

Scampi And Cherry Cream

by chivalric

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1: For Breakfast – Scare Fudge

Chapter 1 of 4

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Author's Note: This story is the sequel to "Truffles and Strawberries". Like the prequel, it will have four chapters. Please do not continue reading if you are offended by a Menage-a-Trois. Which will take place in the last chapter, by the way, not in this one. A threesome with Fudge is a truly horrible thought and even I am not that cruel!

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1: For Breakfast Scare Fudge

Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, was a happy man. And he was still quite surprised about this fact, as he had been kicked out of his job not too long ago. Scrimgeour had succeeded him; Scrimgeour had laughed at him; Scrimgeour had thought he could do everything better.

But Scrimgeour was dead now, and the war was finally over. Voldemort was dead, too, and not many Death Eaters were still on the run. So he, Fudge, was once again Minister.

Ha!

He loved it. He loved his office, especially his desk. He certainly loved the power he had. He could talk to whomever he wished, in any way he chose to. He could refuse to converse with anyone he didn't want to bother with. Actually, there was only one thing that really, really angered him.

Severus Snape. That bastard! Snape, who was dead but still a war hero. Fudge had been quite brutally forced to give the former Potions master the Order of Merlin, First Class, although all the Minister had wanted to do was bury the man in a small, unmarked grave. But no, Minerva McGonagall and that werewolf had stormed into his office and demanded demanded! that Snape be honoured for what he had sacrificed.

Bloody hell, the man had been a triple spy for most of his life! He had betrayed Voldemort, helped Potter, and killed Dumbledore on Dumbledore's own order. It had proved impossible for Fudge to keep all this under the carpet. How he would have liked to keep Snape a Death Eater and nothing else! The man was a disgrace, despite his actions. He had been ugly, dangerous, unfriendly, and his nose had been far too crooked to be seen in public.

Well. He was dead, of course, but still, it bothered Fudge immensely that he had been blackmailed by McGonagall and Lupin to grant an interview to Rita Skeeter, telling the whole Wizarding world the secrets of Severus Snape.

At his funeral, there had been millions of people, crying like idiots, all of them grieving that damn, dead, traitorous Potions master!

Bah! thought Fudge. *He wasn't worth it, he really wasn't!*

Absently, he moved a few pens around on his desk, placing them neatly next to each other like little soldiers. He liked his desk in order. He liked...

A knock sounded on the door, soft and gentle. His secretary with tea and a tart. Or two tarts. Or perhaps three.

Looking around, making sure no one could see him, Fudge opened the top button of his trousers. Breathing became easier. Maybe he had gained a stone in the past few weeks. Or two. "Come in, Daisy," he called, smacking his lips in anticipation of the tarts.

"Ah, it's not Daisy," a male voice said. "It seems she's left her desk. May I come in anyway?"

Damn. Lupin. "Erm... actually, I'm quite busy," Fudge stammered, but the werewolf strolled in nevertheless.

"You don't look too busy," Lupin said and slumped in the chair in front of Fudge's big desk. "I think you have time to discuss a little problem of mine."

Fudge straightened his shoulders and raised his chin. "I have no interest in helping you with any of your problems, Mr Lupin," he huffed. "You blackmailed me into talking to Rita Skeeter. Her article was very rude where it concerned me. She made Snape a hero and me a coward, and I dislike..."

"It's about Hogwarts," Lupin interrupted him. "And the new so-called Headmistress. A few people are not happy that you gave her the post. Some would like her to be elsewhere. Anywhere, actually, but not at Hogwarts."

Fudge jumped up. "I don't care what some people want!" he shrieked. "Headmistress Umbridge is the perfect choice for the post! She has done it before, and splendidly. She..."

Lupin growled. Low and dangerous, and Fudge felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. "That woman is cruel, unfair, and completely incapable of running a school. Anyone who lets her near children is mad. And besides you had no right to give her the post anyway."

With trembling hands, Fudge took a rubber and placed it next to his pen-soldiers. He needed to calm his nerves, and the rubber would surely do the trick. Taking a deep breath, he replied, "Of course I had the right, Lupin! I am the Minister! It was more than time to announce a new Headmaster or Headmistress for Hogwarts, and so I did. You may leave now, and..."

Lupin crossed his legs at his ankles and made himself comfortable. "Headmaster Snape's portrait didn't appear amongst the other portraits," he calmly pointed out. "That leaves only one conclusion he is still alive, and therefore, you can't give his post to someone else. Actually, if I were you, I would have some sleepless nights at the prospect that he could turn up out of nowhere, maybe in the middle of the night in your bedroom, asking you... questions. He is exceptionally good at asking questions, what with him having been Lord Voldemort's second-in-command for nearly twenty years and all."

Fudge had become paler and paler in the last few minutes. Meanwhile, he looked like old, rotten dough. He smelled about as nice. "Snape's dead. The traitor is dead! We buried him. I wasn't there, but I saw it in the newspaper. He. Is. Dead!"

"The missing portrait?" Lupin inquired. "And don't you tell me there is no portrait because he wasn't rightfully Hogwarts' Headmaster. He was. Dumbledore meant him to take over after his death. You know that, Harry testified for it, and Albus's will made it even clearer. If Severus had died, there would be a portrait. So where is it?"

"Don't care!" Fudge snapped, or at least tried to snap. The words came out half strangled, and somehow his desk was far too close to this infuriating, awful werewolf. In the far corner of his room, it surely would be a lot more comfortable. "Umbridge is Headmistress. She will stay Headmistress. I said so! I signed her contract! There is nothing I can do about it unless... unless..."

"Unless Severus walks in and claims his post?" Lupin suggested mildly.

"Exactly!" Fudge screamed, and felt a wave of relief wash over him. The man was dead, he knew it. Therefore, he couldn't possibly walk in anywhere. Conclusion: everything was fine. Phew!

Then why did the werewolf look so smug? Bollocks, a smug-looking werewolf was a dreadful sight, at least in Fudge's opinion. Had he said something wrong? No, certainly not. There was no way Snape could walk in anywhere.

"That's sorted, then. Good," said Lupin and half turned in his chair. "Are you coming in anytime today, Severus, or do I have to come out and get you? I've done all the talking!"

Fudge gulped, then gave a shaky little laugh. "Very funny, Lupin," he managed. "You nearly had me there. For a moment, I really believed Snape was out there."

"And why wouldn't I be?" Snape said, leaning lazily against the doorframe. To Fudge, it seemed as if he had appeared out of nowhere.

"Gargh!" the Minister of Magic squeaked, eyes bulging out of their sockets. His legs turned to jelly, and slowly he sagged towards the floor.

Impossible. This man this dead man! couldn't be here, in his office! He couldn't be standing there, and had he always been that tall? Snape, who looked less pale than Fudge had ever seen him before, was lying in a grave! He was NOT here and this was a nightmare and gods, the man was thin! It was an affront to be that thin, with him, Fudge, having maybe a little extra weight about the ribs. A stone perhaps. Or two. Or five.

Casually, Snape took a step in to the office, and Fudge couldn't help but register that the man moved carefully and didn't swing his left arm. As if he was injured.

Hadn't he been bitten by that snake? That certainly would explain a few things. If he had been ill, he would have lost some weight, and if he had been recovering, it would explain why no one had known he was still alive. "You are dead!" Fudge croaked. "Absolutely, completely, and entirely dead."

Snape laughed. So did Lupin. A horrible sound to Fudge's ears.

"Where have I heard that before?" Snape chuckled and shared a glance with Lupin. "I'm not dead. One of my pupils two, actually saved my life. Lupin and Poppy brought me back to my legs. Last night I learned that you assigned Hogwarts to Umbridge. That is unacceptable. I have no intention of stepping down as Headmaster, Fudge. As you have just confirmed, all I need to do is come in here and claim Hogwarts as mine. That is what I am hereby doing. Hogwarts is *my* school, Fudge. It has been since Albus died. So, will you tell Dolores or shall I?"

"But, but, but..." stammered Fudge. "I can't tell her! She'll kill me! She blackmailed me into giving her the job, she knows a few things she shouldn't know about, and she knows there is a certain establishment in Knockturn Alley I like to visit..." Suddenly, the Minister realised that he was talking entirely too much. He clamped his mouth shut and closed his eyes for good measure. Maybe, if he didn't see the catastrophe in front of his eyes, said catastrophe would cease to exist?

"I see," said Snape, in a nearly friendly voice. "So I will have a little talk to her. Suits me. Come along, wolf, or do you wish to stay here?"

Lupin grinned. "Absolutely not, Severus. Let's have lunch, what do you say?"

"You are paying," Snape stated, and together they left the Minister behind, sitting on the floor, his head covered in his hands and shaking all over.

Side by side, the two men left the Ministry, Snape covered by a hooded, black cloak. He didn't want people to see him right now before the more pressing issues were resolved. He had to sort out Umbridge first, and he had to seek out a few people as well, telling them in person that he wasn't dead. Potter was amongst those, and Minerva. Hagrid, certainly, and the rest of Hogwarts' staff.

But first, it was time for lunch. Scaring Fudge for breakfast had been surprisingly joyful, but all in all, Snape was still recovering from Nagini's bite, the resulting blood loss, the fever that had claimed his weakened body only a week ago, and a deep, midnight-black depression. Additionally, there was the fact that he was out on the streets for the first time since the Dark Lord had fallen it felt strange for Snape to walk along the streets without having to fear a fellow Death Eater would see him in the werewolf's company.

