

a letter
from exile



one
merciful
morning

by
textualsphinx

Hh what can a feminist-socialist preacher
Do with the pairing of student and teacher?
Here's angst laced with humour and tender enchantment,
The grammar and lexicon serve as enhancement.
You get your Romance from Snape's wholesale redemption,
And thoughts about sex — sufficient temptation?

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foreword:

LETTER FROM EXILE ONE MERCIFUL MORNING is a work of 'fan-fan-fiction' — an alternative ending to the very first Snape-Hermione story to appear on the net, Lupinlover's **BEYOND THE SILVER RAINBOW**. I read it at ff.net in September 2000. (For further detail on Lupinlover's original story, please see the Afterword.)

I was, as the phrase goes, Squicked. Not that that stopped me devouring the story as avidly as anyone. Student-teacher pairings were already appearing in fanfiction (quite a few Hermione-Lupins, apparently) but **BEYOND THE SILVER RAINBOW** was the first I'd come across. Here was a 'breathless' romance, full of pathos and considerable charm, that didn't even attempt to address the power imbalance of a male teacher/female student liason. The emergence of sado-masochist 'SS/HG' scenarios and even 'rape-fics' in the wake of

Lupinlover's proposal of the pairing (typically featuring Snape as the violator of an ultimately 'willing' Hermione) was far more alarming, though hardly the fault of BEYOND THE SILVER RAINBOW, which wasn't *that* alarming. This was all in the days before ff.net removed NCI7 stories.

Censorship is not just morally dubious; it is ineffective. Theoretically, I'd always held that creating feminist erotica/romance to displace misogynist porn — and naïve romances — was politically more potent than suppressing or criticising them. I'd just never done it practice. After weeks of carping in the review boxes, it became clear that *someone* should write an alternative version of the 'ship' rather than treat it as a voyage you just don't go on. Of course, most sensible writers solved the problem by delaying matters until Hermione's adulthood — but that rather dodged the issue. Student-teacher relationships do happen, after all.

Lupinlover (it transpired much, much later) was barely older than twelve at the time; her story provided insights into female adolescent longings I'd either forgotten or, more likely, skipped. (As an edgy bookworm of a teenager, corrupted by feminism long before adolescence, I'd sneered at Romance.) Though her characterisations were off-Canon, and the slide into romance had that dreamlike swiftness that has little to do with reality and everything to do with collective fantasy, there was still *something* about the story that was compelling and truthful.

Lupinlover now writes as Keysersoze and has deleted her story from the net — a pity, given its 'historical' significance,

however inevitable the Severus-Hermione pairing was. (See |Odel's essay on the subject elsewhere on this site). The key incident of her tale which has been duplicated the backstory of LETTER FROM EXILE ONE MERCIFUL MORNING is that the liason is discovered, and all hell breaks loose. Snape is sacked and leaves Hogwarts; he writes Hermione a letter.

Who could resist filling such a gap? Even Rowling, who clearly likes Snape far less than her readers do, allows him verbal flair. A love-letter from someone who describes Potions in such unmistakably sensual terms had to be worth reading. Any thoughts of constructing a Plot of my own vanished. The whole thing was furtively and feverishly penned, in an exercise book, during a week of illness that kept me in bed at the start of an artist's residency in southern France. Luckily no one was in any of the rooms adjacent to mine, or they'd have heard the cackling. I got my Real Work done thoroughly and on time, so no one was the wiser — but the thing's suffused with Guilt as well as an odd nostalgia for the state in which it was written. This is why the text has not been drastically improved in cooler moments since, despite its excesses of style. The excuse is that 'narrator' Severus writes what eighteen-year-old Hermione wants to read, and if the characterisation is just as off-Canon as Lupinlover's, no one seems to have minded much. The excesses of style are probably the point — language can create desire in itself; it is not simply there to give photographically naturalistic portraits of (imaginary) people in love.

It is ironic (and was certainly news to me) that Letter from

Exile has sometimes been held responsible for spreading the ‘Snape-Hermione plague’. Apart from the fact that plenty of people wrote the pairing without ever having read it, the Romance, for all my intentions of subverting that popular female form, is little more than a frame for what is actually a *Snape-fic* that happens to deploy Hermione as its audience. (Her feelings are never actually *explained*: she simply occupies the position of a desiring female reader and laps up Snape’s flattery on our behalf.) Snape writes the kind of thing that Hermione/the female reader wants to devour – and that doesn’t stop at Romance. He is compelling because we can project onto him all the existentialist Angst, political/strategic significance, ambiguous development and (potential) moral grandeur that female characters rarely embody. How many great anti-Heroines do you know?

That said, any Snape-Hermione fans coming across this for the first time shall find a great many clichés. My only defence is that LETTER FROM EXILE invented some of them.

Ellen Fremedon combed through the text to ensure that the grammar and lexicon were as enhancing as promised. I thank |Odel for her thoroughness in researching and reworking the illustrations, for setting the work so stylishly and publishing it here. Finally, I want to thank every person who has reviewed LETTER FROM EXILE, or written to me about it, over the past few years.

— Textualsphinx
October 2004



“Now Gods, stand up for bastards!”

~ KING LEAR, Act I scene 2



RON MARCHED INTO THE HALL, late for breakfast. It was a week since Snape had been sacked. He was clutching a very thick letter and a small parcel. Hermione ran in after him, stumbling across chairs.

“Didn’t have the guts to write to you in Hall did he,” yelled Ron. “Has his Owl sneaking to your dormitory, the creep.”

“So you sneaked in too!” cried Hermione. “Very noble!” Ron stopped at the opposite end of the table from her. He slipped the package under his robes and ripped open the letter. Pages of folded Muggle-paper sprang out.

Harry, already seated, clawed the tablecloth.

“Give it back to her, Ron. It’s a private letter.”

“Not any more it isn’t. Her ‘private’ life has public effects. She won’t get away with it.”

"I can be addressed directly, Ron."

"Fine! You want to know what's it your letter? You can hear it. Out loud. Or I burn it with that fire spell of yours. *Fumos!*" Blue flames appeared at the end of his wand. He stood like a sentinel, letter in one hand, flames in the other.

Dumbledore was not at breakfast. He hadn't been at meals for several days. McGonagall had made the announcement — with severity and tact in equal measure. She moved swiftly to the Gryffindor table, but Hermione reached a decision first.

"Good! Read it out for everyone to hear. Let's get it over with for once and for all. Drag me through the mud, snigger at my secrets and then we can all go home. I'll even magnify your voice for you!" She chucked the spell at Ron's throat. He put the fire out.

McGonagall withdrew. *Don't interfere, let them have this out* was her conscious thought; the less conscious one being *This I've GOT to hear*.

"It's an awfully *long* letter, Ron," observed Hermione. "And there's just one condition: you read *all* of it, even if it means missing the start of the Quidditch match! No skipping the difficult bits as you usually do. No cutting to the juicy parts everyone wants to hear. All or nothing, Ron."

"All, then."

He began with an approximation of Snape's voice, pitched halfway between sneer and whine, to extract all possible melodrama from the first paragraph.

'DEAR *Hermione*,

Can you EVER forgive my FOOLishness? It is so clear to me now, writing to you from this quiet London café, a world away from Hogwarts, what I should have done: realised that we could neither deny our LURVE nor keep it under wraps; realised that there was no question of having both you and the job, nor any doubt as to which I would choose. I should have resigned. ["Too right." Ron commented.] 'Resigned the moment you said you loved me; I could have left the school I have served so long without this stain on my character, and more importantly, spared you the indignity and humiliations you are to face.'

It was hard to sustain the fake intonation. The writing demanded a low-key delivery. Ron stuttered over 'humil-liations'.

"Oh *dear*. Words of more than two syllables, and subordinate clauses. Are you sure you can manage it, Ron?" Hermione proffered a lethal smile.

"Just read it out normally." Harry said quietly. "Let's judge for ourselves. We want to hear what he says, not your acting."

Ron met Harry's gaze with difficulty. He took a breath and continued in an expressionless tone; but the Hall was mesmerised as, for the first time in their lives, people saw (or rather heard) the hidden history of Professor Severus Snape — uncoiled by his rival and exposed to the light of day.

