

A Matter of Will

by Memory

The war is over, and now Severus Snape has to face his worst enemy: himself.
Alternate Universe, HBP compliant.

Coming Back

Chapter 1 of 5

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Disclaimer: I obviously don't own any of the characters in this story. This story was created many months before the release of DH.

Warning: I'm Italian, so my English may sound strange to native ears. My fantastic betas have done their best to give a sense to my wild writing. Infinite grateful thanks to **Jynx67** for her patience, to **Pennfana** for her useful considerations, and to **Ladyinthecloak** and **Notsosaintly** for their final revision.

Chapter 1 Coming back

Darkness.

Pain... Intolerable pain... Thirst... Anguish...

Darkness again.

Darkness.

Memories floating in a chaotic whirl.

Pain... *Pain*... Panic... Struggling to stay conscious...

Darkness again.

Darkness...

Pain... Less pain... Trying to understand what is happening...

Memories coming slowly...

Huge walls. Massive stones. Scarce light. Torches smoking and burning with crackling sounds. Green mould. Musty smell... The dungeons... Somewhere in the

subterranean and most mysterious part of the Hogwarts Castle. Noises and shouts muffled by distance, clashes and thunders reverberating loudly in the deep...

The Dark Lord enters a passage, his red eyes glowing menacingly, his imposing figure walking regally towards the younger wizard waiting for him. As usual, Wormtail is following his master closely, but this time he looks tired and extremely nervous. Nagini, the big serpent, is sinuously crawling after them, her ferocious head raised disdainfully far from the muddy ground.

"It seems they are resisting more forcefully than I had believed, Severus... Is this the force of desperation or have they found unexpected support somewhere?"

The Dark Lord's high-pitched voice has always sounded inhuman and cold, but this time, a different, more threatening note is coming through. His piercing eyes are intensely scrutinising the thin, pale, exhausted man in front of him.

The younger wizard lowers his head in a bow, apparently to show his respect, though actually to hide his uneasiness. "Should I go back and see what's happening, my Lord? Perhaps another wand could be of help..."

"How gracious of you!" A dreadful pause. "But tell me, Severus, who are the ones you are wishing to help? The men and women who carry the same mark I burned on your arm, the symbol you swore to obey... or the dear, good, old friends you never truly abandoned?" The Dark Lord's voice is icy, and Wormtail cringes in apprehension, his gaze flickering anxiously from his master to the uncharacteristically tense Severus Snape, his worst fears growing stronger every minute.

Severus is clearly making an effort to control his anxiety. His words sound strangely uncertain, somewhat insincere. "My loyalties have always been yours, my Lord. I don't know how I might have disappointed you."

"You don't know, Severus? You really don't know?"

In another moment, Wormtail would greatly enjoy this verbal exchange. He knows perfectly well that when his master begins to pose these frightfully ironical questions, calling his target repeatedly by name is the signal of a rising anger that will soon be followed by a rewarding scene of suffering. And Wormtail loves to see people suffer. The more important, powerful or honoured they are, the more pleased he is to see them imploring and writhing at his master's feet.

But today, Wormtail is too scared to appreciate the absolutely unexpected pleasure of seeing Severus Snape being cruelly teased, even if this is a pleasure he has always dreamed of witnessing. Today, all their lives are at risk, a terrible risk. He has always been afraid that this moment would come, and now it is coming, alarmingly rapidly, even more frightening than death.

Is Severus Snape a traitor? Is he THE traitor, as Bellatrix Black has always declared? What is going to happen if the Dark Lord's party is defeated? And what kind of punishment would then be reserved for Wormtail, the man who had played a main role in the Dark Lord's rebirth?

Wormtail feels his throat tightening in panic. Nobody exactly knows what the prophecy says... Has the Dark Lord been so foolish as to inconsiderately rely only upon exalted, hopeless dreams, sacrificing the lives of his followers in a vain quest for power?

Severus Snape can easily read all the doubts gathering and clashing in the eyes of the little man watching him in deep anxiety. It's so easy to detect those emotions! After all, he is a superb Occlumens and a skilled Legilimens, as Albus Dumbledore used to say. But this thought is scarcely a comfort at the moment.

A bitter smile twists his lips when he raises his head again to face his master.

He is alone. As always, he is alone.

Fear... Anguish...

Darkness... blessed darkness ... Then oblivion.

Abruptly awake. Is it night or day?

Darkness. Pain.

Finally he can move a hand.

Memories return in a sudden flow of images and sound.

The Dark Lord is staring at Snape, his face distorted by hate and suspicion, while Severus silently braces himself, gathering all his remaining strength. Nothing is going as he has planned in his highly organised mind. He breathes deeply. There must be a way!

For a few, infinite seconds, time stops in a pocket-sized eternity where everybody moves in a bizarre parody of the real world: the Dark Lord's hideous features hardening in rage, Wormtail backing slowly, eyes full of terror and sudden awareness, Nagini hissing menacingly behind its master... Now everybody seems frozen in time.

Then, abruptly, life comes back, accelerating again.

Remus Lupin is suddenly at Severus' side, wand lifted, lips tightened in a determined expression. What the hell is he trying to do? A red flash glows while Severus is still reaching for his wand. Lupin falls gracefully on the ground, eyes blank, mouth open in a silent scream. The Dark Lord now smiles, and his smile is of cruel pleasure.

"Another foolish attempt," he declares sarcastically. "So, has your turn finally come, Severus? You won't be afraid of me, I believe... After all, aren't you the one who killed the great Dumbledore?"

Severus hesitates under the gaze of those merciless, reptilian eyes. He doesn't know if he should at least make an attempt. Indecision. Fear. Impotence. Where is Potter? Where is the supposed saviour of the wizarding world hiding?

The Dark Lord laughs, and the sound echoes loudly against the stones while he seems to grow stronger, dreadful, overwhelming! Just a word, and the younger wizard's body is aflame. Severus writhes on the ground, feeling his bones become liquid fire. Pain. Pain! Such an unbearable pain!

Darkness. Silence. In the unknown place where he is lying, Severus lightly touches his face, slowly, almost fearfully. His mind is confused.

Am I still living? Am I in hell? Why can't I hear a sound? Where am I?

Then he feels the bandages around his head, and he knows. He is injured, but still alive. Should he be glad? Pain, terrible pain explodes in his brain when he tries to get up. His hands finally find the soft sheets under him.

This is a bed! Is somebody taking care of me? ...

Back into darkness again. Now memories are much more coordinated, but emotions are difficult to hold back. He struggles against a devastating sensation of panic and tries to regain his self-control.

My name is Severus Snape, Potions master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, former Death Eater, member of the Order of the Phoenix and spy for both sides. But I'm also a traitor and Dumbledore's murderer, and... Oh, how many labels, how many sufferings in a life that hasn't even reached its middle!

If the "good side" has won, will I be prosecuted for what I've done? Is there somebody left to testify on whose side I really was? Will somebody believe me, or are they just keeping me alive for the glory of my punishment?

He sighs in despair. Again, memories begin to flow mercilessly in his mind...

Remus Lupin is on the ground next to Severus, his empty eyes looking blankly at the ceiling. His body is stiff, rigid as if it were made of stone. Even if Snape has never cared for him nor considered him a friend, even if they have always been opposites since the days of their youth, an anguished sensation of loss and fear enters his heart and mind violently.

"This is the final battle! Our only hopes rely upon Potter... and me!"

But the Dark Lord is still keeping Severus under his curse. And he is too powerful! How will a pathetic boy, who has never shown a particular talent except luck, be able to escape such a terrible threat? Severus twists in agony while his mind concentrates on the boy. The pain is so horrible that he can't even cry, his mouth gritted in spasms. All he can do is hope that the torture may end, even with his own death. He is too weak, worn-out and desperate...

"Albus was mad thinking that we could have a chance against this power! And I was even more foolish to believe him!"

Suddenly, the torture stops, and Severus hears his master's mocking voice calling him. "Rise, Severus, my loyal follower. Rise and receive the prize you so truly deserve!"

Severus' pride helps him. He is NOT going to die crawling in the mud. He has just painfully risen to his feet when Potter enters, running in the passage, as always escorted by his ever-present sidekicks, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley. Oddly, but luckily, they have not been followed by those other two useless children, Neville Longbottom and that crazy Lovegood girl.

Hermione Granger looks at Severus with wide, anguished eyes while the boys glare at him in anger and contempt. The Dark Lord immediately turns to them, raising his wand again. He is triumphant. Three children, just three children in front of the master of all evils! This time, only luck will be there to help them... Luck and the quickly vanishing forces of Severus Snape, too exhausted even to speak.

"Welcome, my dear, dear friends! Come to join the party?" Voldemort exclaims as he bows ironically. "Ah, Harry, finally, we meet again, and I hope you were expecting this moment as anxiously as I was. Because today is my day, and this time, there won't be any chance for you! What an unlucky coincidence for the other young fellows here to be associated with you!" A frightful pause, then a cunning, hideous smile. "But perhaps one of them is having second thoughts? I feel generous today, so I will kindly offer a last possibility to those willing to accept it..."

His eyes stare coldly at the small, silent group. The children are clinging together instinctively. They look so young and defenceless, just like those tiny little birds that get close to each other to comfort themselves. And as a result, they offer a perfect target.

The Dark Lord smiles meaningfully. "As I imagined..." he murmurs, grimly amused.

Everything happens quickly. His smile turning suddenly cruel, the Dark Lord rapidly lifts his wand and casts a forceful curse. The children are ready to react, but the spell is too strong, even if they are three against one. Only the addition of Severus' silent "Protego", even if he is still shaking in weariness, succeeds in managing an acceptable shield, thus deflecting the attack. However, Weasley must have somehow escaped the protection. He falls with a cry of pain, thrashing in spasms more and more faintly on the ground until he lies motionless. The other two seem to freeze in horror.

"Ron!" The girl gives an agonising cry, while Harry steps forward and pushes her behind him, protecting her with his body. With frightening slowness, the Dark Lord turns to stare at Severus, a sentence of death unmistakably written in his dreadful eyes, an enigmatic smile still curling his lips. Harry Potter, too, is looking at his former professor with hating, implacable eyes, and Snape, with a shiver, suddenly realises that the boy still believes him to be an enemy. Evidently, Potter hasn't understood what happened. Clearly, he thinks that his friends and he haven't been strong enough to stop "two" joined hexes. Obviously. Weasley has been struck, and Severus is there, wand raised, the Dark Lord's deceiving words of congratulations still echoing in the air. How could Potter trust him? Why should he?

Harry speaks through gritted teeth. The arrogant brat has more backbone than Severus would like to admit.

"You bastards! I'll do my best to kill you both in the most painful way! And you, Lord Voldemort, remember the prophecy and be afraid! I have already met you and survived four times!"

The Dark Lord shifts involuntarily, a wondering frown on his face, when unexpectedly Hermione Granger casts a spell. The rational one! Too afraid to face Voldemort by herself, she is at least trying to eliminate all the minor adversaries and leave the Dark Lord unprotected. And Severus, in this moment, is an easy target, too weak to react properly. Again he falls in the mud, feeling its slimy wetness reach his body through his damp clothes.

Voldemort has regained his composure and his cruel, inhuman smile. "It seems that your reward will be more than enjoyable, Severus. Even your former allies are willing to be of assistance. Perhaps you have been too efficient in your double task!"