Secretly, Snape glanced at the man who walked next to him and wondered how he could have allowed Lupin to address him as 'friend'. They had disliked each other for so very long. Now, he felt almost comfortable in the werewolf's company. Snape had even offered him the job as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, knowing that Lupin was not only a talented teacher, but that he needed every Galleon as well to support his small family.

Maybe the snake venom has softened my heart, Snape thought ironically and was quite glad that they had arrived at the small pub they had been heading for. Although the walk had been short and slow, he needed a rest, a drink, and some food.

"Take a seat, Severus, I'll place the orders," Remus murmured and headed towards the bar.

Snape frowned for a moment. "Just order me around, wolf," he grumbled, but nevertheless sought out the darkest corner of the pub. He found a table, took the seat with its back to the door, and pushed the hood off his face. It was highly unlikely that anyone who knew him would stroll in, as this wasn't a place that was visited by wizards under normal circumstances.

"Did everything go well?" someone asked, and before Snape could turn round to look at the speaker, a young, blond wizard slipped opposite him onto the bench. "I hope you scared the life out of Fudge," Draco Malfoy continued and placed a glass and a bottle of butterbeer in front of Snape. "He's such a coward, I bet Umbridge blackmailed him in to giving her the post."

Snape couldn't help a smirk crossing his face. "Actually, that's exactly what she did," he confirmed. "And he was quite glad that I offered to tell her myself that I have no intention of allowing her to move into my office. All I have to do now is to find the woman. I'm quite looking forward to seeing her."

Comfortably, Draco leaned back and took a sip of his cider. "You know, Snape, I might be able to help you with that problem," he mused. "Maybe I saw her in Diagon Alley earlier today. Maybe I know where she will be today at half two. I might even be persuaded to tell you if you let me come along." Thoughtfully, he placed the glass back on the table.

Snape considered a glare for a moment, then forgot about it. The boy had not only saved his life, he had hid him as well for more than a month, had endured his black mood, and had been bright enough to bring Lupin along as well. He owed the boy, and more, he had grown to like him. So instead of snapping a cold answer, Snape just said, "Fine. Come along. Where will she be? And how do you know about it?"

Caught off-handed by the unexpected agreement, Draco took a look around as if to see if Snape was really talking to him. He clearly had expected Snape to rather pick a fight than to relent so instantly to a cheeky inquiry. But then... the previous evening he hadn't only come voluntarily downstairs to the kitchen, the man had cooked as well, outing himself as a wizard with a taste for good food, wine, and chocolate. And he had soothed Granger; he had even embraced the girl.

All in all, Snape seemed to be more human than Draco had ever seen him before. He even gave a small smile when Lupin arrived with two plates.

"Vegetables for you, Severus," the werewolf said and began to devour his roast duck. "What is this about Umbridge, Draco you really know where she is?"

"Your hearing is far too acute for your own good, wolf," Snape said and speared a sprout.

Draco looked from one man to the other. "It's quite scary that you two are friends now," he grumbled. "I can just see you plotting mischief at school; you'll probably make the O.W.L.s and the N.E.W.T.s harder, and then come up with ideas of how to terrify the students."

Snape and Lupin looked at each other and grinned simultaneously.

"Possibly, Draco," Remus chuckled. "And if he doesn't behave, I even know enough to blackmail him into agreeing to anything I want. Haven't considered that yet, but the prospect is wonderful."

"You know nothing about me, wolf," Snape objected and began to clean his plate with a piece of bread. He'd been hungrier than he had thought.

Draco smirked and ticked off one finger after the other. "Depression, tears, you having icy showers in the middle of the night..."

"Draco!" Remus said with a warning sub-note. If the boy told Severus...

"And then, Remus has seen you naked, held you in his arms like a mother her child when you were ill, and he soothed you when you were raging with fever I think that is enough to blackmail anyone," Draco pointed out with a grin on his face.

Snape lowered his fork. "He... what?"

Draco went on. "Actually, I could blackmail the both of you. I just have to drop a rumour about you spending the night in the same bed..."

"Lupin!" Snape hissed, ignoring Draco. "If any of this is true, I will break your neck with my own hands!"

Lupin nodded solemnly. "I knew you would. Will you do it now or later, when I have had a chance to say good-bye to my son?"

Snape snorted. For lack of options, he focussed on Draco again. "You either tell me now where Umbridge will be this afternoon, or I will..."

"Trinity's," the young wizard interrupted. "At half past two. She wants new robes for the big event of her going back to Hogwarts. Lilac with rosy laces, if I got it correctly."

A cold smile curved Snape's lips. Trinity's was the most expensive tailor on Diagon Alley, but it was located dangerously close to Knockturn Alley. It would be easy to reach the shop unnoticed. "Excellent," he said with a silken voice. "I think I need a new... shirt myself."

2: After Lunch – Kick Umbridge

Hogwarts' newly announced Headmistress is in trouble. Well, she should have known that it is a bad idea to mess with Severus Snape...

2: After Lunch Kick Umbridge

The three wizards spent a comfortable hour at the pub enjoying their lunch. For Snape, it also meant he could catch his breath and relax his aching shoulder whilst doing not much more than leaning back into the cosy chair. He wouldn't have confessed to it, but Nagini's bite and her poison had left him with nearly constant pain. So he ate and drank, talked, wondered if Dolores would be daft enough to draw her wand at the sight of him, and tried with a vengeance not to use his left arm.

Maybe chopping the garlic last night had been too much, he mused. But it had been such a temptation to do so, to handle the goods Draco had bought, to smell the onions and the strawberries, and most of all, the truffles. He hadn't been able to not do the cooking. Unfortunately, he now had to pay for his foolishness, feeling his shoulder hard as stone and aching as if Nagini had bitten him just a minute, not over a month ago.

"What's wrong with you?" Draco asked suspiciously. "You haven't said a word in over fifteen minutes, you haven't finished your drink, and you look grey."

Snape didn't answer; instead, he put his hand on his shoulder and began to knead it. It hurt. Damn. "I'm fine," he grumbled, not very convincingly, though.

"You need a massage, Severus," Remus said, watching him closely. "If you like, I can loosen the muscles in your shoulder later on."

Snape glared at him. "You will stay away from me, wolf," he said, only to see his friend grinning into his beer. "What?" he snapped.

"Nothing. I just expected you to say something like that." A sip, and Remus had emptied his glass. "As you wish, my friend. Just know that you don't have to suffer. I'm just offering a release." He got up and pulled his jacket on. "Twenty past two. Let's go. Unless you don't feel up to it, Severus?"

Sighing, Snape heaved himself out of the chair. *Massage*, he thought. *How dare he!*

Dolores Umbridge, newly announced Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, stood on a small podium in the back room of Trinity's and admired her image in the huge, beautiful mirrors. Of course, the mirrors were not as beautiful as what they were showing, but then, nothing and no one could have been more glorious than herself.

She looked marvellous. Unbelievably good. Wonderful. Every beauty queen was an ugly duckling compared to her, every young and stupid and oh, so lovely witch was irrelevant now, and certainly no one looked more compelling, intelligent, totally brilliant than her.

Because she, Dolores Umbridge, had made it. She was Headmistress again. After they had removed her from the school, after they had assigned it to that horrible, utterly ugly bastard Snape. After those filthy creatures had terrified her with their hooves. "No centaurs at the school," Umbridge hissed at her image, which smiled back mildly. "No Trelawney. No Hagrid. McGonagall will be fired in no time. The ghosts will get banned. The dungeons will be sealed. No Mudbloods. No half-bloods. Only Purebloods."

"That's the right attitude, Miss Umbridge," a smooth voice purred into her ear, and Dolores nearly fell off the little pedestal she was standing on, waiting for the tailor to finish her robes. Lilac robes with tiny little roses. Pink roses, naturally. Perfectly matching her pink fingernails and her pink eye shadow.

Of course she didn't fall. She was a witch, she was self-controlled, and nothing could scare her apart from the sound of clopping hooves. But there wouldn't be any of that rubbish at Trinity's. After a moment which she needed to calm her heart down to a normal speed Umbridge turned without crumpling the fabric and stared at the young man who leaned in the doorway.

"Mr Malfoy," she cooed. "It's Headmistress Umbridge. How nice to see you. I must admit, I haven't heard anything about your well-being in the past few weeks. Have you been in trouble?"

"Slightly," Draco said and came closer. Smoothly, he took the Headmistress's hand and breathed an admiring kiss on the cold skin. "One could say I was stuck in my own house for the last few weeks. Only recently, things got better. As I walked past the shop, I saw you and wanted to say hello."

Dolores Umbridge stared at the young man through narrowed eyes and decided that he had grown an inch or two since she had last seen him. The familiar sneer was painted on his lips, but then, he was the descendant of one of the richest families in Great Britain he should sneer. It suited him. "I am expecting you back at my school, Draco," she said, a small tremble in her voice.

"Sorry," Draco said. "I'm not going back there. Lupin will be teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts, and I'm not having a werewolf demanding me to do homework for him." He turned, about to leave, when Umbridge called him back.

