

Second Chance

by Pyttan

Severus is, against all odds, still alive. But he's not exactly the way he used to be.
And a second chance is difficult to handle.

Saved by the Bell ...

Chapter 1 of 10

Severus is, against all odds, still alive. But he's not exactly the way he used to be. And a second chance is difficult to handle.

Disclaimer: All recognisable Harry Potter characters, settings, situations etc. are the property of J.K. Rowling. No money is being made from this work, and no copyright infringement is intended.

Many thanks and endless gratitude to Diabólica, Hechicera and moiramountain who have, all in their own way, helped me. I owe them.

Chapter one: Saved by the Bell ...

Surprisingly, light had taken over his world. First, the colours had turned stronger and more vibrant, and as the colours faded, the light took over. He hadn't expected that.

The lack of pain was a blessing. He wasn't quite clear on where he was, and he didn't really care. Wherever it was, it lacked pain; that was enough for him, and it was sublime. At some level he recognised that this might have something to do with dying, but if this was dying, it was quite all right.

He knew that he had fought something, or maybe it was someone, and that had brought him to this point. Fighting didn't seem important either. Why would he fight something this pleasant?

He felt euphoria rise when her eyes appeared in front of him. Those beautiful green eyes he had loved so much. She wore spectacles. He didn't remember that, but he didn't mind. He wanted her to stay with him, to lead him into the light. He had to show her, convince her that he was worthy. That he wasn't the man she used to know.

He stretched out his hand and tried to reach her, and to his great delight, he got hold of her robes. When he felt the cloth underneath his hand, she smiled at him. He could hear himself speaking but didn't quite recognise his own voice. The words came out as an odd, wheezing gurgle: "Take ... it ... Take ... it ...", then he let the memories go, so Lily could watch. Lily would, finally, understand everything.

He looked deep into her eyes, and said, "Look ... at ... me ...". He let her go and convinced that she would come with him, this time turned towards the light and started walking.

He was thrown backwards out of the light and into the twilight of the Shrieking Shack with a powerful jolt. The pain of awakening was agonising enough for him to wish for immediate death, and he fleetingly wondered why he had woken up at all. Gasping for breath, throat and lungs burning, he could feel blood trickling from his wounds. As he tried to stop the bleeding he discovered that he was paralysed.

Someone or something was moving in the room. He wondered if the unknown person was friend or foe. Not that he really cared. He wanted to be put out of his misery, so maybe a foe would serve him better.

He understood Albus now. He finally understood what had driven him. If he had held the same power over someone as Albus once held over him, he would have commanded his own murder in the exact same way. There was such a thing as killing out of mercy after all. He hoped the approaching someone would be merciful or, if mercy wasn't a part of their nature, at least quick about ending him.

He could hear the unknown someone walk towards him, and when silence fell, he found himself looking at the hem of a black robe and a pair of heavy boots. One booted foot lodged itself under his temple and flicked his head upwards so that he was staring at the dirty, cobwebbed ceiling of the shack and into the face of the intruder.

Bellatrix Lestrange.

It couldn't have been worse. Being found by Bellatrix was nothing less than disastrous. She would make the most of this, and all he could do was watch while she did her worst.

As she looked down at him, her eyes widened, and her upper lip curled, baring her teeth in something that might be a smile.

With a swift movement she went down on one knee beside him, and he felt her fingers creep over his throat, coming to rest on his carotid artery.

"You're still alive! I knew it! And you seem to hear me ..." she said. "You are so resilient, Snape, impressively so. But so are cockroaches, wouldn't you say?"

Bellatrix wrinkled her nose in disgust as she looked at him.

"You do look a mess, don't you, but then again, you always did. Grooming was never your forte, was it?" She shook her head and grimaced in distaste.

"You are in such a state. Do you realise how pathetic you look? You have bled all over the floor!" she said, studying his neck, leaning over him, prodding the marks Nagini's teeth had inflicted, causing him even more pain.

"I came here as soon as the Dark Lord told me what happened. Imagine my delight when he finally recognised you as the filthy traitor you are."

He wondered how she would react if she'd known the truth: that the Dark Lord had killed his most favoured servant to gain more power and strength. That her adored leader had no feelings of loyalty as far as his followers went. He almost felt sorry for her.

"We are winning, you know. We are going into the Forbidden Forest to wait for Potter. Our Lord will give an ultimatum. If the boy gives himself up, the Dark Lord will spare Hogwarts and everyone within its walls. Potter will come, of course, attempting to save all his little friends," she said and laughed that cackling laugh that had always grated on his nerves.

He knew Bellatrix was right. Potter would come. He would keep coming at the Dark Lord until one of them was destroyed, the same way he came at every adversary he had ever encountered, Severus included.

"Potter will finally die," she said while placing two fingers on the side of Severus's throat again; then she cocked her head, scrutinising him. "Your pulse is very weak now. It has grown weaker even in this short time. You will die soon if no one helps you. Not even Comminuo Moruus will keep you alive much longer."

It was the delayed-death spell that had woken him. He should have realised. He had both seen and used that particular spell any number of times when the Death Eaters wanted more information from a victim already at death's door. He remembered how Bellatrix had enjoyed using it. He wouldn't live much longer now. Thankfully.

She rose from her crouching position beside him, towering over him. "I wanted to see you dead, you know, but alas ..." she said and smirked at him.

"What to do with you now, I wonder? You are still alive, after all, and I honestly think that our Lord was a bit hasty when he decided to kill you."

The calculating look she gave him made his stomach churn. She had made her decision now he could see that in those dark, hooded eyes of hers and he hoped his life would be over before he found out what that decision was.

"After all, we do need to set a good example for those who still dare to defy the Dark Lord," she said, sounding almost absentminded.

She rose and then turned to the table behind her, picking out a couple of small items from her pockets and putting them in a row on the table.

"I am going to be the new Headmistress. The Dark Lord will give me Hogwarts. The Mudbloods will be guinea-pigs for spells and potions, and the half-bloods will be slaves. Only purebloods will be educated to use magic. Only purebloods will be allowed to carry wands."

She giggled in an almost girlish way, anticipating of the future to come. "But what to do with you?"

She fell silent and glanced at him over her shoulder, her eyes gleaming.

"Dying is too easy and too merciful, as far as you are concerned, and I can't help feeling it is only fair that I'm the one who has found you. That it is I who get to punish you on my Lord's behalf."

She chose two flasks from the table, walked over to him and sat down beside him again.

Bellatrix lifted his head off the floor, and he felt something being forced down his throat.

"Blood-Replenishing Potion. I'm losing you, and we wouldn't want that now, would we?" she said, immediately taking the next flask and emptying it into his mouth, holding his nose shut, forcing him to swallow.

"This is an antivenin of my own making. I think that will do you good. Also, it will close that unsightly wound of yours," she said, and let go of his head. It hit the floor hard enough for Severus to see an explosion of colourful little stars.

"It's going to hurt," she said, with a malicious smile as she rose and backed away from him.

She was right; it did hurt. He convulsed for what seemed an eternity, his body shuddering from the pain. The situation didn't improve by Bellatrix's presence and her obvious enjoyment of his suffering.

When it stopped and before he could pull himself together, she was there again, this time rubbing a sticky substance on his hands and face. He waited for the pain, but none came. It felt quite soothing and rather pleasant.

"This is the Ointment of Youth. It takes an age to make, one full year, in fact. It is extremely expensive, too. It contains very rare ingredients. Forbidden. It isn't even in Moste Potente Potions."

She sighed deeply and said, "You should feel honoured. I made it for me, to get rid of the effects a stint in Azkaban has on one's face and body. There will be enough left for me after I'm finished with you, though."

Severus had a very distasteful suspicion why Bellatrix would make that kind of ointment. He had been aware - like most of the other Death Eaters - of Bellatrix's obsession with the Dark Lord, but he was surprised by the depth of her lunacy if she imagined the Dark Lord cared about her appearance, that he would want her beautiful. He felt nauseated when the thought took hold and carried him further than he wanted to go.

She continued to work the ointment into his skin with hard, brutal movements.

"The ointment is absorbed by the body. You will end up a strong eighteen-year old." She smiled that malicious little smile again and said, "It would not be good for me if the Dark Lord were to recognise you, and this will take care of that little problem, with the added benefit of giving me a strong young body to work with."

It was at that moment that Severus understood what she was doing, that she was keeping him alive. For some reason he had up until then assumed that he would die, either from his wounds or her abuse or possibly by the combination of the two. Instead, he could feel himself healing. His miserable existence would continue, at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange.

She walked over to the table again and held up the last object so he could see it.

"Do you know what this is? This is the last Time-Turner in existence. You know how it works, don't you? It is meant to be a device that moves you back in time. However, I will send you forward in time instead. A bit unorthodox, but it will serve my purposes very well indeed."

She knelt beside him again and placed the chain of the Time-Turner around his neck. "I also have a quaint little spell I will apply to the Time-Turner. It will take you straight into Hogwarts. I wouldn't want you to escape, because with your help, I will show everyone at the school, every single teacher and pupil, exactly how to punish traitors and half-blood filth. Beginning at the start of term banquet. There is nothing like a couple of Crucios to subdue resistance, is there? Also, you do so enjoy the dungeons, do you not? You will love where I am going to house you!"

She lifted the Time-Turner from his chest. "Well then, Snape, goodbye for now."

He felt rather than heard her cast the spell as the chain around his neck jingled, and then everything went dark.

Hating Hagrid

Chapter 2 of 10

Severus is, against all odds, still alive. But he's not exactly the way he used to be. And a second chance is difficult to handle.

Disclaimer: All recognisable Harry Potter characters, settings, situations etc. are the property of J.K. Rowling. No money is being made from this work, and no copyright infringement is intended.

Chapter two: Hating Hagrid

Severus found himself lying on his back on the cold, hard ground, looking up at a dark sky filled with bright stars. The air was clear and cool and permeated with the smell of the damp earth.

He heard himself groan as he gathered enough strength to stagger to his feet. He was feeling stiff and sluggish, still weak and nauseated, after the ordeal in the Shrieking Shack. Uncertain where he was, he looked around and found himself standing between the Forbidden Forest and the borders of Hogwarts grounds. Everything was silent and had a deserted feeling to it. The eerie silence worried him and he reached for his wand, only to realise that he didn't have it anymore. As daunting as that was, he would have to make do without it.

He started to brush the dirt and leaves from his robes while considering his options. He could simply vanish, and try to build a new existence somewhere else, or he could try to find out what had happened: two possibilities and in reality no choice at all. He hadn't come this far to give up. He was going into the castle. If the Dark Lord had won the war, Severus would terminate Bellatrix or whomever the Death Eater sitting in the Headmaster's office was then he would attempt to find and contact the surviving members of the Order.

It didn't escape him that his decision was very much the same as a certain boy would have made, and Severus could only hope that, at the very least, he would manage to do this with a little more caution and a lot more discretion than Potter usually demonstrated. Escaping from Gringott's on one of their dragons, indeed. Not even Albus could have staged anything so flamboyant. Severus snorted at the thought.

He found himself hoping that Bellatrix had indeed become the Headmistress. He liked the thought of using his bare hands to kill her. The way a Muggle might kill. He didn't think she would appreciate it, or even see the poetic justice in it, but on the other hand he didn't intend to leave her any time for philosophical reflection, either. He wanted her dead and he didn't care whether or not she knew that he was her killer.

He turned and looked up at the castle. Everything seemed calm enough; the fight was obviously over. The building was damaged in several places, but it looked like some extensive repair work had been done already. Spirals from the magical repairs wrapped the castle towers in a haze of silvery dust that reflected the moonlight.

The surrounding grounds, pitted with holes, were charred in several places. The destruction had been devastating, but work was obviously progressing. The battle must have ended some time ago, Severus deduced, since grass had started to grow even in the places where the ground had burned.

He turned to look towards the lake where the white marble tomb that was Dumbledore's last resting place glowed in the darkness. From this distance he couldn't discern if it was still broken, but it was promising that it was still there. If Death Eaters had been in residence, Dumbledore's grave would, without a doubt, have been the first thing obliterated.

His gaze returned to the castle. It appeared that Potter had won, but Severus needed to be sure. There were also his former colleagues to consider; if they were still at the school, they posed a very real threat. Meeting Filius or Minerva by accident wasn't at all appealing, since both of them were very apt at duelling and neither one of them would hesitate, even for a fraction of a second, to inflict serious damage on a perceived threat. Caution was required when entering Hogwarts, especially considering that

he had lost his wand in the chaos of the Shrieking Shack.

The biggest question, however, was how Potter had managed his victory, if he had indeed won. Severus hadn't succeeded in giving him the necessary information, after all. Knowing Potter, the boy had probably placed himself in harm's way and got himself killed by the Dark Lord, and thus inadvertently won.

Moving stealthily, Severus advanced towards the castle, when heavy footsteps suddenly closed in on him, and a moment later he found himself hanging by the scruff of the neck, dangling above the ground, staring into the hairy face of Hagrid.

"We've had enough o' the likes o' yeh!"

They were now nose to nose, and then Hagrid hesitated.

"Who are yeh, anyway? Yeh look familiar."

Hagrid narrowed his eyes, now looking bewildered. "Yeh look like some'un ... " His voice trailed off into nothing, before he added, "Yeh look a bit like Professor Snape." And then Hagrid was back to roaring at Severus again. "We've had enough trick'ry from the likes o' yeh! I'm takin' yeh to the headmistress!" He shook Severus, not unlike a dog reprimanding a disobedient puppy, and then strode towards the castle doors, dragging Severus along in his wake.

Severus was furious over the way Hagrid was manhandling him. The fact that he, through the years, had stood by, smirking, while an assorted collection of students had been

treated the exact same way among them the Weasley twins did nothing to improve his temper.

"Hagrid, I am Severus Snape. Put me down so I might at least attempt an explanation."

Hagrid threw Severus a quick, threatening look.

"Yeh messed up the potion, yeh did," Hagrid said and continued walking. Severus's boots were dragging the ground, and even if he scrambled to get a foothold, it turned out to be impossible.

"What are you talking about?" Severus said, half choked by Hagrid's firm grip.

"The Polyjuice Potion, o' course. Yeh think yeh'd do a better job, bein' dark wizards an' all," Hagrid said. "Yeh look like a kid, yeh do. I don' know wha' yeh lot did wrong, but yeh look much too young to be Professor Snape," Hagrid said. "But yeh could'a been him 20 years or so ago, I give yeh tha'."

"I am Severus Snape, and if you do not let me down I will " His rant was interrupted by several firm and rather painful shakes that made his teeth rattle.

"Yeh'll behave now. " Hagrid said, and his continuous shaking made Severus realise that the best course of action would be to keep quiet for the time being. He just hoped that the headmistress, whoever that might be, was more receptive to his explanations.

Being caught by Hagrid was, in its own way, good news. At least he now knew for certain he wouldn't find any Death Eaters at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Hagrid gave the gargoyle the password. The gargoyle slid aside, and the staircase brought them up to the Headmistress's office. Hagrid knocked, but as there was no answer, he opened the door, stuck his enormous head into the office and called out, "Headmistress McGonagall? I've got a bit o' trouble here ..." With another firm shake and a stern, "Now, yeh behave!" he gave Severus a hard shove that sent him stumbling into the office and followed him inside.

The room seemed devoid of human life, the only living creature being a tabby cat sleeping in front of the hearth. A fire warmed the room, the flickering lights adding to the pleasant atmosphere. Ignoring Hagrid, Severus approached the cat, carefully reaching out his hand to touch it.

"Minerva?" Severus said, careful not to scare her.

He wasn't careful enough. The cat woke with a start and, with a screeching meow, she sank her claws into his hand. Severus was very impressed with the speed with which his old colleague transfigured back into her human self. She was holding him at wand-point within a fraction of a second and, even worse, Hagrid was once again dangling him by the scruff of his neck a foot off the ground.

Trapped in Hagrid's grasp, Severus grimaced while rubbing his bleeding hand. "Minerva, while I knew that my arrival might be less than welcome, I did not expect you to scratch me. Quite unladylike of you," he said. "Perhaps you'll at least afford me the opportunity to explain my actions? If you would tell Hagrid to let me down."

Minerva was staring at him. "Who are you?" she said, voice hard. She was aiming her wand at the middle of his chest, while giving him an assessing look.

"Minerva." Severus closed his eyes. He had hoped Minerva would accept him looking like his younger self. "You don't recognise me at all, do you?"

"Recognise you?"

Minerva's voice was shrill. "I can see who you are trying to impersonate. Who are you, and why are you here?" she said, stepping closer, and pushing the point of her wand under his chin, forcing his head up.

Still in Hagrid's firm grip, Severus raised his hands, palms out, and tried again. "If you would order Hagrid to put me down, I might be able to explain," he said, keeping his voice low and level.

"Hagrid, put him down." Minerva's voice was even colder now, and she didn't take her eyes off him, even for a second.

"Are yeh sure?"

Hagrid hesitated. "What if he's a Death Eater in disguise?"

"I'm sure. I am still more than competent with my wand and I suspect he's bright enough to know I'll hex him where he stands if he attempts anything. I fail to see how he could do much harm."

She stepped back and removed her wand from underneath Severus's chin. With a nod, Hagrid obeyed. "Thank you," said Minerva.

Hagrid frowned, looking worried.

"Are yeh sure?" he repeated.

"Quite sure. No need to worry," said Minerva.

Hearing that, Hagrid gave Minerva a troubled look, and Severus a threatening one, before nodding and leaving.

"Sit down," she said as the door fell shut.

Then she walked straight at Severus, jabbing her wand into his chest. A small spiral of smoke rose from Severus's robe where the point of Minerva's wand was lodged. The pain was severe enough to make him realise that he was on the verge of getting a burn mark on his chest.

In this way, she backed him into an armchair where he hurriedly sat down and started to tell his story.

"Your story is unbelievable, to say the least." Minerva's lips were pursed, and her hesitation to believe him was evident. She was seated opposite Severus in a straight-backed chair, and even though she had laid her arms on the armrests, her wand was still pointing straight at Severus. Surprisingly, she was looking wistful, even sad, and she did seem willing to listen.

Step one was to prove who he was. Step two would be harder. Convincing her that he wasn't the traitor everyone supposed him to be would be challenging and, most likely, he would be forced to turn over some of his memories. Returning Minerva's direct gaze, Severus leaned back in the comfortable armchair where he was seated, and crossed his legs. She didn't believe him, and proving his identity wouldn't be all that easy without Legilimency. At this point, exhausted as he was, he didn't care to allow anyone into his head.

"Very well," he said after a long pause. "You bought Potter his Nimbus 2000, his first year. I still view that as cheating."

