

Summary:

Snape is told some bad news, and it goes downhill from there

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1. [Chapters 1](#) by Lexin

2. [Chapter 2](#) by Lexin

3. [Chapter 3](#) by Lexin

4. [Chapter 4](#) by Lexin

Chapters 1 by Lexin

Snape looked down at his seventh year students with dislike. Right under his nose - he'd put them there years before - were Granger and Longbottom, his brightest student and the dullest boy he'd ever had the displeasure of teaching. He hoped he'd been thoroughly successful in putting Longbottom off creating any kind of potion for as long as he lived. There were more than enough charlatans in the wizarding world and potion making tended to attract those with little power and no talent. Longbottom had yet to get through a term without a poisoning, an explosion or a destroyed cauldron. In a good term he could manage all three. He must most assuredly be put off creating anything which might escape into the water supply.

Snape's eye moved on to Granger. To clever for her own good, that one.

Next to them, Potter and Weasley. This Weasley was without his twin brothers' casual malice, but was content to slide through school just getting by. What a waste of a mind. Dumbledore's golden boy, Potter, he dragged down with him,. Everything bounced off Potter from Voldemort's curse to threats to punishments. He lacked his dead father's effortless brilliance, but would make a fine wizard if he worked. Which he didn't.

Not a boy any longer of course; over the last summer he'd grown and was on the edge of turning into a man. He'd never be tall and Snape wondered if he regretted it. Weasley was tall - he even topped Snape by an inch - but Potter was only a little better than small.

They all looked at him nervously as he started the lesson. He had one more year to teach them something worthwhile. It wasn't nearly long enough.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me, Severus."

"I had a choice? It's a little late to tell me that now." Snape stirred his tea - black China tea, which was what Dumbledore always gave him. He'd never asked whether Snape liked it or not.

Dumbledore leaned back, uncharacteristically quiet. Then he said, "I have something to tell you."

"Oh? I take it this is bad news or you wouldn't have dragged me here."

"Bad? Well, I suppose it depends on how you look at it. I think you will see it as bad news, which is why I wanted to talk to you alone."

"Go on." Snape waited for the other shoe to drop.

"You are aware of course of Merlin's Curse?"

Snape searched his memory. "That strange prophecy about the birth of the Protector? A sort of wizarding Arthur who acts as lock and ward, protects the country from invasion, Dark magic and other nasties?"

"That's the one." Dumbledore stretched his long legs out.

"Oh." Snape waited.

"You're not making this any easier, Severus."

"It might help if I could see where this was leading, Headmaster." Snape knew he was using his silkiest and most dangerous tone, something he rarely did with Dumbledore.

"The Protector--" Dumbledore stopped. "It's a tricky thing to fulfill the prophecy exactly, hasn't been done for at least six hundred years. But there is an opportunity soon, and with the Dark rising we must try."

"We? In what way am I to be included in your machinations? My life as a faux Death Eater is quite exciting enough, without taking part in prophecy fulfillment."

"I am afraid this can't be done without you, Severus." Dumbledore poured more tea. "You will not be aware of it, but I am the keeper of the Orb of Light. The Orb exists to choose the parents of the Protector. I am afraid that you are one of them."

"Me? Headmaster, you are mad!" Snape choked on his tea. "And I warn you, if the other parent is either Bulstrode or Granger I categorically refuse to lay a hand on either of them. Bulstrode is far too ugly and Granger enough to make the bravest man turn tail and run."

"No, it's not Miss Granger or Miss Bulstrode. I think you may be doing Miss Bulstrode a disservice, I'm sure she has many fine qualities."

"Professor McGonagall seems rather old to be taking on motherhood."

"Or Professor McGonagall."

Snape sighed. "I could sit her all evening and guess through every woman and girl in the school, but that would waste even more of my time. At least give me one good laugh - who is it?" "It's Potter."

Silence. Snape cursed all magical objects to the lowest region of hell. He fell back on lying.

"Headmaster. Potter is a boy. Where's the foetus going to gestate? Are you going to keep it in a box?"

Dumbledore ignored the tone, and the words. "Inside you."

That man knew more than was good for him - entirely too much, in fact. "Me? You mean I'm going to be this unfortunate brat's mother? You are joking. I've had entirely too much of being used." He hadn't meant to add that last bit, he must be angrier than he thought.

"You..."

Snape said, "If this is some kind of obscure joke at my expense, it's not funny. If it's not a joke, then I hope you find someone else to help you, because I won't." He put his cup down. "Thank you for the tea, Headmaster. I have things I must be doing."

There was a knock at the workroom door, and Snape looked up. "What do you want, Potter?"

"A...well, to talk to you."

"About what?"

"May I come in?"

"You are in, but shut the door." Snape had more than an idea what this might be about.

Potter looked around, but by now knew better than to touch any ingredients. Snape stared at him. Finally, Potter spoke. "The Headmaster... He told me about Merlin's Curse. I just wanted to say, I'm prepared to go along with it if you are."

Snape looked him up and down. "But I'm not."

"I knew you hated me. I just didn't think you hated me that much. To risk everything we've worked for."

"Did Dumbledore tell you to use that line?" Snape was curious. "Believe me, Potter, there are thousands of wizards in the world, and I don't want to carry a child for any of them. From that aspect, my objections to this idea are not personal to you." "Is there someone else?" Potter asked.

Snape almost smiled. "In a manner of speaking."

"Then...why didn't you tell the Headmaster? I'm sure he'd understand." "It's not that simple. Now, Potter. Go."

Snape looked up from clearing the mess left by his third years to find the Headmaster looking down at him from a vantage point by the door. He wondered how the Headmaster did that, because he was actually shorter than Snape, if not by much. The Headmaster said, "Harry told me he'd talked to you."

"Yes."

"He told me what you'd said. You are not involved with anyone else."

"No. I also told him it wasn't that simple."

Dumbledore sighed. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Not particularly. It's not a very pleasant thing to talk about and I would prefer to forget it as far as possible. And if you are about to suggest that talking about it might help, I will tell you that my experience has been otherwise."

"I see." Dumbledore moved over to him. "Severus?" "Yes?" Wary, quiet.

"About the prophesy. I am afraid refusal may not be an option."

"I was afraid of that. Does Potter know?"

"I haven't told him. At least, not yet."

Snape sighed, hoping Dumbledore wouldn't hear it. "I was hoping it was all over."

"What?"

He shook his head. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

"You'll go along with it?"

"I'd rather not."

"You know what's at stake?"

"The free world? Or, at least, a world to be free in? Of course." He tried not to sigh again. "I just wonder what you're going to do to force me, because it will take force."

Dumbledore looked hurt; Snape was surprised that anything he said had the power to hurt Dumbledore. "I would never... I would like to persuade you."

"To sacrifice myself for others? Again? I did that once before and got precious little thanks for it. I think once is enough per lifetime, don't you, Albus?"

"You were a Death Eater, but turned back to the Light. It was a fine, brave thing you did."

Snape dried his hands on a towel he kept there for the purpose. He said, "Do you know why my information was so good? It was the best you had."

"Yes it was. You were in Voldemort's inner circle, close to him."

"Not exactly. I was Voldemort's...well, I suppose he would say lover, though there precious little love was involved. I was a body he used to satisfy himself when he felt that kind of need. He gave me the Mark to be sure he could trust me - which is something of a joke, I'm sure you'll agree." Snape saw Dumbledore's face. "No, I would imagine it's very difficult to believe that Voldemort felt anything as straightforward as lust, and you'd be right. He didn't."

"I-- I had no idea."

"Because I didn't want you to know. You see now the risk I am running posing a Death Eater. And you see the cosmic joke in your Orb choosing me for anything."

"You cannot continue--"

"If I'm prepared to take the risk I don't see--"

"That isn't what I meant. Voldemort doesn't - didn't - want you, surely--"

"No, any handy receptacle would have done. He just preferred the one he was used to, whose reactions he could predict."

Dumbledore took a deep breath, "Listen to me, Severus, please." Snape waited, tense.

Dumbledore went on, "He didn't want you because you attracted him."

Snape said, "Oh, please! Don't spare my feelings. I'm well aware I've never been beautiful." He spat the word out as if it was the foulest epithet, and even Dumbledore took a step backwards.

"He wanted you because of what you represent, he wanted to make you useless to us. You cannot let him succeed."

Snape swallowed the first words which came to mind and thought for a moment. He said, "You really are a manipulative bastard, Albus."

Potter again, waiting at the door of the dungeon as his class left. Snape merely looked enquiring, he couldn't think of anything he might wish to say. What he wanted to do, whenever he saw Potter or Dumbledore was scream and throw things, but he held on to his dignity as tightly as he could - he might as well, he might not have it much longer.

Potter came in. "Professor Snape?"

Snape carried on looking what he hoped was enquiring while he stirred the cauldron holding the one potion that had worked. Snape detested waste. "Professor Dumbledore tells me you've agreed."

"Has he?" Snape didn't remember doing that exactly. The best he could say was that he wouldn't fight it.

"That's what he said." Potter waited, possibly for him to say something. When he didn't, Potter went on, "What happens next?"

"It's Dumbledore's game. No doubt he'll let us know." Snape looked up at Potter from the cauldron; the boy seemed worried. "It won't be straightforward," Snape said. Nothing to do with that man ever is, he thought, "But I expect we'll manage." He realised it wouldn't do to alienate Potter, they'd have to do this together. He just didn't have to like it.

Dumbledore supplied them both with tea and biscuits, he seemed to take an extraordinary amount of time over it. This was going to be embarrassing, Snape realised. He knew why Dumbledore had arranged to have Potter there, but felt he'd rather he wasn't. Dumbledore's eyes twinkled over the teacups - and why not? He was getting what he wanted from both of them.

"I'm sure you both have a lot of questions," Dumbledore said.

"How..." Potter started, then seemed to think better of it, then changed his mind again. "How is Professor Snape going to..."

"That's up to the Professor," Dumbledore's eyes twinkled even more, if that were possible. "I would suggest the Charm of the Valyard, but--"

Snape broke in, "That won't be necessary."

"Severus?"

"You can take it up with Poppy, but you can forget your wand waving. I can do what is necessary myself, I don't need your help."

"There is one other thing," said Dumbledore, taking another biscuit.

"What?" Snape was suddenly wary.

"You must marry. The full binding ritual."

"What?" Snape stood. "You have no integrity at all, do you? Ruin my life if you must, there wasn't much left of it anyway, but he's seventeen!"

Dumbledore waved Snape back to his seat, "If there was any other way you know I wouldn't insist. But there isn't."

It was...hard...to continue teaching as if nothing had happened with that hanging over him. Potter didn't seek him out this time, but stayed behind after the seventh years' Potions class. Entirely without preamble he said, "What did you mean?"

"About what?"

"What you said in Dumbledore's office."

"Professor Dumbledore," Snape corrected automatically.

"I don't give a stuff! I want to know what you meant."

Snape looked across the room, he could see a face looking in, curious. "Not here and not now. Come to my office after my last class. It's at four, should be over by five."

"Very well." Potter turned on his heel with an impressive swirl of cloak. Which left Snape with one problem. What to tell him.

Potter said, "Look, I know you don't love me...just the opposite...but we could divorce. Afterwards, I mean."

"That's just it." Snape sat on the edge of the desk feeling obscurely that it gave him an advantage to look down. He could see he'd have to explain in more detail - curse Potter for being brought up by Muggles. "The origins of marriage in the wizarding world lie in the Roman tradition where there were two forms, one which allowed couples legal divorce and one which didn't. Binding doesn't - it's the 'strict form' of marriage. Whatever either of us does, whatever we come to think of each other, we remain married until one of us dies. It's the marital equivalent of a wizard's bond, an unbreakable magical contract. Though," he added with a ghost of gallows humour, "I suppose a death could be arranged."

"No. Apart from anything else, Dumbledore told me that the child will need both parents at least until it's twelve."

"I see. I wonder what else he's told only one of us?" Snape thought for a moment. "Have you ever had the feeling you're caught in a long dark tunnel and there's no way out?" He winced - he

hadn't meant to say anything so personal to Potter of all people.

"Yes. The whole year of the Triwizard Tournament. I know how it feels." There was a moment of curiously peaceful, bleak silence. "We'll manage," said Potter, finally.

"Ever the optimist." Snape had meant to sound sarcastic, but that wasn't how it came out.

Another of those long silences, while Snape considered what it would be like being stuck with Potter for the rest of his life. Then Potter asked, "What did you mean when you said that a spell wouldn't be necessary? Are you going to take a potion?"

"I...yes. But that's not quite what I meant." Snape felt his throat constrict, and waited for it to pass.

"I was hoping no-one need ever know - who doesn't already, that is. But you will have to. Did Dumbledore--?"

"Professor Dumbledore."

"Don't be insolent, Potter. It's very irritating. Do you want to hear this or not?"

"Go on."

"Did he tell you about me and Voldemort?" Snape found his past difficult to put into words.

"He said Voldemort raped you."

"In a sense that is true. I was given to him as a toy...and that was how he treated me. Voldemort liked to make full use of his toys, so he had certain adjustments made."

"That's weird. Such as?"

Snape swallowed, "He had the sexual organs of a Muggle girl transferred into me. Or most of them. I hear her screams still. I don't know what they did with rest of the body. Dropped it down a pit, probably."

"That's..." Potter had paled. Snape couldn't tell if it was the prospect of touching him, what had happened to the girl or the revelation of his past association with Voldemort. Perhaps it would have been better to keep these things separate, but it was hard enough to tell anyone about it, without dragging it out.

"Sick. I thought so." Snape took a deep breath. "Her name was Valerie Jamieson. That's what she was screaming as they cut into her. I swore I wouldn't forget her. I never have."

"Oh. Oh...that's really-- I am so sorry."

"I am telling you because you need to know, not so that you can pity me."

"I realise that. But I am sorry."

"You'll tell Dumbledore," said Snape. Another secret he couldn't keep.

Potter looked at him levelly. "Not if you don't want me to." Potter stood and took a turn round the room to return finally to stand beside Snape. He reached out and before Snape could stop him had taken hold of one of his hands. "I like your hands," he said casually. "I always have." Snape tried to pull away, but Potter held on. "I need to ask you something."

"What?"

"Will you bind to me?"

"I thought we didn't have an alternative?"

"We haven't. But I thought I should ask anyway."

"In that case, I accept your proposal."

Potter kissed the hand he was holding, "I am honoured," he said. "Thank you." He smiled into Snape's eyes but didn't attempt to kiss him again. Snape watched him go with a mixture of fear and relief.

"It will have to be soon," Dumbledore said.