Then he adds coldly, no longer amused. "I'm glad you reminded me of our previous meetings, Potter. Luck, simply luck has helped you to survive until now and only to lead you in front of me again. So, you'd like to kill me? You foolish little child! It will be a pleasure to finally see you begging for mercy. But rest assured, you won't die alone. I'm not going to separate you from these so very faithful friends of yours!" He gives a short laugh, then he continues sarcastically. "You will forgive me if I keep for myself our dear Severus, since his punishment has to be long, long and painful. I think you won't mind, will you?"

A shot of light and Severus, who was painfully trying to rise and possibly speak, curls up in torment. He doesn't even try to stand up again. Potter is looking confused, enraged, but hesitant. He is gazing uncertainly at Snape, wand ready to strike, when Remus unexpectedly regains consciousness with a moan and stammers, "Harry, don't, Severus is a fr..."

The Dark Lord simply raises his hand.

This time, Snape hasn't the time or the strength to appropriately protect his old schoolmate, even if he tries to. The spell is ferocious, of course, so his wand skips away, far from his reach, while Remus writhes in convulsions until he becomes immobile. Luckily, he seems to be still breathing. Severus numbly thinks that the werewolf should thank him if they survive.

"Remus!" The children gasp in shocked horror; Hermione almost in tears, Harry paling horribly. The Dark Lord's lips curl in contempt before the pathetic bunch of survivors.

"So, who's next, now?" he invites, dangerously calm, and Severus sees through his unfocused eyes that neither Potter nor the girl know what to do.

"Albus," he thinks bitterly, "how could you hope? HOW COULD YOU HOPE!?"

Then, without warning, he stretches himself with a moan and snatches Remus' wand from his contracted hands. It's not his own wand, so he knows that it won't work perfectly, but he must do what he must do. It's difficult, but not impossible. It's a matter of will.

He is waiting in agony to be blasted once more when, surprisingly, two amazing events happen almost simultaneously.

Hermione Granger, with a sudden decision, coldly points her wand at Nagini and kills the enormous animal with an astonishing "Avada Kedavra". Her spell is so powerful that everybody flinches as the deadly green light crosses the space between the girl and the beast. Then Hermione, shocked by the violence of such a malignant curse, slumps to her knees, trembling.

The Dark Lord gives a terrible scream and presses a hand to his chest, tightening his wand so forcefully that he nearly snaps it in two. Immediately after, with a speed impossible to match, a red flash of anger reaches the girl, knocking her down before anyone can even think to react.

"No!" Harry shouts in desperation while he casts a spell that is easily deflected by his furious enemy.

"Enough! I have toyed too much with you and your friends, Potter, sparing your miserable lives! Die, and may all my enemies die with you!" The Dark Lord's rage is terrible to see, almost unsustainable, and Harry, for a moment, steps back, lost in panic.

During this exchange, a trembling but determined Wormtail, eyes full of tears, has advanced slowly and undetected behind his master. His cowardice is incredibly forcing him to ally with his former enemies! What is going on in his mind? Is he hoping for a more merciful sentence? Are his old feelings of friendship awakening or is this merely his conscience? Is he willing to pay the debt he feels towards the boy who once saved his life? Nobody will ever know, but when the Dark Lord, livid in anger, points his wand at Potter, Wormtail is ready to stop the mortal ray. Then, his wand explodes in the effort, and the little pathetic man opens his watery eyes one last time, incredulous before death as if he couldn't believe what he has just done.

Voldemort looks more than frightening: all his evil powers are gathering in violent waves that make the air and earth pulsate forcefully around him. Every element of Nature seems to join him and submit to his command. His figure is dreadfully blazing and his spidery fingers emit rays of light while he regally moves his hand, lifting a radiant wand with intolerable slowness.

Suddenly, three different shots erupt in the darkness. The first one is the Dark Lord trying to strike Harry Potter. The second one is Harry, counteracting. And the third one is Severus, shielding Harry with the last of his power.

Now he is certain that he is awake, as he hears voices in the distance, muffled as if they were coming from behind a door. He desperately tries to understand what those indistinct sounds are expressing because he needs all the information he can collect... He has always been vigilant.

A door opens quietly, and he waits motionless, not even breathing. Friend or enemy? Soon he will know.

The soft rustling sound of a person walking, a sweet, fragrant scent, then the soothing touch of warm, delicate fingers on his head and his hands. Could this possibly be a mediwizard? He feels the placid power of a Diagnostic Spell washing over his body and relaxes for a moment. Then, the stranger silently exits the room, and before the door is closed, he hears the gentle voice of a girl declaring quietly, "Nothing has changed till now. He appears to still be unconscious."

A more mature tone answers, concerned, "I hope that he will recover soon...he has suffered so much! He deserves every moment of peace we can offer to him."

That voice! His heart seems to break into a thousand pieces! Poppy! Poppy Pomfrey! He IS safe! But this violent emotion is too much for his exhausted body, and he finally falls mercifully into oblivion.

Discoveries

Chapter 2 of 5

The war is over, and now Severus Snape has to face his worst enemy: himself. Alternate Universe, HBP compliant.

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Chapter 2 - Discoveries

As soon as he wakes up again, Severus frets with impatience. Now positive that he is safe, he cannot wait to ask and to receive answers. Strange emotions for a man who has cultivated control for almost his whole life! But he doesn't care, he only wants to speak with Poppy now. He tries to rise, but immediately he realises that he is too weak even to call for help. And these damned bandages on his head and eyes! He knows he was injured, since his head is aching awfully when he moves it, but these bandages are an annoying limitation, because they don't allow him to see. Is it day or night? How much longer will he have to wait? Again, he has to muster all his resources to resist his devouring impatience. It's a matter of will, more than ever, and he struggles to keep his mind under control.

Thankfully, an answer comes after only a few minutes of torture. The same light steps he heard before, the same warm fragrance, the same gentle touch. But this time, he

is ready to speak. "Who are you? Where am I? Is this St. Mungo's?"

"Professor!" A delighted, unbelievable, unmistakable note of happiness comes from the voice; nobody has ever addressed him with such joy. "You're finally awake! Oh, I'm so glad! Everybody here will be so pleased! How are you feeling?"

But he is Severus Snape, and things must be done the way he wants.

"Who are you? Where am I?" he insists forcefully.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" The girl answers hastily and he can sense the smile in her voice. "You are in St. Mungo's, of course. They brought you here after the battle... and I'm Becky Ingham. Do you remember me, Professor? You taught me in sixth year, but I passed the N.E.W.T. with Professor Slughorn, as you were..."

She stops, embarrassed. Foolish, clumsy girl! And so young! How can people at St. Mungo's depend on such unqualified assistance? Have so few of the experienced Healers remained that he has to be watched over by this clearly untrained girl? He feels a deep rage rising.

"Yes, I remember you, Miss Ingham, a remarkable failure in my class! How could you pass the N.E.W.T. in Potions and enter such a renowned institution like St. Mungo's? Now, let me guess. Knowing Professor Slughorn, this is not that difficult. He is so well known! How did you bribe him, crystallised pineapples?"

Life is flowing more and more powerfully in his veins with every sarcastic word he pronounces. He enjoys his strength coming back, although now he can perceive the girl physically retreating from him, her voice sounding incredulous and sad.

"I didn't... *buy* my admission! I worked hard to improve my marks because I've always wanted to be a Healer," she says in a resentful tone.

"How fascinating!" he answers acidly. "But I still believe you are too young to be a qualified Healer. May I ask why I must suffer your attention? Perhaps you are using me as a subject for your experiments?"

The girl swallows before replying. She seems to choose her words carefully, as if she is trying to remain calm and aloof. "I personally asked for the... the honour of assisting you while you were unconscious." Her voice trembles a little. "My primary duty was to check your condition, which I have done constantly for the entire time you have been here."

"What a commitment!" He sounds even more detestable. Obviously, her performance hasn't impressed him. On the contrary, he is decidedly infuriated that he's been seen in such a vulnerable state, and worst of all, by one of his former students!

Suddenly, a new, disturbing thought crosses his mind.

"How long?" he asks brusquely.

The answer is shocking. "Twenty days, Professor."

"Twenty days... I have been here... for twenty days?" His voice is a whisper now, his hands shaking slightly.

She can see the different emotions twisting his mouth, which is the only visible portion of his face. Surely now he will understand her sacrifices and dedication. She hasn't slept properly in days! Lately, her head has been continuously spinning, and she has been seriously, even if reluctantly, considering the idea of asking for a substitute.

But he only sighs deeply, then he declares in his usual venomous tone, "I am sure you did your best, Miss Ingham. Best being obviously a relative term. Now, may I ask you a favour? Leave and send me a more competent person with whom I could talk."

Not a thank you or a word of acknowledgement... only contempt and harshness. She wonders what she was expecting, anyway. After all, he was her teacher for six long, insufferable years. She lowers her head and says quietly, struggling against tears of rage and humiliation, "I'll call a Senior Healer immediately, Professor."

She leaves the room quietly but, with his now sharpened senses, he can hear her just outside the door, speaking with someone else. Evidently, others have gathered by his room. He feels pleased he is finally considered important, and his impatience rises consequently. He wants to know, he needs to know. He's already cursing himself for not having specifically asked for Poppy... because she is there, he knows it!

Then the voices become louder, and he can hear distinctly the words pronounced by another unknown, astonished woman. "You mean he threw you out?"

The girl replies, her voice beginning to break. "I was so happy for him! Why does he have to act like that?"

"Because he is a bastard; hero or not, he always has had the same arrogant manner. You'd think he would have learned better, but some people simply can't! Now, don't cry, dear, don't blame yourself. You did all you could, more than expected. Look how tired you are!"

The girl sounds rather childish with disappointment. "I... I thought he would have been happy to see one of his students!" Then, suddenly embarrassed, she stammers, "Well, I didn't exactly mean... see."

The other voice says with a practical, professional tone, "I know what you mean, dear, and this surely is one of the loveliest things you could wish for him. But with those eyes, I doubt he will ever be able to see again."

Words fade in the distance. The two women have gone somewhere else, leaving him in a cold sweat. His heart is sinking in desperation while his mind simply refuses to accept what he has just heard.

His eyes... lost forever? How can he live, how can he work, how can he practice magic without his sight? No, no, NO! It must be a mistake. Surely, he's confused; after all, he is ill. Twenty days in this bed, where is Poppy Pomfrey?

"WHERE IS POPPY POMFREY?!"

He is shouting now, his body is shaking in panic, his hands opening and clenching frantically, while the terrible words keep repeating in his head: *But with those eyes, I doubt he will ever be able to see again... But with those eyes, I doubt he will ever be able ... But with those eyes, I doubt he will ever be able ... But with those eyes, I doubt he will ever be able ...*

Suddenly, the door opens and slams with a powerful thud.

"Please wait outside, Becky, I'll take care of him," says the firm, reassuring voice of Poppy Pomfrey.

He stops thrashing immediately and tentatively extends a hand. "Poppy!" he whispers, shaking violently. "What happened to me? My eyes... are they lost?"

He feels her warm, comforting hands on his hands, then on his shoulders. "Severus! So you have finally awakened! I'm so happy!" Poppy is efficient as always, but he can perceive an uncharacteristic uneasiness in her usually brisk manner, and this makes him even more anxious. "Now calm down, I'm here to help you. Tell me, how do you feel?"