He smiled at her, keeping his lips firmly closed when he did it. "Cheating on two accounts, no less. You bought the broom, and you got him on the team his first year, contrary to the school rules." Severus examined the nails of his left hand. "I could have used Draco that year, you know," he added with a shrug.

"Are you, of all people, accusing me of cheating? I talked to the headmaster ... I ... I ... you ...", Minerva was almost incoherent and red blotches were erupting on her neck and cheeks.

Severus curled his upper lip, just to annoy her a bit more. "Albus was biased, and you know it," he said. "I didn't realise you would be this easy to convince, though. Surprising. I always knew you to err on the safe side of caution."

Minerva straightened in her chair and pressed her lips together. "I'm in no way convinced. Pray continue." Her wand arm had risen and was no longer in contact with the armrest of her chair.

"Duelling club," he said and snorted with disdain, refusing to respond to Minerva's threat. "Not even Filius was willing to embarrass himself by being Lockhart's partner, but the only thing that saved him from such a distasteful endeavour was the fact that I owed him a favour. I also wanted an opportunity to hurt Lockhart ... preferably, a lot." Minerva's mouth twitched, as if on the verge of smiling, and her wand sank.

"I also happen to know that you were at the back of the room when I blew Lockhart off the stage. You enjoyed my performance, didn't you?"

He looked at Minerva as her expression went from amusement to obvious embarrassment. "However, I will not divulge that little bit of information to anyone, since you and I were in agreement as far as Lockhart was concerned."

"I also know that Hermione Granger, aided by you, got permission to use a Time-Turner in her third year. She worked herself into utter misery, didn't she?"

Minerva, was now developing a deep blush. "That was a bit of a mistake on my part," she said, looking pained at the memory. "The girl was so convincing and ... "

"Eventually, the strain got to her," he interrupted, "and she more or less told Trelawny to go to the devil, didn't she?"

He smiled at the memory of Trelawny's indignation when she had complained about Miss Granger. "I almost forgave her for being friends with Potter when I heard."

"I am also willing to wager that the Time-Turner was somehow connected to the escape of one Sirius Black and that hippogriff." Severus threw a malicious look at Minerva. "That cost me an Order of Merlin, Second Class, perhaps even First Class."

Glaring at him, Minerva cut him off, making a dismissive gesture with her wand.

"Do stop it. If I had Severus Snape here in front of me, I would tell him that coveting such a silly token was beneath him. I would also inform him that he now has an Order of Merlin, First Class, albeit posthumously."

He sat, still as a statue realising he still didn't know when it was.

"It was the second of May the day of The Battle of Hogwarts. What is today's date? Bellatrix claimed she would send me into the halls of Hogwarts. She failed. She also intended to send me into the future. Did she succeed with that objective?" he said.

Minerva looked at him, eyes narrowed, hesitant to answer, but then she gave him a curt nod and answered, "Today is August the twenty-ninth, 1998."

Hearing her answer, he couldn't help himself; he needed to know, and he was, for once, incapable of hiding it.

"What happened during the Battle?" Severus said, his body moving forward in the armchair an involuntary movement that made him feel ashamed of himself. He could hear how eager, even greedy for information he sounded. He hated that he was giving away how uncertain he was. It was also a tactical mistake.

Minerva's face turned stony and he could see something in it very close to triumph. Her grey eyes bored into his. "I will not tell you anything, unless I am convinced that you are Severus Snape," she said, the words clipped, and her wand was again ascending.

The miserable old crone. He was exhausted and he was developing a headache. The effects of everything he had been exposed to were weighing him down, and now now Minerva was being Minerva: stubborn, imperious, and so very single-minded. He wanted to hex her, hurt her, and make her suffer, for not believing. He wanted his wand back, so he could meet her as an equal. He hadn't been Bellatrix's equal in the Shrieking Shack, and in a way he felt just as exposed here, with Minerva.

He bit down on his cheek, as hard as he could, to counteract the painful headache and the descending misery. When he finally felt the metallic taste of blood, he continued.

"Mad-Eye," he said, keeping his voice level while he watched her.

Severus didn't have to use Legilimency to see that Minerva hadn't expected Mad-Eye's name to come up. He found that very satisfying. It was a rare treat indeed, to have her really, truly off balance.

"Mad-Eye was special to you, wasn't he? If I had turned Potter into, let's say, a terrier the only creature in the animal kingdom as annoying and tenacious as the boy himself and bounced him around the school yard, there would have been hell to pay, Minerva. You would have made it your personal business to get back at me." He enjoyed seeing Minerva's cheeks burn, her discomfort obvious.

"What did you do to Mad-Eye when he turned Malfoy into the amazing, bouncing ferret, as one Mr Ronald Weasley very succinctly put it? I will tell you: you did nothing. After the tournament, when you nursed the real Moody back to health, I became sure that you cared for him. You cared for him quite a lot. Taking his scars, whirling eye, paranoia and all into account, that really gives us other ugly bastards hope of finding love," Severus added, his voice acidic.

Minerva's wand arm was now resting peacefully on the armrest of her chair.

"And then the Ministry sent us Umbridge. A low blow even for them. She administered Veritaserum to the children, but you knew that already, didn't you? I actually ran out of stock."

He was leaning forward in annoyance. "Know this if she ever enters Hogwarts again, I will show her exactly what a Potions master administers to his victims if he is in a bad enough mood, and it will not be anything as benign as Veritaserum, I assure you."

Severus closed his eyes and leaned his head back in the chair. His temples were pounding and the nausea was increasing. A migraine was coming on. This time he had to force himself to continue.

"Teaching Potter Legilimency that, Minerva, was a dreadful experience indeed," he said, voice hoarse with pain and fatigue. "Did you know I hid some of my own memories in that Pensieve?" He pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut even harder than before. "I hid them for both my sake and his, no matter what you might think. I didn't want him to witness some of my more humiliating, frightening and damaging memories, on the off chance that the boy could get into my head."

He opened his eyes again, looked at Minerva and added, "His father was not at his best in one of those particular memories." Severus paused. "Not that he ever was," he said in resignation. "There was a disturbance outside my quarters, and as soon as I left to see what was going on, Potter dived straight into the Pensieve, the nosy brat. I found him there when I came back. When I pulled him up, he had discovered that his father was not the saint he thought him to be."

Minerva was looking straight at him, and he knew she was starting to believe. Her wand was now drooping, pointing at his leg rather than his midriff or face.

Then her eyes narrowed again.

"And what about your year as headmaster?" said Minerva. He could see the fury in her eyes and for a fleeting moment she looked just as vindictive as Bellatrix had in the Shrieking Shack.

Severus wasn't interested in recalling the past year. It had been a long, bitter journey through horror, misery and death. All his energy had been spent keeping his promise to Dumbledore, trying to protect the idiot students of Hogwarts, and walking on eggshells around the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters. He closed his eyes, only to open them again, trying to avoid the memory of the battered and bruised children that the Carrows had dragged into the Headmaster's office after punishing them. Expecting him to praise them, expecting him to enjoy it, expecting him to give them his support with the Dark Lord.

"The Carrows. I don't think Hagrid ever understood. Neither did you. I thought you both would realise eventually," said Severus. "They were terrified of him. Mixed blood. Giant. And a wizard, no less. I was able to keep him on staff by telling the most horrendous lies about how he treated the students. It ... appealed to their tastes," he said and looked away.

"When the Carrows became too vicious in their punishments, I sent the students to Hagrid instead. I knew he would help them, if for nothing else, just to spite me." He smiled a self-deprecating smile, looking at Minerva again. "Longbottom would have ended up like his parents, if I hadn't had the option of sending him to Hagrid. You know that, too, Minerva, don't you?"

Minerva was almost persuaded now, he could see it. Then she hesitated, and slipped right through his fingers.

"You are convincing," Minerva said, her voice almost pitying, "but it is not enough. "

Severus closed his eyes, and shook his head in dismay. He didn't want to do this anymore. He was tired, he was worn out, and he wanted none of it. He silently cursed Bellatrix. That sadistic, vicious bitch. Why hadn't she just ended him. He was supposed to die in the war, one way or the other. He wasn't supposed to be forced to live on, in the miserable half-life that was his, and he didn't want to either. He was supposed to be free by now.

The silence stretched between them. Then he remembered, and decided to make a last attempt, the very last one. If this didn't work, he would do something drastic, and force Minerva to act so he would finally get to rest.

"Minerva, do you remember my Sorting?" Severus said, his voice gruff and tired. "My first day at Hogwarts?"

He looked down at his hands and let his hair fall forwards to cover his face.

Since Lily's death, this was a memory he had pushed away, a memory that always triggered unwelcome reflections of what might have been. It made him consider choices already made, something he avoided since they were useless to dwell upon.

"Do you remember what you whispered to me when you gave me the hat?" he said, and then looked up, through the tangles of his hair: he could see that it was filthy and matted with blood. "I hope you will join my house," he quoted her, and then looked down again.

"It is you," Minerva said, her voice an incredulous whisper and then she was standing in front of him, wand lowered, "It is you. It really is you." She looked at him, her eyes filling with tears. "I am so, so sorry, Severus. I should have known."

Severus rose from his seat and held up his hand to stop her. "I did everything I could to make you think what you did." He didn't succeed in keeping the bitterness from his voice.

Minerva's eyes were filled with tears. "I duelled you," she said, fumbling in one of her pockets and pulling up a handkerchief.

Severus bared his teeth in an attempt to smile, he suspected it came out as a grimace; he didn't know. "Actually, you are the only person who has ever bested me in a duel. You had an unfair advantage, though. You fought to kill, and I couldn't do that, could I?"

Minerva started to sob. Hard, dry sobs that seemed to get stuck halfway out. Then she did the unthinkable she wrapped her arms around him in a fierce embrace.

Minerva losing

Chapter 3 of 10

Severus is, against all odds, still alive. But he's not exactly the way he used to be. And a second chance is difficult to handle.

Chapter three: Minerva losing

Minerva more or less placed Severus in the armchair again before producing a potion to deal with his migraine. He felt desolate and disappointed in a way that had nothing to do with logic that Minerva had seen how sick he was, but had still let him suffer. It was something he might have done, but he never imagined Minerva doing something similar.

She also arranged for a very impressive meal to be brought to him, and after he had eaten and the tea tray had arrived, Minerva started, in her rather abrupt manner, to give him a general outline of the Battle of Hogwarts.

Severus filled two cups with strong black tea from the large teapot, and handed one of the them to Minerva. He leaned back and drank, savouring the taste, listening to the story.

"So, the Dark Lord used Avada Kedavra?" Severus said, and put his cup down on the small table beside him.

"Of course he did, after a very long rant," Minerva said, her voice dry.

"Yes, he tended to do that. The boy had thwarted him so many times, so I imagine he'd had some time to build up his ire. What did Potter counter with? I assume he also used Avada Kedavra?" said Severus.

"No, not all." Minerva said, with a proud smile. "About as far away from that horrid spell as you can possibly get, I would say."

Severus looked closely at Minerva.

"Why didn't he use it? Do you know?"

"I have no idea. I never asked him. I think he finds that spell too distasteful. No wonder, if that's the case, considering what happened to his parents, and Diggory, of course."

She shrugged and, looking somewhat downcast, poured herself some more tea.

"So what did he use?" Severus asked.

"As Tom Riddle used his signature spell, Harry also used his. He used Expelliarmus."

Severus felt his face fall, and for once, he was unable to school his features into indifference.

"Expelliarmus?" he said. "Potter used Expelliarmus to beat the Dark Lord, and he won?"

Minerva looked at him and gave him a rather smug smile. "I think he learnt that from you. At the Duelling Club," she said and then added, in a overly sweet tone of voice, "and you always said that the boy didn't pay you proper attention."

Severus threw her a dirty look.

"I don't know why you are so amused. Do you even realise what a disaster that might have been? Expelliarmus indeed."

"Do stop it, Severus. It ended well, after all. Not as well as one might have wanted, with so many deaths, but we both know it could have been far worse."

Severus gave her a reluctant nod. It was no use ranting about Potter. The boy had won. The boy who lived, no matter what was thrown at him, was a hero yet again, and as irritating as it was, it was still a relief that the Dark Lord was dead. If he hadn't hated the brat so intensely, he might have been tempted to thank him.

"Amazing that the boy managed so well," he said with a sneer of pure distaste.

Minerva looked at Severus with both surprise and annoyance. "How so? The poor boy has proved himself any number of times. I really thought you had put your animosity aside, considering everything you chose to give him," she said.

Severus felt uneasy. The comment had sounded like a non sequitur to him, but he knew Minerva. Her mind was an ordered one.

"I don't understand ... give him?" he said.

Minerva sighed. "Your memories Severus, as you well know. Not only did he use them to beat You-Know-Who but he also used them to clear your name." She gave him a stern look. "He told us everything that happened to you in the shack, how you recognized him, even as you were dying, and how you gave him the memories he needed. How you had the ... generosity ... to even give him those ... " She straightened her back, looking awkward and embarrassed. She watched the fire intently and said, in a tone of voice that made it clear that whatever other people might have heard, they hadn't heard it from her, " ... private ones."

Severus was feeling nauseated.

"Minerva, what exactly are you referring to?" he said, keeping his voice devoid of emotion.

"Oh, Severus," she said, sounding exasperated, "the memories of Lily, of course. That you were in love with her and what happened between the two of you. It was very generous of you."

Severus shuddered and sank deeper into the armchair. He hadn't had any time to contemplate what had really happened in the shack, but he hadn't forgotten either. He had assumed, however, that giving Lily his memories was a hallucination induced by his dying, oxygen-deprived, brain.

Lily was dead, and she had never worn spectacles. Rather ugly, round spectacles. Exactly like Potter's. He could feel his cheeks heating from the humiliation. The mistake was embarrassing enough. The fact that he had presented the whole pathetic story of his wasted life to the son of his archenemy was devastating.

Adding to his misery, Minerva smiled that smile she used when she was pleased about something. The exact same smile she sometimes used when a particularly stupid student, by some odd quirk, had succeeded with a difficult task.

"It helped Harry so much," she said.

"How many people know?" Severus said, fearing the answer more than he had ever feared the Dark Lord.

Minerva answered his question, seemingly oblivious to Severus's embarrassment.

"Harry told the remaining members of the Order and showed them to Shacklebolt. That was enough to have your name cleared, and you are now a hero. The Order of Merlin I mentioned before came about because of those memories."

"I was dying," he said, hearing his words coming out cold and aggressive. He tried to recall the names of the surviving Order members. He would have to Oblivate the Weasley family in its entirety. Potter, of course. Granger. It would be hard to get to Shacklebolt. He gritted his teeth, sinking even deeper in the armchair. It was a shame he couldn't deal with Minerva immediately. He needed a new wand as fast as possible.

Minerva, now aware of Severus's foul mood, seemed to opt for a quick change of subject. She cleared her throat and said, "I take it we should find you that mirror now." She hesitated and looked at him again. "You look very young, you know."

Severus straightened his back in an attempt to regain control, and said, "About eighteen or so? At least that was what Bellatrix told me."

Minerva smiled. "Yes, Severus, about eighteen. Your posture is much better than it was then, though." She looked critically at him. "You carry yourself with more confidence, and you're not as twitchy as you were back then. Thank heavens for that, because you always did remind me of an overgrown spider when you were a boy."

Severus watched Minerva as she rose from her chair and walked over to her tartan handbag, where she rummaged around until she found a mirror.

"Brace yourself," she said, handing him the mirror.

Severus took it, frightened of what he would find, but still needing to know what Bellatrix had done to him.

He let out a hissing breath as he stared at his reflection with horrified fascination. He couldn't help bringing his hand to his face to trace the changes. He was young again. Terribly young.

Dirty and bloodstained as he was, his nose was still the same. His eyes were the same. His hair was the same. His angular face was the same. The wrinkles around his eyes were gone though and so were the deep grooves around his mouth. His skin was smooth and sallow, but his teeth looked better. Still crooked, but whiter. Oddly enough, he didn't look quite as horrible as he remembered.

At eighteen, he had hated everything about himself. Now, in contrast, he didn't think it was all that bad. Severus rose and looked down at himself. He was tall, not that surprising since he had reached his full height at age sixteen. He had regressed though, which was unfortunate since he was now as thin as he had been back then, and that made him bony, rather than lean and wiry. The greatest difference, however, was that nothing hurt anymore. An upside to the misery of being a teenager again, since his old body had hurt constantly, battered as it had been.

Minerva gave a small sigh, looking into the fading embers of the fire as Severus put the mirror on the table and sat down again.

"We do have a lot to discuss, you realise," she said.

"What do we have to discuss?" he said, voice deliberately soft as he watched Minerva. He was suspicious.

Minerva, pursing her lips and giving him a stern look, said, "What I meant was, what are you going to do now?"

"What do you mean? According to what you just told me, I am now, in the eyes of the world, a war-hero rather than a traitor. I assumed I could go back to my old life, maybe even teaching."

"Yes, you are a war-hero. I am also quite certain you could return to Hogwarts as a teacher anytime you choose. I would find something for you. The question I am trying to ask, however, is if you want to go back to your old life. You have the unique possibility to choose: do you wish to be Severus Snape, former Potions master, DADA professor and Headmaster of Hogwarts, in the eyes of the world?" Minerva tilted her head and watched him intently. "Or do you want something else?"

Minerva had a very good point. After a long silence, he said, "I would prefer something entirely different."

"I suspected as much. So what are you planning to do?" Minerva said.

"I haven't had any time to consider the matter," Severus said, "especially not from this viewpoint."

Severus looked at Minerva, realising that she was giving him that calculating look he had learnt to hate over the years they had worked together. That look always preceded something unpleasant that she was trying to present in an attractive package.

"I have been thinking, Severus," she said. "I would like you close at hand for a while, in case something happens due to the potions or the time-travel Bellatrix exposed you to. She was very good at Potions once - one of the best in fact - but the woman was deranged none the less."

She sipped her tea and continued.

"If any of the potions you were treated with were to backfire, we might be able to help you here at Hogwarts. If that were to happen, I would tell the staff the truth, so every measure could be taken to help you. In the meantime, you would act as one of our students."

She delivered the last sentence briskly and gave him a stern look over the rim of her glasses, as if that would be enough to browbeat him into obedience.

"Have you lost your mind?" he said.

"Hear me out, Severus. You will be sorted together with the first years. You will be introduced as Severus Snape, Junior. That way we don't have to deal with any name confusion." Minerva was mapping out the plan for him, sounding determined, calm and convincing.

"Minerva, have you been dipping into Trelawney's sherry?" Severus said. "If you, even for a second, think that I would return to Hogwarts as a student, you are very much mistaken."

"Again, hear me out! You can survive one year at Hogwarts. You have done it before!" She took a deep breath and continued. "Your father, for obvious reasons, hid you at birth. You have been home-schooled by Albus, myself and Severus Senior."