Her icy voice dropped the temperature by several degrees. "Lupin? That filthy beast? He's worse than the centaurs. I will not allow him anywhere near my school. Actually, I will recommend to the Minister that he bans werewolves from our beautiful island. Shall they terrorise the continent, I say."

Draco cast her a small smile. "Well, I'm afraid you won't have any say about that, Miss Umbridge. Snape assigned him the job. As far as I know, Lupin is thrilled to be earning some money after all."

Umbridge opened and closed her mouth several times without any words coming out.

"You look like a trout on dry land," Draco pointed out helpfully.

"Snape!" gasped the Headmistress. "He's dead!"

"Ah, no," Draco objected. "I confess to having saved his life. A weak moment, I assure you."

Umbridge was made out of a different kind of wood than Fudge. She drew her wand and pointed it at Draco. "Tell me everything," she demanded. Stepping down, she caught her foot in the too long garment and landed face flat on the floor. Shrieking, she tried to hex Draco, but when she looked up again, he was gone.

"Well," she managed. "A misled youth. Disturbed in his mind. Snape is dead. I'm certain of it. Nagini such a nice creature, that snake would have killed anyone, not only such a pitiful excuse of a wizard."

"It went well," Draco munched. He was sitting in his kitchen, eating what Snape had cooked. Only steak and salad, tonight. Delicious, though.

Snape leaned against the wall and watched the young wizard eat. And he watched Lupin watching him. "Stop looking at me, wolf!" he snapped, irritated at the soft, gentle eyes prying his body as if he were a sickly cow. "I'm fine. Just not hungry. Go on, Draco, tell us the rest."

Draco first shared a glance with Remus Lupin, clearly seeking advice if he should continue or not. The werewolf just gave a curt nod. "He won't agree to as much as sitting down if you don't tell us the tale, Draco," he stated. "Severus is too tired to stand, and he needs to eat. Best do as he wishes."

"Bloody Merlin." Snape sighed and obediently took a chair, sitting down stiffly. He would not admit to his wardens that his back was bathed in fire each muscle was stiff from the day's work, and he wished he could just lie down and sleep for a fortnight. "Did you tell her I'm alive?"

Draco nodded and dug into the salad. "She tried to get more out of me, but fell in the attempt to reach me. I was gone before she had her head up. Can I take the second steak? After all, neither you nor Lupin are eating, and I don't want to waste the food..."

"Whatever," Snape said. He wasn't hungry, but got a fork and pulled the bowl with the rest of the salad towards him to sooth both Draco and Lupin *Strange, that after all those lonely years someone is actually caring for me*, he thought, but barely managed to bring the fork to his mouth. From neck to hips he felt like freshly whipped; if possible, he would have given up eating, talking, and moving for another few weeks.

"You ache," Lupin observed. "You very definitely need a massage if you want to be able to get up tomorrow morning. Unless... do you want me to sneak into Dolores's bedroom on my own? You could stay here instead..."

An evil gleam appeared in the Potions master's dark eyes. "In your dreams, wolf. I will enjoy scaring the living daylight out of her. She will step down as Headmistress more than willingly."

Draco, grinning widely at the two men's argument, looked more than glad that Hermione chose that moment to enter the kitchen. In her arms she balanced a huge pile of books and just managed to dump them at the table before the first one began sliding to the floor. "Oops," she said, caught the book, and held it out to Snape. "Here your order, sir. I went to your house at Spinner's End and got those for you. And I would be more than grateful if you could tell me a thing or two about them. Please?"

Snape tossed his fork aside and began stroking the book gently until it opened voluntarily. Then he cast a disbelieving glance at the girl. "Are you telling me you didn't read the books?"

Hermione slumped into a chair. "Not enough time," she confessed. "It took me ages to locate them, even after I had the wards undone. I've come directly from your house. What is so important about those books?"

Sitting became uncomfortable, so Snape got up and hoped, if he walked around a bit, that the movement would ease the tension in his back and buttocks. "Dark Arts, mainly. Information about Hogwarts' history my own notes about that subject, of course, nothing you would find in an ordinary book. Part of Albus's immense power was based on what is written on those pages. And as I couldn't get them on my own, I had to send you. I am... grateful. Thank you, Hermione."

She blushed slightly, obviously not used to a Potions master who behaved decently. Nor at the fact that he addressed her with her given name.

Snape picked up another one of the books. It was more a journal, really. It contained a thin set of parchment, the handwriting clearly his own. He flicked through the pages until he had found what he was looking for. "Come over here, wolf," he ordered. "I will read the passage, and you dip your finger into the wine whilst I do so."

Amused, Hermione and Draco watched as Remus did as ordered. He looked silly with his finger in the wineglass, and they might have laughed but for the tension that hung in the air.

Snape murmured a few words. Sparks erupted from the wine, shot into the air and danced around Lupin's hand. Snape's face was expressionless; Hermione's and Draco's eyes, though, widened when they saw the werewolf's face go slack and shocked. The glass slipped out of Lupin's fingers and would have shattered on the ground if Snape hadn't flicked his wand to catch it at the last moment.

"Amazing!" stuttered Remus, staring at the tiny drop at his fingertip. "I know everything about the wine, the yard where it grew, when the vine was planted, about the weather the day the grapes were harvested, the woman who plucked them... everything!"

Snape smiled, a thin and cold smile. "Now imagine you would touch something more complex when the spell is cast," he mused. "Something like a broom, for example. Or a knife a murderer had used to kill. A wand. Or... hmmm... a piece of Hogwarts, maybe?"

Hermione understood first, as usual. "You want to cast the spell at Professor Umbridge!" she exclaimed. "But... wouldn't she learn everything about Hogwarts? Wouldn't that knowledge give her immense power?"

Remus shook the drop off his finger and shuddered. "She'd go mad," he said weakly. "Too much knowledge, too much to listen to I can't even imagine what it must be like to know everything there is to know about that school!"

"It is fascinating," Snape said. Kneading some life back into his shoulder, he continued, "It requires preparation and dedication. It requires love for the school and respect for the ones who live there. Dolores can offer nothing of these things. I believe she knows about the spell, and I believe she has no intention of performing it. And if she is brave and mad enough to do it, she will learn tonight that the school doesn't want her. Hogwarts has its own way of expressing things. Either way, she will kiss my feet for taking the Headmaster's task off her."

"You... you have done this?" Hermione asked, wide-eyed.

"Naturally," Snape answered. "Albus cast the spell for me briefly before I killed him. I know that Hogwarts is mine simply because the school has accepted me as Headmaster." Rolling his shoulders, he let out an exasperated sigh.

"Forget about doing anything tonight unless you give in and let me massage you, Severus," Remus urged. "I know a few things about muscles and nerves. A transformation is an unpleasant thing for the body, and I usually feel as if I've been severely beaten up. I can help you; if you let me."

For a moment, Snape stared at his old enemy as if he wanted to hex him. Then he nodded, short and brisk.

"Upstairs with you, then. Get your shirt off, lie on the bed, and try not to wriggle too much when I touch you," Remus ordered.

Suppressed laughter followed the two men as they headed for Snape's room.

Dolores Umbridge never had any problems sleeping. She brushed her teeth, applied her night mask to keep her skin nice and young, then said good night to every single porcelain cat. As soon as her head hit the pillow, she was in dreamland, dreaming of power and obedient students and of ruling the Ministry of Magic. Never dreaming of horses. Dreaming of horses would mean waking up screaming, and obviously she was far too dignified to do that.

Tonight was different, though. The window was firmly closed, it was nice and warm inside her bedroom, the front door was locked and warded and no one would bother her in her own house.

So why couldn't she sleep?

Ah, that was why there were voices in front of her bedroom window. Low voices, barely audible even in the quiet peace of the night. But disturbing nevertheless. And annoying. Her house was in a private area, and no one had the right to lean against her walls!

Furious, she got up and stormed to the window. Of course she could have cast a silencing spell, but that was impossible this here was about the principle! There were

rules everyone had to obey, be they student, colleague, employee or... anyone, really. The rules were important, and one rule said that talking was forbidden whilst she, Dolores Jane Umbridge, tried to go to sleep. Silencing spells might have erased the noise, but wouldn't have solved the main problem: someone was talking without her allowance.

This had to stop. Silently, she opened the window and looked down at the street. Not that she had any interest in eavesdropping, but one needed to know what happened in front of one's own house!

"...grip like a lumberjack!"

"Will you stop complaining sometime tonight? I only did what was necessary. Your muscles were as hard as stone. I eased you up, at least for now. I made it possible..."

"You went too low! You touched my... my..."

"Bum' is the word you are looking for. Yes, I touched your bum. Accidentally! With my elbows whilst massaging you. Stop whining, Severus. It wasn't as if I tried to seduce you."

Dolores Umbridge slapped her hand in front of her mouth to prevent a scream slipping out. Severus Snape? Underneath her window? But he was dead!

"No one has ever managed to seduce me, wolf, so..."

And Remus Lupin! The filthy werewolf now, that was it. She would cast a Killing Curse at them. Immediately. It would rid the world of vermin, that much was certain.

"...obvious that you never had a good shag or you wouldn't be so bloody prude when it comes to..."

"I am not prude! I just dislike..."

"Quiet down there!" Umbridge shrieked, ripped the window wide open, and nearly fell out at her attempt to curse the two men standing on the pavement as fast as possible.