Hermione — I can't give you lessons in living; but I can tell you about survival. You are very strong — stronger than you realise — but if you are to get through the next two months in one piece you will have to be tough. Be ruthless with yourself and focus entirely on your studies. It will help you ignore the crass comments of people who are not your true friends, nor, frankly, destined to occupy positions in life high enough to influence yours.

["Snob." commented someone from the Hufflepuff table. Hermione winced.]

It will also serve you well in the long run to do yourself intellectual justice. I am not just being the nagging teacher here. I confess to self-interest! You know that I would never have fallen for simple prettiness, even with kindness. I love to see you excel, and you would be the first to complain if I were threatened rather than dazzled by your brilliance.

[Harry noticed McGonagall share a smile with Professor Vector.]

If this does not convince you, let the practicalities speak for themselves. In your last letter, you wrote that you had 'catapulted me into poverty.' I hated to think that you blame yourself — but happily, there is no more cause for anxiety. I have a job, Hermione, a very good job.

I have not always lived as I should, but I have always got through — on cleverness, on discipline and cunning:

"He's a bastard, but he's a clever bastard, and so a useful bastard" as Sirius Black always says.

[Harry stared uneasily at his half-eaten toast. He adored his godfather Sirius]

Well, several of the larger chemical and bio-chemical companies that supply the potions market have been head-hunting me on and off for years, wanting me on their Research and Development teams. I have a few friends among them — acquaintances

rather (I dropped them because they kept trying to lure me from Hogwarts, which I regarded as my sanctuary). Anyway, I got an owl from one of them, who said (I quote) —

'Sev, ya bastard —'

(See? everyone calls me that:) 'GOTCHA!

Read about what happened and we're uncorking the champagne right now. We've been willing you to take drugs or embezzle the school funds for years. Well, well my son — you've gone beyond our wildest dreams here! We don't want your morals, just your brains — if you haven't ejaculated them. HA HA HA.' (They're very blokey — only ever talk about money or Quidditch; another reason I dropped them, plus I hate being called 'Sev.')

'Start next Monday — 40 galleons a month plus the bonus you're bringing in.'

[A series of chuckles had rippled through the Slytherin table. If 'Sev's' mates were rooting for him, why shouldn't they?]

So there you have it. One worry fewer for us. If your

parents don't approve of me and cut you off, you won't be without a sickle to see you through university. I'll support you as long as you like. Take a masters degree, do a doctorate if you want. Become a Professor.

Telling you all this cheers me up somewhat, and yet, Hermione, I hate to think of what people will call you. It's worse for women. After all, 'bastard' can almost be a compliment; it insults a man's mother more than it does him. There's no male equivalent of 'slut', 'slag', 'tart' or 'whore'. I write these words plainly because you may have to get used to them. At best (or maybe worst) people will pity you as my gullible victim. Do not waste your energy, Hermione, on trying to explain the truth. It must be enough that we know that what is between us is very beautiful and very balanced and very honest — that it has nothing to do with exploitation or mere self-gratification. So, if someone calls you a slut, just say that at least you're not a stupid slut.



and let them deal with that while you get on with your work. The words' power diminishes through over use — like monetary inflation.

I am not recommending this harshness as anything but a necessary tactic, a short-term measure. It has been my strategy in life for far too long, and you see it in the faces of students who dreaded my classes.

[Quite a few students exchanged looks. Ron stopped and glanced through the next page. He stood very still.]

“I’d better stop here.”

“Not dirty enough for you?” asked Hermione sourly.

“No — it’s just — he really wouldn’t want us to know about this.” He tried mouthing a word to Hermione, but she had looked away.

“Don’t pretend *that* bothers you,” said Harry, who was now really curious, along with everyone else. “All of it, Ron.”

Ron swallowed. His mouth had gone dry. He produced a magnified whisper.

You have asked me to explain it to you, this harshness of mine, and you have a right to know the worst of me. What I am about to tell you, Hermione, I tell

you not to exercise your compassion but to reveal to you your power. Remember, I write of a time now passed, and don't let it distress you.

You cannot begin to imagine the change you have wrought in me. I must tell you bluntly: if it were not for you, instead of now writing this letter, I would be setting my affairs in order. Their final order. I had planned, Hermione, to 'do us all a favour' (to quote Sirius again) and make this summer my last.

[The temperature of the Hall seemed to drop to nought, freezing the professors in attitudes of shame. Professor Vector had grabbed McGonagall’s arm and Flitwick stared at his lap. Students at the Slytherin table were white. Ron read as clearly as he could.]

For many years I have been very desolate; existing, surviving — but not living. It began when I was barely older than you. I joined Voldemort, not because I believed in his so-called cause, but simply because I was asked. I wanted to belong to something, to feel



needed — and no one else asked for, or needed, me. I was very ambitious. Indeed, any hopes of working my way up through the Ministry were dashed before I was born: my family were supporters of Grindelwald, and I was known to have a certain expertise in the dark magic. With brothers like mine, I'd have been dead by the age of five if I hadn't. At school, I was puny and ugly and bound to be picked on. I had no chance of defending myself with my fists. This is an explanation, not an excuse.

What was not excusable was the total want of values, of sympathetic imagination, that made me, a so-called pureblood, incapable of putting myself in the place of Voldemort's victims. It wasn't an issue for me — racism against those of mixed blood I regarded as stupid rather than evil. I was blinded by my own struggles to survive, and Voldemort was clever at adapting his rhetoric to each case. He was very charismatic. Words like 'Eternal Glory', 'Renewed Strength' and 'Unity' appeal to the

lonely. I thought of the 'suppression' of Muggles as a kind of side issue, a propaganda tool that appealed to the snob element of Voldemort's followers, and just a necessary part of empire-building. I wanted to have power in whoever's empire won the day. I pushed the idea of what 'suppression' meant to the edge of my mind, and did not kill anyone directly: I'm one those creepy bastards who worked behind the scenes; but I consider myself responsible for allowing deaths to happen. That's the eternal privilege of having brains — someone else does the manual work, someone else gets their hands dirty and has to wash the literal blood off. Luckily for me, Voldemort didn't see it that way. He thought I was being deprived of a pleasure, and as a special treat for his most promising disciple (the whole culture of the Death Eaters made a fetish of fine hierarchies — thankfully again, I was already tired of grovelling or being grovelled to) he decided to let me watch the 'purifying spectacle you've made possible'. We witnessed the scene in

a pensieve and I recognised one of the victims — Patrick Clearwater, a Ravenclaw Prefect from my own year who, without actually befriending me, had never joined in the taunting and discreetly treated me with respect. It wasn't enough for them to kill him; they had to do it slowly, and to humiliate him first. And there was nothing I could do. He was already dead. I had never felt so helpless or so sickened, pretending to enjoy the spectacle and all the while imagining, counting off in my mind, the others I had helped set up.

I contacted Dumbledore, asking him to meet me with one of the Aurors who had a licence to kill Death Eaters on sight. I had critical information, I claimed. We met by the lake at Hogwarts. The Auror was masked and would not reveal her name. I broke my wand to pieces and showed them the mark on my arm. I told Dumbledore I'd betrayed everything he'd tried to teach me, and that I'd done things that gave the Auror the legal right to execute me there and then. I was

ashamed of my moral blindness, of my ambition and above all of being a Slytherin, as we formed the core of Voldemort's followers. Dumbledore stayed the Auror's hand (she was itching to dispatch me) and looked into my eyes as if he could read my mind. He told me I couldn't die yet; there was work for me to do.

"A task that only a Slytherin — a fearless, intelligent Slytherin — can fulfil. You'll be of more help to us than ten Aurors together, and better placed than anyone to protect the people you care for." A spy. The darkest, sneakiest job in the world. Perfectly suited to my talents, Dumbledore said.

The Auror was not convinced. She thought it was a trap, so Dumbledore subjected me to an ingenious test. We went inside the castle and he made me drink five drops of Veritaserum; then we went to a room I didn't know.

"This will tell us, Auror, whether he still wants to serve Voldemort." He unveiled a large mirror and placed me before it. I think you know of this mirror.

the Mirror of Erised. He asked me to tell him what I saw, and I almost screamed: a nothingness, a void, a vacuum so absolute that it seemed capable of sucking us, the room, the whole world into itself.

"Just blackness."

"He's blocking," snarled the Auror.

"If he is, he won't sustain it. Wait."

