

For His Angel

by dracontia

Have you ever wondered why Snape made that unbreakable vow to Narcissa without hesitation? A series of vignettes, illustrating how a sympathetic Slytherin prefect helped a scared, awkward first year adjust to the realities of life in Slytherin House, suggest a possible answer... (Before we get the real one and all this speculation is shot.)

one shot

Chapter 1 of 1

Have you ever wondered why Snape made that unbreakable vow to Narcissa without hesitation? A series of vignettes, illustrating how a sympathetic Slytherin prefect helped a scared, awkward first year adjust to the realities of life in Slytherin House, suggest a possible answer... (Before we get the real one and all this speculation is shot.)

Disclaimer: The characters and their setting aren't mine. Psychoanalyzing them is but one of my many absurd hobbies.

"He's going to Hogwarts! He is a wizard...you can't deny that any more!"

"And why shouldn't I? A fair lot of good it's done you, being a witch! Why in the bloody hell should we waste money as if we had it, training him to be like ~~you~~?"

"As if he'd be any better off being some ambitionless tinkerer like you! If you'd try using the muscle between your ears, maybe you wouldn't have to break your back so much using the rest of them."

"You liked my muscles well enough when you met me, woman."

"Don't take me down that lane, Tobias Snape! Sometimes, I swear that Severus was the only good thing to ever come of you...and couldn't you have spared him some of that strength, so he wouldn't be so sickly all the time?"

"Well, it remains to be seen, doesn't it if he'll turn out a well-sound? If you have your way, he may yet go the way of the both of us. And it's your bloody fault he can't stand against a stiff wind, you and your hop-pole figure."

Severus shut his eyes, feeling vaguely sick. He wasn't sure why he always felt the need to listen to his parents arguing. Even now, when they were in the same room (a space so small it hardly seemed equal to the task of containing the bitter yelling), he simply hunched himself down in the corner and tried to remain unnoticed. *Wanting* to be so close to them was strange, when the narrowness of their house forced uncomfortable and often unwanted closeness. Still, outdoors was a big, bad, cold place for an undersized boy whose oversized nose was so apt at attracting head colds and jeers.

From a very young age, Severus Snape had a pretty good idea that he was completely screwed.

"Cissy? Oh, little Cissy, where are you?"

Bellatrix's voice was sickly-sweet, and that was bad. Narcissa Black had rather hoped that her eldest sister's pending engagement would have settled her mood swings a bit. No such luck. Hastily, she finished levitating the fallen nestling back to its home in the wormy crabapple tree and directed a 'Silencio' towards the creature before strolling towards the back entrance of the house, her heart pounding all the while. It wouldn't do for Bella to find the nest, not at all.

No one knew that Cissy Black was fond of birds. That was the sort of knowledge one kept from an older sister like Bella... That, and anything else that could be used against you. Sharing with Andie was equally fraught with hazards, chiefly because Andie was a headstrong hoyden who wasn't immune to blurting something out in the heat of the moment even at the supposedly mature age of seventeen. Speaking to Father was the equivalent of Russian Roulette, a disturbing Muggle game which had been explained to Cissy last term by a more-or-less tolerable half-blood. And Mother... well, Mother was usually... indisposed.

Safe topics of conversation were in short supply in this sagging branch of the Black Family Tree.

Cissy had learned to look for entertainment elsewhere if she wanted any measure of peace. Since social invitations were few and far between for the impoverished branch of the Black family, and since their father wouldn't have accepted any unless they were issued by the most distinguished of pureblood families, that usually meant the garden. Like their home, it wasn't much...two scraggly trees and a patch of indifferent grass, surrounded by tired shrubs and a few valiant flowers. But it occasionally harbored birds, innocent creatures which she put from her mind when she opened the door to find Bella looming on the other side.

"Did you want something, Bella?"

"I think you might want something, Cissy. Don't you want to have what the owl brought?"

"Well, not if it's a Howler." *Let's see if acting casual works today.*

"Catch, then," Bella said, tossing the letter and snickering wickedly.

Fortunately, Cissy had excellent reflexes, and the letter had something heavy in it that made it fall perfectly. Bella seemed satisfied at having made her scramble for it and wandered off, probably to practice Slicing Hexes on the rats in the basement. *Better on them than on the birds*, Narcissa thought. Even so, it gave her a queasy sort of feeling, to know how much Bella... enjoyed... slicing up rats.