His shivers are slowly placating now, though he is even more irritated and worried. Why is everybody being so kind and willing to reassure him? Why doesn't Poppy reply with her usual frankness? The pressure on his shoulders gets firmer. Reluctantly, he answers. "My head is aching terribly, and I'm feeling very weak," he admits

grudgingly. "But that doesn't matter, I know everything will be all right soon. Meanwhile, my eyes... This blindfold... Poppy, please..." He has never sounded so imploring. He hates himself for being so helpless and the woman in front of him for keeping him in the dark.

"Severus, you have always been brave. Really..." Her hands hold him tightly to keep him from moving. "I think I should apologise for the many times I believed you were a traitor and wished you all the worst. Maybe this is not the right moment, but we all are in your debt now, and I will personally make sure that you have the best medical treatment. Please trust me."

Her voice is calming. She is a Healer and a professional, used to dealing with children often out of control. However, these expressions of sorrow are unexpected on her lips. Severus waits tensely. He doesn't want to interrupt, but he is scarcely interested in her apologies. His entire life had been full of hate, derision and contempt. Not even one person on either side he has served was ever a true friend, except for his great mentor and protector, Albus Dumbledore. So he never cared for feelings. Perhaps he might in the future, but what kind of future is waiting for him now?

Perfectly aware of his tension, Poppy continues, her hands always keeping him firmly settled. "Now, I will explain what happened. You were brought here unconscious, so you weren't able to give us an explanation. We had to ask Harry Potter, the only one that was awake, wounded, but still responsive. Do you remember anything about the battle?"

"Just a part... Memories are still coming and going. I suppose the Dark Lord is no more?" he asks wearily, realising he doesn't effectively remember too much of what happened.

"Yes, Harry destroyed him, but he succeeded only because of your help, which is why everybody in the wizarding world is now greatly indebted to Severus Snape." A soft smile in her voice, then sorrow returns. "Our victory was a sad one, however, because of the many lives that were lost to defeat that vicious monster."

An impulsive, unexpected question rises, and it surprises him. "Lupin?"

Her hands tighten abruptly. "Alive, but paralysed; he won't be able to walk ever again."

His reaction is frantic. "What do you mean, 'ever again'?" he asks angrily. "You are Healers! Can't you help him? There must be a way!" And he feels uncomfortable because he knows that it is not Lupin's tragedy that upsets him so much, but the sudden awareness that not all can be solved, even by magic.

"Severus, calm down!" Poppy reprimands him gently. "It's nice of you to be so concerned because I remember well how you dislike him. But he was unfortunately hit by Lord... Voldemort himself! Dark Magic and a very powerful spell. There is nothing we can do for him at the moment, but we are trying very hard to find a solution, believe me. We owe him a lot, too."

"I'm glad to see how valuable we have become!" he snaps sarcastically.

"Severus!" Poppy is sad, but somewhat comforted to see him reacting the usual way.

He snorts. "Weasley?" he asks again.

"Which one?" The answer takes him by surprise. He hadn't thought of them as an entire family. But before he can reply, Poppy is already continuing. "Oh, sorry, I should have imagined, the youngest, Ronald. He, too, was found with you... Well, he..."

"He?" His tone is sharp.

"His body has been burnt almost completely by a Dark Curse. His skin has dried and become rigid; he can barely move his arms and legs without lacerating himself..." Her voice is trembling now.

He stiffens. What a price paid to save the world!

"Granger?" He is implacable.

"Oh, the poor one! She cried so much when she awakened. Her face is disfigured, like Weasley's body... And she can't speak properly, as her lips have been practically destroyed..."

Severus is storing all of this information mechanically. There is no more room inside to feel compassion. Only rage, terrible rage. He tightens his lips, and Poppy, noticing it, turns professional again. "But there will be time later for this unfortunately sad news. Now, let's speak about you. You have been lying unconscious for twenty days. I think Becky Ingham already told you that."

Her tone now changes a little, becoming firm. "Incidentally, Severus, I don't think you conducted yourself appropriately with that girl. She has dedicated a lot of time to you. I know she is not a trained Healer, but she has good will, patience and resistance. These are the only and best qualities needed to tend a patient in the state you were... if 'patient' is a word that can ever be applied to you." She allows herself a quick joke, hoping to see a reaction.

He doesn't comment, and Poppy continues in that brisk, efficient tone doctors use when they want to mislead their listeners.

"Well, you are awake and in your usual grumpy mood. I believe that this is a clear sign of rapid recovery. Of course, you are weak now because you haven't eaten properly, but I'm certain that in a few..."

"Poppy!"

His hand has seized her wrist unexpectedly, with a force that leaves her astonished. But tears fill her eyes as she sees how much his hand is trembling.

"Poppy!" His voice is now a whisper, full of fear. "Have I become blind?" She hesitates and his grip tightens. "Please, tell me the truth!"

Silence. Again he implores, "Poppy, please..."

It's a plea, it's a hope, it's an anguished doubt, but she is troubled and uncertain about giving him a sincere reply. Never has she seen her usually short-tempered colleague so desperate! But he will have to know, sooner or later, and after all, he is Severus Snape. A wave of emotion washes over her body, and finally, Poppy nods in assent, even though he can't see her. She speaks concisely, in brief sentences.

"You too were hit by a Dark Curse. Your eyes are permanently burnt. More than burnt. They have become stones. I examined them personally while you were unconscious. It's Dark Magic. There is nothing we can do at the moment."

His hand stops trembling, and he takes a deep breath. Then, abruptly, he releases his grip, crosses his arms abruptly over his chest and turns his head, as if refusing to listen anymore. Exactly the reaction she had feared.

"Severus!" She calls him forcefully now, almost shaking him. "You have always been brave, don't give up right now! There are other sources we can search... Please believe me! I will help you..."

"You are too late. Now please, leave me alone." His voice is cold, distant, bitter.

"Severus!"

"Go away!!!"

"Severus..." she pleads once more, but his face is dark and brooding. She knows him too well to attempt saying something else. Her news was too much for him to handle at once.

Sighing hopelessly, Poppy resumes her professional, detached tone. "We will be constantly here, so please, do not hesitate to call me or Becky Ingham if..."

"I don't want to see that girl anymore!" he replies harshly and irately, before realising what he has just said. How ironic the everyday sentences in life have become! Suddenly, he feels as if something is cracking inside him, and he curls into a ball, pushing his hands on his useless eyes. His body begins to shiver uncontrollably; then the shudders become more and more intense, while little gasping sobs escape his lips.

Poppy sadly watches the total defeat, the final humiliation of a man who had learnt to perfectly rule his emotions, who was even able to suppress them completely if he considered it necessary. Moved, she turns her head away, feeling like an intruder in such a private moment. Not wanting to embarrass him even more, she backs away, noisily enough to let him know that she is leaving.

And suddenly, another terrible realisation comes to her. He cannot cry! His dry orbs cannot produce fluid any more, and this will certainly make his desperation even more painful without the gentle, soothing consolation of tears washing away his sorrow.

Poppy shakes her head in discomfort, then slowly retreats and exits quietly, leaving him alone. But, as soon as the door closes after her, she leans against the wooden frame and listens in anguish to the sounds of his torment, feeling on her cheeks the warm drops he can no longer shed.

Memories

Chapter 3 of 5

The war is over, and now Severus Snape has to face his worst enemy: himself. Alternate Universe, HBP compliant.

Disclaimer: *I obviously don't own any of the characters in this story. This story was created many months before the release of DH.*

*Infinite grateful thanks to **Jynx67** for her patience, to **Pennfana** for her useful considerations, and to **Ladyinthecloak** and **Notsosaintly** for their final revision. But also thanks to all those reading and reviewing.*

Chapter 3 Memories

Severus is alone again in the darkness. Is it day? Is it night? What does it matter? It makes no difference to him any longer. His head is aching terribly, and his mind is wandering, relentlessly following the path of desperation.

What is going to happen now? How is he going to manage his life without sight? Proud as he has always been, how can he spend the rest of his days surrounded by pity and commiseration? A man whose eyes could read even the deepest layers of a soul!

As minutes slowly elapse in the shadows, he keeps asking himself, "Why?" Why him? Why now? Why is he so cruelly being punished, just at the end of his long and painful journey? Will there never be repentance for the faults he has committed? Has an entire adulthood of sacrifices and solitude been completely worthless?

The thought of his other unfortunate companions crosses his mind in a flash, and he shivers, realising how cruelly they have been punished too... even if, unlike him, they hadn't committed any crime for which they needed to make amends!

He retreats in rage. He doesn't care! He doesn't care, because nobody has ever cared for him. At least they can... they could... they might... His mind explores furiously every option, searching for a difference, and finally finds it. The others are not alone! This knowledge hurts him so utterly. Every one of them has somebody who cares! But what about him? The only one who promised him salvation, the great Albus Dumbledore, is definitely and forever gone, murdered by the hand of the man he had endeavoured to save, leaving that same man burdened with the weight of this action for the rest of his life. It doesn't matter that Albus' death was a highly unpleasant but necessary occurrence that had been carefully planned and painfully executed. On his hands, Severus has the blood of his only benefactor. The mistakes he made in his youth will never disappear. So much time and effort he has dedicated to his redemption, only to discover that evidently, Fate never accepted his offer. His role was to be a sacrificial victim, right from the beginning. He never had rights, chances or hopes, and he will never have. His life has reached its peak and has stopped there... forever.

He curls on the bed that he is beginning to consider as his personal cell, and closes his mind to everything. Pain is still haunting him, forceful, continuous, distressing... He sometimes thinks that it must be something connected with his wounds, because it is located around his eyes and seems to dig inside. But he is going to keep it at bay; it's simple when you know how to do it. It is a matter of will, as all his life has been.

However, tomorrow... today? Well, as soon as somebody comes in, he is going to ask to remove those damned bandages and have his eyes checked again.

Slowly, very slowly and wearily, his head falls down, his eyelids close on his useless pupils, and he enters again into the merciless world of memories.

The passage lights up sinisterly when three different spells collide with an explosion of glittering sparks. Silence falls abruptly, an incredibly astonished silence, as the Dark Lord angrily discovers he's been betrayed once more; meanwhile, Harry Potter incredulously realises he is still alive.

Then Harry's eyes widen in sudden understanding as he turns to stare at the panting Severus, who has collapsed again in the mud after that terrible effort. But there is no time to thank his saviour as he would like. The Dark Lord is already advancing, a frightening expression on his hideous features. He is raising his hand again when Harry, with an impulsive decision, points his wand at the ground, uttering a sharp command. Instantaneously, many great blocks rise from the floor and begin to clash against one another with loud thundering sounds. The Dark Lord is taken by surprise. Another harsh order and the big stones wrap around the infuriated Voldemort, closing him solidly in a suffocating hold. Immediately, Harry runs near his exhausted professor and crouches by his side, grabbing him by his shoulders. Severus looks at him in weariness.

"You saved my life!" the boy exclaims, incredulous, his voice coloured by a mixture of amazement and respect.

"I did, Potter, but I can't promise I'll do it again." Snape is sharp as usual while he shakes Harry's hands from his shoulders in irritation. "Give me back... my wand!" he murmurs as he sways and struggles to rise, paling in the effort.

"Here, let me help you!" Harry seizes the older man's arms to lift him. Suddenly, the rocky wall breaks, throwing stones and dust so violently around that the boy barely has the time to protect himself and his companion.