Snape exchanged glances with Potter. "We thought you wouldn't want to wait," said Snape.

"When?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"That soon?" said Snape. "I'll forgo the trousseau, then." He looked at Potter again, wondering what he was thinking. Strangely, Snape felt as if he ought to apologise, though for what he couldn't have said. The mere fact of his existence, perhaps?

He heard Potter mutter, "What am I going to tell Sirius?" It was as if he'd stepped into a cold bath. In-laws. Sirius Black, a man he'd loathed at school and whom he still hated as an adult. Potter's godfather. It was a reminder that he was bonding with a boy young enough to be his son, whose father was an exact contemporary. It was enough to make a cat laugh.

"You must tell him what you think best," Dumbledore gave Potter that fatherly look, but it didn't

seem to comfort him.

Sirius Black stood in the doorway and scowled, and Snape restrained his irritation with difficulty. Black said, "This is an obscene idea." His voice still had that strange rasping quality it had acquired in Azkaban. Snape thought him surprisingly calm, and wondered if for once Dumbledore had been on the receiving end of Black's famous temper. It would make a change if he had.

"For once we are agreed," Snape said. He pushed aside the fifth years excuses for essays on Ocularis potions. "I don't want Potter any more than he wants me, but I don't think Dumbledore's joking."

"It'll ruin Harry's life."

"It's not going to do a lot for mine."

"You really don't want to." A statement, not a question.

"No." Snape saw Black's look and sighed. "Despite what you might think, my sexual interest in my students is nil. My interest in that particular student is less than nil - I don't even like him, let alone want to have sex with him. If you can think of a way to get Potter - and me - out of this stupid mess I suggest you produce it and quickly. I'm sure Potter will be extremely grateful." He paused. "I know I will."

The room actually contained only four people, but Snape's initial impression had been of a crowd.

He was revolted to see that Black had brought his pet werewolf. Of all the people in the room, Lupin looked the most welcoming - Black clearly wished him dead, Potter looked more panic stricken than he did before Quidditch matches and Dumbledore was concentrating on something else, probably the details of the binding spell.

Nobody spoke.

Finally, Dumbledore came back from cloud-cookoo land and noticed him. He smiled. Snape didn't smile back. "Severus," he said. "Please stand here."

Snape moved across the room to stand where he was told.

"And Harry here."

Potter came over and stood, facing him. Snape could see his eyes, wide and green behind the awful glasses he always wore. He looked even more scared close up.

It was surprisingly easy to let his mind drift as Dumbledore performed the Binding. All he was expected to do was allow him to bind their arms with the rope made of new hemp from the elbow to the fingers, hands splayed palm to palm. To his slight surprise, Potter's hand wasn't that much smaller than his own.

He had hoped the spell wouldn't work. While a perfect match was not required, it couldn't be fully completed if the couple were totally wrong for each other, but he could feel the forces swirl around him, and knew it had been successful. He came out of the spell-induced haze to see Black's eyes on him again. Couldn't the man leave it alone? It wasn't as if he'd chosen this, consent notwithstanding. He wanted, desperately, to be alone.

Potter, he noticed, looked as if he'd received a sudden blow to the head. He remembered the boy didn't have that much experience with mind spells. He wished he could say the same.

"Congratulations to you both," Dumbledore said. Snape stared at him as if he were mad.

"Oh, er...thank you," he heard Potter say, and Black gave a snort of derision. Lupin looked poker faced. They all stood around for a few moments; it seemed that nobody wanted to be first to break the silence which followed.

In the end he did - he had to get away. "I have a potion to prepare. If you will excuse me?" It wasn't even a lie.

Dumbledore nodded, "Of course, Severus."

He left, closed the door and then leaned against it in relief. He heard Potter say, "He's not taking it well."

Lupin's voice replied, "You can't expect him to."

"It's a lot to expect of Harry, too." Black of course, quick to protect his godson.

"How are you feeling, Harry?" Dumbledore, doing his kindly old grandfather act.

"I-- I don't know. OK, I suppose."

Snape pulled himself away from the door and made himself walk down to the dungeon. He wanted to run, wanted shut himself away and never see anyone again.

Mixing the Yvladis potion was a complex discipline for the mind and it calmed him. The purpose of it receded from his consciousness, and it became simply an intellectual exercise like Arithmancy in its purest form.

Snape wasn't a teacher whom many students would seek out, but there was one. Of course, there would have to be. Draco Malfoy.

"Professor Snape?"

"Is it urgent?" Snape was careful to sound no more than politely interested. He was sure he knew what the problem was Dumbledore had insisted that he ignore the last summons from Voldemort, and someone was bound to check up on him.

"A message from my father." Malfoy put the parchment on the nearest desk. He looked curiously at the ingredients around Snape's worktable. "He thought sending it through me would attract less attention." Malfoy's eyes were narrowed.

"Thank him for me, he's very considerate." Snape continued to stir the potion with an unhurried movement. "If that's all, Malfoy, you can go." He didn't want Malfoy to see Potter anywhere near the dungeon - not with this brewing. He doubted he'd put two and two together, but one never knew. Malfoy looked annoyed. Such an abrupt dismissal was unusual, but he went. Snape returned to his contemplation of the strange pinkish Yvladis.

"I thought you would be here." Potter of course. "Was that Malfoy I saw leaving?"

"Did he see you?"

"No."

Snape looked up from the cauldron. "Invisible or merely hiding?"

"Hiding. Contrary to some people's opinion, I don't carry the cloak around on the off chance I might meet Malfoy." Potter stopped. "I don't like him, though."

"Contrary to some people's opinion, I don't like him either."

"You could have fooled me."

Snape stirred the potion, watching the darker pink swirl through it. Almost ready. "I did," he said. Potter came over and put an arm round Snape's shoulders. Snape moved away.

Potter said, "How are we going to..." what they were going to do he couldn't articulate, "...if you won't let me touch you?"

"I'll let you touch me when I'm ready. Until then, don't."

"Because of what happened to you?"

"You could say that." Damned perceptive boy.

Potter turned his attention to the potion. "What's this?" he asked.

"It will make certain that tonight will be successful." Snape tried to keep his voice steady.

"Oh."

It was actually quite pleasant, a light fruit taste but not quite any known fruit. He drank it slowly, aware of a strange sensation, neither heat nor cold but somehow composed of both, travelling through him.

Potter put an arm around him, and this time he didn't shake it off. Potter waited for a moment or two, then put the other one around him so that they were face to face. Potter said, "You'll have to tell me if I do this wrong. I don't have much experience."

Voldemort had never kissed him, not that Snape had wanted him to. Snape opened his mouth and endured Potter's slow exploration almost unmoving. They must start somewhere after all. It wasn't as unpleasant as he had expected, either. Odd, perhaps. But not unpleasant.

Potter said, "I think this will be possible."

"Good. I'd hate to have wasted everybody's time."

"You are a bastard, sometimes."

Not resisting took all the strength Snape had. Potter was careful; clearly he was nervous but Snape wasn't sure if that was because he was a man - well, maleish - or because he was a teacher. Likely it was both. He pulled away, and led Potter through his rooms to the bedroom. He allowed Potter to undress him, feeling the desire to run and hide grow worse. He wasn't used to being seen by anyone, his clothes carefully chosen to keep people away. Potter continued to

kiss him, which was strange. He noticed Potter had his eyes closed, and wondered what the boy was thinking of. Probably some girl.

Feeling vaguely light-headed, he helped Potter undress. He was slimmer than Snape had expected and he wondered about the huge clothes. Most strange.

Snape saw that Potter was looking at him and braced himself for some stupid remark, but Potter merely smiled, and led him towards the bed. His nervousness increased, instantly. He felt Potter's arms go round him, he was pulled into a close embrace, and wondered, as he occasionally had before, if the boy was borderline empathic.

He lay back on the bed, and took a couple of deep breaths. He could feel Potter lying beside him and knew he was watching. Snape wanted to hide his fear, was ashamed that he couldn't. Unlike Voldemort, Potter seemed content to wait; Snape could hear his soft breathing, feel just his hand on Snape's arm.

Potter leaned forward and Snape felt his breathing hitch, but all he did was kiss his shoulder, lightly. A lesson learned from one of Voldemort's other toys came back to him: 'If you can, pretend not to hate it.' Snape forced himself to calm as much as he could, and turned his head to meet Potter's mouth. Once again, kissing reminded him that this was not Voldemort.

He felt Potter's erection poking into his thigh, and the slow descent of the hand down his body. He didn't want to be touched, not there. He rarely touched his penis for any reason not concerned with hygiene. He covered the hand with his own before it could make contact. Potter accepted this, though his brow creased.

Despite himself, Snape was curious. Potter had said that he didn't have much experience and Snape had assumed that meant he was a virgin. It seemed not; he'd very obviously kissed before, and the way he touched Snape's body wasn't clumsy or rushed, more hesitant.

Snape let go of Potter's hand, hoping he wouldn't try that particular touch again. He didn't, he ran his hand down Snape's side to the top of his thigh, but no further. He made no comment, either, on the lack of an erection.

Snape reached out to the bedside table, where he'd left the phial. He managed not to knock it to the floor, which was a minor victory. Potter gave a nod of understanding and held his hand out. Snape would have preferred to do it himself, but if Potter wanted to... Snape handed it to him.

Potter's wet fingers touching him felt very strange, but even he couldn't associate it with Voldemort. Voldemort had never bothered with such petty considerations as whether his partner was ready for him, or even interested, and he supposed he should be grateful for the change. The fingers were replaced at last with a penis. Snape had felt it rather than seen it and it had felt larger than his memories. He'd therefore expected entry to hurt. It didn't. It wasn't a pleasant intrusion, and it was impossible to ignore, but nor was it the agony he remembered. And nor did Potter lean his dead weight on Snape, he partially supported himself so Snape didn't feel suffocated.

As his thrusts grew faster and deeper, Potter leaned down and kissed his chest, and neck and then his mouth. Snape allowed it; he hoped it would be over soon.

Afterwards he lay silent, wondering if Potter was asleep yet. One thing he had forgotten which now came back to him full force: if spunk dried in the crevices it itched like fury. He was desperate to wash it off, but he didn't want to wake the boy.

Then he felt it; a strange almost-tingle deep inside him, as if someone with a wand had cast Lumos. If he hadn't been lying so still he probably wouldn't have noticed it, so he was grateful for that at least. He'd never believed the tales he'd read of women feeling the moment of conception, and was rather surprised it had happened to him. Perhaps it was the potion.

The room was quite black so he couldn't look, but he could hear Potter's quiet, deep breathing. At least the boy didn't snore, though that would have had the advantage of signalling when he was properly asleep. Snape slid out of bed and made for the bathroom.

When he returned Potter was still asleep, but as he slid under the covers Potter moved towards him and murmured, "Missed you," quite distinctly. Snape waited for a moment. He wondered if he'd find out the name of Potter's dream girl, but he said nothing more.

Snape lay awake, staring up into the darkness.

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 2 by Lexin

The first few days weren't too bad; he felt vaguely dizzy like the day after a hangover, but nothing more. Lunchtime, three weeks in, the first bout of sickness hit him; he only just made it out of the Hall in time. He knew exactly what it was - he wasn't a fool after all, and groaned. This could go on for three months or more.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Dumbledore. Trust him to turn up when he wasn't wanted.

"Die in a ditch," said Snape, as another bout overtook him.

"Is there anything you can take?"

"Not safely."

"I'll see what I can do to rearrange your timetable," said Dumbledore.

"Please do. After all, what would people think if the Potions master started vomiting over his pupils?" Snape sighed - he wouldn't allow himself a groan. "Though I was fine with the potions, it was food that did it." He stopped. "Merlin's beard, Albus! Leave me to it, I can throw up perfectly well on my own, I don't need your help."

Potter came to see him, of course, later that day. "What happened at lunch?"

"Go away."

"But..."

"Get Granger to find you a book about babies. Better still, don't ask Granger, find one yourself."

"But..."

"Potter! Leave me alone." Potter went.

A couple of days later, he was back. Snape looked up, as Potter closed the door.

"How's the morning sickness?"

Snape stared at him, and said nothing.

"I found a book, just like you said. I didn't ask Hermione, I didn't think you'd want her to ask questions." Potter faltered, then said, "So, how is it?"

"Vile."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No."

They stared at each other. Potter said, "We're...we are married. I want to help."

"In that case, go away and stay away."

Absurdly in Snape's opinion, Potter looked hurt. "He's my baby, too."

"He?"

"You didn't know?"

Snape stared at him. He concentrated for a moment. Potter was right. This child was...would be...male. Well, good. Snape couldn't imagine his face on a girl - or Potter's, oddly enough. For all that Potter was still quite delicate looking, he was very masculine.

"Sirius asked how you were doing."

That was all he needed, Potter's psychotic godfather asking about his health. "Did he?"

"And Remus, too."

And the werewolf. What joy. "Oh," said Snape.

"I'll send them your regards, shall I?"

The reply that leapt into Snape's mind was 'no', but he didn't say it.

"I will anyway," said Potter.

"Why did you have to tell them?" Now he was being petulant, and he knew it.

"They're family. They're the only family I've got, really. Well, there's you and the baby, now, of course."

Snape was puzzled. "I thought you had Muggle relations," he said, before he could stop himself. Potter's face darkened, "I try not to think about them."

"Why?"

"I don't like them very much."

Snape took the shuttered expression on Potter's face as a hint and asked no more.

After that, Potter visited him at least once a week, occasionally twice. Snape realised it was difficult for Potter to come up with excuses to visit a teacher he didn't even like. On the other hand, no amount of sarcasm or insults made it less often.

About three months in, just when Snape's trousers were starting to feel a bit tight, Potter turned up for his weekly visit carrying something. Snape looked at it, and froze. "What the...?" he asked.

"This is a vashaheron," said Potter, cheerfully. "One of the snakes of the Medusa."

"I know what a vashaheron is. Why have you brought it here?"

Instead of answering, Potter said something to the snake. It uncoiled and slid down Potter's hand onto the desk. "Put your hand on the desk," said Potter.

"Why?"

"Istlani is going to protect you, at least until the baby is born." Potter sighed, gently. "If you don't put your hand down, she'll go up your trouser leg, and you really don't want that." "Their bite is fatal."

"In about a minute and a half, yes. But they make very faithful guards."

"How do you know the bloody thing won't bite me?"

"Because she gave her word," Potter said, as if this ought to be obvious. "Vashaheron provide a degree of magical protection."

"Voldemort is also a Parselmouth."

"I know. So does Istlani. But she's bound to me, not to Voldemort." Potter said something to the snake, which slid off the desk and down to the floor.