Cissy had a fondness for baby birds for reasons she truly didn't understand. They were ugly, fragile, and the ones in their garden were not even magic. But someday they would fly. It was sort of what she pinned her hopes on.

Speaking of pins...

"So I'm a Prefect," she said, examining the badge in awe.

Snape would have considered the Hogwarts Express a distillation of everything life had taught him thus far, if he were old enough to articulate such philosophical thoughts. What he knew, or didn't know, about magic proved less important than whether a couple of snotty rich knobs decided he was 'in.' Just because Severus didn't let them have their way, like that timid Lupin fellow, or bend over and kiss their arses, like the other bloke with the funny name...

"Snape, Severus."

Severus sat under the shadow of the hat, anxiously awaiting the verdict.

"Simmer down, lad. You've got a lot of anger packed into your little frame. Take care it doesn't bend you out of shape. Try to relax, and let the old Sorting Hat have a look at what makes you tick."

Severus tried.

"Ravenclaw would welcome you. You're a clever sort."

Snape thought this a very bad idea and told the Hat so. What with his beak-like nose and black hair, there was no use inviting more derision than he was already doomed to have.

"You're a tough one... There's a core of courage in there, loyalty, too... a fierce combination. Gryffindor would truly suit you."

No. Way. In. Hell. Potter and Black, wealthy and conceited bastards extraordinaire, were in Gryffindor. He expressed his dissenting opinion to the hat in no uncertain terms.

"I want the House for ambitious people. I'm going to make something of myself. I want to be in Slytherin."

"So be it."

Narcissa was used to feeling this way about baby birds...not people.

But one of the newest batch of Slytherins was as much like a baby bird as any human was likely to get. Scrawny, big-headed, and with a beak-like nose, he resembled nothing so much as a rather ugly, small nestling. Even his lank black hair blended into the collar of his robes, unevenly shiny in their second-handedness, and evoked images of a baby crow still damp from hatching. She might have said that the finishing touch were his flickering, beady, little, black eyes but for his name. Snape... he was just one letter away from being a little skinny-legged bird.

Which was probably why she favored him with a genuine smile and obliged a couple of disgruntled third years to budge up to make room for him at the table.

Somehow, Narcissa Black, beautiful, glowing angel of the dungeons, was always the prefect on duty when things went most pear-shaped for young Severus Snape. Similar scenes repeated themselves several times over the course of Severus' first year at Hogwarts.

"I don' wanna stee Mabam Pombrey," he muttered, shuffling his oversized feet awkwardly as he tried to staunch his nosebleed.

Narcissa sighed. "It's my fool of a cousin again, isn't it?"

Severus simply glowered over the ragged white rose of a handkerchief that was slowly blooming red with blood. As usual, Narcissa relented.

"All right, just once more...but you have to be careful about being indebted to a witch or wizard," she warned. "I'll count this one as part of my job as Prefect... and part of standing up for a fellow Slytherin. We can't let the other houses get too far out of line." A spell or two later, and he was mended and clean. "Wait here."

Severus obeyed. He knew that people just didn't do things for other people. He'd always understood that there was a price, and that understanding served him well in Slytherin. It was almost the only thing that did serve him.

Except... except that Miss Black didn't ask him for anything. She said that it was just part of her job or duty to their house, but that didn't account for her genuine smiles. Or for the fact that she sat where he could watch her at meals so that he learned which fork to use and how to handle the serviette like a well-trained Pureblood. She made a point of giving him some bit of advice on obscure topics, from etiquette to not looking like a right pillock when handling a broom. She used her authority as a prefect to cast

into confusion her nasty cousin's and Potter's plans for him. She was a perfect being like one of those angels in the windows of the church that his dad took him to twice a year.

"Make good use of this," she said, her voice cool and precise. "You can't afford to owe anyone right now, either for protection or for clearing up your messes when you can't protect yourself. You have some studying to do, Severus." She tucked a book into his hand and gave him a keen look. He nodded, transfixed by the sky-bright blue of her eyes and the golden glow of her hair, radiant even in the dim subterranean light. She favored him with one of those tiny, genuine, almost motherly smiles and turned in a graceful flurry of robes.

He looked at the book, head swimming. *101 Useful Curses* was the title. And it registered with him that she had called him Severus, not Snape or Mr. Snape.

Life was still unfair, but at least Severus had his own guardian angel.

It wouldn't hurt to give him that old book. She had all the pertinent parts memorized. To do otherwise growing up with Bella and Andie, was sheer folly.

