

His First

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1: The First He Had to Protect

Chapter 1 of 12

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Special thanks go to my faithful beta, Appleblossom.

Chapter 1: The First He Had to Protect

Severus Snape, newly appointed Potions master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was standing in front of the Deputy Headmistress' desk with his head held high and his hands clasped behind his back. And he couldn't help but put his chin out just a little bit. Minerva McGonagall was not going to make him feel like a student once more. He was her colleague now, a teacher like her. She was not going to intimidate him. And she was most certainly not going to tell him how he was supposed to do his job. But exactly that seemed to be her intention.

'As Head of House, it is your responsibility to talk to the girl,' she pointed out, fixing Snape with a look that would make anyone else rush to the task, never daring to contradict her. But Snape wasn't having any of it.

'Miss McKibben will be of age in three weeks,' he argued. 'If she does not want to continue her Defence Against the Dark Arts studies, there is little I can do.'

The Deputy Headmistress pursed her lips. 'In three weeks' time, yes. Today, Miss McKibben is still under-age, and seeing that her father has not given his permission for her to drop Defence Against the Dark Arts, she is skipping classes. And that, Severus, is something you, her Head of House, will have to address. Furthermore, it is in your own interest that your students do well. Miss McKibben's Defence grades have always been excellent. It would be a waste of talent if she dropped the subject in her NEWT year. It will make Slytherin lose valuable House points.' She shrugged and managed to look indifferent. 'But if you want the House Cup to go to Gryffindor, be my guest.'

Snape gritted his teeth. McGonagall had always known how to push his buttons, already when he had been her student. She knew perfectly well that Slytherins were ambitious and competitive by nature and that he Slytherin as he was would have to make sure now that the House Cup would stand in *his* study by the end of the school year, even if it meant that he had to interact with students outside his classroom, a task which he had avoided so far.

'You'll have to talk to the girl right away, Severus,' McGonagall added. 'She has already missed two classes, and you don't want her to fall behind, now do you?'

Of course, Snape didn't want that. He wanted that House Cup, and to get it, he needed his students to achieve as many Outstandings in their exams as possible. And he would make that very clear to Miss McKibben. He would give her detention for the two Defence classes she had skipped. He would also add one extra detention because

her skipping class had resulted in him having been called to McGonagall's office. And yet another detention he would add because he had to call Miss McKibben to his office. He had far better things to do on a Friday night than talk to a student.

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A few minutes later, Snape slammed the door of his study shut behind him, almost begging for someone to come knocking so he would have someone to yell at. But the three Slytherin first-years that had been unfortunate enough to meet their Head of House in the dark dungeon corridor were now back in their dormitories, shaking and wiping off their tears. None of them would dare disturb Snape that night, not even if the Slytherin common room were on fire.

A well-placed hex sent a couple of phials smashing into the dungeon wall, and the sound of breaking glass that followed was like sweet music to Snape's ears. And the thought of those phials smashing against someone's head instead of the wall was more than satisfying. McGonagall's head, maybe, or McKibben's. Or Dumbledore's, or the Dark Lord's.

Snape sneered. He had understood the cleverness of Dumbledore and the Dark Lord's plans that put him in a teaching position at Hogwarts. It meant that he could spy for both sides and no one would ever be the wiser. And it had not seemed like too bad an idea in the beginning. His position enabled Snape to enjoy the privileges of being a Hogwarts teacher, eat three meals a day, sleep in a warm bed and receive a pretty well-filled bag of Galleons at the end of every month. And maybe, just maybe, the role he was playing would show Lily that he wasn't like the Death Eaters-to-be he had hung out with while they had still been at school. Maybe, she would be awed by the fact that he had thrown himself into mortal danger to bring the Dark Lord down and at the same time protect her. Maybe, when everything was over, Lily would come back to him. Maybe ...

Snape shook his head and banished the picture of Lily Evans yes, Evans, not Potter out of his mind. He had sworn not to think of her. It was too dangerous. If the Dark Lord ever found out just how much Snape cared about her ...

Back to the task at hand then, Snape thought and groaned. He had most certainly not signed up for this. Teaching Potions was bad enough. He hated sharing his passion with a bunch of untalented nitwits. He had racked his brain to come up with another position he could fill at Hogwarts that would enable him to be around Dumbledore almost twenty-four hours a day. Teaching Defence would not have been half as bad as teaching Potions, but Dumbledore had turned Snape down. And Snape had accepted the Headmaster's decision. For the time being, at least. Should he still be at Hogwarts in one year's time, he would apply for the Defence post once more. And that time, he would get it. But most probably, he would not last a year, Snape admitted grudgingly. He wasn't teacher material, he knew that very well. His standards were too high and his tolerance too low to endure babbling teenagers. Sooner or later, he would either poison one of them or suffer a stroke.

The only thing at Hogwarts Snape hated more than teaching, however, was being Head of House. It was bad enough to endure teenage idiocy for the duration of a Potions lesson. But having to talk to those dunderheads in private, discussing everything from grades over family matters to pimples and hormones, that was something Snape hated with a passion. He had almost hexed the little, timid-looking first-year who had come knocking on his door two days into term, telling him in a tear-filled voice that she was homesick and wanted to speak to her mother. After that, Snape had made sure to always wear a scowl outside his office. Maybe, he thought, if he looked intimidating enough, none of his House would be brave enough or stupid enough to come knocking on his door. So far, this strategy seemed to be working, Snape concluded. He had now been working at Hogwarts for two weeks, and no one else had dared approach him or disturb him in his study. And he had been thoroughly enjoying the lack of professor-student-interaction. But now, McGonagall had told him that he actually had to call one of his students into his office in order to remind the girl that slackness would not be tolerated in Slytherin House. Oh, McKibben would pay for that.

She arrived less than five minutes after Snape had sent an elf to fetch her. The knock on the door was firm, and judging from it, Snape expected a broad-shouldered, sturdy girl to enter. But he knew that he was wrong. It had taken him only a day or two to learn the names of the students in Slytherin House, and he knew that Nadezhda McKibben was anything but broad-shouldered and sturdy. Instead she was tall and slender and moved so silently that the only sound announcing her entering Snape's study was the creaking of the heavy oak door.

'You wished to see me, Professor.'

Snape slowly put down his quill and equally slowly lifted his eyes from the parchment in front of him to look at the girl. She stood very straight, her arms hanging seemingly relaxed at her sides and her eyes respectfully lowered to the floor. Everything about Nadezhda McKibben's posture spoke of an upbringing in a fine Wizarding household, where she had been taught to look pretty and modest and keep her mouth shut. Just as all the daughters of old Wizarding families were taught. Most probably, Snape thought, the girl was already betrothed. Most probably, she would have been bred by the age of twenty. Most probably, it didn't matter whether she studied Defence or not. She would marry a nice pureblood boy, have nice pureblood babies and would never have to work a single day in her life.

'Miss McKibben, do you know why you are here?' Snape asked in a cold tone, making an active decision to not offer the girl a seat. He didn't want this conversation to last even a second longer than necessary. He still considered the meeting to be a waste of time.

The girl shook her head. 'No, sir,' she replied, her voice firm but her eyes still cast to the floor.

'Professor McGonagall informs me that you have decided not to continue with your best subject at NEWT level,' Snape explained. He had the girl's OWL grades in front of him. She had achieved Exceeds Expectations in Potions, Transfiguration, and Herbology and Outstanding in Defence Against the Dark Arts and Charms. 'Care to explain?'

Once more, the girl shook her head, a gesture which made her long, raven black hair fall from her shoulders and obscure her face.

'Miss McKibben, I expect to be given an answer when I ask a question,' Snape barked.

The girl mumbled something something in reply, and Snape couldn't decide whether her mumbling annoyed him or disappointed him. The girl had looked rather confident when she had entered his study, just as confident as she did when walking down the corridors or to her bench in his classroom. Snape had hoped for this confidence to last a little bit longer than two minutes.

'Miss McKibben,' he addressed her, his voice now low and threatening, 'speak up when you are talking to me.'

The girl hesitated a moment before she spoke. 'My father said it wouldn't be fitting for me to study Defence Against the Dark Arts.'

Snape raised an eyebrow in surprise. 'And why is that, Miss McKibben?'

'I think you know the reason, sir.'

The cheek! Snape's black eyes flashed dangerously. He did not care much for the tone the girl was suddenly taking.

'Miss McKibben,' he hissed. 'You are testing my patience. I demand a straight answer now: why would you or your father, for that matter think it unfitting for you to continue studying Defence Against the Dark Arts, your best subject?'

The girl's head snapped up, and Snape found himself staring into a pair of green eyes that made the breath catch in his throat. Emerald green and almond-shaped, just like Lily's, but framed with long, dark lashes. And in Nadezhda McKibben's eyes was not a trace of the smile he had so often seen in Lily's eyes when they had been children. The eyes he was staring into now were empty of any emotion and cold like a frozen lake.

'The reason why it is unfitting for me to study Defence Against the Dark Arts, sir,' the girl started, her voice just as empty of emotion as her eyes, 'is branded onto your left forearm. And in three weeks' time, it will also be on mine.'

Snape swallowed. Branded onto his left forearm. The girl must be talking about the Dark Mark. But how did she know?

His mind started to work feverishly. McKibben. McKibben. Who was the girl's father? In front of Snape's inner eye, there popped up the image of a middle-aged, balding

wizard. Quite wrinkly, with dark shadows under his eyes. He was working for the Ministry. Or at least, that was where he was getting his monthly Galleons from. In fact, he was working for the Dark Lord. Snape had no idea if McKibben carried the Dark Mark, but from what he had heard so far, it seemed as if the girl was prepared to take it. In three weeks' time, when she came of age.

'Have a seat, Miss McKibben,' Snape said, trying to keep both his voice and his facial expression neutral. He had to let her sit down now. Most probably, it would be advisable to even put the kettle on. Their conversation was about to take much longer than he had anticipated.

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'There is nothing we can do, Severus.'

Snape gritted his teeth. He knew, of course, that he was not to meddle, that it would be dangerous to even think about it, but still he did not like Dumbledore's answer. Were they to sit back and watch as one of their students joined the ranks of the Death Eaters? A young, innocent girl? A girl who most probably had no idea what it meant to be a servant of the Dark Lord? There must be something they could do.

'You have spoken to Miss McKibben, I assume?' Dumbledore asked calmly.

'With little effect,' Snape growled. 'The girl is brainwashed. She thinks that it is an honour to receive the Dark Mark.' He let himself fall onto the chair which Dumbledore had offered him over ten minutes ago. 'She has no idea what lies in store for her.'

'*Brainwashed* might be the wrong word to use,' Dumbledore pointed out, pushing a cup of tea towards his Potions master. 'The girl has been raised in family where blood purity has always been highly valued. She has been fed with Voldemort's propaganda from the very start. For her, his truth is the truth.'

Snape snorted. What Dumbledore had just said was the best definition of brainwashed he had ever come across.

'From what Miss McKibben told me,' he continued, 'she is expecting to be given the Dark Mark in three weeks, on the night of her seventeenth birthday. Can we not just forbid her to leave the castle that night?'

Dumbledore smiled kindly. 'Forbid her to leave the castle? Dear Severus, would me forbidding you to leave have made you stay in your dormitory the night Lucius Malfoy took you to meet Lord Voldemort for the first time?'

'This is different, Headmaster. The girl is innocent.'

'And you weren't?'

To that, Snape said nothing. He had no intention of discussing the purity of his soul with Dumbledore tonight. What he wanted was to make sure that the girl's soul was given a chance to remain pure.

'There must be something we can do, Headmaster,' he urged once more.

Dumbledore nodded pensively and started pacing his office. At the window, he lingered, petting his Phoenix with his left hand. 'Maybe there is, Severus,' he said slowly. 'But it will require something you don't like doing.'

Snape frowned. There were many things he did not like doing. What could the Headmaster be after?

'It will require you interacting with a student outside your classroom. Miss McKibben has missed two Defence lessons and has fallen behind. I also believe she deserves detention for having skipped those two classes. Let her serve detention with you, Severus. Teach her white magic and listen to her reasons for choosing the dark. Maybe, you will be able to find a counter argument. Maybe, you will be able to change her mind.'

2: The First He Got to Know

Chapter 2 of 12

Severus Snape has been teaching at Hogwarts for only a few weeks when he realises that being Head of House is not going to be as easy as he had hoped.

Chapter 2: The First He Got to Know

'I hear you have already made quite an impression on some of your students, Severus. However, I recall that being put in detention has never made a good impression on anyone.'

Snape felt a muscle in his jaw twitch, but he was quite certain that the Dark Lord had not noticed. It was too dark for that in Lucius Malfoy's drawing room. Now all he had to do was keep his voice steady and his thoughts obscured.

'I assume you are referring to Miss McKibben, my Lord.'

Voldemort nodded slowly, a movement which reminded Snape of a giant cobra that was ready to strike and kill.

'The girl has written to her father,' Voldemort explained. 'And he, in his turn, is not too happy about the fact that his daughter has been put in detention. As I understand, her record has so far been spotless.'

'Miss McKibben skipped classes,' Snape explained, fully aware that the Dark Lord didn't really care about his measures of discipline. 'Insubordination must not be tolerated.'

'I agree with you, Severus,' Voldemort consented. 'Discipline must be enforced. And our subjects forgive me your students, need to be shown every now and then who is in charge. But the girl also wrote that you are making her take up Defence Against the Dark Arts again.'

'I am indeed, my Lord,' Snape responded quickly. A little too quickly, maybe. The Dark Lord mustn't even suspect that Dumbledore and Snape were working against him. If it were up to them, the girl would be as much Death Eater material as Godric Gryffindor himself in three weeks' time.

'Why is that, Severus?' Voldemort asked. 'The girl has no use for Defence Against the Dark Arts.' His voice was still low and by his standards soft, but there was no doubt that he wasn't pleased with Snape's decision to make the girl rejoin the Defence class. Now he was demanding an explanation. And what Voldemort demanded, he received.

'My Lord,' Snape started carefully, 'it would not be prudent for Miss McKibben to drop the subject now. She will be a Hogwarts student for two more years, and even if she is to join your ranks in a few weeks ...'

Something changed in Voldemort's otherwise impassive face. It rendered it even more inhuman, grotesque. And Snape realised that the Dark Lord was smiling. It was a horrific sight.

'If the girl is to join my ranks,' he said in a contemplative tone, the smile still playing around his thin lips. 'Is Nadezhda ready, Severus? Is she worthy?'

Snape frowned slightly. Why would Voldemort be asking him that question? Was this a test?

'I have not spoken to Miss McKibben about this issue, my Lord,' he replied.

It was a blatant lie, one among many. Snape had spoken to the girl, not as her teacher, not as her Head of House and not as a fellow Death Eater. He had spoken to her as a fellow human being, someone who had already made the journey on which she was about to embark, someone who knew that the road was stony and the destination hell itself. But to be precise, he had not talked at all. Instead, he had tried to coax the words out of her mouth in order to find out why on earth a not even seventeen-year-old, seemingly smart girl would want to take the Dark Mark. But he had been forced to give in. The girl had either no better reason than 'It's what is expected of me' or she didn't want to tell him. And he had not deemed it prudent to pressure her into telling him. Not yet.

'I would like you to talk to Nadezhda, Severus.'

Snape suppressed a sneer. If he didn't know better, he would bet his last Sickle that Dumbledore and Voldemort were having tea together on a regular basis and plotted on how to make his life difficult. Did they have to insist on him talking to students? Was there no other way to torture him?

'Find out if she is ready and worthy,' Voldemort continued. 'If you deem her neither, I will not waste my time by summoning her.'

With a bow, Snape accepted his task and accepted it gladly. Voldemort had no idea that he had just handed him the tools to save the girl.

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'Oi, McKibben. McKibben! Nadezhdaaa!'

The wailing tone in which her House mate shouted her name across the Slytherin table made Nadezhda McKibben fall dead in her tracks, and Snape, who was walking down the aisle on the other side of the table, slowed down his steps as well. He had made a habit out of eavesdropping on the girl's conversations with her peers in order to get to know her better and to find out what kind of person she was. He didn't like spying on her, but he deemed that he had no choice.

His attempts to get under her skin during her detention the previous Saturday had failed miserably. Her answers had been polite but monosyllabic to say the least and had contained no valuable information whatsoever. After the detention, Snape had still not known more about her than he had read in her file: she was a hard-working student with grades above average, involved in a few extra-curricular activities, well-behaved and diligent. Nothing indicated that she had a predisposition for the Dark Arts or was hostile towards Muggles. And still, joining the Dark Lord's ranks seemed as natural to her as breathing. It just didn't make sense.

What Snape got to see from Nadezhda McKibben that morning was once more the result of an immaculate upbringing. She was annoyed by the way her House mate had shouted after her, Snape could see that by the way the muscles in her neck had tensed up. But still, she turned towards the boy in a slow and deliberate movement that barely made her robes swish, and the look on her face was calm. What betrayed her were her eyes. They were cold enough to make the Black Lake freeze to ice.

'Have I not told you to not call me by my first name, Herrington?'

The tone of her voice was neither hostile nor angry, but it suggested that the boy had crossed a line.

'Yes, you have,' he admitted, flinching slightly. 'But I really wanted to get your attention,' he added hastily.

The girl crossed her arms in front of her chest. 'And why would that be?'

'I was wondering if you would mind helping me with my Charms essay. I'm really having troubles with it, Naddie.'

Nadezhda's green eyes softened somewhat. 'I'm serving detention today, Charles,' she answered, and Snape noticed that her voice, like her eyes, had become less harsh. 'I'll help you after dinner.'

'Thanks, Naddie. I appreciate it.'

The boy smiled, and for a fraction of a second, Snape could see a ghost of a smile in Nadezhda's eyes as well.

'Any time, Charles. Any time.'

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Two hours later, Snape peered at the girl over his issue of the *Daily Prophet*. He had given her some chapters in *Dark Curses and How to Fight Them* to read for that Saturday morning detention. He would test her after lunch and then even make her cast some counter curses. For the time being, however, he would just observe her.

She was sitting at her desk with her back straight and her head slightly lowered so her black hair obscured most of her face. In her right hand, she was holding her quill and was eagerly taking notes. Her left hand lay still beside her book. Her fingers were long and slender, Snape noticed, and her nails flawlessly manicured. Yet another sign of a good upbringing, he concluded. He could just imagine the girl having been slapped on the hand every time she had attempted to chew her nails or suck her thumb as a child.

When she turned a page to start a new chapter, Snape decided it was time to strike up a conversation. He was not going to find out anything about her by watching her read.

'Nadezhda is an unusual name,' he pointed out, acutely aware of how dull a topic it was. About as bad as talking about the weather. But the girl's vehement reaction towards her House mate calling her by her first name earlier that morning had intrigued Snape.