Snape shivered as the dry cold body crawled up his leg, but he didn't dare move. Slowly she slid up his body, his belly and chest, and down his right sleeve to curl round his wrist. "Not too tight," said Snape. She obligingly loosened just a little.

"She'll leave you alone when you're in your rooms, but you won't be able to go out without her."

Snape looked at the snake, curled round his wrist like a rather tacky basalt bracelet. She slid round to look at him in the eye - hers were green, rather like Potter's, he noticed. He frowned.

"I see Harry came up with a method of protecting you - not one I would have thought of, but efficient I've no doubt," Dumbledore's eyes twinkled.

"Yes," said Snape.

"What do vashaheron eat?"

"Potter hasn't told me, you'll have to ask him."

Snape no longer went to lunch, it simply wasn't worth it when he would have to run out again as soon as he smelled food so he didn't see Dumbledore most days until dinner. He saw the curious glance Dumbledore gave him as soon as he sat down, but he ignored it. Professor Podmore, the current Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher eyed the snake as he did every day.

"Severus?" Dumbledore rarely spoke loudly, but somehow he could be heard above the bustle of the students leaving the Hall after dinner.

"Headmaster?"

Dumbledore walked with him towards the dungeons, "Harry went to lot of trouble...and risk...to get that for you." He indicated Istlani.

"Did he? I didn't ask him to."

"He didn't mention his plan?"

"He doesn't confide in me."

Dumbledore looked saddened, "I had hoped...never mind."

"Hoped what?"

"It doesn't matter." They walked on a bit further then Dumbledore said, "Harry...he's doing his best, you know? This is all very new to him."

Cast in the role of evil bastard again, thought Snape. Why always bloody me?

Nobody said anything when he moved from trousers to the kind of flowing robes Dumbledore always wore. But then, plenty of wizards preferred them for whatever reason. He never had, but anyone could change. Even Potter was silent on the subject when he wandered along for his weekly duty visit. In any case, Snape let him in and ignored him, so he didn't get a chance to say much.

Snape hadn't worked out how Potter was feeding the snake, but it was still with him.

February turned into March and March into April. Nobody had mentioned that he was looking a bit fat, but at last he was able to start eating lunch again, which was a relief. However, now his back started to hurt, a generalised ache he found deeply annoying. He could see by the faces of his students that his tone had taken on an even more acid bite than usual. Snape just wanted it to be over, for this...thing...to be out of his body. He felt invaded and abused.

Another month, May, and he had piles, which was deeply humiliating. And he had to take every opportunity to go to the lavatory between classes. The baby had taken to sitting - or standing - on his bladder.

Potter still visited him every week, but no longer even attempted to open any kind of conversation.

Snape didn't know why, perhaps looking at the results of his handiwork was too much for him. Potter always stayed exactly two hours, though what significance it had for him, Snape had no idea. He also now brought a book to read - but then his NEWTs were drawing closer and a couple of hours reading in a quiet room couldn't harm him.

May crawled to a close; Snape thought this was becoming his longest year of teaching ever. In the last week in May, he rather exhaustedly started taking his seventh year class through the intricacies of invisibility draughts. Always tricky, these, and he watched Longbottom with particular concern - as he did Malfoy, whose marks and therefore his confidence were higher than he deserved.

Halfway through the lesson, Malfoy made the mistake of putting a hand on Snape's arm. It had been a cold May and Snape didn't feel it immediately through the weight of his robes; he first heard the hiss of Istlani at his wrist. He looked at Malfoy's face, frozen in a rictus of terror, and deliberately removed Malfoy's hand from his arm. Istlani calmed.

Then he saw Potter's face, looking not at him but at Malfoy. Snape knew full well that Potter and Malfoy despised each other, but even that didn't account for the look on Potter's face, a rage so powerful that had it been a spell it would have blown a hole in the wall and reduced Malfoy to a smoking heap.

As the class left he heard Granger say, "Harry, we have to talk." One person had been watching, then, but Granger never had missed a trick.

Whatever Potter said, he'd said it to both Granger and Weasley. Snape could tell that from the looks on both their faces at the start of the next lesson; Granger was better at hiding horrified astonishment than Weasley probably ever would be. Both of them had a way of looking at him, a gaze which would start at his face, then move down his body to come to rest somewhere around his middle and which made him want to throw both of them into detention for the rest of their natural lives.

Potter came along for his weekly visit, bringing the inevitable book. He knocked and came in, as he always did, then sat down in the only other chair in Snape's office. After a glance at Snape, he opened the book - Astronomy, Snape noted. He wondered if Potter was any better at Astronomy than he was at Potions.

Snape sat back and watched him. He'd changed over the last few months, he'd started to shave, Snape noticed, and this morning had cut himself slightly, as if he wasn't yet completely in practice. He wondered what Potter planned to do with his life, since any kind of legal marriage with anyone else was now out of the question. He supposed Potter could live with someone, if he could find any girl willing to overlook the fact that he had a spouse and child already. He hoped the dream girl wasn't Hermione Granger; he couldn't see her settling for second best.

Potter looked up from his book, and said, "Hermione guessed. She'd realised you were having a baby back in March. In Potions she guessed it had something to do with me."

"Why did you tell Weasley?" "He's my friend."

Oh, well, thought Snape, that explains everything. But...perhaps it does. I have no way of judging. But why did you tell a nobody like Weasley?

"What's wrong?" Potter asked.

"Nothing."

"Don't give me that; you look like someone cancelled Christmas. More than usual, even."

"It's nothing." Snape moved around, trying to get comfortable. The baby kicked him in protest.

"Why do you keep coming back?" he asked.

Potter thought about it. "We're...married," he said. "It seems the right thing to do. I don't want to leave you to face this alone."

"I won't be. Poppy will be there."

"It's not the same."

"I will be fine." Spoken with a confidence he didn't feel.

From his expression, it didn't convince Potter, but what he said was, "He's my baby, too." Then, in a smaller voice, he added. "I want to be part of it."

"You are. There's nothing anyone can do about that."

"And I'm your...husband, I suppose." Potter's brow creased. "Funny, I never thought I'd be anyone's husband, let alone have one."

Snape was puzzled. "Surely there are lots of pretty girls just throwing themselves at famous Harry Potter."

Potter's jaw tightened as it always did when Snape used that phrase. "There are," he said.

"Unfortunately, I'm not interested in girls."

"But..."

"I had a crush on one in fourth year. But that's all it was. Some boys who turn out to be straight get crushes on boys. I did it in reverse." He sat for a moment in silence, then added, "I've always wondered what would happen when someone got hold of the story and told the Daily Prophet. With wizard numbers being so small I've always had the feeling I'm expected to Set An Example." The capitals in the phrase were clearly visible. "You realise when it all comes out about you, you'll get the blame?"

"Yes." It was one of the things about their situation which haunted him. He could be even more hated than he already was.

"Nobody's going to blame Dumbeldore, that man's Teflon coated--"

"What?"

"Muggle thing, don't worry about it. And they'll probably say I was Led Astray." Again, the capitals were clear. "That leaves you, marriage or no legal marriage. You're stuck with the consequences of this, forever. Baby, quite possibly the sack if the governors overrule Dumbledore, marriage to a man half your age, forever being pilloried as the man who tricked 'famous Harry Potter' into it. I don't think anyone's going to be interested in the prophecy, even if we could tell them, which we can't."

Snape stared at him. Potter was brighter than he thought.

Potter went on, "Now do you see why I can't leave you to face this alone?"

"No, actually." He fully expected Potter to leave school, and him, and to be left alone to bring up their child. Part of him was looking forward to it.

"If you weren't such a fucking martyr I'd kill you myself," Potter sounded merely resigned.

"So you're..."

"Gay is what Muggles call it. Yes. And before you ask, I've never kept it a secret from either Ron or Hermione."

"That wasn't what I was going to ask."

Potter looked enquiring, but Snape didn't go on. He wasn't sure that he did want to know about Potter's sexual experience, and anyway didn't have the words to frame the question. And it occurred to him that as he and Potter were stuck with each other, it was probably better he didn't know.

Potter picked up his book again and went on reading. Snape went on marking essays and occasionally squirming when the baby moved inside him. Silence fell.

Finally, Potter stood and stretched. "I'd better be going."

Snape watched him leave, and then looked down at the snake. She slid round his wrist, scales rubbing together with a noise like crackling parchment.

Dumbledore came to see him; there seemed to be no obvious reason, and Snape wondered if Potter had said something to him. He accepted the tea Snape offered him, then asked, "How are you?"

"Ask Poppy." Snape had no intention of discussing his health with Dumbledore. Or anyone else for that matter.

"She wouldn't tell me even if I did. Nor should she."

"I'm coping."

"And the baby?"

"As well as can be expected."

"What does that mean?"

Snape sighed; expecting Dumbledore to stop pushing was like expecting the River Hog to flow back up the mountains. "I'm not designed for this, and that has to take its toll on him."

Dumbledore looked serious. "And on you, too?"

"Yes."

"And Harry?" Yes, it would all come back to him. As if Snape could ever forget.

"He is a true Gryffindor. Bloody annoying."

"He doesn't visit?"

"Just the opposite. Apparently it's his duty." The snake moved around Snape's wrist, tightening then releasing. He looked down at it, impatiently.

"He told you that?"

"Not in those words," Snape could feel a frown forming. "You're about to tell me what a suffering abused flower he is. Spare me that at least."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "You should try talking to him."

Snape had never been someone who slept easily or well, but as the baby grew he became worse. He had to sleep slightly propped up, and even then the baby woke him by kicking or moving - or resting on his bladder, which was worse.

Sat up in bed one night, merely resting his eyes, he heard a noise from his workroom. He sighed and heaved himself out of bed. The nightlight was on, but nothing else so there was a dim light. He walked slowly to the door and pushed it open.

Potter sat on the floor, cross legged, hissing to the snake. He picked up a knife - clearly very sharp - and cut his finger. Snape watched as the snake slid over to him; Potter continued the soft hissing and Snape wondered what he was saying. "What are you doing?" Snape asked.

Potter jumped, and looked round. "Feeding her."

"With your blood?"

"You'd rather it was yours?" Potter continued to drip blood into the open mouth of the snake.

"Why?"

"It's what she lives on."

"I meant, why are you doing it?"

"I can't be with you, and I need to be sure you're safe."

It was true that nowhere was completely safe, not even Hogwarts. But it still didn't answer the question, or not the one Snape had really asked. But Potter seemed determined to misunderstand.

"Isn't there an easier way?" Snape asked.

"Most of them wear off over time - usually just when you need it the most. And Istlani has a degree of intelligence, can react appropriately to a situation."

Snape had no reply to that. It was true the snake never reacted to Poppy Pomfrey's examinations, but she loathed Malfoy. Snape remembered too the look of rage on Potter's face. "Is it you who reads her mind, or her who reads yours?"

"Something of both. Shouldn't you be resting?"

"He won't let me."

"Oh." The snake fed, Potter performed a simple healing spell and stood up. For a moment, Snape envied him his easy athleticism. Potter said, "You haven't been to Voldemort since..."

"No. Dumbledore said he'd see through whatever disguise we came up with - especially magic. He wasn't - isn't - prepared to risk the baby."

"Or you?"

"Believe what you like."

"I do," said Potter, but he didn't expand on that. "You look tired," he added. "I think you should lie down."

"Don't tell me what to do!" For a moment he regretted his outburst, but he already had Dumbledore and Poppy Pomfrey on at him day and night, wanting what was best. "Suit yourself. Good night."

Term and the school year ended, to Snape's relief, and Potter left with the other students. Now it had come to it, Snape felt rather more alone than he had expected. Potter's weekly visits had been a burden, but now they had stopped he felt...abandoned. Dumbledore, who came to visit often, was no substitute.

A month after term ended, Poppy Pomfrey came to see him in the dungeon. "I thought you could do with not having to manage the stairs," she said.

"Thank you." It was a kind thought - though he wasn't especially pleased to have his rooms invaded.

"I see you've still got your pet," she indicated the snake curled up in its vivarium in a corner of the room.

"Yes." He endured the examination in silence, as usual. He could never think of anything to say; he loathed the trite conversations usual with mediwizards and did not encourage them. She said, "Have you given any thought to what we discussed last time?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"I haven't yet decided how I would prefer to risk death. Or when."

"You're already risking death, Severus." Poppy sounded severe, but then wizards often did risk their lives, and she was often left to put the pieces back together. "The options are quite simple nature, magic or physical intervention."

"And all of those risk my life and hurt like hell."

"If you're waiting for a fourth solution that is both safe and painless you're going to be disappointed. If there was one, witches would have come up with it already."

"My...chest...hurts," he changed the subject, before they had chance to fall out. He needed her, and would need her more before he was done.

"Show me."

He unbuttoned his robe and allowed her to examine his chest. Then as she pressed a little too hard, "Ouch!"

She stood back. "You need to make a decision. Soon."

"Why?"

"Your body is getting ready - I have to congratulate You-Know-Who on his thoroughness, it seems all my time teaching you to prepare bottles was wasted. You're going to be able to breastfeed."

"Wonderful."

"Don't be sarcastic. You'll find that however irritating and inconvenient it is to breastfeed, making up bottles would be worse." She stood back. "Get dressed, I've got to go. I'll be back for your decision tonight."

He heard the noise at his door later that day, and he assumed it was Poppy returning. It wasn't. He raised an eyebrow, and said, "You've left."

"Dumbledore let me come back."

Snape heard more behind that remark than Potter was letting on, but he said, "So I see." It had only been a few days, but weirdly Potter had changed. The last few traces of boyishness had been wiped away and Snape wondered what had happened.

"Oh." Poppy Pomfrey's voice from the open door. In all the time she'd been seeing Snape through his pregnancy she'd never asked who the father was. There was no point in her asking now.

"Does Albus know?"

"It was his idea," said Snape, after a moment of wondering how little he could get away with telling her.

"That I do not believe."

"It was!" Potter, of course, sticking his oar in.

"Go," said Snape. "I'll deal with this."

"I am not leaving you." Potter at his most irritatingly determined was about as much as Snape could cope with.

"Piss off, Potter."

"No."

Snape cursed, but silently. He couldn't throw Potter out, not as he was, even if it wasn't undignified to fight with a pupil. Though Potter was no longer that, he realised, suddenly.

"At least you're facing up to your responsibilities," Poppy turned to Potter. He said nothing.

"He's not responsible," said Snape. "I was."

"You weren't." He and Potter stared each other out in a silent duel.

"I need your decision," Poppy said at last, sounding rather cold.