Narcissa Black helped young Snape because it was part of her job as a prefect, and because it was part of her duty as a Slytherin to make people from other houses miserable if they interfered with Slytherins. She helped him because it wouldn't do for him to reflect poorly on their house. Finally, she did so because her little cousin was a pillock with decidedly traitorous inclinations (witness his Sorting), and thus had to atone.

None of these reasons fully accounted for why she continued to help him.

The boy was as poor as a church mouse, had no connections, and was too young to show any real potential as a wizard. To top it all off, rumor had it that he was a half-blood, something her observations of his manners and bearing seemed to confirm. But he had a face only a mother bird could love. And he looked at her as if she were his mother bird, source of his sustenance and warmth. It was refreshing to be looked up to rather than ogled.

It wouldn't hurt to help him with his flying a bit.

"You fly like an owl," he said admiringly. It almost soothed the sting of having been told that she was not at all welcome to try out for Slytherin's Quidditch team. Witches weren't to risk spilling their pure blood for the sake of a game. A fertile womb was a rare find in the older families.

It wouldn't hurt to ask the other prefect to keep an eye out for him.

By the time Bellatrix and her fiancé met Andromeda and Narcissa on platform 9 ¾ at the end of the year, Severus made so bold as to wish Narcissa a good summer before leaving with a gaunt, tight-lipped witch in a shabby black dress.

"So, how do you like having ickle firsties sniveling on your robes, Cissy?" Bellatrix asked with a nasty laugh, despite there having been neither physical contact nor tears involved in the polite valediction.

And you wonder why you were never made a prefect, Narcissa thought.

Snape returned from the summer holidays taller by a head and grimly determined in his scrawny, birdish way. His parents' bitterness was, if anything, deeper than ever. Only physical exhaustion from constant labor made the expression thereof less vocal. He would figure out something that would convince his father that there was more to it all than 'foolish wand waving.' He could not fail, considering all that his mother was putting into his education...they lived on far too thin a margin to permit failure.

Despite her permission to address her as Cissy, he still found Narcissa awe-inspiring...particularly in the distinctly melancholy turn her beauty had taken. His angel appeared to be in mourning, though it took the rumor mill to suggest why. When he heard the news about Andromeda, he mustered the courage to ask her about it with vague ideas of offering comfort.

"Cissy, is it true? About Andr..."

"Severus, I shall only speak of this once. Listen carefully, and do not ask me again." His eyes widened at the chill in her voice, though the coldness did not seem to be aimed at him.

"I'm to be married as soon as I leave school. It's a good match, really. This Malfoy fellow is richer than Hades. You see, we purebloods do our duty to our families," she told him sternly. "There is no room for romantic notions or running off into the sunset with unsuitable lovers. The penalties are harsh for any sort of infraction. You weren't born into that world, but the hat put you in Slytherin, and you'd better get used to it.

"Andromeda forgot that."

He nodded. There were a dozen things he wanted to ask, foremost of which were: Where was Andie now? Was this Tonks fellow so bad? What, exactly, was the problem with Muggleborns, anyway? But she changed the subject, and he held his tongue.

"Have you met my cousin Regulus yet?"

Snape vaguely recalled watching a short, sober, polished version of Sirius Black being sorted into Slytherin at this year's Welcoming Feast, and instantly becoming much more of a non-entity than Snape had ever been.

"I think so."

"I would like to help him this year, but the advanced classes leading up to NEWTs are very demanding. Spend time with him, Severus. Watch him for me, if you can. He's really the only proper male the Black family has left."

"I promise, I'll look after him," Snape said, almost pathetically eager to please and not caring in the least.

Narcissa's eyes shone with conflicting gratitude and distress. "Oh, Severus. Be careful about making promises."

It wouldn't hurt to encourage him to cultivate Professor Slughorn's favor, Narcissa thought. Never was a head of Slytherin more skilled at making connections than Professor Slughorn, though he did insist on squandering them on frivolities.

She didn't realize how her eyes lit up when she looked at Severus, her gangly little bird. "Did you do well in Potions today, Severus?"

"Yes, Cissy! Professor Slughorn paired me with one of his best students today. He said he expects great things from us." He held his chin high, and his features for a moment looked less unwieldy and more formidable. *He has the potential to grow into a fine specimen of a Slytherin, indeed* Cissy thought. She was glad to have given Severus permission to use her nickname.

At least I can pretend to have a little brother.

"Good. It is wise to cultivate his favor, Severus. He may be quite useful to you."