"I don't have a mother then?" Severus said. "Was I found in Hagrid's pumpkin patch perhaps?"

"Of course you have a mother. You are the result of a temporary liaison between your father and a Spanish witch ..."

"So I am a bastard? Not all that surprising I suppose ... " he said, the comment causing Minerva to slam her hand down on the table so hard the cups rattled.

"Do be quiet, Severus! She died when you were born. He never told us her name. We have no idea what abilities she might have had. It was your father's fondest hope that, when it was safe again, you would come to Hogwarts and take your NEWTs."

Severus gave a snort. He tried very hard to infuse it with as much contempt as he possibly could.

"A weak story, at best. Salazar is turning in his grave as we speak," he said.

Minerva gave him another stern look over the rim of her glasses. "You do understand that if we do this my way, you will get proper marks as well as a plausible background, and when you leave Hogwarts, you will have every possibility to build a new life?"

Minerva's countenance softened, and she smiled at him.

"You will have what so many of us only dream about: a new start. I think you above all others deserve that. Do you agree?"

He closed his eyes for a short moment. One year in the hands of adolescent idiots? One year of trying to avoid hexing someone into the depths of hell? He had already lived in hell for years, and he had no intention to prolong the experience.

His answer was short and succinct: "No."

Minerva's eyes narrowed, and she was now looking irritated, her beady eyes narrowed.

"Why not? It would work. You would get the best grades wizarding Britain has ever seen. You could do anything. One single year: that would ensure your health, as well as the best jobs you could find when you graduate."

She pursed her lips so hard they turned white, in an obvious attempt to keep her temper under control.

"No, Minerva. I would rather take my chances with Bellatrix again than return to school. As far as the potions go, I am willing to risk it. You seem to forget I have been dabbling in potions myself for quite some time now," said Severus, his voice dripping with irony.

"You stubborn, pigheaded..." Minerva was so upset that she had trouble finding words. It felt quite satisfying.

"You stubborn man! Why can you never see when people are trying to help you?"

Severus refused to answer her, and they sat in an uncomfortable silence for a long time, Minerva seething with anger and Severus doing nothing to end the conflict.

Minerva then poured herself another cup of tea and gave in. "So what are you planning to do then?" she said and gave an irritated huff.

"I have lost my wand," he said. He pressed his lips together and straightened his shoulders. He'd had it since he was eleven. He missed it. He felt vulnerable without it, not a feeling he enjoyed. It probably wouldn't work for him now even if he could find it, since he had lost it to the Dark Lord.

"I need a new one, and that is the first issue I am going to address. Is Ollivander working again?"

"Yes, thankfully, he is. We were worried for a while, but he is up and about. Miss Lovegood has helped him in the shop during the summer." Minerva looked amused. "I have been told that it is quite a surreal experience to shop for a wand these days."

Severus nodded. He remembered Miss Lovegood. Unflappable and impossible to intimidate. She was, by far, the most unnerving student he had ever had the misfortune to teach. "Unfortunately, I need to go there as soon as possible. Is she still there? The term is starting soon after all?"

Minerva looked at him, the flickering light from the fire reflecting in her glasses. "Oh, I think she will be there. Mr Ollivander and Miss Lovegood are very close. You should go as soon as you can," she said as she regarded his baggy, threadbare robes, wrinkled her nose and said, "Why not take the opportunity to buy some new robes, since you will be going to Diagon Alley anyway?"

Severus glared at her. "Making a fashion statement hasn't been high on my list of priorities, these last years. Trifling matters, like staying alive and protecting Potter, took up most of my time," he said, adding an acidic smile for good measure.

"Severus, do you have any money?" Minerva said, ignoring his comment.

"I will manage."

Minerva sighed. "Good. I will place you in one of our guest rooms for the time being. Why don't you clean yourself up and rest for a while? Our discussion is far from over. You need somewhere to go, and it is foolish of you not to consider my suggestion," she said.

"Minerva, I am very tired. I need a wand, and as you so charmingly noted I need clothes. When I have dealt with those practicalities, I might be willing to discuss the matter again."

And with that, he politely took his leave and was led to a room, by a house-elf that Minerva summoned, where he took a warm bath and washed away the dirt and blood.

In the safety of his room, he fell asleep as soon as he put his head on the pillow, and for the first time in eighteen years, he slept without dreaming a single nightmare and without waking up even once.

Minerva winning

Chapter 4 of 10

Severus is, against all odds, still alive. But he's not exactly the way he used to be. And a second chance is difficult to handle.

Disclaimer: All recognisable Harry Potter characters, settings, situations etc. are the property of J.K. Rowling. No money is being made from this work, and no copyright infringement is intended.

Many thanks and endless gratitude to Diabólica, Hechicera and moiramountain who have, all in their own way, helped me. I owe them.

Chapter four: Minerva winning

They Apparated to Diagon Alley, since Severus had refused to Floo. He detested Flooing. It made him nauseated, and on one horrible occasion as a child, he had vomited uncontrollably afterwards. Motion sickness, he seemed to remember his worthless Muggle father calling it. He'd had it all his life, and his father's claim that he would grow out of it had been wrong. Tobias Snape usually was.

Minerva came along with him, claiming that she had important errands too -- quite unconnected with him, of course. She surprised him, however, when she told him that she needed to shop for writing materials, and after informing him that she would meet him at Ollivander's, she disappeared among the shoppers at Diagon Alley.

In the end, buying black robes for different occasions didn't take long. The only change he made was that he refused to buy robes made of wool. It wouldn't be necessary anymore. He wouldn't spend a large part of his life in a cold, damp dungeon again. He wasn't in need of clothes that could withstand fire to a certain extent. He chose soft fabrics to wear next to his skin. Fabrics that wouldn't itch.

Walking through Diagon Alley was reassuring. Most of the shops were being reopened or were already open again, if he was to believe the signs in the windows. No doors or windows were boarded up as they had been just a couple of months ago.

He found Minerva waiting for him outside the wand shop, as agreed. The entrance to Ollivander's had been renovated, and the door was newly lacquered in the bright purple so familiar to Severus. The door had been purple as long as he could remember. Inside, the shop was just as eerie and strange as it had been the first time he had walked through the door as a child.

He had visited the shop several times after he started working at Hogwarts. He had, at times, taken care of Muggleborns in need of guidance through wizarding London, and he had also accompanied a couple of orphans. One of the reasons he had voluntarily taken on what the staff at Hogwarts usually called 'the baby-sitting missions' was the regular visits to Ollivander's wand shop. He had loved it on sight the first time he entered it, and he still felt ridiculously excited when he entered the establishment.

The shop had the combined smells of old books and varnish. A low-pitched humming gave the impression that the shop itself was a living, breathing entity. The queer atmosphere had always appealed to him, since it both relaxed and exhilarated him. That was not true for everyone who entered, he had come to realise; Severus had actually been forced to stop one or two students-to-be from leaving the shop without a wand. Those students had seemed quite willing to go back to the Muggle world, rather than subjecting themselves to buying a wand. He had never understood why.

Severus viewed with fascination the rows and rows of boxes containing the wands. Narrow boxes in purple and black, from floor to ceiling, and not a single wand exactly the same as any other.

Minerva looked around, craning her neck, trying to see into the dark depths of the narrow, dingy little shop. "I wonder if Miss Lovegood is around?" she said.

She was. Luna was gliding through the room towards Severus and Minerva, absently trailing what looked like Ollivander's tape-measure behind her.

"Hello, Professor McGonagall," she said with a vacant smile.

"Miss Lovegood. This is Mr Snape, the newest addition to Hogwarts."

Luna turned her protuberant eyes to him. She looked at Minerva again. "We've met." Luna held out her hand to Severus, and he shook it briefly. "Good afternoon, Professor Snape. I really thought you were dead, to be honest." She watched him curiously. "And I thought you had a wand already?" She tilted her head and looked at him, unblinking.

Severus stiffened but held his features under rigid control. He threw a quick glance in Minerva's direction and met Minerva's eyes. She was also displaying an overly controlled look.

Seeing the byplay, Luna's eyebrows rose into her hair and she exclaimed, "Oh, I didn't realise it was a secret. Don't worry, Professors, I won't tell anyone." She smiled again and then asked, "Which arm is your wand arm? I don't seem to remember."

"Just choose one," Severus said.

Minerva sighed and looked decidedly annoyed. "Just tell the girl, and stop being difficult."

"I am not being difficult. It doesn't matter to me one way or the other," Severus said.

A shuffling sound interrupted Severus, and he looked up just as Mr Ollivander came into view. He had aged. He was thin bordering on emaciated, and his eyes showed distinct traces of pain and fatigue. The time he had spent in Malfoy's dungeons had almost killed the old man, Severus knew. Seeing the physical evidence of how bad it had actually been was depressing. He had done nothing to aid the old man. Nothing at all. For the common good. He pushed his hair behind one ear and took a deep breath. He would have made the exact same choice again.

"Professor McGonagall," Ollivander greeted her, "you are bringing me a young man in search of a wand, I see."

"Yes, I am. Can you see who he might be, I wonder?" Minerva said, immediately falling in with the old man's slightly theatrical way of expressing himself. Ollivander turned his eerie, expressionless eyes to Severus and watched him for a long time.

"Oh my, you are the very image of Severus Snape. He used to visit my shop regularly, you know. I enjoyed his company," Ollivander said.

He turned his head towards Minerva again, asking curiously, "I didn't know he had a son?"

"Not many people do. Severus was afraid for the boy's safety, so he has been in hiding. He is coming to Hogwarts this year to sit his NEWTs," Minerva said. Severus almost smiled. He would make sure he told her that her attempt to manipulate him back to Hogwarts was feeble, to say the least. He decided he would go along with the background she had outlined for him. It would suit well enough, and Spain -- that could be a good place to start a new life.

"Actually, I plan to sit the exam, rather than going to school," Severus said.

Mr Ollivander ignored him.

"His mother being?" Ollivander asked, looking curiously at him.

"We only know that she was Spanish. She died giving birth."

"Ah." Ollivander turned back to look at Severus again. "You have a lot to live up to. Your father had more cunning and courage than anyone could ever imagine." He paused and added, as an afterthought, "It has been a privilege to have met so many great wizards. I will soon be gone, you know."

"Gone? You are retiring then?" asked Severus.

"I am an old man. A very tired and worn old man, and the likes of me tend to die sooner rather than later," Ollivander said.

"But the shop? Who will take over?" Minerva asked with surprise, and after a slight pause she added with clear revulsion, "You can't mean we will have to buy wands from France?"

"As it is, yes. There is no one who will take over. I have no heirs, and I never did find anyone with the right touch to take on as an apprentice." Ollivander looked forlorn.

"It isn't too late yet," Minerva told the old man. "We have many promising students leaving Hogwarts this year. Luna is one of them, as you well know. Why not her?"

"Oh, not me," Luna said. "When I try to handle wands that haven't chosen me, very strange things happen. Besides, I can't smell them," Luna said.

"Smell them?" asked Minerva, staring at Luna.

"There is research that suggests that the sense of smell is most powerful sense among wizards and witches. My father wrote an article about it in the Quibbler. But I can't smell the wands," she said to Minerva, who didn't look any more enlightened by that somewhat nonsensical statement.

"I would have liked to have Luna as an apprentice," Ollivander said with a sad sigh. "But she really can't sense the wands. You need to have ..." Ollivander seemed to search for the right word. "You need to have a certain something, to be a wandmaker. Ah, well. It gives one food for thought. I should not have waited so long to find someone. I need the right person: intelligent, creative, intuitive, and artistic. Not many wizards and witches like that around. Even fewer with any flair for wandcraft. But I will consider it. Might I visit Hogwarts and meet a few students?" he asked Minerva.

"Of course you may. I will set up a few interviews with suitable candidates. I think I will start with Dean Thomas. He is artistic," Minerva said, while Luna and Mr Ollivander looked at the tape measure that had been working on Severus.

Ollivander nodded. "A very nice young man, but as I said, it is not all that easy to find someone talented with wands," he said as he went over to the far wall, letting his long fingers wander over the boxes. He chose three of them and returned to Severus and Minerva. "I assume you had a wand at one point?" he said while lining up the boxes in front of them.

"Yes, I did. I lost it." Severus didn't elaborate, even when Ollivander looked questioningly at him.

"Lost it?" Ollivander said, his eyes boring into Severus's.

"It disappeared on my journey to Hogwarts. I don't know how. However, I am not happy about it. It suited me," Severus said. Ollivander nodded.

"You used one of mine?" he asked.

"No, I inherited my mother's wand. Spanish origin. I do not know its maker." Severus's lie came without hesitation.

"Well, we can remedy that loss. I am sure we can find something for you. Try this one first: ebony, 12 ½ inches, inflexible, unicorn hair. Give it a wave," Ollivander said, handing the wand over to Severus, handle first.

Severus took it, weighed it in his hand and waved it. It reacted, sparks flying as he cut the air with it. Yet this wasn't his wand. He didn't feel any connection. He put the wand down and shook his head. "No, I think not."

Mr Ollivander gave him an oddly intense look and said, "It reacted well enough, but if you say so."

He opened the second box and gave him the wand inside. "Try this: oak, 10 inches, stiff, dragon heart string."

The same thing happened again. After nearly an hour of trying wands, every single one of them reacting to him reasonably well and then being rejected by him, Mr Ollivander's excitement was obvious.

"Curious," he said. He nodded thoughtfully to himself and then said, "I suggest you find your wand in your own way, Mr Snape." He took a step to the side, turned and held out his arm as an invitation to Severus to enter the inner sanctum of the shop.

"I do not understand," Severus said, still stepping forward, tempted by the offer.

"I want you to find your wand on your own. You can use any means you like to do so." Ollivander beckoned him forward.

Severus approached the shelves where the wands were neatly packed into boxes. He stepped closer to one of the shelves, and he heard the shop's ever-present humming more clearly. That humming sound he had always associated with Ollivander's was much stronger here, when he was standing among the wands. He turned and touched another shelf. The wands were singing for him, he realised. It was like listening to a choir. He couldn't contain himself. He moved quickly between the shelves, pressing his ear to the boxes, listening, stretching to reach a box with a particular sound and kneeling to reach yet another one. He could hear the wands. He barked a laugh when he thought of Luna...so right, yet so terribly wrong. He continued his search.

And then, he heard it: a beautiful note, a perfect note. A deep female alto, but with a faintly electrical tinge to the sound. He took three fast steps towards the sound, but was forced to stop again in order to locate it.

He found the wall, then the section, then the shelf, and finally the box containing the wand. His hands were shaking as he slowly opened it and looked at the wand, which had fallen silent when he took the lid off the box. It was a fairly long wand, made of a blond wood with very dark, irregular growth rings that gave the illusion of the wand being burnt in places.

When he looked up, he discovered that Ollivander, Minerva and Luna were watching him: Ollivander with a smile, Minerva with something close to shock and definite worry.

Luna looked curiously at him and asked, "How did you know? Did you smell it? I always thought your nose would be very good at smelling things."

"Smell it?" Minerva said, shaking her head.

Severus rose and looked at the girl. "Actually, it sang to me," he said.

Minerva looked at him as if he had lost his mind.

Ollivander smiled. Looking almost serene he said, "I hear them also. Gregorovitch heard them, too, when he was alive. Most wandmakers do." He nodded at his own words and then took the box from Severus and looked at the wand inside.

"Mountain birch, 14 inches, rigid, phoenix-feather core. A very versatile wand." He gave the box back to Severus.

Severus touched the wand. The tingling sensation in his hand was intense. When he lifted the wand to take a closer look, without any real intent other than to familiarise himself with it, a spray of black stars shot from the tip, and a howling whirlwind threw the stars around the shop. When the wind stopped, the stars floated placidly around them, glittering and twinkling, while Minerva, Mr Ollivander, Luna and Severus looked on.

When Severus finally looked at the old man again, Ollivander's eyes were full of tears.

"I am so happy to see it in the right hands before I am gone." He nodded.

"The wand?" Severus asked.

"No, the wand shop and the craft," Ollivander answered, turning towards Minerva. "Minerva, I do not think I will meet any of your other students after all."

Then Ollivander turned to Severus. "I want you as my apprentice. Very few have the natural abilities necessary to create truly great wands. You are probably one of the chosen ones. Today I have seen wands bend to your will, even though they hadn't chosen you. I have seen you listen to the wands. You could be great."

Severus's black eyes met Ollivander's silvery ones. A wandmaker. He could be a wandmaker. One of the most prestigious professions in wizarding society. Without the slightest hesitation, Severus nodded at Ollivander.

"Welcome, my boy," Mr Ollivander said and smiled. "When can you start?"

"Now," Severus answered.

Minerva's curt voice interrupted the moment. "Aren't there any requirements, knowledge-wise, that would be necessary for him to have in this line of work? I am just wondering if Hogwarts might be able to help in any area."

Ollivander looked at Minerva and nodded slowly. "Potions would be a necessity." Severus smirked at Minerva. "He also needs Astronomy and Charms." Severus's smirk grew bigger as Minerva's face grew stonier. "And he would need Divination and Care of Magical Creatures."

This time, Minerva smiled at Severus -- smugly.

"Well then, Severus, it seems you will need to spend some time at Hogwarts, after all. I seem to remember that neither Divination nor Care of Magical Creatures are a part of your current curriculum."

Severus stiffened. He could not believe it. He was having subjects that belonged on a slag heap foisted upon him.

"Are Divination and Care of Magical Creatures really necessary?" he said to Ollivander with a sneer.

The old man nodded. "Very much so, and so are the others."

"The others aren't a problem," Severus said, with an obvious edge to his voice.

Ollivander positively beamed at him. "Then it is settled. If it is only those two, I can't see the problem. Don't you agree, Professor McGonagall?" Ollivander turned to the professor.

"I agree," said Minerva. "As long as Severus is willing to apply himself, Hogwarts is quite willing to have him ... " Her voice trailed off.

Severus closed his eyes for a fraction of a second.

"Professor McGonagall," he said, straightening his back, "would it be possible for me to take only Divination and Care of Magical Creatures lessons at Hogwarts so that I may accept the apprenticeship with Mr Ollivander?" He put some extra emphasis on the word 'only' and added, "Just sitting for the NEWTs in the other subjects?"

Minerva smiled. "But of course. On the condition that you live at Hogwarts. I feel that it is best that you live together with the other students. Would that be acceptable to you?" she asked Ollivander.

Ollivander nodded. "It would suit me very well indeed. I do not have very much room, and as the apprenticeship does not pay much, I think it would be a good solution for the young man."