"Nature and magic," Snape said.

"Will you want him there?"

"No," said Snape, clashing with Potter's 'yes'.

"Which is it to be?"

Potter got in first with, "What do you advise?"

She looked him up and down, "I think you should see what he goes through. Maybe it will stop you doing anything like this again."

"I think she's fallen out with me," Potter said, when she was gone. "Istlani says you're afraid."

There was nothing to be gained from sugar coating the truth, so Snape said, "I may die."

Potter turned to look at him, "You won't. The prophecy won't let you."

Snape watched Potter standing in the window. He was holding the baby, singing to him softly. He wasn't very good, no-one who attended Hogwarts ever was - music was one thing the school didn't even attempt to teach - but he was better than Snape would have been.

Snape felt primarily very, very sore. The pain of childbirth hadn't been as bad as the Cruciatu Curse, but he was feeling it, and was sure he would for some days to come.

Potter saw him looking and stopped singing, embarrassed. He said, "You want him back?"

"Not especially."

"He's wonderful."

"Seems like a normal baby to me." Everyone seemed to expect Snape to adore his son from the moment he was born; he took a perverse pleasure in confounding their expectations.

"You're not impressed at all?" Potter's tone was teasing.

"I can't imagine why I should be."

"You wouldn't care at all if I dropped him?"

"I might not, but Dumbledore would. I doubt if even you could get away with that." Snape stretched out, feeling every joint and muscle. He knew perfectly well that there was no way that Potter would harm the baby.

Potter came over and put the baby in his crib. "Sirius and Remus want to see him."

"Is there any reason why they shouldn't?" Though thinking about it, Snape could come up with several.

Potter said, "I thought I'd mention it to you before bringing them here."

"Not here. Take the baby to them."

"You don't want to see them?"

"No." Bad enough that he was humiliated in his own eyes. He couldn't face Black, not now.

His next visitor was Dumbledore, who cooed over the baby in a quite revolting way. The baby seemed to take it all in his stride, Snape supposed it was as well that one of them did.

"What are you going to call him?" Dumbledore asked.

"Baby?" suggested Snape. He was being snide and he knew it.

Trust Dumbledore to respond as if it was a serious suggestion. "I wouldn't do that. Imagine when he went to school. There aren't any family names you could use?"

"Not that I would wish on a child of mine."

"Has Harry--"

"No, he hasn't suggested anything." A thought struck him. "Oh, no." Dumbledore looked enquiring.

"Potter's going to want to call him James."

"If you can't bear the idea--"

"I'll... I'll learn to live with it," said Snape. Dumbledore looked somewhat puzzled, and he went on,

"I don't have much choice. That is his name." He'd realised as soon as name had come to him,

though where the knowledge had come from he couldn't have said. It was a realisation like the moment of solving a particularly difficult problem in a potions experiment.

"I see."

"I suppose that has some sort of cosmic irony," Snape smiled, mirthlessly. "Imagine how angry his grandfather would be. That should make me feel better."

"James would have been very proud of his grandson."

"No matter who his...other parent...turned out to be? On the contrary, I think I'd have been dead by now for ever laying a hand on his son, even if it wasn't my choice, or my idea."

"I'm very conscious of what you're doing for us - for me Severus. You have given your life for the Light every bit as much as anyone who has died for it." Snape had no reply to that.

Not very many days later, the news hit the headlines. Snape didn't lose his job, though it was a close-run thing, not least because Lucius Malfoy had been less than pleased with Draco's exam results.

For once, though, Potter had it harder than he did. He was, for all Snape chose to belittle it, a very talented Quidditch player. Before it all came out, several prestigious teams had been lining up to recruit him. Snape knew this through the other teachers - Rolanda Hooch, for one, was very proud of Potter's achievements. Afterwards, the teams weren't so keen. It was difficult for Snape to see why; fatherhood, however bizarre the identity of the other parent, could not possibly have affected Potter's ability on the Quidditch field. But they weren't.

Snape coped with his two Howlers that day - his highest score was six, the day after Rita Skeeter's first article - and went to the dungeon to prepare lessons for the coming year. First he lifted James to his breast - they weren't large, barely large enough to show through his clothes, but James seemed happy with them and suckled readily enough. It felt strange but oddly fulfilling to have James's little mouth on him and Snape looked down at the face of his son. James fed, he put him in his cot next to the desk, where he could keep an eye on him.

Snape was so involved in his work that he had to conceal a start of surprise when Potter said, "You don't play with him."

Snape said, "I'm working, he's asleep. I'm not going to wake him up to play." Potter looked, he noted, rather unhappy. It was not surprising; in his circumstances Snape would have been more than 'rather unhappy'.

Potter crossed the room and picked James up. The baby whimpered, but then calmed. "Sirius and Remus are here," Potter offered by way of explanation.

"Oh."

"I'll bring him back if he seems hungry."

"I should imagine you will."

"You won't come with us?"

"I've got things to do. Don't let him get overtired." Potter went out. Snape went back to his lesson.

There was a noise at the door and he looked up to see Lupin carrying James. Perfectly competently, as far as Snape could see. They stared at one another for a moment, and Snape silently indicated the cot - James was asleep.

Lupin said, "Harry's very proud of him."

"Is he?"

"He's a beautiful little boy."

Snape looked down at James, who had chosen that moment to screw up his face so that he resembled nothing more than a little monkey. "Sometimes," he said.

"Well, yes." Lupin tickled the baby, gently. "Harry's having a bit of a rough time, you know. You'll have to bear with him for a while."

"Why do I get the feeling you are blaming this on me?"

"I'm not blaming anyone, and definitely not you."

Why did Lupin always have to sound so bloody reasonable? "Then what are you saying?"

"Harry needs someone to talk to. Sirius and I aren't going to be around for a while, Professor Dumbledore's sending us to Uzbekistan."

"Uzbekistan? What on earth for?"

"I can't tell you. Will you?"

Snape stiffened, "Potter must have plenty of people to talk to."

"But you're married to him. It would make sense for it to be you. That is, if you take your marriage seriously."

"And you take marriage so seriously you've never bothered with it."

Lupin looked up; his face still wore that 'reasonable' look which so annoyed Snape. "Sirius and I would marry if we could you'll be aware of the prohibition against humans marrying werewolves."

Snape had forgotten. His first impulse was to apologise, but that was foreign to his nature.

"Talk to Harry," Lupin said. "I think he may surprise you."

Snape kept a wary eye on the door for the rest of the day; he had half expected Black to turn up and start abusing him. He would have enjoyed the argument, but Black never came.

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 3 by Lexin

The school year started. Snape found his pupils doubly irritating; he put it down to his new-found notoriety and dealt with any outbreaks of giggling by issuing detentions to be spent with Mr Filch and taking more house points than ever. Nobody found that humorous, not after Ravenclaw went into minus house points, and the outbreaks were not repeated.

Potter occupied himself with helping Madam Hooch - completely unofficially. The pupils loved him as they always had. He visited his son every day; he and Snape rarely spoke, but Potter continued to feed the snake, which stayed wrapped around Snape's wrist. It seemed its protection extended to James, though quite how that worked Snape wasn't sure.

Potter arrived in Snape's rooms one day about halfway through the term, holding a letter. He watched Snape change James; it was not Snape's favourite job, but something he had to do.

Potter didn't interfere; the one time he'd offered to help, Snape had squashed him - did Potter imagine him incapable of a simple task like changing a nappy? But as soon as James was dressed again he held his arms out, and Snape handed him his son.

In doing this, Potter had dropped his letter. Snape picked it up. "Are you going to accept?" He realised when he saw the headed paper that it was an offer from a Quidditch team.

"The Manchester Mosquitos? I don't know."

Snape didn't follow league Quidditch. "Why wouldn't you?"

"Second division."

"Does that matter? I would have thought the question is do you want to play? Or would you rather sit around and teach idiot children to fly and fill in whenever a teacher has a sniffle?"

Potter rocked his son, gently. "I suppose if they can put up with me..."

"I doubt they'll have to 'put up' with you."

"I'm glad someone appreciates my talents."

Snape thought Potter looked unaccountably cheered, and felt a bit baffled.

At lunch, several months later Rolanda Hooch said, "The Mosquitos are doing very well." Snape looked at her, vaguely puzzled.

"You know. The team your husband plays for."

Light dawned. Potter never talked about Quidditch when he came for his daily visit. He rarely talked about anything very much at all; he played with James, and if they exchanged a remark it would be about their son. Snape said, "Oh, really?"

"Third from the top in the second division."

"Good."

Hooch made a wordless noise of irritation, and strode off, cloak flowing after her. He sighed. He supposed she had a point; as they were linked for life a polite interest in Potter's career wouldn't go amiss. And...that was the first time anyone including either of them - had managed to describe one of them as the other's husband rather than, 'your...er...husband' or 'your...um...husband', so he supposed he should be grateful for that. The hesitation had become rather wearing.

Over the next few days he discovered in the sports pages of the Daily Prophet that the most common adjectives used to describe Potter were 'tragic' and 'troubled' though occasionally the phrase 'bedevilled by scandal' came up as well. Potter himself was never interviewed; obviously he'd learned his lessons well as far as the press were concerned.

On the positive side, the team stressed that their 'tragic', 'troubled' Seeker was a family man who went home every night to his husband and baby. This was true as far as it went, but Snape couldn't help but wonder why he bothered when he got so little welcome. Though James was always pleased to see his father.

Dumbledore said, "Do you think it's wise for Harry to be so exposed to danger? And to apparate every day from Hogwarts to Manchester?" He'd invited himself to tea in Snape's rooms to coo over James and interfere in Snape's life.

"Where is Manchester?" Snape's geography, even of Britain, was a bit hazy.

"Not far from Liverpool." That didn't help Snape very much. Somewhere he had no idea of the location of was near somewhere else.

"About two hundred and fifty miles south of here."

Despite himself, Snape was impressed. To apparate five hundred miles a day, every day, was no mean feat. He couldn't have done it, but Potter did. And played Quidditch on top of it, a sport which demanded accuracy, stamina and concentration. Snape knew perfectly well that the adulation heaped on Quidditch players was not just because they tended to be handsome and young - the sport was difficult and physically demanding.

Snape said, "I think if you want to tell him to give it up you'd better do it yourself." Dumbledore looked enquiring.

"My marriage is a disaster already; I can't alienate my husband still further by asking him to give up his heart's desire. I won't do your dirty work for you, Albus. Not this time."

"It puts him very much at risk from Voldemort."

Snape stirred his tea. It was a delaying tactic, and Dumbledore must realise it, because Snape didn't take sugar. "He must realise that. It's a risk he is prepared to take."

"I'm not so sure...tell him--"

"No," Snape interrupted Dumbledore, and even he trembled a little, inwardly. "I'm not a messenger between you and my husband. If you have a problem with Harry, you sort it out."

Dumbledore looked momentarily surprised, then said, "Of course, Severus. That was insensitive of me, you are quite right."

Snape sighed. Dumbledore had a way of doing that - challenge him over something and he'd take the wind out of your sails by agreeing cheerfully. It could be damned annoying.

"How is James?" Dumbledore asked.

"He's a baby. For a baby, he's pretty normal, or so Poppy tells me."

A few nights later, Snape was woken by a knock on his bedroom door. He slid a dressing gown on - the dungeon was inclined to be cold - and opened the door. It was Potter, as he had suspected it might be.

"You need to leave now," Potter said.

"Why?"

"Voldemort's going to try to kill James tonight."

"I see." Snape didn't waste time arguing. Potter didn't play tricks about Voldemort, nobody did. He went over to the cot, picked up his son and a few necessaries in a bag.

"Tell Dumbledore," said Potter. "He's been expecting this, and he'll know what to do." He led the way out of the dungeons. "Then get out as fast as you can. Go to Hagrid's cottage, and wait for me there. What's the password to get into the Slytherin common room and dormitories?"

"Why do you need to know that?"

"Someone's got to get them out, and it's not going to be you. I need you to guard James. What is it?"

"Standing water. What's Voldemort going to do?" The other question was: how do you know about it? But he didn't ask.

"I can't explain. No time. Go to Hagrid."

With everyone out of the school, they waited. Some of the students were inclined to treat the whole thing as a huge joke. Snape wasn't; he could see the strain on Potter's face.

His reverie was interrupted by a question. "What's your baby called?" It was Edna Bulstrode, younger sister of the Millicent who had been in Slytherin in Potter's year. Edna was in Gryffindor, to the irritation of her family.

"James," said Snape.

"He's beautiful," she said. "Can I hold him?"

"He's asleep."

"I won't wake him. Honestly." Warily, Snape gave her James to hold.

"He's gorgeous," said Edna.

Some of the other girls came over, not just Gryffindors but from all the houses, even a few from his own. James woke up, but he didn't start to cry. Instead he seemed to enjoy being the centre of attention. He's like his father or his grandfather, thought Snape, uncharitably. They all worship him and he loves it.

"We won't lack for babysitters," said Potter.

Snape couldn't imagine going out with Potter and needing a baby sitter. But he didn't say so.

"What are we expecting?" he asked.

There was a slow rumble, like an earthquake. "That," said Potter. He looked over to the castle. Snape followed his gaze as Hogwarts collapsed like a house of cards. James started to cry. Snape felt like doing the same, but knew he was being absurd and controlled it ruthlessly. He hushed James as best he could.

"How did You-Know-Who do that?" one of the girls asked, when the noise had stopped. It took a long time.

"Nobody knows - knew - how far Hogwarts stretched underground. Nobody except Voldemort," said Potter. "It looks like he made good use of it." He raised his voice slightly, "Everybody! Stay together." Then more softly to Snape, "Get James and stay with me." The strained look was still there.

The Death Eater attack which followed left seven students and two professors dead. Snape never really remembered it, but while it was going on it seemed interminable. He took a wound to the arm, Potter one to the thigh. James, protected by both parents, was unharmed though he screamed with shock and fear for most of the night.

Morning came. "Why is he still crying?" Potter asked.

"Hungry," said Snape. "I haven't had chance to feed him."

"Oh. And I don't suppose you have any in a bottle?"

"No." Snape looked around at the school, now in the main street of Hogsmeade. They were mostly sitting on the wet ground, still in nightwear, looking as if they would never move. He shrugged, sat down and unbuttoned his robe. Nobody took the slightest notice of a man breastfeeding a baby, they were all too tired or shocked. Potter watched him; Snape supposed the expression on his face was besotted. It looked more like gormless. James suckled powerfully, Snape hadn't lied when he'd said he was hungry. Snape hoped it would be enough; he was beginning to wean James off breast milk, but in the circumstances it was all he had.