Which, sadly, is probably more than I can say for cousin Regulus.

It was fortunate that Snape wasn't an optimist. Otherwise, he might have been disappointed that Potter and his gang had become even bigger prats than before (in every sense of the word) over the summer holidays. Snape could work like a bloody Hufflepuff, but for rich kids like James Potter and Sirius Black, everything came easily. Until he got well in with the right sort, life was going to remain a grind. He was deeply grateful to his angel for pointing the way in that regard.

Other than that, he was bearing up under his third year. Regulus suffered from a distinct lack of aptitude for logical thought; but he was better company than might be expected, considering what he had for an older brother. He and Severus developed a sort of uneven friendship, the usefulness of which was limited to those times between classes when a third year and a second year might be able to watch each other's backs for a few minutes in the corridors. Still, it was better than a hex in the eye from an enemy's wand.

Snape was beginning to shine in Potions such that Slughorn decided to pair him with the Gryffindor star of the class. Evans was tolerable... for a Gryffindor. Severus began to think that she might actually be sincere in her amiable attitude towards him, especially as it extended to those difficult days when he only felt like communicating in the barest of monosyllables. He still wasn't entirely certain what was supposed to be wrong with Muggle-borns. She seemed... nice. Genuinely nice.

Cissy still dropped a word of friendly advice now and again. Severus treasured each brief conversation, as NEWTs were approaching, and Cissy's time was more precious than Galleons.

Which is why it made all the more impression upon him when she took him aside for a very serious discussion.

"Severus, is it true that you are friends with a Gryffindor? A Mudblood, no less?"

Narcissa's tone of voice suggested that she had heard that her friend had contracted a terrible disease, and she very much hoped that it wasn't true.

"I wouldn't say that we're friends," he answered cautiously. It was true. They were civil to each other in class, and he was happy for the respite from the world's general scorn. They occasionally exchanged polite greetings between classes. Calling it friendship would be overly optimistic. "We work well together in Potions. I believe I mentioned that Professor Slughorn is pleased with us."

Her expression relaxed slightly, causing relief to ghost over Severus' mind like a breath of fresh air. "Well, if it pleases Slughorn, then I suppose being civil to her has its uses. See that it doesn't become more than that...and see that you do not let her take too much credit or seem to be helping you significantly. It wouldn't do to stain your reputation by mixing with the wrong sort."

"Okay, Cissy." He couldn't quite bring himself to ask what was so wrong with Muggle-borns. None of it made sense, but not appearing ignorant was an important part of fitting in. Most of all, he didn't want to upset Cissy. His angel had been through enough, after all.

She changed the subject. "I'm rather impressed that you enjoy Potions. I've never been best pleased to handle all those dead creatures and their parts."

He saw her shudder, and almost tried to reassure her by saying, 'It's just animals.' But he suddenly had a flash of memory from his first year, when Andromeda and Cissy had a worried, hushed exchange about Bellatrix's rat-killing proclivities. "Well... we don't have to actually kill them," he offered cautiously, suddenly glad that they didn't.

Cissy had a faraway, slightly disturbed look in her eyes. "Yes. I don't know that I would like to become... comfortable... with killing things."

It didn't take long for Snape to realize that Hogwarts without Narcissa's protection was a very brutal place. She must have been using her influence to keep Potter and Black from doing their worst to a far greater degree than he'd ever suspected. Regulus was of limited help.

He didn't dare ask Evans...despite the fact that she had actually said goodbye to him on the platform at the end of both third and fourth years, her Muggle family goggling at the sights (except for her sister, who seemed to be only able to gaze at wizards in general and Snape in particular with a curious brand of revulsion). She'd even mentioned that they could call each other by their first names, seeing as they'd known each other for the better part of four years. He let it pass with a noncommittal shrug. He wasn't going to disrupt his careful balancing act between a studious and respectful persona for the benefit of his teachers, a mysterious and aloof one to impress people within his house, and a 'surly bastard' one to keep the rest of the world at bay.

If stupid, fucking Potter and Black hadn't decided to be particularly nasty arses during OWLs, he might have gotten away with presenting only his studious and respectful aspect to her. It only took a few minutes of one day to erase all hope of ever being civil and just calling her 'Lily,' like a normal friend.

"My brother's a bastard," Regulus said sourly. A day later, to be sure, but it usually took Regulus that long to marshal something sensible to say. His off-the-cuff remarks tended to be unsuccessful at best. His most careful plans weren't much better. "At least you had better sense than to let that Mudblood get mixed up in it."

