

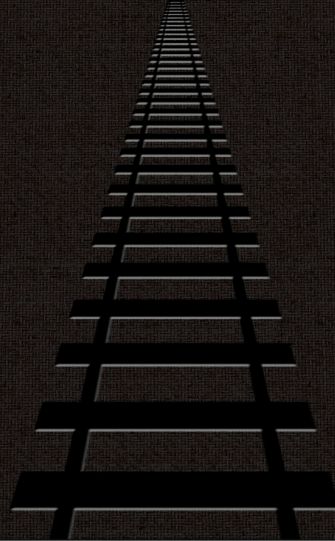
Adventures in Fanfiction

The TRAINS



in this COUNTRY
are a DISGRACE

by Ceridwen



A Novelization of "The Comic that Does Not Exist"



AN ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION
EDITION

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X +HE TRAINS IN +HIS COUNTRY ARE A DISGRACE

BY CERIDWEN

A NOVELIZATION OF THE COMIC
THAT DOES NOT EXIST



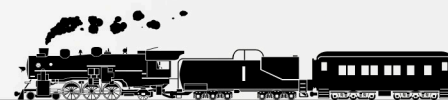


DAILY PROPHET EXCLUSIVE: DEATH EATER ROSTER

by archivist Ima Middlin-Hacker

CARROW —	...Torture...	Slytherin.
LESTRANGE —	...Torture...	<i>Slytherin!</i>
MULCIBER —	...Imperius...	SLYTHERIN!
SNAPE —	Responsible for information leading to the deaths of James and Lily Potter. Head of Hogwarts during the Dark Year. Spy for Order of the Phoenix but originally Voldemort supporter. Head of House and the face of... <i>SLYTHERIN!</i>	

THE SUN THAT ROSE over the death of Voldemort shone down upon the first day of a new world without the threat of a Dark Lord. Harry Potter was feted with parades in Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley. Giant posters of his smiling face adorned shop fronts and any blank space where they might be seen. Banquets were given in his honor. Groups formed just so they could have him come and speak. He and his friends, Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger, were awarded the Order of Merlin first class in an elaborate ceremony in the magically expanded Ministry atrium, which still showed the ravages of the months under Death Eater dominion. The honored dead





were interred in another well-planned ceremony in the graveyard at Hogsmeade.

People were freed of fear. They began standing up to neighbors who embraced Pureblood Supremacist ideals. They welcomed the Ministry raids in Wizarding districts. Neighbors pointed the Aurors to people who might be harboring fugitives or own Dark artifacts.

Many were leaving Britain. Known or suspected Supremacists, most of them Slytherins, were vulnerable to false charges and accusations leading to midnight raids on their homes and long days of confinement in re-education camps before the charges could be heard by an overburdened court. The ones who stayed dutifully sat their courses to become "the backbone of the New Era," in Hermione Granger's words. She enthusiastically oversaw the curriculum of the courses and was the driving force behind the re-entry program.

Hermione Granger's new book, *CORRECT BEHAVIOR FOR A NEW ERA: HOW TO AVOID THE RISE AND SUCCESS OF DARK WIZARDS AND WITCHES*, sold out of its first three printings by July and was the mandatory text for the newly-revamped Defense Against the Dark Arts course at Hogwarts. She stood in the middle of Diagon Alley with a poster of Harry's giant face behind her and quoted platitudes from her book to the passers-by.

"I don't like it," Guggenheim said. He gave Hermione a worried look as he and Draco passed her. "All this re-education stuff. Didn't they teach you wizards well enough at Hogwarts?"

"It can't be too bad," Draco shrugged. "She wrote the textbook but she's going back to school. The Ministry's just wor-

ried about attitude."

Guggenheim cast a glance at the towering face of Harry Potter before turning onto the side street leading to the Goblin Quarter.

"Guggenheim!"

The goblin and his wizard friend stopped and turned around. Griphook was standing on the top step of Gringotts Bank, his jacket thrust back by his wrists, his index claws resting in his waistcoat pockets. A long golden chain strung between the pockets glinted in the morning sun. Griphook jerked his chin at Draco. "The human there. Isn't he supposed to be at camp?"

Draco tried to look agreeable for his friend's father. "I leave tomorrow, sir."

"You have your papers? They're all in order?"

Draco drew a leather folder from his pocket so Griphook could see, then put it carefully away.

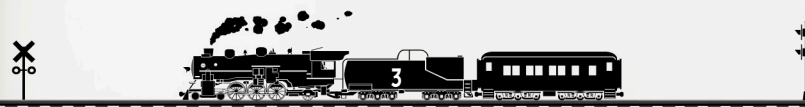
"Eh, well. See that you make your connections in the morning, then. Don't want any trouble."

"I will, sir."

A group of children passed them, the eldest shepherding the younger ones away from the goblin and the former Death Eater. She gave them a dirty look as the group passed into the crowd. Draco and Guggenheim left Diagon Alley for the respite of Guggenheim's studio.



Minerva McGonagall stepped off the Knight Bus and entered the dingy old Muggle department store which housed St. Mungo's Hospital.





She had barely entered when someone called, “Aunt Minerva!” and she was swept into an embrace by Emmeline Vance, her niece who had just returned from hiding in the United States. “You’re early, but that’s all right. I’ll just tell the duty nurse that you’re here and I’ll be in the cafeteria.” Emmeline’s eyes sparkled over the joyous smile Minerva had despaired of ever seeing again. They started across the wide lobby. “I’m glad you could come before start of term. I have so much to tell you!”

Minerva stopped at the stairs. “We have so much to catch up on, but first, I want to see Severus Snape.”

Emmeline frowned sympathetically. “He isn’t conscious. He was severely wounded. I’m afraid he isn’t out of the woods.”

“I know.” Minerva touched a tissue to her nose. *All those years, all her suspicions...* “I’d still like to see him, in case he does know...”

Emmeline led Minerva up the stairs, past the pictures of former healers who tried to gain their attention, past nursing stations and closed ward doors, down a long, wide hallway to another station, dimly lit, and into a darkened room. The healer placed one finger at her lips and brought Minerva to the bedside.

The Head of Hogwarts lay unmoving on his back; his skin was like an ashen pall draped over the contours of his face rendering his cheekbones sharper, his nose larger, his eyebrows so black they defied the existence of light. His scalp shone white through the sweat-spiked tufts of newly-grown hair; the sheet barely moved with his breath.

Minerva covered her mouth and clung for a moment to Emmeline’s white coat. “Did you have to shave his hair? He’ll be beside

himself! The hair defines the wizard in the old traditions...”

“He’ll be fine.” Emmeline patted her aunt’s hand. “We need access to his scalp, to the veins, that is.” Just then, a small dun-colored disk with a conical attachment whirled around Snape’s head and paused at his ear. It then went on to scan in rows along his head. “Shaving his head was necessary to monitor his temperature and the retrogression of the venom. He can always grow more hair. He can’t come back to life without the use of extremely Dark magic.”

“Or phoenix tears.” Minerva reached out and stroked the stubby head. “He didn’t want to live.” The whirring disk investigated her hand and found it not to be its subject. It went on with its scan.

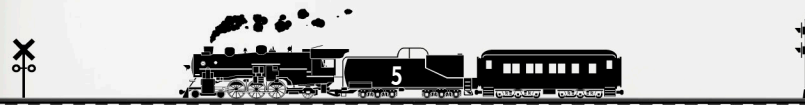
“Death is not an option. Not on my watch.”

Minerva turned in surprise at her niece’s tone.

“He’s my patient.” Emmeline lifted Snape’s wrist and consulted her Muggle nursing watch. “None of the other healers have any experience with Muggle technology. I’ve treated severe trauma without the aid of magic. His condition is magic-resistant. Besides, I owe him my life.” She laid his wrist down on the sheets and smiled at her aunt. “Shall we go to lunch?”



The last frantic weeks before start of term at Hogwarts saw the dormitories and common rooms repaired. Crews of landscape wizards worked over the grounds, filling in spell damage holes and encouraging new grass to grow where scorched and blooded ground had lain. A master artisan had been brought





in from France to oversee the refurbishing of the Great Hall and the reinstatement of the spells which allowed the ceiling to show the outside weather. Minerva McGonagall had been approved as the interim Headmistress.

"I don't see why we need two Divination teachers," Sybil Trelawney harangued when Minerva returned to the castle.

It had been a disappointing day. Emmeline had said that Severus was improving, but he was still in his coma. Hermione Granger's enthusiasm to change the Wizarding World was taking on an alarming force all its own. The posters of Harry Potter still hung over everything in Diagon Alley and several smaller posters had been lined up in rows and columns at the entrance to Knockturn Alley like some sort of warning. Minerva liked Potter and his friends, she appreciated everything they had done, but they were running wild now with nothing to do and for Granger especially, this was not good.

"It's either that nag or me. I've given the best years of my life to this school and what do I have to show for it?"

"A sizeable nest-egg at Gringotts?" Minerva asked acidly.

"That's beside the point! And I strenuously object to Aurors disturbing my supplies!"

Minerva stopped so fast that Trelawney sailed past her. "Aurors? In your stock?"

"Yes!" Trelawney flapped her shawls like a flock of fringed birds. "They've opened every tea packet and sniffed around, scratched the ouija boards, broke fourteen cups and saucers, and that big one insisted on weighing my crystal balls! These are delicate instruments for those whose Inner Eye is attuned

and should not be disturbed by oafs!"

"Write an order for the items you need replaced and I'll submit it to the board. Where are the Aurors now?"

"The dungeons." The seer sniffed and pulled her skirt as though it had trailed in dung.

Aurors were a fact of life at the castle these days, poking into everything and asking questions. They had confiscated Crabbe's, Goyle's and Malfoy's belongings and sealed off Snape's former quarters while they systematically tore everything apart inside. Minerva understood why they did it; she didn't have to like it. She stalked to the dungeons and surprised three former students in their guilty duty.

"Where is Auror Shacklebolt?" she demanded.

Their eyes were as round as students caught after curfew. One nodded toward the ceiling. "Seventh floor, Professor." Minerva stormed up the stairs again and found Kingsley in the headmaster's suite, rummaging through Severus's drawers.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt!"

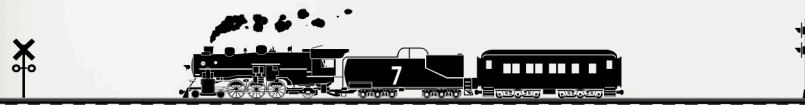
He started in spite of himself, a pair of boxers dangling from his hand.

Minerva kept her eyes firmly confined to Shacklebolt's face. "You have already checked these quarters for magic. I understood that you would be finished by now."

"We have orders to check everything manually, in case he left some information in Muggle form. He was a half-blood."

"I imagine he still is. The school is due to open in a week. I trust you will be gone..."

"I'm sorry, Headmistress, we have orders to remain until after





the Sorting.”

Minerva stiffened. She had not expected this. “I shall complain to the Board of Governors.”

He inclined his head. “As you wish. The board has been quite cooperative with us throughout this search.”

He had the upper hand. Minerva sat on the bed. The elves had been warned against disturbing anything; a thickening layer of dust covered everything, disturbed only by the finger marks of the Aurors. “Why must you stay until the students have arrived? It will only upset them.”

Kingsley took a deep breath. “We need to know which families are still sympathetic to Slytherin’s twisted view of our world.”

“You’re going to take names?” The horror sank in slowly. “They’re children! Eleven year old infants! They’re hardly a threat!”

“Not now, no. They aren’t. But their families may be harboring fugitives or Dark artifacts, or they may be actively teaching Supremacist ideals at home. There is a directive from the Office of Muggle Relations; I’m sure you have seen it.”

Minerva nodded. Re-education classes for Slytherin students. As a Gryffindor and as one of Dumbledore’s confidants, as much as he had ever had a confidant, she had always assumed Slytherins to be the worst of the lot. The former Tom Riddle had merely proven this to everyone’s satisfaction. She had been so smug in her Gryffindor superiority but even Dumbledore had not seen fit to sentence these children to extra classes!

Kingsley laid a warm hand on her shoulder. “It’s only for a few years, until we can get the situation under control. There are hurt feelings, desire for vengeance, grief... This is for every-

one’s good. We don’t need another Dark Lord rising from the ashes of this disaster.”



The Sorting was so difficult! Minerva watched the half-frightened faces as the hat descended, and the shame and humiliation the Slytherin children wore as they were booed all the way to the Slytherin table. As the Sorting wore on and more children were placed there, Minerva thought she heard snide comments and, once, a threat. Horace Slughorn bowed his head each time the hat called out his house — even he was not immune to the hatred filling the hall. It was an ominous way to begin this new year.

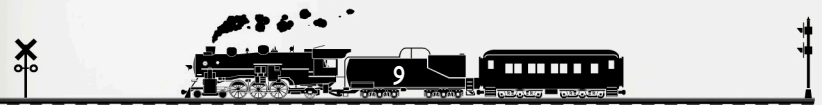
The last child had been Sorted, into Slytherin of course, and the stomping and catcalls were deafening. Minerva held the hat in her hands and watched the poor child, shoulders slumped and face reddening, make her way to the far table. “I... wish there had been a way to avoid the Sorting this year,” she said.

Shacklebolt, at her shoulder, replied, “We need to know who these people are.”

Minerva surveyed the hall. The food had appeared without her order and the students from the other three houses had forgotten their animosity in their race to eat. Only the Slytherins were still affected. Several of them cast dark, wounded glares at the rest of the school. This was only making things worse!



**Rnghphl* been *urmeh*...lay...*





I, Severus Snape, double S like Salazar Slytherin, never did believe all those things about an Afterlife, capital A. So far, I have not been disappointed. I had come into this Afterlife, capital A, with nothing, not even the clothes on my back. I began to accumulate things. First, clothes, then this mission, then...

*Sor *ngmuphlerough*..onvenience...*

Baggage. Due to which I could not continue on into said Afterlife. Right, it's the damned mission, but the mission was only assigned because of the baggage. I can't go on so might as well do this one little task.

**mmphrmum*...a delay...*

Give me strength. I thought death meant it would all be over and I would sleep the blissful sleep of the Blessed. At least a man should be able to rest in peace, R.I.P., all capitals, when his life has been nothing but work and misery. Lily dead; duped into minding that brat of hers; Dumbledore and his Machiavellian manipulations; facing the Dark Lord, the one who killed Lily... Strength? Give me gin! Some Firewhisky would not be amiss, Lord.

Lord! Another delay. The trains in this country are a disgrace! This might be Eternity but I don't have all day. I have a mission, or I don't. Send me on or send me back... All I want is sleep, that blissful sleep of the dead. The hype is over-rated...

*The *mrmull* be arriving...*

At last! The rumble in the tunnel, the ramping volume, the excitement of the powerful engine thrumming in the night... the tunnel fills with steam and soot as the train...

...backs in? Flippin' 'eck! Soot and smoke and steam and ash shut in on me from all sides. Spongey, not gaseous at all, rail-

ing down from above, wiping me away like a hapless animation...



I opened my eyes to a tousled blond head, a radiant face. An angel? No...

Gilderoy Lockhart?! Beaming like a brainless Booby. Didn't Boobies go extinct? At least he's dead. Merlin, I hope he never had the chance to reproduce...

Who am I kidding?

"Hi," he smiled.

I tried to read behind his eyes to find out something about this new hell, but I couldn't. "What's happened? What is this place?" I asked.

"I cured you."

I felt terrible and said so. Cured my sweet aunt's...

The sickening surge of emotions overcame me. I could not Occlude them. Raw panic welled inside of me and overflowed.

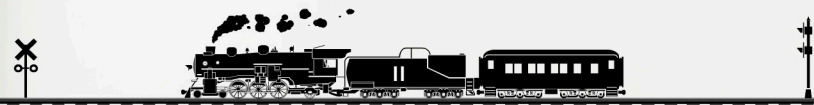
"Aw, don't cry," Lockhart crooned. He flung his arms around me and nestled his head into my shoulder, his voice muffled against my neck. "You need a hug."

I was looking right at him! I couldn't see! I couldn't tell what he was set on doing until he did it! My Legilimency... gone!..

My god... I've been sent to a new level of HELL!



"Gilderoy Lockhart!" Emmeline Vance rushed to the burbling amnesiac and nudged him firmly from the bedside.





"I cured him," Lockhart jabbered as Emmeline guided him toward the door.

"I know you did." Every ruddy day. Couldn't they restrain him in the long-term ward? "Beautiful work." Emmeline gave him a final boost into the hallway and shut the door.

The man on the bed hunched over his knees, his hands shielding his face, his short hair bristling in the artificial light from the overhead fixture. A momentary sympathy stole over the healer. He had been good to her, very good, hiding her while brazening out the story that he had killed her, to the evillest wizard in a century; now here he was, shorn for medical purposes and vulnerable to any lunatic wandering the wards. He had refused to let anyone see him and he would have shut her out as well, but she was his healer and he had to suffer her presence.

Not joyfully, any more than he suffered Lockhart's periodic forays. He would be less than thrilled at her news, but then, it wasn't life-threatening. He would have to understand that.

"Well? Are you going to stand there gawking all day?" One dark eye glared at her from between Severus Snape's long fingers.

Emmeline sighed and sat down by his bed. The eye followed her as far as it could, then the other glowered from between the fingers of the other hand. When it caught sight of her watching it, the fingers closed.

She picked up her clipboard. "The venom is flushing, but slowly. You'll have bouts of fever and weakness at odd moments. You'll need to stay here for a few weeks, until we can examine the problems more fully."

"Bah."

"So much of healing is attitude, Severus."

The eye appeared again along with portions of cheekbone. "What else?" His voice was rough and edged with panic.

"Otherwise, you're physically fit. No broken bones, no curse damage." Best to get the positives out before the worst. It wasn't really so bad, but he would think it was.

"And?" He had hidden his face again. He already knew the answer.

Emmeline consulted her clipboard, pretending it was trivial news. "Mmm, your Occlumency seems to be impaired..."

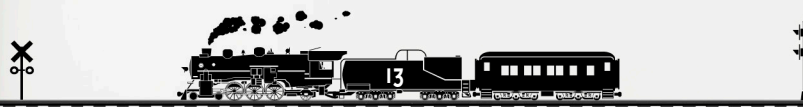
A hiss echoed in the cup of his hand. He raised his head, neck stiff, teeth clenched. "*Brilliant* deduction, doctor," he said in tones that would make any Hogwarts student cringe.

"As the vast majority of the population seems to survive without it, I'm afraid it's not my treatment priority. There is nothing wrong with you. This is a perfectly normal reaction to stress." She gave him an understanding smile.

"Doctor?" a young student healer called from the door. "Some men are here to see you." Snape ducked his head into his hands again and Emmeline left him.



Kingsley Shacklebolt was an intimidating man. His bald head plunged in a sheer precipice of rich, dark skin to where his muscular shoulders were made even more impressive by the close cut of his robes. He wore no expression of recognition or friendship; his eyes glinted like black steel and he frowned. His partner hung back, allowing Shacklebolt to dominate the room. Emmeline sat down and clasped her hands in front of her





as though she had called them to her office for an infraction. "What can I do for you?" she asked warily.

"Are you the Healer responsible for the dark wizard, Severus Snape?"

"I wouldn't call him a 'dark wizard'."

"Are you or are you not responsible for the care of Severus Snape?"

"I am."

"You reported that he is now awake and able to answer questions." Shacklebolt turned the folder on her desk and read the name and room number on its flap.

Emmeline spun the folder around again. "I reported that he is awake."

Shacklebolt jerked his head at his partner and they strode out the office door.

"Here, now!" Emmeline lunged out of her chair and followed the Aurors down the hall. "Auror Shacklebolt, you are not authorized in this ward at this time!" She barely scurried around the Aurors before they reached the door.

"You said he is awake. We need to speak to him," the smaller Auror said. She threw her arms out in front of the door, daring the Aurors to enter. "I said he's awake. I did not say that he is able to undergo questioning."

"Merely a debriefing."

"He's ill!"

"He is a Dark Wizard. This is for the greater good." Shacklebolt elbowed his way past her and opened the door.

The room was empty, the bed rumpled but unoccupied.

They were standing at the only door and there was no window.

"Where is your patient, Healer Vance?" Shacklebolt rumbled.

Emmeline could only shake her head.

Shacklebolt stood at her shoulder. "He's an extremely powerful Dark Wizard. The Ministry needs to be able to locate him."

"He's not a threat to anyone but himself, Kingsley," Emmeline answered.

