

The Potions Master's Nephew

by SeverelySnaped





The Potions Master's Nephew

When a potion goes horribly wrong, Professor Snape is transformed and seemingly trapped in his fifteen-year-old body. Much to his disgust he finds himself enrolled into Harry Potter's fifth year, forced to hide his true identity. Girls, drama and teenage angst do not bode well with Severus.

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Contents

Prologue	5
<i>In which a potion goes decidedly wrong</i>	
Chapter 1	8
<i>In which fifteen is hell</i>	
Chapter 2	45
<i>In which a lot of trouble is caused by a broom</i>	
Chapter 3	72
<i>In which there is bickering and blood oaths</i>	
Chapter 4	92
<i>In which there is serious danger</i>	
Chapter 5	120
<i>In which Gryffindor's Keeper is quite a catch</i>	
Chapter 6	150
<i>In which there is much detention</i>	
Chapter 7	184
<i>In which Snape becomes the villain</i>	
Chapter 8	218
<i>In which it is a very Slytherin Christmas indeed</i>	
Chapter 9	267
<i>In which everyone demands a kiss</i>	
Chapter 10	318
<i>In which the loser gets the prize</i>	
Chapter 11	356
<i>In which pain can end or begin with a kiss</i>	
Chapter 12	389
<i>In which the play is just the background drama</i>	
Chapter 13	423
<i>In which much blood is in the heir</i>	
Story Notes	467
Author's Note	468



Prologue

~ In which a potion goes decidedly wrong ~

The air was cold in the Hogwarts dungeon. The flickering torchlight cast eerie shadows against the brushed stone walls, making a head of lank, greasy hair glint the same colour as the green flames it passed.

Severus Snape returned from his storeroom and placed the ingredients carefully onto his workbench. His face, usually bearing an expression of unpleasantness, was even stormier and stung with irritation that evening. The perfect consistency of the enormous cauldron's contents next to him did nothing to appease his mood, but rather the steam wisped slowly up at him, resembling the Headmaster's beard which he longed to yank on until the old man finally saw his way.

Dumbledore had managed to pull another Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher out of thin air, politely turning down Snape's annual application for the job. It was as if he thought that teaching Dark Arts would just whet Snape's appetite and tempt him back to the other side. Surely years of faithful service had proven exactly where his loyalties were.

"You know what I must ask you to do, Severus, are you ready?"

As if continuing to doubt him, Dumbledore's questioning voice echoed in his mind. While being examined so searchingly by the Headmaster's piercing eyes he had answered instantly, precisely, unflinchingly; *"I am."*

There was a long silence as Snape continued to stare at the swirling steam, pondering perhaps, if he had answered too rashly. It would be so easy to take a long-deserved trip overseas and just leave everything he knew behind. Hogwarts held next to no fond memories in his mind, and

there was hardly anything else that he would miss. Perhaps the usual thoughtful book from the Headmaster at Christmas time...

Slight bitterness filled Snape's mouth at these self-pitying thoughts, and it was then that he realised how he could have answered Dumbledore's question so easily, and why he would stay and do what was needed.

He simply had nothing else.

Flickering his eyes from the steam, Snape strained the precise amount of lacewing flies into a small bowl, and tipped it slowly into the simmering cauldron. The potion started to bubble gently as he stirred it, the thick liquid making a quiet gurgling noise. It was one of the few noises that Snape actually liked, and the look of unpleasantness on his face seemed to fade somewhat.

He was so absorbed in the slowly changing colour of the mixture, that a light tinkling noise from the shelf above his head made him jump. Craning his neck upwards, he was rewarded with a glimpse of an old, mangy cat skulking around the rarest of his bottled potions. Reaching for his wand with his free hand, he tried to restrain the urge just to zap the cat out of existence, settling with glaring at it murderously whilst he levitated each bottle one by one onto his work bench below.

Barely had he reached his third bottle however, when Mrs Norris realised that her shields against brutal assault were disappearing, and she crouched suddenly, as if poised for attack. Her sudden movement made one of the bottles wobble slightly, and Snape's concentration was momentarily broken. The cauldron made an angry gurgling noise at the sudden halt in its stirring, and the levitating bottle tipped precariously onto its side.

"Careful now," Snape ground out in what he hoped was a soothing tone. "Just move slowly away from the bottles..."

But the way the muscle was moving in Snape's cheek

didn't sit well with Mrs Norris, and in a split second she bolted backwards against the wall, sending bottles flying and making Snape yell in anger. The bottle that had been suspended in the air fell to the floor with a smash, the splattering bits and pieces exploding suddenly as they hit the blue flames underneath the cauldron. Attempting to steady the shaking cauldron with one hand and stop further bottles from falling with the other, Snape waved his wand wildly, not bothering to restrain roaring his complete fury at the alarmed cat. In sudden panic she lunged through the rest of the bottles, launching herself straight at Snape's contorted face. Snape barely had time to register before a shower of bottles hit him front on, followed by a scratchy ball of tattered fur.

Although he heard the splash and fizz of potions hitting his mixture, he still tried one last attempt at levitating the entire cauldron backwards. But the floor was slippery with liquid and Snape only succeeded in slipping backwards himself, grabbing the rim of the cauldron for support and batting away the terrified cat scratching at his face. He gave one last unintelligible yell that turned into a gurgle before the cauldron tipped over; dousing him in scorching, blue liquid.

Chapter One

~ In which fifteen is hell ~

Severus Snape opened his eyes. He felt warm and comfortable, and didn't seem to be staring at the dark, barely visible stone ceiling of his dungeon. The ceiling above him was lit a light pink from the setting sun, and a warm breeze wafted through a nearby window. He blinked bemusedly around when a blur of black fur suddenly obscured his vision, hurling itself towards him and latching on to his face.

"Get off!" he choked, tearing the furball from him and throwing it away.

The kitten twisted its body in midair, landing gracefully on its feet and bolting under the bed. But Snape wasn't paying any attention to the cat; he was staring very hard at his hand in front of him. He looked quickly around for his wand, and seized it from the bedside table. He was just about to summon a mirror when he caught sight of his blurred reflection in the looking glass next to the sink. Unable to believe what he was looking at, he brought his hands up to touch his face before cursing violently and stumbling awkwardly out of bed towards the mirror.

He glared at his clear reflection and gasped. A horrified, teenage boy was staring back at him.

"So, until we have a counter-potion I am afraid you are stuck like that, Severus."

Snape stared into space as Albus Dumbledore paced the room, still unable to comprehend how the recent chain of events had come about.

Much to his horror, the house-elves had already cleaned up the mess in the dungeons, leaving not a drop of spilled liquid behind. The Potion Masters at Beauxbatons and

Durmstrang, along with various doctors from St Mungos were each contacted one after the other, but to no avail. Each had replied promptly that such a case was not possible to happen in the first place and were quite curious as to why Dumbledore would enquire such a thing. Snape was horrified at being made a laughing stock, so Dumbledore hadn't bothered to reply.

The enormity of his condition just starting to sink in, Snape's moody stare flicked from the blank wall before him to out the window, at the glittering lake below. He couldn't help but feel that Dumbledore would think he'd done this on purpose, as if to get out of whatever nasty job was in store for him. He felt unusually cowed as he sat there, suddenly unable to meet the Headmaster's eyes.

"I don't blame you for what happened, you know," murmured Dumbledore, breaking the long silence and reading Snape's averted gaze like a book.

"I know that," replied Snape curtly, feeling horribly uncomfortable but forcing his eyes to glare back up at Dumbledore's. To his surprise, Dumbledore was looking back at him with a half smile on his face.

"You know, Severus, although it's an unpleasant ordeal for you, this is still quite a notable achievement that you've stumbled across," he said. "I believe this is the first successful body-age reduction of all time."

Snape snorted loudly, though straining his brain as he tried to mentally run over all of the different combinations of ingredients, and then all of the potions they had been combined in, and then all of the possible ways they could have affected his Polyjuice Potion...

"It wasn't successful at all," he said eventually, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice as his brain gave up in frustration. "It was an accident – and a ridiculously clumsy one at that."

"Some of the best inventions start out being accidents."

"That's only assuming this is permanent," said Snape at

once, “–and I shall make sure that it will *not* be.”

“Yes, that would be a pity,” agreed Dumbledore after a brief pause. “The loss of your services would be quite a blow to our side. Not to mention your value as a teacher in this school.”

“Yes, well the remaining weeks of the holidays should be sufficient for finding a cure,” said Snape stiffly, annoyed at himself for flushing slightly at Dumbledore’s words. It was as if a steady supply of adrenaline was pumping into his body and making him feel restless and emotionally agitated. He could’ve sworn he hadn’t felt like this when he was a teenager the first time.

“Are you quite all right, Severus?” asked Dumbledore gently, peering with some concern at Snape’s rapidly drumming fingers on the bedside table.

“I’m fine,” snapped Snape, ceasing the drumming and instead fiddling with a loose thread on the mattress.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows ever so slightly and looked out of the window with interest.

“You know when I was younger, I found there was nothing more relaxing than spending a sunny day rowing or swimming to get rid of any, ah... *excess energy* I might have had. It made my concentration and countenance so much more agreeable.”

Snape sniffed rudely. “I assure you that I am *fine*, Headmaster,” he ground out. “I am perfectly capable of handling this adolescent body without any meaningless physical exertion.”

Dumbledore smiled at the Professor’s precise words coming from a sulky boy’s mouth. “Well, I wish you good luck in your endeavours and look forward to having my Potions Master back before the start of the school term.”

As Dumbledore got up to leave, a slightly harassed look came over Snape’s face. “Er... Headmaster... If, by any chance, I somehow don’t –” he began.

“Then you must continue to work on it throughout the year,” cut in Dumbledore genially.

“But the students –”

“You can act as a student yourself,” said Dumbledore smoothly. “We have quite a few on exchange this year, you know. No one has to know who you really are.”

“But –”

“We’ll say that you are Professor Snape’s nephew, and he has gone away for a while, leaving you (who is honourably named after his uncle) to start school at Hogwarts.”

“Who will –”

“I will teach Potions in the meantime.”

“But-you-can’t-expect-me-to-do-this!” Snape burst out angrily in one breath, before he could get interrupted again.

Dumbledore looked at him mildly. “Now, Severus, it will give you time to catch up on your childhood. Besides, I have absolute faith in your potion making abilities and I’m certain you’ll find the cure within a few weeks anyway.”

But the more Snape thought about finding a cure, the more difficult he thought it would be. Polyjuice Potion in the least took a month to brew.

“Oh and Severus... I’m afraid some of the staff already know about your current predicament,” said Dumbledore offhandedly, though not quite meeting his eyes. “Minerva was here earlier and seemed to find your situation... er... slightly amusing and brought back the other Heads to er... that is... they found it slightly amusing also.”

“*What?*” Snape glared him. “That old trout! And who else has she told in the meantime?”

“Don’t be rude, Severus,” reproached Dumbledore. “She knows she’s to tell nobody else. It’s only the Heads of Houses, Madam Pomfrey and myself who are to know.”

“And that’s five too many,” muttered Snape under his

breath.

“Don’t make yourself handle this on your own, Severus,” said Dumbledore, seriously. “And besides, Professors McGonagall and Flitwick have both taught you before and would most certainly have recognised you anyway. You know it’s still quite easy to tell who you are.”

“Then everyone will know!” Snape burst out at once. Annoyed that he’d lost his cool, Snape settled into a seething silence, narrowing his eyes as Dumbledore drew his wand and started descending towards him. “Wait... what... what are you *doing*?”

“*Incisorus!*” Dumbledore commanded, waving his wand to sever large clumps of hair from Snape’s head. Ignoring the alarmed look on Severus’s face, Dumbledore continued to zap here and there, cropping Snape’s slightly greasy hair very short against his head.

“I could have done this myself,” muttered Snape sullenly, glaring at his reflection on the far side of the room. “And what’s that? You can’t just leave one long bit when it’s all short. I look ridiculous!”

Dumbledore shrugged. “I thought they were all the rage these days.” He zapped it off at Snape’s look of irritation. “There. What do you think?”

“I don’t know, it’s just hair,” said Snape testily, glaring at his reflection. “Can you order the house-elves to my office for questioning? I’ve wasted enough time lying around up here.”

“Of course,” replied Dumbledore, his concerned face softening as Snape struggled out of bed in robes too big for him. “But don’t be so hard on yourself, Severus. If things don’t go as planned, perhaps you could treat this as a long-deserved break.”

Snape’s face tightened at these words and he didn’t reply. Quickly transfiguring his robes, he left the room in strained silence.

Snape tossed and turned in his bed. It felt somewhat comforting to be back in his quarters but he still felt strange, as if he didn't fit somehow. He wasn't short for a fifteen-year-old, but he still felt too small for his bed and simply ridiculous sitting behind his desk with his feet barely touching the floor. Questioning the house-elves had achieved hardly anything, and he was currently starting to brew a fresh batch of Polyjuice Potion.

It was then that he realised that the last batch he'd ruined had been for Dumbledore, yet another thing he'd messed up.

After about five minutes of pummelling his lumpy pillow in frustration, he began to feel much calmer when another sudden thought struck him. He reached for his wand on his bedside table.

"Lumos," he muttered.

Snape pulled the sleeve of his left arm up. He glared at the familiar tattoo, not knowing whether to be relieved or depressed.

It would be hard resisting the Dark Lord's call in this weaker body. He'd already discovered that his spells weren't as powerful now as they'd grown to be. And he had no idea as to how he was supposed to defend himself when he couldn't even Apparate anymore. Perhaps he should speak to Dumbledore about it.

Tomorrow. Try to sleep.

But it was so hard. Sleep didn't come easily to this restless body. He tried to relax his clenched jaw but only succeeded in clenching his fists instead. The school term started in barely a month! He had a horrible feeling that his cure would evade him, and Dumbledore would force him to relive his humiliating school days.

No, Snape thought to himself. The idea was preposterous. In any case...at least his old school rivals

wouldn't be back to haunt him.

Snape shovelled soil vigorously. After two sleepless nights in a row he had grudgingly accepted the offer to help Hagrid with his vegetable patch. Much to his disgust, everyone seemed to treat him like he was fragile, and Snape was starting to regret working so closely with Hagrid as the great oaf seemed to have developed the idea that he was to be 'taken under his wing'. It was only later that Snape found out that his parents had apparently died quite recently, and his dear Uncle Severus had gone to clear everything up – courtesy of Dumbledore.

Snape slapped an insect and winced as he hit burnt skin. Blasted sun, he seethed. Pale skin was absolutely useless! And what was the point of working off his energy during the day when it was impossible to sleep at night with all this irritating sunburn?

He ran his fingers through his short hair, hating the way it had become a habit to do so. He kept thinking that he'd gone bald, without the familiar curtains of hair drooping down over his face, so perfectly concealing and comforting.

His thoughts were interrupted as a soft ball of fur hit the back of his legs. He whirled around in a second, happy to take out his frustrations on the kitten.

"Stop following me," he growled, and kicked out at it.

He couldn't understand why the cat kept following him around, Mrs Norris had never particularly taken to him before her transformation. Filch refused to believe that they were the same cat and was still lamenting the supposed death of the 'real' Mrs Norris. Snape had already put up with the Headmaster's suggestions ("Why don't you keep her? I say, call her Oreos!").

He'd responded with a long-suffering scowl and stalked off, however the effect was somewhat ruined by a

gambolling 'Oreo' proceeding to chase his ankles. He'd eventually decided to ignore the playful cat and contented himself with aiming a kick at the kitten whenever it bounded past.

"Diggin' teh Australia are yeh, Sev?"

Snape's shovel froze in mid-thrust. With all the despicable things he had to endure, he didn't think he could stand one more.

"*What* did you just call me?" he asked scathingly, as he turned to the Gamekeeper and gave him his coldest look imaginable.

Hagrid squinted at him in surprise, the sun beating down into his eyes. "What was that, Sev?" he inquired, completely oblivious to the look on the boy's face.

Snape growled indistinctly and took it out on the soil. He still couldn't figure out why Hagrid hadn't recognised him, let alone why he kept asking for his help in his garden. Hagrid had been Gamekeeper while Snape had been at school properly, and hadn't exactly been one of Snape's biggest fans.

The shovelling boy glanced over at Hagrid, who had stopped his work and was looking at him with something close to pity. Snape's face tightened and he dropped his shovel. He didn't need any *pity*.

He stalked back to the castle for a shower. He'd been wasting far too much time doing mindless exercise when he needed to spend it working on his counter-potion. There were still the countless bottles that were on his shelf that he needed to analyse, and he still had to deduce exactly which ones might have fallen into his cauldron.

Snape cursed as he jogged up the castle steps. He had forgotten to ask Dumbledore about his assignment. There had to be *something* he could do, even if he looked like an adolescent twit.

He glared around him at the empty Entrance Hall. Only three weeks to go before it was filled with students'

mocking laughter.

The sun peeped over the Forbidden Forest. Severus Snape stretched and got up. He was feeling strangely light, probably because his sun-blistered skin had finally healed itself. He started to pull on a robe and glanced into the mirror. He was shocked at the image before him, and stared disbelievingly at his reflection for a few seconds. He ran his fingers through his short hair but then stared at his palms and fingers in horror.

Gone were the tapered precise fingers, made steady from holding potion ingredients hours upon end. Instead were these coarse, clumsy things, hardened and callused by physical labour. He clenched his fists and noticed new, still lean but slightly prominent muscles tensing in response. His sunburnt upon sunburnt skin had peeled away, leaving him a light nutty brown colour, instead of his pale, bordering on anaemic skin prior. Finally he looked at his face, and felt a burst of annoyance. He looked like a simpering fifth year, with his smooth chin and pleasant expression. He quickly twisted his face into his usual scowl-cross-sneer and felt relieved. This young body was twisting his mind, now he was starting to feel as if he didn't belong down here, as if he wanted to be outside. He shook his head and fastened his outer robes. He had painstakingly recreated nearly all of the potions upon his shelves, and it was nearing the time when the Polyjuice Potion would be ready.

He started up the stairs, aiming a kick at a certain black kitten and remembering his question for Dumbledore. The Headmaster should be back by now. He had been away on his usual mysterious business for the past two weeks.

Snape made his way up the moving staircases, to the very top floor towards the Headmaster's office. Feeling slightly foolish, he whispered the usual ridiculous

password and ascended up the stairs. He opened the door and saw Dumbledore sitting at his desk, writing busily with a luxurious quill. Snape cleared his throat and Dumbledore jumped. The Headmaster pushed his half-moon spectacles back into place and smiled at the changed figure standing before him.

“Sneaking up on me, Severus?”

Snape looked indignant. “Of course not, I made no such effort!” he replied hotly. *Damned stupid adrenaline rush.*

Dumbledore looked at him shrewdly and set down his quill. “I suppose my letter to Aberforth can wait,” he murmured.

Waving his hand in an irritated apology, Snape launched straight into his prepared speech. “I came to see you, Headmaster, because I am anxious to know what you are assigning me to do. I know I am not much use now, but –”

“On the contrary, Severus, you are very useful as you are now,” Dumbledore interrupted.

Snape looked taken aback. “I am not at my full strength...at the moment...but the Polyjuice Potion will help me brew my cure very soon,” he began.

“Cutting it a bit fine aren’t we, Severus? Term starts in one week, yes, yes I know the Polyjuice Potion won’t be ready until then,” he said hastily, as Snape started to turn red. “But there might be something else you could do...” he said thoughtfully.

Snape looked at him mistrustfully. “If it has anything to do with Potter, then no,” he said flatly.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows and picked up his quill once more. “I thought as much. But someday you *will* have to work together, Severus, you know that don’t you?”

Snape grunted.

“Well, good luck then. I must get back to my letter, Severus, but we shall talk again before the start of the

term.”

Snape hovered in front of the Headmaster’s desk a while longer, before the scratching of Dumbledore’s quill made it clear that the conversation was over. Feeling quite annoyed and unable to believe his situation was being taken so lightly, Severus turned on his heel and slammed the door behind him. His face was stormy as he pictured another week of teenage awkwardness. Taking the steps two at a time he descended quickly, heading downwards towards Hagrid’s hut for his daily dose of unpleasantries.

Rubeus Hagrid glanced at the boy next to him gulping down his breakfast. He really did eat a lot. Sort of reminded him of himself at that age. It was quite a pity really; the boy had told him he might be leaving today. He’d been a great help organising lessons for the year and he was going to miss the strong lad who helped him in his garden.

Severus Snape finished his breakfast and got up. He nodded at the Gamekeeper and Headmaster and left hurriedly.

Finally. *Finally* it was ready.

A familiar black kitten followed closely at his heels, but this time he made no effort to kick it away. He whipped out his wand and opened the door to his office, striding across the room to the adjoining one in which he brewed all of his potions in private. He quickly switched back to his old (rather big) robes and left Dumbledore’s transfigured, shorter ones by the door.

He opened a vial and pulled a clump of boarhound fur from it. It seemed ridiculous but his experiments had shown that dog hair should counteract with that damned cat hair. And speaking of which...

He contemplated whether he should change the cat back as well. Seeming to read his mind, the kitten gave one last

rub against his ankles before bolting for the door. Snape shrugged. He didn't care anyway.

He tossed the fur in firmly. Stirring the mixture carefully he uncorked the next vial of carefully prepared liquid and poured it slowly in.

The potion turned a familiar bright blue colour. Snape put his wand on the table and looked down at the steaming mixture. Deciding to do everything as he did before, he got ready to tip the cauldron of liquid over himself before he hesitated. He was starting to feel strangely attached to his new body...

He pinched himself furiously for having this momentary fit of insanity. It would be ridiculous to remain a boy! Besides, the Headmaster was counting on him.

He steadied his hands onto the rim and got ready to tip it over when something sharp hit his face.

"YOU STUPID BEAST!" he roared, batting the cat furiously away.

But this caused him to lose his balance, tipping the liquid not only over him, but over the alarmed feline as well. He felt the steaming fluid wash over him, as he reluctantly opened his mouth to allow some to go gushing in. Then his head hit the floor with a crack, and his vision blurred to black.

Severus Snape groaned dully as he rolled onto his side. His closed eyelids flickered as memories of a cauldron tipping on him a second time started forming hazily in his mind. With a sudden burst of realisation, he flung his hands to his face and sat up.

Nothing had changed.

A wave of frustrated fury burst through him as he rolled over and buried his face in his pillow, furiously analysing preparations he'd gone through, checking and rechecking why, after all his planning it didn't work. His head started

to hurt from concentration and disappointment, every calculation fading instead to the look of scorn on everyone's faces when they'd seen that he'd failed. By God, he was a *man*, not a snivelling boy; how could the world taunt him like this?

"I'm sorry, Severus."

The Headmaster's gentle voice didn't come as a surprise to the numb Potions Master. He was obviously in a bed in the hospital wing, and he at once felt self-conscious of the fact that his face was buried into a pillow as if he was crying. He instantly rolled over and sat back up, glaring stonily out of the nearby window towards the huge lake. Judging from the sun it was quite late in the afternoon. He must have been unconscious for quite a while.

Dumbledore spoke again, his voice irritatingly soothing. "When you're ready, Severus, you must tell me of what happened in every detail."

Snape continued glaring at the glittering lake, the sunlit reflections hurting his eyes but refusing to look at the Headmaster. Eventually he started to mutter what had happened, but when he got to the part about Fang's fur, Dumbledore interrupted.

"So that explains the tail!" he exclaimed.

Snape's glare intensified. "Tail?"

"Er...yes...nasty job removing it... but continue with your story," Dumbledore said rather hastily.

But the wave of humiliation he felt was suddenly put on hold when a thought occurred to him. "What about the *cat* fur the first time?"

Dumbledore looked at him closely, as if expecting him to sprout a pair of whiskers.

"I see no visible cat attributes," said Dumbledore eventually, but then his expression brightening at a growing muffled disturbance below. "Aha! I hear the sound of trampling feet! The students are arriving! We shall talk later tonight, Severus. Come now, let us go

greet the students in the Entrance Hall.”

Snape sank further into the bed as a response. He must have been unconscious for at least forty-eight hours!

“What you said a month ago,” Snape said suddenly, gripping the blankets around him tightly. “About me being enrolled as a student – you can’t be serious!”

“I’m sorry, Severus,” replied Dumbledore with a sigh. “But we need your potion-making skills on hand and there is nowhere more convenient and safe than Hogwarts. You look to be around fifteen and I’m sure the fifth years won’t even notice you amidst all the other exchange students.”

“But–”

“I’m sorry, Severus,” Dumbledore repeated wearily. “Oh, and I shall be teaching Potions in the meantime, as well as being Slytherin’s Head of House.”

“What!” Snape burst out in disbelief. “The Slytherins will *revolt!*”

“Don’t be melodramatic, Severus,” Dumbledore called over his shoulder, heading for the door but motioning towards a cupboard. “I’ve shortened some of my old robes for you to wear. I hope you don’t start the term by being late.”

As always, Dumbledore had the annoying ability of making it clear that the conversation was over, and Snape, wallowing in self-loathing and disbelief, pulled on his new robes and forced himself to follow.

Merry torchlight flickered outwards as Rubeus Hagrid pulled open the great doors of the castle.

“Welcome teh Hogwarts!” he boomed to the awed first years.

“You’re early, Hagrid,” Professor McGonagall said quite pointedly to him, making her way past the older students to look at him rather severely.

“Oh... well, some of these firs’ years are good rowers, eh?” he said somewhat shiftily, fingering his enormous umbrella, but then getting distracted as he caught sight of Dumbledore and a certain sulky-looking boy descending from the far stairs.

“SEV!” he bellowed, making McGonagall stagger backwards with her hands over her ears. “Glad yeh stayin’! Listen, I wan’ yeh t’meet a few friends of mine!”

Far off on the stairway Snape paused, looking as if he’d sucked on a lemon.

Dumbledore glanced over his shoulder at the boy and raised his eyebrows. “You know, being acquainted with wizards of such moral fibre as Hagrid would surely be an asset in the social department, Severus.”

“Bah,” muttered Snape with a long-suffering glare, but eventually moving towards the enormous shaggy man with a very bad grace. “Hello, Hagrid,” he muttered, nodding stiffly and attempting to control his scowl.

Hagrid grinned in reply, looking as if he was about to give him the biggest treat in the world. Snape responded with a thin smile that turned to ice as he heard his next words.

“HARRY! RON! HERMIONE! OVER HERE!” Hagrid bellowed.

An important-looking girl with a big ‘P’ badge started to push her way towards them. A boy roughly the same size with a shock of messy black hair followed hastily afterwards. A second boy, taller than the other two, followed reluctantly after them, rolling his eyes and apologising for the girl’s behaviour. They stood as a trio, all talking at once with Hagrid beaming away at them.

“Righ’ I’d like all yeh t’meet Sev Snape, Professor Snape’s nephew.”

Harry and Ron exchanged disbelieving looks before they all turned to face him.

Snape fixed them with an icy stare. “That’s *Severus*

Snape,” he said coolly, trying to restrain the intense dislike radiating from his face.

Harry, Ron and Hermione looked as though they were trying to restrain the incredulity rising in theirs.

“Er... what year are you in then?” Ron began lamely.

“I didn’t know Snape had a nephew,” Hermione blurted out suddenly. “You look just like him!”

Severus gave her a withering glare. “Thank you for the compliment,” he sneered, and stalked off.

But as he was leaving, he couldn’t help but overhear Hermione’s whisper, “I know this is mad – but I’d swear that’s the Professor himself! He seems to act just like him... plus, he does sort of resemble a better-looking Snape...”

Luckily he walked out of range before he could hear Harry and Ron’s gagging noises.

Snape seethed as he shouldered past countless students. He tried to force himself to calm down and think rationally, but whenever he grew angry he found it hard to think these days. Trust that know-it-all Granger to jump to conclusions. So he acts like ‘Snape’ does he?

Oh no, he groaned mentally, but it would be so difficult to act otherwise! But... he *must*. No one must suspect him, especially not Potter and followers. He may have lost his body and half his magical strength, but he would not lose his reputation or his pride.

Distracted by his thoughts, Snape changed direction suddenly, only to collide heavily with a boy slightly shorter than him.

“Watch out!” they both snapped at the same time.

Snape glared at the boy in annoyance, surprise replacing his anger when he recognised the irritated face. “Malfoy!” he exclaimed.

Draco Malfoy looked at the stranger in suspicion. “Who’re you? Have we met?” he demanded at once.

Snape quickly replied. “Ah yes...my uncle mentioned

you – you might know him, Professor Snape? I was named after him...”

Draco looked somewhat gratified at being mentioned by his Head of House, and his expression became almost friendly. “Are you really?” he replied, looking slightly impressed. “Well, I must say, your uncle is definitely the best teacher here *by far*. He really puts those smarmy Gryffindors in their place. I bet you’ll be in Slytherin just like him, eh?”

Snape smirked smugly in response. Perhaps all of his students weren’t such a lost cause after all.

The huge crowd of students clamoured around the Great Hall, each eager to catch up with their friends. Draco was standing towards the back with Severus, bragging about the merits of Slytherin House and the absolute awfulness of Gryffindor which Snape found himself strangely enjoying.

“Do you have a broom?” asked Draco suddenly, but then looking disappointed at the other boy’s negative headshake. “You really should get one, I’m head of Slytherin’s Quidditch team and I could probably get you on if you’re any good.”

“Oh... I don’t think I am,” Snape replied, thinking back to his clumsy attempts at flying in his school days. “But thanks for the offer.”

“That’s quite all right,” said Draco rather formally, as if he wasn’t quite used to being genuinely thanked for something. There was a brief uncomfortable silence as he looked around the room. “Your uncle’s not at the staff table, where is he?”

“Er, my parents are dead. Killed quite recently,” mumbled Snape, looking slightly awkward. “He’s taking some time off to sort out... er... our estate.”

“Oh,” Draco muttered, just as awkwardly. “Right...”

Sorry...”

Severus ran his fingers through his hair, wracking his brains for something to break the silence with. He'd always favoured Draco – mostly because it rubbed Potter the wrong way – but also because he reminded him of himself at that age. He hadn't been expecting anything close to sympathy though. He was just about to reply when McGonagall called for silence and announced that the Sorting was about to begin.

“See you in a bit.” Draco waved, and moved quickly over to the Slytherin table.

Severus nodded, feeling slightly foolish for befriending his own student. He jostled into a queue surrounded by exchange students, while the rest of the Great Hall settled down and listened to the Sorting Hat's song with interest. It felt like a long time before all the first years were sorted, and he was just starting to feel restless and wonder whether he could sneak off somewhere until it was over when he realised there was nobody left in front of him.

“Snape, Severus,” McGonagall called.

A slight murmuring grew in the hall, as a few hundred faces turned to stare in his direction. He walked stiffly towards the battered hat, restraining a furious glare in response to all the whispers. He was just about to put on the hat when the Headmaster rose from his place.

“I would just like to welcome Severus Snape, nephew of our Potions Master at Hogwarts, Professor Snape...” (loud whistles from Slytherin, suspicious glances from all of the other houses), “...unfortunately Severus Junior's parents have passed away, and Severus Senior had to depart temporarily to settle some business.”

The hall fell silent, not knowing how to react. Draco caught his eye and gave him a lazy nod. Snape stared glassily ahead, finding it hard to feel intimidating in this strange, awkward body with hundreds of eyes upon him. The Headmaster looked around shrewdly and resumed his

seat. Severus gave one last glance around the room, before the hat fell over his eyes.

“Well, well, who have we here?”

Snape jerked involuntarily. It had been so long since he’d heard that voice.

“Not that long,” the Sorting Hat chuckled.

Save your comments, Snape growled mentally.

“What a temper! Phew, and I thought you had changed.”

Well, you thought wrong.

“Oh, I’m never wrong... You *have* changed, Master Snape.”

Yes, I’m not a Death Eater anymore, you useless rag.

“You weren’t a Death Eater when I last sorted you... No, no, it’s something else...”

Snape waited, annoyed and impatient.

“Aha! Why my dear Severus, I believe you have set yourself some boundaries!”

Snape swore under his breath. How long had he been sitting there?

“Patience, Severus, you are difficult to place...”

Just hurry up and put me in Slytherin, will you!

“Ah, so you want to be in Slytherin...?”

And what’s that supposed to mean? Snape interrupted.

“Events have changed you,” said the hat cheerfully. “The end does not justify the means anymore. As I said, you have set yourself *boundaries*.”

Look, I don’t know what you’re going on about...

“But you didn’t answer my question, Master Snape,” the hat interrupted.

Snape made an exasperated noise aloud. *Yes, what is it?!*

“Do you really want to be in Slytherin?” the hat said mildly.

Snape’s head whirled in confused annoyance. *What? Why would you even – Of course I –*

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Severus Snape blinked at the sudden light. The entire

school was staring at him open-mouthed. Forgetting his appearance, Severus gave them all his best glare. He started to walk stiffly to the Slytherin table when it struck him.

Wait.

The hat's bellowed choice echoed around whispers of the room, and Severus Snape spun around to face the long table decorated in scarlet. The look of horror upon his face was reflected in each of their faces. McGonagall had half risen and was staring at him incredulously; even Dumbledore's eyebrows had risen quite high.

McGonagall quickly recovered from her shock. "Woodley, Philip," she called.

Snape managed to regain control of his frozen legs and moved quickly and silently to the scarlet table and sat as far as he could away from everyone else. Pretending not to see the way Hagrid was giving him the thumbs up and beaming proudly at him, Snape looked instead over to the Slytherin table. He searched for Draco and saw that he was already staring at him, quite pointedly. When Snape caught his eye, the young Slytherin frowned and looked away. Snape's feeling of numbness faded away as he glared down at his empty dinner plate. Picking up his knife, he started to hack at the table with it, his head whirling with anger and confusion once more.

The hat was obviously broken, or else playing a very poor joke. Or perhaps Dumbledore had tampered with it in his usual cruel and meddlesome way. How on earth was he supposed to keep up the I'm-not-Professor-Snape-I'm-his-nephew-who-is-nothing-like-him facade now? He'd be around Gryffindors all the time!

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall," said Dumbledore, as the Sorting drew to an end. Gesturing down the table, he continued. "A warm welcome also to Professor Garwood, who will be teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts this year."

A smiling witch rose to her feet and Snape glared at her in loathing. She looked to be barely his original age! What had qualified *her* over him?

A massive feast appeared magically before him, but it did nothing to appease his mood. Snape picked up his fork and started mashing his potatoes viciously, transferring his glare over the Gryffindors instead.

They seemed to be over their shock and were now throwing him suspicious looks. The Weasley twins were doing rather bad impressions of him mashing his potatoes while Neville Longbottom was laughing nervously. Harry and Ron seemed to be ignoring him but Hermione was staring at him curiously. Ginny Weasley, following Hermione's stare, gave a shudder. Hermione noticed and nodded.

"Creepy, isn't he?"

Ginny glanced at the new student again.

"Creepy is an understatement," she replied, as Snape caught her eye and gave her a defiant scowl.

Snape sat in the Gryffindor common room, reading a book in the corner and waiting for everyone to go to bed. Whenever anyone had attempted to talk to him or get within several feet, he'd responded with an icy look, leading to a hasty retreat on their behalf. Even Fred and George Weasley had offered him only one of their Canary Creams to try, and half-heartedly at that. Snape was starting to regret not being friendly, for he was acting exactly like a suspicious Professor Snape in disguise.

Only two people were left now. Harry and Ron were playing wizard chess, while discussing Quidditch animatedly.

"Oh, come on, Harry! You'll be perfect as team Captain! I bet that rat Malfoy'll buy himself into the position on Slytherin team."

“Y-yes,” the other boy said reluctantly, “but we still need a new Keeper.”

Ron leant back. “No problem, we’ll hold trials tomorrow,” he said easily.

Harry grinned at him. “You going to try out?”

Ron considered. “Nah, maybe next year I’ll try out for Chaser though...”

Harry looked slightly relieved. He wasn’t very keen on picking someone over his best friend.

Ron yawned. “We should go to bed.”

Harry glanced at the brooding new boy in the corner. “We haven’t finished our game!” he protested.

Ron grinned and whispered to his knight. A single piece moved to claim Harry’s queen. “Checkmate,” Ron said lazily, and headed up the stairs.

Harry frowned and followed reluctantly, shooting one last look at the new student’s back.

As soon as they were gone, Snape jumped from his chair and slid out of the portrait hole, much to the Fat Lady’s protest. A miniature ball of fur flung itself at his feet, and Snape scowled and kicked out. “Get away!”

The merry kitten danced nimbly away from his kicking feet, and continued to follow him as he descended down the corridor. Feeling restless and unsure exactly of why he was heading there, he started down to the Entrance Hall. He walked lightly, eyes catching every movement, ears tuned to every creak. Finding himself at the main doors, Snape slipped between them, the moonlight glinting off his dark hair as he prowled silently down the steps.

A slight rustling in the nearby bushes caused him to stiffen in shock. What on earth was he doing? It was as if he was struggling to restrain the uncontrollable urge to chase whatever had moved in those bushes!

It wasn’t until the sight of a graceful Oreo pouncing upon a cricket at his feet, that realisation finally dawned upon him.

This wasn't the teenage energy of his new hormones; *this was the cat.*

It seemed so ridiculous to him that he almost laughed out loud. However he was finding it increasingly hard to resist chasing after the small kitten, and since he knew that there was no chance of him going to sleep in this state, he decided to sprint around the castle a few times to relieve his energy.

Severus started to run, with Oreo bounding closely at his heels.

The new Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor tossed and turned in her bed. It wasn't as if it was uncomfortable; during her Auror training she had spent many a cold night camped out in a ditch. If anything the bed was too soft...or perhaps she was just restless.

Throwing the heavy quilt off, she reached for her sling. When a nasty curse had injured her wand arm, Albus Dumbledore had offered her a teaching job while it healed. She could still perform her standard spells, but not to her full power. Her boss had told her she could use the experience, even if it was with a bunch of delinquents. He Who Must Not Be Named didn't seem to be back after all, despite the gossip column in Witch Weekly.

She was used to working long nights; perhaps a quick walk around the grounds would do her good.

It was chilly outside, and Professor Garwood was glad of her coat. She waited at the door for her eyes to become accustomed to the dark. A chill went up her spine as she heard running feet. *You're getting paranoid*, she thought to herself, *it's probably just a misbehaving student.* However she pulled out her wand and put on her best stern expression.

“Hi, you! Stop!” she called sternly, as she caught a glimpse of a dimly lit boy running.

Garwood frowned in annoyance, as the boy merely threw a look at her over his shoulder and quickened his pace.

“*Accio broomstick!*” she cried, running after him.

The boy was barely still in sight when an old school broom flew to her hand. “About time,” she grumbled, cursing her weakened abilities.

Although it was only an old Clean Sweep, a broomstick was still faster than a running boy and she soon caught up. To her surprise she heard regular breathing, instead of the usual panting of someone who had just sprinted a quarter mile. She ordered him to stop once more but the boy continued to run, a faint snigger marking that he’d heard her.

Garwood’s frown turned grim and she called for him to stop once more, before making a sudden grab for the back of his collar. Her hand slipped but she reached again, grasping thin air in surprise as he ducked neatly out of the way. Her determination mounting, Garwood swerved her broom around, trying to get in front of him. She made another wild grab but he dropped to the ground, rolled beneath her, and sprang nimbly to his feet, running on. She gaped at him. He was like a cat!

“Oh, I’ll get you, you little wretch,” she vowed to herself, though secretly enjoying the chase. She really should just end it but this was probably going to be the most exciting thing that happened to her this year so... “Whoa!”

Narrowly missing an old statue, Garwood jerked sideways. It was then that she realised that they were nearly back where they started.

Oh, hell! He was going to escape back into the castle!

With a resolute sigh, she reached into her coat pocket for her wand, only to discover that it was gone.

Her reluctance to end the chase dissolved into irritation, as she thought about having to poke around in the dark for it afterwards. Putting on a sudden burst of speed, she waited until she was right beside him when she leapt.

WHAM!

They fell to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs. The Professor grappled with the boy's collar grimly, as her captive tried just as stubbornly to wriggle away. His face was covered in darkness and all she could make out were his flashing eyes glaring at her. In the back of her mind she felt suddenly embarrassed at being in this sort of position with a student; especially as his robe was starting to become unfastened.

"Aha!" she yelled, finally getting a decent grip and startling the struggling boy. "Got you, you little...ARGH!"

She batted away the scratchy creature that had launched itself at her face, only to feel one last tug on the boy's collar until it slackened. She leapt up and saw a nearly naked figure running into the castle doors, wearing nothing but bright green drawers. A small, black creature bounded furiously behind him.

Garwood sat down heavily on the damp grass. *That little wretch.*

Remembering the robe she was holding, she glanced at it in sudden glee. *It was labelled!*

Dashing closer to the castle lights, she read it eagerly. Her mouth dropped open and she gave a groan.

Neatly marked in purple ink was the name, 'Albus Dumbledore'.

Severus Snape ran silently to his dormitory. He found his bed and all of his things arranged in the cupboard beside it. He rifled through his robes, noting with satisfaction that they had been slightly transfigured and shortened for

his benefit. It felt odd wearing Dumbledore's old ones and even though they were a lot fancier, he preferred his familiar black ones. He rifled through his robes once more and was relieved to see that none were missing.

Wait. That meant...

Snape's thin lips twitched into a slight smile. He was positive she wouldn't be able to identify him now, especially with *that* little puzzle.

Snape sniggered and tried to stifle a laugh. He felt elated. Perhaps these cat-like abilities would come in handy after all.

His thoughts turned to his pursuer. She was even worse than he'd expected; how stupid could she get? Perhaps the rumours going around the common room that evening were untrue. If she really was an Auror, she could have stunned him scores of times. It really was typical of Dumbledore, hiring a failed Auror over him. He probably did it so she wouldn't burst into tears.

Snape sniggered once more. The thought of her standing on the wet grass holding a robe marked 'Albus Dumbledore' turned his snigger into a chortle. He was just about to laugh when the figure in the next bed sat up.

"Harry?"

Snape cut his laugh short and swivelled in annoyance to look at the speaker. *What was Potter doing, snooping around late at night?*

"It's Severus," he replied shortly.

"*Lumos.*"

A dim light lit up Snape's countenance. Ron Weasley gasped. "Where have *you* been?!" he demanded.

"Where has *Potter* been?!" Snape demanded back.

Ron glared at him furiously. "If you say anything, I swear I'll..."

"Oh *give up*, Weasley, I don't care," cut in Snape annoyed. The effects of the chase were starting to kick in and he was feeling tired.

Ron stared at him dubiously. “D’you *always* sleep like that?” he asked, his eyes narrowed.

Snape looked down and saw he was wearing nothing but drawers. Then he looked at his feet. *Bloody hell. His shoes. And they were covered in bits of wet grass.*

“Aren’t you *freezing*?” exclaimed Ron.

Snape observed that the other boy was wearing a woolly, lumpy jersey underneath all his covers.

“No,” Snape replied truthfully. He was used to sleeping in the dungeons where it was icy cold for Merlin’s sake.

He moved out of the light, mentally sniggering, as Weasley hadn’t even noticed his shoes. Nothing more was said as the light went out. Snape quickly shoved his wet shoes into his cupboard and settled down to sleep. His ears pricked up at a sound and he sat up, looking around with his sharp eyes. Seeing no one, Snape settled down once more, briefly wondering where Oreo was, before he fell asleep.

As soon as he heard regular breathing, Harry Potter pulled off his invisibility cloak and stared curiously at Severus Snape’s sleeping figure.

A chink of light hit the dormitory floor, and a single boy opened one eye. Snape sat up fully awake, and started to dress. It was the crack of dawn and he was feeling fully refreshed and revitalised. He pulled on his usual pair of black robes and muttered a charm to clean his shoes. He gave an annoyed glance at a sleeping Harry Potter and started down the stairs. Plenty of time for a morning run before breakfast.

He poked at the tiny kitten in front of the common room fire, remembering the way it had scratched that Professor in the face. The kitten stretched and yawned, lazily swiping at his finger before jumping to follow her master’s ankles. Snape crept out of the portrait hole and

padded down to the main entrance. Hearing no signs of Filch, he slipped outside the doors and ran headfirst into a solid wall of warmth.

“Sev! You’re up early this morning!” he heard a loud voice exclaim.

Snape edged away and looked up at the speaker. “I was wondering if you wanted help in the garden again, Hagrid?” Snape replied, somewhat truthfully.

The Gamekeeper beamed. “Actually, I was jus’ thinkin’ of askin’ yeh t’help me on a private project I’m workin’ on...”

Snape shrugged and smiled politely. Hagrid took that as a ‘yes’ and so, forgetting whatever business he had in the castle, he accompanied the restless boy back to his hut.

Snape ran his fingers through his hair and panted. What kind of a special project was this? All he was doing was shifting huge stones from one place to another! He voiced his opinion aloud and felt even more annoyed when Hagrid simply touched his nose and winked.

“Well, there’s not much time left now, but a nice stone wall ‘round the veggie patch should look good, eh?”

Snape muttered something in grumpy acquiescence and Hagrid chuckled in reply, hefting a boulder the size of a small first year over his shoulder. Snape’s look of irritation intensified. He had been trying to move that very stone for quite a while now.

Noticing his glare, Hagrid smiled. “Now, don’ look like that. You’re already stronger than most boys yer age.”

Snape gritted his teeth and threw his own boulder down indignantly. “I assure you, I was not...”

But at that moment the breakfast gong sounded, and Snape looked up at the sun in surprise. Had he really been working for two hours?

Hagrid looked disappointed, but then his face brightened

as he looked back at his hut. “Now, how abou’ havin’ breakfast with me? I’ve got fifth year Gryffindors and Slytherins straigh’ after!”

Severus blanched. He had been introduced to Hagrid’s cooking over the holidays. But still, it *would* keep him away from those nosy Gryffindors.

“Er...all right,” Snape replied, accepting that it *would* be good for his image... His strained smile wavered however, when Hagrid beamed at him and slapped him on the back. He followed the half-giant into his hut annoyed and somewhat winded.

Sitting down by the empty fireplace, he picked uncomfortably at the splintery stool he was sitting upon and waited for Hagrid to finish by the stovetop. Fang trotted up and cast an adoring look at the kitten that had curled itself around Snape’s shoulders and neck. Oreoleapt down and swiped at the enormous boarhound with her tiny paws. Fang gave a yelp of excitement and attempted to do the same. The cat and dog bounded outside, a tumble of claws and fur.

Snape looked in disgust at the flecks of drool Fang had left upon him and stared out of the window gloomily. He could distinctly smell burning now and his robes were sticking to his body with a mixture of sweat, dirt, and canine drool. Despite popular belief, he hadn’t gone for this long without a shower before.

Snape made up his mind and stood up. There was barely enough time to run back to the castle, plus there was Hagrid to deal with...

The Quidditch showers! Of course!

“I shall be in the Quidditch change rooms if you need me, Hagrid,” Snape called curtly.

Hagrid looked over his shoulder at the uncomfortably sticky boy.

“All righ’! Here, yeh can eat this on the run, jus’ be back in time fer class!”

After shoving a plate piled with unidentified substances into Snape's hands, Hagrid hurriedly turned back to his bubbling pot on the stove. Snape strongly suspected something had gotten out of control. He eyed the mass on his plate and gingerly tasted a tiny portion. It had a surprising taste, not bad, but then not very good either. He gobbled the rest down, mumbled a quick thanks and left the plate on his stool.

He ran outside the door and continued on to the Quidditch pitch, aware he had only half an hour until class. He ran past a gambolling Fang, and felt a familiar weight jump onto his shoulders and dig into his robes. Taking no notice of the tiny feline, Snape kept running and soon reached the building's entrance. To his relief the room was deserted, and he slid quickly into the nearest shower stall.

Stopping to collect his thoughts, Snape started to feel rather foolish for hurrying. He pulled off his filthy clothing and shoes at a more leisured pace and had just started up the shower, when a faint explosion echoed throughout the room. Looking out of the tiny window above, Snape saw a pillar of smoke ascending from Hagrid's kitchen window.

Snorting in amusement, Snape poked a grumpy stone gargoyle with his wand. It spat out shampoo reluctantly, and he continued his shower, trying not to laugh. The sound of approaching footsteps however, quickly changed his amusement to annoyance. Snape turned off the shower and spun around testily.

Standing in the doorway was Draco Malfoy.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "What're *you* doing here?"

Although Snape had only a thin piece of wood covering his wet, naked body, and his hair was invisible under a fluffy cloud of shampoo, he still managed to maintain a

dignified stance. “What does it look like?”

Wrinkling his nose, Draco went on, “Well *you’re* in trouble; I heard your precious McGonagall’s already taken points off you for coming in late last night.”

“Oh?” Snape replied coldly. *How did anyone find out about that?*

Draco glared at him. “Not like a *Gryffindor* is it?” he sneered.

If those words cut into him, Severus Snape made no sign. “Oh, and I suppose a *Slytherin* is going to lecture me on moral values?”

Draco gave a shout of anger and pulled out his wand. Snape felt surprised at this sudden outbreak. And Dumbledore thought *he* was wound tight.

Snape seized his wand from his bundled up robes with an equal flourish, as Draco advanced until he was only ten feet away. Their glares intensified, each one fighting furiously not to blink. Draco’s eyes were just starting to sting when a black ball of fur leapt straight at his face. Snape gave a snort of laughter as Draco swore, hitting out at the kitten in anger.

“That cat is mine,” Snape declared smugly, raising his wand. “Do not hurt it.”

In the midst of fur and claws, Draco caught a glimpse of the pointed wand and panicked. “St – STUPEFY!” his muffled voice cried, waving his wand wildly at the boy in the shower.

“Watch out!” a new voice squealed from the door.

The streak of scarlet light hit the shower-door’s mirror and headed straight back at Draco. Much to Ore’s relief, Draco dived out of the way just in time. Both boys caught a brief flash of Ginny Weasley standing in the doorway before she was knocked backwards by the hex.

Draco and Snape whirled back at each other in accusing horror. “WHAT DID YOU DO?” they yelled in unison.

They continued to glare at each other, annoyed.

“This is all *your* fault!” Draco burst out angrily.

“Shut up and get her inside before anyone sees her!”
Snape snapped. His fault? What cheek!

Draco clenched his fists and gave him one last glare before running out. Snape hastily rinsed himself off, muttering a cleaning charm on his clothes and shoes as he pulled them on furiously.

What the hell was that stupid girl doing here? She must have arrived while they were arguing – but why the hell had Draco over-reacted so grossly? And what in all *hell* was *he* thinking when he’d said what he did?

Snape burst out of the shower stall in anger, his mind replaying his earlier words. “*Oh, and I suppose a Slytherin is going to lecture me on moral values.*”

Snape gritted his teeth. *Damn it all, he was starting to sound like James Potter himself.*

His thoughts were interrupted as Draco came back with a limp Ginny in his arms. He dropped her on the floor in disgust.

“If only it was her stinking brother,” he muttered to himself.

Ginny’s eyes flew open and she jumped up and slapped Draco across the face. Snape jumped back, startled.

“I heard that!” she cried, out of breath.

Snape raised an eyebrow. “How did you...”

“LUCKY I had my wand out and managed to say a small shielding charm before you two ATTACKED me!” she snarled.

The two boys glared at her incredulously.

Ginny glared straight back at them, noting with satisfaction that Malfoy was holding his scarlet cheek with one hand.

Draco swore and turned bright red. “Weasley, I’m going to—”

“Say you’re sorry?” Ginny cut him off. “I don’t have time for half-arsed apologies, Malfoy.”

Draco turned from red to white.

“IF YOU THINK...” he began, but was interrupted again by Ginny.

“Oh, grow up,” she said coolly, and started to walk to lockers on the other side of the room.

Draco stood stock still, deep in shock. Snape however, wanted some answers. “*What* are you doing here? This is the *male* change room.”

Ginny reddened ever so slightly and fingered the chain of a small golden key in her palm. “Well, Harry got his broom fixed and they delivered it to his locker...” Her colour faded somewhat as she frowned back at Snape’s disapproving look. “What? I’m getting it for him. He’s in the hospital wing.”

“What’s Potter doing in the hospital wing?” countered Snape disbelievingly. “I saw him sleeping like a troll when I got up this morning.”

“Who cares?” interrupted Draco suddenly, seeming to recover from his shock to give Ginny a rather nasty smile. “So, *Potter’s* broom’s here, eh?”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed. “You—” she began as she turned, but stopped when she found Draco’s wand only a few inches from her face.

“*Accio, key!*” Draco cried.

Ginny gave a shout of alarm as the chain tugged from her wrist and Malfoy caught the golden key with a triumphant swipe. He whirled and raced for his rival’s locker, just managing to wrench it open when Ginny appeared directly at his elbow, furiously trying to shove him out of the way.

“GET OFF!” they yelled at the same moment, two pairs of hands thrusting forward to seize the broom.

Then suddenly, all noise stopped. Snape blinked and narrowed his eyes. He stared around the empty room, his gaze resting upon the empty locker, its door still ajar and swinging slightly.

They were gone.

Irrational panic started to rise in his chest. He fought it down furiously and forced himself to think clearly. A sudden pain convulsed through his left forearm.

The Dark Mark. Not now! Why was the Dark Lord calling him now?!

Then it struck him.

Potter's broom. It must have been tampered with while it was being repaired. Someone had made it into a Portkey – but it was meant for Harry Potter. And this meant...

Snape swore out loud. He should go to Dumbledore, but there was no time. The Dark Lord would be furious. And he knew better than anyone what the Dark Lord did when he was furious...

Snape clenched his jaw as he sprinted outside, entering the Forbidden Forest and continuing on until he reached the end of the Hogwarts grounds. Snape shuddered slightly as he drew to a halt, his left arm shaking. He lifted up his sleeve and glared at his ugly, now-glowing tattoo.

It had been so long since he'd answered the call, and although it didn't feel like long enough, he still knew the routine.

He tapped the mark once with his wand and muttered the word. A black cloak-like robe and hood wrapped itself around his body.

The outfit of a Death Eater.

Sickened by a surge of memories, Snape hesitated.

Just one more tap... One more tap and he would face the Dark Lord once more.

He pulled up the sleeve of his new outfit and raised his head to stare at the sky. But the glare of the sun caught his eyes, and instead of blue sky he saw a hazy image of Dumbledore peering back at him.

"Are you ready?" he heard it say.

Severus Snape narrowed his eyes.

“Yes, I am!” he thought defiantly, and drove his wand firmly to the mark.

Chapter Two

~ In which a lot of trouble is caused by a broom ~

Although the sun was bright in the sky, there was hardly any light in the small, musty clearing. The trees grew so close together, towering over the slowly appearing shadowy figures, that it looked to be dusk.

Draco Malfoy and Ginny Weasley appeared suddenly in the centre of the clearing, thrown to the ground with terrific force. Disorientated and thrashing wildly, Draco struggled to get up.

“Ge...get-off-me!” he yelled angrily.

“You get off *me!*” Ginny yelled back, thrashing just as wildly but still stubbornly clutching the broomstick. With her free hand she flicked her wand at the Firebolt, binding its handle against her leather belt. With an exclamation of triumph, she looked up but saw Malfoy stagger backwards, an expression of horror rising in his pale face.

“What is the meaning of this?” said a voice full of cold anger.

Ginny nearly stumbled backwards herself, her eyes suddenly accustomed to the gloom as she stared around in horror. “N-no...” she mumbled faintly.

She was surrounded by dozens of hooded figures, but one in particular one drew her gaze. Taller than the rest he stood before her, silent and powerful. A purple hood masked his face in shadow, and a white, skeletal hand directed its black, slender wand straight at her heart.

Ginny clutched the broomstick instinctively, stumbling back into a shaking Malfoy. “Wait!” she cried desperately, the only Voldemort-related information she could think of bubbling to the surface of her mind. “Tom Riddle! You’re Tom Riddle!”

There was a low murmuring amidst the Death Eaters, silenced almost immediately by a raised hand from their

master. He stepped forward, pulling back the purple hood from his head. Livid, red eyes fixed on the shivering girl before him.

“You know me,” he whispered. “But I do not know you.” He paused while he considered her. “Ginny Weasley, isn’t it?”

Ginny’s breaths were sharp in her chest. Perhaps she could deny it, how would he *know*?

But Voldemort’s voice was like poison in her veins; she was barely capable of speech, let alone lies. All she could do was stand there, frozen, and try not to throw up.

“Ginny Weasley, for speaking that disgusting, Muggle name,” said the Dark Lord softly, “you shall feel pain you cannot even begin to imagine.” He smiled. “And then you shall die.”

Voldemort’s eyes fell on Draco. “And your friend,” he said, raising his wand. “He will share your fate.”

Malfoy’s face filled with horror and he shoved Ginny aside.

“No!” he cried.

“*Crucio!*”

Ginny stifled an ear-piercing scream as Malfoy fell to the ground. His eyes were clenched shut as he clawed at his head, awful noises of pain convulsing from his throat. Voldemort’s eyes narrowed even further as he looked down at the writhing boy, a flame kindling in them as he watched Draco’s contorted face. Then the pain stopped and Draco lay on the ground, quivering in the wake of his agony.

Voldemort spoke aloud a name, and every Death Eater in the surrounding circle was thankful it wasn’t theirs. Save one.

“*Lucius,*” he said again, louder this time.

A single trembling Death Eater stepped forward. “Y-yes, my Lord?” he said, his head bowed.

“Why is your son lying at my feet, instead of Harry

Potter?”

The Death Eater shook so much his hood fell down, revealing his white-with-terror face. He continued to stare glassily ahead, unable to look at either Voldemort or Draco's jerking body. “M-my Lord, h-he is not my son...”

Although incapable of speech, Draco's red-rimmed eyes betrayed his hurt. He jerked an arm towards his father.

Voldemort flicked his wand quickly, and Lucius's voice cut off with a sharp gasp. His eyes widened in shock as he clutched at his tightening throat, ignoring his son's feeble hand clawing desperately at the air between them. “He is y-yours,” Lucius choked, his usually proud face a dull purple. “Y-yours to do with what y-you...w-will.”

There was a tense pause as Voldemort raised his wand once more, before lowering it again with a mirthless laugh. “How very like you, Lucius,” he said, releasing the older Malfoy. Lucius stumbled back and rejoined the circle. “One more mistake however, and you won't have any family left.”

Ginny gazed down at her feet, where Draco was lying still on the ground. At Voldemort's laughter, his shoulders tensed and he jerked his head upwards, his blurry vision just catching his trembling father shrinking backwards into the gloom.

“And you, boy,” Voldemort spoke once more, his attention back to the two of them as he walked forward and kicked Draco in the stomach. “Are you going to try to save your companion once more? Or do you have something you can offer your new master?”

Draco gasped painfully, attempting to shuffle away from the towering wizard. Ginny also waited for an answer, a tiny ray of hope growing in her chest.

“No...you don't understand, I was trying to tell you...I'm no friend of hers,” he spat.

A blade of ice seemed to jab into Ginny's heart, as she

continued to clutch the Firebolt almost numbly. She raised her wand and pointed it at Draco's chest.

"*You...*" she breathed, but jerked backwards when Draco staggered to his feet, raising his own wand in answer.

"What, you think I actually care what happens to you, Weasley?" said Malfoy, his face streaked with dirt and his fists shaking. "You think I wouldn't sacrifice your life to save my own?"

Ginny's throat felt horribly constricted, but her scorn overrode her fear. The Death Eaters and Voldemort were momentarily forgotten as she screamed in return. "I never assumed for a second, *Malfoy*, that you weren't a cowardly worm *just like your father!*"

There was a split-second of silence before the sky went black. Already quite dim, the clearing was now swamped in darkness, and two things happened at once. Voldemort's wand flicked and a burst of red light streaked straight towards Ginny, as Draco simultaneously yelled, "*ACCIO, FIREBOLT!*" Ginny felt herself jerked through the air by the broomstick, the flash of light slicing her cheek and hitting the broom instead. Draco, who had started running to the edge of the clearing, was suddenly barrelled into by a struggling Ginny, the force of their collision throwing them into a tangle of thick bushes to the side.

A burst of blue fire erupted from Voldemort's wand, illuminating the clearing instantaneously and revealing each of the Death Eaters staring up into the sky barely visible through the thick trees. The greenish hue of the slowly appearing Dark Mark in the clouds mixed strangely with the blue light of the clearing, and Voldemort extinguished his flames with a snarl.

"Whoever did this will be punished," he said, his red eyes gleaming with fury as they flicked from each of his followers to the next. "You!"

The closest Death Eater staggered backwards under

Voldemort's hideous gaze.

"Find the children and kill them," Voldemort instructed. The Death Eater nodded fervently and hurried into the woods. "The rest of you, away! Aurors will be Apparating within minutes."

Without another word Voldemort vanished with a loud crack. The remaining Death Eaters followed his lead. Draco watched through narrowed eyes, the way his father merely glanced at the Death Eater who was assigned to kill them, before Disapparating himself.

With only one Death Eater remaining, Ginny shoved Draco off of her and scrambled about the ground for her wand.

"What are you doing?" hissed Draco. "He'll hear you."

The last Death Eater's head suddenly jerked in their direction.

"Shut up!" hissed Ginny back, finding her wand at last. She exploded from the bushes, "*STUPEF—HEY!*"

Draco had barged past her at the last second, pointing his wand at the dark figure.

"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*" he snarled.

A small spark of green light flew harmlessly from Draco's wand. Ginny groaned in horror while Draco paled considerably.

"*Expelliarmus!*" the Death Eater yelled angrily, lifting a hand to catch both students' wands. "You are *fools!*" he growled, and flung back his hood.

Severus Snape landed hard on the moist grass.

His teenage body felt all stretched and queasy, but he was thankful for once that the Dark Mark had done its job and brought him there. There was no chance he could've Apparated like that on his own, of that he was now certain. Thankfully his clumsy landing had brought him just outside of the central gathering, behind a clump of

bushes. Severus straightened up, fixing his belt and hood and just about to join the crowd when he froze, mid-step.

“And your friend, he will share your fate.”

It had been so long since he'd heard that voice, but the mere tone of it brought back horrible memories he'd started to forget...

Thrusting the memories aside, Snape whirled and sprinted silently away. An idea was forming in his mind, one that forced him to concentrate ruthlessly on his breathing rather than the cries of pain from the clearing.

After running through wild undergrowth for barely a minute, he lifted his wand to the sky and summoned all his strength.

“MORSMORDRE!” he bellowed.

There was a brief pause as Severus clutched his wand in a sudden wave of self-doubt, before a thick, black cloud erupted from the end of it. It billowed into the air almost magnificently, with answering black clouds forming out of thin air to meet it just above the trees. The hint of a gigantic glowing skull started to fade in, and Severus hurriedly brought his wand to his forearm once more. Donned in black, Severus reappeared this time towards the front of the crowd of Death Eaters. Feeling slightly disorientated at the sudden yelling and people around him, his eyes had barely adjusted to the gloom when a jet of blue flames from Voldemort's wand blinded him.

“You!” the Dark Lord roared. For a terrifying moment Snape could've sworn Voldemort knew who he was. “Find the children and kill them!”

The Dark Lord yelled orders to the other Death Eaters then Disapparated. In moments Severus was left standing in the dark, waves of relief washing over him that both students had escaped. His sharp ears however, caught a quiet rustling noise coming from a nearby bush, and a soft hiss of a voice. Hoping it wasn't a lingering Death Eater, Severus gripped his wand slightly firmer and walked

quickly towards it.

Snape jumped violently as Draco and Ginny burst out of the bushes, brandishing their wands wildly. The last thing Snape heard was 'Avada Kedavra' before he realised what was going on.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he barked angrily, catching their wands in his outstretched palm. "You are *fools!*" he cried, and pushed the black hood from his face at once.

Draco and Ginny gaped in shock as Severus pulled off the rest of the Death Eater robes, which dissolved into black smoke as he threw them away.

"Snape?!" burst out Draco incredulously.

"This place will be crawling with Aurors very soon!" Severus said harshly, ignoring the two of them stammering and demanding answers. "We have to move quickly."

Snape snatched the Firebolt from Ginny, the sudden movement snapping her back to reality.

"Wait," Ginny demanded, snatching the Firebolt back. "Why are you running away from the Aurors? They can help us!"

Snape snorted and gave her a scathing look. "Even assuming the Dark Lord hasn't infiltrated half of them, we're at the scene of the Dark Mark and Mr Malfoy here has just used the killing curse. We're not dead so we're obviously accomplices. How understanding d'you think they'd be?"

And he really didn't feel like being questioned about his Morsmordre.

Draco paled. All of his bitterness and anger had faded into a feeling of extreme nausea at the thought of his near death experiences. Making up his mind, he also made a swipe at the Firebolt and attempted to mount it. A small scuffle ensued as all three hurriedly tried to clamber onto the now-battered broomstick.

"Look, it won't take all three of us," Ginny said crossly,

after being pushed and shoved out of the way. “Two at the most, and it won’t go very fast either.”

“Well, *one* of us can stay,” growled Draco, giving Ginny a rather nasty look.

Snape growled in frustration.

“I’m not leaving anyone here! It’s too dangerous. You two go, I’ll catch up... We meet three miles due west from here, preferably a tall tree. Is that clear?”

The two students stared at him, taken aback.

“Hurry up! I’m not bloody repeating myself!” he said irritably.

Draco scowled and mounted the broomstick with a very bad grace, followed by Ginny who gave Snape a curious look.

“Why should we trust you?” she said slowly.

Snape made an impatient noise and thrust their wands back into their grasp. “Because if you don’t, you’ll get us all *killed*,” he snarled, restraining himself from shaking the daylights out of them.

Draco and Ginny flinched, but managed to rise into the air relatively fast. They hovered in the air as Snape quickly used his wand to get his bearings. There was a brief pause as they stared down at the glaring Severus, before Draco and Ginny shot away in silence.

With one last glance around, Snape sprinted quickly after.

“Stop shoving will you?!”

“You’re the one taking up the whole dirty broom you...”

“We’re going off course! Trust *you* not to...”

“We have *not* and I should know. Girls have no sense of direction.”

“Of all the stupid things you’ve said, Malfoy...”

“Move back, I said!”

“I *can*’t!”

A slight scuffling between the two arguers caused the broomstick to wobble precariously. Already sinking lower and lower, it seemed as if the broomstick was on its last legs. Fortunately they'd travelled about the right distance to alight in the boughs of a large leafy tree below.

Ginny Weasley flopped down between a pair of forking branches and started rubbing her neck in relief. Draco glared at her disapprovingly.

"You should be on guard, not lazing around. Aurors could come at *any* time," he said rudely.

Ginny stared at him indignantly. "Yes well, *I* have nothing to worry about, *do I?* Not *my fault* you tried to kill someone, *was it?* Especially if it was going to be *me* not so long ago, *wasn't it?*"

"Oh, *shut up*, will you," Draco said irritably. "I ended up saving your useless life, don't you remember?"

"Only because your cowardly escape-plan backfired!" cried Ginny in outrage. "Do you actually expect me to thank you for that?"

"Well, I wouldn't expect it from an ill-bred Weasley!" sneered Draco at once. "And what does it matter? We're alive. That's all that counts."

Ginny glared at him, scorn rising in her flushed face. "I thought you didn't care what happens to me! As far as you're concerned, you'd sacrifice my life to save your own –"

A blurry memory of his father turning purple and denying him flashed across Draco's mind. "Just shut your awful face, won't you?" he yelled suddenly.

"You shut up," replied Ginny coldly, and she turned her head and looked the other way.

Draco glared at her, his now shaking hands fingering his wand. What he wouldn't give to... But no, he mustn't. Any signs of magic would have Aurors flocking.

Ginny glanced at the way his fingers were lingering around his wand and snickered to herself. Draco

immediately heard and his glare intensified, feeling furious that she wasn't cowed in the least by his presence, but bordering on smug. He looked her up and down and voiced the first insult he could think of.

"You look awful!" he snarled.

Although Ginny looked very untidy and the cut on her cheek had left a bit of dried blood on her face, she looked infinitely better than Draco, who looked beaten down, scruffy, and as if he'd been crying in the dirt.

Taking in his appearance, Ginny felt the least worried she'd felt all morning.

"Malfoy," she said calmly, leaning backwards against one of the boughs, "—your opinion means absolutely nothing to me and I'm going to ignore you from now on."

Draco turned red at the collected girl in front of him. "Ignore me and I'll push you out of this tree," he snarled haughtily.

Ginny burst into hysterical laughter and Draco gave a yell of rage as he charged straight at her. Ginny turned her head just in time to get a shoulder in the side of her jaw as she felt herself falling... falling...

Scrabbling desperately at scratchy branches Ginny felt herself jerk to a stop, nearly wrenching her arm out of its socket as she managed to catch hold of a sturdy branch. To her satisfaction she heard a resounding thud on the ground below followed by a moan of pain.

"Serves you right, you psychotic idiot," Ginny muttered, shinning deftly down the tree trunk.

Draco was lying sprawled on his back, his face contorted with pain and humiliation. Ginny rubbed her cheek where she'd been hit, not feeling in the least bit sorry for him.

"What on earth were you doing?" she demanded indignantly. "If you have a problem then I'll duel you! It's not exactly normal to go tackling people out of trees, you stupid git."

Draco responded with an unintelligible mix of insults

and swearing. He was just struggling to his feet when he felt a knee go right into his side.

“Argh!” he yelled, only to find himself trying to be pulled up by the front of his robes by Ginny Weasley. “What’re you –!”

“Hurry! M-move!” stuttered Ginny, a look of panic on her face.

Draco’s head jerked around, as if expecting to see a lurking Death Eater directly behind him. Instead he saw a glittering coil of scales, hissing in disturbed anger.

“Argh!” he yelled again, lunging forward against Ginny, causing them to stumble backwards and fall heavily to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs.

Ginny groaned in pain as she saw the poisonous snake slither away into the undergrowth. She tried to sit up only to find that she was being pinned down by a shocked Draco.

“And just what are you two doing, may I ask?” said a voice icily above them.

Draco muttered something about a snake and it not being his fault and scrambled off the flushing Gryffindor.

“How did you get here so quickly?” asked Ginny haughtily, instantly regretting her words.

Oh, great now it sounds like me and Malfoy were planning to...

“I ran, you stupid girl,” Snape said coldly. “Where’s the broomstick?”

Ginny looked sulky at his insult and didn’t reply. Draco motioned sullenly towards the top of the tree.

“What’s it doing... Never mind, I’ll get it.” Snape made a face. “That is, if I can leave you two alone for one minute...”

“Oh, please,” they both sneered in unison.

Snape raised his eyebrows and they both turned a dull red.

“I’ll get the bloody broom!” Ginny burst out in

annoyance, and started to shin her way back up the trunk.

Draco's eyes narrowed as Severus threw him a sideways glance. "Not a word, *Snape*."

Severus cleared his throat with the barest hint of a snicker before calling up to Ginny, "Can you see anything from there?"

There was a rustling of leaves, before Ginny slid down the trunk with a thump. "What?" she said blankly.

Snape made a noise of exasperation and climbed up himself. "Judging from the mountains in distance," he called down to them, "we're actually somewhat close to Hogwarts."

With a sudden leap, Severus sailed through the foliage and landed gracefully on the ground. Draco and Ginny jumped back in alarm.

"You were twenty feet in the air!" exclaimed Ginny.

"Wait," said Draco, waving irritably at Ginny to shut up. "If we're close to Hogwarts then that means..."

"Yes," nodded Snape. "We're in the middle of the Forbidden Forest."

Ginny looked scornfully at a paling Draco. "Well, that's a good thing. Students go into the forest all the time; we really *are* close."

Snape frowned at her disapprovingly. "The Forbidden Forest is *out of bounds*. It extends for miles and miles to the east of the school and is quite easy to get lost for all of eternity. Not to mention all of the dangerous creatures and poisonous plants, both of which could kill a dim-witted student without a second—"

Ginny and Draco were both looking distinctly pale now, and Severus stopped and cleared his throat. "But of course... Ah... We are quite close to Hogwarts after all... Perhaps only forty miles give or take."

"Forty miles!" yelled Draco.

"Yes, but I'm here!" snapped Severus. "And I'm...er...very intelligent for my age." He glared at them.

“You’ll be fine.”

Ginny gave him a hard look. “OK,” she said slowly, “but you still owe us some answers.”

Draco nodded in agreement, and then gave an annoyed noise as he realised who he was agreeing with. Snape waited silently, mentally going over the answers he’d prepared during his run there. “Ask what you will,” he said.

Ginny took a deep breath and recounted in her head what had happened. “OK... how did you follow us?”

Severus shrugged. “I grabbed hold of you when you were just disappearing, but I was unable to get a proper grip and so was flung off to the side while we were spinning around... I ended up landing not far from you, in some bushes nearby.”

Snape kept his dark glittering eyes fixed on Ginny’s light brown ones until she eventually drew away. He could tell that they didn’t quite believe him and he couldn’t blame them. It really was quite a rubbishy story, but there was no chance of him telling them about his tattoo.

Ginny hesitated and carried on. “How did you get Death Eater robes?”

Snape crossed his arms and smirked. “I stunned one and stole them from him... then I saw that I could do nothing to help you, so I ran a short distance away and conjured the Dark Mark—”

“That was *you*?” said Draco disbelievingly.

“That takes a lot of dark magic to conjure up,” said Ginny doubtfully.

“Well, I was taught by the best –” Snape glared at them challengingly, “my uncle.”

Ginny’s eyes widened and Draco thumped his fist into his palm. “*That’s* why you wanted to get out of there! Not because of *my* pitiful *Avada Kedavra*, but because of *your* *Morsmordre!*” Draco gave a loud, hollow-sounding laugh.

Snape looked surprised at the sudden outburst. "Trust the Slytherin to work it out," he replied with a smirk.

Draco stopped laughing and looked at him sharply. Then he realised that he wasn't insulting him.

"Yes, well," he drawled slowly, obviously pleased with himself as he leaned against a tree. "I hope the Malfoy's are at least a *little* bit smarter than the average wizard."

"Yes, and what a *little* bit it is," Ginny muttered under her breath.

"Fine, I've told you my story, now tell me what happened with the Death Eaters," Snape interjected hastily.

And so Draco and Ginny told their story and Snape listened, then thought for a moment.

"Let me see the broom," he said. Ginny, who'd been clutching it to her chest the entire time, handed it to him reluctantly. There was a gash down the shaft and the tail was out of alignment. Snape ran his fingers over it carefully. "It seems clean now, though near useless after being hit by that spell. We may as well leave it."

Ginny reached for the broom hastily. "I'll carry it."

"Probably still too much for your family to afford though, eh, Weasley?"

Ginny whirled. "At least I have a family, *Malfoy*."

Draco turned red. "Shut up!"

"*Both* of you shut up!" growled Snape. "I'm sick of you two *whining idiots* at each other's throats all the time! There's nothing else we can do but start heading back while it's still light. If you value your lives you'll follow me. Are we clear?"

Draco gritted his teeth and turned away. Ginny murmured unenthusiastically.

"Then let's get moving."

"Bloody insects!" Draco yelled, swatting at his knee.

They had been walking for four hours now without stopping. Draco was more tired, sweaty and dirty than he'd ever been in his life. He couldn't stand the way his usually pristine hair kept on falling across his forehead, and every ten seconds he would irritably brush it away, longing to use his wand to fix it.

A tousled mess of red hair obscured his view, mockingly refusing to proceed with his wishes and just faint from sheer exhaustion. He longed to push her over, to get her back for laughing so scornfully at him. He couldn't stand being ignored, and especially by *her*, who was so infinitely beneath him. His memory flashed back to that nasty moment when she really had been beneath him, the one that Snape had barged in on.

Not so nasty though, was it, Draco?

Draco came to an abrupt halt, furious at himself for thinking these ludicrous thoughts. His two companions paused also, and looked back at him.

"What is it?" Snape inquired, giving Draco a curious look.

Draco shook himself and clenched his fists.

"I dunno but *it's* in my way," he growled, and barged past Ginny.

Ginny rolled her eyes and followed silently, wondering why, of all the people she could've been stuck with, she'd ended up with Malfoy.

It was quite late in the afternoon when Severus halted before a small, trickling stream. "We may as well stop here," he said, pointing to a gigantic hollow tree a little into the distance. "And we can spend the night there."

"What?" exclaimed Draco at once, looking appalled. "Why can't we make it to Hogwarts by nightfall? We've been walking *all* day."

"With the pace we're going it will take us at least a

couple of days,” Snape said shortly. “It should be safe enough to use our wands tonight anyway.”

“That’s a relief,” said Ginny. “I can’t wait to get clean; I’m absolutely filthy.”

She glared quickly at Draco, but was surprised to find that he hadn’t even pulled a face. He seemed to be staring bitterly at his murky reflection in the stream, fingering something around his neck absent-mindedly. Ginny felt a twinge of guilt and slightly petty. She really shouldn’t have made that jab about him having no family. It had been so unlike her! She should at least try to be civil.

“What’re *you* looking at?” Draco snapped, suddenly meeting her eyes and scowling.

“Not you, you can bet,” snapped Ginny back, glaring at the pale-faced boy before turning away.

It was impossible, she thought angrily. Everything about him made her see red, and she found it exceedingly difficult to travel with someone so cowardly and self-absorbed.

She glanced over at Severus, who had stridden towards the hollow tree and was busy pulling a mass of vines over the entrance.

She wasn’t quite sure how she felt about Snape, only knowing that she’d much rather follow him than Draco. It was hard to believe that he’d risked his life to dress up as a Death Eater when he could’ve just saved his own skin. Although her friends had been dubious at first, she could see now why he’d been put into Gryffindor.

Snape swore, zapping at one particular vine that had tangled against his chest. The vine pulled tighter against his robes, outlining the curves of a muscular upper body. Ginny grinned despite herself.

Yes... The fact that he was a Gryffindor, and he seemed quite fit... Those were very positive values, in her eyes.

“Ugh, we’re not actually going to eat that are we?” murmured Ginny, pulling a face at the dead rabbit Severus had flung in front of them.