The girl carefully put down her quill and raised her head. And Snape wondered how he could ever have thought that her eyes looked like Lily's. The shape was similar, yes, and so was the colour. But Lily's eyes had always been kind and smiling. The eyes he was staring into now, however, didn't hold any trace of emotion. It was like looking at two emerald gems.

'It's a Bulgarian name, sir,' the girl explained, her face impassive. 'It means *hope*.'

Hope? How ironic, Snape thought. If he didn't come up with a solution soon, there wouldn't be any hope for this girl in two weeks' time.

'How come you have a Bulgarian first name, Miss McKibben?' he asked. McKibben was, after all, a good old Scottish surname. And choosing a Bulgarian first name seemed somewhat odd.

'My mother was Bulgarian,' the girl replied. 'My father picked a Bulgarian name to honour her memory.'

'To honour her memory? Your mother is dead?' Snape asked, cursing inwardly. As Head of House, he was supposed to know such things. But there hadn't been any mentioning of her mother's death in the girl's file.

To Snape's surprise, Nadezhda closed her book and put her hands on top of it. Obviously, she had for once no intentions of cutting their conversation short.

'My mother was very ill when I was born. She and my older brother had been infected with bacterial meningitis when Mother was about eight months pregnant with me.'

Bacterial meningitis? Snape frowned. As far as he knew, that disease had not killed any witch or wizard in decades. In fact, it was considered to be extinct in the Wizarding world.

'My parents and my brother were visiting my mother's relatives in Bulgaria,' Nadezhda answered Snape's unasked question. 'They stayed in a Muggle village in the countryside. My brother caught the disease from a local kid, a Muggle, and Mother caught it from my brother. He died three weeks before I was born, and my mother didn't even live long enough to name me.'

Snape swallowed dryly. He had not expected this, neither to hear about the tragic demise of Nadezhda's mother and brother nor the girl telling him about it without even batting an eyelash. But the fact that her mother and brother had died of a Muggle disease explained a lot. The girl certainly had reason to hate Muggles enough to willingly join the Dark Lord. And Snape could not blame her for it. There were people who had joined Voldemort for less.

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'Why does Miss McKibben's file not say anything about her mother's death?' Snape demanded to know. He had hated every minute of his conversation with the girl, and now he wanted some answers from Dumbledore. Surely, the Headmaster had know.

'The girl's father requested the information be kept a secret,' Dumbledore explained.

'And why is that?' Snape barked.

'I do not know, Severus,' Dumbledore replied calmly. 'Maybe you should ask Mr McKibben at the next Death Eater gathering.'

Snape sneered. Did Dumbledore really think that Death Eater gatherings were about socialising? Besides, now that he was a spy, Snape was rarely summoned along with the other Death Eaters, except for the ones who belonged to the Dark Lord's inner circle.

'I have made some inquiries about Mr McKibben,' Snape informed the Headmaster. 'As a Ministry employee, he is of course forced to keep a low profile where his anti-Muggle sentiments are concerned, but from what I have heard, he does whatever he can to keep the Wizarding society pure.'

Dumbledore nodded. 'He was quite active in the campaign to ban Wizard-Muggle marriages. Thank Merlin, that law did not go through.' He stroked his beard pensively and fixed his Potions master with an intensive look. 'Tell me, Severus, is the girl showing any signs of having been raised with anti-Muggle beliefs? There are a few Muggle-borns in Slytherin House. How does she interact with them?'

'In the nicest way possible,' Snape declared. 'I think Miss McKibben might be in the library as we speak, helping Mr Herrington with his homework.'

'Charles Herrington?' Dumbledore enquired. 'He's Muggle-born.'

'Indeed,' Snape confirmed. 'And I think he and Miss McKibben might be friends. From what I have heard, they study quite often together and have been seen together in Hogsmeade.'

'I assume this is not a way in which Voldemort wants his Death Eaters-to-be to spend her free time. In the company of a Muggle-born, I mean.'

Snape snorted. 'Most certainly not. In fact, the Dark Lord has asked me to speak to Miss McKibben in order to find out if she is worthy to join his ranks. If I tell him that she is socialising with Muggle-borns ...'

'Don't tell him, Severus.'

Snape frowned. Why would Dumbledore not want him to tell Voldemort that the girl's best friend was Muggle-born? Certainly, that piece of information would make Voldemort think twice about letting her take his mark.

'Don't tell him, Severus,' Dumbledore repeated. 'If Voldemort learns that the girl has a weak spot, he will use it against her. You know that as well as I do.'

'You mean, me judging her to be unworthy of joining will not save her?' Snape asked, feeling his stomach clench.

Dumbledore shook his head. 'I'm afraid it won't. In fact, I fear that Voldemort might use this piece of knowledge as a weapon. I wouldn't put it beyond him to make the girl prove her loyalties towards him by asking her to kill her best friend. We mustn't expose either of them to such danger.'

Snape nodded. He should have known that it wasn't going to be easy.

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It was the third Saturday of the term and time for Miss McKibben's third detention. It was most probably also the last chance Snape had to talk to her. She would turn seventeen on Friday. Next Saturday, she would be out of reach.

Snape looked around his study. This was not going to be yet another detention with Miss McKibben reading some chapters in the textbook and him letting her cast some counter curses after lunch. He had to get through to her today. He had to make her understand what it meant to be a servant to the Dark Lord. Hence, his study was even darker and more fear inducing than usual.

The girl was waiting outside the door of the Potions classroom at exactly ten o'clock, just like she had done the previous Saturday and the one before. And as Snape told her that she would be serving her detention in his study instead, she just nodded and followed him wordlessly. Would she do the Dark Lord's bidding as well, Snape wondered. Just as silently and without any comment? He desperately hoped not.

He heard her sharp intake of breath as she entered his study, but by the time he had charmed the door shut behind them, the girl had already banished any sign of shock or surprise from her face. But she stood rigid, and Snape knew that every muscle in her body had tensed up. He had expected nothing less. His study certainly looked like one of the Muggle Ghost Trains he had once visited with Lily when there had been a fair in town.

'Today, Miss McKibben, we are going to study the effects of the Dark Arts,' he started. 'Can you tell me what curse might be responsible for these injuries?'

A slight wrinkling of her tiny nose was the only reaction Snape got from the girl as she eyed the picture he had indicated. It showed a bloody heap of flesh which upon closer consideration could be interpreted as the remains of a man who seemed to have been flayed alive.

'Excorio,' she identified the curse correctly.

'How does this curse work?' Snape demanded to know.

'It removes the skin from the body, inch by inch. If cast properly, the victim can be kept alive for hours.'

Snape nodded pensively. A textbook answer, except that this curse was not described in any textbook available at Hogwarts. Why the girl knew anything about this curse, however, he did not want to ask.

'What about this picture, Miss McKibben?' he asked, indicating a second one. In this, the victim a young witch was still moving, twitching uncontrollably. As Snape removed the Silencing Charm, her screams of agony cut through the silence of the dungeon like knives. And to his utter relief, Snape saw the girl flinch.

'Can you name the curse?' he asked once he had silenced the picture again.

'The Cruciatus Curse, I assume,' Nadezhda replied, her voice trembling slightly. 'It causes excruciating pain without physically harming the victim. It's one of the Unforgivable Curses.'

Once more, Snape nodded and pointed towards a third picture. It showed a boy of about five. He was lying on his back with his eyes closed. He looked as if he were sleeping.

'Avada Kedavra,' Snape pointed out. 'What can you tell me about it?'

'It's a Killing Curse. It leaves no trace. When the body is examined, there are no identifiable marks for the cause of death. The victims seem perfectly fine apart from the fact that they are dead.'

The girl's cheeks had become paler, and Snape could see that her jaw was clenched. And he decided that it was time to go even further.

'I want you to read the text on the back of those three pictures,' he instructed. 'Loud and clear, if you please.'

The girl stepped forward and picked up the first picture. 'Unidentified Muggle. Cause of death: blood loss due to removal of the skin. Suspect: Evan Rosier.'

'The Rosiers were one of the first families to join the Dark Lord,' Snape explained. 'I assume you are familiar with the name?'

The girl just nodded.

'Evan Rosier kills for fun,' Snape went on. 'This Muggle had probably done nothing wrong except being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Rosier just wanted to play. Go on to the second picture.'

'Katherine McKenzie. Tortured to insanity by Bellatrix Lestrange.'

'Another name that sounds familiar, I assume,' Snape pointed out. 'The Cruciatus Curse is Bellatrix's speciality. She loves it. And she is damn good at it. Have another look at the picture, Miss McKibben.'

The girl eyed the tormented but now silent witch for some moments. When she paled, Snape understood that she had seen the Dark Mark on the woman's left forearm.

'Not even Death Eaters go safe. Katherine McKenzie took the Mark when she was about your age. When she realised what she had done, what it meant to be a follower of the Dark Lord, she tried to defect. She managed to hide for almost two years. Then she was tracked down.' He nodded towards the picture of the dead boy. 'This was William McKenzie. As I know Bellatrix, she made Katherine watch her son die. You tell me what is worse for a woman: watch her child being murdered or being tortured herself.'

The girl didn't answer. Snape hadn't expected her to either. But he had expected hoped for the reaction that he now saw: the girl was deadly pale, her hands were trembling, and he could have sworn that he saw tears shine in her eyes.

'This is what Death Eaters do,' he went on. 'They kill, they torture. Some do it on command, others do it for pleasure. But sooner or later, they all do it. Are you ready for that?'

The girl squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, and Snape hoped she would shake her head. But instead, she clenched her fists at her side.

'Do you want this?' Snape asked, his tone cold and threatening. 'Do you want to become one of them?'

'I have no choice.'

The girl's voice wasn't more than a whisper but filled with so much desperation that it rang through the silence like a church bell.

'What do you mean, you have no choice?' Snape asked. 'The Dark Lord will not burn his Mark into the arm of someone who is not willing to serve him.'

'I have to join him,' the girl whispered. 'If I don't, I will not survive my birthday.'

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'He made her swear. He made her take the Unbreakable Vow. He condemned his own daughter.'

Snape was beside himself. He had seen many cruelties, had suffered many of them by the hand of his own father, but this was beyond anything he could imagine.

He had not needed to use Legilimency or Veritaserum on Nadezhda. She had told him willingly how her father had transferred his hatred of Muggles onto her and made her swear that she would do anything to avenge the death of her mother and brother. She had also told him that she had been too young then to understand what her father had been asking of her. It had first been when she had come to Hogwarts, when she for the first time in her life had come face to face with Muggle-borns and Half-bloods that she had realised that her father's teachings had been wrong, that they were neither monsters nor ruthless killers. But by that time, it had been too late. Her father had joined the Dark Lord, and he expected her to do the same.

Snape accepted the glass of Firewhisky Dumbledore handed him and drained it. He was shaken to the core. He was aware that quite a few students in his House were fascinated by the Death Eaters and would sooner or later join the Dark Lord. But they would do so out of their own accord. Nadezhda had no choice, and she didn't want to join.

'Will Voldemort accept her?' Dumbledore asked. His voice sounded strained, too. 'Or will he understand that she will never be a loyal follower and refuse her?'

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers, not sure if it was the whisky that made him dizzy or the hopelessness of the situation.

'If the Dark Lord refuses her, that will be her certain death,' he concluded. 'Her father's spell will kill her.'

'Maybe death would be a fate less cruel.'

Snape's head snapped up, and he stared at Dumbledore in disbelief. He must have misheard. 'What are you saying, Headmaster?'

Dumbledore sadly shook his head. 'Let us be honest, Severus. How long will the girl last? Will she make it past her first killing? Or will she be unable to take a life and be punished instead? Or will she try to hide and end up like Katherine McKenzie?'

'What do you suggest we do?' Snape asked, a prominent note of desperation in his voice. 'We have to do something!'

'Would it be possible to delay the girl's initiation?' Dumbledore asked. 'Can you convince Voldemort that she is not ready, that she needs further training? If we could win another month or two ...'

'What good will another month or two do?' Snape asked.

'It may make all the difference in the world for Nadezhda,' Dumbledore replied. 'If we are lucky, there will be no Dark Lord left to whom she can pledge her allegiance by the start of November.'

3: The First He Couldn't Keep Safe

Chapter 3 of 12

Severus Snape has been teaching at Hogwarts for only a few weeks when he realises that being Head of House is not going to be as easy as he had hoped.

Chapter 3: The First He Couldn't Keep Safe

He was waiting for her in his study, already wearing his travelling cloak and under it a pair of his finest black robes. Lucius Malfoy had told him to look his best as there would be other guests at the manor, and Snape had obliged. Despite what his students and colleagues thought, he knew how to dress and did own some very nice, tailored robes. Malfoy had seen to that years ago.

Snape always looked his best when he was summoned by the Dark Lord. Nowadays, he never wore his Death Eater robes. First and foremost because he hated them, just about as much as he hated the damned Mark on his left forearm. But he couldn't let Voldemort know. Instead, he claimed that he could not afford to be caught with compromising robes in his current position. He was a spy now. And the Dark Lord had agreed. What his fellow Death Eaters thought of him and his outfit, Snape didn't care. He assumed that most of them hadn't noticed or didn't bother. Of the few who had noticed, most weren't dumb enough to ask about his reasons. Only Avery had dared once. And Snape had not even had the time to explain himself before the Dark Lord himself had thrown a curse at Avery.

But maybe tonight, wearing his Death Eater robes would be appropriate, Snape mused. After all, he was about to bring one of his students to the Dark Lord, and it was crucial that the girl understood that it was Snape, the Death Eater, and not Snape, the Hogwarts teacher, who was bringing her there and that he was only carrying out orders. Maybe, if he wore the robes tonight, the girl would not hate him her Head of House the next day. Maybe, if he wore the robes, she would be able to forgive him. And maybe, just maybe, he would be able to convince himself that he had no choice.

He didn't want to be the one to bring the girl to the Dark Lord. He wished for nothing more than that he could spare her. But he knew that if he refused, he would be punished and the girl would be accompanied by someone else. And that someone could be just anyone. Dolohov maybe, or even Bellatrix. And what they would do in order to get the girl to the Dark Lord as quickly as possible, Snape did not even want to imagine. If he was the one to bring her, then he would at least be able to deliver her with her dignity still in store. That he couldn't protect her, he knew only too well. But it was what Dumbledore expected from him and what he himself had sworn to do. How he was going to do it, however, he had no idea. If the Dark Lord decided to brand the girl tonight and make her one of his followers, Snape would not be able to do anything. And if the Dark Lord refused the girl and her father saw her not taking the Mark as her breaking her vow, Snape would be able to do even less. All he would be able to do would be to stand by and watch. So he prayed for a miracle.

He had worked with the girl over the last couple of weeks, tutored her and shown her as much white magic as he had dared. It had been far less than he had wanted to, but he had been forced to be careful. If she knew too much white magic, more than could be expected from a sixth-year, the Dark Lord would grow suspicious. And for the girl's sake and his own, Snape could not let this happen. So he had taught her just enough for her to realise that she could do white magic. Hopefully, it was enough to save her, too.

She knocked on his door half a minute to eight and entered upon being told to do so, closing the door soundlessly behind her. She, too, was already wearing a travelling cloak.

'Good evening, Professor.'

'Good evening, Miss McKibben,' Snape replied, inwardly rolling his eyes at the turn of phrase. This evening was bound to be anything but good for either of them. But still, one could always hope.

He eyed the girl intently. Her cloak was tailored and not part of the average student wardrobe. It also looked brand new. Most probably, it was a birthday gift from her father. The gloves she was holding in her clenched hand were of the finest leather and so were her boots that stuck out from under her cloak. She carried herself tall as usual. And as always, she had her eyes cast chastely to the floor.

The image of a pureblood witch, ready to be launched into society Snape thought, barely able to avoid a sneer. The girl was not going to dance with nice boys tonight and sip on her first glass of goblin-made champagne. Instead, she was about to take her first steps on the road that led to nowhere else than hell.

She should be in her common room, drinking butterbeer directly from the bottle, eating cake and celebrating her coming of age with her peers, Snape thought bitterly. Just like any seventeen-year-old did. But then again, he hadn't done that either. On his seventeenth birthday, he, too, had for the first time met the Dark Lord. But Snape doubted that he had looked quite as miserable as the girl in front of him did. For him, meeting the Dark Lord had been an honour, and he had looked forward to joining his ranks. Today he knew better, and he cursed the day he had agreed to carry the Mark.

Wordlessly, he picked up the box of Floo powder that was standing on his mantelpiece and held it out towards the girl. There was neither need nor time for pleasantries. She knew where they were going, and she knew why they were going there. She didn't need to be told.

As his fingers closed around a handful of powder, Snape paused in mid-movement and looked at the girl. To his surprise, he found her green eyes already looking at him. Green as spring clover, almond shaped. And for the first time, Snape saw a flicker of fear in them.

'Tonight, I will not be your teacher, Miss McKibben, nor will I be your Head of House,' he explained in a grave tone. 'Tonight, I will be a fellow Death Eater, a follower of the Dark Lord. And whatever happens at Malfoy Manor will stay at Malfoy Manor. The moment we return, the moment we are back in this office, I will not know anything about what has happened to you tonight or what choices you have made. I will once more only be your teacher and your Head of House. I will not know whether you took the Dark Mark tonight, and your decision will have no effect on how I treat you as a student. Do I make myself clear?'

The girl nodded, and Snape gestured towards the fireplace. 'After you.'

She took a step forward but froze, and her green eyes once more sought her teacher's dark ones.

'I'm scared, Professor,' she whispered.

'You should be,' Snape simply stated and then watched her disappear in a sea of green flames. 'You should be terrified, Nadezhda.'

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One had to hand it to the Malfoys, Snape thought as he let his gaze wander through the ballroom of Malfoy Manor some hours later. They knew how to throw a party and who they had to invite to make a good impression.

There were about fifty guests. Ministry employees, members of the Wizengamot, patriarchs of old Wizard families, landowners and politicians, one more influential than the other. And carefully strewn into their midst, one here, one there, were the followers of the Dark Lord. Crabbe and Goyle were standing at the buffet, Avery, Macnair and Nott were each engaged in conversation with some influential person, and Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrangle played hosts together with the Malfoys they were family, after all. And there right beside Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy was Duncan McKibben, dressed in his best robes, beaming at his daughter.

Snape's eyes came to linger on the girl, and he couldn't help but admit that he was impressed with her. Back at Hogwarts, right before she had Flooed to Malfoy Manor, terror had been etched into her very face. She had even admitted that she was scared. But now, she was once more showing off the impeccable façade that was to be expected from a girl of her status. She stood at her father's side, shook hands and smiled sweetly and accepted everyone's birthday wishes with a tiny nod. Nothing betrayed the fear Snape had seen in her eyes.