The Dark Lord emerges from the crumbled walls of his prison, awesome in his fury, and again advances implacably towards the boy, who has risen and is now fiercely standing in front of him. The red, feral eyes of the old wizard are glowing with rage, but this time Harry is feeling oddly at peace. Fear has totally abandoned him. His gaze slowly contemplates the abandoned bodies of his friends lying motionless in oblivion, unaware that the final sacrifice is about to happen. Then his eyes rest, still incredulous, on his only surviving companion, really the last one he would have thought to have at his side.

Kneeling on the ground, Severus, unable to rise, lowers his head in bitter resignation. He is too exhausted to fight and, in any case, there is no hope. There never has been. Discouraged, in a fit of impotent anger, he raises his eyes to look at the boy who should have been their rescuer. Severus has saved Harry, yet he still detests the boy so much! How many lives have been sacrificed for him? Was he ever worth all these losses?

Harry seems to read all the anguished doubts in the orbs of the man he once believed to be an enemy and who is now staring so anxiously at him. Again, his gaze lovingly embraces his friends, and a deep emotion strengthens his heart, the firm conviction that he will never abandon them as they have never abandoned him. He can feel all the love he has received during these last years gathering around him and enfolding him like armour. Unexpectedly, he smiles, and it makes him feel invincible. His eyes are serene while he raises his wand, inviting his dark adversary to strike.

But, strangely, Voldemort is standing still now, nostrils flaring and eyes narrowing at the perception of a strange, subtle change in the atmosphere. There is something happening that he doesn't understand. A new, indefinite but immense power has joined them, and he is alarmed. The words of the prophecy that he has never been able to hear completely are haunting his soul. He stops, hesitating for a moment, and that little, almost imperceptible indecision fills Harry with a supernatural hope.

Then the new powerful presence enters forcefully and reveals itself in its glory. Harry's wand slowly begins to vibrate gently, then more and more intensely, uncontrollable in its strength, until it appears to be gradually lifting the boy's hand in a gesture of command.

Voldemort watches in astonishment, and his eyes widen with uncharacteristic anxiety when, unpredictably, his wand also begins to shake violently. He looks surprised, then worried, while he desperately tries to keep it still, tightening his grip. But the power is too strong to be stopped even for him, and incredibly, the more he struggles the more the wand pushes him back until he is forced to kneel.

Sparkles of pure, incandescent, intolerably brilliant light begin to dance in the darkness. Soon they form a luminous stream, whirling more and more powerfully until they gather in a forceful flow that, with a blinding flash, surrounds Harry in a glittering aura.

The boy shivers in blissful ecstasy. Then his mouth opens to pronounce words of spell so arcane he can't absolutely know, and that must have been clearly suggested by the mysterious, nameless power. The light reacts with a joyful twinkle, and slowly, the boy's body seems to multiply itself in several glowing, ghostly forms.

While the Dark Lord and Severus Snape stare in terrified wonder, every spectral shape gently bows its head in a greeting then rises firmly, positioning itself at Harry's side. Watching in awe, Severus recognises the smiling faces of Lily Evans and James Potter, then, totally unexpected, Sirius Black, and finally, with a terrible pang of joy and pain, Albus Dumbledore.

Harry seems to suddenly awaken, and with an overwhelming cry of happiness, he turns to look at his parents and friends, eyes luminous with tears. The pearly figures surround the boy, shining in diaphanous beauty. Their movements are slow and solemn, but the pure joy and love they radiate are so intense that Severus is forced to lower his eyes, his body aching with exclusion.

Completely unmindful of his dreadful antagonist, Harry now bathes in his parents' smiles, timidly trying to touch their incorporeal bodies. The tremulous look he gives Sirius, eyes wet in commotion, is returned by such a vivid grin that the boy can't help but laugh. Finally, the figures turn expectantly to Albus Dumbledore, who has been patiently waiting, a kind smile under the merrily twinkling eyes that Harry remembers so well. And surprisingly, Albus speaks, a remote voice coming from unknown, unfathomable depths lost in time and in space.

"Harry, my dear, dear boy! How happy I am to see you! We were all looking forward to this meeting. I hope we haven't made you wait too long!"

"Professor!" Harry is crying now, so great is the joy he feels. He doesn't care anymore if he is going to die, as he is surrounded by his most loved ones. And surely also his best friends, whose bodies lay motionless at his feet, will join him soon in that new perfect world, thus making it even more perfect, if possible... But understanding his thoughts, the ancient wizard shakes his head in denial, his smile becoming sad and determined.

"No, Harry, it is not time for you to leave yet. We are here only to assist you in your task, because the force of your love called us. Do you remember what I told you, Harry? The power you have been filled with, the inestimable gift your mother left you with her sacrifice?"

Harry is looking at his mother now, tears streaming on his cheeks. "Yes, Professor," he whispers softly, and a new determination pervades his soul. Fiercely he raises his head and his wand, nodding. As if they had expected that signal, all the ghosts turn to stare at the Dark Lord, who has been witnessing in mute alarm, unsuccessfully trying to rise from his kneeling posture.

Dumbledore walks solemnly towards his old student, magnificence and authority radiating forcefully from his person. "So, we meet again, Tom!" His voice sounds incredibly kind, even if it is tinged with an immense sadness.

Still struggling with the effort of controlling his wand, Voldemort answers in a strangled tone. "Dumbledore! I thought you were dead! You must be dead! My followers... They were on the tower when Severus killed you..." He realises his mistake suddenly. "Oh, but now I understand! It was a ruse! He never really struck you!" He is frantically searching for an explanation for this prodigy surpassing his understanding.

"No, Tom." Such painful intensity was in the old man's expression! "Severus had to kill me that night... as I ordered him. My life for Draco's. A fair exchange."

He slowly turns his head to glance at Severus, a gentle, acknowledging nod. It's the first time he seems to recognise his presence, and Severus again feels an acute pang of jealousy, bitterness suddenly invading his soul. Not a word for him, not even a greeting? Does he deserve only such little consideration from his old protector? Anger and hostility against the Boy-Who-Lived raise their heads once more in his chest. But the moment has already passed, and Dumbledore turns again and listens to the Dark Lord.

Voldemort is attentively considering his adversary. Now that the first frightening sensations are over, he seems to have regained his confidence. "Why are you here, then, if you are dead, Dumbledore? To take the boy? To... fight with me?"

"Again, no, Tom. I'm not allowed to interfere. I am here only to talk, to speak with you and possibly make your mind, if not your heart, finally open in understanding."

"Your efforts are useless then." The Dark Lord is reassured and cruelly pleased. This smiling ghost of the once tremendous wizard he remembered the only one he had effectively feared can't be a real menace anymore. "We have had plenty of time to talk... in your previous life. Now you are only a powerless shadow. Your nonsense isn't going to convince me today, in the hour of my most glorious victory."

"It may not convince you, I admit. But you see, I didn't come here only for you." Dumbledore points his wand to the ground and a glittering ray gently illuminates Wormtail's motionless body. "Can you hear me, Peter?" the old man asks compassionately.

A sudden tremble and, with a painful moan, Peter Pettigrew stretches a hand forward, then tries to lift his shaking body on his hands and knees, but he falls miserably in the mud again. Everybody pauses to look at him in silence. Only the Dark Lord cannot prevent an uncontrollable flinch as he sees his victim slowly come back to life.

Peter makes another pitiful attempt to move. Then, unable to support the weight of his failing body any longer, he raises a devastated face. A violent emotion twists his lips, curling them in a painful smile. Breathing with difficulty, he focuses his cloudy eyes on the group protectively gathered around Harry, and he whispers in tears, "James... Lily... Sirius... My friends... My dear old friends... I'm sorry... so sorry..."

Lily has a gentle, compassionate smile. She glances encouragingly at her son and husband, then walks towards the fallen, crying man. Peter is exhausted, his forces are quickly fading, but he makes a last effort to look at the radiant woman bending close to listen to his words.

"Please, forgive me... Please..." he stammers with difficulty, his jaws already hardening in the imminent end.

Once more, Lily has a luminous smile and replies tenderly, "You saved my son today, Peter. You paid for your faults, and I forgive you. May you rest in peace forever."

James and Sirius frown hesitantly, then they advance to join Lily. Their voices are remote, but when they speak, they sound surprisingly clear.

"You were my friend once, Peter. I forgive you. May you rest in peace," says James quietly.

Sirius shakes his head with an uncharacteristically embarrassed barking laugh. "For Merlin's sake, Peter! It would have been better if I hadn't entrusted you with that secret so many years ago! But I imagine I should also blame myself for that..." His voice softens while he adds, "Rest in peace, old friend. You are forgiven."

Peter manages a last, incredible, infinitely peaceful smile. Then his eyes flicker, and his body falls heavily in the mud, lying lifeless.

The ghostly figures bow reverently. Severus is trembling in awe and weariness while Harry smiles in renewed joy, cheeks dampened by tears. Only Voldemort dares to break the silence with his high-pitched, derisive laugh.

"He finally died, as every traitor ought to," he says scornfully. "And he'll never return to life again, whatever you may say. What did you want to demonstrate by that, you old fool? I am the only one who has successfully come back from death. I cannot be defeated by any living being!"

Dumbledore looks at the dark wizard with a helpless sigh. "Once I told you that there are things worse than death, Tom, do you remember? But you still don't understand. I believe you will never understand, and this makes me feel definitely hopeless."

Then patiently, as if he were speaking with a child, he said, "Your Horcruxes have been destroyed. All, completely and totally, except the last one. You cannot count on them anymore. Perhaps you thought to have a hope, even without your serpent. Well, forget it now. You cannot rely on them any longer."

"You are lying, Dumbledore! This cannot be true!" For the very first time, Harry can see fear more than fear, terror in the Dark Lord's eyes, while he struggles desperately against the power controlling his wand.

Dumbledore seems to take a deep breath. "For the last, the supreme time, Tom, I'm telling you the truth. This is your final chance to recognize your faults. You cannot be granted mercy if you refuse to accept!"

"I will never bow to your requests!" It's the firm, ferocious answer, followed by a cry of wild joy, as the wand begins to slow down its convulsive movements.

"Then you have made your choice and decided your fate! Our time is ending. We'll never meet again in this world, Tom," the ancient wizard says with a sigh.

"Then we'll never meet again, Dumbledore, because I will win and rule over death once more!" The Dark Lord is triumphant now. "Go back to your shadowy realm, you and your ghostly allies! Your moment is over!"

Dumbledore looks at Voldemort impassively. Then, turning his shoulders to him, he approaches Harry and says quietly, "Be thou of good hope, Harry. We will always be with you, even if you can't see us. May your arm be steady, and may love and courage guide you in this last battle."

Dumbledore seems ready to join the other spirits respectfully waiting for him when he suddenly meets Severus' gaze. Shaking his head in disbelief, the ancient wizard turns again to look down with a smile at the shattered man, who has fought so bravely to follow his orders, although so many times he has vehemently protested against them. "Ah, Severus, my dear boy!" he exclaims softly, bending as to embrace him. "It's so beautiful to see you again! Please excuse an old, absent-minded man. I didn't forget you and your commitment, even if, alas, somebody else will have to properly repay you for all the times I didn't. At present, I can only offer you my most grateful thanks along with a very important piece of advice, which I hope you will accept in the name of our old friendship. A hard time is coming for you, Severus, a very hard time, and you'll have to muster all your forces to overcome it. So, be prepared and don't forget my words! When those obscure days arrive, and this will happen soon, listen to your heart as you did so many years ago... and you will finally find the happiness you deserve so much."