Two faces looked up. A moment later, a Stupefy hit her, and she fell backwards, landing hard on her bedroom floor.

There was no noise when the window opened wider and the two wizards intruded her privacy as if it were the most normal thing in the world. Carefully, the werewolf closed the window; it seemed obvious that they didn't want to get disturbed. The thought made Umbridge shiver with barely controlled fear, and she wanted to scream for help when Lupin bent down and gagged her.

Two faces looked down at her, two faces she had hoped never to see again. One was a werewolf's face, which was bad enough. The other was that of Severus Snape. "Mmm hmmm hhhmmm!" she mumbled through the cloth in her mouth. "HHmmhhM!"

Snape sat on her bed and smiled. It pushed Hogwarts' former Headmistress right over the edge of fear in the waiting arms of panic. Rolled up in one of her own carpets, immobilised and speechless, she hoped they would just kill her and not torture her beforehand.

"No, I'm not dead," Snape answered, having translated the witch's unintelligible words correctly. "Although I feel like it after that so-called massage Lupin tormented me with. It was utterly horrible. It hurt worse than Nagini's bite. This wolf has hands like a butcher!"

"Wimp," Remus quipped.

Umbridge's eyes grew big at the two arguing men. She struggled, tried to get back on her feet, and gave up the attempt when Snape knelt down next to her. In his hand he held a small stone, about the size of a fist. In his other hand, he had his wand.

"This is a stone from my rooms in Hogwarts," Snape explained, all pretended exasperation gone from his voice. "Hogwarts, which was built over thousand years ago. This stone *is* Hogwarts. I want you to touch it."

"Hmmm?"

"Why? Because with the help of this stone you will learn everything that there is to learn about my school. You want to be Headmistress? Then you need to know how Hogwarts feels, what it thinks and what it wants. You will need to become a part of the school. I will help you to achieve this task. That's why we are here."

"Hmm! Hmhmm hmmm hhh! ARGHm h mmm!"

"I thought you might not be too happy about it," Snape said. Ignoring her protest, the Potions master placed the stone on her forehead. In addition, Lupin cast a small binding spell, immobilising Umbridge and thus hindering her movements to throw off the stone.

Panic didn't linger any more. It flared up into her pale eyes, hot and burning. When she saw Snape opening a thin book, she began to fight.

Absently, Snape patted her foot. "Don't worry, Dolores. This will just make it easier for you to become the Headmistress Hogwarts deserves. I understand you know about this spell? I thought so. You have a greater knowledge of the Dark Arts than one would suspect. I bet you had no intention of joining with the school. It is overwhelming, I can tell you that much. You must be absolutely sure you want this job, or the spell and the knowledge seeping from the stone into your brain will rip you apart."

Umbridge became very still. A dubious look appeared on her face, and she desperately tried to get a glimpse at the stone that laid on her forehead. Naturally, this was impossible, and so her eyes nearly popped out. Then she pursed her lips around the gag and said, "Hmhm!"

"Was that a 'No'?" Snape asked casually, flicking his fingers. The hex that held her head still was removed.

Umbridge nodded severely.

"To clarify things you don't want me to perform this spell? You don't want to know every single little detail about Hogwarts?"

Umbridge shook her head so hard the stone landed under her bed.

Lupin got up. "That went fast," he stated. "Let's go."

Snape shot him a look. "I need her vow that she will make no attempt to become Headmistress ever again. In addition, I want her out of Britain for good. She will do the vow. You will be the binder. Agreed?"

Umbridge nodded and fearfully looked under the bed, searching for the stone. Lupin just got his wand out. Snape pulled the woman to her feet and locked hands with her. "Get it done," he said wearily. "I'm tired and want to get home."

"Yes, Headmaster," Lupin said and performed the spell that formed an Unbreakable Vow.

When I first posted this, I was looking for my beta and friend Dreamy_Dragon. For your information: she's turned up again. Thanks for all the good wishes!

chivalric

3: Dinner – Shock Harry

Chapter 3 of 4

Harry manages to find Snape. When he sees the not quite dead Potions master, he reacts a bit rash.

3: Dinner Shock Harry

"May I ask you a question?"

Snape looked down at the young woman standing next to the oven, peeking into his pots and pans and very obviously avoiding eye contact. With his right hand, he stirred the scampi; his left rested, as ordered by Lupin. "Can I hinder you?" he asked, but without the familiar sneer in his voice. Since he had held Hermione some weeks back, at the night she had found out that he was still alive, since he had comforted her, something had changed between them and he was sure she was aware of it.

She smiled. "No. But if you wish I will wait until you are finished making lunch."

"How very thoughtful of you." Concentrating on his task, he added a few sprigs of rosemary to the sizzling crustaceans, nodded the pot with farfalle aside, and summoned some lemongrass. The combined flavour made his stomach grumble and would with certainty bring Draco down into the kitchen as well as Poppy and Lupin. They were somewhere in the house, and as he would leave for his own place later that day, he had offered to cook one last time.

Hermione silently sat on a chair and watched him, not saying a word until lunch was on the table. They might have a minute or two before the hungry mouths would storm the kitchen. "I wondered would you get angry if I didn't come back to Hogwarts after the summer break?"

Stunned, Snape put down the small glass with plum wine he had been about to drink. "Are you telling me you plan not to finish your education, Miss Granger?"

"Hermione," she corrected him with a small voice. "You've called me Hermione most times in the past weeks. We've actually talked to each other for the first time since I've known you. I... I like it. And I fear, if I go back to Hogwarts, if I have to sit in your classroom again, you will be the... the..."

"The horrible teacher, the dungeon bat who torments you and your friends," he finished the sentence for her, poured some plum wine for her and handed her the glass. Thoughtfully, he took in her hair, her expression, the way she held her body. She had grown up, this girl, had turned into a young woman right under his eyes.

She nodded, but didn't dare to answer him aloud.

"Well, I consider it unacceptable. You will need a proper education if you want a career. And I assume a career is on your agenda. Or do you plan to marry Weasley, give birth to his kids, and become a housewife instead?"

She blushed furiously. "Ron and I... we are friends!" she exclaimed. "I have no intention of marrying him. Or anyone else. I am too young to marry, anyway. And I won't neglect my education, either. Beauxbatons offered me a place. I agreed. As my mother's sister lives in Paris and because we have visited her often, I speak reasonable French. I thought... But I wanted to ask you first."

Footsteps thundered downstairs. Draco must have smelled something to eat. Lighter steps were heard as well; Lupin and Poppy, obviously. Another moment, and they would storm into the kitchen.

Snape half turned to the door and warded it with a finger snap. Then he took Hermione by her shoulders and pushed her onto a chair. "Beauxbatons?" he asked. "They might not be bad, but certainly you can't honestly consider leaving Hogwarts for them!"

Hermione hung her head. "Really," she said in a small voice. "I have a good reason, and if you could stop only for a moment being so damn righteous, you would know what I am talking about. I..."

The wards fell and Remus Lupin came into the kitchen, wand drawn and eyes flashing furious daggers. "What the hell do you think you are doing, Severus?" he growled. "We can smell dinner and you dare to lock us out that's unacceptable. Argue elsewhere, will you?" With that, he sat down and looked expectantly at Poppy and Draco, who came rushing in as well.

Hermione blushed. Snape, not knowing what to answer, decided that attack was usually the best defence. "Time I move out of here back to Spinner's End. If I want to argue, I will argue, is that clear? And anyway where's Tonks? You said you would tell her about me. I expected her to come around and be nasty, given the fact that I've kept you away from home and her bed most nights for several weeks now."

Solemnly, Lupin poured himself some wine. "She left," he said. "To Europe. Got a job offer in Italy she couldn't refuse taking."

Buttering her toast, Poppy nodded her head in understanding. "I heard that you planned to separate," she said. "So sorry it didn't work out for the both of you."

Lupin flashed her a smile. "We are still good with each other," he said. "We always have been better friends than lovers, so this is fine for both of us. And I will see Teddy on a regular basis. She wanted to do some research on vampires, and now that this job has come up, we both agreed she should take the opportunity."

Snape looked at the werewolf with narrowed eyes. "You could have mentioned that last night," he said accusingly.

Sniggers all around the table startled the Potions master even further. "What?" he snapped. "He was upstairs with me and he usually talks a lot afterwards..."

Delighted laughter from Poppy and Hermione and a broad grin from Lupin finally brought Snape on the right track. "He massaged me! There was nothing sexual involved." Indignantly, he got up and turned his back to the bunch of imbeciles at the table.

Lupin gave in first. "Sorry, Severus," he managed. "But you must admit, the way you said it indicated..."

"I never indicate anything," Snape replied coldly. "And I utterly dislike you making fun of me, wolf!"

Lupin sighed. "No sense of humour at all, Severus," he said sadly. "Truly, you need to loosen up a bit, my friend. Thinking about it, a decent lay could help you tremendously to reach that target."

Hermione blushed furiously, Draco snorted into his wine, and Lupin grinned once more when Snape hunched his shoulders and left the kitchen, looking furious and not at all as if he would ever come back.

Three days later, Snape once more lay face-down on his bed at Spinner's End with a werewolf kneeling behind him.

"Ouch!"

"Don't fight me, it'll only hurt more," Lupin said, adding gentle pressure at the tender spot between the Potions master's shoulder blades.