When the music started, she danced first with her father, then with Lucius Malfoy. Of course, she would dance with her host. After all, he had spent quite some money on her party. Not that he didn't have more money to spend than what was good for him, but still. Then she was approached by a young man with milky white skin and straw blond hair.

Snape sneered. Barty Crouch, Junior. How many of the guests knew that the young man, whose father was the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, had been carrying the Dark Mark on his forearm for almost two years now, that he was Bellatrix Lestrangle's lapdog and capable of horrid deeds his poor father couldn't even imagine in his worst nightmares? Not many, Snape concluded. The Death Eaters knew, of course, but none of the other guests. And the McKibben girl had most certainly no idea. Otherwise, she would not have granted Crouch a second dance, and a third, and a fourth. Snape scowled. As much as he tried, he could not explain to himself why the girl's choice of dancing partner annoyed him so much.

The hours went by, and one by one, the guests started to take their leave. The highly regarded members of the Wizarding world thanked their hosts for their hospitality and once more wished the McKibben girl all the best. Soon, the only ones left in the ballroom were the Death Eaters.

And when Narcissa Malfoy left and the curtains magically drew themselves shut, Snape knew that it was time.

Like one man, they all sank to their knees as the Dark Lord entered. There wasn't a sound to be heard except the rustling of his robes. It seemed almost as if everyone had stopped breathing. Voldemort paused for a moment, letting his gaze wander over his subjects as if to choose who to address first. His choice fell on the master of the manor.

'I hear the party was a success. Is that so, Lucius?'

'My Lord, I certainly hope so,' the blond wizard replied, rising but keeping his head bowed. 'We have once more established our place in the Wizarding society.'

The Dark Lord nodded, obviously pleased, and continued his round. Some of his followers, he simply told to rise, with others he exchanged a phrase or two. Snape, he thanked for coming. As if there had been a choice.

In the end, he paused in front of father and daughter McKibben. The father was told to rise but wasn't spoken to otherwise. Instead, Voldemort focused on the girl.

'Welcome,' he said, in a tone that could almost have been interpreted as sweet.

He took the girl's right hand and pulled her up, considering her with narrowed eyes as if she were a present which he wasn't sure whether he liked yet. And the girl stood tall, her eyes respectfully on the floor.

'I hope your passing into adulthood has been a pleasant one.'

'Yes, my Lord,' the girl replied quietly. 'Thank you.'

My Lord. Snape felt a muscle in his jaw twitch. She wasn't supposed to call Voldemort 'my lord' just yet. But then again, what else should she call him?

'Tell me, Nadezhda,' the Dark Lord continued, 'what do seventeen-year-old girls wish for their birthday nowadays? Surely, you are too old to play with dolls. Jewellery, perhaps? Silver and precious gems?'

Out of thin air, a bracelet appeared, coiling around the girl's left wrist like a snake.

'My Lord,' she gasped.

'Silver and emerald,' the Dark Lord explained. 'Your House colours, I believe. And the gems look just like your eyes. Just as green, just as cold.'

Snape felt a shiver go down his spine. The girl had not looked up at Voldemort once. And still he knew.

'Tell me, Nadezhda,' the Dark Lord continued. 'Do you hate Muggles?'

There was collective intake of breath, and everyone's eyes came to rest on the girl. None of them had ever been asked this question by their lord. To hate Muggles was expected from a Death Eater. Did him asking the girl mean that the Dark Lord had his doubts?

The girl hesitated for a moment, but then she raised her head. Once more, the Death Eaters gasped, but this time, not all for the same reason. Snape's sharp intake of breath was due to the coldness in the girl's eyes. Looking into them generated the same feeling as being doused with a bucket of icy water. The others, however, were shocked that the girl dared to look the Dark Lord straight in the eyes.

'My mother died only hours after my birth because a Muggle had infected her with a deadly disease which had not taken a single life among witches and wizards for decades,' she said in a low tone. 'My brother I never even got to know. I believe that Muggles are a threat to our kind.'

Voldemort smiled, sneered, grimaced, Snape could not really decide on which. But the play of muscles around the Dark Lord's mouth made his stomach clench.

'I should know better than to expect a straight answer from a Slytherin, shouldn't I?' Voldemort asked, and ripple of laughter went through the group of Death Eaters. Obviously, they thought that the Dark Lord had been amused by the girl's answer. Snape, however, doubted it.

'If you truly believed that Muggles are a threat to wizardkind,' Voldemort continued, 'then your best friend wouldn't be Muggle-born. Or would he, Nadezhda?'

Snape could see the muscles in the girl's jaw had tightened, and he did not miss how her hand cramped around the fine fabric of her skirt. And he was certain that the Dark Lord had noticed, too.

'An answer, please, Nadezhda.'

Please? The Dark Lord never said please. He certainly never meant it.

'Muggles are a threat to wizardkind,' the girl repeated, her voice now trembling slightly. 'They are inferior to us. They are jealous of our powers, and they try to steal our magic.'

'Do you really believe this?'

'These are the beliefs I was raised with, my Lord.'

'Do you believe it?' Voldemort asked once more, stressing each syllable.

The girl remained quiet and lowered her eyes.

'Your father is an embittered man, Nadezhda.' The Dark Lord's tone was so unnaturally sweet and understanding that it made goosebumps erupt on everyone's arms. 'Not only did he lose his beloved wife due to a Muggle disease but also his son, his first-born. And he directed all his bitterness and anger towards Muggles. Do you know what happened to the boy who infected your brother?'

'I supposed he died,' the girl replied. Her voice was thin now and her eyes firmly on the tip of her shoes.

'The boy did die,' Voldemort affirmed, extending his pale hand to cup the girl's chin in order to make her look at him again. 'But not of meningitis. He was given treatment and survived. But three weeks after he had been released from the hospital he was found dead, in his room. The Muggle doctors were unable to determine a cause of death. In their eyes, the boy should still have been alive. But he was not. Neither were his parents or his baby sister.'

Snape didn't even listen to the Dark Lord. Instead, he studied the girl's face carefully. She had paled considerably, but otherwise her face did not betray her emotions. Her eyes did, however. They reminded Snape of the eyes of a little animal, a rabbit maybe or a mouse, caught in the shadow of a bird of prey, unable to move, unable to run away and aware that they were doomed. And who could blame the girl? Voldemort had just told her that her father had wiped out an entire Muggle family. Her father had killed to avenge his wife and son. If she let him down tonight, would he hesitate to do the same to her?

'You are not yet ready, Nadezhda,' the Dark Lord suddenly announced, letting go of the girl's chin as if burnt. 'You are too young, and your thoughts are still far too innocent. But this can be remedied. You need proper guidance. You need someone who can teach the proper way for a Death Eater to think.'

He turned around, searching the room with his cold, cold eyes. They first fell on Snape, and the Potions master felt a wave of panic wash over him. How could he teach the girl the 'proper way for a Death Eater to think' when all he wanted was to protect her from the dark?

But Voldemort didn't call for him.

'Bartemius,' he said instead.

From Snape's left, Barty Crouch, Junior, detached himself from the semi-darkness of the room and submissively fell to his knees beside the Dark Lord. He was, however immediately told to rise again.

'I have no need for you by my feet, Bartemius.' Voldemort chuckled. 'I want you to stand beside your bride.'

It was hard to say who looked more surprised, the girl or the boy. For a boy was exactly what Barty was. Barely two years older than his so called bride and just like her far too young to be in this room.

'The girl might be of age now, but she is still a Hogwarts student,' Voldemort started to explain, responding to all the puzzled looks around him. 'Old Dumbledore would not approve if she were called here, to Malfoy manor, every Friday night, for example. But if she's to visit her fiancé, Dumbledore will not object. Fool as he is, he believes that love is a gift that must be cherished. He will willingly let the girl leave the castle every weekend. And you, Bartemius, will await her with open arms and teach her what she needs to know.'

The plan was ingenious, Snape had to admit that, but already, he saw a flaw and with it, his chance. After all, he was the girl's Head of House. He would make sure that she, for some reason or another, would not be allowed to leave the castle the next weekend, or the one after that. And when the Dark Lord questioned him, he would blame everything on Dumbledore. Yes, it would work. He was certain of that.

But he had not taken into account the sick and twisted mind of Bellatrix Lestrange.

'My Lord,' she breathed, falling to her knees. 'If Dumbledore is to believe that the girl is in love, then she has to believe it, too. If he questions her ...'

'What do you suggest, Bellatrix?' Voldemort asked, gesturing for her to rise. And she rose, taking his pale hand and kissing it, her back still bent.

'My Lord,' she replied, her eyes glittering madly as she looked up at her lord. 'There are spells to ensure the girl's love and loyalty. All we need is for Barty to make her his tonight.'

4: The First He Took A Risk For

Chapter 4 of 12

Severus Snape has been teaching at Hogwarts for only a few weeks when he realises that being Head of House is not going to be as easy as he had hoped.

Chapter 4: The First He Took A Risk For

The dark moon, virgin blood, seven witnesses to the act. Had the situation not been so serious and had it not concerned one of his students, Snape would have laughed. The only thing missing to turn the whole affair into a ludicrous old wives' tale was the mentioning of the devil. But then again, Bellatrix Lestrange with her madly glittering eyes and her twisted grin could substitute for the Wicked One any day.

After she had made her proposition, an eerie silence had settled over the room and everyone had stared at her, some in disbelief, some in confusion and others in anticipation. To Duncan McKibben's credit, he was one of those who looked shocked. How the girl was taking it, Snape could not tell. She had once more lowered her head and was keeping her eyes firmly on her shoes.

The first one to speak was the Dark Lord. 'Lucius, tell your wife to have the elves prepare a bed chamber. Also tell her to come here once she is done. I have a task for her.'

Lucius bowed and left the room, just to return a few moments later to the same uncomfortable silence, closely followed by Narcissa, who was told give the girl a nightgown and to use the Dark Lord's words have a *motherly talk* with her. And Narcissa never questioned her orders, but simply gestured the girl to follow her.

'Duncan,' the Dark Lord addressed the girl's father. 'I want you to go to the library and wait for me there. I will join you once all the instructions have been given.'

'But, my Lord ...'

'What, Duncan?' Voldemort replied, a sneer on his face. 'Would you rather witness the deflowering of your daughter?'

McKibben blushed and then paled just as quickly. 'No, my Lord,' he muttered, bowing deeply to apologise for his insolence.

'Who says the girl is indeed still a virgin?' came the low, drawling voice of Lucius Malfoy out of the shadows. 'We all know what can happen in dark corridors and empty classrooms at Hogwarts. Or in the Slytherin common room, for that matter. Don't we?'

Everyone chuckled. Everyone but McKibben. 'My daughter is untouched,' he announced in a convinced tone. He was standing straight again, with his chest puffed out and his eyes flashing angrily. 'I can vouch for that.'

Snape sneered. McKibben could *vouch* for his daughter's chastity? How was he able to do that? Had he made the girl swear a second Unbreakable Vow, that she would not have intercourse before her father allowed it? What kind of father was this man? But to be quite honest, when it came to Duncan McKibben and his daughter, nothing could surprise Snape anymore.

'Duncan, the library,' the Dark Lord repeated in a tone one would expect from a school teacher who sent a six-year-old out of the classroom in order to make him think about his misbehaviours. And once more, McKibben bowed and then left the room without another word.

'Now, Bellatrix,' the Dark Lord addressed his most devoted follower. 'Who do you want to be present in the bed chamber?'

'Rodolphus and Lucius,' Bellatrix replied at once. 'And Snape, Avery, Nott and Macnair.'

The Dark Lord nodded. 'You heard the lady,' he said in a lazy tone. 'You others are dismissed. No! Not you, silly boy! You, we need.'

Bellatrix huffed and rolled her eyes as Barty, who like the rest of the Death Eaters had bowed and made his way towards the door. Obviously, she was disappointed about the lack of intelligence her protégé was displaying.

'My Lord, forgive me, I do not understand,' Barty piped up, bowing so low that his straw blond hair almost touched the floor. 'What is it that I am expected to do?'

The Dark Lord's lips twitched. 'So young. So innocent. Bellatrix, enlighten the youngster.'

'You are supposed to make the girl yours tonight, Barty,' Bellatrix repeated. The sound of her voice was ever so patient and understanding, and the way she patted Barty on his back suggested that she had the deepest understanding for his confusion. But anyone who knew her understood that it was just for show. Bellatrix knew that she had come up with a twisted idea that would bring nothing but pain and misery to anyone involved. And she was about to enjoy every second of it.

'Your bride is awaiting you,' she went on, taking the young man by his hands and pulling him up. 'A young, innocent girl, ready for the taking. She'll be yours, all yours.'

'What are we others supposed to do?' Nott interrupted, leering. 'What exactly do you mean, we have to witness the act, Bellatrix?'

Avery grunted, so did Macnair. The only one who looked slightly discomforted was Rodolphus Lestrange.

'All you'll have to do is keep up the magical energy,' Bellatrix explained.

Snape scowled. This all sounded like utter humbug to him. And he knew Bellatrix well enough to suspect that there were no witnesses required, but that she only wanted to fill the room with people to make the situation utterly uncomfortable for Barty and the girl and thus satisfy her own perverse lusting. Most probably, there was not even such a spell as the one she had been talking about. Most probably, she was just in the mood for a perverted, voyeuristic game. And the Dark Lord allowed it in order to humour her.

'So, we do get to watch?' Avery asked. If he were any more excited, he would be drooling.

'You will be in the room,' Bellatrix pointed out. 'I don't trust you enough to be close to the girl. You might start pawing at her and disturb the magic.'

Again, everyone laughed, even Avery.

'But I will require an assistant,' Bellatrix continued, 'someone who'll keep the magical energy strong.'

Snape didn't even think. 'I will assist you,' he responded quickly, regretting his decision in the same moment the last syllable of his answer had left his mouth.

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He was disgusted. Thoroughly disgusted. He had long since known that Bellatrix Lestrange was a twisted, sadistic lunatic. But this! This was low even by her standards.

Snape looked around the room. It was a pretty chamber, painted in soft pastel tones. The bedsheets were of the finest white silk. There were candles burning, emitting a sweet scent that reminded Snape of midsummer roses. Surely, if Narcissa and Lucius ever had a daughter, this room would be her bridal chamber. Hopefully, however, that girl would have the fortune of having to entertain none other but her husband on her wedding night.

Avery, Nott, Macnair and Rodolphus Lestrange had already taken their positions behind the curtains of the four-poster bed. Bellatrix had insisted that they would not have a direct view of the young couple but stay behind the curtains. As if it mattered, Snape thought. They would still be there. They would still witness a moment no young woman should have to share with anyone but her lover. Snape himself stood at the foot of the bed, right beside Bellatrix. They, in contrast to the other five, would have a good view of whatever went on between the silken sheets. And Bellatrix for one would be watching intently, Snape was certain of that. He, on the other hand, would keep his eyes on the curtains, the pillow, hell, on anything but the girl. It was the least he could do for her and the very reason why he had volunteered to assist Bellatrix. Standing closest to

the bed of all the men, he would at least be able and willing to make use of his option to avert his eyes.

Yes, he would not watch. He mustn't. For the girl's sake.

The door opened, and in came Lucius Malfoy. In his wake was young Barty, wearing a silken, expensive looking robe.

'Here comes the groom,' Lucius said jokingly and gestured for Barty to disrobe and climb into bed.

At least, the boy had the decency to not look excited, Snape thought as Lucius theatrically placed the silken robe on a chair beside the bed and took his position behind the curtains. Then again, Barty had no reason to be excited. He was about to perform in front of seven witnesses with a girl he barely knew, a girl who had not made the decision to share his bed herself. Barty must know that whatever he was about to do with the girl was nothing short of rape. Hopefully, he would at least make it easy on her.

The door opened a second time. This time, Narcissa Malfoy entered, holding Nadezhda by her hand. The girl, too, was wearing a white, silken robe. As so often, her head was slightly lowered, and her hair was covering her face like a set of black curtains. And for the first time, Snape was glad that he did not have to look into her eyes. He did not even want to think about what he might see there.

'Here comes the bride,' Bellatrix sang before starting to cackle madly, and the men behind the curtains chuckled.

Narcissa shot her sister a cold look, and Snape saw her squeeze the girl's hand, which made him wonder what exactly Narcissa had included in her so called motherly talk. Had she consoled the girl? Had she told her that she felt sorry for her? Or had she just advised her to close her eyes and think of England? He hoped for the first.

Beside the bed, Narcissa gently patted the girl's cheek and kissed her forehead before helping her out of her robe, and Snape couldn't help but feel an enormous gratitude towards the wife of Lucius Malfoy. She might have carried out her orders without questioning them, but she seemed at least have done everything in her power to mentally support the girl.

Just like Lucius had done, Narcissa carefully folded the robes and put them onto a chair while the girl slipped under the sheets. Then Narcissa left, closing the door just slowly enough to be able to cast a furtive look in the direction of her husband.

Bellatrix raised her wand. 'Let us start then, shall we?'

Some candles went out, and the temperature seemed to drop by several degrees. Snape sneered. He had always known that Bellatrix was a drama queen, but this was just ridiculous. And so was the reaction of the five men behind the curtains who all inhaled rather sharply and seemed to retreat an inch or two. What a cowardly bunch they were! The Dark Lord would be ashamed if he knew.

Snape cast a look towards the two young adults in the bed. Barty was lying on his side with his head propped up, watching his so called bride. She, however, lay motionless on her back, her face vacuous and her eyes half closed. She looked almost as if she were about to fall asleep or meditating. Had Narcissa given the girl a potion, Snape wondered. Had she been that kind?

Barty tentatively reached out for his bride and twined a lock of her black hair around his finger. 'You're pretty,' he whispered. 'But don't you ever smile?'

'I smile when I have a reason to,' she replied quietly, turning her head and opening her eyes to look at the young man beside her. She looked neither scared nor anxious. 'It doesn't happen too often.'

Barty nodded and smiled sadly. He seemed to understand her reasoning all but too well.

'Stop being all sugary, Barty,' Bellatrix hissed. 'You're not here to play Casanova.'

Barty flinched as if being hit on the back of his head and obediently rolled over to kiss his bride. Snape slightly shifted his position, too. Things were about to happen, and he had no desire to watch. He had sworn to himself that he wouldn't. Instead, he focused on Bellatrix: her eyes were widened, her pupils dilated and her lips slightly parted. She was excited, so much was clear. And still she held her wand high in the air.

Snape heard the sheets rustle and the sound of lips making contact with soft skin. He also heard Barty's breathing become laboured. He ventured a look.