We waited. Then something was vomited up from the whirlpool of darkness: a book that looked familiar to me. It was the book in which my family had written our births, marriages and deaths for nearly three hundred years. It has diagrams showing different branches of the family tree. The book opened and the pages were turned by an invisible hand, rapidly through the ages until we reached the present. There was my father's name with his parents and sisters; facing it, my mother's, and a line pointing down to their children. I read the names of my two brothers, but mine wasn't there beneath them.



"Will that satisfy you, Auror?" asked Dumbledore, when I'd described what I'd seen: "Here is a perfect instrument for you: an ally whose heart's desire is that he had never been born. He will take any risk, undergo any danger, for he rates his life at nothing — or rather, he will calculate the value of self-preservation or death only according to which better serves our cause. Is that not so, Severus Snape?"

I agreed that it was, and did so ever since. That was Dumbledore's gift to me: to be useful, to be needed. A bastard — but a serviceable bastard, an indispensable bastard! More than that, the grave dangers of my task meant I had to be brave, heroic even. The greater the peril, the more I felt — not happy exactly, but at peace. The atonement became an addiction. I couldn't hurl myself at Death enough. It was the best rebellion against Voldemort there was. People usually translate his name as 'Deathflight', 'Flight of Death'; but it can equally be read as 'Flight

from Death'. He wanted to conquer mortality above all things. If you face up to mortality, you face up to him.

It was the most remarkable time of my life, for with it came another gift of mortality, the closest thing to joy in life's transience I was ever to know. The Auror and I, the hard-headed Auror whose astringent beauty stung me to the core, became lovers. (Well, you did ask.) We were in no position to marry. It had to be a snatched and secret affair, fraught with danger for both of us if either side found out. I now believe the romance was in the situation, not ourselves. We made a bleak, driven couple. She had a coldness that matched my own, and a pitiless sense of humour.

"Well, well — it's Albus' Kamikaze soldier!" she commented, when we first met again; and that's what she called me — Kamikaze. 'Kam' if she was feeling affectionate. Never my own name, on the pretext that it was safer to think of each other in

code. Strange, a pet name that made things more, not less, impersonal. In the same mocking spirit I addressed her as 'Auror.' I will never forget her rattle of laughter the first time I made love to her. "Albus was right! Aren't you the perfect instrument!" — and she was gone on another mission before I'd recovered breath to reply.

[Hermione flinched in the face of expected sniggers. There were none.]

It was often like that. Her very praise marked the limit of what I meant to her. She was selflessly dedicated, highly intelligent and more courageous than anyone I knew; but she did need me. She lived under constant pressure, and I was her respite, a soul for her to save. No woman had ever so much as looked at me, except to think I made her skin crawl: I was enthralled by her. I would have done anything — did do everything — to have her approval. It was as if I were under an Imperius blessing. 'Die for me!' she

seemed to say, and I wanted to, because she loved me for what I did, not for who I was or could be. When I paid a furtive visit to the Mirror of Erised, during a report to Hogwarts, I didn't see us living happily ever after, but still my own death — only this time I was a dead fighter in her arms. Perhaps there was little difference between those two embraces — the French call it 'le petit mort', the minor death, and for me ecstasy lay in oblivion, in the utter shattering of self. We were selfless. We looked 'not at each other but in the same direction,' as St Exupéry wrote. Even when she had the sheer genius to make the Ministry lend her a time-turner, pretending she needed it for her assignments, we found ourselves reversing it back to the present to check up on what was happening 'at the front'. The more fools we. The last time we were together, we gave ourselves three days, a kind of honeymoon. We found a place to hide, got sufficient provisions. After a day and night of desper-



ate, wordless intimacy we found we couldn't cope with the luxury of time, couldn't allow ourselves to relax, to talk, to know each other as people and not as servants of a cause. So we went back, and the next day she disappeared for good.

Would you believe that the ministry grounded me for three weeks after the Death Eaters captured her? Someone guessed we were seeing each other, and suggested to Crouch that I was far too indispensable as a spy to risk my blowing my cover by rescuing an Auror. They put me in a nice room with a binding spell, confiscated my new wand and said they'd do what they could for her. They hardly bothered to pick my brains about where she might be. I can never forgive that insult to her memory. What she did was important; she saved many lives; she made a difference — but at that point Aurors had become cannon fodder.

By the time they released me, Voldemort was beaten; by accident — a mere baby. People were

still rejoicing in the streets, but for all my relief, I couldn't join in with them. I stumbled through those happy crowds feeling totally disconnected from it all. Nothing I'd done seemed to carry any weight: not only had I not been in action at the time, but if I had been, and found out about Pettigrew, I'd have intercepted him: Lily and James would have lived — and so would Voldemort. Even my grief for my Auror didn't seem quite solid. It wasn't just knowing she'd have left me the minute the war was over, but that I seemed to have lost the shadow of a dream, not a real person. I would check the records and those books on 'martyrs to the struggle' for years afterwards, just to confirm she had existed. Her body wasn't found for a very long time. Death Eaters habitually transfigured their prey in the most cursory manner, not bothering with burial. Eventually the spells would wear off, so for several years subsequently quite harmless-seeming objects would turn into

perfectly preserved corpses. 'Voldemort's last laugh', people called it. She had no family left, and I was asked, as one of the few who could, to identify her. It was the only time Dumbledore and I had a fight — he didn't want me to go.

It could have looked worse. Whatever she'd been changed into had been cast out to sea and trapped in a glacier that was now melting more than usual. When they pulled back the sheet, I thought I saw her immaculate, frozen replica. It wasn't her body, Hermione, but what she had written on it, in her own blood scratched repeatedly from her arm, that tormented me forever. "SNAPE — YOU BETRAYED ME YOU BASTARD". She had finally used my real name — in revenge, to incriminate. Every scenario was equally unbearable. Either they had tortured her out of her reason, which for her sake I had to hope was not so, or she had never really believed in me, not without constant proof.

The few days after my release remain a blank in

my memory. I am told I attended the Potters' funeral, and that I got myself to Hogwarts, where Dumbledore found me in a trance before the Mirror of Erised, staring at the void. He made me promise never to 'check up on my soul' in that mirror again. He claimed that even if I saw myself kissing Voldemort's hand, a man's deeds weighed more than his desires. I was consoled by that, but saddened too. There were people on our side — cynical and ungenerous — who said I'd only changed sides because of my affair with the Auror. Dumbledore always defended me. "She was his reward, not his reason." A precisely weighed reward, that. For my actions only. No more and no less than I deserved.

And deeds were no longer available to me. I grieved most keenly for the loss of the fight itself. The focus of my life had gone. It was ridiculous and irrational, but true. I could no longer be useful; I was no longer needed. Dumbledore was very astute — and he wanted to keep an eye on me. He understood that however much he — or anyone else

— forgave me. I could not forgive myself. I had to prove my worth again. It was as if the power I'd borrowed from Voldemort had been lent at an infinite rate of interest. I would never pay off the debt.

"Severus," he says. "I believe you are still looking for a penance. What would you say to being holed up in a miserable dungeon laboratory, trying to transmit your skills in Potions to people you can't begin to like or understand — oh, and being Head of the House with the most troubled students?"

[People stole glances at the Slytherin table, as if its largely unpleasant occupants might, too, be hiding lives of 'quiet desperation']

I said it sounded perfect. It was like entering a monastery. I'd grown wary of the world, or rather, myself in it.

I narrowed my life to a set of sparse rooms and three goals. The first, to keep searching for any ways in which Voldemort could reappear, and stamp them

out. The second, to pass on my knowledge as comprehensively and skilfully as possible. The third, to do what I could for the students of Slytherin House, whom I do like, and understand only too well.

The first I had no problem with.

["Could have fooled me." muttered Harry, thinking of Stone, Book and Bone. "Anytime — don't mention it."]

In the second I succeeded but partially. I knew my stuff and could explain it clearly — for interested, advanced students who could ignore my unpleasantness. I could be inspiring — but there is more to teaching than that. Control of the class, for one. Children sense fear like dogs and I found myself facing the one thing I couldn't include in my 'penance' — mockery. Their very innocence mocked me, and in that inverted logic of self-hatred, which maybe no-one can sustain without taking out on others, I was harshest to those who were the most decent, who most resembled what I wished I'd been.