"But it hurts!" Snape tried to throw the werewolf off, to no avail. Lupin was stronger than even the strongest human man, and the Potions master had no chance against him. "You... ouch! Stop it! You damn... ah! Yes! Aaaaah! That's it! There Yes!! Hmmm!"

"Told you so," Lupin stated dryly. After weeks and weeks of massaging Snape, using different potions and oils during the process, it seemed as if finally he'd managed to permanently ease the constant pain his friend had suffered from ever since Voldemort's snake had bitten and poisoned him. "It has taken me long enough, but now that this blockade is gone, a bit of regular exercise will keep your muscles smooth. No more massages needed. Unless you want one, of course."

Snape turned slowly and lay on his back. Hesitantly, he moved his shoulders it felt good. Both arms were outstretched across the blanket, and he looked at Lupin with something like amusement. Actually, he looked content. "I might take up your offer," he said, and that caused the werewolf's jaw to drop.

"Are you serious?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Snape asked and finally decided to get up. Sitting on the bedside, he fished for his shirt and pulled it over his lean frame. Regular food in the company of his friends had done him a world of good, and he didn't look like a skeleton anymore. Buttoning the grey fabric, he continued, "Without you I wouldn't be able to move anymore, wolf. And your touch is not at all unpleasant. Now that Tonks is in Europe, I don't even have to think about her consternation in case I desired more than a massage."

"You... but... you're joking!" Remus gasped.

Snape grinned mischievously. "Of course I am, Lupin. I won't allow anyone to call me humourless."

The werewolf was still struggling for an answer, when downstairs loud bangs nearly broke the front door of Spinner's End. Relieved to be spared, Remus asked, "Are you expecting a visitor?"

Snape shook his head. "Only you, Hermione, Draco and Poppy know that I am here, and each of you can lower the wards without breaking the door down. It's probably one of the neighbours."

More banging, and now a voice calling out, "Stop it! I'm coming. Stop banging, for Merlin's sake!"

Remus grinned. "Hermione feels quite at home here, don't you think?"

Snape was already heading downstairs. "She's been here nearly every day since I moved back in, and she helped a lot with the renovations this house was a disgrace, uninhabitable, before she took care of it. Of course she feels at home." Rushing past the living room, Lupin at his heel, he reached the door just before Hermione, who had been in the kitchen painting the ceiling white. Snarling, Snape ripped his front door open, expecting a neighbour complaining about the noise from the renovations. They had tried to be quiet and had put some minor wards up, but of course, a complete silencing spell was impossible. It would have been far too suspicious if a whole house got nearly torn down without as much as a whisper. "One more kick at my door, Mr Winterbellum, and I..."

Harry Potter, fist raised, stared at him for a small, dumbstruck moment, then screamed, "You lousy bastard!" and drilled his wand in Snape's chest. "How dare you to impersonate Professor Snape!"

The Potions master was so flabbergasted at this attack that he didn't even think about getting his own wand out. "What?" he said and looked down at the boy, who was pale and sweaty and seemed in quite bad condition, all in all. "Potter! You dimwit why are you attacking me in my own home? And how did you find me here, anyway?"

Harry, wide-eyed and furious, shouted a *Stupefy*, but missed Snape by inches as he was shaking all over. The spell hit the wall, bounced back, and vanished in a shower of sparkles. "Who are you, you bastard?" Harry was shouting, and sweat was showing on his forehead. "I put a tracking spell on Hermione; she's been behaving oddly, lately, and never tells me or Ron where she goes. I followed her here, and find you and you dare... how dare you..."

Snape shot him an exasperated look, then half turned round to Lupin, who was standing in the shadows behind him. "First he lets me die and now decides he should address me with respect," he grumbled. "Had I known my death would have had such an impact on him, I would have let Nagini rip half my head off a lot earlier." Then he turned to Harry again. "Put that wand down, Potter," he said as calmly as he could master. "And then come inside. You look even more awful than I felt a couple of weeks ago. Pathetic, Potter, truly pathetic."

Harry swayed gently, but didn't lower his wand. His face had taken on an unhealthy, ashen colour. "How did you do it? Polyjuice? A glamour? Who are you, and..."

"Harry," Hermione interrupted him, pushed past Snape and thus stood between Snape and her friend's wand, which now pointed at her chest.

Very quickly, Harry lowered his weapon. "Look, Hermione, I don't know what's going on here," he began, then suddenly dropped his wand and steadied himself against the doorframe. "Sorry, 'Mione," he murmured and shot Snape a look full of uncertainty. "Feeling dizzy. Must be the sun. Could you... may I... some water?"

Lupin opened the door wide. Harry, seeing him only now, gaped. "What are you doing here?" he asked, wiping sweat off his face. "What's going on here and who... how..."

"Shut up, Potter, and get inside before you collapse," Snape snapped, quite irritated that he felt something close to pity for the boy. He clearly remembered the memories Lupin had given him a few weeks ago. The sight of Harry sitting on Hogwarts stairs, waiting for a portrait of his dead teacher to appear, had softened his usually coldly calculating heart. "When was the last time you ate?" he asked the young man. "Or slept? Goodness, boy... Oh, damn."

Harry, having stared at Snape with open mouth, had unceremoniously passed out. Snape, standing closest, had no other choice but to catch him or he would have hit the floor hard. "He could have broken his stupid skull," he snapped at both Hermione and Lupin whilst he carried Potter into his living room to put him on the sofa. "How would I explain that, Miss Know-it-all?"

"I didn't complain, Severus," she answered with a grin. "I just didn't expect you to catch him, that's all."

"Broken skull, blood splattered everywhere, soiled planks, and the problem of explanation would remain," Snape grumbled and knelt down next to the young man. "Hand me that bottle from the shelf, Lupin, will you?"

Apparently, the bottle in question contained something smelly, nasty enough for Harry to cough and gasp and to shoot up from the couch as soon as he sniffed it.

Snape placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "Remain seated, Potter. You are in a disgraceful condition; I won't allow you to faint twice in less than ten minutes." Sternly,

Snape looked at his visitor and could nearly see dozens of questions shooting through Potter's mind. He quirked his lips. "No, I'm not dead, Potter, in case you wanted to comment on that fact."

Harry stammered, "But, but, you..." and heavily slumped back into the soft cushions. As the sight of the tall, dark wizard was obviously too much for him, he focussed on Hermione instead. "He's dead, Hermione," he told her. "We saw him die. We were at his funeral. He's been dead for over two months and why are you here, in his house?" Confused, he ruffled his hair and shot the man who couldn't be Hogwarts' Potions master a sideways glance. "Besides, this one here," he jerked his head in Snape's direction "is obviously capable of taking showers and washing his hair and brushing his teeth, and he's not pale enough to be Snape..."

"Headmaster Snape to you, Potter," Snape stated, and Harry's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

"You *sound* like him," Harry said, unsure. "You look like him and you act like him and you are in his house... But... I saw you die!"

"Repetition won't change the facts, Potter," Snape snapped and pointed at a plate of sandwiches standing on the couch table. "I'm not dead. Hermione healed the wound in my neck. When Draco Malfoy came to get my corpse, he found me still breathing, and hid me in a safe place. There he took care of me until I was close to killing myself simply because I believed the Dark Lord had won this awful war. At that point, he told Lupin, who called for Poppy. I'm surprised he didn't place an advert in the *Daily Prophet*, but then, it turned out to be for the best. Eat that sandwich, Potter, or I will shove it down your throat!"

Flabbergasted, Harry nibbled a bit at the soft, white bread. Then took a bigger bite. And another one. "That's good!" he exclaimed. "Didn't know you could make sandwiches like this, 'Mione!"

Hermione shook her head and held up her paint-covered hands. "Severus made it. He's the cook in the house. You'll find out for yourself, as I assume he will invite you to dinner."

Snape narrowed his eyes at that statement. "Or what, witch? I agreed to cook for my..." The smallest pause. "... my friends, but not for someone who insulted me and threatened to kill me only a few minutes ago."

"Harry eats with us or I won't finish painting," Hermione said with a sweet smile. "Because of your refusal to announce you're alive, we all suffered a great deal. Harry probably suffered more than most, and now you just caused him the shock of his life. Behave decently, Professor!"

"Yes, Miss Granger," Snape said obediently and only with a small subnote of sarcasm in the friendly words.

Lupin laughed. "You two are battling like a married couple. Stop it, or Harry will consider this a nightmare."

True, the young man looked positively like someone who had been repeatedly hit over the head with a large and heavy club. "Dinner," he murmured and got up on wobbly legs. "Prepared by Snape. Who is not dead, but Headmaster of Hogwarts. And lives in a beautiful house and not in the dirty hole I was expecting." He staggered towards the door. "He is not dead, but I am," he decided. "So I can very well have something to eat before... before..."

"Before you collapse again," Snape stated and took the Harry's elbow, leading him into the kitchen.

It was an early dinner, and Harry ate in silence, his eyes never leaving his former Potions master's form. Snape, sitting opposite him, was well aware of the fact that Potter craved answers, and so, when they had reached dessert, he gave him answers. He told the young man more or less everything, including his own pitiful state a few weeks ago. "So believe me when I say that what you need is regular food, eight hours sleep at night, and someone who kicks your arse whenever you threaten to fall back into a depression again," he stated dryly. "I assume your friends will happily do the deed, otherwise you can always turn to me."