"Well then," said Minerva. "It is settled." She turned to Severus. "Come along then, and pay the man. We have another stop to make. We need NEWT-level books for your new courses. I am sure Professor Trelawny and Hagrid will be very pleased. I actually think you will be Hagrid's only NEWT student. You can be sure to get special treatment." Minerva smiled at him.

"Imagine," Severus said, swearing to himself he would get back at Minerva at the first possible occasion.

"And I'm in Divination," Luna said. "Don't worry, I'll help you fit in."

Hearing that, Minerva turned and hurriedly left the store, and Severus was forced to endure her muffled giggling as they went to buy the books he needed.

Sorted out

Chapter 5 of 10

Severus is, against all odds, still alive. But he's not exactly the way he used to be. And a second chance is difficult to handle.

Disclaimer: All recognisable Harry Potter characters, settings, situations etc. are the property of J.K. Rowling. No money is being made from this work, and no copyright infringement is intended.

Many thanks and endless gratitude to Diabólica, Hechicera and moiramountain who have, all in their own way, helped me. I owe them.

Chapter five: Sorted out

Severus was testing his new wand when Minerva came to fetch him for the start-of-term banquet and the Sorting Ceremony. He had borrowed an empty classroom and had gone through a whole range of charms, spells and hexes at different levels. As far as non-verbal spells went, the wand was tuned in to him in a way he'd never thought possible. His charms and spells were improved, which was saying a lot. His hexes were somewhat harder to handle.

"I can see that you're enjoying yourself," Minerva said from behind him, her voice disapproving and her Scottish burr more pronounced as a result. "Your new wand seems to be working well enough. The clean up will take some work though. You frightened the animals. You do know that even transfigured animals have bowel movements, do you not?"

He turned and looked at her, and the room as a whole. Several pieces of furniture had been reduced to smouldering ash, causing smoke to gather in a cloud hovering below the ceiling. Steel daggers were buried in the walls, and he knew that two transfigured animals were hiding somewhere in the room. Chaos ruled, and he couldn't help smirking as he surveyed his handiwork.

"Yes, I am pleased. I had expected the wand to cause some problems, but it is only my hexes that seem to have suffered. They come across as somewhat heavy-handed." He indicated the blackboard, which was now a pile of shards lying on the floor; the stone wall where it once had hung cracked.

"Well, we just have to hope that you will not find it necessary to hex anything or anyone this year. Just a thought," Minerva said, frowning at the mayhem he had caused. She sat down on one of the remaining desks, drew her wand and placed it on her lap. She looked at the room and then added, "We need to talk."

Severus eyed Minerva. He knew that tone of voice and he didn't like it at all. It made him feel wary and with good reason.

"Severus, I withheld important information from you, and I am sorry. However, I was sure you would leave if you knew," Minerva said.

"What kind of information?" he said, deliberately lowering his voice to a warning growl.

"You want that apprenticeship. Staying at Hogwarts is the only way you'll have it," Minerva said, her beady, grey eyes unflinching and a threatening note creeping into her voice. She looked up at him, hesitated and then, like the true Gryffindor she was, plunged right into it.

"Many of the seventh-year pupils from last year weren't satisfied with their education," she said. "They never did get the chance to sit their NEWTs. Most of them returned this year."

"Pardon?" Severus heard himself choke. "I must have misheard."

"No, you heard me correctly," Minerva said, voice curt.

"Who came back?" he said.

"Everyone, except those who died in the battle and a few of those who ran rather than stay and fight."

He had known that he had been too enthusiastic when he had been invited into the shop. That Minerva would use his eagerness to get the apprenticeship as leverage was no surprise at all. Even as he conceded defeat because he was defeated as long as Minerva could wield the apprenticeship over him he was seething with anger. Severus wanted to roar at Minerva. Screech and rave like the time he had lost every scrap of control in the hospital wing when he had been informed that Black had fled. It was bad enough to be back at Hogwarts as a student. Adding to the misery, Potter and his faithful sidekicks were still here. It would be James Potter and Sirius Black all over again, turning his life into a living hell.

"I will not go to school with Potter," Severus said. He had aimed for haughty, but he just sounded petulant even to his own ears. He sounded like the teenager he looked like.

"You will forgive me for this. If you don't, so be it. This is for the best," said Minerva.

"You are starting to sound like Dumbledore. For the best ... for the common good," he said, mocking her, since it was all he could do.

Minerva smiled at him a sad smile and then she looked down on the wand in her lap.

"Perhaps, but there is something you seem to forget: I do want what is best for you. As did Albus, in his own way."

And then she rallied. When she spoke again she sounded like her own, brisk self. She rose and said, "We need to go downstairs to join the banquet and get you sorted. You will clean this later."

Severus snorted. He wasn't doing any cleaning. Not after this; he summoned a house-elf for the cleaning, and the creature happily started to take care of the mess he had made of the room. For a moment it looked as if Minerva would issue a counter-order, but in the end she just closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head.

A shadow of a smile hovered on Minerva's lips as she strode through the door he found himself opening for her. He was tempted to slam it shut in Minerva's face but decided against it. He didn't really have the energy. As unfortunate as the situation was, he needed to make the most of this.

"I am not at all happy with the way you manipulated Mr Ollivander at my expense," he said as they left the room.

"Of course you aren't, and I don't care, since I got my way," she said.

"I imagine you don't. However, you might remember that I am not in the habit of letting transgressions against my person go unpunished."

Minerva looked up at him, not at all bothered by his statement as they walked towards the stairs.

"It hasn't been that long. I do remember your tendency to nurture old injustices. I am sure you will forgive me eventually," she said, "and do stop scowling at me." She gave a haughty little sniff.

They descended the stairs, but before they reached the first-years Minerva made an abrupt stop, put her hand on his arm and gave him a pleading look.

"Please, Severus, don't sabotage yourself this time." And with that she walked Severus to the end of the line of first-years and left him there, signalling to Hagrid to open the doors of the Great Hall.

Entering the Great Hall everything got worse, as things always did. Everyone fell silent and turned to stare at him. The teachers, the students, even the ghosts were all at a standstill.

Severus hadn't been around the predatory lot that was the Death Eaters without learning how to handle himself, though. Without even a hint of hesitation, Severus straightened his back and strode through the room without deigning to look at any of the assembled students.

The tension seemed to break in the Great Hall, and the students started to whisper and mumble all around him. Severus scowled and listened to the running commentary as he passed through the room.

"... exactly like his dad."

"Snape had a kid?"

"... that nose ..."

"... just as scary ..."

"... any good at magic ..."

"... watching my back now."

"... Slytherin for sure."

And then someone said, "... staring! He probably hates it."

Severus looked in the direction of the familiar voice he had spent the last seven years loathing: it was Potter.

Another voice chimed in, Hermione Granger's he realised.

"Harry's right. Stop it," she said to someone. She sounded imperious and bossy, but then she always did.

Potter looked up, and when he discovered that he had been overheard, he blushed and pushed his glasses up the ridge of his nose. He nodded at Severus and made a short, fidgety wave. Severus assumed it was meant as a greeting of sorts.

The Great Hall fell quiet. The students had observed Potter's gesture, even though it hadn't lasted more than a few seconds. Memories of how it was to be a student at Hogwarts resurfaced. And in that moment he was reduced to that awkward student he once had been, wearing threadbare cast-offs, with few friends and no appeal for the girls. He wanted to spin on his heel and walk out of the Great Hall, never to return. The only thing that held him back was the apprenticeship. He would become a wandmaker. With that came prestige, wealth and above all: a certain amount of power.

What surprised him was that Potter's behaviour didn't seem hostile. It might be a smokescreen, but then again it might not, and he had already decided not to provoke interest. He was not going to get into a feud this time. Not unless he had to. He would avoid attention and get his marks. He would try to live a life that was somewhat normal, somewhat pleasant. A prestigious career that didn't involve teaching of any kind. A house not located at Spinner's End.

If provoked he would strike back so hard that he would be sure to be left alone for the rest of year, but he had nothing to lose by behaving courteously at this point, no matter how much he loathed the boy, so he nodded, acknowledging Harry and the rest of the surrounding Gryffindors.

Minerva had held her little speech and the Sorting had begun. The Hat had placed a pretty little girl named Harriet Purdy in Ravenclaw. Brock Rockwood, a boy built along the lines of a future beater, was placed in Gryffindor, and Aphrodite Santini a truly beautiful girl, slanting glances at the boys under long dark eyelashes was placed in Slytherin.

And then Minerva called Severus's name and the Great Hall went still.

He stepped forward to the low, four-legged stool standing beside Minerva. He looked at her, studiously raising his brows. She shrugged and smiled.

"I'll prefer to stand thank you, Headmistress," he said, since he had no intention of trying to fold his long limbs to sit on a stool intended for small children.

Minerva handed him the hat, and he put it on with every expectation that it would be like the first time. Back then, the hat had fallen down over his eyes, and it had called out his house. There were rumours of students to whom the hat had talked, pondering where to place them, but that hadn't been the case with him, and the students who were placed in Slytherin never owned up to it happening to them. When the low voice started to buzz in his head, he was surprised.

"Oh my. Severus Snape! This is a surprise. Considering your rather unexpected youth and of course you are wearing me again, I am sorting you, am I not?"

"I think that is the objective, yes," said Severus.

"You have changed. Things have happened."

A pang of trepidation hit Severus in the chest as he recalled something Dumbledore had once said. "... sometimes I think we Sort too soon."

"He was wrong," the Hat said.

"Pardon?"

"Dumbledore was wrong. He was, sometimes. Anyone can be Sorted at any point in their lives. However, the result wouldn't necessarily be the same. The small ones usually haven't gone through very much. They are placed according to their raw natural talents and general demeanour, compared with the traits the founders favoured in their students, but people do change. Quite a few people need different things at different times."

"Are you implying that I am one those people? I do hope you are not, since I am planning to join Slytherin house," Severus said.

The Hat snickered, "We don't know that yet, do we? And once I have declared your house, it is yours. Magic, you might remember. You can't go anywhere else."

"I would prefer Slytherin," he said, starting to feel something close to desperation.

"I know you do. What I don't understand is why," said the Hat.

"Why?" Severus said, his mouth starting to go dry, "This is absurd! I used to be the Head of Slytherin house. Did Minerva put you up to this?"

"Neither the Headmistress nor anyone else can put me up to anything. I sort people into houses, as I always have. Slytherin house led you on a path of misery. Why would you want to go there, when you could go to any other house of your choosing? Few are as loyal and hard-working as you, few as courageous and few as intelligent. And since I have to concede the point, few are as cunning. You could go anywhere, be anything."

Severus gritted his teeth, "I am Slytherin," he said, nausea curling his stomach. He didn't have any interest in going to a new house, where the modus operandi of the students were different from what he was used to. He just couldn't be sorted into Gryffindor, he couldn't stand the thought of Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw ... no.

"It saddens me," said the Hat, "since you would be an asset, a matter of pride to any house. But as you wish."

Severus's eyes snapped open in relief when the Hat called out his house. He pulled the hat off his head and handed it to Minerva. She made a small gesture towards the Slytherin table and he turned towards it, and for a short moment the table looked like a photograph: a Muggle photograph to be precise, with everyone frozen in time. He almost growled at the thought of living with the Slytherin brats he had tried to foster into something that at least resembled human beings.

And then someone started applauding.

"Bravo, m'boy! Excellent, I just knew it. Had your father, you know," said Slughorn, his voice loud and jovial. Severus looked at Slughorn, just barely suppressing his urge to sneer. Dear lord, what a sycophant the man was. Slughorn was standing up, beaming at him, his whole demeanour radiating fatherly good will. Severus nodded at his

Head of house and then averted his eyes, instead focusing on the Slytherins.

Slughorn had triggered a reaction among the students sitting at the Slytherin table. Blaise Zabini started to applaud with slow, deliberate claps. The rest of the seated Slytherins followed suit. Zabini had always been a malicious brat of a boy, and this applaud was not one of welcome.

Oddly enough, this reception in his own house, no matter how expected, left Severus feeling ill-humoured. Open hostility he could handle, fear he could use, and defiance he would simply crush. But this was something else. This was a reception of reticence and withdrawal. But he would handle this too. He had handled the Dark Lord, he had handled Bellatrix and he had handled the rest of the Death Eaters. He could handle a bunch of teenagers. He already had. For years.

Severus arrived at the Slytherin table, observing the seating arrangements. Zabini was seated in the middle of the table, back against the far wall so he could view the rest of the room in its entirety. Zabini had usurped Malfoy's place in the pecking order. Zabini was flanked by Nott on his right and Parkinson on his left. Malfoy was seated far down the table, where the first-years were seated, with his back to the rest of the room. He was obviously persona non grata, but at least he had shown some backbone, coming back to Hogwarts.

The row of students with their backs to the Great Hall started to shuffle aside to make room for Severus. They were opening a spot at the middle of the table, rather than at one of the ends, but that wasn't good enough.

Without hurrying, Severus strode past the short end of the table and kept walking between the wall and the seated students, until he reached Zabini. Zabini hadn't been all that observant, he noted. The boy had probably assumed that he would seat himself at the place that had been allotted to him, and now sat talking to Nott. Severus looked down at them, placing one hand over Zabini's shoulder putting enough pressure on his collar-bone for it to be painful, then he indicated the non-existent seat between Zabini and Parkinson with his other hand. Zabini flinched and gave Severus a surprised look.

"May I?" Severus said, keeping his voice bland. As he met Zabini's gaze, he applied some more pressure on his shoulder. The gesture would look friendly enough to anyone watching, if a bit intimate.

To his credit and to Severus's surprise, Zabini didn't show any sign of the pain Severus was inflicting on him; instead he gave Severus a quick, guarded glance, hesitated for a fraction of a second and then lowered his lashes.

"By all means," said Zabini, and made room between himself and Parkinson as he shrugged Severus's hand off his shoulder. Severus smiled. So Zabini wasn't at all willing to admit defeat just yet. But his behaviour gave Severus a good indication of how things stood. Zabini preferred Nott over Parkinson. Parkinson's dismayed look at being moved down the table confirmed it.

Severus sat down, and as the feast continued he proceeded to inch himself closer to Zabini until he was crowding him enough to make him move over and Zabini did move without even a token protest to Severus's great pleasure. He hadn't expected it to be so easy.

Severus smirked to himself, pleased with sitting at the centre seat of the table, Zabini pushed aside. He was sitting at Severus's right, of course. Whether he could keep that seat remained to be seen though, especially since Nott was already trying to make eye contact with Severus. A minor victory, but a meaningful one nevertheless.

He didn't doubt that Parkinson would remain at his side. She had always quick on the uptake moved as close to Severus as she could and was giving him one of her prettiest smiles the one that she had once saved for Malfoy. It was not an altogether unpleasant experience.

He lifted the goblet and sipped the pumpkin juice. The centre seat of the table was his, and as far as he could see, there was no one to challenge him for it.

Scars

Chapter 6 of 10

Severus is, against all odds, still alive. But he's not exactly the way he used to be. And a second chance is difficult to handle.

Disclaimer: All recognisable Harry Potter characters, settings, situations etc. are the property of J.K. Rowling. No money is being made from this work, and no copyright infringement is intended.

"I'm Pansy," Parkinson said to Severus by way of introduction and offered him her hand. She was looking at him, smiling, her eyes glinting with interest. He gave her hand a brief touch and withdrew as fast as politeness would allow.

"So, how come no one ever knew Professor Snape had a son?" Parkinson said, as always so straight to the point that Severus marvelled that she hadn't been placed in Gryffindor rather than Slytherin.

"Father didn't want anyone to know. The reasons, I imagine, are obvious," he said. He turned away from her and continued to eat the shepherd's pie he had chosen.

"I really liked your dad, you know," she said and flipped her dark hair over her shoulder. "We all thought it was just awful when he died, especially since he was so clever. He was the best teacher we had." She smiled at him again.

"Well, he was committed, one might say," Severus said. He wondered what she was trying to do. Parkinson had detested him, almost since she first arrived at Hogwarts, and he knew that several of his students' more inventive epithets for him had originated with her.

The conversation was interrupted as the Great Hall fell quiet. Looking up, he saw that Minerva had risen from her seat, and her gaze was sweeping over the room as the main courses were cleared off the tables.

"We are very happy to see so many of our students from the 1998 seventh-year returning to sit their NEWTs. You will find you have made a good choice," she said. She made a short pause and continued, "First, I would like to introduce our staff, starting with our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher and Head of Gryffindor house, Professor William Weasley."

Severus watched as the Gryffindor table erupted in applause and whistles. The rest of the students were more sedate, but applauded with a certain enthusiasm nonetheless. William Weasley was a good choice for the post – calm, cool and well versed in the Dark Arts due to his days as a curse breaker at Gringotts. He would be satisfactory.

"I would also like to introduce our new flying teacher, Mr Cormac McLaggen." Minerva didn't look as pleased this time, and her added sniff at the end of the introduction was dangerously close to derisive. No wonder, since McLaggen was close to being a sexual predator. Severus didn't know how many times he had interrupted McLaggen's forays around the school. His dating habits had been promiscuous, to say the least. Once or twice it had also been obvious that the girl McLaggen had been with was grateful when Severus had swooped down on them and interrupted their tryst. A Hufflepuff girl had even gone so far as to stand behind Severus, holding on to his robes in a rather desperate attempt to get away from the boy. The girl had actually been less intimidated by Severus than McLaggen. That had made Severus realise how severe the problem was. After that, he had made it his business to stop the boy at every turn, ferreting out where he brought his girlfriends and disrupting him as often as he could.

He would have to find out how McLaggen had got the teaching position. Then he would get rid of him; it wouldn't be hard. Severus thoughtfully dragged his finger along the rim of the goblet until it squeaked. He was too far away to be able to enter McLaggen's head and get the information he wanted. But he would get close enough. Eventually.

"And now," Minerva said, concluding her presentation of the rest of the staff, "we will all rise and honour the students and friends who gave their lives to protect Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

All the students and teachers rose, almost in unison, then silence fell. For the first time that Severus could recall, complete stillness reigned in the Great Hall. A row of candles started to float down to the centre of the room, where they one by one flickered, died and fell to the floor. Severus counted them. Fifty.

He felt like he was going to suffocate. He stood there, watching, back straight, keeping his face blank, biting into his cheek until the pain was almost unbearable, and he felt the taste of iron filling his mouth.

Finally, the painful ceremony was over. Several of the students were crying, some trying to hide their tears, others making no attempt to hide their distress.

"We will remember them," Minerva said, and with tear-filled eyes, she raised her goblet. "A toast. Let us rejoice, for their sacrifice was not in vain." Everyone lifted their goblets and drank. Minerva spoke again, her voice now brisk, breaking the almost suffocating tension in the room.

"Now we shall have dessert. The house-elves have outdone themselves this evening." She sat down and the rest of the room followed suit.

