-year Slytherin boys, and three of his dorm mates, were standing in a circle around something which he couldn't quite see through the tightly gathered robes. Several closest to the door spun around and pointed their wands at him, and he brandished his in reply.

"Snape!" Lestrage said in a syrupy voice, a diabolical look on his face. "SO glad you could join us!"

Severus merely raised his eyebrows in reply. "I've just gotten back from revising. Exams begin in a week. Black mentioned you were looking for me?"

"Yes," he crooned, waving two of the boys, who'd turned their attention to whatever was in middle of the circle, aside so that they'd make room for him, and stepped forward.

To say that he didn't expect to see what greeted him was an understatement. Evan Rosier was vigorously fucking Lily Evans' body, and Severus looked in alarm at the glazed-eyed girl lying passively on the floor. But after a moment's consideration, he realised that Lily wouldn't behave that way...if she were there against her will, she'd be fighting tooth and nail, and if she were for some ridiculous reason there by her own volition, she'd be a far more active partner. He put the thought utterly out of his mind and assumed it was one of the other Slytherins...either one of the girls or a younger boy.

"Em," he said to Lestrage with a sidelong glance of distaste at Rosier and his partner, "I'm really not much in the mood for a gang-bang." He made as if to withdraw and found wands drawn on him again. This time Lestrage affixed him with a glare that brooked no argument.

"Oh. But we *insist*," he said darkly, holding his wand at such an angle that Snape caught a flash of black against pale skin. His eyes flew wide with recognition at the brand on Lestrage's arm. "The year is almost over, some of us are moving on to bigger and better things, and we shan't get this opportunity to bond like this in school again."

". . . Right . . ." Severus said, recognising the situation for what it was and resigning himself with a quiet sigh.

At that moment, Rosier finished with a strangled grunt and sat back on his heels, panting. After a few moments of catching his breath, he laughed maniacally. "Dear Lord...that's good shit!" he sniggered with a triumphant look at Lestrage.

"Mmm. Indeed. I certainly enjoyed it," he said, and with a flickered glance at the girl who was starting to move a bit, turned his attention to Snape. "You're next. And you'd better be quick about it," he said, glancing at his watch.

Severus sighed and moved to the girl's feet. "Oi, Rosier. Cast a cleaning charm; that's disgusting!" he said with a grimace.

Rosier stood up and with an annoyed flick of his wand leered at Snape. "You could have cast it yourself, you know," he sneered.

"It wasn't my mess!" Severus countered, manoeuvring himself into position.

He noted Lily's emerald eyes on him *don't think about that right now . . .*) and for effect twisted the girl's body into one of the more contortionist positions Rosier had shown him when Rosier was under the impression Snape still thought he was Lily. He closed his eyes to try to build his concentration, which was shattered by the crowd of onlookers, and shifted his weight forward, his lank hair falling around his face like curtains, blocking his view of the others.

"Severus!" the imposter beneath him whispered, nearly inaudibly, but in a voice of panic. He opened his eyes slightly to look at her. Nobody called him Severus except his family . . . and Lily.

"Whatever you do, *don't stop!* Don't let them know I'm talking to you!"

He frowned.

"*Don't stop!* But the potion is starting to wear off, and I'm freaking out. Severus, you've got to help me, you've got to get me out of here ... you PROMISED!"

"What?" he mouthed. *What potion? What is this idiot talking about?*

"They slipped me the Draught of Peace, Severus, PLEASE! You've got to help me; I'm really scared! I'm not on The Pill!"

Severus froze, feeling his blood turn to ice in his veins.

"Nononono!" Lily, who was really Lily, whispered shrilly. "Don't stop! They can't know that you know or I know, or they'll kill us!"

He gave a tortured groan. *This cannot be happening. I am not raping my best friend in front of an audience.* "Unf. Move your leg," he said, more for an excuse to have stopped than because he really wanted her to move her leg. *Think, damnit, think!*

But it was happening, and he knew she was right.

"Severus, help me. Please!"

"All right," he whispered, nodding. But he had no idea how since he didn't have a phial of the Draught of Peace on him and didn't like at all the conclusion he came to. The fact was, it would be absolutely perfect in present company.