Draco stared at it in vague disinterest while Severus smirked. “Why no, of course not, I’ve just brought you a nice dolly to play with,” he replied, prodding the body with his wand.

Draco gave a snort of laughter while Ginny blanched.

“Very poor taste, Snape,” replied Ginny in a suffering voice, picking up the rabbit by the ears and walking off.

“Wait, where are you going?” called Severus in alarm.

“I’m cleaning the stupid thing! We can’t eat it like this.”

Severus frowned at her retreating figure. “Come on, we have to follow her,” he grunted.

“Why?” muttered Draco, but reluctantly pulling himself up.

After a long and messy process in which the rabbit was almost carried off by the stream, the three ravenous teenagers sat down by the fire to watch their meal slowly roast. Following what seemed to be an eternity, they tucked in. Although there were many complaints of burnt fingers and a ridiculous number of bones, each secretly found it to be the most delicious thing they’d ever eaten.

It was very late at night before all three travellers trooped towards the enormous hollow tree. They sprawled in the warm glow of Snape’s wand, and, despite the complete darkness that surrounded them, each was feeling sleepy and comfortable enough to relax.

Draco yawned, and Severus was quite surprised with how tired he was also. He was usually so active at night. Well, the day’s events had been a little wearing. Though strangely enough, trudging through the woods wasn’t as bad as he thought it’d be. It seemed sort of... relaxing, in its own way.

Snape ran his hands through his sweaty hair, feeling slightly guilty.

Well, he *was* going as fast as he could. He couldn't risk leaving them by themselves. It wasn't as if he could use this body to Apparate and get help. And besides, they really didn't need it; they were fine and would get back to Hogwarts eventually anyway.

Glancing around him in surprise, Severus realised they had fallen asleep.

"Move over, you lazy slugs," he grumbled, poking them with his wand.

Draco didn't respond and Ginny merely grunted and rolled over. Snape frowned, but didn't poke them again. "*Mobilus Corpus*," he muttered, and moved a floating Draco more to the side.

The sleeping Slytherin landed softly on the cushion of grass that they'd stuffed the space with earlier. Snape then did the same to Ginny, who woke up as she hit the ground. She looked at Snape sleepily through the gloom.

"Mmm... it's awfully squashed in here," she murmured, burrowing into the thick grass.

Snape ignored her and put an outside repelling charm on the entrance. He then lay down, his back to the sleeping Gryffindor, and his face turned towards the dark forest.

Draco's eyes snapped open.

What a horrible dream...he had dreamt about his father...

As his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he realised where he was and the wave of irritation at the thought of his situation swept over him once more.

It was so... stupid. Hard to believe that he had faced the greatest Dark Wizard of all time and lived. Now he was living like a Muggle savage, eating rabbits and sleeping in trees. Though come to think of it, it did seem to be an awfully *cosy* tree...

Draco froze, suddenly realising why he was so cosy.

Ginny Weasley's slender form was pressed against his side with her arm draped across his chest. To his horror he saw that his arm was pinned underneath her shoulders.

No, no, no! He thought furiously. *I am not going to be caught in another compromising position with her.*

Hurriedly twisting his hips in the opposite direction, Draco slowly started to draw his arm out from underneath her, furiously ignoring the way his body was protesting at the move. To his dismay, she snuggled up even closer and drew her arm even tighter across his chest.

"Harry..." she murmured.

Draco glared at her in disgust. Pitiful, oh how pitiful. Of all people it had to be Potter, didn't it?

Draco felt a sudden urge to punch Potter, right in the glasses, and see what she thought of him *then*. Somewhat comforted by this thought, Draco resumed untangling himself from her embrace, though a bit rougher than before. When he was free, he slowly and methodically started to roll her to the other side of the space, closer to the other boy's sleeping figure. When he was done, he shuffled back into place and snuggled once more into his old spot.

Draco closed his eyes and tried to sleep, ignoring, for the moment, the way he could still feel the lingering warmth of her body pressed against his.

Ginny opened her eyes sleepily, feeling deliciously warm but wondering why the noise of crickets was so loud. Memories of that day came flooding back to her, making her groan in annoyance at waking up in the middle of the night when she was so bloody tired. She was just about to close her eyes once more, when she became acutely aware of where her hand was resting.

Oh no. Her hand was... Well, no wonder she was so bloody warm; she was cuddled up with freaking Snape for

Merlin's sake!

Try not to think about it. Just free your hand from out of his robes, slowly and very, very carefully.

Ginny became suddenly aware of the rippling muscles underneath her moving palm.

Oh, this is not good. Trust you to start lusting after the tall, dark, mysterious stranger that saved your life and just happens to be lying right next to you... Oh great, I'm babbling... Oh God I have to get my hand out...

Ginny stared at Snape's face for a long time, trying to make sure he was fully asleep. She then started once more to move her hand away when a steely grip on her wrist made her freeze.

"What the hell are you doing?" hissed Snape, glaring at her.

"Er...I...er...I was just...er..."

Snape sat up while Ginny stuttered in horror and pulled her hand away. She felt a slight pressure leave her side and heard Snape gasp in horror. He stared incredulously at his own hand currently trying to free itself from her robes. Ginny's eyes widened in shock as Snape jerked his hand free and started jabbering to himself.

"Was I... D-did I...?"

"Your...your-hand-was-on-my-hip," said Ginny quickly, flushing a bright red.

A gigantic wave of relief washed over Severus's face. He shook his head violently as if trying to convince himself that it didn't happen.

"How did we...I don't know how..."

"It's OK," Ginny mumbled in embarrassment.

"No, it's not! I shouldn't even be—"

"Really, it's OK," Ginny interrupted more forcefully this time. "Look, it won't happen again... let's not... let's just... forget it."

Snape stared at her through the gloom. It was a long time before he spoke.

“All right,” he said quietly.

Ginny sighed and settled back down before speaking again. “I don’t know about you, but I’m wide awake now.”

Snape gave no reply. He had lain back down also, although he was a lot further away than he was before. “We should try and get some sleep,” he said shortly.

Ginny murmured an assent and Severus’s eyelids began to feel heavy once more. He was just drifting back to sleep when Ginny spoke once more.

“Severus?” she said quietly.

“What is it?” muttered Snape, rolling onto his side to face the outside forest.

“Are you really Professor Snape’s nephew?”

There was a long pause before Snape replied. “Who do you think I am?” he said finally.

The pause was even longer this time, before Ginny spoke.

“What’s your real name?” she said quietly.

Snape’s gaze travelled to the pale crescent moon overhead.

“It’s Severus,” he muttered.

Ginny’s eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, but she wished she could see Snape’s face as she was talking to him. She looked very hard at the back of his head before saying what had been on her mind since the first moment she saw him.

“Can I...” Ginny hesitated before plunging fiercely ahead. “Can I trust you, Severus?”

Snape’s eyes lowered. Memories of when he’d first been asked that question by the Dark Lord, and then later by Dumbledore came flooding back. Both times he’d hidden his slight uncertainty while answering. Now that he was being asked again he realised, with mild surprise, that he didn’t have to think very hard at all to answer that question once more.

“Yes,” he said quietly.

Ginny hadn't known what answer to expect, but she felt a huge load of tension lift from the back of her mind. She looked at him curiously through the gloom.

“Can I ask you one more question?” she said.

“What is it?” said Severus tiredly.

“D'you trust Malfoy?”

Snape shrugged to himself and closed his eyes. “We've no other choice,” he said at last. “Do you think he trusts you? And I'm sure it doesn't help things if you're always insulting him.”

“What?” exclaimed Ginny, sitting up in indignation. “*I'm insulting him?*”

But Snape was fast asleep, and didn't respond.

Ginny rolled over in annoyance. Her irritated thoughts began to grow vague, and she fell asleep.

The morning dawned and Snape opened his eyes and sat up fully awake. To his relief he noticed he was well away from Ginny Weasley and could stretch comfortably without finding himself in an awkward position. He shook his head as he remembered last night, wondering how on earth they had ended up like that. His teenage hormones were obviously dangerous.

Severus gazed down at the sleeping students, both of them faintly frowning but otherwise looking quite peaceful.

“WAKE UP!” he roared nastily, using his wand to dig them both in the ribs.

Draco sat up startled while Ginny gave a yell and clutched at his neck, unfortunately clawing him in the face.

“GAH!” roared Draco, feeling desperately around for his wand while trying to shove Ginny off his lap. Ginny jumped off Draco in shock while Severus felt the urge to

snicker shamelessly.

“What’d you do that for?!” Ginny yelled.

“Time to go,” stated Severus, and rose to leave.

“Go?” cried Draco in outrage. “But it’s barely dawn!”

“Did you want to get back to Hogwarts or not?” replied Snape, raising an eyebrow at the two wild-haired, bleary-eyed teenagers. “Now is the best time to travel, before it gets hot.”

After a bout of mutinous muttering, Draco and Ginny pulled themselves to their feet, eventually catching up with Snape as he arrived at the nearby stream. There was barely any light from the rising sun and the reflection on the water was near black.

Peering into the murky water, Severus touched his wand against the surface. He muttered something under his breath and the water turned radiantly clear.

“It should be fine,” he told them, satisfied, and slowly and methodically began washing his face.

Ginny gazed at the stream, feeling impressed at Severus’s seemingly casual use of magic. He barely concentrated at all.

“That was brilliant,” she exclaimed, only to realise that Draco was echoing the exact same sentiment.

Draco scowled, catching Ginny’s eye and quickly looking away. Ginny also looked away, her conversation with Severus the night before replaying in her head. Making up her mind she marched a step closer to him and held out her hand.

Draco looked from her determined expression to her outstretched hand. “What d’you want?”

“I don’t like this any more than you but we’re stuck together,” muttered Ginny, jerking her hand.

Draco narrowed his eyes. “I’m not shaking that, it’s filthy.”

Ginny said nothing, ignoring the way her mind was screaming that she really didn’t want to touch Malfoy’s

slimy hand either, but using all of her concentration on keeping it there for Malfoy to shake, because it was what had to be done.

“Fine,” he said eventually, holding out his hand to grasp hers and letting go very quickly. “Only because I have to and it’s temporary.”

“That’s the idea, Malfoy,” Ginny replied, restraining the urge to wipe her hand on her robes.

Draco walked stiffly off to another part of the stream without another word. Ginny continued standing still for a moment, wondering what on earth Harry and Ron would think of her now. Kneeling slowly by the stream, she started to wash her face.

Snape had watched this affair out of the corner of his eye and was slightly impressed by how it had turned out. He knew he’d never have been able to declare a temporary truce with any of his old school rivals, especially unbidden. His decided his disdain for Ginny Weasley had lessened somewhat.

“What are you doing? Hurry up, will you?” Snape called out.

The larger boy was hacking his way through a particularly thick piece of undergrowth and had just discovered to his alarm, that Draco and Ginny were out of sight.

“Sod off!” came a muffled cry indignantly.

Snape gave a snort of disgust and retraced his steps. They’d already taken more rests and toilet breaks than he’d thought necessary.

“What is the problem here?” he demanded, glaring down at the two sprawled out students on the ground.

“We haven’t eaten for *ages*,” groaned Ginny Weasley casting a pitiful face at the unimpressed observer.

Even Draco nodded fervently. “Yeah, I’ve got this

horrible *empty* feeling in my—”

“Head?” replied Snape dryly.

Ginny gave a snort of laughter despite herself.

“Oh, switching sides now, Weasley?”

“Look, we have to keep moving. Death Eaters are not idle and I am very surprised they haven’t caught us yet!” snapped Snape irritably, before they could start arguing again.

“Oh, don’t be,” came a cold voice behind them. “I myself am not at all surprised that I caught you.”

The three travellers spun to face the stranger in horror.

“Way to jinx us,” muttered Draco under his breath.

Standing in the remains of their beaten path was a solitary figure clad in dark flowing robes and hood.

The outfit of a Death Eater.

Chapter Three

~ In which there is bickering and blood oaths ~

“So, you actually thought you could escape?”

The two students were pushed into a thicket as Severus Snape strode in front of them. “Stay out of sight,” he muttered.

The Death Eater stiffened as he saw the boy standing before him. “You!” he gasped.

Severus stopped, eyes narrowed. “If I have to hurt you, I will,” he replied coldly.

The Death Eater clenched his fists. “Who are you? ...I have no business with you! Stand aside!” he cried.

Snape stood his ground and was joined with Draco and Ginny glowering beside him.

“I told you two, get *back!*” Snape snarled at the two teenagers, as he threw a hex at the shocked Death Eater.

“Well, you heard him,” Draco said somewhat relieved, starting to back away.

“No! We can take him together!” Ginny yelled, grabbing his sleeve and pulling him forward.

“Get your filthy hands off me, Weasley!” snarled Draco. “As if we could do anything!”

Ginny glared at him. “You coward!” she spat. “We could at least try!”

“I already told you I’m not getting myself BLOODY KILLED for you, so fucking LET GO OF ME!” roared Draco, ramming Ginny to the ground.

“CRUCIO!”

Snape rolled quickly out of the way, just missing the crackling curse. “SECARE DEXTRA!” he bellowed.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Death Eater fling himself behind a fallen tree, but a sharp scream diverted Snape’s attention. To his horror he saw the body of Ginny Weasley writhing on the ground in agony, with Draco

standing over her in equal horror.

“I-I didn’t mean to...”

“I TOLD YOU, GET BACK!” Snape shouted, directing his wand at the now-standing Death Eater and knocking Draco to the ground with his other arm. “*LOCOMOTOR MORTIS!*”

“AVADA –”

“*MOBILIARBUS!*” Snape roared, diving to the ground and directing his wand at the Death Eater’s fallen tree.

The massive log flipped up into the air and crashed down onto the leg-locked Death Eater.

Draco’s head spun at the suddenness of the duel, barely feeling a clammy hand brush against his ankle. His whole body turned numb as he looked down at Ginny Weasley still writhing in pain.

“UNCURSE HER YOU STUPID FOOL!” roared Snape, scrambling off the ground to sprint towards the fallen Death Eater.

“*Finite Incantatum!*” Draco cried immediately. He wasn’t feeling the wave of satisfaction he thought he would, but ill and horrible as he stared down at her wiping tears from her closed eyes. He got up quickly and turned away, sprinting over to where Severus was standing by the fallen tree. To his shock he saw that the other boy was holding the Death Eater’s wand and that the owner of which was still alive.

“Would you prefer to die of suffocation or would you like a nice clean death?” asked Severus coldly.

The Death Eater gave a hollow cough before answering. “The Dark Lord will avenge me,” he muttered, and shut his eyes.

Severus stared at him inscrutably before lifting the Death Eater’s wand to his purple throat. “Turn away, Draco,” he instructed and started to mutter a curse when the Death Eater jerked involuntarily.

Snape flinched, startled. Draco had spun around, sensing

something was wrong. The Death Eater glared up at them, the whites of his eyes barely visible in the shadow of his hood.

“How long do you think you can keep this up?” he growled venomously. “My Lord will find you, and if he doesn’t...one of you will betray...”

But Snape’s curse had done the trick, and the Death Eater’s head fell forward with a sudden sharp movement. Snape swallowed and checked his pulse. He snapped the wand and threw it next to the body.

“Let’s go,” he said shortly, flicking his head towards Draco as they walked back to meet a shaky Ginny.

The trees had thinned out somewhat, but Ginny was finding it increasingly difficult to keep up. They were moving a lot faster than before, and Severus was constantly darting from the rear to the lead, his wand out and brandishing the broom like a spear. She felt strangely light-headed, and thought that perhaps the boys wouldn’t mind if she just took a quick rest... perhaps right now... just a little while...

The young Gryffindor fell to the ground in a swoon. The two boys stopped and looked back in surprise.

“How could I be so ignorant?” Severus muttered. “We’ll put her on the broom.”

Draco didn’t argue but watched on silently. Ginny managed to regain herself just enough to hold onto the broom handle.

“Draco, watch her will you?”

Draco muttered an assent.

Severus glanced around at the swaying leaves and kept moving. Try as he might, he couldn’t shake the words of the dying Death Eater. “*One of you will betray...*”

Severus couldn't sleep. Whenever he closed his eyes he saw the Death Eater's glaring back at him, uttering those foreboding words just hours before and sounding horribly familiar. He wondered if he'd gone to school with him... probably. The Death Eater seemed to have recognised him...

Draco and Ginny didn't seem to be losing sleep over it. But of course, they didn't know that he had the Dark Mark.

"One of them will betray..."

Well, it wasn't as if he was talking about me, thought Severus peevishly to himself.

He shook his head and got up, making his way out of the thick gorse bush from where the other two were sleeping. A quick walk to shake off these ridiculous thoughts would do him good.

He had only gone a small distance away when a sudden rustle froze him in his tracks. Without warning he was knocked to the ground by a terrific force. The thud of enormous hooves hit the ground next to him, causing him to panic that he was lying on his wand arm.

"Don't move, marked scum!" cried a deep voice.

Severus struggled to get to his feet when he was pressed against a tree trunk by a tawny bulging fist.

"Get –get off me!" he gasped.

Although it was almost pitch black, it was obvious to Severus what his attacker was. Clipping hooves, bulging biceps... He was being held up by a centaur.

The great beast brought his face very close to Snape's. "You do not belong here, *Death Eater*."

Realisation dawned upon the shocked Severus. He wondered how on earth he could see his Dark Mark but realised that pleading his innocence was probably more important at the moment. "I'm not!" he protested through breaths, as the grip tightened. "I mean... You don't...understand..."

“Severus!” came a cry.

Ginny Weasley came running up, her eyes wide and her wand dimly lighting the area. Draco followed just behind her and saw the other boy pinned against a tree by an enormous-looking centaur. The young Slytherin swore and stopped in his tracks.

“Leave him!” Ginny yelled, pointing her puny wand at the gigantic flanks.

To their shock, the centaur obeyed her command and allowed Severus to stumble back to his companions. Draco soon recovered his disbelief, and turned on the other boy. “What the hell did you do to make him so bloody hacked off?” he hissed.

“Nothing!” Snape hissed back, rubbing his neck where he’d been grabbed. “Be *quiet!*”

The centaur gazed at the three students seriously, as if he hadn’t just slammed one of them against a tree. “So, you are still alive then,” he murmured, his voice no longer angry. “I doubted this very much. You are the three missing Hogwarts students, are you not?”

Draco started opening and closing his mouth in shock.

“Yes! We –” put in Ginny eagerly but the centaur raised his hand for silence.

“Albus Dumbledore is searching for you, I know. I told him you were dead but he still believed there was hope. There are still others who are looking for you...”

“You told him we were *dead?*” cried Draco indignantly, forgetting his shock.

The centaur shifted his solemn gaze to the Slytherin. “The skies read terrible things about you, Draco Malfoy, and you Ginny Weasley,” he added, his blue eyes boring into the fourth year’s light brown ones.

Severus narrowed his own eyes, noticing that the centaur was seemingly ignoring him.

“I fear I have put you all in danger by telling Dumbledore you are dead,” the centaur said. “I thought

him foolish when he did not believe me. Perhaps if I had not shaken his faith, you would have been found by now. I have wronged you, and by the laws of my people, I am in your debt, yet those same laws forbid me to help you. My reading of the stars was wrong, this time, but I fear time shall prove it true.”

Ginny shrank back, alarmed at the unpleasant prediction, but the centaur’s gaze softened, and he gave Ginny a thoughtful nod.

“Courage, child,” he said. “These are dark times, but if we stand together, we may chance to see the light again. In this spirit I offer you my oath, so it may bind and protect you three. Will you take it?”

Snape looked at him silently, not willing himself to speak. Draco narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

“Will you take my oath?” the centaur asked again, his eyes shining in the gloom.

Ginny gazed back at him, thinking he was the most beautiful creature in the world. “I’ll take your oath.” she said easily.

“Wait,” said Severus, the suspicion obvious in his voice now that the centaur didn’t seem threatening. “What’s this oath about?”

“It will help you on your journey.”

“Snape,” Ginny hissed, “–that’s about the clearest answer you’ll get from a centaur. Come on, it’s not as though you could get this from the Standard Book of Spells. How many people could say they’ve experienced this sort of magic?”

“Wait, are we thinking new, *powerful* magic?” Draco muttered, his eyes gleaming.

“Certainly *not!*” said Snape sharply.

“Maybe!” exclaimed Ginny.

“I’m in,” said Draco, holding up his left hand with a smirk.

“You’re both idiots,” Snape growled, wrestling with the

idea of grabbing them both and running.

The centaur strode over to Draco who flinched as he touched just below his collarbone. "May I?"

Draco gave him a hard look and undid something around his neck. "Here," he said, handing it to him reluctantly. "Watch it, the wings are quite sharp."

Snape looked at the miniature silver dragon on a chain. "Where did you get that?"

"My father," Draco said defiantly, glaring at the ground.

The centaur held up the swinging dragon and instructed them to make a small cut on their palms.

"A blood oath can't be broken," murmured Snape warningly, as Ginny was the first to make a small nick on her right palm.

Ginny shrugged and looked from the centaur to Snape. "How could you not trust him?"

Severus narrowed his eyes but quickly made the small incision, feeling horribly trapped and willing the centaur's eyes to draw away from his. He passed the chain back to Draco, who hesitated before making the scratch.

"He doesn't want us to discover that his blood's not red," muttered Ginny to a tense Severus.

Draco muttered something rude in response and slashed his palm quickly. The centaur gazed at them approvingly.

"And now, the wounds must be aligned."

"Wait, wait," said Draco, quickly. "What d'you mean, aligned? As in, together?"

"Of course," replied the centaur, looking at Draco as if he was dim.

"I seem to recall mentioning this was a bad idea..." growled Snape at Draco's annoyed expression.

"Here, Malfoy, give me your hand," interrupted Ginny, looking at him steadily.

"What?" retorted Draco incredulously. "Weasley, don't you understand? This isn't a temporary handshake, this is binding us together forever –"

“It is not forever,” said the centaur, interrupting without having to raise his voice. “Indeed, the bond is solely dependent on your willingness to be bonded to the other person, and could quite easily fade over time or disappear in an instant.”

“Well,” said Draco disbelievingly, after a long pause, “ – Well, I must say that’s a fat lot of good to us then, since we all hate one another.”

“You just said that you didn’t want to be bonded together forever so isn’t this a good thing?” demanded Ginny, but then turning to a stony-looking Severus. “You said we’ve got no choice; we have to trust each other. It only has to be until we’re safe. Until then though, I know *I’ll* need all the help I can get.”

As Ginny’s determined expression continued to bore into him, Snape eventually looked away and muttered an assent.

“Only until we’re safe,” Draco muttered, aligning his left thumb with Ginny’s right, to cross Snape’s gash horizontally. “What’s the bet we’ll *never* be safe...”

The three students looked up at the centaur restlessly, and were surprised to see his eyes shut and a curious chant being muttered under his breath. Without warning, he stepped forward and placed both his hands over their joined palms. Severus, Draco and Ginny couldn’t help but stare in slight awe, as his voice rang clear through the night.

Blood on blood, fire and ice
Treachery and betrayal, none suffice
Blood on blood, earth and air
Respect and courage, enemies, beware!

The centaur gave them all a small smile, and the three students drew their hands slowly away. To their surprise, the wounds had completely disappeared, leaving no trace of blood or scarring.

“As long as you need it, those spots will sting if one of

you is in serious danger. Whether you three survive depends on how you help each other,” the centaur said solemnly. “I only wish you greater fortune than what I read in the stars.”

The students blinked at each other and the great beast directed his gaze towards Severus. “I am sorry for being slightly hasty in my accusations. I must have been confused...”

Snape lowered his eyes to the ground. Stop talking...don't say it...don't apologise for the Death Eater business...

“I shall be leaving now, to inform Albus Dumbledore of your survival,” said the centaur, much to Snape's relief. “Good night, Hogwarts students. May my oath serve you well...”

And so saying, the centaur kicked off with a giant leap and sailed over the undergrowth, with only the sound of galloping hooves to indicate that he was ever there in the first place.

“Well, that's something that doesn't happen every day,” murmured Ginny, breaking the silence.

“You mean ‘night’,” responded Draco automatically, but then grumbling, “I thought he was going to give us something more than that. A pain in the hand isn't exactly what I had in mind.”

“I know,” admitted Ginny, following Draco in the direction of the gorse bush. “But still, it was pretty cool when...”

But Snape wasn't listening to the others. He stood alone in the glow of his wand. He touched his right palm gingerly and looked at Ginny and Draco as they walked away together.

What had he gotten himself into?

The sun beat down on the unlikely companions.

“We’ll stop here,” Snape called, pausing at the edge of a bubbling brook.

Draco gave a strangled cry that sounded like ‘finally’ and threw himself onto a soft spot of grass. Ginny wasn’t far behind him, dropping the battered Firebolt to stumble towards a nearby stream.

Craning his neck to the sky, Snape looked up at the setting sun, his gaze finally resting back on the exhausted teenagers in half-pity. “Who’s hungry?” he grunted.

“Merlin, I’d eat a *live* rabbit,” said Ginny, collapsing on the bank.

“I feel hungry all the time now,” said Draco bitterly. “It never goes away, it’s horrible.”

“I won’t be far,” Snape called, pulling out his wand and descending into a thicket.

Ginny yawned and shut her eyes. “I can’t believe all this stuff that’s happened,” she murmured. “Centaur... Death Eaters... eating rabbits...”

“Never-ending conversations...”

Ginny sat up and threw a clod of soil at the lazing Slytherin, which completely missed him.

“If I wasn’t feeling half-dead, I would’ve hit you,” she reassured him.

“Yeah, whatever you say, Weasley.”

Perhaps it was mere exhaustion but their insults seemed to have lost their usual sting. True, they still lost their tempers at times, but it was as if they had gotten used to being around each other somewhat. The exchange of insults had become almost relaxing in their familiarity.

Shaking herself from her doze, Ginny began picking out strands of grass and spider web from the Firebolt. Snape soon returned, his pockets full of berries.

“Lunch,” he called, emptying them into a pile on the grass.

After the berries were eaten, they accompanied Severus back to the bushes to pick some more. Half an hour later,

all three sat back by the stream and sighed.

“How much longer till we reach Hogwarts?” said Ginny.

Draco looked up from washing his juice-stained fingers in the stream.

“Maybe three days,” said Snape. “We’re travelling slower than I thought, and with a lot more detours.”

He had climbed a tree that morning to check on their progress. It could be worse he supposed. He found it was getting easier to keep his cool, trudging around in the wilderness all day... Even Draco and Ginny didn’t seem to be getting on his nerves so much.

“But we’ve been walking for three days *already!*” exclaimed Ginny.

Snape grunted and Draco gave a suffering moan.

It had felt a lot longer than three days.

Draco rolled onto his back and looked at the stars. They were in the middle of a large gorse bush again, but it wasn’t nearly as warm as the tree they had spent their first night in. He had found himself in the middle for some reason, and both of his companions kept poking him in their sleep, keeping him awake. At least he wouldn’t have another nightmare about his father – the one last night had been the worst.

Severus and Ginny had been in it, and they had relived that horrible Death Eater scene with the screaming and the tree, only this time his father had been the Death Eater. He narrowed his eyes, willing himself to stop thinking about it, about him. His mind switched instead back to Ginny on the ground, screaming, writhing.

Draco rolled over, scowling at her peaceful back. Something was happening to him. There was something seriously wrong with how he was taking this. Maybe it was the oath.

Yes, probably, he thought relieved. As soon as they got

back to school they wouldn't have to see each other and the oath would become obsolete.

Draco drifted to sleep with that last thought on his mind. For some reason it still wasn't too comforting.

As soon as the light hit the trees, Severus Snape opened his eyes. He glanced down at his sleeping companions thoughtfully.

"Oh no you don't!" shouted Draco immediately, sitting up.

Severus gave him an amused smile. "I wasn't going to do anything," he murmured to himself.

Ginny sat up and rubbed her eyes. "Ho, yes, sure, Severus, I bet..."

"Time to go!" barked Snape quickly, making his way out of the bushes.

"Enthusiasm in the morning should be outlawed," commented Draco bitterly. "And not even a 'please'."

Ginny murmured an agreement, still half-asleep as she stretched languidly.

"Hurry up, I want a good two hour walk, then breakfast."

The two students groaned but followed tiredly after.

"Water!" exclaimed Draco fervently, barging past the two of them and leaping into the stream.

Severus rolled his eyes but Ginny couldn't help snickering, throwing up any restraints she had and jumping in after him.

They'd had to take yet another detour to avoid a particularly wide chasm. It wasn't getting over it that Severus was worried about, but the horrible snuffling noises that seemed to be coming from within. Draco and Ginny hadn't heard a thing, and Severus didn't know

whether his sharp, cat-like hearing was a blessing or a curse. If they took too many risks then they'd never get to Hogwarts, but the same would be true if they didn't. That detour must have cost them at least four hours.

Snape sighed and swept his eyes over the area. Seeing nothing of any harm, he allowed himself to perch gingerly on the bank of the stream, scowling at any splashes directed his way. "All right, I suppose we can stop here for the night."

"What's for dinner then?" asked Draco after a while, making his way towards Severus with his face finally clean and his hair plastered wetly back. "I hope it's not rabbit *again*."

"What's wrong with rabbit?" demanded Ginny, wringing out her hair as she trudged with sodden robes onto the bank. "I mean, it'd be nice if they weren't so old and tough..."

"Well, why don't you fetch it for once?" replied Severus in annoyance, waving his wand over them and drying them instantly.

"What?" said Ginny blankly, catching her hair back into a messy ponytail. "Me? Why not Malfoy?"

"I'm not a bloody house-elf," said Draco imperiously.

"And what d'you think I am?" said Severus, feeling tired for the first time in days. "It's about time you two did something even minutely useful. *You* can grab the dinner for once."

Draco and Ginny stared at each other incredulously.

"What?"

"You can't expect *us* to –"

"You've *got* to be joking –"

"She'll get us *lost* –"

"He'll get us *killed* –"

"NO WAY!" they yelled simultaneously.

“You do realise this is all your fault, don’t you?”

“Shh! You’re going to– LOOK! Get it!”

Draco threw himself forward at a squawking hen-like bird. The flustered bundle of feathers gave him a peck on the nose and flew away.

“You let him get away!” cried Ginny in anguish.

“You try diving for the bloody thing next time, and see how you like it!” snapped Draco indignantly.

Both of them were refraining from using their wands, as neither had full control over the strength of their stunning spells. The first one they had stunned had gone flying backwards and squashed messily against a tree, and neither was willing to repeat it.

“Got one!” cried Ginny triumphantly, snatching at a bird that just flew out of the thicket.

Draco gave her his most scathing look imaginable. “Well, *my* family’s not used to hunting for our food.”

To his annoyance she just gave a laugh, and he turned away huffily. Fortunately however, he managed to seize a dopey-looking bird that had just stumbled from the thicket. “*Ah-hah!*” he cried, and held up his prize triumphantly.

Ginny glanced at it and grinned. “Very good, Malfoy,” she reassured, and, with three larger ones in her arms, she started to make her way back to a bored Severus.

The sun shone overhead, tinting the enormous leaves and boughs of the passing trees. They had been wandering for six days now, and Severus, Draco and Ginny were starting to get used to spending hours upon end walking. They’d taken it in turns to lead, zapping undergrowth from their path, and also following up the rear by zapping plants back into place to cover their tracks. It was only recently that the forest had evened out and no longer required beating a path to walk. Although untidy and

usually dirty, their eyes were bright and each had grown accustomed to the noises of the forest. During the occasional break, Severus had offered to teach them how to properly duel, and both Draco and Ginny were getting lightning fast with their wands. However this could also be due to the fact that Severus was forcing them to catch every second meal now.

Whatever the reasons, all three of them didn't seem as easily irritated as before, and the silence as they walked didn't feel as strained. It was almost peaceful at times, and Severus was surprised when he noticed the change in his companions for the first time.

It was odd how not even a week stuck in the forest had changed them so much, he thought. They looked so much more... ready? Confident? Mature? And especially Draco – although still usually scowling, the underlying sneer and smugness had lessened dramatically.

Snape wondered if he himself had changed. He didn't feel any different... except of course, more relaxed. It wasn't as if he was forgetting his duty though, they were quite close to Hogwarts now, he was sure of it.

Overall he thought it had been a good experience for them, perhaps they could do this with students more often. Well... minus the Death Eaters. And some of the life-threatening animals that had caused so many detours. And the centaurs – meddlesome beasts. And the quicksand... What was he thinking? The Forbidden Forest was out of bounds for very good reason.

Severus glanced at Draco and Ginny. So why had he enjoyed the past few days so much?

It must just be the fresh air, he thought. Or perhaps the triumph of getting away from the Death Eaters scott free...

Severus tried to ignore the tiny doubt gnawing at the back of his mind.

Death Eaters never gave up.

“Hey, you two! Come and see!”

A clear voice pierced the peaceful silence of the early morning. Draco Malfoy yawned and scrambled up the tree surprisingly quickly. “What is it?” he said, taking his place next to the larger dark-haired boy.

“Hold on!” cried a third voice grumpily, the owner of which making her appearance soon after.

Severus said nothing, but drew back a large branch. “Look for yourselves,” he motioned.

The two students gazed at the view, broad smiles creeping to their faces. “Hogwarts!” they cried in unison.

Far into the distance was a familiar, grey castle, early morning sunlight glinting off the shiny surface.

“A fast walk or jog should get us there by the afternoon,” Snape nodded, snorting at the absolute glee on their faces.

“Hot baths—”

“Fresh robes—”

“Soft beds—”

“Civilisation—”

Draco and Ginny practically fell from the tree in eagerness.

“What? You actually want to start straight away?” called Snape disbelievingly. “It’s barely dawn!”

“Come *on!*” laughed Ginny, scooping up the scruffy Firebolt and starting to run.

Draco gave a very un-Draco-like-whoop, and sprinted after her. Even Severus smiled as he landed softly on his feet. He soon caught up and all three slowed down to a walk and enjoyed the silent anticipation. All of the pain and hardships of their journey seemed far away now that the end was in sight. Even the birds seemed to be twittering almost sweetly as the three of them soaked in the morning sun.

“You know it hasn’t been that bad,” said Ginny after a long pause. “Almost sort of... fun.”

Draco made a face at her but it was a half-hearted scowl at best. “Your idea of fun is pretty rotten,” he said at last.

“Of course it would have been better if you two weren’t so pathetically unfit,” added Snape.

His two companions rounded on him indignantly. Snape’s mouth twitched and Draco shoved him hard into a prickly bush.

“Ha!” cried the young Slytherin, as Severus untangled himself. “Who’s unfit now?”

“You know what I’m going to do as soon as I get back?” murmured Ginny dreamily, taking no notice of the jostling going on around her. “I’m going to eat so much food that I pass out on my wonderfully soft bed.”

“I’m going to pass out in a huge foamy bath, eating ice-cream,” said Draco at once, frowning however as Ginny burst into a fit of laughter. “What?”

“Do you... d’you like ice-cream?” Ginny gasped, her eyebrows raised. “That seems so very... I mean, you seem more of a *flan* person.”

Draco looked at Ginny as if she was an idiot and Severus rolled his eyes, thinking about an armchair by the fire and a glass of Firewhiskey. He wondered if Dumbledore had been seeing to his stewing potions, and despite the warm breeze against his face, he felt a sudden rush of longing for his old office and Hogwarts.

Ginny pulled a tangled piece of vine from the Firebolt fondly. “It’s going to be weird getting back to Hogwarts,” she said. “I wonder if anyone noticed us missing...”

Draco followed her gaze and scowled. “Why d’you still have that thing? It barely flies.”

“I’ve been fixing it,” said Ginny defensively. “And it belongs to... Well, it doesn’t matter, it’s a Firebolt,” she finished, blushing.

Draco looked at her in deep disgust. “Hey Severus,” he

said, turning to the other boy. "As soon as we reach Hogwarts, let's lose the Potter-worshipper."

Ginny shielded the sun from her eyes and looked at him crossly. "Look, I was starting to think you were all right—"

"Oh, *all right*. Well, that's *all right* then, THANK you very much!" interrupted Draco sarcastically.

Ginny gave him a scathing look and turned to Snape. "Severus, don't you think —"

"Oh, *Severus*, oh, so now we're on first name basis are we, *Severus*? Won't you please tell me your opinion, *Severus*?" Draco continued sarcastically, batting his eyelids in mock imitation of Ginny.

Ginny glared at him. "Is there a problem, *Malfoy*?" she replied icily. "You know you call him that also."

"Well, I've more of a right to do so!" said Draco immediately.

"What's that supposed to mean?" demanded Ginny.

"We're nearly there you two," Snape interjected testily. "Can you just give me a bit of *peace* so I can enjoy the last of my pleasant walk?"

Draco and Ginny gave Severus somewhat betrayed looks.

"You know Potter's just going to burst into tears when you give him that broom," muttered Draco under his breath.

"You don't know Harry at all," Ginny hissed back.

Draco snorted and picked up the pace. "Well, neither do you."

"I remember this spot!" exclaimed Severus, looking around in surprise. "We're barely a mile away now!"

Draco looked at him suspiciously, but Ginny cut in first. "How do you know that?"

Snape cursed mentally. How was he supposed to explain

that he often went this way to collect rare herbs?

“Er...I came here with Hagrid a few weeks ago. He’s, ah... We went for walks while I stayed here over the holidays,” Snape finished off somewhat lamely.

“Right,” said Ginny sceptically, raising an eyebrow at Draco.

Draco shrugged. “Barely a mile, eh? Race you then, *Severus*.”

Ginny rolled her eyes.

“No... I don’t want to leave you two behind,” muttered Snape, looking around.

Draco opened his mouth to protest, when a slight stinging sensation in his left hand made him cry out.

Snape whirled on him and grabbed his shoulder. “You felt that too?” he hissed.

Draco winced in reply and threw a look at Ginny. Ginny stared back at them with wide eyes. “I felt it too,” she whispered.

“Oh great—”

“Serious danger—”

“Here we come,” growled Severus, and pulled out his wand.

Chapter Four

~ In which there is serious danger ~

“Behind you, Ginny,” Severus whispered, laying a hand on her shoulder.

Ever so slowly, the smaller Gryffindor turned her head, catching sight of a wide-mouthed Slytherin on the way. Her eyes travelled further and she felt herself freeze.

Perched upon a fallen log was an enormous salivating black dog. It would have looked like a normal bull-mastiff except that its eyes glowed a dull red. Two others were standing behind it, just as large as their leader.

Ginny let out a slight whimper. The three beasts responded with a blood-curdling howl.

“The Firebolt!” Snape cried, his voice going higher than he’d intended. “Get up to the treetops!”

As quick as lightning, all three students scrambled onto the broomstick. The smallest dog gave a howl of rage and leaped towards them.

“HOLD ON!” snarled Snape, as the Firebolt shot straight into the air.

But a piercing scream stopped the broom in mid-flight.

“WAIT!” Draco roared to Severus, staring in horror at the still figure below them.

Ginny had been jerked off by the sudden acceleration of the broom and had fallen to the ground, hitting her head on a sharp stone.

“RELASHIO!” the Slytherin yelled, pointing his newly drawn wand at the slaving beasts.

A burst of fiery sparks hit the lead dog with a sizzle. The huge beast shrieked in pain and the smell of singed fur stopped the others just about to spring.

“MOBILICORPUS!” came another voice strongly, making the body of Ginny Weasley jerk suddenly into the air.

Draco grimaced as Snape fought to direct Ginny's body higher. Their barely-functioning broom was sinking lower and the two unhurt dogs were growling louder.

"She's not going to make it!" cried Draco in panic.

"*SHUT UP!*" yelled Snape, his head hurting from concentration.

Without warning the burnt dog gave a snarl and the closest dog's eyes glowed bright red. With a throaty howl it leapt up at Ginny's floating body. His mind suddenly blank, Draco gritted his teeth and threw himself at the beast with an answering snarl. Boy and beast hit the ground with terrific force, winding them both.

Severus gave a shout of anger and dove the broom down, catching the barely conscious Ginny over his shoulder. But the roughed-up broom couldn't take it any longer and the two Gryffindors were also flung to the ground. "Ginny, *REDIVIVUS!*" Snape cried immediately, pointing his wand at the body next to him.

Without waiting for her response, the black-haired boy leapt up, throwing himself on the animal smothering Draco. Severus rolled the startled brute off the other boy and closed his hands around its neck.

"You'll pay," Snape hissed, his abnormally strong fingers wringing the great beast's neck. "I know what you are, I know who—*AAARGH.*"

"*SEVERUS!*"

It was like a pain he hadn't experienced for so long, not since he had served the Dark Lord...

"Hang on, Severus!" came a distant voice.

Draco searched wildly for his wand, but in vain, for it had fumbled from his grasp when he'd leapt. Ignoring the stupidity once more, he threw himself at the beast digging into Severus's back. To his horror, the beast anticipated this and rolled out of the way, and Draco ploughed into a hunched-over Severus. Draco stared at the drooling fangs and tried to reach Severus's wand instead.

“ST—”

“*STUPEFY!*” came Ginny’s scream to his side, cutting him off.

The foaming brute slumped to the ground. Draco’s head whipped around as he searched for the other creatures, finally spotting them on the ground. He let out a sigh of relief as he recovered his dropped wand, and walked shakily over to his companions. Ginny was already stooped over Severus’s body, trying to roll him off the strangled dog. Ginny looked up as he came over and gave him a small smile.

“We need to wash his bite before I close it,” she said softly, motioning to a nasty wound in Snape’s back.

Draco nodded weakly and lifted his wand. “*Mobilicorp—*”

“It’s all right,” cut in Snape with a groan. “I can manage...”

Ginny bit her lip and helped the larger boy up. Snape grimaced and tried to focus on something besides his back. His eyes wandered around the scrubby clearing, noticing that the dog he had strangled to death had lost the red light in its eyes. He felt a rush of hatred in the pit of his stomach and looked away.

“Is that one only stunned?” he asked his companions, pointing to the one that had bitten him.

“Yeah,” Draco assented, glancing at Ginny, but then noticing the bloody, disfigured body of the other one. “What the hell happened to *that* one?”

Ginny suppressed a shudder. “Well, it was coming straight at me,” she muttered.

“*Diffindo?*” Snape asked, picking up the battered Firebolt.

Ginny continued to stare at the mangled body. “Yeah,” she said. “It was the only thing I could think of...perhaps it was a bit much...”

“It deserved it,” replied Snape at once, casting a

backward glance at his seemingly dead beast on the ground. “Come on then.”

His two companions followed him silently for some distance.

“A stream!” Ginny cried gladly, running to the surface and turning it crystal clear. Relief washed over her face as she started cleansing Snape’s nasty looking bite before closing it up.

Draco watched in silence, hesitating slightly as he approached the larger boy. “Look, I’m sorry for being such a fool. I know I shouldn’t have jumped off the sodding broom—”

“Then why did you?” cut in Snape irritably, the pain of his wound just starting to sink in. “Of all the stupid things you could’ve done – tackling the thing in midair –”

“What?” Ginny interrupted this time. “Did you really?”

Draco glared at Severus as Ginny went off into peals of laughter. Snape glared at them both in equal annoyance, when a sudden rustle brought them back to their situation. A wave of irritation rushed over Snape’s face as he whipped his head around, searching for the cause of the noise.

“Still up for that race?” he asked, his eyes darting around the shadows.

Draco and Ginny nodded uneasily.

“Let’s go.”

“Stop!” hissed Snape, throwing his arms out against his two panting companions.

The two students froze and clenched their wands tighter.

“What is it?” Draco growled between breaths.

To their shock he gave them both a broad smile. “Hogwarts,” he breathed, pulling back a branch.

They were standing on the edge of the forest, right at the back of the Quidditch change rooms.

“Back where we started,” Ginny murmured, placing a hand on the cool wall.

The three students pushed their way out of the undergrowth and stood in the warm sunshine. The great castle that was Hogwarts rose magnificently before them. Ginny felt her knees go weak and Draco felt exceedingly tired all of a sudden. Snape looked for the familiar glint of the Headmaster’s window and felt a feeling of satisfaction swell up within him.

“WE MADE IT!” Ginny shouted suddenly, making the two boys jump violently.

All three students exploded into hysterical guffaws, running at the castle and punching the air.

“We made it!”

“To Hogwarts!”

“And we’re still alive!”

“No thanks to you!”

“Oh, shut up, Malfoy!”

“Finally!” Severus crowed, giving them both a clap on the back but then stopping suddenly.

Draco and Ginny also skidded to a stop and grinned at him breathlessly. Snape nodded towards Hagrid’s cottage about a hundred yards away, at four rapidly approaching figures.

“GINNY!” came a roar.

Ginny’s face lit up as she recognised the running figures. “Ron!” she laughed, running forward to meet them.

Draco wrinkled up his nose and looked sideways at Severus. Snape shrugged. “Yeah, let’s go—”

“SEV!” came a bellow, drowning out whatever the black-haired boy was about to say next.

Snape froze and turned around to meet the enormous Gamekeeper. He hastily shook Hagrid’s hand before the big giant could pull him into a hug.

“SEV! Where’d yeh go? What happened? Everyone’s bin lookin’ for yeh; Dumbledore—”

But the sound of three loud voices all talking at once drowned out even Hagrid's booming one.

"*WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!*"

"*WE'VE BEEN LOOKING F' YOU FOR AGES—*"

"*WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!*"

"*MUM AND DAD'VE BEEN GOING MENTAL—*"

"*WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!*" they all finally cried at once, glaring at Ginny half-angrily, half-hysterically.

Ginny looked at them all dazedly, feeling quite overwhelmed. Hermione glared at her slightly tearfully and suddenly gave her an enormous hug. "We were so worried..."

Ron looked at her white-faced and gripped her shoulder very hard, as if he thought she was going to suddenly disappear again. "Everyone was!" he said tightly.

Ginny still felt slightly dazed. "Really?"

"Of *course* we were," a familiar voice agreed emphatically, making her heart beat faster.

Ginny turned to meet the warm green eyes that she'd dreamt about since she was eleven. Harry Potter gave her a relieved grin.

"Are you all right? Do you need to sit down?" he asked, his grin fading slightly.

Ginny blushed violently and tried to say something but her tongue seemed to be stuck. To her surprise a deep voice spoke.

"We were port-keyed at least forty miles into the Forbidden Forest," Severus stated curtly. "It was a trap meant for you, Potter, and the Dark Lord faced us with his cult of Death Eaters...however we managed to get away and we've been travelling through the forest in the meantime."

Harry, Ron and Hermione spun around to face the speaker in shock.

"How—"

"I'm sure Ginny will explain later, but right now we've

got to report to the Headmaster,” Severus cut in dispassionately.

“Hang on,” said Ginny desperately, before her tongue froze again. She blushed violently once more and presented Harry with the battered Firebolt. “Sorry it’s all beaten up... If it’s any consolation... it saved my life.”

Draco gagged loudly at this but Harry stared at the broom, barely recognising it. “My Firebolt...” His stare transferred to Ginny and he smiled. “I can’t believe you brought it back all that way. You didn’t need to— I’m just glad you’re all right.”

Draco scowled and Severus grabbed the Firebolt instead. “It needs to be examined for further dark magic,” he said nastily, ignoring Harry’s mutinous frown. “I’m sure Dumbledore will let you have it later... what’s *left* of it anyway.”

Severus smirked slightly but motioned impatiently to Ginny and flicked his head at Draco. But Ginny was still being interrogated by her brother, with Hermione giving cries of horror every now and then.

“But what I don’t get is,” Ron burst out finally, after interrupting Ginny every time she tried to explain something, “—HOW DID YOU TRAVEL *FORTY MILES THROUGH THE BLOODY FORBIDDEN FOREST?*”

Ginny looked taken aback at her brother swearing and paused. Ron, Hermione, and even Harry were gazing at her with barely concealed admiration. Ginny looked at her shoes. “Oh...well, we wouldn’t have made it if it wasn’t for these two,” she said loyally, glowing at Draco and Severus.

Harry, Ron and Hermione stared at the two boys incredulously while Draco and Severus gave them their best scowls.

“Hurry up!” Snape snapped, glaring at an unfortunate Ginny.

“Yeah, talk it up, Weasley...” Draco muttered, giving

her a dirty look.

Ron opened his mouth to yell something when his best friend laid a hand on his shoulder. “Not now, Ron,” Harry murmured, throwing Draco a dirty look in return. “Ginny needs some rest.”

Ron’s face turned worried again. “Ginny, d’you want us to carry you back to the castle—”

“Ron, I’m fine.”

“No, but you might be feeling ill, and you could’ve caught something out there in that creepy—”

“Yes, there’s lots of nasty bugs out there, I read about it in One Million and One Life-Threatening Disea—”

“Hermione! I’m fine—”

“Now I’m your brother, and I think you need a long rest with plenty of—”

“It’s just that we care,” put in Harry hastily, seeing Ginny turn red.

“Yeah, Gin’,” Ron replied soothingly, patting her on the back. “I mean, if I’d been stuck with Malfoy along with loony Death Eaters on my tail, I’d be out of my mind right now.”

Ginny opened her mouth indignantly but it was another voice that spoke.

“Look, *Weasley*, if you weren’t such a blithering *idiot* you would notice that she was OK—” it took Ginny a few seconds to realise that Draco was talking to her brother and not her, “—and what’s more, Ginny’s probably handled it better than you ever could’ve, you great stinking—”

“Don’t you *dare* call my sister by her first name, *Malfoy*,” Ron spat, whipping out his wand.

“RON!” bellowed Ginny, waving her hands in her brother’s face. “Stop it!”

Harry and Ron stared at her dubiously, along with Hermione who was giving her a hard look.

“Look, Dumbledore’s expecting us,” Ginny carried on, a

slight flush appearing at the back of her neck “So Severus and, erm... *Draco* and I... should start going.”

Hermione’s look turned disbelieving, along with Harry and Ron who stared at her in slight horror. The freckled boy reddened and rounded on Draco at once, grabbing his shoulder roughly.

“*You watch yourself, Malfoy,*” he hissed, right next to the scowling Slytherin’s ear.

A steely grip on Ron’s shoulder made him turn slightly.

“*You watch it, Weasley,*” Severus Snape snarled, giving Hagrid a glare as he moved to intervene.

Harry sent Snape a furious look and rounded on Draco. “Trust *you* to chum up with another Crabbe slash Goyle counterpart,” he sneered, giving Snape his most disgusted look.

Severus turned white and clenched his fists, but it was an unlikely source that intervened.

“*Harry!* How...how *could* you?” Ginny stammered, giving the rage-filled Snape an apologetic look. “Severus saved my life...more than once, and yes, even Malfoy! Show them some respect... *please.*”

Harry, Ron and Hermione stood there, dumbfounded once more. Hagrid scratched his head, looking quite surprised himself.

“Now, if you don’t mind, we’re going to see Dumbledore,” Ginny finished off determinedly. And with that, the flushing Gryffindor turned her heel and marched away.

Snape and Draco smirked at each other. “*If*, you don’t mind,” Draco drawled, jerking himself from Ron’s grip and setting off after Ginny. Snape crossed his arms and followed silently, unable to stop himself from sniggering at their expressions before he left.

Ron sat down hard on the short grass. “She’s gone mad,” he murmured faintly, shaking his head.

“She *was* acting odd,” Hermione muttered in agreement.

“I guess being stuck with *them* for a week, really changes a person,” Harry added, gazing at Ginny’s retreating figure with raised eyebrows.

“Er...I’m sorry about—wait! Where are you going?” Ginny exclaimed, as Severus pulled them behind an enormous tapestry.

“Shortcut to Dumbledore’s office,” Snape answered, revealing a hidden passage opening out to a narrow corridor. “I don’t want a lot of nosy students breathing down my neck...”

“How did you—”

“I’ve stayed here holidays remember? Since there was no one here, I had free reign over the castle...lots of time to explore.”

Snape smiled to himself. At least he’d been ready for that one.

Ginny looked somewhat satisfied and continued. “Well, anyway, I’m sorry about all the fuss that happened earlier—”

“It’s all right,” Snape cut in, casting a sidelong look at Draco.

“Yeah,” Draco smirked, “—the look on their faces when you said you were going off with us...”

Draco’s voice drained out to an uncomfortable silence. The only sound now was the faint echo of footfalls on the stony floor.

“I did mean it...” Ginny began in a small voice. “I mean... I never thanked you, Severus... and you, er, Draco. I wouldn’t mind, you know... We could still talk and er...”

There was an awkward silence as Ginny trailed off and no one replied.

Severus felt a strange feeling swell up in his stomach as his thoughts drifted back to the last few days. All the pain

and Death Eater attacks aside, it would not be those instances he'd remember in the years to come. It would be the smaller, almost insignificant moments - Draco and Ginny gathering food, falling out of trees, laughing and fighting at the same time... Severus started to rub his right palm unconsciously.

"Blood on blood," he mumbled to himself.

Draco and Ginny continued to gaze at the stony floor, vague memories of that night wisping into their minds.

"Well, at least we know that the oath worked after all," Ginny murmured.

"Yeah, but like I said earlier," Draco sneered, though rather half-heartedly. "I was hoping to get more than just a sore left hand."

To his shock Ginny collapsed on the spot. Draco dropped to her side in alarm, only to discover that she was silently laughing.

"Sore... sore left hand!" she gasped for air, getting to her feet and starting to move once more. "Well, I don't know what you were expecting when you got stranded in the forest with a beautiful girl, but I assure you, Draco, a sore left hand was the most you could've expected."

Severus rolled his eyes at the childish innuendo but started sniggering at Draco's pained expression.

And although Severus felt they'd have answered a hesitant *not really* when asked if they were friends, he knew that something strange had happened in that moment. Something had changed.

The three students reached the end of the passage and blinked at the sudden light, as the thick tapestry was pulled backwards by Albus Dumbledore himself. Severus, Draco and Ginny trooped quickly out, to find themselves standing in the same corridor as the statue that led to the Headmaster's office.

"I'm afraid the whole school has headed down to the Entrance Hall to get a look at you, but I assume you'd

rather come upstairs and have a chat?” Dumbledore inquired, his eyes twinkling at Severus.

Draco and Ginny looked at him reluctantly, thinking of the enormous welcome that awaited them. Not to mention it was probably time for lunch...

The Headmaster seemed to read their minds. “Yes, I have a small meal prepared for my hungry travellers, and also, I’m sure your parents would like to drop by to make sure you’re all right...”

All three of their faces lit up at the mention of food, but then Draco remembered something, something that made his body feel numb.

“My father...” he began.

“Yes, yes, please tell me everything upstairs, come along now,” Dumbledore interrupted briskly, whispering the password and gesturing them to the stairs.

When all three were seated, (which didn’t take long as the food was sitting next to the chairs) Dumbledore spoke in an unusual, serious tone.

“Now, I wouldn’t be pulling you up here if it wasn’t vital you told me exactly what happened. I know you are hungry, tired, and generally uncomfortable, but would you please recount all the details of your disappearance.”

Draco shrugged and Ginny scratched her head. Snape looked at them and sighed. “You two can eat, I’ll tell the story...”

And he told Dumbledore in as much detail as he could remember, all about their weary journey, helped out by a few comments between mouthfuls by Draco and Ginny.

He began with how they had all ended up in the Quidditch change rooms, the fight over the Firebolt, the sudden disappearance, the story that he told Draco and Ginny about his ending up there (while flashing the Headmaster a meaningful look), their encounter with Voldemort, Draco with his father (Dumbledore looked incredibly sombre at this account), the single Death Eater

incident, the centaur (the Headmaster's face brightening), the oath (turning thoughtful), their last trek through the forest and finally the encounter with the horrible dogs. And all through this, each had added comments about small hardships they had come across, from the poisonous snakes to the swamps of quicksand.

When they had finally finished, Mr and Mrs Weasley, along with Bill and Charlie Weasley popped out of the fireplace, demanding an explanation and throwing themselves onto Ginny as soon as they saw her. And so they had to tell the whole story again for their benefit, and again when the Heads of Houses and Cornelius Fudge turned up, and once more when everyone demanded to hear it a second time, it was so unbelievable.

Luckily, on the third time Dumbledore had bewitched a quill so it wrote down everything that had been said by the exhausted trio. A copy was made for the Weasleys, the Minister of Magic, and a special one each for Draco, Ginny and Severus, and finally one for Dumbledore himself.

The Heads of Houses departed for the Great Hall and Fudge departed via Floo. The Weasleys said their reluctant and tearful (mostly on behalf of Mrs Weasley) goodbyes, and were the last to leave. Before he left, Arthur Weasley shook hands with Severus and then, hesitantly, with Draco.

"You're good lads," he said sincerely, giving them both small smiles, "If there's anything I can do for you..."

Snape smiled politely back and Draco shut his mouth firmly and shook his head.

"You're good lads," he repeated finally, stepping backwards into the fireplace.

Dumbledore rubbed his hands together. "And now I think you can go." He smiled, shooing them out the door. "I'm sure everyone at the feast will be dying to know your story also."

All three companions exchanged broadening smiles. They had been sitting in his office for several hours and, although they had tried to listen attentively to everything the Headmaster was saying, all they had really heard was one word:

Feast.

“Hang on, will you!” Ginny exclaimed, all three students cascading down the stairs with the black-haired boy in front as usual.

“You two had all that food in Dumbledore’s office,” Snape argued, refusing to slow down as he thought of the feast ahead.

“That was long forgotten!” Draco counteracted, shoving in front of the other boy with a triumphant cry.

“*Wait!*” Ginny yelled once more, putting on a sudden burst of speed. “We look awful! Shouldn’t we stop off at *-oof!*”

Snape stopped suddenly, making both Draco and Ginny collide into him and knocking them all into a heap on the stairs.

“Watch out,” muttered Snape annoyed. “What’d you do that for?”

“*ME?!*” Draco countered indignantly, shoving the larger boy off him.

“Get off!” bellowed Ginny, whose robes they were still standing on.

“Yes, perhaps we should tidy up a bit,” Snape said thoughtfully, smoothing down his short hair and ignoring the other two’s glares. “After all, what kind of long lost heroes are we, if we don’t enter in style?”

Draco smirked, forgetting their accident. “Prefects bathroom ahead,” he declared, sprinting down once more.

Ginny grinned to herself and followed a running Snape. “I hope it’s empty...” she murmured, catching up and

standing in front of a creamy picture of a lemon.

Draco whispered the password and climbed through the gap, leaving the two Gryffindors outside.

Snape looked at Ginny a trifle smugly. "Didn't you know? Draco's a Prefect."

Ginny blinked at him. "Oh, well... good for him..."

Clambering through the portrait hole, Ginny looked around in awe. Immediately starting towards the massive sunken-in bath, she came to a sudden stop. "Er...is this a boy's bathroom?"

Draco tested the frothy water with a finger. "Yeah, but there's no one in here. They're all probably waiting in the Great Hall."

Snape started to undo his robe and Ginny gaped at him. "Er...but what...what about you...er, you two?" Ginny stuttered, turning a violent shade of puce as Snape bared his chest.

"What?" replied Draco blankly, removing his shoes.

"See-you-in-a-bit!" Ginny yelled suddenly, jumping into the only closed shower cubicle and slamming the door.

"What's with her?" Draco mouthed to the larger boy. Peeling off his outer robes, Draco plunged into the bath with a sigh.

Severus soon followed, taking care not to reveal his Death Eater tattoo. The water was so warm and relaxing he soon forgot all else, until his thoughts were interrupted by a loud blaring noise seeming to come out of nowhere.

"Play something else, you dratted thing!" he heard Draco growl.

Severus spun lazily to look over at Draco, who was irritably prodding some sort of stone lion with his wand. The lion had a defiant look on its face and the sound of bagpipes droned from its open mouth.

"One of the Slytherin prefects charmed it last year," Draco explained. He hit the lion with his palm. "Although the bloody thing's supposed to produce *music*."

The lion started playing an angry fast tune, as if to say it *was* producing music.

“Hey! I like bagpipes!” came a muffled shout from the shower cubicle.

“Yeah, but you’ve got bad taste!” Draco yelled back, but giving up on the smug stone lion in disgust. “Sounds like someone’s beating a house-elf...”

“Bagpipes are all right,” Severus yawned.

“—And the house-elf’s beating a kneazle,” continued to moan Draco, now under a cloud of shampoo. “And the kneazle’s being violently ill...”

Severus felt too lazy to care. “Just make it stop if you don’t like it.”

“Don’t you dare!” came Ginny’s answering shout.

“I can’t,” muttered Draco bitterly, as the stone lion steadfastly ignored his wand movements. “The bloody thing hates me now... for absolutely no reason...”

After half an hour of complaints about bagpipes, and the resulting water fights that thus ensued, all three teenagers left the bathroom soaked and slightly more dishevelled than when they’d entered. The trio glanced at each other and burst into snorts of laughter.

“To the Great Hall!” Ginny cried dramatically, whipping Draco in the face with her wet hair.

“Race you!” Snape said hastily, seeing the young Slytherin turn red.

“On your marks—”

“—Get set—”

“GO!”

“Where is she?!” hissed Ron, jabbing the table with his fork.

The whole school milled around in the Great Hall, including teachers and the Headmaster himself. Word had spread like wildfire and Dumbledore had come down and

given them a short recount on what had befallen Ginny, Draco and Severus. Although they didn't know it, their disappearance had caused an enormous uproar in the magical community.

The Firebolt had been traced and revealed to have been tinkered with dark magic, and since Ginny had been going to fetch it the day she disappeared...

Hogwarts had been in chaos, and no one knew where to start looking since they had left no clue to their whereabouts. It was widely rumoured that Voldemort had risen once more, and now Albus Dumbledore himself had confirmed it during his tale.

The past several days had been nervous unsettling ones, and with students being ushered to each class by teachers, it was just like when the Chamber of Secrets had been opened. It was enough to shake anyone's nerves, but when the news had reached Hogwarts that the three lost students were safe, students and teachers alike were so overjoyed that they threw up their usual Saturday activities and celebrated.

It was because of this that the whole school was waiting with baited breath as three awkward figures stumbled uncomfortably through the doorway.

Severus Snape stared around at the sea of expectant faces around him and his smile dissipated.

A roar like the sound of an enormous wave crashing hit them full on. All of a sudden they were drowning in a sea of students all rushing to whack them over the shoulder or shake their hands or pat them on the head or simply roar even louder in their ears. Snape gasped for breath and struggled to get out but was pushed even further under by another magically appearing swarm. Ginny was laughing and crying at the same time, her voice ringing with emotion as she hugged her friends and her brothers all at once. Draco was being pummelled by the Slytherins, the older years congratulating him and slapping him on the

back, the girls staring at him adoringly. Snape noticed, to his utmost disgust, that he also had an enormous girl troupe trying to get as close as they could to the ‘mysterious new boy’.

“Will everyone please resume their seats?” rang a clear voice from the other end of the hall.

Severus sent the Headmaster a relieved look as everyone moved reluctantly back to their chairs. A burly Ravenclaw offered to carry Ginny to her seat but she graciously denied, grinning widely at Draco and Severus. Draco rolled his eyes and peeled a hysterical Pansy Parkinson off him. Dumbledore motioned for them to come towards the front and smiled slightly. The three travellers strode forward, feeling slightly awed at all the attention transfixed upon them.

Ginny sent Harry and Hermione a hurt look as she walked past them. “Why didn’t you come to welcome me?” she whispered.

Harry winked at her and Hermione smiled. “Party in the common room afterwards,” she whispered back.

Ginny glowed at them and soon found herself standing in front of a serious-looking Dumbledore. Her smile evaporated and she looked in alarm at the unusually sombre Headmaster. Dumbledore nodded at them and raised his arms to the rest of the hall.

“I have briefly recounted the chain of events that led to the disappearance of these three students. Now that they have returned, there is no use denying it any longer.” Dumbledore’s eyes seemed to bore into every single person’s in the room. “Voldemort has returned.”

The unlikely trio at the front looked at each other soberly, their encounter with the Dark Lord playing slowly in their minds.

“But—” the tone of Dumbledore’s voice changed dramatically, “—we must not be discouraged in the face of such evil—” he turned to the three companions and

smiled slightly, “—and we should always hold on to our successes, and ever always celebrate them.”

A ragged cheer arose from the school, the atmosphere lightening considerably.

“And so,” Dumbledore continued, holding up his hands again for silence, “it’s time for the old points awarding—” the hall’s cheer rose up again, “—and I’m sure you’ll all agree; for acting with courage, cunning and showing pure willpower in an utterly bizarre and chilling, devoid-of-their-fault circumstance, I award Ginny Weasley, Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape... fifty points each!”

It was as if they had just walked in again, the roar of cheering was as deafening as before. Harry and Hermione were punching the air wildly, with Ron, Fred and George leaping on the table and cheering with pride. There was a lot of whistling and bellowing from the Slytherin table. Even the other two tables were cheering uproariously, but the unlikely trio stood stock-still and looked at each other wide-eyed.

“But...but we didn’t do anything,” Ginny whispered.

“DIDN’ DO ANYTHIN’, SHE SAYS!” Hagrid boomed heartily, slapping Professor McGonagall on the back and giving a chuckle.

A wave of laughter started up in the hall while Professor McGonagall replaced her spectacles.

“But it’s true...” Ginny said, looking at Draco and Severus.

“Oh well...” Draco grunted, torn by the prospect of fifty points.

Dumbledore smiled. “Of course, you haven’t heard.”

But a chorus of voices cut in first.

“The Ministry’s caught several—”

“Dozens!”

“Yeah, DOZENS of Death Eaters—”

“At the far side of the Forbidden Forest—”

“They stuck out on account of a huge Dark Mark—”

“Most of ‘em stupidly Disappeared to the edge of the forest—”

“VERY stupidly!”

“Yeah, right into Aurors loving arms—”

“And one blabbed—”

“Seems they were going to some hollow—”

“And so off popped the Aurors, Charlie was with them—”

“And Bill! And Dad!”

“Yeah, they outnumbered the robed-rotters five to one—”

“Dad caught one single-handedly—”

“But we had no idea—”

“NO IDEA—”

“That you had anything to do with it—”

Dumbledore smiled at them congenially. “Thank you Fred and George Weasley, and I might also add that your return has opened up the eyes of the Wizarding community, and especially the Ministry.”

But their heads were still in a whirl with the sudden news.

“What about...?” Snape’s voice trailed off as he gave Dumbledore a meaningful look.

The Headmaster shook his head. “Alas, Voldemort himself and his inner circle weren’t traced, even some minor cat’s paws escaped. But we did get the majority, so cheer up, make yourself merry! It is only four o’clock and we have a long celebration ahead of us!”

The hall cheered as mountains of food started appearing on the long tables. Draco, Ginny and Severus suddenly remembered their hunger and gazed at the banquet in anticipation.

“C’mon, Gin’!” chorused Fred and George Weasley.

Ginny beamed at them and turned to their scarlet table. She looked uncertainly to Draco and Severus and then back at her table.

“See you round I suppose,” Draco said stiffly, and moved off to the stamping Slytherin table.

Ginny sent Severus a hopeful look. Snape scowled and followed her reluctantly to the Gryffindor table. He seated himself right at the end and began to shovel down food as fast as he could.

“Hullo there!” came a cheery voice next to his elbow.

Snape looked up as a blonde boy plonked himself down on the seat next to him. He was unfamiliar to Snape, yet he was far too large to be a first year.

“Oh!” the boy said extending a hand. “My name’s Philip Woodley! I was next up for Sorting after you, remember? I just transferred.”

Severus ignored the boy and hoped he would move away. He couldn’t remember seeing him at the Sorting, but then there had been more exchange students than usual this year. He was just about to resume eating when something large and wet landed on his plate. Much to his disgust, a large yellow toad was burrowing around in his mashed potato.

“Sorry about that!” came the cheery voice once more. “Thorn’s like that y’know, loves her mash.”

Severus fixed him with a steely glare.

“Here, Thorny, come on, girl, get out of the angry boy’s ‘taters,” Woodley coaxed, prodding the toad with his carrot.

Severus opened his mouth to say something cutting when the boy gave him a sudden wink. “I think she likes you, what did you say your name was? Scrape or something like that—”

“I didn’t say,” Severus cut in with barely-concealed rage, “—and its *Snape*, weren’t you listening to the Headmaster?”

“Oh, yes!” Woodley replied instantly, sending him an admiring look. “But I’m just terrible with names! Ha ha!”

Severus ignored him and pushed his toad-filled plate

away in distaste. He had just reached for a new one and was piling it up once more when Woodley clutched him violently.

“What is it?” he cried in alarm, all of the instincts of the forest kicking back into gear.

“Thorn did a trick!” cheered Woodley, picking up the fat toad and dancing it across the table.

“What *year* are you in?” Severus demanded, in his most withering tone.

“Fourth year!” whooped Woodley, flipping the alarmed toad, oblivious to the glare Severus was giving him.

“Yes, I can *tell*,” sneered Snape in distaste, specks of gravy flying everywhere.

“Maybe we’ll be in the same classes together?” said Woodley, turning his attention back to Severus.

“I am in fifth year,” Severus said snootily. “We don’t associate with younger years.”

“Are you really?” asked the other boy. “But what about the other missing girl? She’s a fourth year – I know because we’re a girl short and—”

“Well, she’s more mature than most of *your* year,” cut in Snape with a scowl, looking at Woodley as if he was something gooey in the bottom of one of his cauldrons.

To his annoyance, the twinkling boy just gave a wink and nudged him hard in the ribs. “Mature, eh? Know what you mean, she looks like she’s got a temper though! Say no more!”

“*Look*, will you just *leave me alone*?” Snape replied dangerously, grinding his teeth.

“No need to get your robes in a twist, Scrapey old boy! Here, I’ll give you a hold of Thorn if you—”

But at that moment Snape gave a strangled roar and threw himself on the alarmed Mr Woodley and started pummeling him with his juice goblet.

“GO IT, WOODLEY!” came a roar.

“SNAPE, SNAPE!” came an answering chant.

“Severus! No!” screamed the unmistakable voice of Ginny Weasley.

“C’ARN, WOODO!”

“Watch it, Pip!”

“SLAUGHTER HIM, SEVERUS!”

The last cheering bellow had come from the other side of the room, where Draco Malfoy was dancing around on the Slytherin table, his eyes bright and his goblet raised to the ceiling.

“Philip Woodley, SEVERUS SNAPE!” came a shout from the staff table.

The two scuffling boys leapt to their feet and stared in horror. Minerva McGonagall descended towards them like a very tall and thin, enraged bull ant.

“DETENTION!” she roared, and seized them both by the ears and pulled them out of the Great Hall.

A storm of clapping rose from the table as the two flushing boys were yanked past. Philip managed to throw his toad to another fourth year before he went, and soon they were away from the noise and were heading upstairs along an old dusty corridor.

“Let go of me!” Snape hissed, outraged and humiliated by being pulled away by his own colleague.

“You should be setting an example, *Mr Snape*,” McGonagall grated, twisting his ear harder.

“Oh no,” groaned Woodley. “Not the Trophy Room...”

McGonagall stopped outside a door and looked sharply at Philip.

“Don’t tell me you’ve had a detention already, Mr Woodley?” she asked disbelievingly.

From the look of Woodley’s crestfallen face, it seemed he had.

“Now, I will be calling Filch to ensure he looks over you while you work,” McGonagall said sternly, shoving the two boys into the Hogwarts Trophy Room. “There are the cleaning tools in the corner, and there’s no point using

magic in here as your wands will refuse to work.”

And with that, the still-outraged witch slammed the door while the two boys moaned in complaint.

After a slight pause, Woodley rubbed his cheek. “That’s quite a punch you pack there, Scrape.”

Severus felt like desperately punching him again, but restrained himself and took to glaring at him instead.

He looked rather like Draco, Snape noticed, picking up a wet rag and moving to a trophy. He had the same blonde hair, although it was brighter and thicker, and the same pointed face. In fact, if he wasn’t always grinning like an idiot and his eyes were a cold grey instead of a twinkling green, they’d make a strange match.

Woodley looked up and caught Snape’s eye. “All right?” he said good-naturedly, as if they hadn’t been bashing each other ten minutes ago.

Severus scowled in response and went back to cleaning his trophy. To his surprise, it was already sparkling clean, as were nearly all of the rest. He looked at the other boy.

“Yeah.” Woodley grinned. “I cleaned most of ‘em two nights ago. That Squelch really breathes down your neck...”

Severus grunted. The stupid boy must be talking about Filch.

“What did you do to get the detention?” he asked grumpily, throwing his rag back and slumping against the wall.

“Oh, you know...” Woodley shrugged distractedly, finishing off the last of the trophies and perching lightly on the bench. “Got lost...”

Severus grunted once more. He couldn’t be bothered asking for the details.

“So tell me, what was it like out there in the woods?” asked Woodley wistfully, after a long pause.

Severus shrugged. *It had been the best time he’d had for ages.* “All right,” he said stiffly.

“I grew up in the city you know,” sighed the other boy.

Snape gave him a scathing look, hoping he'd take the hint that he didn't care.

“I was home-schooled,” Woodley went on, not noticing the other boy's sneer. “I didn't even know this place existed...”

“How could you not?” Snape replied rather scornfully. “Every wizard in Britain gets a Hogwarts letter when they reach eleven, why didn't you get one?”

Woodley shrugged lightly, looking embarrassed. He was just about to reply when the door burst open and Filch stomped nastily in.

“Aha! Not working are we?” he accused, glaring at the two boys.

“We're finished!” replied Woodley cheerfully, giving him a whack on the shoulder and slipping past him.

“See you, Argus,” Snape said vaguely, and also pushed past.

Filch stared disbelievingly around at the sparkling trophies. “Cheeky stinkers,” he muttered under his breath, his plan of yelling at the boys for the rest of the evening vanishing into nothing.

Severus was welcomed in the Gryffindor common room by a cheerful roar and numerous crackers. Swiftly backing out of the portrait hole, he decided to pay Dumbledore a visit instead. He still had to fill him in on the details of the Forbidden Forest that he couldn't discuss in front of Draco and Ginny. Much to his confusion he found the office empty, and finally found Dumbledore dancing merrily with the rest of the teachers in the staffroom.

Severus left in great disgust, ignoring the invitation to stay. He walked back down to his old quarters, sitting himself down in his armchair by the fire. Although it felt

good to be back amongst his old things, the stark, chilly atmosphere familiar and comforting, he still felt restless. He poured himself a glass of Firewhiskey to relax, and soon found himself dozing.

It was about midnight when Snape decided to creep back to his dormitory to retire. However, whenever he tried to close his eyes, vivid images of their time spent in the forest would replay in his mind.

His thoughts eventually drifted to the Woodley boy. During the scuffle he had looked quickly up when he'd heard Draco's voice cheering him on. Draco hadn't looked at all like the sneering boy who'd once been his student, his face full of mirth and his hair tousled about.

Then Draco had been pulled down by that new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Snape smiled to himself as he remember her chasing him around the Hogwarts grounds, only to grab a pile of robes with Dumbledore's name on them. It seemed so long ago now. Everything before the forest seemed so distant and vague, but he could still remember those flashing grey eyes as she had struggled to hold him down. He would be looking forward to Defence Against the Dark Arts this year.

And with that last thought in his mind, Severus Snape fell asleep with a slight smile playing on his thin lips.

Chapter Five

~ In which Gryffindor's Keeper is quite a catch ~

Draco Malfoy paced in front of the smouldering fire in the Slytherin common room. He had woken early in the morning feeling restless. It was strange lying in a bed of silky sheets, with the sound of Crabbe and Goyle snoring nearby. He had become accustomed to Severus regularly digging him in the ribs and Ginny's laughter. It had also felt strange having no one next to him while he was sleeping, no one kicking him absent-mindedly in their sleep, drifting off to the hum of crickets and various hoots...

Draco shook himself; he had to pull himself together. He was finally back, back to civilisation. So why did he feel so uncomfortable?

He wondered what Severus was doing; he would most certainly be up. Too bad he was in Gryffindor.

Draco scowled.

If only he was in Slytherin.

"Oh, hullo," came a voice behind Severus Snape. "Thought I'd find you here."

Severus got out of the armchair and turned to face a fully dressed Ginny Weasley. "Used to waking up early?" he asked.

"Yeah," she answered. "Come for a walk?"

Severus gazed from the common room window, towards the shimmering lake. "All right."

"Where the hell is she, Harry?" gritted Ron, looking up and down the Gryffindor breakfast table.

"I'm sure she's all right," replied Harry, but looking

slightly worried himself.

“Calm down, Ron. I asked the girls in her dormitory, they said she just got up early,” said Hermione, buttering a piece of toast and coaxing Ron with it.

“Thanks,” he said absent-mindedly, taking the piece of toast and biting it savagely. “But she better not be with that rat, Malfoy.”

“No problem,” Harry said cheerfully. “Ferret-features has been at his table for ages.”

Seeming to read their minds, Draco Malfoy looked up from his scrambled eggs and scowled at the three best friends. But his scowl changed abruptly as two entering figures greeted him.

“All right, Draco?” Severus said amicably, pulling up a chair.

Ginny smiled vaguely at him, looking around the hall and spotting Harry and the others. “Meet you later,” she called, walking over to the Gryffindor table.

“Where’d you go?” Draco asked, glancing at Ginny’s retreating figure with a frown.

“Walk,” Severus replied through a mouthful of bacon. “Did you wake up early too?”

“Yeah, as you can see, no one else does.” Draco motioned around the empty Slytherin table.

“Meet you tomorrow morning then, six.”

“What? Trying to train us up again or something?”

Severus laughed. “If you want.”

Draco snorted. “What’re you doing for the weekend?” he asked, rolling Severus a tomato.

“What are you doing?” Severus asked back, feeling slightly awkward.

“Well, I was thinking of practising for Quidditch. The first match of the season is only a couple of months away...”

“Seeker must be tough,” Severus said absent-mindedly, chopping up the tomato.

“How’d you know I was Seeker?”

Snape jerked in his seat. “Oh, yeah, er...word gets around...”