Severus sat down, watching as the other students took their seats at the tables. He had known that some of the older students had been killed in the battle, but he realised now that Minerva hadn't told him the whole truth of it.

It seemed that some students were expecting their dead friends to walk through the door and join the banquet, and therefore they had left them an empty space at the table. Other students huddled together, maybe in an unconscious attempt to fill the space left by a missing friend. There were so many more students missing than he had expected. He swallowed hard, trying to get rid of the constricting lump in his throat, and started to take inventory.

His own house had escaped more or less intact, since the one member he couldn't find wasn't much of a loss in the first place. It seemed that Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were the houses that had suffered the most. Five students were missing at the Ravenclaw table, three from the old seventh year and two from the sixth. Seven students were missing at the Hufflepuff table. Three from the old seventh year and four from the sixth.

He turned to the Gryffindor table, feeling light-headed and nauseated. He quickly realised that the elder Creevy brother was missing, together with a girl from the old sixth-years.

He continued looking, feeling his stomach churn with something that might be worry when he finally found her, and he could let out the breath he was holding. She was still the same. Small, with long, blond hair. Relieved that she was there, he tilted his head, trying to get a better look.

His last year as Potions master, Severus had to his own embarrassment developed a habit of resting his eyes on Lavender Brown, particularly when double Potions with the Gryffindors and Slytherins was wearing him down. And that particular class always wore him down. The fact that he had managed them for five years without a single casualty still amazed him. Malfoy and Potter was not a good combination at the best of times.

Teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts had been an improvement. The subject practically oriented as it was had allowed him to watch her without anyone being suspicious. He had even given her individual instructions her, standing close behind her, holding her wand hand as he demonstrated the right movements. He had been careful not to do it too often even if she smelt of fresh air.

No matter how frivolously she had behaved, he had never succeeded in mustering the right amount of contempt to be able to give her the severe set downs he thought she needed. She had been so very pretty, with a broad, open smile with lots of white teeth, and cornflower-blue eyes that crinkled in the corners when she smiled. Nothing like Lily. Where Lily had been willowy and rather tall, Lavender was short, curvaceous and on the sturdy side. Lily had been a redhead; Lavender was a blond. Lily had been very intelligent and so very good at magic. Lavender was ... absent-minded perhaps. Unfocused. A bit childish. Or so he hoped. If not, she was stupid.

She was sitting beside the Gryffindor Patil twin and Romilda Vane, but in contrast to them, and unusually, she wasn't talking and seemed to be concentrating on her food. As if she could sense him watching, she looked up and turned her head, looking straight at him.

At first he didn't realise what he was looking at, and then came shock. The left half of her face had been savaged. It looked hideous. Four long, uneven scars knotted their way down her face. They were shiny and pink and ran from her forehead down to her shoulder. They looked painful and raw. Two of them divided her eyebrow in three parts. Her eye was intact, but the outer corner of her left eye, as well as her mouth, were tilted downwards, pulled down by scar tissue, giving her face a forlorn expression.

He could see that the scars were cursed, but whoever was responsible for healing her had done a good job. He suspected that Poppy had been involved and perhaps Pomona too.

He leaned over to Pansy.

"What happened to her?" Severus asked, unable to tear his eyes away from Lavender, who turned away from him, looking distressed.

Pansy looked up and followed his gaze. "The Daily Prophet said it was Greyback, during the battle," she said with an indifferent shrug. "I heard Granger say that she's really sensitive about the scars."

It was scratches, then, and maybe bite marks too. Severus held back a shudder of revulsion.

"She fought Greyback?" he said, wanting more information.

"No. The article said he attacked her. Granger saw what happened and blew Greyback off her. One of the teachers dropped a crystal ball on him too. Weasley and Longbottom killed him," she said. "Rita Skeeter wrote the story, and it was just so sentimental." A note of annoyance had crept into Pansy's voice, and she was stabbing at her chocolate pudding with the spoon.

"She's a werewolf?"

"I don't think so. She wouldn't be here if she were, would she?"

"Contaminated?"

"Probably. Why do you ask?" Parkinson was now watching him with narrowed eyes and a protruding lower lip, her tone of voice petulant.

Severus had shown interest, he admitted to himself. A lot of interest, and he had no idea why.

"The scars are noticeable. Curiosity, I suppose." He drank from his goblet of pumpkin juice, trying to adopt an air of languid disinterest. Parkinson looked pleased, smiled at him, and started eating again.

Severus threw another surreptitious glance at Brown. She kept pulling her hair over the damaged half of her face.

"You are a curious one, aren't you?" Zabini said. Severus was surprised enough to turn and look at him, "A dangerous thing at Hogwarts. A lot of surprises here," Zabini continued. He sounded genial enough; even so, Severus got the distinct impression that Zabini for some reason was not happy about Severus's questions.

"Curiosity also can be helpful," Severus said, serving himself some fresh fruit. He offered the bowl to Zabini, who declined with a shake of his head. Severus took a raspberry and bit into it. After swallowing, he continued, "After all, cursed scars usually have unfortunate side effects, other than the obvious. Curiosity is good if one would for example and purely hypothetically of course wish to avoid roaming werewolves, or maybe being infected with rabies." Severus gave Zabini a closed-lipped smile. Zabini cocked an eyebrow, nodded and turned away from him again.

Severus was happy when dinner was over. He was exhausted and nourished a faint hope that he would get another full night's sleep.

Arriving in the Slytherin common room where the students were gathering reading, talking or playing games he decided not to linger. He was tired and didn't want to risk having to talk to anyone. He made his way through the room towards the dormitory instead.

As he entered the room and closed the door, he looked around to see where his things had been placed. He found his trunk by the bed on his left. The bed wasn't visible until you closed the door which opened inwards. The best place in room. He would have plenty of time before anyone or anything entering the room realised he was there, and since there were no windows in the dungeons, the door was the only way in.

He went over to his trunk, opened it and took out some of his new flannel pyjamas and changed into them. He folded his robe, socks and underwear on top of the trunk where the house-elves would fetch them for laundry.

He sighed and sat down on his bed, feeling downcast, when the door opened and someone entered. Severus drew his wand and waited until he could see who it was.

The newcomer was easy enough to identify. The white hair was visible even in the flickering light of the two burning candles.

Malfoy closed the door behind him, threw a cautious look around the room, wand in hand, and when he finally looked left, he flinched as he saw Severus.

"Hello," said Malfoy. He had obviously been looking for his trunk when he entered the room, because as he saw it he moved towards the bed where it had been placed. It was the one on the other side of the door: the second worst place in the room, the bed opposite the door being worst. Malfoy sat down on the edge of it, looking at Severus.

"I'm Draco Malfoy."

"Severus Snape."

Malfoy smiled and leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees letting his hands dangle between his legs. "Our fathers used to be friends ... of sorts," he said.

"I know," said Severus.

"I supposed you would," Malfoy said. "You look a lot like your father."

Severus didn't answer; instead he fluffed his pillow and propped it against the headboard. He leaned his back against it, putting his legs up on the bed. He made sure his wand was visible but made a point of setting it down beside the pillow. Severus looked over at Malfoy again. He had risen and gone to his trunk. He opened it and started to rummage around in it.

"Tired?" Malfoy asked from the depths of the trunk.

"Yes, very."

Malfoy resurfaced holding a pair of black pyjamas.

"So what do you think of Hogwarts and the House of Slytherin?" he asked. His voice had a slight edge to it.

"It's hard to have an opinion after mere hours."

Malfoy shrugged, took off his shirt and dropped it on the floor. He disposed of the rest of his clothes in the same casual manner, before putting on the pyjamas.

"What a diplomatic answer. But you annoyed Zabini. What happened?" Malfoy asked, giving Severus a curious glance.

"Pardon?"

Malfoy smiled and then blew out the candle beside his bed, leaving the room in complete darkness, since Severus had already put his out.

"Actually, you annoyed both Zabini and Parkinson. What happened?"

"I have an annoying personality?"

Malfoy barked a laugh.

"Perhaps, but in this case I don't think that's why."

Severus felt apprehensive about telling Malfoy anything at all, but he was curious. Besides, Malfoy was most likely looking to groom him as an ally; possibly even a friend. He would probably be more than willing to give him some information and what was most important he would not be inclined to talk to others about their exchange.

"All right ... I asked about that scarred girl at the Gryffindor table. Lavender Brown I think they said her name was. It annoyed them. I have no idea why."

Severus heard Malfoy chuckle in the darkness.

"They don't want competition," Malfoy said.

"Do explain," said Severus.

"She is a prudent choice, after all," Malfoy said, still sounding amused.

"A prudent choice? I don't understand."

Malfoy actually had the gall to snigger. "No, of course," he said, irony lacing the words. "I'll explain then: Brown is one of our resident Muggle-borns. The war might be over and that's good news. However, we're Slytherin and not well regarded among roughly three-fourths of wizarding society. It's worse than ever now. We need to be cautious whom we associate with," said Malfoy.

"I would appreciate if you would expatiate upon the subject a bit more," said Severus. He was interested now, he had to admit.

Malfoy was quiet, for just a tad too long.

"It's eerie. You sound exactly like him," said Malfoy. "I would appreciate if you would expatiate upon the subject a bit more." Malfoy deepened his voice and quoted Severus word for word. He didn't sound mocking though; he sounded more apprehensive than anything. "You'll scare every student your father taught to death, doing that."

Malfoy was right, Severus realised. Ever since he had joined the ranks of the Death Eaters, he had worked hard to get rid of every trace of his roots. The first thing he had dealt with was his speech. He had made sure no one would be able to identify his origins by listening to him. It had been both by choice and necessity. He had had so many strikes against him. Being half-blood, poor and working-class. Surprisingly, every single one of those negatives had turned into positives: half-blood like the Dark Lord; poor, like the Dark Lord had been; working-class roots made him unafraid of soiling his hands with dirty work, and with the added bonus of an ambition few could match. The Dark Lord had taken to him almost from their first meeting.

But now he was sticking out again. His carefully schooled way of speaking had been an excellent way of impressing and intimidating the Death Eaters. Here at Hogwarts it would be something the students could target as a point of ridicule.

"Well, I suppose you might be right. I'll take care," said Severus, keeping his voice bland, "You were saying ... " Severus said, trying to turn the conversation back to Lavender.

"Ah, yes, sorry. As far as a future career, you have it made. At least if the gossip is true. Personally, I'm aiming for a career at Gringotts."

"As you said: prudent," said Severus.

"Yes." Malfoy fell quiet for a couple of seconds and then continued, "The ideal for a Slytherin would be a girlfriend who was one of the heroines of the Battle of Hogwarts. Preferably rich, pretty, with good connections and this is important Muggle-born, even if a girl from a blood traitor family might go a long way. No Slytherin girls of course."

Malfoy sighed and continued, "Please know I find this reasoning distasteful. Anyway, the closest we can get is Granger, the Weaselette and oh joy Lovegood. But the first two are both taken, and Lovegood ... no. Just no."

"You would consider the other two girls you mentioned?"

"No, and that's not the point. The point is that Zabini would. I find Granger particularly difficult to stand. Truth be told, she hates my guts too. With reason, to be honest."

Malfoy fell quiet again Severus assumed it was for effect and then continued, "But then we have Brown. She's Muggle-born, not rich, but fairly well connected by now as she was one of Potter's hangers-on. She was loyal to him through the years even though she used to gossip a bit too much about him. She also went out with Weasley for a while, by the way. The lucky guy who succeeds in convincing Brown of his honourable intentions will be seen as a good man who can see past her flawed exterior. She also has the added bonus of being Gryffindor. They're all the rage now, you know." Malfoy's voice dripped with acid on this last remark.

"So "

"So Parkinson sees you as a potential boyfriend. You, as Professor Snape's son, have an exceptional father in the eyes of the wizarding world unlike me. I think you can even get away with being sorted into Slytherin on account of him." Malfoy fell quiet again.

"What about Zabini?" asked Severus.

"He wants Brown for himself." Malfoy yawned. "He told Nott on the train. The way he figures, she's easy prey, because she's disfigured." Severus heard Malfoy yawn again and gritted his teeth. Of all the students belonging to Slytherin he had always liked Zabini the least.

"Parkinson told me Greyback gave her those scars," Severus said, fishing for more information.

Malfoy fell quiet for a few seconds and then cleared his throat before answering.

"I think he went for her because ... " His voice trailed off and Severus heard him swallowing, and then he added, "he liked ... young girls."

Malfoy knew of course. He had been there. He had seen and heard more than he should at Malfoy Manor when Voldemort had been in residence. Severus had almost forgotten that.

"Yes, Father told me. He found Greyback distasteful ... foul," said Severus.

"Your father was ... I liked your father," said Malfoy in the darkness of the room, and then he fell quiet.

Severus didn't answer him.

First, he thought it was the low voices of the rest of the boys who shared the dormitory that kept him awake, but it was now three o'clock in the morning and Severus still hadn't been able to fall asleep. He had twisted and turned until his bed was an uncomfortable mess of tangled bedclothes. He was thinking of Lavender.

Zabini was probably correct. Lavender would be easy prey. Zabini was handsome and had the ability to turn on the charm at will. She didn't deserve to be manipulated that way.

He burrowed deeper under the covers, trying to get comfortable when it dawned on him: he could protect her. It would be no trouble at all. He had done it for Potter all these years. He didn't even like Potter and had still succeeded. The adversary had been Voldemort no less.

Protecting Lavender would be easy.

Severus closed his eyes and, with that decision made, fell asleep.

Finagling

Chapter 7 of 10

Severus is, against all odds, still alive. But he's not exactly the way he used to be. And a second chance is difficult to handle.

Disclaimer: All recognisable Harry Potter characters, settings, situations etc. are the property of J.K. Rowling. No money is being made from this work, and no copyright infringement is intended.

A cold wave of adrenaline surged through Severus as something hit him between the eyes. The object hitting him was soft, with a certain bounce, but it still made him grab for the wand only to discover that it wasn't where he had placed it the evening before. He threw himself out of bed, landing on his hands and knees, looking for the wand. His stomach churned with horror as he realised that the wand wasn't on the floor either ...

And then he remembered where he was: Hogwarts, in the *Slytherin* dormitory. He rose from the floor and turned.

"Sorry about that. Breakfast is served soon and timetables are up," said Malfoy with a smirk. He held up Severus's wand and then threw it back to him. Severus caught it, feeling unnerved and deflated. He had lost his wand twice in four days.

"Always get the wand first," Malfoy said.

Severus grumbled. He was tempted to hex Malfoy, but his brain felt sluggish and his muscles weak. A pair of rolled-up green socks lay on the floor beside the bed. He picked them up and put them on. Malfoy probably had enough of them, and he owed him for the fright he had given him.

"Where is everyone?" Severus said, his voice gravelly and raw.

"They've already gone down. Eager to get some breakfast, I think." Malfoy shrugged and fell quiet.

They dressed in silence. Malfoy seemed preoccupied, and Severus, never having been a morning person, was satisfied not having to talk.

Waiting for Malfoy turned out to be a frustrating experience, however. Malfoy took a long time to get dressed, and as they left for the Great Hall, he was dragging his feet, which annoyed Severus no end.

On the verge of delivering a cutting remark, Severus looked at Malfoy only to realise that he looked apprehensive. Scared, even. Malfoy's posture reminded Severus in a very unpleasant way of Lucius during the last days at Malfoy Manor.

Weak.

Defeated.

Frightened stiff.

"May I ask you something?" Severus found himself asking.

"Yes, of course."

"Why did you return to Hogwarts? I imagine the Malfoy name even in the current situation would get you a low-level job at Gringott's? Your family's fortune alone should suffice."

"Your father seems to have told you a lot about us."

"Of course he did, but that's beside the point. I wouldn't have returned. Why did you? Your father made you?"

Malfoy hesitated, and for the first time Severus noticed that he looked resigned, tired and much older than his years.

"No. He said I didn't have to. Mother wanted me to go. What mother wants and all that."

Narcissa's doing then. Not surprising when Severus thought of it.

"She said that no son of hers was going to ruin his life on account of some unpleasantness," Malfoy said and gave Severus a wry smile.

"Interesting turn of phrase." Severus couldn't help smirking. Looking as fragile as a Ghost Orchid, Narcissa had the soul of a Dandelion: able to break through concrete if it was necessary for survival.

"She's right about one thing: it certainly was unpleasant." Malfoy said, interrupting Severus's thoughts.

"Did she give you any advice before sending you into the lions' den?"

"I don't know about advice. She said: a Malfoy breaks before he bends," answered Malfoy, making a fair impression of Narcissa's voice. "Very cliché."

Severus empathised with Malfoy, but he still agreed with Narcissa's choice concerning her son. It would have been a strategic mistake not to send Draco back when most of the other students had chosen to return.

Severus said, "I've heard worse."

Malfoy had reached the door of the Great Hall, and there he hesitated.

Two sixth-year Slytherins passed them. They hesitated at the entrance of the Great Hall and then entered with bent heads. They slunk rather than walked towards the Slytherin table.

"Fear is unbecoming. If it's there, it shouldn't show," Severus said as he watched them. He caught Malfoy's eye and indicated that he should enter the room before him.

Malfoy gave Severus a wry smile, straightened his neck, placed a sneer on his face and, adopting his usual swagger, he walked through the door. The boy was more like his mother than Severus had realised. A good thing. He strode after Malfoy, catching up with him as they came up level with the Slytherin table.

"Sit with me," said Severus, "if you like."

"Fine." Malfoy's fleeting expression of relief was quickly substituted by his customary haughty one.

"Zabini," said Severus when they reached the centre of the table. "Please move over."

Zabini shot Severus a filthy look but moved, and Severus and Malfoy sat down.

Severus chose to enjoy a cup of strong, black coffee and watched as the Heads of House worked their way down their respective tables, handing out timetables to the students. The familiarity of it almost made him shudder. It had been tedious, boring work.

Severus sought out Lavender instead. She was sitting next to the Weasley girl, her blond hair loose and smooth over her back. Sipping his coffee, he tried to come up with a way to get close to her, preferably before Zabini did. He looked at the students at the Gryffindor table, contemplating whether one of them could be used as means of introduction. Then his gaze caught on William Weasley, who had been working his way down the Gryffindor table. He was speaking to Ginny Weasley now, and he was going to speak with Lavender next. Lavender's timetable would be set within minutes. This was probably the best opportunity he would get. He leaned over to Malfoy.

"Do you happen to have an Extendable Ear handy?" Severus asked.

"I might. Why do you want it?"

"I want to listen in on a conversation."

Malfoy sniggered. "Let me rephrase: to whom do you want to listen?"

Severus gave Malfoy the glare that had made first-years cry and sent seventh-years running for cover. The result was less than satisfactory: Malfoy laughed.