Then, lowering his head in a goodbye, he adds tenderly, "I bless you both, my beloved children. Remember, don't ever give up hope, ever!"

One by one, the pearly figures extend their right hands to wrap Harry's wrist in an incorporeal grip. Dumbledore is the last one to add his hand when, unexpectedly, the Dark Lord regains control and immediately lifts his wand to cast a spell. The hex passes through the old wizard's ethereal body and bounces against the rocky wall. With a wild laugh, Voldemort rises violently from the ground and shouts exultantly, eyes glowing in folly, "I may not be able to hurt you anymore, old man, but if you can't be harmed, perhaps the boy will!"

Another blast of light travels at mad speed through the air and hits Harry brutally, tracing a red gash on his cheek. The boy widens his eyes and gives a painful gasp, immediately followed by Voldemort's triumphant laughter. "You are mine, Potter! Finally, you are mine!"

With a shiver, the pale figures abruptly disappear in a flash of light. The dark wizard and the boy now proudly face each other while time seems suspended in eternity. Suddenly, they raise their wands and fiercely aim them. Rays of lights explode and intersect in the darkness, sending sparkles everywhere. Both adversaries fight ferociously, and incredibly, the boy matches the old man in might and ability. Severus stares in amazement at this unexpected spectacle, his body trembling more and more with exhaustion.

("Professor, are you all right? Professor Snape? ... Please wake up. Is there anything you need? ... Professor, please answer me!")

The battle of spells fights furiously when with a cruel, determined smile, Voldemort summons all his powers to cast an ultimate Hex. The boy is quick to raise his wand and stop the mortal ray in mid air, but the evil forces generated by his wicked antagonist seem too strong to be resisted, even by his new supernatural powers, and the flux of energy inexorably pushes him back against the rocky wall.

As soon as Harry touches the stones with his shoulders and the Dark Lord gives an exultant, vicious laugh, Severus comes to a decision. Gritting his teeth and trying to resist the pain torturing his worn-out body, he struggles to stand up and help his most hated student. If they have to die, at least let it be fighting.

("Professor, Professor, please! What's happening? Madam Pomfrey! Madam Pomfrey!!!")

But, before Snape can make a move, Harry grabs his own wand with both hands, holding it firmly with obstinate desperation. Then, a terrible sound of anguish and pain begins to well in his throat while he writhes under the wicked forces trying to break his resistance. Gradually, his lament grows in intensity until it transforms itself into a powerful cry, a mighty enchanted call asking for help. His wand reacts, vibrating forcefully, and the malignant ray begins to pulse less and less vigorously until it finally explodes in a myriad of little sparks.

("I am here, Becky, let me see! Severus! It's a nightmare! Severus, please, wake up! Merlin! He is having an attack!")

A deep, loud, prolonged musical sound follows Harry's call, and soon the darkness is echoing with thundering noises, as if a great storm were approaching. The Dark Lord is forced back with a last, powerful effort, and there he stops, panting in apprehension, wand lifted in anxious wait. Then abruptly, with a profound vibration that shakes the castle in a violent spasm, ghostly hands begin to surge from the ground while an icy, freezing breath fills the air. In a few moments, the spectral essences seem to multiply, encircling Voldemort and grasping his robes with their pale, skeletal fingers.

The Dark Lord's black outline begins to blur and fade at their touch, and the old wizard screams in pain and terror as his body begins to sink slowly into the ground. His terrified cries make Severus shiver in horror, while he watches his previous Master vainly struggle against the inexorable power of the shadowy presences. Harry stands in silence, looking at the Dark Lord's hopeless ordeal with eyes full of tears, arms crossed, head proudly raised in determination. His gaze quickly turns to meet Severus', reassuring him with a nod. For a moment, Severus can perceive the immense power concealed in the boy and lowers his head in respect, ashamed of his own frailty.

("He is not reacting! His pulse has become erratic! Quick, help me!")

Voldemort is rapidly weakening, and his body is becoming more and more vague and indistinct. Helpless and desperate, the Dark Lord raises his wand and frantically but uselessly tries to strike the spirits surrounding him. Then in a last spark of hatred, feeling his life fading away, he furiously aims his wand at Harry in vengeance. The boy smiles and simply lifts his hand to stop the deadly rays. So mighty is the power acting inside him that he doesn't even need a wand to protect himself! As the last quivers shake Voldemort's body, his red, furious eyes feverishly search for another victim... and find it. The Dark Lord and Severus Snape exchange a final, supreme glance. Then, with his vanishing forces, the older wizard casts his last, revengeful, terrible hex.

"Obscuro!"

Instantly, a red blast of energy explodes and sharply penetrates into Severus's eyes. An atrocious, intolerable pain travels through his head, piercing his skull like a burning blade. He screams in terror, then a sudden, blessed oblivion welcomes him into its dark embrace.

On the other side of the universe, Severus abruptly opens his useless eyes with a cry of panic, searching for light, unaware of where he is, confused, terrified. His nightmare was so terribly vivid! Frightening images are still dancing in his mind, and he convulses in violent spasms as he relives those last dreadful moments: the daunting spectral hands, Voldemort laughing in folly and Harry Potter, suddenly alarmed, lifting his wand in a defensive but vain gesture.

He struggles desperately against the arms that are holding him until he recognizes Poppy's soft, worried voice calling his name. Then, feeling protected, he allows himself to calm down, searching for comfort in her warm, tender touch. His eyes are hurting so much! For a moment that seems to last eternally, he rests himself in her gentle hold.

Then, pride and anger awaken, and again he is Severus Snape. Angrily, he disentangles from her embrace and tries to sit up on the bed, but he is still too weak to afford this kind of violent reaction. Feeling suddenly dizzy, he leans back with a moan and helplessly disappears into a dreamless void.

A Study in Black

Chapter 4 of 5

The war is over, and now Severus Snape has to face his worst enemy: himself. Alternate Universe, HBP compliant.

Disclaimer: I obviously don't own any of the characters in this story.

Infinite grateful thanks to **Jynx67** for her patience, to **Pennfana** for her useful considerations, and to **Ladyinthecloak** and **Notsosaintly** for their final revision. But also thanks to all those reading and reviewing.

Chapter 4 A study in black

This chapter is dedicated to my aunt Lia (Giulia), a sweet, intrepid little woman born at the beginning of the XX century. Due to a rare and, at that time, incurable disease, her sight slowly faded away when she was barely older than thirty, leaving her eyes imprisoned in a perpetual world of darkness. As I was one of her youngest nieces, I got to know her only when she was already in her late years: a patient, quiet, tender old woman, who had accepted and survived this sad destiny, clinging tenaciously to her memories, and who savoured in gratitude every little joy and emotion that life could still offer.

Thankfully, my aunt had been spared many troubles and sufferings. Living in a little town, she was always surrounded by several affectionate friends, who were willing to fill with love a life that otherwise would have been wasted in solitude and sadness.

But although my aunt was a serene, even joyful creature, in the few periods I had the chance to stay with her, I could easily understand how painfully limiting blindness can be, and how defenceless are those who experience this cruel imperfection.

So, some of the considerations expressed in this chapter stem straight from my past personal experiences. Please take my words as a loving tribute to the courage of a kind, tender woman, who could only listen to my voice while she longed so much to see my face.

Thank you, Auntie Lia, for showing me the real meaning of the word "brave".

Severus is sitting in an armchair. His cell has expanded. After a few days of continuous improvements in his physical condition, he is allowed to rise and enjoy a little walk in his room. Poppy Pomfrey and Becky Ingham are constantly there to help him and guide his uncertain steps, clasping his cold, rough hand with their soft, warm fingers.

After that first discussion with Poppy, he hasn't renewed his request to have Becky removed, but in a way, his relationship with the girl has worsened. He is now arrogantly condescending, cruelly polite and positively sulky. His sarcastic remarks and harsh comments about her ability often push her to the breaking point. But she persists.

During these difficult days in fact, thanks to Poppy's tacit encouragement, Becky has gradually discovered an inner force she didn't know she possessed. In addition, the girl seems to have developed an instinctive way to deal with such a difficult patient, even though Poppy suspects that Becky must bite her tongue to avoid replying sharply each time Severus deigns to speak with her. However, Poppy has also quickly perceived the feeling of subtle revenge implicit in this otherwise admirable sense of duty: the man who had been so caustic to Becky while in school is now depending so completely on her. How could the mediwitch blame the girl for savouring at least this grim satisfaction, given the constant difficulties of her task?

On the contrary, Poppy shows an extreme patience towards Severus, and this inexhaustible tolerance has initially disconcerted the wizard, and surprised Poppy herself. It took her a while to understand the reasons behind her actions, as her actual attitude is the result of a long bout of regret and compassion.

Madam Pomfrey is a mature, calm, efficient woman, who isn't prone to getting emotionally involved with her patients, as every good doctor should be. "You can't cure somebody if you contract their disease", is her favourite motto, and one of her most appreciated qualities is the brisk but kind manner she uses to deal with people. This characteristic is very well known, as generations of children at Hogwarts have benefited from her quiet, amused understanding when in trouble. But in spite of her highly tolerant nature, Madam Pomfrey must admit that the only one she has never really managed to accept or to trust completely has been, beyond a doubt, Severus Snape. Right from the first moment that their new Potions master had entered the castle, she disliked him. He had already been a nasty, unpleasant boy when in school, but as a man, she had found him even more unattractive, bad mannered, exasperating, arrogant, and a lot of other negative traits. Of course, she had always been careful to conceal her feelings, luckily helped by the fact that there had been few opportunities for them to share each other's company, except in those rare times he had accompanied one of his favourite students to the infirmary.

Now, in hindsight, after a war in which he behaved like a hero (at least according to Harry Potter, but why should she doubt?), she realises that her opinion has been sadly and greatly incorrect, that he must have had at least some good (although invisible) qualities otherwise Dumbledore wouldn't have relied so heavily on him. So, being a straight, honest person, the recurrent thought of having misjudged and therefore condemned a man without proof hurts her conscience painfully, making her feel deeply uncomfortable.

As a consequence, her attitude towards him begins to soften. During the long days in which Severus lies motionless in oblivion, his features revealing unmercifully every one of his inner emotions, she is constantly at his side. And when he finally awakens in desperate blindness, she becomes even more concerned and thoughtful, observing his anger and desolation increasing. She is aware that he needs support and a guidance to learn how to live in this new world of shadows. But knowing her former colleague too well, she can easily imagine how intolerable it will be for him to depend on somebody else's pity. Bringing this thought to its natural conclusion, Poppy is soon psychologically ready to propose herself as his medical supervisor.

The other mediwizards express their relief. Nobody really likes the man, hero or not. Too many strange facts, too many terrible events in his life; his dark character, his strong connections with so many notorious Death Eaters and his questionable role in the Dark Lord's service make him suspect and unwelcome, even after his "redemption". In addition, there are so many other patients in the hospital needing attention! The decision to entrust Poppy with his care is therefore unanimous.