“Oh,” said Draco, looking slightly gratified. “So... how about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, aren’t you going to try out for—” Draco’s face slightly twisted, “—Gryffindor’s team?”

Severus shuddered. “Not bloody likely.”

This seemed to have cheered Draco up greatly, and he proposed that they both go flying anyway. Severus agreed and they left the hall, Ginny giving them a slightly hurt look when they passed silently by.

“What’s up, Gin?” Harry asked, watching her expression.

But the chatter of about fifty students, all entering the hall at once, drowned Ginny out. Hermione laughed at her mystified look.

“The exchange students, they’re all used to getting up at the same time.”

“Yeah, you must have loads in your year, Ginny,” said Ron, spearing a piece of bacon.

“Most of them are from Beauxbatons,” Hermione rattled off, “but there are a few from Durmstrang—”

“Oh really?” Ginny winked at Hermione, making her blush scarlet.

“Victor’s left school already,” she muttered.

“So, er, about that Transfiguration essay,” Harry interjected hastily, seeing Ron glaring at Hermione and mashing his eggs rather violently.

Hermione glared back at Ron but said snootily, “Well, I’ll be working in the library this evening if you want my help, Harry. I shall certainly expect to see you there, Ron.”

“Washat-men-ta-mean?” Ron asked angrily, through a mouthful of eggs.

Harry caught Ginny's eye and grinned. Ginny giggled back and felt the sudden urge to jump up and down in joy. It felt good to be back.

"Hey, not bad, Severus," Draco commented, as the larger boy swooped through the air and caught the small golf ball.

"Yeah, I know," Severus replied shamelessly, throwing the ball in the air and giving it a whack with the broomstick.

Draco snorted and started throwing the balls up at great speed. "Try and hit all these back then!"

Severus smirked to himself and gripped Draco's broom tightly. He was still riding the thrill of discovering his feline balance and grace extended to flying. Before his transformation about a month ago, he'd been awkward and clumsy on a broom. Now these slow-moving golf balls were no match at all.

Draco dived to the ground with a yell as each small white ball hurtled back to the ground. He peeked up and saw Severus moving like lightning, dodging between some, hitting some back up higher, somersaulting, swinging off the broom with one hand and kicking them, it was endless. Draco stared at him open-mouthed and got to his feet.

"I thought you said you were rubbish!" exclaimed Draco indignantly, before Severus dove straight down at him with a worried yell. "ARGH!" Draco yelled, getting shoved to the ground with his broomstick in his side.

He glanced sideways and saw Severus sail through the air and land nimbly on his feet. "WHAT'D YOU DO THAT FOR?"

Snape tried to stifle a laugh but failed miserably and burst out uncontrollably. "Your face!" he gasped between guffaws. "You should've seen your—"

But at that moment Draco gave a yell and tackled him; and they were soon scuffling on the ground.

“BOYS!” called a rapidly approaching voice.

Draco and Severus got up quickly and tried to flatten their already perfect hair.

“Why, it’s you!” the voice exclaimed from behind them.

Both boys turned to face the speaker slowly. It was the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.

“You were the one that was fighting before!” Professor Garwood accused, pointing a slender wand at Severus.

Snape and Draco looked at each other.

“Oh, no, I wasn’t,” Snape assured, shaking his head in what he thought was a convincing way.

“Oh, no, he wasn’t,” Draco smirked, nodding his head vigorously.

Garwood raised her eyebrows and gave them a stern stare.

“All right...it was me, er...my name’s Ron Weasley,” Snape added quickly.

Draco sniggered violently and Severus glared at him.

“Well, Mr *Weasley*, I see the fighting was not serious, just don’t do it again,” she said dryly, turning her heel and walking towards the broom shed.

Severus pulled a face and Draco laughed. “Ha, lucky she didn’t—”

But Draco was cut off as the new Professor stopped and turned to face them once more.

“I shall see you in class, Mr Malfoy,” she said coolly, “and you Mr Snape,” she added.

And so, with her mouth twitching slightly, the Professor resumed her stride and was soon far away.

“Great... I thought we’d get Weasley a detention...” Draco grumbled, as they also moved back to the castle.

Snape shrugged in response. “D’you think she’ll be a good Dark Arts teacher?” he asked after a pause.

Draco grinned. “Not if I can help it!” he declared,

swinging his Nimbus over his shoulder.

“Yeah, me too,” Snape gleamed, a not very nice thought forming in his mind. If the current Professor was no good at her job... Dumbledore would have to take him next year...

“Hey, have you looked at your timetable yet?”

“What?” Snape replied, coming back to reality. “Er...no.”

“We’ve got Potions with Dumbledore now! And it’s just Slytherins, I mean, we’re not with Gryffindors anymore!”

“Really?” said Snape, stepping through the wide doors of the Entrance Hall. “That’s rubbish. Are we in any classes together?”

“Yeah, Defence. But, hey! Where is your uncle anyway? Does he know you got back all right and—”

“SNAPE!”

“SNAPEY, OLD BOY!”

Draco stopped in mid-sentence and scowled at the two approaching seventh years. Fred and George Weasley were cascading down the stairs as fast as they could, running straight through a disgruntled ghost.

“Why didn’t you tell us?!”

“It was amazing!”

“Brilliant!”

“Absolutely Spiffing!”

“Positively corking!”

Snape looked at them uncertainly and started to back away.

“We saw you!” they reassured, slapping him on the back.

“Looked out the window—”

“Saw you swooping and diving—”

“Weaving and whacking—”

“Just what we need!”

“How about it?”

“What?” replied Severus, frowning at them.

“Good on you, Snapey!”

“*Knew* you had it in you!”

“WELCOME TO THE TEAM!” they chorused, and ran off cheering.

“Team?” he muttered to Draco. “What in...? Oh no...oh no, wait!”

Draco gave a snort of laughter. “Your face!” he cried mockingly. “You should see your face!” Draco shoved him in front of a shiny suit of armour.

Severus stared at his reflection. A look of shock, horror and disgust was staring back at him.

“Say hullo to Gryffindor’s new Keeper,” Draco declared, shaking his head in half-irritation, half-admiration.

“This is stupid,” said Snape, flushing slightly.

Draco’s mocking smirk faded somewhat. “I guess we can’t train together then.”

“Don’t be stupid, Draco,” scoffed Snape. “You need all the help you can get.”

Draco looked at him indignantly then saw his mouth twitch. “Sod off, will you,” he muttered half-heartedly. “Let’s go get some lunch.”

“Is this seat taken?”

Philip Woodley looked up and saw a small and familiar looking redhead standing next to him.

“Go ahead!” he replied with a smile, sweeping the desk clear.

Ginny Weasley sat down with a polite thank-you and set out her books. “There’re a lot of people in the library for a Sunday,” she said, looking around at the full tables.

“Yeah, mostly all the new students, very devoted to their studies, see?”

Ginny looked at the boy’s piece of parchment and laughed. “That’s a nice toad.”

“It’s a dragon,” he said cheerily, holding up his drawing. Ginny looked aghast. “Oh! Yes! I see it now! Must’ve just been—”

But she soon stopped when she saw his eyes twinkling mischievously back at her. Ginny gave a squeal of laughter and hit him lightly. Her smile faded when Madam Pince and several students gave her disapproving looks.

“I’m Philip Woodley,” the boy winked at her, making her smile again.

“And I’m—”

“Ginny Weasley!” he interrupted. “O’course I know who *you* are!”

This earned him a few shushes from the same group of disapproving students. Ginny grinned at him, feeling a sudden giggle coming on.

“I’ve already met your chum, Scrape,” he continued. “Nice lad, tad unstable.”

Ginny straightened her face. No wonder if Woodley was calling him *Scrape*. She made a mental note to call him that next time she saw him. Come to think of it, she had come here looking for them; they really should be trying to catch up on their missed schoolwork on their weekends.

With a sudden jolt she recognised the boy.

“Why, you were the one fighting with Severus!” she exclaimed. “Did he hurt you?”

Woodley grinned and waved it aside. “Nah, I’m just glad we didn’t lose any house points. Plus, I think it was worth the super welcome we received when we got back.”

Ginny laughed. “You’re in Gryffindor then? I must’ve missed you at the party last night. What year are you?”

“Fabulous fourth,” he smiled. “I can help you with some of that if you like.”

Woodley motioned to Ginny’s big pile of books. Ginny considered the offer. She could see Severus and Draco

tomorrow morning, and Harry and the others tonight...

“And did I mention I’m exceptionally brilliant in class?” he added merrily, his eyes twinkling.

“All right,” Ginny smiled at him, grabbing her Ancient Runes textbook. *And did I mention you’re awfully cute?*

Severus got out of bed and stretched. It was Monday morning and he would be attending fifth year classes for the first time this year. He dressed quickly and realised that he hadn’t even looked at his timetable yet. Pulling out a large, thick parchment from his drawer, Snape glanced at it carelessly.

Dumbledore had put him down for Muggle Studies and Care of Magical Creatures!

Severus shuddered.

He didn’t want to go anywhere near Hagrid’s little ‘pets’, thank you very much. And Muggle studies! He didn’t want to learn about annoying, prying Muggles with all of their ridiculous gadgets. Why had Dumbledore put him down for these subjects when he hadn’t even done them the first time?

Thankfully, those seemed to be the only elective subjects he was taking. He noticed that Dumbledore was indeed still teaching Potions. Snape wondered how the search for a substitute teacher was going, surely Dumbledore didn’t expect to be teaching them *all* year.

Severus looked across at his bedside clock and started down the stairs in a hurry. He, Draco, and Ginny had promised to meet every morning for duelling practice, starting today. He wondered if he was technically allowed to do this... but he’d already started teaching them in the forest, and he couldn’t just leave it half-finished. Also, he was starting to feel restless again. He really needed the exercise...

“There you are!” Ginny said crossly, as he entered the

common room. “We’re supposed to be down there by now!”

Severus put his thoughts on hold, following an impatient Ginny out of the portrait hole to pad quickly down the stairs.

“It’s not like Hagrid to be late, Harry,” said Hermione worriedly, looking around the oval.

Harry glanced in the direction of his hut but Ron just shrugged.

“We saw him yesterday, remember? Probably just slept in.”

Hermione was about to say something when she stopped and stared reprovingly at two smirking figures that had just arrived.

“Snape! You’re late! And as a Prefect—”

“*You’re* a Prefect, Granger?” cut in Draco with a sneer. “And I thought Gryffindor couldn’t sink any lower.”

Ron went purple and seized his wand.

“No, Ron, don’t,” cut in a quiet voice. “It’s *Slytherin* that’s wallowing in the mud.”

A threatening murmur passed over the curiously watching Slytherins, and Crabbe and Goyle suddenly stationed themselves around their sneering captain.

“I’d watch how you speak to her, Malfoy,” Harry Potter continued. “You wouldn’t want your reputation as a Prefect to be tarnished.”

Draco stared at the cool wizard before him, a little silver “P” glinting on his robes. He should’ve known Potter would be made a Prefect also.

“Going to grass on him, Potter?” sneered Snape, surprising everyone there.

Harry looked momentarily startled at being addressed like this from a fellow Gryffindor. “Don’t be stupid,” he replied shortly. “Why would I waste my time—”

But at that moment a huge bellow erupted from behind Hagrid's hut. Simultaneously, a shriek from the Slytherins broke out as Pansy Parkinson lunged at Parvati Patil, clawing at her face. Apparently Parvati and Lavender had been making pug-faces at her while Draco and Harry were talking. Snape watched with amusement until another bellow from behind Hagrid's cottage snatched his attention away. He looked up and saw he wasn't the only one no longer watching the fight; Harry, Ron and Hermione were clustered together, discussing something in low voices.

"Hagrid's in trouble..."

"Well, aren't we going to..."

"What about them...?"

"What are we studying again?"

"Wyverns," answered Severus, striding towards them with a sneer on his face.

"Wyverns?" exclaimed Ron.

"That's what I said," said Snape, wrinkling his nose in irritation. "Aren't you going to be all saintly and run off to rescue him?"

"I've read about wyverns." Hermione ignored Snape's question, her thin eyebrows rising. "Aren't they a sort of dragon?"

"Yeah, titchy little things, but heaps vicious." Ron shuddered.

"We can handle them," Harry said determinedly, nodding at Ron and Hermione.

"You've got to be joking," Draco scoffed, appearing at Snape's side. "*You* two? Maybe *Granger* can smother them to death in that gigantic animal she's got growing off her head." He shot a disdainful look at Hermione's bushy locks.

But a third bellow from behind the hut ceased any retaliation on the Gryffindors' behalf. So, with one last furious look, Harry, Ron and Hermione sprinted off and

disappeared behind Hagrid's cottage.

"Aren't you going to help Pansy?" Severus asked.

"Nah," Draco replied smirking. "She's having the time of her life."

And it seemed this was true, as Pansy was clearly getting the upper hand. (This could have been due to Millicent Bulstrode standing over Parvati and secretly kicking her when no one was looking.)

"What's with you?" Draco asked suddenly, staring at the peculiar expression on Snape's face.

"I told Hagrid not to teach us wyverns until next term," he growled oddly, feeling a sudden burst of anger.

"Yeah, well, the big oaf's done this kind of thing before, who cares?"

Severus gritted his teeth and tried to push aside the memories of working in the garden with Hagrid, fixing paths with Hagrid, having tea with Hagrid...

"Those idiots will just botch it up even more," he snarled, and strode quickly over to the small hut.

Draco yelled after him, "What? What are you doing? Don't tell me—"

"Yes," Snape cut in. "I'm going to go help the big oaf."

And with black robes billowing behind him, along with the angriest expression on his face imaginable, Severus Snape disappeared behind the hut.

Draco's mouth fell open. He hesitated for a moment, annoyed at himself for even considering going after him.

"He's a bad influence on me," he muttered darkly to himself then marched towards the hut.

Severus rounded the corner and stopped dead at what he saw.

There were about twenty wyverns flying about, dive-bombing Hagrid and the three students helping him. Ron Weasley was holding a squirming wyvern tightly in his arms while several others slashed at him as they swooped past. Harry had pinned one down, but three others were

biting at his back while a fourth flew away with his wand. Hermione had lost her cool completely, stunning every creature in sight and screaming at a small wyvern tangled in her hair. In the centre of the chaos was very large and doleful-looking Hagrid with four wyverns under each arm, trying to force them into some kind of crate.

“I’m going to regret this,” Severus thought fiercely, then ran into the throng. He was incredibly angry at that moment, angry that Hagrid hadn’t taken his advice, angry that Potter and friends were smug enough to think they actually stood a chance, angry at Draco for scoffing at him, but most of all he was angry at himself. He was angry for even caring that Hagrid would get in trouble, that Potter and his friends would get seriously injured, and that some Slytherin student twenty years younger than him wasn’t by his side, fighting with him.

“*STUPEFY!*” he bellowed. “*STUPEFY! STUPEFY! STUPEFY!*”

The wyverns dropped in surprise at the furious boy hurling jets of light every direction, giving Hagrid and the others a chance to quickly cram them into the crate.

“*Stupefy!*” said a voice at Snape’s side, and the last wyvern dropped to the ground. Draco slipped his wand back inside his robes and said lazily, “Don’t know what all the fuss was about.”

“You’re here,” said Snape, still gasping and red in the face.

“Good thing, too,” Draco said with a bemused expression. “What would you have done without me?”

Severus was about to reply when something small hurled itself at him, letting out a terrific wowl.

“What the—?” cried Draco.

“*Oreo...*” Severus breathed, staring at the tiny, dirty, half-starved feline that was trying to burrow itself into his robes.

Draco came closer and frowned at the messy bundle of

fur in Snape's arms. "Isn't that the cat that attacked me?"

"You were going to curse me, remember?" replied Snape, stroking the kitten grudgingly.

"Well, you insulted me," muttered Draco, still looking darkly at the purring cat.

The two boys fell silent as a big shaggy figure descended towards them.

"Er...thanks abou' that, Sev," said Hagrid gruffly.

Severus looked around and saw that Harry, Ron and Hermione had packed away the last of the wyverns and were staring at them with incredulity.

Draco scowled back at them and put his nose in the air. "Great lesson *this* has been," he sneered, and marched off. "See you, *Sev.*"

"Er... how abou' you four gettin' the res' of the lesson off, eh?" Hagrid said hastily. "Prepare for yer next class maybe."

"Oh no! We *couldn't*—" began Hermione.

"Come on, Hermione, Ron's bleeding," cut in Harry, nudging Ron hard in the ribs.

"What?" said Ron. "Oh! Yes! Er...Ouch...my finger." Ron gave Hermione a pitying look and held up a finger with a tiny cut on it.

"You are *not*—" Hermione started, but Ron and Harry grabbed her arms and marched away muttering something about, 'never any fun'.

Hagrid nodded at Snape still cradling the purring kitten in his arms.

"I was goin' to tell yeh," he said. "Poor little thing's been runnin' wild ever since yeh disappeared. Ran away into the Forbidden Forest five days ago. Didn't think we'd see her again."

Snape nodded thoughtfully to Hagrid then started back to the castle.

"Thanks again, Sev!" called Hagrid after him and hurried back to the class.

Severus didn't cringe at the nickname as he usually did. He held Oreo carefully in his arms and examined her matted fur.

"You need a good soaking, you know that," he murmured to her and she nuzzled her nose deeper against his arm.

Severus allowed himself to smile as he thought about Harry, Ron and Hermione yelling and screaming as they were attacked by wyverns. For a bunch of smug Gryffindors, they'd looked incredibly clueless and hopelessly clumsy. But Severus had been quite clumsy himself the first time he was a teenager. He suddenly realised how quickly he had begun to take his extreme fitness and stamina for granted. He had abilities no normal fifteen-year-old boy had ever had. His strength to jump abnormally high, to land so lightly on his feet, to move with wondrous precision and silent grace, with senses tuned to even the slightest twitch, sound or smell, not to mention his cool, feline confidence, were the only reasons he had made it through the Forbidden Forest alive, and definitely why he'd been made Gryffindor's Keeper.

Oreo mewed and dug her claws ever so lightly into his arm, as if telling him to just accept it and move on.

Severus made a face. "What do you know?"

He reached the main doors and pushed them open, stepping over a lightning-quick foot that was thrust into his path.

"Hullo," said the owner of the foot.

"Hullo, Draco," responded Snape automatically, walking on. "How did you escape?"

Draco ran to catch up. "Easy," he said with a shrug. "What other electives d'you do?"

Severus thought back to his timetable. "Muggle Studies."

"You do *Muggle Studies*?" said Draco, unable to

suppress a sneer.

Snape grunted and scowled. The two fifth years walked on in silence.

“We have a free period after lunch,” stated Snape, aimlessly.

Draco considered. “Meet you in the library,” he said hesitantly.

“All right, what did Ginny say she had?”

The young Slytherin shrugged. “Dunno, wasn’t listening.” He grinned.

“Neither was I.” Snape grinned back. “She was going on about some boy—”

“With flowing, golden locks—”

“Beautifully porcelain skin—”

“Long, fluttering eyelashes—”

“Crimson lips, more perfect than a rosebud—”

The two boys broke into snorts of laughter.

“Well, at least she’s over *Potter*,” Draco said eventually, shaking his head in disgust and following Severus into a boys’ bathroom.

Severus said nothing but looked at Draco thoughtfully, remembering the look on Ginny’s face whenever she saw ‘The Great Harry Potter’. He doubted whether her foolish infatuation could ever be cured, especially if Potter started to appreciate those looks she gave him.

“Are you all right?” Draco asked curiously. “You look strange.”

“Yeah,” replied Snape, shaking his head with a frown.

“Just... help me wash Oreo, will you?”

Draco smirked and pulled out his wand, directing a torrent of water straight at the alarmed feline. “My pleasure.”

“I am pleased to announce that we will be studying my favourite topic this term, ‘Muggle Theatre’.”

There was a half-hearted cheer from the few students awake, jerking some of the sleeping ones from their daydreams. The Muggle Studies teacher, a well-meaning young man called Professor Mimble, started to pace the room, encouraged by the unusual level of enthusiasm.

“Now, as part of your assessment, we will be—” But at that moment a loud snore interrupted the Professor’s speech. “MISS LANE!”

A pretty Hufflepuff girl jerked awake.

“Why does everyone always fall asleep in *my* class?” the Professor muttered to himself.

“Oh, but sir, we don’t!” said a serious Ravenclaw in the front row.

“Yes, you’re not nearly as boring as Professor Binns,” said Lane, her voice trailing away as she realised she had said the wrong thing.

Ginny stifled a giggle and poked the sleeping boy next to her. “Pip! Woodley!” she whispered. “You’d better wake up. I think Mimble’s going to crack!”

Woodley sat up and yawned loudly.

Mimble waited for him to finish, his left eye twitching furiously. “Now, as I was saying, part of your assessment this year will involve putting on a Muggle play for the school to attend —”

“BRILLIANT, SIR!” roared Philip Woodley merrily, banging his desk suddenly and making everyone jump. “I think a Muggle play would be a *smashing* idea!”

“Er...Good.” Mimble blinked, then continued more enthusiastically. “Yes, good! Good! Of course we have to figure out exactly which one to do. There’s a particularly interesting one that originated in North Scotland, or was it Ireland? Anyway, it’s been around since the 1700’s or was it the 1600’s? Come to think of it, I think it was somewhere in between...”

But the class had once again fallen into a daze, with only Ginny and Philip Woodley whispering and silently

laughing every now and then.

“Severus! Draco!”

Both boys looked up and saw Ginny waving furiously from down the corridor. She soon caught up and started chatting eagerly about some kind of vampire squirrel.

“Slow down!” said Snape with mild bemusement.

“Yeah, and tone it down a little,” added Draco, rubbing his ears.

But Ginny was too wound up to retaliate. “Have either of you had Defence Against the Dark Arts yet?”

Draco and Severus looked at each other.

“Before lunch I had Herbology.”

“And I had Charms, why?”

“Professor Garwood’s starting a Duelling club!”

“And...?”

“We should join!” Ginny burst out, practically skipping into the library and earning an icy stare from Madam Pince.

Snape wrinkled up his nose. “Whatever for?”

“We’re already getting duelling practice from Severus anyway,” Draco pointed out, sprawling into a chair.

“Yes, but, it’ll be *fun*,” coaxed Ginny, spreading out her books and taking a seat.

“You just want to show off,” said Snape amused, crossing his arms.

“I do *not*—” began Ginny defensively.

“Hey, good idea!” nodded Draco suddenly. “I bet stinking Potter and Weasley’ll join—other Weasley,” he added hastily, at Ginny’s expression.

“If you want then,” Snape shrugged, finally sitting down.

“Can’t wait to see the look on their faces...” Draco’s eyes gleamed and he twirled his wand slowly.

Ginny looked slightly alarmed at his expression. “Just

don't go overboard, you two..."

"Oh, we wouldn't dream of it, would we, young Malfoy?" drawled Severus, giving a rather nasty smile and looking sidelong at the gleeful Slytherin.

Young Malfoy sniggered.

"At least there's no Unforgivable Curses, thank goodness," murmured Ginny, thinking back to their encounters in the Forbidden Forest.

"I hope you didn't tell anyone about those," Severus growled.

"Yeah, well, I'm just glad no one asked why we didn't just hang around and wait for the Aurors, instead of running away into the forest," put in Draco. "Some people are pretty thick though—"

But at that moment a huge giggle interrupted his words, which seemed to be coming from Ginny's direction.

"What on earth—?"

The two boys stared at the idiotically grinning Ginny and raised their eyebrows.

"Over there," Ginny motioned, waving discreetly to a blonde boy who had just sat down a few tables away. "That's who I was talking about this morning."

Draco and Severus swivelled their heads to glance across the room at Philip Woodley.

"Don't look!" hissed Ginny, whacking them over the shoulders. "Could you be any more *obvious*?"

"Oh! Right! Sorry," Draco spluttered, trying to keep a straight face, but mouthing to Severus. "*Lips like a rosebud.*"

Severus snorted with laughter, and Woodley looked their direction. He saw Ginny, grinned and gave her a wink. Ginny grinned back and gave a sort of idiotic wave. Draco and Severus coughed violently, only to have Ginny give them both a quelling look and grab their shoulders.

"I want you two to meet him," she said.

"I already have and I don't care to repeat the

experience,” said Severus.

“I don’t care. Come on!”

And with that, the two boys were pushed and shoved over to where Philip Woodley was quietly drawing. Woodley looked up and smiled merrily.

“Hullo, Gin, you too, Scrape,” he nodded, and looked inquiringly at Draco.

“*Scrape*,” beamed Draco to Severus. “Sev *Scrape*.”

“Er, this is Draco Malfoy,” Ginny said hastily. “We’re...er...we’ve been...er...he was stuck in the forest with us,” she finished off lamely.

“My name’s Philip Woodley,” the other boy said amicably, extending a hand.

But Draco froze, looking at Woodley with narrowed eyes. He looked from Ginny to Woodley with an expression of incredulity on his face. There was an uncomfortable silence and Ginny cleared her throat.

“My name’s *Snape*,” Severus said suddenly, making everyone jump. “You always seem to forget that... And I’m going for a walk. Coming, Draco?”

Draco tore his eyes away from Woodley.

“Yeah...you coming, Ginny?” he asked the redhead, giving her an odd look.

“All right,” Ginny hesitated, facing Woodley. “See you in—”

“Potions,” Woodley cut in, his eyes twinkling. “I’ll watch your books.”

Ginny grinned idiotically once more and ran to catch up.

“Watch out!” exclaimed Draco, annoyed as Ginny turned and ran full pelt into him.

“What is it?” she said uncertainly, walking in between them and glancing at Draco’s peculiar expression.

Draco paused and gave her another odd look. “He looks just like me,” he said shortly.

Severus snickered to himself, though wisely keeping quiet.

“Who?” said Ginny blankly, walking slower.

“That Woodley fellow!”

Ginny gave him an incredulous look and shrugged it off.

“No, he doesn’t.”

Draco stared at her disbelievingly and grabbed her shoulder. “He. Looks. *Exactly*. Like. Me!” Draco cried, gesturing at his face.

Ginny looked at his hand on her shoulder and frowned. Draco quickly removed it and gave her an insufferable look.

“No, he doesn’t,” she repeated, ignoring the look of pure infuriation she was being given.

“You are so *stupid*,” Draco breathed, unable to say anything else.

“*You* are quite *mad*,” Ginny replied snootily, resuming her march. “You’re probably just wishing that you didn’t have to look in the mirror every morning and stare at the face of a retarded Slytherin.”

“Oh yes! Keep talking!” Draco cut in angrily, gesturing rudely at her back. “Perhaps *one* day you’ll say something intelligent.”

Ginny whirled and glared. “Oh, that’s rich, coming from you!” she yelled. “Every second thing you say is something utterly *stupid*! If you’d only bothered to *talk* to Philip, you’d see that—”

“I didn’t need to!” Draco yelled back, also losing his temper. “I’m not *blind*! I know what I saw! If you’re too bloody thick to see it and not even *listen* to what I’m *saying*—”

“But what you’re saying is *rot*!” exclaimed Ginny. “Why don’t *you* just shut up and listen! Philip’s got warm, *green* eyes for one; he has a warm, *real* smile, a warm, *charming* voice, and a permanent, *warm* expression on his—”

“PARDON ME!” interjected Draco furiously. “But you’ve obviously mistaken me for someone who gives a

damn!”

Ginny gave an inarticulate yell of rage, turned her heel, and marched in another direction. Draco clenched his fists and whirled on Severus.

“WHAT ARE YOU SMIRKING AT?” he snarled.

Snape looked taken aback. “What? Oh! Nothing! Nothing at all...”

“GOOD!” snarled Draco, and strode outside into the courtyard.

Snape raised his eyebrows and tried his best not to look amused. “Hey, *I* think you have the voice of an angel,” he called out.

Draco swore loudly in response and pulled out his wand, zapping one of the hedges to pieces.

Draco’s stormy mood continued until they reached Defence Against the Dark Arts.

“Boys! You’re late! I’ll take points off next time!” said Professor Garwood sternly.

Snape ignored her and sat down but Draco looked up and glared at the Defence Professor sullenly. “We couldn’t find the stupid classroom. The Slytherins are used to having this subject in another room, so why are we stuck with these *stinking Gryffindors* in *here*?”

His retort was met with silence but then all of a sudden a loud angry babble of voices broke out.

“WE DIDN’T WANT TO BE STUCK WITH YOU ROTTERS!”

“HEY, YOU’RE LUCKY WE’RE IN *HERE*!”

“WHAT THE *HELL* IS YOUR PROBLEM?”

“YOUR *FACE*!”

“QUIET!” roared Garwood.

The voices stopped abruptly and everyone looked at the new teacher.

“As I told the class last week, Mr Malfoy, you are being

combined in my class as Professor Dumbledore wishes to teach only one house at a time in Potions,” Professor Garwood said calmly. “So we had better treat each other with respect or I will be giving out detentions, understood?”

There was a sullen murmur and a few grunts in ascent. Draco sat next to Severus, ignoring the annoyed looks from both houses.

At that moment a bespectacled boy with messy black hair entered the classroom.

“Mr Potter! Not you too? What’s your excuse?” the Professor said exasperated.

“Er...” Harry glanced at his friends and Severus could’ve sworn that he had shot a guilty look at *him*.

“Well, moving along!” Garwood said briskly. “Now, can anyone name one of the Beasts of Terror?” Garwood paused as she looked around the silent classroom. “Or was it only Miss Granger who did her background reading as usual?”

The Professor smiled at the bushy-haired girl and looked around questioningly. Snape turned around and scowled at Hermione’s raised arm. With a sneer on his face he raised his own stiffly.

“Mr. Snape?” said the Professor surprised. “But I don’t expect you to know the answer, especially since you’re—”

“Hellhounds,” cut in Snape coldly. “Granger isn’t the only one with half a brain.”

There was an angry buzz once more and a few grins amongst the Slytherins.

“Thank you for that entirely pointless comment, Snape,” replied Garwood dryly, holding up her hands for silence. “And Hellhounds are indeed one of the most feared Beasts of Terror. Does anyone know how they became to be famous?”

“They’re famous?” mouthed Dean Thomas to Seamus Finnigan, who had turned slightly green.

“Hellhounds were used during the Dark Lord’s reign to hunt down the weaker wizards,” answered a Slytherin, giving the Gryffindors a scornful look. “The ones that weren’t worth the Death Eaters’ time.”

Professor Garwood shuddered. “Thank you, Mr Zabini. They were bred to cause panic among the masses, killers of the weak and innocent. They were supposed to have disappeared alongside their master, but recent events have proved otherwise.”

The class looked curiously at the Professor standing in front of them.

“Can anyone tell me what made the dogs so dangerous?”

Draco threw a sidelong look at Severus but the larger boy was too absorbed in his own thoughts to take notice.

“They had poisonous saliva,” called out Ron, looking up from Hermione’s notes.

Hermione glared at him and Harry suppressed a laugh as she moved them out of Ron’s reach but into Parvati’s.

“Yes, Mr Weasley,” replied the Professor gravely. “Whenever they went on their massacres at least one person was bitten. Very few people survived because of it.”

Garwood paused in front of Severus’s desk and raised an eyebrow. “Your classmate, Severus Snape, survived a deadly bite. Not only that, but along with Mr Malfoy here and Ginny Weasley, they managed to get away and cause a great deal of damage to them.”

The class looked at Severus with new respect, and the Slytherins gave a few smug cheers for Draco.

“In our next double lesson we’ll be able to observe them. Yes, they were secured when you came back,” added the Professor, at a surprised look from Severus. “They’re being kept here until the Ministry comes next week.”

There was a sudden buzz of excitement, and even the Slytherins were looking less bored than usual. Severus frowned. He could have sworn they were dead. And why

didn't the Headmaster inform him of this?

"We were attacked by *Hellhounds*?" said Draco slowly, the fact just sinking in.

"Too bad it didn't finish him off," muttered Ron, looking sideways at Harry.

Harry grinned and was about to reply when an indignant Hermione shushed him. "*Ginny* was with them, remember?"

Harry and Ron looked at each other guiltily.

"Can anyone name any other Beasts of Terror? Yes, Miss Patil?" interjected the teacher hastily, as Draco turned around to glare at Harry and Co.

Severus zoned out for the rest of the lesson, feeling increasingly restless and wishing he was outside, hacking his way through the dense undergrowth once more...

"Oi! Severus! Lesson's over, let's go!"

Severus blinked and the world came back into focus once more. He and Draco were the only ones left in the classroom, with the exception of the teacher.

"Finally," Snape muttered, gathering up his books.

"Mr Snape!"

Severus looked over his shoulder at the serious-looking Professor. He noticed, for the first time, that her hand had an ugly scar upon it. No wonder she'd been hopeless with a wand the night she chased him, she was injured. Wait, did she suspect?

"What is it?" he muttered.

Garwood looked at him appraisingly. "Are you going to sign up for the Duelling Club?"

Snape felt a strange boldness take over him. "Thought I might," he said offhandedly, running a hand through his short hair.

"You too, Mr Malfoy?" Garwood asked, turning her attention towards the young Slytherin.

Draco looked from Garwood to Snape and cleared his throat. "Maybe," he muttered, then in a louder voice.

“Let’s go, Severus.”

Severus gave him an irritated look but started walking after him anyway. A sudden impulse made him stop at the doorway however, and look curiously back at the seated professor. Garwood had started dictating so a self-writing quill and didn’t look up. Severus stood still for a while before walking quickly away.

“Finally!” Draco exclaimed, ceasing his glare at Harry with all his books on the floor, and motioning to Severus. “Come on. Potter and followers are giving me the willies, they’re everywhere I go.”

Severus grunted and the two boys walked in silence for a while when Draco gave a sudden snigger.

“What?” said Severus, looking around.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself!” mocked Draco, coming to a halt and shaking his head.

“What?” Severus repeated, coming back to reality.

“Oh...you know...”

Draco waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Severus stared at him blankly. Draco winked and gave him a sharp nudge with his elbow.

“WHAT?” roared Severus finally, losing his temper.

Draco grinned and shrugged. “You’ve got it bad for a teacher.”

“WHAT?!” roared Snape again, but this time in a different tone.

“Oh come on,” said Draco scornfully. “You’re potty over her; you should’ve seen your face when she asked if you were joining the Duelling Club!”

The young Slytherin flicked back his hair dramatically and said in a deep, dopey voice, “Oh yes, Professor! I’d love to join your Duelling club...”

He started to make kissing noises when Snape leapt at him with a snarl.

“BOYS!”

Snape and Draco leapt up guiltily, wishing that anyone

else but her had caught them.

“*What* did I tell you two about fighting?” Professor Garwood demanded, glaring at them in disbelief.

“Er...”

“Well, you see...”

“*No* excuses! Detention! Come with me to my office.”

Professor Garwood marched grimly before them, as both Gryffindor and Slytherin walked sheepishly behind.

Snape looked at Draco in annoyance. “This is your fault!” he hissed.

“You should be thanking me.” Draco smirked and waggled his eyebrows.

Snape gave an inarticulate growl of rage and stamped promptly on his foot. Luckily, they reached a small oak door before Draco could retaliate.

“Wait here,” Garwood said curtly, and shut the door firmly behind her.

Snape sighed and leant against the cool, stone wall. It wasn’t half as fun receiving detentions as it was giving them out.

“Phew, I’m glad that’s over,” exclaimed Ron Weasley, stretching out in front of the common room fire.

“Yeah, I know,” replied Harry, throwing himself into an armchair.

“But we’re still nowhere!” muttered Hermione, hugging her knees and staring broodingly into the fire.

“Hermione! We’ve watched him for forty-eight hours straight!” cried Ron irritably.

“Day *and* night.” Harry yawned, staring out the window into the gloomy darkness.

“Yes, but are you *sure*? *Absolutely sure* that Snape didn’t take some kind of potion—”

“*YES!*” yelled Ron, thumping the ground.

“We *did* have the invisibility cloak, Hermione,” said

Harry. "He had dozens of chances to take something, but he didn't."

"Besides," continued Ron, "—just what would he take? Youth potion? It doesn't have *that* much of an affect! Polyjuice Potion? *How* and *why* would he turn into someone who looks just like a younger version of himself?"

Hermione sighed and continued staring into the fire. "It's still fishy," she said stubbornly. "Professor Snape goes away, Snape junior comes here, and we haven't heard at all from Snape Senior..."

"I've written to Sirius," put in Harry in response. "And he agrees that it does seem dodgy, but he also told me that Snape was really scrawny and rubbish on a broom when he was at school."

"And why are you so worried, anyway?" complained Ron tiredly. "Dumbledore wouldn't have let him into the Tower if he was dangerous."

"I know but... I've just got a nasty feeling about him, that's all. I know he's friends with Ginny but he knows powerful dark magic, and he's—"

"Been sorted into Gryffindor," cut in Harry calmly, "—and we all know that Snape Senior's a Slytherin, through and through, so it's impossible that he could actually be Snape Junior."

Ron made a triumphant noise and leant back. Hermione sighed but then looked sharply at Harry.

"What is it?" she asked curiously, noticing the weary look on one of her best friends' face.

"It's Snape," replied Harry darkly. "I forgot to tell you...he's Gryffindor's new Keeper."

Upstairs, in the fifth year boys' dormitories, Severus Snape woke up with a start.

He could've sworn he'd heard a muffled bellow of indignation coming from the common room.

Chapter Six

~ In which there is much detention ~

Professor Dumbledore glanced up at the bustling students entering the classroom. Catching his eye, Severus stiffened and strode quickly to a seat that was furthest away from everyone else.

Rising to his feet, Dumbledore smiled at the sea of expectant faces before him. “Good morning, fifth years,” he said with a twinkle.

There was an eager chorus of ‘Good morning, Professor’ that Snape joined in with a grunt.

“Now I’m afraid I’ll only be continuing to teach Potions for a short while,” Dumbledore continued. “I am needed elsewhere, so you will be getting another temporary Potions teacher during Professor Snape’s absence.”

There was a murmur of disappointment, with an especially dismal sound coming from Neville. Severus sneered to himself. *Just wait until he got back...*

Dumbledore stood up and collected his notes. “Now, what were we studying last week?”

“Excuse me, Professor,” said Hermione, as Harry and Ron rolled their eyes, “–but where exactly *is* Professor Snape, and when will he get back?”

Dumbledore looked surprised at the interruption and Hermione flushed. “As I mentioned earlier, Miss Granger, Professor Snape is sorting out some very tricky business that may take time. However, rest assured Gryffindors–” Dumbledore twinkled around to the rest of the class “–our Potions Master will be returning as soon as he can.”

The rest of the class gave him a feeble smile, followed afterwards by a slight shudder when he turned around. Snape smirked from behind his cauldron and started copying down notes.

It was nice to still have those snivellers in place, almost

felt...back to normal.

“But the question is, what play are we to do?”

The class groaned silently and Ginny Weasley fell back into her usual daydream. They were *still* discussing which Muggle play to do for their assessment (well rather, Professor Mimble was chattering away and the rest of the class was ‘listening’).

Professor Mimble stopped suddenly and frowned. “What’s that noise?” he said sharply.

There was a strange rhythmic thumping noise coming from the back of the room. The drowsy class jerked awake and looked around blankly. Ginny giggled and pointed to her far left.

A singular Ravenclaw was banging his head slowly against his wooden desk.

The class gave a roar of laughter but the Professor looked alarmed. “Are you all right there, Boot?”

The Ravenclaw looked up and stared at him hysterically. “All right?” he said bitterly. “I think I’m going mad! If I don’t do something soon, I’m going to—”

“All right! All right!” cut in Mimble hastily. “But *you* try getting up here and teaching a whole lot of—no, no, just a figure of speech—sit down, I say!”

There was a slight struggle as William Boot tried to stand up on his desk with Mimble attached to his collar, while the rest of the class watched on in interest.

“GARN, BOOT!” came a cry, and soon the whole class was yelling and cheering and generally getting out of hand.

“SIT DOWN!” bellowed Mimble, slightly dishevelled.

But Boot had sat down for a restless two hours, and he wasn’t giving up that easily. “I SAY, WE WRITE THE PLAY OURSELVES!” he roared above the rabble, jumping up and down and accidentally kicking the

Professor in the nose.

It was as if he'd just proposed rebellion to goblins, from the roar of enthusiasm he received in response.

"But...but that just defeats the purpose of Muggle Studies!" Mimble spluttered, purple in the face from trying to hold Boot's ankles.

But Mimble's voice was drowned out by another yell of joy; it was time for lunch.

"Severus!"

Snape recognised the caller's voice and nodded amicably. "Hullo," he said. "What're you in such a rush for?"

Ginny grinned at him and looked over her shoulder conspiringly. "We just had Muggle Studies and—" Ginny went off into peals of laughter.

"Don't tell me," Severus smiled slyly. "You revolted on Mimble?"

Ginny paused laughing and looked surprised. "How did you know?"

Severus snorted inwardly. He didn't know why Dumbledore kept the pathetic man; this seemed to happen every year. In Snape's opinion, he was even worse than Binns, because he actually noticed if you were sleeping or not.

Not waiting for a reply, Ginny tugged on his arm. "We're going to be late!"

"We've got lunch," he said with a frown, trying to wriggle his way out of her grip.

Ginny gave him a disbelieving look. "We've got try-outs for the *Duelling Club*! Lunch goes for an entire hour!"

Severus frowned and said, "Look, I don't think Draco..."

Ginny glared at him. "Does everything have to revolve around *Draco Malfoy*?"

“I don’t know why you’re so angry at him,” said Severus. “They do both have blonde hair—”

“Oh! Take *his* side now! You always—”

“You wouldn’t happen to be talking about me, would you?” cut in a familiar drawl coming from behind them.

Ginny whirled on the young Slytherin. “What are you doing, sneaking up on—”

“I wasn’t sneaking!” Draco snapped, then under his breath, “—for a change...But it’s not my fault you’re now deaf *as well as* blind,” he added louder.

“Well, *Severus* and I are going to try out for the Duelling Club,” Ginny said. “So don’t try and stop us.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “As if I care,” he scoffed. “Besides, I think I might try out too.”

Ginny turned an angry red and Severus clapped him on the back. “Good, good, knew you would,” he said quickly. “Why don’t we all start heading over there now?”

With a disdainful sniff, Ginny turned her heel and started marching off without them. Draco grinned at her retreating figure and followed lazily.

“I don’t know how you stand her,” he called over his shoulder to the other boy. “She gets denser and denser everyday.”

Severus smirked. “As opposed to the retarded Slytherin?”

“Shut up, Severus.”

Not surprisingly, lots of students turned up on the Quidditch pitch to try out for a chance to be in the new Hogwarts Duelling Club. Rumour had spread that the new Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor was actually an Auror, and that things could really heat up into an interesting match.

Hermione was first there, followed quite eagerly by

Harry and Ron, and then by nearly a third of the school. A slouching mob of Slytherins made up the majority, more numerous than the other houses put together.

Neville Longbottom, who decided he'd just come to watch, looked slightly unnerved at the surly sea of faces. Ron noticed his look and also grimaced. "They don't look very sporting, do they?" he said darkly, pulling a face at a sneering sixth-year Slytherin.

Hermione looked at him sharply. "Don't be silly, Ron! Just because they're in Slytherin, doesn't mean..."

But Hermione's voice drained away when Millicent Bulstrode, an enormous Slytherin girl, thumped her fists together and glared at her. She began to stride forward when burly Slytherin boy stopped her. "We'll get our chance later," he said, smiling nastily at the trio.

Harry recognised him as Blaise Zabini, who was proving to be the dominant Slytherin now that Draco was always off with Snape. Even Crabbe and Goyle had stationed themselves around him, though Zabini didn't need it. He was like an ancient Greek wrestler, but with the facial expressions of an angry bear.

Harry shuddered and looked away, his eyes falling on Ginny running towards them from the castle. He noted with concern her face was flushed.

"Ginny!" Hermione exclaimed. "What's wrong?"

Harry could've sworn that Ginny had glanced slightly over her shoulder before answering. "Nothing!" she said abruptly. "Am I late?"

Ron frowned at her. "Are you going to try out too?"

"Well, why shouldn't I?" she said defensively. "Honestly, Ron! You sound like Percy!"

Ron looked horrified at the accusation and looked at Harry and Hermione for support.

"Er...well, it wouldn't hurt for Ginny to try out..."

"Yes, I think she's proved that she can look after herself," assured Harry, grinning at the blushing Ginny.

Ron stared at his two best friends in disbelief. “You...you don’t *really* think I sound like Percy, do you?”

Harry and Hermione laughed, giving him a light shove. Then Professor Garwood strode into the centre of the throng and the chatter died down.

“Welcome everyone,” she called. “I am quite surprised at the turn-out! Keep up this enthusiasm and I’m sure we’ll make professional duellers out of you all yet!”

The crowd of students gave a cheer, even the Slytherins.

“Now, we’ll start by each lining up in pairs...”

There was slight disorder as each chose their partners and shuffled into place. Harry and Ron automatically moved together and Hermione looked inquiringly at Ginny. Ginny grinned at her and they moved off to form the last pair.

Professor Garwood glanced up and down the forty pairs in amusement. She hadn’t expected this many students. It was interesting how the majority were Slytherins; she would’ve expected Gryffindors...

“Sorry we’re late,” came a voice behind her.

“Yeah, it’s all Severus’s fault,” drawled another, making her smile.

The Professor turned around and looked at them sharply. “You’re holding up the group,” she said, though her eyes were twinkling. “Hurry and line up with your partner.”

Draco smirked at Severus, whose neck was turning a pale tinge of pink. They faced each other in anticipation and lined up next to an annoyed-looking Ginny and Hermione.

No holding back, Draco’s look seemed to say.

Prepare to be knocked off your feet then, Snape’s laughing look replied.

“The first objective is to get your partner’s wand,” came Garwood’s voice. “I will watch your technique and method, and if I touch your shoulder then you are to move

away to my left.”

Draco’s eyebrows waggled and he mouthed, “*She wants you,*” to the flushing boy opposite.

Snape bared his teeth in reply and Hermione looked at him in alarm.

“NOW!” Professor Garwood cried.

There was instantly a roar of ‘Expelliarmus’, but some people had yelled different curses as well, making about half of the students dance wildly or fall to the ground or even make loud animal noises.

Ginny was screaming with laughter (she had been hit with a tickle charm) and Hermione was staring at her legs in horror (they seemed to have disappeared).

Harry and Ron were each racing towards the other’s wand (they had used the Disarming spell at exactly the same moment, and had caused each other’s wands to fly backwards).

Half of the students now had the other person’s wand, and Professor Garwood started to divide the students accordingly. A certain pair happened to catch her eye, as they seemed to be arguing more than duelling.

Severus Snape leaped backwards and again missed Draco’s crackling curse.

“Not bad!” Snape smirked. “You’re learning well.”

Draco gritted his teeth. “You’re not trying!” he yelled, running at him and firing another hex at the same time.

Severus pointed his wand and performed a counter-curse. “Neither are you,” he retorted. “Use your cunning, don’t just—” Snape jerked out of the way of another crackling hex, “–rush into things,” he finished off.

Draco narrowed his eyes, inching slowly towards his superior-looking partner. “Fine.” Draco paused, a smirk creeping up his face. “But just wait ‘til I tell Professor Garwood that *Sev Scrape* has a crush on her—”

Severus’s smirk faded and he leapt on him with a roar, but Draco was ready for him. He quickly ducked around

and grabbed the other boy's wand like lightning.

"HA!" Draco yelled triumphantly.

"HA!" Snape yelled back.

The two boys stared at each other, each holding the other's wand.

"Good!" said Garwood, as each boy felt a small pat on his shoulder. "Though why you two insist on physically fighting all the time is beyond me."

Draco and Severus moved off silently, and joined eighteen other students to the left of the main group. Ginny ran towards them beaming, while Harry, Ron and Hermione watched dubiously.

"I *knew* you'd make it!" Ginny grinned, looking as though she wanted to throw her arms around them.

Severus and Draco exchanged a look, eyebrows raised.

"I'm the only fourth year here!" she whispered, trying to look modest but failing miserably. "Oh, I can't believe it! Me!"

Some of the students who didn't make it started to trudge off gloomily, while the majority stayed back and cheered for their friends.

"Congratulations all, for trying out! Don't be discouraged if you weren't chosen today, for anyone may work themselves to the top, starting from next week!" Professor Garwood surveyed the group of twenty in liking, before continuing. "These twenty, in particular, showed strategy and skill both efficient and unique. So it is with great pride that I introduce to you, the starting members of the new Hogwarts's Duelling Club!"

Cheered on by their friends, the duellers grinned in embarrassment. Draco looked around at the other members and was given a friendly punch by Blaise Zabini.

"Glad you made it in, Malfoy," he said gruffly, then rather surprisingly he nodded to Severus. "You too."

"Right," Severus said with a shrug. He glanced at Harry

and Co. and sniggered. *Finally, he had a legitimate excuse to hex Gryffindors.*

Everyone started heading back to the castle and Ginny waved happily goodbye to the boys, before leaving with Harry, Ron and Hermione.

“Looks like she’s forgotten your argument,” said Severus, waiting for Draco to buckle up his shoe that had come loose during their scuffle.

“Yeah,” said Draco, sounding surprised. “Weird.”

Remembering the look on Ginny’s face as she’d skipped off with Potter, Severus didn’t think her good mood was strange after all.

“Mr Snape, Mr Malfoy!”

Draco raised an eyebrow at the other boy and they both turned to face the speaker.

“Yes, Professor?” said Draco, with exaggerated politeness.

Professor Garwood crossed her arms and said, “Now, about your detention...”

Snape looked up with a frown. “But we were practicing duelling, Miss Garwood,” he said, trying to ignore the way her auburn hair glinted in the sunlight. “Surely you wouldn’t give us detention for that?”

“I don’t recall seeing any wands,” said Garwood with an amused smile playing across her lips. “And that’s *Professor* Garwood, Mr Snape.”

“Muggle duelling then,” said Draco. “For *Mr* Snape’s Muggle Studies homework.”

Draco caught Snape’s eye and just barely manage to contain a snigger. Professor Garwood leaned forward and put a hand on Severus’s shoulder. “Unfortunately for you two, someone else already has detention in the Trophy Room tonight.” She shook her head. “*That Woodley...*”

Draco wasn’t able to stifle this snigger and had to hastily straighten his face as Garwood stared at him.

“But!” she continued, her eyes twinkling. “Since both of

you are so exceedingly good at Defence Against the Dark Arts...you are to help me tonight in the Forbidden Forest. I need to collect some bogies for my first years.”

Draco and Snape shared a look. Garwood seemed to think this would scare them, but a night in the Forbidden Forest with only their wands and finely tuned instincts to protect themselves? This was going to be the best detention *ever*.

Philip Woodley sighed and left the Gryffindor common room at nine o'clock. Ginny looked at him strangely as he got up.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Detention,” he said with a shrug, giving her one last smile as he left.

Ginny made a sympathetic noise and glanced back at her book, wondering where on earth Severus was. It was getting late; maybe she should just go to bed...

But the chatter of loud voices coming through the portrait hole changed her mind. “Where were you?” she asked curiously, to an annoyed-looking Hermione.

“Hagrid’s,” the other girl replied grumpily, settling down on the next chair.

Ginny started to wonder why Hermione wasn't in a good mood when she realised that Harry and Ron were talking about Quidditch. Again.

“—Well it shouldn't be allowed!” Ron argued. “They can't just replace their whole team with—”

“Yeah, I know!” cut in Harry. “But some of their Chasers are over at Beauxbatons so—”

“Well, one of our Chasers is over there too! But you don't see us filling up our team with professionally trained players from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang...”

Ron's voice trailed away as he caught sight of Harry's face.

“What?” said Harry hoarsely. “What d’you mean, *one of our Chasers?*?”

Ron stared at him, his mouth dropping open. “What? Didn’t...didn’t you know...?”

“Know what?” Harry demanded, staring at him apprehensively.

“It’s Alicia Spinnet,” Ron said incredulously. “She’s exchanged this year to Beauxbatons...”

Harry sat down hard on a thick rug. “And just when was the whole team going to tell me?” he groaned, his dreams of winning the Quidditch Cup going down the drain with one of their star Chasers.

It was Hermione’s turn to look surprised. “But...but everyone knows, Harry, we were told that day that Ginny disappeared...”

“And I don’t suppose that anyone noticed that I wasn’t there,” he said irritated. “And that I spent the first breakfast in the *hospital wing* with the *‘flu*, from being stuck out *half the night* in the *cold, wet—*”

“But what were you doing out on the first night?” Ginny exclaimed, then reddening when Ron glared at her.

Harry looked at her uncomfortably and gave her an apologetic smile. “Er...sorry about all that,” he said, looking up at them all. “It’s just that I don’t want to fail the team as Captain...”

Ron gave a snort of laughter. “Oh, *come on*, Harry! We’re talking about the famous Harry Potter here! All we need is another Chaser, and if Snape’s as good as the twins say he is, we’ll win it with both arms and legs tied behind our backs!”

“Now, there’s an image,” Harry muttered, although the tension seemed to leave his face as he smiled back at Ron.

Hermione smiled at them both and gave them an encouraging squeeze. “Gryffindor couldn’t possibly lose,” she declared.

Ginny sat near the fire and watched them somewhat

wistfully. They were all such good friends...

"All right!" said Harry briskly. "Well, how about you, Ron? You said you wanted to try out for Chaser sometime!"

"What? Oh! Oh, no...I don't think..." Ron flustered, feeling suddenly embarrassed.

"Come on, Ron!" encouraged Ginny immediately. "You're not that bad, even *Charlie* says so!"

"Yes! Come on, Ron!"

"You've always wanted to..."

And so the conversation thus ensued until Ron finally yelled that only if they had proper trials, *then* he would try out properly. And before anyone could reply, he strode quickly up the stairs to his dormitory, his ears pink. Harry and Hermione grinned at each other and laughed.

"Good night, Harry," Hermione said with a yawn, climbing another set of stairs. "'Night, Ginny."

The two remaining students chorused a reply and also got up. Harry looked at Ginny uncomfortably.

"Thanks for helping convince Ron," he said, smiling awkwardly.

"That's all right," Ginny said shyly. "Er...good night."

"Good night," Harry replied, and climbed up the stairs to go to bed.

Professor Garwood looked bemusedly at the two figures striding towards her.

"I'm surprised you're not late," she said dryly, as Draco and Severus flung back their hoods. "Let alone early. Not many students look forward to a nine p.m. stroll through the Forbidden Forest."

Draco gave her a cocky smirk. "*Severus* and I aren't like most students," he drawled.

Garwood raised her eyebrows and gave Severus a hard look. "Indeed," she stated, and started walking towards

the gloomy forest.

Severus glared at Draco and the young Slytherin gave an innocent shrug.

“Now, I trust you both know what a bogie looks like?” Garwood said shortly. “Pretty harmless, little gnome-like creatures with scaly hands and feet. Usually covered in mud and leaves.”

Severus nodded and Draco smirked. “Sure it hasn’t got red hair and a whiny voice as well?” he muttered under his breath.

“Now, I know that you have both proved that you can look after yourselves in here,” she said approvingly, not hearing Draco’s comment. “But we still must keep together, or the Headmaster will have my head.”

The two boys nodded once more, but looked at each other gloomily. Professor Garwood looked at them both and suddenly smiled.

“Come, then.”

The three, cloaked figures padded quietly through the gloomy forest. They had been going for quite a while now, only stopping now and then to check some freshly dug burrows for the infamous bogies.

“I don’t understand it.” The Professor frowned. “It’s exactly the right time for them to be out, so where are they?”

Severus rolled his eyes. She really *was* a bit of an idiot. “They *are* out, but they can hear us coming from a mile away,” he scoffed.

“That’s a bit rich,” replied Draco. “You’re making just as much noise as we are.”

“I am not,” growled Severus. “I bet I can get one in five minutes if you two stay here.”

Garwood shushed them. “This isn’t a field trip,” she reprimanded. “Lead if you like, but I won’t have you two

fighting again.”

“Fine,” Severus muttered. “I still bet I’ll catch one first.”

Draco shook his head sceptically. Severus may have been brilliant in duelling and Quidditch, but he needed to take some serious lessons in charm.

They walked on for a few minutes even more silent than before, when Severus darted suddenly out of view. In an instant he reappeared again, something large and wriggly hanging from his hand.

“Told you,” he said smugly. “*Stupefy*.”

Draco squinted at the limp creature hanging by its tail in the darkness. “All right, Severus!” he exclaimed. “Now can we go? I’m bored...”

“Detention is not meant to be fun,” Professor Garwood said severely. “And we need at least five more.”

“No problem,” bragged Severus, twirling the bogie around by its tail. “I could catch these pitiful things in my sleep.”

“Give me that!” Garwood exclaimed, snatching at the slowly getting airborne creature. “You’ll take out someone’s eye!”

“I will not,” replied Severus with dignity. “And it’s not my fault you’re standing so close.”

“I was talking about Mr Malfoy,” grated Garwood, “and—see! Look!”

Draco was rubbing his shoulder; a spike from the bogie’s tail had gone right through his cloak and robes. “What’d you do that for?” he shouted.

“Shut up!” Snape muttered, glaring at him in the darkness.

“Well stop bloody showing—*Oof!*”

Draco gasped as Snape shoved him into a nearby tree.

“Quiet, boys!” hissed Garwood. “There’s one! *Stupefy!*”

Professor Garwood picked up the stunned bogie and waved it around triumphantly.

“Stop that!” said Severus irritably. “You’ll take out

someone's eye."

"Don't be cheeky," said Garwood sternly, but then laughed. "Right, the person with the most bogies in five minutes gets a free Butterbeer from the other two! Go!"

Draco smirked at the other boy and dived into the shadows. Severus scowled back and pushed him over, getting to the burrow first. After a lot of scuffling, Severus managed to get the bogie first, with Draco glaring at him and leaping at another hole instead.

"Five minutes is up!" called Garwood. "And I think you two owe me a Butterbeer."

Draco and Severus got up scowling, their faces streaked with dirt.

"I've got two," protested Draco, holding up one of his own and grabbing one of Severus's.

"So have I!" frowned Severus, holding up one of them and looking around for the other.

"Well, I have three," said the Professor, with an unusual smirk. "I think this strategy is a lot better than sneaking around, eh?"

Draco and Severus smiled grudgingly at each other and started to follow as she strode off.

"Well, at least we have *one* good thing out of all this," muttered Draco to his companion, giving him a meaningful smirk.

"What's that?" Severus asked warningly, lowering his voice as Garwood turned around.

"*You* get to buy her a drink," leered Draco, elbowing him in the side.

Severus rolled his eyes. A moment later, however, he caught himself smiling.

"Very good, Severus, take five points for Gryffindor."

"But I'm not in Gryffindor," he protested.

"Yes, you are! Now be a good boy and—"

"I'M NOT A BOY!"

"Don't be silly, of course you are, and I've already told you I don't go out with students twenty years younger than me so—"

"ARGH!"

Severus sat up in bed with a jerk and wrenched a startled black kitten off his face. He got up and glared into the mirror irritably. What a stupid dream, he scowled to himself. These blasted hormones went on overdrive whenever he went to sleep.

He continued giving his reflection his most ferocious scowl possible until he felt something soft brush against his legs. Oreo started to purr and Snape's scowl faded slowly away. He looked at the kitten grumpily and aimed a half-hearted cuff at its neck. The kitten gave a small mew and swiped at him with a tiny paw.

Severus sighed and threw a light robe on over his drawers. "We're going to Hagrid's," he muttered to the cat. "Hopefully Fang will eat you this time."

Oreo put her nose in the air and leapt onto her usual spot on her master's shoulders. Severus padded quietly down the stairs and looked around for Ginny. Seeing no one, he shrugged and left the common room. He was soon out on the grounds, hurrying towards Hagrid's hut. The sun was just coming up but no one seemed to be out yet.

Draco must have slept in as well, he thought. He supposed it didn't matter, he felt like a bit of physical exertion anyway.

He reached the hut and was greeted at the door by Hagrid. "Ah, Sev! Thought yeh might be comin' round t'day!" he boomed heartily.

Severus ignored the nickname as usual and nodded cordially at the shaggy groundskeeper.

"Now, abou' that special project..."

Snape groaned, despite himself. Surely they weren't going to shift rocks around again?

Hagrid chuckled at Snape's expression. "No, no, Sev," he continued. "Here, I'll show yeh what I mean."

Hagrid motioned for Severus to follow and starting walking off in the direction of the shimmering lake. Severus followed curiously, throwing Oreo off onto a joyful Fang as he left. Instead of going to the lake's edge, Hagrid walked around to where the forest met the lake, disappearing into a tangle of weeds and vines.

Severus frowned and went forward cautiously, pulling back a branch and peering through. "Hagrid?" he called uncertainly.

"Over 'ere!" came a muffled shout.

Severus pushed his way forward, vines and brambles scratching him in the face. It brought back memories of being lost in the forest and instead of feeling irritated, he eventually emerged from the enormous weeds with his eyes gleaming and a slight smile on his face.

"Come on!" came the muffled shout again.

Snape stopped and faced an impenetrable bush that seemed to stretch far into the forest. He looked the other way and it seemed to go right round to the edge of the lake.

"This way!" came a sudden cheery roar.

Severus jumped, startled. Hagrid's gigantic head was sticking out of the seemingly solid bush a few yards away.

"This way!" he repeated, reminding Severus of a five hundred pound niffler on the scent of a leprechaun.

Severus walked towards where Hagrid's head had disappeared and stared at the bush dubiously. It seemed solid enough. He pushed his arm against it and was surprised to find it went straight through. Feeling rather idiotic, he went leg first through the 'hole' and straightened out on the other side.

He was not prepared for what he saw. It was like a hugely overgrown garden. There were small cobbled

paths running around the small area, but they were so worn and covered with weeds that it was nearly impossible to see that they were there. A swampy, overgrown pond littered with a couple of mouldy-looking statues was before him, but what immediately caught his eye was the enormous tree, even larger than the Whomping Willow and much, much older, growing majestically in the centre. Hagrid motioned silently to Severus and both walked slowly towards it. The unusually silent Groundskeeper sat on an ancient stone bench beneath the leafy boughs and patted the seat for Snape to join him. Severus sat stiffly, but then drew in a sharp breath. He was not the type to get sentimental about views, but this one... it was magnificent.

The early morning sun glittered off the silver lake, making the colours dance and the rising castle walls seem even taller and more majestic than before. All his time at Hogwarts, both school years and teaching, he had never witnessed this grand a view.

In fact, he frowned suddenly, why hadn't anyone found this place yet? Surely Dumbledore must know about it, and why didn't he inform the staff? How did Hagrid know about it?

Seeing Severus's puzzled look, Hagrid nodded in response. "Quite a while back I stumbled across this place by accident." Hagrid looked somewhat troubled by the memory, but his brow lightened as he continued. "But when I came back... it seemed so... it's a great place jus' to sit and think... There's somethin' abou' this place that jus' calms yeh."

A warm breeze wafted across Severus, and he felt his body agree.

"So when Dumbledore suggested I show you this place, and I've noticed yeh don't mind the odd spot of gardenin'— I thought that maybe..."

Severus ran his fingers through his hair uncomfortably.

“It’s really incredible.”

Hagrid looked around him wistfully and grunted. “Maybe yeh can clean this place up a bit,” he said. “It must’ve been glorious in its time.”

Severus glanced up at the magnificent tree, silently agreeing. Hagrid followed his gaze and motioned a giant hand towards an area of the trunk where the outer bark didn’t grow. Faintly scribed into the tree were the letters, G.G, H.H, R.R, and S.S.

“The Founders,” Snape breathed. No wonder the whole area felt ancient...

“Yeh know the story, about how the four of ‘em gathered together an’ decided to build a school?”

Snape nodded.

“Dumbledore reckons they were standing on this spot when they decided, lookin’ out over the lake to where Hogwarts now stands.”

Severus stared out at the view once more, feeling awed that he might be standing in the Founders footprints. Eventually tearing his eyes away, he got to his feet and started to wander around the garden with renewed interest. He noticed that the thick bush he had seen on the outside surrounded the whole perimeter, even overhanging the bank onto the lake. After a closer inspection, the four dilapidated statues around the swamp were actually the Hogwarts animals, the water now stagnant in each of their basins. He was just beginning to wonder what the statue in the middle originally was, when Hagrid called out to him.

“Breakfast’s in ‘alf an hour,” Hagrid said, looking at the sun. “Better head back.”

Severus pulled himself away from the pond reluctantly. “Coming,” he replied, and followed Hagrid out of the invisible gap into the tangled thicket outside.

Pushing his way through the brambles, Severus was soon crossing the short grass of the grounds once more.

He was greeted uproariously by a frolicking Fang and Oreo, and couldn't keep a straight face when thinking of where he had just went. It was amazing! Just wait until he showed Draco!

Severus paused and shot Hagrid a guilty look. Would he care if Snape showed his secret place to someone who tried to get him sacked?

“Er...Hagrid...?”

The Groundskeeper looked at him questioningly. “What is it?” he answered.

Severus looked at him uncomfortably and flushed slightly. “Doesn't matter,” he muttered, trying to convince himself that Draco wouldn't be interested in a stupid garden anyway.

Hagrid looked at him perceptively. “I don' mind if yeh tell anyone abou' the garden,” he said gruffly. “It's not my place to boss over.”

Severus sent him a keen look and Hagrid nodded slowly. “P'raps it'll do that Malfoy some good,” the half-giant said shortly over his shoulder, as he closed his hut door behind him.

Turning around slowly, Severus started to make his way back to the entrance doors, thinking, perhaps, that Hagrid was more deserving of people's respect than he'd thought.

“Why, hello, Mr Snape!” exclaimed a feminine voice to the right of him.

Severus paused mid-step, groaning as he recognised the voice but turning to face her anyway. “Good morning, Miss- er- Professor,” he said, in a kind of strangled voice.

If only those memories of that horrible dream he'd had earlier would go away...

“I see our midnight stroll didn't seem to phase you into sleeping in this morning,” Garwood smiled. “I've just come back from feeding and watering our crafty bogies.”

Severus Snape ran his fingers through his short hair. “Oh...er...they didn't give you any trouble, did they?”

Garwood laughed. “No fear!” she said. “And I’m not surprised either, with the way you and Draco were spinning them around...”

Severus stared at a point directly in front of him, trying to forget those warm grey eyes boring into him. They walked through the huge oak doors and soon reached the entrance of the Great Hall. Snape breathed a sigh of relief and Garwood sent him a concerned look.

“Are you feeling ill?” she asked kindly.

Severus coloured deeply and muttered a short reply before going down to sit at the Gryffindor table. Glaring at his food, he once again cursed his teenage hormones. Why, if he were in his full-grown, normal body, *she* would be the one getting all hot and bothered.

Yes, Snape smirked to himself as he swished his porridge, just wait until he changed back...

“Where were you this morning?” snapped an angry voice beside his shoulder.

Snape’s smirk vanished in an instant as glared upward at the speaker. “What’s it to you, Potter?” he sneered.

Harry narrowed his eyes and looked Severus full in the face. “I’m Gryffindor’s Quidditch Captain and we all agreed that we would practise this morning before breakfast, *so where were you?*”

Severus crossed his arms and looked down his nose at the famous boy wizard. “Ha! I don’t need to practise,” he said. “And besides, who died and made you Captain?”

A flicker of emotion crossed Harry’s face at these last few words and Severus saw him give the Hufflepuff table a haunted look.

“We voted Harry in as Captain!” came a chorus of voices on either side of Harry’s shoulders.

“And so did we!” said Katie Bell and Angelina Johnson, joining the Weasley twins.

Harry smiled faintly at them and shot Severus a steely look. “We practise every Wednesday morning before

breakfast, and every Sunday afternoon after lunch, like it or lump it.”

Severus looked darkly at the whole Quidditch team standing before him. He knew that Potter was longing to kick him out of the team, which was more than enough reason to stay on and annoy the hell out of him. “I’ll be there,” he snickered. “But only because you asked so nicely.”

The Weasley twins laughed but Harry just gave him a cold look. He looked as if he was about to say something further but Ron and Hermione suddenly appeared and grasped his shoulders.

“Don’t worry, Harry,” Hermione murmured. “You’ll do fine.”

Ron threw him a quick scowl before marching Harry away. Severus glared around the table once more until he saw a certain slick-haired Slytherin enter the room. Severus felt a sudden gladness come over him as Draco Malfoy waved him down and beckoned him over to the Slytherin table.

“Hullo, Draco,” Severus said quite pleasantly, forgetting his small fight with Potter.

Draco nodded amicably to him and slid him a new plate of food. “Sorry, slept in,” he said through a mouthful of food. “I can’t believe we got back at one a.m., weird, eh?”

Severus looked at him, startled. “Did we really?” he asked, taken aback. “But I didn’t feel at all tired when we got back.”

“That’s because you’re strange,” Draco said knowingly. “Or was it because you were up all night thinking about...”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Oh, yes, how on earth could I sleep when all I could think about was *her*.”

“Talking about me, Severus?” Ginny laughed, coming up behind him and sitting next to Draco (much to the horror of the rest of the Slytherins).

Draco sent her a scathing look. “*As if,*” he scoffed, poking her with a banana he had in his hand. “*You* think too much of yourself, Weasley.”

“Oh, so it’s *Weasley* now?” she exclaimed, clutching her heart in mock distress. “And apparently *I’m* the one who’s always acting all ‘Oh! Everyone-kiss-my-erotic-mauve-pyjamas-because-I-have-blonde-hair-and-resemble-a-ferret’—”

“There’s nothing wrong with erotic mauve,” replied Draco defensively. “And how d’you know what colour pyjamas I have?”

“Oh, Draco!” sobbed a voice suddenly. “How could you?”

Draco turned around just in time to see a tearful Pansy Parkinson storming off. Without meaning to, Severus emitted a loud guffaw and Ginny went off into uncontrollable laughter. Draco frowned at them in exasperation.

“Pansy!” he called.

But Pansy simply made a rude gesture at the shocked Slytherin and turned her eyes adoringly upon an alarmed Blaise Zabini.

“Idiots,” Draco muttered to his two companions. “This is all your fault.”

“I knew it was coming!” declared Ginny. “It will always be *‘all our fault’*.”

Draco looked at her in annoyance. “I thought you weren’t talking to us,” he said grumpily, finishing off the remainder of his breakfast.

“I wasn’t talking to *you,*” Ginny replied haughtily. “But since you’re losing sleep because you can’t stop thinking about me...”

Draco snorted.

“I’m willing to let ‘the matter’ go. In fact, it’s officially closed,” Ginny finished off firmly.

Severus, who had been shovelling in food blinked at the

two of them. “What’s the matter?”

Ginny and Draco rolled their eyes at him. “Nothing,” said Draco. “But I know what’s the matter with you...”

“What?” asked Severus.

“Nothing,” Draco repeated. “But I know what’s the matter with you...”

“I heard what you said!” snapped Snape. “But what’s the matter with you? I mean Ginny. I mean...oh, take that!”

Draco ducked under the table to avoid a gigantic grapefruit fly across the table.

“Sorry about that,” said Severus hastily, as the grapefruit hit the wall and covered a couple of Slytherins with juice.

“Oh, doesn’t matter,” smirked Draco, popping his head back up and flicking his wand at Severus’s porridge.

Luckily they were stopped before the whole table joined in.

“But, Professor!”

“*No buts!*”

“We’ve already—”

“*I know!*”

“So why are we—”

“*Because!*”

Fifteen students sat in gloomy silence, one student flicked his wand disinterestedly, and one irritated Muggle Studies teacher paced the classroom.

“I know you’ve already studied Muggle literature last year, but this is a chance to gain some extra credit where some of you failed.”

Most of the students shuddered, a few looked indignant, and one continued to flick his wand disinterestedly.

“I have decided that the fourth years aren’t to do a Muggle ballet like last year...”

The class snorted.

“You mean my brother and his class revolted on you and

you let them write the play themselves—” muttered a sturdy-looking Ravenclaw.

“What was that, Boot?” said Mimble sharply.

Terry Boot grunted.

“And I know we have already started Social Interactions of Muggles, or SIMs if you rather,” continued Mimble, ignoring the usual lack of enthusiasm. “But I do urge you to take a part in the play, because, as I said before, many of you failed last year’s unit...”

“Maybe ‘cause I had to wear bloody tights,” growled another Ravenclaw.

“I am strongly recommending that you take a part...”

“You know the only reason he doesn’t want us to fail is because our parents will complain that he’s a stupid—”

“ARE YOU WHISPERING, FINCH-FLETCHLEY?!”

“Yes! No! I mean, no, *Sir*.”

“Hmm...now, since you have all agreed to take part in—
Mr Snape!”

The single student who had been waving his wand disinterestedly the whole time had accidentally caused a string of sparks to appear, incidentally igniting the hem of Mimble’s robes.

“Sorry,” said Snape unembarrassed. “Did you say something, Mim—er – Professor?”

As with all the other times that Mimble found himself in trouble, the rest of the class watched on in interest as the flustered man tried to yell at a student and undo the mess that they had caused at the same time. The flames finally went out and Mimble rounded on Snape with his robes still smoking.

“You...you...” Mimble stuttered with rage, nearly purple at the sight of the smirking student. “DETENTION!”

Severus’s smirk faded and he stared at the wall with a sigh.

“And five points from Gryffindor!” Mimble finished

with one last glare.

Severus cheered up. Well, that was one thing, at least.

Draco Malfoy walked at his usual leisurely pace to the next class, staring at the mass of his fellow Slytherins in front of him. They still treated him with the usual respect that he naturally got for being the richest and of purest blood, but they behaved differently around him now. It was as if they weren't quite sure what to make of him, as if both of his parents had just died or he had some kind of mental disorder. Crabbe and Goyle were starting to hover around Zabini now, and Pansy kept fawning over him like they were arranged to be married.

Still gazing at the group before him, Draco waited for the trickle of jealousy to follow through.

"Weird," he muttered to himself. Zabini had taken his position as leader of the fifth year Slytherins, and he didn't even care.

"Sickle for your thoughts!" said the voice of Ginny Weasley in his ear.

Draco drifted back to reality and turned his head towards the passer-by. "You've got Severus's cat," he stated.

Ginny held up Oreo for Draco to carry. "She wants him, can't you take her? And hullo t'you too!"

Draco frowned as the purring kitten extended a slender paw and swiped the air in his direction. "I don't do cats," he scowled, returning Oreo's malevolent glare.

"Please?" pleaded Ginny jokingly, looking back at the rest of her departing classmates. "Pretty please?"

"Get away from me," said Draco, disgusted, noticing a few Slytherins looking back at them and grinning.

Ginny's playful mood changed and she scowled back. Draco felt relieved; he liked her better when she was frowning.

"Take her, *Malfoy!*" she snapped, and thrust the alarmed

kitten into his arms before marching off.

“Get over yourself, *Weasley!*” Draco yelled after her, and smirked to himself. She was so easy to annoy now... “Ouch!” he exclaimed, as Oreo sank her teeth into his arm and bounded off. “If you were anyone else’s cat...” he gritted to himself. “What the...?”

Draco stared down the completely empty passageway and started off on a run.

“Where the hell’d they all go?” he muttered to himself.

He looked into their usual classroom but it seemed to be empty. He stood still for a while and tried to think of where they would have gone. A sudden creak of an opening door caught his attention.

Might as well follow it, he shrugged, and ran up the stairs, searching for the source of the noise.

He paused outside of a half-open door and listened for any noise that might be going on inside. He looked at the engraved letters on the door and immediately felt foolish. He was standing outside of the Trophy Room, and it wasn’t bloody likely that his class was in there. Draco started to leave when an awful hollow groan froze him in his tracks. He looked around but no one was in sight. He backed away from the half-open door and heard the same hollow groan again, coming from inside.

If this had happened last year, he wouldn’t have stayed around to hear another sound, he would’ve left straight away.

But this year was different.

This year, he had spent almost a week in the Forbidden Forest, where screeches and moans were lullabies as you closed your eyes at night. This year, he had battled Hellhounds and come face to face with the Dark Lord himself. Draco smirked and withdrew his wand. This year, he was more than a match for some lost boggart or stupid student playing a prank, and right now, he felt like a bit of exercise.

Draco mentally counted to three and rushed through the door. “AHA—ouugh!”

Draco’s triumphant yell was cut short as he collided head on with someone roughly the same size as him, and fell onto the floor.

“Groooough,” he gurgled, glaring at the other boy. “What the...what the hell are *you* doing here?!”

Philip Woodley smiled faintly at him. “Sorry,” he said cheerily. “I got separated from our class... accidentally wound up here. Well, should be going then, bye!” And with that abrupt speech, the younger boy got up and hastily left the room.

Draco scowled at his retreating figure, wondering what the hell Ginny saw in that thick-headed chump. “Besides the good looks of course,” he sniggered out loud, catching a glimpse of his face in the reflection of a trophy.

Then, remembering where he was supposed to be, he hurriedly picked up his fallen wand and leaped up for the door. A sudden impulse made him stop though.

What the hell had made that groaning noise?

He looked around cautiously but nothing seemed to be out of place. The only queer thing about the room was that everything was spick and span, as if all the trophies had been polished and cleaned every single day since the start of term.

That’s a lot of detentions, he thought to himself as he stared around at the gleaming figures of brass. But he’d better get going... perhaps the class was outside for the day...

Dwelling on that thought, Draco walked swiftly towards the windowsill.

“Aha!” he exclaimed, looking out and seeing the unmistakable group of DADA fifth years down below.

He squinted down at them, wondering if he could summon his Nimbus from up here and make a dramatic entrance. He reluctantly decided against it. It was

something that attention-seeking Potter and Weasley would do. He, Draco, didn't need to fly in to arrive in style.

“Zabini! Seen Draco?”

Blaise Zabini looked doubtfully at the speaker and gave a negative grunt. Severus frowned and kept walking. He wondered if he should quickly cut back and look for him, but the class and Professor had stopped walking and were now all gathered around a large, black, rectangular object.