Snape schooled his expression carefully. Regulus might be a failure at logic, but he was a most accurate barometer of Slytherin house sentiment. Duty. Ambition. This was what Snape had chosen. There wasn't much point in being anything but a bastard outside of the Slytherin common room from that day on. Though within said room, he could, by dint of judicious displays of magical prowess and carefully learned regal demeanor, style himself as a Prince.

Cissy would be proud.

Severus felt incredibly out of place here. Narcissa had invited him just a week after his final term at Hogwarts had ended, after having written to him only once in the intervening years. Now he was mingling among wizards whose blood was so pure he imagined that he could smell it. Or, more disturbingly, that they could smell traces of Muggle in him. Malfoy Manor was sparkling and opulent and everything he wasn't used to. It made his limbs feel large and clumsy, all out of proportion to the rest of his body.

Lucius Malfoy was richer than Hades. And speaking of hellishness... Snape was certain he'd just twigged as to what was going on in the Manor, and it wasn't just a social gathering. His earlier nervous thoughts about his half-blood status returned emphatically.

"Severus," a familiar voice beckoned.

"C-Mrs. Malfoy." He caught himself just in time.

She nodded her approval. He was learning.

"You know what's happening here tonight, don't you."

Narcissa didn't really answer. Fair enough; it hadn't been a question.

"I need to ask something of you," she whispered. "Severus... I'm going to have a baby. I haven't told Lucius yet. He's in too deep to quit now, and it's no use asking him to. But I need to ask you... When the subject is brought up tonight...would you...join? To watch out for him... for my sake? If something happens to Lucius before the baby is born, his family may decide to repudiate me and refuse to acknowledge the child. There are still cousins of his in France who would love any excuse to take the estate."

Snape didn't trust himself to speak.

"I have no brothers. My sisters... " She trailed off. "If Lucius dies, no one will be able to protect me. No one will protect my baby."

I would protect you, Snape thought. But it was a wishful thought. He couldn't shield her from scorn in such a situation, and he couldn't support her in the manner she deserved. She was worthy of a better refuge than the dingy house where his mother wallowed in bitterness and mourning, assuming up his late father's hobby of criticizing his failures and taking his successes for granted.

Regulus might be sympathetic. Snape was fairly sure Regulus *would* be sympathetic, left to his own devices. But if Cissy's own family decided to turn on her, Regulus would toe the line like a dutiful son and look on in approval while she was disowned. And he didn't blame Cissy for being unwilling to take that chance.

Severus studied the liquor in the goblet that he held. It was nearly colorless. Just like all the best poisons.

"I'll do it. For you," he promised quietly.

Narcissa sat in silent shock in a private room at St. Mungo's. Her entire being was numb, in a way that had nothing to do with the quarts of potions that had been poured into her. Out of reflex, she raised her tearful face when she heard the measured steps of her husband at the door. But it was not until she saw a momentary flicker of concern in the dark eyes of the man behind him...the man who watched his back on her behalf...that she broke down.

"I've lost her, Lucius," she sobbed. "Our baby..."

"It was a girl?" Lucius asked distantly.

"Yes," she whispered in misery.

"Well, we shall try again... Hopefully, a boy will prove more resilient." It sounded distinctly like a threat.

Narcissa caught the fleeting, venomous glance that Severus shot at her husband from his place just behind Lucius's right shoulder. By the time Lucius turned to leave the private hospital room, his shadow's features were impassive again. She felt a painful flicker of pride at how well her little bird mastered his expressions. But just before the door closed behind them, Severus slipped his wand free and wordlessly transfigured the quill on the bedside table into a white rose.

Held together weakly by the profound concern in a discreet look and a single flower, Narcissa wept into the petals.

The witch had azure eyes and a rippling mane of black hair. She had attended Beauxbatons and seemed relatively intelligent. They had a wonderful dinner. They talked all evening. She was interested in him and not afraid to show it.

Snape said goodnight and left her confused and disappointed. He could tell; her eyes were searching his hand for a wedding ring, her mind was searching memories of their conversation for what might have gone wrong.

The way she drinks, I could never bring her to meet Cissy.

A year later, two things had changed: Narcissa was pregnant again. And Snape realized that he was in over his head.

"Sir," he said, on his knees in an office full of sleeping portraits and mysterious artifacts, "I only joined because a...a good friend asked me to. I promised to protect someone. I can fulfill my promise far better if the Dark Lord is defeated."