Now, the first days are tough to manage. Wounded, suffering and overreacting, he is living in a constant emotional storm, rebelling against his condition and violently rejecting the help he is offered. Consequently, Poppy is forced to hold her ground and to be as nasty as he is, imposing her authority with great determination. It is a hard struggle of wills, and when they both seem to have finally reached an agreement, she finds herself entangled in several new, unpleasant and completely unpredicted difficulties.

Annoying, but luckily simple to resolve, the first problem she needs to deal with is the question of his wand because, defenceless as he must feel, he immediately asks for it as soon as he awakes. Understanding his anxiety, Poppy is ready to reassure him. His wand was found in the dungeons after the battle and was brought immediately to St. Mungo's where it was seized by the Security Department. At his immediate, angry protests, she firmly declares that no one except a mediwizard is allowed to keep a "potential weapon" in the hospital wards; therefore, his wand has to be stored in a safe, protected place. In a way, this is true, and he has resentfully accepted to submit to the rule. But Poppy knows very well that this cannot be the real reason for keeping his wand so carefully locked away...

It has been the continuous coming and going of the Ministry's folks enquiring about his condition that has put her on alert. Although all this attention could be seen as proof of his importance and perhaps offers him consolation, she has deliberately chosen to keep him unaware of this. Because, wise old woman that she is, Poppy has the uncomfortable feeling that his worries are not over, and that even more annoying troubles are going to arrive, probably from the same ungrateful people he has contributed to save.

The second problem has been his isolation. Very few people are allowed in his room, and they are always the same: Madam Pomfrey, her assistant, Miss Ingham, and occasionally, another woman, who helps them with little tasks. This last person in particular is really only a voice to him, as he barely knows her name. She is too respectful or better, too afraid to exchange more than few, timid words with Severus the rare times he decides to speak.

So, feeling cut off, as soon as his physical condition improves and his mind regains its balance, Severus has cautiously begun to ask about the "others." Having been told about the sad condition of the who have had the dubious honour of being struck by the Dark Lord in the final battle along with him, he now wants to know more about the remaining players of that wicked contest, the ones who are still in this world and the ones who have definitely left it. Encouraged by these first tentative signals of interest, Poppy supplies him with carefully selected information.

The primary object of his questions is, of course, his nemesis and eternal antagonist, the ghost that constantly haunts his dreams, the one he has ended up considering as the other side of his personality: Harry Potter. Why hasn't he shown up during all this time? What is he doing at present? Patiently, Poppy tells him that Harry has come many times to ask about his former professor while visiting his other friends in the hospital, but Severus was still unconscious. Now Harry has left for a sudden engagement, a trip that Madam Pomfrey reasonably suspects to be only an excuse to escape the extreme pressure he is constantly under. But he has promised to return soon, and then he will surely come again to see Severus.

More and more interested by the news that Poppy attentively doses, Severus successively learns that many other people are luckily still alive and that some hadn't even needed to pass through St. Mungo's. That's the case, for instance, for Nymphadora Tonks, who comes every day to visit Remus Lupin and try to cheer him up a little. Also, Mad-Eye Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt had incredibly not even been scratched, as well as Ginny Weasley and her twin brothers. However, many other losses have occurred, and very painful ones. The same Weasley family, for instance, is mourning their intrepid knight of the dragons. Having eagerly arrived from Romania, Charlie Weasley was killed by a dark curse while he was trying to protect his younger sister...

About his ex-fellow Death Eaters, some were sent to Azkaban, and some are still waiting to be processed. Severus is weirdly pleased to hear that Lucius Malfoy, who never managed to escape from his prison and join the Dark Lord, was conceded a visit from his wife and son. Narcissa and Draco are waiting for their trial, too, but it seems that they could benefit from special consideration, as they had been secretively passing information to the Ministry during the last few months. It was due to Severus' merit, of course, even if nobody knows it, and he had taken a great risk revealing himself to the lady and the boy. Obviously, he hadn't been so foolish as to tell them the authentic truth! He had simply disguised the matter under a vest of advantage, letting them understand that the Dark Lord's chances of victory were too scarce to make their staying at his side worthwhile.

It had been hazardous anyway, as both the woman and the lad could have betrayed him, ruining his final plan. But luckily, they were too scared of the Dark Lord and too confident in Severus to even think of such a dangerous possibility. So, Severus now sombrely considers that they should have sent at least a message of thanks. No one seems to remember that he is alive and alone, blind and helpless because of his commitment to the cause. He comes to the bitter conclusion that he has been sacrificed

as a worthless pawn, and this intensifies his resentment against the world.

As days monotonously go by, and he tries to get accustomed to his new, imperfect life, more worries and fears add their weight to his already burdened shoulders, making his days an endless struggle against the many doubts and anguishes his limitation incessantly generates. Being a proud, arrogant man, who has suffered so much the horror of being taunted in his youth, Severus' greatest, most haunting fear is to be observed and criticized without having even the slightest possibility of being aware.

Surrounded as he is by darkness, people around him have become a mystery. No more chances to understand, foretell or manipulate their reactions while, on the contrary, he is unmercifully exposed to their gazes. Although he tries to improve his other senses, he can only primitively perceive changes in moods and tones, slight differences in vocal inflections and all those eloquent, terrible little pauses that he never noticed before in a conversation, but that now seem to occur so frequently.

Unsurprisingly, his skills are very limited. He has always depended so much on his sight! His eyes have been more than essential for his survival, and this is why he fights with all his force to overcome his imperfection, refusing to be trapped in its limits. So every day, he opens his eyelids in the desperate, impossible hope of a miracle. Every night, he closes them in a mute prayer. And every morning, he feels unreasonably frustrated, discovering that nothing has happened.

Now he painfully understands what it means to be completely helpless! And this inner, immense vulnerability soon becomes the source of his second greatest fear as well: being helpless, therefore being ridiculous. The first time he tried to eat a meal by himself, for instance, he had inadvertently stained his chin and his robes. Always solicitous, Miss Ingham had instantly been ready to clean him with a towel... like she would have done with a baby. His reaction had been immediate and, as always, excessive. Rising furiously to his feet, he had violently pushed the table away, scattering dishes and food noisily on the floor. Then, rudely shaking off the hand she had placed on his arm in a vain attempt to calm his anger, he had tried to reach his favourite armchair by himself, shouting and menacing the girl in impotent rage. As a result, Miss Ingham had begun to stammer in panic and, in the ensuing confusion, she was unable to help when he slipped and fell on the soiled floor, thus losing what little dignity he still possessed.

Thankfully, alarmed by his incoherent yells, Madam Pomfrey had immediately rushed in, taking the situation under control with two firm reprimands. One public and meant to calm him to Miss Ingham for her immature behaviour. The second later, private and stern to him for his equally immature behaviour.

However, this humiliating experience has at least taught him to manage his outbursts with more composure. But his is a hopeless battle, as his imperfection is continually adding great and little fears to the ones already existing, like unbreakable rings in an endless chain of sufferings.

The fear of being defenceless. Once a man who was living constantly on alert, impossible to catch unprepared, now he is totally exposed in his shameful frailty. Everybody can reach him, surprise him, harm him, without any chance for him to detect it and therefore react properly. Understanding his uneasiness, Poppy and Becky are always careful to let him know where they are, what they are doing and what they intend to do. They are even more careful when what they need to do involves physical contact or just staying close to him.

The fear of forgetting faces, places, situations, colours; in a word, the main part of the existence he has previously lived. Being enwrapped in total obscurity, he is painfully surprised to discover that images are somewhat slowly fading in his mind. Sometimes he can recall a whole picture, sometimes he can only "see" it partially. Other times he can remember bodies, but not faces, words, but not expressions. Occasionally, his visual memories are changed or distorted in ways he cannot control anymore. So, more and more often, he experiences the uncontrollable need to be able to see persons and places again, even if only for a moment, to focus and fix and readjust his disappearing reminiscences. But he cannot, he cannot, he cannot anymore! While his longing grows stronger and desperately painful.

And finally, the most frightening of his terrors, the total, absolute fear from which all his other fears are generated: the horror of wandering in a world of shadows, populated by fiends that he alone can see. As light cannot filter through his stony pupils any longer, his wake and sleep processes gradually begin to alter. Soon there is no difference between day and night, but nights quickly become intolerable pauses in which he is exposed, alone and unprotected against his dark ghosts. Nobody is there, not even Poppy or Becky, and he is left in his solitary meditation, with no sounds or activities to interrupt or distract him from this forced contemplation. Often he falls into nightmares that awaken him, screaming in terror, damped in cold sweat, shaking in anguish. In these moments, Poppy is the only one he admits in his room, as she alone is allowed to see him in his most abject desolation.

As days endlessly go by, hours and rhythms begin to mix in an inextricable chaos. Feeling protected by the armchair's rigid structure, soon he elects it as his favourite refuge and begins to spend the most part of his nights curled there. During the days, reassured by the quiet, alternating presence of his two assistants, he occasionally falls into little, soothing rests. He knows that both women are ready to awaken him gently should they see that he is entering into his dark tunnel, but their kind compassion doesn't relieve his anxiety; on the contrary, it exasperates him deeply.

Sometimes Poppy tries to propose a pastime to him, like a game, a chat, reading or something similar to distract and relax him by keeping him busy. But what games can be played with no sight, and what kind of conversation can be held when the other interlocutor is constantly in a sulky, sarcastic mood?

However, finally something begins to slowly change. Even though he's resistant at first, Poppy begins a new regimen. A program is prepared to keep him as busy as possible, dividing the day into many little steps, and he is forced to follow their progression.

As soon as he is able to walk, she accompanies him on a daily tour of his little space a bedroom and a bathroom making him touch and remember the position of every object. She obliges him (and constantly reminds Becky) to put everything always in the same place so that it can be easily found. Consequently, in a relatively short time, he is able to manage his simplest needs.

Naturally, there are still many little actions he can't possibly handle without his sight, even if they were so easy in his previous life. For example, he can't shave himself properly. But Poppy has a very kind way of asking him if he would like to, making him lean back in the armchair while she passes her wand gently around his face. Once the mediwitch had even asked him if he would like to be shaved "the Muggle way", with foam and a real razor. His head had snapped up in surprise, and he had enquired, sincerely interested, "You know how to do it?"

"Of course," she had replied, laughing. "I used to do it for my father!"

So immediately after, he was given a luxurious foaming shave, and he had enjoyed it so much that he had involuntarily slipped into a peaceful nap. Now he must struggle to dissimulate his anticipation each time Poppy comes in to give him a shave, as he feels childishly irritated at the quiet amusement he perceives in her voice.

He also likes her help when he dresses. He can perfectly manage the entire ritual, but when he has finished, he appreciates her firm, kind hands straightening his collar or giving his clothes a final touch. He is evidently enjoying these little attentions, even if his manners are still sharp and sullen. But these are the only rays of sun in a perennially stormy weather.

So today, like all the other days before it, Severus sits hopelessly in his armchair and tries to think. There is nothing, nothing he can do. Without his sight, everything has become difficult, distressing, exasperating, even with the assistance he is constantly offered. A mind sharp as a razor is now confined to the dark limitations of his skull. He can't read, he can't enjoy a view, he can't manipulate potions as he isn't able to monitor them, he can't walk by himself except in his room... Even his meals are terribly exhausting if somebody is not there to help him chop the food or pour the water in his glass. And he must ask continuously, a humiliating occurrence that makes him feel vulnerable and helpless. Every day is a struggle, and he is beginning to wonder if this frustrating existence can really be worthwhile. Until now, his pride has aided him, but how long will he be willing to persist?