A petty weakness, I know. The first class I taught played up (some practical joke making my chair sizzling hot) and I came down on them hard. I dropped the temperature of the room ten degrees at a time until a shivering exchange student from the Ivory Coast falsely confessed to the deed. I took ten points off everyone except him, cultivated my sarcasm and never had a rowdy class again.

With my third goal — it is difficult to say. Have you noticed how very quickly the Sorting Hat recognises Slytherins? It picks up on the uneasiness behind their drive to win, to prove themselves, to belong in a secure hierarchy. It detects their skill in hiding themselves. When they arrive, some of them are already damaged, and set to repeat the cycle with their own children. The lucky ones come from very ordinary, loving families — too ordinary and loving to understand the stars in their eyes. Less lucky ones have just been neglected, and show the most independence

of spirit. Others have either been spoilt rotten or horribly abused — or both, all within a rigid framework of rewards and punishments. Can you blame me for favouring them, Hermione? They needed some unconditional approval, and if I kept them winning I could reduce their excuses for bitterness.

[Outraged murmurs had broken out at the Slytherin table, and begun to swell into an angry rumble.]

“You shouldn’t have read that out Weasley,” warned Draco Malfoy.

The professors made to stop the whole proceedings, but to everyone’s astonishment, not least its owner, a high, clear voice broke through the shouts and stilled them. A fractured china doll, with trembling ringlets and glimmering eyes — Pansy Parkinson had got to her feet.

“He should. It’s true. We compete on bruises, don’t we!” Her face twisted to its usual sharpness. “Oh, yours is nothing! Look at the one Father gave me for Christmas!” She thudded back into her chair to a sickened silence. “Now BELT UP the lot of you and let’s hear the rest.”

[They’re shunning her already, thought Hermione, watching the space that seemed to grow around the angry girl.]

Of course more Dark Wizards come from Slytherin than anywhere else. I will never say it’s in their blood, but it is in their bloodlines, their family traditions. That’s harder to fight than an external enemy. You have to reject what you expect to love. I couldn’t turn the entire House over to sweetness and light with an open, wholesale strategy. Can you imagine it? “Now children, let’s all be nice to each other!” For one thing, I wouldn’t have kept control of the hard core of students who were bound to follow in their parents’ footsteps. I had to use Slytherin cunning. I isolated the hard core and watched them closely. I showed everyone that it was in their best self-interest to obey the rules, and taught some of them to understand their value. For the rest, I worked on individuals. I tried to foster friendships, alliances with other houses — in particular the Ravenclaws, who annoy Slytherins the least and have plenty of intelligent loners. I always started with the loners, or the ones who hovered at the edge of cliques. It was done very discreetly, almost as

a conspiracy. That appealed to them — doing good on the sly — and avoided open splits in the House. I like to think that I stopped the rot in many individuals, helped them lead productive, positive lives. Believe me, Hermione, you will find no better ally against the dark forces than the Slytherin who turns out well. Theirs is a hard-won virtue. They can't pretend that evil is somewhere out there, they can't project it onto a hate-figure in the way die-hard purebloods blame Muggles for every death in their family since the middle ages. They understand what they're up against. I'm trying not to speak for myself here; I don't know if I turned out well, not completely. Decency and kindness and all those virtues you Gryffindors take for granted in yourselves didn't come as fairy gifts at my naming.

My Auror, who was eight years my senior (just for the record) was a Slytherin. No, there has never been anyone else.

So I survived, Hermione. I got through; but I couldn't

allow myself to be happy. I hardly knew what happiness was. Until now, until you. I generally experienced two states of mind — agony, or its numb absence. I can't even say I am now happy 'beyond my wildest dreams'. I've never had dreams — only nightmares.

To return to the matter of my would-be last summer. Don't be alarmed. I am not habitually suicidal. I've never cried for help, and until this year did not seriously consider taking my life because it would have been an ungrateful slap in the face for Dumbledore — and for my colleagues who put up with me so patiently, never prying with their sympathy, but letting me know they were there for me: even though I made myself hateful, deliberately repellent body and soul, to ensure I wouldn't elicit love, or even liking.

["He means that hair of his was intentional?" Madam Hooch whispered to Sprout.]

I got through pretty well until last year, when we



— all of us together — finally defeated Voldemort. I didn't have the honour of finishing him off myself — Harry, again. That boy always beat me to it. One of the reasons I can't stick him. Couldn't.

[Be my guest thought Harry; the man was definitely some hairs short of a wand.]

As usual, I worked behind the scenes: slippery Snape, setting the traps. I can claim credit for one thing only. I didn't kill Voldemort, but I helped ensure he'll never come back. 'Death hath many a thousand doors' and Voldemort could open dozens of them in both directions. I had to find out — using all the cunning and double-dealing I could manage, cajoling and manipulating an array of people on both sides — every back up plan and passage back from Death he had. We couldn't eliminate them all in one fell swoop, but I deciphered a pattern in Voldemort's way of operating so that, as well as getting him to use the fake 'back up plans' that I persuaded his

closest advisers to suggest to him, we were able to close enough escape routes at the right moment to stop him reaching the rest. Those we dealt with afterwards, as fast as we could. It was difficult, intricate, meticulous work. I was in my element.

Anyway, with Voldemort gone — finally, irrevocably gone — I sank into another depression, worse than any before. I was intellectually exhausted, and my services, as you know, had been somewhat under-appreciated: Order of Merlin 3rd Class — well, Fudge is welcome to strip me of it; he always delivers less than he promises. Dumbledore, bless him, was furious. I also noticed a weakening in my powers — a faltering over complex spells. Wizards have been known to lose their powers completely after very great exertion, and that alarmed me. I started thinking about how long Dumbledore would live, and whether I could last out until he died. Some thought! Albus will be with us when you're 50, trust me. And then, an accident in the

potions lab, with a toxin I'd tested on a rat, gave me an idea. It occurred to me — so simple. I'm amazed I hadn't thought of it before — that I could die without anyone knowing I'd taken my own life.

I developed a poison that simulated the effect of a brain tumour well enough to escape detection in all but the most thorough autopsy. It worked on a half-hour delay. I planned to go on 'holiday' at the beginning of the Long Vacation. I would leave my affairs in enough order to be easily dealt with, and to suggest I was just keeping up with annual accounts and administration. I was to go to Rome, where my mother's family comes from (none left — all the wrong side). I'd send some quite cheery picture-owls to my colleagues saying what an interesting time I was having, dropping hints about a promising date, but complaining that living in Scotland for so long had made me intolerant of the heat, which was giving me headaches: more subtle than that, but you

get the idea. There's a little café near the cemetery where my ancestors are buried. I would quietly slip the potion into my espresso, transfigure the bottle into an innocuous piece of litter, drink up, drop the cup to break it so it wouldn't be re-used, and go and wait at a plausible distance from the family vaults with a fresh bunch of flowers. I liked the neatness of it: that the people who found my body wouldn't know me from Adam and might well be graveyard workers used to the dead; that a brain tumour was perfectly likely in your 30s; that there would be no practical difficulties — they could dump me in the vault there and then; that there would be plenty of time to fill the Potions job, and that by the time word got back to Hogwarts (Italian owls are so slow) the shock would be lessened because people, being away, would hear of it in dribs and drabs. It would already be old news.

That was my plan, Hermione. To slip away so softly that no one would know. They would barely

miss me. I would part without protest, without fuss, without tears, without ceremony — with nothing but my secret, and knowledge of good deeds, to go with me and be my guide. I thought it a very beautiful plan.

[Ron's voice had gone completely. He allowed half a minute's silence, like a mark of respect, before trying to continue. He indicated to Harry to take over, but rather more throat-soothing charms than were strictly necessary found their way to him.]

Then you came to me one day and asked me to help you with a potion you couldn't get right, and when I brushed you off wouldn't take no for an answer (do you ever?), and I saw you — met you properly for the first time. I destroyed the poison and all my notes on it the day you sought me out in the lab to tell me you couldn't forget me, or pretend that what was happening between us wasn't, or couldn't.

Forgive me for writing on these subjects at such length (it is easier than telling you face to face) but I want

you to know how irrevocably you have altered me. You defeated my despair as thoroughly as we all defeated Voldemort. You are not just another cause, a means for me to restore a semblance of my integrity. I love you because you have lifted me out of thinking only in terms of moral credit and debt. I love you because you do not need me, because you will never find me simply useful. I love you because you want me, and desire is in glorious excess of mere need. I love you because I can't reduce you to a single idea or function in my life. I will never fully understand you, and that enchants me so.