"I'm sorry, Lily," he whispered, "but it's the best I've got on short notice. Don't fight this. *Imperio!*"

The glazed look returned to Lily's eyes, and Severus threw all his concentration to how he was going to get them out of there as soon as possible.

"Snape!" Lestrangle hissed, "Don't get any bright ideas. We want to make sure you follow this to completion. So do it *where we can see*."

It didn't escape Severus's notice that all of them now had their wands drawn and on him. He emptied his mind and put everything he had into the task at hand, knowing his very life, and Lily's, depended upon it, having learned long ago in the that he must always do whatever needed to be done.

When all was said and done, Severus stood, his knees threatening not to hold him.

"Take her back to the Gryffindor common room and administer this antidote," Lestrangle commanded, tossing him a clear crystal container.

"... *What?!*" Snape demanded, privately glad for a publicly acceptable outlet for his emotional turmoil. "You *kidnapped* her? Have you lost your mind? Dumbledore will have us all expelled!"

"MIND YOUR TONGUE, Snape, and show some respect!" threatened Lestrangle darkly. "It matters little. And what need have I of exams? I've learned here everything I can and am moving on to greener pastures in a simple matter of days!"

"Not all of us are so fortunate, Lestrangle. Any one of us expelled before OWLs cannot legally practice magic, and not all of the sixth years are of age."

Lestrangle waved off Snape's tantrum. "No one is going to be expelled. That imbecile Dumbledore is hamstrung. My father is on the Board of Governors, as is Rosier's, as is Avery's and Wilkes'. And might I add, Abraxas Malfoy is the Chairman of the Board of Governors, and Nott and Mulciber, also on the Board of Governors, are in his pocket. And what, *exactly*, did you think was going on here, anyway?"

"Rosier's been to me every night for weeks!" Lestrangle shot a shocked and angry glance at Rosier. Severus continued. "I assumed it was someone else he'd Polyjuiced!" *Well, that wasn't exactly a lie . . .*

"You knew about that?" Rosier asked, obviously flustered.

"I've shared a bloody room with you for nigh on six years! You think I haven't picked up on your speech patterns!?"

"SILENCE!" Lestrangle boomed. "Take. This. Filth. Back to her Common Room. Ease your mind about expulsion, and I'll hear no more of it!" he said, shoosing Snape off.

Severus glowered at Lestrangle murderously for a moment but turned his attention to the girl curled in a heap at his feet. *Fuck. She's fighting it.* "Get up," he commanded and threw a non-verbal Imperius at her as Rosier tossed her robes back onto her. "Get dressed," he said with a scowl on his face and watched as she robotically complied. "Come here," he commanded when she'd finished, and when she approached him in a daze, he tapped his wand over her head, Disillusioning her.

So engrossed was he with getting the two of them out of the dungeons, preferably unnoticed, that he missed Lestrangle's knowing glance to Rosier and Rosier's obedient nod.

And so caught up was he in his own internal turmoil that he didn't notice Rosier following them all the way back to the Gryffindor common room. He bade her, "Go into the common room," lifted his Imperius Curse and watched her step over the threshold...and was utterly taken aback when he heard Rosier's triumphant, "Oblivate!"

Severus turned in wide-eyed shock to his dorm mate. "That spell's restricted by the Ministry!" he hissed. "Have you gone completely mad!"

"So's Imperius, Snape. She hadn't enough potion to be so docile for SO long. It was wearing off when you showed up. No loose ends, eh?" Rosier said with a wink and sauntered off.

Severus stared at his retreating roommate for long moments at a loss. He knew there was no possible way he could go back to the common room and face those vile betrayers. And it was after curfew, so he couldn't possibly get away with leaving the castle grounds at this hour. Feeling inexorably trapped, he headed for the Astronomy Tower, heedless of the door swinging open behind him.

He was very seriously contemplating flinging himself off the tower when he heard one of the two things he least wanted to hear.

"Severus?"

Oh God. Gods above and below, please just strike me with lightning and kill me now. Please. I beg you.