"What are we going to do without the school?" Edna Bulstrode asked, from a position at Potter's feet.

Snape didn't know what to say, but Potter answered her. "Hogwarts isn't the buildings," he said.

"It's the people. And most of us are still here."

Snape looked over at the row of bodies, each covered with a sheet. He could just see Dumbledore's hand, and a length of silver hair. The desire to hex Potter for being so trite receded slightly. He swallowed, and looked down at James who was still suckling. Bulstrode looked comforted. Snape wished he could say the same.

Potter, of course, was once again the hero - he'd saved most people's lives after all. The Daily Prophet even wanted a picture of him with husband and baby. Potter caught Snape's eye and refused as politely as he could, to Snape's relief. He seemed to Snape to be remarkably unimpressed, but then he knew better than anyone probably that such treatment was fleeting at best.

Not that he was weeping and creating a fuss, unlike some of the younger children, and even the older girls, but even Snape - who found Potter remarkably opaque - could see that the loss of Hogwarts had hit him very hard. It was almost as if he'd lost a family.

This prompted thoughts of Snape's own family. They fell into two groups. Those few who had disowned him when he joined the Death Eaters, and those who wouldn't speak to him because

he hadn't remained one. Foremost among these were the parents who had given him to Voldemort, they hadn't contacted him since he stopped attending Death Eater meetings. This was not something he confided to anyone - even Albus hadn't known. He loathed them, but he still didn't want any of them to see him with a husband young enough to be his son and a small baby. He could imagine only too well what they would say, and he wondered why he should care. Neither group had ever given a damn about him.

It took a full day to arrange for all the students to go home for the rest of the term at least, and Snape knew that not all the parents would be pleased to have them back or would be able to find temporary places in Muggle or other wizarding schools.

"That's it," said Potter, when the last of them disappeared on a hastily arranged train. "Now we can go to my place."

"Your place?"

"Unless you've a better suggestion?"

He didn't, as it happened. "Very well," said Snape, unwillingly. "Where is 'your place'?"

"I have a flat in Manchester, I use it on nights when games go on too long for me to be safe apparating back to Hogsmeade. I've told McGonagall, she knows how to get hold of us." "All right." Snape was too tired to argue.

"We'll apparate, we'll have to. I'll guide you."

Silently, Snape took Potter's hand and concentrated. He felt the usual sickening dislocation of apparation and then arrived in a belt of trees beside a path. Potter led the way to what looked like a Muggle building. Snape was no expert at dating Muggle architecture, but it didn't look all that old.

"This is Chestnut Lodge," Potter said. "My flat's on the second floor."

"Oh."

Potter led the way in, along a rather dark carpeted corridor, up two flights of stairs, and along more corridor to a door. This he unlocked with a key rather than a spell. Potter said, "Alohomora sends this lock funny, I don't know why."

Snape followed him into the flat. He'd rarely been into a Muggle house before - though Potter's flat was really a mixture of wizard and Muggle. He shivered; it was cold.

"I'll make us a drink." Potter looked a bit uncertain. "And arrange somewhere for the baby to sleep." He left Snape in the living room.

Snape looked around. He supposed it wasn't that small, but compared with massive chambers at Hogwarts it felt tiny. He carried James to the window and looked out; he could see a small formal garden, the bulbs were just beginning to flower and it actually didn't look too bad. James was heavy in his arms, he'd been mostly carrying him for over a day. He felt dirty; he had arrived in this strange place still in his night clothes. He realised, sickened, that with Hogwarts gone he'd lost everything. He looked at James again. Or almost everything. He kissed the baby absently, but didn't wake him.

Potter returned. "The room's ready," he said.

Snape put James into a cot in the simple room. The baby was already asleep, and barely moved. Just his fist came up to the small pink mouth. His black hair looked like his father's.

Potter handed Snape some tea, his first really hot drink for two days. "Why tea?" Snape asked.

"I don't have any coffee; I don't like the taste."

Snape could have changed his tea to coffee, but he was too tired. He sat and stared at Potter. If Potter resembled the long dead, what must he look like?

"Bastard's still not dead," murmured Potter.

"No," said Snape, knowing he meant Voldemort.

"What's it going to take? Tactical nuclear strike?"

Snape didn't answer; he hadn't a clue what Potter was talking about.

He woke up next morning with Potter beside him in the bed. Potter's mouth was slightly open, and his eyelids creased in sleep. It occurred to Snape that this was the first night they had shared a bed since James had been conceived. He had been far too tired to be afraid - no doubt Potter had been too tired to take advantage. How long would that last? This flat had only two bedrooms, and James was in the other. Besides, they were married. In the circumstances and given his past

it seemed somewhat ridiculous for him to flounce around like an affronted virgin and demand to sleep on the sofa. He'd have to make the best of it - he didn't have anywhere else to go and he had James to consider.

He'd fed the baby, changed him and made himself some tea before Potter put in an appearance. And then all he did was look at them both and fetch his own tea from the kitchen.

"Where do you get your robes?" Potter asked.

"Madam Malkin, same as everyone else. Why?"

"So she'll know what you like?"

"Yes." She certainly should do; Snape had an idea she regarded him as her most difficult customer. "Why?"

"You'll need new clothes, you can't go to Diagon Alley dressed like that, and my robes won't fit you. Always black, right?"

"Except the shirts. Black shirts make you look like a faded rock star."

"And you'd know this how?"

Snape smiled at him - a look he knew annoyed people beyond bearing. Actually he'd read it in a Muggle book somewhere, but he wasn't about to tell Potter that.

Potter had no sooner gone than there was a knock at the door. Snape sighed, stretched, and went to answer it. Weasley and Granger, he should have guessed they would be along. Snape looked down at them - well, down at Granger anyway. Weasley was taller than he was. They both seemed rather taken aback.

"Is Harry in?" Weasley asked, after a long moment in which they stared at each other.

"Not at the moment." Snape paused. He wanted to send them away, but they were Potter's friends, and after the shock of last night he would want to see them. He added, "But come in anyway." "Where is he?" Weasley looked as if he thought Snape might have eaten him.

"Shopping," said Snape, as if the truth were a lie.

"We heard about Professor Dumbledore; you must have known him a long time. It was a dreadful shock. We're very sorry," said Granger, after another moment of tense silence. "We'll...all of us miss him very much." She sounded as if he meant it. Snape swallowed his grief. He couldn't think of anything to say. They'd reached the living room, and Granger said, "Oh."

Snape followed her, and saw her looking at James. He was annoyed; she had no reason to look at James as if he were one of Hagrid's monsters.

"I'm sorry," she said, after a moment. "Harry's talked about him, of course, but--"

"Can I hold him?" Weasley asked. Granger looked at Weasley as if he were mad.

"If you wish," said Snape. He handed James to Weasley, who took him perfectly competently.

"My brother's wife had a daughter last year," said Weasley. "Bill, you know. The one who works at Gringotts. But she's not as pretty as James." Weasley smiled at the baby, who gurgled back at him, and tried to pull his hair.

"I'll make some tea," said Granger. She went out.

"She's not a great one for babies, our Hermione," said Weasley. "No brothers or sisters, you know."

"I didn't," said Snape.

"She doesn't mean anything by it. Actually, I'm hoping that what with James here and Victoria that's my brother's little girl - she might come around. Hasn't worked so far." He kissed James, indulgently. "Harry's really proud of him, he can be really boring about it sometimes. He'd love to spoil him, I think he thinks it would make up for the rough time he had."

Snape looked at Weasley. He was rather puzzled, and it must have shown.

"The Muggles he lived with...he used to make a joke of it, but they didn't like him much. Like...his first Christmas at Hogwarts they sent him a fifty pence piece as a present. I mean, to send Muggle money to Hogwarts was bad enough, but so little. It wouldn't even buy a loaf of bread." Weasley stopped to remove James's hand from his hair for a second time. "Hasn't he told you about any of this?"

"No." But then, Snape hadn't asked.

"Probably thinks it would sound as if he was whining. Tea! Thanks, Hermione."

Potter wasn't long - he'd clearly apparated both ways - and he handed Snape two of Madam Malkin's distinctive bags. Snape curled his lip slightly - he usually asked her to put whatever he

bought into a plain bag, to her annoyance.

He returned to the living room clean, in new clothes, and feeling slightly more human. Potter, he could see, hadn't quite lost the strained look he'd had last night, but he seemed to be honestly enjoying showing James off to Weasley. Granger was sitting some distance away, looking prim, and she glanced up at Snape as he sat down.

"How do you cope?" Granger asked. Her voice was quiet.

"I do the best I can." He wasn't sure himself how he did it, sometimes.

"I would never have thought babies were your thing."

"They're not," he looked across at her. "But James is my son. That's different."

Hermione frowned slightly, "My Mum always says, 'It'll be different when it's your own'. But the thing that worries me is what if it's not? It's a bit like watching someone cut their arm off, and having them tell you, 'It'll be different when you do it'. You can't help thinking, 'Why should I?'"

She sighed. "But there's Ron, and he'd make such a good Dad."

"I don't know, Miss Granger. I can't help you."

"I know, I was just thinking aloud."

He looked at her, then down at the table. He said, "I'm not sure I would have done it had I been given the choice." Hermione smiled at him.

A few days later Professor McGonagall arrived at their door with a house-elf in tow. Snape had never seen a house-elf like this one. She was dressed for one thing, but looked as if she'd slept in a coal bucket. He let the ill-assorted pair in before their Muggle neighbours could see them, and looked enquiring.

"You'll no doubt have heard--" began McGonagall.

"That it will take seven years, minimum, to rebuild Hogwarts, even using magic? Yes, we get the Daily Prophet."

"And cost several million Galleons."

"So I understand. Congratulations on being appointed Headmistress."

She frowned at him, "Thank you. In the meantime we're looking for temporary new buildings--"

"Seven years is a fairly elastic use of the word 'temporary'," commented Snape.

"When we do find somewhere, I trust you'll be returning? I know your loyalty was to Professor Dumbledore, but--"

"There isn't anyone who understands Potions as I do. Yes, I'll come back."

"Good," she sounded relieved, and Snape wondered why - what had she imagined he might do with his life? Then she went on, "This is Winky."

Winky raised her round eyes to him, and gave a loud snuffle.

"Oh," he said, when the silence had gone on too long.

Winky gave an even louder snuffle.

"She needs a new home," said McGonagall. "I hoped perhaps you and Potter..." She trailed off and started again. "Albus paid her a Galleon a week with one day off a month."

"Albus paid the house-elves?"

"Only Winky and Dobby, they'd been freed. Dobby is staying with me."

The last part of McGonagall's words were drowned out by a howl from Winky. Immediately, James joined in from the bedroom.

"Oh, no!" Snape muttered to himself. "I'd just got him to go to sleep." He went and fetched the baby.

McGonagall's face softened, and Winky immediately fell silent. "I kept hoping you'd bring him to see us," McGonagall said. "He's lovely, Severus."

Snape said nothing. In truth, he had been ashamed. Not of James, but of himself, of what they would say about him, of what they would think about his physical submission to Potter.

Winky looked up at the baby as if she'd seen a deity. "Master has a child?" "Er...yes," said Snape. He held James so Winky could see.

"You needs a house-elf?"

"It would be very useful, yes." More than that, as Snape admitted to himself. Domesticity had palled after only three days.

"I will stay."

"Thank you, I am honoured." Though he'd never had one before, Snape knew the protocol for

accepting a house-elf.

"Thank you, Severus," said McGonagall, looking embarrassingly misty-eyed. She sniffed. "I'll be in touch when I have some news about replacement buildings."

"I hope it's soon," said Snape, disgustedly. "Before I blow up Potter's kitchen - or become completely addicted to daytime television."

"Television?"

"I'm afraid so." He didn't have the words to explain to her how it filled up the silence left by the end of the life he'd known for so long - but she seemed to understand.

"What are we going to do with James when you start work again?" asked Potter.

"Can't he stay with me?"

"I think he's got beyond that stage."

Snape could see that Potter was right. James was into everything. Not the sort of child anyone would want in a Potions classroom. Snape said, "He could stay here with Winky."

Potter considered it. "I think he needs other children," he said, at last. "Perhaps we could find a nursery--"

"Muggle children?"

"They're not poisonous."

"I don't know how you--"

"I don't hate all Muggles," said Potter. He reached for Snape's hand. "Only the Dursleys and people like them."

"Don't touch me!"

Potter let go again. "They're not all like that. I know they're not. James needs company and stimulation. Human company. Winky's very sweet, but he needs people." Reluctantly Snape had to accept that Potter was right.

Hogwarts new home happened - fortuitously - to be in Manchester, the former home of a convent school. Snape understood from McGonagall that it had been lent, or rather leased, to the Ministry of Magic by the city. The amount of magical expansion they could do was limited and it was only just big enough and any students who were able to and staff who could be spared were required to live out. This included him, because as McGonagall pointed out he and Potter had a perfectly adequate home at Chestnut Lodge. Snape swallowed his fury with difficulty.

Despite this, it was a relief to be back at work again. The empty days in a flat with a small child had nearly driven him insane. He looked around his new domain with guarded approval; it was light, a former chemistry lab, generally well suited to the teaching of Potions. Better, if truth be told, than the dungeons. At least here he had natural light. Using whiteboards and rather than chalk took a little getting used to, but he managed. By the end of the first week he made a mental note to ask McGonagall when they outfitted Hogwarts to stick to the whiteboards, even if that was in six years time. Chalk had been hell on the robes.

He looked out of his window, and saw Hooch leading a line of second years across the playground. One of the major problems with the temporary home was that it offered nowhere safe for them to teach flying, a necessary skill for a witch or wizard as he admitted - though he didn't do it often. The best they had been able to come up with was the use of the Manchester Mosquitos training ground, as that was magically concealed already. But it was some way away, and he and the other teachers were already complaining about the loss of time because of course students could not apparate.

He turned back round and fixed one of his fifth years with a baleful glare. She went back to her potion, swiftly pretending she hadn't also been staring out of the window. Maybe they weren't such a good idea.

Snape still read the sports pages of the Daily Prophet every day. If he didn't, he'd never find out anything about Potter's career - though it was restful to have a husband who left his work at work. The Mosquitos were doing well, they'd moved up a division and were getting some better players to add to their star Seeker.

The England team, on the other hand, were doing appallingly. Their group for the World Cup were not especially strong Luxembourg, Zimbabwe, Japan, Germany and France. Well, France and Zimbabwe were good, but the other three should have been easy meat for any halfway

adequate team. England, however, had been flattened by all of them, and their cup chances were squashed again.