"What I need is to tell you how very, very sorry I am," Harry objected and reached out his hand. "I'm sorry, Professor Snape. For misjudging you. For not trusting either you or Professor Dumbledore. He always said you were on our side, and I was too stubborn to believe it. I... I let you die and... and..."

"Lupin," Snape said, exasperated. "Slap him for me, will you? If I do it, Hermione will scold me, but I can't listen to this babbling any longer."

Remus folded his arms across his chest and looked stern.

"All right then, Potter," Snape gave in. "I accept your apology. And there was nothing you could have done for me. You killed the Dark Lord. That is much more than I expected of you, and I am most grateful that you were successful." With that, he took Harry's hand and shook it.

Harry grinned for the first time since the night he had killed Voldemort. With both hands, he grabbed one of Snape's and held fast. "And now you need to come with me," he urged. "To Hogwarts. You need to tell McGonagall that you are alive. Did I get that right, Umbridge is not going to be Headmistress? That's great! Ron will be there, he'll fall unconscious when he sees you. And Luna will say she knew it all along, and..."

"Good grief," Snape said and rolled his eyes. "I should have died, really. Less noise on the other side of the veil."

"Less fun, too," Lupin reminded him and placed his hand at the small of his friend's back, thus pushing him out of the kitchen and towards the Apparition point. Hogwarts was waiting.

4: At Last – Kisses For Dessert

Chapter 4 of 4

Hogwarts, Professor McGonagall, and his students await Severus Snape. It won't be easy to deal with all of them...

4: At Last Kisses For Dessert

Although it had begun to rain, Hogwarts looked beautiful under grey clouds. To Snape, the rain didn't matter, as he had honestly believed he wouldn't see the school ever again. But here he was, on a quite normal evening in the middle of August, with Hermione to his left and Lupin to his right and Potter, Harry bloody Potter, in front of him, leading the way.

As if he didn't know the way by himself. *Damn boy*, Snape thought, thunderstruck at the fact that there was something like fondness for the black-haired young man lacing

the mental scold. When had he become soft, mellow? When had he realised that he was able to express amusement and humour, that he treasured friendship? Had someone hexed or maybe poisoned him?

Ah, yes. A damn giant snake. Had he known that the beast's bite would change him so entirely, he would have stayed away from her.

Then Snape saw the damage the battle had caused and froze. Like a statue, he stood in front of the huge front gates; one was dangling loosely off its hinges, the other one was burned up to the middle. There were holes in the stone walls to the left and to the right, big holes, wide enough to let a small troll squeeze through. The school's roof was more or less gone. The windows were broken, all of them, as far as he could see. The grass was dry and shrivelled, most trees were dead, and the lake shone in an unhealthy grey.

Everywhere, people worked to repair the damage. Students and teachers, even children too young to be students and adults he had never seen in his life. Fast as ants, they undid what the war had caused, in a never ending line working at his school.

Snape felt goosebumps running down his spine, a most unpleasant experience, but one he couldn't stop. Whilst he had been close to death and then far too gone in the embrace of depression, those people had worked. Here. At Hogwarts.

Unbelievable. Embarrassing. He should have been here, should have...

"You look even paler than a ghost, Severus," Remus said quietly, half whispering the words in the Potions master's ear. "What's wrong?"

Damn the man, Snape thought. *He knows me too well.* Forcing himself to shrug abrasively, he said, "I'm fine," and then felt himself drawn forward, closer to the huge gates. It was as if the school called for him, now that he was finally here.

He placed his hands to the walls, and then he leaned his forehead to the stones, allowing his fingers to whisper across the burned door, the broken hinges. He breathed in the smell of his school, a school he had considered home since he had been eleven years old. Felt the lives and deaths pulsating in the ancient masonry, heard the screams and sensed the fear. Hogwarts had been there during the battle. Most of it had happened within those walls. Blood had soiled the floors; lives had been taken, cruel and forceful. It was an overwhelming, although not an unexpected, experience after all, Severus Snape was Headmaster of the school and was now recognised and welcomed with two months worth of memories.

Snape, feeling dizzy and disoriented, was grateful when Remus stepped up next to him, placing a supporting hand on his shoulder. "We are constantly repairing Hogwarts," he said. "A lot of the initial damage has been fixed. And you couldn't be here. You were injured, closer to death than to life. Pull yourself together, man, or do you want to be seen crying like a little girl?"

Snape ripped his head up, broke the contact with the walls and tried to stab the werewolf with a well-aimed glare. "I never cry," he hissed.

"Unless you are fever-ridden and scared to death that Voldemort's coming to get you," Remus replied dryly, patted his friend once on the back and stepped through the broken gates, leaving Snape behind.

That was until Hermione took his hand, pulling him along.

Truly, the Potions master thought with desperation, *friends are rude and extortionate. I need a plan to get rid of them, or they will bring me to my grave.*

The first one not only to see but to recognise them was Lee Jordan. Covered in dust, he nodded a 'hello' as he levitated dozens of bricks ahead of him. He was already round the next corner when a huge crash announced that something had struck Jordan as odd.

He peeked round the corner. "Aren't you dead, Professor?" he asked, then slapped his forehead. "Stupid. Obviously, you're not dead. Pity, though. It was a nice funeral. Have a great day and try not to destroy things. The dungeons are freshly painted!" Having said that, he vanished again.

Hermione giggled; Remus grinned. Snape didn't say a thing.

Then they bumped into Hagrid, and things got complicated because the half-giant simply didn't believe his own eyes. Hermione tried to hold him back, but failed. Remus wisely hid behind a statue, Harry was just able to jump aside at the last moment. "Professor!" Hagrid roared, and half the school heard him. "Professor Snape! Come on 'ere, let's give yer a hug!"

"No!" Snape yelled, but too late. Gigantic arms lifted him up, shook him like a rag doll, and it was even possible that a few wet smacks landed on his face.

Disgusting thought. "Hagrid!" Snape shouted right into the Gamekeeper's ear as he struggled to get loose. "You will put me down onto my feet this instant, or I will fire you!"

"Course, sir," Hagrid beamed, obviously not surprised to see a man whose funeral he had attended only a few weeks back. "Sorry, sir. Didn't mean to crush yer. Sir. Did you just say you'd fire me?"

"Possibly," Snape hissed, rearranging his clothes. He wore just jeans and a shirt, but still, a certain dignity needed to be kept.

Hagrid performed a little dance, looking quite dangerous by doing so, as anyone too close would have been crushed under his feet. "That means y'er Headmaster!" the half-giant cheered. "Need to tell Fang. And everyone else. Ron! Luna! Everyone hear the news? Snape's back! Erm see you later, Professor. Harry, Hermione, Remus got to go!" And off he ran towards the Forbidden Forest.

"You won't really fire him, will you?" Harry asked, suspicion in his voice.

Snape just looked at him. Harry had at least the courtesy to blush.

Getting through the school wasn't as easy as Snape had hoped or expected. He was recognised, naturally, but the fact that no one tried to kill him seemed odd. Even knowing Remus's memories, Snape considered it unnatural that people actually seemed to ... like him.

But they did. Some hugged him, some cheered, some gaped at him with open mouths, but no one drew a wand and no one began to mutter hexes at his sight. His back was clapped more often than he could count and at one point, he leaned closer to Remus, whispering, "Sorry, wolf, but I'm going to have to take up your offer of another massage when we get back. My shoulders feel completely butchered."

"No problem," Remus replied quietly and then they finally reached the statue that had once stood next to the Headmaster's office. It was lying face down on the ground and was broken into three pieces. Therefore, no one guarded the office. Unobserved, they went upstairs, Snape first. He was now eager to see Minerva; she of all people would behave normally and not like a madwoman.

He didn't knock on the door; after all, it was his office. Naturally, it opened, but the office was empty apart from the portraits. Most frames were empty; in some, their owners were asleep. Two former Headmasters were deeply engaged in a conversation, and only one acknowledged the visitors.

"My dear boy! You cannot imagine how delighted I am to see you safe and sound!"

Snape couldn't help having a small grin appear on his face. That he had survived, despite Dumbledore's prediction, was surprisingly satisfying. "Albus," he greeted the portrait with a nod. "You don't look that stunned to see me."

Dumbledore twinkled frantically. "I knew you weren't dead, dear boy. But that you are so well... Splendid. Truly wonderful."

Harry grabbed Snape's shoulder and pushed him out of the way, approaching the portrait of Albus Dumbledore with a thunderous expression on his usually so friendly face. Snape, caught off-guard by the movement and by the boldness of the boy to touch him so carelessly, just stepped aside.

"What the hell do you mean, you knew Snape wasn't dead?" Harry hissed. "I spend days, weeks even, in here, waiting for his blasted portrait to turn up and you knew he wasn't dead? That there wouldn't be a portrait?"

Dumbledore took off his glasses and polished them with a corner of his midnight blue robes. He looked slightly embarrassed. "Weeell . . .," he began, "I did tell you not to wait for Severus's portrait, Harry."

"I thought you meant... that he wouldn't get one, with him being a traitor and all!"