"So he's a mentally unstable extremely powerful Dark Wizard. Wonderful," Kingsley said.

Between appearing Gilderoy Lockharts and vanishing Severus Snapes, Emmeline was in no mood to coddle a perfectly healthy Auror. She crossed her arms and glared up at Shacklebolt. "And the Aurors only collaborated with the Death Eaters when they were actually in power," she snapped. "Incidentally, is there a legal definition of 'Dark Wizard' yet?"

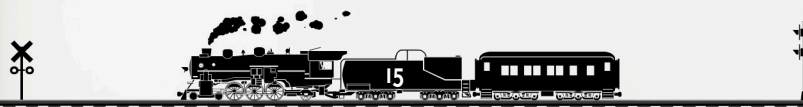
Shacklebolt clamped his jaw shut and scowled.



A rumpled figure shook its head and rose slowly out of a rubbish pile in a derelict alleyway outside of an abandoned department store...

They make a mistake when they store patients' clothes in the room with them. I was watching out for that idiot Lockhart when I saw Shacklebolt's shiny bald head in Vance's office. I grabbed my clothes and wand and ran down the hall to the loo.

Just in time. I could hear Vance protesting from behind the door as I dressed. The clothes didn't fit quite right but I didn't have time to figure out why. My head was spinning and the Aurors were on my trail. I don't know how much Potter told them, or if





he told them anything at all. For all I knew, I was a wanted man.

I wasn't fit to Apparate, even if St. Mungo's didn't have spells against it within the wards. Instead, I opened the small window and dropped to the ground.

It was a good thing I left my robe. I found myself in a shabby part of Muggle London. While a robe would not have been amiss against the sudden cold, it would have marked me as a wizard to anyone who knew. I shivered, wishing I had my father's sturdy pea coat, when I noticed something lying in the rubbish. An old trench coat, much the worse for wear, had been discarded in the pile. I repaired the frays and tears and siphoned off the worst of the dirt before putting it on. With this bloody short hair I looked like any other out-of-work Muggle.

Still, I had to keep watch. Shacklebolt is an excellent Auror and would probably have the hospital searched. It wouldn't be long before someone found the open window and figured out what I had done. I had no strength, no *magic*, left to shut the window. I bent into the wind and walked as fast as I could away from the hospital.

I wasn't watching where I was going, which meant I might have run across an Auror. Instead, I ran into Minerva McGonagall.

I knocked her glasses askew, I remember. I should have left, but I couldn't move. Thoughts glutted my brain. I saw my colleague, a friend as much as I ever had a friend, and sharp daggers conjured from her wand heading straight for me that last awful night. It was summer then, and the Dark Lord was still ascendant. I could not break my cover, not even for her. She thought...

"I beg your pardon." She adjusted her spectacles and recog-

nized me. "Oh... Severus," she said.

...*Death Eater, murderer, torturer*... I couldn't get a grip. She was so reticent, she must have thought the worst. I couldn't be seen; she had recognized me and every memory I had of her threatened to immobilize me until I could be caught. I lowered my head like a battering ram and rushed past her before I broke down.

"Severus," I heard her call.



Emmeline had gotten rid of Shacklebolt and his partner only to find her aunt, Minerva McGonagall, sitting forlornly in her office. The older woman gave her niece a wan smile that didn't last.

"I saw him," she said simply, sighing.

"Where?" Emmeline knew who she meant without asking. Aunt Minerva had flooded for news of him every day, and come down when she could.

"On the street, outside. He was in an awful hurry. I can't say I blame him."

Minerva sniffed and removed her glasses, tucking them neatly away in her bag. Her eyes were misty. She sniffed again and Emmeline summoned a hot cup of tea.

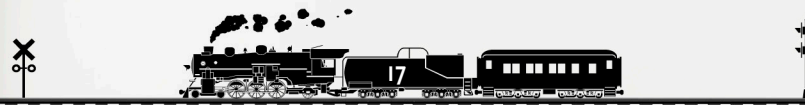
"Do you know where he was going?" she asked gently.

"No. I was too surprised to see he'd been released."

"He hasn't been."

"He hasn't?" Minerva's brow creased in concern.

"No. He just... up and left." Emmeline didn't mention the Aurors. Her aunt had enough on her plate with the re-opening of Hogwarts. "Did he say anything to you?"





Aunt Minerva sighed. "Nothing. I called him. I wanted to speak with him, apologize..."

The first tears came. Emmeline steadied her aunt's saucer.

"Why did I think he would want to speak to me? To any of us?" Minerva wept.



I was too weak to Apparate, which was probably good. The Aurors would be watching for a sudden use of magic. I couldn't use the Knight Bus for the same reason. I joined a crowd of Muggles heading underground and began my trek north. I found a vacant row of seats and leaned my head against the window. I was tired, so tired. The rhythm of the wheels lulled me.

Trains. They rule my life. My childhood was punctuated by the trains stopping at the mill then lumbering on, their whistles shrill over the soot-covered houses; the train to Hogwarts, first carrying me and Lily and introducing me to the plagues of my existence, then bringing students to make my life a pain; trains for bleak holidays, trains for work. Crowded trains. Late trains. Trains. In the Afterlife there was only one train before the backward engine, and that comprised of what I have been informed are Free Spirits. No train. A soul train. Only one passenger disembarked. To talk to me.

Lord! That thing with its blinking in and out and losing track of its talk... can spirits be Attention Deficit? This one is. I had to piece together this mission by letting its words fall to see what made sense.

I had boarded the train north and was just dozing when the air

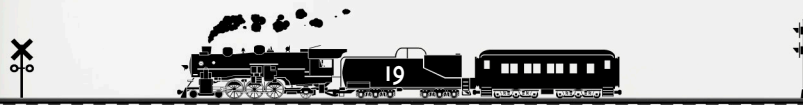
beside me suddenly collapsed in a vacuum. I looked over. The bubble-headed lava lamp creature was sitting primly beside me, its head disassociating from its neck in a blobby, bubbly way. It was chattering, its words coming in bits and pieces as they always did. At length it got its head to cooperate long enough to tell me that I had to go back...

Go back? I rested my head against the window for a minute. When I looked again to tell the thing what I thought of its insanity, the seat beside me was empty.



It had been a disappointing morning. Harry and Ron had both been informed they had failed the Auror entrance exam. They could take the exam again before the new class started, but Harry didn't think it was necessary. He'd been the best in his year at Defense Against the Dark Arts, he had defeated a Dark Wizard — blowing the Potions portion of the exam shouldn't have meant a thing. After all, Snape had been a Death Eater, and he'd hated Harry for being the offspring of James and Snape's precious Lily. It was all Snape's fault. He'd deliberately sabotaged Harry's education. He knew Harry planned on entering the Auror training program. He *knew*!

Then, they had planned to meet with Hermione for lunch, since she had come from Hogwarts that morning to lecture some reporters and ministers about the re-education program. What had set out to be an hour's discussion had turned into a full-blown press conference with questions fired at her by reporters from around the globe and by interested Education





Ministers. Harry's stomach grumbled.

Hermione was in her element. Her eyes shone, her cheeks had a rosy tinge to them that was usually lacking. She welcomed dissent and answered everything with the logic of the Greater Good. Harry's hand slipped and he adjusted his glasses again. He had been in the room for three hours and no one had noticed. Anonymity was what he always wanted...

"Are all Slytherins being re-educated, or only the ones who are known to have been sympathetic to He-Who... *Voldemort*," Rita Skeeter asked.

"Wager she's Slytherin," Ron mumbled.

Hermione tossed her head. "The camps are only for the avowed supporters of the former Tom Riddle. There is no need to send anyone else. As you know, Ms. Skeeter, Slytherins were not the only ones to support him in his bid for power. His closest henchman was the late Gryffindor, Peter Pettigrew."

The other reporters began to shout out their questions, but Skeeter still held the floor. "I heard that Slytherin students, and only Slytherin students, at Hogwarts will be undergoing re-education classes."

A steady susurrus swept the hall. Hermione breathed in deeply. "Hogwarts is a slightly different story. The students all share dormitories. We have not been able to ascertain the amount of damage done to the Slytherin students through exposure to those who have been raised in the Supremacist ideology."

"What about other Gryffindors..."

"Why don't we give someone else a chance?" Hermione said, pointing to a head bobbing in the crowd.

Ron pushed himself up. "Are they really doing that? Re-educating all the Slytherin students?"

Harry shrugged. He had overheard Molly and Minerva talking, but he hadn't paid attention. The questions continued for a few more minutes, then Hermione was making her way toward them in the crush.

Lunch with Hermione and Ron fell through. They had barely stepped into Diagon Alley when they were accosted by Draco Malfoy.

"Weasley!"

Ron jumped. "What?"

"You can't wear that jumper with those shoes!"

Ron glowered into Malfoy's face. "What are you, the fashion police?"

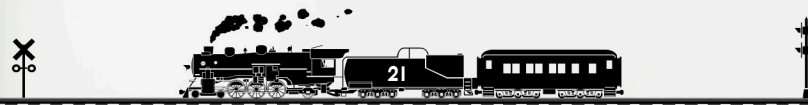
Malfoy blinked, then showed Ron the shiny badge pinned inside his tasteful jacket. "Why, yes," he said, a bit too proudly for Harry's taste.

Harry was about to intervene — how dare Draco Malfoy harrass Ron after what he and his friends tried to do back at Hogwarts — when Hermione stepped in.

"Comrades!" she exclaimed, nearly dropping the folders in her arms. She shifted her paperwork and slung her arm across Malfoy's shoulders. "Draco is one of the successes of our re-education camps!"

"*Draco*?" Ron echoed in disbelief.

A crowd was gathering. Some of the reporters who had been at the lecture were jostling one another for a better look. Whispers began: "Draco Malfoy..." "Isn't he the one..." "...parents fled to France..." "...hear he hated it once he was in..."





Malfoy's pale, pointy face tinged with pink. "I led the self-criticism group," he admitted modestly.

The onlookers broke into applause. Malfoy grabbed Ron by the jumper. "I'm afraid I'll have to sentence you to shopping."

Ron cast a helpless look in Hermione's direction, but she only smiled happily and waved. Newly flushed, she turned to her audience and began to lecture again.

Harry had had enough. He ate a solitary lunch at the LEAKY CAULDRON, then went back to Grimmauld Place. He was tired from the night before. He hadn't told anyone, but he had been having dreams again. Strange dreams, dreams he didn't quite remember when he awoke. His head felt thick; his blood surged as sluggish as syrup, maybe slower. Ron could wake him when he got back, if he didn't go to that pitiful little flat he'd let instead. Ron had been depending on the Apprentice Auror stipend to pay for that hole.

It was all Snape's fault, Harry thought as he set his glasses on the bedside stand. He hated Harry and his friends; he hated all his students. He was the worst teacher...

"Professor Snape's students consistently perform above level," Umbridge cackled at the edge of sleep.

"Sometimes we Sort too soon," Dumbledore intoned.

Something formed... unformed... to the fading voices. Harry couldn't see but he could hear the calls of animals beyond the light. The thing, the blob, whatever it was, tried to gain its shape. It tried to speak, to tell him something...

Animals... snarling wild beasts... the roar of a lion...

Harry blinked at the ceiling without seeing it and turned over

on his other side.



"Did they?" Ron asked the elegant blond opposite him. Malfoy had dragged him to only two shops, far fewer than Hermione or his mother managed in a morning, yet Ron was better-dressed than he had ever been. He cringed as an unwelcome thought of the Yule Ball in fourth year intruded. Now they were dining at an out-of-the-way place just off some main thoroughfare in Kent. "Those classes are for all the students, right?"

Malfoy sobered and toyed with the spare meal on his plate. Ron never could understand how people could order two beans and a carrot and call it a meal. "The thing is, Weasley, it was Slytherin more than any other house that supported..." his voice dropped "...Voldemort."

"Peter Pettigrew," Ron said.

Malfoy pushed his plate away. His long legs stretched out toward Ron under the table, but his arms were folded tightly against his chest, his head sunk down, his eyes on the tablecloth. "Name another."

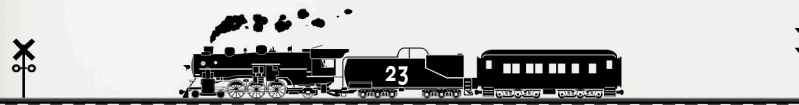
Ron couldn't. Malfoy blinked, then lifted his eyes under his fair eyebrows. Ron nodded and gazed down at his half-eaten burger.

"Still, it isn't right. They just assume..."

"...evidence is overwhelming."

"Right, and I'm a prat. Can't save a goal if I tried. You made those buttons, Malfoy. You know."

"Infantile bollocks." Malfoy signalled the waiter and his plate was Vanished. "That was just a demoralizing technique."





"Did you just say 'bollocks?'" Ron sat up straighter in his chair. Draco Malfoy had said 'bollocks!'

Malfoy shifted, the old, familiar sneer on his face. He raised his eyes a moment and Ron saw defiance before the unassuming curtain dropped over them.

"Those buttons and the 'Potter Stinks' buttons were bollocks. There. I said it again."

"They were serious at the time. I mean, they really bothered us."

"Potter'll never admit it. I'm surprised you did."

Malfoy wasn't the glorious example of Hermione's re-education classes now. He was surly and sullen and...

Hurt?

"What happened to those classes you took?" Ron asked, watching Malfoy closely.

A shutter seemed to close. Malfoy shrugged. "I took them." He threw his napkin on the table. "I led my group. I did what I was supposed to do and here I am, re-educated."

"And they're going to do that to all the Slytherins?"

"Have to turn them into Glorious Gryffindors somehow."

The waiter touched Malfoy's shoulder and murmured something in his ear. Malfoy scanned the restaurant, then pushed his chair back.

"Don't forget those fashion tips I gave you, and do get *GO* or some other Muggle magazine."

Ron saw the deformed features of a goblin in the shadowed lobby, watching Malfoy's movements. Ron stood as Malfoy did.

"Wait."

Malfoy looked toward the goblin, then at Ron, then toward

the goblin again.

"I'm finished. Mind if I walk with you?" Ron asked.



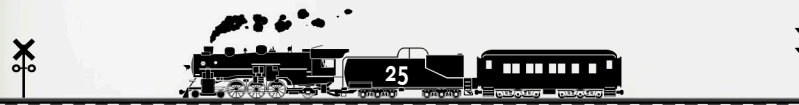
Spinner's End. The end of the spinner. The end of me. How many lies had I told in the past seventeen years and not one of them yet disassociated from me? I entered the house, an end unit in a row of monotonously identical brick structures overlooking a valley with a dirty river and a distant highway; two up, two down, toilets cobbled on sometimes, when the owners could, when the owners hadn't abandoned them. This toilet was added under the stairs. I made a stop. The face in the mirror was familiar — my own.

Yet not my own. I looked like I'd been smacked with a bucket of sin. Pale, sickly, thin. My hair was shorn, the mark of the harlot. I had whored myself and this was the price. Right, then. Right. Do what Dumbledore says, this is what it gets you. A chance at redemption, a chance at the brass ring. Only there is no ring on this whirligig, no prize, not even death. Just aching, exhausting futility.

I was spent. I gave over to fatigue and collapsed on the sofa. I hadn't been here in months, nearly a year. Dust rose soft and fine, Sandman's dust. I don't recall closing my eyes.

The jarring clang of old alarm spells woke me. Magic was in use. I sat up, my brain reeling with the sudden change. Some things are automatic. I felt my wand in my hand. The door swung wide and I fired off a spell.

One of them went down. The other hid behind the wall.





"Headmaster Snape!" he called.

"What do you want?"

"Head Auror Shacklebolt would like to see you at the Ministry." It took a lot for him to say that. I could hear teeth grinding in his words. I didn't need Legilimency to know he would rather have stunned me and have done with it. He was under orders.

I didn't trust him. Two knuts or a fire-whisky would have him giving my location to anyone who asked. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

He sent in his credentials. I still didn't trust him and I said so. His friend had come to and they had a hasty discussion which ceased when a shadow fell across the door. "Severus!" someone called.

I knew that voice. "Shacklebolt!" I shouted back, not welcoming. He could go to hell if his goons couldn't knock.

"Let us in." His voice was rumbling but smooth. Too smooth. He was trying to placate me. I don't trust placation.

"What are you doing here?"

"It's just routine. We need to talk."

Bronze against the afternoon sky, beady eyes steady, he faced me down from the door. I took my time getting up, mentally adjusting to the altitude, my brain spinning with each centimeter; I didn't let him see. Let him think I was stalling. He didn't need to know how I felt. He hadn't asked.

It was a parody of another time, another moment, but that was in the past. I faced him with as much dignity as I could with my ill-fitting clothes and shaven head. To punctuate the moment I slowly reached for a pack of smokes. Still moving

slow, I grabbed my jacket, almost falling from the dizziness but maintaining myself somehow. I couldn't let on that I was weak — they thrive on weakness.

"This must be pretty important," I said. "They're sending out the head of the troops."

"You're an important man," he answered. Condescending. He stepped in and held the door for me. In my own house!

At least he kept his goons at bay. They reached for my arms, he warned them off and took my elbow loosely himself. "What? No flowers on our first date?" I asked. I had to hand it to them. They knew the Apparition point. We stood by the river; sickening minutes later we were at the Ministry of Magic.

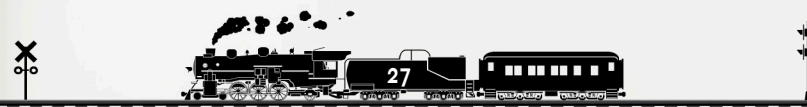
Another time, another place, another me, not so important. I wondered what made me so important now. I knew he wasn't joking when everybody in the halls stopped to stare at me. Even the cleaning crew stilled their spells until I passed. I kept my eyes straight ahead.

Another time it was those other cells. This time it was Shacklebolt's office. He closed the door against the racket and switched on the lamp. "This is just a precautionary measure."

Did he think I hadn't heard things there in the hospital? Draco Malfoy sat with me that first day — or was it the first week? — reading the paper, feeding my nightmares. I lit a cigarette, trying for indifference, managing defiance. "I'm here. Get it over with."

"The Ministry has instituted a policy to keep tabs on all Dark Wizards."

"Meaning me."





"It is believed that you are a Dark Wizard. Yes."

"You know where I live. You visited the hospital. You know I'm in no shape to take over the world. What more do you need?"

"You're a special case."

I raised one eyebrow. "Am I?"

"Because of what you did."

"And what was that, exactly?"

"You defied Voldemort. You actively worked against him."

I gave my life to defeat him. Shackbolt didn't mention that.

"You used Dark Magic to defeat Dark Magic. You're a hero."

"So carve a statue."

"Severus, don't be like this. Don't be bitter."

"Why not? The world's a bitter place."

"Do you know of any other wizards, any other Dark Wizards, that is, that we should watch?"

"No. I don't."

"You were head of Slytherin House."

Before that I was in Slytherin. There were only three years between my own school days and my becoming Head of House. I would have known everyone.

"I'm not even sure what a Dark Wizard is," I said.

He rubbed his face and glared at me. "A wizard or witch who uses Dark magic for Dark purposes."

"Ah. You mean like using Imperius to break into a bank, or the Cruciatus curse to torture someone for spitting on a friend. Unforgivables."

"Severus..."

"If that's the case, then I can point you to Harry Potter."

"That was different. He used those curses for the Greater Good."

"As did I. Or am I mistaken and you didn't say that?"

"Harry Potter is different."

"He's a Gryffindor."

"Dumbledore said..."

"Spare me. If it's the intention of the spell, then Expelliarmus could be Dark."

"Do you want another Dark Lord to rise?"

"I do not!"

"Then help us do our job."

"I'm done with helping." I crushed my cigarette in a conjured ash tray. "I gave my life to get rid of this one. Let someone else deal with things from now on."

"I understand you've been ill..."

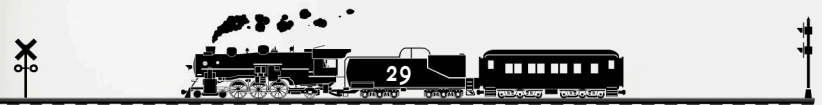
"Been ill? I'm still convalescing!" I turned too fast. My head reeled. Shackbolt bounded to his feet and caught me before I slammed my face into his desk. A glass of water later and I was leaning back, catching my breath.

"If you won't help us..."