The sheet had slid down, and now the girl's neck was exposed. So was one of her breasts. The other was covered by Barty's hand. He could have been described as gentle for the way he was caressing his bride's breasts and covering her neck with kisses. But she didn't seem to appreciate it, and every time Barty tried to catch her mouth with his, she turned her head away.

'Whenever you're ready, Barty. We have all bloody night.' Bellatrix's voice was dripping with irony. It was very clear that she had no inclination to wait any longer.

Barty shifted his weight, pressing himself against his bride and latching on to her neck, leaving a mark as he released her. Then he whispered something which Snape couldn't hear. But the girl could, obviously. She nodded almost imperceptibly, and the next moment, Barty positioned himself between her thighs.

'Yes!'

Bellatrix's triumphant outcry covered any kind of sound the young couple had uttered in the moment of their coupling, but Snape didn't need to hear. He had seen the muscles in the girl's jaw tighten and her hand cramp around the silken sheets. He had also seen the solitary tear that had managed to escape before she had squeezed her eyes shut. The deed was done, then, Snape thought bitterly. Nadezhda was no child anymore. And her virgin blood was about to seal her fate.

'Come on, Barty. I know you can do better than this,' Bellatrix mocked. 'Take her. Make her truly yours.'

Snape whirled around to stare at Bellatrix. But of course! He should have known that she had taken Barty under her wings in more than one way. It was just like her to develop a taste for young flesh. Surely, she had taken Barty to her bed already on the night he had received the Mark and lured him back there regularly ever since, with or without her husband's consent. And Snape didn't even dare imagine what kind of perversities Bellatrix had taught the boy.

Truly, Barty seemed to be under the dark witch's power. As she had commanded, he started to move faster, thrusting into his bride with a ferocity that made Snape want to vomit. Why did Barty have to listen to Bellatrix? Why did he not have the guts to stand up against her and continue as he had started? He had been sweet to the girl at first. Did Bellatrix have to take that away from them? Did Barty have to let her?

'Yes, Barty! Yes!'

With disgust, Snape watched Bellatrix rock her hips in the same rhythm as Barty. There was a deranged smile on her face and sweat on her brow. And judging from her laboured breathing and ecstatic screaming, it could have been her who was being taken, not Nadezhda. There really was no spell, Snape concluded. The whole thing was only being staged in order to satisfy Bellatrix's perverse lusting. But he was proven wrong.

The moment Barty collapsed on his bride with an animalistic outcry, Bellatrix slumped over, too, just to rise again after a fraction of a second, raising both her arms into the air.

'Now, Snape!' she bellowed.

The surge of power that hit him made Snape lose his balance for a moment, but he managed to raise his arms in a similar fashion to what Bellatrix had done. He had no idea what he was doing, actually, and just mimicked her movements. But he could sense her magic, could see it hanging in the air, a blanket of some cold, dark mass that

seemed to hover over the bed. The last candles went out, but the room didn't become dark. There was a faint light engulfing the young couple in bed, illuminating them in an utterly eerie fashion.

'Move away, Barty! I need to see!' Bellatrix screeched, and the young man immediately withdrew to cower at the edge of the bed, leaving his bride exposed and vulnerable.

To Snape's utter surprise, Nadezhda did not move. He had expected her to make a dash for the sheets or her robe to cover herself, but she lay motionless, her legs still parted and her hands still clutching the silken sheets so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

'Yes!' Bellatrix exclaimed triumphantly, staring at the few drops of crimson that sullied the white sheets. 'There's blood! She's yours, Barty. Yours! OURS!'

The energy in the air shifted. Earlier, it had been hovering over the bed, but now it seemed to plunge down, showering them all with glacial water. The ghostly light disappeared, and from somewhere in the darkness came a cry of terror that echoed from the walls, filling the room with an icy cold that seeped into everyone's bones, threatening to freeze their very marrow. Snape winced and tried to shut the sound out. He had no idea who had been screaming. It could have been Nadezhda. It could have been Bellatrix. Or it could just as well have been he himself.

It was over as suddenly as it had begun. Bellatrix collapsed and was caught by her husband, who had detached himself from the shadows behind the curtains. A quick look into the direction from where Rodolphus had come running told Snape that the others four men had already left. Most probably, they had been put to flight once they had realised that their peep show had turned into a true and horrifying display of dark magic. Cowards!

'It's alright. You're safe.'

The whispered words from the bed made Snape ignore the Lestranges and turn towards the young couple. He couldn't see much, as the room was now wrapped in darkness, but he could make out the outline of two people closely huddled together. And he could clearly hear Barty whisper to his bride.

Frowning, Snape raised his wand. '*Lumos*.'

The Lestranges had gone, Snape noticed, and he directed his wandlight towards the bed. There he found Barty with his arms wrapped around his bride's shoulders, softly whispering to her.

'Put your robes on, both of you,' Snape snapped, striding over to the bedside cabinet to re-light some of the candles. He was slightly taken aback. He had not expected Barty to suddenly play the protector, and he had most certainly not expected Nadezhda to let herself being cradled like a frightened child. Both actions annoyed him utterly.

But first and foremost, he could not believe his ears. How could Barty claim that everything was alright and that Nadezhda was safe? Nothing was alright. No one was safe. Not now. Not ever. Not as long as the Dark Lord was around.

5: The First He Cared For

Chapter 5 of 12

Severus Snape has been teaching at Hogwarts for only a few weeks when he realises that being Head of House is not going to be as easy as he had hoped.

Chapter 5: The First He Cared For

Barty was just about to hand Nadezhda her robe when the door opened and the soft light of the candle fell onto Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy.

'The Dark Lord awaits you, Barty,' Lucius said quietly, waving his wand and thus dressing the young man in his own clothes. 'Make haste.'

'But Nadezhda ...' Barty started, looking at his bride as if parting from her would rip his very soul apart.

Lucius, however, cut the young man short. 'The Dark Lord wishes to see you straight away,' he declared. 'The girl is to be taken back to Hogwarts. Snape, that will be your job. Hurry up now.'

Barty seemed torn. His feet were carrying him towards the door to follow the master of the manor, but his eyes continuously darted back towards his bride.

'When will I see her again?' he asked, looking at Lucius but addressing everyone in the room.

'When the Dark Lord sees it fit,' Lucius hissed and impatiently grabbed Barty by the arm. 'And unless you want to suffer his anger, you'd better come along now.'

Reluctantly, Barty let himself be more or less dragged from the room, and after the door had fallen shut behind him and her husband, Narcissa turned towards Snape. Her nose was slightly wrinkled. She seemed disgusted by something.

'The Dark Lord wants you to take the girl back to Hogwarts and await his orders to escort her back here some time next week,' she announced.

Snape accepted his orders with a slight bow. He had already suspected that he would be given the dubious task of bringing the girl to her so called fiancé whenever the Dark Lord saw it fit. There were appearances to keep up, after all, and even if the girl was a pureblood and expected to be betrothed as soon as she was of age, she would still need a chaperon when leaving the castle during the school year.

Already pondering how he would thwart those plans, Snape studied the woman in front of him. He had expected Narcissa to take her leave as soon as she had delivered the Dark Lord's orders, a task which she obviously considered to be beneath her. But the lady of the manor didn't move. Instead, she was eyeing Snape just as intently as he was eyeing her, and had he not known better, he would have believed that she was trying to use Legilimency on him. After a while, however, she simply gave him a curt nod and turned towards the girl, who was still silently standing beside the bed, her robe pulled tightly around herself and her head once more slightly bowed.

'I see it worked,' Narcissa commented after casting a quick glance at the crimson drops on the white silk sheet.

'If you are talking about your sister's deranged plan ...' Snape started, but Narcissa cut him short.

'No, Severus. This is not what I am talking about,' she said coldly. 'You did well,' she added, once more addressing the girl. All of a sudden, her voice was much softer.

Nadezhda nodded silently and handed the older woman a small phial. Its inside was still coated red.

'Good girl,' Narcissa said and nodded towards the door that led to the en suite bathroom. 'No one noticed. Bella is convinced that everything went just as she wanted it to. Now, go wash yourself. Your clothes are already in the bathroom.'

'You faked this?' Snape hissed once he and Narcissa were alone, staring in disbelief at the receptacle Narcissa was holding in her hand. Certainly, part of him was glad that Bellatrix's deranged plan had been foiled, but another part of him was concerned by the risks that had been taken. What if Bellatrix found out?

'How do you think McKibben would have reacted had he found out that his daughter wasn't as innocent as he wanted to believe?' Narcissa asked quietly, not yet looking at Snape. 'How do you think he would have reacted if there had been no proof of the girl's chastity while the room was full with witnesses?' She more or less spat out the last word, and Snape frowned.

'McKibben vouched for his daughter's chastity,' he interjected. 'He was most convinced.'

'The girl lied, Severus,' Narcissa exclaimed, turning around to face Snape. 'She lied as so many other women of ancient and noble families have been forced to do before her.'

She took a shuddering breath, and Snape saw something change in her otherwise so cold eyes. Was that compassion he saw?

'I, too, had parents who vouched for my chastity and a father-in-law who demanded it,' Narcissa continued in a tone that was so bitter that Snape could almost taste the bile in his own mouth. 'I, too, was forced to present proof after my wedding night. I know what it means to fail in delivering said proof.' A muscle twitched in her jaw, and she drew herself up to her full height, fixing Snape with a look that made it impossible for him to look away. 'I couldn't let this girl take another beating. What happened in here tonight was bad enough.'

'Another beating?' Snape enquired. He was at a complete loss.

'You didn't see her scars?' Narcissa's eyes widened. 'By Merlin, you really did not watch. Lucius said you hadn't, but I ...' She covered her mouth with her hand. 'Forgive me, Severus, but when Lucius told me you had volunteered to assist Bella, I assumed ...'

Snape didn't react. For the time being, he didn't care if Narcissa believed him to be a pervert or a saint. He was too amazed to see that she, Narcissa Malfoy, trophy wife and perfect hostess, actually seemed to possess a heart, that she cared for a girl she barely knew.

'Of course, our little deception poses a slight problem,' Narcissa went on, lowering her hand to straighten her robe. Her momentary display of compassion seemed to have passed, and once more, her face did not show the slightest trace of emotion. 'Bella's plan ... Her spell now has no effect on the girl, as it was not cast on her blood. And as sweet as Barty might be ...'

Snape snorted. Barty Crouch, sweet? He might look that way to Narcissa, since he had seemed so reluctant to leave his bride. But Narcissa had only seen that. She had not seen him drive into his bride like a man possessed. She had not seen him act on Bellatrix's orders and take what wasn't rightfully his.

'As sweet as Barty might be,' Narcissa repeated, ignoring Snape's reaction, 'I doubt Nadezhda likes him enough to convince Dumbledore that she cannot survive a week without meeting her fiancé. And if she is not allowed to leave Hogwarts ... Severus, I am scared for the girl. If she is not allowed to leave the castle, I wouldn't put it past McKibben to take her out of school and lock her up at home.'

'What do you know about McKibben, Narcissa?' Snape enquired.

'Nothing,' Narcissa admitted. 'But I saw how terrified this poor girl was at the thought of her father finding out that she is not a virgin anymore. Severus, this girl seems more afraid of her father than she is of the Dark Lord.'

Snape nodded slowly. It sounded odd, he had to admit that. But he knew how it was to be so afraid of one's own father that the Dark Lord's inner circle seemed like a safer place than one's own home. And still, his own father seemed positively saint-like compared to Duncan McKibben.

'I will do everything in my power to ensure the girl is kept safe,' he assured Narcissa. And if that meant hiding her in the dungeons and being punished, so be it.

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Snape eyed the girl intently as she exited his fireplace. Her black hair was immaculately braided and her robes unwrinkled. Her back was straight and her head, as always, a little bowed, just as her eyes, as always, were respectfully lowered to the ground.

Snape contemplated her posture. At the beginning of the school year, he had interpreted it as a sign of shyness. After having read her student file, he had taken it as a sign of an old-fashioned, pureblood upbringing. But now, Snape knew better. This was the posture of someone who once too often had been shown her place. It was the posture of a girl who had never received as much as a single ounce of love from her father, but only orders, threats and beatings. He could sympathise. He had known a boy with such a posture once; a pale boy with hair just as black as hers, a boy who had always kept his head low. That boy, too, had been shown his place, by his father, by his schoolmates, by his so called friends. And that boy had ended up making all the wrong choices. Heaven forbid the girl was already beyond salvation.

He watched her brush the ashes off her robes and then tore his eyes away from her to sweep towards the cabinet where he stored his potions. A minute later, he placed three phials onto his desk.

'A Sleeping Draught,' he explained, pointing at the first phial. 'It has been a long night.'

The girl nodded.

'Essence of Dittany,' Snape continued, relieved to see that the girl once more nodded in acceptance. He had no desire to explain why he was giving her that particular potion. Neither did he want her to know that Narcissa had told him about her scars.

'And this,' he said, pointing at the third phial, 'is smartweed and cotton root. A contraceptive.'

For the third time, Nadezhda nodded.

'You may return the empty phials to me in the morning,' Snape instructed. 'For your own sake, I recommend you keep them hidden from the students you share your dormitory with. Unless you are in the mood for uncomfortable questions.'

A fourth nod.

Snape felt a muscle twitch at his jaw. He really wished the girl would say something now. Anything. But she kept silent and did not once meet his gaze. Instead, she pocketed the three phials, and as Snape didn't have anything else to say, he told her to return to her dormitory. She bid him goodnight and left. Snape didn't return her wishes for a good night. He didn't have the words to tell her to sleep well. He didn't feel like he had the right to tell her anything, even though it felt as if he should tell her that if she couldn't sleep or needed someone to talk to, she could come and see him. But he couldn't tell her that. Had he not told her that once they returned to Hogwarts, he would be nothing more than her teacher and Head of House and that he would know nothing about what Snape, the Death Eater, had seen at Malfoy Manor? Not that he would ever be able to forget what he had seen or had been told. But he felt that he needed to draw this line between Snape, the Death Eater and Snape, the Potions master. Because the latter did not want Nadezhda to feel self-conscious in his presence. He did not want her to be afraid of him. He did not want her to hate him. How he could achieve that, however, he didn't have the faintest idea.

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Dumbledore buried his face in his hands, and Snape watched him, silently appreciating the older wizard's gesture. The news he had just delivered, his description of the night's events, was too horrific to be ignored yet at the same time too gruesome to be commented upon. Silent shock was the only reaction that seemed fitting.

'The girl is in bed, you say?' Dumbledore finally enquired.

Snape nodded. 'I sent an elf to check. She says Miss McKibben is asleep.'

'Good. Good.' Dumbledore conjured two glasses out of thin air. A moment later, they filled with an amber liquid. 'Not a Dreamless Sleep potion,' he commented, 'but this, too, has the power to chase some demons away for the night.'

Snape gladly accepted the Firewhisky and drained half his glass in one gulp. He hadn't touched a drop of alcohol all night. He never did at Malfoy Manor or any other Death Eater gathering. But now, Dumbledore's promise of dreamless sleep was too alluring to pass.

'The magic you described, Severus, have you experienced something similar before?'

'Are you suggesting that I have been involved in all kinds of abominations just because I carry the Dark Mark?' Snape snapped, quite quickly regretting his words. Dumbledore was only looking for answers, answers which he hoped that Snape had. It wasn't the Headmaster's fault that Snape was feeling tired and helpless.

Apologetically, Snape shook his head. 'I have no idea what it was, Headmaster,' he confessed. 'For the better part of the evening, I was convinced that there was no such spell as the one Bellatrix performed, but ...'

'Blood magic is old magic,' Dumbledore explained. 'Very old and very powerful.'

'But there was no blood,' Snape interrupted. 'Not the girl's anyway. And still, something happened in that room, something sinister. The spell did work.'

Dumbledore nodded slowly. 'You see, Severus, I think the spell Bellatrix used did not necessarily require blood. I think what it required was something living, the sheer essence of life.'

Snape didn't follow. Most probably, his mind simply didn't want to.

'I am afraid, Severus, that Bellatrix's spell found a victim even without the blood of a virgin. I think it chose Barty.'

'*When will I see her again?*' Barty's words suddenly rang as clearly in Snape's ears as if the young man were standing right beside him, and he could once more see the desperate look on thereckled face. Barty had not wanted to leave. He had wanted to stay by Nadezhda's side and keep her safe, just as he had promised her. The spell had chosen Barty then.

'Bellatrix will throw a tantrum the likes of which have never been seen before when she finds out that her own spell tied her lapdog to another woman,' Snape commented drily. 'She does not appreciate competition.'

'Then we have to make sure she doesn't find out.'

Snape frowned. 'With all due respect, Headmaster, I do not see how Barty Crouch's well-being is any of our concern. He is a grown-up and has chosen his ways on his own.'

'Has he now?' Dumbledore asked, looking at his Potions master over the rim of his half-moon spectacles. 'Or has he simply not had a choice, like so many others?'

The line between Snape's eyes deepened. Dumbledore was not seriously expecting him to feel sorry for a spoiled pureblood brat like Barty Crouch, was he?

Dumbledore shook his head and waved his hand, signalling that he had no intention of discussing the topic of Barty's choices any further. 'You have to remember, Severus,' he went on instead, 'that Barty's fate and Nadezhda's are now linked. How do you think Bellatrix or Voldemort for that matter will react when they find Barty yearning for his bride? Don't you think they will become suspicious?'

Snape just gave a non-committal grunt.

'We will have to forestall this, Severus. We have to make sure Barty gets to see Nadezhda before he turns into a lovesick puppy.'

'You want me to bring Miss McKibben to Malfoy Manor?' Snape burst out. 'Headmaster, this was exactly what I was planning to avoid. Why would you want me to put her into danger in order to keep Crouch out of trouble?'

'Barty getting into trouble will mean trouble for Nadezhda as well. Don't you see that, Severus? If anyone finds out that the girl is not under the influence of any spell, they might try something else to ensure she wants to spend time with Barty so he can *teach her the proper way for a Death Eater to think* to use Voldemort's words. Besides, Barty is smitten with Nadezhda now. I doubt he will be anything but nice to her.'

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The early hours of Saturday morning found Severus Snape in the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library. He had been there for the better part of the night, leafing through tome after tome, looking for answers.

He had tried to go to sleep after his meeting with Dumbledore. By Merlin, he had. But every time he had closed his eyes, his mind had brought him back to Malfoy Manor, to the pretty chamber that was painted in soft pastel tones, to the bed with the white silk sheets. He saw Bellatrix, and he saw Barty. But first and foremost, he saw a pair of green eyes; a pair of eyes that stared blankly into the night. Fixed, broken, lifeless.