He swallowed hard. "Lily."

"Severus . . . I feel very strange."

I'd bet you do.

"Lily, it's not safe for you to be out at this hour. Come on, let me walk you back to your common room."

She complied, still clearly out sorts, which worked in Severus' favour as he was in no condition for conversation.

They had almost reached the comparative sanctity of the common room *(and what will you do then?)* when he heard the other thing he least wanted to hear.

"Good evening, Master Snape, Miss Evans. I'm sure whatever has a young Gryffindor and a young Slytherin out wandering the corridors at such an hour would make for a lovely bedtime story. Care to join me in my office for a cup of tea?"

Severus whimpered.

* * *

"Lemon drop?" offered the headmaster pleasantly. Lily, still in bit of a disoriented daze, took one politely...Severus stared unseeing at a spot on the floor.

"Severus? Lemon drop?" the headmaster asked when the boy didn't acknowledge him.

The occupants of the portraits murmured quietly amongst themselves.

"Severus?"

"Severus Tobias Snape!" snapped the sallow-skinned portrait of Everard Prince, causing Severus to jerk back to the present.

"Huh?" he asked, blinking dazedly at the portrait of his great-great-grandfather.

"The headmaster asked you a question."

Severus turned eyes so devoid of life to the headmaster that for a long moment, Albus Dumbledore genuinely feared the boy had been made into an Inferius. It was his dazed weaving that convinced him otherwise, as the boy was barely breathing.

"Severus. What is wrong? Whatever has happened?"

Severus only shook his head minutely, unable to speak.

"Severus?"

Severus shook his head again slightly, then with a second's pause, again more vigorously, and eventually held his face in his hands and started rocking back and forth.

"Severus?" Lily gasped in alarm, reaching out to her friend. He hissed and yanked his arm away.

"DON'T! Touch me!" he spat viciously at her, and Lily pulled away in confusion.

Dumbledore watched this interplay with increasing alarm and rose abruptly, striding to his fireplace. He reached into a small bucket on the mantle to grab a handful of power, which he threw in the fireplace. "Potions Master's office!" he called and sank to his knees, sticking his head into the green flames. "Ah, Horace. Do you happen to have any Veritaserum?"

"Of course, Albus. I always have all known potions on hand."

"May I have it? And the antidote?"

"Straight away," the old man said, waving his wand and summoning the two bottles to him, Levitating them into Albus' waiting hand. "Anything I can help with? Or should be aware of?"

"No, I think I've got it. If something requires your attention or assistance, I'll come for you."

"Fair enough, old man."

"Thank you, Horace."

Dumbledore withdrew from the fireplace and turned back to the two students in his office.

"I'll take it," Severus said in a voice that again called to mind an Inferius. "I'll take the whole bottle...just don't...don't make her listen," he said, finishing in a whisper.

Dumbledore poured three cups of tea from a service which had appeared on his desk and withdrew a sharp silver dagger from his desk. With Lily watching in shock, the Headmaster very carefully poured a single drop of the powerful truth serum onto the blade of the dagger, causing half of it to fall into the cup he handed to the black-haired boy in front of him and the other half to drip back into the bottle from whence it came.

"Do you know what this is, Severus?" Dumbledore said after placing a heavy stone basin on his desk.

Severus flickered his eyes toward the desk and shook his head slightly.

"It's a Pensieve. If there is something you wish me to see, you have need only to think about it with your wand to your head, and you may withdraw it from your mind. If you drop it into this basin, I can view it as an impartial third party."

Severus raised his deadened eyes to the Headmaster. "I have to *think* about it?"

"Well, it's that or you must tell me," he said, gesturing at the untouched cup of tea.

Severus paused for moment before he raised his wand to his head. He did so four times, a voice in the back of his mind noting that he felt no untoward compunction to disclose that which he didn't feel absolutely necessary, which would not have been possible under Veritaserum, but ignored the voice and simply waited for Dumbledore to pull out of the Pensieve, during which time Severus repeatedly rebuffed Lily's attempts at conversation and with increasing hostility. The poor girl was on the verge of tears when the Headmaster sat up and affixed Snape with a piercing stare.