I did not say that I write this from one of your cafés, in your corner of London. I've been tracing your footsteps in all your old haunts, the places you've told me about, to feel nearer to you. Yesterday was Saturday, and there was some kind of fête at your old school. I went in and bought some things I didn't need and struck up a conversation with an elderly teacher. "My wife attended this school." I venture (hiding

my left hand in my pocket so she doesn't see the absence of a ring).

"Well, I've certainly been here long enough to have taught her," says this rather formidable woman, underestimating my age delightfully. She reminded me of Professor McGonagall.

"Hermione Granger?"

"Ah, yes." She suddenly looks very severe. (McG must have a Muggle aunt.) "Such a pity she didn't attend our upper school. We needed students like her in an inner city Comp ((Camp?)) but oh no, her parents let their liberal principals stop at their front door! Off she goes to some fancy boarding school in Scotland. I suppose she's done very well for herself — Cambridge Double First, hmm?"

"Well yes." I lie: relieved she thinks you're at least twenty-two. What gives me the impression that this teacher had quite an influence on you?

[Harry flashed Hermione a grin. She managed a weak smile.]

"So she's now Mrs — er?"

"Oh!" I picture the name 'Hermione Snape.' Life can't be that cruel.

"She calls herself Ms Granger, professionally and privately." (See how I've boned up on Muggle etiquette?) "She'd be out of her remarkable mind to take a surname like mine. Doesn't suit her at all." Or me, for that matter — not that I'm prepared to take yours either. It's a bit wholesome for a name like Severus.

Anyway, I wandered all the way down to the Angel and into Roseberry Avenue to check what was on at Sadlers Wells, thinking how much of London I have to discover, thinking of London as somehow like you, something that will always be a mixture of familiar and new.

I say all this, Hermione, because in these next few weeks many people will try to convince you that you have done a terrible thing, or that I have done a terrible thing, or (if they have a modicum of insight)

that we have done a terrible thing together. When they tell you this, remember that you have done more than save a life. You have **MADE** a life: you have created a reason for me to be. Not by setting out to do right, but just by being you, and noticing me, and detecting something worthy, just as Dumbledore did. You have his same benevolent power, perhaps more so. You magnify the atom of grace you found, so that everything contemptible in my past diminishes. If people say you are disgusting, ask how could you possibly embrace such a man, tell yourself it is because you have the power to transfigure, to transform the glum monster. Tell yourself: I can do this to him. I touch him and he changes. He becomes his real self. Dark, unlovely Severus turns quicksilver in my arms.

[There was a universal gulp, and the surreptitious rustle of people shifting in their chairs. McGonagall scribbled a note: NB Mercury.]

I believe that most of your troubles will come

from students, not the staff, who blame me more than you. It is my dear wish that we will one day come to an understanding with them. There was quite a scene when I went to say goodbye — well, I wasn't going to sneak off without facing them. It's more amusing in the retelling than the experience. ["Oh dear," murmured half the teachers under their breath.]

I went into the staff-room. Dumbledore was still in his office, and everyone just sat there in shock while I collected my stuff together. Hagrid was in tears and being physically restrained by three of the teachers. Flitwick was the first to speak — or rather squeak.

["Here we go," muttered Vector, in mock despair]

"I don't know how you have the **NERVE** to show your face here."

I didn't mean to go into the usual defence mode, but old habits die hard and I hear myself snarling.

"I have the nerve because I'm not a coward — and



I wanted to see you all, if it's for the last time."

Then Binns interrupts — positively animated!
— and admonishes me.

"You! Severus! Of all people. A philanderer!" (well, he is literally Edwardian.) "Seducing a young girl."

"The nerve!" squeaks Flitwick.

[The students tittered. Ron had unintentionally got him to a tee. His innate sense of humour, and the story-telling skill that came from being in a large family, had got the better of him. His listeners were treated to perfect comic timing.]

"I have the nerve." I repeated. "because although I'm a sinner, I'm not a miserable coward of a sinner — nor a persistent one. Binns. Men who fall in and out of love all the time, who habitually seduce women — young or otherwise — would have wriggled out of this more adroitly. What you have before you is the result of nearly half a lifetime's chastity."

Now that really shocked them. There wasn't a

man in that room who hadn't at some point bought me a butterbeer and advised me to get out more, and er, find myself a good time, if I knew what he meant (which I didn't.)

["Explains a lot," Ron quipped.]

"I also came here to invite you to my wedding."

"Making an honest woman of her now are you?" sneers Binns.

It's so frustrating wanting to punch a ghost.

"She's never been a dishonest one!" I yell. "What she is, or is not, doesn't depend on me. As far as my relation to her goes, she's my life, and when she's 60 and I'm 80 no-one will remember I was old enough to be her father."

This triggers Hagrid off, who hasn't taken anything in so far.

"Yeh **BASTARD**. How could you do that to 'er. To 'Ermione. Jittle 'Ermione!"

(I suppose he'll always think of you as 'little'.)
I couldn't resist telling them the truth. I'm sorry Hermione, but you can't blame me for telling the truth. In exits of great importance, style with sincerity is the vital thing.

"Ow could yeh?" roars Hagrid.

"**BECAUSE SHE ASKED ME TO. BECAUSE SHE INSISTED ...**" (I tuck my cauldron under my arm.) "**TWICE.**"

[Hermione buried her head on Harry's shoulder with a couple of thumps.]

I swear to you; there's this pained look McGonagall gets when she won't let herself laugh, and she had it then. Strangely, only the men were aggressive. The women seemed too shocked to be angry. (They just stared as if I'd arrived naked from another planet.) Binns mumbles something about minxes and Hagrid, to be fair, kind of shrugs. I watched all the men repressing the thought that made me want to punch the air:

'The bastard... the bastard... the LUCKY bastard...'

Well, I drew myself up to my full height (It's nice being tall, I'd forgotten) and said that all I regretted was not jumping before I was pushed. I repeated the invitation to our wedding, asked the women and Hagrid to look after you better than I had, turned on my heel and left — cloak in full swish, so to speak.

I'd got halfway down the stairs when I heard the tension break. An explosion of laughter — just the women — real witches' cackles. I edge back up the stairs.

["Ohhh shit..." muttered half the teachers.]

"It couldn't be helped your Honour," splutters McGonagall. "She would insist!"

"**TWICE!**" howls Vector.

"Does that mean he gave in the second time or the third?" wheezes Sprout.

"Well, let's see..." This has to be Madam Hooch



— she's an excellent mimic. She does a take-off: me at my most clipped and pompous, you at your most earnest and stubborn.

[Madam Hooch made to go, gabbling something about Quidditch, but the professors pulled her back to her seat. We're in this together.]

"Professor. I need to ask you something." (Snort. giggle. giggle.)

"I'm rather busy. Granger. What is it?"

"I've been doing some research on the History of Sexuality in the Magical Community, and —"

"I'm not aware that that's on the NEWT's syllabus" (cackle cackle).

"It isn't — it's the first module of my BA. I've done all my revision and thought I'd get a head start for university." (Sound of coffee-table being banged. cups clattering.)

"So — er — what is it precisely you want me to help

you with? You know I disapprove of love potions."

"Well, none of the books I've read make sense unless you've had practical experience, they just assume you do... That's what I need your help with."

"Ahem. Granger, if I understand you correctly, then what you are asking of me is ENTIRELY OUT OF THE QUESTION." (Pause, then courteously). "Regrettably, I daresay."

"Refusal One," announces McGonagall.

"But I need to KNOW — and you're the only person here who can show me."

"I'm surprised, Granger, that you want to flout the school rules, even in the name of research. But if you must — and do please take precautions, I'll brew some up for you — I'm sure there are plenty of male students in your year who would be willing — thrilled — to share your discoveries."

"Refusal Two!" declares Sprout.

"But they won't have your skill, Professor. I may

not be your favourite student." ("Ooh, clever move." – Vector), "but I have seen to the precautions, and I know I'll get better lessons from you."

"Lessons! You want... more than one... as in... a whole... course?"

And they chortle away for a good minute, until one of them – I couldn't tell who, the cackles muddled up the voices, gasps –

"Half a Lifetime's Chastity – Come to my Wedding – She is my Life – The jammy cow! The JAMMY, JAMMY COW!"