Piercing blue eyes, very different from the ones whose pleading brought him to this point, studied him thoughtfully. A bearded chin dipped in a nod of approval.

"Stand up, Severus."

It had been years since Snape had thought of the stained glass windows. His mind had long since divorced Narcissa-as-angel from the original image. Looking at Dumbledore, he remembered that the glowing glass angels had been clustered around God.

The baby could easily have been carved of alabaster; it was so pale and still.

"He's so fragile, Severus."

Severus had heard that sentiment several times from Lucius, though couched in pejorative terms. Far be it from him to agree with Lucius, particularly when Narcissa's tone was so plaintive. "He's perfect."

It was the right answer. Heavenly blue eyes gazed up at him gratefully, lifting the shadow of the mark on his arm for a fraction of a second. "Lucius chose godparents for him based on what they could do for us politically. I would have chosen you, Severus."

"I... Thank you, Narcissa. It doesn't matter what Lucius did. I'll do whatever I can for the child."

Draco opened one translucent eyelid. Severus imagined that there was a trace of blue in the pale eye regarding him sleepily.

"Oh, Severus." She didn't caution him against making promises this time.

Fucking prophecy.

The house was in ruins. He stumbled through it, trying to figure out what, exactly, had happened. The Dark Lord was nowhere to be found. Potter was dead, and Snape couldn't figure out what it was that tasted like ashes, because didn't he hate Potter?

Maybe he tasted the apology to Lily that had lived for so long on the tip of his tongue, but had died over and over again without leaving his mouth. She'd only been trying to be decent to him. There she lay, in stillness only possible in death. Bugger his reputation for calm, collected coldness.

"I'm s..."

A soft cry interrupted him. Lily's eyes were open, fixed on him with sorrowful hope. The only problem was, they weren't in her face.

Dazed, Snape blinked at the baby, whole and alive in the wreckage, with only a small mark on his head to show for the trauma. Even as Severus' entire being shook with the improbability of it, he tucked a slightly scorched blanket around the child. His hands moved purely from reflexes happily learned in his rare, precious moments helping Narcissa with Draco. He failed to notice the tiny hand that briefly gripped his finger before he pulled away.

Dumbledore needs to know. Need to tell him...the boy lives.

Over a decade and a half later, all was in ruins again.

Snape ran, and he shouted, and he dragged the too pale, too thin boy along beside him, wondering if there was a chance in hell that anyone could pull this one out of the bin. His thoughts rumbled along familiar tracks to the beat of running footsteps.

It wasn't fair that Potter's son should have the eyes of the only other witch who'd ever been decent to him *in that* face... Miserable boy, so hot tempered, yet showing maddening flickers of justice and truth.

It wasn't fair that Narcissa's boy should look at him with cold, gray eyes trapped in a face so like the one he admired... or that he should be as petulant a spoiled little brat as his father, rarely showing glimmers of Narcissa's bright wit and reasoning.

It was hardly fair that he had more in common with the son of his bitter rival than with the son of his first friend and protector. The injustice twisted in his mind like a knife in his heart that the boy whose presence he couldn't stand struggled against greater adversity and achieved more than the one who reminded him of his Slytherin angel.

If only we had been in closer touch, over the years... If only it had not been prudent to stay away from them, to avoid being associated with past actions...

And it gnawed at his innards painfully and bitterly that, by Snape's own standards, the boy with Lily's eyes and James's face, deserved success more than the boy whose features were as delicate as his Angel's even if his eyes were Lucius-cold. There were potions that could turn one's heart to acid slowly, poisoning every organ. The juxtaposition of those two boys was as effective as any of them.

Bloody stupid children! They think classes are hard. Life is hard. You're supposed to work hard. It's only a few unholy lucky sorts who have it easy. And luck doesn't last.

And it wasn't fair, no, not in any way, that the only two people in the world who could ask and expect an Unbreakable Vow from him, both did so.

But then, Severus had always known that life wasn't fair.

Death wasn't fair, either.

FIN

With gratitude to Dreamy_Dragon, britishqt13, Farzana, and Lisa, for offering to beta-read this...and with no particularly emphatic thanks to Yahoomort and Hotsnail, for making it so bloody hard for me to take any of them up on their kind offers.

Any mistakes are purely my own, owing to my outlandish habit of writing new bits right up until I hit the 'Add Story' button.

Next time I post, 'twill be in the post-DH twilight of one of my many alternate universes. See you on the other side, amigos!