“Now, I'm sure you've all guessed what I am about to show you,” Professor Garwood called. “Yes, Miss Granger?”

“The captured Hellhounds,” Hermione said promptly, staring at a surly-faced Snape, much to his dislike.

“Yes,” said Garwood, turning around to see whom Hermione was giving such a hard look and smiling slightly at Snape's expression. “A Ministry official is coming today to collect them, but for the time being they are situated within this opaque magical-prism.”

Snape looked on in interest as a few of the Gryffindor girls shuddered and backed slightly away. He strode to the front of the group and touched the black box with a slight scowl on his face. Professor Garwood tapped the surface with her wand and muttered a few words under her breath.

The whole class gasped (even the Slytherins) and jerked involuntarily as the prism became crystal clear. Lavender Brown screamed as an enormous black dog threw itself at the glass, leaving specks of drool on the side. Severus narrowed his eyes and resisted a ridiculous urge to hiss.

There was a big bundle of fur in the corner, making it hard to tell which dog was which. There was only one beast active, the one that had tried to pounce on Lavender. Severus glared at it and wondered whether this was the

one that had bit him. He looked at the others and was surprised to see that they didn't seem to be hurt at all, not even scarred from where Ginny had repeatedly used the 'Diffindo' slashing curse.

"Their healing powers are phenomenal," Garwood said quietly. "They may be ruthless and terrible, but even we can benefit from studying their magical properties."

"But there's no way we're going to do that... yeah, Professor?"

"No, not likely at all," she smiled at Dean Thomas. "I think we'll leave that to the experts."

There was some nervous laughter that died away when the dog's eyes started to glow a deep red. The terrible beast transfixed his gaze on Severus and started growling. Severus gave it his best sneer in reply, tapping tauntingly on the glass as its hackles rose.

"Show off," muttered Ron under his breath to Harry, who was looking very closely at Snape's sneer.

The class gazed silently at the staring battle that Snape and the salivating creature were taking part in.

"Maybe he wants a biscuit," came a sudden drawl by Snape's elbow.

Both Gryffindors and Slytherins jumped, along with the Professor. "Did you just join us, Mr Malfoy?" said Garwood sternly.

Draco looked up bemusedly and turned back to the clear prism. "Look, he likes me too," he commented, moving his hand around and laughing at the promptness at which the slavering wolf followed it.

"'Like' is rather a strong word, Mr Malfoy," said Garwood. "Everyone get one last look at the creatures and we'll head back. Remember, I want a foot and a half on the characteristics of a Hellhound next lesson."

The class groaned, but looked rather relieved to hear that they were going soon. Both Gryffindors and Slytherins looked slightly grey as they moved closer for one last

glance. There was something just foul and terrible about the blood-redness of the eyes and the ever so slightly twitching muscles, something that made you want to gag and scream at the same time.

“Where were you?” asked Severus, as he and Draco trailed behind the returning class.

Draco shrugged. “Nowhere.” He motioned into the distance at the Professor’s retreating back. “So what’s the deal with you and Garwood then? Any updates?”

But Severus was only half-listening, and the glint of the lake had caught his eye instead. “Oh! I’ve got something to tell you...”

Draco looked taken aback. “Do you really?” he asked, sounding impressed.

“What?” said Snape, looking confused. “No! Not... you dunderhead! No, there’s a place I have to show you—”

But at that moment a tiny ball of black fur flung itself directly at Snape’s face, startling him into flinging his wand out and accidentally poking Draco in the eye.

“Hey!” yelled Draco, fending it off. “First it’s your bloody cat, and now you! Lay off, will you?!”

Snape glanced at the angry-faced Slytherin and laughed. “Oreo,” he smirked, stroking the purring kitten’s soft fur. “Draco’s a bit miffed, have you been hunting ferrets again?”

Draco glared at him exasperatingly. “I’ve had it up to here with all the stupid ferret references,” said Draco annoyed, but then adding with a slight gleam in his eye. “Hey wait, don’t eagle-owls like to *eat* small, annoying kittens...?”

Snape looked at him sharply.

“Don’t you dare—”

Draco grinned at him lazily. “Oh dear, old chap, you seem to be getting a bit miffed...”

“I mean it, Malfoy.”

Draco sighed and shrugged. “Get over yourself,

Severus,” he said, and they entered the doors to prepare for their next class.

Chapter Seven

~ In which Snape becomes the villain ~

The days soon passed quickly by as the weather grew colder. It had been nearly two months since Draco, Ginny and Severus had gotten lost in the Forbidden Forest, and it now seemed to the infamous trio like a strange and wonderful dream, all troubles and pains forgotten. It was probably because so much had happened between then and the present that the details of their hardship were far from their minds.

Severus had shown Draco the hidden garden by the lake (“What the hell is this place doing here?”) and they had set to work weeding the barely visible lawn and replacing the worn out path. Severus was rather surprised to notice that Draco didn’t complain when they were required to shift the huge stones into place for cleaning. He guessed that he too was feeling restless, and had become used to trekking for hours in the forest. Or maybe it was just because Severus could lift with ease, boulders that Draco could only roll.

Whatever the reason, Severus had noticed a difference in Draco. Even Ginny when they were practising duelling against each other found that more force seemed to come from Draco’s hexes than ever before.

Along with the Duelling Club, Quidditch practise, fixing up the garden, and the usual homework and detentions, Severus barely had time to revisit his office every now and then to continue his potion brewing.

Deciding to dash down before lunch, Severus packed up his Charms books hurriedly and left the classroom. To his dismay he collided head on with Professor Garwood.

“Ah, Mr Snape! I seem to recall you mentioning that you take Muggle Studies. I assume you’re on your way to the casting now?”

Severus's face dropped. He'd completely forgotten about the awful play. Ginny's class had been writing it for the past month, drawing heavy inspiration from the Muggle fairytale, Flashdance.

"Yeah, I suppose." His face brightened. "Except I've been feeling sort of ill lately. I might have to visit the hospital wing first..." And then never show up, he finished mentally.

Garwood smiled indulgently. "Feeling butterflies already? A confident young man like you? Nonsense! Come on, Professor Mumble requested my presence. You can direct me to the room."

"But—"

"Severus!" Draco yelled, peeling himself from the mass of Slytherins trooping down the hall. "Lunch!"

Severus shrugged at Garwood apologetically. "Lunch," he agreed. "I'm absolutely starving."

"You said you were ill."

Severus clutched his stomach. "I'm ill with hunger."

Garwood frowned at him and Draco marched up, grinning suggestively. "*Hello, Professor.*"

"Mr Malfoy, do you do Muggle Studies?"

Draco snorted. "No!" Then he turned towards Snape. "Oh, that's right! You've got casting for your Muggle play this lunch!" Severus glared at him. "Ginny was going on about it. Apparently there's *singing*."

Draco went off into guffaws of laughter and Professor Garwood gave him a disapproving look. "I suppose you know where it is then," she said.

"Oh, yes." Draco grinned, motioning him to follow. "Come on, Severus, or we'll be late."

Severus groaned and Garwood frowned at him a second time. "Coming..." he muttered. He cast a sulky look at Garwood who started to walk in front of him. "Professor, what does Mumble need *you* for?"

"Moral support," said Garwood breezily. "Cheer up, Mr

Snape. I'm sure your lunch won't eat itself."

Severus glowered, wishing that Mimble had chosen any other Professor to help him control the students. He kicked at the hem of Draco's robe.

To his annoyance, Draco just glanced over his shoulder and winked. "You know," he said to Garwood. "I bet Severus is going to get the lead role." Severus kicked his robe harder and Draco beamed. "He has the voice of an angel."

Garwood cleared her throat. "Is it much further?"

"Nearly there. Are you going to Hogsmeade on Friday night, Professor? I believe we still owe you Butterbeers."

Severus fumed behind them but Garwood didn't notice. She smiled at Draco. "Of course."

As the three of them rounded the corner, they were met with Mimble's voice yelling over uproarious cheering. Garwood walked through the doorway of the old classroom and the fourth and fifth years' cheering died down. Mimble hurried towards her from the other side of the room, while Woodley leapt from the collapsible stage.

"I'm glad you're here," Mimble muttered. "These students don't seem to value my opinion at all."

Garwood raised her eyebrows. "That's unfortunate." She motioned to Draco and Severus. "Here, I've brought more recruits."

Mimble looked at Draco. "You're not in my class."

"Oh, I'm just here to observe," said Draco. "But Muggles are *so* interesting, aren't they? I'm absolutely obsessed with comblutors and the internets."

Mimble's frown dissipated. "I do love comblutors."

"You do realise," said Ginny, sidling up to Mimble and snorting at Draco's earnest expression. "He's taking the piss."

"Language, Miss Weasley," said Mimble. "Although the accusation offends me even more. Five points from Gryffindor for being cynical."

Draco caught Severus's eye. Unable to help himself, Severus burst out laughing.

Ginny rounded on him and crossed her arms. "Severus," she said, her eyes gleaming. "I don't suppose you'd like to try out next?"

"Certainly not," said Severus, though hesitating at Garwood's encouraging smile. "I mean... that is... What's the part?"

"The dashing hero!" declared Draco. "There is no lesser part that Severus Snape could—ow!"

Ginny stepped off Draco's foot. "Don't be stupid. Philip's the lead; everybody voted." She turned to Severus. "No offence, it's just that everyone thought you were more... well, the *villain* type."

"The villain?" repeated Severus, scowling.

Garwood, Mimble, Draco and Ginny stared at his face and started nodding at each other.

"I'd always thought he had a villainous sort of face," said Mimble.

Snape's scowl intensified. "Certainly *not*," he repeated. "I just wanted a background part." He paused, realising that half the room had ceased their conversations and were staring at him in anticipation. He glared around at them. "You hear that? You can't make me do something I don't want to do! I am *not* playing the villain. The mere concept offends me. Besides, I'm in *Gryffindor*... I'm not evil."

"He's so tortured," whispered one of the Ravenclaw girls.

Severus rounded on her. "No, I'm not!" he said angrily. "You stupid girl!"

All of a sudden a great gust of wind swept through the classroom window, billowing out Severus's cloak to its full length around him. Mimble gave a slight scream and the room gasped. The Ravenclaw girl started fanning her face.

“Genius,” said Woodley, clapping his hands.

“Brilliant,” said Garwood.

“Absolutely inspired,” said Draco.

Ginny threw her arms around a flushed Severus. “I *knew* you’d be perfect!”

Feeling absolutely humiliated, Severus found himself unable to say a word. When did everybody stop taking him seriously?

It was very late at night when Severus crept back up to his dormitory. He’d checked on his potions and spoken to Dumbledore, who didn’t seem at all worried that he was no closer to finding a cure. He’d even hired a temporary Potions Master to replace him.

Pulling off his shoes, Severus slid into bed. He wondered if Dumbledore ever expected him to change back. A tinge of guilt grew in Snape’s stomach. It was so easy to get distracted by the day-to-day life at Hogwarts. Life had seemed much simpler at the beginning of term. Back then there were no week-long treks in the Forbidden Forest or idiotic plays or female Professors that didn’t know that he was actually a couple of years older than them...

He didn’t know how or why, but he would eventually change back, and then... *then* he would claim his prize.

“Ron!”

“Mmmhmm...?”

“Ron! Wake up!”

“Urrrgh...”

“Quidditch prac. Come on!”

Ron Weasley rubbed his eyes and sat up in bed. “Jeez, Harry, I think Oliver was a bad influence on you...”

“Look!” replied Harry Potter in satisfaction. “Snape’s

still sleeping!”

Ron blinked and stared across at a peaceful looking Severus in the next bed.

“Well, have fun—” Ron started to say, when he remembered that he had been chosen for Chaser during Trials the day before.

His enthusiasm seemed to wane as he felt a breeze of cold air blow in through the window. He was going to shoot Harry a wheedling look, but changed his mind when he saw how serious his best friend looked.

“All right,” said Ron wearily. “I’ll go get changed and you can wake our dear lamb.”

Harry grinned at him and stifled a laugh as Snape’s face twisted into a very un-lamb-like frown.

“Good morning, Snape,” said Harry.

Harry didn’t think that anyone could glare at him as soon as they opened their eyes but Severus proved him wrong.

“You walk like an elephant, Potter,” Snape sneered. “I think it’s a rotten morning.”

“Right,” said Harry. “Well, I hope you’re ready for Quidditch practise.”

Snape threw him an insolent look, leaped out of bed, and threw on a nearby robe over his drawers. “Ready, when you are, *Potter*.”

“OK...” Harry murmured, raising an eyebrow.

“All right,” said Ron after a pause, coming out of the bathroom untidily dressed with a comb stuck in his flaming hair. “You can use the—eh? How did you...?”

Ron stared bleary-eyed at an already dressed Severus. “Don’t you ever change?”

“Don’t be stupid,” sneered Severus. “I’m going down.”

And with that, Snape caught up his cloak and strode from the room in a flurry of billowing black. Ron jumped out of the way just in time to see a ball of black fur streak past his ankles after its master.

“Well...better get going then,” said Harry, with a quiet

smile at the expression on Ron's face.

"Yeah," Ron replied, not listening but following anyway. "But I swear, that cat is *evil*."

The boys trooped down the stairs in rising spirits, Ron complaining indignantly about cats and Harry laughing as he agreed with him.

"I admit that Crookshanks is all right, once you get to know him, but—"

Ron stopped suddenly at the base of the stairs causing Harry to run into him. In the common room Ginny Weasley was cuddling Oreo and chatting happily with Snape.

"Oh, hullo, Ron," she said. "Thought I'd watch you practise...if that's OK?"

Harry saw her glance at him shyly and he couldn't resist grinning back. "I'm sure Ron doesn't mind," he said with a smile, hoisting his new broom over his shoulder.

"Ron does mind," said Ron, looking from her to Snape. "But I suppose its all right...just don't go squealing off to Malfoy about—"

"Ron!"

"All right, OK, just joking..." her brother said hastily. "But I still don't see why you talk to the..."

It was here that Ron's voice came down to an inaudible mutter and Ginny gave him a withering look. Severus was just about to say something biting in response when his gaze flickered to Ginny and he contented himself with a scowl instead.

"Hullo, Harry!" came a chorus of voices. "We actually got up on time!"

Severus looked at Fred and George Weasley in dislike, but they didn't seem to notice as they slapped him on the back.

"How's our spiffing Keeper, eh?"

"Not giving our Captain any trouble?"

"Glad to hear it!"

“And how’s ickle Ronniekins?”

“All ready to stuff up?”

“Glad to hear it!”

“And where are the other lovely Chasers?”

“Over here,” came two feminine voices behind them.

“Glad to hear it!” the twins chorused finally, magically managing to slap everyone on the back at once.

“Er...OK...let’s go then,” said Harry awkwardly, looking around at the unusually enthusiastic team.

“We’ve got two hours.”

“Good one, Ron!”

Ron grinned at his best friend as he caught the Quaffle in a perfect swoop and threw it over to a passing Katie Bell.

“Yeah, you’re not that bad,” Katie smiled, as she caught it deftly and aimed at the goal.

A hand hardened by physical labour stopped the ball in mid-flight and hefted it across the field.

“Snape! You’re meant to be staying in goals!” cried Harry, annoyed.

“It’s boring,” Severus said offhandedly. “And besides, I am *around* the goals, and I am perfectly capable of stopping these pathetic attempts even from here.”

Much to his annoyance, Katie Bell laughed and threw a wink towards Angelina Johnson, who was practising a new formation with Fred and George Weasley.

“Oh, *you* can come as close as you want, *Snapey-boy*.” Katie laughed, fluttering her eyelashes.

Severus glared at her in shock and backed hastily into goals. “Idiot girl,” he muttered.

The two Chasers laughed and winked at their Captain. “It’s easy, Harry. All you have to do is use your...”

Angelina Johnson’s voice faded away as she saw the strained look on Harry’s face. Ron stopped grinning and looked where Harry was staring.

“*Malfoy*,” he growled.

Down at the stands, Ginny Weasley was chatting happily to a bemused Slytherin.

“What’s *he* doing here?” muttered Ron, trying to give him an evil look but failing as a Bludger hit him on the chin.

“Are we going to practise or what?” yelled the twins.

“Yeah, but—” Ron started to say, but then raising his eyebrows as Harry shook his head. “Coming,” he said reluctantly, giving Harry a curious look as he flew off.

Harry set his face into a wry smile and dove down to the spectator stand.

“No way!” Ginny exclaimed to Draco.

“It’s true,” said Draco smugly. “I’ll show you then.”

“All right, but I bet you’re—” Ginny paused, noticing a shadow fall over her. She looked up. “Oh, Harry! How’s practise going?”

“Excellent,” said Harry, hovering above them. “Hello, *Malfoy*.”

Draco’s manner changed and his face twisted into a sneer. “Come to throw me off, Potter?” he sneered. “I’d like to see you try, you prancing, little—”

“Actually,” said Harry abruptly, turning his eyes towards Ginny. “I came to ask Ginny to Hogsmeade with me—us—there’s a band at the Three Broomsticks for Hallowe’en tomorrow night, and they’re supposed to be really good.”

Ginny stared at him wide-eyed. Harry smiled at her. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Draco staring at him also, but with the coldest look on his face imaginable.

“I’d love to go, thank you,” said Ginny shyly.

“Cool,” said Harry, his grin widening as he jerked his broom upwards. “See you soon.”

Ginny’s heart skipped a beat as she watched Harry fly away. “What?” she asked Draco, who was staring at her insufferably.

“Can I ask you a question?” he said slowly, flicking his gaze between the airborne Potter and her light brown eyes. “Just what d’you see in him, anyway?”

Ginny smiled at him wistfully and looked up at the lightening sky. “He’s what I’ve always dreamed about...” she said earnestly. “I still dream about him at night, and I think I always will.”

Draco thought back to the night in the Forbidden Forest when she had whispered Potter’s name in her sleep. “So, you’re going to follow some mad dream?”

“We’re all a little mad, Draco,” she said absent-mindedly. “You know what I mean.”

“Speak for yourself,” sniffed Draco haughtily. “Then I guess that Woodley fellow is out of the picture then.”

“Oh, Philip,” giggled Ginny. “Oh, I don’t know...half of fourth year have already asked him out...so, you know...”

“No, I don’t know,” muttered Draco. “So, what d’you consider me and Severus?”

Ginny looked at him, taken aback. “Well...I don’t know,” she said eventually. “You’re just...well...*there*...I mean,” she said hastily, “—that’s not what I *mean*. I mean, I...oh...I don’t know! Why do you ask?”

Draco shrugged and lowered his frown to his hand. Ginny followed his gaze and clenched her fingers over her right palm instinctively.

“Well, like it or not we’re all still joined by your beloved oath.”

Ginny frowned slightly. “You say that as if it’s a bad thing.”

Draco shrugged once more and looked over his shoulder in dislike. “Tell Severus I’ll see him at breakfast,” he muttered, and strode quickly away towards the castle.

Ginny wondered why he had left so suddenly when she saw a bushy-haired fifth year coming towards her rapidly.

“Ginny!” said Hermione, breathlessly. “Did I miss

anything? How's Ron doing? Is Harry all right?"

Ginny laughed at Hermione's anxiousness. "They're fine," she said teasingly. "Just like all the other times they've practised, Ron's getting even better and Harry's doing a wonderful job of Captaining. Even our Keeper is practising hard."

Hermione looked at Ginny closely and settled down in a seat next to her with a sigh. "I don't know why I'm so panicky," she apologised. "It's just that...I don't know. I'm just worried about Harry this year, after the...you know."

Ginny nodded, her cheerfulness fading away.

"There's something that he's not telling us, I think it has to do with...Cedric... It's eating at him, whenever we have breakfast or dinner—any meals...he's withdrawn."

Ginny fiddled with her wand and lowered her eyes to the ground. "Has he talked to Cho Chang lately?"

Hermione gave her a shrewd look and shook her head. "No, he hasn't," she said. "I think that's one of the reasons also... He hasn't talked to her since last year. I think he's filled with guilt whenever she's near..."

"I know," said Ginny quietly. "I was at the Yule Ball too; I saw how he looked at her."

Hermione gave a start. "You...you still have a thing for..."

"Yes," said Ginny, flushing. "But I feel terrible."

"Don't," said Hermione firmly. "He definitely needs a spot of sunshine in his life, even if—"

"—Even if it's his best friend's little sister," muttered Ginny.

"That's *not* what I was going to say!"

Ginny grinned suddenly. "I know," she said with a smile. "Besides...Harry asked me to Hogsmeade."

Snape hefted another Quaffle away and looked down at the spectator stands in disgust. He perceived a laughing Hermione jumping up and down with an equally happy

Ginny. He snorted and continued training.

“Sorry for going all Parvati/Lavender on you,” said Hermione, regaining her composure and trying to stop unusually grinning. “Although it was actually quite fun.”

Ginny laughed, her heart still racing. “So you’re not...not...annoyed?”

Hermione looked at her blankly. “Annoyed?” she echoed, but then smiling warmly at her. “Of course not! Isn’t this what you’ve always wanted?”

Ginny nodded happily and Hermione laughed. “I’m happy for you,” she continued. “Why would I be annoyed?”

“Well,” said Ginny awkwardly, “–it’s just that...you’re so close...”

Hermione’s smile faded and she looked thoughtfully at the flying Harry Potter, laughing with his best friend.

“I know,” said Hermione absent-mindedly. “And I know I...er...*should* like him...”

Ginny looked at her strangely. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, isn’t it obvious?” Hermione asked, still absent-mindedly. “He’s *Harry Potter*; famous, brave, talented, with a heart of gold.” Hermione smiled to herself. “He always manages to say exactly the right thing to me if I’m upset, but he would definitely hex me if he heard what I was saying.”

Hermione paused, an expression of perplexity crossing her intelligent face. “But still,” she continued. “There’s something else that gnaws at the back of my mind...an indescribable feeling that pulls me towards...”

Hermione stopped, all of a sudden looking hot and bothered.

“What?” demanded Ginny, making Hermione jump. “It’s not someone else is it? It’s not... tell me it’s not my brother!”

“Don’t be silly,” said Hermione with dignity, as Ginny

went off into peals of laughter. “It is *not*, I mean, I don’t *know*, I mean... he can be the most aggravating and most stubborn person at times! Sometimes I can’t stand him at all!”

Ginny raised an eyebrow in a rather Severus-like manner. “All right,” she murmured, attempting to straighten her face.

Hermione hesitated and said with a sigh, “Look...don’t you feel as if you *should* like one of your friends—I’m not admitting to anything—but just...feel drawn to...another...I mean, you think you know them until they do something so unexpected... that you start to question not only them...but yourself...like something that—oh! I cannot believe we are having this conversation!”

Ginny stiffened throughout Hermione’s unusual speech and the other girl looked at her curiously.

“Do you know what I mean?” asked Hermione in surprise.

A tiny thought crossed Ginny’s mind, which she quickly shook off. “No idea,” she replied quickly, jerking her head towards the sky and catching a glimpse of Ron crashing into the far goal post. “Oh no! I *knew* he shouldn’t rely on those old school brooms! Ron!”

The two friends started to sprint over to where Gryffindor’s new Chaser was lying.

“Oh, I just hope he isn’t hurt or embarrassed,” Hermione said between breaths. “I hate it when he’s disappointed, especially if he starts hearing what people are saying...”

“—That he was only picked as Chaser because he’s Harry’s best friend?” Ginny scowled.

Hermione stared angrily into the distance. “Honestly, I just can’t believe...”

“Well, *I* think he’s brilliant,” said Ginny loyally. “And so does the team, so I don’t care what people say, they can answer to his sister.”

Hermione laughed and sent her a knowing look. “The

forest has really changed you, Ginny,” said Hermione. “Everyone’s noticed.”

Ginny smiled awkwardly at her comment and looked ahead at the figure of Harry Potter, swooping down to check his best friend.

“Well,” said Ginny softly, “—perhaps its time to start living the life that I’ve imagined.”

“Hey! Hey, Malfoy! A word?”

Draco looked away from the blazing fire, as a band of Slytherins led by Blaise Zabini gathered around his armchair.

“Two, if you want,” Draco replied.

The way the Slytherins had positioned themselves around him was one Draco didn’t like. He wondered if they were going to beat him up. As if reading his mind, Zabini held up his hands.

“We just want to talk, Malfoy,” Blaise said.

Draco shrugged. “All right, what is it?”

The whole common room suddenly went quiet, everyone giving him unsure looks. Zabini looked at him hard, and started to talk in his deep voice.

“What’s the deal with the two Gryffindors?”

Draco closed his eyes and settled back into his chair. “Who cares?” he said with a slight sneer. “What d’you want to hear about? Some sort of scandal?”

Zabini scowled at him. “Our fathers all wrote to us, and told us to keep away from you. It seems that you’re not to be trusted...”

“All right,” said Draco languishingly. “*Don’t* tell me about your pitiful plans to kill Potter, or Muggles or Dumbledore or whatever. Who really wants to become a Death Eater anyway? Travel the country, meet interesting people, and kill them. Oh wondrous joy.”

“You could’ve had a place of honour among the Death

Eaters,” said Blaise. “But after what happened in the Forbidden Forest... Crying when you took the Cruciatus...”

Draco leapt to his feet and bared his teeth. “I did not cry,” he spat. “And you must’ve been deprived of oxygen at birth if you don’t know that it’s impossible *not* to yell out.”

“Your father was a great Death Eater,” Blaise answered. “And you’ve shamed him.”

“He shamed *me!*” roared Draco. “Don’t you dare defend what he did! That pathetic excuse for a man; it was *him* that started snivelling when the Dark Lord recognised me as his son. He would’ve killed me for his fucking honour! His own son! How could you respect someone like that?”

Blaise Zabini gave a mirthless laugh. “And we’re supposed to believe you?” he scoffed. “You’re Dumbledore’s boy now.”

Draco’s hand itched for his wand but there were at least twenty Slytherins now, all gathered around him in a big mob. He contented himself with sitting back down and saying with dignity, “I will never be *anyone’s* boy.”

“Oh, yes, you will!” shrilled a voice from the crowd. “Why, right now, you’re Ginny Weasley’s boy!”

Draco glared at the speaker, who turned out to be Pansy Parkinson. “Shut up, Pug-face,” he said, giving her the finger.

“Here, enough of that,” ordered Zabini, who suspiciously sounded as if he was suppressing a snigger.

Draco looked at the larger boy in doubt and noticed that he too was looking at Pansy with intensely shielded dislike. Draco smirked to himself. That’s what you get for hanging off the most important Slytherin all the time, Pansy...

“What’s all this then?!” bellowed a disembodied voice.

The crowd hastily scattered as the Bloody Baron charged in, demanding they all go to bed. Draco also got up when

a solid arm grasped his shoulder.

“Tell me straight, Malfoy,” growled Zabini. “We all used to like you. You pulled off some cunning stunts on the Gryffindors in your day, and now you’re all chummy with them! Tell me why.”

Draco shook him off and crossed his arms. The common room was virtually deserted now, and the Bloody Baron was coming towards them.

“Five minutes, Baron,” said Zabini, still giving Draco a hard look. “Now spill.”

Draco eyed him in annoyance and finally shrugged. “I’m not *chummy* with anyone, and you know Severus,” he said. “Well he’s all right, so what’s wrong?”

Zabini also shrugged. “Our fathers didn’t think Snape had a nephew. They told us not to trust him either, since his uncle turned out to be a traitor.”

“Right, whatever,” said Draco, feeling slightly surprised when he heard that their Head of House was a traitor. “Well, that’s it. I hate all the other Gryffindors, you know that.”

Zabini raised an eyebrow. “We see you all the time with Ginny Weasley. Don’t tell me you’re—”

“No!” snapped Draco. “We’re not *involved*, and look, if you had to spend a whole week in the Forbidden Forest with someone, you would’ve had to have learnt to cooperate with them too, unless you wanted to wind up dead.”

“You’re not in the forest anymore,” said Zabini, still eyeing him suspiciously.

“Yeah, well, it seems as if everything’s still against me,” Draco replied bitterly.

“Look, we just don’t want trouble,” reasoned Zabini. “You *know* that serious relationships with those sorts of families are not—”

“WE ARE *NOT* IN A RELATIONSHIP!” exploded Draco. “Hell! I would rather kiss Longbottom’s *toad*.”

Zabini gave him a strange look and started to walk away. “So, what happens now?” called out Draco, insolently.

“I guess you’re all right, Draco,” Zabini hesitated. “We’ll make up something good to tell our fathers. Just... don’t go all sappy over the Weasley and we’ll keep our mouths shut.”

Draco grunted.

“Although, I don’t really blame you,” Zabini continued, lowering his voice. “*Our* lot of girls kind of resemble a bunch of modern art pieces.”

Draco snickered and Blaise gave him a grudging smile, as they both marched down to their fifth year dormitory.

The early morning sun beat down on two sets of shoulders, one holding a head of very light blonde hair, and the other of coal black.

“Looks good,” remarked Severus, straightening up.

“Yeah,” agreed Draco, sprawling out on the recently scrubbed stone bench. “I can’t believe no one knows about this place. It’s great.”

Severus looked amused. “What’s great? The garden or no one else knowing about it?”

“No one else knowing about it,” grinned Draco. “You may like to pull up weeds all day with no magic but – Hey!”

Draco shook his head crossly, pulling dirt from his hair that Severus had just thrown at him. “I’m prepared to overlook that, *Snape*, since you’re probably just nervous about tonight...”

Severus rolled his eyes. “I’m not nervous.”

“Why?” said Draco. “Do you have a plan? Besides seducing this older woman with a tankard of Butterbeer and your adolescent charm?”

Severus threw another clod of dirt at him which Draco zapped with his wand. “You did get your uncle to sign the

permission form, right?"

"Yes," said Severus as he stretched out on the lawn.

"Good," said Draco. "Since it's your first time there, I'll give you the full tour. We'll definitely have to go to the Shrieking Shack. You know what they've got guarding it? A *giant!*"

Severus raised his eyebrows. Only a select few knew why Dumbledore had placed a giant at the entrance of that cursed shack. He wondered if Professor Garwood would want to wander around Hogsmeade also.

"I told Ginny," Draco scoffed, "—but she didn't believe me. I'm going to show *her*..."

Draco's good mood seemed to fade. Severus propped himself up on his elbows, looking out at the lake. "D'you think Professor Garwood is single?" he asked.

"I don't know." Draco scowled, pulling out his wand and zapping a fly. "Can you believe that Ginny's going to Hogsmeade with Potter? It's embarrassing."

"Potter's an idiot," said Severus. "Ginny'll figure it out quickly." He paused. "At least Garwood's not married... I mean, she hasn't a ring."

"Who cares if she's married," said Draco. He crossed his arms. "Potter's so beneath...*everybody*. Ginny has got to be the thickest person I know."

The two boys stared off into space.

"I don't even know her first name," said Severus eventually.

Draco blinked at him. "Who?"

"You know, Garwood."

"Oh, right."

"Who were you thinking of?"

Draco scowled. "What makes you think I was thinking about someone?"

Severus shrugged.

"I'm heading back to the castle for a shower," continued Draco. "You coming?"

Severus yawned and nodded, following the other boy out of the hole in the hedge.

Although the drone of Professor Binns was just as stupor-inducing as usual, the Gryffindor fourth years were finding it difficult to sit still. Each was excited about the Hogsmeade trip that evening, and it was all Ginny could do not to dash down the hallway, whooping at the top of her lungs.

“And now, if you could all turn to page six hundred and fifty-eight of *The Founders: A History*,” droned Binns. “Chapter seventy-two: The Building of Hogwarts.”

There was a strained silence as each student attempted to tug their massive textbooks to the correct pages. Half of the students gave up, and Ginny ended up using her wand to find her place. Normally she would have just nestled into the pages and taken a brief nap, but that afternoon she felt too restless. Glancing at the clock, she forced herself to listen to a reading Binns, in hope that time would go faster.

“As you all remember, in our previous lesson we discussed the war between two of the strongest families in Britain, Slytherin and Gryffindor.”

Ginny couldn't remember at all, and suspected she'd fallen asleep earlier than usual.

“Long before Hogwarts was built, the two families fought violently against each other for generations. It was only at the end of their bloodiest battle yet, that each family's youngest son looked down at their slain relatives and wept. These two survivors – Godric of the Gryffindors and Salazar of the Slytherins – were unable to exact revenge. Their wands had been cursed with the same core, for they were brother wands and refused to fight against each other.”

Ginny gaped at him. “Professor,” she said, raising her

arm. “Isn’t that what happened to Harry and You-Know-Who?”

Binns stared at her and half of her classmates perked up at the mention of Voldemort.

“I deal with *history*,” said Binns. “Not the contents of Witch Weekly.” He resumed his droning speech. “The rest of Britain rejoiced, for they had lost much during the family feuds...”

The class resumed their fiddling, many faces turning towards the clock. Ginny looked at her textbook in renewed interest. She read ahead of Binns, looking for the brother-wands to be mentioned again, and eventually she found what she was looking for. However, after skimming the enormous page she felt disappointed. She’d been hoping to find a way that one of the wands could have beaten the other. Instead, Godric and Salazar had declared a truce and, together with Helga Hufflepuff and Rowena Ravenclaw, had used their wands together to build Hogwarts.

Ginny followed her classmates’ gazes to the clock. Much to her delight, it was almost time to go. Perhaps she should read during History of Magic more often. She picked up her wand to poke Philip Woodley, who was sitting next to her, when she stopped.

Woodley was wide awake and immersed in the last third of the book. His lips moved silently and his face held a look of concentration that Ginny hadn’t seen before. And yet there was something about his frown that seemed familiar, she thought, as she put down her wand.

Philip looked up at her and Ginny realised she’d been staring.

“All right?” he whispered, giving her a queer look.

“Oh,” whispered Ginny back, feeling awkward. “Just er...” She wracked her brains for something normal to say. “Are you looking forward to Hogsmeade tonight?”

Woodley’s eyes flicked back to his textbook. “I can’t go.

I've got detention."

"What?" exclaimed Ginny. "It's Hallowe'en!"

Luckily it was time to go and Ginny's exclamation was lost in the rush for the door.

"I can't do anything about it." Woodley shrugged but gave her a grin. "Hey, I'll still be at the feast though."

Ginny smiled back, but couldn't help but think that Woodley's smile seemed distant. "See you then," she said.

Pumpkins and skeletons hung from the ceiling of the Great Hall, and each table was filled with laughter and chatter. Nobody noticed a quiet Philip Woodley enter rather late. Nobody except a pair of cold, grey eyes.

"I'm so hungry I could eat a stoat sandwich," declared Ron, his mouth full of pumpkin pie.

"I know, eet ees fantastic," said an exchange student opposite him. "Ogwarts certainly ees not stingy when eet comes to meals!"

"Hear that?" said Ron proudly, elbowing Hermione in the ribs. "She was complimenting the house-elves! Aren't you glad you dropped the whole SPEW thing now? I told you it was pointless."

"Thank you, Ron, for bringing that up," said Hermione, putting down her utensils and glaring guiltily at the food before her. "I was feeling hungry too, you know."

"Well, eat up," said Ron generously. "There's plenty more where that came from."

Ron winked at the exchange student, who giggled in return. Hermione frowned and was given a half-sympathetic look from Harry.

"He's just trying to wind you up," he said laughingly, shaking his head at his distracted best friend.

"I know," said Hermione with a sigh, but then pausing as she noticed that he was smiling at her. "Harry,

you're...well...smiling!"

Harry Potter grinned in reply. "So are you," he replied.

Hermione felt a strange wave of relief wash over her and she started eating her food absent-mindedly. "So," she said. "Have you ever been to a Wizarding concert before? Or a Muggle one for that matter?"

"Oh, no," said Harry cheerily, "–but Dudley once went to a Muggle rock concert, and they nearly burst him all over the stage."

Hermione laughed. "Neither has Ginny," she replied. "I once went to a Muggle...er...Harry?"

"What's a *mugooluharrie*?" said Ron with interest, just catching the last half of the conversation.

Hermione ignored him and looked curiously at Harry. He had stiffened ever so slightly when she had said Ginny's name.

"Yeah, what?" he said awkwardly.

Hermione gave him a hard look and looked up the table at Ginny, who was sitting with a bunch of fourth years. "Tell me you didn't just ask her because of..."

"Give me some credit, Hermione," said Harry wearily. "Malfoy had nothing to do with it. Can we just drop it?"

Ron looked at them both inquiringly and waved his fork in front of their faces. "Cheer up, it's Hallowe'en! Hogsmeade tonight!"

Harry smiled faintly at him but Hermione snapped, "Oh, *do* shut up, Ron!"

Ron blinked at her and resumed eating, looking slightly offended and turning back to the exchange student.

On the other side of the Great Hall, Draco Malfoy irritably mashed at his pumpkin, reducing it to a runny pulp.

"What is it, Draco?" asked Severus, picking up his goblet and toasting an enthusiastic Slytherin third year. "I finally sit over here for dinner and all you do is stare into space."

Draco grunted, the other boy's unusually good mood irritating him more. "I'm going for a walk," he announced sullenly. "Meet you in the Entrance Hall after the feast."

Severus frowned at him and looked doubtfully at the bunch of Slytherins next to him. To his surprise, Blaise Zabini nodded genially at him and raised his goblet for a toast. Snape smiled slightly back and was about to nod to Draco when he noticed he was gone.

Happy Hallowe'en to you too, Mr Malfoy, he thought to himself, feeling slightly offended.

"You! Woodley! Wait there a second!"

Draco cursed as the slim fourth year quickened his pace and disappeared up a flight of stairs.

"Woodley!" he yelled again, feeling distinctly annoyed.

Seeing the boy arrive late for dinner had reminded him about that case of awful groaning again. He'd been feeling rather tetchy and restless and thought that confronting Woodley would be a welcome distraction. Draco continued bounding up the stairs, rounding a corner and stopping at a big wooden door, startled to find himself at the Trophy Room again.

Frowning as he shoved the door open, Draco strode straight into the centre of the room and stared at a huddled figure on the floor.

"Hullo," said Philip Woodley, getting up and holding out a scrubbing brush. "Come to help?"

Draco's lip curled and he snapped, "Why didn't you answer me before?"

"I had detention," said Woodley expressionlessly. "Couldn't be late."

"You have detention on *Hallowe'en*?" scoffed Draco. "What in hell did you *do*?"

Woodley smiled faintly at him and went back to scrubbing the enormous, marble tiles. "Well, what did

you want?" he asked, ignoring the previous question.

Draco frowned down at him, and crossed his arms. "Remember that day I ran into you here?" Woodley shrugged. "Well, while I was outside the door I heard a horrible groaning noise—"

"—That was me," said Woodley promptly.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "What the hell was *wrong* with you?"

A sudden coolness rose in Woodley's green eyes that seemed to infuriate Draco even more.

"Know that I'm watching you, *Woodley*." Draco scowled. "And don't think I don't notice the way you look at Ginny."

Woodley remained silent for a long time, his eyes still filled with the indifferent coolness before he spoke. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he said quietly. "And what do you care?"

Draco's scowl deepened, though forcing himself to step backwards as a tall shadow fell over him.

"Why, Mr Malfoy! Aren't you going to Hogsmeade for the evening?"

Albus Dumbledore stood in the doorway, looking quite hard at Draco and just seeming to notice Philip Woodley as well. "Mr Woodley, I daresay your friends are waiting for you also."

"But I've got—"

"It's Hallowe'en," said Dumbledore, waving his hand. "I'm sure whoever gave you the detention will understand."

Woodley tried to protest once more and Dumbledore gave him a hard look.

Draco glanced from Woodley to Dumbledore and left the room. As he strode down the stairs, he cursed himself for bringing up Ginny. Woodley was right; he really *didn't* care about that stupid Weasley.

Draco was soon down in the Entrance Hall. There was

only one cloaked figure left, tapping his foot impatiently and glaring at Draco when he came up.

“What took you so long?” grumbled Severus. “I’ve been waiting for ages!”

Draco shook himself, and concentrated on his best friend. “Did you get mobbed by a bunch of girls again?” he asked, patting him in mock sympathy.

“Yes. It was horrible.”

Draco laughed, his arguments temporarily forgotten. “And you’ll still only settle for that Professor?”

Severus smirked, twirling his wand between his fingers. “I’m a hard man to please.”

“D’you want a Butterbeer?”

Ginny Weasley smiled shyly at Harry’s awkward question. “All right.”

Harry grinned back and went off to the bar. Ginny sighed happily and looked around the crowded room to the mass of people dancing wildly in time to the live music. Her smile widened as she caught Hermione’s eye, who was dancing *very* wildly and most un-Hermione-like with a suspiciously tipsy Ron. As soon as they had entered The Three Broomsticks, Hermione had given her and Harry a significant look and had dragged a rather reluctant Ron onto the dance floor, hissing at him when he’d given his best friend an alarmed look. Harry and Ginny had sat down at a tiny table and talked politely for ten minutes, before Harry had just offered her a drink.

Ginny’s smile quirked as she noticed that one of the band members had picked up a pair of bagpipes, and was now playing them quite loudly. Lucky Draco wasn’t here, she thought to herself. He would have a fit.

Harry soon came back, interrupting her thoughts with two mugs of sloshing Butterbeer. Ginny picked up a mug but her gaze soon drifted wistfully to the happy throng of

dancing people.

Oh, please, Harry, she thought longingly to herself, *please ask me to—*

“Dance?” asked Harry with a quiet smile. “D’you want to?”

Ginny looked at him, feeling strangely startled but satisfied at the same time. “I’d love to,” she said, her voice louder than expected.

Harry grinned once more and walked hesitantly to the dance floor. Ginny followed him, just as hesitantly, and Harry was rather relieved to find themselves next to Hermione and Ron. Ron greeted them uproariously and slapped them on the back rather hard.

“C’mon, Harry! It’s my favourite song!” he yelled, grabbing his and Hermione’s hands and starting to jump around wildly once more.

Harry caught Hermione’s eye and they both started to laugh. Hermione grabbed one of Ginny’s hands and soon she was in the circle too, also feeling giddy from laughing and moving to the quickening tune. The cheering crowd soon parted away and clapped their hands to the beat, as the four laughing friends spun faster and faster. But the smallest of the Weasleys threw back her head and laughed the loudest. She was finally accepted. She wasn’t just Ron’s little sister anymore. She was now one of Harry Potter’s friends.

“*Lumos.*”

Severus and Draco raised their eyebrows at the massive toes lit up by the glow.

“Hullo,” said Snape pleasantly, craning his neck upwards. “Seen anyone suspicious?”

The sleepy-looking giant bared his broken yellow teeth in reply.

Draco sniggered slightly and yanked on Severus’s

shoulder. "Trust you to try and start a conversation with a giant," he said. "Now c'mon, it's nearly nine o'clock."

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Severus, shaking him off with dignity.

"Professor Garwood, remember?"

"I know that," said Severus, annoyed. "I meant, what did you mean with that 'giant' comment?"

"Oh, you know," said Draco vaguely. "I've seen you talking to a centaur, Hagrid's weird animals, and not to mention that bloody weird cat of yours! Where is it, anyway?"

"I had to leave *her* in the dormitory. She's all jumpy tonight and hisses at anyone who goes near her."

"*Tonight?*" muttered Draco under his breath. "Sounds like normal behaviour to me..." He turned towards the direction of The Three Broomsticks. "It's freezing out here, let's *go*."

It had rained quite hard that afternoon, and the dirt paths sloshed with puddles. Draco walked a few paces when he realised that Severus wasn't following him. He turned around to be met with a wet splat of mud on the front of his robes.

"That," said Severus, cleaning his hands with a smirk, "is for the Muggle Studies casting session."

To his surprise, Draco smirked right back at him and whipped out his wand. "As soon as it started raining I *knew* you were going to pull something like this!" Draco flicked his wand. "So *I* came *prepared!* *Canum conicio!*"

Severus gave a yell as he was pummelled in the back by a gigantic self-created ball of mud. Glaring at Draco, he also whipped out his wand and repeated Draco's spell. To the Slytherin's dismay, an equally large mud-ball started to rise up at himself.

"It took me ages to learn that!" yelled Draco crossly, before getting knocked to the ground slightly winded and horribly dirty.

Each of them started yelling the spell over and over again, until they could no longer watch the other boy get hit but barely had any time to avoid them themselves.

“Oh, dear,” said a stern voice, making them stop suddenly and barrelled over by the remaining balls of mud. “Not *fighting* again, are we?”

The boys groaned silently and Severus gave Draco a warning look. “Don’t say it.”

“This is all your fault,” Draco muttered, digging him in the ribs with his wand.

Professor Garwood eyed the two of them covered head-to-toe in mud and scuffling to get up. Unable to help herself, she burst out laughing and held out a red woollen mitten. “Since it’s Hallowe’en and you’re not on Hogwarts grounds, I think I may excuse you this once,” she said, as she pulled up Draco and then offered Severus her hand.

Severus looked uncertainly at her and took it gingerly. The Professor started to pull him up when Severus stumbled forwards into a puddle and found himself on his stomach, lying directly on top of a ruffled-looking Garwood.

“Gah!” he yelled, hastily trying to clamber off her without squashing her any further into the mud. He finally managed to roll away when he hit the shiny black boots of a certain Slytherin.

“Need any help?” asked Draco, suspiciously sounding as if he was holding back a laugh.

Snape pummelled one of the boots for good measure and awkwardly got up, hating the way he seemed so clumsy all of a sudden.

He took a deep breath and turned to face her. To his surprise Draco, who was smiling in a most charming way, was already helping her up. Severus glanced at her face, wondering if she was angry. As if in response to his expression, she burst into laughter once more.

“Oh, dear!” said Garwood. “You look as if you’re expecting a whole week of detentions!”

Severus made an odd, strangled noise in the back of his throat. Draco caught his eye and looked meaningfully from the strangely-deep puddle to his glowing wand. *Just trying to help*, he mouthed.

Severus clenched his fists, wanting desperately to throttle him. Garwood looked at him in concern. “Are you all right, Mr Snape?” She pulled out her wand and waved them both clean. “You look quite pale, are you cold?”

“What? Oh! No! Er...”

Snape paused, feeling a slight flush rise from his neck.

“Oh, good.” Garwood smiled. “Your colour seems to be coming back. Now, how about those Butterbeers?”

Seeing the way Severus was gritting his teeth at him, Draco dashed ahead hurriedly, calling out he’d save them seats. Severus mentally groaned but forced himself to slink next to Garwood, who was travelling at a much more leisurely pace.

Harry returned from the bar with three more mugs of Butterbeer and one tall glass of water.

“No, Ron,” said Hermione disapprovingly, as Ron Weasley reached for a mug. “You’ve already had *nineteen*, you need some water.”

Ron grinned at her and lolled his head on her shoulder. “Why d’you hate me?” he complained, as Harry started chuckling.

The music was still going wildly but the four friends had decided to take a break and catch their breath a while. Some of Ginny’s fourth year friends started to call her, and Harry waved her away with a smile.

“I’ll join you later,” he said, trying to find something Hermione could transfigure into a cushion for Ron. “Have some fun!”

Ginny beamed back at him. Life with Harry was already so fun, she thought.

She was just about to join her friends when her eyes turned strangely to the door, a gust of cold air sweeping in as it opened. Draco Malfoy entered, his eyes bright and his face flushed as if he'd been running. Making his way to the bar, Ginny noticed that his usually swept-back hair was slightly tousled, and the left part of his fringe flopped over his forehead.

Ginny looked around at Harry but he was still preoccupied by a dozing Ron, who was now being eyed mischievously by Fred and George. Her friends had all seemed to have paired off anyway, as a slow song was being played.

A very romantic song... she thought wistfully.

Ginny rubbed her palm slightly as she made her way to the long counter. "Hey, Draco," she said, taking a stool next to him.

"Oh, hullo," he said unenthusiastically. "D'you want a drink or something?"

"No," said Ginny with a sigh, watching the slowly swaying couples. "I'm fine, thanks."

Draco followed her gaze and looked at her oddly. "Why aren't you out there?" he asked, tossing a few sickles at the bartender. "You know, enjoying yourself."

Ginny met his gaze and looked suddenly startled. "Er...I was enjoying... I mean, but now...I don't know...I don't know!" She frowned. "What happened to me?"

"Weird," said Draco. He yawned. "Well, got to go. See you."

Ginny frowned at his abrupt speech and grabbed at his shoulder. "Wait."

Draco frowned at her hand and Ginny hastily pulled it away, giving him an annoyed look.

"Aren't you going to dance?" she continued, motioning towards the hearty band onstage. "I mean, they're never

going to come here again, you might as well—”

“Maybe...” said Draco suddenly, moving his face so close to hers that she stopped in mid-sentence and shivered at his warm breath next to her ear, “—some other time,” he finished off coolly, and strode away.

Ginny sat stock still for a while, only moving when Colin Creevey pulled her onto the dance floor and started to sway alongside her to the music. She looked over Colin’s shoulders and her gaze rested on Harry, who was smiling at her and waving. A couple soon obstructed her view and she saw that it was Hermione, dancing with an exchange sixth year. She looked away instantly, trying to forget the older girl’s words the day before...

“...I mean, you think you know them until they do something so unexpected...that you start to question not only them...but yourself...”

Chapter Eight

~ In which it is a very Slytherin Christmas indeed ~

“So, are you going to tell me what happened?”

Severus merely smirked at Draco before staring back up at the early morning sky. Draco nudged at him with his foot, feeling strangely restless for some reason. Severus batted him lazily away, stretching once more upon the trimmed grass of the hidden garden.

“Well?” said Draco impatiently, getting up from the stone bench and looking for something to throw at the other boy. “C’mon, you owe me.”

Severus’s smirk faded and he gave an angry exclamation. “I nearly forgot!” he growled. “You and that stupid puddle....”

“What?” said Draco innocently. “Don’t tell me you didn’t enjoy it?”

A small dark kitten leapt onto Snape’s chest, making his scowl fade somewhat. He automatically brushed it off but started to aim half-hearted bits of grass at the playful claws. “Forget it, I’ll get you back sometime anyway,” he said shortly, then after a thoughtful pause, “Where were you last night? How come you didn’t end up sitting with us after you ran ahead?”

Draco shrugged and kicked a pile of dead leaves. “Didn’t feel thirsty anymore,” he said in a bored tone. “And besides, I couldn’t stand that horrible music.”

“Ah, yes, the bagpipes,” remembered Severus. “Did you see Ginny?”

“I didn’t stay for very long,” said Draco. “Went back to the castle.”

“Well, she asked where you were,” Severus continued. “I think she wanted to talk to you.”

Draco grunted and started to walk away. “Is it breakfast time yet?” he asked over his shoulder. “I’m starving.”

Snape sighed at his retreating back. “What did you say to her?” he called after him. “She seemed kind of upset when I spoke to her.”

Draco made a face. “What, sore feet from dancing with Potter?” He rolled his eyes. “She’s always whinging about something—”

“You shouldn’t keep upsetting her,” said Severus, reluctantly getting to his feet to follow the other boy.

Draco scowled. “What’s with all the preachiness this morning?”

Severus scowled back at him. “Oh, shut up, will you,” he muttered after a long pause.

“Right,” muttered Draco under his breath, then louder. “See you, I’m going back to the castle.”

And with that, Draco left the other boy and pushed his way through the hole in the hedge. Severus stood still for a while, and looked out across the shimmering lake.

He wondered what was wrong with Ginny. She had been with Potter for God’s sake, so why was she all bothered when she had come up to him? And after all that, Draco had forgotten to find out what had happened between him and Professor Garwood.

OK, so nothing had happened.

Well...he *was* progressing...OK, so he wasn’t. But hell, if a student had started hitting on him when he was a Professor, they would probably be on their way to St Mungo’s at the moment.

Severus frowned. Now that he thought of it, if she did respond to his...’charm’...how would he be able to live with it after he changed back? It was all getting much too strange for his liking and the sooner he was back to normal, the better.

Catching up Oreo in his arms, he made his way to the hedge.

He really shouldn’t be putting it off for much longer, he had to change back soon... Even if he was still worried

about Draco.

The days passed by and Snape was still no closer to finding a reverse effect for his predicament. Magical fireworks whizzed sporadically around the Great Hall, but then Guy Fawkes Night had come and gone, and now bits of holly and mistletoe were starting to take over the hallways and common rooms.

Draco been acting distant lately, and Severus soon guessed why.

Draco had received an owl from home. It was his only owl from Malfoy Manor since the start of term.

With narrowed eyes, Draco had opened the letter, aware that the whole Slytherin table was watching him out of the corner of their eyes. Severus had watched from the Gryffindor table, and although he didn't know exactly what it had said, he was given the main idea when Draco left his place silently and walked out to the main notice board. Severus had also left his place and followed, but when he'd arrived, no one was to be seen. He had then examined the board and found that his guess was correct. Underneath the list of people who were staying for Christmas was Draco's name, written jaggedly in black ink. Severus had immediately taken up the quill and written his name straight underneath it, irritably noticing that the name 'Harry Potter' was near the top.

Well, at least he wouldn't have to go through that embarrassing ordeal of pulling a cracker with the Headmaster this year, he thought.

Ginny had also noticed the change in Draco. For although he wasn't snapping back as much as usual, it seemed to her even more depressing that he would rather walk away or simply ignore her than continue an argument.

“G’night, Ginny,” said a blonde messy-haired boy. “You goin’ to bed too?”

Ginny was about to answer Woodley when a pair of dark eyes darted at her from a corner of the Gryffindor common room.

“Er...no,” she said regretfully. “But good night anyway.”

“Night,” said Philip Woodley and swept up the stairs.

Ginny turned a questioning glance towards Severus Snape, who was occupying an armchair in the corner. “What is it?” she asked.

Severus glanced at her and started to stroke a purring kitten on his lap. “It’s Draco,” he said quietly.

Ginny looked at him uncertainly. “What about him?”

“Are you staying back tomorrow? Over the Christmas break?”

Ginny hesitated, wondering what was coming next.

“Draco is,” continued Severus, slowly, “—and I think we should do something for him.”

“Why?” she blurted out. “I mean, why is he staying?”

Severus gave her a significant look. “Don’t you remember in the forest?” he said quietly. “Lu—his father...remember what he said?”

“He is yours... yours to do what you will...”

Ginny shivered at that cold voice echoing in her thoughts. “I guess... I guess I hadn’t really thought about it,” she said in a small voice.

Severus scowled at the crackling fire. He’d been to see Dumbledore about Draco, only to find out that Lucius was still missing, and had been so since the forest incident. When Severus had asked where Dumbledore thought he was, the Headmaster had just given him a strange look and told him that he was sure Draco would be fine.

“I just don’t understand how someone could do that,” continued Ginny, interrupting his thoughts. “I mean, I

always thought Lucius Malfoy was a horrible person...but his own *son*...

Severus surveyed her darkly. "I'm not surprised," he said quietly. "I thought you knew? He's done this sort of thing before."

Ginny glanced at him sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Lucius was never the Malfoy heir," muttered Snape. "He had two elder brothers, twins. You come from an old family, you know how it works."

"What, the eldest inherits everything?" replied Ginny doubtfully. "But hardly anybody does that anymore. It's rather nasty and *very* old-fashioned."

"Well, the Malfoys are rather nasty and *very* old-fashioned," said Severus. "And Lucius was horribly jealous of his two brothers, and decided he'd do anything to be the rightful heir."

Ginny frowned in disbelief. "He can't have killed them," she replied. "And how could you possibly know all this?"

Severus stared into the fire. "My uncle overheard him telling his story to the Dark Lord. He made quite an impression." His eyes returned to Ginny's shocked face. "And you're right," he continued. "He couldn't kill them, not without being expelled from the bloodline and losing everything."

"So..." murmured Ginny hesitantly. "What did he do?"

"He poisoned their minds," Severus muttered. "Flitted back and forth between them, turned them against each other. They fought over a woman, and when they finally killed each other, Lucius married her."

Ginny joined Severus's gaze into the fire, horror rising in her throat as she tried to banish the conversation from her mind.

"Sorry," said Severus shortly. "I probably shouldn't have mentioned it..."

Ginny winced. "Not the best idea before bed."

"Well anyway," muttered Snape. "Back to Draco..."

“Right,” said Ginny numbly. “Draco...”

Severus stared at Ginny intensely. “You know he’s nothing like his father.”

Ginny blinked and snapped at him. “Of course I know that!” she said fiercely. “He’s *Draco*... not some horrible murderer who...who gives away Tom Riddle’s old school things for kicks...” Ginny’s voice died down to a mumble.

“So, you’re staying here for Christmas?” hesitated Severus.

Ginny’s creased brow cleared and she turned to face her fellow Gryffindor. “Of course.”

Upon the seventh stair, Philip Woodley heard the sound of scraping armchairs. His eyes didn’t twinkle in the torchlight as he resumed his ascent up to his dormitory. “Pull yourself together, man,” he said to himself. “It’s not *your* fault.”

Christmas Eve dawned bright and clear. The snow on the ground seemed to give off a sort of white glow, which all of the remaining students decided to celebrate with a snowball fight. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Woodley, Fred and George, and Katie Bell, were the first out of the castle to pelt snowballs at each other. Most of the exchange students had gone back for the break, but there were a surprising number of people left at school. Draco and Severus had rolled their eyes when they saw the big group of snow-covered Gryffindors streak past them, and had promptly edged back into the castle to ungraciously help decorate. Ginny had sent them a hurt look when they’d left, but had decided to follow them after a short while anyway.

She found the two of them using their wands to decorate a small fir tree with Christmas baubles. “Having fun?” she asked laughingly, as two shiny balls started slamming

each other with great force.

“Oh, great,” said Draco, annoyed as one of the balls fell to the ground. “Mine would’ve won if it wasn’t for you.”

Ginny grinned. “Yes, yes, it’s all my fault. Can I help?”

Severus smirked at Draco’s frown and slid her a box of decorations.

“Ooh! The angel! And she has red hair as well!” exclaimed Ginny. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

Draco glanced at her, his mouth twitching. “Not really,” he snickered.

“What would you know?” replied Ginny crossly. “Well, don’t you think so, Severus?”

“She’s all right,” said Severus, waving his wand a little too hard and setting a star on fire. “Oh, hell!”

Draco gave a snort of laughter, accidentally knocking a container of explosive glitter onto the floor. It was Ginny and Severus’s turn to snigger as Draco looked in horror at his green robes covered in pink glitter.

“Oh, Draco, you’re *so* pretty—”

“Pink is *so* becoming—”

“I just *adore* your hair—”

Ginny and Severus exploded into laughter once more before Draco scooped up some of the glitter into his hands and rubbed it violently into their hair. In an instant, they were pushing and shoving each other, scuffling to be the least glittery.

“Ahem...”

The scuffling stopped and three heads were raised distractedly at the speaker.

“Oh, hello, Hermione,” murmured Ginny, hastily pushing off Draco and getting off Severus. “We were just...er...decorating.”

“Ah, yes,” Hermione said, poker-faced. “Just wanted to let you know we’re having lunch in the common room. See you later.”

“Bye!” called out Ginny lamely, as Hermione left.

“Damned thing, get off!” cried Draco irritably.

Ginny stepped off the hem of his robe haughtily. “Get off yourself!”

“I was talking,” said Draco scathingly, “—to the glitter.”

“Well, I’m sorry for interrupting your intellectual conversation with the glitter,” exclaimed Ginny. “But you’re on my robes also.”

Even though he was covered with pink glitter, Draco managed to get up with great dignity. “You’re lucky it’s Christmas Eve, Ginny,” he replied, just as haughtily. “Or I would’ve been forced to take proper revenge.”

“Oh, you don’t have it in you!” Ginny laughed. “You’re too...sparkly.”

Draco rubbed at his face irritably and only succeeded in putting more on.

“Damn it, Severus! This is—”

“ALL YOUR FAULT!” snorted Ginny and Severus, laughing as they all headed off to the Prefect bathroom.

“A toast to our wonderful guests.” Albus Dumbledore smiled, raising his goblet. “A Merry Christmas Eve to each and every one of you.”

The few exchange students looked at each other pleased, and the whole hall started enthusiastically on the enormous banquet. Both students and staff were using only the two centre house tables, but both were quite filled up.

Draco and Severus were sitting quite away from the rest of the party. Ginny was sitting next to Philip Woodley and William Boot, pulling crackers with them and constantly giggling. Harry, Ron and Hermione were sitting opposite them, trying out suspicious-looking sweets from Fred and George. Ron gave a yell as his two front teeth started to grow larger and larger until they pierced his slice of plum pudding. Hermione looked at

them in dislike, tapping them with her wand and reverting them back to normal. Severus gave a snort of laughter at the sight, but hastily stopped when Hermione spun around and gave him a sharp look.

Severus looked instead at a surly-looking Draco, who seemed to be picking at his food. "Not hungry?"

Draco grunted in reply.

"Try the pudding, it's my favourite," Severus continued, unconvincingly taking a bite and choking at the sweetness.

Draco looked at the plate in disinterest and shoved an enormous piece into his mouth. "Urgh," he muttered with his mouth full. "Wot-the-'ell?"

Draco grabbed the nearest napkin and removed a shiny silver Sickle from his mouth.

"Guess it's your lucky day," said Philip Woodley, who had come over to retrieve a rocket-like hat that had landed nearby.

Draco scowled at him and flicked the silver Sickle across the table in annoyance. "We had Galleons at home," he muttered, rising to leave.

"Draco..." began Snape.

Draco scowled. "What?"

Severus sighed. "See you tomorrow," he said. "Good night."

If Draco was surprised at these final words, he didn't show it. "Night," he said finally, and left the hall.

Severus turned his head to glance at Ginny and saw that she was already looking over at him, an expression of slight pity written on her face.

Tomorrow, he told her with his eyes, was going to be the best damned Christmas Draco Malfoy had ever had.

"What's wrong, Harry?"

Hermione detached herself from the singing Gryffindors

and sat next to the silent boy-wizard.

“Ah, nothing,” replied Harry with a smile. “I’m just feeling kind of tired.”

“You are not!” exclaimed Ron, who had noticed them not joining in the singing. “C’mon! It’s Christmas Eve! Be merry!”

Harry laughed as Ron took up Hermione’s hands and started to jig.

“How many Butterbeers did you drink this time, Ron?”

“Oh, c’mon! Have some fun before someone remembers you’re a Prefect!” cried Ron, grinning and avoiding the question. “Don’t be like Ginny! You’re not going to bed early too, are you?”

Harry’s grin faded somewhat and Hermione sent him a strange look before turning to Ron. “It isn’t early,” she said. “It’s ten o’clock, and I’m sure Harry is going to be the only one conscious enough to open his presents tomorrow morning.”

Ron frowned at her. “Well, if Harry’s going to sit here, then so am I,” he announced taking up the armchair next to Harry’s and looking stubbornly into the common room fire.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Fine. I’m going to go dance, see you later.”

Ron threw a sideways glance at his best friend and Harry laughed. “Go on, there’s always tomorrow night. I promise I’ll be stupid alongside you then, OK?”

Ron grinned at him affectionately and moved off, narrowly avoiding one of the twins’ noise-free fireworks.

Harry resumed his gaze once more into the diminishing fire.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “Tomorrow I’ll have fun...when everyone’s here...”

Ginny opened her eyes and sat up in bed. Her head spun

from the sudden movement, but she quickly tuned in to her surroundings as she'd been trained to in that eventful week at the start of term. Glancing at the clock on her bedside table, she cursed softly to herself. She got quietly out of bed and headed for the adjoining bathroom, careful not to wake the other girls. "Oh, great, no time to get changed," she muttered to her reflection, as she quickly splashed cold water on her face.

She wondered how she could have overslept like this, she was certain that she had taught herself to get up whenever she'd planned to and had even gone to bed early. Ginny sighed and finished brushing her teeth. She caught up her hair in a messy ponytail and padded silently down the stairs.

"I thought you weren't coming," said a deep voice, making her jump.

Ginny frowned at the speaker and brushed an insistent lock of hair from her face. "Of course I'm coming," she said annoyed. "I just...slept in...that's all..."

Severus Snape looked from her deep blue pyjamas to her tousled red hair. "Really?" he said rather dryly, smoothing back his perfect short hair. "I couldn't tell."

"Oh, it's three a.m., Severus," Ginny shot back. She looked him up and down. "And it's Christmas! Why d'you *always* insist on wearing black robes?"

Severus gave her a withering look. "Because it matches my soul." He started for the door. "We have to hurry; I locked Oreo in the dormitory and she'll be scratching everyone's eyes out any minute now."

Ginny nodded and moved quickly towards the portrait hole. "Well?" she asked a suddenly stock-still Severus. "You're the one who said to hurry up!"

"Maybe we could wait a while..." muttered Severus slowly, glancing up the stairs with a nasty smile.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Come *on!*"

Severus sighed and followed.

“Give me your sword, son.”

Draco’s face twisted into an expression of pure hatred.

“I am not your son,” he spat. “And I never will be.”

“We are of the same blood...you know that, my son.”

The man’s voice was low and menacing now, as he pulled back his hood.

“You...” breathed the boy. “You will pay for this...”

“Oh, I do not think so, Draco,” sneered the voice.

“Poor, poor, Draco...Draco...Draco...”

“Draco?”

“*STUPEFY!*”

Ginny Weasley gave a cry and was just about to hit the floor when a pair of muscular arms caught her.

“*WHAT ARE YOU DOING?*” shouted Severus, laying Ginny on the floor of the dormitory and bringing his wand to her temple. “*Enervate.*”

Draco stared at them in horror, looking from his wand to the slowly awakening Ginny. “Severus?” he breathed. “Ginny?”

Ginny opened her eyes slowly and blinked at a confused Draco still sitting up in bed. “Happy Christmas to you too,” she said weakly, getting up and stretching. “Thought we’d surprise you... Never do that again...”

Draco stared at them both, slightly stunned. Severus cleared his throat. “Er...yes...Merry Christmas, Draco,” he said sunnily, as if they had planned the whole thing as a pantomime. “Er...*did* we surprise you?”

Severus gave Ginny a ‘well-that-didn’t-go-too-well-did-it?’ look, which Ginny returned whole-heartedly.

Draco rubbed his eyes. “*What...are you two...doing...here?*”

“Well...” began Ginny.

“I thought—”

“We thought—”

“You could do with some—”

“Christmas cheer,” finished off Ginny firmly, waving a hand at Severus’s frown.

“You got up at—” Draco squinted at his grand bedside clock. “—*five a.m.* to come down here and—”

“What are friends for?” said Severus.

“It was actually three a.m.,” Ginny added.

“—scare the living hell out of me?” Draco finished off disbelievingly.

Snape rubbed the back of his neck and Ginny shuffled awkwardly.

Draco sat still for a while, trying to collect his thoughts. He looked around his empty Slytherin dorm and fully took in the situation. He was sitting in bed, his wand still tightly clenched in his fist, Severus giving him an almost anxious look as he was absent-mindedly poking his mirror, and Ginny, of all people not-properly-dressed, had now taken to bouncing up and down upon Blaise Zabini’s bed.

“How did you get in here?” Draco asked suspiciously. “And how did you get our password?”

Ginny gave Severus a disapproving look. “Severus bullied a Slytherin first year into giving it to him.”

“I did not,” he defended. “I asked him nicely and he said something rude, so I asked him more forcefully and he graciously replied.”

“Severus punched his head,” Ginny explained.

But Draco was still too stunned to snigger, and shook his head once more. “I still can’t believe you two are here,” he said slowly. “I mean, hell, I think this is the first time a pair of Gryffindors have actually made it in here without getting stun—er—hexed...” he finished hastily, avoiding Ginny’s gaze.

To his surprise, Ginny grinned back. “Actually,” she said slyly, “—the real reason we came were to see those

pyjamas... Erotic mauve...”

Draco fought back the urge to pull the covers back over himself. “Looking pretty flashy yourself, Weasley,” he shot back, “–in those electric blue ones.”

“You know Severus is the only one not wearing a pair...” said Ginny, shaking her head in mock shame. “I know he feels like the odd one out...”

“No, I don’t!” said Snape quickly, glaring at Ginny and not liking the sudden gleam in Draco’s grey eyes.

“Well, if you *really* want to spread the Christmas Cheer, *Severus*.” Draco smirked as he got out of bed and rifled through his enormous wardrobe, “–you would wear...*these*.”

Severus looked in slight horror at the lime-green, silky trousers and shirt that Draco was waving in front of his face.

“I am not wearing your pyjamas!” said Severus scathingly, jumping back as Ginny came swiftly over and started to jeer and wave the pyjamas at him. It was as if they had both suddenly gone mad.

“Come on, be a sport.” Draco sniggered, yanking the shirt from Ginny and flinging it at Severus. “Here, we’ll turn around while you put them on.”

And with that, Draco promptly grabbed Ginny’s shoulders and spun her around forcefully, so she was facing the same way he was with her back to Severus. With a sour expression and not feeling the Christmas Cheer at all, Severus started to tug irritably at his collar while inspecting the lime-green pyjamas gingerly.

Ginny had stopped giggling when she realised that a pair of surprisingly strong hands were gripping her shoulders. From the corner of her eye she followed the lightly tanned hands up to a silky maroon sleeve, and was suddenly conscious of a faint breath of air blowing onto the back of her neck. She levelled her gaze ahead once more, feeling vaguely annoyed and wanting to shake off the grip, but

her muscles not responding.

“Ugh, I feel like a leprechaun,” said Severus suddenly, making her jump.

She felt the hands instantly let go and Draco’s voice laughing and replying, “Well, you look like one too.”

Ginny slowly turned around, feeling a slight queasiness in her stomach that instantly evaporated when she heard Draco’s next words. “What’s with you?” he said. “You look like you’re going to be sick.”

“Don’t be stupid,” she said shortly, but forgetting everything else when she glanced at Severus and burst into laughter. “Oh, dear, where’s Colin when you need him? This is too priceless to waste!”

Severus scowled at her half-heartedly and threw his own robes onto Draco’s bed. “Never again,” he replied, but then poking his robes. “I’ll collect these later.”

Draco looked at him, surprised. “Why? Where are you going?”

Severus shrugged offhandedly. “To the common room.”

Draco’s expression darkened. “See you at dinner then,” he grunted.

Ginny laughed at him, earning an annoyed look. “Are you going to stay in here all day?” she asked innocently.

Draco glanced at their slightly twitching faces and raised his eyebrows in suspicion. “Why?” he asked. “What did you do?”

“Come with us to the common room,” suggested Severus. “And we’ll show you.”

And with that, the two Gryffindors started to march an alarmed Draco up the stairs away from the dormitory. “Stop it!” he cried, trying to shake them off. “I don’t *want* to go to your stupid common room!”

Severus smirked at him. “Neither do I,” he admitted, “—so that’s why we’re going to yours.”

Ginny giggled at the expression of disbelief on Draco’s face. “But you can’t...” he said feebly, trying to shake off

their grip once more as they marched him up the stairs. “I mean, you’re not allowed in—”

But Draco’s voice was cut short as he reached the top of the stairs and stared with incredulity at the transformed Slytherin common room reaching out before him.

The usual rich but gloomy tapestries hanging on the dungeon walls were covered with a sort of silvery material, which added to the effect of the enchanted snowflakes falling softly on the far side of the room. Where the floor was sunken next to the fireplace was a glittery pool of ice, which didn’t seem to be melting at all even though an enormous fire was roaring in front of it. But the thing that struck Draco the most was the remarkably life-like quality of the trees, which towered over everything and seemed to cover the ceiling with their ancient boughs and deep green leaves. It was like stepping into another world, from the tiny bunches of holly and mistletoe scattered around, to the soft silver snowflakes all over the thick green carpet, everything held a slight element of fantasy.

“You did it up to look like the Forbidden Forest,” Draco said quietly, feeling a jolt of familiarity and meeting their eyes for the first time since they’d entered. “Why?”

Severus and Ginny looked at each other, slightly disconcerted with his reaction.

“It was Severus’s idea,” Ginny blurted out. “It was supposed to symbolise... I mean, it was where we all became... Er...you know...”

Draco stared at the silent boy in front of him with an inscrutable expression on his face.

Severus ran his fingers through his hair uncomfortably. “It was Ginny’s idea too,” he muttered. “She helped a lot.”

Draco’s gaze flickered to Ginny and he sent her a gradual lop-sided smile. Ginny blinked at him and suddenly looked away, but Draco didn’t seem to notice as

he addressed Severus.

“You’re lucky most of the Slytherins are away,” he said in a strange voice. “You would’ve been dead.”

Severus snorted. “D’you really think they would have succeeded in kicking us out?”

“No,” said Draco simply. “But the force of their heads exploding would have killed you both.”

Severus snickered and Draco started to laugh, a different laugh from his usual jeer and snigger, not high but not very deep either, an infectious, almost comical laugh that made Ginny and Severus join in with him.

“You know...” said Ginny, catching her breath after a long pause. “Despite everything, I’m really glad that we were all stuck together. This year’s been the most fun I’ve had since I came to Hogwarts.”

Draco raised his eyebrows. “I hope you’re not getting all sentimental on me, Weasley.”

Ginny found herself smiling in return. “Wouldn’t dream of it, Malfoy.”

Severus stared at a gigantic oak tree. Just for today, he vowed to himself, he wouldn’t think at all about changing back.

“Is that—?”

Glancing over to where Draco was staring, Ginny grinned at Severus. Sitting neatly in the corner, snowflakes landing lightly on its smaller branches, was a familiar-looking fir tree.

“That’s the same tree we decorated,” exclaimed Draco. “How’d you get *that* down here?”

Ginny coughed loudly and Severus sent her an amused glance. “Ginny persuaded the house-elves to do it. They’ll also be bringing food down later on.” He gave Ginny a sideways look. “Though *I* could’ve talked them into it...”

“Punching heads is not persuading,” Ginny replied smugly. “And you forgot to mention that they also brought down the presents.”

Draco looked at them startled, suddenly remembering that there had been no usual cartload of presents at the foot of his bed, and that he hadn't even thought of it until now. A sudden coldness seemed to hit Draco, which Severus and Ginny didn't seem to notice as they started for the tree.

"What's wrong?" asked Severus, looking back at him.

Draco took a while to reply. "D'you really think I'd get presents from home after..." The Slytherin left his sentence harshly unfinished, his expression changing to a deep scowl almost simultaneously.

Ginny grabbed his sleeve and pointed towards the small Christmas tree. "Draco," she said softly. "Look."

But as Draco stared at the multitudes of different coloured parcels of all shapes and sizes lying beneath the thick boughs, his grey eyes caught the names inscribed on the small tags attached, and the sudden coldness seemed to clutch him even tighter than before.

Draco turned to his companions, his face slightly flushed. "You got me presents?" he stammered. "I...I thought I wasn't going to be here...so I...I was going to get yours back at the Manor...but I just forgot... I'm..."

"Don't be stupid!"

The two boys jumped at the sound of Ginny's harsh voice.

"Don't be stupid!" she repeated fiercely. "I never expected you to think about such a trivial thing as presents, especially with all that stuff on your plate with your father! I'm just glad that you're here with *us*, and not with *him*!"

Ginny glared at Draco, as if daring him to disagree with her. Draco stared back, feeling slightly stunned. A strong hand gripped his shoulder.

"She's right," said Severus, quietly. "And I don't expect any presents from home either. It just takes some getting used to, that's all."

Draco looked at the other boy suddenly, as if seeing him properly for the first time. He inwardly kicked himself for not realising sooner. Severus's parents were dead—killed recently in fact... And here he was, stupidly carrying on about his father, when Severus hadn't even his uncle here for Christmas.

Draco opened his mouth to say something when Severus frowned sharply.

"I...I'll see if I can dig up something to give you both," Draco muttered, glad that he hadn't ended up awkwardly apologising.

"All right," said Ginny impatiently, but giving them both a quick grin. "But let's have a look at these ones first, OK?" She pulled the two boys to the floor. "Ooh!" she exclaimed. "Here's one for you, Severus...and you, Draco! Ooh, is this one for me? Oh, look!"

"That had to be a record for getting the wrapping off," commented Severus, as Ginny waved an extravagant feather quill in his face, tickling his nose.

"Thanks, Severus!" Ginny sang, launching herself at him and enveloping him in an enormous hug.

"Get *off*," demanded Severus with dignity, though it didn't seem to have the same effect as Ginny had inconspicuously slipped the rest of her fancy quills into his hair.

Draco gave a snort of laughter and picked up the parcel that Ginny had shoved into his hands. His eyes flicked idly over the nametag, and his heart seemed to stop when he noticed the small 'Malfoy Manor' coat of arms stamped onto the surface.

"Look, I *do* have one from home," he said to the other two, forcing his voice to sound casual.

Severus and Ginny looked uneasily at each other and stopped what they were doing as Draco unwrapped it. Ginny gasped as Draco pulled a magnificent fur coat from the packaging and read silently the note that was attached.

“It’s from my mother,” he said briefly, scrunching up the note and tossing down the coat. “She doesn’t mention my father or anything, just says ‘Seasons Greetings.’”

“Oh, well,” said Severus awkwardly, but then picking up another package. “Here, this is yours too.”

Draco seemed to forget the coat and looked curiously at this new present, wondering who it was from.

“Er...you don’t need to open that one...” said a small voice.

The two boys looked in surprise at Ginny, who was looking distinctly green.

“Why ever not?” asked Draco, ripping off the string and starting to unravel the brown paper.

“Because—oh—don’t worry...”

Ginny’s voice trailed away as Draco withdrew from the paper a deep green cloak. It wasn’t fancy or expensive like the fur one, and had silver flashing letters on the back. Draco shot Ginny a strange look and stood up silently.

“How do I look?” he asked grandly, throwing the cloak over his shoulders and doing up the silver clasp.

“Like an idiot with a note in their hair,” commented Severus, snorting as Draco shook his head in annoyance.

Draco picked up the fallen note and pocketed it shamelessly. “What does the back say?” he asked Ginny.