"I can't." It was the truth. I was too tired to spar. "I don't know anyone you haven't either captured or killed or chased away. If I knew them, I'd see to them myself. I don't trust you or the Ministry, and I worked toward the same goal. I don't want another Dark Lord to rise. I'll do anything to prevent it. Only I won't work under you and I won't betray people who are innocent."

He sighed. "I believe you."

"You'll be leaving me alone, then?"





"We can't do anything else, can we? You're a hero, Severus, the Good Slytherin. Could you imagine the uproar if we officially brought you in? I think even Harry Potter might object." He rose, I rose, he shook my hand. "No hard feelings."

His goons took me back. I didn't allow them in. Even a Good Slytherin's got to have his privacy. I waited until they left, then I stood at the window. Farther down the valley I could see lights on the invisible ribbon of highway, white lights and red. A siren blared. Out there in the darkness people lived their lives, ran to comfort and away from pain. They lived, they died, they killed and were killed. And nothing mattered. No, Shackbolt, no hard feelings; no feelings at all.



I knew she was trouble the moment she walked into Spinner's End. She swept in from the fog like a Dementor's spawn: Rita Skeeter, star scandal-monger for the DAILY PROPHET; Manbane, a rated-quintuple-x wizard-killer. She looked around.

"Is this your place? What a dump."

"You should feel at home," I answered, holding the door.

"So you're Severus Snape. I've heard about your scathing wit. Too bad you left it in the Afterlife."

Witless or no, I didn't want her there. I continued to hold the door for her, but she didn't take the hint. She dug her poison-green quill from her bag.

"How does it feel to be the Wizard Who Returned from the Dead?"

I wasn't just a sordid story to amuse the Wizarding World. I

grabbed her wrist. The quill fell to the floor. She still had one hand free. My mistake. She reached for my trousers. I grabbed that hand and held my wand against it.

"Looking for this?" I asked. She tossed her head. A strand of hair, obviously colored, fell across her cheek.

"I came here for a story, and I'm not leaving without one."

I've been known to make people go weak at the knees for all the wrong reasons. It isn't every wizard who can make Rita Skeeter nervous; I wanted to see if I could. I shoved her against the door. "You'd better pray that I don't hex you into oblivion."

"I don't pray — kneeling bags my stockings."

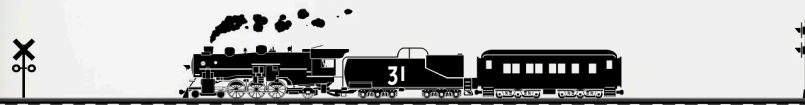
She fainted to the left, then lunged right, but I was ready for her. I caught her in my arms. Her glasses dropped to the end of their chain. Her Muggle suit hugged her like a snug glass hugs firewhisky. She twisted her wine-red lips into a sneer. I suddenly wanted to get drunk.

A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell. I'm no gentleman, and I didn't kiss her — she kissed me. My mouth was suddenly invaded by her all-too-willing tongue. She wanted to know how it felt to return from the dead — she was about to find out.



She was an animal, a fantastic beast, native to Britain and found, writhing, on my sofa. I kneeled around her squirming hips and pinned her wrists to the cushions. Her head fit nicely into the permanent dent in the upholstery. I wasn't sure how we got there, and I didn't care. I had never felt more alive than now.

She knew it. She licked her teeth and twisted her lips. Her hips





surged beneath me. She was still struggling, but in a way that made her jacket come undone. I admired the silk-clad hills and valley.

Her voice was low and husky. "Let me go."

I didn't. I liked the way she squirmed.

She reared up and bit my lip and said, "What do you think you're doing?"

"You said you wanted a story."

"Something for the *Prophet*, not *Witch Noir*!"

"Take it or leave it," I said.

She assaulted me again. Her tongue probed the iron-tanged spot left by her teeth. I was becoming more alive every second as her mouth traveled down my jaw to my neck.

"*Witch Noir* is a decent rag," she murmured into the hollow of my throat.



I like to think I keep in shape, but my shirt never fit me like it fit Rita Skeeter. She paraded about the kitchen, shirt-tails flapping, flashing me tantalizing bits of flesh as she bent over the sink. Her calf muscles tensed when she stood on her toes to check the cabinet. I leaned back in my chair to enjoy the view. It was like a scenic trip through fairy hills.

"Ruined, ruined, ruined," she said, setting cups down on the drain board. "Don't you have anything that isn't damaged?"

I studied the flashing bits of anatomy. "No."

She paused a fraction too long before she said, "Merlin, is it that late?"

I checked the clock. It was nearly midnight. "Miss your bedtime?"

"I wasn't expecting to stay this long. I have a deadline."

Too bad. She was a creature of the night and so was I. "You didn't get your story."

"I hope I didn't get anything else."

"Need a potion?" I smirked.

She turned around and leaned against the draining board. Her eyes were heavily lidded. I couldn't read her. After a minute, she pushed away and stretched. "I should go."

"You didn't get your story," I repeated.

She came slowly to the chair and straddled my knees. "Are you offering?"

I caressed what was under the shirt. She thrust her hips forward invitingly. I lifted the shirt and admired what I saw. She let me look a while.

"Well?" she said at last.

"It's the least I can do after keeping you this long."

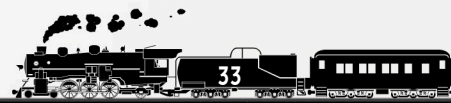
"I'll need my quill..."

"Use mine." I didn't trust that green dagger.

She sat down in the chair across from mine and I *Accio'd* some parchment. Her hand fit neatly around the shaft of my quill. She adjusted her glasses and peered seductively over their rims. "How does it feel to be the Wizard Who Returned from the Dead?"

She could have interviewed herself and got an answer, but she was serious about this. I leaned my arms on the table and began. How did she get me in this position?

It was the same old story, to a point. Betrayed by the two most powerful wizards in our world, killed for the sake of a





stupid wand, then sitting interminably in the Afterlife only to find that I'd been dead for less than a day. She wanted information, so I gave it to her. She was interested in Dumbledore; she obsessed over Lily.

"She sent you back?"

"Yes." I rested my forehead in my hand. That had been the cutting blow — spurned in life, sent packing in death, all by the same witch.

"Did she tell you why?"

She had never wanted me or loved me. She had used me as her entry into the Wizarding World. She used me, she laughed at me, she hated me in the end...

"No, no, and no. Can we move on?"

She adjusted herself in her chair. If we hadn't been talking about Lily, I might have responded. As it was, I felt guilty and cheated all at once. Here was an enticing and willing witch, capable of raising the dead, but my mind was being forced into a confrontation with my past. Lily Evans... Lily Potter. Mocking, cruelly laughing, Mudblood...

No. Not a Mudblood. A capable witch brought down too soon, all on my information. Guilt burned inside me. I wished I hadn't offered to answer Skeeter's questions.

"They said the phoenix was lying on you when they found you."

I confirmed it: "Like some pillaging bird of prey."

"They said you didn't want to live."

"I didn't."

"Why?"

"What is there for me here?" I asked. "No one wanted me.

Not my so-called friends and colleagues. When Potter told them I'd killed Dumbledore, they all believed it. Everyone believed I was more than capable of murdering my only supporter. That isn't life."

She fingered my quill. I grabbed her hand. "This part doesn't go into the paper."

"My readers will want a reason."

"Because death is preferable. Because death is..." I chose my words. "Death is a release from the cares of life. Family, people we have lost, are waiting for us there. Old friends, old pleasures, without life's burdens."

She wrote what I told her in a slanting, pointed script. I could see the line between her breasts where my shirt was unbuttoned. Did she mean for me to notice? I hardly knew any more. I was devastated after talking about my sojourn.

"You spent several weeks in hospital."

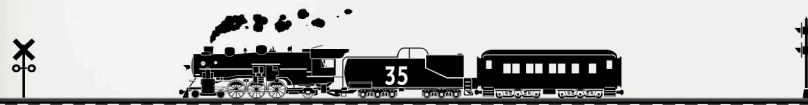
"From what I understand, that is when I met Dumbledore. I'm no longer certain when that was. It's been months, and I wasn't in good health."

"That's an understatement. Dead people usually aren't." Her eyes left my face for regions lower. "You're not dead now."

My mouth went dry. It was after midnight; she had a deadline and she had her story. What was keeping her?

She stood up and stretched. "I should go," she said. I rose and followed her into the parlor.

She dressed quickly, the Man-bane regaining its skin. She turned to face me, her glasses settled on her nose again, their chain glinting in the dingy light from the candles all about. She





opened the door and held it. "Thank you for an enlightening evening, Headmaster Snape."

"Don't call me that."

Her eyes gleamed. "Why not?"

"You've bared me completely. You could at least use my name."

"Thank you... *Severus*. What time is it now?"

I checked my watch.

"One-thirty."

She took a breath. "I'm late. It's past my deadline."

I took her in my arms. "Stay. You're already late. A few minutes more won't matter."

She kissed me and pulled away. "I can't."

I shut the door against her and the night.



The interview duly appeared in the *PROPHET*. Two evenings later, I was roused from my chair by a knock at the door. I opened it and Rita Skeeter walked in. She removed her traveling cape, revealing a light green evening gown. "Lost?" I asked her.

She eyed my rumpled clothes.

"That won't do at all!" Without warning, she hurried up the stairs.

"Flippin' 'eck!" I shouted and ran after her. She was rifling through my wardrobe, rejecting every stitch I owned. I slammed the wardrobe shut. "What in bloody mercy do you think you're doing?"

"You can't wear *that*," she said with a nod to my clothes.

"I can wear what I like. It's my house!"

"This." She levitated a black shirt and trousers from the rack. "You'll fit right in. You need to get out, *Severus*." She grabbed

my vest and wrested it off of me. I didn't fight too hard: I wanted to see where this might go. Her long, cool fingers unbuttoned my shirt. So far, so good. I was down to undershirt. That came off, too. Here the promise ended. She flicked her wand and the black shirt came down over my head.

I protested, but not too much. The way her body moved in that dress, like a potion undulating over heat, had me mesmerised. Besides, a shirt's a shirt. The trousers were next. I wouldn't miss this opportunity. She backed me to the bed.

"Ah-ah," she chastened, slipping out of my reach. "There'll be plenty of time when we get back."

"Back from where?" I was on my feet.

"The party! Surely you don't think..." She laughed, the most deceitful sound I've heard. "You need to get out, and I need someone good with a wand. We're going to Knockturn Alley. You know what that place is like after dark!"

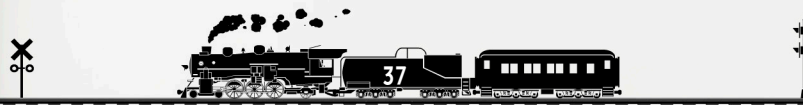
"I'm not your bodyguard!"

Another false laugh. "*Severus*! You're my *escort*!"

"Muggle women pay for escorts," I said, reaching for her again.



Four steps down and through a narrow passage, we were admitted to the absurdly-named "Loft in Knockturn". Garbled voices filled the edges of the room. Smoke drifted through the air in wispy clouds; someone was playing a piano. As my eyes adjusted, I saw witches, wizards and goblins milling about in knots, some talking, others drinking and listening to the piano which stood along one section of wall.





I recognised several former students, and others who had been at Hogwarts when I was a student. Most of the humans were Slytherins. A young goblin woman wearing a beret was pounding her finger into the chest of a banker from Gringotts. Several couples were snogging in out-of-the-way corners. I had an urge to deduct points.

Someone began plucking a double-bass. Skeeter's hips bounced in time with the music. The view was nice, but a view can get old. "Must we stay long?" I asked.

"Long enough for me to get my interview." Skeeter snagged two martinis from a passing tray. I moved, or the groups shifted. Draco Malfoy was sitting on a stool near the piano, in earnest conversation with a goblin. The crowd shifted again and I lost sight of him.

I heard a woman's voice: "Is that *Severus Snape* with *Rita Skeeter*?"

"Seems like," said Blaise Zabini.

I felt my face going hot. "People are talking about us!" I whispered.

Skeeter turned around and gave me an uneven kiss. "Let them talk."

"That's hot," the woman said.

"Oooh, yes." Blaise answered. The crowd shifted again; Draco Malfoy was staring through the smoke at me.



I downed my martini and *Accio'd* another one. Anything not to see him. My heart was pounding. For a while, I couldn't hear. *Draco Malfoy...*

I hadn't spoken to him since Potter revealed I was a spy and that everything Draco thought I was had been a lie. He sat with me that first day in the hospital. I don't know why. I had used him; I had treated him abominably.

I couldn't face him. I grabbed Skeeter's arm and pulled her close. "*I'm leaving!*"

She gaped at me. "Not yet! I said we'd leave after..."
"I'm leaving *now*! I can't stay."

She pinned me against the wall. "I need this interview! I can't just interrupt them! Wait. It won't be long!"

I didn't care what she did with her hands, I had to avoid Draco. He would follow me if I went outside. We would be alone. My safest bet was to blend into the crowd. I downed my martini and *Accio'd* another. "Hurry up and get your interview!"

Skeeter set her eyes on her prey and swayed into the crowd. When I looked again, Draco was gone. I leaned against the wall and drank. "Professor Snape?"

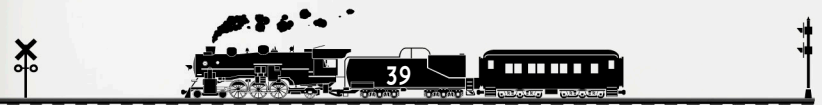
Damn. He was beside me. I had let my guard down; a fatal mistake. I tried to sound indifferent. "Draco."

Draco spoke. "I thought..." He paused, his voice choked and loud. He circled around in front of me, his eyes glaring, his finger shaking at my nose. "We were friends. You knew my parents. I thought you liked me!"

"I do," I said.

"Funny way of showing it. You let me do all those things! I almost killed two people! You didn't stop me!" His hair fell down across his face. His goblin companion was tugging at one arm.

"Are you drunk?" I asked in my coldest voice.





"Yeah. What's it to you?" he fairly shouted.

His friend made a noise. "Actually, he's only had half a gin and tonic."

"You let Potter nearly kill me! Your *pet!* Potter!" I looked into his eyes and couldn't read him. It was hilarious. I, Severus Snape, superb Legilimens, and I couldn't read Draco Malfoy! People had turned to stare unashamedly. Even the pianist had stopped playing. I noticed a dark archway and a sign labeled "ROOF." Maybe trudging up some stairs would snap him out of it. I downed my latest martini and summoned another.

"Let's take it outside, boy."

He rounded on me when we reached the roof. "It was all for him. Wasn't it? All for *Harry Potter* and his *mother's eyes!*"

I crossed my arms. "I did what I had to do. That monster had to be eradicated."

"You have *Potter's* undying loyalty."

"He liked me well enough when I was dead. He didn't appreciate a thing I did in life. Going into the Dark Lord's presence, knowing that, at any moment, he might discover my deceit. Do you know what he would have done had he found out?"

"Kill you?" Draco said. "Oh, wait. He did that anyway."

"Mind your tongue!"

"Why should I? You knew I was going to join the Death Eaters, but you didn't stop me. You *needed* me to join! You never liked me! You only pretended. You used me for information!"

He was agitated. His arms flew wildly and I wondered if he really was drunk on half a gin and tonic. He paced to the low wall surrounding the roof. I followed, ready to catch him if he

tumbled. He veered away from the edge.

"Vincent died!" He choked. "He died from Fiendfyre! You were Headmaster then, you didn't stop the Carrows from teaching the Dark Arts!"

"I couldn't reveal my loyalties. My position was too important."

"We thought you were our friend. We thought we could trust you."

"Would you rather the Dark Lord had won?"

"No! Of course I don't! After what he did, what he said he would do to Mother and Father? No. But you lied! You were never really one of us! Dumbledore said you were Sorted too soon!"

"*Do not* insult me!" I shouted. "*He* insulted me by that! I was Head of Slytherin House. I was Slytherin House! If I was Sorted too soon, then we all were! It's a lie!"

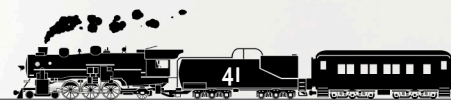
"You lied! You... you set us up! You betrayed us! I thought you liked me! My parents thought you were their friend! We had to leave the country to get away. Not *you*. *You're* a hero. But you wouldn't even tell *your friends* the truth to save them!"

"What do you want from me? Candor? The truth? I don't even know what the truth is any more! I haven't been able to speak an honest word to a human being in seventeen years!"

I couldn't. I had lost the Occlumency which had protected me all those years and I cried. Damn it! "Dammit," I said, crushing my eyes with my hand. This had never happened in front of anyone before. The world closed in. I sank to a box, wishing Draco would leave.

He didn't. He sat on a box beside mine, just sat there, while I fell to pieces.

In time, I got up. I faced him, waiting for the last insult, his





ridicule. Instead, he spread his arms.

"Hug?" I nearly fell backward over a stack of crates.

"What!" Just then, there were sounds from the stairwell and below us in the street.

"Raid!"

"Clear out!"

"Raid!"

Draco was distracted by the racket. Thank God!



The cries continued from the stairwell. "What the bloody hell?" I said.

"They're looking for Dark Wizards."

"Here?"

Draco shrugged. "Slytherins... goblins..."

I tore open the door and ran down the stairs. The party was a melee. I looked for Skeeter. If she was there, she was hiding pretty well.

Two of the intruders were stopped beside the door, watching the fight. "As soon as they tire themselves out, we'll clean up," one gloated. "These Purebloods are pansies!"

"Did I mention I'm half Muggle?" I said, clocking him with a chair.

Wood splintered. He dropped; his companion dove through the doorway. I threw down the broken remnants and turned around. Theo Nott fell in front of me, followed by a grim-faced man in hooded black. I swung my fist and sent the pursuer sprawling.

Draco grabbed my arm. "We've got to go!"

Someone else was bearing down on us. I didn't like the look

in his eye. I rounded on him, pulling Draco out of his path, and jerked my fist up under his chin. He staggered as Draco dragged me through a fall of beads. We were in another room. Maybe it was the activity, maybe it was all that gin. My head began to swim. I reeled forward, just stopping myself at the door frame. Draco dragged me back and I fell in a heap on the cold floor.

"Don't pass out on me now!" he pleaded, squatting like a creature poised to flee. The sounds of fighting swelled in the other room. Draco tensed and watched through the beaded curtain, his body a pearlescent arrow strung for flight. He barely moved his fingers as he prodded me. "Let's go!"

"Where? What?" I blathered in my thickness.

He dragged me to my feet just as that dunderheaded youngest Weasley boy came charging through. Beads dribbled off his head as he looked right and left dramatically, then spied us standing, arms interlocked, directly in front of him.

"Come on!" he cried, grabbing my other arm and pulling. "You'll be caught for sure!"

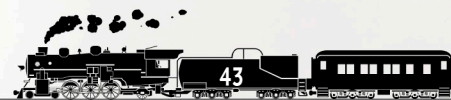
My head split. Half of it went sideways, the other half dropped to the floor. I only retained my footing with the help of these two unlikely co-conspirators.

"He isn't well," said Draco.

"Think it'll make a difference?" Weasley cried. "We've got to get him out of here!"

Draco's hand clapped over my mouth. He was doing it: he was hugging me, he and Weasley. Not my idea of a threesome. "You're sure you can do this?" Weasley asked around my arm.

"I've got to, haven't I? Unless you can think of something





better,” Draco said.

“Hurry up!” Weasley urged. My head reseamed itself and split again. There was a nervous edge to his voice that stabbed to my quick. Draco reseated his hand on my mouth, and I was suddenly whirling sickeningly through space. We landed and I fell to the ground.

“Thanks, Draco.”

I rolled onto my back, the world spinning. Weasley had just used Draco’s first name. They were both looking around them: at the fog, at the weeds, at the sky so close their heads poked into its low clouds. I grabbed each of their knees and tried to sit up.

Draco pushed me back. “Wait.”

I heard nothing. Weasley and Draco were looking in opposite directions, still tense. I felt their anxiety. My blood raced.

“Right, let’s get him inside.”

I was lifted, dragged, I’m not sure which. A house loomed. A familiar house, one I vaguely knew. Scenes of childhood...

Down the uneven streets. Up slanted roadways. Around, my head spinning even worse as a single turn had me thinking we’d gone backward. I was finally deposited on my own stoop while the two of them fiddled with their wands.

Dunderheads. *Dunderheads!* I got to my feet, reeled, fell against the bricks before they could manhandle me again, and managed the spells. The door swung open and I fell in.



“Did you get him back? Is he here?”