Mildly, Dumbledore shook his head. "That was always the mistake you made, Harry. Making unfounded guesses. Of course Severus will get a portrait when he's dead. But I couldn't tell you he was alive, could I? I didn't know where he was, and with whom, or under which circumstances. He could have been in a coma. Or hiding amongst Muggles. Perhaps he had decided to become a winegrower on one of those lovely little islands in the Mediterranean Sea."

Snape snorted. "Highly unlikely. Leave it be, Potter. It makes no sense to be angry with a portrait. I've tried it. It is not satisfying. Albus, could you tell us if Minerva is here?"

"Oh, yes. She's in the bedroom... Ah, no. Here she is. Hello, Minerva. Look who's come for dinner." Cheerfully, Hogwarts' former Headmaster waved at Minerva McGonagall.

She looked stern, tired, and had a few more grey hairs in her bun than the last time Snape had seen her. In her hand she held her wand, and she was pointing it straight at his chest.

It was an unpleasant feeling, indeed.

"Severus."

He bowed his head, making sure she could see his empty hands. She looked as if she would hex him at any moment.

Out of the corners of his eyes he became aware of Remus and Hermione edging a little closer to him as if they were trying to protect him without making their intention too obvious. *Now when did that happen those two coming to my rescue?* he wondered.

"Minerva," Snape said. "It is good to see you. I am sorry that..."

"So you failed to die, then?" Not only stern. Cross, angry, even.

Snape wished he knew how he had offended her. Apart from not having died, of course. "Draco Malfoy found me. I was in his house for a few weeks until I had recovered."

The older witch took a step towards him, but she didn't lower her wand even half an inch. "You look well," she stated. "Not as if you got up from your sickbed a day or two ago."

Snape felt a strange urge to apologise for nearly everything he had ever done in his life. "Actually, I am..." he began. "That is, until a few weeks ago I was..." he continued.

"You are stammering. Have you been in a coma?" McGonagall asked.

"No." Short, clear answers seemed easiest.

"Have you been held captive? Were you mute? Didn't you remember your name?"

Snape shook his head. "Nothing like that. I was in Draco Malfoy's house, I was in a bad condition, and the boy thought it best to hide me. I believed the Dark Lord was still alive until Lupin told me otherwise. That was about two months ago."

Minerva McGonagall came closer until her wand touched his throat. Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "You could have told me eight weeks ago that you were alive? EIGHT WEEKS?"

Snape considered lying, but Remus was faster. "In theory. But you must understand the circumstances, his injuries, his bad condition... Poppy advised us to take it slowly."

Wrong choice of words, obviously. McGonagall threw her wand into the next corner, a most scary sight as it exploded with tiny little sparks, sharp like razorblades. "Poppy knew. Remus and Miss Granger knew. Draco knew and Potter as well, quite obviously. And I heard Hagrid shout your name a while ago. Saw him through the window, hugging everyone and everything on the way down to his hut. Thank you for telling me last, Severus. And find yourself another Transfiguration teacher. I quit." With that, she spun and left the office, slamming the door shut behind her.

Dumbstruck, Snape stared at the closed door, feeling more helpless than he had in a very long time. He never had owned a good hand with people. He offended them, annoyed them, sneered at them or simply spied on them. Being responsible for the well-being of people was new to him, and he didn't have a clue what to do here. "When did life become so damn complicated?" he murmured to no one in particular.

"The moment you failed to die, apparently, old friend," Lupin said. "Now go after her before she hexes someone."

Dumbledore chuckled in his frame. "You better get used to it, dear Severus. Handling your colleagues will become a full-time job, believe me. And my Minerva is particularly hard to handle."

"You don't say," Snape snapped, and went after the old witch.

He caught her on the stairs next to the fallen gargoyle. She stared at it with unblinking eyes, and Snape felt quite uneasy in her company. He tried a hesitant "I'm sorry, Minerva," not expecting a reaction to his words.

He was wrong. She turned to him, her lips pursed. Looking him up and down, slowly and calculatingly.

He felt his face flush this was far too close to how she had looked at him whilst he had been a schoolboy. "I refuse..."

"You didn't trust me, then," she interrupted him. "You ran this school for a year, keeping your secret. You helped Harry, you protected the pupils as much as possible with the Carrows around, but you didn't trust me. That hurts. And that is the reason why I will leave."

"Merlin's bloody beard, Minerva!" he shouted. "I had no choice, and you know it. All of this was Albus's plan, and it was not my call to tell it to anyone. Don't you think I

would have liked to share the burden? I feared either Alecto or Amycus would, sooner or later, kill a student. But I couldn't tell you. I didn't know the full plan, or I wouldn't have stepped open eyed into the Dark Lord's trap for me. Knowing even parts of it would have endangered you. I didn't tell you, not because I didn't trust you but to protect you."

Damn this, he thought, exasperated. I shouldn't shout and she shouldn't look so bloody hurt.

"I refuse to accept your resignation. I need you here. I am in no condition to take over full duties, and you had better not argue. I handled Fudge and Umbridge. Today, I was attacked by blasted Potter, Lupin insists on calling me a friend, Hermione doesn't want to come back here at all, and why the hell didn't I kill myself some weeks back?" Yes, he definitely sounded annoyed, and slightly hysteric on top of it. Great.

McGonagall, ever in perfect control of any situation, patted him gently on the shoulder. "I didn't know you were still in such a bad state, Severus," she said, a lot friendlier than she had sounded only moments ago. "I should have seen... Is anyone looking after you?"

"Too many people, apparently," Snape grumbled, took Minerva's arm and walked along the outer wall with her. "Actually, I could do with your advice on how to handle all these... people in my life!"

Minerva cast him a smile. Apparently, losing control, freaking out for a moment or two, had been the perfect thing to do. Her ruffled feathers were smoothed again, and she nodded understandingly. "It must be tantalising be in the centre of attention all of a sudden. And now everyone who's at Hogwarts knows you are alive. Tomorrow, you will be on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*. Did you say you had talked to Fudge?"

"Scared the life out of him. And Dolores agreed to leave the country for the next fifty-five years."

McGonagall looked at him suspiciously. "'Agreed'? That doesn't sound like her."

Snape smirked and repaired a broken window with a quirk of his eyebrow. "Swore an Unbreakable Vow. I threatened to perform the Binding Spell on her. She wasn't willing to risk her sanity to become Headmistress."

"Bitch," Minerva muttered, and then they were standing in front of the Great Hall where the whole school was waiting for the Headmaster to take his place at the High Table.

In the crowd, Snape could see Hermione, Lupin, even Potter and Draco. "I already have eaten," he said weakly. "I really would prefer a quiet read in my rooms, Minerva."

"Not tonight, Headmaster," Minerva said, sternly again, and pushed him in.

It was a surprisingly complicated task to eat whilst several dozen pairs of eyes were watching, as Snape found out during dinner. He sat at the High Table, with Lupin to his left and Minerva to his right, with Sybil, Hagrid, Flitwick, and everyone else who had survived the war. Poppy was at the infirmary, but would join them later. A few ghosts were missing, but all in all, there were many students around who stared, whispered, gossiped, and were quite obviously not stunned into speechlessness by the Potions master's sudden reappearance.

"I will have the dessert in my quarters," Snape murmured under his breath. "I can't stand this constant attention any longer."

Lupin chuckled. "Get used to it. You came back from the dead. Nearly everybody attended your funeral. They just want to make sure you don't vanish again as soon as they look away."

"I'm thinking about it, wolf," Snape grumbled. "Being a Spanish winegrower is becoming more and more appealing by the minute."

Dinner was finally over, and as no one had a real reason to linger, students and parents and teachers were leaving, searching for some last things to repair for the day. "You'll get used to their stares," the werewolf continued. "And they will get used to the fact that even a giant snake can't kill you. So what was that about dessert?"

Snape leaned back in his chair and gave this some serious thinking. Dinner had been nice, in a way, but now he craved some privacy. And, shocking as it was, the company of his few friends. "Dessert indeed, wolf," he teased. "Cherries and whipped cream. In case you don't have anything better to do, come along. I hear my quarters down in the dungeons are renovated and freshly painted."

"May I..." three different voices said simultaneously, then Hermione laughed. "We would like to come along," she continued. "Draco is lost without your dessert, and Harry is unwilling to part yet. Luckily, Ron fell asleep at the table or you would have to invite him as well."

"I do hope I may join you as well, Severus." In Professor McGonagall's voice was a small threat.

Obediently, Snape bowed his head with a sigh. "Dessert in the dungeons," he said. "Get along, I'll go to the kitchen and get cherries and cream. Lupin, you know the password; just try to leave me a small sip from my firewhiskey."

The house-elves were close to fainting when a human showed up in the kitchen, demanding to have a look into the larder. "Master should not be here!" they chirped and tried to block his way, but Snape was not in the mood to be pushed out of his property. Hogwarts was his, and that included the kitchen as well. Ignoring the elves, he took what he needed and then sat at one of the big tables where Hogwarts' helpers usually prepared meals and snacks and whatever else students and teachers demanded.

It had been a long day, he decided. First Potter, accusing him of being an impostor. Then Jordan, Hagrid, and Minerva. Not to forget Albus, and the rest of the students. Everyone had been delighted to see him.