And then, when he begins to successfully manage the majority of his physical needs, he comes to the awful discovery that, in a world of darkness, ears and mouth are his best friends. Once a man who used to enjoy his solitude, eager to transform a conversation into a series of snappy remarks, Severus is at present slowly but inexorably sinking into the desperate need of having somebody next to him, a mirror for his words, an echo for his thoughts. Now he realizes that, in his state, most of the occasions of feeling alive pass mainly through verbal communication and consequently require the presence of other human beings around him; exactly the situation he has always avoided, feared, detested.

As a weird result, although he doesn't admit this need even to himself, Severus is waiting more and more impatiently for a break in his desolate meditation, craving for visitors. But many days of pure boredom have to burn his brain and challenge his stubbornness before his wish can be finally satisfied.

Visits

Chapter 5 of 5

The war is over, and now Severus Snape has to face his worst enemy: himself.

Chapter 5 Visits

The girl

It is morning and a sunny day, so Severus was told. As if he could care less! While he tries to recall the complicated preparation of an almost unknown potion to keep his mind busy, there is a hesitant knock at the door. He doesn't even raise his head, sure as he is that it is the insufferable Miss Ingham, back once again with more annoying comments.

"Come in!" he exclaims in irritation, since his mental processes are positively spoiled. While the door opens, he adds angrily, although he is relieved to have a break in his solitude, "Have we decided to play another game today, Miss Ingham? This is the third time in five minutes you've bothered me with your irrelevant questions!"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Professor," says a completely unexpected voice.

He feels a pang in his heart. This voice is slurred, low and slightly anxious, yet he recognises it immediately. He had heard that voice so many times during his last years at Hogwarts, but in those days, it was ringing like a bell, daring and confident, the true mark of a bold, intelligent, mischievous young woman.

"Miss... Granger?" he asks in absolute surprise.

"It's me, Professor," she says, clearly apologetic, and his eyebrows furrow in the effort of "seeing" her through her words. From the embarrassed silence that follows, he understands that the girl is blaming herself for making him face his limitation with her awkward entry. Finally, she speaks.

"May I come in and talk with you just a moment?"

Curiosity that irrepressible need to find a diversion for his restless mind and the knowledge that she, too, has been badly hurt makes him answer more gently than he would have liked.

"You are welcome."

He hears her enter slowly, as if she were regretting her decision. Then she takes a breath, preparing to break the silence, but he is quicker.

"Well?" he asks, sardonic again. "Come to visit your dear old professor?"

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," she begins in her excruciatingly slurred voice.

"As you can see," he emphasises the last two words, "I've nothing to do at the moment..." His voice becomes bitter. "And it seems highly improbable that I will have something more important to do in the near future. So, your point?"

Sounding somehow encouraged by his harsh tone, she says simply, "I've heard you are getting better, and I've come to thank you. Thank you for helping me and saving Ron during the battle. And, of course, for saving Harry and... all the other people in our world..."

A terrible pause follows. She swallows and goes on, her voice trembling a little. "And... I would also like to apologise. I struck you while you were trying to protect us all. I... I hadn't understood. I'm so sorry, Professor! I had always been uncertain about you, but I couldn't believe you were a traitor, even when you... Even after that night with Headmaster Dumbledore." She stops, as though strangled by her own emotions and exhausted by the effort of articulating all these words with her damaged lips. With a choked sob, she adds, "Sorry, I didn't mean to bring that up."

"You have always had the deplorable habit of speaking too much, Miss Granger," he answers in his usual dry tone. "There is nothing you need to apologise for, I assure you. And there is nothing you need to thank me for either. My own person was included in the rescue, so let's say it was only a selfish action."

But she goes on, a little more animatedly, "I also wanted to thank you on Ron's behalf. He cannot come here, so he asked me to present his best regards to you."

"That is very nice indeed of you both," he replies with a twisted smile, his impatience growing. "And it settles the matter once and for all," he adds in a definitive tone.

Another long pause follows. For Severus it's not difficult to perceive her uneasiness: the conversation probably isn't going as she had imagined. Surely she was expecting more empathy, more compassion from a man that shares her pain. But this is exactly why he prefers to be brief.

Then she speaks again. "How are you, Professor? May I ask if they have found something for your eyes?"

"Your impertinence has always been great, Miss Granger, but the incompetence of this so-called hospital is even greater. No, at the moment there is nothing that can be done, and I don't believe there will ever be. Cheer up, Hogwarts and the wizarding world will soon be joyous at the announcement of my retirement."

She says in a whisper, "I'm sorry. What are you going to do then?"

"I don't know, and I don't care at the moment," he replies disdainfully. "And I don't think you should worry about this. What are you going to do instead?" He is carefully avoiding any mention of her wounds. He has never been good at comforting people, and he finds the thought that she could be trying to comfort him strangely intolerable.

"Well," she says pensively, not reacting to his harsh tone, "I've been offered I mean, Headmistress McGonagall offered me unlimited hospitality at Hogwarts. I think I'll accept her proposal and stay there for the next few months."

"And what about your parents? Do they know what happened? How are you going to explain such a long absence?" For the moment, he is sincerely interested.

"I can always say that I've been asked to do some special research."

"But that is irrational! Wouldn't it be better for you to stay with them?"

"Do you think I want them to see me in this state?!" she replies furiously, raising her voice too much for her damaged lips. So, her next sentence is almost a whisper. "Do you think I could go there and tell them I became a monster while trying to save the world?"

He feels suddenly uncomfortable. "I'm sure that..."

She cuts him off impatiently. "It is lucky that you can't see me. I'm living locked in my room here at St. Mungo's!"

An unpleasant silence falls. Then, as if regretting her outburst, she says in a calmer tone, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Anyway, soon I'll have a new family. Ron and I are going to get married once his condition stabilises."

This time he is really astonished. "Given the situation, don't you think this is an even more irrational choice?"

Her voice is ringing now, just as it used to at Hogwarts. "I don't expect you to understand. After all, you cannot have changed just because you have saved the world."

He is baffled, and for a moment, he doesn't know what to say. He hears her backing towards the door and he tries to reply, but she interrupts him with cold fury. "I just wanted to thank you, Professor. I hope you will feel better soon. Have a good day."

She immediately exits, leaving him fuming in useless, painful rage.

Interlude I

It is mid afternoon when the door opens again, but this time he has been informed of the important visit he is going to receive. In a way, he feels pleased. In another way, he is worried. What is the consultant of the Minister of Magic going to tell him? And why isn't the Minister coming himself? He is anxious to know, but at the same time, he tries to keep his emotions under control. It has become difficult in this new situation of total vulnerability, but he has to do it. It's a matter of will, as always. And his will has been trained for all of his existence.

The Consultant

Cornelius Fudge enters eagerly and announces himself in that same pompous, falsely cordial tone he uses to handle all embarrassing situations.

"Professor Snape, my dear friend!" he exclaims joyfully, noisily putting something on the table used for meals. "I'm glad to see you have finally recovered! What a wonderful surprise! We were so concerned about your condition, so worried we could possibly lose one of our saviours... the hero we didn't know about!"

Severus tightens his lips. An embarrassed silence follows this sentimental explosion. Then Fudge leans to clasp Severus' hand in his, squeezing it a little. Cornelius' grip is weak and insincere; he knows perfectly well the awful character of the man sitting before him. And he is concerned; if the man should say something unpleasant, he wouldn't know how to answer. He cannot offend a war hero. Even worse, he cannot reply harshly to a blind man. Now the silence makes him feel very uncomfortable as well, and Severus seems to be doing his best to reinforce his uneasiness.

"So, my dear boy," Cornelius takes a seat and resumes talking in the desperate attempt to raise a reaction from the unfriendly man sitting in front of him, "how are you feeling today? Are the people here taking good care of you? We cannot risk disappointing our new celebrity, can we?"

Another forced laugh. Cornelius begins to find the man exasperating, and wishes his task were finished.

"Your visit is an honour, of course" says Severus quietly, "but may I ask why exactly have you come to see me?"

"My dear, dear boy!" yelps Fudge, delighted to have finally received an answer, and a calm one. "I hope you didn't think that the people at the Ministry, and precisely the ones who so incessantly watch over the wizarding population, could leave you here hanging, waiting uselessly when we all are so greatly indebted to you! It has been an uninterrupted party outside here since we received the incredible news of the victory. Unfortunately, you missed the main celebration. You know, everybody was too happy; it simply wasn't possible to wait for your recovery..."

With a conspiratorial smile that is completely lost on his blind listener, Cornelius leans to say confidentially, "Even if I must say that it has been a very sad celebration indeed. The only one who could participate was Harry, and he was understandably pained by the absence of so many of his friends."

"I'm glad he noticed," Severus snorts irritably, and Cornelius pauses to look at him, a perplexed look on his face. He will never understand this man! He waits for a moment, but nothing else seems to happen, so he goes on in his most cordial tone.

"But I have a surprise for you. I imagine you would have surely preferred to receive it in public, but, alas, as I told you, it was simply impossible to wait. However, here it is. Order of Merlin, First Class. I am very glad to be the first one to congratulate you on this appointment!"

Severus gives a sharp gasp when the cold weight of the medal meets his fingers, and Fudge obviously interprets it as a comprehensible reaction of astonishment. The consultant smiles knowingly and goes on, happy to have finally found a chink in that impenetrable armour.

"Now, the main reason for my coming here, apart from my personal concern about your well being, is basically a practical one. We want you to know that a considerable pension will be granted to each one of the persons who have fought against You-Know-Who and have particularly distinguished themselves. Of course, individuals who have suffered elevated financial losses or relevant physical damages are in a special position for either a significant reimbursement or a permanent allowance that may permit them to live serenely from now on."

"Very kind of you indeed," Severus replies coldly.

Disconcerted by this inexplicable lack of enthusiasm, Fudge looks wonderingly at the blind man, his cheerful smile fading in uncertainty; then he frowns and adds more harshly than he would have liked, "I'm glad you appreciate our efforts. It's going to cost us a little fortune, but somebody has to repay you for your commitment."

This last declaration seems to hit Severus painfully, and Fudge shifts nervously on his chair. His mission has been accomplished, and there is no need for the consultant to remain. So, as soon as decency allows, Cornelius rises to his feet and bids Severus goodbye, clearly relieved to leave that gloomy room and its dark occupant. His handshake is stronger now, and his laughter is really jovial. With a cheerful smile, he walks out hastily to his office and his career, waving a hand at the Healers and mediwitches looking at him with respect.

Interlude II

Alone again in the darkness, Severus tries to understand what has hurt him so much. Lost in a painful trance, feeling the round shape of the medal in his hand, he lets his mind go back to that cursed night in which Wormtail had decided the destiny of the whole wizarding world and four old friends and enemies had met again. That night, he had been extorted this exact same prize - an Order of Merlin, First Class - and the terrible humiliation and frustration he had undergone has been burning his soul for a long, long time. Today, his heart has only had an accelerated beat before realising how vain, how useless, how stupid the piece of metal is, the hard edges of which brush sharply against his fingers.

His mind wanders in turmoil when, with a sudden pang, he remembers the battle, Dumbledore's ghost and his last words of thanks. An intense, bitter, aching sensation of loss gradually washes over him, soon becoming intolerable. Slowly, he folds his arms on the table and wearily lays his head on them. Forgotten, the precious, useless medal slips from his fingers and lands on the floor with an acute ting.