Skeeter’s demanding voice shrilled in my ears. I was swathed

in linens and night. Feet on wood thudded in my veins. My entire body echoed them.

“How did you manage?” Skeeter said, much closer now. A cool hand covered my forehead. “He’s burning up. What did you do?”

“I had a couple of drinks,” I slurred, but she didn’t mind me.

“He’s just got out of hospital! What were you thinking?”

“We’re not the ones who fed him gin,” Draco mumbled.

“He just saved his neck, that’s all,” Weasley told her. “If he didn’t get him into that room, he’d have been caught in the raid for sure, the way he is. They’d just throw him in a cell and hope he sleeps it off. That wouldn’t have been very good.”

“It would’ve been a disaster! I spoke to his doctor, the cow, and she said he shouldn’t get too overwrought.”

Fingers were at my throat, stretching my shirt around my ears. I batted at them.

“Settle down!” Skeeter snapped.

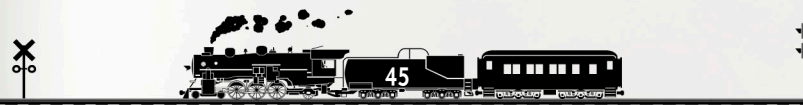
“Maybe we should... er, take care of dressing him?” Draco said.

I opened one eye. He was half-turned from me, the grey eye I could see was directed at the bed. Weasley rubbed his hair self-consciously.

“Er, yeah,” Weasley agreed. “Maybe you should wait outside. We’ll see to him.”

My shirt came off. My bare arms flopped to the mattress. “Don’t be ridiculous,” Skeeter told them. “I’ve seen more of him than either of you.”

Which didn’t improve Weasley’s complexion at all. “Too much information,” Draco grumbled. He turned Weasley by the shoulders and steered him from the room.





"Do you need a nightshirt? Or would you rather sleep *au natural*?" Skeeter mumbled at me.

"Leave," I said. Her messing about made my head swim.

Her hand rested low on my stomach. "Leave? Are you *certain*?"

"Later. Just... leave the room. For now."

Blessed blackness was closing in. The last thing I remember was taking a huge gulp of air.



I couldn't breathe. My chest was constricted; my head spun. I opened my eyes. I had Apparated. I was seated with the Dark Lord at Malfoy Manor, answering questions and praying he wouldn't break through my shield. Above us, the unconscious Charity Burbage slowly rotated, her flesh gleaming like alabaster in the intermittent light. I couldn't look at her, or the Dark Lord would guess my allegiance...

I had to look...

I was dangling head down, wrapped in Nagini's foul embrace in the darkness of the station. Someone was coming...

Lily...

She would send me back. I knew it. I braced for her words...

I was eaten by the snake. I *was* the snake...

Lily Transfigured into a lioness. I was on the ground, slithering on my belly. Animals screeched all around us. Children screamed as eagles swooped in to peck at their faces. Snakes moved sinuously as, somewhere, someone raised a standard to ward off their bites. Another standard rose, this one with a blue banner. The shriek of the lioness alerted me and I barely

missed being mauled by her claws.

Blood ran red on the floor. I leaped to my feet, surprised I had them, and turned, not knowing which way to go. Animal noises burst from the darkness all around. A brindle mass shot from the gloom and grabbed my face: a badger. My heart pounded until I thought it would stop. Instead of clawing the flesh from my bones, the badger backed away. It wasn't a badger. The head was too smooth, the neck too undulating and long. It separated and came back together for all the world like a lava lamp. It wanted to tell me something, but someone was talking.

"I need to know where he is! He should be in bed!"

"Honey, I can assure you he's spending *plenty* of time in bed."

The figure wavered, then vanished, overcome by its efforts and the light of day. My head pounded. I looked up to find my Healer at my bedside. The heavy feeling of my dream still lingered, though the sheets seemed real enough. "Vance?" I said.

"Snape," she returned. "How do you feel?"

She isn't a bit like Skeeter. Seeing her in my room was awkward. I wanted her to leave. "Fantastic," I told her.

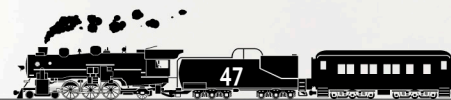
"Yes, that's why I prescribe gin and bar brawls for all my patients."

"I didn't drink that much."

"A drop's too much in your condition! Whatever were you thinking, going out like that? I thought I made it clear at St. Mungo's that you should remain quiet."

"I left St. Mungo's."

"I know." She clucked her tongue. "You really shouldn't have gone without speaking to me. You're a sick man!"





I reached for the cover, then noticed I was naked. I pulled the sheet as I sat up.

"People say that to me with some frequency."

"This time, it's official." She stood up and shifted a book which had been on her lap. "Too bad we don't have a responsible and *healthy* Potions Master around here. You need a blood restorer and a swelling reducer."

"Couldn't you get something from St. Mungo's stores?" Skeeter asked. "It's a travesty when the hospital won't give medicinal potions to the sick! And a hero, at that!"

I felt myself coloring. I didn't know we weren't alone. Draco and Weasley were crammed together in the door frame while Skeeter leaned against the wall. I glared at my two former students, then at Skeeter.

Vance narrowed her eyes at Skeeter. "You keep your poisoned quill away from St. Mungo's," she said. "Hack!"

"Hack?" Skeeter dropped her arms and strutted toward Vance. "*Hack?* I'll have you know my name is respected in journalistic circles! I've written books..."

"I've read your books," Vance said, coldly delivering her pronouncement: "Muckraking."

Skeeter huffed. Her eyes grew ten times larger behind her lenses. She sputtered, but Vance turned away, leaving Skeeter hissing like a leaky valve.

Vance planted her fist on her hip and looked down at me. "I presume you have cauldrons and stores here."

I nodded.

A card appeared in Vance's hand.

"Ron, will you help me brew these potions?"

"Draco's better at Potions," Weasley said.

"Well, then, Mr. Malfoy, will you?"

Draco nodded and they disappeared. Weasley lingered in the door a moment, but he, too, drifted away, leaving me alone with Skeeter. She reclined on the bed beside me. "That was quite a posh accent you put on. I suppose M'Lord will be heading to the manor house for some peace and quiet?"

"I'd go to my place in the country, but we're having the peacocks cleaned this weekend," I replied.

"Bit of a chip on the shoulder, dearie?" she asked.

"Oh, leave it."

She didn't know when to leave well enough alone. I turned my back to her and shrugged off her arm.

"I said, leave it, woman!"

"No!"

"What do you mean, no?" I asked, turning with some difficulty to my back again.

"You were trying to impress her!"

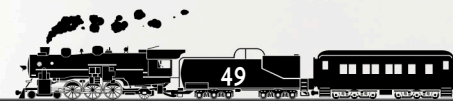
"There are certain conventions..."

"My arse. You were trying to impress her!"

We glared at each other, then I turned my back on her again. She left me.



Emmeline Vance is one of the most upstanding witches I know. She had allowed me to falsify her death to preserve my cover with the Dark Lord. Perhaps I did try to impress her. She





was different than Skeeter, more refined. She was here in this dump because of me. Where did I end and the stained, torn wallpaper begin? Could she see there was a difference?

I dozed off and on until the shelf at the bottom of the stairs swung aside. Vance came in, followed by her entourage. She leaned over me and studied my face and eyes. "You really shouldn't have snuck out the way you did, Severus, and you certainly shouldn't be drinking or fighting. You've only just been conscious a week."

"If you've finished," said Skeeter pointedly.

Vance ignored her. She was standing very close. I could smell antiseptic over lavender and sage. "I've left the potions and instructions with your friends. They'll see that you take them. You need to rest," she said to me. "No parties. No gin. Hex anyone who tries to drag you out. Sleep is still the best healer."

I nodded. I could already feel sleep's woolen mantle. I heard myself snore.

"So sorry you have to leave," Skeeter crooned as Vance backed away from my bedside.

The boys clattered into the hall. Vance stopped at the door. "I do my job, Miss Skeeter. It's hard enough when my patient decides to disappear. I'd appreciate it if you didn't make it any harder by trying to kill him."

"I didn't," Skeeter said, but she sounded unsure.

"I'll leave him in your hands, then," Vance said, with a curious note in her voice.

Skeeter followed her out. I heard their shoes on the stairs, and Draco say, "So, still think she doesn't fancy him?"

The shelf hadn't quite shut. Vance's voice came from the bottom of the stairs. She spoke softly, but impatiently. "I have no intention of becoming emotionally involved with Severus Snape... because *I'm* not an IDIOT."

"Idiot!" Skeeter echoed, and the shelf closed over her shrewish tones.

Draco said, "Note she didn't say she didn't fancy him!"

Weasley replied, "Oh, you think everybody fancies Snape."

I turned over in my bed. So Vance didn't fancy me. Did it matter? I think it did. At the least, my pride was wounded. Skeeter had raised my expectations. A year ago I wouldn't have expected even as much consideration as Vance had given me by coming. Now, I was oddly affected by the words I was convinced she didn't mean for me to hear.

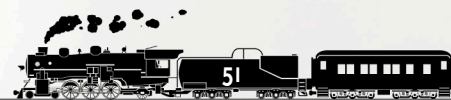
The shelf swung back again and Skeeter came up the stairs. "See to the mess in the kitchen," she told the boys, and they scattered down the stairs.

I was drifting again, dozing, though I could hear everything in my room. I saw only reddened darkness in front of me. I was searching for the station, for that oddly disfiguring spirit. I felt the bed bow and Skeeter at my back, her breath on my ear.

The station seemed to shimmer in the darkness, then disappear. I slept.



I didn't know what happened. One minute I was trapped in a dream, attacked from behind. Then I was holding Skeeter by the throat, my wand poised to curse. "Oh my God," I said. She





grabbed my wrist and pushed my hand away.

"Rita?"

She sagged on the mattress and coughed. She clutched at her throat. "What the fuck was that?" she rasped.

"I-I'm not used to sleeping with... I mean, sleeping.." I stammered.

She leaned on her arms and turned her head, her body heaving. The look she gave me before she got up could have melted a cauldron. She strode, hips swinging, to the stairs.

I ran down after her. Draco and Weasley clattered out of the kitchen and stopped, mouths agape. I ignored them and followed Skeeter into the cobbled-on lavatory. She had pulled a pot of make-up from her bag and was trying to cover the redness on her neck.

"It won't work," I said.

She spun around, dropping the make-up, breaking its jar. Skin tone spread uselessly over the floor. Her voice was still uneven. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

"I'm used to sleeping alone. If someone touches me, I'm obviously under attack." I raised my wand cautiously. "Let me tend those bruises."

"You did that?" Weasley asked. He stared at the bruises which were darkening on Skeeter's neck, then stared at me. "How could you? After all she's done for you?"

I didn't need some Gryffindor hero to tell me my business. I leaned into him. "She woke me."

Draco was trying to lead Weasley away. "That's it?" Weasley shook his arm and stood against me.

"She woke you? That's all she did, and you nearly killed her?"

"Ron," Draco said. He leaned his hand on Weasley's shoulder. "Let's just go back in the kitchen and finish cleaning the mess."

"But, we finished!"

"We'll just make sure."

Draco started pulling Weasley toward the kitchen. Weasley pulled away. "We can't leave her alone with him! Look what he's done already!"

"I'm fine," Skeeter said, leaning around me, her hand on my back. "He'll be all right. I can handle myself, you just go along. Ron, you're due back at your mum's anyway." She flicked her wand and the front door opened. The twilight of the near-dawn spilled in.

Weasley goggled at it, as if he had never seen a liminal time of day before. "Mum said she'd be sitting up," he groaned.

Draco was still watching Skeeter. "You're sure you'll be all right?" he asked.

"I'll be fine." She slung her arm companionably across my shoulders. "We'll both be fine. It was just a misunderstanding. He'll make it right, won't you?" She chided me. "You ought to do something! I can't go to the *Prophet* looking like this!"

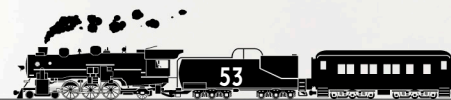
The tension bled from the air. I heard whispers behind me, then shuffling feet and, finally, the front door closing. I turned her face and applied my wand to her neck.

She winced. "You must cover up your handiwork pretty often."

"About as often as people must give in to the urge to strangle you."

"Most people have urges like that when they're awake. What in Merlin's name were you dreaming of?"

"The war. Nothing. I don't remember."





"The war's been over for months."

"To you." I inspected my work. The bruises were fading, from the dusky grape back to the sunset greens and yellows. The job would finish itself in another few minutes.

"The war's been over since June. It's November. Or do you know something I don't?"

"The war only ended last week."

"To you," she aped.

"That's what matters!" I gestured toward my head. "I don't remember anything between Nagini and last week; just a dream about a dead woman and a station."

"Dead woman?" she mocked. "The *love of your life*! No wonder you treat me like this! Nothing can compare with Saint Lily!"

Tears of anger glinted in her eyes. I suddenly noticed the dark circles above her cheeks, the same dress she had worn to the party. I filed that away: I was in a confrontation. Things could turn ugly at any time. I tightened my grip on my wand.

"I don't have red hair. I don't have emerald eyes! I'm just something you can push around and abuse because I'm *not*..."

"Quiet!" I bellowed. "I'm sick of your prattle and your demands!"

"My demands! I've put up with enough of your bullshit, Severus Snape! Not talking to my friends, sneaking away, *fighting*, attracting *Ministry attention*! Getting sick so we had to bring in *that cow*..."

"Emmeline Vance is a respectable witch, a *brave* witch..."

"Oh. I'm so sorry if I called her a cow." Skeeter's voice dripped acid, then ascended to a shriek. "I meant to call her a *dragon*! A *Hungarian Horn-Tail*! Ugly, over-rated..."

"Over-rated!"

"...over-rated, condescending..."

My fingers ached from squeezing my wand. Skeeter knew it. She had her wand in her hand, its tip leveled in my direction. We stood in the cramped space, a corner hollowed out for indoor plumbing, and glared at each other. She was panting hard. The strap of her gown slipped; she jerked it to her shoulder. "You're not getting anything from me!"

I knew how to get at her. "Why would I care? I've already had it!" "Oh!"

Her jaw dropped; her eyes widened. The dress shimmered as she trembled. Her arms stiffened at her sides, wand forgotten. I let her know, with a leer, I was admiring her scenery.

"You... *pig*! You insufferable... *prat*! You *bastard*!"

I was in my element. Catch them off guard, go at them from a new direction. I crossed my arms smugly, but stayed easy with my wand. She was as angry as any Muggle fish-wife and might come at me. Her nails were painted as red as blood to remind me.

She raised those nails and tugged at the straps of her gown again. "I am *not* that sort of witch!"

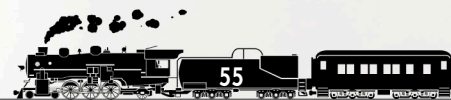
"Aren't you?" I sneered at her outrage. "You were in it from the moment you entered this house."

"That was different."

That didn't set right. "How?"

"I came here for a story." She lifted her chin. "I got my story."

"So that's what it is." I was vaguely aware of a slight tremor in my skin. I clamped my jaw. "You'll give whatever it takes to get your story."





She shifted, buckled, her eyes darting away. "Why do you *think* I slept with you? Your good looks and charm?"

"You prostitute!"

She slowly uncurled. Her body lifted almost regally; if it hadn't been for the obviously tinted hair, she might have looked majestic. Her head tilted until her chin rose above her neck, which was now completely healed of its bruises. An undulation ran down her throat as she swallowed.

"I think I have enough."

She was waiting for me to move. I stepped aside.

"Thank you for your cooperation, *Headmaster Snape*. I can't say it's been pleasant, because it hasn't." She brushed past me. "Good-bye!"

I listened to the front door slam. Silence descended on the house. I was suddenly tired; I was alone.



Guggenheim son of Griphook stood back to study the geometric pattern he had imposed on a treated canvas. He was trying to capture the essence of the Muggle skyscrapers he could see, if he squinted hard enough, from the windows of his loft. The loft was one room deep, but it stretched across the front of the tallest building on Goblin Square. It was a good place for an artist to live, if he didn't want much company.

Guggenheim attracted company. Behind him, his potential mate, Getty, was lounging on a shabby sofa while Draco Malfoy and his tag-along friend Ron Weasley talked.

"So it seems, as usual, that I am totally right," Draco said.

"I can think of some things you've been wrong about," Ron answered in a flat voice.

"I mean, about who fancies who, alright?" Draco answered. "This requires serious analysis."

"Oh, here we go," Ron groaned, echoing Guggenheim's sentiments.

Draco ignored his friend. "One, the hair. Two, my genius plan to reform the wizarding world through fashion. Meaning he now wears nice trousers instead of concealing robes."

Guggenheim shook his head. Draco had been sent off to some wizard's camp to learn how to reform wizarding fashion. Re-education, they called it: stupid, Guggenheim's father had said when he heard what the camp had done.

"Three... I mean, tormented, wounded double agent... need I say more?" Draco finished.

"Maybe women just like gits," Ron said. "Girls like to fix things that are broken. You don't get a lot more broken than Snape. That's it."

Guggenheim closed his eyes. Getty wouldn't lie still for references to females. True to form, she sighed heavily. "Not that anyone asked me, but women are clearly drawn to his coded feminine characteristics."

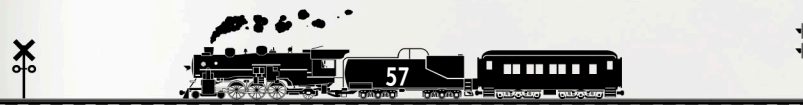
The flat fell silent.

"But, humans all look the same to me, so I wouldn't know," she finished.

"Coded feminine whats?" Ron asked.

"Ron, Ron, Ron. Characteristics! His... er, the way he... ah..."

Guggenheim chanced a look behind him. Getty was smirk-





ing over her Love and Rockets magazine while Draco tried to decode what she had said and Ron simply looked lost. It was time to put a stop to this. Guggenheim affected his best “temperamental artist” voice. “Could you guys keep it down? I’m trying to work!”

Ron smiled in relief. “Hey, you should do a comic book, Guggenheim!”

Draco twisted in his chair. “DaVinci said sophisticated conversation helped him work.”

Guggenheim contemplated explaining the difference between sophisticated conversation and the muddle those three had been mushing about, but decided against it; it would only lead to more blather. If he kept up his temperamental act, the wizards just might leave and he could get to some serious conversation with Getty.

Ron was the first one to twig. He closed his magazine and stood up. “I’d better go before Mum goes spare.”

“Leave? But we just... Ow!” Draco grabbed his shin where Getty had accidentally kicked him. “Oh. Right. I’ll walk you down.”

They stood up, forming a short line between sofas so they could make it out the door. As soon as their footsteps sounded on the hardwood stairs, Getty got up and put her arms around Guggenheim.

“Still trying to work?” she crooned into his ear.

“In all, it’s been a successful venture,” he replied.



Down on the street, Draco stopped to rub his shin again. Ron lifted Draco’s trouser leg and aimed an easing spell at the bruising.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” Draco asked as they sauntered past the statue of the giant goblin with his wizarding petitioners.

Ron shrugged. “I have five brothers and a sister. You just learn.”

“Any word on Auror training?”

Ron shrugged. “The next class opens at the end of the year. I’ve been studying, I’ll make it. Thanks for those Potions tips.”

“No problemo. You’re not going back to Snape’s?”

“Mum said she’d like to see me occasionally.” Ron shrugged and twisted his lips into a squiggle. “Vance left those potions, Skeeter can take care of Snape. Aren’t you going home?”

“For a couple of days. I’m going to take the Chunnel train in the morning.”

“The what?”

“It’s a Muggle train that goes in a tunnel under the Channel. Tunnel, channel, Chunnel.”

“Er, right.” Ron scratched his head awkwardly. “I’d invite you to dinner, but my mum would freak...”

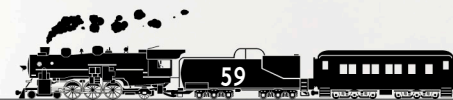
Draco gave him an encouraging smile. “We’re like Romeo and Juliet in the Muggle story.” His eyes widened. “But without the sex!”

“Uh... yeah. See you later,” Ron said as they reached the first Apparition point.

Draco slammed his hand against his forehead. “We’ll meet at Snape’s in two days, right?”

Ron smiled awkwardly. “S all right. See you.”

Seconds later, there was no one where the two wizards had stood.