"That look worked when your Father did it, but with you ... sorry, not at all as impressive. But I do have one. I'll give it to you if you tell me whom you want to use it on."

Severus knew he would have to give in if he wanted the Ear. William Weasley had been talking to his sister for a while now, and he was sure to move on to Lavender any minute.

"I want to know Brown's curriculum," he said, waiting for Malfoy to laugh. He didn't.

"I should have known," said Malfoy as he slipped Severus an Extendable Ear.

Severus set it in motion and just in time. Weasley nodded at his sister and continued on to Lavender, even as the Ear slithered under the tables, coming to rest on top of Lavender's bag.

Malfoy was trying to listen in, and Severus was forced to elbow him hard in the ribs to get him out of the way.

"You are drawing attention."

Malfoy sat up straight again, looking petulant.

"Fine, but you'll tell me everything later," he said, glaring at Severus. Severus ignored him.

"... waste."

Weasley's stern voice.

"But they're the subjects I took my sixth year."

Lavender, sounding whiny.

"Yes. But you got seven OWLs, and now, instead of taking the ones that could land you a good job, you chose three NEWTs: DADA, Muggle Studies and Divination."

Seven OWLs. Severus was surprised. He hadn't known that.

"But Headmistress McGonagall "

"I talked to her about you, and she wants you to try harder."

"But ... "

Weasley looked at the scroll he was carrying, ignoring Lavender's protest.

"You wanted to be a beautician?"

Beautician? Severus felt horribly disappointed. How very useless.

"No, not exactly. I want to make my own skin ointments. My mum has this skin condition ..."

Lavender looked eager now.

"You would need to take Potions then."

"But I only got an E in Potions and ... "

"I know, and Professor Slughorn accepts Es from his students, so that's not a problem. Why don't you consider taking the subjects you're qualified for?"

A useless question. Severus had never in his years as Head of House asked his students: he had decided for them. Students made notoriously bad choices and parental advice, biased at best, rarely helped.

"But ..."

"I'm recommending that all my students do that. In your case it means that you'll take ... let's see: Care of Magical Creatures "

"Oh no, please. I only got an A, and he breeds the most horrible things. The Skrewts were just ... Eurgh ..."

Severus stopped himself from chuckling just in time. Instead he made sure he kept his features in an indifferent mask. Weasley was trying to hide a smile too; Severus could see that, even from this distance.

"Hagrid knows he's not allowed to breed creatures like that, and he said he'd be happy to have you. He was very impressed with the way you handled the Skrewts. So, Care of Magical Creatures, Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, and Potions."

Lavender looked down at her lap.

"But what about Divination?"

"Divination? I suppose you can take that too, if you like."

Weasley's disdain for the subject was obvious. Severus hoped that Weasley wouldn't influence her in this matter. Not that he disagreed with Weasley, but if he had to suffer through Divination, he wanted Lavender there. Watching her would at least keep the boredom at bay.

"What about Muggle Studies? I had an O in Muggle Studies." Lavender was pleading with Weasley now.

"You're Muggle-born, aren't you?"

"Yes, but ... "

"Then why take Muggle Studies? It's a waste of time."

Severus silently agreed.

Weasley continued, *"This curriculum has the advantage of opening up several career options. You'll need to work hard at Potions and Charms, though. You barely got the required marks in those. We've already freed up time by dropping Muggle Studies, and if I were you, I'd drop Divination so you can focus on the important subjects."*

Lavender's shoulders were hunched.

"I'll drop it then. I don't think I'll manage if I don't."

"Good choice."

Severus swore to himself as Weasley waved his wand over a piece of parchment and gave it to Lavender.

Severus took the ear-piece out, summoned the Extendable Ear, and passed it back to Malfoy.

Lavender and Zabini would unfortunately be sharing classes. Severus remembered Zabini's curriculum. The boy wanted a career in banking, just like Malfoy. That meant Aritmancy, Ancient Runes, Charms and DADA. He also took Potions for some obscure reason Severus didn't want to know.

He didn't know how he would get into DADA and Potions without raising suspicion, and Charms was just as bad. But he needed to get into at least one of them. Potions was a necessity. It would be easy enough for Zabini to be grouped together with Lavender, especially since Slughorn favoured the boy.

A voice right behind him interrupted his musing, taking him by surprise. He barely succeeded in not flinching.

"Oho," said Slughorn, "Severus Snape, our new celebrity."

Slughorn's demeanour was jovial, and he seemed filled with what Severus assumed was supposed to be bonhomie. It always came off on a false note.

"Hardly that, Professor Slughorn," said Severus, keeping his voice cool and polite. "There are students far more deserving of that epithet."

Slughorn chuckled. "Now, now. Don't put yourself down m'boy. Being Britain's next wandmaker isn't something you should disparage." He winked at Severus. "The son of Severus Snape too. That alone ... and placed in Slytherin, but where else, where else? It usually runs in families." Slughorn bounced up and down on the balls of his feet. "Your father was brilliant, of course. Outstanding. You'll take after him, I'm sure." He looked at Severus as if he were a particularly tasty treat.

Severus repressed a shudder. He didn't like Slughorn. He never had.

"Spoke to the Headmistress about you. Told me you were taking Care of Magical Creatures and Divination," said Slughorn. "Your Father and Dumbledore taught you the rest? Such a shame. It would have been good for Potter to have some competition."

"Any Slytherins in your class, Professor?" Severus said and tried to smile.

"Of course: Daphne Greengrass, Theodore Nott, Blaise Zabini and Draco Malfoy." A derisive note crept into Slughorn's voice when he mentioned Malfoy.

Severus hesitated but decided on a direct approach. He wouldn't get a better opportunity than this.

"Father had a lot to say about learning," he said, keeping his voice slow and thoughtful. "He often emphasised the importance of learning from numerous sources. He didn't like me being home-schooled. Unfortunately, it was a necessity." He paused and looked at Slughorn, whose moustache was fluttering with excitement.

"I have always found Potions interesting, and I was wondering if I could join your class after all?" Severus paused for effect. "I do understand if you can't accept me, since I haven't got any official marks." He gave Slughorn a look he hoped was sufficiently imploring. He didn't think it came off particularly well if Malfoy's reaction snatching a napkin, covering his mouth, and muffling his laughter was anything to go by.

Thankfully, it was good enough for Slughorn.

"But of course, of course, m'boy. I'll talk to the Headmistress immediately, immediately. Your father was right, and it will be so exciting to see if you share his flair for the subject."

"Do you think there might be room for me in Professor Weasley's class too?" Severus said, hurrying with the request since Slughorn showed every sign of heading straight for Minerva. Slughorn gave Severus a somewhat sly look.

"I'm sure there is. After all, your father was an authority. The master. Professor Weasley should be happy to have you," he said.

Severus didn't think that would be the case, since the Weasley clan had a rather set moral code that ruled out both favouritism and nepotism. Not that he cared as long as he got a spot in that class, so he smiled back at Slughorn, his cheeks aching with the effort. He wouldn't need Charms, thankfully. If he got these two, it would be enough. Beyond enough, in fact, since he didn't want to be at Hogwarts in the first place. Severus went from being pleased with the way things were developing to feeling sullen.

"I'll dash over to Professor Weasley and have a quick word, shall I?" said Slughorn, giving Severus another fatherly pat on the shoulder before waddling off.

"Your father used to be subtle. Did you know that?" said Malfoy with obvious amusement.

Severus snorted, "No, he wasn't. He was rather blunt. Besides, subtle would have been a waste of time," he said.

Malfoy nodded, conceding the point.

Severus watched Slughorn and Weasley as they talked. Weasley didn't seem pleased with the discussion, but Slughorn had a tenacious streak few could hold out against. Weasley was not one of the few. Severus could see the moment when Weasley gave up.

Next Slughorn went over to Minerva, and another animated conversation took place. One where Minerva's eyebrows rose, her eyes rounded and her chin fell. When she closed her mouth she looked over at Severus, giving him a thoughtful look. He knew that look, and it didn't bode well for the questioning Severus would have to endure later. She finally looked back at Slughorn and gave him a curt nod.

Slughorn returned with a broad grin on his face, waved his wand over a piece of parchment with dramatic showmanship and handed Severus the timetable. A quick look revealed that he would have to suffer through double Care of Magical Creatures and Divination on Mondays, while having Potions and DADA on Thursdays and Friday afternoons. At least he would get to leave Hogwarts two and a half days a week, and maybe he could convince Ollivander to let him work Saturdays and Sundays too.

"Thank you, Professor."

"Delighted, m'boy." For a moment it looked as if Slughorn was going to leave, but then he made a show of remembering something. "Oh, almost forgot: I'm hosting a small gathering next Saturday. The students call it the Slug Club ... " Slughorn chortled. "You'll come?"

Severus bit down hard on his cheek, and for a fraction of a second he thought that not even the pain he inflicted on himself would be enough to stop the retort he wanted to give.

"Of course, Professor. I would be honoured," Severus said as Malfoy started to cough into his napkin again. As Slughorn went on to talk to Malfoy, Severus was left wondering how he would explain his change of mind to Minerva and how he would get out of attending the Slug Club.

Loopholes

Chapter 8 of 10

Severus is, against all odds, still alive. But he's not exactly the way he used to be. And a second chance is difficult to handle.

When the post owls arrived, Severus left the Great Hall. The hooting birds sweeping over the room created enough distraction for him to leave unnoticed. After dealing with Slughorn, he didn't have the strength to manage Minerva too. He needed some peace and quiet.

He didn't think he would find that peace and quiet in Care of Magical Creatures, and for a while he wandered the grounds, regretting the decision to stay at Hogwarts.

He had started to walk towards Hagrid's hut when he heard voices behind him. Looking back, he saw a group of students. The glum conclusion was that he would be forced to have Care of Magical Creatures with a group of Gryffindors, because they were all easy enough to identify. It was Harry Potter, Dean Thomas, Ronald Weasley and Lavender Brown from the 8th year and Ginny Weasley and Demelza Robins from the 7th, and they were all heading in the same direction as he was.

It seemed that William Weasley had forced every Gryffindor with a mark better than Troll into the class, and now they had seen him. Severus's misery was complete when Thomas pointed in his direction, said something to the others and waved at him. The group hurried to catch up, and Severus didn't have much choice but to wait for them.

He noticed that Potter looked relaxed in a way Severus had never seen before. He had placed his arm around Ginny Weasley's shoulders, holding her tight against his side; his back was ramrod straight as always, but without that strained quality he used to display. Now Potter's posture seemed effortless and relaxed as he talked and laughed with the rest of the group. It was Potter with nothing to prove, nothing to fear, and nothing to hide any more. Severus felt a violent pang of envy watching him.

"Hey," said Weasley when he caught up with Severus.

Severus acknowledged him with a nod.

Severus noticed an uncanny likeness to Molly when Weasley looked him over. It was the exact same look Molly wore just before she declared that someone looked peaky and started to ladle large amounts of food onto their plates. He had been exposed to that more than once himself.

"Blimey, you really look just like your dad. I reckoned there would be at least some differences up close, except for the age thing, but I can't see any."

"So I've been told," Severus answered, adding a deliberate sneer to demonstrate that he wasn't at all interested in the subject.

"So you're taking Care of Magical Creatures too?" said Robins with a careful smile in Severus's direction.

"Obviously," Severus said. Then he fell quiet, not knowing how to continue.

Thomas chuckled. "We were strong-armed into the class by our new Head of House," he said. "I'm kind of nervous, truth be told."

"But you chose the subject, didn't you?" asked Potter, looking at Severus.

"Not chose, exactly. I have to take it on account of an apprenticeship," Severus said, looking away from Potter, hoping that his attitude would put them off trying to get to know him.

"Hagrid's happy, at any rate," said Potter. "Hagrid's our teacher, by the way, and this is his first NEWT class ever. Talked to him yesterday, and he said the lessons would be exciting."

Lavender moaned behind them. "I don't want exciting," she said, sounding morose. "I've had enough excitement."

"The Thestrals and Hippogriffs were pretty much ok, but the Blast-Ended-Skrewts ... " said Weasley. "I wonder what he's going to bring us next?"

Potter chuckled. "Acromantulas?"

Weasley visibly paled. "Don't even joke about that."

"More dragons then?" Potter said and smirked.

Before Weasley had had a chance to answer, Hagrid came around the corner of his cottage with Fang trailing behind him. With broad smiles on their faces, Potter and Weasley waved. They obviously felt that being with Hagrid was enough compensation for having to be in his class. The other Gryffindors followed suit, and Severus let himself fall behind the group, feeling like an outsider.

"Mornin'," said Hagrid, beaming at them. "I though' we'd start indoors today, havin' a cuppa while goin' through the theory stuff." He stepped aside, inviting them in.

Lavender looked confused. Severus noted that her eyebrows when she drew them together formed an upside down v over the bridge of her nose. She looked ... endearing.

"Hagrid," she said, "you never used to teach much theory before?"

"No, didn' care much about' theory. Borin' stuff, tha'. But ye' can find good stuff too, if yer lookin' in the righ' place."

Warning bells went off in Severus's head. That was a worrying statement, knowing Hagrid.

"So ... where's the right place?" asked Potter, eyes narrowing behind his glasses, clearly drawing the same conclusion as Severus. Potter wore an odd look of combined curiosity and trepidation.

"The Library of Wizardin' Laws, Rules an' Regulations," Hagrid said, looking very pleased. "But sit down now, every un', an' have summat to eat an' drink while we talk."

The group sat down around Hagrid's table as he rummaged around the kitchen, pouring tea and putting a plate filled with rock cakes on the table in front of them.

"How come you went there in the first place?" said Weasley.

Hagrid chuckled. "Ye' know how fond I am of certain kinds o' beasts?" Hagrid said, winking at them.

"Dragons, you mean," said Weasley. "Yeah, we knew that. What's that got to do with the library?"

Severus had an inkling but was hoping he was wrong.

"It started when me an' yer dad had a couple o' fire-whiskeys at the Leaky Cauldron. We talked about' missin' Fred. I though' I'd try to cheer him up, so I asked him about' tha' car o' his: how it was tha' he was allowed to keep it. An' tha's when he told me." Judging from the expression on Hagrid's face, Arthur Weasley had given him directions to the holy grail. "He told me about' the loopholes." Hagrid gave them a solemn nod.

"Loopholes?" asked Thomas.

"Loopholes." Hagrid nodded again. "The loopholes in the law. I asked him where to find them loopholes, o'course, an' he told me. The librarian there was nice. Small man. Reminded me o' me dad. He helped me," Hagrid said, unperturbed by his unenthusiastic students.

He pulled a pile of battered scrolls from one of his pockets, looking closely at each one. "Tha's them," he said and started handing them out. "I never could teach yeh lot ter"

handle 'em, since I wasn't allowed to keep dragons."

Severus received his scroll and bent over it. It was written in a small, pedantic copperplate, probably belonging to the librarian. It said:

According to the book 'Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit', a dragon has the following defining characteristics:

1. *A dragon has scales on most of its body.*
2. *A dragon walks on four legs.*
3. *A dragon has wings and can fly.*
4. *A dragon can breathe fire.*
5. *A dragon may or may not be able to breathe sulphur.*
6. *A dragon may or may not have poisonous fangs or claws.*

To be classified as a dragon, the creature in question must fulfil all of the above stated criteria or it is to be classified as a beast that is something else than a dragon.

His hunch was correct then. Severus rolled down the scroll and continued reading.

At the Warlock Convention of 1709, the above definition was accepted and used as grounds for the law forbidding private ownership and/or breeding of dragons. The definition above was accepted without changes or additions. However, the definition above leaves out several dragon-like beasts of which the most notable are:

1. *Cockatrices*
2. *Pyrolisks*
3. *Wyverns*
4. *Lindworms*
5. *Basilisks*

It is argued that the latter two beasts are to be considered of the serpent family rather than the dragon family. However, the first three beasts mentioned above are widely regarded as in fact being dragons. It has been an ongoing argument between the dragon-keepers of Britain and the Wizengamot, in which the Dragon-keepers argue that the definition of a dragon should be amended to include the above mentioned creatures.

Fortunately for the Wizengamot, in the common wizarding mind the creatures listed above have never in fact been viewed as anything but dragons definitions aside and therefore no one in their right mind has ever tried to breed or domesticate these beasts.

Severus straightened and looked up.

Lavender's cheeks had turned a bright blotchy red, her scars purple; the Weasleys were pale white; Thomas's face was a sickly greyish brown, and Robins was clenching her jaws so tight, Severus was expecting to hear her teeth crack from the pressure. Potter was the only one not exhibiting much distress. He was looking thoughtful more than anything.

"All o' those aren't dragons." Hagrid beamed at them. "Just a beast that is something else than a dragon."

"Hagrid," Potter said, "just because the law ..."

"Bu' tha's the beauty of it, see? We can work with beasts other than dragons, withou' breakin' the law."

"And which of these creatures are we going to meet today?" said Severus.

Hagrid chuckled. "Yer a sharp un'. Jus' like yer dad. We're goin' to have a closer look at a Pyrolisk. She arrived yesterday. Beautiful, she is. Yeh should know a couple o' things about' it before we go out, though. She's got scales, and she has wings an' can fly fairly well. She's tied down though. The chains are long, so ye'll have to watch out. The Pyrolisk doesn't breath fire; tha's why it's not considered a dragon. It's her gaze yeh need to worry about'. Her gaze can incinerate yeh."

"A bit like the Basilisk then," said Potter, looking gloomy.

"Tha's righ'."

Potter sighed deeply hearing Hagrid's answer. Potter showed no enthusiasm at all, and that surprised Severus. More than anything, Potter seemed tired.

"Don' worry Harry," said Hagrid, picking up on Harry's mood. "There's a difference, see. The Basilisk can't control it. It petrifies every livin' thing it happens to look in the eye. The Pyrolisk can control it." Hagrid gave the group a reassuring nod.

"Explain to me how it is good news that the beast has control and can aim," Severus said. He knew he was glowering at Hagrid but couldn't help himself.

"Not that I want to be a wet blanket or anything," Weasley said, "and not that I thought I would ever say these words, but Snape has a good point."

Severus repressed the urge to snarl and hex Weasley into oblivion.

"Now, don' worry. She migh' be able to aim, an' she aims well, too, but if yer observant, yeh can see when she's goin' to attack. She has three eyelids, see. The upper un', the lower un' an' the third un'. It's the third un' yeh need to watch."

"How can she see if her eyes are covered with an eyelid?" asked Ginny Weasley.

"Oh, she can see. It's just a thin membrane tha's see-through. As long as the third eyelid is closed, the eye looks yellow, bu' when the Pyrolisk lowers it, the eye starts changin' colour. Red, orange an' yellow, all swirlin' in her eyes. Really pretty. Jus' before she blasts ye', there is a tiny glint of blue in there. If ye' see tha' blue glint, yeh better get down." Hagrid chuckled.