"Nonsense," snaps Minerva. "She's earned him. Every little bit."

[By this point, the whole Hall had dissolved into knowing, affectionate merriment. Professor Vector looked decidedly pink. It was like a family celebration. Only Ron's laugh was bitter.

"There's still a bit to go." So much for the Quidditch match.]

Well, then I would have punched the air, only

Dumbledore emerged from just round the stone pillar. From the twinkle in his eye, I guessed he'd heard a good deal, but he just took my arm very gently.

"There's something I'd like us to do before you go. The pinstripes have gone."

He led me along a corridor I hadn't, as promised, entered for years.

"I hope you're not expecting me to take Veritaserum."

"Certainly not. But it would reassure an old man to see you smile in front of this mirror."

I did more than that. For the second time that day I try not to laugh my head clean off. Dumbledore eyes me very quizzically.

"This is most surprising, Severus. I thought you were rather 'Sturm und Drang' about this kind of thing. All burning intensity and 'Liebestod.'" He starts to look anxious. "It is she?"

"In this scenario, Albus, of quite surreal charm, it couldn't be anyone else. And you may tell the pin-

stripes she's wearing the family ring."

I left him guessing the rest: but it still amuses me to think of how I could ever justify what I saw to those louts I'm going to be working with.

[Don't describe it, please Severus, Hermione begged silently. Ron wore a mischievous grin.]

'Whaddayahmean 'she wasn't naked!' Tell us she had decent lingerie at least...'

'I don't know. I couldn't see under the bedclothes.'
'Couldn't see? You want a doctor, mate. There was a bedroom though?'

'Not exactly. A study, a library that happened to have a bed in it.'

'Sev, you need help. Spare us the white linen sheets: say they were black satin: please Sev old son.'

'Neither.'

'You're getting me worried.'

'They were books. Dozens of them. She was under a bedspread made of books.'



[Hermione sighed with relief. The Ravenclaw girls looked impressed. Vector made a note. "Warn Madam Pince".]

There is one more thing, Hermione, the most important, most serious thing. For all I have said about your strength and your integrity, I like to think it would help you to have a part of me with you. This is something, too, that might protect you from people who think like Professor Binns. I meant to give it to you after you left school, but thought you could do with it now. If you open the silver box brought to you by the second Owl (it's loaded with security charms, this was a real risk) you will find your engagement ring. It is also your wedding ring — you will understand why you don't need two.

[Hermione looked for her package in alarm. Ron delved in his robes for it, glanced at the letter, and with a deftness unusual for him Summoned Hermione's wand. He tapped a complicated rhythm on the parcel, and the packaging unfurled like petals].

It is very old and very new — as we are. The stone goes back to Roman times. It is a sapphire.

round cut, which is why it doesn't look obviously expensive — but I assure you it is very rare and unflawed, and has endured two millennia unscathed. Some Senators of Rome were my forbears, according to family legend — well, after 2000 years a lot of people could claim that — but I know it to be true. After your exams I will tell you a spell that makes the stone show the names of all those who have possessed it — that's how I know, but it keeps you occupied for hours, so not yet. The Stoics, who made endurance a virtue, wore this ring. Medieval scribes and sorcerers wore it. Renaissance merchants and courtiers wore it, eighteenth century healers and scientists wore it, 19th century seers, cotton-mill workers and explorers wore it, and so on through the 20th century until today. Do you notice something odd? The mixture of magic trades and Muggle trades, the changes from aristocratic families to the merchant class to the poorer workers and back? You would expect something handed down the centuries to have stayed

within narrower social bounds; but this ring follows no ordinary genealogies. It subverts them.

Let me explain: I had the ring off my father, who was given it by his wife, my mother. She'd inherited it from my maternal grandmother, who received from her husband, my father's father, who was given it by his wife. You see the pattern? The ring is passed on, not through the male line only, the usual inheritance of father to son — nor through the distaff side, but via an ever-alternating, serpentine path that winds its way down the generations through both. (One day you will appreciate the Slytherin view of serpents). Isn't that beautiful? It is a wayward, unpredictable path that slides under family names: it follows love rather than property, the ladders of inheritance. Its enchantment depends upon it; and because even in the magical community (which traditionally embraces female power more readily than the Muggle one) a family's status is defined by the

father's occupation, so the preciousness of this ring has moved outside its expected social spheres through the desires of rebellious or ambitious daughters. Of course there were hiccups when a ring-wearer had no child of their own sex, but then it would just go to the first child or next of kin who married. Occasionally it was cloistered in a convent, monastery or museum as a rarity, but someone always managed to claim it and bring it back into the world. The principle remained the same and re-established itself — an endless exchange of love and influence between the sexes. I never thought of this way before. You made me think of it.

["Excuse me," hissed Sprout. "He must have heard my theories on the artificiality of patriarchal genealogies compared to those in the plant world a dozen times."] "

"We all have," observed McGonagall. "I'm afraid that's how men acknowledge our ideas — unconsciously."

So much for the old part. The setting is new. People

traditionally change it with each wedding, to adapt to the sex of the new wearer. The setting my father had was an abomination. Very heavy, elaborate red and yellow gold knots — you hardly saw the stone, or what was in it. I've chosen platinum for you because I thought you'd prefer the colour, and because it's the hardest of the precious metals. I could have it wrought very fine, and as plain as could be, to off-set the stone's complexity. (A bastard, but a bastard with impeccable taste!) Now read the inscription.

[Ron kept his hand on the box. Harry and Hermione glued their eyes to the hand.]

As you can see, it means "I bear the soul of the giver". It's always the same inscription, though people changed the language. I prefer to keep the Latin. The ring is enchanted to hold a particle of the soul. Look closely into the sapphire and you will see a tiny flame — white, though the gem renders it blue. When the giver of the ring dies, the flame goes out. Some say the particle rejoins the departing spirit, others

that it is lost forever — none knows for sure. That is when the wearer passes it on to their son or daughter, who, if married or about to marry, performs an incantation that draws their soul into the stone.

I hardly dared look after I said the incantation last night. I was scared that instead of a white flame there'd be a wisp of black smoke! (I know, I know — you've seen higher self-esteem in the average House Elf). Not any more. Look at the flame — when you put the ring on, it will burn brighter. The ring can't lie. If the love of either the giver or wearer fades, the flame dulls. There can be no deception, and if you do see it fade, the ring must be returned. If it is kept without love, the fragment of the soul withers. In effect, you would allow a part of me to die. It is no accident that it is a sapphire. Blue traditionally stands for truth. I need hardly add that, in consigning this to you, I give you my absolute trust. It has no other particular properties. Its power is in its symbol-

ism, underpinned with a certain literalness. It won't protect you from dragons or diseases; but I believe that those who mean you harm will be awed and intimidated by it. People stand back from an austere beauty such as this. Wear it to feel armoured, to feel adult, to feel I am with you.

[Ron paused, and again tapped a rhythm on the small, gun-metal box. The lid sprang open. He continued to read, letter in one hand, and box in the other. The Hall held its breath.]

You will be very much alone, but keep Harry by your side. Of course I don't think he betrayed us to Malfoy. It isn't his style, it wasn't his father's. He has been very tolerant, very decent and very wise in all this. He has my respect, even if I haven't his.

["Tell him he has now," whispered Harry to Hermione.]

The crowds around Camden Lock are growing, and it is no longer quiet enough to write. I like this

place. I never thought there was so much to wonder at in the non-magical world. I was here most of yesterday too, writing. The owner keeps giving me free cups of coffee because customers hang around thinking I'm a trendy London novelist. They keep addressing me as 'Self' or 'Will'. I thought I'd Apparated into some bizarrely apt medieval allegory until the café owner explained. I looked up the man's books in Waterstone's but didn't buy them. Even Voldemort's idea of fun wasn't that sick! Mr Will Self apart, I've bought you a fair selection of new Muggle novels for the summer. I think Dumbledore would be intrigued by my choices. It was he who taught me to love literature. He's often observed that there are no great writers, artists or composers among witches and wizards. It is the non-sorcerer's mind that compensates for its lack of literal magic with Imagination and beauty of form. These creators don't need Polyjuice to become someone else. They

transfigure life with metaphors, or with apparently pointless patterning. They are no less powerful than we. It is a different, subtler magic.