The world was swaddled, white in a shroud of mourning. There was no end to the ice, no beginning to the sky. Only the hulk of the listing ship as it erupted like a tare from the ice, was dark. The sound of the fire axe as it cut into the firm yet crumbling surface was muffled by the still and the cold: no echo reverberated from the expanse.

Our ship was icebound, moored in a frozen Sargasso. Shadows flitted about its decks at the edge of vision: impotent shades of hope; regrets, perhaps; or just the laughter of the cold as it forced its way through our layers and into our bones. The others had given up and now lay under piles of blankets waiting for the end. Better some small comfort even from the cold than to suffer the despair in each other's eyes.

I could not sleep. Our plight was physical. With rapidly dwindling supplies, there were only the two choices: work to be free, or succumb. I took the axe from its brackets and threw a ladder over the side of the ship which leaned nearest to the ice. I could at least do something to try and break us free.

It was a labor of Hercules, the frustration of Atlas. No matter how deep I hewed into the ice, there was more ice below. Strange that this brittle substance should hold a ship in its thrall. I despaired of ever reaching the sea.

Cracks eventually appeared; larger chunks broke free and tipped away from their parent. Heartened, I renewed my efforts. My shoulders ceased to ache as I swung the axe. More cracks, more chunks. Brackish water seeped up through the crumbs at the bottom of the hole.

A large creak, a mighty groan, filled the air, at once embedded

in my bones and far away. I stopped, pensive, as I heard the crack.

White disappeared into black ocean farther on. Its scar split jagged, streaking for me. The ice divided and buckled and separated between my feet. My foothold was unsure; I tried to gain one side of ice or the other, but I was off balance. The split widened, revealing the black, murky depths. I tottered; I plunged into the sea...



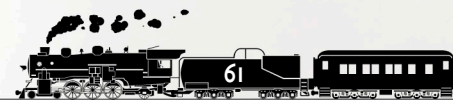
My heart hammered in my chest. I sat up, feeling the unyielding cold. My breath was steam. I gulped for air as familiar objects took form. My sofa table, my chair, the walls lined with books. I summoned a cup of tea from the dark kitchen and clutched at its warmth between my hands. Cold reached with its feathery fingers into my marrow.



Sleet stung Spinner's End, coating pavement and cobbles with a sheet of treacherous ice. The wind howled around the terraced houses, seeping in through doorframes and window sashes. Most of the housing was deserted; I lived in the last house so I didn't need to see my few neighbors if I didn't wish.

I didn't wish. I did not wish to see anyone. Having Skeeter and the boys at the house had shown me how horrible I was to be around. I had nearly strangled Skeeter for the crime of waking me; I had gotten involved in a brawl like a common dockman. When that was over with, I was ill and had to be attended. I wasn't fit company for anyone. I didn't know why I was still alive.

An owl landed on the windowsill, its talons slipping in the ice.





I aimed my wand at the sash and singed the bird's feathers. It flew away without leaving its burden, its scorched feathers leaving a dark trail of dust in the grey winter sky. I had scorched so many owls in the last few days that I had lost count of them. Most had been Hogwarts owls, probably bearing the germination of someone's conscience. I am not a father confessor; I have my own demons. Dreams plagued me now as they had for years. Fearing death for what I had been had taken its toll. By day I froze in this run-down hovel, by night I froze in the arctic tundra.

The heat at Spinner's End had never worked well. Years of neglect as I whiled away what I thought to be my remaining years at Hogwarts had left the fireplace disfunctional, its heat only lingering near the grate. I might have seen to it, but I was weak in both magic and in body. I was a failure.

I had rid the house of magic. The wireless was gone, replaced by an old Muggle radio which blared tinny music. As November waned and December swept in, the songs were gradually replaced by Christmas carols. I left the noise as a background to my life. It was the only form of human companionship which could not be killed by association with me.

By Christmas Eve, carols had taken over the airwaves. I left them playing as I dressed. I was expecting company: Emmeline Vance had sent her Patronus, telling me to expect her in ten minutes. She had a favor to ask, but she did not say what it was. I couldn't think of anything she might need, so I was completely surprised when she Apparated directly to my door with an armload of packages topped by a woven basket.

She had used a sticking charm on her shoes to stop herself

from slipping on the ice. The downside was that she stuck to the threadbare entry mat when she stepped over the threshold. I took her packages as she removed the charm. She retrieved her parcels and led me into my kitchen, where the radio suddenly spewed static. I shielded it from the force of so much magic in the room and offered Vance a cup of tea.

"Ta," she said, separating the various items in her stack. There were two bound parcels, and the basket, which she kept at hand. I set the cups on the table, but before I could sit, she touched my arm and pushed the basket toward me.

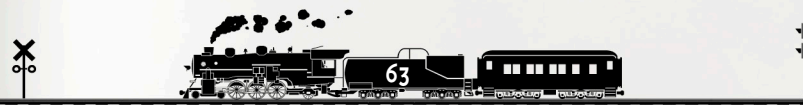
I lifted the corner of a soft towel and saw a sickly kitten. It raised its head on its wobbly neck and mewed. The effort was too much for the thing. Its head dropped to its paws as a shudder ran down its spine.

"Got into some potions stores," Vance said.

I leaned closer. The combined scents of wormwood and bowel rose from the blanket. Wormwood, or absinthe, is an essential ingredient in healing balms, but ingesting the oil could be fatal. The usual symptoms are convulsions, foaming at the mouth, and involuntary voiding of the bowels.

"Dear, dear. Foolish beast!" I would have used much stronger language, but Vance was at my elbow. "How much wormwood oil did it ingest?"

"Not much. It just licked the stopper. I was able to stop the convulsions, but just barely." Vance leaned over my arm, her robe brushing my sleeve. "Can you do something for it?" There was a quiver in her voice. She seemed anxious, though I couldn't get a fix on her thoughts.





"It isn't dead yet," I said, to reassure her. The kitten was in a bad way. It was lucky the stopper had been firmly in place, or it would not have survived its encounter. Still, it had survived. Where there is life, there is hope. I reached for my stores cabinet, which took the place of a broom cupboard, and pulled some ingredients. The kitten spasmed at the sound of the bottles.

With Vance's help, I brewed a blood restorer potion and a strengthening draught. The blood restorer was her idea. She's the Healer, and it seemed to work. I usually left these decisions to Poppy Pomfrey at Hogwarts.

I summoned a fresh towel for the basket while Vance drizzled drops into the kitten's slack mouth. Minutes later, it had perked up enough to lie down properly in its nest. Vance leaned over the beast, then carefully set the basket on the floor by the arch.

"Thank you," she said, and straightened. "Now, for you."

"Me?" I stiffened out of habit. When other people make plans for me, there is usually an unpleasant catch. Vance reached in her bag and brought out her wand.

"Since I'm here, I thought I would check you. It's been over a month; how do you feel?"

"Fine," I said.

"As well as you did after your brawl?" One eyebrow arched. She was trying to suppress a smile.

"Better." I scowled.

"Good. Shall we go to the sitting room?"

The first thing she did was unbutton my cuff and check the place where my Dark Mark had been. The skin was red and scaly. I couldn't feel her fingers, only an unpleasant electric

numbness. I would rather anyone but Vance had conducted this portion of the examination; that was another story. I submitted to it, wishing it was done with.

"Looks good. It will never completely disappear, but the dryness should go away after a while. Move your eyes up and to the left."

She cupped my face and tilted my head while she inspected my eyes with her lighted wand-tip. There was a brief moment when I considered reaching up to take the cool hand against my cheek before she began to feel my throat and under my jaw. As she bent down to tuck her wand into her bag, I had the feeling that a significant moment had been squandered.

"I'll just check on the kitten again," she said.

I followed her into the kitchen, where the creature was sleeping soundly in its nest, its back and sides heaving. Vance set her bag on the table and drew out a sheaf of folded parchments.

"Since I was coming, my aunt asked me to bring these few things along. It's funny," she continued, busying herself with the parchments and packages, "owls don't seem to reach you. They return with their letters still attached, and their feathers scorched."

"Funny," I agreed.

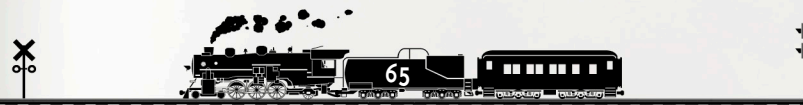
"Well."

She clasped her hands in front of her, her bag dangling from her wrist. I made a motion, then shrugged. I didn't want her to leave, but I didn't want to keep her from her dinner.

"I'll be leaving."

"The beast," I began.

"We're swamped at St. Mungo's just now. You know how the





holidays are, people lighting themselves and others on fire, drinking and splinching. Can you keep it for me? I'll be back around to see it next week, before New Year."

Her expression was hopeful. I found it too difficult to refuse. She smiled, a rare, bright light, then left. As soon as she had gone, I removed the shield from the radio and turned it up. I felt like hearing music.

Night was coming on. The cold, which had been bad all day, worsened. I settled into my blankets on the sofa and picked up the book I had abandoned earlier. I had just reached a boring stretch when I felt something against the dangling edge of my bedding. I jumped, then looked down.

The kitten was on its hind legs, leaning against the sofa. Affecting my best Head of House voice, I demanded, "What are you doing out of bed?"

Instead of putting the creature off, my voice was an invitation. It leaped onto my lap and started turning. I began to feel its warmth through the wool.

"Trying to find a warm place, are you?" I asked. "Well, I suppose I at least can provide 37 degrees of it." It found a notch between my legs and settled in. I thought of Vance's concern for the beast, then remembered the things she had brought. I looked back at the kitchen table, just visible through the open doorway, and saw the stack of parchments and a corner of the larger package. I didn't want to, I really shouldn't...

I regretted singing the owls. It was unconscionable to kill the messenger, after all, and people had gone to enough trouble to write and send the things. I summoned everything and

settled in. The larger package contained an afghan knitted by a former student; Minerva had sent a biography of Sir Ernest Shackleton. I turned to the letters as the radio played.



Emmeline Vance leaned into the mirror on her dressing table and adjusted her earrings. She had been invited to attend Christmas Eve dinner with the staff at Hogwarts, and was looking forward to the evening. It would have been perfect if Severus...

Frowning at her own reflection, she said, "No. It's quite enough. Stop thinking about him!"

"Man trouble, dearie?" her mirror asked. Her reflection continued to fiddle with the jewelry as her thoughts poured out in a rush.

"Damn, he's hot... but so *messed up*! Plus with the thing where he saved my life he'd think I was just paying him back or something... In any case he's my patient so it's *totally unethical* so why am I even thinking about this?"

"He won't be your patient forever, will he?" asked the mirror.

"Well, no..."

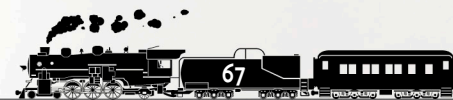
"Tell me about it."

"I nearly kissed him. Lord, good thing his Legilimency's gone!"

"You're not getting any younger."

"You have a crack or two yourself," Emmeline said, scowling at the mirror.

"Oh, now, you don't look a day above twenty, but the years..." The mirror clucked at her. "The years have a habit of creeping up on all of us. If you find a good one, don't let him go! Oh, you're not





thinking of wearing that necklace with those pearls, are you?"

Emmeline looked at the chain in her hand. A cartoonish cloisonné flower blinked back at her.

"You'll never get a man with taste like that," the mirror said.



Christmas was my last lucid moment for a while. The fever took over again and I found myself stuck in bed with a relapse. Vance had stopped in for who knows what reason, but, within moments of her arrival, I was back at St. Mungo's.

The properties of Nagini's venom keep a wound from healing and blood from coagulating. The only thing which could have saved me on that night in the Shrieking Shack was what did save me: Dumbledore's accursed phoenix weeping into my wound. Fawkes's tears rebuilt the severed vein — yes, the damned snake got me in the jugular, barely missing the carotid artery, I can't imagine how she managed that — and bound the outward wound on my neck. The one thing the phoenix tears did not, perhaps could not, negate was the venom's affects in my blood. I am assured that the venom is flushing from my system, but there is still enough to fever my brain at odd moments and in general weaken my body. So there I lay in a hospital bed, tortured by dreams and visions.

Most of my dreams included Vance. I saw her perhaps three times a day as she inspected me, which may be why my mind kept returning to the night I won her from the Dark Lord.



She had been captured by Yaxley and his crew. I couldn't break my cover to save her; we both knew it. I saw it in her eyes before she looked away.

"You believe he's on your side," the Dark Lord said, forcing her chin up with his wand. "You believe it... Yes."

He turned away. Vance lowered her head until her chin touched her chest.

"What shall we do with her, my lord?" Yaxley asked. Yaxley was an ugly man, scars disappearing into his robe, his face scarred and pock-marked. His sloe eyes shone dully at the thought of what might be done. His chest heaved like a barrel in an ill-fitting sea. I heard a low growl from his man, Fenrir Greyback.

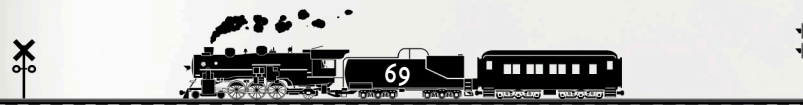
"We shall extract whatever information we can, then kill her."

She stiffened and swallowed. I had to do something. Fortunately, the Dark Lord had taken some perverse interest in my private life. I had wanted him to spare Lily Potter; he thought it was for physical pleasure. He didn't understand that she had been my friend. When he returned, he asked me about my life, my attachments, to see if I had gotten over her death. I had calmed him, I don't know how. Maybe it was because I had no intentions of imprisoning Lily as my slave. I couldn't spare Vance the torture, but I could save her life.

"My lord," I said. This would take some finesse, something Yaxley and the others lacked. I carefully Occluded my mind, then approached the Dark Lord with suitable subservience. "Might I make a suggestion?"

The Dark Lord assented.

"Give her to me."





"Ere, now!" Starling, one of Yaxley's men, cried out.

"What makes you think you deserve her? We captured her," Yaxley said.

The Dark Lord was not as quick to condemn my efforts. He inclined his head to listen.

I lowered my voice and moved closer to the monster with the serpentine face. "The Mudblood was lost to me; I would like this witch in her place. She's a Pureblood. As you so rightly said, I deserve better than a Muggle-born wench. And this one..."

I looked at Vance. She was a brave witch. She knew what they would do to her, but she made no sound, her face betrayed no emotion. She understood that her reaction would be a part of their enjoyment. She was beautiful... I allowed my face to betray a lechery I did not feel.

The Dark Lord shifted, straightened inside his flowing robes, believed he understood my meaning.

"Very well, Severus. She shall be yours, once we are finished with her. Yaxley!"

Even now, Vance did not betray me. For all I knew, she believed what the Dark Lord believed. She barely looked at me as they dragged her away. I hoped she would see that there was no reason to resist too strenuously, that her small part in the grander scheme would not affect the master plan. I busied myself with the potions I had been assigned while she screamed in another room. At long last, the screaming ceased. I was left to wonder what had become of her.

"Severus." I put my things aside and wiped my hands.

"My lord." Vance was strung limp between two of Yaxley's

cruellest. Her feet dragged the floor. I considered her without visible emotion.

"When she wakes, you may take her."

I finished my work. By that time, she was coming around. I took her arm, rougher than I would have liked, and urged her to her feet. Yaxley's crew were aware of our movements. I seized her in my arms and took her outside, to the Apparition point.

We had gotten away with it, I thought, she was safe. We landed by the river near Spinner's End. I splashed cold water on her face. She sputtered and clung to me. My prize, the bird I meant to free.

She was warm in my arms, a delicate reed who had survived a hurricane. "Severus?" she said, blinking unbelievably into my face. Her lips were dry, parting reluctantly from each other as she spoke. Her body hung heavy against mine as she tried to piece things together.

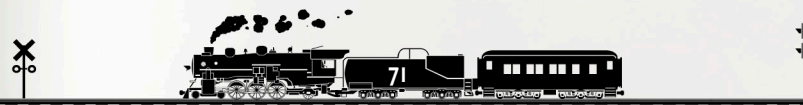
"You're safe."

"I'm..." Her features twisted. She pushed away from me. "You... he gave me to you! What am I? Rubbish? I won't! I..."

She collapsed again as the pop of another Apparition rent the air. I turned around; Starling had his wand pointed straight at my chest, his teeth clenched in a humorless grimace. I let Vance drop to the ground.

"Why should you get 'er? We captured 'er!" he snarled in his Cockney mawl.

He should have cursed me when he had the chance. He didn't get another. I was too fast for him, drawing my wand and firing off a curse in one smooth motion. He dropped, dead before he





hit the ground.

"Severus?" Vance's fingers curled around my robe. She was struggling to rise. I bent down and retrieved her, using *Levicorpus* to ease both our burdens. I took her to my home and left her on the sofa, then I retrieved Starling's remains and Apparated back to Malfoy Manor.

I was angry and did not disguise it. I threw Starling's body down at the Dark Lord's feet. An idea had percolated to the surface of my brain and I acted on it. It was a risk. It would either cement my reputation as a wizard not to be trifled with, or it would kill me.

"He came for her," I said, kicking the corpse. "He meant to kill me, but he killed her instead. She was mine!"

The room grew quiet. Even Bellatrix Lestrange quivered in her boots. I held myself still, though I was terrified. The Dark Lord's eyes deepened to a cruel claret, but he was not angry with me. He spun around, his wand levelled at Yaxley's chest.

Yaxley backed away, honest terror in his eyes. "I didn't know he'd gone, my lord! I swear! I would've told you! I would've sent someone to fetch him back!"

"When I give a gift, it is given!" the Dark Lord said. "No one interferes with me! No one!" He turned to me. "I am sorry, Severus."

I had escaped death this time. The next time he apologised to me, it would be for killing me



Various scenarios filled my brain, some more implausible than others. I saw myself prostrated before the Dark Lord's feet begging for the "pureblood wench." I saw myself again, taking

her to the zoo — perhaps the one in London, but it might have been another — and Transfiguring a squealing pig into her form so I might kill it and present its body to my erstwhile master as proof of her death. In one, which was so lifelike that I awoke with sore knees, I challenged the Death Eater Starling to a Dungeons and Dragons duel of the dice. All of these dreams were real. All of them might have happened. I awoke at the New Year, unsure of my own past, and ready to be home again and away from the constant smell of disinfectant.

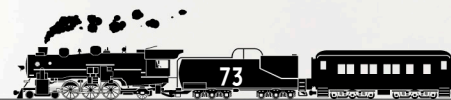


Sunlight filtered softly through the canopy of green. Ahead, brighter light shone into a clearing where several mourning animals gathered around a lucent pool. "It is poisoned," a badger said in answer to Harry's unspoken question. "A snake has died in it."

The undulating body of a snake disintegrated into ripples on the water above a corpse frozen in a horrific scream. The sunlight didn't seem as warm now; a chill came from the trees. Harry pulled the covers around him and peered into the shadows.

He saw movement, light. A silver doe stepped gently along a narrow path, its gleam blurring its surroundings, attaching the framing tree limbs to its umbra. The doe came on, a branch silhouetted against its forehead, forming itself into a single horn. Though it was approaching the watering hole, the forest around it seemed to darken as if smothered by an invisible storm...

Hunters. Their silver armor dimly reflected the radiance of the doe. Harry tried to shout, to warn the doe, but his throat closed and his feet were rooted to the ground. He clutched the





blankets to his chest and waited for the awful conclusion. The badger stood beside him, equally silent, directing his attention to the scene. The doe, no, unicorn, came, unsuspecting...

The lance barely whispered as it sped through the trees and thunked sickeningly through the unicorn's neck. It writhed in pain. Blood splashed in torrents as the unicorn went down. The silver tarnished to black robes, to black hair, to Snape kneeling on the floor clutching at his neck, blood spurting out...

Harry gasped and clawed his throat. Sweat beaded cold on his forehead. He'd asked Hermione for advice, but she had merely said he needed rest. It had been a difficult summer, with the commotion following Voldemort's demise. This was worse now than it had been in November. He was sure he'd been awake. He tossed the blankets aside and peeked between the curtains and the sash. Weak winter light flooded down onto the unkempt square of Grimmauld Place. He needed to be somewhere else. He thought of Ron...



In a flat just inside the Goblin Quarter, Ron Weasley paced back and forth across his parlor floor. A dark-haired young man clutched at his head and groaned on the threadbare settee. To the rest of the world, Harry Potter was a hero, the Chosen One, the only one who could have, and did, defeat Voldemort. To Ron, Harry was a friend, a potential brother-in-law judging by his sister's determination, and an unexpected visitor with a problem. Harry groaned again, especially loud this time.