The Mediwitch

It's evening when Poppy finally finds the time to go and visit her most difficult patient. Normally she is very punctual, but today, feeling nervous and tired, she has been trying to delay her appointment as much as possible. New events are happening. Her life is going to follow a completely different path in the future. Some irrevocable changes are going to take place, and she has been thinking about them the whole day, as she knows that they are going to affect Severus' life as well.

School will soon start again, and she has kindly been urged to resume her role there. Pleased for this welcome opportunity to return to her habitual routine, she has obviously decided to accept the offer. But this will mean leaving the hospital and her actual patients, including Severus. She already knows that her decision is probably going to bother him deeply, but how could she refuse? Hogwarts has been her home for so many years, the main part of her existence! Why should she sacrifice her aspirations for a man who most of the time doesn't even thank her for her commitment? In addition, St. Mungo's has dismissed several fully recovered patients in the last few days, so the staff isn't going to need her help anymore, even if the other mediwizards are scarcely enthusiastic at the idea of taking Severus back in their charge.

Still, being a responsible woman, Poppy is very uncomfortable about her leaving, and feeling her already heavy responsibility becoming heavier, she has spent the main part of the day thinking about her decision and planning the best way to communicate it to her patient, as she expects this to raise a fierce reaction. But surely, she can't go on all her life being his nurse, guardian, foster mother or trainer! Hence, she will have to prepare him as soon as possible for this impending future without her assistance.

Thinking in hindsight, they both knew that this moment would come sooner or later. During all those long weeks in which she had helped him to learn how to survive, she has constantly reminded him that someday he would be forced to manage his life completely by himself. But protective as she has become recently and knowing his financial situation, she has also wondered how this could be possible. He has lost his previous job, he obviously can't apply for a new one, and he doesn't come from a rich family. To make the picture even darker, nobody except she seems to be really concerned about his future, in spite of the important role he has played in the victory. She has therefore evaluated the opportunity of a discreet enquiry at the Ministry to present his case. To be even surer, she has already sent them an owl to ask for an appointment. Although in the meantime, the situation seems to have unexpectedly started to develop by itself, as Cornelius Fudge was expected to visit him today. But she doesn't believe in that vain, pompous man. He has always focused only on his career, and now that things are going to be better, he will tenaciously avoid any possible complication that could spoil his plans of a renewed success.

On the other hand, if nothing should happen, maybe a private audience with the Minister himself could help. After all, Poppy Pomfrey and Rufus Scrimgeour were schoolmates in their younger days, even if they cordially disliked each other right from the beginning. So, why not? She could try this final effort before considering her moral debt totally paid. However, she sincerely hopes that a convenient solution will be found in the meantime; otherwise she is afraid that she will feel obliged to remain at Severus' side. But now, how to prepare him, at least for the idea of her approaching departure?

Lost in meditation, she knocks twice to announce herself as she normally does, but this time she is unpleasantly surprised at not receiving the usual irritated reply. Immediately worried, she opens the door and enters hastily. Severus is curled on the table, placidly sleeping, head on his arms, his breathing soft and regular. Relieved, a kind smile playing on her lips, she approaches as quietly as possible, trying to decide what to do. It's dinnertime, but she hates the idea of awakening him from this peaceful slumber. However, as always, it's Severus himself to put an end to her hesitation; his reflexes have always been quick, and they have become even quicker since the moment he became blind. His head instinctively snaps up in alarm as she gets near, and she is pained to see how his eyes open wide in the effort to see something, even after so many days of uninterrupted darkness. She immediately announces herself.

"It's me, Severus. Sorry if I have disturbed you, but it's dinnertime."

She sounds slightly anxious, so he questioningly "looks" at her. His lips are strangely trembling, but his tone is calm when he replies. "No need of apologies, Poppy. I was only... dreaming."

His voice breaks, and he clenches his fists, seeming to resist some unknown emotion. Feeling surprisingly moved, Poppy lowers her head in embarrassment sometimes she forgets he cannot see and, doing so, she notices the golden medal on the floor.

"An Order of Merlin, First Class!" she gasps in astonishment while she bends to collect the heavy decoration. She places it gently in his hands, suddenly radiant. "Oh, Severus," she exclaims, "this is fantastic! We will have to order something special for your dinner tonight! It was Cornelius who brought it to you, wasn't it? What did he say?"

"I'm afraid I don't remember too well," he says, indifferent at her joy, toying distractedly with his award. Poppy looks at him, a perplexed frown on her wise, old face. How remarkably peculiar is this attitude! The Severus she used to know had suffered so much from the loss of this same decoration years ago that he had revengefully succeeded in making his hated colleague, Professor Lupin, resign his job and leave Hogwarts in dishonour. The memory still disturbs her very much, as she has always liked the nice, kind and unfortunate Remus Lupin, right from the days when he was a child and she used to help him through the pain of his transformation. In the grim silence that follows, each one of them absorbed in their thoughts, Poppy suddenly notices a sealed roll of parchment on the table. Surprised, she picks it up and turns to look at him again.

"And what about this parchment? Did he read it to you? It's still sealed," she enquires, wondering if this could be the reason of his sadness. But this time he is genuinely amazed.

"A parchment?" he exclaims. Now he looks excited again, really impatient, and as a result, he becomes rude. "Well, what the hell are you waiting for? You know I can't read it!"

Suppressing a harsh reply, Poppy opens the roll with slightly trembling hands. This man and his irritating reactions have always had the power to exasperate her, and today she is already feeling nervous! Thankfully, as she quickly glances over the text, a big smile grows on her face. The news is wonderful! She lets her happiness transpire through her words. "This is a letter from the Cabinet of the Ministry's Assistants, declaring that you have been assigned a pension for war merits. Attached there is also a note establishing the various possibilities and amounts you can request and... Oh, Severus, Cornelius personally signed two of them, and they are the biggest! You have been listed for 'distinguished actions' and for 'relevant physical damages'. If you add them together, this should give you a monthly income of..." and she tells him a figure she is sure he would have never dreamt to hear.

He lights up in excitement. At least something good has finally happened. She is so delighted! It's the answer to all her worries; a relief for her, a new life for him, freedom for both! The evening couldn't have ended in a better way.

Interlude III

Forcefully holding the medal in his hand, Severus now waits for his special dinner, mind full of innumerable options. For the first time after his awakening, he feels confident, powerful and safe again. Maybe the obscure times he dares to remember Dumbledore's words have finally ended. His brain is working full force now, and he doesn't react with his usual harshness at Poppy's jubilant comments. He is so caught up in his calculations that he almost doesn't notice her thrilled joy.

With a sum like that, he can afford to purchase a new house, to have house-elves to serve him, to buy new clothes and furniture and rare food, even to travel... in a word, to enjoy life like he has never done before! In a different way, perhaps, but still a marvellous perspective. And who knows, maybe in another country he could find the cure his compatriots haven't.

But to this new happiness is soon added a drop of bitterness. Practical as always, Poppy immediately takes this joyful opportunity to prepare him and announce very, very carefully, of course the news of her future. He shouldn't have been affected by this revelation, at least not now that there is a new life waiting for him.

Instead, surprisingly, he feels incredibly outraged. He had begun to consider Poppy and Miss Ingham as two annoying but useful appendices in his life. Now he realises that he will have to start everything again, teaching some unknown house-elf how to manage his needs and facing every occurrence by himself. This unpleasant perspective makes him feel oddly disappointed, and as a result, his mood begins to oscillate from a deep joy to a resentful nastiness while his mind swings unsteadily in emotion.

The Boy

It's late evening when Madam Pomfrey is called out of the room. The dinner was excellent, but not as enjoyable as it could have been, given her patient's most unpleasant mood. Challenged by his irritating manners, her temper too has begun to rise alarmingly. She is a kind, patient, tolerant woman, but too much is too much, and today she is finding him exasperating. Therefore, she is very happy to have an excuse to leave him alone.

To her great surprise and joy, Harry Potter is there waiting for her outside of the door. She embraces him tenderly. How the boy has changed in these last weeks! His voice has become grave, definitely adult, and his eyes are always serious. That mischievous, joyful smile that sometimes lightened his traits when he was at Hogwarts has completely disappeared after the last severe trials he has undergone, and he now looks like an austere, dignified young man.

Accepting her warm welcome, Harry affectionately kisses Poppy on the cheek, then says quietly, "I just got in and saw Ron and Hermione. I wanted to see Remus as well, but he is already asleep. However, I was told that he is feeling better... At least, he seems to be. Anyway, when I said I wanted to see you, too, Hermione mentioned that Professor Snape is out of his coma and that he is well... but he won't be able to see anymore! Is it true? Is there really nothing that can be done to help him regain his sight?"

Poppy is looking in sad amazement at the boy. So wounded, yet so generous! The man whose condition he is so anxiously enquiring about has done his best to ruin Harry's life in school, yet the boy is sincerely concerned about him. With a sigh, she explains the situation in short but precise words, and Harry nods thoughtfully in understanding. Then, with sudden hesitation, so strange on the lips of the Dark Lord's conqueror, he asks timidly, "I know that it's late, but I would really like... I mean, may I see him now?"

Poppy manages a tired smile. "You know him, Harry. He is still a difficult man. He doesn't like to be surprised. I will have to ask. If you don't mind waiting here..."

Quietly, she goes back in the room, but Severus has stiffened in his chair. She realises that he has overheard the conversation right outside his door, and now, his anger seems to be escalating. He declares furiously, anticipating her question, "So, the great Harry Potter has finally deigned to come. Well, I have some interesting news for him! I'm not going to receive anybody tonight. Let him wait as much as I did. Perhaps this will teach him something."

Poppy tightens her lips and shakes her head in disbelief. Then, not caring to hide her disappointment, she asks firmly, "Are you sure? The boy has just arrived from a long trip and came here to see you as soon as he knew you had improved. Don't you think he should deserve a better treatment?"

But he is resolute in his stubbornness. The shadows of his feelings are altering his face, and Poppy can almost perceive his grim considerations. Finally, the long awaited Harry Potter has come! At last, somebody who must ask Severus' permission, who is totally depending on Severus' decisions, even better, who has to bow to them! This is going to be a cruel satisfaction for the boy's former professor, a memorable occasion that Severus will no doubt use to vent all the frustration he has accumulated.

"Severus!" Positively angry, Poppy interrupts his thoughts, and he reacts like the child he sometimes becomes. That is, ceding her victory... but not completely.

"No! I'm too tired now! Tell him to come tomorrow morning if he really wants to see me!" he finally utters, then crosses his arms and turns his head, obstinately refusing to listen any longer.

With a deep sigh, Poppy leaves. Harry already knows and smiles quietly while she reports the message.

"Always the same nasty bastard!" he remarks, and unexpectedly amused, he declares, "Well, if he keeps going like this, there is still a hope!" Looking at her sad, tired face, he adds in a soft, comforting tone, "I'll be here again tomorrow, don't worry. Have a good night and thank you so much, Madam Pomfrey, for everything you have done for us... and for him."

Speechless, Poppy stares at him incredulously. It has been a hard day and she is still very upset, so his kind, sympathetic reply makes her feel suddenly vulnerable. Tears begin to prickle at the corners of her eyes while she fumbles for words. But with his new amazing capacity of understanding, the boy has already kissed her again and leaves silently in the darkness of the night.