The problem - or so Snape read - lay in the fact that they constantly changed Seekers. There were very few really good English Seekers, though Scotland, Wales and Ireland didn't have that problem. Occasionally, the sports letters page would contain a note from someone pointing out that the Manchester Mosquitos currently fielded the best Seeker in England, but Potter was constantly passed over. It didn't make the slightest difference.

What Potter thought Snape had no idea. He never saw him read the paper, and he never raised the subject.

Snape only collected or took James to the nursery when Potter was involved in a particularly long match, and thus he didn't see the staff all that often, but it was still a bit too often for his taste. However, James liked it there, and that that was the main thing.

"Papa!" James ran to Snape and held his arms out to be picked up. "I made a dinosaur!" "Well done," said Snape. He took the gluey thing off James and looked at it.

"Isn't it good?"

"Marvellous." Snape hoped he managed to sound enthusiastic.

"Professor Snape? I'm glad to meet you at last," came a voice from behind him.

"Yes?" Snape turned and faced a young woman in a yellow overall with blue rabbits all over it. Her name tag read 'Doreen'.

"James talks about you, of course, but Mr Potter's not very forthcoming." She smiled at him, and Snape tried to think of something to say.

"Papa?" James pulled his collar. "Can we have rings for tea?" By this Snape knew he meant spaghetti hoops.

"I don't see why not, James."

"Good! Get down now?"

Snape put James down and watched him rush off, waving his 'dinosaur' with abandon. He turned back to Doreen.

She said, "We're all very impressed with James. It's not every child who can read at three."

"I could," said Snape. He was rather surprised.

"And you taught him?"

"Yes."

"He's such a friendly little boy, too."

James ran back towards them. The dinosaur was looking rather the worse for wear. "Is he?" said Snape. "James! Time we were going."

"Yes, Papa."

"You must have loved his mother very much to still be in mourning for her. And to put James in mourning, too. Very sad."

Snape looked at her as if she was mad. The Muggle ability at self-delusion was truly stunning. With those green eyes and that nose any fool could see that he and Potter were James's parents. Snape could only hope he'd grow into the nose.

Potter's habit of touching him in public was beginning to get on his nerves, rather. "Not here!" Snape said one day at a feast the school still had them, and Potter was often a guest. He was a wizarding celebrity after all.

"Where then?" Potter sounded exasperated. "You won't let me even hold your hand."

"Why do you want to?"

Potter looked confused. "You're my husband. Of course I want to." "Look at me," Snape hissed. Potter did. "What am I looking for?" he asked, after a moment.

"You haven't seen."

"I recognise you. You're Severus Snape, my husband. What are you getting at?"

Snape sighed, and looked away. He just stopped himself from resting his head on the table in frustration.

"I get it!" said Potter, just as the dessert arrived.

"What?"

"You were trying to tell me you're ugly."

Snape didn't say anything. He had been trying to say exactly that, but that didn't prepare him for someone else saying it.

Potter grabbed his hand. "You're not, you know." Potter's hand tightened. "That's why you won't let me do the other thing as well, isn't it?"

Snape stared at the green eyes. "Let go!" he said. "We are not going to talk about that here."

Potter let go. "But we will talk."

Their babysitter gone, Potter faced him. "How long have you felt like this?"

"You don't know how I feel."

"You were doing a good impression of hideous and worthless at dinner. Were you pretending?"

"No." Somehow, lying to Potter was never worth it, and Snape felt it beneath him in any case. "I know what everyone says about me."

"They're wrong."

"You used to say it, too."

"Then I...no I can't say I know you, even with James and having lived with you all these months. But I'm not ashamed of you."

"I ruined your life."

"No. Voldemort did that when he killed my parents, just as he ruined yours when he did those things to you. Being dragged into a prophecy hasn't helped either of us. But none of that was your doing." Potter sat down beside him on the sofa. It was small but Snape pulled away as much as he could. Potter said, "But there are things you could do that would help."

"Such as?" Snape tried hard to keep the sneer out of his voice and partly succeeded.

"Stop behaving like an apology and be my husband."

"You mean, have sex with you."

"Partially," said Potter. "I also mean that we could actually get to know each other. You never know, you might like me. I think I like you."

Snape stood up, and stared at him, "You can't."

"Oh, sit down. What I mean is, the small amount of the real you I've ever seen seems OK."

"I will not remind you of the several incidents which would prove the opposite." Not least because things like the ridiculous incident at the end of Potter's third year reminded Snape of how much younger than himself Potter really was. He looked away, not wanting to see the expression in Potter's eyes as he remembered the dreadful things Snape had done over the years.

Snape sat down as Potter had asked him to, and stared at the carpet. 'He's trying his best' everyone seemed to have told Snape that. 'Meet him half way. Talk to him.' Snape took a deep breath.

"How about you stop touching me in public if I agree to the sex thing with you in private?" "That's rather businesslike." Potter sounded rather taken aback.

"It's the only offer you're going to get."

"Very well, I agree."

Snape had second thoughts almost immediately, but he didn't retract the offer.

He had half expected Potter to jump on him at once. He didn't know whether to be grateful or annoyed that he didn't. Grateful would have been more logical, he realised that, but he wanted to have reason to be angry, to take back his words, and he couldn't. All that happened was that from time to time, when they were alone, Potter would take his hand or touch him. Slowly, over the following days, the touches grew more intimate - and more frequent. But never in public - not even in front of James who hardly counted as public.

Finally, just when Snape was beginning to feel he'd scream if nothing happened between them soon, Potter kissed him. It felt strange, as it had done before. It didn't hurt, and he'd agreed to let Potter use him so knew he had no reason to object. And now given carte blanche to explore, Potter did just that. It was strange to feel someone else's hands on his body, and he closed his eyes so as not to see the triumph on Potter's face.

Potter penetrated him, and the sensation of having that inside him was peculiar, as it had been the first time, the time James had been conceived. Potter took time and trouble to make sure he was ready if not exactly eager, and he relaxed as much as he could and let it happen. It was an odd feeling; not unpleasant, and it felt as if he was reaching for something but whatever it was he

didn't quite get there.

When he opened his eyes again, the expression on Potter's face wasn't triumph. More a sort of curiosity, a lively interest he was sure he'd never seen in Potions lessons. Snape thought this most strange, but then Potter always had been weird.

The next time it happened, he was more prepared for that odd reaching feeling, and rode along with it. Then something hit him like the Hogwarts Express at full speed, and he knew nothing but that...sensation.

Potter looked extraordinarily, irritatingly, pleased with himself; Snape was covered in fluid, sweat - mostly Potter's and semen. His own, he realised. He felt strange, as if his entire body had been shifted in time and space and was now settling slowly.

"What was that?"

Potter's surprise showed. "Orgasm," he said. "You've never had one before?"

"It seems not." Definitely not. He would have remembered a feeling like that. It was rather like the end of what he mentally categorised as 'a weird dream', but not quite. And he never liked those because of the mess they made. Not, he thought as he lay on the wet patch, that this made any less mess. ****

Why had he ever thought lust was simple? The present Harry Potter gave him for his 40th birthday turned out to be a raging libido - unintentionally, because he'd never told Potter when his birthday was. He was grateful for his foresight in not allowing Potter to touch him in public, or the school would have been treated to the sight of their Potions master being shagged senseless by his Quidditch player husband - and not caring until afterwards. He could just manage to stop himself reaching out, but sometimes the desire was so strong it crawled over his skin like ants at a picnic.

Now he understood what led the students to fornicate in corners; he could barely resist it himself. For all he'd been told - and told - that lust was a powerful force, until now it was as if he'd been told that water was wet but never put his hand in a stream. Now suddenly he'd been thrown in at the deep end. He wondered what Albus would have said; there was nobody else he could confide in. Probably he would have been pleased. Snape's need for Potter's body consumed entirely too much of his waking hours; he didn't care if the man never said another word to him as long as he had that cock inside him at every available opportunity - not that there were all that many with him working full time and taking care of James.

Potter seemed stunned. As well he might be given that his difficult and unwilling husband had suddenly turned wanton. On the other hand his Quidditch improved and for a professional player that could only be a good thing.

Marking sixth year homework actually required some attention, so Snape hadn't listened to the start of whatever game James and Harry were having. At some stage over the last few weeks, probably during sex, 'Potter' had become 'Harry' and stayed. But one phrase stood out. "If you don't behave I'll keep you under the stairs." "Wouldn't!" James, of course.

"Wouldn't I?"

Snape looked up from his marking, "Of course you wouldn't, I wouldn't let you." He put his quill down and turned, "Why under the stairs?" Potter ignored him and went on with the game.

He waited until Harry had given James his lunch and convinced him to take his nap. Snape said, "What was all that stuff about keeping James under the stairs."

"It was a joke."

"I know. This is a flat, there are no stairs. But it's a strange joke."

"You don't tell me about your family."

It seemed an irrelevance, but something clicked in Snape's mind, "Why did they keep you under the stairs? Weren't there enough bedrooms?"

"There was plenty of room. They just didn't like me very much. I told you. Why don't your family have anything to do with you?"

Snape shrugged. "They don't agree with the decisions I've made."

"To join Voldemort?"

"Some of them. Or to leave."

Potter reached out for Snape's hand. "My family and yours sound as if they might get on well

together. Just as well we're both away from them." Snape looked down at their joined hands.

Another long match, and Snape went to the nursery to collect James.

"Professor Snape?" A voice from behind him - they seemed to like doing that.

"Yes?" Snape turned to Doreen. They always called him this, and if they liked to think he was a Professor at one of the Manchester universities he didn't disabuse them.

"I don't want to worry you, but a very strange man was here and he asked about James - but he asked for James Potter, not James Snape."

"What did you tell him?"

"That there was no child at this nursery by that name."

"What was he like?"

"Small, blond. Older. Rather a ratty looking bloke Vannie said I didn't see him. Is it someone you know?"

"I'm afraid so. If he comes back, send him on his way again. He had no legitimate reason to be asking about James." Snape controlled his fear before James could catch on. Like his father, James could be more intuitive than was entirely comfortable.

"I'll do that," said Doreen. "I'm glad I mentioned it."

Harry's match finished very late that night, a win against the Chudley Canons, which always pleased him. Snape waited for him.

"You think it's Pettigrew?" said Harry.

"It sounds like it," Snape agreed.

"I think it's time for the Fidelius Charm again." "Didn't work last time," pointed out Snape.

"We'll make a better choice of secret keeper." Harry sounded confident.

Snape wasn't so sure. "Who?" "I thought Ron," said Harry.

Snape would have liked to think of some objection to Weasley, but couldn't come with one. He had no doubts that Weasley would keep Harry's secret even beyond death. They had that kind of friendship. It wasn't something Snape had ever known, but he recognised it. ****

Lunch on Sunday - they were teaching James to sit at table so had to do the same themselves.

"Papa?"

"Yes, James?"

"When the new baby comes, is he going to sleep in my room?"

Severus and Harry looked at each other and then at James. "He's right, you know," said Harry after a moment. "You are."

"He'll have to share with you," said Severus, neutrally.

"Or we'll have to get a bigger house," said Harry. He sounded surprisingly cheerful about it.

"I don't mind sharing," said James. "I like the flat, and I'm sure the baby will."

[Back to index](#)

Chapter 4 by Lexin

"I can't believe you took that kind of risk, Severus. How old are you? Seventeen?" Poppy Pomfrey washed her hands, somehow investing the act with irritation.

"I didn't think I was fertile without help," he pointed out. He hoped it sounded reasonable. The last thing he wanted was to get into a fight with her.

"It seems you were wrong."

"When is it due?"

"My best guess is around Christmas. I can't be completely sure, because you don't have anything so convenient as a menstrual cycle."

"Lovely. That means Minerva will have to find a replacement for me for the spring and summer term." Snape ignored her swipe at his body.

"Thoughtless bastard," Poppy said.

Snape stared at her, "Is the personal abuse part of the service?"

"Not you. Potter. I thought being with you the last time would cure him, but..."

"Poppy." Snape waited until he had her attention. "People don't get married to hold hands," he said, conveniently forgetting the months of celibacy he'd made Harry live through.

Minerva McGonagall simply stared at him blankly, and said one word, "How?"

"The usual method," he replied. Then he remembered. Dumbledore had known about him - knew more than he was comfortable about. Minerva didn't. He didn't want to explain, it wasn't even as if she was one of his closest friends. He didn't have friends that close, other than Harry.

"I can't imagine who we'll get to teach in your stead," she said.

"You'll think of someone."

"We'll have to, you can't apparate a baby here every day - it was all very well when we were in the old buildings. You lived in."

She would have to remind him of that, and he suppressed the temptation to grind his teeth. But all he said was, "I'm not looking forward to it much, either."

"There are some nice houses over at Bramhall," said Harry on day, apropos nothing at all.

"Are there? James, eat your toast, don't play with it. Don't you want any more? I did tell you not to drink all your juice before you started to eat." He stopped and looked over at Harry. "Do we have to move?"

"No, we can stay here for a year or two, until James does get tired of sharing."

"I think that would be better."

Harry sighed. "I suppose you're right - and you are very vulnerable when you're pregnant."

"This isn't as bad as the last one." He'd actually had very little sickness, and other than a minor liking for pickles harder on Harry than it was on him - he thought he wasn't doing too badly.

"I meant vulnerable to attack rather than ill," said Harry.

As everyone at the school knew what he was by now, he didn't bother trying to hide this pregnancy, just lived his life as normally as he could. He only bothered with a concealing charm when he had to collect James from the nursery. He wondered, in passing, what excuses the Muggles who ran it would come up with when he and Potter produced a second child. That they would grasp onto anything except the truth he had no doubt.

Of course, the news soon got out into the wizarding press - the Mosquitos had wanted he and Harry to give an interview. Harry refused, citing the privacy clause which he'd had written into his contract. They took it reasonably well. He did, however, consent to write a statement to give to journalists; it managed to blend concern for his partner with a sort of dignified joy. Despite himself, Snape was impressed.

The Fidelius Charm worked, well, like a charm. Had it not, he had no doubt that the press would have been hanging round their flat like vultures. As it was, there was no sign of them - and McGonagall forbade them from coming into the school. Occasionally, the students would give him odd glances, but he ignored them.

At home, Harry fussed over him; Snape was torn between irritation and relief - by the end of a full day of teaching, mostly spent on his feet, he was exhausted. Having someone simply make his tea was welcome, if peculiar.

"Papa!" At the end of one particularly gruelling day he sat on the sofa in the flat, and instantly had a lapful of his son.

"What is it, James?" Snape kept his eyes closed.

"I drew a horse!"