When not even his own Dreamless Sleep Potion had been able to give him any peace of mind, Snape had given up on sleep, dressed and left the dungeons. A goal he hadn't possessed. For an hour or two, he had just haunted the corridors of the castle, striding along like a man who had somewhere to go with his gaze fixed in the darkness some feet ahead of him. He had not once wondered why he didn't encounter anyone, not even a ghost. Had he seen his face, he would have understood that a scowl like his even put the undead to flight.

He was furious, to say the least. At some point during the night, he had considered rousing Dumbledore and giving the old man a piece of his mind. How dare he suggest that Barty being under the influence of Bellatrix's spell had any good sides at all? But obviously, the Headmaster was seriously convinced that Barty would be nothing but good to the girl. In fact, Dumbledore had even suggested that Barty would do anything in his power to make sure Nadezhda did not receive the Dark Mark. He had, after all, promised to keep her safe.

But Snape didn't like the idea of putting the fate of the girl into the hands of a young Death Eater who was not only under Bellatrix's spell but also her influence, and so he was now in the library, searching through pages too horrid for any student to read. But even the most dusty books, books so old that their pages carried spells and counter-spells that already had been forgotten centuries ago, seemed to be mocking him. It seemed that there were no answers. It seemed that Bellatrix's spell had a firm grip around Nadezhda even though it had been cast on Barty.

Snape was just about to slam the thick, leather-bound book shut, when hushed voices from the corridor outside the library made him freeze in mid-movement.

'Stop following me.'

'I'll follow you until you give me an answer.'

'I've given you an answer already. It's not you. It's me.'

There was a snort. 'Such a worn-out phrase and totally meaningless. I think I deserve more than that, Nadezhda.'

Snape peered around the corner of a shelf and just about managed to see the entrance to the library. There, in the dim light of the torches that were burning in the corridor, stood Nadezhda McKibben and Charles Herrington.

'You better leave now, Charles,' Nadezhda said quietly, obviously wanting to get her House mate to leave her alone. 'Madam Pince will flay you alive if she catches you here at this time of day.'

'And what about you? You're not supposed to be here either.'

'Actually, I have a note signed by Professor Snape that allows me to be here. I have to catch up on my Defence studies.'

She turned to enter the library, but Charles grabbed her by the arm. 'Naddie, please.'

'Let go of me, Charles. It's over.'

Over? Snape frowned. This almost sounded like ... Were the two breaking up a relationship?

'I'll let go of you if you tell me why you don't want to be with me anymore,' the boy insisted.

They were indeed breaking up.

Snape soundlessly closed his book and shifted uncomfortably. Somehow, it felt as if he were intruding. This was a private conversation between two young adults. Obviously, they judged it private enough to not have it in their common room, but away from curious ears, in a deserted corridor. But Snape had nowhere to go. The library had no back door, and the only way out was through the very door outside which the youngsters were standing. What would be worse, Snape contemplated: unintentional eavesdropping or interrupting them?

He was just about to choose the latter option, when Nadezhda spoke again. And what she had to say made Snape stay and stare at her in disbelief.

'We can't be together, Charles. We never should have been. We're ... too different.'

'Too different?' Charles seemed as surprised and shocked as Snape. 'I'd like to think we have a lot in common. We read the same books. We both hate Quidditch. We're the only studious people in our House ...'

'I am not talking about our hobbies, Charles.'

'Then what are you talking about?'

'You ...' Nadezhda paused, and Snape saw her once more try to pull free from Charles' grip. But the boy held on. 'You're Muggle-born, Charles.'

Her voice was so cold that Snape felt a shiver go down his spine. He couldn't detect any hint of disgust or contempt in her voice, and she hadn't used the word Mudblood either. But still it was very clear that Nadezhda's statement was not well-meant in any way.

Charles let go of her as if burnt. 'Muggle-born?' he exclaimed, his voice almost cracking. 'You must be joking!'

'I'm sorry, Charles.'

The boy started to back away. 'Muggle-born?' He shook his head. 'One night at Malfoy Manor and you suddenly think I am not good enough for you anymore because of my bloodline? I never thought that you of all people ...'

'I'm sorry, Charles,' Nadezhda repeated. But her apology reached deaf ears. Charles was too disappointed, too hurt. And he walked away, still shaking his head at her and not once looking back.

Go after him, girl, Snape thought, painfully reminded of a similar incident not too many years ago. *You don't want to lose him. Go after him, and tell him you didn't mean it* He hadn't meant it either back then.

But Nadezhda didn't go after Charles. Instead, she turned on her heel and entered the library, back straight and her head held high. And the cold look in her green eyes made Snape retreat deeper into the shadows. Nadezhda never noticed him, and that was just as well. He wouldn't have known what to say to her anyway.

6: The First He Couldn't Understand

Chapter 6 of 12

Severus Snape has been teaching at Hogwarts for only a few weeks when he realises that being Head of House is not going to be as easy as he had hoped.

Chapter 6: The First He Couldn't Understand

'What now?' Snape groaned as a rather resolute knock on his door woke him up. Could the world not just leave him alone today?

He had only returned to his study about an hour ago, after dutifully having attended breakfast in the Great Hall despite not having felt the least bit hungry. He had deliberately skipped the coffee and reluctantly swallowed some porridge, just enough to avoid any questions from the Headmaster or the matron. Those two certainly treated their staff like little children at times.

After breakfast, Snape had quickly retired to his study, where he, behind a closed and warded door, had started to grade some essays on Healing Potions. But after having marked the sixth essay with a big red T, he had decided that he was not going to suffer through thirteen more and had postponed his grading duties to later. Much later. Instead, he had brewed an infusion of St. John's wort and put his feet up. Only a few minutes later, he had finally felt sleep wrap him into a warm, soft blanket, and he had not fought it. No one would mind if he fell asleep at his desk, least of all him.

But now, someone did seem to mind, and judging from the repeated knocking, they seemed to be demanding the attention of the Potions master.

For a moment, Snape contemplated pretending that he was not in. If he didn't open the door, the intruder would probably leave again and he himself would hopefully be able to go back to sleep. Oh, codswallop! Who was he trying to fool? He was awake now and would stay so until nightfall at least. And whoever was on the other side of the door had voluntarily come down to his office on a Saturday morning. No one did that, unless they had a very important reason. The chances of them leaving were therefore more than slim.

Snape rose from his chair and approached the door with swift strides. He would open the door, but that didn't mean that he would be the least bit welcoming. And sure enough, by the time he had reached the door, any sign of sleepiness had left his face and had been replaced by a trademark scowl that was feared by first and seventh-years alike. Whoever was behind that door would quickly understand that knocking on Snape's door on that Saturday morning had been a very bad move.

'Miss McKibben?' Snape was so surprised that he forgot that he had intended to growl at the person who had knocked. Whatever was the girl doing at his doorstep?

'I am to return your phials, sir,' Nadezhda answered his unasked question, holding out two empty phials towards him.

'I believe I supplied you with three phials,' Snape commented.

'Yes, sir,' Nadezhda confirmed, her eyes firmly on the phials, which Snape had not yet accepted. 'I ... I still have need for ... for one of them.'

'Of course,' Snape replied, for the time being not really wanting to know which of the phials Nadezhda still needed, and took the two empty ones from her hand. It was slightly clammy, and taking a closer look, Snape realised that Nadezhda was paler than usual and that her posture, which normally spoke of high status and equally high confidence, was slightly hunched. And yet again, she refused to meet his gaze. *Good girls do not stare*, Snape thought with a sneer. Surely, the girl had been taught that along with *Good girls do not speak unless they are spoken to and Muggles are the filth of the earth*

Then he noticed a Defence book under Nadezhda's arm.

'You do realise that you have served your detention, don't you, Miss McKibben?' he asked, pointing at her book. 'I have been informed that you have caught up nicely with your classmates. Hence, there will be no further need for you to study Defence under me anymore.'

'Yes, sir, I am aware of that,' Nadezhda replied.

Her voice was steady, but Snape saw her shoulders droop just an inch. What was this, he wondered. Had she been expecting him to call her for another detention? Had she wanted him to? After what he had witnessed the previous night, did she really want to spend time alone with him?

Despite himself, Snape felt his scowl soften. He had been worrying that Nadezhda would hate him or even fear him for his involvement in her fate. And there she was now, on his doorstep, silently begging for him to let her in. And he could not turn her away.

'You may have served your detention for skipping class, Miss McKibben,' he carried on, using his best teacher's voice as not to betray the feeling of pride that against his will was swelling in his chest, 'but it has come to my attention that you have not been in your common room last night at curfew. For that, you certainly deserve detention until lunch at least. And as you happen to have brought your Defence book, I suggest you open it on page one-hundred-and-twenty-four and read up on non-verbal defensive spells.'

You will need those spells, girl, Snape thought as watched Nadezhda take a seat at his potions table and open her book. She would need to be able to cast them silently, so no one would notice. Well, Bellatrix might notice, of course, and the Dark Lord definitely would, but Snape was hoping that the girl wouldn't be forced to perform any kind of magic in front of either of the two any time soon. For the time being, he hoped that she would meet only Barty. And maybe, with him, she wouldn't need any defensive spells at all. But better be safe than sorry.

He'd test her after lunch, Snape decided. It was one thing to read up on spells. Casting them was another matter altogether.

Nadezhda scribbled away frantically, now and then respectfully raising her hand to ask a question, and Snape answered them, feeling pleased. She asked intelligent, valid questions, and Snape was convinced that she with some practice would be more than proficient in casting those spells. He fully expected her to succeed in casting at least some of them already after lunch.

To his big chagrin, however, neither he or Nadezhda ever made it to lunch in the Great Hall. In fact, Nadezhda barely managed to get through the first page of the chapter he had instructed her to read before the face of Lucius Malfoy appeared in Snape's fireplace.

'Ah, Severus, I was hoping I would catch you. I hope you managed to get a good night's sleep. It was a rather intense night, wasn't it?'

Snape gave a non-committal grunt. *Intense* was not the adjective he would have chosen. And he could not even imagine what word Nadezhda would use.

'If you have no other plans,' Lucius continued smoothly, 'I'd like you to come over for lunch.'

'Lunch?' Snape's expression darkened. 'I think this is on rather short notice.'

'Don't tell me you have anything important to do, Severus,' Lucius commented in a patronising tone. 'You can yell at your students in the afternoon. And talking of students, is there any possibility you could bring the girl along? Barty is still here, and if you ask me, the boy is more than smitten.'

'Miss McKibben,' Snape started, inhaling slowly through his nose as not to lose his composure, 'is serving detention today.'

'With you?' Lucius asked, craning his neck but unable to see the girl from the fireplace. 'Even better. No one will notice then if she is not at lunch. And should anyone ask, you can tell them she has been chopping Flobberworms. That is what you are making your students do in detention, is it not? Or do you force them to re-assemble crushed black beetles?'

He laughed at his own wittiness, and Snape had to fight very hard not to give in to the impulse of extinguishing the fire or worse, testing if Unforgivable Curses could be cast through the Floo network.

'One o'clock then?' Lucius continued casually. 'No need to dress up. It will just be the four of us.'

'How about your wife?' Snape enquire.

'Migraine,' Lucius explained. 'Maybe, you could bring along one of your brews? I'm sure Narcissa would appreciate it.'

Snape inclined his head. He certainly would bring a potion for Narcissa, one that worked in a blink of an eye. He needed her to attend lunch. If she didn't, he could just imagine how the scenario would look: Lucius would try to distract him with wine and cigars in the drawing room after the meal, and Barty would have Nadezhda all to himself. And what the youngster would come up with, Snape did not even want to imagine. At least, with Narcissa around, the girl would have a female ally.

'I can assure you that I will be on time, Lucius,' Snape replied. 'As for the girl, she will have to seek the Headmaster's permission to leave the grounds. I cannot guarantee anything.'

Lucius sighed theatrically. 'For goodness' sake, Severus. You're the Head of Slytherin. Make Salazar proud. Come up with something. Be cunning.'

When the blond wizard's face had disappeared and the flames had died down again, Snape turned towards Nadezhda. She had closed her book and put down her quill but was still looking down, her black hair obscuring her face.

'You do not have to come along,' Snape declared. 'I can say that the Headmaster did not allow you to leave the castle.'

'It's alright,' Nadezhda replied. 'I'll go. As I understand, there will only be Barty and the Malfoys. It shouldn't be that bad.'

Not that bad? Snape almost snorted. 'Barty will expect you to have longed for him just as much as he has longed for you. I assume he has not slept at all last night, pining away for you. Can you act that well, Miss McKibben? Can you make him believe you have missed him?'

'I will do my best, sir.'

Then she finally looked up at her teacher, her face once more an inscrutable mask, and Snape deemed her ready.

'Go make yourself pretty,' he instructed her. 'We will be leaving at a quarter to one.'

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The afternoon passed in exactly the way Snape had imagined it. Narcissa never came down to lunch, despite him having provided her with one of his best migraine potions. Then Lucius insisted on showing him his newest purchases from Borgin & Burkes. And Barty, who had been unable to keep his eyes off Nadezhda during the duration of the main course and had moved his chair close enough towards hers so he could spoon feed her dessert, had ever so gallantly held out his arm towards his bride after the meal and announced that he wanted to show her the Malfoy winter garden. And Snape had had no other choice than letting the two adolescents leave. Any protest from him would have looked suspicious. But he didn't like it. Not one bit.

'Severus, will you stop looking that grumpy?' Lucius chided when Snape, for the third time, failed to show his admiration for one of his host's toys. 'Really, one could think that you didn't want to be here. Don't tell me you're longing back to Hogwarts already. You've been here for what? One hour? Two?'

'Three hours and forty-seven minutes, to be precise,' Snape growled. 'As for me longing for Hogwarts, believe it or not, Lucius, I have work to do there.' He graciously ignored Lucius' snort and turned to the window. 'And Miss McKibben still has detention to serve.'

'Be nice, Severus,' Lucius suggested. 'Let the two youngsters have some fun. They seem to like each other quite a bit. Barty is floating on fluffy, pink clouds, I tell you. One could think that he was under a spell. And besides, you know he has a job to do.'

Snape gave a curt nod. He was fully aware of the nature of Barty's so called job. He was to train the girl and turn her into proper Death Eater material. Right now, he was most probably filling her ears with a mixture of pureblood propaganda and words of love.

'Bellatrix brought over some rabbits this morning,' Lucius told Snape. 'I really hope the two don't mess up the rose bushes. It would be a shame.'

'Rabbits?' Snape asked. Why on earth would Bellatrix bring ...

'To practice on, of course,' Lucius announced. 'What did you think? That Barty would have Nadezhda practice her Dark magic on Muggle babies? Seriously, Severus. Not in my house!'

Snape felt his stomach clench. He had imagined Barty and Nadezhda having a snog in the winter garden, and already that thought had made him nauseous. Now his mind was flooded with images of flayed, maimed and mutilated rabbits.

'Let us go and have a look,' he suggested, trying hard not to let his concern show on his face. Lucius mustn't know. 'For all his enthusiasm, I doubt Barty is a good teacher. We might have to step in.'

'Adult supervision?' Lucius chuckled and made a crack about no young couple ever having taken to kindly to being chaperoned, but in the end, he agreed, and the two men made their way to the winter garden, one of them in a slighter bigger hurry than the other.

The sight that greeted them was beyond gruesome. Along the path that led to Lucius' award winning roses lay four dead rabbits. Each of them had bled to death, by the looks of it. And on the bench beside the Angel's Trumpets sat Barty, looking slightly dazed, and Nadezhda, her eyes on the rabbit closest to her and her wand still in her hand.

'Is this your doing?' Lucius enquired, wrinkling his nose at the bloody mess but nonetheless sounding more than just a little impressed.

Nadezhda nodded slowly, but it was Barty who explained what had happened. 'I showed her twice,' he explained, pointing at the two animals to his left. One had its throat cut, the other sported a wide gash across its chest. 'And look how quickly she picked up on the curse. These are two perfect cuts.'

Barty beamed, obviously immensely proud of his bride, and Lucius bent over the rabbits to examine them closer.

'*Sectumsempra*, I assume?'

Barty burst out in a vaunt about how excellently Nadezhda had performed her curse, and Snape felt a muscle twitch in his jaw. That particular curse had so far brought nothing but trouble, and he loathed himself for ever having invented it. He also hated the fact that he in a moment of teenage stupidity had shown it to Avery, who later had shown it to other Death Eaters.

Lucius applauded, however, as if the casting of a deadly curse were worth praise. 'And Severus here thought that you were a bad teacher, Barty. I think you just proved him wrong.' He chuckled. 'And you, Nadezhda, seem to be a talented student. Shame they don't teach Dark Magic at Hogwarts. You'd be the best in your year. But maybe, your Head of House will award you some extra points for this. Won't you, Severus?'

'I most certainly will not. On the contrary,' Snape snarled, Vanishing the dead rabbits with a flick of his wand. The sight was just too sickening to stand it any longer. 'As a matter of fact, Miss McKibben still has detention to serve. I think it is just about time for that now.'

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The girl hadn't said a word, neither in the winter garden, nor on their way back to the Malfoy drawing room, and now she was standing silently in front of the fireplace in Snape's office, back straight, head bent, and Snape could just have slapped her for it.

'Two rabbits, Miss McKibben?' he bellowed. 'You killed two rabbits? You were not supposed to learn any Dark Magic from Barty. Did you not understand that?' He threw his travelling cloak onto the chair behind his desk and contemplated conjuring a big glass of Odgen's to wash down his nausea. But he was too furious to even drink. Instead, he just flopped onto his chair.

'Why do you think I have been bothering with teaching you Defensive magic?' he thundered. 'So you could defend yourself and stay in the Light. And there you go,

dabbling with Dark magic on the first occasion. Do you realise that producing Light magic will become harder and harder for every Dark spell you cast?"

'I didn't cast any Dark spell.'

Snape shot off from his chair as if he had been stung by a Blast-Ended Skrewt. 'What did you just say?'

'I said I didn't cast any Dark spell, sir.'

'Don't lie to me!' Snape hissed, swooping down on the girl like a bird of prey, towering over her and fixing her with a dark gaze that would have turned some of the toughest Death Eaters into whimpering babies.

'Rabbits do not just drop dead on their own account, Miss McKibben. They do not slit their own throats either. Barty admitted to having killed two. Consequently, you killed the other.'

Nadezhda almost imperceptibly shook her head. 'I didn't cast any Dark spell,' she said for the third time.

Snape didn't believe her. Barty might be smitten with her, but he wasn't foolish enough to lie to Lucius Malfoy right in the face, telling him that the girl had killed the rabbits when in fact she hadn't. Why would she not just admit to what she had done?

'Give me your wand,' Snape demanded.

Nadezhda hesitated.