“*Praepespetis*,” she said in an odd, strangled-voice. “It means rapid flying... It’s also a spell used in making broomsticks... Your Nimbus would already be under it of course – but how did you know that I gave it to you?”

Draco smirked. “Judging from how you keep looking at that fur cloak and this green one, I would almost think that you were embarrassed, Ginny.”

“Well I’m—”

“Don’t be,” cut in Draco suddenly. “I would rather have this one than some rubbish fur one any day.”

Ginny went slightly pink and shot him a suspicious look.

“Oh, don’t be silly,” she said half-heartedly. “You know that fur coat is worth—”

“If you like it so much,” cut in Draco once more, “–you can have it.”

And so saying, the young Slytherin swept the expensive cloak from the floor and took out his wand, zapping it in some places and muttering strange charms.

After sneaking a glance at a silent sitting Ginny from the corner of his eye, Severus turned his attention back to a present he was unwrapping from Hagrid.

“Finished,” commented Draco, putting his wand away and holding the cloak in one hand.

Ginny slowly raised her eyes to his face as he walked over to her. Draco met her gaze and held out his left hand silently. Ginny glanced at the hand, remembering how he’d held that same hand to hers on the night of the centaur’s oath. Hesitantly she took it, and immediately felt a jolt of electricity run through her as she was pulled upwards. She looked at him startled, but if Draco had felt it he made no sign, and, as always, he met her gaze once more with unblinking grey eyes. As soon as she was steady, Draco instantly let go and Ginny felt the strange feeling of power slowly fade away. She clenched her right fist instinctively and stiffened as Draco flung the fur cloak over her shoulders and deftly did up the clasp.

“It’s...it’s too tight,” she said feebly.

“Nonsense,” said Draco. “Your hair’s just getting in the way. Here.”

Ginny shivered as she felt a cool hand brush her neck and push away a lock of hair. Her eyes started to close and a sudden impulse made her bring her hand up and press it over his.

“Draco...” she started to say.

“HOLY–WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO OUR COMMON ROOM?”

Ginny jerked and felt the hand tug away. She opened her

eyes and caught a glimpse of the back of Draco Malfoy striding towards the stairway.

“Oh, hullo, Higgs,” said Draco. “A bit early for screaming at the top of your lungs, isn’t it?”

Terence Higgs looked mistrustfully at the younger boy. “You are bloody lucky Professor Snape isn’t here! Even if you do get away with murder – he would definitely hit the roof if he saw what you’ve done to our common room—”

“Good morning,” said a deep voice behind Draco. “I don’t believe we’ve been formally introduced. My name is Severus Snape.”

The dirty-blonde sixth year stared disbelievingly at the black-haired boy before him.

“I know who you are,” sneered Terence Higgs back. “And I also know that you’re a—HOLY COW—”

It was here that the sixth year’s voice drained away, as he looked past Draco and Severus and towards a red-haired figure, still standing stock-still.

“Moo,” murmured Severus.

“WHAT’S A *WEASLEY* DOING IN OUR COMMON ROOM?” shrieked Higgs.

“Oh, come on, Higgs,” said Draco in a bored tone. “It is Christmas after all. Good will and all that.”

“Oh, you’re for it, Malfoy,” said Higgs bitterly. “A *Weasley*... in the *Slytherin common room*.”

“Hello,” said Ginny timidly, coming closer but pointing to the sixth year’s bare heel. “Oh, there’s a hole in your stocking.”

“How embarrassing,” supplied Severus.

Higgs glared at his stocking and looked as if he was about to burst a blood vessel. “DAMN IT, MALFOY, I SWEAR I’M GOING TO...”

Ginny grinned. “You mean darn it,” she interrupted. “You really should darn the hole—”

“GET OUT!”

“What?”

“YOU STUPID GRYFFINDOR! *GET OUT!*”

“Now, see here, Higgs—”

“You too.”

“What?”

“I said, you *too*, *Snape!*”

“Come on, Higgs—”

“Shut it, Malfoy.”

“Will you just—”

“Cram it, Snape.”

“Oh, please, won’t you—”

“Suck it, Weasley.”

Higgs’ last words were answered to with a punch in the jaw. The Slytherin sixth year staggered and was just about to fall backwards down the stairs when a pair of hands grabbed his dressing gown and pulled him forward.

“Lie down, Higgs,” said a quiet voice.

“Who hit me?” Higgs demanded groggily. “Wait ‘til I get my wand.”

“Lie down,” repeated the voice of Draco Malfoy firmly.

Terence Higgs grudgingly stayed still on the ground until the dizziness cleared away. He got up slowly and looked at the three younger students standing before him.

“It was me,” said Ginny sheepishly, giving him a small wave. “I didn’t mean to, but it was pretty awful what you said...”

Higgs looked suspiciously at her. “Feels like you hit me with a brick.”

“Oh, well, what with Draco and Severus and my six brothers always fighting each other...” Ginny stopped hastily, realising that mentioning her brothers wouldn’t help. “Er...oh, look! The house-elves are here!”

And so saying, a multitude of seasonal-tea-towel-wearing elves began streaming through the door with delicious looking platters. One of them approached Ginny shyly and gave a quick curtsy.

“We will be back at brunch to collect the dishes and

provide you with more, Miss Weasley,” she said, looking nervously at Malfoy (who bared his teeth with a smirk). “Good day.”

“Draco!” said Ginny sternly, when the tiny elves had gone. “Why are you so horrible to them?”

“Who cares?” said Terence Higgs with a sudden gleam in his eye. “Bloody hell, I’m getting into this food.”

The unlikely trio eyed each other, eyebrows raised. Terence Higgs gave them an amicable nod and settled down on a stump by the roaring fire, with two jugs of Butterbeer by his side.

“Well...now that that’s over with, I think Higgs will keep the rest of the Slytherins who come down under control,” said Severus amusedly. “Let’s go look at the rest of these presents.”

Ginny started to smile as the two boys brushed past her, when she remembered Draco’s touch on her neck.

It had been so... well...it was hard to believe that so simple a gesture could make her feel as if she was floating on air...

“Draco...” she started to say.

“Just a sec,” he yelled, running past her and disappearing down the stairs to the dormitories. “Got to go fetch something!”

Ginny sighed and turned instead to Severus, who was sitting beneath the tree and examining a rectangular-looking parcel. His strong hands soon ripped apart the brown paper, revealing a large, leather-bound book. He ran his fingers over the soft, smooth cover and read the small cursive writing in the card.

*Dear Severus,
This is so you’ll never forget your time at
Hogwarts (and other places) with us.*

Love, Ginny

Wondering what on earth it was, Severus opened to the first page. Stuck in the centre was a photo of three untidy and dirty but glowing-with-energy students, shoving and laughing and jumping around as if they hadn't a care in the world.

"Ginny," Severus murmured. "How did you get this?"

Ginny beamed at him. "Actually, it was Professor Dumbledore's idea," she admitted. "I used his Pensieve to take photos of my memories... This one's when we just returned to Hogwarts, when we just realised that we made it back..."

Severus looked at himself on the page and snorted. He turned the pages and began to snort once more; only towards the end did the snorts turn into guffaws, and then real (though rather snide) laughter. When he reached the last page he looked up to find Ginny staring at him anxiously.

"It's brilliant," he said quietly, meeting her shining eyes with his own.

"Severus."

Severus blinked and looked inquiringly at a suddenly arrived Draco.

"Here," said Draco, handing him a long, hurriedly wrapped package. "It's kind of last minute...but I've been meaning to give it to you sometime anyway..."

Severus smiled cordially at him and took it, rummaging through the pile of parcels and throwing over a miniature one to Draco. "You open yours first," he said.

Draco looked curiously at the small box and opened it cautiously. Something gold immediately whizzed past his ear, making him jump in surprise and swipe out at it.

"A Snitch!" exclaimed Draco in surprise, staring at the whirring ball in hand. "Jeez...this is brilliant, Severus! How'd you get a hold of it? You're not supposed to be able to own your own Quidditch balls."

"My uncle gave it to me. For my fifth birthday, I think."

“You got a Snitch when you were five?” exclaimed Ginny. “But you told us your uncle was rubbish at Quidditch.”

“Oh...right,” Severus muttered distractedly, before turning to the long, thin package in front of him. “Draco, can I open it now?”

“Yeah,” exclaimed Draco, looking at him as though he was an idiot.

Ginny stopped unwrapping her presents from home and looked on curiously. She ran her fingers through her extravagant fur cloak. *How did Draco manage to make it fit so perfectly?*

Severus ripped off the paper enjoyably and smirked when he pulled out a dangerous-looking silver sword.

“D’you like it?” said Draco, almost anxiously. “I’ve got another one down in the dorm’ if you don’t.”

“It’s perfect,” announced Severus, his eyes gleaming as he leapt up and swiped at a falling snowflake.

Draco frowned as Severus stopped swiping suddenly. “What’s wrong?” he demanded.

Severus stared at the insignia beneath the blade. “This is a Malfoy heirloom,” he said eventually. “I can’t possibly take it...”

Ginny’s eyes widened as she stared at the blade, her recent conversation with Severus echoing in her mind.

“Well, I’m giving it to you,” responded Draco, scowling at no one in particular. “I’ve always had an extra, it’s my spare. I was going to teach you how to duel with it, since you’re teaching me and Ginny how to duel with a wand.”

Severus eyed the sword temptingly. “Why do you have them at school?” he asked.

“My mother sent me all my things a few days ago,” Draco muttered, looking as if he didn’t want to discuss it any further. “So anyway,” he began in a louder voice. “Are you going to keep it, or not? You know I’ve been looking forward to beating you in at least one thing and

I'm a bloody *excellent* swordsman."

"Such modesty," Ginny murmured.

"Yeah, all right," replied Severus, the shiny blade weakening his wariness. "I've been looking for a bit of a challenge..."

"Oh, you'll get one."

"How about some music?" suggested Ginny, eyeing a bunch of goggling Slytherins listening to a narrating Terence Higgs. Luckily his mouth was so full with food that they could barely understand him 'getting smashed in the chin by a brick'.

"All right, so long as it's not—"

A fast, sharp tune started coming from the common room fireplace.

"—Bagpipes," finished Draco grumpily.

Ginny was relieved to notice that the Slytherins had chosen to ignore them, and seemed quite pleased with all the food, Butterbeer, and even the music. "Come on, you two!" she whooped. "Let's dance!"

Severus raised an eyebrow at Draco who muttered something like 'Slytherins don't dance.' However much to Draco's annoyance, the group of Slytherins by the fireplace had left their food and had started moving wildly in time to the music. "Now *this* is what gives Slytherin a bad name," he said irritably.

Seeing that her two friends weren't going to get up, Ginny moved boldly over to the mass of Slytherins and started dancing with an alarmed third year. Severus gave a guffaw when he saw the third year try and escape into the crowd but failing, as the music changed and Ginny grabbed his hands for the Tango.

Severus put down his sword. "Hey, Draco."

Draco swiped at the evasive Snitch. "Yeah?"

Severus raised an eyebrow at him. "Aren't you going to go dance with Ginny?"

Draco turned to face him. "What?"

Severus's eyebrows raised even further. "You heard me."

"What?!" spluttered Draco. "No, I didn't! I mean, I did, but... Why me? *You* go dance with her if you want!"

"What?" said Severus blankly.

"*You* dance with her!"

"Why me?"

"Ha! Why *me*?"

"Because you obviously want to."

"*What*?!"

"Stop saying 'what'. Now, go on then, do your thing."

"What?"

"Stop saying *what*."

"*No*, I meant *go on and do what*?"

"You know what."

"No, I don't bloody know *what*."

"Well, you should."

"Well, I don't."

"Well, you should."

"Well, I don't!"

"Well, you should."

"Well I—SEVERUS!"

"What?"

"DON'T SAY WHA—"

"Draco, are you going to dance with me?"

Draco blinked up at Ginny Weasley, slightly disorientated. "What?" he said blankly.

"Forget it," snapped Ginny. "Severus, come on."

"Oh, no," said Snape instantly. "I refuse to touch any stu—er—one. Not anyone."

"Well, you can touch *me*," said Ginny indignantly, then blushing slightly when she realised what she had just said.

"Er... come on—I'll teach you the Tango."

And with that, the only Weasley who had managed to intimidate Severus Snape dragged him forcefully onto the 'dance floor'. Draco grinned at Severus's face, gave him

the thumbs up, and made his way over to the other Slytherins.

“Draco seems to be enjoying himself,” said Severus, gingerly putting his hand on her waist.

“Yes,” said Ginny absent-mindedly, grasping his other hand and trying to ignore a sudden realisation that Severus’s chest seemed to have grown even harder than it was at the Forbidden Forest. “One, two, walk, walk.”

“Er...” continued Severus, trying to get rid of the awkwardness he was feeling. “But don’t you think Draco’s feeling left out right now, I mean because we’re dancing and...”

Ginny frowned at him. “Look, he doesn’t want to dance with me and I want to dance with you, so what’s the deal?”

“No deal,” said Severus quickly. “I mean, he really does want to dance with you...”

“Why would he?” muttered Ginny grumpily. “He’s so...”

“Don’t say *boring*,” interrupted Severus. “And he wants to dance with you because... er... you’re a good dancer.”

“Thanks,” said Ginny, a little surprised at the compliment. “And I was going to say he’s stupid, not boring.”

“Oh, well, that’s all right then,” said Severus dryly.

Ginny sighed. “Why do all our conversations revolve around Draco?”

Severus glanced at the blonde-haired boy who was toasting his fellow Slytherins. “Well, if you just danced with him—”

Ginny frowned. “*Severus!* Shut up about *Draco*, I want to dance with you!”

Ginny’s irritated voice carried across the room and a few of the Slytherins next to Draco snickered. Unfortunately they had heard only the last seven words of the sentence and misunderstood the meaning.

“Hear that, Malfoy,” a sixth year imitated in a high voice. “She wants to dance with *you*.”

Draco ignored them, and looked at Ginny with his eyebrows raised.

“See what you’ve done,” hissed Ginny to an amused Snape. “You just bloody embarrassed me.”

“Sorry,” said Severus, though sounding not in the least bit sorry. “Oh, look, Draco’s coming over now.”

Ginny stamped promptly on Severus’s foot and clapped her hand over his mouth when he was about to yell out.

“You deserved that,” she said haughtily, but hastily removing her hand at the feel of the boy’s hot lips. “Quick, tell him what I really said.”

“Hullo, Severus. Ginny.”

Ginny glanced at Draco’s smug face and gave Severus a warning look.

“Come to take over?” asked Severus politely, ignoring Ginny’s vicious jab in his shoulder.

“Oh, I don’t dance,” said Draco cautiously.

As if on cue, the music changed to a slow waltz. Ginny looked at Severus in deep suspicion and noticed his wand was sticking out of his pocket in a hurriedly replaced position.

“Everyone can waltz,” replied Severus, smiling sunnily at Ginny.

Draco followed his gaze towards Ginny. “D’you really want to?” he said hesitantly.

Ginny glared at Severus and stepped forward to shove him when she was suddenly falling...falling...falling...

“Got you.”

Ginny looked up startled. She found herself half-lying on the enchanted snow, half-sprawled against a silky mauve chest.

“Sorry!” she heard Severus’s voice snigger above her. “I tried to warn you about that slippery ice but... oh well... I’m off to open the rest of my presents...”

Ginny moved against the silky shirt, wondering why the owner wasn't getting up. She tilted her head upwards to find Draco looking down at her with bemused grey eyes. Ginny hastily shut her own eyes and sighed.

"Go on, say it," she mumbled.

"What?" asked Draco.

"You know what," said Ginny, annoyed.

"No, I don't," replied Draco, just as annoyed. "Why does everyone keep saying that?"

Ginny ignored him and said, "You're supposed to say: 'I knew you'd fall for me,' like any normal person would in this situation."

Draco snorted. "That's stupid."

"So are you," replied Ginny half-heartedly.

"And that's why you're lying in the snow."

"And that's why you're letting me."

"You were the one who slipped over."

"Only because Severus pushed me somehow..."

"Oh, come on, why would he do that?"

"Because he's stupid," muttered Ginny sulkily, finding the scent of Draco Malfoy strangely comforting.

"What're you doing?"

"Nothing."

"You're smelling my shirt."

"So," said Ginny, irritated. "It stinks."

"It does *not*."

"It does," said Ginny decidedly. "It reeks of Draco Malfoy."

"Well, so do you."

"I don't!"

"You do, I can smell it in your hair."

"You're smelling my hair?"

"*Smelt*. When you went over I nearly choked on it."

"Well, you didn't have to catch me," said Ginny with a glare.

"You practically fell into me! I was saving *myself* when I

threw out my arms.”

“Oh, yes, it’s always about you, isn’t it?”

“Why else would I have caught you?”

“I’m sorry; I forgot chivalry wasn’t a characteristic of Slytherin house.”

“So am I, I forgot clumsiness *was* a characteristic of Gryffindor house.”

“I’m not clumsy,” replied Ginny, slightly offended.

Draco shrugged. “All right.”

“I’m not!” insisted Ginny.

She really is odd, Draco thought to himself, *when I agree with her she doesn’t believe me. It’s only when I argue that she’s sure of herself.*

“I don’t believe you,” replied Draco slowly.

“Ha!” said Ginny triumphantly. “I knew you wouldn’t!”

Draco just rolled his eyes. *She was so predictable.*

“So, are we going to dance?”

Draco blinked at her demanding words. *Well, maybe she wasn’t.*

“The song’s half over,” he stated.

“Well, we can’t just lie here,” reasoned Ginny, suddenly realising that they *were* just lying there, as they had been for half the song.

“Well, get off then,” replied Draco.

“All right,” said Ginny rather coldly, clambering to her feet. “Just don’t bother to help me up.”

“Well, I can’t even get up myself with you sprawled all over me,” retorted Draco, scrambling up after her.

“I wasn’t *sprawled all over you*,” Ginny replied haughtily. “And I’m rather hungry now, I think I’ll have some breakfast first, OK?”

“Good idea,” said Draco amicably. “Severus, come over!”

Ginny glared at a falling snowflake for no reason and proceeded over to the side table piled with food.

“Hullo, Weasley,” leered a Slytherin seventh-year.

“Want a seat?”

The enormous boy patted his lap and promptly passed out. Ginny stepped back, startled. Draco and Severus came up behind her.

“It’s eight o’clock in the morning and this boy has already consumed fifteen Butterbeers,” commented Snape disapprovingly.

“And he’s passed out,” added Ginny in disgust.

“That’s my Slytherin!” Draco beamed, patting him on the back. “This calls for another toast!”

Severus waved a finger at him. “You have to eat something first. Don’t drink Butterbeer on an empty stomach.”

Draco smirked at him. “What’re you, your uncle? Come on, Severus, it’s Christmas! Let’s see how much of a man you are.”

“You must be joking,” interjected Ginny scathingly, “to think that drinking—”

“You too, Ginny.”

“I’m not a man,” replied Ginny with dignity. “And I don’t intend on pretending to *be* one by drinking the weakest beverage in the world.”

A few Slytherins who were listening whistled at this last sentence.

“Weakest beverage, eh?” challenged Draco. “And I suppose you’re an expert on Wizarding drinks?”

“I have six brothers,” replied Ginny calmly. “Of course I am.”

The crowd of Slytherins grew larger and started hooting in response.

“You know you have to back up that mighty speech, don’t you?” shot back Draco.

“Ginny, don’t,” warned Severus.

“Don’t be stupid, Draco,” said Ginny scathingly, ignoring Severus. “I’m not getting drunk in a room full of Slytherins.”

Surprisingly enough, the group of Slytherins (who were mostly boys) cheered wildly at this.

“I don’t expect you to,” replied Draco, looking at her as if she was an idiot. “But let’s see if you can beat the Master Slytherin of Sculling—which is only one Butterbeer so don’t go mental.”

“And who is this ‘Master’?” challenged Ginny, feeling rather gratified at the Slytherins encouraging whistles.

“You’re looking at him,” replied Draco coolly.

Ginny looked around the room in mock surprise. “Who? *Severus*?” She shrugged at the Slytherin crowd. “He’s not a Slytherin.”

Draco scowled at the titters of laughter. “*No*,” he said coldly. “*Me*.”

A bellow of ‘hell yes’ arose from the Slytherin crowd and Severus tried to restrain himself from telling them how disgraceful their behaviour was.

Ginny cleared her throat, fighting to hold back a laugh. “How did *you* become the ‘*Master*’?”

“I’ve had practise at home,” said Draco haughtily. “*And* I’ve beaten everyone in this room—well, maybe minus the exchange students—so *beat that*, Weasley.”

Ginny’s smile vanished. “Oh, so it’s Weasley now?” she exclaimed. “Very well, *Malfoy*, I bet I *can* beat you in your little sculling game. Bring it on.”

“This is childish,” said Severus sharply, as Ginny and Draco scowled at each other and prepared to bring the identical bottles to their lips.

But the rest of the room was already chanting, “Scull! Scull! Scull!” and Severus gave up exasperated, as Ginny and Draco tipped their heads back and started drinking. A roar filled the room as both throats worked furiously, which grew even louder as both bottles were slammed onto the table at the same time.

“Finished!” they coughed in unison.

Draco and Ginny stared at each other incredulously.

“I beat the whole of Slytherin!” exclaimed Draco.

“Well, that’s not saying much,” said Ginny snootily. “Since all of my brothers, even Percy, can beat *me*.”

“OOOH!” chorused the Slytherins.

“When you two have *quite* finished with this foolish contest.” Severus scowled. “*I’m* going to have a bite to eat.”

Draco and Ginny just stared at him, then suddenly burst into laughter.

“Oh, dear,” said Ginny. “Severus is feeling left out.”

“Here, *Sev*,” sniggered Draco, shoving a Butterbeer in his hands. “Your turn.”

“CARN SEVVIE!” a voluptuous girl hooted from the crowd.

“*No*,” retorted Severus in his most scathing voice possible. “And besides, we’ve only got about fifty more bottles to last us all for the rest of the day.”

The crowd of Slytherins – along with Draco and Ginny – all started eyeing each other silently. There was a sudden roar and Severus found himself buried under a sea of students, each trying to reach the treasured bottles for themselves.

“GET OFF!” he bellowed, struggling to get out but only succeeding in getting buried further in.

The mob of students eventually cleared away, but only after ten minutes of hasty sculling, stealing of everybody else’s bottles, and a good deal of pushing and shoving.

“Where’s Severus?” choked Draco, halfway in between gulps.

“I don’t know,” gurgled Ginny back, trying to finish off her hoard before anyone else could get to them.

“I’m here,” said a very cold voice. Severus shoved aside a certain voluptuous student, spilt Butterbeer dribbling through his hair as he glared at them from the floor. “I am going to kill you both.”

Draco laughed and kicked warm snow in reply.

“Severus!” Ginny giggled, sitting down suddenly. “*Severus!*”

Severus scrambled to his feet, restraining the urge to throttle them. “*What?*”

“I think someone spiked all the bottles,” she said in a loud whisper, tickling the Slytherin third year she had danced with before (who now seemed anxious to get closer).

Glancing around at the mob of unusually blissful Slytherins, Severus swore. “Get up!” he said hastily, giving the leering third year a kick but pulling Ginny to her feet. “You’re not to drink anymore!”

“I’m not *drunk!*” protested Ginny indignantly, before bursting into hysterical laughter as Severus started dragging her away from the rest of the crowd.

“Sev’rus,” drawled Draco, starting to follow them but staggering over a passed out Slytherin. “What’d you do to the music? I feel like dancin’, yeah.”

The rest of the Slytherins gave an agreeing chorus and Severus rolled his eyes. “Fine,” he muttered, pointing his wand at the fireplace and flinching as the music resumed its screechy fast tune.

Reaching the other side of the common room, Severus flopped a giggling Ginny onto a couch. He glanced back at the mass of Slytherins in disapproval. They seemed to be getting very *friendly* with each other now, and Severus had to hastily rescue Draco from that same Slytherin third year.

“Draco, get *up.*” Severus glared at him, hauling the other boy to his feet and pulling back as Draco flopped over his shoulders.

“You’re ruinin’ my *moves*, Sev’rus,” slurred Draco over his shoulder. “I was gonna show Ginny how a *real* man dances...”

Draco gave an exaggerated wink and fell on his face. Severus’s glare intensified as he yanked him to his feet.

“You complete and utter idiot,” he said. “Now try and walk!”

Severus half dragged, half carried Draco over to where Ginny was lying. “Finally,” he growled, bringing his wand to the other boy’s temple. “Draco, *Redivivus*.”

Severus shoved the Slytherin roughly to the ground and proceeded to say the same words for Ginny. “How do you feel?” he asked reprovingly.

“Mmm,” mumbled Ginny. “A bit fuzzy but OK.”

Draco rubbed his eyes. “What’d you do? I still feel sort of funny though.”

Severus crossed his arms, still feeling grumpy. “The stuff won’t hit you all at once and but it’ll last longer. You’ll probably feel like this for the rest of the day.”

Draco grinned. “I can live with that! It feels impossibly glorious, like I don’t have a care in the world.”

“Yes,” said Severus with a frown. “But if this happens again, I’m leaving you two to get groped by that promiscuous third year.”

Ginny giggled. “He *was* kind of cute,” she murmured.

“He was not,” argued Draco. “You have abs’lutely...no taste.”

Severus rolled his eyes. They would never be having this conversation if they were in their right frame of minds. Dwelling on that fact, Severus decided to go look at his recently acquired photo album. Perhaps it would do them some good...

“His hair was cute,” argued Ginny back. “It’s all in the hair!”

“And what’s wrong with my hair?” demanded Draco, looking slightly offended despite his ridiculous grin.

Ginny shrugged. “Nothing... But s’always the same!”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothin’... I guess it’s you.”

“What d’you mean, me?”

“I mean y’hair is you, ‘suits you.”

“Yeah, an’ that’s why it’s *cute*.”

“Ha! You’re not *cute*!”

“What? Why not?”

Draco sounded slightly hurt at her last comment and Ginny couldn’t resist going off into a fit of giggles and grabbing Draco’s arms.

“Let’s dance!” she whooped. “You said you’ve got moves... let’s see ‘em!”

“I can’t *now*,” argued Draco foggily. “You’ve built ‘em up too high – it’d just be rubbish!”

But Ginny just laughed and dragged him into the crowd, joining in the wild circle of euphoric Slytherins. Draco and Ginny eventually pulled over a reluctant Severus and soon all three of them were moving wildly and ungracefully to the fast-paced music. The rest of the Slytherins cheered them on, pushing them into the centre of the circle and actually toasting them when the house-elves appeared with more food (and, to Severus’s dismay, more Butterbeer).

“HERE’S T’A BLOODY EXCELLENT PAIR’F GRYFFINDORS—YOU’RE WELCOME HERE ANY TIME!” roared a red-faced Terence Higgs, who was on his nth Butterbeer.

Severus rolled his eyes, knowing that all the Gryffindor love wasn’t to last, but he soon forgot any thoughts on that matter, for the whole crowd was dancing wildly once more – on the tables, in the miniature mounds of snow they’d made, even shimmying on the ice pool next to the fire. The hours flew by, the house-elves came and went, the snow on the dance floor became more and more churned up, and only when Severus noticed that most of the Slytherins had passed out, did he realise that it was six o’clock in the evening.

Feeling quite tired himself, Severus began collecting the multitude of presents to carry back down to Draco’s dormitory, looking forward to wearing his old robes. As

he went down the stairs, he briefly noticed Ginny lying back down on the couch, with a sprawled out Draco lying on the warm snow below.

“I’m dying,” complained Ginny, rolling on her stomach to scoop up a bit of snow and throw it half-heartedly at Draco. “My head feels like it’s going to implode.”

“I’m worse,” Draco groaned. “I have pains in places I didn’t know existed.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have drunk all those extra Butterbeers.” Ginny grinned, continuing to pile the magical snow upon Draco’s chest.

“You did too,” said Draco fuzzily, grabbing Ginny’s hand as she added more snow to the pile. “Stop that!”

Ginny slapped his hand lazily and tried to jerk free, only succeeding in tumbling off the couch and onto the pile of snow.

“What are you doin’?” asked Draco, in a vaguely surprised voice. “Oh, hell. I’ve lost feeling in my legs.”

“Oh, well,” mumbled Ginny, foggily realising that she was in the same position as before, half sprawled on the ground, half on his silky pyjama top. “I think I have too.”

There was a long pause.

“You like smelling my shirt, don’t you?”

“It smells of Butterbeer and sweat if you’re interested.”

“I’m not sweaty!”

“You *are*,” mumbled Ginny, but snuggling into the silky shirt anyway. “You’re warm too.”

“So are you,” Draco replied sleepily, trying to wriggle away from Ginny’s embrace but eventually giving up. “Sweaty, that is.”

Ginny appeared not to have heard his last words, his light breath on her neck causing her to burrow even more into his shirt. She was getting that feeling again, she thought fuzzily, that feeling she’d got when Draco had touched her neck only that morning...

“Draco,” she murmured softly.

Draco grunted.

Ginny fought the urge to shut up and just relax on the glorious silkiness of Draco's shirt. "I...er...I'm sorry for being a prat..." she mumbled. She waited for a response but all she heard was heavy breathing. "Draco?" she murmured questioningly, sighing when she realised he'd fallen asleep.

Ginny looked up at his flushed face for a long time, noticing that even when he slept he still wore that characteristic half-frown that distinguished him from the old Malfoy she'd met in Flourish and Blotts, the one with that horrible sneer.

He hadn't changed much, she mused absently. He still had that sharp, pointed face, though it wasn't as pale as before, that slender frame so unlike her brothers, and that slicked back, impossibly-lighter-than-blonde hair.

Her mind was becoming clearer now, and she suddenly realised she was still lying on Draco's chest, with one of her hands tracing patterns over the silky mauve material. Ginny hastily shook herself and rolled clumsily off. She sat up and glanced once more at the Slytherin's face, noticing that she had accidentally kicked a bit of snow on his cheek when she'd moved.

Hesitantly, Ginny brought her hand to his frowning face and tentatively brushed the snow away. Draco breathed deeply at her touch, resulting in a sharp intake of breath from her. Without thinking and guided by an impulse she couldn't control, Ginny bent down and pressed her lips against his.

In a sudden daze she pulled back, noticing in the back of her mind that Draco's frown had deepened instead of melted away. She could still feel the imprint of his lips against hers though...but *what the hell was she doing?!*

"Ginny, all set?"

Ginny looked around, disoriented and still in shock. "Severus?" she asked tentatively.

“Here,” said the voice of Severus Snape, coming into focus as he offered her a hand up. “You wanted to go to the Christmas feast in the Great Hall tonight?”

“Y—yes,” replied Ginny somewhat reluctantly, her minding clearing as she was pulled up by a muscular arm. “Only if you’ll come though.”

“I have to keep an eye on you anyway,” replied Severus grimly. “I don’t think Draco will be able to make it though.”

Ginny jerked at the mention of his name and blinked down at the sleeping boy beneath them. She felt a sudden urge to back quickly away, a slight flush appearing on the back of her neck as she thought of that stolen kiss...

“Ginny, are you all right?”

Ginny smiled weakly at Severus; his words sounded slightly concerned, anxious even. “So long as you’re with me,” she murmured, linking her arm through his and not looking back as they exited the common room.

The corridors were still and deserted as the unlikely pair of Gryffindors padded through them.

Ginny looked across at a silent Severus and noticed that he had changed back into his original black robes he had worn that morning. She looked down at herself and realised that she was still in her bright blue pyjamas, and also bare foot.

“Severus! I can’t go to the feast like this!” she squealed.

Severus glanced at her in surprise. “Well...” he reasoned. “Just fasten your cloak over you and I’ll run back for some shoes.”

Ginny nodded as Severus left her side and sprinted back to the Slytherin common room a few staircases down. She had forgotten about her fur cloak, and she brought the thick material around her comfortingly. She peered at a nearby coat of armour and hastily tried to fix her hair,

zapping it with her wand in uneven spots. Unfortunately, the armour kept on moving so her hair ended up looking much the same as it did before, tousled and falling all over her shoulders.

“Here,” said Severus, returning with a pair of shoes. “I borrowed a pair of Draco’s because I couldn’t find any others. Had to run down to his dorm.”

Ginny giggled slightly at the shoes. They were black-green with slightly pointy ends...they were going to clash horribly with her fur cloak and blue pyjamas...

“I even brought socks,” continued Severus generously.

Ginny giggled even louder when she slipped on the socks. They were a familiar shade of erotic mauve...

“All set?” asked Severus, smoothing back his perfect hair. “I’m starving, aren’t you?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed in shock. “I haven’t eaten all day!” Severus gave her an exasperated look and Ginny grinned back. “Race you.”

“All right,” he said grudgingly, and they both ran up the wide corridor, robes billowing after them.

Albus Dumbledore looked up in surprise as two breathless students burst into the Great Hall. Everyone had already eaten and most had taken to shyly dancing upon the cleared, glowing dance floor, to the music of a jaunty-looking Wizarding band.

Ginny gasped for breath as she playfully shoved her companion back out the doors. “I won,” she declared, looking in delight at the beautifully decorated hall. Her eyes fell on the lavish spread still on the side tables. “Severus, look, they haven’t put away the food yet!”

“Thank you, Merlin,” Severus muttered to himself, gazing hungrily at the enormous carved roast.

The two Gryffindors lost no time in piling their plates and tucking in. Ginny was just going back for a third

helping when a familiar voice behind her made her freeze.

“Ginny?”

The chewing Gryffindor hurriedly wiped her mouth with a napkin and turned cautiously around. “Hullo, Harry,” she mumbled, the sudden vivid image of that black hair and green eyes bringing her back to reality and making her realise that she was still in her pyjamas.

“Where were you all day?” he asked dully, his gaze flicking between her and Severus in a way that made her feel suddenly guilty.

“Er...”

“Excuse me,” sneered Severus to Harry, glaring at Dumbledore in annoyance. “But the Headmaster wants me. Sorry, Ginny.”

“That’s OK,” mumbled Ginny, not daring to look Harry in the eyes for reasons she couldn’t understand.

Harry ignored the larger boy and faced Ginny once more. “I was looking for you all day,” he said quietly. “—everyone was. We were all worried about you, worried that you were off with Malfoy somewhere...”

“And what if I was?” Ginny cut in squeakily.

Harry jerked back and Ginny felt a sudden burst of hatred for herself. “No, no,” she whispered. “I mean...I did spend the day with him, and Severus...but I...”

“No, it’s fine, really,” muttered Harry, looking away. “You don’t need to make excuses to me... or Ron, or Hermione, it’s obvious you don’t need us worrying about you or...or caring about you anymore, now that you’ve got Malfoy and Snape by your side instead of one of us—”

“Harry, stop!” Ginny exclaimed half-tearfully. “I do! I *do* need—I...I *want* you to still care about me—I...I still care about...”

Ginny’s voice trailed away but Harry shook his head.

“I thought you’d have wanted to spend Christmas day with us,” he said in a low voice, gradually getting louder.

“Just like every other year... But I was obviously *wrong*... wrong and *stupid*.”

Harry’s voice had risen quite loudly and a few students were glancing curiously over.

“Harry, you’re *not*!” said Ginny in distress at the suddenness of his tone. “*I’m* sorry for being such a prat—”

“*No!*” cut in Harry angrily, but then recoiling at her shocked face. “No...” he repeated softly, after a long pause. “*I’m* sorry for being such a prat, it’s *my* fault...and *I am* stupid...and I’m sorry...”

Harry shook his head in self-disgust, a tired expression fleeting across his famous face as he gazed at her wistfully. Ginny gazed back in shock and froze as he hesitantly bent down and kissed her on the cheek. “I’m sorry,” he repeated clearly.

“Holy flipping fwoopers!” yelled Fred Weasley. “Harry’s smooching our sister!”

“What’s all this?!” roared George, elbowing his way past his twin to look at them sternly.

Harry gave Ginny a sheepish smile, which Ginny returned quite dazedly. *Harry Potter had just kissed her*, she shrieked inside her head, *Harry Potter!*

“What? Ginny’s back? And HARRY KISSED HER?” Ron demanded, tearing himself away from the dance floor and running up the two of them. “Is this *true*?”

Ron took one look at the two flushing faces and jumped back in shock. “Oh, that’s *disgusting*,” he said reprovingly, looking at his best friend as if he had sprouted an extra head. “Harry, this is *Ginny. Ginny!*”

Harry gave Ron a surprised grin and looked back at his glowing sister.

“I know.” He smiled, offering her his arm and leading her slowly out on the dance floor. “Strange how things turn out...”

A few yards away a brooding boy was staring at them

bitterly, ignoring even a comment on the quills in his hair from a certain Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor.

“Yes,” Severus growled to himself. “Bloody *stupid* how things turn out if you ask me...”

Through tons and tons of stone, far below the Great Hall, a single Slytherin awoke just enough to pick himself up and stagger down to his dormitory. He collapsed on his bed, vaguely remembering the day as a fanciful blur, and trying to remember an even more fanciful dream he'd been having just before, where Ginny Weasley had kissed him briefly upon the lips...

Draco shook himself awake and felt something crinkle in his pocket. He took out the crumpled note lazily and started to read.

*Dear Draco,
I know we're on opposite sides for Quidditch,
but I do hope you'll wear this cloak for good
luck.*

Love, Ginny

The last two words echoed in his head like church heralds.

Draco half-smiled to himself, as he remembered her tousled hair spread out on his chest.

Nothing could ruin this day, he thought to himself. *Nothing.*

Several floors above, a sudden tingle in her right palm made Ginny pause as she moved her head to meet Harry Potter's lips with her own beneath the mistletoe. Closing her eyes she pushed the tingle away, and tried to enjoy the first proper kiss that she'd only experienced with Harry in her dreams... even if the scent of Draco Malfoy on her robes threatened to engulf her.

Chapter Nine

~ In which everyone demands a kiss ~

“I know you like her.”

Severus’s deep voice broke the morning’s silence. Draco paused as he mounted his broomstick.

‘How to answer?’ he mused. *‘Of course I bloody like her? There’s no way I bloody like her? Does it really bloody matter now that Potter’s bloody with her?’*

“Go to bloody hell,” Draco retorted, taking off into the air and releasing his sparkling Snitch.

Severus took off after him, controlling the urge to knock him off his broom. “Stop being a thick-headed chump, Draco,” he shouted, scowling at the back of his rapidly retreating figure.

The Christmas holidays were long over, and all students had come back to Hogwarts enthusiastically looking forward to the first Quidditch match of the year. The Quidditch season had started late to adjust to all the new exchange students, and Slytherin was playing this to their advantage by putting off their usual first match against Gryffindor and getting in as much training time as possible for their new team members from Beauxbatons.

It was just as well, thought Severus, shaking his head at Draco’s unfocused grab for the Snitch. Gryffindor would have steamrolled them if Draco continued being distracted from his role of Seeker and Captain.

Severus grimaced as he thought back to that eventful Christmas day. How could Ginny just melt in Potter’s hands like that?

Draco had eventually found out (in the worst kind of way, Severus thought) from the rumours being whispered around the student body. And now it was as if Draco and Ginny were making up for the friendliness they’d experienced during Christmas, by avoiding each other as

much as possible, and barely speaking when they held their morning duelling sessions. It was getting on Severus's nerves.

He'd always *known* Potter was an interfering snot with an ego as big as his father's, why didn't anyone else *see* it?

Severus frowned to himself and was just about to yell at him again when his gaze met an empty sky. Ignoring the sound of the breakfast gong, Severus flew down slowly towards the broom shed, his gaze sweeping the ground below for a familiar glint of blonde. He landed lightly on his feet, preparing to enter the small building when he paused, his sharp ears catching a muffled conversation from within.

"—And that's what I've heard," came an expressionless voice.

"Well, what of it?" replied another voice, higher than usual. "It doesn't really matter anyway."

"Of course," said the first voice bitterly. "Why should it matter? And especially to me."

There was a long pause and Severus gave in to his curiosity and edged closer to the door.

The second voice began once more in a pleading tone. "Draco, I...it's just that...oh, please don't...please, look at me."

"Why should I?" spat Draco in undertones. "You were right the first time, *Ginny*, it doesn't matter at all. I don't know why we're even having this bloody conversation because it *doesn't fucking matter*."

There was a slight pause as Ginny recollected herself. "Draco," she said softly. "I can't just let this go. You don't know how long I've been waiting—"

"Of course I know how bloody long you've been waiting!" snapped Draco suddenly. "And that's why I can't believe you're just going to...to *run back* to him now that the stupid git has just realised you're not

hanging onto his every word anymore.”

“I am *not* running back to him!”

“Liar,” spat Draco. “Get close to one unlikely person and you run.”

“I have no idea,” seethed Ginny, “—what you are talking about.”

“Of course you wouldn’t!” shouted Draco angrily. “You are the most stupid, blind, thick-headed person I know—”

“SHUT UP!” yelled Ginny back. “That’s *all* you ever do! *Insult* me! Tell me I’m *stupid*! *Constantly* put me down! *HARRY* would never—”

“HARRY DOESN’T CARE ABOUT YOU!” cut in Draco with a snarl, making Severus nearly jump out of his skin.

With years of practise, Severus silently sneaked a glance around the corner. Ginny was standing stock-still with an expression of wretchedness on her white face, while Draco stood opposite her with his jaw set and an expression of utter anger coursed throughout his.

“And you would know?” she said quietly, her voice radiating poison. “You, *Draco Malfoy*, who sneers at the mention of half-bloods, house-elves, or Knuts. You hate *everyone*... How can you lecture me on affection? How can *you* tell me that Harry doesn’t care about me?”

“Oh, fuck *off*,” snarled Draco back, not attempting to deny any of Ginny’s accusations. “You wouldn’t know love if it spat in your *face*.”

Ginny gave an inarticulate growl of rage. “Stop acting so fucking superior, Malfoy!” she yelled back. “You don’t know *anything* about love! You don’t even—”

Draco thrust his face an inch from hers. “I would know love,” he cut in, with a curl of his lip. “If it *slapped* me in the face.”

Ginny’s breath hitched in her throat. “What are you implying?”

Draco glared at her and turned to leave. “*It doesn’t*

matter,” he spat. “*God*, I’m through with this.”

Ginny grabbed at his shoulder, the anger on her face melting into tense anxiety. “Wait! Why can’t you just be happy for me? Why do you have to ruin it?”

Draco shook off her hand and whirled upon her. “Don’t you think it’s funny,” he said through gritted teeth, “—that Potter should suddenly take an interest in you after *three years* of disregard?”

Ginny clenched her fists, shaking her head at the glaring Slytherin.

“Don’t you think it’s funny,” continued Draco scathingly, “—that after you spend time with his worst enemies, after you turn to his worst enemies instead of him, after he realises that his *worst enemies* are actually getting the better of him for once; he suddenly decides he wants you back? Don’t you think it’s even *slightly* funny? I do. I think it’s fucking *hilarious*.”

Draco gave a short mirthless laugh and caught Ginny’s hand just as it flung to hit him in the face.

“Are you saying he’s jealous?” shouted Ginny, her wrist shaking in his grip. “Because he’s *not!* He’s *not* that sort of person!”

“Believe what you want,” he muttered, meeting her flashing eyes with his own. “But I think he’s mad with rage at the sight of his own Ginny Weasley fraternising with the enemy.”

Ginny drew a deep breath and was the first to break the glare. “Don’t touch me!” she yelled, yanking her hand from Draco’s steely grip.

There was a long pause and Severus had to strain his ears to hear Ginny’s next comment.

“You don’t know Harry,” she whispered. “You don’t know him like I do, he would never—”

“You don’t even know *yourself*,” Draco spat, looking away.

Ginny drew back as if she was slapped, the tenseness in

her face rising once more. Draco made no sound as Ginny fled quickly from the broom shed, not noticing the silent, black-haired boy around the corner.

“Hey Gin’, why the long face?”

Ginny glanced up into the twinkling eyes of Philip Woodley and sighed heavily. She hadn’t spoken to Draco since their argument, and even though it had been over a month ago, she still caught herself dwelling on it.

“I don’t know.” She grimaced, her previous topic of thought surfacing once more. “But of course, I don’t know anything, do I?”

Philip took the armchair beside hers and observed her through brilliant green eyes. “You know a lot more than most people.”

“Nothing that matters,” said Ginny, bitterly. “Everyone else seems to know what’s going on, but not me, not ever.”

There was a long pause before Woodley spoke. “Maybe you know exactly what’s going on, but you just can’t accept it.”

Ginny looked at him quickly but Woodley was looking away, his face masked in shadow. She tried to decipher those soft words but gave up and started absent-mindedly examining her fellow fourth year in minute detail. She supposed if he did slick back that hair... and had a perpetual look of scorn... perhaps he would...

Ginny tore her eyes away, angry at her mind for always going back to him.

“There’re a lot of things hard to accept,” Woodley continued, as if a long pause hadn’t just elapsed.

“Like what?” said Ginny heavily, tearing her eyes away from his angular jawbone.

Woodley just gave her an odd look. “It’s different for different people,” he muttered.

“What about you?” Ginny pressed, glad for the distraction. “D’you—why are you saying all this?”

“I’m just saying,” Woodley said shortly, “—acceptance is the first step towards happiness.”

“That’s an odd theory,” remarked Ginny. “But it depends on what you’re accepting though.”

“No,” replied Woodley softly. “It doesn’t.”

“But what if it’s something stupid?” argued Ginny, surprised Woodley wasn’t grinning for once. “Or something incredibly unfair, or what if it’s something completely horrible?”

“Well, I suppose you have to try harder,” Woodley argued back. “But ignoring it will get you nowhere.”

“Acceptance will get you nowhere!” Ginny declared, wondering how she’d never seen this side of her friend before. “If you don’t like something, then *fight* it. You’ve always got a choice.”

Woodley stared at her awhile, eventually cocking a blonde eyebrow at her. “I can see now why people call Gryffindors stubborn and pig-headed.”

Ginny grinned, relieved the mood had lightened somewhat. “Yeah well, some things are worth fighting for,” she said with a smile.

Returning her smile, Woodley settled back into his armchair. “Yeah,” he mumbled. There was a brief pause when he snapped his fingers suddenly, making Ginny look up.

“Sorry to bring this up,” began Woodley, slightly embarrassed, “—but I was supposed to be talking to you about Draco Malfoy...”

But Ginny had frozen, her scowl replacing her amiable expression as soon as she heard that name. “There’s nothing to talk about,” she said at once.

Woodley cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I was just going to ask whether you could talk to him—”

“No.”

“—and try and convince him—”

“No.”

“—to-sell-shirts-to-the-Slytherins.” Woodley garbled out, before Ginny could interrupt once more.

“No... Wait, what?” said Ginny, taken aback.

“For the play,” mumbled Woodley, looking as though he was regretting something.

“Oh...” repeated Ginny, her brow clearing as she remembered that they had agreed to sell t-shirts to try and raise money for their play’s props. “Er...don’t worry about it... I’ll sell them to the Slytherins.”

“You?” said Woodley, rather sharply. “Why you? You know Slytherins don’t—”

“It’s OK,” said Ginny confidently. “I’m...er...sort of friends with some of them...erm... Over Christmas we...er...talked.”

“That’s a lot of ‘er’s,’” said Woodley jokingly, though his eyes seemed narrower than usual. “Sure you can cope?”

Ginny laughed. “Of course!” she declared. “Come on! Let’s go sell a few now, everyone’ll be at lunch.”

“Kiss me, I’m famous,” said Harry Potter wryly.

Ginny blushed and hurriedly tried to wave the sparkling letters away with her wand. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “But they’re all pretty bad...if that helps...”

Harry covered his newly purchased t-shirt with his robes. He grinned at her. “It’s pretty clever. Did you bewitch them yourself?”

“I helped,” replied Ginny, grinning uncertainly back. “They all have custom blurbs that appear on the back when the person puts them on...they’re supposed to relate to that particular person. It’s supposed to be for Valentine’s Day next week.”

“Right,” remarked Harry, looking over her shoulder in

amusement. "*Kiss me, I'm sweet?*"

Ginny blushed once more as Harry read out hers rather loudly. "Harry! I'm only wearing it for publicity..."

Harry smiled at her and nudged his best friend. "Hey, Ron, buy a shirt?"

"What?" said Ron distracted, pulling himself from a usual argument with Hermione. "Shirt? Why?"

"I'll buy one," offered Hermione, glaring at Ron but smiling at his sister. "I can't wait to see the play, Ginny. I almost wish I'd stayed in Muggle Studies."

"Here you go." Ginny smiled back, peeling off a plain white t-shirt from the pile and handing it over. "Seven Sickles?"

Hermione counted out her money and asked for another.

"Hermione!" Ron exclaimed, as a white shirt was thrown in his direction. "What'd you do that for?"

"You can pay me back at the common room," she said smugly. "I'm almost certain yours will read: *Kiss me, I'm wrong.*"

Ron scowled as he bit into an enormous sandwich. "Well, I know yours will say: *Kiss me, I think I know everything,*" he said irritated.

"You don't actually have to put them on," said Ginny. "Just sort of drape it over your backs."

Ron gave his sister an ugly look.

"Well, come on, Ron," said Hermione sweetly. "Let's see if I'm right...or rather, if you're wrong."

"You first," he said grumpily, looking at Harry for support.

"Yeah, come on, Hermione," responded Harry. "It can't be worse than mine."

The three Gryffindors moved around to read the phrase on Hermione's shirt as she threw it over her back.

"*Kiss me, I'm brilliant,*" Ginny read out, laughing at Ron's look of annoyance.

Hermione blushed slightly. "*Bloody brilliant, eh, Ron?*"

Ron muttered something under his breath that sounded like ‘dodgy messages’, and flung his own shirt over his back ungraciously. “What does it say?” he asked grumpily. “And don’t let Hermione read it out.”

But Hermione had pounced on him as soon as the letters had appeared, beating Harry and Ginny to it. Ron waited for a triumphant exclamation but it never came.

“What’s this supposed to mean?”

Hermione’s voice sounded puzzled.

“Er...I think I better go prepare my books,” said Harry hastily, avoiding Ron’s eyes but grinning at Ginny before he left.

“Harry!” yelled Hermione, annoyed. “We’ve got class with Hagrid next!”

“If you’ve had a good enough gloat,” said Ron, turning around. “Will you tell me what the bloody shirt says?”

“It must be defective,” Hermione said in a superior voice. “As it doesn’t make sense.”

“Um,” said Ginny.

“What does it say, Gin’?” asked Ron, rolling his eyes.

Ginny ignored him and called to a girl sitting on the other side of Hermione. “Lavender, would you like to buy a t-shirt?”

“I’ve already bought one from Philip Woodley,” she replied, giggling with Parvati but glancing briefly at where Hermione was looking and giggling even harder. “Look what Ron’s says.” She poked her best friend.

“What are you giggling at?” demanded Hermione. “All it says is ‘*Kiss me, I’m large*’—it doesn’t make sense at all.”

“What?” exclaimed Ron; whipping the shirt from his back and going slightly red. “Er...have to go prepare...books...” he mumbled.

“We don’t need books!” yelled Hermione after him. “*Honestly*, what’s *with* everyone today?”

“Um,” said Ginny once more, feeling it was high time

she should also leave.

“*Kiss me, I’m large,*” said Hermione to herself. “I’m large? What does that have to do with *anything*? How is Ron large? I know that his ego is enormous but what else could it be describing if it wasn’t—*oh...*”

Lavender and Parvati burst into a fresh fit of giggles at the sight of Hermione’s face.

“Um...” she mumbled, flushing even redder than Ron had. “Er...my books...must go and...er...see you, Lavender, Parvati.”

Hermione practically fled from the table, not even thinking of her forgotten t-shirt lying beneath Ron’s hastily dropped one.

Lavender Brown turned to a blonde-haired boy sitting opposite her. “What does yours say, Seamus?” she asked in deep interest.

Seamus gave Dean a disgusted look, and Ginny finally decided to move over to the Slytherin table as it seemed as if no one had been near any of them yet.

“Er...hello, Higgs,” she murmured, brandishing her t-shirts bravely.

“What d’you want?” growled Blaise Zabini, who was sitting next to the eating sixth year.

“Hullo, Weasley,” said Terence Higgs amicably, waving his fork at her. “What is it?”

“Er...buy a shirt for our play?” she asked, her confidence going up as Higgs drained his goblet and reached into his robes pocket.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of these,” answered Higgs, ignoring Zabini’s stunned look and dumping a pile of silver in her hand. “Keep the change.”

“Thanks,” said Ginny clearly, enjoying the sudden shocked silence in the hall as Terence Higgs flung back his robes and pulled on his newly purchased shirt over his bare chest.

‘*Kiss me, I know how to have fun*’ flashed on the back of

his shirt in sparkling silver letters.

“Come on, boys,” he yelled to the rest of the Slytherins, though suddenly noticing the band of goggling girls at the table opposite. “Er...be right back, Weasley,” he said, and strutted off to the Hufflepuff table.

Very soon Ginny was surrounded by a dozen or so Slytherins—most of which she had danced alongside with on that eventful Christmas day.

“Er...” she said weakly, gawking as all the boys around her followed Higgs’ example by shucking their robes from their shoulders to hang down by their waists, and clustering around her bare-chested.

Ginny slowly became aware of a low murmur that had started up in the Great Hall, which gradually grew into a mass of hysterical giggling. Resisting the urge to giggle alongside of them, Ginny solemnly watched her pouch of money swell larger and her pile of t-shirts slowly decrease in size.

“Ginny,” she heard a familiar voice exclaim. “What are you doing?”

“Hullo, Severus,” she said cheerfully, but then noticed the alarmed expression on his face as he worked his way through the crowd. “What is it?”

“I thought you were getting attacked.” Severus scowled, forgetting who he was for an instant. “Pucey! Get that shirt back on!”

A reckless-looking sixth year who was waving his white shirt around responded by whacking Severus in the back of the head with it. “Good one, Snape!”

Fortunately (or rather unfortunately for most of the girl population in the room) a few professors left their seats to intervene with all the gratuitous nudity going on at the Slytherin table.

“Er...” said Ginny lamely. “D’you want to buy a t-shirt, Severus?”

“Fine,” muttered Severus, scowling at no one in

particular when Professor Garwood came up to where they were standing.

“I’ll buy a shirt,” Garwood offered, though glaring at a Slytherin who was attempting to take off his shirt once more. “Here you are.”

Ginny took the silver Sickles obediently and handed her a t-shirt, looking curiously at Severus who had turned a dull red. “Severus, are you OK?”

Severus muttered something incoherent and grabbed his shirt hurriedly.

“Come on, let’s see what it says!” Ginny said enthusiastically, looking from the Professor to Severus with a strange expression. “Just sort of drape it over—yes, like that.”

Severus craned his head to look at the back of his shirt, knowing that once Ginny saw the words he would be free from that bloody Professor’s intoxicating gaze. “What does it say?” he demanded, wondering why Ginny had gone a very bright red and was trying to restrain a huge giggle.

“Er...” she said.

“Ah,” said Professor Garwood, looking as though she was trying to hold back a laugh.

“*What?*” Severus demanded once more, sounding rather like Ron did.

Professor Garwood coughed and then noticed a light-haired Slytherin coming towards them, “Ah, Mr Malfoy, come to buy a t-shirt?”

Draco sent her a brief look and then suddenly noticed Ginny. “I came to get Severus,” he answered, tearing his eyes away from Ginny’s confused gaze. “We’ve got Care for Magical Creatures.”

“Draco,” Severus said loudly, “—read the back of my shirt, what does it say?”

Draco looked at him as if he was an idiot. “You’re not even wearing it! Take it off and read it yourself.”

Severus gave him a withering look but did what the Slytherin had said.

"Kiss me, I'm sexy," read out Draco anyway, much to Snape's horror. "Jeez, Severus, what'd you go and buy a shirt like that for?"

Severus started blustering a combination of insults and swearwords when Professor Garwood coughed once more.

"I must get back to the staff table," she remarked to no one in particular. Then, as if noticing them all for the first time, "Well! See you three at the Duelling Club tonight." The Professor nodded at the trio, catching Severus's eye and making him flush further.

"Are you OK?" asked Draco, smirking at his best friend.

"Shut up," he said faintly, then in a stronger voice. "Get a bloody shirt and let's get out of here."

"I don't need a shirt to proclaim my sexiness to the world," scoffed Draco, ignoring Severus's snort.

"They don't all say that," explained Ginny. "They adapt to that particular person."

"Oh," said Draco, momentarily shocked at Ginny's lack of hostility in her tone. But then again, he thought wryly, maybe she just wants to sell me a bloody t-shirt.

"What does yours say?" Draco asked finally.

Severus eyed the two of them, wondering whether they were going to talk to each other properly for the first time in a month.

"It's stupid," said Ginny quickly, shoving a t-shirt into his hands. "That's seven Sickles."

Draco handed her the money slowly, giving her a sarcastic smile as she flinched at his palm brushing her own. "I don't have an infectious disease," he said clearly, ignoring Blaise Zabini's suspicious look.

Ginny said nothing but stood silently, as if waiting for something.

"Well, let's see what it says and leave," said Snape

irritably, glaring suddenly at Zabini.

“OK,” replied Draco, loosening his cloak’s collar.

Ginny looked around the Great Hall. Lunch was already over and most of the students had started to leave. She looked back at Draco who was now fiddling with his top robe fastenings.

“You don’t actually have to put the shirt on to read it,” she said suddenly, looking him directly in the eyes and narrowing her own.

“Oh?” replied Draco, a hint of defiance in his voice as he shrugged off the black material from his shoulders, letting it fall to his waist to reveal his bare chest.

There was an ever so slight gasp from the nearby Slytherins, but Ginny stayed staring into the Slytherin’s dark grey eyes, not allowing her gaze to travel downwards... not even if the whispers had interesting things to say about the upper body of Draco Malfoy.

“Hurry up and put your shirt on,” she hissed angrily, suddenly aware that her voice was echoing.

Draco gave her the same sarcastic smile and eased his new shirt over his head quickly, magically managing not to ruin his smooth, slicked back hair. “You didn’t care at all in the forest,” he hissed back.

“Draco,” said Severus warningly, putting a hand on the shoulder of the slightly smaller boy. “Continue this somewhere else.”

“Shut up, Severus,” muttered Draco. “So tell me, Ginny, why d’you suddenly shy away now that there’s a simple change of setting?”

“I’m not shying away!” gritted Ginny, trying to keep her voice low. “I just told you to bloody put your shirt back on!”

“I’m not talking about that,” muttered Draco angrily. “But as I said before, *you didn’t care at all in the forest!*”

“We were swimming!” exploded Ginny.

“While we were walking.”

I wasn't interested back then! “It was hot,” she retorted aloud, instantly reprimanding herself for thinking that she was the least bit interested *now*.

“Well, I didn’t see you taking your robes off.”

“There’s a reason for that!” exploded Ginny again.

“Fine,” replied Draco, unabashed but turning to leave.

“Talk to you next month.”

Ginny opened her mouth to retaliate when she realised what Draco had just said. Severus nodded at her and strode after the young Slytherin, leaving a confused Ginny. She was just about to turn around when she noticed the back of Draco’s t-shirt: ‘*Kiss me, I’m Draco Malfoy*’.

“Obviously it couldn’t think of a strong enough word for *stupid*,” she muttered to herself. “Or perhaps evil-git, or annoying-prat or—”

“Oi, Weasley,” yelled a voice, interrupting her thoughts.

“What?” she snapped.

“What’ve you got next period?” the voice of Terence Higgs asked.

“History of Magic,” she said with less hostility, wondering why this Slytherin sixth year was talking to her almost affably.

“Good,” he said in satisfaction. “I’ve got Divination. Here, come with me.”

To Ginny’s surprise she was dragged suddenly from the Great Hall, up a flight of steps, and into an empty classroom. Her head whirling, she sat on one of the dusty desks as Higgs started to pace the room before her.

“OK,” he said firmly, looking her up and down. “Firstly, the clothes have got to go.”

“What?” yelled Ginny in alarm.

“Hmm,” responded Higgs slowly. “Though maybe Malfoy goes for that pathetic sort of urchin look... I’ll have to research this. OK, keep the clothes for now.”

“Higgs,” said Ginny, wincing at the familiarity. “What

are you talking about?"

Terence Higgs waved his hands impatiently at her.

"Show me!" he exclaimed suddenly, pulling her to her feet once more. "How d'you walk? Go! Give me a demonstration!"

Ginny shook his hands off hers and slowly edged towards the door.

"No, no!" said Higgs impatiently. "You look so...*furtive*. You have to look calm...smooth...seductive."

Ginny stopped trying to creep out of the door and put her hands on her hips. "Tell me what you're talking about!" she demanded. "Now!"

"Good," said Higgs, sounding surprised. "Fiery is good, very good. I think we'll go on that."

"*Tell me!*" yelled Ginny exasperated.

Terence Higgs finally took notice of her cries and looked at her like she was an idiot. "You're going to seduce Malfoy," he said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"*What?*" exploded Ginny. "Why would you— you want me to do— *WHAT?*"

Higgs sent her an insulted look. "If you don't want my help then you can just say so."

"*Help?*" yelled Ginny hysterically. "Why would I want any *help?*"

Higgs rolled his eyes. "You need help," he said firmly.

"So do you," retorted Ginny. "You're mental."

Something dawned on Higgs' face and he started to snigger.

Ginny glared at him. "What?"

"You're in denial!" he yelled incredulously. "You Gryffindors really *are* thick!"

"Shut up," said Ginny with dignity.

"You *like* Malfoy."

"I *don't*," she said sharply.

“Bloody Merlin!” yelled the sixth year. “Your shirt should read: *Kiss me, I’m in denial!* Give up! Accept it! You like Malfoy, and he’s tripping over his robes to get you to realise it!”

Ginny was strongly reminded of Fred and George when Higgs talked, and tried to remember this as she had a sudden urge to punch him in the jaw again. “Fine,” she said sarcastically, changing her approach. “Whatever you say, I don’t care – but why d’you care then?”

Higgs crossed his arms. “I want you two together.”

“What?” said Ginny incredulously, half-forgetting her anger and wondering if he was slightly mad. “Why?”

Higgs rubbed his hands together. “Revenge,” he gloated.

Ginny sent him a somewhat relieved look. Now *this* was how a normal Slytherin should act, she thought to herself, scheming and gleeful. “Revenge?” she asked curiously. “Against whom?”

“Everyone,” said Higgs, sweeping his arm around the room. “Your moronic brothers, Lucius Malfoy—just everyone in general. If you two get together, Hogwarts will be in *chaos*.”

“I don’t think so,” replied Ginny, cursing herself for sounding defensive. “And my brothers *aren’t* moronic.”

Terence Higgs snorted. “Well, they’re bloody annoying. Don’t you find them finishing off each other’s sentences all the time even slightly annoying?”

“I think Fred and George are quite clever,” Ginny replied rather coldly.

“You would,” sneered Higgs, then looking rather surprised. “You know, this is the first time I’ve helped a Gryffindor—not to mention a Weasley.”

“Thanks awfully,” replied Ginny, rolling her eyes. “But you’re not helping.”

“I suppose the first step is getting you out of denial,” Higgs mused.

“I’m not in denial.”

“But how? I’ve never worked with thick, naïve Gryffindors before.”

“I’m not in denial.”

“Obviously Malfoy’s not in denial...so I can’t understand why he hasn’t just jumped you yet.”

“I’m *not* in—*WHAT?!?*”

“Yes,” said Higgs thoughtfully. “I wonder if he lost his balls in that forest incident.”

“For your information,” said Ginny with dignity, “– Draco is a *lot* braver than he was before.”

“Don’t pretend as if you don’t know what I’m talking about,” snapped Higgs irritated. “I’m talking about his hormones, his testosterone, what no wizard can live without... Did you kick him there sometime?”

“*WHAT?!?*” exploded Ginny.

“I’ll take that as a no...” said Higgs unperturbed. “Hmm. Maybe he swings the other way.”

“*WHAT?!?*” yelled Ginny once more.

Higgs gave her an incredulous look. “You can’t be *that* sheltered, Weasley,” he exclaimed. “If he swings the other way it means he’s into other boys, into the laddies instead of the ladies, likes jerkin’ the gherkin, pickin’ up soap, slappin’ the—”

“I *know* what it means!” yelled Ginny hastily. “Don’t be vulgar.”

“Well, what d’you think?” replied Higgs, ignoring her as usual. “He’s around that nephew of Snape a lot, isn’t he? D’you think Snape junior’s a ladies’ man? Whenever I see him, he’s runnin’ away from huge flocks of girls—there’s got to be something queer about him.”

“Severus is *not*—”

Ginny stopped. Come to think of it, girls were always chasing Severus (ever since someone caught a glimpse of him bare-chested while working with Hagrid) but he had never shown the slightest bit of interest in them. He was even keen on avoiding them.

“Well, *Draco* isn’t—”

Ginny stopped once more. Whenever Draco and her had...touched, Ginny had felt a jolt of electricity...or a jolt of something, but when she’d tried to see if Draco had felt it too, he’d just looked at her with those unreadable grey eyes, as if he hadn’t felt a thing.

Ginny chose her words carefully.

“Well, I don’t think that they’re *together*—”

Ginny stopped for the third time and swore in her head. They *were* rather touchy-feely, whether they were hitting each other or wrestling or whatever...and they always seemed to disappear certain mornings of the week and not mention it to her...and whenever she talked to Severus, he would bring up the subject of Draco, or whenever she talked to Draco— Well, she never did talk to Draco anymore but it seemed as if his whole world revolved around Severus, especially after he had given him one of those duelling swords...

“I don’t know,” she said dully. “What d’you think?”

“I think they’re bloody weird,” responded Higgs off-handed. “Whether they be queer or not. But they don’t seem to give off the vibe, just like they’ve got something else on their minds and not girls. Weird.” Terence Higgs shook his head in disbelief as though he thought this wasn’t possible. “Though I did see pink glitter in Malfoy’s hair during Christmas,” he added suspiciously.

Ginny managed a weak smile, wondering why she suddenly felt so incredibly depressed.

“Well, it’s too bad,” continued Higgs gloomily. “I bet Malfoy’s dad would’ve fallen on his arrogant arse if you two had gotten together...”

Ginny stared at him. “What have you got against Lucius Malfoy?”

Higgs walked over to the dusty window and glared out. “Kicked me off the Quidditch team a few years ago,” he growled eventually. “Gave everyone else high-class

brooms, and put his son in my position.”

“Were you Slytherin’s seeker?” she asked surprised.

“Yeah,” continued Higgs with gruff pride. “I was only a second year when I got picked, but then I got kicked off a year after...but at least I got to bash Malfoy junior to a pulp when he missed the Snitch back in ‘94.”

“Did you really?” exclaimed Ginny in a rather high voice.

“Of course,” replied Higgs, giving her a strange look. “What d’you care? You didn’t even know him back then.”

“Yes...” said Ginny reluctantly, “—but still.”

“Well, he gave me a bleeding lip,” continued Higgs enjoyably. “Though I nearly broke his jaw and gave him two black eyes, a bleeding nose, and I hexed his hair bright red—sort of like the colour of yours.”

“I didn’t notice,” replied Ginny surprised. “And neither did Ron, he would’ve been gloating for weeks...”

“He went straight to the Hospital Wing, refused to let anyone see him though he only stayed there for a few hours... actually we respected each other more after that—” Higgs glanced at Ginny’s dawning expression. “What’s with you?”

She smiled. “My brother Ron and Harry Potter.”

“What about them?”

“D’you think they’re gay?”

“Don’t know,” shrugged Higgs. “Never talked to them.”

“Well, that’s who Severus and Draco remind me of,” Ginny said. “Their friendship is just like Harry and Ron’s—it’s just like they’re best friends.”

Higgs’ face brightened.

“And Hermione,” continued Ginny with a wry face. “I’m like Hermione...I’m the one who’s stuck in the middle. Whenever one of them has an argument, they always side with each other...and not with me...they obsess over Quidditch, take me for granted...don’t realise I’m a girl.”

“What?” said Higgs, not listening but thinking of where

he could get low cut robes that matched dark red hair.

“Nothing,” sighed Ginny, though eventually glancing back at him. “But, Higgs? Er...I mean, can I call you Terence?”

“No,” said Higgs brusquely. “Keep going.”

“Well, I don’t think you should continue with your plan to get me and Draco—” Ginny’s voice wavered slightly. “—together.”

“Why not?” demanded the sixth year.

Ginny blushed. “I’m sort of...sort of with Harry.”

“So?” replied Higgs. “Drop him.”

“No!” exclaimed Ginny, sounding scandalised.

“Well, get him to drop you.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Ginny flushed.

“*Because—*”

“No, I don’t want to hear it!” exclaimed Ginny. “I can’t believe we’re still having this argument! I’ve been going along with you for far too long now. And don’t you dare—” Ginny paused, realising she was sounding somewhat out of place by the way she was talking to a large male Slytherin two years older than she was. “Please don’t mention this to Harry,” she said finally. “*Or Draco, or Severus, or even anyone, not that there is anything to mention.*”

Terence Higgs tilted his head to the side and looked at her for a few seconds. “All right,” he said. “But you’ll change your mind.”

“Yeah,” muttered Ginny sarcastically. “Right.”

“See you then,” said Higgs, standing by the empty doorway and waiting for her to go out.

“Yes,” said Ginny suspiciously, though not noticing the way his wand flicked as she passed him.

“Cheers!” Higgs yelled, as Ginny descended down the flight of stairs, bright silver letters on the back of her t-shirt flashing: *‘Kiss me, I’m in denial’*.

“Oi, Malfoy.”

“Oi, what?” responded Draco, frowning as he looked up from his essay. “I’m busy.”

“Hang it, it’s just an essay for old Binns,” said Terence Higgs, grabbing a chair and sitting on it backwards. “Now tell me what’s going on between you and little Weasley.”

Draco had been about to make a cordial remark but his expression immediately closed at Higgs’ last question. “I’m busy,” he repeated, starting to write furiously with a luxurious green quill.

“Well, anyway, I happened to be talkin’ to her,” continued Higgs amicably, as if Draco hadn’t spoken. “And you managed to come up in the conversation.”

“Oh?” replied Draco, beating down his curiosity and managing to glare at the other boy. “Should you be telling me this?”

“No,” said Higgs regretfully. “But I managed to keep it to myself until after dinner, didn’t I?”

Draco resumed scribbling on his parchment.

“Well, anyway,” repeated Higgs. “When are you going to step up and ask her out or something?”

Draco kept scribbling, though the nib was pressing on the parchment rather hard. “Shut up,” he finally replied, ripping the paper as he did so.

“If it’s Potter,” said Higgs, “all us Slytherins’ll chip in to get rid of him.”

Draco snorted. “You think you and your friends can do what the Dark Lord can’t?”

Higgs shrugged. “We won’t kill him...just...uglify him or something.”

“Another cunning plan from Slytherin house,” muttered Draco.

“Damn straight!” declared Higgs, banging his fist on the table and upsetting the inkbottle all over Draco’s just-finished essay. “So, it’s settled then?”

“Look what you’ve done!” seethed Draco, waving his inky parchment through the air and resisting the urge to whack Higgs in the face with it.

“She *wants* you, Malfoy,” continued Higgs, waving his wand over the parchment and charming the ink away.

Unfortunately the written words were gone as well, and Draco was left with a blank piece of parchment.

“I hate her!” yelled Draco, glaring at Higgs and violently collecting his stuff together to move elsewhere.

“You don’t hate *her*,” replied Higgs smoothly. “You just hate *me*.”

Draco muttered something furiously incoherent under his breath.

“Here, give me your parchment,” said Higgs, grabbing the paper along with Draco’s quill before he could protest. “Now this’ll make you change your mind.”

“Change my mind to *what*?” snapped Draco, his fingers reaching for his wand.

“To take some action,” said Higgs firmly, scrawling on the parchment. “Here, I’ve started you off.”

The smug sixth year handed Draco the parchment and quill and sat back and relaxed.

Draco glared at the parchment, ready to set it on fire if it had anything to do with Ginny on it. There were two columns drawn, the first one headed ‘good’, the second ‘bad’. There was only one other word written on the parchment and that was in the ‘good’ column. That one word made all thoughts of arson clear from Draco’s mind.

“Pretty?” he read out, guessing what the parchment was supposed to signify. “You think she’s *pretty*?”

Higgs looked up at the amused tone of voice. “She’s all right,” he said, unabashed. “For a fourth year that is.”

Draco snorted. He’d seen better.

Then why aren’t you thinking about them all the time, said an annoying little voice in the back of his mind.

Shut up, he responded fiercely.

“If I fill this out—” Draco scowled as he looked at the other boy. “Will you bugger off and leave me be?”

“Already going,” said Higgs with a grin, turning to walk to the other end of the common room.

Draco gave a disgruntled sigh and looked at the parchment grumpily. “Well, at least I can fill up the bad column,” he said in satisfaction. “Let’s see...”

The History of Magic essay was soon forgotten as Draco became more and more engrossed in filling up the two columns. After half an hour of muttering angrily and crossing things out, the page looked as follows:

GOOD	BAD
Pretty	She's a Weasley
Fit	Griffindor
Smart	Red hair that's always unruly
Good dueller	Horrible brothers
Interesting	Dirt Poor
Sense of humour	Argues <u>all</u> the time
Speaks her mind	Father hates her
Good taste in pyjamas	Scumborn
Gets along with Nymphadora	Improper
Pureblood	Has a temper
Can smell a drink better than	Outspoken - doesn't know her place
red hair	- But when things matter,
pretty	she doesn't speak her mind at all!
Father hates her	Whiny voice
	Likes Pottor.
	Pottor likes her.
	Likes bagpipes
	Likes Severus's cat
	Unpredictable

Draco smirked as he looked at the list. Clearly, there were more bad points to Ginny than good ones, and there was no point in doing as Higgs had suggested, and take some action to claim her.

But... Draco's face contorted, he didn't write how she

managed to make him forget all else whenever she sang in that stupid play, or how she had made him feel unstoppable when she fell among those horrible Hellhounds, or how proud he felt whenever she used to watch him swoop for Muggle golf balls instead of that stupid Potter...

Draco glared at the parchment.

Well, he also didn't write down how she had snuggled up to him in the forest only to mutter Potter's name, and how Potter only had to say the word and she would cancel everything else just to be with him, or how her and her stupid arguments were tearing up his and Severus's friendship, making them argue all the time instead of having fun like they used to.

Yes, it was all her fault, he thought angrily, grabbing the parchment and suddenly scribbling over the entire good column.

Only one point in that column was readable now. Draco glared at the last point and snorted.

"Yes, that's the only good thing about her," he said loudly, not caring whether the rest of the Slytherins heard him. "Father *hates* her."

Cramming the parchment into his pocket, Draco retired stormily to his dormitory.

"Lavender?" said Ginny, flopping on the couch opposite a reading fifth year. "Can I ask you something?"

"Hmm?" Lavender responded, flicking through the pages of a trashy magazine and sighing deeply.

"I mean...it's concerning a...a..."

"A boy?" demanded Lavender, throwing away her book and looking at Ginny hopefully.

"Er...yes..." said Ginny embarrassed, glad that most of the Gryffindors had gone to bed. "Um...but I would prefer..."

“Cross my heart,” said Lavender, then yelling across the room. “Parvati! We’re needed here!”

Ginny blinked and there was suddenly another beaming girl sitting opposite her, grasping her hand reassuringly.

“Is it Harry?” Parvati asked.

“No,” said Ginny quickly. “Not Harry.”

“Ron?” asked Lavender in interest.

“What?” said Ginny disoriented. “Why would I—”

“Ooh, *Snape*,” chorused the girls, looking as though Christmas had come extra early.

“*Snape*?” exclaimed Ginny, but then realising who they were talking about. “Oh, *Severus*! No, no it’s not—” Ginny frowned, wondering why the image of a tall, greasy Professor crossed her mind when the name ‘Snape’ was mentioned. She knew perfectly well that Severus’s last name was Snape also. “No it’s not about him,” she said firmly. “It’s about Dra—er...Malfoy, it’s about Malfoy.”

“Malfoy?” exclaimed Lavender incredulously. “As in *Draco* Malfoy?”

“Well...who else?” mumbled Ginny peevishly. “There’s only one Malfoy in this school.”

Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil exchanged looks. “What about him?” said Parvati, observing Ginny rub her right palm nervously.

“Well...” she hesitated.

“Oh-my-God!” yelled Lavender. “You’re not...?”

“*No!*” cried Ginny, flushing. “I wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“Well, what is it?” said Lavender, looking slightly disappointed.

“We won’t tell a soul,” said Parvati, attempting to sound sincere.

“Well...what’s your...your opinion of him?” Ginny said finally.

“Oh, I thought you wanted advice,” said Lavender, not

bothering to hide her disappointment this time.

Ginny hesitated. “Well...I would really like your opinion first.”

“Looks-wise?” asked Parvati interestedly. “Snoggable-wise? Competition-wise? Personality-wise?”

“Er...any,” mumbled Ginny, feeling thoroughly embarrassed.

“All right, looks-wise,” said Parvati to Lavender.

Lavender made a face. “He still looks rather pointy-faced to me, and especially when he sneers, reminds me of that ferret incident...” Lavender paused to snicker. “He’s not as pale as last year...and he’s not *horribly* bad-looking I *suppose*... though don’t get me started on his hair.”

“I like his hair,” said Ginny unexpectedly.

Lavender and Parvati just stared.

“Well...I mean,” began Ginny defensively. “I think it suits him—”

“What, all slicked back and plastered down?” asked Parvati incredulously.

“Does he look *worse* with normal hair?” asked Lavender curiously.

Ginny thought back to their time in the forest, the first time she’d seen his natural hairstyle... It had a sort of amusing flop and fell over the left side of his forehead when he was irritated—

“Hullo, Ginny, are you still with us?”

“Hullo,” Ginny responded automatically. Yes, it was a nice hairstyle when it wasn’t slicked back, though it just didn’t seem Draco if he didn’t have it styled...maybe only when they were by themselves she would like the flop...