"I'm even starting to see it when I'm awake," Harry moaned.

"You've got to do something!"

Ron sat on the arm of a dilapidated chair and leaned his elbows on his knees.

"You're not the first person to talk to me about dreams. Someone else..." He trailed off. Would Harry really care about Draco Malfoy's nightmares?

Harry chuckled unconvincingly. "Maybe it's all that time you spent in Trelawney's class."

"Did you ask Hermione?" Ron asked.

"She said all I need is rest."

"Rest? It's your dreams that are bothering you!"

Harry looked at Ron with a hopeless expression. "That's what she said before she left."

Ron wandered to the tall windows overlooking Goblin Square. He had not seen Hermione since the abortive press conference. She had decided to complete her seventh year at Hogwarts even though the Ministry had assured all of them that they did not need to attend, that their performance in the late war had earned them their WIZARDING credentials. Ron and Harry had gleefully accepted the offer, but Hermione obsessed as always, and was on the Hogwarts Express when it left Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ on first September. She didn't come to The Burrow at Christmas — she toured the Americas with her book and her ideas instead. She had permission to be gone from school until February.

"How is she?" he asked, hoping Harry didn't notice the thickness in his voice.

"Good. Still a swot."

"Always," Ron replied. He missed her. "But, she didn't have





an answer for these dreams?”

“She asked if I was sure it wasn’t some communication from another Dark Wizard. I had to explain my link with Voldemort to her all over again. It’s crazy.” Harry laced his fingers in his hair and groaned again. “She’s the smartest witch I know — hell, the smartest person I know, but she doesn’t have an answer.”

“So you came to me.”

“Hey.” Harry looked up suddenly and ran his hand across his hair absently, like Sirius used to do when he was disturbed about something. “I’m sorry I didn’t stop sooner. I told you, I’m studying for the next Auror entrance exams now. It’s all I can do to keep up with my studies. But I can’t keep up, not with these dreams.”

Ron sighed and leaned against the weathered window frame.

“What... what did you tell the other person...”

“The same thing I’m going to tell you. You’ll take my advice about as well as he did. Go see Snape.”

“Snape!” Harry reared back. “See Snape? He hates me! I’m practically my father to him! I’m the one reminder he doesn’t need, that my mother loved someone else!”

“He’s changed. Gotten... I don’t know. Sad. Miserable. Nothing like what he was.” Of course, Draco had known that. Draco had seen him as much as Ron had, and left him for the same reason. Ron widened his eyes, seeing not the shabby flat above a Goblin apothecary, but the marks on Rita’s neck. Finger-marks, dusky, angry. The two of them fighting. Rita, so vulnerable, protecting Snape. Leaving in the cold pewter morning. Draco...

Draco. Ron stiffened. Draco was going to drop in, he’d said. What if he came now? As if in answer, Ron heard footsteps on the

hollow stairs. Harry sat up and looked around. Someone knocked.

“Come,” Ron called weakly.

The door opened and Draco came in.

Harry leapt to his feet, his hair scattering across his forehead, hiding the famous lightning-bolt scar. Draco stiffened and reached for his wand. Ron ran between them, wand out, separating the two rivals. With a last unsettled look, the two went to different corners of the cramped flat.

Ron sighed. Being an adult was less fun than he’d imagined. Nothing went smoothly. Harry and Draco... it was as if they were still at Hogwarts. “Look,” he said, facing the sink and the tattered curtain below it, “you both have the same problem.”

“Which is?” Harry asked stiffly.

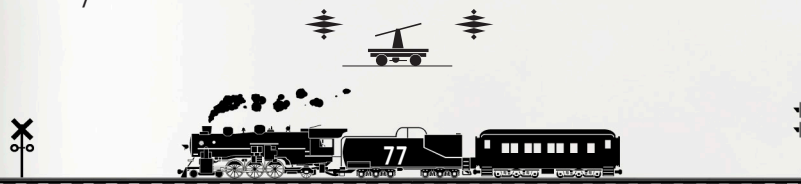
“Bad dreams. I’ve told you both what I think you should do — go to Snape. I hear he’s out of the hospital now.”

Draco looked mistrustfully over his shoulder. Harry started to say something, then stopped. They would be that way all night if Ron didn’t get them out of there. Ron was tired.

“Go. See Snape. He’s had dreams, too.” Ron herded Harry toward the door and closer to Draco’s position. “Draco, you know he’s had dreams. Go see him.”

Ron put his hand in the middle of Draco’s back and pushed gently. Draco started to protest.

“Maybe he can help,” Ron said, shoving both of his friends out onto the landing and shutting the door. He cast a ward and sank into his chair. Would they ever get over their schoolboy rivalry?





Draco Malfoy stopped at his flat to retrieve a package. "It's a present for Severus from my parents," he explained. "It's his birthday."

"What's in it?" Harry asked, lifting the edge of the linen cover.

"Food. Foi gras, ratatouille, some truffles, Crème Brûlée, coq au vin..."

Harry shuddered. "Brutal grass and rats? Sounds evil."

"It's our *entree*. Our 'in.' We're delivering something for my parents. You haven't seen him since the war."

Harry followed Malfoy down the stairs. "I saw enough of him at Hogwarts." He didn't mention that he'd seen him die, or that he'd seen it all again in his latest dream.

"He's changed. Maybe worse, from your point of view. To me he's... different."

They stopped at the Apparition point. "Where are we going?" Harry asked.

"Just hang on and follow me."

The garden's elegant appointments blurred to nothing. Lung-stopping seconds later Harry and Malfoy were standing on the bank of a sluggish stream. Snow clustered in patches around the stalks of yellow weeds. Ice glinted in patches near the water. Harry followed Malfoy up the bank, wondering why he was doing this. If it hadn't been for Ron suggesting that he go with the Slytherin, he would have just gone home.

Clouds hung high in the air over rows of identical attached brick houses, the remnants of an industrial town. A chimney stretched above the rooftops. Wind rushed around corners and scoured the streets. Harry hunched his shoulders against the cold; Malfoy cradled the basket of evil French food.

They stopped at an end house. Malfoy knocked, then pounded against the peeling door. "Come on, I can feel you on the other side of the door!" he shouted.

The place was forsaken. Harry shoved his hands farther into his pockets. "Look — this was a bad idea..." What had Ron been thinking?

Malfoy didn't listen. "I'm going to stand here and yell all day!" he shouted at the unyielding door.

It suddenly opened and Snape, or something approximating the Potions Master Harry knew, was glaring from the doorway. Harry shrank into his jacket. Malfoy stopped shouting, suddenly cowed. "Oh, good. You're in," he wavered.

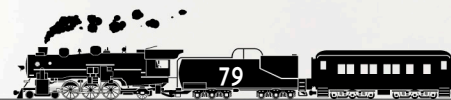


Time meant nothing. Light and darkness were mere inconveniences to my life. I puttered about the kitchen, stopping to rest against the counter when the weakness overtook me. Breakfast took much longer these days to prepare.

When I had eaten I laid down on the sofa. A dream overtook me at once.

The sun beat down from a copper sky, reflecting in the well of a glimmering pump. Bodies of the dead and dying clustered on the hard-packed street, the ones with some life left to them clutching at their throats in the sear sirocco. My hair caught in that wind and stung my face. I tucked it under my broad-brimmed hat as the ends of my duster coat flapped about my knees. A collapsing burst of air alerted me to the bubble-headed apparition.

"The well is poisoned." It lifted a finger which separated into a hov-





ering blob. "We must draw from a new source." I followed the undulating creature into the desert until we came to an innocuous spot.

"Dig."

Tok. Tok. Tok. *The sun beat down on me; I shed my duster. My hat vanished, baring my head to the blazing light. Sweat streamed down my hair to my back and chest; my arms were muddled.*

Tok. Tok. Tok. "You are a hard worker," the badger said.

Tok. Tok. Tok. "Them as don't work don't eat, my da used to say."

Tok. Tok. Tok. *The hole grew deeper. The dirt was cool. The sun blazed down unmercifully. I dug. I seem always to be in the middle of a wasteland, digging myself deeper and deeper into a hole. The badger stretched itself on a mound of cool dirt and watched my progress.*

Tok. Tok. Tok.

Splutch. Sodden gravel gave way to spurts of water. It covered my feet, my ankles, my knees. I dipped myself into it and came up shorn and shriven. I cupped my hands and offered the badger a drink. "It's good..."

I awakened to a knock, then a thunderous tympani on my door. I opened it, not knowing what to expect. What I saw made me think I had fallen into another dream.

Draco Malfoy stood tense beside the cringing Harry Potter. They neither one seemed anxious to speak to me. "What fresh catastrophe does this portend?" I demanded.

Draco pasted on a smile. "We came to wish you a happy birthday!"

"Happy..." I counted the days. Was it the ninth already? I couldn't allow them to throw me off balance.

Draco leaned in. He thrust the package he was carrying into

my arms. "Omigod, look at your kitten!"

I was left with a swaddled bundle and Potter hunched on my stoop. Damned orphans always show up on doorsteps. I glared at him and he came in. It was an awkward moment... for him. He hadn't seen me since he erroneously announced my death. I dropped the package on a chair and stopped in the open door of the toilet, waiting for him to speak. I deserve some sort of acknowledgement.

And he knew it. He cleared his throat. "I, er... you see... I didn't know." He stopped to clear his throat again. "I thought you were on Voldemort's side. I didn't realise until I saw your memories that you'd been on our side all along."

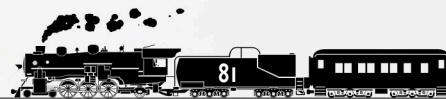
I didn't need this after all. My air caught in my chest. I shifted, hoping he wouldn't notice I was ready to break down.

"You went to him, you faced him knowing... I'm sorry I ever doubted you. You're the bravest man I know... sir."

My memories. My life. I gritted my teeth as much to keep from railing on the brat as to keep my emotions in check. I backed further into the room to hide myself. "There's no need to call me sir, as I am no longer your professor... as for the rest of this obsequious persiflage... I really don't see what you hope to..." It wasn't working. Emotion swelled in my chest and clogged my throat. "...excuse me..."

I couldn't even take the time to shut the door. I turned my back to the hall and covered my face. Potter's shadow blocked light. The damned brat saw me!

Draco made matters worse. "Oh – he's having kind of a nervous break-down thing... Sorry, should have mentioned it."





I was the only one who could stop this pity party. "What do you two want?" I demanded.

Draco left off playing with the kitten. "Ron thinks you can help us," he said. He met my eyes, but only for a moment, perhaps afraid I might Legilimens him. When I said nothing to this, he went on, "We've had dreams. Both of us. Disturbing dreams."

Potter nodded.

I put coffee to percolating in the old pot and we sat at table. "Tell me about these dreams."

"It's dark," Draco said. "Animals are out there. I never see them, but I can hear them. Then, it's the Sorting. The hat won't get on my head, then it won't get off again. It keeps taunting me, saying things..."

"You belong in Slytherin," Potter said. "That's what it tells me. I'd do well there. Then, everyone in the school is pointing their wands at me, threatening to kill me. Only, not everyone, just the Gryffindors, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. I'm at the Slytherin table, and they all want to kill me."

"It says I'm only good for Slytherin," Draco said. "Then, it's dark again. There's a light, but I can't tell where it's coming from. I'm a snake, and the animals all want to eat me."

"The light," Potter said. "It's a... something. A person, only not a person. If you've ever seen a lava lamp, it's like that, changing blobs that just resemble something human. It's trying to speak to me, it needs to tell me something, then... Nothing."

"I've never seen that," Draco said.

"Only, this time it was different." Potter swallowed hard and forced himself to look into my eyes. Did he think I could see his

memories? I let him stew.

"I saw the doe. Your Patronus. It... changed. It was a unicorn. Some hunters killed it with a lance through its throat; then you were there, bleeding on the floor."

I gripped at my head. "You're here because you had a dream that I was a unicorn."

"The... the badger showed me."

The badger. The bubble-headed thing. I stood up and took their cups, needing something to look at other than them. I washed the cups, mulling over what they had said, especially Potter. I had seen his 'lava lamp' being myself, I knew its message. I was once again on the same side as Potter in yet another mess.

There had to be a way to explain things to them so they could understand. The young can be so traditional! I dried the cups, knowing what I had to say.

"Do you ever suspect you live in a universe created by a mad and hostile god?"

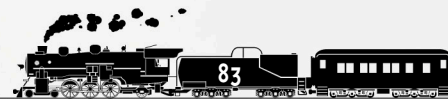
Potter ducked his head between his shoulders. "Uh, no."

But Draco had straightened up, as I knew he would, with a look of amazed confirmation on his face. "Yes!"



"It's bad."

Draco Malfoy sat at my table with his hands planted palm downward on the scratched formica surface. He stared at me, ignoring the famous Boy Who Lived beside him. Was he hoping I would read his thoughts, interpret for the Chosen One? I stared back, a challenge to him to keep talking.





"I didn't mind at first. The re-education camps... sounded like a good idea. We were... tainted. By him. By V-voldemort. I understood. I did my part." His breath was coming faster now, his pauses catching on the inhale. He showed me the badge inside his jacket: FASHION POLICE. Potter's head sank farther into the collar of his sweater.

"Then they... made decrees. Tons of them! First, no Slytherins... meeting... the party, that's why we had that... raid. No more than two or three. No support groups not... *approved* by the Ministry... and led by a non-Slytherin. There were little things. Like jobs. No one could get one."

"The Ministry," Potter began, but was quelled by Draco's shiver.

"Not Ministry sanctioned — they wanted us to work. Work... makes us upstanding... citizens. But no one would hire. Applications — which House were you in? Substandard treatment — Gregory waits forever to be seen. They... take care of Lockhart all right... he tried to get the Weasley girl killed... but not Gregory. He's in the long-term ward." Draco twisted his left fist around his right forefinger. "And Pansy..."

He stopped moving. I leaned forward. "What about Pansy?"

"You haven't heard. They wouldn't tell you, not in hospital. Even Rita Skeeter wouldn't... She wanted... to turn *him* over to..."

"Voldemort," Potter supplied.

I was afraid I knew; I didn't want to believe it. "But, what happened? What..."

"No one would talk to her. Everybody turned their backs — Can't you see?" Draco grabbed at my hands, imploring me to sort through the baggage of his mind.

"I... can't. *I can't.*"

"She's dead." Potter's voice was dull. He stared at a burned patch on the table. "She... killed herself."

"So did Marietta Edgecombe," Draco said.

I was having a hard time keeping up. "Edgecombe was a Ravenclaw."

"She betrayed Harry Potter!" Draco shouted. Potter blushed. "She betrayed that Dumbledore's Army they had. She told Umbridge. She got that permanent brand across her face. No one would have anything to do with her. She went insane and slit her wrists. Her mother said she was so *alone!*"

"We didn't realise..."

"You didn't *care!* Now they're starting... all that stuff... re-education... in Slytherin House. At *Hogwarts!* Slytherin and only Slytherin! And your *good friend Hermione* is in it to her eyeballs!"

"She means well!"

"They all mean well! The best intentions..."

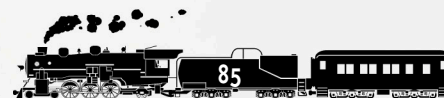
The road to hell is paved in good intentions. I closed my eyes. Pansy Parkinson, not the prettiest or the smartest student in her year, but loyal. A good friend. Marietta Edgecomb, her intentions were every bit as good as Granger's. I remembered others: Mulciber, MacNair... yes, *criminals*; Karkarov, the Les-tranges, the Carrows, Regulus Black...

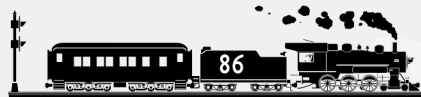
"We're all Dark Wizards, don't you know?" Draco hissed.

"You said that at the party."

"How did it get this bad?" Tears glistened in his eyes. "It was never this bad before!"

"It was." There were others, people never mentioned in the





PROPHET. People who had died, or killed themselves, the last time. "Your father must have mentioned... maybe you were too young."

"He did say some things."

"He was five years ahead of me. I was accepted in his group for the two years we shared at Hogwarts. When he left, I was alone. There were others, but I didn't want to..." I looked at Potter. He was still staring at that spot. "I didn't want to disappoint friends, but we grew apart. I didn't love her at the end, Potter. I'd betrayed her. She'd been my friend. I..." I shook my head. "I lived with those others, MacNair, Mulciber, the rest. One generally stays in one's own house at Hogwarts. Slytherins rarely stray outside it. We were never well-liked, not since Salazar left the school. The Dark Lord only made things worse."

"It was the same. A fanatical Ministry, a fanatical group growing in my own common room... he recruited Death Eaters from amongst the students. That should hardly surprise you. Students are idealistic and have little experience with life. They're perfect for subversion. I tried to stay out of it, being a half-blood and having little other hope for my future beyond my studies, but things happen."



Regulus Black happened...

"I say, Severus!"

I had come to this secluded part of the lake for some time away from the common room's uproar; Black had followed me. I wanted no company but Black couldn't see it. Perhaps he

thought he was the exception. He seemed to think that being a Black entitled him.

"That was some speech you gave about Muggles in closed shops. I didn't understand the half of it, but it seemed to make sense. They are caught up in their own little minds, aren't they? Trapped in their prejudices, hateful, hurting... The group was very impressed."

I stuck my hands farther into my pockets. 'The group' sympathised with the Dark Lord and his followers. I wanted nothing to do with that. It's one thing to play pranks and perhaps hang a rival or two by their ankles, but it's quite another to form a political alliance.

"We've done nothing but discuss your ideas and it struck all of us that a man like you..."

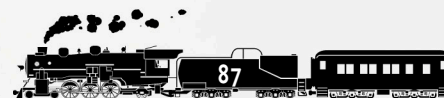
"What sort of man do you think I am?"

"A man of ideas. A man of action — don't think we haven't noticed that you give my brother and his friends as good as they give, and there's only one of you to the four of them, though I doubt if Pettigrew really counts for much, and Lupin... Suffice it to say, you've impressed the right people." He slapped my shoulder.

"Thank you very much," I growled. Alarm bells were going off in my head. I was afraid to guess who he meant by 'the right people.' I didn't want their attention. I couldn't afford to be associated with them.

"If you need anything, anything at all, we're there and ready whenever you are."

I had no intentions of joining their little group or of fighting the Ministry, our entire world. It's the knife-edged bridge





and I'm no Lancelot. I could see that I was set up for a fall. I grabbed his elbow and squeezed it hard. "Don't come near me. Don't talk to me. Leave me alone!"

"Ah." He tapped the side of his nose. "I get it! Right. You have your own secrets. Well, I'm off!"

I'd sent him packing but it was impossible to ignore that group completely with half of Slytherin House involved. Yes, I said half. If they weren't Marked, they sympathized. I couldn't very well avoid it all the time. I had to listen, I had to seem somewhat interested, or at least neutral. I hated my father then, so it was easy to talk against Muggles. I always meant him. I did what little I could get away with and went on with my studies.

They were satisfied, so I could concentrate on my upcoming N.E.W.T.s and on the situation at home. My father was ill and in hospital; my mother was all but begging me to come home. I forgot about Regulus and his group as tragedy overtook my family. I had expected my father to die, but not for my mother to be killed in an automobile accident coming back from the hospital. I went home, buried my mother and answered my failing father's questions, returned for my exams, then was called away for the last time to bury my father. The Slytherin common room and its rowdy Dark Lord supporters were in the past. I had my future to consider.

Then it happened. Regulus Black, the last shining example of Black Family Pureblood ideology... committed an atrocity. His magical fingerprints were all over the scene.

He came to me.

I knew his visit meant no good though I didn't know what he

had done yet. "What are you doing here?" I demanded.

He shot past me and dove for the couch. "Shut the door, man! Hurry!"

As if a door could keep Aurors at bay. I latched the door and cast a few spells against detection and interest, but I had to get rid of him. Crouch was in charge of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement back then. He had an agenda against suspected Death Eaters. This was in the thick of the Dark Lord's first rise. Crouch threw people into prison without trials. He gave his Aurors latitude to use the Unforgivable curses.

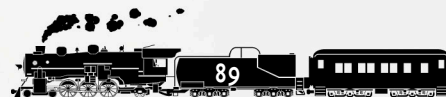
"You'll have to leave," I said, checking out the window for signs of magical activity. "I don't want any part of this."