"What do you think I should do now?" the Headmaster asked, his skin unusually pale.

"Why . . . would you POSSIBLY care . . . What. I. Think?" Severus asked.

"I find it advisable to garner the impressions of my students from time to time . . ."

"If I asked you to put me out of my misery, would you?"

"Severus!" Lily admonished as Dumbledore sighed and said, "Of course not."

"Then it doesn't matter what I think," he said with finality.

"Think about what?" Lily asked. Severus had no desire to contemplate where Rosier had gotten such experience casting Memory modification charms.

Dumbledore sighed and held his hand up to Lily to indicate that he'd heard her and would address her momentarily. "Unfortunately, Severus, I believe the youngest LeStrange is correct. I cannot legally prevent him from taking his exams without an expulsion, and the Board of Governors requires a two-week advance notice to ratify a recommended expulsion. Nor has it escaped my notice these many years that he is right-handed, so I am fully aware that him raising his wand to you with his left was an untoward threat. At this point I can only offer both of you protection. Miss Evans, I must inform you that your memory has been illicitly modified . . ."

"What!? By who?!" she gasped with a frantic look at her headmaster and her best friend.

"By someone who means you harm. And while I am normally loath to do such a thing, with your OWLs looming I must consider that it may be better to allow you to concentrate on your tests. After the exams are over, we can discuss returning your memories to you."

"No!" Lily insisted. "No. If my memory has been modified, I want the memories back."

"Miss Evans, I don't think you fully understand the gravity of the situation. Memory work is very difficult and very time-consuming. It is also very delicate. A single misstep could have your mind permanently altered...a single twitch at the wrong time could erase all your knowledge you've struggled so hard to obtain these past few years. I won't endanger your mentality and your career by trying to rush it."

Lily opened her mouth as if to protest but scowled at the Headmaster and snapped her mouth shut with a huff.

"The both of you should spend the rest of the weekend in the hospital wing. I'll arrange for your Heads of House to gather your necessities...personally." Dumbledore said with a knowing glance at Severus. "You may use my Floo connection," he said, rising and offering the small bucket to his students.

Severus stepped into the Floo and let a handful of Floo powder fall at his feet, to which he flatly intoned, "Hospital wing." He knew the night could not possibly get any worse and was genuinely looking forward to a bottle of Dreamless Sleep...then his earlier knowledge was proven wrong as he looked up into the smug gaze of Rabastan Lestrange. At that moment, Dumbledore stepped gracefully out of the Floo and saw Lestrange eyeing the younger boy with a self-satisfied smirk. Madam Pomfrey, drawn by the sound of the flames, bustled over to the Headmaster.

"Give this to Mr. Snape," Dumbledore said, thrusting a bottle of Veritaserum antidote at Poppy, noting that the fleeting look of panic on the elder boy's face was replaced with a knowing sneer. "Treat them both for shock and leave them here all weekend."

"Of course, Headmaster," Poppy said, obviously flustered by the old man's abrupt demeanor.

* * *

On Sunday night, the Headmaster found Lily huddled on her cot in tears. "What's wrong, dear?" he asked kindly.

"I-it-it's Severus!" she wailed. "I don't know what's happened, and he won't speak to me! Every time I go to him he acts like he's asleep, but I know he's not because his breathing is irregular!"

He patted the distraught girl's back sympathetically. "Perhaps, dear, here is neither the time nor the place to confront him?" he offered gently.

Lily simply buried her head in her pillow and bawled.

Three beds away, Severus Snape was envisioning a man (who bore a startling resemblance to Tobias Snape) building a brick wall around his heart and mind.

Released from the Hospital Wing Monday morning just in time for breakfast, Snape made it a point to leave the Great Hall when his dorm mates did and walked with them to double Charms and also Potions class, arriving well ahead of Potter and Black and managing to slide into a seat next to Evan Rosier. The two were hunched over in conspiratorial conversation when Lily Evans walked in. Seeing the seat next to her customary spot empty, she looked around and catching Severus' eye, showed a slight expression of disappointment, and in response, Snape leaned over and whispered something to Rosier that had them both sniggering. Shock and disappointment flickered across her face, and she threw her books angrily onto her desk.