'Your wand,' Snape repeated, stretching out his hand.

Reluctantly, Nadezhda produced her wand from her sleeve and handed it over. Elder, Snape deduced quickly, but he had neither the time nor the peace of mind to ponder the wand's qualities. Instead, he held it aloft and pulled out his own wand with his free hand.

'*Prior Incantato.*'

The misty vision of two limp rabbits rose from where the two wand tips met. Probably the rabbits that Barty had slaughtered, Snape thought and was for a moment at a loss on why him conjuring Nadezhda's last spell would show him Barty's. But then the two rabbits seemed to grow in size. Then they split. And suddenly, there were four instead of two.

'You multiplied the carcasses?' Snape asked in disbelief, staring at the ghostly image of the spell in front of him.

Nadezhda nodded.

Clever little witch, Snape thought despite himself and cast *Deletrius* to vanish the smoky rabbits. Multiplying the already dead animals in order to not have to kill any on her own was an ingenious move. However, there was a slight snag.

'What did you do to the other rabbits, Miss McKibben?'

'I released them.'

'And how did Barty react to that?'

'He didn't. He was fast asleep.'

'He was what?' Incredulously, Snape stared at the girl in front of him, and his look of surprise deepened as she pulled a small phial from one of her pockets.

'Your Sleeping Draught,' she explained, putting the now empty receptacle onto her teacher's desk.

Snape first eyed the phial and then the girl. 'Are you trying to tell me that Barty just swallowed this because you asked him nicely?'

Nadezhda shook her head.

'Did you use a spell on him?' Snape asked. *Confundus? Imperio?*

Once again, Nadezhda shook her head, infuriating Snape with her silence. Why did she have to make it so hard? Why could she not just open her mouth? Hadn't she understood yet that he was trying to help her, that he was on her side? He had believed that she trusted him when she had come to see him in the morning.

'How did you make Barty drink the Sleeping Draught, Miss McKibben?' he asked again, trying to keep himself from growling but not really succeeding. Merlin forbid the girl had done something stupid. 'Look at me, and tell me.'

He heard her take a shaking breath, and when she finally looked up at him, Snape wish he had never asked her to. Never had he seen her green eyes filled with so much ... so much what, exactly? Was it guilt? Shame? Or fear? Snape couldn't tell. And before he could analyse the look in those green eyes any further, they iced over once more, leaving two perfectly cut emeralds, precious but lifeless and cold.

'Infatuated boys do many things when you promise them what they are yearning for,' Nadezhda said quietly.

Snape swallowed drily. He knew pretty well what Barty was yearning for. The youth had barely been able to keep his paws to himself during dessert.

'What did you tell him the potion was?' Snape asked, his voice now considerably softer.

'A contraceptive,' Nadezhda explained. 'I told him I was allergic to it and that he would have to take it instead.'

Snape nodded. 'A deception worthy of a Slytherin,' he commented bitterly. 'I should award you ten points.'

'I'm not proud of what I did.'

Snape frowned. The girl wouldn't be feeling remorseful for having tricked Barty, now would she? She had deceived him to save her own skin, as any other Slytherin in her position would have done. And Slytherins didn't normally experience pangs of conscience after such acts.

'You are, of course, aware that you will not be able to slip Barty a Sleeping Draught every time he attempts to teach you a Dark spell, Miss McKibben?' Snape enquired, deciding to not discuss the topic of guilt with the girl. 'Sooner or later, you will need to come up with something else.'

Nadezhda nodded. 'And sooner or later, I will have to cast one of those spells,' she stated quietly.

Snape couldn't do anything else than agree. As long as Nadezhda was with Barty, she was more or less safe. She might be able to lure him with a potion once more, use her female charms or even seduce him. But one day, Barty might not be the only one present. One day, the Dark Lord would want to see results. And Snape did not even want to imagine what would happen when the Dark Lord realised that the girl had not learnt anything at all.

7: The First He Couldn't Hide

Chapter 7 of 12

Severus Snape has been teaching at Hogwarts for only a few weeks when he realises that being Head of House is not going to be as easy as he had hoped.

Chapter 7: The First He Couldn't Hide

Had they ever sat together?

Snape let his eyes wander down the Slytherin table, more than just a little bit annoyed with himself. He had had his House table right in front of his nose for three meals a day ever since he started teaching at Hogwarts on the first of September. And still he could not for the life of him say if Charles Herrington and Nadezhda McKibben had ever sat close to each other at either breakfast, lunch or dinner. Had there ever been any sign that they were a couple? Or had they for the sake of appearance always kept away from each other, just as they did now?

Charles was sitting with some fellow fifth-years on the far end of the table. His peers were talking animatedly, most probably about the upcoming Quidditch match, but Charles even though he was a member of the team seemed distant. And more than once did Snape see the boy's eyes wander towards the other end of the table, in the direction of a group of sixth-year girls. Nadezhda was sitting among them with her back straight and head slightly inclined as to show the other girls that she was listening intently. Her hands lay folded in her lap, and her eyes were modestly cast down, just as was expected of her. And the other girls looked admiringly at her, trying to imitate her posture. But none of them succeeded. None of them could compete with her poise.

Snape looked back at Charles, noticing that something had changed in the boy's look. A month ago, when the two had just broken up, Charles had looked at Nadezhda almost imploringly. *Please, tell me that you didn't mean it* his gaze had called out. *Tell me that you haven't changed. Tell me my blood status doesn't matter to you*

But Nadezhda had not responded. Instead, she had kept away from Charles and acted as if she hadn't noticed him whenever they were in the same room. And now, Charles was looking at her with the sort of gaze that was normally followed by a pitiful shake of the head and a sigh. *Silly girl*, that gaze said. *You have been taken in. You are a fool and beyond salvation.*

Snape clenched and unclenched his right fist a couple of times and then decided to hold onto his coffee mug, forcing himself to ignore the boy's look, a look that was not even directed towards him. That look was hitting a bit too close to home. Lily had looked at him in a similar manner after the incident by the lake. She, too, had shaken her head and sighed, indicating that she considered Snape a lost cause every time she had seen him together with the likes of Avery and Mulciber. And even though all this had happened years ago, the wound was still fresh, bleeding and hurting. Some days, Snape doubted it would ever heal.

'It's a shame, isn't it? I very much liked the idea of those two being a couple. It was a quite ground breaking relationship in Slytherin House.'

Snape turned his head to look at Dumbledore, who was leaning in slightly so no one would overhear the conversation between him and his Potions master.

'You knew?' Snape asked incredulously. 'You knew about McKibben and Herrington?'

Dumbledore nodded. 'I have an uncanny knack of knowing exactly those things that are kept the most secret in this castle,' he responded, his blue eyes twinkling mysteriously behind his half-moon spectacles. 'Charles and Nadezhda have been study partners since Charles' second year,' he explained. 'He was hit by a Bludger and not allowed to leave the hospital wing for three weeks. Horace sent Nadezhda to tutor him. And she kept on helping him with his homework, even long after Poppy had dismissed him.'

Snape nodded pensively. The first time he had heard Charles address Nadezhda, the boy had asked her to help him with his Charms homework. That day, Snape had seen the ghost of a smile in Nadezhda's eyes. Now he wondered if anyone would ever see that again.

'If I may steal some moments of your precious time, Severus,' Dumbledore continued, clearly not noticing the Potions master's ruminative expression. 'I'd like to talk to you in private. My office, if you don't mind. I fear the dungeons are too damp for a man my age.'

'Certainly, Headmaster,' Snape replied, already rising from his chair. It was just as well that Dumbledore coaxed him away. He had no desire to stay in the Great Hall any longer anyway.

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'How is Nadezhda doing?' Dumbledore asked some minutes later, as the two men were ascending the spiral staircase that led to the Headmaster's office.

'She is attending all her classes, and as far as I know, her results are acceptable.'

'I am not talking about Nadezhda's grades, Severus,' Dumbledore replied patiently. 'I am wondering how she is doing. How does it look in her heart and soul?'

'If you are referring to Miss McKibben and Mr Herrington breaking up, Headmaster, then I am the wrong person to ask,' Snape snapped.

Dumbledore, in his turn, chuckled and held the door open, gesturing for Snape to enter first. 'You know, Severus, I would not even dream of asking you about your students' love lives. I have no desire to be hexed on such a lovely Halloween morning.'

He approached a window and opened it, turning his face into the fresh autumn winds, inhaling deeply a couple of times.

'A lovely morning, indeed,' he repeated and then looked over his shoulder towards Snape, who was lingering in that part of the office where the rays of the sun couldn't reach him.

'You know what I am talking about, Severus,' Dumbledore pointed out, turning to the dark wizard and letting the window fall shut behind him, shutting out the birds' song and the rustling of the autumn leaves. But the sunlight still lingered.

Snape nodded. He knew all but too well what Dumbledore was talking about. 'Miss McKibben is doing what is expected of her,' he informed the Headmaster.

'I thought as much. How often has she been to Malfoy Manor now?'

'Three times a week for the last month,' Snape responded in a sour tone. He wasn't at all happy with that number. If it were up to him, Nadezhda would not have been to the manor at all. But unfortunately, he wasn't always the one to decide. It was one thing to turn down Barty when the youngster sent an owl and tell him that it was inappropriate for Nadezhda to visit him. Snape could also turn down Lucius' invitations to dinner, claiming that the girl had to study and could not afford to spend the evening dining and wining at Malfoy Manor. But he couldn't keep her safe at the castle all the time. In fact, if he told Lucius no too many times, it might start to look suspicious. And that was something Snape couldn't afford.

'Has Voldemort asked to see Nadezhda yet?' Dumbledore asked.

Snape shook his head. 'Miss McKibben has not yet been summoned,' he responded, stressing the girl's last name just a bit more than necessary. He didn't like Dumbledore using her first name. It eradicated the mental distance Snape was trying so desperately to maintain.

'I assume that the Dark Lord is waiting for Barty's report,' he continued. 'After all, he himself issued the order for Barty to teach the girl the proper ways of a Death Eater.'

'And is Barty fulfilling his task?'

'The boy is somewhat *preoccupied*,' Snape replied, fighting hard not to sneer. 'His personal interests seem to be interfering with his orders where Miss McKibben is concerned.'

Dumbledore settled in the chair behind his desk and pensively stroked his long white beard. 'In this case, Barty needs to be kept happy,' he pointed out. 'As long as the boy has nothing to complain about, I think we can hope that Voldemort will not get involved.'

Snape agreed. If he kept Nadezhda away from Barty too often, the boy might start complaining. Bellatrix would get wind of it, of course, and she would not waste a second to tell the Dark Lord. And once the Dark Lord knew, Snape would have to come up with a damn good excuse for not allowing Nadezhda to leave the castle. 'It's against school rules' would definitely not cut it. As long as Barty spent time with Nadezhda, however, everyone would assume that he was indeed teaching her Dark magic and Death Eater values and would let the youngsters carry on.

'How is Barty treating the girl?' Dumbledore asked after some moments of silence.

Now Snape did sneer. 'Barty is acting as any other infatuated young man. He can neither keep his eyes nor his hands off his so called bride.'

In fact, Barty was growing bolder and more demanding with every visit to Malfoy Manor. Three weeks ago, he had just looked at Nadezhda like a puppy dog, trying to make her look at him in a similar fashion, but now he would paw at her as soon as she was within reach and claim kisses from her she was unwilling to give. And what Barty was up to when he excused himself and pulled his bride with him, Snape knew only too well. But on the bright side, Barty having his carnal needs satisfied meant that he had neither the time nor the desire to teach Nadezhda Dark magic.

'And Nadezhda is ... playing along?' Dumbledore asked tentatively.

Snape's sneer turned into a scowl of the darkest shade. 'Miss McKibben is doing what is expected of her,' he replied curtly, well aware that he was repeating himself. But this was all he had to say. Dumbledore didn't need to know what ways Nadezhda had found to keep Barty happy. It was bad enough that he himself knew. He certainly wished he didn't.

'And you are certain that she has not produced any Dark magic yet?' Dumbledore enquired with a concerned tone in his voice.

'I am most certain, Headmaster,' Snape replied.

'Do you have proof? Or do you trust the girl nowadays?'

Snape's eyes narrowed, and he wondered if Dumbledore was asking a genuine question or if he once more knew exactly what was going on. 'I do have proof,' he replied.

'*Prior Incantato*?'

Snape nodded. He was indeed still using this particular incantation every time he and Nadezhda returned from Malfoy Manor. But nowadays, he didn't use it because he distrusted the girl. When she told him that she had not cast any Dark magic, he believed her. Why would she lie to him? She knew by now that she could trust him.

No, the reason why Snape still used *Prior Incantato* was the look in Nadezhda's eyes every time she handed over her wand to him upon their return to the dungeons. For a tiny moment, a duration of time shorter than a heartbeat, her green eyes were filled with a silent yet desperate plea. She wanted Snape to check her wand. She wanted him to see for himself that she was still a good witch. Innocent, untainted.

And so Snape did check her wand every time they returned from Malfoy Manor, nodded and wordlessly handed the slim piece of Elder back to her, not knowing what to say. Praise seemed inappropriate, and words of comfort he had none.

Dumbledore sighed. 'I wish there was something else we could do, Severus,' he admitted. 'I don't like this, not at all.'

'Trust me, Headmaster,' Snape replied, 'I do not like it either.'

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By eleven o'clock that same morning, Snape had handed out more detentions than over the last two months combined. Not even the Slytherins had been spared. Six of them had been given detention that morning, four of them with Filch. But it didn't seem to work as a deterrent; the little dunderheads just went on blundering, melting cauldrons and spoiling potions, and the list of detentions grew longer and longer at the same rate Snape's scowl grew darker.

Needless to say, the Potions master was in a highly foul mood when he dismissed his last class that morning, fifth-year Slytherin and Gryffindor. Well, dismissed was probably not the right word to use, seeing as he threatened to test a batch of poison on them unless they managed to clear the classroom in under ten seconds. Of course, the students were out of the dungeon faster than Bowtruckles up a tree, and Snape himself turned his back on the door in order to wipe the blackboard. By hand, well-noted, as this simple act proved to be far more therapeutic and relaxing than the use of magic.

After two wipes, however, he froze in mid-movement. Something was wrong. The door to his classroom was charmed to fall shut and seal itself after the last student had left. But so far, the door had not creaked and the lock not clicked. That must mean that there was at least one student left in the room. Who, by Merlin's beard, would have such a pronounced death wish?

Determined to put even the bravest Gryffindor to flight, Snape spun around, the look in his eyes resembling an Arctic ice-storm. He would have that student out of his dungeon before they could say antidote. But he never yelled at the student in front of him.

'Miss McKibben,' he brought forth instead, quite stunned. What was the girl doing in his classroom? 'You are supposed to be attending Charms.'

'Professor Flitwick let me leave early, sir,' Nadezhda replied, her voice steady but her eyes as always cast down.

'Then you should be in the Great Hall, having lunch.'

'I've been there, sir.'

Snape felt his temper rise and silently counted to ten. The girl had better spit out why she was in his classroom right away lest he lose his patience.

'I received an owl, sir.'

Snape's eyes narrowed. Mail was usually delivered at breakfast. An owl arriving in the middle of the day could only mean very urgent news.

'From whom?' he demanded to know.

Nadezhda's steps seemed determined as she approached him, but when she produced a roll of parchment from the folds of her robes and handed it over, Snape could see her hand shake. And for some reason, this annoyed him utterly.

Unceremoniously, he snatched the parchment from Nadezhda's hand and unrolled it.

'Your presence is requested immediately,' he read aloud and frowned. This was Lucius' handwriting, alright, but the tone was all wrong. Lucius had never *requested* the girl's presence before. He had always invited her with the sweetest of words, assuring her how glad he and his wife would be to welcome Nadezhda to the Manor. Lucius *requesting* her presence didn't bode well.

'You will not be going,' Snape snapped and tossed the parchment into the fire. 'Compile a reply, and tell Lucius that you have classes to attend.'

The girl nodded, and Snape seethed. 'Are you not even going to question my decision?' he bellowed.

Nadezhda shook her head. 'No, sir.'

'And why not?' Snape hissed.

'Because so far, sir, I have never had any reason to.'

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Snape glowered. He remembered the Hogwarts Halloween dinner consisting of nothing but sugar already when he had been a student, but pumpkin pie for lunch? Had the elves lost their minds? Pumpkin pie was a dessert, for crying out loud, and certainly not a meal suitable for already hyperactive teenagers! But everyone else seemed happy with the menu, especially the Headmaster, who had already finished his second slice. Better eat then, Snape thought, if only to fill his stomach and avoid having Dumbledore questioning his appetite. He cut off a piece of cake and viciously stabbed his fork into it, silently wondering if he could transfigure it into a pork chop without anyone noticing, when a searing pain on his left forearm almost made him drop his fork.

It was almost unbearable. If he had to describe the pain, Snape would have used the comparison of a white-hot pitchfork being driven into his flesh, just below the elbow, and then being pulled down to his wrist. The Mark was burning like the flames of hell.

With as much grace as he could muster and desperately trying to keep himself from shaking, Snape rose from his chair. He heard Filius Flitwick make a comment about him not liking the menu of the day either but did not answer. He wasn't sure if he'd manage to open his mouth without him screaming.

He strode out of the Great Hall and down the stairs that led to the dungeons, lips tightly pressed together and his hands balled into fists. He had to hurry, he knew that. The Dark Lord did not appreciate being kept waiting.

In his private quarters, Snape pulled on his travelling cloak, not the one he used when he visited Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley, but the one that would turn into a hooded robe and a mask once he had Disapparated. It was quite a clever enchantment. Even if a band of Aurors were to raid his quarters, they would not find his Death Eater robes.

'Do you know why you are being summoned?'

Snape spun around. He had not heard Dumbledore come in. Neither had he noticed the Headmaster following him to the dungeons, so preoccupied had he been with the very question the old man had just asked.

Dumbledore carefully closed the door behind him, and Snape shook his head, teeth still clenched. He had not been summoned at all since he had entered Dumbledore's services. The Dark Lord himself had pointed out that it would be counterproductive if Snape were summoned away from Hogwarts right from under Dumbledore's nose. After all, as far as the Dark Lord knew, Dumbledore believed that Snape had turned to the Light for good. He had no idea what Dumbledore was using Snape for.

'I assume,' Snape brought forth, 'that it is something of highest importance. Otherwise, the Dark Lord would not risk summoning me during a school day.'

Dumbledore nodded pensively. 'Be careful,' he implored the younger wizard. 'Do not give him any reason to ...'

'Professor Snape!'

A young male voice and an urgent banging on the heavy wooden door made Snape and Dumbledore look at each other, alarm etched on both their faces. Snape had no time to lose, they both knew that. But there was a student in distress on the other side of that door. They could not just ignore that.