“Erm, yeah, I like his hair slicked back,” said Ginny firmly.

“All right,” said Lavender, giving her an odd look.

“Parvati? The body.”

“Hmm...” replied Parvati thoughtfully. “He’s not that

short anymore, is he? And we all got a good look in the Great Hall this morning. I never thought he'd actually *have* an upper body."

"I know what you mean," Lavender replied grinning. "He must be working out somewhere...though not nearly as good as Snape."

"Definitely *not*," Parvati agreed, looking as though she was going to giggle.

Ginny stared at the two leering girls beside her. It was starting to dawn on her that perhaps everyone in Hogwarts was, in fact, gossiping about her two best friends, her friends that she'd never really pictured as anything *but* friends.

She imagined Severus striding forcefully down the corridor, managing to be amazingly graceful and all the while radiating the sort of authority that made you feel slightly intimidated and not really question his presence. Draco's steps, too, were graceful, but instead of the cocky swagger he had grown up with, his new walk was slightly more rushed and vague; mostly giving off the impression that he was more irritable than proud lately. It was no wonder then, that when Draco and Severus walked together, the whole corridor seemed to spread apart.

And to think she had been spending most of her time with these two boys and never even seen it... Hell, she'd practically groped Severus (something she was never going to tell her fellow fourth years, or, probably, another soul) and stolen a kiss from Draco. Before Christmas they'd even scuffle during duelling, and although she'd always been slightly aware of Severus's rather...*attractive* upper body, she'd still never really thought...

"But the chest is still pale."

Ginny realised they were back to Draco once more.

"Yes, pale is icky," agreed Parvati once more. "Is the prat snoggable, Lavender?"

“Well, he was going with Pansy for a bit, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, but she was more of a show poodle...”

“Show *pug*...”

“*Ugly pug*...”

Ginny gave them both exasperated looks and the two giggling girls hastily straightened their faces and continued.

“Yes, well besides her –and she’s a maybe – I don’t think he’s kissed anyone... *or vice versa*—” began Lavender.

Ginny winced at the ‘vice versa’.

“So experience-wise...” continued Parvati.

“Duh-dun!” the two girls chorused, giving each other high fives.

“As for competition,” said Lavender shaking her head.

“What competition?” sniggered Parvati. “All right, he’s rich, but he’s such a horrible, spoilt little bastard and wouldn’t go with a Gryffindor, that I don’t think anyone would go for him in the first place.”

“Maybe little Ginny Weasley,” said Lavender, giving Ginny a sidelong look. “He’s rather friendly with you, isn’t he?”

“He’s all right,” said Ginny rather ungraciously, feeling strangely annoyed at them for insulting Draco so much...after all, he wasn’t *that* bad...was he?

“Well, his personality is his biggest let down,” said Parvati decidedly. “And it’s *Malfoy* for God’s sake. Imagine going on a date with him! If it’s not something dull about the weather or Ministry, your conversations would probably revolve around hunting Muggles or beheading house-elves or something heartless like that...”

Ginny scowled in annoyance, wracking her brains for something to contradict the other girl with. “He’s not dull,” she said eventually, then her brow lightening. “He likes ice-cream!”

“Really?” said Lavender sceptically. “He seems more of

a flan person.”

“Well, he’s not,” said Ginny irritably. “And he’s not heartless! Everyone has a heart... deep down.”

“Very deep down,” said Lavender dryly.

“Very, *very* deep down,” said Parvati even more dryly.

“An itty bitty tiny heart.”

“Which only beats on the last day of the twelfth season...”

“During the full moon of a summer solstice...”

“Oh, stop being so horrid,” snapped Ginny, getting up.

“You wanted to know.” Parvati shrugged. “Ask anyone, that’s how everyone feels about Malfoy.”

“I don’t,” said Ginny angrily.

“Well, *you’ve* obviously got feelings for him then,” said Lavender, grinning at Parvati.

“I *don’t*,” repeated Ginny angrily, starting to back away when Harry, Ron and Hermione poured through the portrait hole.

“Then why’d you ask us about him?” called out Parvati after her.

I don’t know! Ginny screamed to herself, turning and running up her dormitory steps with ‘*Kiss me, I’m in denial*’ flashing behind her in silver letters.

The morning of the first Quidditch game of the season dawned bright and clear. As soon as the first chink of light hit the dormitory floor, Ron Weasley got out of bed and dressed quietly. For the first time in his life he was the first up and out of bed – even Snape was still rubbing his eyes and stretching when Ron crept stealthily from the room.

It’s our first game, the flame-haired boy thought to himself as he descended down the stairs. *I’m not going to let Harry down.*

It was strange how things had changed that year, Ron

continued to muse. It wasn't at all how he'd expected. You-Know-Who hadn't been mentioned at all since Ginny's encounter. Ginny wasn't hanging around them so much and seemed to have changed a great deal. Harry was more distant than last year, but he was doing great as Captain. It was definitely weird between Ginny and Harry...it didn't seem plausible to Ron... but the proof *was* there when they sometimes spent evenings together in the common room, both content just to huddle up close and gaze into the blazing fire.

He and Hermione had been forced to spend more time together, whether it was to let Harry and Ginny have some time alone, or whether they could weave plans to cheer Harry up more, Ron didn't know. He only knew that he was missing his times with his best friend.

Sure, Hermione was more agreeable these days, and definitely more fun to be around than she was before...but Harry was Harry, and not Hermione, and he bloody missed him.

Ron sighed as he grabbed his old Cleansweep Seven from the broom shed. He quickly mounted it and felt the familiar rush of adrenaline as the wind swept through his hair. He wasn't an exceptional flyer, but practise did make perfect and he had been flying since he was small. Plus everyone knew a Weasley could fly better than the average wizard.

Ron spiralled to the ground, nearly colliding with a dark-haired boy striding below.

"Whoa!" Ron yelled, screeching to a halt right in Severus Snape's path. "Merlin, sorry."

Severus nodded coldly and strode around him, making his way to the Forbidden Forest. Ron watched him curiously, wondering where he was going. As if he could feel the dark blue eyes upon him, Severus turned around and glared at the boy on the broomstick. Ron waved.

Severus cursed, wondering how he could evade him.

Mistakenly thinking that Snape had stopped because he was waiting for him, Ron flew over to the other boy and swooped down. "Want to practise?" he asked, noting in satisfaction that he didn't have his horrible, scratchy kitten with him.

"No," said Severus, looking over at Hagrid's hut but then realising he was out for the weekend.

"What are you doing then?" asked Ron, landing fully on the ground. "Where are you going?"

Severus glared at him, feeling annoyed that he was stuck around there until breakfast. "To the broom shed," he answered acidly, moving off in that general direction.

"I thought you didn't want to practise," continued Ron, hovering just behind him much to Severus's annoyance.

"Changed my mind," he replied grumpily, reaching the shed and grabbing his racing broom that his 'uncle' had sent as a Christmas present.

"All right," said Ron enthusiastically. "Chuck us a Quaffle then?"

Severus pulled a medium-sized red ball from the basket and, with a rather nasty grin, lobbed it as hard as he could in Ron's general direction.

"Oof," exclaimed Ron, getting flung backwards out of the shed but catching it anyway. "Good throw."

Severus scowled, disappointed.

But it was soon Ron's turn to be disappointed, as he tried time and time again to throw the Quaffle through the waiting rings, only to be stopped every single time by a muscular hand or foot or side of the broom.

"Damn it," he grunted, his high spirits lowering. "Why can't I score at least once?"

"Oh, are you trying?" murmured Severus. "I had no idea."

Ron merely gave him a very expressive look and zoomed upwards, the red Quaffle sitting securely under his arm. "Get ready, Snape!" he yelled, though even to

Severus's ears it sounded faint as he was so far up.

"What's the fool doing?" he muttered, preparing himself when he saw the red-haired boy position himself into a steep dive. "He knows he's supposed to *throw* the Quaffle in the goals... not try to barge past me."

"READY?" yelled Ron once more, a determined look on his face as Severus nodded slightly. "*Here I come...*"

Ron Weasley dove towards the goals. His broom might have been slower than most but it seemed as if he was really pushing it to the limit this time, as his red hair and black robes streamed backwards into a brown blur.

"Weasley," cursed Severus under his breath, feeling slightly alarmed at the speed the boy was going straight at him, "—what the hell are you doing?"

But nevertheless, Severus stood his ground, watching the other boy come closer and closer. However, this soon changed as Ron's determined look changed into one of horror, as he tried to suddenly pull backwards only yards from Severus, before failing horribly and going into a flailed spin.

"*Watch—AHHH!*" yelled Severus, as a spinning Ron careered wildly into him, his elbow connecting with Snape's chin.

Jerking back sharply, Ron fell dizzily downwards to the ground below, Severus's hastily drawn wand sticking out of his ribs. Managing to keep one leg around his broom, Severus flipped upside down and caught a view of Ron hitting the ground with a sickening thump. "*Idiot,*" he mumbled, flying down clumsier than usual and holding his head in his hands. "WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?" he shouted when he got down.

Ron didn't reply, but only made an indecipherable groan, pulling weakly at Severus's wand in his side.

"My wand!" exclaimed Severus, his head still throbbing as he grabbed for it. "Give it back!"

Ron's groan turned into a roar when Severus yanked his

wand away from the other boy's limp hand. "MY WRIST!" shrieked Ron.

"Oh..." muttered Severus disconcerted. "Er..."

"Oh no," moaned Ron. "The match...Harry...oh bloody, bloody, BLOODY HELL!"

"Settle down," muttered Severus, though handling his wand somewhat guiltily. "Here, I'll conjure up a splint."

"NO!" roared Ron. "DON'T COME NEAR ME AGAIN!"

Ron attempted to use his broom as a lever to get up, but only succeeding in crumpling back down to the ground again.

"My leg," he moaned, but still managing to yell at Severus when he edged closer. "PISS OFF!"

"As I recall," said Severus sourly, "—it was *you* who ran into *me* in the first place."

"Well, you didn't have to go breaking my wrist afterwards, *did you?*"

"Well, what did you think you were *doing?*" said Severus angrily.

"Weasley feint," mumbled Ron. "Just conjure up a stretcher and I'll get into that."

"Weasley feint?" Severus sneered, trying to drown out the other boy's groans as he directed the stretcher towards the castle. "Sounds like a rip off of that Seeker's move, the Wronski feint, to me."

"It sort of is, we always use it for Chasers at home," mumbled Ron, closing his eyes.

"Oh, so it went *wrong?*"

"Yeah, didn't stop properly," replied Ron with a grunt, ignoring the sarcasm and feeling somewhat more relaxed now the entrance door was in sight. "You were supposed to get out of the way just before I was going to 'hit' you so I could score...but then I went out of control and you didn't move...so it mucked up..."

"How you've managed not to kill yourself, Weasley, is

beyond me.”

“*Ron!*”

Walking up the stairs Severus rolled his eyes, waiting for trouble in the form of Harry Potter and Hermione Granger to start yelling at him.

“WHAT DID YOU DO?” Harry shouted angrily.

“*You...*” Hermione breathed, resembling an angry rhinoceros.

“S’OK, Harry, Hermione, it was mostly my fault,” came Ron’s voice at his side. “Take my broom will you?”

“Mostly!” burst out Severus at once, glaring at Hermione when she yanked Ron’s broom from his grasp.

“That was my sore shoulder,” he said coldly.

“*Good.*” She glared back, moving back next to Harry who was asking Ron what had happened.

Severus gave them a final glare before proceeding to breakfast, wishing he could deduct points for cheek.

“All right, Severus?” came the voice of Draco, then turning into a sneer when he noticed Ron and Co. making their way upstairs. “What happened to Weasley?”

“Where were you?” said Severus grumpily, ignoring his question. “Why didn’t you meet me this morning?”

“Slept in,” replied Draco, his eyes darkening. “Couldn’t sleep last night.”

Severus scowled. “Well, thanks to you, I had to practise with that idiot Weasley all morning.”

“What?” asked Draco surprised. “Quidditch?”

“No, Gobstones,” growled Severus, pulling up a seat at the Gryffindor table and whacking his broom down next to him.

“Oh, right. Your match after breakfast...” remembered Draco disinterestedly. “Well, I’ll cheer for you, but I’ll be booing your Seeker.”

“All right,” said Severus gruffly, though feeling strangely satisfied. “See you then.”

Draco nodded, moving slowly away to his own table and

purposely away from an interested Terence Higgs and suspicious Blaise Zabini. He ate his breakfast slowly, glancing from time to time at the Gryffindor table, though it wasn't always to Severus Snape.

Ginny Weasley was also sitting by herself. She had gone to sit with Severus, but seeing that he wasn't in the best of moods, had moved even further away from the throng than he had. She picked at her food, noting that Harry wasn't at the table, nor was Ron or Hermione...nor any of the Quidditch team come to think of it –well, except for Severus.

Across the room, Draco brushed a strand of imaginary hair from his face.

It was stupid, all these habits he had picked up from their time in the Forbidden Forest. He wondered, briefly, if it had been worth all this annoyance...or would it have been better if nothing had ever happened. If all three of them had never gotten thrown together to face the Dark Lord, the Death Eaters and his father. If they had never taken that stupid oath with the centaur, or encountered the infamous Hellhounds, or even if they hadn't even met on that fateful day in the Quidditch showers...

He, Draco Malfoy, would still be head of his gang of fifth years. He would have a father. He wouldn't have stayed at Hogwarts for Christmas. He would despise *all* Gryffindors. He would hate Potter for all the same reasons that he did for the last four years, and no more. Severus wouldn't get under his skin. And neither would Ginny. The biggest worry in his life would be trying to impress the new Potions Master, since Professor Snape was absent. He could concentrate on Quidditch. He wouldn't have to play against a best friend on the opposite team. And he wouldn't have to list all of these stupid points whilst staring at a red-haired fourth year across the room.

Draco bit savagely into a piece of toast and traced his left palm with his index finger. His gaze flicked back to

Ginny, who had looked up and was searching the Slytherin table with her light brown eyes.

He couldn't tear his eyes away, and continued to watch as she searched the crowd, feeling strangely gratified that he knew she was searching for him. When finally she locked her eyes on him, she saw that he too was sitting away from the crowd, and was staring inscrutably back at her. Draco saw her jerk in surprise and look quickly away, welcoming the distraction of a hysterical Hermione dragging her away from the breakfast table.

Draco, too, looked away, wondering what the hell was stopping him from sprinting over there and carrying her off into the opposite direction...

He scowled.

Damned, stupid pride making him miserable... But what was his pride worth nowadays? He was friendly with two Gryffindors, one being a Weasley. He was hoping to get more than friendly with the Weasley. His father had disowned him, he didn't even know if he was able to come home that summer. His pride was worth squat to him now. Well, maybe his *Malfoy* pride... and even his Slytherin pride...but not his self-pride.

Pride, pride, pride, yelled an annoying voice in the back of Draco's mind, *you're a Weasley-loving sappy fool! Even your self-pride means nothing now.*

"Hey, Malfoy," came the voice of Terence Higgs. "You ready to swallow your pride and ask Weasley out?"

Higgs's amicable inquiry was answered with a punch in the jaw. Draco stood over him, as the sixth year sprawled onto the table slightly stunned.

"What the hell, Malfoy?" gasped Higgs incredulously, as Draco withdrew his wand and held it against the other boy's throat.

"Draco!"

As the gleam in Draco's eyes started to melt away, Higgs shoved Draco away from him and straightened his

robes.

“Draco, what are you doing?” came the voice of Severus Snape once more, hurrying over.

“Oh, nothin’,” responded Higgs promptly, looking as though a punch in the jaw was the usual greeting between two Slytherins. “Just muckin’ about.”

Severus shot the sixth year a suspicious look and looked back at Draco.

“Nothing,” echoed Draco, his eyes focusing in and looked towards his best friend. “Let’s go to your match now, eh?”

“What was he talking about?” Severus demanded, jerking a thumb at the retreating figure of Terence Higgs. “What did he say about pride? Was he insulting you?”

“Let’s go to your match,” Draco repeated, standing up and resting a hand on Severus’s shoulder. “Don’t want to be late.”

Severus gave him a relieved look. He could’ve sworn he’d heard a trace of the old Draco-mockery in his tone. “You’re not seriously going to cheer when you’re sitting with the Slytherins, are you?” he said slowly. “Hell, I would hex you.”

“I won’t sit with them,” replied Draco, cocking an eyebrow at Severus.

“You’re going to sit with Ginny,” Severus stated, a hint of amusement in his usually glaring eyes as he read the other boy’s slight smile like a book. “It’s about bloody time.”

“Shut up, Severus,” said Draco calmly, but then suddenly digging him in the ribs with his wand. “I’ll race you.”

“Ouch,” muttered Severus, his resolve to poke the other boy back dissolving as Draco gave him a shark-like grin. “Fine.”

And with that, Severus contented himself with pushing the smaller boy to the floor with his broom and starting to

run, his earlier feelings of anger starting to melt away, with the hope that perhaps Draco was finally back.

“And it’s the first match of the season! Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff – who will win?”

Lee Jordan’s hearty voice boomed across the rapidly filling stands. When they were quite full, and the noise had settled down somewhat, the enthusiastic commentator continued his introductory spiel.

“Well, we all know that leading Gryffindor team is *Harry Potter*! Seeker for four years and now *Captain*!”

All of the Gryffindors cheered madly, and Lee Jordan was finding it hard not to cheer himself.

“Around a third of Hogwarts is on exchange, including part of our Quidditch team...so in place of our beautiful Chaser, Alicia Spinnet, we have the not-so-beautiful Ron Weasley! Yes! *Another* Weasley on the team!”

There was a slight wave of laughter at this, though a small part of the girl population were yelling comments which sounded like ‘not beautiful, my arse’. However this cheer was suddenly interrupted by Lee’s excited voice once more.

“Well! Here’s some news, folks! Ron Weasley has been temporarily injured, and will *not* be playing in this match!”

“WHAT?” came a surprised roar from the crowd.

“Yes! And—what’s this? Here he is! It’s our latest Weasley addition himself, arriving not on broom but on stretcher right next to me! He is accompanied by Hermione Granger; *Merlin*! What d’you two have to say for yourselves?”

Ron tried to sit up on the stretcher but only succeeded in cracking his leg once more. Unfortunately, his roar of pain was amplified throughout the stands and was met with an enthusiastic cheer.

“There you have it, ladies and gentlemen!” yelled Lee Jordan dramatically. “But who will replace him? And at such short notice? *Who?*”

Hermione leaned over and whispered something into his ear, making him nearly yell in surprise.

“What’s this?! Not *ANOTHER* Weasley?!”

“WHAT?!” the crowd roared, clearly getting pumped up.

Above the top row of seats, upon the roof of the stands sat a single Slytherin, his fair hair glinting in the sun. After he couldn’t find a certain fourth year seated anywhere, he had decided to sit by himself and fly his broom to the roof, so he could watch his best friend stop goals only thirty feet away. He had remained relatively bored throughout the introduction of Gryffindor’s team, but on Jordan’s last exclamation, he had exclaimed ‘WHAT?!’ just as loudly as everybody else.

“You heard me correctly! It’s GINNY WEASLEY! The youngest of the Weasleys is going to valiantly try and take her brother’s place just for this match! Jeez, I hope she’s good...”

“NO FUCKING WAY!” yelled Draco, in a very-un-Draco-like manner.

Down in the Quidditch change rooms, Severus Snape was reacting in much the same way.

“*Ginny?!*” he yelled incredulously.

“Hey,” she said waveringly, adjusting the scarlet robes around her collar. “Merlin, I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Ginny!” yelled Harry, bursting into the room with the rest of the team. “You don’t have to do this! We—”

“It’s OK,” said Ginny firmly, taking a deep breath. “Hermione was right. You need someone who knows all of the formations and strategies, not to mention the *signs* that you’re going to make when you want these carried out. No one else outside the team knows them, except me because I’ve been practising with you. *Please*, I know you

have no one else lined up and you really need to win, so I'm willing to help you... in whatever way I can."

There was a pause while Harry looked at her for a long time, his face melting into a grateful smile. Fred and George simply gaped, the thought of their little sister playing as Chaser on their team wiping all thoughts of jokes from their minds. Severus blinked at her, still oblivious to the fact that Ron was *still* hurt. Surprisingly, it was the other two Chasers who nodded to each other and slapped her on the back.

"Spoken like a true Gryffindor." Katie Bell smiled. "Anything's better than a forfeit, eh?"

"Wait, wait!" cut in Fred Weasley, before Angelina could open her mouth to also offer words or encouragement. "You're saying Ginny is going to play on the team? *Ginny*?"

"We don't want her getting smashed by the Bludgers," explained George, shaking his head at his sister. "Mum'll kill us if she knew—"

"She wouldn't!" interrupted Ginny spiritedly. "Mum'd be proud if I played just this once! She was on the team back then also, if you didn't know."

"And besides," said Angelina indignantly, "—the only way she's going to get hit by the Bludgers is if *you two* don't do your job properly."

"Remind me to step on your toes next time we dance, Angelina," muttered Fred under his breath, poking her slightly with his broom.

Harry took a deep breath. "If Ginny wants to play, she can, but we're not forcing—"

"I want to," she said promptly.

"Cool." Harry grinned, catching her hand inconspicuously. "I was starting to go mad... I was considering fetching Colin since he's been at half the practises snapping photos."

"Thank goodness you didn't," shuddered Katie. "He

gives me the willies.”

Further discussion was suddenly interrupted by a big booming, “AND HERE THEY ARE! GRYFFINDOR TEAM!”

Harry quickly positioned himself onto his broom and gave his team a tense smile. “Ready?”

“Been ready,” growled Snape.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” murmured Ginny nervously.

“Of course,” said Angelina.

“When you are,” said Katie Bell.

“READY!” chorused Fred and George cheerily, forgetting their slight worries about Ginny when they heard the crowd cheer wildly.

Draco watched as seven scarlet blurs streaked from the room below the stands, joining the canary yellow opposition already hovering above the field. His eyes stayed trained to one particular figure, flying not as confidently as the rest, and seeming to avoid everyone. Feeling foolish, he tore his eyes away and cheered his best friend.

“KILL ‘EM, SNAPE!” he roared, as a sullen-faced figure flew up to the goal rings.

Severus’s moodiness lessened somewhat as he searched for the source of the shout, finally catching sight of Draco on the roof.

“Dunderhead,” he smirked.

Ginny Weasley clung to her brother’s broom self-consciously, her brain clouded with the suddenness of events.

When Hermione had dragged her from the breakfast table, she had had no idea that Ron was injured, let alone too injured to play for the moment. Hermione was practically having a fit, saying that Ron was seemingly even more upset than Harry, and after all their hard work, they were going to lose their first match. Ginny had snuck a look inside the Hospital Wing (She and Hermione had

just been in the corridor) and all the rest of the Quidditch team were tightly squashed around a doleful looking Ron, discussing in horror what they were going to do. It was too late to cancel the match, and, as it was only twenty minutes away, they would have to forfeit. Hermione had suddenly grasped her shoulder, whispering her idea.

“Oh hell, oh hell,” Ginny whispered to herself, snapping back to the present as Madam Hooch threw the Quaffle into the air. “What am I *doing*?”

But before she could answer herself, Angelina had caught the Quaffle and was heading backwards in her direction.

“Ginny!”

Ginny looked up at Harry, who punched his fist and gave her the thumbs up. Ginny grinned shakily back, and concentrated on the formation she’d watched so often from the stands. But suddenly she didn’t have time to think, as the Quaffle was hefted in her direction and she barely had time to grab it and zoom upwards, away from the eager opposition.

In a matter of seconds Katie spiralled below her, knocking shoulders with a determined looking Hufflepuff. The Hufflepuff veered off course when a whizzing Bludger flew past his ear, and Ginny threw the red ball as hard as she could down to her fellow Gryffindor. Biting her lip she flew straight towards the awaiting goals, following a zigzagging Angelina.

Ginny didn’t have any time to reason like she did when she was just mucking about with Ron and Harry – every move she pulled off, every pass she made, was automatic. She had always had an excellent store of knowledge for Quidditch, as her brothers at home barely talked of anything else. She wasn’t the best flyer, probably the worst out of everyone on the pitch, but her reflexes had been nearly perfected due to her duelling with Severus and Draco, and she was playing this to her advantage.

“GOAL! GRYFFINDOR SCORES!”

Ginny flushed in pleasure, as Katie Bell circled the goal rings and gave her a high-five. But she didn't celebrate for long, as Hufflepuff was already zooming towards their goal rings.

“SAVED! And what a save! Oliver Wood would've been proud.”

Draco whistled from the roof, waving his broom through the air at Severus. Severus didn't see him but scowled hotly at the crowd, which changed into a deep flush as his sharp eyes caught sight of the Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor waving a scarf in his direction.

“Go, Ginny!” Hermione screamed, startling Ron into falling out of his stretcher.

“What's going on?” he said groggily, wincing as he pulled it down to clamber back in once more. “Is she doing all right?”

“I think so,” replied Hermione. “Here, you see.”

Hermione whipped out her wand so that the stretcher was on an angle and Ron had a clear view of the fast-paced game.

“Oh, Merlin!” he exclaimed, as Ginny nearly fell off her broom from a sudden burst of speed. “I can't watch!”

“GOAL!” screamed Hermione, clutching Ron and dancing around. “WE GOT A GOAL!”

Gryffindor let out a big roar of approval, as Lee Jordan's magnified voice proclaimed at exactly the same time as Hermione that Katie Bell had scored *another* goal. Ron roared along with the rest of the crowd, though it was partly in pain as he tried to leap out of his stretcher and dance around also, but had to be helped back into it after a sickening crack.

Up on the roof, Draco harrumphed, but there were slight fingernail marks in his broomstick from when Ginny had nearly got knocked off her broom by the opposition. Luckily, no Bludgers had gotten even remotely close to

her, but this could be due to Fred and George imagining their mother's face if Ginny had gotten even a scratch.

Over at the Gryffindor goal rings, Severus was getting bored. Sure, the Hufflepuff Chasers were giving him decent competition, but he was considering whether to let a few goals pass, maybe just to rile up Potter or mar Gryffindor's reputation, he didn't know. At least those bloody third year girls waving the sparkly sign reading: 'Gryffindor's Keeper Can Catch *Me* Any Time' would probably burst into tears.

Severus's thoughts were interrupted as he perceived Draco waving his broom over his head and laughing and pointing at a Hufflepuff on the ground.

"FOUL? OH, COME *ON!*" yelled Lee Jordan.

Ginny flushed embarrassedly, Madam Hooch reprimanding her for stopping suddenly and knocking a following Hufflepuff to the ground. Ginny looked shamefaced up at Harry, but he, like the rest of the team, was grinning at her and trying not to laugh at the expression on her face.

"Ginny, everyone makes mistakes," he whispered into her ear, as Hufflepuff took the penalty shot. "You have to admit, that was pretty funny."

Ginny grinned surprisingly back. "Well, I really *am* a shocking flyer," she admitted back. "So I still can't believe that Madam Hooch thought I did that on purpose."

Harry winked at her and flew upwards once more as the Quaffle came back into play.

The rest of the game existed as a sort of blur in Ginny's mind, a very fast-paced blur involving a lot of close calls. She vaguely remembered hearing her brother roar over all the rest of the crowd when she narrowly missed scoring, and out of the corner of her eye she saw Severus stopping goals again and again, each time with an excited compliment from Lee Jordan. She remembered going into various formations with Angelina and Katie, and Fred and

George hovering around her constantly, usually resulting in Harry getting suddenly attacked by Bludgers every now and then.

But the best moment of all was when she saw the two Seekers dive forward at a glint of gold, hovering just near the Hufflepuff goal rings. Instantly, the game between the Chasers seemed to freeze, and the anticipation grew and grew as the Seekers' dives steepened. The crowd's roar got louder and louder, until suddenly it exploded, and Harry flung his full hand over his head and landed neatly on the ground with a big smile on his face.

"POTTER CAUGHT THE SNITCH!" roared the announcer. "GRYFFINDOR WINS! TWO HUNDRED TO NOTHING! WE WON!"

"We won!" screamed Ginny, laughing half-tearfully as she dove clumsily to meet her whole team on the ground. "WE WON!"

"Good on you," she heard someone whisper quietly into her ear.

"Oh, Severus!" she blurted out, throwing her arms around him and startling him into hurriedly backing away.

But Ginny was too worked up to feel offended, and she could only raise her broom above her head and make indecipherable screams of joy. Slaps on the back rained upon the whole team, as all of Gryffindor poured from the stands and starting screaming into their ears also.

She surveyed the crowd through slightly blurry eyes, noticing Philip Woodley and all her fellow fourth years yelling proudly and making their way towards her. And then she saw Ron, bellowing as he attempted to jump up and down, but Hermione not stopping him as she waved wildly at her. Her gaze then moved unconsciously to the Slytherin stands, and she saw a few amused-looking Slytherins giving her small cheers, but most of them already leaving. Her eyes, however, kept searching past them, her smile slowly breaking down as she realised the

person she was looking for wasn't there.

"Up there, Ginny," she heard Severus's voice rap, before he leapt back onto his broom and zoomed away from some screaming third years.

Ginny looked up in the direction where the hastily departing boy had motioned, and the swelling lump in her throat began to rise as she saw a lone figure standing upon the Quidditch stands' roof. The figure of Draco Malfoy stood with his hands in his pockets, his robes streaming behind him, as he stared down at Ginny's figure with an inscrutable look upon his face.

"Draco."

Ginny's voice hitched in her throat, as she started to try to push her way through the crowd.

"*DRA—*" she started to scream, but a deeper voice managed to cut in.

"*GINNY!*" she heard Harry yell, and she felt herself swept into his arms, and a pair of warm, green eyes and a shock of messy black hair obscured her vision to the Quidditch stands.

"H-Harry?" Ginny stuttered, her head whirling as she flung her arms around him back. "Oh, *Harry!*"

Harry laughed and whirled her around, "We beat 'em, Gin'!"

Ginny threw her head back and laughed alongside of him, all signs of worry fleeing from her face.

"We beat 'em...we beat 'em...we beat 'em..."

Harry's soft, warm voice echoed through her mind, and soon an enthusiastic crowd was pushing them along to the awaiting celebration party. Ginny felt an overwhelming burst of happiness as all her friends surrounded her. She whooped and cheered as loud as she could, but she couldn't stop her eyes from straying one last time to the Quidditch stands' roof. A sudden soberness seemed to wash over Ginny, as she continued to search though in vain.

There was no one there.

Chapter Ten

~ In which the loser gets the prize ~

Severus stretched out on the short grass, propping his head against the ancient stone bench. The early morning sun shone through the winding branches above him and glinted off his closely cropped hair. A black kitten lay purring in his lap and Severus sighed as he stroked it.

Although it was only a month since their first Quidditch game, the days seemed to drag when he wasn't with Draco. They were sort of 'fighting', he supposed, because he'd finally lost his temper when he'd heard that Draco hadn't made up with Ginny yet, and that they *still* weren't talking to each other. He'd been so angry... and yet it angered him so much more that he couldn't just straight out and say it. He wasn't going to be around forever. He wasn't always going to be there to make the peace. The two of them needed to make up, and needed to stay friends. As soon as he got his old body back...

Yet again the question of exactly how he was going to do that started buzzing in the back of his mind. And yet again he pushed it away.

It annoyed him how much he worried about Draco now, in fact, most things had been annoying him lately, and, with their garden all spick and span, there was hardly anything for him to take it out on any more. Not even beating the hell out of Potter and friends during the Duelling Club practises seemed fun any more, and not even his extra conversations with the DADA Professor!

"Stupid, bloody sod," he cursed himself. "You're getting soft."

Oreo mewed in agreement and started to wash herself. Severus frowned and got to his feet, scooping up a few loose pebbles and making his way to the pond.

OWLS were starting to loom on the horizon, and all the

fifth years around him were studying like mad. Of course, he didn't need to study, fifth year standard spells were common knowledge to him now.

He wondered, idly, if this was how it felt to not have to work for anything, to just have everything come easy to him like James Potter and Co. had. It was the same on the Quidditch pitch; thanks to his cat-like abilities and workouts in Hagrid's garden, stopping Quaffles was simpler than signing his name.

Severus shrugged, finding it dull to dwell on the past for once. He thought instead back to his current predicament, and his brow furrowed. Well, since he couldn't knock sense into *Draco*, it was about time he tackled Ginny.

Dropping the loose pebbles into the murky pond he turned to leave, when his sharp eyes noticed a strange marking near his feet. Carefully stepping to one side, he gave a low exclamation. There was a faint outline of a footprint in the soft earth, and when he looked closer at it, he noted the surface to be strangely smooth, as if someone had carelessly directed water over the footprints to clear them.

Severus narrowed his eyes. There was no way it was his or Draco's footprint; the sole was too worn... It had a somewhat cheap look to it, not like the expensive shoes he and Draco donned. It was reasonably large, as large as Draco's foot...so it couldn't possibly be Ginny's...and she didn't even know this place existed...

So whose was it? Who the hell had been in his garden?

Severus calmed down, feeling slightly foolish for somewhat over-reacting. As usual, he blamed it on his bloody overcharged teenage hormones. Well, he would just have to keep a better eye on it in future, and look for further clues as to who was the intruder...

Hearing an ever so faint breakfast gong, Severus left the garden through the hole in the hedge.

“In a world made of steel, made of stone...”

A pretty Hufflepuff girl jumped upon the collapsible stage and started dancing in time to the music. “Well, I hear the music. Close my eyes, feel the rhythm...”

At the side of the stage, Ginny Weasley shook her head. “You’re twirling too much!” she shouted over the music. “Remember you’ll be wearing tight Muggle trousers; you’ll hardly be able to move.”

It was a Sunday morning, and most of the fourth and fifth years doing Muggle Studies had gathered together for play rehearsals. Ginny was standing by the stage trying to convince the lead, Emily Lane, to follow the agreed choreography. She kept knocking over her partner, Philip Woodley, whenever she closed her eyes to sing. The rest of the students were practising their lines on the other side of the stage, and the volume of both the music and voices made it difficult to hear.

“It’s not *my* fault!” exclaimed Emily Lane, dropping her character. “Ginny, why haven’t we bought the costumes yet? You keep going on about these trousers but I’m yet to try them on!”

“We’ve still got three months,” said Ginny, shrugging her shoulders. “And there hasn’t been a Hogsmeade weekend for ages. If you like I’ll ask Professor McGonagall for permission to go specially.”

“These trousers,” said Terry Boot dubiously, walking over from across the stage, “they’re not anything like *tights* are they?”

Ginny shot him a serious look. “Definitely not. They’re much more shiny.” She glanced over at Woodley. “Pip’s might even have sequins.”

There was a universal groan from the rest of the students. “We have to be authentic!” exclaimed Ginny. “Apparently that’s what Muggles *wear*.”

“We should’ve picked the other one,” complained a

fourth year Ravenclaw, “the one about the Matrix.”

“Well, we can’t change now!” said another.

“Yes we can! We’ll change the ending!”

Emily Lane, who had a solo at the end of the play, stamped her foot. “We’re *not* changing the ending!”

“At least the Matrix tale had duelling...”

Woodley shook his head. “Muggles don’t duel.”

“What about their gun things?” said the Ravenclaw. “We should drop a song and have a Muggle duel in the middle of it!”

“We can’t get *guns*,” exclaimed Ginny.

“Well, another Muggle weapon then,” argued her classmate. “Pointed sticks.”

“Pointed sticks!” cheered another.

“How about,” began Woodley, holding his hand up for silence and raising his eyebrows, “*swords*.”

There was a buzz of excitement at Woodley’s words and Ginny gave him a betrayed look. Woodley shrugged at her. “You know it might spice things up a bit when the hero confronts the villain.” Ginny continued to look disgruntled. “I’ve seen Snape and Malfoy walking around with two shiny-looking swords,” he added. “So the idea is not only exciting, it’s thrifty.”

Ginny felt a smile tug at the corners of her mouth. “Idiot,” she said. She looked at Lane. “Are you OK with this?”

Emily Lane looked bored. “Don’t care,” she said.

“Right,” said Woodley, clapping his hands. “Let’s write this new scene then!”

The rest of the students cheered and Ginny frowned. “Wait, where’s Severus?”

As if answering her question, the door to the old classroom swung open and Severus Snape stood in the doorway, his arms crossed.

“Ginny,” he said firmly. “We need to talk.”

Ginny gave an exasperated sigh. “Practise started half an

hour ago, Severus!”

Severus waved a hand. “I don’t care. Look, we need to talk about—”

“Not *now*,” she interrupted. “You’d better listen to Philip. We’ve changed a scene.”

“But—”

“Shh!”

Scowling, Severus wandered reluctantly forward, jumping upon the small stage. In a matter of minutes he retreated to the window seat, the shouts and arguments giving him a headache. The rest of the rehearsal seemed to drag, and it was lunchtime when the actors broke up and he managed to get Ginny alone.

“Finally,” he grumbled. “*Now*, we need to talk.”

Ginny eyed him distrustfully, putting the newly-revised scripts back in the cabinet. “Why were you late?” she asked.

Severus scowled slightly, knowing she was trying to change the topic. “That stupid idiot, Terence Higgs, was following me about trying to shove some giggly girl onto me. Told him I wasn’t interested and he got all worked up about picking up soap.”

“You weren’t interested?” exclaimed Ginny. “Oh...does that mean...er...I mean, don’t you...er...did you not like *her*? Or was it because she was a gir-er...I mean, don’t you...”

“What are you trying to say?” demanded Snape, glaring at her.

“Nothing,” squeaked Ginny, looking thoroughly embarrassed. “Um...what did you want to speak to me about?”

Severus calmed down and surveyed her thoughtfully. “Draco,” he said shortly. “As you well know.”

Ginny’s expression automatically closed. “Yes,” she said with a non-committing grunt.

“He was at the Quidditch match you played,” continued

Severus, giving her a piercing look. “Did you see him?”

“I saw him,” said Ginny guardedly.

“And you didn’t say anything?” he pressed, feeling annoyed at the shortness of her answers.

“What was I supposed to say?” said Ginny. “He should have come up and congratulated *me*.”

“You went to all his Slytherin games, why didn’t you congratulate *him, then?*”

Ginny squirmed as she reached to open the door. “He wouldn’t care,” she mumbled.

“Oh for Merlin’s sake, Ginny,” snapped Severus. “He *does* care! He—”

“Well, why—I mean—what—who—” Ginny stuttered, before getting interrupted by an angry exclamation.

“Talk to the boy!” ordered Severus coldly. “Here, it’s lunchtime now. *Don’t* put it off any longer.”

“Severus!” protested Ginny, but Severus pushed past her, descending down the steps and giving her a black look when she opened her mouth once more.

Ginny sighed as she went down the stairs, not noticing Severus smirk to himself in front of her.

He should have done this a long time ago. Obviously, reasoning never got them anywhere; it was only strict words that shook students to their senses. He had been right all along.

“Er...Higgs?”

Terence Higgs looked up from his sandwich and eyed Ginny Weasley with slight apprehension. “Wot-is-it?” he grumbled, his mouth full of ham. “Jeez, Weasley, you’re ruinin’ my reputation.”

“I’m looking for Draco,” said Ginny quickly, noticing his face brighten considerably.

“He’s taken his lunch to the Quidditch pitch,” choked Higgs, trying to swallow his mouthful extra quickly.

“Quick, he went ten minutes ago. I followed him but he told me to piss off.”

“Thanks,” she said, and left the Great Hall, making her way towards the Entrance Hall.

Ginny’s pace slowed as she exited the huge oak doors. Just why had she listened to Severus, anyway? Why should she be the one to make up with the Slytherin prat? Why couldn’t *he* apologise to *her*?

Ginny frowned. And just *why* were they fighting in the first place?

“*WHY?!*” she exclaimed, feeling ridiculous as she couldn’t even remember the reason. “I have no idea *why!*”

But Ginny’s expression started to sober, as she realised her legs had automatically taken her close to the broom shed. Unwillingly, the resolve took her once more, as she observed the person she was seeking, sitting in the shadows with his back to her.

Merlin, I feel terrified, she thought incredulously to herself. It was just *Draco!* What was she scared of? Nothing *he* could say could hurt her...

But nevertheless, when Draco Malfoy stiffened and turned around, Ginny’s chest gave an odd sort of clench and she froze in mid step. Realising how stupid she must look, she quickly resumed her pace and walked forcefully up.

“Draco,” she began, forcing her voice not to waver and looking him directly in the eyes. “D’you mind if I join you?”

Draco stared straight back at her, though still sitting down. “If you like,” he answered, waving a hand at a few untouched sandwiches on a napkin.

Ginny sat firmly down opposite him, but suddenly didn’t feel very hungry. She opened her mouth to say something, but the young Slytherin had crossed his arms and was leaning against the cool timber wall of the broom shed, his eyes upward to the sky. Ginny’s mouth slowly closed,

and Draco's gaze flicked back to her, but then back to the sky once more. Ginny sighed deeply, but Draco made no acknowledgment of having heard.

At least we're not arguing, she thought wryly. But then again, we're not really talking either.

"So," she said weakly, after a long pause. "I saw your game against Hufflepuff..."

"I didn't see you," said Draco flatly. "You weren't sitting with Severus."

"Well, *Severus* saw me," said Ginny in a rather high voice. *Shut up! Don't start another argument – try to make peace!*

Draco uncrossed his arms and put his hands in his pockets.

"Gryffindor versus Slytherin is coming up soon," Ginny continued, in what she hoped was a pleasant voice. "I can't wait to see that match."

"Why's that?" asked Draco idly, giving her a slight scowl. "So you can cheer for—"

Ginny jerked, and Draco left his sentence cut off.

"I should go," he muttered, getting up and leaving the sandwiches untouched.

"Draco, *wait* – we need to talk."

Draco shoved his hands back in his pockets, and looked at her still sitting on the ground. Ginny felt surprised herself; the words had just fallen out automatically.

"About what?" he said quietly.

Ginny hesitated. "Where we both stand now...and because..." Ginny averted her eyes from his and blushed slightly. "Friends don't... friends don't just walk away from each other."

Draco looked as if he was restraining an ugly scowl from appearing on his face. "Friends?" he spat out suddenly, clenching his fists in his pockets. "Is that what you're saying we are, *friends*?"

Ginny felt her face grow even hotter as a pang of hurt

embarrassment seemed to stab her in the chest.

“I’ve got enough *friends* thank you very much,” continued Draco, his face screwed up furiously, “ – without adding *you* of all people to them. Don’t you fucking *get* it? I don’t *want* to be your fucking friend!”

Ginny stared up at him, horribly stung and for a split second, speechless. “*Well*, I’m sorry for being so fucking presumptuous!” she yelled back, her eyes blazing as she struggled to her feet. “D’you think it’s fun for me trying to stick up for you when you’re constantly insulting my *real* friends? D’you think I enjoy all the rubbish I have to put up with from my brothers when I even say ‘hello’ to you?”

Draco’s expression of scorn had skyrocketed. “Your *brothers* are the most pathetic bunch of ill-bred misfits in the entire school!” he yelled back. “Do you think I care at *all* what they think? Do you have *any* idea of what *I’ve* had to go through with all the *Slytherins*? And now I don’t even know why I’ve been *wasting* my time as it’s obvious–”

“It’s not just them!” Ginny screamed in response, her chest erupting with hurt and fury. “The whole of Hogwarts says it, and probably your precious Slytherins! You’re this spoilt, snotty little bigot obsessed with beating Harry Potter – and you’re *never* going to do it! You’re *never* going to beat him and you’ll ALWAYS BE BELOW HIM – no matter *how hard* you PATHETICALLY TRY!”

“Congratulations,” spat Draco through gritted teeth, as he took a step backwards and glared at her through cold, grey eyes. “You wanted to know where I stand? Well, now I can tell you with complete conviction that I do not stand with you.” Ginny’s eyes continued to flash angrily as Draco shook his head with a sneer. “I will never,” he continued, “ –stand with you. I’ll be standing as far away as possible from you and your mundane, pitiable,

worthless life.”

And Draco turned away and left, leaving Ginny in an angry red haze. The argument played again and again in her mind, each word cutting her anew. She staggered backwards and hit the side of the broom shed, sliding down the wall until she hit the grass with a thump. The anger began to fade, leaving a chilling numbness in its place.

She didn't know how long she sat there, staring into space, when she heard the familiar whoosh of a landing broom and soft footfalls making their way towards her.

“Hullo, Harry,” she murmured wearily.

Harry said nothing, but sat down beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. She laid her head on Harry Potter's shoulder, and felt some of the tension leave her body.

“Rough morning?”

Harry's breath was warm against her hair and Ginny clung onto this element of comfort to prevent herself from sinking even further into the growing hole Draco had made when he'd walked away.

“A bit, yeah,” she mumbled.

“Then come flying with me,” suggested Harry, pushing himself to his feet and offering her his hand with a smile. “It'll make all your troubles disappear.”

“Will it now?” muttered Ginny, but her face softening as she took his hand and he pulled her towards him.

“Well, at least for a little while,” promised Harry, and, with Ginny's hand in his, they mounted his new Firebolt and took off into the sky.

“Well?” demanded Severus, as Ginny entered the common room. “How'd it go?”

Ginny's cheeks were flushed and her hair was sticking up wildly. She'd had a particularly amiable expression on

her face when she'd entered the portrait hole that evening, but now, as soon as Severus had spoken, she flared up.

"How did *what* go?" she said angrily. "Look, I can't talk, everyone's expecting me at dinner."

"Your conversation with *Draco*!" snapped Severus, annoyed at her angry tone. "And here, I've already *got* dinner things; eat with me."

Ginny sent him an ugly look but sat down opposite him anyway. "Everyone's expecting me," she repeated, with an odd closed expression on her face.

"Who cares?" said Severus. "You'll see them in an hour anyway. Now, *tell me what happened with Draco*."

"You sound just like your uncle," snapped Ginny back. "You know that?"

Severus scowled at her, trying hurriedly to change his expression into something more pleasant. "Will you *please, tell me*," he grimaced.

Ginny's closed expression wavered slightly as she surveyed him curiously. "Well, what d'you care?" she replied offhandedly. "It's not like—"

"Oh, shut up," snapped Severus, unable to bear his strained smile any longer. "You didn't even try, did you? It's ripping our friendship apart!"

"Friendship, is it?" said Ginny in a low voice, unable to hide the bitterness in her voice as she looked at the boy opposite.

"What else would you call this mixed-up relationship?" Severus spat, feeling horrified at what he was saying. *You are getting soft!*

"I don't know, Severus!" replied Ginny angrily, pushing aside her dinner with a clatter. "But I do know that whatever we had – it's over. You can ask Draco yourself if you want. I never want to speak to him again."

Severus gaped at her. "What on earth did you *say*? I bet you insulted him or mentioned Potter or something like that!"

“You always take his side!” flared Ginny back. “You always think it’s *my* fault when we have a fight! The insults were going *both* ways, Severus – Stop rolling your *fucking* eyes at me!”

Severus went from angry to furious, bringing down his butter knife so hard it stuck into the table. “OF ALL THE – *You* are the most *stupid*, idiotic –”

“I’ve been called enough names today!” cut in Ginny angrily, getting up from her chair. “And I’m sick of taking all your crap, Severus! Being friends is not something you should have to work at and I’m sick of working at it anyway. I’m going to dinner.”

Severus glared at her retreating back, feeling a wave of betrayed fury sweeping through his veins. “Working at it? WORKING – You’ve done *squat*, Ginny!” he roared, angry sparks flying from the wand on his belt. “Why can’t you just *grow up* and realise that if it wasn’t for *me* holding you two together–”

“*Nobody* asked you to, Severus!” she interrupted with a bellow, whirling to glare at him bitterly just before she reached the portrait hole. “GET OVER YOURSELF!”

And Ginny slammed her way out of the common room, leaving an enraged Severus in her wake.

Bright, yellow sunshine filtered through the stained-glass windows of the Great Hall onto a tousled mop of red hair. Ron Weasley groaned and tried to position his sleeping form more comfortably at the sound of the breakfast gong. After trying unsuccessfully to find his pillow to cover his head, he realised he was already at the breakfast table and groaned even louder. Harry yawned in agreement and even Hermione was eating her porridge with a slightly glazed look upon her face.

With the OWLs only two months away, the teachers had been piling on the essays and assignments in belief that

the less sleep they got, the better the results – well, that was according to the students anyway. There wasn't a single class that they could slack off in. Even Hagrid was piling on the extra readings.

Harry yawned again and waved at Ginny across the hall. Ginny waved back and made her way through the tables to sit sleepily down next to him.

“Why're you so tired?” he asked with a slight grin, as she started to butter her toast with a spoon.

Ginny blinked at him and shrugged. “No reason,” she said vaguely.

Harry nodded in acquiescence but his gaze lingered briefly on the unusual dullness in her eyes before he pointed upwards at a tawny brown owl.

“Watch out, Ron,” he called cheerfully.

Ron groaned in protest and continued dozing next to his porridge. A second later his groan turned into a shout as a brown parcel dropped into a bowl of muesli opposite, showering him in cold milk and sultanas.

“It's for you!” he muttered in disgust, lobbing the sodden package towards Ginny and shaking bits of breakfast from his hair. “Stupid owl should be roasted...”

“Don't be horrid, Ron,” snapped Hermione irritably, waving her wand to clear the mess. “And don't just chuck around people's things like that. It might be valuable.”

“It's all right, it's just chocolate eggs,” interjected Ginny at Ron's disbelieving snort. “Mum and Dad are trying to bribe me back home for the Easter hols.”

Harry and Ron's faces immediately brightened at the mention of the Easter break but Hermione's look of irritation just intensified.

“Now, you two, if you go to the Burrow you'll just end up slacking away those precious few days before OWLs –”

“Excellent thinking.” Ron grinned through a mouthful of Ginny's chocolate. “Another brilliant plan from

Hermione.”

“Such genius,” agreed Harry, ignoring Hermione’s weak protests and winking at Ginny. “How about it, eh?”

Ginny smiled at him in response and looked down at the letter from her parents. They really did want to see her and she realised that she missed them both and her old room terribly. She looked back up at Harry but he was busy with Ron trying to coax Hermione into eating one of the homemade chocolates. Her gaze wavered over to the Slytherin table and she didn’t know whether she was relieved or depressed when she didn’t see Draco there. It was so painful to see him look straight through her in the corridors, and Severus really wasn’t much better. She hadn’t seen him in the common room since their fight but whenever she did manage to catch his eye between classes, he treated her with the same cold disdain he reserved for everyone but Draco. It was tearing her apart and, although she’d tried to thrust it aside and put all of her concentration on the Muggle Studies play, every so often she cracked and she was horribly afraid that someone would find out just how hard she’d been taking it.

Ginny continued watching Hermione try to irritably bat handfuls of chocolate away from her lecturing mouth. It seemed as if everyone had best friends to fall back on except for her. Even Philip Woodley seemed to be avoiding her lately, and although being with Harry should constitute as having someone there for her, it just seemed that whatever burning emotion she’d felt for him before was now being taken up by her pain and jealousy of Severus and Draco’s continuing friendship.

“You know, I think I will go back home for Easter,” said Ginny abruptly, managing a strained grin as Harry and Ron gave triumphant cheers. “I think I could use a break from Hogwarts for a while.”

Hermione’s look softened as she took in Ginny’s tired

expression. “Well, I know *you*’ve earned it,” she said kindly. “It’s these other two that I’m worried – mmf!”

Ron had taken this opportunity to shove the last of the chocolate eggs into Hermione’s mouth and he grinned as he leapt to his feet.

“Gin, you’re a lifesaver! Let’s go pack, eh?”

Ginny looked back at her brother and a laughing Harry. “All right.” She smiled. “But I think you three owe me some chocolate.”

The clash of steel blades broke the early morning silence. Hot sun beat down upon a pair of dishevelled heads, and Draco took a moment to step backwards and catch his breath as the far-off breakfast gong sounded. It was the first day of the Easter holidays and both boys were working off their restlessness by sword fighting in the hidden garden by the lake. Severus straightened but didn’t lower his sword as he continued to face Draco steadily.

“I’m not hungry anyway,” responded Draco to the other boy’s unspoken challenge.

“Neither am I,” said Severus, and met Draco’s heavy blow with the edge of his blade.

Draco grimaced as the hit rang through his clenched palms. Ignoring the slight pain he swung his sword again, taking comfort in the way he didn’t have time to think when they duelled. There was only time to react and strike, over and over again. The strained silence that was growing so awkward between them was non-existent at the moment, and Draco meant to keep it that way. The topic that they kept avoiding was no longer an issue, Ginny was no longer an –

“Argh!”

Draco stumbled backward, the other boy’s blade just grazing his left shoulder.

“What are you doing?!” exploded Severus, glaring in

horror at the slight tear in Draco's clothing. "Why aren't you using the protective charm?"

Draco shrugged, hiding his angriness for getting distracted. "I fight better when I've got more to lose," he muttered, resenting the way Severus was looking at him as if he were mad. "Look, are we going to continue or not?"

"The way you fight, Draco," said Severus, ignoring Draco's question and narrowing his eyes at the tear, "–is as if you have *nothing* to lose."

Draco's lips pursed and he raised his sword up challengingly. "Are we going to continue," he repeated loudly, "–or not?"

"Not," said Severus angrily, "–until you use the protective charm. Another stunt like that and there'll be a lot more blood. I can't believe you didn't put it on in the first place!"

"You sound like a bloody Professor." Draco scowled, lowering his sword and waving his wand over himself. "And you barely nicked me – I just wasn't concentrating at that split second."

"Well, it was really stupid of you!" snapped Severus irritably, lowering his sword with a slice to the ground. "I've had enough anyway."

"Oh, come *on*," scoffed Draco with a sneer. "You're always the first to back out – why can't you just let it go?"

Severus's grip on his sword tightened and he swung it upwards to slam away Draco's raised blade.

"I back out when I get sick of putting up with your self-deprecating rubbish." He glared back, stepping quickly sideways to avoid an answering swing whistle past his ear. "Stop it. I'm leaving."

"Well, *I'm* in your way," replied Draco smoothly, raising his sword once more.

Severus's jaw clenched, the unusual anger simmering in

Draco's eyes pooling in his own. *Well, you've been in my way since first term! he wanted to scream. Instead of trying to change back I've been stuck pretending to be friends with a pathetic boy too stupid to realise I'm his own Professor!*

"GET OUT OF MY WAY!" he yelled angrily, his sword slicing through the air and clashing with Draco's counter strike.

But how pathetic is that Professor, continued the poisonous voice in the back of his mind, when he actually starts to enjoy their company... when he actually started to believe that they cared for him... the way he so desperately cared for them –

"I SAID –MOVE!" Severus roared, swinging his sword again and again as Draco met each strike with his own just as furiously. "I'M SICK OF ALL THIS! I'M SICK OF YOU!"

There was a split second where the world seemed to slow down to Severus, before he felt a colossal blow to the side of his head. He fell to his knees, dropping his sword and clutching his ringing head in his palms. He'd felt the protection charm shatter as Draco's sword hit him, but it was not with relief that he felt no wound on the side of his face.

"Get away from me," he spat through curled fingers, reaching painfully for his wand on his belt.

Bringing his wand to his temple, Severus muttered something to ease the pain, and finally looked up at the boy standing opposite. Draco was breathing heavily, his back against the sun and his face contorted in the glare.

"Sorry for being an inconvenience," he muttered with a sneer, before hoisting his sword over his shoulder and walking jerkily off.

Albus Dumbledore glanced up from his desk to the sound

of sharp knocking. "Come in," he replied.

The door opened immediately and a tense-looking Severus Snape entered the room, his hands fiddling restlessly with his wand.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Dumbledore smiled, waving at a cushiony armchair.

Snape continued to stand, not returning Dumbledore's smile. "Headmaster," he began, not bothering to hide the anger in his voice, "—I am sick of remaining a child and it is completely impossible for me to continue. There is no reason for me to attend classes, no reason to sleep in the student dormitories — it's ridiculous enough that I've spent *this* long doing so."

Dumbledore continued to gaze at him silently through his half moon spectacles. "So, what is it you wish to do exactly?"

"I want to work on my cure in private," said Snape immediately. "I want to stay in my workroom until I finish, I don't want to see anyone — I don't want to *speak* to anyone until I am back to normal. I've done nothing of use this year, my continuing to live like this is meaningless."

"And a life without meaning," interjected Dumbledore, quietly, "—is a terrible burden."

Severus narrowed his eyes at Dumbledore's comment, but when he opened his mouth to speak Dumbledore was already continuing.

"I asked you sixteen years ago why you wanted to spy for me, and you replied 'to destroy the Dark Lord'. I am asking you this question again once more; for I have reason to believe your answer may have—"

"What, you think I don't want him dead?" interrupted Snape angrily. "After all I've *done* —"

"That is not what I said, Severus," said Dumbledore seriously. "Why must you always assume the negative?"

"Why must *you* never give me what I want?" burst out

Snape in response. “You’re not my teacher anymore, and yet you continue to lecture me! This isn’t just another Defence Against the Dark Arts application – you cannot refuse me the right to my old life!”

“You are not my student anymore,” replied Dumbledore sharply. “But if you were, I would try to give you what you need. You are not a teacher anymore, but if you were I would give you that which did not detriment the school in any way. You are not a spy for me anymore, but if you were I would give you that which would benefit our cause. I am treating you as I would a friend, Severus, and I am instead giving you what you *want*.”

“You’re giving me my workroom and privacy then?”

“No,” replied Dumbledore crisply. “I am giving you the chance to give your life meaning, and to put meaning into the life of others.”

“What?” spat Snape, turning red as he tried to vocalise his fury. “That’s not what I – I don’t *care* – I – my life’s meaning is my *work*, my teaching—”

“Then perhaps it’s the teacher within you that understands the importance of giving their students’ lives meaning. And perhaps, in the case of Draco Malfoy: salvation.”

“What are you saying?” burst out Snape once more, clenching his fists in frustration. “You’re keeping me like this to help *one* student? Because it sure as hell isn’t worth it!”

“Not one student,” replied Dumbledore, his gaze softening at the furious boy before him. “*You*, Severus. Young Malfoy is just a bonus.”

“Malfoy is a *child!*” ground out Snape, ignoring Dumbledore’s reply. “He doesn’t listen to a thing I say! He’s so wrapped up in himself he doesn’t see what’s right in front of him, he’s unhinged!”

“I’m sure you’ll both have a lot to talk about then,” murmured Dumbledore, but then sighing at Snape’s

sudden grinding of teeth. “I’m sorry, Severus, but surely you, of all people, can see how people turn out this way. Blood, money, and good marks are not enough to secure happiness –”

“He’s not my problem!” interrupted Snape furiously. “And he’s not going to stop me from changing back – and neither are you.”

Dumbledore rose to his feet but Snape had already started backing towards the door, shaking his head at the troubled Headmaster before him. “He’s not my problem,” he repeated in a low, bitter voice, before wrenching open the door and slamming it behind him.

Despite the flickering torchlight, the air was cold in the third floor corridor. The muffled sound of merry chatter could be heard indistinctly through the stone walls, but it was away from this that Draco Malfoy was walking. Dinner had started a half hour ago but, like many times in the last two months, he wasn’t feeling at all hungry. He rarely seemed to be without an unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach now, and whenever he’d seen Madam Pomfrey about it, she’d unfeelingly provided him with a heavy dose of something nasty. He’d forced himself to eat and take sleeping draughts during his OWLs week, but felt as though he’d performed horribly anyway.

He hoped, with a sudden burst of vindictiveness, that Severus had done just as badly. Although they hadn’t spoken since Easter, he’d noticed a definite lack of attendance on Severus’s behalf during classes... hopefully the stupid Gryffindor had failed and wouldn’t be allowed to go on to sixth year. Although knowing his luck, his odds of doing fifth year over seemed highly likely also.

Draco’s face tightened and he kicked a puddle of water viciously. No! Definitely *not*. He’d rather leave Hogwarts than have classes with not only Severus, but *her*...

The puddle was deeper than he'd thought and Draco found himself walking through ankle-deep water, soaking his shoes right through. He glanced angrily around for the source, his hand itching to pull out his wand and hex the culprit. His grey eyes rested on a wooden door he'd never noticed before, turning out to be the door to a girl's bathroom. Glaring at the water still seeping out from beneath it he turned to leave, when a burst of cold blew through him, making him jolt in shock.

Moaning Myrtle tore away from him with her hands over her tear-stained face, her translucent body streaming after her. Draco turned at the sound of rushing footsteps from inside the bathroom. The door jerked open, and a blonde-haired boy stopped mere inches from Draco's glowering face.

"*You*," Draco sneered, lifting his chin and sidestepping to take up the entire doorway. "What're *you* doing here?"

Philip Woodley narrowed his eyes in return, his pupils like tiny black specks in pools of green. "Get out of my way."

Draco felt all of his bottled up anger and frustration roar at Woodley's reply, and it was with this that Draco welcomed the dangerous gleam in Woodley's eye as he glared back at him, choosing instead to stand his ground and tilt his chin higher. "Answer my question, muddblood," he spat.

Woodley's eyes flashed and he pulled out a peeling and worn-out-looking wand. "Get out of my *way!*" he snarled, jabbing his wand tip at the base of Draco's throat.

Draco jerked his neck away and brought his hands up to Woodley's shoulders, striking them with such force Woodley staggered, falling backwards into the bathroom and landing in a puddle of water.

"You think you're a match for me," sneered Draco, advancing on the sodden Woodley with his own wand drawn now, "—with your obvious lack of talent and your

hand-me-down wand?”

Woodley struggled to his feet, his wet robes weighing him down and his jaw and fists clenched. “You don’t know me,” he said through gritted teeth. “You have no idea who I am.”

“What’s there to know?” Draco looked him up and down coolly. “A pathetic nobody who skulks around girls’ bathrooms at night, getting off on making them cry—”

Woodley lunged at Draco who pointed his wand at the other boy’s furious face. “Locomotor Mortis!”

The seething fourth year fell against the wall with his legs locked together, his wand falling to the ground with a clatter. “You’re one to talk!” he snarled in response, gripping the stone wall with white fingers. “After what *you* did to Ginny!”

Draco glared at the other boy for a split second before grabbing the front of Woodley’s robes and shaking him. “I haven’t spoken to her,” spat Draco, his voice bitter and low as he spoke right in Woodley’s face, “ –for three *months*.”

“You’re a *liar*,” spat Woodley back, his usually twinkling eyes narrowed in loathing. “If it’d been three months, she wouldn’t still be crying over scum like *you*.”

Draco released the front of Woodley’s robes with a shove, ignoring the fourth year’s snarl of pain as he fell backwards and hit his head on one of the sinks.

“Uncurse me you stupid git!” glowered Woodley, as Draco turned on his heel and headed for the door.

Draco paused, tilting his chin upwards once more as he sneered at the boy behind him. “Your excuse for a wand is over there,” he said over his shoulder. “Be thankful I’m not deducting house points for cheek.”

Draco slammed the door behind him, scowling at the scattering of students trickling down the corridor before him. He strode past them quickly, turning into a larger hallway that overlooked the courtyard below. He paused

in an alcove, muttering a drying charm on his soggy shoes when the sound of familiar chatter drifted upwards to his sharp ears.

Glancing over the open ledge, Draco scowled as Harry Potter and co. walked leisurely through the courtyard, moonlight glinting off their grinning faces. Where normally Draco would've taken one look at the cheerful Gryffindors and left, something seemed to make him hesitate this time, enough for his scowl to quickly flick over the three bobbing heads, to finally rest on the smallest figure, her red hair obscured by an oversized beanie.

Unbidden, and completely unwelcome, Woodley's earlier words swept into his mind. Draco's scowl intensified at the echoing words, which he could clearly see were untrue. Ginny was laughing as the other three joked with her, not looking at all as if she wanted to run off and cry her eyes out.

But that something that'd made him hesitate the first time tugged at him once more, causing Draco to hesitate a second time, allowing his gaze to linger just a while longer on the red-haired figure now halfway across the courtyard. And that's when he saw, for the very first time, the way she seemed just half a step behind the other three, and the way her smile never lingered after she laughed, and the way Potter seemed to put his arm around her so gingerly, and the way she leaned so heavily against him in return. He saw the slight droop in her shoulders, the way her arms barely swung on her sides, and then...nothing... for the four Gryffindors had passed through the courtyard and out of Draco's line of vision.

Draco continued to stare downwards, his mind as blank as the mossy ground below.

The Sunday of the last Quidditch match of the year

dawned perfectly clear. Anticipation could be tasted in the air, the question of whether Gryffindor would beat Slytherin the source of many bets and conversation. Straight after breakfast, nearly all of Hogwarts poured out of the castle doors and over to the Quidditch stands to anxiously await the beginning of the match.

Among the crowd were two hurrying Gryffindors, each making their way to the very top row and brandishing scarlet and gold banners.

“This is it, Ginny,” breathed Hermione. “The last game, the one that really counts...”

“Hermione!” mocked Ginny. “Don’t tell me you’re actually getting into Quidditch?”

Hermione responded with a fierce roar as the Gryffindor team flew out, before smiling apologetically at an alarmed Ginny.

“I’ve just been worried about Ron, that’s all,” explained Hermione. “Well, at least you’ve managed to keep Harry under wing; he’s been smiling so much lately. Now I just hope they both do something spectacular to end it all.”

“Yes, me too,” agreed Ginny, smiling back.

Something flickered across Hermione’s face as she looked at the other girl. “So...” she hesitated. “It doesn’t bother you that Harry’s playing against—”

“Please don’t talk to me about him,” murmured Ginny, but her face breaking out into a beam as a familiar Gryffindor started to fly towards her. “Harry! You’re supposed to be lining up!”

Harry flew up close and gave them a quick grin. “Wish me luck?”

“Of course!” declared Hermione. “And tell Ron also.”

Harry grinned at Hermione and looked to the girl beside her. “I bet you’re glad you’re not playing this time...”

Harry’s voice trailed away as he caught sight of the expression on Ginny’s face. She wasn’t looking at him at all, but was staring straight past him. She hadn’t even

seemed to have realised he was talking to her.

“My cloak,” she mumbled. “He’s... wearing it...”

Harry narrowed his eyes and swivelled his head, taking a guess at who was behind him.

Hovering only yards away was Draco Malfoy, but if he had seen Harry looking at him he made no sign. His eyes were transfixed on Ginny’s, his blonde hair becoming unstuck in the wind as he drifted closer.

Harry looked back at Ginny and had to stop himself from jerking back in surprise. Gone was the shy smile she’d always worn when she’d looked at him, and although she didn’t look in the least bit happy, Harry was struck by the depth of the feeling written across her face.

Hermione too had noticed this, and caught Harry’s eye. Harry gave her a wry grimace and turned to fly away. As he started to accelerate, he turned his head and caught a glimpse of the back of his archrival’s deep green cloak.

That wasn’t the usual Slytherin uniform, he thought puzzled. And what was with the flashing, silver letters?

“I can’t believe he’s wearing it...” mumbled Ginny to herself once more.

“What?” said Hermione sharply. “What do you mean? *Who?*”

But Ginny wasn’t listening. The background noise had levelled out into a slight roaring in her ears, and all she could do was stare at Draco Malfoy, drifting closer to her with his deep green cloak strewn behind him.

“PLAYERS, LINE UP!”

And in a blink of an eye he was gone, racing towards the centre of the pitch with only a silver blur on his back to distinguish him from the rest of his team.

“AND QUAFFLE’S IN THE AIR! CAUGHT, JOHNSON! WHAT A SWERVE! AND SHE PASSES—NO—YES! A BACKWARD PASS TO WEASLEY! A FUMBLE—NO! IT WAS ON PURPOSE, BELL IN POSSESSION NOW—AND SHE SCORES!

GRYFFINDOR SCORES IN THE FIRST HALF MINUTE!”

A huge cheer came from the crowd, backed up by a big bout of booing from the Slytherin stands.

At the Gryffindor goal posts, Severus Snape gritted his teeth at the cheering crowd, feeling a huge urge to boo also. He was gripping his broomstick so tightly his hands and forearms were flushed red. Professor McGonagall had threatened to reveal his identity if he didn't play today, and he was furious at Dumbledore for allowing such a thing to pass. He had such an itching temptation to throw the match anyway...

But something flickered on Snape's livid face, as a green figure streaked with silver swooped overhead. "What the hell is he wearing?" he muttered, only to be deafened by a sudden triumphant roar from the Slytherin crowd.

“—SLYTHERIN CHASER IN POSSESSION! AN EXCHANGE STUDENT FROM DURMSTRANG—FELIX—HIS NAME IS—PASSES IT TO ICARUS—FELIX—ICARUS—WARRINGTON, THE ONLY OTHER STUDENT BESIDES MALFOY THEY HAVEN'T REPLACED—scheming, cheating bastards—”

“Jordan!”

“It's true!” cried Seamus, who was sitting in front of Hermione and Ginny. “They've replaced their Beaters as well! Just because some of those exchange students play Quidditch for summer teams...”

Dean got up to boo loudly when Hermione's scarlet and gold banner accidentally hit him in the back of the head.

“Ron's got the Quaffle!” she squealed.

“AT 'EM, WEASLEY!” roared the Gryffindor fifth years, their roar turning into a howl as a Bludger connected with the side of his head.

“I'm fine!” they heard him yell in a rather strangled voice, as Harry swooped down to see him. “Watch out for

the Snitch!”

The game soon became more of a Beater and Bludgers competition after that. Fred and George were determined to get revenge on the Slytherin Beaters who had targeted their brother, and the Slytherin Beaters were just as determined to take out the Gryffindor Keeper who kept stopping all of their goals. The Chasers on both teams could barely inch forward from the continuous stream of Bludgers flying in their road, and the sudden Beater who flung themselves in their paths to ward them off.

“GET OUT OF THE WAY!” screamed Katie Bell, as Fred Weasley careered into her.

There was a loud OOOOH from the crowd as both Chaser and Beater hit each other with such force that their brooms flailed wildly and they crashed into a tangled heap on the pitch.

“Fred, you dolt!” yelled Angelina, being backed up despairingly by George. “Katie, what are you doing?!”

But neither Katie nor Fred could answer properly; Fred just gave an unintelligible groan and it seemed as if Katie had been knocked out cold.

“Harry!” roared Ron, narrowly missing another Bludger and looking upwards at his best friend. “We need that Snitch!”

While the Gryffindor team was distracted by the loss of two of their players, the Slytherin Chasers took this time to score a few illegal goals.

“That’s stooging!” shouted Severus, getting the wind knocked out of him as all three Chasers crashed into him simultaneously from different angles.

“Nothin’ personal, Snape,” said the biggest one rather apologetically. “Your uncle would understand.”

“Oof,” gasped Snape, feeling slightly dizzy and trying to glare and hang onto his broom at the same time. “I’ll...I’ll kill you!”

“FOUL!” screamed the Gryffindors, pulling their eyes

away from their fallen team and looking up to the goal posts.

But in the confusion of Fred and Katie's collision, Madam Hooch hadn't seen the way in which Slytherin had scored their nine goals, and the game continued with no penalties.

"That was such a foul!" screamed Hermione and Ginny, being backed up by a roar from their housemates.

Lee Jordan was unusually silent, but probably because he had rushed down to the pitch as soon as Fred and Katie had collided and was jumping up and down in rage, shaking his fist with Professor McGonagall at the suddenly noticed Slytherin Chasers.

"RON! ANGELINA!" bellowed Harry. "GET BACK INTO THE GAME! YOU TOO, GEORGE!"

The two Chasers nodded quickly to each other, and swooped back into the sky. Harry let out a deep breath and continued scanning the skies. If he caught the Snitch now they would win the game, but tie for the Quidditch cup. He cast a sidelong glance at Malfoy and saw him smirking at the Slytherin crowd.

Harry felt a sudden burst of anger as he looked down at Fred and Katie, and even at a disoriented Severus Snape. No one messed with his Quidditch team. And especially not bleeding Malfoy and shoe-ins.

"I DON'T BELIEVE IT! WEASLEY HAS THE QUAFFLE AND IS HEADED TOWARD THE GOALS!"

Harry felt his breath hitch along with the rest of the crowd as he heard Lee Jordan's voice echo once more across the Quidditch pitch.

"YOU CAN DO IT, RON!" he cried hoarsely, along with about five hundred other variations coming from the crowd.

Harry gripped his handle extra hard as he watched his best friend zoom forward, all thoughts of the Snitch wiped

from his mind. Draco Malfoy too, watched, a flicker of hope on his face evaporating into a glare, as Weasley dropped the Quaffle only to have Johnson catch it instead. His glare intensified as Johnson passed it back to Weasley, who spun his broom around with a sudden burst of speed and hurled the Quaffle straight at the centre goal hoop. The Slytherin Keeper screamed as the red ball hit him in the face, knocking him backwards through the hoop with the Quaffle bouncing miraculously after.

“YES!” shrieked the crowd along with the commentator, scarlet and gold banners flying. “SNITCH TO WIN FOR GRYFFINDOR!”

“COME ON, ICARUS!” yelled Draco, punching his broom in frustration. “SCORE, WARRINGTON! WHERE ARE THOSE BLUDGERS?!”

Down in the stands, Hermione and Ginny turned and slowly faced each other.

“Ron scored!” they screamed simultaneously, setting off the whole of Gryffindor once more.

But Gryffindor’s cheer soon turned into an angry buzz as two well-aimed Bludgers savagely attacked both Angelina and Ron, making the Quaffle fall into the hands of a gleeful Slytherin seventh year.

“SCORE, DAMN YOU!” bellowed Draco again, but all thoughts of the red Quaffle vanished from his mind when he saw the only ball he truly wanted to be his, dart past him.

A quick glance at Potter showed that he miraculously hadn’t noticed it yet. Not only that, but that familiar glint of gold and those tiny, fluttering wings were a lot closer to him than it was to Potter himself. Draco couldn’t believe it. He was finally going to beat him. He was finally going to prove that he was the better wizard.

“It’s mine,” he breathed, and shot forward.

“I DON’T BELIEVE IT!” yelled Jordan for about the millionth time that match. “MALFOY IS CHASING THE

SNITCH!"

"Oh, God," whispered Ginny.

"No," gritted Harry, and shot forward.

"Argh!"

"MALFOY GETS A BLUDGER TO THE SHOULDER! WELL *DONE*, WEASLEY!"

Fred Weasley grinned as his carefully-aimed Bludger struck Draco with such force that his hands closed upon empty air instead of the Snitch. Harry pushed all thoughts of giving Fred an especially big Christmas present when the tiny golden ball took a sudden spin upwards, along with a furious Malfoy streaking after it once more.

"OH, NO! IT LOOKS AS THOUGH—WHAT'S THIS?! HOLY—LOOK AT POTTER GO! HE'S CATCHING UP TO MALFOY LIKE A—A—*I DON'T BELIEVE IT!* THEY'RE BOTH NECK IN NECK FOR THE SNITCH!"

Lee Jordan's words were a faint buzzing in the ears of Draco Malfoy. In those split seconds of time, the only thing he was aware of was the Snitch right in front of him, and Potter's determined hand stretched out unwillingly next to his. He didn't hear the crowd's roar, or even his team mates random bellowing, and he didn't even care that he was hurtling higher than he'd ever been before. All he wanted was to get that Snitch, that tiny golden ball that represented all that Potter had, and all that Draco wanted.

It was usually taken for granted that when two Seekers are neck in neck for the Snitch, the rest of the game is halted and everyone, both Chasers, Keepers, and sometimes Beaters, were to freeze in mid-play and watch the battle for the Snitch in awe. However, much to the shock of Ron as he tried to watch his best friend's dive get steeper and steeper, the Slytherin Chasers bashed into him full force and stole the Quaffle, streaking off to the Gryffindor goals.

Severus's faint mutterings of 'Die Potter' were interrupted as a bright red ball hit him full force in the shoulder. Momentarily stunned, his glare took a while to distinguish all three Chasers stationed around him. They caught the ball on the rebound and prepared to heft it towards the goals once more.

Gritting his teeth and swinging around like a cat, Severus stopped the Quaffle this time with his palm, slamming it straight back at Warrington's nose.

"ARGH!"

The bellow of pain seemed to come as a wake up call for the absorbed crowd. It was here that they were torn; they desperately wanted to see the outcome of the two seekers getting closer and closer to the Snitch, but they also wanted to see whether one Keeper had a chance against three Chasers. Especially if that ten points could decide who won or lost the Quidditch Cup.

Lee Jordan was having just as much difficulty in commentating.

"AND IT'S POTTER IN FRONT! THEN MALFOY—POTTER—MALFOY—AND SNAPE STOPS THE GOAL, OOH FOUL! BUT NO! THEY'RE CONTINUING, POTTER'S NOW IN FRONT, SNAPE IS BATTING THE QUAFFLE AWAY LIKE A PUFFSKEIN, FELIX IS DOWN AND OUT—WEASLEY AND JOHNSON ARE MAKING A COMEBACK—POTTER'S STILL IN FRONT—OH, NO! WARRINGTON SCOR—NO! SAVED ONCE MORE!"

It was then that the half of Hogwarts who were watching Harry and Draco drew in a sharp gasp.

Draco was becoming increasingly frustrated by how Harry was inching closer towards the Snitch than he was. He'd been so *certain* it was his, and now everything was going wrong! It couldn't end like this! It *couldn't*—

As if reading his mind, the Snitch seemed to hang for a

split second in the air, before plunging directly vertical towards the earth below. The two Seekers swore, flipping their brooms around almost instantaneously and diving straight after it. But something went wrong for Draco in that instant, for the string from his cloak flapped viciously into his eye, causing him to swerve ever so slightly off course as he batted it away. This then resulted in a number of things, the first one being a sharp gasp from the crowd, followed by everything going black.

“MERLIN! IT SEEMS AS IF MALFOY’S CLOAK HAS SOMEHOW COME UNDONE, AND NOW HE’S BEING SMOTHERED IN IT!”

Snape dizzily looked up through the mob of Slytherins and Bludgers to see a green streaked blur flailing downwards at breakneck speed.