Now that he fancied himself safe he had relaxed. He reclined like some decadent Roman emperor on my sofa while I wracked my brain trying to think of some way out.

"You're a deep thinker, Severus. You understand these things. You've no one left for them to attack if they find me here. This is the only place I could come! You wouldn't want my parents to be tortured, would you?"

Two-faced apple polisher! Just like all the rest. 'Oh, Severus, you know so many spells! Teach them to me!' 'You're so good at Potions, help me with this project.' 'You're so smart, you'll understand — you have no one so no one's likely to get hurt.' No one but me; but what did he care? It was only a matter of time before the Aurors followed him and found him on my couch. I told him to leave again. He stayed, he begged my hospitality. Only for a night. *One* night.

Then another night a different week, then another. I sud-





denly knew too much. I'd seen faces, heard names. I was in it for the long haul now — I had to keep my mouth shut or die. I knew I would eventually have to take the Mark.

There is always a point where one must commit or be forced into commitment. My point came the morning the Aurors broke down my door. I was asleep, but my wand came readily to my hand. I winged their point man before three more got the better of me.

"What have I done?" I demanded as they dragged me to the stairs.

"You resisted arrest. You attacked an Auror in the execution of his lawful duties."

I was still foolishly trying to make sense of it all. "Why are you even here?"

"We have been informed that you are a Death Eater in high standing."

"But, I'm not! I never..."

They dragged me down the stairs and into the street. I wanted to know who had set me up. "Who gave you my name?" I shouted.

They didn't answer. I was taken to the Ministry, to a dark and secret place beyond the bustling law enforcement offices and cells. They must not have known about the Dark Mark because no one checked my arm. It was smooth and clear back then, not a blemish or a scar. I was interrogated, then thrown into a dark cell. Later, someone came and brought me to a room...

They wanted to make an example. They tortured me. It was unbelievable. Excruciating. There were always two of those fine, upstanding Aurors. They cast the *Cruciatu*s and held it for

what seemed an eternity. Between sessions I lay in darkness, wondering if I would die. When I got out I wanted to destroy everything. In a sense, I did.



I turned my coffee cup in my hands and watched the tarnished liquid staying put. I felt so naked! And, ashamed.

Draco spoke softly, hesitantly. "My father told me that..."

I finished for him. "He got me out of the Ministry. Yes. I have never forgotten it."



Potter shifted in his seat. "You think it was my dad who gave your name to the ministry?"

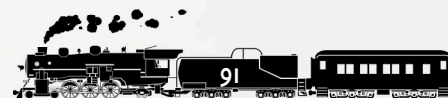
"I did. I didn't. Your father, Sirius Black — I expected it to be Black. Regulus was his brother, he would try to protect him. I know what he told you, but when it comes down to it, it's family that matters, not outsiders."

"But he was against everything Voldemort stood for! He wouldn't!"

"He would. There is a hierarchy. Family, then House, then world. Sirius Black hated me; he hated me even more when he saw that his brother spent time with me. To him, I was the bad influence, not Regulus or the rest. You didn't come from this world. That's the way it is. There are too few of us, we protect our own in the end."

"They protect their own, we protect ours," Draco corrected me.

"But, we're all witches and wizards," Potter said. He was suf-





fering a severe case of denial.

"Did you want to be Sorted into Slytherin?" I asked.

He hunched his shoulders sheepishly.

"Er, no."

"Why not?"

Draco started to speak; I silenced him. Our eyes on him, Potter couldn't sink back into his complacency. He had to answer. "Well, first, I met Ron, and he wanted to be in Gryffindor. Then I met Malf... Draco, and he said some really nasty things about Ron and his family. The Weasleys helped me get onto the platform, I liked them."

"So you were offended on behalf of your friends. This proves the hierarchy rule — family, but in your case you had no family, then friends. Is that the only thing?"

His face spread with blushing shame. "No. Hagrid — he rescued me from the Dursleys that first time — he said... he said that not a wizard went bad who wasn't in Slytherin House."

"And you believed him."

"I was eleven years old! I didn't even know this world existed before I met him!"

"So at eleven, you took the word of a virtual stranger. Your entire view of our world was colored by a chance remark from a man you had only just met. Is it surprising that other eleven year olds take the word of their parents?"

"But, Sirius..."

"I don't pretend to know his situation. Maybe he was angry that he got a baby brother and was no longer doted on. Maybe Regulus really was the family favorite and Sirius thought he'd get back

at them by being anything but what they expected. You have already demonstrated the hierarchy rule in siding with the son of a family that had been good to you, now in believing a stranger who had been kind. You still haven't realised that Hagrid lied."

"He... lied?"

"Never a wizard who went bad who wasn't from Slytherin House? At that time, everyone believed your godfather, a *Gryffindor*, was the murderer of a wizard and a dozen Muggles, and the betrayer of his closest friends. Hagrid knew this, yet he told you that only Slytherins went bad."

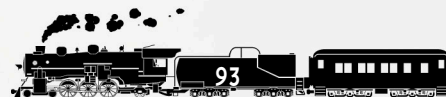
"But even Phineas Nigellus Black said that Slytherins would prefer to save their own necks!"

"Oh, really?" I twisted my neck and tugged at my collar to show him the scar that still remained. "Is this saving my own neck?"

"No..."

"What's wrong with trying to stay alive? Slytherins don't rush into things as a general rule; we leave that up to Gryffindors who seem to have a death wish. Think, Potter! How can one person's death help his cause? Dumbledore wouldn't have asked me to kill him if he wasn't dying anyway. You were a special case, you had a horcrux implanted in your scar. Even then you had an out. But normal people, people who aren't horcruxes, what good would their deaths do? Losing people weakens a side, it doesn't strengthen it. It's more beneficial to stay alive. It's a hell of a lot better for group morale."

"The Ministry is losing a quarter of its population," Draco said. "Their rules, their camps, their re-education, their prejudice, their raids, their suspicions, their imprisonments..."





Potter blinked in disbelief. "A quarter of the population?"

"Slytherins are leaving Britain. Almost everyone my parents know have moved to France, or to Germany, anywhere but here. Roughly a quarter of the British wizarding population is Slytherin; we learned that in the re-education camp."

"I could have told you that," I said.

"We're not cowards," Draco said. "We're just not eager to die."

"I wasn't either, but when it came down to it..."

"When it came down to it, we all did what we had to do. I laid there bleeding to death while you and your friend, who brags now about having saved *her boyfriend* from bleeding to death and healing you from a bite by that *same snake*, stood by and watched; I might have done something then to save myself, but no. I had to give you those memories so you could do what you had to do. I hear that Bellatrix Lestrange met her death as bravely as any Gryffindor, and about as foolishly. When it comes down to it, Potter, what is the bloody difference?"

"But, she supported Voldemort!"

"And she died bravely, fighting for her convictions. Believe me, there was never any love lost between us, but I recognise bravery even when it's dressed in Slytherin green."

"But, they need to be re-educated! They can't go on thinking Muggle-borns are inferior!"

"No, we can't. *You* can't go on thinking that Slytherins are inferior! Prejudice only gives rise to violence and more Dark Lords."

Potter only blinked.

"Bah. What's the use?" I collected the cups and saucers from the table and plunged them into the dishwasher. "Nothing will

ever change. No one can do anything about this."

Draco was pacing. He stopped behind me.

"You can do something — You're the 'Good Slytherin', everyone says."

I'd had enough. I let the saucer slip beneath the water. "Severus, do something! Severus, hide me from the Aurors! Severus, kill me and make it look like a murder! Severus, be a- a- a unicorn! Well, forget it. I'm through."

"But you're the only one who can!"

"You're right," I snarled at the boy. "I should use my *enormous* personal popularity and *political influence* to fix everything. You *can't change anything*, Draco. You endure, and you do what is right. That is *all*."

He crossed his arms and glared. "You can't just sit around here moping forever!"

I took up my dish rag. "I don't plan on living forever."

I didn't expect him to attack me. He hit my back; the saucer I'd been washing shattered on the floor.

"Don't say things like that!" he shouted, panic in his voice.

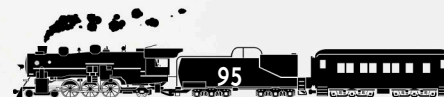
"Why can't you use your influence?" Potter asked, coming around my other side. "The Headmaster of Hogwarts has a lot of influence."

"The *what*?" I shook my head to clear it from the fog. I thought he said something about the headmaster of Hogwarts...

"You're still the headmaster. Minerva... McGonagall..."

"I know who Minerva is," I snapped.

"She told me she couldn't get into the office except to get the Hat for the Sorting. It won't let her in. That's where you can





do the most good. You need to go back.”

“Go back?” The bubble-headed entity said I must Go Back. Now Potter was saying the same thing. We’d both had dreams about the bubbly badger...

“Right.” My head was suddenly clear, my breath strong and steady. I held out my hand to catch my robe.

“Where are you going?” Potter asked as I headed for the door, fastening the robe which swirled around my body.

“To tender my resignation... To *Hogwarts!*”



We arrived at the gates near sunset and passed through onto the snowy grounds. I wanted to get this over with. The weight of my culpability blotted my mind as I was restored in body. Hagrid’s hut came into view, its roof bare where snow had melted by the chimney. The lake’s icy fingers seemed to shrivel from its banks as the path bowed outward. A few more steps and the mirage evaporated. Another turn and we would see the castle. A tremor passed through me. I dreaded, I longed, to see.

There it was, mottled gray, moving through the trees as we moved. I was jittery and anxious. We rounded a bend. The castle rose vanishingly tall, dessicated and ancient over the natron snow. My eyes were drawn to the headmaster’s tower. It did not want Minerva — it wanted me.

I never should have stayed away. I was as dead as an amputation. Nagini’s venom may resist magic but I thrive on it.

We swept along the gallery. Students stared. I kept my eyes ahead of me and let Draco and Potter do as they would. I could

feel the humors shift behind the walls. Those who are touched by the castle do its bidding however imperfect their efforts may be. We are all failures, I the chief amongst them. I meant to rectify that failure tonight.

“Severus!”

I stopped. Minerva McGonagall, wrapped in a plaid woolen robe, ran to greet me. I shot a glare at the gawking students. They scattered, leaving the hall to us. I scowled at Potter and Draco and they withdrew.

She felt my forehead. “Should you be out?”

“I won’t be here long.” I bowed my head so only she could hear. “I have come to tender my resignation.”

“You’re... resigning?” Her brows shot up. “You can’t! What would we do without... who would... oh, you can’t mean me!”

“Why not? You’ve been deputy head for decades. You deserve...”

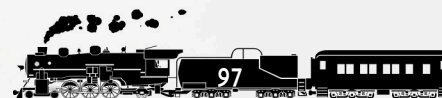
“What? The headaches? Interference by the Board? The Ministry sticking its long nose in here and setting extra lessons for the students?”

She went on, but a shadow crept into my brain. I could feel it on my back, like eyes watching me. The castle was closing in. The shadow took on weight. I looked up. “It’s in a strange mood tonight.”

“What?” Minerva turned her head but I knew she couldn’t feel it. Draco and Potter, leaning against the wall, had no clue. I was the only one, because I was the headmaster.

“Call an assembly.”

“But, Severus, you haven’t given the position a chance! You





can hardly call last year a proper introduction..."

My head was throbbing. "Call an assembly!"

She rushed away. Draco and Potter stared at me. I massaged my temples and looked around again. We were all wanted in one place.



The students sat at their respective tables curious to know why they were summoned. The teachers, my old colleagues, took their places at the head table. Draco and Potter hovered by the Great Hall doors along with the ghosts.

I had a speech all planned out, something about handing over the reins to the capable hands of Minerva McGonagall, lauding her many years of serving the school, and ending with an exhortation to the Board of Governors to stop being imbeciles and give the woman her due. I looked out over the students' faces and saw the empty seats which represented the students who had been injured or killed under my leadership...

I banged my knife against the side of a silver goblet. The last bit of talking subsided. The floor was mine.

"The last year was a harrowing one for us all. Under my administration of this school, you were subjected to horrific punishments; some of your fellow students were maimed for life, some were killed. All of you..."

"I did all of you a disservice. I failed to give you what you needed the most — protection and security within these walls. I allowed Death Eaters into this castle. I allowed unqualified teachers to torture you and to teach you the Dark Arts.

"I have desecrated the noblest school in Britain and degraded the most honorable calling to which any wizard, or witch, could aspire. What I did was unconscionable. I knew what I should have done, I had excellent predecessors whose wisdom was available to me. I did not avail myself of it. I failed you, I failed those who are no longer among us. I am sorry. I ask, but do not expect, your forgiveness."

The Great Hall filled with talk and shouts. Some were visibly glad, others murmured to each other in their seats. I took the time to marshal my emotions which had begun to slip, then banged the goblet again.

"Well.. that said, I hereby tender my resignation—"

The imploding air alerted me just as I heard... "Uhn... Suhn..."

I stared, gobsmacked. The blobby thing from my dreams was standing at the head of the central aisle. I took a heaving breath and covered my eyes. I'm seeing it when I'm awake now...

Someone's hand rested on my back. Minerva said, "What is that?"

I whipped my head around. "You can see it?"

"SEVERUS SNAPE!"

The ominous tones of the Sorting Hat filled the Hall. Bubbles presented it to me like a malignant artifact. It opened its stringy mouth.

"I HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY!"



The bubble-headed creature brought the hat forward, then just stood there.

"Well?" I demanded.

Bloppy mothered the hat but it was no use. "I cannot speak."





It stopped a measure. "My enchantments prevent me."

This was too much. I had made a wonderful speech if I do say so myself, heartfelt and meaningful at least, and they interrupted with the public service announcement that the Sorting Hat cannot speak when it has something to say. I turned to the amorphous blob. "What about you then?" One of them must have the answer. Either would do.

It tried. The hat scrunched its face, stopped a measure, then said, "This spirit is too ancient."

They had their fun. It was my turn. I lifted my head, ignoring the entities in front of me. "As I was saying, I hereby tender my..."

"STOP!"

The hat had everyone's attention. Again. It bounced on its brim the way it does at a Sorting.

"I realize a hidden well is quite an awkward climb

"But when I speak before the school it always must be rhyme.

"I cannot say it plain so you must contemplate intent

"Decypher what I tell you so you'll know where you've been sent."

An enigma wrapped in a puzzle muzzled with duct tape...

"The tallest tower underground old God-er-ick proposed

"To plumb the darkest forest til the mystery is closed

"A knight in shining armor with a lance to catch his prey

"Cimmerian enchantments so the headmaster will stay."

I wasn't about to be enslaved by a talking fedora. "You will not force me to..."

The hat boomed out, "Who said that you're the headmaster I spoke of in this rhyme?"



"You have not always been here, boy, my gist is clandestine!

"I'm hampered by the spells in me, you have to get a clue

"None but the Head can do this and the Head I chose is you!"

I am not a hat person.

"Miasma in the hidden well and unseen tower deep

"But cross the sword that is the bridge, secure that blessed sleep

"You're the designated goat, the one who has to fall

"The deepest tower, hidden well, and now I've told you all."

"It's a riddle," said Filius Flitwick, going so far as to jump up on the table.

Draco and Potter had come up the central aisle. "It sounds like those dreams," Draco said.

"I dreamed about the knights in the forest with their lances," Potter said.

And I had dreamed of a well, and longed for the blessed sleep of death. If that is what it will take to solve this abominable mystery, I have no fears except that the trains in the After-life will finally run on time.

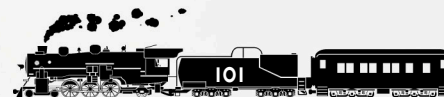
All that remained was to solve the riddle. The Hogwarts elves served snacks to the students in the Great Hall while the staff retired to the staff room, buzzing with excitement.

"That was Helga Hufflepuff!" Pomona Sprout bubbled.

"She isn't any older a ghost than the Bloody Baron. Why couldn't she speak?" Filius asked.

"Because she hasn't been a ghost all along!" Pomona beamed at her cleverness.

The small room was too warm for me. I shed my robe on the





back of my chair and stuffed a hand in my pocket. I leaned back and looked at the human resources available to me, the best the Wizarding World has to offer — oh, and Potter. Well, he'll suffice for derring-do. We may need some before this is over.

The blasted bonnet was now perched, silent, on top of Potter's head. It steadfastly refused to repeat itself or to answer any more questions. "Does anyone remember exactly what that hat said?" I asked.

"It said it's hard to climb a well and that there is a deep tower underground." Trust Argus Filch to cite the obvious.

"A forest, a knight with a lance, and a bridge made of swords," Draco mused.

"It couldn't be plain. We have to decypher the riddle," Filius chimed in.

No one mentioned that I was supposed to take the fall for all of this.

"You're not the headmaster, but you are. What does that mean?" Potter asked.

"No. He wasn't the headmaster the hat was talking about..." Draco explained.

"But then it said he was!"

"Just... Stop." Before they got sidetracked. I addressed the rest of the assemblage. "We have a poisoned well, a hidden tower underground, a forest, a knight with a lance..."

"And its prey," Horace Slughorn reminded me.

"A knight with a lance and its prey, a bridge of swords..."

"No." Horace adjusted his chair and leaned forward importantly. "The sword that is the bridge: The Knife-Edged Bridge!

The tapestries! In the dungeons!"

I stared at him. I knew those tapestries. I had been here for more than twenty years all told, most of my time spent in those dungeons. I knew the story behind each one of them, too. What had I done with my mind?

"There's a tapestry set, with a couple of knights hunting a unicorn." Draco turned to Potter. "That was your dream, wasn't it? There's a unicorn, and there's a deer, and the hunters kill the unicorn..."

"We're not getting into that again!" I hissed.

"But it fits!"

"The well-spring for the castle is in the dungeons, too," Minerva said, "right near those tapestries."

The knife-edged bridge tapestry hid the spring house door. It was the only answer. I nodded and stood up. "It said I'm the one who's supposed to do this. The rest of you stay here and mind the students."

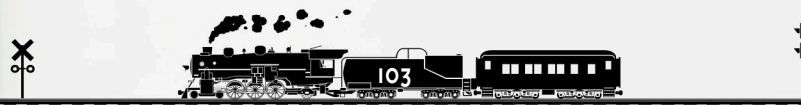
Potter and Draco were both on their feet. "We'll go with you," Draco said.

I could see the logic in taking one — one could be a runner — but not both. As few as possible should be put in harm's way. "Only one of you. The other one stay here and be prepared to go for help or for whatever's needed."

Draco and Potter both dug coins out of their pockets. Filius offered his own coin and flipped it, Potter calling heads.

It landed heads. Damn. Well, he is the Designated Hero of this cartoon...

Minerva stopped me at the door. "You shouldn't go alone. The





two of you might need help. Let a few more of us go with you.”

“You heard what it said. I have to do this.”

“It didn’t say you couldn’t bring help.”

“I’m the only one who ‘has to fall.’” I drew quote marks in the air. “If there’s trouble, you’ll need every available hand to get the students out. Keep them in the Great Hall, just in case.”

The castle well is in a circular room appended to the lowest corner of the dungeons. The door is concealed as a tapestry showing Lancelot crossing the knife-edged bridge. I spoke the password and Potter and I entered the room.

“I didn’t know this was here,” Potter said, staring around.

“None of the students know about this room. It keeps the water pure.”

“What’d you think? We were going to bathe in it?”

“Some students might think it funny to taint the well with potions.” Love potions to be exact.

“Oh.”

This was our starting point. I began examining the walls for signs of ancient magic. I found traces of the various headmasters on the walls, but nothing as ancient as Helga Hufflepuff and the rest.

Potter kept out of my way by leaning over the spring pond itself. He was obviously trying to do what I was doing. He tapped the stones with his wand, then poked at the bubbling effluence.

“Something’s down here,” he said. He stuffed his face into the pool as if it was a Pensieve.

“Potter, what on earth...”

He disappeared. His body was sucked into the pool, his feet

vanishing before they reached the surface. I ran to the edge and shoved my own face into the cool water.

I was sucked in and transported to a circular stone room which had no windows and only a very tiny door. At least I was dry. Potter was looking around.

“It’s like Alice in Wonderland,” he said. “There should be a table with a cake and a potion on it somewhere.” He poked around, then shoved at the door with his toe.

He is the luckiest wizard on the planet. One shove and he was stretched like a pencil and sucked through the keyhole. I told myself I was too old for this sort of thing, but reminded my more logical self that I had to do this. Once the hat spoke, its words became as magical as a prophecy, and everybody heard it. I shoved the door with the toe of my shoe and followed Potter.