'Professor, please!'

Dumbledore approached the door with swift strides, and Snape fell back into the shadows. Hopefully, the Headmaster would take care of whoever was knocking, and Snape would be able to sneak out. But the sight of Charles Herrington and Nadezhda McKibben made both the Headmaster and the Head of Slytherin understand that the latter would not be going anywhere soon.

'Mr Herrington, what is this all about?'

Charles was supporting Nadezhda to the best of his abilities, which proved to be rather difficult, as the girl seemed to struggle against his grip. But anyone could see that she would be unable to stand on her own. She was deadly pale and shaking like a leaf from head to toe.

'There ... there is something wrong with her ... her arm,' Charles stammered and let Dumbledore take Nadezhda from him. 'She ... she said something about a ... a snake.'

Snape's eyes widened in shock, and he rushed forward to pull up the girl's left sleeve, hoping against hope that his suspicion was wrong.

'Why the hell are you still wearing that bracelet?' he thundered, momentarily able to ignore the pain in his own forearm.

'It can't be taken off,' Nadezhda whispered. 'A Sticking Charm, I guess. I never minded. But now ...'

She didn't need to tell him what was happening, Snape could see it all too clearly. The silver bracelet the Dark Lord had gifted Nadezhda with on her seventeenth birthday had changed shape. It had turned into a silver snake with emerald green eyes, curled tightly around the girl's wrist and sunk its teeth into her flesh, producing an ugly, red discolouration that was rapidly spreading up her forearm and obviously causing a fair amount of pain.

It seemed as if Snape was not the only one who was being summoned.

8: The First He Lost

Chapter 8 of 12

Severus Snape has been teaching at Hogwarts for only a few weeks when he realises that being Head of House is not going to be as easy as he had hoped.

Chapter 8: The First He Lost

'Be assured, Mr Herrington, that your friend is well taken care of.'

'But what's wrong with Nadezhda? Her arm ...'

'Mr Herrington, I must ask you to leave now. Your friend has fallen victim to a vicious hex, but Professor Snape and I are more than capable of taking care of the situation.'

'A hex? But she's been talking about a snake. And that bracelet ...'

'Mr Herrington!'

The Headmaster's raised voice made Snape peer past Nadezhda, who was now quietly sitting on a chair in front of him with her back towards Dumbledore and Charles. Dumbledore had managed to get the boy halfway out of the room, but Charles didn't look as if he liked the idea of leaving. Certainly, he would not want to blatantly disobey the Headmaster, but him lingering in the door, craning his neck, gave Snape very much the impression that Charles didn't want to leave his friend's side.

His friend's side. Snape couldn't help but feel a rush of affection towards the boy. After the way Nadezhda had ended their relationship, no one would have blamed Charles for not even wanting to be in the same room as her. It would have been more than understandable if he had turned his back on her and decided that her problems weren't any of his. Lily Evans had most certainly acted that way and done everything in her power to keep as far away from Snape as possible after their incident. But Charles Herrington was obviously different. He was still looking out for Nadezhda. He had taken care of her when she had needed him. Maybe, Snape hoped, their friendship could still be mended.

After once more assuring him that Nadezhda was in good hands, Dumbledore finally managed to usher Charles outside. He closed the door right in the boy's face and warded it in order to keep him out for good. Then he turned to face Snape.

'I assume there is no way to remove that bracelet,' he said calmly.

Snape shook his head, looking down at Nadezhda's wrist, where the snake still hung on with its fangs sunken into the girl's flesh. Her forearm was now starting to bruise, and Snape could not tell whether her wrist was swelling or if the snake was tightening its grip.

'I fear any attempt to remove the bracelet will prove futile at the best,' Snape informed the Headmaster. 'It might even be dangerous.' Certainly, the Dark Lord had taken measures against the removal of his precious gift.

Dumbledore nodded. 'Ingenious, though,' he pointed out, stepping beside Nadezhda and laying a comforting hand on her shoulder. The girl barely reacted. 'And so very typical for Tom to mark what he considers his.'

Snape sneered. He should have known. He should have known that the Dark Lord had made his choice already when he had first laid eyes upon the girl. He had wanted her from the very start. The whole idea of Barty having to teacher her the *proper ways* before she would be initiated had just been a farce. Had he not wanted her, he would have said so.

A new surge of flaming hot pain made Snape hiss and wrap his right hand around his left wrist. If he didn't respond to the summoning soon, the pain would increase and eventually make him pass out. And what would happen later, he did not even want to imagine. So far, he had never failed to respond to the Dark Lord's call, but he had heard rumours about what had happened to those who had failed.

'You do not know to where you are being summoned?' Dumbledore enquired. His hand was still resting on Nadezhda's shoulder, and it seemed to Snape that something in the girl's posture had changed. It seemed almost as if she was leaning into Dumbledore's comforting touch. Was the pain in her arm increasing, too?

With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, Snape shook his head to the Headmaster's question. He never knew to where he was summoned. None of the Death Eaters ever did. When the Dark Lord called upon them, they just Apparated, letting the damned mark guide them.

'And I assume you do not know why you are being summoned either,' Dumbledore continued.

Again, Snape shook his head, although he could guess what the summoning was about: the Dark Lord wanted the girl now. Oh, he had always possessed a flair for the dramatic. Initiating her on Halloween fitted just perfectly.

Dumbledore seemed to have come to the same conclusion. 'Leave then,' he said. 'Leave and take Nadezhda with you.'

Snape opened his mouth to protest. He could not guarantee the girl's safety. In fact, he was quite sure that him taking her to the Dark Lord would result in her carrying the mark before midnight. But Dumbledore never let him voice his concerns.

'I'd rather you take her than that she be dragged away by someone else,' he stated, giving his Potions master a long and hard look before sinking to his knees before Nadezhda, giving her no other choice than to look at him.

'Child,' he started, 'I am not sending you away lightly. But I fear we have no choice.' He took her left hand and lifted her arm, which made the silver serpent glisten eerily. 'Voldemort is calling you, and I do not know what this snake will do to you if you do not heed his call.'

'Will I be allowed to come back?' Nadezhda asked quietly. 'If I receive his mark today, can I still come back to Hogwarts?'

Dumbledore nodded slowly. 'Yes, Nadezhda, you will be allowed to come back. We will protect you.'

Protect her? Damn good job we have done so far! Snape thought. How dare Dumbledore make such promises? How was he planning to protect the girl once she was branded? With the mark on her arm, she'd be the property of the Dark Lord, and he would be able to do with her whatever he pleased. The walls of Hogwarts would not protect her from him.

Enough of this drive! Enough of empty promises!

Swiftly, Snape snatched Nadezhda's hand from Dumbledore and pulled her into a standing position. She swayed for a moment but steadied herself before Snape had to reach out to hold her.

Good, Snape thought. Make sure that you will stand tall before the Dark Lord as well. At the very least, don't give him the satisfaction of seeing you break

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Snape closed his eyes in the moment of Apparition, for once not in order to block out the feeling of nausea that accompanied that particular form of magical transportation, but to gather his thoughts. He very much wanted to protect the girl whose hand was still lying in his. But how, by Merlin, was he supposed to do that?

He had failed so far. He had not noticed that the Dark Lord had put his mark on the girl already on the night of her seventeenth birthday and dragged her into the fold without anyone knowing. And now he was calling her to judge her progress and make her his for good. Or break her, toss her aside and step over her body as if she were of no importance to anyone.

How? How could she be protected?

When he felt his feet hit solid ground, Snape opened his eyes and released his grip around Nadezhda's hand. Not that he wanted to let go, not really. Her little hand felt good in his, and the way she held onto him told Snape that she trusted him. But he didn't feel like he deserved her trust. He would not be able to help her. And holding her hand meant luring her into a false sense of security.

She stood quite steady beside him now; the Side-Along-Apparition didn't seem to have affected her too much. But she was still pale, and now that her hands were free once more, she wrapped her right one around her left wrist and clutched it tightly as if that could somehow stop the pain. Snape knew this reflex. But he also knew that it was useless. Nothing could lessen the pain of the Dark Lord's mark.

'Where are we?' Nadezhda asked quietly, letting her green eyes wander over the lawn in front of her.

Snape, too, looked around, more to win time than to actually figure out where they had Apparated to and wishing that they had been summoned to anywhere but this place.

'This,' he started tentatively, pointing at the house on the other side of the grounds, 'is Riddle Manor. The Dark Lord only summons his most trusted followers here and only on special occasions.'

'Like initiations.'

Nadezhda had spoken the word so quietly that it could have been mistaken for a whisper of the wind. But Snape had heard her, and he nodded, hoping against hope that there was another reason for their summoning. But he knew there wasn't.

Without another word, he placed his mask on his face. He seldom wore it, even found it ridiculous to wear it to a summoning where the only other people participating were Death Eaters of the innermost circle, Death Eaters who knew more about each other than any of them cared to admit. But today, Snape welcomed the shadow of the mask. It created a barrier, a protective wall behind which he could hide. He had to collect himself now, so he would be able to step in front of the Dark Lord with his mind clear and his emotions safely locked away. The Dark Lord mustn't know how much he cared about the girl he was delivering into the fold, how much he wished that he didn't have to. And Nadezhda, she didn't need to see Severus Snape. Better for her to see Snape, the Death Eater. It would make things easier once they returned to Hogwarts. Maybe, hopefully, she would be able to forgive her Head of House for having failed to protect her.

'Are you ready?' he asked, sneering at his own choice of words. Ready for what? Ready to receive a mark she didn't want to carry? Ready to be pushed into a bottomless abyss? How could anyone be ready for that?

But Nadezhda still nodded. 'I am ready,' she whispered, closing her eyes for a moment and taking a deep breath. Snape saw her shoulders relax and her posture become straighter, and he knew that she was collecting herself behind her closed eyes just as she was behind his mask. When she opened her eyes, Snape stared for some moments into the cold emeralds. No fear, no apprehension. Nothing.

'Let us go then.'

Swiftly, Snape turned and approached the manor house, with every step adding yet another brick to his mental wall. By the time they reached the front door, his mind was empty of all emotions, and the girl he was leading to slaughter was standing unflinchingly by his side.

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When they entered the large room that had once served as the dining room of the Riddle family, Snape's nostrils filled with a sourly sweet scent; copper and metal with a hint of rust and salt. Blood, he deduced.

He quickly scanned the room. There were ten Death Eaters present, flanking the room, five on each side. By the window stood Bellatrix Lestrange, wand still raised and her lips curled into a cruel yet almost ecstatic smile. Snape knew that look. It was the look Bellatrix bore whenever she had killed.

His eyes travelled to the far end of the room. There lay a man, face down in a puddle of his own blood. Snape didn't recognise him. But one thing, he knew for sure: there was too much blood on the floor for the man to be still alive.

'You missed a good show, Severus,' Yaxley pointed out. 'Dear Bella is in top shape today. McKibben never stood a chance.'

McKibben? Duncan McKibben?

Snape cast a quick glance at Nadezhda, who had entered the room at his side. Like many others in the room, she was looking at the dead body and the red puddle that was still extending beneath it. It was her father lying there, mangled, executed. But the girl didn't show any reaction.

Snape scowled behind his mask. He was well aware that Nadezhda held few affectionate feelings for her father, but no reaction at all? That was just not natural. But then again, Nadezhda seldom showed what was going on in her heart and mind.

How much longer would she be able to pretend? Snape wondered. And what would happen on the day her walls crumbled?

'Aren't you going to ask why we duelled?' Bellatrix asked in a petulant tone, pouting like a little girl and looking expectantly at Snape.

'I assumed that you would tell me sooner or later anyway,' Snape commented drily before removing his mask. None of the others were wearing theirs. 'Well?' he then asked despite himself. 'Why have you duelled?'

Bellatrix threw out her chest. 'That one,' she started, pointing at the corpse, 'claimed that I have been fooled. He claimed his daughter hadn't learnt any Dark magic at all so far.' She gave a high pitched giggle. 'Imagine that! He claimed that Barty has been lying to me!'

Bellatrix never noticed that Snape's heart skipped a beat. How had McKibben found out? Had he once again beaten the truth out of his daughter? And why on earth had the idiot felt the need to confront Bellatrix about it?

'I must say I am deeply insulted,' Bellatrix continued. 'As if I didn't know what is going on right under my nose. You've been teaching the girl your best moves, haven't you, love?'

She extended her hand, and Barty Crouch detached himself from the shadows in which he had been hiding. He looked pale, Snape thought. But then again, McKibben had hit the floor only a foot or two away from the boy. No wonder he looked peaky.

'Tell us what you've taught her so far,' Bellatrix demanded, patting Barty on the head as if he were a child.

'I ... I started with *Sectumsempra*,' Barty brought forth. 'She ... Nadezhda picked it up quickly. Before I knew it, the rabbits you had brought to Malfoy Manor were cut open.'

Before you knew it, indeed Snape thought. *You were fast asleep*

'What more? What more?' Bellatrix was almost levitating with excitement. She seemed convinced that her protégé had indeed succeeded in turning Nadezhda into a Dark witch.

'She ... she is good at cutting and slicing,' Barty reported. 'And you should see her! *Excorio!* There wasn't a drop of blood on the floor when she was done with that rabbit.'

That was because it was no rabbit at all, you imbecile

That time, Nadezhda had transformed a pillow into what had resembled a flayed rabbit. At first, Barty had bought it, and when he had become suspicious, Nadezhda had distracted him in the most adult way. And when he had been at his most vulnerable, at a point where so many men before him had lost the little sense they normally possessed, Nadezhda had for the first time used a Memory Charm on him. And now Barty was convinced that she had done everything he had bid her to do. For him, she was on the best way of turning into Bellatrix Lestrange.

'Let us see how good a teacher you are then, Barty.'

Everyone in the room spun around and fell to their knees only moments later. None of them had noticed the Dark Lord entering. For as much as they knew, he might have been there the whole time and listened to their conversation. Maybe, he had even seen Duncan McKibben die.

When they were told to rise, the Death Eaters were confronted with one of the oddest images imaginable. The Dark Lord was carrying something white and fluffy in his arms. It was a puppy, they could make out. And the Dark Lord was petting it absent-mindedly.

'I found this little fellow in the garden, trapped under a pile of firewood,' he explained. 'It seems to have lost its way.'

He released the pup without a warning, and the little animal landed hard on its feet, ears laid back and tail between his hind legs. One didn't need to be an expert on dogs to see that the little thing was scared out of its wits.

'Get rid of it,' the Dark Lord commanded casually, his cold eyes focused on Nadezhda.

'My Lord?'

'Get rid of it,' Voldemort repeated, slower now and pronouncing every syllable very clearly.

'How, my Lord?'

The girl was trying to win time, so much was obvious, but the Dark Lord wouldn't have any of it. 'There is no use torturing the beast,' he pointed out. 'So as much as Barty praises your *Excorio*, there is no need to show it off today. Cut the throat,' he suggested. 'And be quick. We have greater things to achieve today.'

'Yes, my Lord.'

The few moments it took for Nadezhda to produce her wand seemed the longest in Snape's life. He saw every single one of her movements, the little, almost imperceptible twitch of a muscle at the back of her jaw and the slight tremble of the hand she was trying to hide in the folds of her robe. He was sure that everyone else must have noticed as well. But the Death Eaters stood looking at their Lord, and Voldemort in his turn was looking at the dog, expecting to see it drop dead. No one was looking at Nadezhda. No one except her Head of House.

'Now, child,' Voldemort commanded in a voice so soft that one could have expected him to offer tea and biscuits next. But Snape knew better. The Dark Lord wanted his wishes fulfilled now. Failure to do so would be severely punished.

Nadezhda raised her wand and uttered the curse. There was a short yelp from the pup, and then it collapsed into a puddle of its own blood. It was over in a heartbeat.

'Bravo,' the Dark Lord commented as he turned over the dead pup with his foot to inspect the cut. 'Right through the carotid artery and the jugular vein. And here some of us thought you didn't have it in you.'

Snape glanced at his student who in her turn was staring at her wand. Her hand was shaking badly now, and she was so pale that the blood on the floor could as well have been hers. She looked terrified. No wonder! She thought she had cast the curse. She thought that she had taken an innocent life. But she was wrong. She had no idea that the dark-clad wizard standing right by her side had cast a nonverbal curse a split second before she had opened her mouth and that the gash across the puppy's throat had not been her doing. But Snape could not tell her. For the time being, he had to let her believe that she had cast her first deadly curse.

'Bellatrix will take care of you today,' the Dark Lord announced, smiling at Nadezhda. 'If she deems you worthy, she will bring you back to me tonight, and I will allow you to receive my Mark. If not ...' He shrugged and waved his hand in the air. A second later, the dead puppy was gone. McKibben's corpse, however, seemed not to bother him.

'Severus,' he continued, 'your task today will be to make sure that Miss McKibben will not be missed by any of her teachers for the rest of the day. As her Head of House, I am certain you can come up with a plausible excuse for her playing truant.'

He was being sent back to Hogwarts? Without Nadezhda?

'Return an hour after midnight,' Voldemort added and headed towards the door. 'Tonight will be a night to celebrate.'

Snape swallowed drily but still bowed in acceptance. The Dark Lord's orders could not be questioned, he knew that. There was not even any point in trying. He simply had to accept the fact that he had failed to protect his student.

9: The First He Cried With

Chapter 9 of 12

Severus Snape has been teaching at Hogwarts for only a few weeks when he realises that being Head of House is not going to be as easy as he had hoped.

A/N: In this chapter, you will recognise lines from chapter 'The Prince's Tale' in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

Chapter 9: The First He Cried With

Snape sat on a chair in the Headmaster's office. He was paler than usual, but that was just about all that betrayed him. His back was straight, his face an inscrutable mask, and not even his eyes showed any sign of the storm that was raging inside him. He had failed, he told himself over and over again. He had failed to protect his student.

'And Voldemort ordered you to come back one hour after midnight?' Dumbledore double checked.

'Yes,' Snape answered. 'There will be some kind of celebration.'

His voice was still as impassive as it had been when he had told Dumbledore about the events at Riddle Manor, cold and matter-of-fact. There was no point in him losing his nerve. It wouldn't help anyone.

'The initiation of young Death Eaters is not normally celebrated, is it?' Dumbledore enquired.

Snape told the Headmaster no, his stomach lurching when he pronounced the word. Initiations were indeed never celebrated. Among the Death Eaters, yes; most of the time with copious amount of alcohol and other mind-altering substances. But so far, the Dark Lord had never explicitly invited his followers to a celebration. Did he plan to celebrate something else that night?