"Does it have any weak points?" asked Potter. He sounded even more tired now, but it was an apt question. Very un-Potterish.

"O'course. Don' waste yer time tryin' to hit the body. Ye' aim at the forehead if she attacks. A stunner is good; tha' way she doesn' get too hurt."

"Anything that works is good, whether it kills it or not," Weasley said under his breath, earning himself a hard elbow in the ribs from his sister. Severus agreed with the boy. He showed a healthy dose of self-preservation, which wasn't to be frowned upon.

"Let's be off then," Hagrid said and rose from the table, heading for the door. Everyone rose, reluctantly following Hagrid out of the cabin. Severus swallowed his agitation and followed the others. He caught up with the group level with Hagrid's pumpkin patch. Lavender was lagging behind, and Severus walked up next to her. She threw him a quick glance and then looked down at the grass again as she continued walking beside him. Severus paused, wondering what to say.

After a moment, Severus knew his chance to talk to her had come and gone. He had waited too long to open a conversation, and the silence was getting awkward. He was wracking his brain for something, anything, to say, and he didn't notice that they had left the grounds of Hogwarts and were heading for the Forbidden Forest. He didn't even notice the stench of dragon dung at first.

But he did notice when Lavender came to an abrupt standstill. "Eurgh," she said, "that's so bad."

Severus looked up and realised that they were standing outside a big enclosure. Inside was the Pyrolisk, and it was the most bizarre creature Severus had ever had the misfortune to lay eyes on. He had seen pictures, but they hadn't done the creature justice.

It was bigger than an elephant, but only just, with a large head that had an odd pug-like quality, only it had scales instead of fur, just as Hagrid had told them. The protruding eyes were the size of bludgers. And it drooled. Long, slippery, foaming tendrils of saliva hung from its snout. The scales were greyish. Its backside and lizard-like tail were covered with feathers. Huge wings were folded over its back, the same way that some insects like flying ants folded them. Severus felt an almost overwhelming urge to laugh at the clumsy, disgusting creature, but succeeded in stifling it. It came out as a low snort instead.

"Isn't she gorgeous?" said Hagrid, looking at the monster in front of them, his adoration obvious.

The Pyrolisk hadn't noticed the small group of humans, Severus was sure of that, and looking at it, he found the creature's behaviour worrying. It was lumbering around the enclosure, and it seemed to Severus as if its behaviour was ... goal oriented. It was methodically searching out the places where the chains were fastened, and when it found one fastening, it kicked it a couple of times and then went to search out the next fastening point.

Severus had the unnerving feeling that she was looking for the weakest point.

"Blimey, Hagrid," said Weasley, "Do you reckon it's -- "

The Pyrolisk heard him and lifted its head. Severus watched as the creature turned around, looking straight at them, and to Severus's horror, it immediately opened its third eyelid. The eye was shifting in reds, oranges, yellows, and then it came, just as Hagrid had described it: blue, somewhere deep in the pupil.

He heard Potter shout to the others to get down, and Severus obeyed, going down with them.

"Stupefy her. Careful not to hurt her." Someone was roaring the words at the top of his lungs. Hagrid, Severus realised.

Severus's head snapped up. Potter had got to his feet, wand drawn, and was getting ready to take the creature on.

Severus rolled over, got up and in one swift movement drew his wand too.

"Get up, all of you!" Severus heard himself bark at the group of dazed students in the grass. "Potter can't take it down alone." Then Severus turned and faced the beast.

The Pyrolisk reared up on its hind legs and let out a furious screech, giving them the window they needed.

"Now!" Potter was taking the lead. Severus lifted his wand, and everyone sent their stunners flying. Seven red flashes hit the Pyrolisk two of them hitting the head. It looked dazed but reared up once again.

"Again!" Potter's roaring carried even over the Pyrolisk's screeching.

Seven new stunners flew through the air, and this time five stunners hit the beast in the head, four in the forehead. The animal went down on all fours again. It was unsteady now, rocking back and forth in front of them. It took two tottering steps towards Severus and shook its head. The next second, the beast's legs gave out from under it, and it fell on its belly with a hollow thump, and with an exhalation that sounded like a groan, the beast closed its eyes.

"Good work every'un," said Hagrid, looking at the group with an approving nod. "Yeh'll be able to handle dragons in no time at all, continuin' like this."

Severus inhaled deeply and searched for something, anything, to say that would express his feelings in a satisfactory manner.

He never got the chance to vent his frustration. Weasley who had been standing doubled over, supporting himself with his hands against his knees beat him to it. Weasley looked up at Hagrid with an incredulous expression on his face, shaking his head.

"Hagrid," he said, "my dad's a nutter. At least as far as bending the rules and Muggle artefacts goes. You shouldn't be listening to him."

As Severus listened to the following conversation, a feeling of unease started niggling at him. Something was wrong. He looked around, trying to locate what was bothering him. He found it.

The beast was moving again.

It was lifting its big head and opening its eyes, looking straight at Lavender. Then the beast's eyes started to swirl with colour once again.

Severus threw the Shield Charm just in time. The fire blast hit the shield full force. He saw how Lavender covered her head with her arms and turned her back to the flames in a knee jerk reaction that would have been of no use at all if the shield hadn't been in place.

The Pyrolisk realised almost immediately that it had been thwarted. It let out a furious roar and then turned its head in search of another victim. Its gaze touched Severus, but then it seemed to change its mind and turned its attention back to Lavender.

At the same moment, as Severus threw another Shield Charm in an attempt to protect Lavender, he realised his mistake. At the last second the Pyrolisk turned its head back towards Severus, the blue glint in the depth of her eyes more pronounced than ever.

In that split second, while the zinging of thrown stunners sounded around him, three disconnected thoughts ran like lightning through Severus's mind: that he could swear that the beast was giving him a sly smile; that there was no time for him to raise a shield to protect himself and that he should have had the good sense to stick to wool robes, no matter how much they itched.

Then Severus was hit by a blaze of fire.

Note: I want to thank the creators of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons who, very conveniently came up with the idea of the Pyrolisk. I have changed the beast to suit my purpose, but its main feature, shooting fire with its eyes, remains. No copyright infringement is intended, and I'm still not making any money. I do, however, hope the Pyrolisk's creator earns loads: that kind of imagination should be rewarded. The same of course goes for the divine J.K Rowlings.

Burnt

Chapter 9 of 10

Severus is, against all odds, still alive. But he's not exactly the way he used to be. And a second chance is difficult to handle.

Two things happened almost at the same time. Fire engulfed him with a loud roar, and at that moment Severus was convinced that he was going to die. But the split second after the flames engulfed him, a deluge of water hit him.

Instead of finding himself on fire with imminent death as a possibility and severe burns as a certainty he was standing in front of the fallen beast with his new robe in sodden tatters and the acrid smell of burnt hair assaulting his nose.

Severus took a staggering step and turned, trying to grasp what had happened, but as he did he overbalanced. His foot got trapped in a root, and he fell, landing on his hands and knees with a heavy thunk.

That was when the shouting and screaming began. Before he knew it, he was surrounded by the other students, and someone was kneeling in front of him.

"Oi, mate, are you okay?" Weasley said, placing his hand on Severus's shoulder. The touch stung, and Severus hissed with pain.

"Let go of me," Severus said at the same time Weasley yanked his hand back.

"He's in pain. Hagrid, we need to get him to the hospital wing," said Potter.

"It's all my fault, please ..." said Lavender, voice trembling.

"Leave me alone. I'm all right!" Pain had started to bloom on his chest, and it was spreading over his shoulder. He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek to counter the pain. It didn't work.

"Ye're not ok. Anyone can see tha'. Yeh have to keep calm now. Ron, yeh run on ahead an' tell Madam Pomfrey wha' happened."

Weasley got to his feet, and Severus could hear him set off running. The sound was gone within seconds.

Severus tried to get up, but he was still on his hands and knees, gritting his teeth in pain when Hagrid bent down and hoisted him up from the ground and into his arms. Just to make his humiliation complete, Hagrid carried him in the manner associated with the proverbial maiden in distress, which made Severus cringe.

"What are you doing? Let me down!" Severus made a violent attempt to get down and out of Hagrid's arms only to have Hagrid hold on to him even harder, and Severus's field of vision narrowed with the searing pain from his shoulders.

"I'm really sorry about this. I know yer in pain an' all, bu' we need to get yeh to the hospital wing as soon as we can, an' this is the fastest way."

And with that said, Hagrid ran towards the castle. He started out in a lumbering jog, but he gained speed fast, and in the end his pace was bone-jarring. It was a nightmare. The pain kept building as they went, and Hagrid's soothing mumbles didn't make any sense to Severus at all.

The next thing he knew, they had reached the castle. Hagrid didn't open the doors of Hogwarts' grand entrance. Instead he slammed into the heavy doors, shoulder first. The bang when the doors hit the walls inside the castle was deafening, and the noise made Severus groan and surface from the fog of pain that had engulfed him.

Everyone in the whole miserable school would hear and come running to see what was going on. It was that realisation that made Severus close his eyes for a moment, in a vain attempt to block out the snowballing melodrama.

"Sorry about tha'. We'll be there soon," said Hagrid, who was starting to sound winded. "Yer an uncomplainer sort. Jus' like yer dad. He didn' complain much either ... at least not about bein' in pain." Hagrid charged the stairs as he talked. "He complained about a lot o' other stuff though."

To Severus it felt like Hagrid was taking the stairs three steps at the time, and all the way up they passed a blur of faces. Severus didn't care anymore. His face was burning, and the searing pain covering his shoulders and chest was enough to make him whimper in distress.

Then Draco's drawl cut through the Hall. Severus made another attempt to clear his mind as he realised that the boy was following them up the stairs.

"What have you done to him?" Draco said.

Hagrid walked even faster hearing his voice.

"Nothin'," Hagrid said, sounding contrite.

"It doesn't look like nothing to me," said Draco. "He's burnt! What did you do?"

Another voice chimed in, accompanied by quick, sharp steps. The voice's owner had a pronounced Scottish brogue.

"Severus ... Severus, are you all right? What happened?" Minerva asked.

Severus turned his head in her direction attempting to calm her. It didn't work. As he turned his face in her direction, she gasped and turned her ire on Hagrid, ripping into him as they all half ran, half walked through the corridor.

"Are you breeding Blast-Ended Skrewts again? If you are, I will have to consider reporting it to the school governors," Minerva said, and her shrill tone of voice promised that if Hagrid was, he would be in a world of trouble.

Severus couldn't hold back another moan. The pain was getting worse, and the horror of being carried was immeasurable.

"Headmistress McGonagall, you heard that: he's in pain! If you don't take action, I will, and if you think my word counts for nothing just because I'm a Malfoy, you had better think again," said Draco, keeping pace with them.

"Mr Malfoy, did you just threaten me?" Minerva's shrill voice cut like glass through Severus.

"No, I didn't. I stated intent."

When had Draco decided to grow a backbone, Severus wondered. And why had Draco decided to show it now? The boy was flawed, he decided. He lacked self preservation. You just didn't go at Minerva like that if you wanted to keep all of your limbs.

The Care of Magical Creatures students had caught up with them somewhere along the way, Severus discovered, and they were gathered around him and Hagrid, keeping pace, also listening to Minerva and Draco's exchange.

"Ten points from Slytherin, Mr Malfoy."

"You are deducting house-points while that ... that ... oaf just gets away with bringing dangerous beasts to Hogwarts, even breeding them?"

"We don't know if that is the case yet, Mr Malfoy. Hagrid, I assume that I will not have to deal with Screws or illegal breeding of any kind?"

"No, yeh won't, Headmistress," said Hagrid, sounding more sure of himself now. "Nothin' illegal. It was jus' a Pyrolisk. An' I need to get this boy to the hospital wing right now!" Hagrid once more lengthened his stride. It wasn't much use; Minerva, Draco and the rest still kept up with them.

"A Pyrolisk?" asked Minerva. Now her voice sounded squeaky. Severus had never, in all the years he known her, heard her sound like that.

"Yep, a Pyrolisk," said Hagrid. "Almost as excitin' as a dragon ..."

Severus wanted to get down. It couldn't be more painful to walk on his own, compared to this.

"But you can't bring Pyrolisks into the school grounds!"

"I didn'. I put it in the Forbidden Forest. I read the school rules, see, an' tha's all right'."

"It's not allowed to keep Pyrolisks at all, Hagrid. It's a dragon! You can't keep dragons."

"No, it isn't," said Ginny Weasley from somewhere behind them. Weasley was keeping her tone of voice neutral. "It's like Hagrid said: Pyrolisks aren't dragons. He taught us that just this morning."

"Pardon me, Miss Weasley," said Minerva, her voice so cold that it was quite clear that she considered the girl's statement no less than treason.

"Here," said Weasley, and Severus could hear a rustling sound, not unlike dry leaves. "It seems that a while back, my Dad gave Hagrid some pointers about regulations, rules and where to find them."

Minerva fell quiet as she walked beside them.

"I understand," she said. "Hagrid, make sure Mr Snape gets adequate care. Since it is surprisingly quite all right to own and breed Pyrolisks, there isn't much I, or the school governors can do." She added, "Mr Malfoy, you will accompany Mr Snape. You seem to have become friends. You will tell Mr Snape that I'll be with him as soon as I have sent a couple of owls."

"Miss Weasley, your brother is still in Romania, isn't he?"

"Yes, Headmistress, and Dad still works at the Ministry," said the Weasley girl. "Did you know that you can't get Howlers into the Ministry? If you want one to get through, it needs camouflage."

It was quiet for a couple of moments, and Severus forced his eyes open, trying to get oriented again and see what was going on.

"Thank you, Miss Weasley. I'll bear that in mind," said Minerva, tone clipped, and then she hurried down the corridor in the other direction.

"Don't worry. He isn't getting away with this. I'll have a word with Mother," said Draco to Severus, coming up beside him. "I'm quite sure she can make the school governors see sense. I was slashed by a Hippogriff my third year, you know. The same class of course, with the same teacher ... I almost lost an arm ..." Draco let his voice trail off, and gave Hagrid a malevolent stare.

Hagrid gave Draco an equally malicious look in return.

"Oh, come off it, Malfoy. Yeh played tha' for all it was worth, yeh did. Yeh almost got Buckbeak killed, even though Madam Pomfrey had you patched up in no time."

"Would you stop bickering?" said Potter in an unexpected outburst. "It was really rotten luck, on Snape's part today. He did everything right, and he still ended up hurt. Let's just get him to the hospital wing so Madam Pomfrey can help, then you two can go duel. If you bring McGonagall, you can all have a tournament, for all I care."

With that, he strode up to Severus.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so," said Severus, at that point realising his voice didn't carry very well.

"Put him down, Hagrid," said Potter, giving Hagrid a stern look.

Hagrid's hold on Severus became even tighter for a second, but then he looked down at Severus. Severus couldn't interpret Hagrid's expression, but he was put down, and Hagrid only let go when he was assured that Severus was standing on his own.

"Could you use a hand?" asked Potter, looking wary and keeping his hands in his pockets.

Severus hesitated. He didn't want to admit it, but he was dizzy and nauseated, and standing on his own made the pain worse, after all. And it was Potter offering to help. He didn't want Potter's help. On the other hand, thought Severus as the burn in his chest seemed to expand, radiating pain, the boy owed him. He owed him a lot.

"I think I might," said Severus.

Without another word, Potter put his arm around his waist and let Severus support himself on his shoulder. After hesitating, Draco stepped up and held onto Severus from the other side, and the three of them started to walk towards the hospital wing, with Hagrid and the rest of the students following them.

"When you meet Madam Pomfrey ... she's our mediwitch," said Potter, "just remember that she means well, ok? She'll be fussing. She'll put you to bed and throw the rest of us out, the general idea being that your friends tire you out and are a nuisance. That's when she'll start prodding and ordering you about. But still, she means well."

Draco heard what Potter said and gave a derisive snort.

"You'd know, Potter. She's fussed over you enough times anyway."

Severus had known Poppy for a long time and, for once, he agreed with Potter. As annoying as she could be, she always did mean well.

"Come on, Snape. Not far now," said Potter, and hoisted Severus up again, since he was slumping precariously.

"How is he?"

It was Lavender's voice, sounding distraught.

"I'll live," Severus said, making a failed effort to sound dismissive.

"How do you feel?" He felt her touch his hand. The one hanging over Potter's shoulder. She had cool, dry hands that sent a small shiver through him. He assumed it was because the rest of him was warm and parts of him were burning with pain.

"I ..."

Severus never got the chance to finish the sentence. They had arrived at the hospital wing, and Poppy was meeting them at the door.

"Potter, I should have known you'd be involved," Poppy said, giving Potter a stern look.

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey. I'm not the one hurt this time, though," said Potter with a nod in Severus direction.

"No, I can see that, and I'm glad. You've had more than your share of trouble. Get him on the bed over there." Poppy pointed at the closest bed.

Draco gave an inarticulate grunt as a response since Severus was leaning heavily on him and Potter by now. Severus was getting so tired. His chest hurt. He could even feel his own pulse beating in the wounds.

He was helped inside and seated on one of the hospital beds and given a Calming Draught. It didn't take away all the pain, just enough to make it possible to follow what was going on around him a bit better. He sat huddled on the bed, both arms held around his body, not caring that he probably looked defensive and miserable.

She made a quick examination of Severus's face and scalp, simultaneously making a couple of tutting noises.

"I'm not fond of the idea of yet another accident-prone boy at Hogwarts, mind you. We seem to be growing them by the dozen." She looked at his chest without touching it as she spoke.

"It could have been worse, I suppose. Robins and Weasley drenching you with water seems to have helped a bit. What are you lot standing there for? Out, everyone. Get moving. He needs to lie down so I can get some proper work done, and the patient needs peace and quiet."

Harry gave him an awkward nod when he turned to leave, which Severus didn't acknowledge. There were a lot of dissatisfied mumbles the most vocal being Hagrid but everybody left the room. The only one who stayed put next to his bed was Draco.

"I'm not leaving," he said, his upper-class accent more pronounced than ever.

"Yes, you are, Mr Malfoy," said Poppy, her voice cold and dismissive.

"No, I'm not. Headmistress McGonagall told me to stay with him, and I will."

Draco looked less than sure of himself, though, and he had an almost unhappy air, but before Severus had time to analyse why, Poppy looked at Draco and then gave him a curt nod.

"You may stay then, if you make yourself useful. Go to the medical cabinet in my office, and fetch me the roll of silver netting and the jar that says: For burns."

Malfoy hesitated, and then, with an unaccustomed willingness, he obeyed the order.