I'm reading Milton — *Paradise Lost*, naturally. (I must be the only person to skip the Books about Lucifer — he's the very last person I want to read about.) After the Fall in Eden, when the guilty pair are exiled from Paradise, Milton says they leave "with all the World before them." That's the point: who would want to stay in Eden? It's so simple and dull for all its prettiness. Only the ignorant could stand it. So, out in the world, you just take enough of its joy for your journey. I tell you, the serpent did them a valuable service.

Well, they've kicked me out before you, but I haven't gone far. I'm waiting for you here, in this energising crowd, where nobody knows or judges me. I'm just another Londoner enjoying my Sunday coffee. The sun, frankly, is not shining; it's hardly glimmering

through the grey: a frail light, unfocussed as tolerance: a light one can take refuge in. This is a merciful morning, Hermione — one of many we shall have: a merciful, merciful morning that bids me remain
Yours ever (entirely) —
Severus

[There was a general female sigh. Harry wondered if he should Summon the box, the ring, but he was scared. What if Ron started a fight? What if he tried to damage it?]

Ron put down the last page and carefully took out the ring — another blue glow that morning. He looked very tired from his ordeal. He returned his voice to normal.

"I didn't stand a chance with you, did I Hermione? Too simple, really — silly, piss-easy puzzle that makes you laugh and you solve it in three minutes' flat. I could never write a letter like that. I wouldn't want to. Just not in his league, am I!"

Hermione made an effort, but the problem was, he was right.

"A different league, Ron, not better or worse. You're not stupid. Who always beats me at chess, the hardest game in the world?" Feeble she thought, feeble.

"Very profound," said Ron. Yet he no longer seemed angry. He could no more begrudge the Potions master his only chance

so I propose you sit here until we've all given it the once-over — yes, well it is exquisite isn't it — and then I must INSIST that you either wear it with the stone facing inwards or on a chain under your cape. Fascinating as it may be to gaze into Severus' soul, he's not on the exam syllabus, and we have work to do."

"Yes of course, Professor," said Hermione in her best I-Am-Very-Serious voice.

"And I wonder if it mightn't be a very great kindness to show Dumbledore this letter? He knows Severus better than most of us, so as everyone else has heard it, I think he can. He's been most upset by all this, and on the whole, this rather elegant epistle would cheer him up. It was very brave of you to make Ron read it out. You may tell Severus that Gryffindor openness pays off."

"Tell Severus? Oh no! I can't! Brave? It was selfish. I didn't think... He'll be *mortified*..."

"I don't see why;" interjected McGonagall. "He's written nothing to compromise his dignity. Admirably frank, of course, but quite without sentimentality or obscenity." She looked faintly wistful. "Which reminds me — Professor Vector?"

She turned away. Hermione was surrounded.

"What was that note you gave me, Minerva?"

"We need to check no-one's broken into the Potions store to filch the mercury. I don't think some of our more, er, *excitable* students have quite grasped the concept of metaphor. They're already asking each other 'What's that thing she does for him with quicksilver?' — the stuff's toxic, for goodness' sake. We could have a nasty accident."

of happiness than deny a crust of bread to a starving man just because he was feeling peckish himself.

"You'll always make someone happy Ron. You're — sound, solid, unequivocally the good guy. Fun. Don't underestimate it."

"The useful joker, the indispensable sidekick," said Ron. "I do have something over him, though. I've never had nightmares. I have *brilliant* dreams. Happy, quirky, sentimental little dreams."

The blue light shone from his hand.

"It isn't mine to give you, but you might as well make half a dream come true. Here's your politically correct ring, Hermione."

Hermione walked up to him and he put the ring on her left hand. The light flared violently.

"Sexy bastard an' all." Hermione smiled, but Ron looked at his scuffed shoes.

"I'm not the unequivocal good guy. I'm petty and jealous and I was the one who betrayed you. I didn't even have the guts to go to my own father. I told Malfoy because I knew his father would tell Fudge. I'm sorry."

(Malfoy, for once, looked as if he wanted the ground to swallow him up).

"It doesn't matter any more. I don't blame you."

People were beginning to swirl around the Gryffindor table, trying to glimpse the ring.

"Perhaps we'd better go," Harry suggested.

McGonagall's crisp Edinburgh timbre cut through the throng.

"Hermione — we may as well get through everything in one go. I'm afraid everyone is going to want a good look at that ring,

— if it stops shining so brilliantly and settles into a comfortable glow? Severus' whole being depends on that ring. 'She is my Life' is literally true; and it's *not* romantic, it's disturbing."

Vector did not reply.

"For her — she has so much in front of her — all the world and its people and its ideas to discover. More so than he, whatever he says about London. What if she starts to see him through other perspectives? I've watched these student-professor marriages before. The wife wakes up at 30 thinking, Why did I take the safe route, why didn't I strike out on my own?"

"But he *wants* her to strike out on her own. You're contradicting yourself, if he's the child in the relationship, not she."

"The thing is," said Mc Gonagall, carefully repairing a fractured jar, "he'll never be the whole world to her, as she to him, because they have a different mindset."

"Come off it, Minerva: the twin detectives?"

"No, at a more fundamental level, Hermione's an idealist. She's looking for a grand world view, a total explanation of what's wrong globally, and a total solution to righting it. The only way Severus sees the wood for the trees is technical or strategic, not philosophical. He operates in the world as it is, and can calculate the value of a compromise. He fights an evil, once a personal connection makes it register with him, more effectively than anyone, but when he defeats it he's left with a Blank. He has no ideals."

"What!" Vector nearly dropped a jar.

"He has *principles*, Vector. Iron principles and honour carved in stone. He's spent half his life in single-minded servitude to

Vector giggled as they slipped out of the Hall. "He can't have meant that as part of the metaphor."

"I wouldn't put it past him." replied McGonagall grimly. "He's still twisted even if he isn't bitter — and if you call her a 'jammy cow' ONCE more, I shall slap you. You're thirty-something and he's been under your nose for years. Serves you right for not noticing — well, there's a lot none of us noticed. Oh dear, that water-tight plan to go to Rome... I hope they'll be all right together."

"Any reason they shouldn't be?" Vector was astounded. "They're perfect for each other — there's no chance of his age dominating her."

"Quite the reverse — that's what bothers me. He's right when he says she doesn't need him. She doesn't; but he needs her — more than he desires her. She's created a life for him, and he worships her for it. Would you accept such a responsibility? She transfigures him into what they both want. So many women dream of changing their men, find they can't do it, and if they have wisdom, fully accept or reject what they have. What if, one day, she loses the power to transfigure him?"

"Come on, Minerva, she knows what he is. He's hidden nothing, and scoured every drop of blood from his hands a thousand times over."

They reached the Potions lab. They unlocked the storeroom and began setting double locking charms on the jars of mercury. It was a sombre, orderly, spiritless place.

"As long as her love is powerful enough, as long as he's at least the most precious element in her life, all will go well. I wouldn't want to be wearing that ring. How will they feel — he especially

his phantom moral creditor. He's a Roman Stoic and she's a 21st Century visionary. She may come to perceive him as old-fashioned, historically defunct."

"But look at the way he analysed insults to men and women, decides she's Ms Granger, the feminist ring, the way he enjoyed our witches cackles. His views are modern."

"Of course they are, Vector — it's within the personal sphere, and he's just come to life. It all seems new to him. But he's content to explore bit by bit. He reads a little Milton, he blends it with the palatable aspects of Slytherin thinking, he drinks coffee on a miserable grey day and calls it merciful. He may piece things together, but not the way she does. He has to understand her only partially, to keep her bigger than he is. For the first time in his life he dares to want, and he delights in fragments whose *only* connection is through her. His is the poetic sensibility — and however much we may admire Hermione, for once I agree with Trelawney. There is a touch of the mundane. And she *doesn't* have Muggle literature in all her stacks of books — she thinks it's a frivolous waste of time."

"Does it matter? Marriages don't depend on people being the same. He was *like* that ice-maiden of an Auror."

"Fair point; but she must accept that fundamental difference in outlook. Severus asks for so little — a weeny slice of happiness and he thinks he's got the world on a plate. He's so grateful, it breaks my heart — and so fragile, Vector. All that harshness and endurance — just so much armour he's cast off for her. He's stepping *into* a patch of Paradise, not out of it; but if he ever has to leave, I'm not sure the memory would be enough to sustain

another journey. He'd go straight to that cemetery in Rome."