“No...” he breathed, his blood running cold. “I knew he shouldn’t have –ARGH!”

Snape clutched at his head in agony as the Quaffle dropped from his forehead, the Chasers from both houses continuing to fight over it.

Ginny Weasley gripped her banner so hard she could feel the wooden splinters digging into her palms, her gaze darting from her brother and Severus fighting the Slytherins at the goal posts, to Harry and Draco plummeting to the ground as if in slow motion.

“Just tear it off!” she started mumbling desperately to herself. “Why won’t you just tear it *off*?”

But suddenly the whole Quidditch crowd seemed to explode into nothing to her when she realised he wasn’t going to take it off – he was so close to the ground now and he still wasn’t taking it off – and then there was nothing but Draco, Draco falling to his doom, falling because of that stupid cloak, falling because of her; and all of a sudden she found herself running down the stairs, not caring that she was knocking people over in the process, not caring that she was tripping over her own

feet, and not willing herself to tear her eyes away from that struggling, falling figure.

She finally reached the edge of the pitch and pulled out her wand, but it was too late. Draco's body hit the ground with what would have been a sickening thud, but was instead met with a terrific roar, for at exactly that same moment, Harry Potter had caught the Snitch and earned one hundred and fifty points for Gryffindor.

"I DON'T BELIEVE IT!" screamed Lee Jordan. "WHAT A CATCH, WHAT A SAVE! IT'S HARD TO SAY WHICH ONE WAS THE BETTER WATCH; SNAPE *IMPOSSIBLY* SAVING THAT LAST GOAL OR POTTER CATCHING THAT SNITCH *JUST IN TIME!* WHAT A GAME! SAVED, SNAPE! CAUGHT, POTTER!"

"SAVED, SNAPE! CAUGHT, POTTER!" the crowd chanted wildly, pouring down from the stands to meet the scarlet-clad team. "SAVED, SNAPE—"

It took a while for Gryffindor's Keeper to realise that it was over, but when he did, the first thing he did was pull out his wand and hex the two remaining Slytherin Chasers and Beaters.

"Bloody bunch of cheaters!" he roared dizzily, going back to clutching his head. "Fouled me about twenty times..."

It was then that Snape suddenly remembered his last glimpse of Draco, and his stomach lurched in a horrible way that had nothing to do with his bruises. He started to zoom rapidly towards the ground, only to hastily retreat to the air once more at all the students in red running towards him.

"DRACO!" he shouted, as if trying to drown out the rest of the crowd. "*DRACO!*"

As if in defiance, the cry of 'SAVED, SNAPE! CAUGHT, POTTER!' bellowed even louder than before, with Professor McGonagall jumping up and down in glee.

Alighting on the Quidditch stands' roof, Severus glared at the Gryffindors still pouring from the stands and obstructing his vision. He kicked off from the roof to fly towards the Hospital Wing, cursing at himself for even caring whether Draco was all right. Because it wasn't his problem and he *didn't* care. Not at all.

The late afternoon sun glinted off his glasses, as Harry Potter came to a very gradual stop and was tackled to the ground by Fred, George, Katie and Angelina. Harry just beamed, his grin widening even more as he saw Hermione sprinting ahead of the crowd.

"*Harry!*" she screamed, enveloping him in a huge hug, but then beating him with her fists. "You prat! Are you *trying* to get killed?"

"Great catch, Harry," came a hoarse voice from behind him.

"*Ron!*" Harry and Hermione's voices yelled in unison, but it was Hermione who threw her arms around him like she had done to Harry.

"You even *bigger* prat!" she sobbed. "I hate you *both!*"

Ron gave her a sort of awkward pat on the back and raised his eyebrows at Harry.

"You've said it yourself, Ron." Harry smiled back. "They're all mental."

"How could I forget," said Ron feelingly, getting his turn of being pummelled by Hermione's fists.

But Harry had turned away from his two best friends, and, while being hugged and shaken and clapped on the back by practically the whole of Gryffindor, his eyes searched the crowd for a familiar sight of long, red hair, pulled back into a messy ponytail. But when finally he caught sight of it, its owner was not running towards him like she usually did. Her arms weren't spread wide and she didn't even have a huge devoted smile on her face.

Ginny Weasley was quite a few yards away crouched over something on the ground, all the while throwing a

fist at whoever came near. Curiously, Harry fought his way closer, trying to get a better view at what she was doing.

“On yeh, Harry!”

Harry gave Hagrid a distracted smile, which slowly faded into surprise as he saw that Ginny was huddled over a person, namely Draco Malfoy. He frowned and was just about to call out to her when he saw Malfoy stir, and Ginny suddenly fling her arms around him.

“*Draco!*” she sobbed. “You pr-prat! What were you thinking? Why’d you wear the s-stupid clunky thing?”

Harry jerked back as he took in the expression on her face, remembering the way she had looked at Malfoy at the beginning of the match also. In the back of his mind he found it slightly funny that girls would insist on calling them prats, instead of congratulating them or complimenting them on what they’d done. The more active part of his mind felt a dull throb of depression settle over him, making him keep his silence and just watch her for a while, wondering, hoping, wishing that she would look up and notice him, the Boy Who sodding Lived.

“Harry!” exclaimed the voice of Ron Weasley. “Where’d you go? C’mon, party!”

At the mention of Harry’s name, Ginny looked up, and Harry’s silent will was carried out.

“Harry,” she croaked, giving him a sincere smile. “Brilliant catch, as usual.”

Harry noticed Malfoy stiffen against Ginny when she’d said this, but during that three seconds of which Ginny’s eyes were locked with his own, the famous boy-wizard felt as though he didn’t know Ginny at all.

He’d thought he had, Harry mused, getting hoisted up by the rest of the Gryffindors alongside the rest of their team, but now...now he realised that there was something about her, some side of her that he had never known about, a

part that she hadn't ever exposed to him... and it left him feeling incredibly empty.

And as all his laughing housemates carried Harry away, he cast one last look back in the direction of the crouching Ginny, now conjuring up a stretcher. It was then that the Boy Who Lived gave a sort of ironic grimace to himself as he realised that he, Harry Potter, may have won the match and secured the Quidditch Cup. But it seemed as if Malfoy, the sneaking, pointed-face Slytherin, had ended up with the prize.

Chapter Eleven

~ In which pain can end or begin with a kiss ~

“Don’t move!” scolded Ginny quietly. “You’ll only make it worse.”

“Well, I have to *breathe*,” said Draco, shifting on the floating stretcher and giving a sudden groan. “Where the hell’s Pomfrey?”

“She left ages ago with the other teachers. I think your team mates saw her.”

“Who cares about *them*?” exclaimed Draco. “I just sodding dislocated my shoulder and it’s lucky I’m not dead...”

Ginny’s face went from flushed to ashen when he said this and Draco’s voice died down.

“Anyway,” he continued, in a slightly disheartened tone. “She could’ve at least had a look at me...”

Ginny remained silent as she walked alongside of him and Draco glared at the slowly darkening sky. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to think back to when he’d just regained consciousness...

The first thing he’d been aware of was the warmth. It’d reminded him of that night in the Forbidden Forest, sleeping in the hollow tree... Then he had tried to raise his head only to be smothered in Ginny Weasley’s vivid red hair. It hadn’t been an entirely uncomfortable experience, and it had given him a certain amount of light-headedness to lose the feeling of the agonising pain in his left shoulder. Then she had started to mumble things against him that his fuzzy mind couldn’t understand, making him want to grin at the absurdity of the situation.

It was then that she had looked up and said Potter’s first name, which brought back the hollow tree memory once more. This had caused him to try to draw back, to which

she hastily complied. And it was then that it had hit him that *Potter* had caught the Snitch and not him, and that Ginny was still in *Potter's* possession, and not his.

“Rotten reality...” he’d slurred to himself, vaguely making out that Ginny was trying to help him to his feet.

Suddenly he had felt himself falling...falling...and then landing...in a soft, floating stretcher. She had then performed some sort of charm on him to get rid of the fuzzy feeling in his brain, and then started to direct the stretcher slowly back towards the castle.

“So,” stated Draco, craning his neck sideways to look at her.

Ginny remained silent.

“What is it?” he finally broke out, annoyed that she wouldn’t even look at him.

“Why did you do it?” she whispered.

Her answer surprised him. It surprised him so much that he didn’t even feel annoyed that she was answering his question with a question.

“Do what?” said Draco warily, suddenly regretting that she was now looking at him. He suddenly felt all hot and bothered.

“You wore it. The cloak,” continued Ginny, who stopped and faced him. “Why?”

Draco’s gaze flicked away from hers, finding himself suddenly unable to remember the words he’d said so often in his head whenever he’d mentally played out the situation.

“I don’t know,” he muttered. “I just...decided to wear it.”

“Yes, but it nearly got you *killed*,” said Ginny desperately. “I didn’t think you’d wear it in a *match*, I would’ve made the clasp stronger – I still don’t see *why* –”

“There doesn’t have to be a reason,” muttered Draco, finally willing himself to look her in the eye. “And it

doesn't have to be complicated. I just... I like it... that's all."

Ginny swallowed at this and ran her hand over her face. "No," she replied, this time averting her own eyes. "It is complicated... and *you're*... you're complicated."

There was a long pause where Draco just stared at her, screaming at his brain to let his voice work. "How am I more complicated than Potter?"

Ginny's breath hitched and her eyes darted back towards him. The sun had just begun to set and his face was covered in the looming castle's shadows. "There's nothing complicated about Harry."

"Right," murmured Draco, "—besides the fact that our current Dark Lord wants to kill him, who, incidentally, has already tried to do so countless times, but, being Potter, has survived each and every time because he's the bloody Heir of Gryffindor..."

Ginny laughed softly. "The Heir of Gryffindor? Have you been reading those trashy Witch Weekly—"

"That's not the point," cut in Draco, though forgetting himself what the point was as Ginny's slight smile continued to linger.

"What?" said Ginny after a long pause, reaching the lit-up entrance steps and noticing that Draco was looking at her oddly. "Do I have something on my face?"

"What?" responded Draco blankly, tearing his eyes away. "I don't know. Probably."

Ginny frowned half-heartedly but paused at the great oak doors, turning to face him. "So... Do you want me to walk you to the hospital wing? Or..."

Draco's expression chilled somewhat. "If you want to get to your House's celebration party, go right ahead. I'm sure I can manage."

"That's not what I was going to say," said Ginny, running her hand over her brow. "I mean...I thought you might not want to get the Slytherins any more riled up..."

“Any more riled up than what?” asked Draco, with a frown.

“Oh...” mumbled Ginny, wishing she hadn’t said anything. “It’s just... you lost the... I mean... you didn’t catch the...er...”

There was a long pause where Ginny fell silent, miserably wondering why she never seemed to think before she spoke.

“What makes you think I lost?” said Draco eventually, raising his eyebrows.

“What?” She frowned, her hand falling from the oak door as she glanced back at him. “Oh...I don’t know...perhaps the lack of cheering Slytherins carrying you off into the sunset...and the obvious presence of me directing your stretcher towards the hospital wing...”

Draco stared at the Gryffindor before him, her untidy hair glinting almost scarlet in the setting sun. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “And what makes you think I lost?”

Ginny stared back at him, that familiar rush of heat she’d felt when they’d touched at Christmas pounding in her ears. She felt herself take a step towards him before jumping violently as the entrance doors swung open.

“Ah, Mr Malfoy! There you are!”

Professor Dumbledore’s smile wavered as both students shrank back, startled at the unexpected interruption. “Oh dear,” he said. “Please excuse my rather rude behaviour but I must speak to you, Mr Malfoy. At once.”

“Oh...” said Malfoy, staring at the Headmaster blankly. “All right...”

“Er...” Ginny mumbled, jerking backwards with her neck tinged a bright pink. “Well...I’ll see you at the Ball tomorrow night anyway. I’m...er...I’m looking forward to it.”

“What?” said Malfoy still blankly, as Ginny practically fled through the castle doors, the tinge of pink creeping upwards into her face. “Ball? What Ball?”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at him and took control of the floating stretcher. "I assume Miss Weasley was talking about the Farewell Ball for the exchange students," he commented. "Now, let's get you to the hospital wing."

Draco muttered distractedly but continued to watch Ginny's retreating figure, his brow only unfurrowing as Ginny glanced back at him with an uncertain smile, before rounding the corner out of sight.

Severus paced up and down the hospital wing, impatient for Madam Pomfrey to return with balm for his bruises. He probably could've brewed the bloody thing from scratch in the same time it was taking her to fetch it.

He glared at himself in a nearby mirror, knowing that he wasn't really there for the balm...but to check if that stupid, fool-of-a-boy was all right. Well, it *had* seemed like quite a serious fall, and it wasn't as if he *really* particularly cared...but there wasn't any harm in just double-checking...

But the sound of Dumbledore's voice drifting up the stairs froze him mid-stride. The chance of Dumbledore sweeping in here...catching him checking up on Draco – not that he *was*, he told himself strictly. Just that...it might seem like that...especially to someone like Dumbledore... meddling sentimental fool that he was...

The footsteps grew louder and Severus panicked, whirling himself abruptly behind the bed curtains of a sleeping patient. Luckily the student continued to sleep peacefully, and Severus breathed a sigh of relief. Now nobody would ever know...

"Ah, Mr Malfoy," he heard Madam Pomfrey exclaim. "Young Mr Snape was just looking for you."

Snape added Madam Pomfrey to his Hate List and cringed at Dumbledore's reply of, "Was he now?"

There was a frown in Draco's voice as he answered. "What did he want?"

"Oh, just to see if you were all right I suspect. Poor thing made up an excuse about needing some bruise balm... I didn't really take him seriously and I suppose he just eventually left."

If glares could cut through linen, Madam Pomfrey would have dropped down dead. A furious eye found a chink in the bed curtains and Severus directed his glare at the two figures now manoeuvring Draco onto one of the empty beds. To his surprise, Draco didn't look even remotely scornful at the idea of Severus checking up on him, but instead looked vaguely disbelieving.

"Are you sure..." Draco hesitated after a long pause, "—he was looking for me?"

"Well, he asked after you," replied Madam Pomfrey, smiling at Dumbledore in a way Snape didn't like.

"But..." Draco frowned at the potion Pomfrey was measuring out for him. "Did you ask why? It's just... we haven't spoken since Easter and it seems highly unlikely..."

"Perhaps Mr Snape's head was hit repeatedly during the match?" suggested Dumbledore.

Draco scowled in response, though it could've been due to the fact that he was gulping down a nasty dose of potion Pomfrey had just handed to him. His scowl continued to linger however, as he finished wiping his mouth and glanced up at a waiting Dumbledore.

"I know you know about him," said Draco finally, unable to bring himself to really glare at the Headmaster so choosing to glare at the empty flask instead. "I know he's got a secret and he always used to see you about it."

Severus froze behind the curtains, hardly able to breathe.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows in response. "Now that your shoulder is healed, Mr Malfoy," he said evenly, "I suggest we talk about yourself and not Mr Snape."

“I already told you I threw all his letters in the fire, *unopened*. I haven’t anything else to tell you.”

“I believe you,” replied Dumbledore. “But I would also like to discuss future letters from your father. I believe that examining them could help us.”

“You mean help you,” said Draco stubbornly. “I don’t want any part of it. If you want the letters, fine, take them. As if anymore would come anyway, being there’s only a week left of term.”

“I’m afraid I still need *you* to open them, Draco,” said Dumbledore gently. “Else the Malfoy seal will destroy the parchment.”

“Fine.” Draco shrugged, pleased at how healed his shoulder felt. He shrugged it a few more times before testing his ankles. “Fine,” he repeated, swinging himself gingerly out of bed. “Well...if that’s all...”

“That’s all,” said the Headmaster, his face softening as Draco hurriedly folded up his broken cloak and placed it carefully into an inner pocket. “Thank you for cooperating, Draco.”

Draco muttered an assent awkwardly, though turning before he reached the doorway to glance at Dumbledore one last time. “When you see Severus next...”

Dumbledore waited patiently but Draco continued to hesitate.

“Doesn’t matter,” Draco muttered finally, and turned to walk away.

His panic forgotten, Snape continued to watch through the chink in the curtains, the bruises on his head settling into a dull ache.

Severus rested an elbow on the banister of the moving staircase, staring down into the gloom below. The staircase stopped and he continued to the portrait hole, his steps faltering when he saw that the corridor was already

occupied.

Ginny Weasley was sitting on the stone floor, her knees to her chest and her back against the wall.

“Hello,” said Severus hoarsely, as Ginny turned her head abruptly. “Why aren’t you at the party?”

Ginny could only stare at him, unable to believe that after three months of ignoring and avoiding her, Severus was actually speaking to her.

“I...er...I’m...” To Ginny’s dismay, she felt a lump forming in the back of her throat. “I don’t know, what d’you care?”

Severus stared straight back at her, putting his hands in his pockets before looking away. “I don’t,” he lied.

Ginny put her arms back around her knees, resting her head once more. She waited for the muffled celebrations to louden as the portrait door swung open, but the sound never came. Instead she heard the sound of material scraping down stone, and when she eventually looked to her right, the hunched-over figure of Severus was sitting down next to her.

There was a long silence before Severus spoke. “I suppose you and Draco are speaking then.”

Ginny sighed and squeezed her arms tighter around her legs. “What do you want, Severus? Did Draco speak to you? I don’t know what I’m doing here, honestly I don’t. You can’t just—I hate the fact—why do you—”

Severus looked at her, confused.

“You’re jerking me around like I’m on a piece of *string*, Severus. Both of you! You don’t include me, don’t talk to me, act as if I don’t exist for *months*. And now today, when there’s only a few days left of term and I won’t see you for months again – you come up to me all blasé, pretending it never happened!” Ginny swallowed loudly. “And that’s not even the part I hate most. You make me hate *myself*, Severus. You two have treated me so horribly but when one of you changes your mind, what do I do?”

I'm skipping Gryffindor's last party, my brother's victory party – I'm considering breaking up with Harry Potter! Look at me, Severus! You walk up to me, say you couldn't care less and now I'm pouring out my fucking heart to you!"

Severus closed his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose with tense fingers. "Don't say that. You shouldn't... you – of all people... You shouldn't hate yourself." Ginny glared at her shoes and Severus continued in barely a whisper. "What you said about... forgiving people. That's something you should be proud of, it takes... I find it very difficult."

"Well, good for me," muttered Ginny. "I give up easily."

"No, you don't give up," said Severus, finally looking at her. "And... and that's what I like about you."

Ginny's eyes openly teared up, and Severus looked away. "Anyway," he murmured. "I'm glad you and Draco are speaking again. That's all I really had to say."

Ginny rubbed her hand over her face once more. There was a long pause as she composed herself. "Well, what happened with you two?" she said eventually. "The way you're talking about him..."

Severus continued staring at the floor, the corridor torchlight flickering in the reflections. "I snapped at him. We haven't spoken since Easter."

Ginny stared at him, disbelief overriding her grief. "Since Easter? But...but that's impossible. I thought nothing... Do you know how jealous I've been? What you two have... it's something I've always wanted. You're *best friends*, how did anything come between that?"

Severus brought his fingers to his forehead once more, his mind unable to fight his denial any longer. To hear the way Ginny spoke about them made his stomach churn in pain. He wasn't like Ginny, he hadn't always wanted this. He didn't know how it had happened but somewhere along the way it had crept up on him. For the truth was he

wanted it *now*; he wanted their friendship back.

“It’s my fault,” said Severus quietly. “And now I don’t know what to do.”

“You could try sitting next to him.” Severus glanced at her, and she gave him the barest hint of a smile in return. “See how things go from there.”

Severus shook his head and Ginny reached out a hand to touch his shoulder. “Whatever you say to him, picture him saying it to you. And however you would react; chances are he’d react the same way.”

Severus exhaled deeply, manoeuvring out of her touch and rising to his feet. “We’re not the same,” he replied, though hesitantly offering her a hand.

“Yes, you are,” murmured Ginny, her smile lingering as he pulled her up. “It’s obvious to everyone but yourselves.”

Severus raised his eyebrows ever so slightly. “Well, I suppose it usually is.” Severus paused, glancing from the sleeping portrait to Ginny’s tired face. “If you don’t feel like going to the party...that is... I know a place... we could go there.”

Ginny hesitated, the idea of putting off talking to Harry and the rest of the Gryffindors strongly appealing to her.

“It’s a place we should have shared with you months ago,” said Severus, averting his eyes. “I don’t know why we didn’t.”

Ginny tilted her head slightly to look at him, every contour of his face lit up by torchlight. “All right,” she murmured softly, and followed him into the night.

Draco opened his eyes slowly to the sound of the Slytherin morning bell. He closed them once more, trying to savour a particularly pleasant dream he’d been having about a certain red-haired Gryffindor. It’d been ages since he’d had a decent night’s sleep, let alone slept in like this.

But a growing eagerness seemed to take Draco all of a sudden, when he realised that the particular dream he'd been savouring was actually a reality. For Ginny had told him yesterday that she was going to rip Potter's heart out of his chest and devote the rest of her life to idolising him, Draco Malfoy.

Well, thought Draco to himself, *that was the main gist of it anyway...*

Draco grinned lazily as he flopped out of bed into his slippers.

All right, so she hadn't actually said that she was completely mad over him, but come on, why else would she be looking forward to seeing him tonight?

Draco wandered over to the bathroom mirror, brushing his teeth slowly and trying to fight down the urge to grin ridiculously at his reflection.

Today was going to be fucking fantastic.

Draco reached the end of the Slytherin table, dumping his books on the floor and sitting as far away from his house mates as possible. A bowl of greyish porridge materialised before him, to which he started eating with strange enjoyment. He was so engrossed with his breakfast in fact, that he didn't even notice someone take a seat next to him until he accidentally bumped elbows.

"Watch it," he said automatically, before jerking backwards. "What... what are you doing here?"

Severus shifted awkwardly on the wooden bench, too horrified with himself to do anything but start buttering his toast. "What, I can't sit here now?" He scowled.

"Well, no you can't." Draco frowned back. "This is the Slytherin table. I mean..." Draco trailed off, still unable to believe that Severus was talking to him.

"Yes, well there's no rule against sitting at other tables," continued Severus doggedly, the butter on his toast now

half an inch thick. “Besides. I hate Gryffindors.”

“Right,” muttered Draco, glancing around at his annoyed Quidditch team. “Well, I hate Slytherins. But you don’t see me sitting with Hufflepuff.”

“That’s because *nobody* likes Hufflepuff.”

Draco stared at his porridge, unsmiling. “What are you doing here?” he said flatly.

Severus dropped his toast and finally looked Draco in the eye, a million apologies running through his head and not one of them able to force past his lips. “I’m leaving Hogwarts,” he said abruptly.

Draco stared straight back at him, his mind struggling with a million answers also. “What’d you do?” he muttered finally. “Fail all your OWLs?”

Severus grimaced as he remembered throwing a tantrum at his potions instructor before storming off. “That’s got nothing to do with it.” He paused but Draco remained silent. “I’m going to travel. See some places that aren’t England.”

A hint of scorn crept into Draco’s scowl. “Isn’t that what the holidays are for? Come on. What’re you really leaving Hogwarts for?”

Severus stared at Draco who had now taken to picking at splinters in the breakfast table. “I just...I have to get away. I can’t do this anymore.”

Draco narrowed his eyes and levelled his gaze straight at Severus. “Do *what*, exactly? What are you talking about? Why are you so fuckin’ weird, Severus? Why can’t you just tell me what it is?”

I can’t! screamed Snape in his head. *You’ll hate me. I already hate myself. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.*

Draco rose to leave and sudden despair wiped Severus’s mind blank. “Come with me,” he burst out.

Draco froze, as did Severus, all common sense and responsibility roaring furiously in his ears.

“What?” said Draco, looking stunned. “That’s... that’s

stupid.”

“I know it’s stupid,” said Severus, running his hands wildly through his hair. “But who cares—”

“We’re *fifteen*. We can’t just—”

“Who would stop us?”

Draco gaped at him. “You’re mad... who would... OK. Where would we go?”

“The Mediterranean!”

“The Mediterranean,” echoed Draco, looking from Severus’s sticking-up hair to his hand in the butter. “You’ve completely lost it.”

Something sagged in Severus’s expression as Draco turned to leave once more, causing him to hesitate and glance back at him one more time. “You’re serious,” stated Draco.

Severus grabbed a napkin and started cleaning his hands, the reckless haze settling down into depression. “I don’t know,” he muttered. “Maybe. A bit.”

“But...you’re...” Draco shook his head. “You really have lost it.”

Severus glanced upwards, suddenly reminded of how Draco had looked at the hospital wing. His tone wasn’t scornful at all, just vaguely disbelieving. “How about just the holidays then?” said Severus quietly.

The two boys stared past each other, the miserable events of the past few months playing silently in their minds. Their final sword fight in the hidden garden and the last words they’d shouted at each other circling around on loop. Neither could bring themselves to mention it.

Draco knew that he had to say *something*, before realising that he knew what he had to say and that he wanted to say it. “A Mediterranean holiday,” he nodded, his eyes still focussed in the distance but giving a faint smile. “I’ll think about it.”

Severus nodded at nothing in particular also, and both

boys gathered up their books awkwardly to go to their next class.

The corridor leading up to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom buzzed with chatter and laughter. Hermione Granger was trying to shush her fellow fifth years half-heartedly, but it was obvious that she too was still high on Gryffindor's victory. There was a slight quietening of voices as Draco and Severus approached however, and Seamus Finnigan pulled his hood over his eyes and did a spirited impression of someone crashing their broom into the ground.

Severus threw Draco a sidelong glance, still feeling too awkward to know what to do. Draco already had his wand out, and was glaring daggers at all the students before him.

"Think I'm funny, do you?" he sneered, all traces of good humour gone from his face. "If anyone wants to have a go at me, let's duel it out, right now."

"We were just havin' a laugh, Malfoy," said Dean Thomas, defending his best friend. "Come on, you'd do the same if you were in our position..."

"Don't compare me to *you*," spat Draco, his glare intensifying as a few grins continued to tug corners of mouths.

Severus looked towards the few Slytherins starting to arrive but saw, much to his annoyance, that they were all pointedly looking in the other direction. "Insensitive bastards," he muttered to himself.

But to everybody's surprise, Draco lowered his wand with a smirk. "Actually, why would I bother duelling," he said slowly, his smirk resting on a pair of spectacles, "when I've already won?"

Harry Potter's eyes narrowed and Ron, who Hermione had forced to keep silent all this time, looked at Draco as

if he were mad.

“Are you stupid or something?” Ron said loudly, looking around to his fellow Gryffindors for support. “We beat your Chasers. Harry beat you. We. Won.”

“There’s more to life than Quidditch, Weasley,” snarled Draco in response. “I hope you remember that when you die a virgin.”

“What?!” spluttered Ron, reaching for his wand. “How... how dare –”

“Don’t listen to him, Ron,” cut in Harry steadily, his eyes never shifting from Draco’s. “You know Malfoy is all talk and no action.”

The Gryffindors grinned at this comment and the Slytherins watched on curiously. Hermione was the only one looking frantically up and down the corridor for a teacher. Severus felt a twinge of unease as Draco stared back at his rival with barely disguised relish.

“You think so?” he leered, a nasty gleam in his eye. “You know, speaking of getting any action – why don’t you ask Ginny who she’s going to be spending the night with?”

The next few seconds happened in a loud blur. Ron launched himself at Malfoy, tackling him to the ground. He was quickly followed by Harry and then the rest of the Gryffindor boys had launched themselves at Snape, who was trying to tear Ron and Harry away from Draco. A couple of Slytherins hesitantly looked at each other and then they themselves threw their books down and started punching their way through the Gryffindors to try and beat a path to Malfoy. It wasn’t long before everyone, including the girls were caught up in a violent, yelling throng. Even Hermione was passionately waving her giant tome of a book she was carrying, trying to hit as many Slytherins in the face as possible.

“I DON’T BELIEVE IT!” came an angry bellow, snapping most of the pummelled students to their senses

as they stopped hitting out and looked up.

An enraged Professor Garwood was storming towards them, her wand in hand and her grey eyes flashing.

“AM I TEACHING WITCHES AND WIZARDS OR AM I TEACHING MUGGLE SAVAGES?” she bellowed once more, glaring around at them all.

There was a disgruntled murmur from the fifth years as they picked themselves off each other. Hermione dropped her thick textbook in horror, not even noticing that it hit Pansy Parkinson over the head when it landed. Last to get up were Severus, Draco, Harry and Ron. Harry’s face was still white with anger, in stark contrast to Ron who had gone an angry red and couldn’t stop clenching and unclenching his fists, as if itching to hit Malfoy in the face again and again. Severus looked only slightly disgruntled, and was actually quite exuberant to be fighting alongside Draco once more. Draco’s neck was tinged with pink but as he snickered ever so quietly before getting up, it was clear that he thought he’d won that battle.

“Right,” said Garwood, calming down ever so slightly but her glare not lessening. “I don’t care if it is your last day of lessons – today’s practical has been *cancelled*. Everyone into the classroom and you’ll be revising your notes until the lesson ends. NO talking.”

The slightly bruised students filed silently into the classroom, the Prefects entering last after the Professor had had a grim word with them. Hermione gave Ron a numb look as she sat down, making Ron scowl across the room at a seemingly complacent Draco Malfoy.

Ginny, seethed Ron to himself, I have no bloody idea what you see in that git.

Comforting himself with the fact that he’d see his sister at lunch (who of course would be outraged that the slimy Slytherin had said such a thing about her), Ron frowned down at his parchment and started trying to decipher his messy scrawl.

Ginny grinned at her reflection as she pulled a Muggle baseball cap over her eyes.

“How about this?” she asked, looking around for her fellow fourth year.

Philip Woodley emerged from behind a messy rack of clothing, dressed in a suit of armour complete with a helmet. “How about this?”

Ginny laughed and picked up a helmet identical to Woodley’s. “Huh,” she mumbled, the visor over her eyes. “This is stupid, I feel like my head’s going to fall off my shoulders at the weight of this old thing.”

“I know,” replied Woodley regretfully, pulling off his bits of armour clumsily. “You’d think that since it’s a Wizarding store, the Muggle costumes would be charmed to be a bit more comfortable.”

“And practical,” added Ginny, wincing as bits of her hair were yanked out with her helmet.

“Everything here is authentic Muggle!” screeched the shopkeeper from the front counter, glaring at the mess they’d made during their costume search.

The two students caught each other’s eye and quickly stifled grins.

“Ooh! How about these?” exclaimed Ginny, seizing a pair of mauve, spandex trousers from the rack and waving them at a dubious Woodley. They reminded her of a certain pair of erotic mauve pyjamas she’d become familiar with at Christmas time.

“Oh, great,” Woodley replied, raising his eyebrows as she started to giggle. “I was hoping you wouldn’t see those.”

Ginny tried hard to straighten her face before replying but a sudden vision of the male population of Hogwarts in tight pants made it difficult.

“This is great,” she gasped, ducking into the rack to hide

her laughter and dig out more pairs. “Ooh, look! Leather ones!”

Woodley made a face. “They look so... *restrictive*. I mean, it’s all right for me,” he said hurriedly, as Ginny popped her head out enquiringly, “because I grew up in tight, scratchy Muggle clothes... but I mean, half of the purebloods like Ernie and Snape are used to wearing robes where there’s... *room*.”

The back of Ginny’s neck grew hot as the image of Severus in leather pants started strutting around on stage.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” flushed Ginny at once, overwhelming Woodley with a pile of fluorescent-coloured clothing. “Come on, we’ve already missed lunch! We can’t leave it any later.”

“All right,” said a muffled Woodley, staggering to the counter with the unsteady pile. “But you’re getting the blame...”

Ginny waved offhandedly in response and started sorting through a pile of old cardboard boxes. A grin broadened over her face as she saw the contents.

Well, it just wouldn’t do to have tight pants without big leather boots.

Severus yawned and looked lazily at the classroom clock. He seemed to be the only one in their last History of Magic class who wasn’t on tenterhooks for the lesson to end. He wasn’t looking forward to the dress rehearsal after class, let alone the actual performance that evening. He toyed with the idea of simply not showing up... but then the thought of barely concealed threats from the Headmaster, Ginny, and Professor Garwood made him reluctantly push the idea away. It would be more trouble than it was worth.

Besides, he wasn’t even that angry... in fact he was in quite an amicable mood. He’d had a decent lunch with

Draco, and the conversation had seemed almost normal. Draco had even offered to lend him his sword for the play, and didn't even seem to care that Woodley would be using Snape's. He seemed to be in quite a pleasant mood, and that mood had rubbed off onto Severus. He didn't know what it was about him, but having Draco back seemed to make Hogwarts more tolerable than usual.

And as for the holidays, Severus didn't know whether to be happy or horrified that they would be spending them together. At the moment he chose to be happy, and was defiantly ignoring any sort of logic that said he couldn't keep his secret forever.

The lesson eventually ended and all the students streamed out of the classroom with whoops of joy. Severus moved apathetically down the hallway, heading in the direction of the old classroom they used for play rehearsals.

But a sudden jolt of pain in his left arm froze him in his tracks. Glancing warily around the empty corridor, Severus moved close to a pillar and rolled up his sleeve. Although the pain lingered slightly, the mark was still its usual dull black.

"Mr. Snape," said a voice behind him.

Severus stiffened and rolled his sleeve down, casually turning to meet the speaker.

Professor Garwood strode towards him, the look on her face still holding faint traces of ill humour from the incident that morning. "I assume you're on your way to dress rehearsals? I'm filling in once more for Professor Mimble." She cleared her throat. "Professor Dumbledore hinted at lunchtime that you might need a little persuasion to show up this evening."

Severus scowled. "I believe Professor Dumbledore has trust issues."

"Oh, really?" said Garwood, raising an eyebrow. "Well, come on, we don't want to hold everybody up."

“Right...” muttered Severus, following the Professor somewhat reluctantly. He supposed he could slip away to examine his tattoo during rehearsals. All he needed was a suitable distraction.

This proved very easy indeed, for as soon as they entered the rehearsal classroom they were met with a throng of shrieks and cursing. All of the fourth and fifth years were rushing around the room in panic, each one engrossed in their own personal mishap. Most of the girls were huddled around Emily Lane, the heroine, whose robes they had tried to transfigure into shimmering silver jumpsuit but had instead gone transparent. The rest of them were trying to pull a half motorcycle-helmet, half teakettle off another student’s head, while a few of the braver boys were attempting to corner a small bear cub with an upturned chair.

“This never would’ve happened,” Emily Lane shrieked hysterically, as her robes became so transparent they disappeared completely, “–if those two bloody Gryffindors had just bought the costumes on time.”

Severus looked around in disinterest, wondering why indeed Ginny wasn’t back yet, while Garwood made an angry noise of impatience and moved towards the bear.

“You idiot!” moaned Terry Boot to his younger brother. “I just needed a bear *suit*. I’m not going to bloody tame *that* thing.”

“It was really difficult,” protested William Boot sullenly. “And besides, this’ll probably be loads better...”

“Oh yeah, *loads*,” said his brother. “I already tried showing him the script and he ate it.”

The bear cub seemed to take offence to this remark and began to growl. However just as it reared up onto its hind legs it shrank with a sudden pop, leaving a small stuffed teddy bear in its place. Garwood just gave them a single look before moving over to the unfortunate student with a teakettle on his head.

“Keep still!” she said sternly, tapping on the metal smartly.

“It wasn’t my fault!” came the muffled but indignant voice of Justin Finch-Fletchley. “It was –”

But whoever’s fault it had been was instantly forgotten as Severus Snape fell to the ground with a strangled cry of pain. Every head and teakettle swivelled towards the doorway as the black-haired boy tried to struggle to his feet once more, managing to make it to his knees before collapsing in agony and cradling his left arm. The room was silent (except for Emily Lane who was still half-heartedly complaining that she was naked) as Professor Garwood quickly walked across the room.

“Snape!” she rapped out sharply. “Snape, what’s the matter?”

Severus grimaced and very reluctantly let go of his forearm and clutched gingerly at his temples instead. “My head...” he croaked, wincing at the ongoing pain and wishing he’d made it out of the room in time. “It just... it hurts, that’s all.”

Severus looked upwards groggily, a nasty feeling of apprehension mixing with the sharp pain as he noticed Garwood looking very closely from his shaking left arm to the expression on his face. “Professor... I need...”

But Severus’s voice trailed away as he fell forwards with a thump. One of the girls gave a slight scream and the hesitation in Garwood’s eyes dissipated. Quickly stooping down she checked the boy’s pulse. “No more transfiguration while I’m gone,” she instructed the room, getting to her feet and waving her wand at the unconscious body. “Your classmate will be fine, and I’m sure a quick trip to Madam Pomfrey will be all he needs to get back on his feet again.”

“Oh no...” muttered one of the fourth years. “There’s no way I can play Snape’s part tonight...”

“I’m sure he will be quite well by then, Mr. Smith,” said

Garwood lightly, catching the dubious comment and her frown softening somewhat. "Although I'm sure you could manage if not."

And with a final wave of her wand Garwood exited the dazed room, directing a hovering, unconscious Severus in front of her.

"There you are!"

Ginny stopped mid-step and grinned over her shoulder at the girl pursuing her. "Can't stop now," she called. "I'm already late as is."

Her and Woodley were making their way towards the upper levels where the rehearsals were. Each was laden with a gigantic plastic bag filled to bursting with colourful clothing, with a strange assortment of batons, helmets and boots floating jerkily after them.

"No, Ginny, wait," panted Hermione, hefting her heavy books from one arm to the other. "It's important – it's about Malfoy."

For a moment Ginny looked as if she regretted slowing down, but dropped her bag with a sigh as she noticed the worried expression on her friend's face.

"All right, what's he done this time," she said jokingly, but then turning to Woodley and waving to carry on. "I'll only be a sec, show everyone those trousers, eh?"

"I knew this would happen!" groaned Woodley, but continuing on anyway. "I was bound to get the blame for those awful things..."

"Thanks, Pip!" laughed Ginny in response, but then her smile dropping somewhat as she looked back at a hesitating Hermione. "What is it?"

"Look," said Hermione at last, sighing as she pushed a piece of bushy fringe out of her eyes. "I know this is going to sound awful, whichever way I put it, but I know Ron will only say something fifty times worse so..."

“What is it?” Ginny repeated with a shrug, trying to hold back a smile. “You know it’s all right, I talked to Draco yesterday and I... what?” Ginny frowned as Hermione’s worried expression turned into one of slight anger. “What is it?” she demanded once more, her good mood slowly dissolving.

“Malfoy and Harry and Ron – well, *everyone*,” said Hermione eventually, “they all started fighting this morning before the Defence lesson –”

“Oh, is that all?” interjected Ginny relieved. “That’s normal –”

“—they were arguing over you,” finished Hermione.

“Me?” said Ginny blankly. “Why? Whatever... oh, no, wait... Harry, I haven’t talked to Harry yet...”

“What?” exclaimed Hermione, pulling away suddenly. “You mean... you mean Malfoy *wasn’t* making things up?”

“What? What d’you mean?” said Ginny wildly. “What did he say?”

Hermione gave Ginny’s flushed face a long look before shaking her head with a sigh.

“Ginny, I’d sort of suspected you’d had a thing for either Malfoy or Snape for a while now...” she said in a low voice.

“What?” protested Ginny weakly. “I do not... I mean... just, keep going.”

“And I know you’d like to think he likes you back,” continued Hermione quietly, ignoring Ginny’s feeble protests. “And maybe he does, I wouldn’t know. But if you’d been there... if you’d heard the way he was gloating, practically *salivating* when he told Harry that he’d *won* you...”

Hermione shook her head once more, as if trying to rid her mouth of something unpleasant. Ginny’s protests had grown silent, the colour in her cheeks slowly draining away. Hermione glanced from Ginny’s rigid expression

and back down to her books before she doggedly ploughed on.

“And it was that awful moment... it was as if he took some sort of perverse pleasure in pushing it further, as if watching the expression on Harry’s face when he told him who you were going to ‘*spend the night with*’... he was just... he had this horrible look in his eye as if it was the paramount... as if he’d finally achieved the pinnacle of every... every...”

“I know,” said Ginny in a low voice, slumping down suddenly on the stairs but looking obstinately the other way. “I know what you’re going to say... I know you’re going to say he was just doing it for revenge... just pretending to like me for revenge...”

“I don’t think that,” corrected Hermione, smiling ruefully at Ginny. “I think more of your judgement than to think Draco Malfoy could string you along like that.”

Ginny’s defiant expression crumpled slightly at these last words, and as the pause lingered she felt unable to stop her head from drooping down into her palms.

“He wasn’t supposed to say anything to Harry,” Ginny muttered dully. “I assumed he wouldn’t...”

“Ginny,” ventured Hermione softly, sitting down next to her and looking at her seriously, “all I want to hear is that you know what you’re getting into here. Do you really know what Malfoy is like all the time? Do you really know his character that well?”

Ginny mumbled something unintelligible into her palms.

“Do you really *know* Malfoy?” persisted Hermione, knowing that it had to be asked. “Are you really... do you know just what he’s capable of?”

There was a long pause as Ginny’s face tightened in her hands. “Severus,” she mumbled, getting jerkily to her feet and turning away. “I’m sorry, Hermione... thanks for telling me everything but I... I can’t do this at the moment. I need... I need Severus.”

“Ginny,” Hermione started to say, but lowered her hand when she saw the look of desperation in the other girl’s eyes.

With a last parting glance Ginny started ascending the stairs once more, leaving a vexed Hermione sitting below.

Ginny’s head was whirling as she entered the classroom full of her laughing classmates. She was immediately greeted by a chorus of good-natured voices demanding ‘what took so long?’ and ‘just what is up with these bloody trousers?’

“Where’s Severus?” she managed finally, ignoring everyone’s comments and looking desperately around the room for him.

“Hospital wing,” replied William Boot, looking at her curiously. “He had a weird sort of...”

But Ginny had already rushed out of the room, her feet pounding the stone floor as she tore off down the corridor.

Severus opened his eyes groggily. The familiar whitewashed ceiling of the hospital wing blurred slowly into his vision, obstructed instantly by Madam Pomfrey’s anxious face looking very hard into his eyes.

“He’ll be fine,” he heard her say, as she crossed the room to Professor Garwood. “Poor boy just fainted.”

“Are you quite certain he’s all right?” replied Garwood uneasily. “He gave the most ear-piercing yell...”

“Isn’t he acting in that play tonight? I’m sure he was just being melodramatic,” replied Pomfrey, shooing the doubtful Professor towards the door. “I’ll send him back down to you as soon as he’s ready.”

After Garwood left, Madam Pomfrey hurried once more to Snape’s side and carefully rolled up his left sleeve. Severus blinked at her, bleary eyed, though didn’t have

enough energy to protest.

“Why does Dumbledore always have to leave at such crucial moments?” she wailed, wrapping his forearm in a cool towel. “Just hold on, Snape, I’m assuming this is what’s bothering you but I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do to completely stop the pain.”

Severus nodded slowly, glad that the pain had alleviated somewhat anyway, subsiding instead to a dull sort of ache. At least his mind could start to examine the meaning of it now, and he was just about to open his mouth to tell her so when Madam Pomfrey rushed from the room towards her office. Severus reached numbly for his wand, meaning to draw the curtains around his bed when Pomfrey burst back into the room.

“I won’t be long, Snape, there’s just been a mishap down at the greenhouses,” she said breathlessly, hurrying towards the door. “There’s a bottle of your Dreamless Sleep potion in the cupboard if you think you need it. Go up and wait for Albus as soon as you’re feeling better.”

Severus muttered an assent as the nurse promptly left, leaving the room silent for him to slowly recollect his thoughts. Why was the pain starting now? Was he supposed to be somewhere? Was the Dark Lord just angry with his subjects in general? Why now?

“Severus!”

The voice of Ginny Weasley at the door jerked him to attention. He stiffened as she came tearing up, flinching further as she threw her arms around him.

“What... what are you doing?” protested Severus in alarm, as he distinctly felt her muffled sobs against his neck.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, though making no attempt to pull away. “I didn’t know what happened to you and I ran into Garwood on the way and she said you’d fainted and I’ve just had the most horrible time finding you and wondering what was going on and I really need to talk to

you and –”

“Don’t be stupid,” tensed Severus at Ginny’s babbling speech. “You’re over-reacting, I’m fine.”

But Severus’s words were immediately proven false when the pain tore through him once more, and it was all he could do not to yell and attempt to tear his arm off in agony. Feeling his chest constrict against hers, Ginny tried to pull away enough to look at his face. However the way his arms were suddenly very tight against her back made it difficult, and when she eventually did see the look of pain in his eyes she had to restrain a cry of horror.

“Severus! Severus, what’s wrong?” she said in a high voice. “Please don’t – what... what’s happening? Please, don’t, please, I really need you right now – *Severus!*”

“Get... get away from me...” He tried pushing her away but only succeeded in slumping forwards onto her left shoulder. “Don’t come near me...”

“What’s wrong, Severus?” Ginny kept repeating, although her voice was getting more and more terrified. “Why isn’t Madam Pomfrey here? What’s going on? What...”

But her voice abruptly stopped as her eyes froze on Severus’s left forearm. The towel had unravelled and loosened during his struggle, revealing a skull-shaped tattoo gleaming a dull red, like the embers of a fire. Although Ginny’s head was whirling, she’d heard and seen enough to know at once what that ugly tattoo signified. It was all she could do not to yell out at the sight of it; the symbol of terror that had plagued so many of her nightmares since her days in the forest.

The unmistakable mark of a Death Eater.

Draco Malfoy yawned and entered the rehearsal classroom. He had his Malfoy sword casually slung over his back, and was on the look out for a certain black-

haired boy to give it to. His entry, however, was met with cold indifference and demands that he leave straight away.

“All right,” retorted Draco, just as coldly, especially glaring at Philip Woodley who was eyeing him grimly in a pair of ridiculous tights and leather boots. “I was just looking for Severus, that was all. He needs to borrow my sword.”

“I’ll give it to him,” volunteered Woodley, tapping the sword by his side. “He’s already trusted me with his.”

“Well, I shan’t trust you with *mine*,” said Draco snootily, disliking the way he was staring at his sword. “It’s bad enough you’re not even worthy to wear his. Where is he, anyway?”

Woodley tilted his chin and his eyes narrowed slightly. “Ginny came looking for him a couple of minutes ago,” he said at last. “Will said he was at the hospital wing... or something like that.”

Draco glanced suspiciously around at the people in the room, as if expecting Woodley to be lying.

“All right, I’ll see him there then,” said Draco graciously, turning to exit and narrowly avoiding clipping Garwood with the hilt of his sword. “Sorry, Professor.”

“That’s quite all right, Draco,” said Garwood absent-mindedly, but then addressing the rest of the students. “Excellent, you’re all dressed? Then let’s start the rehearsals.”

Draco started making his way towards the great flight of stairs leading to the upper floors. He wondered briefly what Severus was doing in the infirmary but then shrugged nonchalantly to himself. It couldn’t possibly be serious; he couldn’t think of a single time that Severus had been ill that year. Draco slowed his pace and lazily began to ascend the stairs before him.

Ginny swallowed and mustered up the courage to move her shaking fingers to the burning tattoo on Severus's forearm. The sudden contact on this area brought him suddenly back to his senses as he jerked away with all the energy he could muster, clutching at his arm and tugging the sleeve back down clumsily.

"I told you to get *away from me*," he groaned through gritted teeth, closing his eyes in anguish at Ginny's horrified expression. After all the precautions he'd taken... after all the lies he'd told... everything had been in vain...

His agonising thoughts were interrupted by a light touch on his cheek, and the feel of Ginny Weasley's body pressed back against his. He opened his eyes to find her staring searchingly at his face, as if desperate to find what she was looking for.

"If you'd only explain..." her voice trailed away, her eyes lowering for a moment before looking back up at him with an odd compassion. "I only want to... I still... I don't want to see you in pain again."

As if to spite them both, the last wave of agony that hit Severus was determined to be the most vicious. Although bordering on the same intensity as the last hits, this wave kept going on and on, until he was in a cold sweat and hadn't realised he'd been yelling, and Ginny was shaking him and squeezing him and on the verge of tears before it started to dissipate.

"I – I can't..."

"What?" swallowed Ginny, choking back the urge to shake him violently and demand to know what she could do to help. "What is it?"

"I'm... I'm too..."

"*What?*" demanded Ginny tearfully after his long pause, moving her other hand jerkily up and running her fingers clumsily through the back of his hair. "Tell me what to do and I'll do it – I'll do *anything*..."

You're too close, thought Severus wildly, as he tried to weakly struggle out of her embrace. But Ginny's grip just tightened and a sudden tension seemed to rise in her face as she looked at him.

"Except leave you," she said almost fiercely, as she continued to hold him tightly. "I won't... I won't ever leave you, Severus."

And as Severus looked into her flashing eyes, huge warning bells started sounding in his whirling mind, the larger part of which warning him to jerk away, but a smaller, usually ignored part taking notice of those eyes filled with that indescribable something, and those words filled with so much promise, and the body pressed against his. And it was that small part of him that overrode his reason, which made him appreciate the warm hand on his cheek enough to cover it with his own.

"I can't do this..." he muttered desperately.

But Ginny felt her heart was beating too loudly to take notice of what Severus was saying. His hand over hers seemed to be scalding hot and as she looked into his anguished eyes she saw a flicker of something she'd never seen before. She'd meant to hug him tightly and say how glad she was that he was all right but somehow her head had moved of its own accord and she was kissing him, kissing Severus Snape and all of her frustrations and heartaches and worries were poured into that kiss and it felt so damn good.

The small, usually ignored part of Snape's brain was kicked into overdrive as instead of pulling away he found himself kissing her back fiercely, all restraints torn down from the extended pain and the way the kiss was filling a void he hadn't realised existed.

No one noticed Draco Malfoy standing frozen in the doorway. No one noticed and the kiss deepened just before Malfoy turned away, his face hidden in shadow, before he ran.

Chapter Twelve

~ In which the play is just the background drama ~

The sky had darkened progressively throughout the day, and heavy rain clouds were making their way steadily towards the grey turrets of Hogwarts. Large, thick raindrops were just starting to fall when Draco Malfoy burst out of the entrance doors and ran blindly towards the Quidditch pitch. Breathing raggedly, he tore at the sword clanging painfully against his back, wrenching it free from its restraints and swinging it violently against a passing statue.

The sword clattered to the ground as Draco gave a strangled cry and clutched his ringing hands. Picking the sword back up, he flung it as far as he could. Thunder rolled as he darted towards the blade, the late sun gleaming in its reflection. He struggled to wrench it from the ground, only to stab it back in again and again, gritting his teeth excruciatingly hard to stop himself from screaming at the top of his lungs.

“I won’t ever leave you, Severus.”

“HOW COULD YOU?” Draco shouted as he continued to run, all self-control lost as he saw his two best friends kissing again and again in his mind. An unwelcome image of Severus smirking at him bubbled up in his memory. “AND HOW COULD YOU?!” he screamed. “YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO BE MY BEST—”

THWACK! His sword hit the side of the Broom Shed, sending splinters of wood flying and barely avoiding Draco’s wide, seething eyes.

“I hate you,” he breathed, struggling to jerk his sword free once more, “I hate you and I don’t care anymore and I don’t know why I even fucking –BOTHERED!”

The force of the suddenly freed sword sent Draco staggering backwards, making him whirl around and start

slashing at the shabby undergrowth marking the borders of the Forbidden Forest. For every stroke he imagined punching Severus, his strikes getting more and more violent as his mind frustratingly refused to let Draco hit him.

“IT’S NOT FAIR!” Draco yelled, before collapsing to his knees in despised exhaustion. “It’s not fucking– *I hate you...*”

Draco continued to heave this defiantly to himself, swearing his hatred for Severus aloud as if to silence the treasonous voice inside him that said he didn’t. Draco ran clenched fingers through his hair, brushing it furiously off his forehead and hating the fact that he couldn’t completely hate Severus, no matter how hard he tried – for fuck’s sake he couldn’t even hate Ginny.

“I’m so *stupid*,” Draco seethed, viciously ripping out clumps of wet grass as he thought about the way Ginny had always blushed when Severus had touched her. All this fucking time, right under his nose. Why didn’t they... why couldn’t they... why would they *egg* him on like that?

Draco squeezed his eyes shut as wave after wave of angry humiliation burst through him. He started to punch the ground, his fists hitting the sodden earth again and again. *It doesn’t matter*, he told himself savagely, bullets of rain mixing with angry tears. *I never want to see them again... I couldn’t care less what they do without me anymore* –

Oh but you do care, interrupted the treasonous voice that was starting to sound infuriatingly like Severus. *You don’t hate them and you do care.*

“SHUT–” Draco lunged at the sword next to him and hurled it violently at the side of the Broom Shed, “-UP!”

The sharp blade stuck into the wooden wall once more, but this time he made no move to retrieve it. His fists clenched, his chest heaving, Draco Malfoy glared instead

at a small rolled up parchment that had fluttered to his feet. He didn't have to look upwards to catch a glimpse of a sleek eagle-owl flying away to second guess where it had come from.

The familiar black seal that marked all Malfoy letters seemed darker in the dwindling light, and, stooping to the wet ground, Draco snatched up the parchment with a sort of vindictive pleasure. Imagining Severus's reaction as he ripped it open, Draco read the words rapidly, his hands shaking with a fierce satisfaction at having this to wave in the other boy's disapproving face.

*Draco,
I assume you have indeed taken my words seriously but have lacked the courage to reply sooner. Join me at sundown, to the northeast of Hogwarts where the forest extends beyond the school boundaries. I know you will be there to claim your heart's desire, and because you will always be who you are – your father's son. Do not be late,*

X

A sharp barking laugh escaped Draco's lips as he scrunched up the letter and thrust it deep into his pockets. He glanced towards the direction of the setting sun hidden by the heavy storm clouds, and cast a quick charm to stop the raindrops from hitting him in the face any longer. He looked back at the castle, his defiant gaze lingering on the windows of the infirmary tower. When he looked back at the forest ahead, his jaw was set and his eyes were cold.

“Why the fuck *not*?”

Swinging his sword back across his shoulder, he set off into the gloomy forest before him.

“Snape! Snape, we need you for the final –”

There was a sudden gasp as Philip Woodley came screeching to a halt, his sword clattering to the ground as he froze in the doorway of the hospital wing. Severus pushed Ginny away with a shocked cry, sending the flushing girl staggering backwards while panting heavily.

“What the hell have I done?” he said faintly.

“Don’t,” whispered Ginny back, looking at him beseechingly. “Please don’t... I... I kissed you back.”

“You don’t understand!” said Severus in a horrified voice. “It’s all my fault! I’m completely out of line! I’m –”

“*Don’t*,” repeated Ginny tearfully, but then turning her head towards Woodley. “Please Philip, you mustn’t...”

Woodley nodded mutely at Ginny’s unfinished sentence, looking from one panting Gryffindor to the other. “Well,” he said at last, clearing his throat. “I suppose Malfoy didn’t end up giving you that sword then...”

“What?” demanded Severus, colour draining from his flushed face. “What do you mean? Was he looking for me? *When?*”

“Er...” stammered Woodley, glancing across at Ginny when he heard her sudden sharp intake of breath. “He was looking for you just ten minutes ago... I told him you were sent here...”

Severus had scrambled out of bed at his words and instantly whirled on a shaking Ginny.

“Did you see him?” he rapped out, grabbing her shoulders but then suddenly wishing he hadn’t.

“He probably didn’t come up here,” supplied Woodley quickly, breaking the tension that Ginny’s numb silence was creating. “He didn’t seem to believe me when I told him you were here.”

As Severus’s expression continued to tighten, Ginny found the resolution to speak. “He would have said something if he saw us.”

Severus's shoulders slackened, clapping his palms to his bowed forehead before dragging them down his face in despair. "I don't think so," he mumbled in embarrassment. "I don't know what he'd do, but..."

"Erm... all right then..." Woodley gave them both uncomfortable looks and started backing out of the room awkwardly. "I was just sent to fetch you if you were feeling better... I've got a few more errands to run so..."

Woodley practically fled from the room, leaving Ginny and Severus standing alone in tense silence.

"Maybe... maybe he didn't come up here," said Severus at last, despising himself for once again, taking the easy way out.

"OK..." agreed Ginny in a small voice, although her stomach sinking when she saw the look of loathing suddenly rise up in the other Gryffindor's eyes.

"No, it's not OK," he said flatly. "We're just being stupid. I'm not doing anything until we find Draco. I'm not going to lose him again."

As Ginny gazed back at the challenging eyes before her, she saw yet another reason to kiss Severus Snape. "You're right," she murmured, but then pointing at the sword lying near the doorway. "Isn't that yours?"

Severus walked across the room and picked up the sword Draco had given him that Christmas, gritting his teeth at the poisonous voice in the back of his mind telling him he didn't deserve such a gift. "Woodley must've dropped it," he said shortly, strapping it to his back before moving towards the exit. "Come on, then."

Ginny nodded, determined not to think about what lay ahead. Taking a deep breath, she followed Severus out of the room.

Completely out of breath, Ginny popped her head through the door of the play rehearsals classroom, hoping that she

wouldn't get noticed. She'd torn around everywhere, checking every single empty classroom, secret passage, hidden nook and cranny she could think of in the west side of the castle. She glanced around the empty classroom in surprise, before realising with a jolt of guiltiness that her classmates were probably already backstage in the Great Hall.

Maybe Severus had found him already, she reassured herself. The thought of letting down her classmates and failing Muggle Studies was making her queasy stomach feel even worse. Don't think about it, she told herself fiercely. Just concentrate on finding Draco.

"Ginny! GINNY!"

Hearing the hysterical voice of Emily Lane, Ginny hastily jumped behind the open door, wriggling slightly to fit in the confined space. The twinge of guiltiness she was feeling grew, remembering that she had run into Emily earlier in her search, only to blow her off by saying she was 'going to change'. Ginny held her breath as her fellow fourth year dashed into the classroom, wailing different versions of 'where *are* you, you stupid Weasley' and 'you're ruining *everything*'. She left in a flurry of bright, Muggle jumpsuit, allowing Ginny to creep out from behind the door and make her way stealthily down to the Entrance Hall.

"Did you find him?" burst out Severus, running over to her and pulling her behind a pillar.

Ginny shook her head morosely, and Severus groaned in frustration.

"Practically the whole blasted school is in the Great Hall, but Draco's nowhere to be found," he growled, his face paling slightly before he spoke once more. "He must've seen us – he's avoiding us."

"He might be outside!" protested Ginny, her voice higher than usual. "We haven't checked –"

"Well, if he's outside then he definitely saw us,"

snapped Severus at once. “It’s practically dark *and* pouring – no one in their right mind –”

There was a lumbering creak as the heavy doors of the Entrance Hall opened. Philip Woodley burst through the doors, reeling to a stop when Severus reached out an arm and grabbed his cloak.

“What were you doing out there? Have you seen Draco?” demanded Severus, his eyes narrowing at Woodley’s dishevelled appearance.

“Let go of me! I just needed some air,” replied Woodley, narrowing his eyes in return but then having them widen as Severus grabbed his shoulders and shoved him back against the oak doors. “What –!”

“Answer my question!” snarled Severus, all of his pent-up frustration directed at the stunned boy before him.

But at that moment a loud squeal broke the rippling tension, coupled with a sudden sharp stinging sensation in Severus and Ginny’s palms.

“There you are!” screamed Emily Lane, charging down the stairs and accosting the three. “I don’t believe it! *All* of you, just having a casual chat in the Entrance Hall, without a care in the world!”

But Severus and Ginny were ignoring the Hufflepuff’s indignant words, as they stared at each other in horror and mouthed the word ‘Draco’ before gripping the iron rings that opened the huge doors.

“He must be in the Forbidden Forest,” barked Severus to Ginny, who nodded tensely. “It’s the only place where he’d run into trouble.”

“Wait!” said Woodley quickly, pushing aside an enraged Emily Lane who was trying to shake him like a rat. “Don’t go there, it’s dangerous!”

“What d’you mean?” demanded Severus, rounding on Woodley once more, his eyes glinting dangerously. “*What did you see?*”

“N-nothing!” stammered Woodley, wincing as Severus

grabbed his shoulders once more. “I-I mean... it’s just dangerous... at-at night.”

Emily Lane gave a horrified squeal as Severus went to slam him against the door once more when Ginny interjected.

“Philip!” she cried, her flashing eyes taking in the way Woodley was avoiding her gaze. “Draco’s out there and he’s our responsibility! What did you *see*?”

There was a pause as Woodley looked at her oddly.

“He was around the far end of the Quidditch pitch when I saw him,” he said at last. “So around... northeast... he’d probably be in that part of the forest if he’s not somewhere in the grounds...”

“Go up and tell the Headmaster that that’s where we’ll be,” instructed Severus grimly, letting go of the smaller boy’s shoulders with a snarl. “You’re lucky I’m in a hurry...”

“Wait!” shrieked Emily Lane, as she saw two of her prize actors slip quickly through the heavy oak doors. “The play is *far* more important than looking for some stupid Slytherin –!”

But Ginny and Severus had disappeared into the night, and Emily was then distracted by Philip Woodley racing towards the stairs.

“Not you too!” she screamed, stamping her Muggle Converse shoes in frustration. “You’re already in costume! Dumbledore’s probably already *at* the Great Hall.”

“He’s not,” muttered Woodley to himself, as he continued to race forward. “He’s going to be away for a very long time.”

But this was the last straw for Emily Lane, star and heroine of Hogwarts’ ‘A Muggle Tale’. She’d already lost her supporting actress and her villain, and there was no way in hell that she was going to lose her dashing hero.

“LOCOMOTOR MORTIS!” she bellowed, pulling out

her wand at the receding Woodley.

The blonde boy fell to the ground with a startled cry, glaring daggers at her as she came jogging up.

“What are you doing?” he seethed, all good humour drained from his face as he struggled to roll over and grab his wand. “Let me go!”

“Certainly not!” she seethed back. “I’ve worked far too hard –”

“What’s going on here?” interrupted Hermione Granger sternly, coming to a halt at the sight of a leg-locked student on the ground. “No magic in the hallways!”

A step behind her were Harry and Ron, looking vaguely uncomfortable in their dress-robos and sighing at Hermione’s usual tendency to interfere.

“Woodley’s trying to run away!” Emily Lane declared, releasing the curse with a sniff. “There’s no reason why he should go all the way up to Dumbledore’s office.”

“Hang on,” cut in Harry with a frown, looking down at Woodley who was scrambling to his feet. “Is Dumbledore back yet?”

“If he was then he’d be in the *Great Hall*,” said Emily Lane at once. “That’s where *everyone* is going to be tonight –”

“Which is where we should be,” said Ron helpfully, motioning impatiently towards the side door. “Come on, who cares about these two kids? Let’s –”

“Just a sec, Ron,” said Harry, whose eyes hadn’t left a sullen looking Woodley. “What d’you want Dumbledore for, anyway?”

Woodley mumbled something indecipherable and once again Emily Lane spoke over him indignantly.

“It’s those two bloody Gryffindors – *your* sister, in fact!” she accused, rounding on a startled Ron. “Running around the Forbidden Forest after Draco Malfoy, skiving rehearsals, getting the costumes far too late –”

“What?!” yelled Harry, Ron and Hermione in unison.

“I KNOW!” bellowed Emily Lane back, waving her arms emphatically. “I WAS NAKED!”

“No,” said Hermione tersely, “what do you mean, running around after... What’s Malfoy doing in the Forbidden Forest?”

“I don’t know,” said Emily sulkily, glaring at Woodley for suddenly stamping on her foot. “Why don’t you ask Philip? *He* saw him.”

“It’s too dangerous,” said Woodley shortly, glaring back at his fellow fourth year. “There’s no point in half the school running after—”

“You tell me where my sister is!” demanded Ron angrily, stepping towards him warningly. “And why didn’t you stop her? You’re supposed to be her friend!”

“Snape gave him a thumping,” sniggered Emily, but stepping back from Woodley in alarm when she saw his green eyes flash dangerously.

“Look, we’re going after her whether you like it or not,” said Harry. Hermione and Ron clenched their fists in agreement. “Now tell us, which part of the forest?”

“Northeast,” rapped out Emily before Woodley could speak, “bring them back straight away, will you? I’ll try and change the performance to after dinner instead of—”

“OK,” Harry interrupted impatiently, quickly moving back up the staircase. “Ron, Hermione – go on without me. I’m going to fetch my cloak and the map just in case.”

His two friends nodded resolutely, knowing full well they had all grown too large to fit under it as a trio anymore.

“You two wait for Dumbledore in the Great Hall,” instructed Hermione to the two younger students. “If we’re not back by the end of dinner, tell a teacher instead.”

Woodley looked defiant, but Emily Lane nodded meekly, silently impressed by how they had managed to

take control. Hermione gave Ron's arm a brief squeeze before they made for the heavy oak doors.

"I'm sure she's all right," she murmured.

"Yeah," muttered Ron in reply, but it was with a tense hand that he placed his wand on his outstretched palm. "*Point me.*"

Tugging open the great doors, Ron and Hermione sprinted off into the night.

"Woodley was lying," snapped Severus to Ginny, making her pause and run slightly back to where he was standing. "Look."

By the light of Severus's wand, Ginny could just make out a set of sunken footprints on a particular marshy part of the wet lawn.

"What?" she said confusedly. "What d'you mean? Those could be anyone's."

"No," said Severus grimly, "they're too fresh and look at the heels on them; Woodley was wearing those ridiculous boots – they're unmistakably his."

"Well, so what?" replied Ginny with a shrug. "He told us he saw Draco around here."

"No, he didn't," corrected Severus once more, striding forward but continuing to speak angrily. "He told us Draco was on the far side of the Quidditch pitch – *northeast*. We've been heading to enter the forest due east."

"What?" exclaimed Ginny, jogging to keep up with him. "What on earth for?"

"That Woodley is hiding something," Severus growled in reply. "I can barely see ten yards in front of me and he thinks he just 'popped out for air' and saw Draco all the way on the other side of the Quidditch pitch. Even from here you can't see that far, let alone from near the castle – and that's taking into account the fact that he had more

light than us.”

“But he’s *Philip*,” argued Ginny incredulously. “Why would he be making things up?”

“I don’t trust him,” said Severus stubbornly. “His cloak was drenched even though he’d only supposedly been out for a little while, and the fact that he hadn’t bothered to dry it or put a rainproof charm over himself like us seems like he’d been in a huge hurry. He was also really shifty when he eventually spat out where he saw Draco –”

“So we’re just going to ignore what he said?” interrupted Ginny incredulously. “Severus, I think that’s loony.”

“Can’t you feel it?” said Severus uneasily, pausing briefly before plunging into the forest before him. “There’s something horrible going on here...”

“Yes, but *Draco*,” reminded Ginny, her hand gripping her wand extra hard as she entered after him. “What if he’s more north *like Woodley said*?”

“We know that Woodley *was* here and so if he saw Draco then he must be around here also,” replied Snape determinedly. “It’s a fair hike from here to the castle and considering that we saw Woodley just twenty minutes in the hospital wing before he came tearing into the Entrance Hall, I highly doubt he ran northeast towards the end of the pitch, saw Draco, then ran south along the forest border before seeing the castle to his direct right and running straight back towards it leaving his footprints in the mud. It’s a long, tiring, pointless journey, especially in the rain.”

“All right,” replied Ginny after a pause, her head whirling before she eventually gave up trying to map it all in her head. “Well, I suppose if you’ve got a feeling...”

Severus managed a weak smile which turned into more of a grimace. “Yeah...” he muttered back. “There’s always the feeling...” He rubbed his left forearm before gripping his wand tighter.

“I hope he’s all right,” mumbled Ginny at his side,

breaking the tense silence punctuated by the occasional snapping of twigs in their path.

“We’ll find him,” Severus promised shortly, though his heart sinking slightly at what exactly he’d say if they did.

“Well? Wasn’t I correct, Draco?”

Lucius Malfoy’s usually cold tone had a slightly pleased element to it as he surveyed his only son rise slowly from the damp ground. It had stopped raining a little while ago, the heavy storm clouds shifting slightly and allowing a dull amount of moonlight to shine through the swaying trees. Besides the two of them there was one other shadowy figure in the small clearing, and it was to this one that Draco turned his bowed, moonlit head to.

“Thank you, my Lord,” Draco muttered, his voice low but shaking with anticipation. “It feels fantastic.”

Lord Voldemort stared at the quivering boy a moment before lifting his wand. Draco found himself jerked backwards, his arms and legs dangling helplessly by his sides while hovering slightly in the air. Voldemort flicked his wand once more and Draco managed to land heavily on his feet, with Lucius looking on in astonishment.

“The experiment has been successful,” said Voldemort to Lucius, but then glancing back at Draco as he made ready to leave. “I have made you great, boy. But know that I can break you if you ever try to defy me.”

“Yes, my Lord,” replied Draco dully, his eyes glinting in the wandlight.

“Remember what we talked about,” reminded Lucius, before following his master as they melted back into the night.

There was a long silence as Draco Malfoy stood stock still before turning slowly around at the faint sound of voices coming from the opposite direction. His eyes narrowed as he fingered his wand, the realisation that he’d

finally be able to test out his newfound strength making the corners of his thin lips curve slightly upward. There was an unnatural gleam in the young Slytherin's eye, making him barely recognisable to anyone who had gotten to know him in the past year.

Ron and Hermione burst out of the undergrowth and stumbled into the clearing, doing a double take at finding Draco Malfoy standing silently before them. Hermione automatically threw out a restraining hand towards her best friend, but Ron had already started charging at the motionless Slytherin.

“What've you done to her?” yelled Ron angrily, shaking Malfoy by the front of his robes. “What've you done to my – ARGH!”

Ron's yell of pain was coupled with a scream from Hermione, as Malfoy wrenched away and struck Ron in the side of his face with his wand, sending the larger boy flying to the ground with impossible force. Draco glared at the two Gryffindors in loathing.

“If you dare touch me again, I'll–”

“EXPELLIARMUS!” bellowed both Ron and Hermione at the same time, sending Malfoy staggering backwards slightly, his wand falling in between them.

Seeing him move forward to retrieve it, Ron threw out an arm and yanked the hem of Malfoy's robes, halting him just long enough for Hermione to beat him to it. Ron scrambled hurriedly to his feet and leapt to Hermione's side, briefly panicking at why she was standing so oddly still. Glancing back at Malfoy he saw that the Slytherin had barely moved himself.

“Hermione!” he whispered in alarm. “What's...”

Ron glanced at where Hermione's shaking finger was pointing and his eyes widened. The left side of Malfoy's robes were hanging loose after being tugged down only moments before, revealing a black, skull-shaped tattoo heaving wickedly over Draco's chest.

“Well!” responded Ron at once, fighting the urge to throw up but snatching the wand out of Hermione’s grasp. “There’s no way you’re getting *this* back then.”

And so saying, Ron placed a second hand on the smooth black wood and snapped it cleanly in half.

“Now,” he continued determinedly, “tell me where my –”

But Ron’s bold words were drowned out by the sound of Malfoy laughing. It was a horrible, disturbing laugh, and it made the two Gryffindors’ skin crawl as their grips on their wands tightened. Continuing to laugh manically, Draco’s arm reached to a handle strapped to the top of his back. Barely had the hexes left Ron and Hermione’s lips before Draco had pulled out his sword, the spells bouncing harmlessly off the gleaming metal before him.

“I believe,” whispered Draco viciously, pointing his sword at a horrified Ron, “I told you never to touch me again...”

Ron just registered the scream of a curse as he was suddenly blinded by bright light, feeling Hermione shove him to the ground before everything went black.

Harry Potter’s invisible body stiffened at the sound of a faint shriek in the distance. Ignoring the brambles hitting and tearing at his cloak he quickened his pace, desperately hoping that the scream hadn’t come from Hermione.

I shouldn’t have gone back, he thought angrily to himself. *I should be by their side; I should be there.*

Harry pushed through a particularly thick bush, breaking out into a small, grassy clearing made slightly marshy by the rain earlier. Not far to his right Draco Malfoy whirled about suddenly at the sound of snapping twigs. Harry stared in shock at the boy before him, a large sword in his hands, his narrowed eyes peering out into the gloom. Harry’s shock was quickly replaced with revulsion when

he saw what Malfoy had tattooed over his heart.

It was then that a slight tinge of red caught his eye, and Harry felt his heart jump into his throat. Ron and Hermione were lying sprawled a small distance from Malfoy's feet, their arms and legs limp, their faces turned away. A sudden wave of sickness seemed to hit Harry, and he thrust his wand before him blindly.

"*STUPEFY!*" he yelled, running towards his friends.

"Potter," breathed Malfoy at the same time, recognizing the voice and quickly sidestepping the bolt of red light. "*Finally.*"

When Malfoy had looked up again however, Harry Potter was nowhere to be seen.

"Potter!" he called at once, his gaze flickering to the two unconscious bodies in front of him. "*Reveal yourself or it'll be the worst for your two –*"

"*PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!*"

But it was just as Malfoy was about to hit the ground when he saw a brief flash of colour to the side of Ron Weasley's body. With a sudden burst of unnatural energy, Malfoy swung himself around and dived towards the tear in the fabric, breaking out of the curse and tearing the invisibility cloak triumphantly from Harry's kneeling body.

"Got you!" he exclaimed viciously, struggling to his feet and brandishing his sword.

But Harry hadn't moved from his kneeling position, his face bowed over his motionless friend before he spoke in a voice full of quiet anger.

"What did you do?" he ground out, receiving no answer and suddenly glaring upwards and thrusting his shaking wand at the straightening Malfoy. "*WHAT DID YOU DO?*"

"They're not dead," replied Malfoy coldly, his eyes flickering between the two bodies before breaking out into a malicious smile. "I thought it would be more

appropriate if they died in front of you.”

“You disgusting –” Harry leapt to his feet in front of his two friends, his wand raised and hot anger coursing through his veins. “WHAT THE *FUCK* IS GOING ON HERE, MALFOY?” Harry motioned jerkily at Draco’s left shoulder. “AND WHAT THE *FUCK* IS *THAT*?”

Draco followed Harry’s glare and instantly jerked back his robe to cover his pale chest.

“None of your –”

“One of Voldemort’s little lap-dogs now, are you?” cut in Harry with a sneer, feeling a wave of satisfaction as something in Malfoy’s composed face seemed to snap. “Can’t say I’m surprised, you fucked-up piece of—”

“YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT IT’S LIKE!” screamed Malfoy suddenly, looking as though he might plunge his sword into Harry at any second. “YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT IT’S LIKE TO FEEL SECOND BEST –”

“*YES I DO!*” yelled Harry back, his green eyes blazing with a different kind of anger before replying in disgust. “And you know what? *I didn’t go crawling to Voldemort for a power-trip to make me feel number one.*”

“THIS *POWER-TRIP* IS GOING TO BE THE DEATH OF YOU, POTTER!” screamed Malfoy back, a streak of energy bursting from his sword and just missing the ducking Gryffindor.

“Yeah?” replied Harry, glaring back at him and standing straighter in the moonlight. “*Well, at least I’m my own man.*”

Draco responded by hurling another crackling curse at Harry. Harry’s wand shook as he blocked the curse, his shield eventually ripping to shreds as Malfoy hurled another. The famous wizard fell to the ground, his body paralysed from the neck down. Draco slowly lowered his sword. Seeing his enemy of five years broken and at his mercy, Draco straightened and regained his cool

composure.

“You just don’t get it, Potter,” said Malfoy dispassionately, pointing his sword back at him when Harry opened his mouth to speak. “You see, I didn’t want to be that *man* – if you could call such a weak, spineless fool such a thing – I didn’t want to be, and never planned to be that pathetic *thing* I’d been turning into this past year. It was absolutely disgusting that a pureblood like myself, a *Malfoy* at that, would suddenly find himself spending time with the sort of people he’d always been taught to despise. Imagine my shock, when I actually started to think of Hogwarts as a pleasant place to be...”

“–So you went crawling off to Voldemort,” finished Harry with a glare, struggling fiercely to unbind himself.

“I never *crawled*,” snarled Malfoy, before regaining his composure once more. “I made up my mind and strode forth and did it. I was promised my heart’s desire and I got it – not just the pure power, but the way I can’t feel those pathetically weak emotions anymore.”

“No one can do that,” replied Harry at once. “You can’t just take away someone’s feelings, even if they are as bitter and twisted as you, Malfoy.”

“You’ve never dabbled in the Dark Arts now, have you, Potter?” replied Draco, waving his sword warningly near Harry’s throat. “And if you want proof I’m sure I won’t have a qualm killing your two friends over there. I assure you, the old Draco couldn’t have done that...”

“YOU COWARD!” yelled Harry, his green eyes flashing as he managed to wrench his wand arm free. “*STUPEFY!*”

But although it was such close range, Malfoy had seen him struggle and swung his sword just in time. The bright red light bounced off the metal with a crackle, and Harry found himself paralysed once more with a sharp point digging slightly into his chest. There was a long tense pause where Malfoy looked as if he was going to increase

pressure when he suddenly seized Harry's wand and took a step backwards.

"All right, Potter," he said, his eyes gleaming oddly as he pocketed the wand. "I'll fight you, one on one; where there's no faster broom or thick-headed sidekick or teacher's favouritism to get in the way."

Harry seethed silently in response, scrambling to his feet as soon as he felt his limbs free up again.

Draco clenched his jaw slightly before lifting his sword into the air. "*ACCIO, SWORD!*" he bellowed.

There was a long wait as Harry stood on the marshy ground, his head whirling angrily but his mind set as he glanced at his two friends lying motionless behind him. He didn't know what sort of game Malfoy was playing at, but he sure as hell wasn't going to let himself lose.

After what seemed like eternity to Harry, the grim silence was broken by a silver sword whizzing past him and stabbing into the ground at Malfoy's feet. The sword was similar and obviously a pair to the one that Malfoy was holding. Harry surveyed it curiously as the Slytherin took a few steps backward and motioned for him to take it.