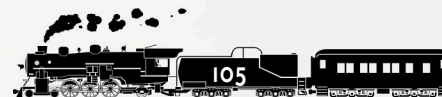
I was engulfed in a noxious gas. Potter was leaning on his arms on the mushy ground, choking. I tried to cast the Bubble Head charm but magic didn’t seem to work. I dropped to my knees and pulled my shirt over my nose and mouth. I motioned for Potter to do the same.

I peered through the stinging fog. There seemed to be a clear space up ahead. We staggered toward it, leaning on one another as the gas seeped through our clothes and into our mouths and noses. We reached the clearing and collapsed on the mossy floor.

“Poison,” Potter choked.

“Miasma,” I corrected him, and gagged. That was the word the hat had used. “It’s a poisonous gas, a swamp gas.”

“So, a poison.” He coughed over his own words. “What’s it





doing in the castle?"

"Guarding something."

"We couldn't use magic there. It's an added protection," Potter said.

"Yes."

We stood up. The gas was behind us, a mucky path turning to stone ahead. We lit our wands and started walking slowly up the path. Walls began to materialize.

We were still in a circular room, only this one was vastly larger than either the spring room or the one with the door. Straight walls ran through it interspersed with arches and ribbed vaults. We followed the curving outer wall as long as we could but the straight walls soon drew us into a maze.

The magic of the castle was at its strongest here. I could feel it coursing through me. My mind was expanding; I could see the magical effulgence traced on the walls. Potter couldn't feel the source as I could, but he could tell we were in an extremely magical place. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up; he moved cautiously for a change.

The floor canted downward. We must have penetrated the foundations of the castle. Magic eddied in dead ends of the maze like trapped clouds of vapor. We staggered through them, around them, continued on our way. Stones rose up to catch our feet; we stumbled and pressed on. Each time we reached a wider space Potter moved away from me to explore the other side.

The floor leveled out. Magical sigils adorned the walls, though Potter was oblivious. I examined every stamp. We had to know what we were getting into.

A space appeared in the far wall and Potter wandered off. I was still reading the latest signs. Apparently the castle itself was less a manual construction than a magical construct...

"I know that sword."

I turned around. Potter was examining something. The Sorting Hat's bulk hid whatever it was from my view. Potter stooped and I saw the carved golden head of a lion, its mouth fixed in a roar, above the crumpled crown of the hat. I went to join him.

The web-encrusted form of a mummified old man was sitting in the chair and leaning on the Sword of Gryffindor. Potter had bent down to study the man's face. The sunken eyes opened suddenly...

I grabbed Potter aside and aimed my wand at the blight. It might be an Inferus charmed to damage whoever found this place.

"Hello, I'm not twelve any more," Potter snapped.

The apparition on the chair stirred. It made a noise. It blinked into the light of my wand, then straightened.

"Kill me," it said.



The style of robe, the lion-headed throne, the proprietary air with which he held that sword...

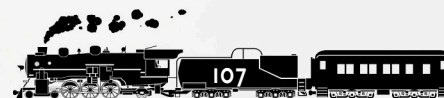
"It — it can't be..." I exclaimed.

"Godrick Gryffindor!" Potter gasped.

The wizard blinked helplessly up at us and nodded.

"How is he still alive?" Potter asked.

I had been wondering the same thing, too. A great many witches and wizards live to extreme old age, take Griselda Marchbanks who had tested Albus Dumbledore in his N.E.W.T.s,





or even Albus himself. Still, there was no record of someone lasting a thousand years...

"Unless..." I said, looking at the suddenly menacing hat on Potter's head.

Potter rolled his eyes to see its brim.

"Figured it out, have you?" gloated the hat.

I snatched it off the boy's head in time to save him from the worst of the bad poetry.

"Two wizards in agreement 'til the ending of all time

"I'm just a handy vessel for the outcome of a..."

I shook the thing. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! You're not in the Great Hall now, you moth-eaten artifact!"

"Was he going to say 'crime'?"

"Now you see why I didn't suggest Ravenclaw," the hat snarked.

"At least you didn't suggest Slytherin," I sighed.

"Actually, I said he'd do well there."

"I should cut you into little pieces and stuff throw pillows with your remains!"

"I asked for Gryffindor," Potter said unhelpfully. "Did you know you could do that?"

"What?" I glared at the hat. "Are you trying to tell me the Sorting is entirely ARBITRARY?!"

The hat opened its stringy maw. "Of course it is! You can't sort children like socks! What the hell is the matter with you people?" it shouted.

"What's the matter with *us*?" I shouted back, crinkling its brim. "Don't you know? Don't you even suspect?"

"I know more than I can say, but I can ask you a few questions..."

"Not in rhyme. Please, Merlin, not in rhyme!"

"Who left his post? Who disappeared?

"Whose name is villified?

"Whose house is full of bitterness?

"Whose students pushed aside?"

"Slytherin... Salazar Slytherin..." I wrapped my hands around the joining of the brim and crown. "Say it! You know what they did!"

It sagged in my hands. "My enchantment still bars me from speaking."

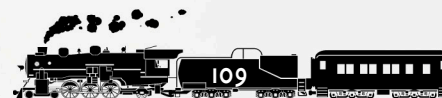
The usual implosion of air heralded Helga Hufflepuff's arrival. She drifted, or rather dribbled, down to Gryffindor's side. "Did you suspect?" I asked her.

She seemed to have done, but she couldn't say. Materializing in this world was too much for her and she bubbled frenetically.

Gryffindor was my last hope. I gripped the arms of his chair. "Why did you do this? Why?"

"He can't answer you!" Potter shouted. "He's like a million years old!"

Gryffindor guttered out a senseless sound. I let go of his chair and sank to the dusty floor. All my childhood I had been urged to seek Slytherin House. The bright people went there, the ones who got ahead. The skillful ones, the ingenious ones, the ones who moved our world. The reality was so different — pushed aside, despised, spit on, hated, all because of what they said about Slytherin himself and his stated goals. Were they real? Had they ever been real? I didn't even try to Occlude my feelings. What would be the use? Just more energy sapped





when I needed it.

Potter grabbed my arm. "Professor?"

"You don't understand," I said. "All my life... I..."

"I know I can't really understand but... we have a job to do."

"Yes."

I succeeded in pulling myself together. The old man wanted to die. I couldn't blame him. Imagine being stuck down here for centuries while life moved on above, ultimately being more marginalized than Slytherin House, left with the memories of what he had done until his mind rotted with the waste and the guilt...

It would take careful reckoning to grant him his wish. The hat housed a piece of Gryffindor's soul, gotten through a method and a victim I didn't care to contemplate, for a wholly necessary purpose from what I had read on the walls. I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that Slytherin submitted to this willingly, for the sake of the school. The hat couldn't have been wrong about everything.

The hat would have to be destroyed, then nature would take its course. A man as old as he would crumble to dust on the spot. I thought about the spells evidenced in the magical graffiti, not minding what Potter was doing.

"This must be done extremely..." I began, but Potter was too quick. He had the sword, he grabbed the hat just as I said, "carefully" and sliced through its leather, snickering the sword until only strips were left.

A darkly blinding light shot from the hat as a brilliant flash illuminated old Gryffindor. The old man froze in shock.

He doesn't think. He never thinks. He just rushes in and

does, without a thought of what might happen. He thinks with his gonads, not his brain! Stupid, idiotic...

"Potter, you imbecile!!" I shouted.

"What?" he shot back in annoyance.

"All spells die with the caster!"

"So?"

"So does this castle look like it stands up by itself?"

The castle answered with an ominous rumble and shifting ground. Stones grated together. Dust dropped in increasingly larger drifts from the vaults overhead. The castle would *collapse*...

The *students*...

I gripped my wand. I didn't know what I would do, but I had to do something. I'm responsible...

My runner. Potter's good for something, even if it is nervous energy. "Get everyone out —" I shouted.

He ran two steps; he stopped. "What about...?"

The bedrock heaved. There was no time. "*Do it now!!!*"

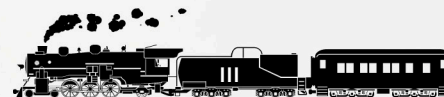
Potter fled. I turned to the dying ancient one before me. He held the power, he could pass me the enchantment...

"Give it to me!" I told him. "I am the headmaster!"

With his dying breath Godrick Gryffindor reached up and touched my head. My mind expanded until I thought my brain would burst. Strange words badgered at me, fell from my mouth. Anglo-Saxon... Norman... damned development of the English language!



Harry Potter plunged ahead, covering his mouth against the foggy poison, sticking through the door like some long, skinny bean.





He paused, caught his breath, then aimed his wand up at the outflow of magic and a silver bolt shot out. He turned back to the door and kicked it but both he and the door remained intact. There would be no rescue for Severus Snape. Left with nowhere to go, Harry went up.

The silver stag landed in the center of the Great Hall. Harry Potter's voice tumbled from its mouth: "Evacuate the castle! Get everybody out!" The students rose as one and the prefects led them from the hall. Minerva McGonagall stood at the head's place watching the orderly retreat. There had been complaints when Severus instituted fire drills the year before — just another onerous duty for the students — Hogwarts would never burn. Now all their training came in handy... She glanced up. The sky above the Great Hall shifted and swayed.

The teachers followed the students out. Draco and Harry fell into step beside Minerva.

"Where is Severus?" Minerva asked.

Draco looked at Harry.

Harry looked at his feet.



In the deepest tower of Hogwarts school a single man chanted the ancient spell which had held the castle intact for centuries as masonry began to fall. He did not seem to know the place or himself, only the words. Something began to take shape, a diaphanous gel, separating and running together in the rain of stone.

"Rest now."

The man reeled to the floor.



The students huddled with their houses as the prefects took roll. The ground shuddered and roared beneath their feet. Head Girl Luna Lovegood approached the staff. "All of the students are present, Professor McGonagall."

Minerva nodded, a wavering smile on her lips, then turned her attention back to the castle. The towers were swaying back and forth. Chunks of stone tumbled from the highest points and bounced down the wildly tilting walls.

The castle bowed, then seemed to shrink. The roar grew louder, drowning every other sound. A cloud of dust spurted into the air as the astronomy tower snapped in two. She couldn't even hear herself call his name.



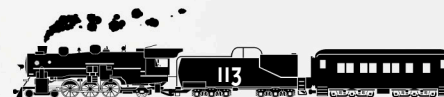
Mortar, stone and dust rained down in the secret chamber. A random beetle buzzed in the air...

A hand grabbed the man's arm. "Yikes! Time to get out of here!"

The students whirled in surprise at the sound of Apparition. No one could Apparate on Hogwarts' grounds, not while the spells were in place...

But then, the spells weren't in place any more. The snow, sign of the season, was melting; the castle was mere rubble...

"Scoop of the year!" Rita Skeeter crowed, lifting her camera to the skies. The headmaster dangled from her grip. She released him and clutched her camera with both hands. "This stuff is





golden! I got some racy stuff of you, you'll be thrilled to know..."

There was no answer. Rita frowned; she bent forward. Severus Snape lay motionless in the cold, wet grass...



Quiet.

Dark.

Light.

The bench was hard. The world was void.

Bench.

Quiet.

Void.

Oh for pity's sake!! Back at this accursed station. Maybe now I've shed enough baggage to go on. I was just settling in to contemplating my future when I heard footsteps. Now what...

Lily.

What to do? The last time I was here she tried to maul me. She sent me back. Do I defend myself or stake my claim to this bench?

So far, so good. She's only sat down...

Lily...

Words...

"I never stopped tormenting myself... I worked every minute to try to undo... I know forgiveness is impossible but I just... Wanted you to know."

Smile of angels. "I have already forgiven all. I have passed this stage."

Sheepish. "Oh. Uh... Well... Good..."

Determined. "It is time to come clean. Severus, it was me. I

gave your name to the ministry."

I didn't hear... "What?"

She gave my name... "Oh God."

She gave my name! "Oh my God!"

Agony!

Agony... Crying...

Lily...

Reach out to her. "I could never hate you... Never..."

Shorn and shriven...

"Nobody's perfect." I touched her shoulders. I let her cry on mine. When the weep-fest was over she leaned back and wiped her cheeks. She smiled — same old Lily.

"Oh, Severus, how did we get here?"

I looked around the station.

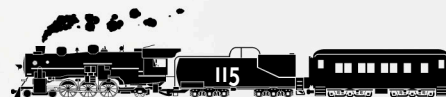
"We died."

"No!" Her hand was warm against my arm. "I mean, how did we get to the place where we both betrayed each other? I did it first — was that it?" She sighed. "It's all right to say anything at all now. It's over."

"I didn't know you were the one. I was angry... I thought you betrayed me long before then. You... laughed at me. I tried to warn you about Lupin, that he was a werewolf, but you wouldn't believe. We were friends. Best friends! I couldn't handle it!"

"We were friends, but... best friends?" Her eyes were soft, her expression concerned. "I liked you, but no more than anyone else. I like people. You know that! What made you think we were so close?"

"I don't know." I leaned forward. "I needed a best friend.





There was no one, until you. Your sister called me a freak, or weird, something — everybody did. You didn't. Before you, I was alone. I hated my clothes, my hair, my family, my home, my magic, everything. It's a terrifying world when there's no one. Even freaks find some mistaken memories and cling to them."

"You're not a freak."

I snorted. "I couldn't even hold the castle up, and he gave me the magical wherewithal to do it. I was too weak. I was... that world was never my home. I was a misfit in the Wizarding World, a freak in the Muggle world. I never belonged. They're better off with me where I am."

She held her hand out to me. "I have something to show you."

I took her hand. Suddenly, we were children again, running through the playground grass. She was dressed in that swiny skirt — girls don't dress like that nowadays, pity — she smiled back at me and my ill-fitting clothes.

Then she was kneeling in front of me, for all the world like my mum. She cupped my face in her hands and smiled sadly, then embraced me.

"Off you go now..."

"Go? But aren't I..."

She still cupped my face, though she had to stand and look up at me to do it. "No — I just wanted a word with you..."

I felt myself go topsy-turvy.

Grass... *the playground...*

Hands... *Lily's, Mum's...*

Groan.

Touching...

Don't try to sit up.

Urgh... I had to...

Lay back...

Sit down...

Stand to attention...

"What part of 'Don't try to sit up' didn't you understand?"

Vance...

"The up part... Which way is up..?"

Screaming...

"Oh my God! Hogwarts!"

Mocking...

"Oh my God! Potter broke the whole school!"

Potter...

"Did Potter survive?"

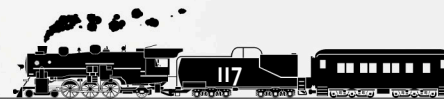
"Yes, everyone is fine!"

"Excellent. I'm going to kill him. As soon as I find out which way is up."



I sat outside Hagrid's hut on a rough-hewn bench and watched the ruckus that had started with the fall of Hogwarts. Parents began arriving to take their children home. Students whose parents had not yet come ran off their excitement over the newly-revealed grass. Skeeter interviewed anyone she could manage to waylay; Vance expressly forbade her to speak to me until I was in better shape. Truthfully, I felt better than I had in years. The weight of my own guilt had been lifted at last.

"Severus?"





I moved over to make room for Minerva on the bench. She had salvaged my robe from the staff room while I was exploring the ancient secrets of the dungeons with Potter and she handed it to me now. I shrugged it on, a headmaster without a school.

I was glad she had stopped. I wanted to thank her for visiting me so often in the hospital, and for everything else she had done, but she spoke first. "Last year..." She squinted through her glasses, rubbed at a spot with her robe, then went on. "I feel like such a fool for never realizing what was happening!"

This stopped me. She had a quick mind; it was one of the things I admired about her. "You did realize what was happening. I must have Obliviated you ten times! It was very irritating. I also had to plant some suggestions..."

I should have eased into that rather than dump it the way I did. Her face became stony, her eyes glinted coldly, her mouth pursed to a small white button. I recalled too late that it was never a good idea to get on the bad side of Minerva McGonagall. She had kept her head down that last year, leading me into a false sense of security.

"Now, don't get excited," I said in an attempt to mollify her. "Your heart..."

She shook her finger at me. "Never you mind my heart, young man — give me back my memories!"

I cowered. "I used your own wand... you can get them yourself!"

She was the same Minerva I had known as a student and later as a colleague. Nothing changes her... My emotions were breaking down again. I couldn't control them. I covered my face and cleared my throat. "Excuse me, Occlumency's gone..."

She softened. Her hand rested on my arm. "It becomes you, my boy."

Filius and Pomona suggested we all go down the pub. I welcomed the distraction and Minerva seemed delighted with the idea. It had been a long night. Once the last students had been collected, the remaining adults gathered to set off.

"Are you coming?" Skeeter asked. She made it attractive — her hands rested on her bouncy hips and a wicked smile curled her mouth.

"I'll come along in a bit."

I didn't want to be cooped up with these people in a small parlor. I wanted to enjoy my first real night of freedom.

"Are you sure?" Skeeter pressed, but Vance cleared her throat.

I transfigured my robe into a blanket and wrapped myself in it. The group set off, leaving me to myself. I moved to a small knoll overlooking the foggy lake and just looked.

"How lovely the evening is," I said, watching the steam of my breath dissipate in the air.

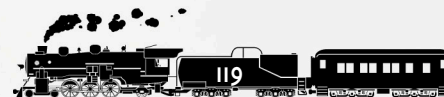
The grass rustled beside me. "I'm sorry," Vance said, "I'll have to stay... You are behaving a bit oddly."

"Am I?"

We sat for a while. She didn't press me. I looked up at the star-strewn heavens. I owed... no, I wanted to share my thoughts with her. "My roof has fallen in," I misquoted, "...and now I may see the stars."



FINIS





This is the end of the line for Trains. Thanks, Syd!
THE TRAINS IN THIS COUNTRY ARE A DISGRACE
was a fun ride. I'm sorry it's over.

REGARDING + TRAINS



he first thing to keep in mind regarding THE TRAINS IN THIS COUNTRY ARE A DISGRACE, is the fact that 'TRAINS' does not exist.

It quite literally does not exist. There *is no* comic book entitled THE TRAINS IN THIS COUNTRY ARE A DISGRACE. None. Neither as a professional publication, nor a desktop-produced hardcopy, nor online. There is no such comic.

Mind you, the story line for such a comic exists, and rather a lot of sketches (something close to a couple of hundred) for such a comic in varying stages of roughness also exist.

'TRAINS' is the creation of the LiveJournalist Sydpad, posted over the course of a year and a half following the release of HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS.

This Lj was at first friendlocked, and has now been purged. My understanding is that this was first done to prevent prospective coworkers, or (what is rather worse) prospective employers from stumbling across the artist's rough, unfinished work. This



is an issue of professionalism.

Sydpad originally arranged to add prospective readers to a custom friendslist enabling them to read the posts of the work as they originally appeared. The friendslock was designed to limit access to 'TRAINS' to Harry Potter fans, rather than leaving it open to the general public. The journal has since been purged, evidently for reasons.

On a slightly different track, there may in fact be a few undocumented DIY specials related to 'TRAINS' lurking on private hard drives, generated by fans who have downloaded the sketches and assembled something like facsimiles of the nonexistent comic, very much in the same spirit that Ceridwen has written this "novelization" of the story line. Sydpad, the creator of the original script and concept (to say nothing of the sketches) gave tacit permission to the readers of her posts to do so before locking her journal. I know that I did one, myself. But these facsimiles are not publicly posted, and never will be.

For, after all, 'TRAINS' stubbornly continues to not exist.

It should also be noted that, along with any number of other fans, Sydpad (and Ceridwen) have adopted Bagheera's story, FIVE MOMENTS OF DOUBT as their preferred version of potential 7th year "canon," and that the story line of 'Trains' (in both iterations) makes express mention of one of the turning points of Bagheera's story in its resolution.

Bagheera's story may be found at:

<http://www.fanfiction.net/u/169884/bagheera>

Слѣдѣннѣ

The layout and formatting of this document was created in Adobe InDesign.

Cover and interior graphics (apart from the TRAINS drawings) were created in Adobe Photoshop. Stock photography is from Liquid Library (formerly Dynamic Graphics), a division of Jupiterimages. The drawings for TRAINS are by Sydpad.

Fonts used in the project are: The Priori families (both serif and sans), by Johnathan Barnbrook, distributed by Emigré foundry. Dingbats are from the Priori families. All railroad dingbats are from RailFonts.com.

Special mention should probably also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book.

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