Vector shivered. She hoped it was just chill of the storeroom.

"Aren't you overcomplicating things? The letter was so, well, *chaste*, that you forget the strong, basic fact of physical attraction. We all saw it when he came to say goodbye. I sat there thinking — has he done something about his hair, got a suntan, capped his teeth — what? He's *gorgeous*, and he'll age gorgeously, and we all wanted him under our cloaks there and then — and sod the Sapphics, don't pretend *you* didn't. It's not every day you blush."

"Well, I hope you're right." said McGonagall, side-stepping this last remark. "But that letter — I was so distracted by each turn of phrase that it's only now I'm realising what disturbed me."

"Oh go on, then. Let's be gloomy on a lovely sunny day." They had locked up the lab and were crossing the courtyard.

"It was the structure. It began and ended very firm and measured, but halfway through he plunges us into the most abject despair imaginable, then no sooner have we bowed our heads in silence he lurches into the extremes of ecstasy. It was a manic-depressive cycle in reverse. The lunatic, the lover and the poet are of a mind, and so forth."

"No way. He's crazy about her, but he's not crazy. He sounded tranquil. It was the sanest, wisest love letter you could ask for."

"Get a grip, Vector."

"I am, I am. Listen, we must talk to her before she leaves. Try to give her some womanly advice about the pitfalls ahead."

"By all means."

McGonagall frowned as they climbed the stairs to the staff

room. She was trying to work out how to do reversible transfiguration on books without causing printing errors. Trust Severus to fantasise a really *fiddly* challenge. Still, it would make the perfect wedding present...

Vector clutched her arm again.

"Do you think he *might* be losing his powers? If he's right about Muggle creativity — I mean, Severus has always been so terse."

"It's possible, but it rarely happens; Dumbledore took care not to expose him to the same pressures as the first time. More likely to have been the temporary effect of depression."

"Good." Vector tried to be cheery. "No point marrying someone from the Snake-house if they can't regularly perform the Slytherin Gift to Virgins."

It was Vector's turn to look superior. This was an area of life she definitely knew more about than McGonagall.

"And *what* is the Slytherin Gift to Virgins? And why is it performed regularly in marriage if it's for virgins?"

"Oh Minerva," she said pityingly. "If you've got to ask you'll never know! And you an Animagus." She smirked and sprinted back down the stairs "Something we forgot to find out..."

McGonagall shook her head and went into the staffroom. Professor Vector crossed the courtyard back to the hall, past the notice-board of staff photographs where a group of Slytherin third-year girls were searching the bins for a removed one of Snape. This was going to be worse than Gilderoy Lockhart's reign.

"You won't find it." Pansy Parkinson was saying, leaning smugly against the wall. "I Summoned it along the floor when

he was going on about the ring."

"That's really sneaky, Pansy!"

"Of course it is — I'm a bloody Slytherin, aren't I? But I'll let you have duplicates — for a price."

"But your Dad's *loaded*."

"Who said anything about sickles? The price is — a happy Hufflepuff. You have to be nice to a Hufflepuff for a whole week and get *them* to ask me for one."

The Slytherins were appalled.

"But why a Hufflepuff, Pansy? Can't we choose a Ravenclaw — at least they're aren't thick..."

"Because — you dim excuse for a Slytherin — Hufflepuffs can't act to save their lives, so I'll **KNOW** if you've bribed or blackmailed them."

Then off she walked, swathed in her hard-won virtue.

Should've made her Head Girl, thought Vector, as she reached the Hall door. The tables were already set for Saturday lunch.

"Hermione?"

The familiar trio of Harry, Ron and Hermione looked up.

"Make sure you let us all know when and where for the wedding."

And she smiled — a genuine, generous, sisterly grin; but as she turned away, her face hollowed to a sober mask. She had been a friend and colleague of Minerva McGonagall's for nearly nine years, and had never known her to be wrong.



author's notes:

You read to the end? Congratulations on your endurance, and thank-you! I hope you didn't mind Pansy Parkinson getting her moment of glory. If you weren't convinced by Snape's reasons for joining Voldemort — I based them on real accounts by people who supported Hitler, in particular Gitta Sireny's book of interviews with Albert Speer.

The unattributed quotations are from (in order) Somerset Maugham's *OF HUMAN BONDAGE*, an anonymous medieval play *EVERYMAN* and John Webster's play *The DUCHESS OF MALFI*. Katherine Hepburn apparently said "What you see before you is the result of a lifetime's chocolate", and I've just found a Dorothy Parker short story containing the line: "Edith dresses well? You mean those clothes of hers are intentional?" — an unconscious memory of mine, sorry not to have attributed it before.

Patrick Clearwater is a distant cousin of Penelope Clearwater's father — a Muggle who was unaware of wizarding blood in his family until Penelope got her letter.

afterword and acknowledgements:

LupinLover posted *BEYOND THE SILVER RAINBOW* in September 2000, but deleted it two years later, so for those

who missed it, here's a summary of the plot:

Snape, 'handsome apart from the greasy hair'(!) falls in lust with 7th Year Hermione when she rewards him with a smile for helping her with a potion she (oddly) can't get right. Hermione is flattered into love by the idea that a "smart, intelligent, older" man is interested, and the affair kicks off after a glorious farce in the Girls' dorm, where she catches Snape reading her diary. Ron-of-the-unadult-tablemanners is dumped and Hermione instigates the sex. (A rewrite of *BEYOND THE SILVER RAINBOW* excised the sex, but only after it had given me the headache of trying to make it plausible.) Harry twigs, insists they stop, but keeps the secret. Stopping does not happen in Hogwarts' hidden rooms at night. The liason is exposed by rejected Ron and nasty Draco. Lucius Malfoy informs Fudge. Snape is sacked and leaves Hogwarts; he writes Hermione a love letter.

A very *short* letter.

I made one crucial change. In Lupinlover's tale, Voldemort kills the exiled (therefore vulnerable) Snape and duels Dumbledore to the death. We end with Hermione contemplating three graves on her 18th birthday. *LETTER FROM EXILE* evades the tragic deus ex machina by shifting the timeframe to after Voldemort's defeat. Hermione and Co. are doing an eighth year to make up for time lost in the war.

LETTER FROM EXILE depended on *BEYOND THE SILVER*

RAINBOW, but rewriting its ending performed a kind of erasure. The story you imagine it is completing is quite unlike Lupinlover's original, largely because I am (was) three times her age, a feminist and Squicked by the very idea of student-teacher romance. Perhaps writing is all about confronting one's Squicks, yet had I known then that Lupinlover was all of twelve, I'd have left well alone. In fact, she proved to be rarity amongst Snape-romancers for her tragic plot. The *LETTER* attempts to overturn the power-relations implicit in (Student-Teacher) Romance without denying the reader its pleasures.

The most powerful sources of inspiration (Rowling aside) were the Angst-y accounts of *How Snape Got to Where He Got* by the end of *GOBLET OF FIRE*. These are the real acknowledgements owing — to the early writers of 'Snape-fics' at fanfiction.net such as Earthwalk, Firecross and MMM. All wrote well on why Slytherins are as they are. Earthwalk's *I WAS RIGHT* remains the classic account of Snape's student years. Firecross did a great line in *Snarky Snape Suffering* with her unfinished *EXERCISE IN CRUELTY*. MMM deleted her promising story of an Obliviated post-Voldemort Snape that was rather influential on my picture of Slytherins.

colophon

The layout and formatting of this document was created in Adobe InDesign. Cover and interior graphics were created in Adobe Photoshop. Clip art is from Dynamic Graphics of Peoria, Illinois.

Fonts used in the project are: Body text; the Priori Sans family, by Johnathan Barnbrook, distributed by Emigré foundary. Titling is set in Bayer ArchiType. (I'm sorry. Foundary name escapes me) The letter itself is set in P22's Michaelangelo with the words set in all caps in Handscript Bold by another unknown foundary. The "merciful morning" dingbat is from Bill's Dingbats. The legend on the frame of the Mirror of Erised is set in Johnathan Barnbrook's Mason, from Emigré.

The images in the Mirror of Erised utilize; digital files, scanned prints of the works of Michaelangelo and digital photos shot locally. The Library background was taken in the Children's room of the Los Angeles Central Library. (Bertram Goodhue, 1926.)

Special mention should probably also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book.

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