The moonlight glinted off Harry's glasses as he moved towards it steadily, gripping the hilt and seeing a shimmer of Ron's hair in the blade's reflection. Lifting the sword with renewed strength, Harry straightened. "All right," he said quietly.

Draco didn't bother to respond. He narrowed his eyes and charged.

The forest was eerily silent but for the hurried footsteps of a frustrated Severus and Ginny. The moonlight was dimming under the thickening trees, but still they ploughed doggedly onwards.

"Severus," said Ginny at last, jerking her ankle out of

some Devil's Snare. "D'you think, maybe..."

Her voice trailed away, wondering how she could subtly hint that maybe Woodley had been right after all. Severus brushed irritably at a bramble and quickened his pace, barely acknowledging that she'd even spoken.

"*Severus*," repeated Ginny wearily, throwing caution to the wind and reaching out a hand to touch his shoulder, "maybe we should try the other way."

Severus shook off Ginny's hand immediately, but then came to a faltering stop as he realised she may be right. Although they hadn't dared yelling and attracting attention to themselves, there were no clear signs that Draco had went this way after all.

"All right," he said heavily, feeling a wave of anxiety and guilt wash over him as he pulled out his wand to get the direction.

Was his logic really that obscure? He could've sworn...

"Wait." Ginny hesitated, reaching her hand back towards him but then remembering its reception a moment earlier. She contented herself with snapping an overhanging twig instead, before plucking up the courage to ask the question that had been eating at her since the hospital wing.

Severus turned and glanced at her, his face tightening as he saw the way her gaze kept drifting hesitantly towards his left arm. He lowered his eyes in return, before cutting her off as she was about to speak.

"Can't this wait?" he said quietly, feeling sick to death at all the lies that were the cause of the mess in the first place. "We've got more important things to be thinking about."

"No, it can't," replied Ginny tentatively. "I know finding Draco is really important but... have you thought about what you're going to say when you find him?"

"I don't know," said Severus, sullenly turning back around and placing his wand on his flattened palm. "*Point*

me.”

“Also,” continued Ginny doggedly, her determination going up at no longer having Severus’s intense gaze on her anymore, “–I know what I saw on your arm and I think we should talk about it.”

There was a long silence as she waited on tenterhooks for Severus to turn around and explain himself, but the moment never came. The only indication that he’d even heard her was the slight tensing of his shoulders before his spinning wand drew to a halt. As he started in that direction however, he felt a familiar, warm hand jerk at his arm.

“Severus,” said Ginny angrily, “you owe me an explanation.”

For what felt like the fiftieth time to him, he shook off her hand at once. “I *don’t*,” he replied, suddenly just as angry as Ginny and whirling around to scowl at her. “I don’t owe you anything –”

“I’m your *friend!*” broke in Ginny angrily. “And you owe me the truth!”

“You’re not my friend!” yelled Severus back, hating the way Ginny had pulled back as if he had hit her. “I never had any intentions of –”

“Of what?” interrupted Ginny, the back of her throat suddenly feeling very restricted. “Of caring what I thought when you kissed me back, only to shove me aside moments later and look at me like I’m a piece of scum?”

“I never meant to –” said Severus wildly. “I didn’t –”

“Well, I never meant to either!” cried Ginny back, struggling to keep her voice steady. “It wasn’t as though I was planning on ...– it, it just happened, and I hate that you’re trying to pretend that it didn’t.”

“Well, why can’t we?” burst out Severus desperately. “It was a huge mistake and now Draco –”

“Stop making this about Draco!”

“But I thought you liked *him*,” yelled Severus in

anguish, tearing his fingers through his short hair. “I can’t give you anything – *he* can.”

“He *can’t!*” yelled Ginny back, not bothering to hide the hurt and despair in her now shaking voice. “You know what he thinks of me! You were there this morning! I saw something in your eyes this evening that I’ve *never* seen in Draco’s.”

“Don’t,” stammered Severus, backing away from Ginny’s heart-breaking look. “I won’t – I can’t...”

But suddenly Severus was jerked violently to the right, his body flying through the air before slamming straight into the base of a tree. Ginny froze in shock, recoiling slightly at the sight of his sword still trying to jerk against the restraints on his back. Without thinking she pointed her wand at the struggling sword.

“*Diffindo!*”

The restraints holding the gleaming sword tore into ribbons, and Ginny watched it dart away through the trees before running over to the unmoving Severus.

“Severus! Wake up – hurry up!” she cried, panicking slightly at not getting a response. “Quick, I think its Draco! I think he’s Summoning the – Severus, *quick!*”

Severus groaned in response and tried to shift his right arm that he’d fallen on. “My wrist,” he ground out, finally freeing his hand but then looking at it in horror. “*Oh no...*”

Ginny also looked on in horror. Beyond Severus’s quickly swelling wrist was a splintery half of a wand. Scrabbling quickly for the other half, Severus attempted to piece them together and mutter a charm under his breath, only to receive a small explosion of angry sparks and singed fingers.

“Try using mine,” said Ginny numbly, handing over her wand as Severus swore at the remains of his. “You should also fix your wrist if you know how... I don’t think I could though.”

But the unfamiliar wand with his left hand was to no avail, and Severus eventually gave up in frustration. “Which way did you say that sword went?” he snapped, thrusting her wand back towards her with a scowl.

Ginny pointed through the trees, knowing that there was no way they were going to continue the conversation they were having before. For some reason whenever she tried to bring up the Dark Mark on his arm, their conversation always landed back to why they had started kissing. And it was then that Ginny realised that she seemed to care a lot more about why Severus kept pushing her away than the fact that he could be a mass murderer, and wondered if she had gone mad.

Determined not to think about it, Ginny shook her head and picked up pace behind a tense Severus. Sooner rather than later however, Severus’s earlier words started to float unbidden through her mind.

“I can’t give you anything – he can.”

Why couldn’t Severus open up to her? And why did he think that *Draco* had feelings for her? How could he think that when Draco was a complete and utter prat to her all the time? Fine, so there may have been the occasional hint that he may have cared... but it seemed to her that Harry had always been around or involved in some way – and this tied in exactly with what Hermione, or rather, she herself had said about ‘him only wanting her out of spite...’

But what if he does like you? a tiny, too hopeful voice in the back of her mind asked her. *What if he cares about you like Harry did, and needs you like you saw Severus did...*

Ginny rubbed her face with her palms, stumbling over an upturned root.

And what about how he makes you feel? continued the small voice, but getting louder and louder in her mind. *Like when he saved you from the Hellhounds, or when he*

danced with you during Christmas, or when he wore the cloak you made during the final Quidditch match, and when he was lying in that stretcher... You were stunned to find yourself thinking it— but you wanted so desperately just to burst out and scream at him that you were completely—

Ginny barrelled suddenly into a frozen Severus Snape. He gripped her arm to silence her and turned his head around through the gloom.

“Severus,” she whispered, ignoring his warning glare and knowing that she would explode if she didn’t set things straight, “I’m sorry I kissed you – I know we didn’t intend to do it, and it was wrong but it’s just... I really needed it. And I know you needed it too – and I’m sick of how you push me away and just don’t understand how much I truly care about—”

But Ginny’s response was cut off as she felt Severus’s lips thrust upon her own. Her vision blurred almost immediately and although this kiss was probably just a way to silence her, in that moment she really didn’t care and started kissing him back fiercely. She felt engulfed with warmth, the dull roaring in her ears getting louder and louder. It was as if she was drowning, but there was no way she wanted to go up for air because that would end that moment of closeness, that moment she’d never thought that Severus would give her.

It was then that a tentative hand on her cheek made her eyelids flicker half open in shock, their mouths breaking just far apart for a gasp of cold, forest air. There was a blurry moment as Severus opened his eyes also, and although they were so close their foreheads were touching, Ginny found herself finally able to read the mysterious emotion that was burning in her best friend’s eyes.

“Severus...” she murmured, when he kissed her again.

Although this kiss was still filled with mixed-up feelings

of desperation, intensity and need, it seemed different to the two beforehand, and didn't feel at all like the kiss in the hospital wing. This kiss was gentler, but still made her heart jump into her throat and her fists clench in response, for this kiss... it felt like goodbye.

Severus eventually pulled away, his face once more inscrutable as he dropped his hand.

"I heard something coming towards us," he muttered hoarsely, before turning away.

"Severus," Ginny repeated quietly, reaching for his hand and enclosing it with her own. "Wait."

Severus's hand felt warm and clammy and for once he didn't pull away.

"You know it never would have worked out," he said in a low voice, his back still to her. Ginny's grip on his hand tightened until he turned around and finally met her eyes. "We both need him too much."

There was a long silence before Ginny swallowed hard and looked away. Her head was filled with so many mixed emotions that she found it impossible to speak. She was finding it difficult to distinguish exactly what she felt for Severus and Draco; and the only thing she knew was that they were both so terribly important to her it was frightening. She was just forcing her tongue into forming a response when all her thoughts turned to ice.

A crackling surge of energy flew past where her head used to be, as Severus wrenched her down with a cry.

"Death Eaters," he hissed into her ear, yanking her back to her feet as she clutched at him in panic. "*Run.*"

In a small, marshy clearing to the northeast of Hogwarts, Draco Malfoy staggered slightly and loosened his grip on his sword. Seeing his chance, Harry swung his blade as hard as he could, knocking Malfoy's glittery sword clean out of his hands. Panting slightly, he thrust his sword

against the Slytherin's chest, hovering the blade just above his heart before surveying him warily.

"Yield!" Harry ground out, struggling not to let the fatigue of the fight show in his voice.

But it seemed as if Malfoy hadn't heard him. The Slytherin was standing stock still, oblivious to anything but his left hand, as if Harry had chopped it off. It was then that he heard him mutter something that sounded suspiciously similar to 'Ginny' and Harry felt a renewed burst of anger.

"You're really something, Malfoy," he spat in disgust, thrusting the sword slightly to get his attention. "Throwing that name in my face to stop me at the last second – I'll never know what she saw in you."

Draco jerked back at the sudden point in his chest, his unfocussed look snapping back to Harry's scornful eyes.

"Shut up!" yelled Draco back, his grey eyes pooling with hate once more. "You don't know anything! SHUT UP!"

"God, you're *sick!*" yelled Harry in disgust. "Of all the despicable things you've done – playing with her feelings – *luring* her in here – how could you just – ARGH!"

Harry staggered forwards, his sword narrowly missing Malfoy's chest. If he'd looked behind him a split second earlier, he would've seen a large stone lift from the ground during Draco's explosion, making its way towards his head at high speed. Barely had he hit the ground when he felt rough hands shaking at his collar.

"What did you say?" he heard Malfoy snarl through gritted teeth. "What d'you mean *in here?* Where is she?"

"Don't... Get off," said Harry feebly, trying to steady his splitting headache. "-Get off!"

"WHERE'S – GINNY?" yelled Draco between shakes, raising his hand to slap Harry in the face.

"I DON'T KNOW!" roared Harry back, his head exploding with pain at the hit. "SHE FOLLOWED YOU IN HERE, I THOUGHT YOU –"

“I haven’t seen her!” seethed Draco back, his eyes flashing furiously. “If you’re lying –”

But though his head was whirling and his mind still somewhat foggy, Draco knew that the pain in his left palm couldn’t be denied. For that single prick of pain had awakened feelings, feelings that weren’t supposed to be there. He suddenly felt starving, as if he’d been given a taste of something he couldn’t fathom living without. And though his hate for Harry Potter was colossal, there was something infinitely bigger inside him that had wrenched free at that moment, and there was no amount of denial or hurt or hate or dark magic that could fight it back down.

Snatching up his sword he strode back over to where Harry tried woozily to raise his own. Draco met his eyes before lifting the flat of his blade and knocking him out cold. Pocketing Harry’s wand, he waved his sword at his rival’s body. “*Locomotor Mortis.*”

Draco turned his head towards the gloom and sprinted off into the night, the body of Harry Potter streaking swiftly after him.

Ginny and Severus tore through the undergrowth, ignoring branches and vines whipping at their robes and faces. Ginny’s chest was pounding, and she was struggling to keep up with the boy in front of her.

“Sev’rus,” she panted, glancing quickly behind her before swallowing raggedly. “I...can’t –”

“You *must*,” growled Severus, pulling her sideways to avoid a crackling curse. “Just... hold on.”

And so saying, Severus clenched his hand around hers and sprinted steadily onwards, ignoring the shooting pain in his right wrist as he thrust his way through the brambles. He knew there was no point going after Draco wandless and with Death Eaters on their tail, so he had been manoeuvring roughly towards what he thought was

west in hope they would find themselves back in Hogwarts grounds once more. However the tiny flicker of hope he had been harbouring was slowly fading into dread, as he realised that although they'd been running for a good fifteen minutes now, the trees didn't seem to be getting any thinner and the Death Eaters seemed to be getting a lot closer.

After what seemed like an eternity of nerve-wracking close calls, Severus and Ginny found they could stumble no further. An impenetrable rising hedge was blocking their path, and Ginny looked left and right in horror, seeing it stretch outwards into the gloom further than she could see. Severus froze for a split second before veering off to the right, his flicker of hope suddenly flaring back up.

"Come on!" he hissed to Ginny, feeling a giddy wave of relief as they rounded the corner to a familiar stretch of hedge.

"Wait, is this—?"

"Yes," breathed Severus, as he thrust her towards the concealed opening of the hidden garden. "Hurry!"

But just as he was about to enter after her, two enraged Death Eaters barrelled around the corner, bellowing curses and running straight at him. In an instant he threw himself back towards the Forbidden Forest, running as fast as he could before ducking suddenly into a hollow tree. A moment later his pursuers ran past and he drew a sigh of relief. He forced his body to calm down as he carefully retraced his steps back to the hedge.

Thrusting himself gingerly through the opening, Severus was just about to call for Ginny when he froze at the sound of all-too familiar voices.

"You fool, Wormtail. Make sure no other students have come wandering in."

Severus's eyes widened and he threw himself upwards towards a thick curling branch, jerking at the protesting

pain in his right wrist, but managing to pull himself up just in time. He held his breath as a black-hooded wizard rounded the cluster of shrubs beneath him, his silver hand gleaming in the light of his wand, his footsteps hitting the worn path sulkily.

“There’s no one else, Master,” Pettigrew said below, as he swept through the nearby shrubs. Severus sneered at him for not bothering to check above, but his face dropped as Pettigrew finished, “It’s just her.”

As further proof he then heard Ginny’s stuttering demands for freedom, before being sharply silenced by what seemed to be a gagging charm. Using his left hand to grip the tree tighter, Severus slowly started to make his way towards the main trunk, inwardly thanking his cat-like stealth and vision and the thick cover of leaves beneath him. As he climbed he realised he had picked the best hiding place he could have—the ancient oak tree with branches that stretched over most of the garden. Sweating profusely, Severus reached the main trunk at last and continued to climb carefully upwards, before glancing down through the swaying foliage below.

There were seven black-robed wizards gathered in the central clearing of the garden. Two others were crouched over the pond, pouring smoking potions into the murky water and waving their wands. An angry hopelessness rose up in Severus, as a glint of Ginny’s red hair caught the moonlight and she was shoved cruelly down to the ground, bound now as well as gagged. He was useless, absolutely useless! He had no wand and even if he did, there were too many! There wasn’t time to go for help, no way to send a message. From the continued aching in his palm, he should’ve known Ginny wouldn’t be safe when he left her. He should never have left her alone! If only he could grab her and Apparate... but they were in Hogwarts grounds! The only comfort was that she was still alive. But still, Ginny’s usefulness to the Dark Lord was not

something to rejoice in.

Severus started to creep forwards on the branch overhanging the ancient stone bench, watching the wands intently as he dug his fingernails into the bark. All he could do was wait, wait for an opportunity to grab her and run, fight, or do whatever it took to get her away from them alive. He had no real plan and Severus had long realised his actions had grown to be shamelessly Gryffindor, but he was damned if he was going to sit by and do nothing while Ginny was killed.

Because he'd lied when he'd said she wasn't a friend. Because she meant so much more to him than that, a hundredfold more than anything had ever meant to him. Because he'd already lost Draco. He wasn't going to lose her too.

The distinct drawl of Lucius Malfoy drifted upwards, the voices much clearer now that Severus was almost directly above them. His blood boiled as he noticed Lucius's hand on Ginny's shoulder.

"...Oh no, my Lord, of course I do not mind. But surely this pureblood child would be just as suited for the Cleansing as Draco. You have given him such power; it would feel like a waste..."

"You think it a waste, for your son's blood to become my own?"

"Of course not, my Lord. It is an honour. But perhaps he could still be of use."

"He shall not be of use for much longer," said one of the Death Eaters. "The new kind – as you well know, Lucius, burn out very quickly. They are nothing but pawns."

"And the blood must be given willingly for the Cleansing," murmured Wormtail.

"If the blood is not willing, the mind must be weaker," Voldemort allowed himself a smile. "Very well, Lucius. You have faithfully sacrificed for me before, and I am a gracious Lord. You may keep your son until his soul is

consumed completely. I hope you enjoy his company.” Then Voldemort stepped forward to tilt Ginny’s chin upwards with his wand. “It seems our paths are always destined to cross, young Weasley. I broke you once before, now I shall do so again.”

Ginny’s eyes widened but she could barely breathe, let alone move. She wanted to scream that she’d never give him anything willingly, that she’d grown so much stronger than her first year self. Her mind wasn’t weak any more, she had confidence, inner strength, and friends that loved her. No one and no thing could break that from her.

A series of flashes and screams broke her train of thought however, as all hooded heads swivelled towards the source of the disturbance. A few of the Death Eaters shifted uneasily, but Voldemort seemed unperturbed. There was the rustling sound of someone entering the garden clumsily, followed by jerky footsteps rounding the cover of the undergrowth.

Ginny’s heart leapt and then froze. The distinct body of Harry Potter floated forward out of the gloom, a sword blade pressed tightly against his throat.

Draco’s grip tightened on the hilt as he walked slowly forward. “I brought you Potter,” he said to Voldemort. “But I want the girl.”

Chapter Thirteen

~ In which much blood is in the heir ~

The door to the Trophy Room creaked slowly open. There was a whispered *Lumos* and soft wandlight spilt out onto hundreds of gleaming awards. A slim fourth year boy with blonde hair closed the door quietly behind him. He crossed the room, one hand holding aloft his wand, the other tightly clutching the handle of a silver sword. The boy knelt down, running his fingers along a groove between the marble tiles of the floor, stopping when he found a notch. He levered the notched tile up carefully until there was just enough space to quickly slip his hand underneath and twist an ancient iron ring nestled in a small hollow.

The walls of the Trophy Room groaned with the sound of rusty mechanical cogs and wheels grating against stone. The blonde-haired boy dropped the tile back into place and turned to where several marble tiles were lowering into the floor. With narrowed eyes he watched as one by one they locked into place, creating a line of steps down to a dark passage below. Turning his glowing wand in his cool fingers, the boy descended down the flight of steps and vanished.

The stairway groaned closed after him, leaving the Trophy Room in darkness.

Draco stood straighter, his sword blade against Harry's throat.

Voldemort stared at him. "I own you, Draco. I can control you. Why would I bargain with you?"

At that moment a gust of wind broke a gap in the clouds, and Ginny, who had been silently trying to get Draco's

attention and Severus, whose nails were bleeding from being clenched so tightly, caught a glimpse of the glowing tattoo through a giant rip on his left shoulder.

No... they breathed.

Draco narrowed his eyes. “Your control isn’t precise enough. You make the slightest mistake and Potter’s head drops.”

Lucius took a step forward. “You don’t honestly think we’d believe you’d kill your own class—”

The blade pressed tighter and Lucius took a step back.

“You forget, Draco,” said Voldemort, unperturbed. “I need Harry Potter, and I need a pureblood. If you take the girl, you shall have to give me yourself in return.”

“What about *him*?” said Draco, his eyes flicking from Voldemort to his father. “He’s as pureblood as they get.” Lucius clenched his fists and a humourless smile touched Draco’s lips. “What, you’re surprised? You said it yourself: I am my father’s son.”

The Death Eaters shifted uneasily, looking to their Master for instruction. Voldemort was looking at Lucius in a calculating way, one in which Lucius didn’t like. He stilled his trembling hands and turned to Draco with a steely smile.

“You are indeed your father’s son, Draco,” Lucius murmured. “You are one of us, a spiller of dirty blood, and a wielder of immense power.” He paused, waving his wand slowly and deliberately. Draco tensed, his eyes never leaving his father’s as Ginny drifted through the air closer towards him. “But have you told her—” continued Lucius, “—that your soul is no longer your own? Does she know that you’re dangerous? That you’re broken? That every time you use your wonderful, new magic, you are burning up bits of your humanity? Do you really think she would still want you?”

Draco never meant to look at Ginny, never meant to let himself get sidetracked, but as his Father’s spiteful words

cut into him, he was unable to help himself. As soon as he did however, he felt his whole body crumple, for Ginny was staring at the Dark Mark on his body and when she met his eyes, he saw fear.

Severus took in the scene as if in slow motion, seeing all the things that weren't seen by anyone else. He saw Ginny hovering so close now to Draco. He saw how weak Draco actually was, and how very little he had left in him. He saw Lucius's flicker of triumph as Draco's grip weakened on his blade. He saw the rest of the Death Eaters all take a step backwards, as Voldemort lifted his staff.

No. Draco was distracted—he'd never react in time. There was nothing Severus could do. There was nothing he could...

Severus leapt from the tree with a roar.

“WATCH—!”

Draco's eyes flicked back into focus, pushing any jumbled thoughts to the back of his mind.

“—OUT!”

Severus froze in mid air, held in place by Voldemort's staff. The Death Eaters looked upwards, all attention on the dangling boy. Severus realised that his sleeves had ridden up during the fall. *No!* he screamed inside his head. *NO!*

Draco stared at his left forearm. “You're...”

“Severus Snape,” murmured Voldemort. “It's been a long time, though it wears little on you. I daresay you even look *younger* than when we last met.”

The blade against Harry Potter's neck shook, nicking the skin ever so slightly. Draco's eyes were red-rimmed and wide as he stared at his best friend suspended in mid-air above Voldemort.

“All this time,” he breathed. “All this fucking time... it was *you*.”

Draco's gaze jerked back to a fallen Ginny, who had

landed just in front of him during the disturbance. She was still bound and gagged, lying on her side as she stared back up at him. Her gaze also faltered towards Severus. Snape and Draco made no move to free her.

“And you...” spat Draco, breathing raggedly as her eyes snapped shut. “Why would you...” Draco tore his eyes away from her and stared back up at Severus. “How could you...”

“*Crucio.*”

Voldemort’s wand never wavered as Severus screamed silently, convulsing in the air and clawing at his left arm. Nothing existed for him but pain, impossible pain from all directions. He’d had everything, everything he’d ever wanted and then it was taken away. Before this year he’d had nothing, and now... now he was going to die with nothing. It was what he should’ve expected.

“*NO!*”

Voldemort’s look of bemusement faded into a frown. Snape was supposed to be incapable of speech and yet his struggling seemed to be...

“*NO!*” screamed Severus once more, barely able to breathe. “*I WANT IT BACK.*”

CRACK!

One of the Death Eaters shrieked in pain as a piece of rubble collided with his face. The rest of them raised their wands and faced the source of the noise, as a thick cloud of dust filled the garden. Voldemort turned also, leaving Severus to fall to the ground half-stunned.

The ancient stone bench lay in pieces beneath the Founders’ tree, and in the swirling dust a slim figure could be seen. With a flick of his wand, Voldemort parted the cloud, revealing a young boy with blonde hair. The Death Eaters made to move forward, but were frozen mid-step by another flick of Voldemort’s wand.

Voldemort observed the boy casually and started to walk towards him, releasing his Death Eaters who slinked away

like dogs. There was something about the boy's face that gnawed at his mind, something about the lean figure, the angle of his jaw, and the fire in his green eyes. Standing a mere ten paces from the boy, Voldemort stopped. The boy was radiating such force of will...

"Who are you?" murmured Voldemort.

The boy's eyes drifted over the garden, the ring of Death Eaters, Draco, Ginny, and Severus lying on the ground barely conscious. His eyes lingered on a stock-still Lucius Malfoy before returning to Lord Voldemort, looking him square in the eye.

"Don't you know?" Philip Woodley said softly. "Think back, fifteen years ago. You came here before."

The Death Eaters shuffled in apprehension but still their Master said nothing, his red eyes burning with an intense curiosity, almost fascination. "You have used the fountain also," he murmured.

The fire in Woodley's eyes burned fiercer. "Not exactly."

"And yet you have knowledge of the true entrance into this garden." Voldemort eyed the sword hanging by Woodley's side. "Gryffindor's sword does not lend itself lightly. Your lineage must be similar to my own."

"Similar, yes," said Woodley. "Like you I was an orphan, unaware that Hogwarts had existed until a late age. When I arrived I had recurring dreams of violence and power, and yet unlike you, my magic was mediocre. My visions grew more and more vivid, triggered by objects and places around Hogwarts that seemed all too familiar, as if they and my destiny were intertwined. I knew instinctively of the Founders' Garden, knew that my past, my identity was connected with it. When finally I found the entrance, I realised that my visions were not visions at all." Woodley paused, his eyes never leaving Voldemort's. "It is said that the Founders' longevity was due to an enchanted fountain, The Founder's Pool, active

once every three years. The water could transform the drinker to how they truly saw themselves, giving the illusion of never aging.”

“Fifteen years ago you entered this garden by force, but you were young, not interested in what your forefathers did. The thing you craved, the quality you valued above all else wasn’t youth, and it wasn’t even power. It was pure blood, blood untainted by Muggles, blood purer than every one of your Death Eaters. So you created a way to alter the Founders’ Pool, a way to strip away the impurities... But the process would whittle you down to something less than human. You needed raw material to remain whole, so you demanded a sacrifice from your purest Death Eater. You rose from the pool cleansed of not only your Muggle ancestry, but also your humanity. You cut out those despised feelings of love, the ones you hated yourself for having. You were no longer human enough even to die.”

The curiosity in Voldemort’s eyes was dissipating into awareness, and yet the fascination remained. “Your visions were not visions. They were memories.”

“Yes,” said Woodley, raising his shabby wand. “I am the remains of the child Lucius Malfoy sacrificed, and the bits of you that were discarded. And tonight, *Voldemort*, I am here to claim what is mine. *Accio*, wand!”

In the blink of an eye Voldemort’s long, black wand shot to Woodley’s left hand. Woodley smiled and tucked his old one into his belt. “Finally.”

At that moment two things happened at once. Harry Potter, who had been regaining consciousness during Woodley’s speech, slammed Draco’s face as hard as he could with his elbow and reached for his stolen wand. The Death Eaters, enraged at this impostor’s claim to their Master, charged at Woodley with their wands raised.

There was another deafening crack as the multitude of hexes ricocheted from Woodley’s shield charm, sizzling

across the surface of the murky pool. Voldemort raised his staff. "Away from the Pool!" he bellowed, sweeping his arm.

A circle of wind exploded from Voldemort, throwing everybody backwards. Woodley was flung to the far corner of the garden and Voldemort strode towards him, all traces of fascination gone.

Draco sat up numbly, reaching for his sword. He was met with a swift kick in the stomach from Harry Potter before he sprinted after Voldemort. The Death Eaters around him struggled to their feet, following an instant later. Draco coughed and heaved but made no move to follow. His eyes moved instead back towards the pool, where the body of Ginny Weasley was lying at an odd angle. As Draco stumbled towards her, an ache of pain tore through him that had nothing to do with his injuries.

"Draco, DRACO! WATCH OUT!"

At the sound of Severus's voice, Draco whirled, his sword raised but barely able to stand. Lucius Malfoy skidded to a stop, his wand an inch away from his son's sword. "You shamed me," Lucius hissed, his face livid.

"No," spat Draco, his grey eyes taking in his shaking Father's. "You shame *me*."

Severus staggered over a fallen Death Eater, punching his way through another. He had no idea what Draco and Lucius were talking about but he knew how it would end. His body was in agony from his fall but he started to pick up speed, hoping he would get there in time. But as he saw Draco's eyes widen, Snape felt a sudden stab of terror and realised he was too late.

"NO!" Snape screamed, taking a running leap straight into Lucius Malfoy.

Severus felt the two of them sail through the air, the green ribbon of energy dissipating from Lucius's wand he fell sideways. Lucius's body hit the churning water of the pool with a scream, and bits of froth splashed up at

Severus's clenched eyelids. But as the young Gryffindor awaited the inevitable, he realised he'd stopped moving, and was once again suspended in mid-air. Snapping his eyes open, Severus craned his neck sideways and was flooded with disbelief as Draco stared back at him, one knee on the ground but with his sword pointing directly at him.

"Hang on," Draco grated out, his arms quivering. "Just...have to..."

But the flutters of elation that Severus was feeling at that moment disappeared into panic. He saw the way Draco was struggling to lift him, the way he was so pale and not even able to stand. Where was he getting the strength? No ordinary wizard should have the strength for this...it wasn't right...It wasn't...

"Wait!" croaked Severus, meaning to shout but his voice refusing. "You can't do this! It's... It's killing you, Draco!" Severus paused, swallowing hard. "Your body isn't capable of power like this, wandless magic... you're burning up bits of your *soul*, Draco."

Draco's jaw tightened, his brow wet with perspiration.

"*Draco!*" pleaded Severus desperately. "Think of Ginny! This isn't worth it, you *can't*..."

Draco shook his head jerkily, the sword continuing to waver. "I *can*."

Severus's breathing grew more ragged as he realised he was now inching upwards and away from the pool. "NO!" he tore out in anguish, as Draco dropped down to both knees. "You're not the one who should die! I should be the one, let me *go!* I'm the broken one, I lied to you, I *betrayed* you! You *don't need me*—"

"Shut...*UP!*" With one last heave of strength, Draco fell forwards onto his stomach. Barely able to flick his eyes open, he glared at the boy who hit the ground next to him. "I still... hate you," he muttered, as Severus wrenched his sword from his grasp.

Severus gave a choking cry and tried to shake the Slytherin back awake but Draco was unmoving. A motionless Ginny lay beside him, the vivid red of her hair seeming dull against the pool of blood beneath it. Screams and curses were radiating from the corner of the garden, and if Severus had glanced towards them, he would have seen Woodley and Potter side by side, encompassed in a blue bubble whilst fighting off Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

But Severus only had eyes for the two bodies beside him. He never saw the wounded Death Eater starting to crawl towards them. He never saw Professor Dumbledore blasting him out of the way. The last thing Severus saw were his two best friends, before his vision blurred into nothing.

“It’s all right,” announced Madam Pomfrey. “They’ll be fine after a good night’s sleep.”

All the worry and weariness on Harry’s face evaporated into happiness. He gave the matron a sudden hug then made his way over to Dumbledore.

“Ron and Hermione.” Harry smiled. “They’re OK.”

“I’m very glad to hear it,” said Dumbledore, replacing the slender wand upon Woodley’s bedside table.

Harry stared at the dozing Woodley. “Is he...?”

Dumbledore smiled. “Philip will be fine. Speaking of which, shouldn’t you be resting also?” he added, eyeing the empty bed on the other side of Woodley.

Harry shrugged, taking in the Headmaster’s tatty robes. “I could say the same to you.”

Dumbledore’s smile faded. “I’m used to this sort of thing.”

Harry sighed. “Me too.”

Nevertheless, Harry took a seat on the empty bed and Dumbledore sat next to him. For a few minutes they said

nothing, with only the sound of the sleeping patients and the swish of Madam Pomfrey's robes to break the silence. Harry glanced across the room to Ginny's bed, the curtains of which drawn closed. Everything in the Founders' Garden had happened so quickly, and then the Aurors had arrived... but it had all stopped dead when he found Ginny lying unconscious by the pool. Since then he'd been a mess, worrying about his friends. But now everyone was going to be fine.

He glanced at Dumbledore, who he saw was smiling again. It was then that he realised that he too was smiling, and he laughed.

"I can't believe it," he murmured.

"Yes." Dumbledore smiled. "I'm having difficulty myself."

Harry grinned back. "It's just... it's so unbelievable. It's *over*."

Dumbledore could only laugh in return. And inexplicably Harry found himself unable to stop himself from joining in. For a while the two of them laughed together, until they were silenced by a sharp look from Madam Pomfrey.

"I can't even begin to understand how it happened," Harry muttered to himself.

Dumbledore's eyes drifted over Woodley's peaceful face.

"I spoke to Philip," said the Headmaster. "He was able to explain quite a bit before he fell asleep. Do you know the legends of the Founders' Pool, Harry?"

"I have heard of it," Harry admitted, "but I don't know it very well."

"Few do," replied Dumbledore. "It has been called 'The Fountain of Youth' by some, a legend so popular even Muggles have heard of it. You see, the Hogwarts Founders, among other things, were famous for their longevity. It was said there was a secret pool they would

visit to restore themselves to youth and beauty. When I came upon this pool myself fifteen years ago, I learnt that this was only partially true. The pool takes a person and makes them how they want to be, how they see themselves. In the case of the Founders, they saw themselves as young, or at least for a long time they did.”

“Godric and Salazar however, have always had a family history of fighting. After several hundred years of peace at Hogwarts, their differences grew apparent once more. It was then that Helga and Rowena took drastic steps to seal away the pool. They surrounded it with wards and enchantments, leaving only a single secret passage as an entrance. They considered Salazar’s prejudice, and Godric’s poor logic, and devised a hidden entrance that used no magic at all. If Gryffindor or Slytherin had ever discovered the complicated system of Muggle mechanisms, neither would have given it a second thought. I don’t know that any of the Founders ever used the pool after that, and they never passed their secret on. Perhaps they thought it was better forgotten.”

“But it wasn’t forgotten,” Harry muttered. “Voldemort found it.”

“Yes,” mused Dumbledore. “I think he may have found it when he was still at school here. He never found the true entrance, mind you, for he still suffered from the same prejudice his ancestor did. It was only much later that he somehow managed to burn a hole through the enchanted hedge wall. He must’ve studied that pool for years, trying to learn how it worked and how he could manipulate his body at will. It was fifteen years ago to the day that he finally achieved his task, casting away the Muggle blood in his veins and all the frailty of humanity. All that remained when he rose anew was a deathless monster. Everything else became Philip Woodley.”

“Hagrid was the one that found him. He was in the Forbidden Forest in the early hours of the morning when

he heard a baby crying and followed it until he came to the enchanted hedge. He searched around it for many hours until he found the small hole and beyond it, the Founders' Garden and baby Woodley. Of course, Hagrid came straight to me. That Hagrid had stumbled upon the entrance to the Founders' Garden seemed improbable, but there could be no doubting what it was. As for the child, I drew the conclusion that anyone might. I believed a wizard had used the pool and washed up a new-born baby. Whether it was a mistake or whether he wished to start again, I didn't know, but I knew the Ministry wouldn't approve. Remember, these were the days when Voldemort was still at large, and the Ministry was very suspicious."

"Whatever the baby had been as an adult, I could feel only compassion for him. If he had wanted a new beginning, I decided to give him one, so Philip went to stay with my brother in London, Aberforth."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "How did you know he wasn't a grown wizard in a baby's body?"

The Headmaster smiled. "He was nothing more than an ordinary baby." Dumbledore paused. "Perhaps a bit too ordinary. By eleven years of age, Philip hadn't shown an ounce of magical ability, much to Aberforth's chagrin. I regretted choosing to have him raised in a Wizarding household. I thought perhaps he'd *wanted* to be done with magic, and to start again as a Muggle."

"You should've swapped him round with me," said Harry gloomily, then waving his hand as Dumbledore tried to interject. "All right, all right, I know I had to stay with my blood relatives."

Dumbledore chuckled, and his eyes drifted back to Woodley sleeping, then he became strangely sombre. "It's been a difficult year for him, you know," he said softly. "Even more than I thought it would be. All his schooling before Hogwarts was from Aberforth, insisting there must

be some magic in him. He never would give in without a fight. I thought it was a fool's errand, but he was right in the end, and Woodley was so happy to go to Hogwarts. At the time I thought the wizard he had once been would have in all likelihood gone to Hogwarts, and it was likely the school would bring back memories. I knew it would be difficult for him to reconcile his new identity with his past... but I had no idea that his memories would be those of Tom Riddle."

"I know what it's like to doubt who you are," Harry said softly. "In my second year, I almost convinced myself I was the Heir of Slytherin, that I was trying to kill those students."

"Doubt is a curious thing," Dumbledore mused. "So hard to silence once it has your ear. Still, Woodley didn't hide from himself; he had the courage to seek out the truth."

Woodley stirred, as if he could feel the heavy gazes upon his face. He opened his eyes sleepily. "Oh, hullo Uncle Albus," he said, smiling at Dumbledore. He noticed Harry. "Are you all right, Potter?"

Harry looked curiously back, seeing that he did indeed have Riddle's eyes. He was wondering how he'd never noticed before when he realised that beneath the intensity was a layer of warmth and compassion. "I'm OK," said Harry, smiling in return.

Woodley rubbed his eyes tiredly. "I heard what happened to your friends, I'm really sorry. I actually never saw Malfoy, all I wanted was to direct you all as far away from the Death Eaters and the garden as much as possible." Woodley paused, taking a deep breath before glancing back at Dumbledore. "As you know it's my birthday today... and I'd never felt a stronger urge to visit the place I was found. I took the passage there this evening, only to have a bunch of Death Eaters enter through the hedge. I hid and managed to escape the way they came. I hoped to catch you before you left..."

Dumbledore sighed. That afternoon he'd been called to Azkaban, to help fight the mass breakout. The distraction had suited Voldemort's plan well.

"I know I should have waited in your office," continued Woodley, "but you don't know what it's like to struggle for months about your heritage, and then to realise your life is *second-hand*. I knew I had to face him. I had to prove to myself I was different from the wizard who'd killed so many people." Woodley lowered his gaze. "So I left you a note."

Dumbledore laid a hand on the fourth year's shoulder. "Long before tonight, Philip, you have proved to be a completely different wizard to Tom Riddle. You had the exact same knowledge at your disposal, and yet you were able to figure out the secret of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw's passageway in a matter of weeks. There is no prejudice in your eyes as you laugh with your friends, and the affection you feel for them is genuine. You are the very sort of wizard, Philip, that Riddle would have despised."

Woodley exhaled deeply, the corners of his mouth tugging into a wide smile. Harry also smiled, feeling a sudden kinship for the younger boy. A thought soon crossed his mind however, which made him frown.

"Hang on," said Harry. "What did *I* have to do with this evening? Voldemort seemed think he needed me to activate the Founder's Pool..." Harry shook his head. "He always did have an unhealthy obsession with ruining my last days of term..."

Dumbledore chuckled. "It's true," he admitted. "The obsession with you, Harry, has been apparent from the start. The events last year and this evening have only strengthened my beliefs." Dumbledore glanced at Harry before starting again. "Voldemort has always been obsessed with his lineage. Discovering he was the Heir of Slytherin was the peak of his existence. From then on, he

took the feud between his ancestors and Gryffindor very seriously. He's always wanted revenge for his bloodline, revenge against Gryffindor." Dumbledore looked at him seriously. "And this is where you come in."

Harry frowned. "What, I represent Gryffindor? Aren't you a better symbol for him to fixate on?"

"You are the *Heir* of Gryffindor," said Dumbledore gently. "He considers you his greatest enemy simply because of your bloodline. That's where his obsession stems from. A Founder's heir is also required to activate the pool, which is why he needed you tonight."

Harry looked disbelieving. "But I'm not the *Heir* of..." Harry snorted to himself. "And even if I was, Voldemort's an heir himself— he could have activated the pool."

"Ah," responded Dumbledore. "But you told me yourself, last year: Voldemort was reborn from the bone of his father, not his mother. His mother was the one whose blood he really wanted."

"But if it was just about blood..." Harry hesitated. "He took mine. Gryffindor's blood would run through his veins also..."

"Voldemort was only born into his new body last year, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Which makes you the eldest. *You* are Gryffindor's heir."

"You'd think he'd try harder to kill me then..." muttered Harry.

"No." Dumbledore smiled. "That is precisely why he couldn't, and neither could his servants. To kill one of the same bloodline discredits the bloodline. It is an ancient magic that can't be deceived or broken. You cannot kill your sibling to become heir. If you do, you lose your place also."

"So that means... I'm no longer..."

"It was self defence."

Harry glanced at Woodley in surprise. "All we did,

Potter,” continued Woodley, “was protect ourselves. It wasn’t our fault Voldemort’s curse rebounded upon himself.”

“Oh,” said Harry, unenthusiastically. “Great.”

“I’m surprised you’re not rejoicing,” said Dumbledore, scratching his beard. “Being the heir of a Founder has benefits.”

Harry stared at Woodley. “Wait... so, the Heir of Slytherin is wielding the sword of Gryffindor...”

Woodley shook his head. “I actually borrowed it for the play...” Woodley clapped his hands over his eyes. “Oh, no... everyone’s going to kill me for missing it.”

“Just tell them you’re the Heir of Slytherin,” Harry suggested. “Then they’ll think you’ll kill *them*.”

Woodley groaned but Dumbledore chuckled. “Since you two are the heirs,” he repeated, “I was hoping for a favour from one of you, in regards to the pool.”

“I’ll do it,” both Harry and Philip replied.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. “You do not know what I may ask.”

“You want to use the pool to be young again,” said Woodley promptly.

Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose further. “I am still in my prime, thank you Pip.” Woodley looked crestfallen and Dumbledore twinkled. “Perhaps in several years, when I’m feeling particularly selfish.” Dumbledore’s face turned serious. “No, it’s for Severus Snape.”

“Snape?” said Harry disbelievingly, glancing over at an occupied bed. “Which one? Junior or...” Something dawned on Harry’s face and his glasses nearly slid off his nose. “Oh *no*. Don’t tell me Hermione was right!”

“I would appreciate discreetness,” murmured Dumbledore.

“I let him play on my Quidditch team!”

“I’m sure Professor Snape would feel much gratitude...”

“Woodley can do it,” muttered Harry.

“He has been through a lot this past year,” continued Dumbledore. “And I feel he deserves to be given what he wants.”

Harry stared across the room at the sleeping figure of Severus Snape, remembering the Professor that used to pick cruelly upon Neville in Potions. His memories shifted, however, to their Quidditch games together, duelling against him, and the way Ginny used to stand up to him. He’d never liked Severus Snape, and he didn’t think he ever would. But he didn’t seem to dislike him enough to hate him anymore.

And so Harry eventually nodded at Dumbledore and felt the mattress shift as the Headmaster stood up.

Severus tossed in his bed, waking up to the sound of Dumbledore calling his name.

“Draco!” mumbled Severus in panic. “Ginny! What happened?”

Dumbledore put a hand over Severus’s. “They’re safe and going to recover. You don’t have to worry, Severus.”

His face awash with relief, Severus closed his eyes once more, only to hear his name being called softly once more.

“Severus,” repeated Dumbledore. “I’m exceedingly sorry to wake you, but this opportunity will not arise again for many a year.” Severus’s eyes opened groggily, and Dumbledore continued. “I’ve had the Founders’ Pool cleansed of Voldemort’s *modifications*, and technically it hasn’t been used yet. You may regain your old body.”

Severus’s eyes opened wider at the Headmaster’s words.

“We have until the end of the Solstice,” Dumbledore added. “A few more hours until dawn.”

His mind blank, Severus found it difficult to form words. “The Dark Lord,” he said eventually. “Is he...”

Dumbledore smiled and touched his arm. “Look, Severus.”

Severus lifted his left arm slightly and stared at the

smooth, unmarked flesh of the underside. “Was... was it Potter?”

“Harry and Philip, yes.”

Snape frowned, bits of the battle blurring into one headache. “But... Woodley... he had the Dark Lord’s wand...”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore again. “Brother wands are useless against one another – but *together*... together they can achieve magnificent things.”

“But Woodley is...” Severus continued to frown, though it was mostly due to his headache. “He’s the combination of Riddle and Malfoy... Malfoy’s blood sacrifice...”

“His blood sacrifice was a baby,” said Dumbledore, soberly. “Draco’s twin, in fact. I believe they run in the family.”

A flashback to Christmas day washed over Snape. *I’ve always had an extra*, Draco had said to him, as he’d presented him with the sword. *It’s my spare*.

Severus clenched his fists. “Lucius, you filthy, rotten...”

“Lucius Malfoy is dead. Draco, on the other hand, is quite lucky to be alive.”

The anger over Severus’s face dissipated into misery at Dumbledore’s words. “He saved my life... he almost died because of me.”

“No, Severus,” Dumbledore smiled. “He is alive because of you. I have spoken to him – he’s asleep now,” Dumbledore added, as Severus tried to sit up. “And I am aware of what happened. He has committed some serious acts I’m afraid, and there will be consequences... but you, Severus, are responsible for him still being here.”

“Of course I am,” mumbled Severus. “And he’s going to stay here for the next few weeks probably. He hadn’t the strength, he even said he hated me and yet he still...”

“Severus,” repeated Dumbledore patiently. “Do you recall the conversation we had a few months ago? I asked if your reason for spying was still the same as it was

sixteen years ago, do you remember?"

"Yes," muttered Severus, looking away. "You doubted me."

"No," replied Dumbledore. "I didn't. When you joined Voldemort, you told me the reason was that you wanted to rid the world of Muggle lovers and half-breeds. And your reason for joining me, was that now, you wanted to rid the world of Voldemort. All your life you've been fighting *against* things, Severus. It was only this year, from your time stranded in the forest, to this evening in the Founders' Garden – that you have finally found something to fight *for*."

Severus stared at the Headmaster, his mind devoid of words.

"You said that Draco hadn't the strength to save you," continued Dumbledore. "And more ridiculously, you said he hated you. Can't you understand, Severus, that if Draco truly hated you, he could not have summoned the strength to save you? You thought he was burning up his soul through Voldemort's mark. You didn't understand that it was that last strain of magic— purely directed towards wanting, and *needing* to save your life— that was the final straw in defeating the dark magic that had been bound to Draco's heart. It drained him completely, but it saved his soul."

Snape buried his face in his hands. "Will he be all right?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore emphatically, then glancing over to where Harry and Woodley were watching them. "But I believe, Severus, that time is of the essence at the moment. If we are to regain your body, we must leave very soon."

Severus stared off into space and Dumbledore looked at him curiously. "Severus," he said gently. "You do still wish for your old body, don't you?"

Severus still said nothing, and waited in vain for the rush

of excitement he should be feeling at those words. He'd been working towards it for so long but all he could seem to picture now was Draco, telling him he still hated him.

Why, when he could finally be his old self again, he tried to tell himself. He'd be able to teach, move back to his quarters, and stop wasting his life away! For that was essentially what the past year was, his thirty-six-year-old voice told him. A giant waste of time...

His gaze dropped as a flutter of memories swept through him, washing away the images of Draco and Ginny's unconscious bodies. Water fights in the Prefects bathroom, swooping around the Quidditch pitch as Draco cheered him on, decorating their Christmas tree, ripping off the paper to find the photo album, the three of them whooping and punching the air when they made it back to Hogwarts... In that one year he'd never felt so wonderful in all his life... or so horrible.

For that was how he felt, he realised, as his gaze swept over the occupied beds of the hospital wing. It didn't matter what Dumbledore had said, he was still the reason they were in here. He had betrayed Draco, and had almost gotten Ginny killed. Just because Draco saved his life, didn't mean he'd want anything to do with him. Draco and Ginny had each other, and if he stayed how he was, he'd only be in the way.

Severus stared at the floor before looking up to meet the Headmaster's eyes. "I'm ready to change back."

Ginny awoke with a sigh, her vision somewhat blurry. As her eyes adjusted to the midday sun pouring in through the window, pieces of memories drifted through her mind. And suddenly she was wide awake, the vividness of the visions startling her from her daze. Her head ached slightly as she sat up, but aside from that she felt quite well. She looked around the very few occupied beds in

the hospital wing and was noticed by Madam Pomfrey, who smiled and started toward her.

“Where’s Draco and Severus?” Ginny said immediately, before the matron had a chance to speak.

Madam Pomfrey looked taken aback. “Mr Malfoy is resting in his dormitory.”

Visions of Draco screaming her name clouded Ginny’s thought processes. “Can I see him?”

Pomfrey looked at her critically. “I believe the Headmaster is talking to him at the moment. However,” she added, “first we must determine that *you* are well enough to see him.”

“I feel fine,” said Ginny honestly, as Madam Pomfrey started doing some tests. “Can I see Severus?”

Pomfrey eyed her once more. “Mr Snape has returned home,” she said shortly.

“*What?*” exclaimed Ginny, batting away Pomfrey’s prodding wand. “*When? How?*”

“Perhaps you should ask Professor Snape,” said Pomfrey grimly. “He could probably give you a few answers.”

Ginny stared at her in consternation. “Wait...d’you mean...” Ginny rubbed the side of her face, the ache in her head suddenly not so minor. “Look, I know about his Dark Mark, and how he used to be a Death Eater. I know who Professor Snape...” Madam Pomfrey frowned at her and Ginny frowned back. “I know he’s Severus!” she burst out.

Pomfrey’s eyebrows raised and Ginny realised it was the first time she’d actually properly admitted it to herself. “Can I see him?” she repeated, as Pomfrey finished her wand-waving.

The matron sighed. “As I said before, perhaps you should ask Professor Snape.” At Ginny’s confused look, Pomfrey continued more gently. “The last I saw of him was just before dawn. He left with the Headmaster and Mr Potter to regain his old body.”

Ginny stared at her numbly. “But... did he say to tell me anything? Did Draco bother to say anything to me either?” Madam Pomfrey shook her head as Ginny started to tremble in anger. “Well, why would they just *leave* me?”

At Pomfrey’s silence, Ginny’s anger grew. “Am I all right? Can *I* leave now?”

The matron looked as if she was going to rebuke Ginny’s rudeness but as she looked at the trembling Gryffindor, she decided not to. “You’re free to go, but make sure you check in tomorrow before you leave.”

Ginny slid out of bed but when she turned to go she hesitated. “Do you know where... where Snape is?”

Pomfrey shook her head. “You know Professor Snape better than I.”

Ginny turned away bitterly. If what she said was true, then Ginny didn’t know Professor Snape at all.

Severus Snape slouched in his armchair, a glass of Firewhiskey in one hand. His quarters had been kept dust-free but the whole room smelt musty and unused, the crackling fire doing little to warm the place. He heard a knock on the door but he made no move to answer it. He guessed it would just be a house-elf sent by Dumbledore, asking him to come to dinner. “I’m not hungry,” he muttered.

The knocking grew more insistent. “I’M NOT HUNGRY!” he roared.

But it was a voice much deeper than a house-elf that yelled back at him. “SNAPE! SNAPE, LET ME IN!”

Snape jerked, his glass slipping from his grip and smashing upon the ground. The knocking paused for a split second before the handle started rattling. “LET ME IN!”

Snape reached for his wand, only to have the door split

with an echoing crack and a pale, bare foot kick through the pieces.

“SNAPE!” Draco yelled, struggling through the debris. “SNAPE, I KNOW YOU’RE IN HERE AND I-”

Draco froze, all words forgotten as he stared at the person before him. “You’re...”

Severus had half-risen and was staring back at him.

“Dumbledore explained to me...” Draco’s voice trailed away for a second time as he stared at the figure before him. “He said you used the pool.”

Severus finished rising but turned to the crackling fire, unable to look at him. It was a long time before he spoke.

“I did,” he muttered. A log burst in a shower of sparks but the heat felt like nothing compared to his face. “Turns out there’s something wrong with my mind because I washed up exactly the same.” Severus glared into the fire. “Or didn’t Dumbledore tell you that part?”

Snape heard Draco take a few jerky steps forward. “I didn’t get to that part, no. I ran off in the middle of the conversation.”

Severus gripped the mantelpiece, Draco’s angry tone making it even harder to look at him.

“I ran off,” continued Draco, “because apparently you think *you* can just run off – or go on some holiday – or just change into somebody else and everything will be OK.”

Severus whirled around, unable to believe that that was what Draco thought. “I’m doing this,” said Snape furiously, “for you. I tried to do this *for you*. And it’s not *somebody else*, it’s me. I’m Professor Snape and it’s who I *should* be!”

“But you’re not!” yelled Draco. “Look at you! Even *you* don’t think that; look what you washed up as!”

Severus spluttered at him. “I’m not a *child*!”

“Oh yes you fucking are,” said Draco with vehemence. “Emotional maturity of one; I had to save your life that

many times.”

“I’ve saved *you* countless times!”

“Well, I saved you last!” yelled Draco back. “You’d be nothing without me! I stuck by you even though you’re a fucking *Gryffindor*! I taught you to swordfight, I gave you a fucking *life* besides *spy-boy* for *Dumbledore*. We had a good thing going on and I probably failed my *OWLs* because *you* fucked everything up!”

“I’m not the only one to blame!” yelled Snape back. “You think Ginny just fell into my arms? *You* drove her there! We both knew it was a mistake but you didn’t have to go running off to *Voldemort*!” Severus paused for air, unable to contain his angry despair any longer. “If you hate me so much, then why did you even bother? Why not just let me *die*?”

“You’re such a *fucking* idiot!” screamed Draco, raising his wand. “I ran off to join Volde-... *VOLDEMORT* because I wanted to *fucking* destroy myself! Because I wanted to destroy everything I had become! Because I *didn’t* fucking hate you, you stupid bastard, and I fucking *hated* myself for it!”

Severus took a step backwards but Draco whirled towards the broken door. “*REPARO!*” A fist on the handle, Draco turned back to glare at him. “So sorry for wasting your time!” he spat, and slammed the door behind him.

Severus stared at the spot of grainy wood where Draco’s face used to be, his heart beating a million times a minute. He didn’t hate him. *He didn’t hate him.*

Snape rushed for the door and pulled it open so hard it smashed against the wall. “It was never a waste of time,” he yelled, his voice echoing through the stone corridor. A wave of misery swept through him, drowning out his embarrassment. “And even if it was,” Severus paused, his throat raw, “it was the best waste of time I’ve ever had.”

Draco stopped halfway down the passage, his back still

to him. Severus stared at his back, noticing for the first time that he was still in his pyjamas. "I'm sorry." The words sounded strange and empty in the corridor, but as soon as they left Severus's throat, they felt bigger than anything he'd ever said in his life. For those words had proclaimed that he'd been completely and utterly wrong. They proclaimed that he should have fought to keep their friendship because it had meant the world to him. That he should have told him who he was, for he trusted him with his life. Those words screamed to Severus Snape that he needed Draco much more than a teacher needed a student. He needed him as an equal. A best friend.

And although he felt the vulnerability crashing through him, it was accompanied by an undercurrent of warmth. For Draco had seemed to miss their friendship just as much as he did, and didn't even seem to care who he'd been.

"I'm still..." Snape hesitated. "I'm still thinking of going to the Mediterranean. If you're ever keen..."

Draco glanced over his shoulder, his face contorted with a scowl and a scathing reply upon his lips. His scowl faded however, as he saw an awkward boy staring wistfully back.

Draco turned away. "I'll think about it," he muttered, and walked off.

Ginny sighed as she slipped through the doorway into the old classroom they had used for play rehearsals. It was a Sunday morning and the last day of the school year. All of her classmates were tearing around Hogwarts looking for items that had been borrowed, misplaced, or confiscated. No one had noticed her leave the breakfast table. She had been meaning to follow Pomfrey's wishes and check in at the hospital wing, but had felt the need to escape from the bustling chatter for a while.

She ran her hand over a piece of plaster scenery, looking despondently at the collapsible stage still set up at the front of the classroom. She trudged towards it, stepping up onto the wooden planks. A slight scuffling and giggling made her step backwards in surprise, and she grabbed wildly at a hanging curtain to steady herself. Unfortunately the curtain was attached to the backdrop, which fell to the floor with a mighty rip, revealing two flushed figures behind it.

Emily Lane untangled herself hurriedly from the figure beneath her and surveyed Ginny indignantly. “*Well*,” she said snootily, “must you ruin *all* aspects of my life, Weasley?”

Ginny mumbled an apology but gaped when she recognised the other flushed figure.

“I’ll see you on the train, Terence,” said Emily stiffly, presenting him with her hand.

Terence Higgs grinned in reply, slapping her on the rear then winking at her scandalised look. “Lookin’ forward to it,” he called, as she hurried away blushing. Higgs cocked an eyebrow at Ginny. “What d’you want, then?”

“She’s a bit *young*, don’t you think,” choked Ginny, quickly averting her eyes from the large bulge in the front of his robes.

Higgs rearranged himself comfortably, while Ginny watched in horror.

“Shut up, Weasley,” he said distantly. “So, come to thank me then? I don’t think much of your timing.”

Ginny sighed, her melancholy catching up with her once more. She glanced at the door but Higgs was staring at her expectantly. “Thank you for what?” she said tiredly.

Higgs snorted indignantly. “You know,” he exclaimed, although his face twisting into a slightly admiring leer as he spoke, “distracting everyone while you and Malfoy and Snape all skipped the Ball to do the dirty that night...”

Ginny stared at him in horror. “I have no idea—”

“Well, that’s what everyone was saying,” interrupted Higgs offhandedly, waving his hand impatiently to silence her. “Besides the death of You-Know-Who and all the other dull things... *anyway*, so it turns out that that Woodley chap – apparently the Heir of Slytherin - had a burst of jealous rage and went after you all –”

“*What?*”

“I know!” said Higgs emphatically. “Fancy being jealous when there’s only one girl... but, anyway, stop fixating on the unimportant things, Weasley. The point was, I kept your cover and played all the lead roles in your shitty little play.”

“What?” repeated Ginny in confusion. “How did you even...”

“I snuck backstage to see if anyone was getting changed,” said Higgs unashamedly, but then continuing in a cheated voice. “All I found were Emily and Woodley fighting though, what a rip off. But the point is,” he repeated, a heroic smile coming to his lips. “I stepped up and I said to them all: ‘Look. If Malfoy and all those Gryffindors want to be together, then not even Dumbledore himself can keep them apart.’”

“Oh really?” said Ginny disbelievingly. “And everyone just went along with it?”

“They were desperate,” said Higgs, with a grin. “And although they didn’t trust me, they believed me when I said this wasn’t about the feud between Slytherin and Hufflepuff...”

“I’m from Gryffindor.”

Higgs shrugged. “All right, but it was the best line ever and, coupled with me in tight pants, I was a massive hit.”

“Well...” Ginny paused, about to make a sarcastic comment when she remembered how much she’d enjoyed working on the play and what a welcome distraction it had been when depressed. She really was sorry that she’d

missed it. "I'm glad it went well," she said eventually, feeling miserable once more. "And...thank you."

Higgs shrugged once more but he looked pleased. "So, you and Malfoy and Snape then..."

Ginny shook her head, her misery growing. "There is no me, Malfoy and Snape. It's just... me."

"Oh," said Higgs sympathetically. "Shit."

Ginny jumped from the stage to land heavily onto the ground. "I know," she muttered. "They don't even want to see me. Draco's staying cooped up in the Slytherin dorms, I swear to avoid me, and Severus..." Ginny walked towards the window and slumped on the frame. "I don't know if I want to see him either."

Higgs coughed loudly at this and Ginny glanced towards him.

Standing in the doorway was a miserable looking Severus. "Why don't you want to see me?" he mumbled.

Ginny's breath caught in her throat and she started towards him. Higgs coughed loudly once more and exited hastily, but Ginny didn't notice. As soon as she was close enough, she brought her hand upwards and slapped Snape across the face.

"What—"

"That's for making me think you'd left!" she shouted, but then all of the angry words she'd wanted to yell at him left her mind, and she was unable to stop herself from throwing her arms around him. "I don't care though," she said eventually, her voice muffled. "I'm just glad you came back."

Severus hugged her back just as fiercely. "So am I." His mouth felt terribly dry and he realised that it wasn't any easier to say the second time. "I'm sorry."

Ginny pulled back so that she could see his face once more, one side of which was flushing red. Now that she was looking at him closely, she wondered how she'd never figured out his true identity. Severus's eyes dropped

at Ginny's intense scrutiny and she realised then that it was because Professor Snape had never looked at her this way, with trust or respect, with awkward bravado, or a certain level of tenderness. He'd always been Severus in her mind, related to Professor Snape...but not defined by him. She'd seen what she'd wanted to see, a person who'd do anything for her, and she for him.

"It's OK," she answered, and she smiled.

Snape also smiled, and the two of them untangled their arms and broke apart. They stood in the doorway, both smiling at nothing in particular. Ginny was the first to break the silence.

"I kissed a teacher!" she exclaimed.

Severus groaned as Ginny started laughing, the tension that had been building over the past couple of days completely dissipated.

"Please don't tell anyone about that," he muttered.

"Why?" said Ginny seriously. "Was I your first?"

Ginny started laughing again at Snape's groans, and the two of them wandered over to the window seat as the laughter sobered. Both of them were thinking the same thing.

"Do you think he'll ever forgive us?" sighed Ginny, flopping onto the seat.

Severus glanced out the window, a hint of his rare smile upon his lips. "Well... he burst into my quarters saying he didn't hate me..."

"What?"

Snape's smile grew into a slight grin. "I know... and it was almost as if..." Snape's grin faded, as if he still couldn't quite believe it himself. "It was as if he didn't even seem to care about my secret."

"Well, of course he didn't care! I didn't." Ginny sighed. "We both knew there was something you were keeping from us... He probably thought you were a werewolf... or something ridiculous. The only reason he never asked you

about it, I think, was because he was waiting for you to tell him yourself.” Severus’s stomach churned, and Ginny gave him a sad smile. “Actually it doesn’t surprise me that he’s talking to you,” she continued, “and he’s yet to even *see* me... he probably blames me...”

“There’s plenty of blame to go around,” said Severus, shifting uncomfortably. “And he also blames himself.”

“That’s a surprise,” said Ginny, bitterly. “Since everything we’d ever fought over he always put down as my fault. You know, Severus, when it’s not the three of us it’s usually just you and him. Very occasionally it’s me and you. But it never was me and Draco. We were the part that didn’t make sense, the part that all our fights seemed to stem from. He doesn’t trust me like he trusts you, and whenever he looks at me...” Ginny sighed as a pang of emotion snaked through her stomach. “He doesn’t... *You* treat Draco and I exactly the same. If you and I don’t have any problems then why do Draco and I...”

“Because I’m not in love with you,” said Snape. “And you know that Draco – so completely and madly – is.”

“What?” said Ginny weakly. “But...”

“And you and Draco might not seem to make sense,” continued Severus, “but neither do the three of us. We don’t make sense at all but somehow, despite expectations and our own judgement and our own undoing... somehow we work.”

Severus smiled at her and held out his hand. Ginny put her hand in his and he pulled her to her feet.

“The Hogwarts Express leaves this afternoon,” she said desperately. “What am I supposed to do?”

“I have no idea,” said Severus. “But you know... chances are he’ll be feeling the same way you are. So whatever you say, picture him saying it back...”

Unable to help herself, Ginny laughed and enveloped Severus in a hug once more. “I’m going to miss you,” she

said. "What are you doing for the holidays?"

Severus shrugged, and glanced out the window towards the blue sky. "Anything I bloody want."

Ginny smiled as she followed his gaze. "But... you'll always come back?"

Severus looked back at her. "Always." He rummaged through his robe pockets and pulled out a piece of parchment. "I stole this from Potter's trunk so I could find you. Perhaps you can use it to find Draco." Severus handed her the active Marauder's Map. "You've also a better chance returning it to Potter without being hexed."

Ginny unrolled the parchment and scoured the jumble of names. Her eyes gravitated towards a small, stationary black dot on the castle grounds. "He's by the lake," she murmured.

"Good luck," said Severus, as Ginny enveloped him in a third and final hug. "Though you don't need it."

Ginny ran her hands over her face and headed for the door. "Yes I do."

The sound of rubber soles hitting stone was soon drowned out by the roar of students in the Entrance Hall. Ginny cascaded downwards, taking stairs two at a time and hitting the crowd of students head-on. She elbowed her way through the crowd, tripping over suitcases and broomsticks to make her way towards the doors.

"Ginny!"

Ginny ignored her classmates gaping faces, ignored the fact that she hadn't even begun to pack, and continued onwards.

"Ginny!"

She was nearly at the doors when someone grabbed her elbow.

"Ginny!" exclaimed Woodley. "Hang on, a parcel arrived for you at breakfast!"

Shaking off his grip, Ginny hesitated but accepted the parcel Woodley thrust into her arms. "Thanks," she said reluctantly, ripping the top open and meaning to thrust it straight back at him. "But I don't want..."

Ginny froze, unable to believe what she was staring at beneath the ripped brown paper. Around her the students continued to jostle, shouting and laughing amongst themselves, as she unravelled the green cloak she'd given to Draco for Christmas. *Why would he...*

Clutching the cloak tight to her chest, Ginny began to run through the crowd once more, not caring that she was knocking people over. A warm blast of air hit her face as she burst from the castle, and a few students paused their conversations to eye her curiously as she tore past.

She rounded the castle, running straight through flower beds and barely missing old statues to finally reach the end of the lawn. It was only when she rounded a clump of bushes and the back of Draco Malfoy swung into view, that she found herself unable to run any further.

Her hands were shaking as she clutched the cloak even tighter against herself. With a deep breath she forced herself to take the final few steps towards his turned back.

If Draco had heard anyone approach he made no sign. He was sitting on a grassy bank overlooking a mass of reeds, his back to the castle, his head turned towards the shimmering water. Beside him were a couple of expensive looking trunks, and his grey eagle-owl perched atop his broomstick. He didn't look up even when Ginny cleared her throat, but continued to stare out across the empty lake.

"Draco," she said finally, forcing the waver from her voice. "I've been looking for you." When Draco's silence continued, she held out the cloak. "This is yours, why did you give it back to me?"

Draco turned his head to glance at the cloak before looking back to the lake. "I don't want it."

Draco's voice was flat and expressionless, devoid of its usual bitter tone or traces of scorn. But the short way he'd replied hadn't filled Ginny with the usual wave of irritated anger. Instead she just felt horribly empty and miserable as she clutched the swaying material back to her chest. She saw Draco's shoulders tense slightly, before she realised that he was just getting to his feet.

He turned around and Ginny tried vainly to read his expression, but the afternoon sun was behind him and her eyes saw only a hazy shadow. "What do you want?" he said quietly.

Ginny wracked her brains for the elaborate speech that she'd been planning, but as she stared upwards at the hazy figure before her, her mind had gone horribly blank. She tried to say something further but her mouth was unbearably dry, and Draco turned away from her once more, flicking his wand and making his trunks rise in the air.

"That's what I thought," he muttered, reaching for his broomstick. "I'm leaving."

"Harry and I aren't seeing each other anymore!" Ginny burst out desperately. "Please don't leave!"

Draco's eagle-owl shot off in a disgusted squawk, as he grabbed the broomstick somewhat violently. And for the first time that week Ginny heard anger in his voice.

"So you think I'm going to come running back to you now?" sneered Draco, whirling on her and gripping his broomstick tightly. "Just because Potter's gone, and Severus—" Draco's face twisted slightly as she jerked backward, and he left his sentence harshly unfinished, whirling back round as quickly as before. "I'm leaving," he repeated.

"Don't," said Ginny desperately, swallowing the rapidly growing lump in the back of her throat. "That was stupid of me – that's not what I meant, you know that—"

"I don't know anything!" shouted Draco suddenly, his

voice cracking slightly as he made to push past her. “I don’t know what happened between you and Severus, I don’t know why I can’t hate him for it, I don’t know, and I don’t think I’ll ever know what the fuck you *mean*, and I don’t even know why I’m fucking still here!”

Ginny forced herself to take a deep breath. “You’re here because...” Unable to say the words her brain was now screaming at her, she clapped a hand to her face in despair. “...I don’t... I don’t know. Where are you going for the summer?” she said finally, her stomach aching horribly.

Draco waved his wand at his suitcases, his face once more in shadow. “Haven’t decided.”

Ginny’s gaze dropped at Draco’s sullen reply, but she felt a distant sense of relief that his voice hadn’t been as unbearably blank as it was before. It’d almost reminded her of how he used to speak to her – and she was suddenly hit with an onslaught of memories involving Draco bragging to her, Draco arguing with her, Draco drinking with her, Draco laughing with her... and it was with an empty feeling of helplessness that she looked up to see Draco now turning away from her.

“I’ll miss you,” she said desperately, before turning around herself; staring out at the lake and wondering hopelessly what was stopping her from simply running after him and...

Ginny jumped slightly at the sound of three loud thuds on the ground behind her. She turned to see Draco’s suitcases lying burst open on the ground, with clothes and books splayed around them. Draco was already standing stock-still facing her, a wave of bitterness twisted over his face.

“Will you just *stop* with the fucking *mind* games, Ginny!” he yelled out, his fists clenched tight and his chest heaving. “I can’t stand it anymore!”

Ginny stared back at him in shock, her train of thought

obliterated by the look on his face.

“What do you –”

“Don’t tell me you don’t know what I mean!” interrupted Draco, his eyes flashing angrily. “It’s always obvious what I’m saying! I’m sick of – why can’t you ever – why won’t you just –”

“*What?*” demanded Ginny desperately.

“–SAY WHAT YOU FUCKING *MEAN!*” roared Draco, his jaw clenching as Ginny staggered slightly, before the tension rose once more in her face also.

“I *CAN’T!*” she yelled back, the lump in her throat returning tenfold. “You have no idea what it feels like to be around you! My mind fogs up, I *can’t* think and I *don’t* think before I say something to you! You think I’m playing games – I’m *not!* I hate the way you exclude me, and hate my friends and don’t trust me – but *Merlin*, Draco, the thing I can’t stand most is how you *never* seem to feel what I feel when you touch me! You confuse the fucking *hell* out of me!”

“I confuse *you?*” cried Draco, throwing his broomstick to the ground and taking a jerky step backward. “How can you say that when *you* –”

“*What do you want me to say?*” shouted Ginny tearfully. “I’ve pretty much just told you I’m fucking mad over you; how *else* can I fucking put it?”

“You’re *not!*” yelled Draco in anguish, continuing to stumble backwards as she started to run towards him. “I’m not Severus! I’m not Potter! I’m *Draco Malfoy*–”

“I know,” interrupted Ginny fiercely, as she threw her arms around his neck. “And that’s *why*.”

And Ginny pulled her lips to his and forgot, for a split second, all the fears of pain and rejection screaming in the back of her mind. All of her surroundings seemed to instead fade away, leaving just her and Draco and their long overdue kiss. When she eventually pulled away, she saw that he was staring down at her with that

characteristic half-frown on his face, as if waiting for some sort of explanation for her behaviour.

Ginny swallowed hard as she gazed back at him, her head finally drooping at the lack of response. There was a brief pause as Draco continued to stare at her, the sunlight glinting sharply off her tousled red hair.

“Fuck it,” he muttered, and pulled her back to him, deepening the kiss and immersing himself with complete abandon into the embrace of Ginny Weasley.

A pair of dark eyes turned away from the entwined couple in the distance, before the owner of which made his way slowly back to the castle doors. Severus Snape paused in the sunlight, his gaze sweeping the near empty lawn before he sat down upon the great stone steps, and opened a leather-bound book. He was soon joined by a small black cat, purring noisily as she rubbed herself against him. Severus thumbed slowly through the pages of photos, his eyes softening at the untidy, flushed faces grinning back at him.

“Ah, Mr Snape.”

Severus looked up, a trace of rare amiability still in his eyes as he raised his eyebrows inquiringly at the speaker.

“Professor Dumbledore would like to see you before dinner,” continued Garwood pleasantly. “He’s in his office.”

Snape nodded in response, his eye catching sight of a smirking Draco motioning suggestively at him from the page below.

“Professor!” called Snape suddenly, getting to his feet and starting after the retreating Garwood. “Er... just a moment...”

Professor Garwood turned, and looked questioningly at an uncomfortable looking Snape. “Yes?”

“What are you –” Snape cleared his throat noisily, “–er, what are you doing this evening?”

Garwood stared at him for a brief second. “Nothing at the moment,” she said slowly, raising her eyebrows.

“Well, perhaps,” continued Snape determinedly, thrusting the leather book in his pocket and attempting to give her an uncertain smile, “perhaps you could join me at the Three Broomsticks...”

Garwood’s eyebrows raised even higher and she gaped at him. “You forget yourself, Mr Snape!” she exclaimed, shaking her head as she stalked off.

Severus watched her leave in righteous indignation, before a slight smile started creeping slowly upon his lips. Oreo mewed as Snape burst into laughter. “Perhaps,” he told the kitten, in between guffaws, “I should wait a few years.”

Ginny pulled away from Draco at the sound of a faint train whistle in the distance.

“I think,” she murmured, though nestling back into his chest, “–we’ve missed the train home.”

There was a long pause before Draco spoke, his eyes half-closed as he nuzzled the side of her neck.

“Well, I think,” he murmured softly, close to her ear, “–it’s all your fault.”

Ginny grinned suddenly into his chest, fighting the urge to burst into tears and kiss him all over again. “I suppose we’d better tell a teacher,” she said at last, reluctantly untangling herself from his arms. “Actually I’m not even packed...”

Draco glanced around at his scattered possessions. “You know I really haven’t made up my mind as to where I’m staying.”

Ginny grinned at him and started scooping up some of his clothing nearby. “You could come stay with me...”

“I think I’ve had enough near-death experiences for the year without having deal with your brothers *and* your

parents...”

Ginny laughed. There was a long pause as Draco straightened his suitcase. “Well, I suppose you’ve spoken to Severus.”

Ginny sobered slightly and dropped her armful of clothing into an awaiting trunk. “What happened between us...”

“Was a mistake,” said Draco, impatiently. “I know. That’s what he said. And I’m still angry about that so just...” Draco frowned and Ginny reached for his hand. “How do you know,” said Draco, starting again, “that we’re not a mistake?”

Ginny smiled, wondering how she’d never noticed that Draco’s grey eyes held a hint of blue in the sunlight. “Because I’m in love with you,” she murmured. “It’s always been you.”

Draco stared at her in shock.

Ginny caught his eye and started to laugh, her voice suddenly muffled as Draco pulled her towards him once more.

“Draco,” she chastised, though nuzzling into his chest once more, “we have to find a teacher.”

“I’m sure a teacher will find *us*,” he murmured back, smirking as she tilted her face up to his. “And if they do, I’ll tell them to piss off.”

Ginny laughed and met his lips with hers, all scattered possessions forgotten.

Severus Snape left Dumbledore’s office with the hint of an uncommon strut in his step, to make his way down to the dungeons and his old living quarters.

The door creaked open and Severus glanced around the room, pulling the leather photo album from his pocket and placing it carefully on the bookshelf. He then strode towards his wardrobe, opening the wooden doors and

sweeping his gaze over the line of black teaching robes.

“Oreo,” he said to the purring kitten, “we need to do some shopping.”

The End



— STORY NOTES —

CHAPTER 3

“Secare Dextra” – Latin words for ‘slice right hand’

CHAPTER 5

Wyverns and Hellhounds are mythological creatures I’ve taken a few liberties with.

CHAPTER 6

Bogies are mythological creatures I’ve taken a few liberties with once more.

CHAPTER 7

‘Canum conicio’ – Latin words for mud throw.

CHAPTER 8

“*Why do you always insist on wearing black?*”

“*Because it matches my soul.*”

—A line nabbed from the movie, *That Darn Cat*.

Fwoopers: are in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*

CHAPTER 10

“*In a world made of steel, made of stone...*”

—lyrics from the Muggle fairytale, *Flashdance*.

— AUTHOR'S NOTE —

Well...there you have it. After three years of stalling on that bloody chapter ten, I've finally pulled my socks up and finished the story. It was a bit of a slog but it feels fantastic to sit back and see it finally basking in completion.

It's a bit of an open ending I suppose, because I like the idea of the characters continuing to live their lives...especially now that the world seems like a slightly happier place to live. I'd like to think that Draco and Severus do go off to the Mediterranean, and Severus does eventually create a reversal potion and becomes hideously rich because of it. Whether or not he uses it, or ever does end up going out with Garwood... well, it's up to him. I like the idea of the three of them continuing to grow up together... and Draco and Ginny continuing to fight and make up...and fight and make up...and fight and make up...

I also like the idea of Woodley and Harry running off to have sexy slythindor babies, but I don't think anyone would want to read about it...except for me.

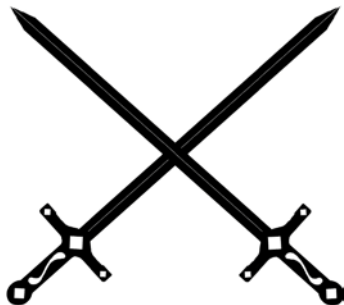
A huge gigantic thank you to all the fantastically loyal and probably hating-my-guts readers out there, for sticking by the fic for an inexcusable six years and getting me off my sorry arse.

Because I really enjoyed getting into it again. And although I often found myself wincing and hurriedly rewriting some of the original dialogue, I'd forgotten how much I'd fallen in love with ridiculously sexy Severus, and of course deliciously angsty d/g. You know it wasn't actually supposed to be a major d/g fic, but somehow they managed to beat their way in there whilst denying of course, that it had anything to do with each other. It's been a fantastic journey and I'll never forget the way it

always made me grin (usually when the current scene being written was filled with either d/g bickering, gratuitous Slytherin nudity, or poor blushing Snape).

A huge, heartfelt thanks again to you guys, especially, *especially* to Jam_Jackson for whipping me the first couple of years or so, and my Mark-man for being the best Beta I could've ever hoped for.

—SeverelySnaped





When a potion goes horribly wrong, Professor Snape is transformed and seemingly trapped in his fifteen-year-old body. Much to his disgust he finds himself enrolled into Harry Potter's fifth year, forced to hide his true identity. Girls, drama and teenage angst do not bode well with Severus.