"Did you?" Snape opened his eyes unwillingly, and took the proffered paper. The horse looked rather more like an elephant and he and Harry exchanged amused glances. "Marvellous," he said. He hoped their son didn't plan on making his fortune as an artist; somehow, wizards had never taken to modern art.

"And look what I can make it do. Jump, horsie!" This to the picture. The 'horse' obligingly lumbered around the picture, jumping over the strange twisted things which James clearly thought were fences.

"Wonderful!" Then more seriously, "You didn't show the people at nursery this, did you?"

"No," said James. He sounded a trifle grumpy. "Daddy said they wouldn't believe it, anyway."

We can only hope not, thought Snape, privately. How did other wizarding parents cope with this kind of thing? He thought back to his own childhood - he hadn't been to school until he was eleven, his mother had taught him until then. It was one of the reasons, he remembered, that he'd had such a rough time at the start. He'd had no idea how to behave among other children. Not

that his parents had wanted him to have no friends, there had simply been no other wizarding families living nearby. Difficult as it was to send James to Muggle school, it seemed the better of the two options.

"Good news for Harry!" Rolanda Hooch waved the Daily Prophet at him.

"Is it?" Snape usually read the paper at lunchtime, as Hooch knew perfectly well.

"Try out for England in the tour against Australia. Jolly well deserved, too. His play's really come on this last year."

"When is the tour?" He took the paper from her and looked. Last week in November, first two weeks in December. He'd be uncomfortably pregnant by then - but he couldn't stand in Harry's way. He'd waited so long for this.

His own copy of the Prophet was waiting for him on his desk when he reached the Potions classroom, but so were second year Slytherins and Ravenclaws, so he had to put off reading it.

"I can't go, of course," Harry said, when Snape got home that night.

"Why in Merlin's name not? You should be back before I..."

"I can't leave you alone here."

Snape groaned, inwardly. He should have guessed he'd be facing the legendary Potter stubbornness. "Of course you can. I'm not completely helpless, you know."

"I didn't mean that, Severus."

"I'll look after Papa," put in James.

"I know you will," said Harry. Severus glanced at Harry, and smiled. James didn't like them to argue and was already finding strategies to stop them.

"You are not giving up this chance out of a misguided sense of duty towards me," said Snape, when James was safely in bed.

"It's not a duty," snapped Harry. "I love you."

"Oh." Snape hadn't been expecting that, and rather thought it was unfair to use blackmail. "You're still going."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"This is silly. I'm not going and leaving you here alone and unguarded." He stopped, "I know. Hermione can come and stay with you."

Snape couldn't think of a more horrifying idea. "Absolutely not."

"Either you put up with Hermione or I don't go."

"I don't want her here, and you're going."

Another argument lost. When and how had Harry - Potter of all people - become this person? Hermione Weasley put the pot of tea on the table and sat down. She said, "Do you think you'll make it to the end of term?" She was carefully not looking at his swollen body.

"I hope so. Madam Pomfrey could only guess when I'm due - should be 'around Christmas'."

"Hm."

Severus could only wonder what Harry had said to her and Ron unless he wanted to ask, which he didn't. On the other hand, she was one of Harry's closest friends and it could be anything. He doubted anything he could say would drive her away if Harry had told her to stay, but it would cause trouble - and he would probably come off worst.

"It's only a few more days to the end of term anyway," Severus said. Then he added, "I'm giving my classes mock exams."

Hermione winced, "Rather them than me."

"I thought it might help whoever they get to cover for me to know where the little swines have reached - or not."

"I'm sure he'll be very grateful," she said, then stopped.

"You know who it is?" They hadn't told him, Snape thought, resentfully.

"Not officially. So I think it's better if you hear it from Minerva."

He had a terrible sinking feeling about this, "Tell me."

"It's Ron."

It took a moment to sink in, and then all he could think of to say was, "What?" It came out in a full throated roar.

"Minerva, I cannot believe you are seriously going to pay Weasley to teach Potions. What are you thinking of?"

She seemed to enjoy watching him rage. "He passed his Potions NEWT," she pointed out.

"By the skin of his teeth and largely thanks to Granger."

"Even so, Severus, you wouldn't have passed someone completely incompetent."

"'Not completely incompetent' does not mean 'competent enough to teach'."

"He'll manage. He's using your outline, and it is only for two terms. You'll be back next September."

"What are you going to do with him at the end of it? Send him back to the Ministry?"

"Professor Flitwick is retiring. Ron is going to teach Charms."

"Merlin's beard, Minerva. What next? Are you going to bring in Harry to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts?"

"Your husband is qualified - one might even say overqualified to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts - but his first love is Quidditch. How are the England team doing, anyway?"

"Played five, won three, lost two."

"Better than the squashing they got last time they went over there, then? I'd imagine that it's Harry making the difference. Well, it was about time someone took some notice."

"What on Earth have you brought James here for?" Severus had just left the school intending to go home.

"You sent me a note." Hermione looked perplexed.

"I didn't. Oh, shit."

"Papa!" said James. "You said a bad word." He struggled to get out of Hermione's arms.

"Quickly. We have to get away from here now."

"But..."

"Now, Miss Granger." Severus turned and walked as quickly as he could up the road, away from the school. If he was right, and he thought he was, he mustn't put the school in danger.

"Hermione. Or even Mrs Weasley," reminded Hermione, but she kept up with him easily even while trying to control a struggling James. "What is it?"

Severus took the pushchair from her, since she was going to drop James if she tried to manage him and it. "Come on, Mrs Weasley!"

"Hermione!" she sounded annoyed. "What is the...oh." She'd obviously realised. "Give me your hand."

"What?"

"Give." She took his hand, "Harry said I wasn't to be separated from you." She held on tight, James still on her other arm. They walked on, up the road.

"There's a bad man behind us," said James.

"How do you know he's a bad man?" asked Hermione. She sounded, to Severus, rather scared. James was silent for a moment, then said, "Just is."

"Ah. Ow!"

Severus took a deep breath. He'd heard of Transubstere - the spell behind portkeys - being used without a physical link but had never experienced it. Now he understood why such use was considered Dark magic. Obviously Voldemort had been ferreting about in the back of spellbooks again.

He looked around the room.

"Where are we?" Hermione asked. She put James down, but held on to his hand.

"I have no idea." The room was dank, dirty and rather dark. He let go of Hermione's hand, and moved to the window. It was also dirty, inside and out, but Severus could see an overgrown garden. For some reason it looked to him like a front garden; he could just about see something which might have been a rockery, some years ago.

"Papa?" James pulled Hermione over to where he was standing. "I don't like this place - can we go home?"

Severus picked his son up. "I don't like it here, either. But I'm afraid we can't."

"Can't we papparate like Daddy does?"

"No, we can't," said Hermione. She caught Severus' eye. "I've tried and I think someone's done something to this room. The moment we arrived I felt - something - muffling all magic." She sounded quite calm, and Severus was aware of a sliver of gratitude. James picked up on emotions, and he didn't want to deal with a hysterical child, he was having enough problems controlling his own fear, without adding James's or Hermione's. "I think you should sit down," she said. "It can't be good for you, all this standing about."

By the time the door opened, the only light in the room was a glow from a distant street lamp very distant. James was asleep in Severus's arms, and Hermione dozed next to him. He had been wondering idly about Harry's team, and whether anyone had noticed he'd disappeared yet, when the door opened and a voice said, "Lumos!"

Before he could react four robed and masked men came in, led by another who hadn't bothered with a mask.

"Wormtail!" Hermione's voice. Severus didn't say anything - he didn't see the point.

"Disarm them," said Wormtail. Two of the Death Eaters complied. Severus would have liked to resist, but didn't miss - or pretend to misunderstand - Wormtail's glance at James. And there was his own condition to consider; running was out of the question. He saw Hermione allow them to take her wand. She didn't look pleased about it.

"So it was this brat, after all." Wormtail favoured James with a disgusted expression. "I turned over Manchester looking for him to bring to my Master. He looks like you - not that that's any recommendation."

"You're a bad man," said James, before anyone else could respond. Severus saw Hermione suppressing a smile.

"You little..." said Wormtail.

"Far be it from me to make a remark about 'out of the mouth of babes'," said Severus. "But my son seems to have got the measure of you far faster than anyone else ever did."

"My Master is waiting for you," said Wormtail. Even he seemed to realise that losing his temper with a four-year-old would simply make him look absurd. He gestured for them to precede him out of the door.

Severus took the stairs slowly. He wasn't going to fall to please Voldemort.

"Well, Severus." The high, cold voice made Severus feel rather sick. "It's been a long time.

Wormtail! A seat for Severus."

Wormtail gestured to one of the Death Eaters, who fetched a dining chair from another room, and placed it opposite Voldemort.

"Sit, Severus." There was a touch of command in Voldemort's voice, and Severus didn't see the point of trying to resist. "I see you've been busy," Voldemort continued, looking at James. "And you've brought another guest. Introduce us."

"My son, James. And--"

"I am Hermione Weasley."

"I didn't ask you." Voldemort flicked a glance at her. Then, "Weasley. That's an old wizarding name."

"Mrs Hermione Weasley," said Hermione.

"I see," said Voldemort. He turned back to Severus. "My handiwork was more successful than even I had imagined. You and your...what do you call him? ...have made full use of my little alterations."

Severus stared down at the carpet. An Abusson, he noted, idly wondering where Voldemort got his money.

"I shouldn't think marriage to you does a lot for him. Still, he's a good looking young man, and an international Quidditch player. I shouldn't imagine he has too much trouble finding his fun elsewhere. What do you think, Severus? I'm sure he meets a lot of beautiful and friendly witches when he's away with his team." Then a sudden shout, "Answer me!"

"I should think it very likely," replied Severus. "Though I have never had any reason to complain of my husband's attentiveness."

"Husband!" Voldemort started to laugh, and Severus saw Hermione pale. "Is that what you call him."

"Under wizarding law he and I are married - in the strict form. No divorce is possible for either of

us. So it wouldn't matter who he met. Or me."

"Next to me he's a living room conjurer. After me I wonder you can stand to be near him."

Severus struggled to control his temper. "He's twice the man you are - even as you were then.

Ah!" This as Voldemort cast Cruciatius and Severus felt his body curve in a rictus of pain.

Through it he could just hear James crying, and the words, "Don't hurt my Papa! I hate you! You hurt my Papa! You wait till my Daddy finds you! He'll kill you, he will!"

The pain stopped abruptly as Hermione yelled, "James! Stop!"

Severus opened his eyes, which he'd closed involuntarily, to see James attacking Voldemort with his tiny fists. Voldemort looked astonished, but he was recovering fast and reaching for his wand. Severus' fear was almost as great as his pain had been a moment before. "James! Come to Papa at once!"

"He hurt you." James knew when Papa used that tone of voice he must obey - instantly.

"I know he did. But you can't help me like that." He lifted James onto his lap. Severus tried hard not to let his fear show in his voice - Voldemort had shown during his last reign of terror that he wouldn't stop at killing children. He would have no compunction at doing away with James, the son of his greatest enemy. Severus swallowed bile. He heard Hermione come over to stand behind him, and felt her hand as she placed it on his shoulder. He was glad she was there.

"What do you want of us?" Severus asked, as soon as he was sure his voice would be quite steady.

"Nothing, Severus. I lost interest in you a long time ago, and my interest in your hideous offspring and your mudblood friend is even less."

"Then why are we here?"

"Severus! You're brighter than that. Think it out for yourself."

He rather though he could - and it didn't help him in the slightest.

Voldemort called, "Wormtail!" Immediately Wormtail came over to attend his master. "Take them back - separate rooms. I don't think I want them conspiring."

"At once, my Lord."

Severus stood, and James clung to him. "But--" he said.

"Take them. Now!"

He climbed the stairs, slowly. Since he was carrying James he scarcely had strength for anything else. Wormtail took advantage of his exhaustion at the top of the stairs to snatch James out of his arms. James immediately started to scream at the top of his rather powerful lungs.

"Give him back to me. Please!" said Severus.

"You can't lock him in a room on his own," said Hermione, behind Severus. "He's only four!"

Wormtail hesitated for a moment then said, "I'll put the child in with the girl."

James continued to howl as he was carried up the corridor. "Go with Aunt Hermione," Severus said. He was suddenly shoved from behind into a room, and the door was slammed behind him, locked, and bolted. He just managed to stop himself from falling over.

It wasn't the room they'd been held in earlier, though it too was magically dampened and he couldn't apparate. The bed was in a different place and when he tried the light switch - he wouldn't have known what it was if he hadn't seen Hermione try the one in the first room - the light came on. He instantly wished it hadn't because it showed up how dirty the place was. Filth clung to the walls and the window, and the wallpaper hung off the walls here and there exposing bare plaster. There was a mouldering carpet on the floor, deadening his footsteps. The mattress on the narrow bed was foul with old stains, but there was nowhere else to sit.

Vile though the place was, Severus had to wonder once again why any of them were still alive. Of all people by now Voldemort should have realised the risks inherent in an over-elaborate plan. Though that may be paying the man too much of a compliment, he realised. He had seen precious few signs so far of any kind of plan, elaborate or otherwise. He slid his over-robe off, and folded it into a semblance of a pillow, and lay down. Worrying about James - all he could do - wasn't very helpful, but at least it kept his mind off the stains.

He didn't get much sleep, but was rather surprised to get any. He sat up, aware of a pressing need to piss. He looked round the room, though it hadn't changed from the last time he'd done that. He shuddered, and suppressed the thought that other people's desperation was the origin of

the stains on the mattress.

Severus examined the window, and then tried to open it. It took him a moment to work out how the catch operated, but once he had, it opened. Jerkily and slowly, but it did. He looked out. He was too far up to attempt an escape that way, though he might have risked it had he not had the baby to think of. Nor could he see anyone, there weren't even any visible houses that he could make out. How in hell had Voldemort managed to find and use as his hideout the one house in Britain that overlooked nobody? Somehow, it didn't seem fair.

This didn't help with his other problem, either. Once he got beyond a certain point in his pregnancy he had to sit down to urinate, and he was well beyond that now. He could make a fuss and see if Wormtail or the other two henchmen would let him out, but he wasn't sure he wanted to draw that kind of attention. Or, indeed, any kind of attention.

He decided he'd have to risk it - he pulled up his robes, reached for his penis under his belly and aimed it in what he hoped was the appropriate direction through the window. When he'd done, he wiped his fingers on his robe - the best he could do in the circumstances - and closed the window without locking it. He sat on the bed and waited, wondering how Hermione was getting on with James. James could be very difficult as far as lavatories were concerned.