A terrifying experience. Snape wasn't used to friendliness. He could cope with hate, loathing, suspicious looks and angry attacks. He knew what to do if someone accused him of lying, stealing, cheating, or murder. He knew with certainty that he could rule this school with a cruel hand he had done so in the past year, after Albus's death and on behalf of the Dark Lord. Students had been injured during this year, expelled, mistreated. He hadn't hindered the Carrows in doing what they wanted to do; he had only forbidden the killing of the ones in his care.

And he had hated this past year. It was partly because of those memories that he hadn't come here earlier, although he hadn't told anyone. He had been scared; scared that Hogwarts would reject him, and that his crimes from the past were too big to be forgiven. He had feared that, when he touched the ancient stones again, he would sense coldness instead of welcome, disgust instead of warmth.

Absently, Snape dipped a cherry into the cream he had been whipping for the past five minutes. "Those times are over," he told a house-elf who stood only inches away from him on the table, looking annoyed in a quite friendly, challenging way. "The Dark Lord is dead, Hogwarts did welcome me, and I am, surprisingly enough, still alive despite Minerva's anger at me. I should go and have dessert with them."

"Master should leave kitchen," the house-elf said, nodding so eagerly that his big ears flopped. "Master should not come back here ever again."

"Don't count on it," Snape said with an amused grin, took the cherries and the bowl with cream and went to see if there was some space in his private rooms, with all those people waiting for him. The house-elf, though, firmly slammed shut the kitchen door behind him.

Strange, Snape thought, that I don't mind them being here. Lupin mocking me, Hermione spending more or less day and night at Spinner's End. Shouldn't I push them

away?

He definitely should. But equally definitely he didn't want to push them away. A few words, well placed and poignant, would have done the trick. He could hurt with words as surely as he could with his wand. Instead, he liked the werewolf's company to an extent that flabbergasted him, and he felt extremely content in the young woman's company.

Slowly, Snape wandered towards his dungeons. The school was quiet although it was not yet ten at night. The days were long and hard; no one felt like staying up longer than necessary with all the work still to be done. Even the ghosts rested, it seemed.

When Snape came closer to his rooms, he saw a small patch of light in the darkish corridor someone had left the door open, and he could hear voices and laughter.

He smiled, looking forward to this evening amongst friends. He could hear Lupin telling them about Fudge, and now Draco cast in, explaining why he had been looking for the Potions master after the battle. Minerva asked the occasional question, and even Albus seemed to have found a way down here, into the new Headmaster's private quarters. Presumably, someone had been mad enough to hang up a portrait down here.

"So why do these rooms look as if Snape might come back any moment?" Harry's voice, and Snape, standing outside his door in the darkness, had to admit it was a reasonable question. He had expected his furniture to have been chucked out, his books given to the library, his private effects burned.

Inside, Dumbledore chuckled, and Minerva snorted with dismay. "Albus made it clear that it wouldn't be a good idea to empty Severus's rooms," she said. "I decided to listen to him. Good thing, I would say."

"Where is he, anyway?" Harry again.

Goodness, if I am not careful, Potter will start to actually like me, Snape realised with a shudder. He edged a bit closer to the open door, fully aware of the fact that he was spying on the few friends he had. But he couldn't help it. Standing outside in the dark, listening to what happened inside, was second nature to him.

Hermione's voice. Soft and gentle, warm and... no. That was not simple friendliness he heard in her words. That was more. Affection, maybe?

"He really likes to cook, Harry, and I guess he's been whipping the cream for half an hour now, just to have a bit time to himself. It's been a long and overwhelming day. How would you feel if your life had changed so dramatically?"

Affection, definitely, and... something else? Something deeper?

He heard Remus moving, possibly searching for his stock of firewhiskey. Snape smirked as he knew the werewolf wouldn't find the hidden crate, the one that contained the really good stuff. "I definitely hope he continues to loosen up. In the past weeks, it was a pleasure to keep him company. He's got a really dry humour; I like that in a man."

Draco chuckled. "Well, yes, Lupin. That you like him is quite obvious. I bet you wouldn't mind bedding him either, would you?"

"Mr Malfoy!" Minerva exclaimed, sounding less shocked than he would have expected. "You are talking about the Headmaster here, don't you forget that."

"I must admit, I can't help but wonder if his kisses taste as sweet as his desserts," the werewolf cast in cheerfully. Snape felt a blush creep in his cheeks, and it deepened profoundly when Hermione added, "I'm with you there, Remus. There's a lot I wonder about don't you look at me like I'm mad, Harry and that's the reason why I will go to Beauxbatons for my last year. I really wish I could find a way to get him out of his shirt."

"A worthy sight," Remus added thoughtfully.

A moment of silence indicated that Snape wasn't the only one who was taken by surprise by both statements. Actually, the Potions master could barely stop his mouth from sagging open. He hadn't quite expected such clear words.

Harry coughed. "Erm... you sure, Hermione?" he managed after a little while and several helpful slaps on his back. "I mean Beauxbatons is nice and all, but to give up Hogwarts for the greasy... Sorry. For him? You really think he'd be worth it?"

Snape, now standing as close as possible, strained his ears to get the answer, but Poppy interrupted. "You know, he could be standing outside, listening to this conversation for the last fifteen minutes," she said pleasantly, and Snape heard her taking a sip from her glass. Maybe firewhiskey, but more likely she had summoned a bottle of his white wine.

"Goodness!" Lupin sounded distressed at the thought, which made Snape smirk. He stepped back into the darkness and a few steps upstairs. Whistling a tuneless little melody, he came downstairs again and pushed the doors to his quarters open. "Sorry for the delay," he said, putting both bowls on a table. "The house-elves tried to help, which is always quite an annoying thing to happen. I see you made yourselves comfortable I hope dessert is satisfying." Taking a cherry, he dipped it into the cream and ate it.

Harry, lounging on his sofa, grinned and got up. Poppy, indeed holding a slender wineglass in her hand, raised an eyebrow at him, clearly trying to figure out if he really had come straight from the kitchen. Draco and Minerva, having occupied a chair each, summoned the cherries towards the little table that stood between them.

Hermione sat on his workbench, legs dangling, hands pressed to the darkened surface. She had no eyes for dessert. Only for him.

And Lupin... Well, the werewolf leaned next to the door, stared at his friend, and smiled knowingly.

Damn, Snape thought, I forgot about his perfect nose. He probably knows that I listened. Smelled me or heard me breathing. Damn, damn, damn!

But as that couldn't be helped, he just shrugged his shoulders and joined Minerva who had finally decided that one cherry, topped with a small heap of cream, wouldn't kill her instantly. After the first try, she even took a second one, and then Hermione came over, squeezing in between him and Draco, changing the topic from dessert to lunch, dinner, and breakfast.

It was close to midnight when Minerva stifled a yawn. "I'm awfully sorry, Severus, but I have to take my leave. I expect you tomorrow morning; we need to discuss further actions, the schedule for next term, and Hagrid has asked if he can have a dragon."

"Wonderful prospects," Snape snorted. "I will be in your office at nine. Is that sufficient for you?"

"Yes. And it's your office now. Good night, Severus."

Harry and Draco got up as well, taking along Poppy who had fallen asleep on the couch. "Too much wine," Harry stated. Together, the young men steered the sleepy matron through the door and out into the corridor. "You coming, Hermione?"

"Of course," she answered and got up. Slowly and reluctantly, she was followed by Lupin. Snape waited until Draco, Harry, and the matron were outside, then he slammed the door shut right in front of Hermione and Lupin. Harry's demanding knock at the other side of the door could be heard and Draco's voice to leave them alone. A finger snap, and the voices were gone as well, muffled by a charm. Snape had locked himself in together with a former student and a man who once had been his childhood enemy.

"Severus," Hermione said, uncertainty in her voice and sharing a glance with Remus, who looked equally surprised. "Look, if we offended you in any way by using your wine without asking..."

"Or your port. Or the firewhiskey," Remus added.

"... then we are sorry. Really."

Snape tipped his head, looking at the young woman thoughtfully. "Hermione. Do you really intend to go to Beauxbatons?"

"My bags are already packed," she answered.

"And you want to pleasure me out of my shirt? Is that correct?" he asked casually. "A few months ago, I would have considered you too young. Now that I know you, and if it is really what you want, we might find a solution for that... hmmm... request."

She blushed, but not as deeply as he had expected. Instead, she raised her chin and refused to look embarrassed. "Indeed I would, Severus. You know I do, so I won't deny the fact that I am interested. Very much interested, that is."

Snape nodded, then turned to the werewolf. "And you?"

"And I what, Severus?" Remus asked. "Am I interested? Would I like to bed you? As you listened to our conversation, you know that both answers are 'yes!'"

"I knew it," Snape said. He stepped closer to the werewolf, thus pinning him to the wall. "You heard me?"

"Smelled the cream and the cherries," Remus said, voice hoarse, and then Snape leaned in and kissed him.

"Do they...?" Hermione asked after a considerable length of time, and Snape broke the kiss, his cheeks flushed and having left the werewolf's hair ruffled from greedy hands.

"Hmmm?" Remus seemed absent-minded.

"His kisses. Do they taste as sweet as his desserts?" Hermione sounded genuinely interested, and Remus grinned widely, pulling her closer so the three of them stood in a tight embrace.

"You need to find out for yourself, dear," he said, and then Severus Snape pulled werewolf and woman towards his bedroom *After all I have gone through, I deserve a bit of fun*, he thought. *Or even a little more than that.*