Poppy had vanished his robe, and used a freezing charm to cool his burns. He watched as she made the complicated wand movements that ensured precision application of the spell. A couple of cleansing spells were used too, as Draco returned with the items Poppy had asked for.

She gave Draco a quick glance and then narrowed her eyes. Then she asked, "Why do I want the silver netting, Mr Malfoy?"

Draco gave her a confused look as she lifted a bowl of water from the bedside table. "I ... I don't know, Madam."

"Silver has anti-bacterial properties. That's also why it works against werewolves, for example. Lycanthropy is a bacterial infection of sorts. You can also dress open burns with it to prevent infection. Even Muggles use it."

She gave Draco a wet cotton cloth, lathered with soap.

"Wash Mr Snape's burns with this first."

A flicker of panic crossed Draco's face. Then he adopted a haughty look.

"There are cleansing charms, you know."

"Yes, I know. I've already preformed those. They aren't enough, though. They never are."

Draco's shoulders slumped.

"I've never done ..."

"Then it's about time, isn't it? Wash the burns. I'll hold the bowl of water for you while you do it."

Draco gave Severus a pleading look that turned into an embarrassed blush, but Severus ignored it. He felt well enough to want to see how Draco would handle it.

"I'll try to be careful," said Draco. "Just ... be sure to tell me if I hurt you."

Draco refused to look at Severus while he washed his burns, and in the end Severus was surprised: Draco was careful and meticulous when cleaning the wounds.

It seemed that Draco had made an impression on Poppy, too. She kept the boy busy, making him put the silver in place over the wounds on his chest while she dressed it. His chest was the only place where the fire had burnt through several layers of the skin.

The wounds were not pretty: crimson red and looking disgusting since a yellowish discharge was also running from them by now. It stung so badly as they were treated that he couldn't control the clattering of his teeth. The Calming Draught Poppy had administered only gave him partial relief from the pain, and he was exhausted when they were finished.

Draco, pale as he always was, was even paler by the time he placed the last piece of silver net.

That was when Draco was ordered to cut Severus's hair and, odd as it was, that was the worst part of it all. Not that he had much hair left as it was. He didn't even want to contemplate what he looked like now, feeling almost bald with only half an inch of hair left.

When Poppy administered the sleeping draught, he was grateful.

Hogwarts was a foul, insane place, he decided and as soon as he was rested he was getting out of here. He was a bloody fantastic potions brewer, and he could support himself as such.

The last thing he heard before drifting off was Poppy:

"Not at all as useless as one might have been led to expect, Mr Malfoy. I'll have a word with the Headmistress about you," she said.

Pierced

Chapter 10 of 10

Severus is, against all odds, still alive. But he's not exactly the way he used to be. And a second chance is difficult to handle.

He woke with a start when the curtains around his bed were separated with a screeching rattle.

"And how are we today, Mr Snape? We do look better, I must say."

Poppy was standing at the foot of the bed, peering at him. And he knew her: she would look for any trace of weakness, and if she found one imaginary or otherwise he would be confined to this bed for unknown amount of time.

"I am very well, thank you," Severus said. "How are you, Madam Pomfrey?"

Poppy chuckled.

"Snarky this morning, are we? If you're anything like your father, that's a good sign."

Without any warning, she yanked off his duvet and threw two quick spells that fizzed over his body, glowed green and disappeared. As the spells danced over him, she looked him over her gaze lingering on his chest and head and then nodded to no one in particular. She did so without once meeting his eyes. It was an odd habit of hers that she always displayed when she evaluated her patients. He had always found it disconcerting.

"Any aches or pains?" she asked.

He had. But only minor ones. The burns still stung a bit, but they were mending, and his face felt normal. He gingerly put his hand on his head, hoping his hair had grown back. It hadn't. It was still cropped close to his head. He would have to get used to having short hair. He didn't want to, but on the other hand it was habit, more than anything, that had made him wear it long. Habit created by the fact that his long hair had irritated his father no end.

"Not really, no "

"Good. We were worried for a while. You've slept for two days."

"It's Wednesday?"

"No." Poppy smiled at him. "It's Thursday morning. We've all been very worried. I've had my hands full trying to stop your friends from sneaking in. Mr Malfoy has been the worst." Poppy, having said that, frowned and pursed her lips so hard they turned white around the edges and continued, "Narcissa Malfoy sent me a Howler! A Howler! Would you believe the nerve of that woman?" Poppy fluffed his pillow in such an aggressive way that Severus hauled himself into a sitting position to avoid having his head shaken.

"Friends? And why would Draco's mother send you a Howler?" Severus asked, since Poppy's agitation made it impossible to sort out what she was talking about.

"She claimed that Hogwarts was trying to cover up that you were hurt by that beast of Hagrid's. And that was helping by keeping the severity of your injuries hidden."

Poppy's voice was shrill from indignation, and she continued her annoyed muttering until a knock on the door interrupted her rant. With a last glance at him, she stalked to the door and opened it. Severus leaned back against the pillow and looked at his bedside table. It was covered with an enormous number of ... things. He sat up again and moved closer.

A large box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans was the closest item. A card with an untidy scrawl he identified as Weasley's was attached to it. He picked it up and read:

I would steer clear of the yellow ones, if I was you.

Ron and Ginny Weasley

Severus looked at the box. He used to like Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans. When she was still alive, his mum had always bought them for him at Christmas, and they had had fun sharing the box and eating the beans. First they had divided the content in the box into two piles: those that looked like they would taste good, and those that looked like they would taste bad. Each pile was divided in two so that they both got their fair share of good and bad. Then they ate. The system was dodgy at best. He couldn't help but smile at the memory. He hadn't thought of that in years. When he reached for the box, his gaze fell on another item: a single chocolate-frog box. Bemused, he reached for that box instead, opened it and deftly caught the frog before it got away.

And then he saw the card.

His own face was looking back at him with cold black eyes, a cocked brow and a sneer. As he looked at the image of himself, it gave him a haughty glare, turned and left the picture.

He read the text underneath the now-empty portrait.

Severus Snape,

Potions master and DADA professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Later Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Considered by many to be one of the greatest wizards of our time.

Serving as a spy for the Order of the Phoenix, he managed to infiltrate the inner circle of Tom Riddle and eventually become one of his most trusted followers. He died 2 May, 1998, at the age of 38, by the hand of Tom Riddle. At the time Severus Snape was attempting to find Harry Potter and provide him with essential information so that victory could be assured. He succeeded in his mission, as he conveyed the information to Harry Potter just moments before he died.

Severus read the card again. He was pleased that the card made it sound as if he had managed to reach Potter, rather than that Severus having been found dying by the boy. 'One of the greatest wizards of our time' pleased him the most though. As far as he knew, only Albus had anything like that printed on his card. He had gotten some of the recognition he had deserved. Even if it was on a Wizard collectible card. He could frame it. No one would find it strange, him having a picture of his father.

In the box was also another note with an even untidier scrawl.

You probably have it already, but just in case.

Harry Potter

The card was a gift from Potter.

Severus sank back against the pillows and ate the frog while staring at the two notes, not knowing what to think about Potter. He looked at the bedside table again and took inventory of the gifts. It seemed like everyone in the Care of Magical Creatures class had sent him something. He had even got a book from Mr Ollivander. A thick, worn, leather-bound tome with the alluring title *The Magic Woods of Celtic Lore*

The last gift was a small green package with silver ribbons. It was, by far, the most elaborately wrapped gift of the lot, and Severus couldn't help feeling curious. He reached for it and unwrapped the pretty package. Inside, he found an earring with a silver dragon hanging from it.

An earring? Who would give him an earring? He didn't even have his ears pierced.

He looked for a note and he found one in the lid of the box, the message written in small, precise letters.

To my saviour

LB

He looked at the earring again. It was a ridiculous gift. It was stupid and inane. And no one who knew him would ever have given him something like this. He held the offending item between his thumb and forefinger, wondering what to do with it. He wanted to throw it away, but if he did, he would ensure that Lavender would feel slighted.

At that point, he became aware of the two raised voices over by the door.

"Mr Malfoy. I know that you're worried about your friend, but I can assure you "

"I suppose I'll have to owl Mother again. Something is obviously wrong and "

Draco's slow drawl was designed to be annoying, and Poppy's upset huff made Severus realise that without his intervention, he would have to endure listening to the two of them quarrel for some time.

Severus lay down again, pulled the duvet up to his chin and made an effort to look forlorn.

"Madame Pomfrey. I would like to thank Draco for his help the other day. If I may?" Severus said, making a stab at sounding pleading.

Poppy turned her head and looked at him. Her expression of annoyance disappeared and was replaced with one of indulgence instead.

"Of course you may. But not too long, mind you."

She looked back at Draco, straightened her neck and then with another huff and a few unidentifiable mutterings she stepped aside and let him in.

Draco, in turn, gave Poppy a haughty look as he swept past her. He pulled up a chair, sat down and put the big box he was carrying on the floor.

"Merlin, you're good. Very impressive, I must say," he said.

Severus didn't even bother to pretend that he didn't know what Draco was talking about.

"It got you in, didn't it? Has no one ever told you, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar?"

Draco smirked.

"Your father did. He had a bit of a rant about it in the Slytherin common room once. I assume he was trying to save time by ranting at all of us together, instead of one at a time. Not very convincing, though, from a man in the habit of blowing up rose bushes when he was annoyed."

Severus cocked a deliberate eyebrow at Draco, who paled.

"Oh, I'm I'm sorry. I liked him. It hasn't really sunk in that he's gone."

Severus didn't answer. He shrugged and looked away instead.

"I think Madam Pomfrey was impressed with you the other day," Severus said, wanting to get away from the subject of his supposed death and the uncomfortable silence.

"Yeah." Draco paused. "About that: Pomfrey told McGonagall what happened, and she thinks I should try for a career as a Healer instead of one in banking."

Severus looked at Draco, who was fidgeting and not meeting his eye. Not many Healers came from the House of Slytherin. For the most part, they came from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. Draco must have done well, though, to have Poppy bothering to speak for him. As far as he knew, she had only done that twice before.

"Well, banking is prudent, I suppose, but I would say becoming a Healer would be even more so," Severus said. "What did McGonagall say?"

"She sided with Madam Pomfrey when they spoke to me, and she'd already sent Mother an owl about it. Mother sent McGonagall a return owl carrying a Howler. The Howler literally hit McGonagall's breakfast yesterday morning." Draco sniggered. "Mother hates the idea of me, and I quote, working in and with filth."

"I take it this particular career choice wouldn't be to your family's liking, then?"

"No. It wouldn't go down well at all. Not enough money in it, for starters." Draco stopped sniggering and was now staring at his hands, fiddling with the cuffs of his robes.

"How would your Father have felt about you being a wandmaker, do you think?" Draco asked.

Severus chose to tell him the truth. "I don't care. His expectations never meant anything to me."

"I might like being a Healer," Draco said.

Severus snorted. "How very decisive of you."

"You sarcastic git! I might be disinherited, for all you know." Draco cheeks turned a pale pink.

Severus couldn't help himself. He laughed. "No, you will not. You forget that Father told me all about you and your parents. Your mother dotes on you."

"And I would have to change my curriculum," said Draco, looking petulant. "Much more work."

Severus's retort died somewhere between his brain and his lips as he looked at Draco's burning cheeks and angry scowl. The boy wanted this. Something had sparked an interest in Draco that day. Draco, who used to be one of those children who was good at most of what they did but not passionate about anything. This, Draco wanted.

"Do it then," Severus said.

Draco looked up at him, slack-jawed and wide eyed. Then he visibly relaxed and snapped his jaws together again. "It isn't like my parents' choices have been all that great, is it?"

"Not especially, no," Severus said, amused by Draco's realistic view of his parents, far removed from the hero-worship of his father that had been almost painful to witness. Lucius didn't deserve that kind of admiration, as far as Severus was concerned.

"So, you are going to listen to McGonagall and Pomfrey, then? Take their advice?"

Draco nodded and smoothed down his already smooth robes.

"Yeah. I never did want to work with numbers anyway."

"What will you tell your parents?"

"I'll lie. I'll tell them when I leave Hogwarts. They can't do anything about it then."

Severus nodded. "You should get McGonagall to help you with that," he said.

"You think she will?"

"Of course she will. She'll love it. She sent that owl, didn't she?"

Draco smiled, a broad smile that was too big for his thin face, giving him a clownish look. It felt strange for some reason, and Severus realised that Draco very rarely had looked happy in the past. He had sneered or smirked, but seldom smiled.

"Do you know why your mother sent a Howler to Madam Pomfrey by the way?" Severus asked, remembering Poppy's agitation before Draco arrived.

Draco laughed, this time with real amusement.

"So, Pomfrey got a Howler too, did she? I wrote Mother about what happened to you. She wrote back, something about a life-debt to your father and us having a duty to protect you."

Narcissa did owe him, of course. He had wondered how he could use that in the guise of being his own son. It seemed that it would be easier than expected, since she seemed to feel responsible for him already.

"Mother sent you this. I almost forgot."

Draco retrieved the box from the floor and put it on the bed.

"Open it," he said, looking expectant. "I told her your robes were burnt to ashes."

"Rags would have been a more accurate description."

"Ashes sounded better. More dramatic." Draco laughed again.

Severus couldn't help smirking at Draco as he opened the box.

Blue wizard dress-robos were placed folded so neatly only the magic of a house-elf could achieve the effect on top of the items inside.

It was, without a doubt, silk. Spider silk, even. The kind Lucius favoured. He placed the robes on the bed. They were the kind of robes so expensive he would never be able to afford them himself. He ran his hand over the silver embroidery around the collar, wondering when he would ever have the opportunity to wear something so exclusive. With a last stroke of the hand, he tore his gaze away from it and looked in the box again, convinced nothing in it could compete with the robes.

Next, he found two plain black robes, the kind he could use every day made of wool. The quality of the wool cloth was so soft it could have been made of the finest cotton. He suspected he would find that they didn't itch either. He was pleased. The robes were also welcome additions, since he had ended up in Potions, after all.

That was when he saw the book. Because it was without doubt a book, wrapped in velvet cloth. He lifted it out of the box, put it on his lap and removed the protective wrapping.

He had admired it so many times. He had read it reverently when he visited Malfoy Manor. It was the *Biblia Magyck*, believed to have been written by Merlin himself. Three known copies existed in the world and only one in Britain.

Only one had had a private owner.

And now it was his.

He opened it, and it was like he remembered it: the historiated initials alone were alluring enough to keep his attention for hours. It was always an animal depicted, together with a man Severus assumed was Merlin. And the texts were equally astounding. He turned the vellum pages with reverent care.

"What is it?" Draco asked.

Severus's first impulse was to clutch the book to his chest, not letting it go, but then with great reluctance he let Draco take it.

"She gave you this?" Draco took the book, opened it and thumbed through it with such lack of regard that Severus retrieved the book again, tempted to smack Draco hard over the head.

"Sorry about that, but at least you got some decent robes. And you could always sell the book. If Father bought it, it's probably worth a lot."

Severus repressed an urge to inform Draco of the greatness of it, the historical value and the magic hidden within. He had no intention of informing anyone of the treasure that had been given him.

"I can help pack the rest of your stuff, if you like," Draco said and nodded at the things on the bedside table.

Severus hesitated, surprised by the offer.

"Yes. Yes, please," he said.

Severus wrapped up the book again, and together, he and Draco started to gather the gifts, placing them in the box. Severus was putting one of the black robes aside for later when Draco, sounding disgusted, asked, "What's this? You wear earrings?"

Severus looked up to see him standing by the bedside table, holding the earring in the palm of his hand.

"No, it's a gift."

"From whom? And what was he thinking?" Draco grimaced.

"Brown gave it to me. As a thank you gesture, I assume."

Draco fell quiet, looking at the earring for a long time, turning it over a couple of times, wrinkling his nose. "Oh," he said.

"And I will have to wear it."

Draco shuddered. "But it's tacky."

"And? I want to get at Zabini." He was not going to admit to Draco that he intended to protect Lavender from those who wanted to take advantage.

Draco smirked.

"That's a good thing: getting at Zabini. Anything I can do to help?"

Severus contemplated the question for a moment.

"The seating arrangements in Potions," Severus said. "I think Brown will make a good addition to our table."

Draco bit his lower lip and frowned.

"Are you going to be there, then? I think Pomfrey might plan to keep you here for a bit longer," said Draco.

"What you plan and what actually happens aren't always the same thing, are they?" Severus answered. "And you are also going to pierce my ear."

"No!"

"Yes, you are. I told you I need to wear that earring."

"That's a bit excessive, don't you think? She's a Mudblood. She isn't worth that kind of sacrifice."

"Don't use that word." Severus heard himself growl at Draco. He made an attempt to suppress his anger when Draco took a defensive step back, eyes widening. Severus pulled himself together enough to continue.

"It's worth it if it gives me an edge over Zabini."

Draco gave a derisive sniff.

"You saved her life. How much of an edge do you reckon you need?"

Severus became so annoyed, he wanted to shake Draco. Pretty-boy Draco who like his obnoxious father had no idea what it was like to be ugly and poor. Severus bit down, hard, on the inside of his cheek, the pain helping him to regain some balance.

"You always need an extra edge. Saving her was chance. She might think or she might even have been told by now that I would have done it for anyone in the group. And I probably would have."

Severus pointed at the idiotic piece of jewellery Draco was still holding.

"Wearing that, however, will show that I care about her opinion of me. Care that she thanked me. You should know these things. You're Slytherin too."

Severus fell quiet, and so did Draco. Severus assumed that he was trying to look serious, but he was failing. Draco was, in fact, looking amused.

"Her opinion," said Draco. "Right. Good thinking." He got to his feet, checking that Madam Pomfrey wasn't around. "Let's fix that ear, then."

Draco drew his wand. He looked at the earring, turned it over and tapped it with his wand.

"Extendere spiculus."

Severus was not pleased when he saw how the earring sprouted a long, sharp needle. Draco smirked at him.

"This will make things easier," said Draco.

"What are you doing?" asked Severus. "You are not using that needle on me. Use a piercing hex!"

"I don't do those. I don't do searing or slashing curses, either. Put it down to bad experience."

"But sticking a needle through my earlobe isn't a problem for you?"

"By comparison? No."

And without hesitation, Draco waved his wand again. Severus didn't have time to react before his whole body became stiff and immobile, and he fell back against the

pillows on the bed.

Draco's head and shoulders came into Severus's field of vision as Draco leaned over him, taking a firm hold on Severus's ear.

"Sorry about this. Can't have you flinching. It would be a bloodbath, and I don't think Pomfrey would like that."

And, with that said, he stabbed the needle through Severus's earlobe.

Comment: *Extendere spiculus* is my invention. It hopefully means something close to *lengthen needle*.