The day crawled by. Snape had known time could hang heavy on the hands, though it rarely did with him, but in an empty, dirty room with nothing to do it passed more slowly than ever. He couldn't even watch the sun move across the sky, the room he was in faced south.

He could just see the sun set if he leaned out of the window and screwed his head round. It had just dipped behind the trees when he felt the first cramping pain low in his belly. He supposed it could be hunger - he'd been given nothing to eat and drink all day - but he didn't think so. He'd felt it once before after all. He went and sat on the bed.

The birth of his first child had taken nine hours. He'd been told this was not bad for a first, though he hadn't wanted it to go on much longer. This second one felt as if he was in more of a hurry. Severus didn't want to tell Voldemort, and telling whoever was guarding them was tantamount to telling Voldemort. He had no idea what Voldemort would do, but it wouldn't be good. He still couldn't help wondering why they weren't all dead already.

Severus stood up and started to pad slowly from one end of the room to the other. Somehow, it seemed to help the pain - enough that he could cope at any rate.

It grew dark outside. It was early December; Severus estimated the time to be only about four in the afternoon. He stood at the window for a few minutes, looking in the direction of the one visible street lamp. He didn't see anything. Then he resumed his slow pacing. He became aware of a wet feeling between his legs, then of a gush. That was that, then. He was definitely going to have this baby.

Now would be a good time to tell someone, but for some reason not clear even to himself, he still didn't. People did have babies alone. There had been that stupid Hufflepuff girl in his second year of teaching, the one who'd had her baby in the girls' toilets of the fifth floor. He remembered she'd been from a strict family of some kind and hadn't dared tell even Poppy Pomfrey. Strange people, Muggles. He tried the door again, though it hadn't opened the last hundred times he'd tried it. It still didn't.

That was when he heard the scream. It didn't sound like either Hermione or James - at least, he hoped it didn't. Then there was the sound of confused shouts and running feet. He hammered on the door of his room as loudly as he could, wishing there were something he could break up to hit it with. There wasn't, or he'd have already used it.

More shouts and running feet. He could hear more hammering from other rooms, and shouts. Among the confused noises he was sure he could hear James shouting, "Papa!" and shouted back. Whatever was going on it was distracting the attention of their guards, because no-one came to shut them up.

His door opened suddenly, and he there stood Sirius Black, a sight he had never imagined he'd welcome. They stared at each other for a moment, then Snape said, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Harry's downstairs," said Black, and moved on. "Go on, then! He's worried about you."

Severus climbed down the stairs again. He didn't want to walk into a battle, and he could still hear shouting and running. Some of that was coming from behind him; he looked back hoping to

see Hermione carrying James, but the only person he recognised was Black. He continued down the stairs.

Severus found Harry standing over Voldemort. "He's dead?" he asked.

Harry turned. "I think so. Look at your arm."

Severus rolled up his sleeve. The Mark had gone, leaving a silver scar. At that moment a contraction hit him, and he bent with the pain.

"Does the scar hurt?" asked Harry.

"Not the scar," he gasped. "The baby."

"Here? Now?" Harry took Severus into his arms.

"Yes."

Harry shouted, "Sirius! Remus!"

Severus winced, Harry's yell was loud. Harry's arms tightened.

Black arrived a few moments later, Lupin and Hermione behind him with James in Hermione's arms. "How are you?" Lupin looked at Severus.

"About to give birth," Harry answered him before Severus could. "Hermione, take James to Hogwarts and bring Poppy Pomfrey here. Sirius, can you find a suitable room? One down here, I don't want him trying to manage those stairs again."

Hermione went, obviously stifling questions, and Harry rubbed Severus back comfortingly. "I think I should get you away from..." his eyes slid to the corpse.

"Yes, I suppose so. Was it the killing curse?"

"No, he'd found a means of protecting himself against that. I used Subito Mors. Not easy, or as well known, but it worked."

"How did you know I wasn't dead?" Severus leaned against Harry; the pains were coming faster.

"Istlani would have warned me. Even from a magically dampened room. That was why Voldemort had to keep you alive, and James. I'd imagine Draco Malfoy told him about her."

Black returned and nodded to Harry, who led Severus to the room he'd found. It wasn't much of an improvement but at least it had no dead Voldemort, and something he could sit on - a faded chaise longue upholstered in green. Severus sat and Harry held him.

"Is there anything I can do?" asked Hermione. "Boil water?" "Some tea would be nice," said Harry.

"I meant for Severus."

"I'd like some tea, too. They didn't give me anything to eat or drink all day."

"If that's how they treat their prisoners they don't deserve to have any," said Harry.

"Wilde said that first. And better. Ah! Oh, Merlin, that hurts," Severus tried to breathe through the pain, but it was rapidly becoming difficult. When he could speak again, he said, "How did you know where I was?"

"We've suspected for some time where Voldemort was. Suspected but not known. This seemed the most likely place, and Istlani confirmed it for me."

Severus raised his wrist; the snake was still there, like a basalt bracelet with jewelled eyes. Her forked tongue licked at Severus' skin.

"She likes you," Harry said, rather awkwardly. "Or she wouldn't stay."

Severus dropped his arm. "I'm used to her."

"Good."

"Oh! Ow, that hurts."

"Where's Hermione with Poppy," Harry muttered. "Though you still can't apparate into the grounds it's not as if there's much by way of grounds."

"I'd gathered that's why Wormtail couldn't just take me from the school. Where is Wormtail, by the way?" Severus was trying to keep his mind of the pain.

"He fled when I killed Voldemort."

"You let him go?"

"Not exactly." Harry looked somewhat nettled. "I was distracted by the fact that Voldemort had actually died and he changed into his rat form and disappeared."

"So he could be anywhere?"

"I'm afraid so. There's no point in looking at me like that, Severus. He got away and I'm sorry. But

I couldn't prevent it." Harry sighed.

Severus looked up as Black came in. "What shall I do with Voldemort's body?" Black asked.

Harry said, "I'd suggest take it out and burn it, but that would only provoke more questions.

Transfigure it into a stick and burn that in the kitchen range?"

"We'll have no evidence that he was ever alive again."

"Send him to the Minister, tied up with a pink bow and a note saying, 'All my love, Harry Potter'?

Sirius, I don't much care what we do with him as long as the Death Eaters don't get him back."

Black turned his attention to Severus. "How is he?"

"Tired of being talked about as if he isn't there. I'm as well as can be expected for someone who's having a baby in a charnel house, thank you, Black." He expected Black to snap back at him, but he didn't. He just smiled, and left the room.

"Sirius means well, you know," said Harry.

"Does he?" Then, "Ah! Ow!" He grabbed Harry's hand as another contraction swept through him.

The next thing Severus noticed was that Poppy arrived - the pain from a contraction distracted him from almost everything happening around him. She examined him, swiftly. "You're nicely dilated,

Severus. Shouldn't be too long now."

"That's easy enough for you to say," he grumbled. "It's not hurting you."

She ignored him, and said, "Next time you get a contraction, push."

Severus sighed, "Oh, I'd never have thought of that."

Poppy ignored that, too. She turned to the people behind her. "Remus? Hermione? Fetch something for Severus to kneel on. I think you found kneeling the most comfortable position last time?"

Severus nodded, he didn't have the strength to speak during a contraction. When Hermione and Remus came back with cushions, he settled himself against Harry's chest.

"Don't close your eyes, Severus. You need more sensory input or the pain will be worse. Potter, rub his back. Now, push again, you're nearly there."

Another contraction and Severus breathed through it as best he could. Then there was a pause while he leaned against Harry.

"And again," said Poppy. "You're doing really well." Sometimes, Severus really hated Poppy Pomfrey.

"Here's his little head," said Poppy. "One more should do it, Severus. One more."

"Scream if you want," said Harry.

"I don't want to. I'm trying not to. Ah!"

Poppy was handling him again, but he couldn't be bothered to stop her. Then she said, "That's it, Severus. Well done. Another lovely baby boy."

Severus slumped against Harry. He wanted nothing more than to sleep for several weeks.

"A few more minutes then you can rest."

"That was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." Sirius Black's voice, and Severus looked up.

From Black's expression he'd seen a miracle - he looked amazed and thrilled. As did Remus Lupin and Ron Weasley. Hermione's expression was torn between that and horror.

Severus summoned up all his strength to yell, "Get out!" But it didn't come out as loudly as he'd hoped. How would he ever live this down?

They hadn't gone. "I want to hold the baby," said Black.

"If anyone's going to hold my damn baby, it's going to be me."

"Don't excite yourself," Harry held on to Severus. "You'll see the baby soon enough. Poppy's not going to let anything happen to him - or you."

"Besides," put in Poppy, tranquilly, "there's the afterbirth yet."

Yeuch. Severus had forgotten about that bit. As soon as he remembered, his contraction started again.

"Oh, Merlin," muttered Hermione. "There has to be a better way."

"When you think of one, let me know," said Severus, when he could breathe.

"You're doing fine," said Harry, softly.

"I think that's for Poppy to say."

It didn't take long, though, and soon Poppy had him lying on the chaise with his new son in his arms and a blanket over him. He was totally exhausted. "How are we going to get home?" he

asked.

"Minerva is sending a portkey for you and the baby. It'll take you straight to the flat," Poppy said.

"Do you have a name for him yet?"

"Yes," said Severus, looking at Harry. "We thought we'd call him Albus." He slipped into sleep.

Now Black and Lupin were back, Severus didn't seem to be able to get rid of them. Harry had returned to Australia very unwillingly, leaving his godfather and Remus behind.

James, of course, was rather taken with them. He didn't recognise either of them, but Harry's obvious affection for them was enough to endear them in his eyes - that and the fact that Black always had a treat or a story or an idea for a game. But Chestnut Lodge was a very small flat to hold three adult men four when Ron was around - Hermione, James and baby Albus.

"Haven't you got homes to go to?" he asked one day, feeling like Madam Rosmerta at chucking out time. He wondered, for a moment, if Hogsmeade was suffering from the lack of the school.

"Yes," said Black.

"Sort of, anyway," put in Lupin.

Severus handed Lupin the baby. As he'd got all these hangers on, he might as well make use of them. "What does that mean? Either you have somewhere to live, or you don't."

"Despite Voldemort's death, I'm still a wanted criminal. There was no evidence there to suggest that Wormtail is still alive or that he was the one who betrayed Lily and James. Without it, I can't claim my house back. Or buy a new one."

"Where are you living?"

"Remus is renting a cottage on the edge of the Lincolnsire fens, near the Isle of Axholme. We go back there."

"So?"

"The agreement runs out in four weeks, the owner is returning from Cyprus and wants it back."

"The heart bleeds," said Severus. He turned to Hermione, "What about you?"

"We're living with Arthur and Molly - Ron's parents."

"I see," said Severus. And he did - at least, he saw why they pestered him all day. "You're not all moving in with us, even if we do get a bigger house."

"Wouldn't want to," said Black. "I want to be able to get away from you when I need to. But I don't want to be too far away, either."

"For crying out loud, Black! Are you a wizard or aren't you? If you want to go somewhere, bloody apparate."

"And arrive cross-hoppled? You've got to be joking."

"You mean you can't apparate?"

"I can if I need to. But I hate it, so I choose not to most of the time."

Severus noticed that rather than leaping to Black's defence, Lupin was concentrating very hard on changing the baby, and decided to let him get on with it.

"He's looking at me," said Lupin.

"He's a baby," Severus replied. "They all do that. James did." James looked up, then went back to his game.

Lupin made a wordless noise which might have been agreement and then again might not - and went on with changing the nappy.

When they had all gone, and he was alone with his two sons, Severus looked again at Albus.

Lupin was right. He did look more as if he knew what was going on around him than James had at his age.

"He's a nice, lively child," Poppy said, when she examined him later that week. "That's all."

"Poppy, it isn't. James is a nice, lively child. Albus is quite different."

"Have you discussed this with Harry?"

"He's still in Australia. He'll be back at the weekend, I hope. Then maybe I will be rid of his friends and wellwishers."

"Severus. They care about you, that's all. They're just interested."

"They care about James and Albus. I could die in a ditch for all they'd bother about me."

"That isn't true." Poppy handed Albus back. "He's in perfect health."

"That's a relief. Imagine what people would say if I didn't look after Potter's brats properly."

Severus dropped into the staff room on his way home - Minerva had said she would be there. Had made a point of it, in fact, and he wanted to ask her something in any case. He wasn't especially pleased to discover that most of the rest of the staff were there, even including Professor Trelawney and Mr Filch.

As he obviously had no alternative, he handed the baby over to Pythagora Vector to make a fuss of, and sat down. Minerva smiled at him, "Was it as bad as they said?" Not surprisingly in the circumstances, they hadn't been able to keep it out of the newspapers and Harry was feted wherever he went.

"It was worse," he said. "But I'm still alive, and so are Harry, the baby and James, and that's what matters." He glanced around the room, but everyone looked involved either with their own conversations or with Albus. "Harry wants to know if you'll be Albus' godmother."

"Just Harry?"

"He asked me if I thought it was a good idea, and I agreed." "I see." Minerva looked thoughtful.

"Will you?"

"Yes."

"Harry will be pleased, thank you."

Minerva gave him a curious look, half smile half something else. Severus looked away.

Suddenly there was a noise from across the room, and Vector's voice, "Minerva! Minerva, come quickly."

Severus jumped up and followed her, though he could hear nothing untoward from Albus. Sibyl Trelawney sat, her eyes rolling up into her head. "Don't touch her," Minerva said, as Professor Vector reached out.

Sibyl appeared to be looking at Albus, though it was difficult to tell because they could see only the whites of her eyes. In a voice unlike her own, she said, "The Protector. Merlin's prophecy and Curse has come true again. The Protector is come among us. His parents are to be honoured among wizards, his name is blessed. He is here." Then she slumped in her seat.

"Is she all right? Poppy?" Vector looked around as Poppy came forward and took Trelawney's pulse.

"Really!" said Minerva. "Albus - Professor Dumbledore - told me she had these funny turns, but I've never seen one before. She's obviously quite mad. Merlin's prophecy indeed, as if anyone believes in that load of rubbish. Is she teaching this afternoon? No? Good. When she comes round, someone escort her back to her rooms and make sure she goes to bed."

Severus reached out and took Albus back into his arms. "I think I should be getting home now, Minerva."

"When does Harry get home?"

"Tomorrow night." Severus put the baby into his pram. "As long as the games don't go on too long."

"Are you looking forward to it?"

Severus thought about it for a moment. In truth, the flat and his bed seemed empty without Harry.

"In a manner of speaking," he said. "Yes."

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[Back to index](#)

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