In the back of the room, the little man in Snape's head spread another layer of mortar.

Later that afternoon, Severus did something he'd not done before...he left class early to go to the Room of Requirement. He was of a mind to gather his belongings before Lily arrived, and skiving off the last twenty minutes of a class taught by a ghost seemed a prudent gamble. However, the castle apparently had other ideas. All the stairways happened to move the wrong way, and he arrived at his normal time. He was desperate to leave before Lily arrived, but such was not the case, as she walked in as he was gathering his things.

"What are you *doing*?" she demanded shrilly.

Without facing her, he replied in a voice totally devoid of emotion, "I would think that would be obvious to someone of your intelligence, Evans."

Taken aback by his uncharacteristic use of her surname, she fumbled. "But end of term isn't for two more weeks!"

"Thank you, I am aware of that," he replied dully.

She started crying. "Why are you doing, this, Severus, WHY? Did you conspire with them? Did you come up with the idea of Polyjuicing Rosier just so you could feel like you were getting in my pants?"

He flinched and rose to his full height, taking a long, deep breath. In a gesture that would become a trademark for him later years, he whipped around and pulled his robes closer to him in a protective gesture. "You think whatever it is you need to think," he hissed at her. "Stay away from me, for your own good...they only went after you because of me. They kidnapped you, drugged you, and gang-raped you because you are my friend. And what you don't remember, because you were Obliviated so you wouldn't report them, is that I *participated*, Lily!"

Crying harder, she protested, "Why are you saying that? Why are you claiming responsibility for something I know you didn't do? That I know you aren't capable of?"

"I AM capable of it, and I DID do it!" he snapped at her viciously.

"Why!? You said you'd protect me!"

He looked away and shook his head angrily before glaring at her. "Lestrangle has taken the Mark, and we were surrounded by every other Slytherin male fifth year and up, Lily, wands out and trained on me. Had I not complied, we both would have died. Somehow, they'd slipped you the Draught of Peace, which was wearing off by the time I showed up, and to get you to comply I *cast an Unforgiveable on you*"

"You tortured me?" she gasped.

"Cruciatius?" he snorted derisively. "I rather think being passed around was enough torture. No, I cast Imperius on you."

"I'm immune!" she protested.

"Not if you don't fight it," he said frankly and continued gathering his things.

"You don't have to do this!" she insisted, and he whirled around.

"Oh but I do, Lily. If not me, who? If not now, when? This war has been going on for over FIFTEEN YEARS. It was milder in the beginning. The Ministry would have you believe it's only been going on for five, but they are delusional. My mother was murdered by Rosier and Lestrange's fathers when I was SIX. They tortured her with her own wand, and they burnt her alive before killing her. Avery's father was probably there, too. They own the Board of Governors, and most of the Ministry has been bribed. It's not going to change until someone brings them down from the inside."

"You would forsake me for them?" she whispered.

"Do not mistake 'for' for 'because of,'" he said, moving toward the door.

"I HATE YOU!" she screamed at him, and he whirled back around and advanced on her.

"If hating me is what it takes to keep you safe, then I would gladly hand you the ammunition as fast as I could load it. Trust me on this, Lily . . . stay away from me," he said darkly and walked away without a backward glance.

* * *

Author's Notes:

If you'd like to be kept abreast of any "news items" for this story, you may check here: <http://cmwinters.livejournal.com/tag/eap> . I post entries there publicly.

Special thanks go to Hachi for the idea of the dream sequence, PauAmma for the Devil's Snare idea, and Spyder for the Body Bind idea, even if that's not what they intended to imply. You guys are FANTASTIC.

Apologies for the length of the update; this chapter has been done for some time but I'm not done with the next chapter yet, and I figured a really short update time between 5 and 6 followed by a REALLY long one for 7 would upset more people than make happy.

As always, thanks a million to my beta team, who have frankly analysed this chapter and given me feedback on it for several months.