'I fear there is little we can do but sit and wait,' Dumbledore pointed out. His voice was calm, and had his blue eyes not expressed deepest concern, Snape would have considered hexing him into the next year. But the old man was worried, Snape could see this clearly.

'You have classes to teach, Severus,' Dumbledore reminded Snape after some minutes of uncomfortable silence in which both men had clung to their own thoughts. 'I know you have other things than potions on your mind this afternoon, but I do not want you to wear out your shoes by pacing back and forth in your study until midnight. Your brooding will not help Nadezhda. Teach your lessons, come to dinner and try to rest during the evening. You may have a long night ahead of you.'

Snape nodded in acceptance and rose from his chair. There was just as little use arguing with Dumbledore as there was arguing with the Dark Lord. Dumbledore's orders made sense, at least, and they were well-meant. How Snape would carry them out, however, was a different matter all together. He would teach his classes, of course, and he would also show up for dinner in the Great Hall, even if it was just to humour the Headmaster. But how he was supposed to rest during the evening was beyond him. He knew already that he would do anything but. He would pace his study and wrack his brain, going over the morning's and the last months' events over and over again in order to find that specific moment in which he could have acted in a different way and thus made a difference; the moment when he had failed.

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The girl giggled. 'Come on, Sev. This is fun!'

She took another careful step on the frozen puddle. And another. Then there was a crack! The ice shattered, and the girl giggled once more.

Young Severus Snape shook his head. 'I cannot see the fun in trampling around in frozen puddles,' he commented drily, thinking about his second-hand shoes that were patched in various places. His socks would be soaked with icy water the moment he broke through.

'This is because you've never tried it,' Lily exclaimed. 'You never know when the ice is going to break under your feet. It's exciting!'

Incredulous, Severus raised an eyebrow and shook his head at his friend's childish joy. He didn't understand it, but he loved the smile on her face.

'Come on, try it!' Lily grabbed his gloved hand and pulled him towards the biggest puddle in the wintry playground. 'I'll start on one side and you on the other. Let's see who cracks the ice first.'

He would, of course, Severus thought. He was heavier than Lily. And his shoes weren't as delicate as her quaint winter boots. But he would humour her. Anything to keep the smile on Lily's face.

They agreed to take one step at the time. Lily's was counting aloud: 'One ... two ...'

Severus thought he could hear the ice groan under his weight, but it didn't crack. Encouraged by Lily's smile, he took another step.

'... three ...'

Nothing happened.

'... four ...'

After the fifth step, the two teenagers had reached the middle of the frozen puddle and stood eye to eye, the ice still intact under their feet.

'It's like magic,' Lily breathed, looking up at her friend. Her cheeks were rosy from the cold winter air, and her green eyes so clear that Severus could see his reflection in them.

First he reached for her hands. They felt so tiny in his.

He looked into her emerald green eyes and bent to kiss her.

Then the ice cracked.

As if stung by a Blast-Ended Skrewt, Snape shot off from the armchair he had dozed off in. For a moment, he was quite disoriented. Had he not just been in the playground where he had met Lily for the first time? Had he not just held his best friend by the hands and leant in to kiss her?

Realising that it had been nothing but a bittersweet dream, Snape looked around in the darkness of his study. He couldn't believe that he had fallen asleep. He had been convinced that he would spend the evening pacing his study, waiting for midnight to arrive and pass so he could Apparate back to Riddle Manor. But obviously, he had sat down at some point. He couldn't even remember when. And he had fallen asleep. Maybe Dumbledore had put a Sleeping Draught into the cup of tea he had brought down to the dungeons after dinner?

Snorting, Snape shook his head. That thought was just ridiculous. He was the Potions master and a double agent. When it came to detecting foreign substances in his food or drink, he could even give Mad-Eye Moody a run for his Galleons. But the tea cup was standing on the table beside the armchair, and it was still half-full. Snape picked it up and inhaled deeply, detecting whiff of elderflower, violets and blueberries, but no Sleeping Draught.

Then his eyes caught sight of the clock on the mantel piece. The tea cup slipped from his hand and shattered on the stone floor. It was twenty past one.

The blood in Snape's veins turned as cold as the ice he and Lily had been standing on in his dream. Twenty past one. The Dark Lord had commanded that he return an hour after midnight, and now Snape was twenty minutes late. But the Dark Lord had not called for him. The Mark was not burning.

Instinctively, Snape's right hand darted towards his left sleeve in order to pull it up. For what reason, he did not really know. There was no way that he could have missed the calling. But then again, he had not thought it possible that he'd fall asleep that night either.

He never saw his Mark that night. The moment he grabbed hold of his cuff, a bright light erupted right in front of him, blinding him and sending him tumbling backwards into his armchair.

'Come to my office, Severus,' Dumbledore's voice echoed through the room. 'It is urgent.'

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The Headmaster's office was almost as dark as the dungeons, and it took Snape a few moments to make out the figure of Albus Dumbledore. He was standing by the window, gazing out into the night, his white hair illuminated by two candles that were burning on the rickety table beside him. Both were white and looked as if they had been burning for some hours.

'You wished to see me, Headmaster,' Snape announced his arrival.

Dumbledore didn't turn around. Instead, he seemed to be talking towards the stars. 'It is past one, Severus,' he pointed out, his voice severe. 'And still you have not been summoned. Do you know why?'

Snape shook his head.

'No Death Eater has been summoned tonight,' Dumbledore carried on. 'Your Lord has not been able to call any of you. He has met his match.'

Snape frowned. Had Dumbledore just told him that the Dark Lord had been vanquished? How? By whom?

'Your Lord set out to find the child of the prophecy tonight. He set out to kill Lily Potter's son.'

Snape felt the breath catch in his throat. So that was what the Dark Lord had wanted to celebrate? That he had killed the child that possessed the powers to vanquish him?

But Dumbledore had said that the Dark Lord had met his match. Had the Dark Lord failed?

'James never stood a chance,' Dumbledore continued. 'Confident that no other but one of his friends would knock on his door, he opened it without hesitation. And Lily ...'

Snape cringed. Before his inner eye, he saw the Dark Lord step over the body of James Potter and approach Lily. His Lily.

'Lily sacrificed herself for her son.'

Sacrificed? But that meant ...

'Dead?' Snape managed to croak. It felt as if an invisible hand had reached into his chest and was crushing his organs, his lungs, his heart. He felt his knees give way and stumbled forwards, collapsing onto a chair.

Slowly, Dumbledore turned from the window, stepped away from the candlelight and into the dark. Mercilessly, he towered over the dark figure that was slumped forwards in the chair, shaking with tears.

'Lily provided her son with the strongest protective magic there is,' he declared, his voice uncharacteristically cold. 'She gave her life for Harry, and thus, Voldemort was unable to harm the boy.'

She gave her life... Snape felt himself shake from top to toe. No Cruciatus Curse he had ever endured had hurt so much. It felt as if his very heart were being ripped from his body and crushed into a bloody pulp right in front of his eyes.

'I thought ... you were going ... to keep her ... safe ...'

He barely heard himself begging for an explanation, nor did he hear Dumbledore's answer. The agonised screams of his soul were just too loud.

'Her boy lives,' Dumbledore said.

Snape flinched. What did this matter? What did Lily's son matter? To him, the child meant nothing. To him, this child was nothing else but yet another proof that Lily had chosen another man.

'Her son lives,' Dumbledore stressed once more. 'He has her eyes, precisely her eyes. You remember the shape and colour of Lily Evans' eyes, I am sure?'

'DON'T!' bellowed Snape. He could see Lily's eyes clearly before him, but he did not want Dumbledore to share his most precious memory. Lily's eyes had been emerald green, almond shaped and filled with a kindness the likes of which Snape feared he would never again see in another pair of eyes.

'Gone ... Dead ...'

Gone forever.

'I wish ... I wish / were dead ...'

'And what use would that be to anyone?' said Dumbledore coldly. 'If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear.'

Dumbledore's words didn't seem to sink in. Snape could hear them, one after one, but they did not make any sense. Lily was gone, dead! There was nothing he could do for her. There was nothing he could do for himself. He would have to live with the fact that he had been the one to carry the Prophecy to the Dark Lord. He would have to live with the guilt of having signed Lily's death sentence. He did not want to live with that.

'You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lily's son.'

Protect Lily's son? Snape's mouth twisted into a sneer. He had never been able to protect anyone. He had not been able to protect his mother. He had not been able to protect Lily. He had not been able to protect Nadezhda.

'He does not need protection,' he spat. 'The Dark Lord has gone ...'

'The Dark Lord will return, and Harry Potter will be in terrible danger when he does.'

Deep inside Snape's mind, a rational voice asked how Dumbledore could know, but Snape shut it out. He did not want to know. Not tonight. All he wanted was to make amends.

'Never tell, Dumbledore!' he begged, shame spreading through his body like venom. 'This must be between us! Swear it! I cannot bear ... especially Potter's son ...'

He'd do it for Lily, for Lily alone. For Lily, he would protect her son. For Lily he would stay alive. And when his task was fulfilled, he would beg her for forgiveness.

~ ~ ~

Nothing. He felt absolutely nothing as he walked through the grass. It was better that way, he told himself. He couldn't allow himself to feel.

Back in Dumbledore's office he had cried. He had cried tears of grief, shame and remorse. But if he cried now, the tiniest of tears would turn into a river, a torrent that would sweep him away and drown him. If he cried, he would die. And that was the one thing he wasn't allowed to do. He had a task now.

He didn't know why, but somehow Snape had imagined he would find Riddle Manor in ruins. Yet the house stood tall and looming, a dark shadow against the starry sky. The walls did not know that their last master had gone.

Tentatively, Snape stepped over the threshold. Dumbledore had been quite confident that he would find Nadezhda and most probably several other Death Eaters at the place where their lord had told them to celebrate his feat. But all the windows were dark and the silence in there absolute. All Snape could hear was the echo of his own footsteps. It felt like descending into a tomb. Even the air seemed to become colder with every step he took. No living creature was inside this crypt, Snape was most certain of that.

He felt a wave of panic wash over him. If the girl wasn't there, then where would he find her? He had no idea where any of the Death Eaters were. Most of them had probably taken flight the moment they had learnt of the Dark Lord's failure. With Voldemort gone, there was no one to protect them. Now the Aurors could hunt them down and bring them in, and there was no hope that someone would come to their rescue. A Death Eater on his own was quite a pathetic being, nothing a squad of Aurors would fear. And the Death Eaters knew this. By now, most of them were probably in hiding.

But not all of them. Some of them, Lord Voldemort's most loyal followers, would be looking for him. Bellatrix, for one, was most probably turning each stone in Godric's Hollow by now, looking for her beloved Lord. Snape doubted that she was alone. Surely, she had forced others to join her. Her husband, Rodolphus, had certainly not dared to leave her side; and where Rodolphus went, Rabastan followed. Did they take the girl along? After all, Voldemort had left Nadezhda in Bellatrix's care earlier. What would happen to her when the Death Eaters were cornered by Aurors? Would she be able to get herself out of the line of fire?

When he reached the door that led to the dining room, Snape sent a prayer to the heavens. 'Be here. Please, be here.' He could not bear to lose yet another innocent soul that night.

Bravely, he pushed open the door and stepped into the room.

His nostrils immediately filled with the odour of decay, and he retched, covering his mouth and nose with his left hand. With his right, he drew his wand.

'Lumos.'

No one had bothered removing or even covering the body of Duncan McKibben. He was still lying in a puddle of his own blood. But someone had turned him around. While he had been lying face down earlier, he was now lying on his back, and his eyes were closed.

'I couldn't fold his hands.'

Snape spun around, wand raised. He had been quite certain that he was alone in the room, and the voice had startled him. But he had also recognised it, and he was not using his wand to defend himself. Instead, he used it to cast a dim light onto the pale face of Nadezhda McKibben.

'How did you get here?' he asked.

'Barty,' Nadezhda replied, shrinking once more back into the shadows of the room, as if she were fleeing the light of Snape's wand. 'He brought me here from Godric's Hollow. He said I mustn't stay there. It was too dangerous.'

'Godric's Hollow?' With a few swift strides, Snape closed the distance between him and the girl. 'What were you doing in Godric's Hollow?'

Nadezhda recoiled, flinching. 'I tried to,' she said, her voice high-pitched and her eyes darting back towards her father's corpse. 'I tried to fold his hands. I really did. But his arms are all stiff. And his hands are so cold. I didn't want to hold onto them.'

Snape froze. Standing mere inches away from the girl now, he realised just how pale she was. Her lips had a blue tinge, and her hands, which she desperately tried to hide in the folds of her robes, were shaking uncontrollably. She was in shock.

Slowly, Snape reached out his free hand and placed it on the girl's shoulder, placing himself right in front of her and this shielding the remains of her father from her view.

'What were you doing in Godric's Hollow?' he asked once more, his voice much softer now.

'Bellatrix,' the girl started, her lips trembling. 'She ... she insisted on following the Dark Lord. When he told her she couldn't, she grew angry and just entered a house at random. There ... there was a woman, a Muggle, and three children. And Bellatrix ... Bellatrix was angry and frustrated ...'

With a uncanny accuracy, Nadezhda recounted just what Bellatrix had done to the woman and her children and how Bellatrix had forced her to cast a curse on the smallest. She never even realised that Snape slowly but determinedly led her out of the room.

By the time they had reached the Riddle library and Snape had sat her down on a chaise longue, the tears were streaming down Nadezhda's face, and her whole body was shaking. Sitting down beside her, Snape took hold of her hands. They were cold and clammy.

'How did Barty find you?' he asked.

'He was already at the other house. Some... something had happened there. An explosion. I don't know. He was there and the Lestranges. They were fighting another man, but he Disapparated when he saw Bellatrix. Then Barty grabbed my hand and brought me here.'

'And left you alone,' Snape stated bitterly.

What had the boy been thinking, leaving Nadezhda alone after she had tasted Bellatrix's madness, in the house where her father's corpse lay mangled on the floor? But then again, Barty deserved praise for acting quickly and getting Nadezhda out of harm's way. Certainly, Bellatrix would have vented her frustration by attacking the weakest in her proximity. What she had done to Barty upon his return, Snape did not even want to know.

He looked long and hard at his student. As much as he wanted to get her out of Riddle Manor and back to Hogwarts, he doubted that she was capable of Apparition. Even with him guiding her, he could not guarantee that she would not splinch herself. He'd have to make her relax before they could go anywhere. He would light a fire to get her warm and keep talking to her to distract her.

But he never made it to the fireplace. When he made to let go off her hands, Nadezhda clung onto his with all her might.

'Don't let go,' she whispered, a desperation ringing in her voice that made Snape tighten his grip again. 'If you let go, I'll freeze to death.'

Snape looked up from their entwined hands and was captured by her eyes, a set of green emeralds, partly hidden behind dark lashes on which tears were still hanging.

He swallowed hard. Mere hours ago, in his dream, a pair of green eyes had been smiling up at him; a pair of green eyes that were now forever closed and would never smile again. Somehow he knew that the same was true for Nadezhda's eyes. Even though there was still life in them and hopefully would be for many years to come, it would take nothing short of a miracle to awaken a smile in them.

The tears on her lashes looked like tiny icicles, frozen water at the edge of an icy green lake. And without even thinking about what he was doing, Snape leant in and kissed them away.

What followed was wrong. Snape knew that, and, most probably, Nadezhda knew it as well. But in hindsight, the events were inevitable. They were two lost souls, both inches away from dying in the icy cold of despair. They found each other in the abandoned library of Riddle Manor, giving each other life in a night of death and grief, frantically clinging to each other as if the contact of their bodies were the only thing that kept them from tumbling into eternal darkness.

His eyes never left hers. Not when he shoved up her robes, not when he opened his own, and not when he buried himself between her thighs. Desperately, he hung onto the green gems, begging for forgiveness with every thrust.

What he was doing was so wrong in so many ways. She was his student. She was vulnerable, alone and scared, just as he was. She trusted him. But he couldn't stop. Relentlessly he drove into her, feeling her hot breath on his lips and hearing her moans echo in his ears. She was warm, and she made him feel warm in turn.

Encouraged by her legs that wrapped around his hips to pull him closer and her nails that dug into his shoulder blades, he thrust deeper and deeper, until his vision became blurred. He didn't know anymore if her moans were still moans of pleasure, just as little as he knew what his own moans meant. But he could not stop. He needed more, much more. The heat of her body wasn't enough anymore. He needed release to stay alive.

Squeezing his eyes shut in a last desperate yet futile attempt to regain control, he lost it and collapsed at her shoulder with an outcry that he managed to strangle in his throat in the very last moment. The young woman who was holding him in his arms was not Lily. If he called her by that name now, it would be the ultimate proof that he had used her.

Shame washing over him, Snape rolled off her. How could he ever look at her again? How could he ever look into a pair of green eyes again and feel anything but guilt?

Rearranging his robes around him, he came to sit at the edge of the chaise, burying his face in his hands. He felt the tears burn in his eyes, but he refused to shed them. He wasn't worthy.

He heard the rustling of robes behind him and something that sounded like a stifled sob. And just when he was about to fly up from the chaise and flee, he felt himself being pulled back. The same tiny, warm hand that had pulled him closer and urged him on only minutes earlier was once again resting on his shoulder. This time, it was consoling him.

'Don't,' he growled, trying to shrug the hand off. 'I do not deserve your sympathies.'

But his words didn't scare her away. Instead, Nadezhda moved closer, wrapping her arm around him from behind and resting her chin on his shoulder. Her breath felt warm at his neck, and Snape didn't fight her. Instead, he took her tiny hand that was resting on his chest in his and kissed it, feeling her tears wet his neck and collar, all the while his own tears silently ran down his cheeks.

He never even noticed Nadezhda raising her wand and erasing the last hour of his memory.

10: The First He Couldn't Fool

Chapter 10 of 12

Severus Snape has been teaching at Hogwarts for only a few weeks when he realises that being Head of House is not going to be as easy as he had hoped.

Chapter 10: The First He Couldn't Fool

'My condolences, Miss McKibben. Your father was a real asset to the Ministry. Diligent, punctual, ...'

One had to hand it to Nadezhda, Snape thought, watching her from across the room. She knew how to act and how to present a perfect façade.

How many hands she had shaken at her father's wake, Snape did not know. What he did know, however, was that she was doing it perfectly. She thanked everyone for coming, Ministry employee and follower of the Dark Lord alike, and let herself be patted on the back, while her face was an inscrutable mask and her green eyes void of any kind of emotion. The perfect pureblood woman: self-controlled, poised and focused on her task which today was to play the grieving daughter.

It had been two weeks since her father had been murdered. He had been found face down in a puddle of his own blood in a dark alley in Little Hangleton on the early morning of November first. 'Ministry Employee Murdered By Dark Wizards', the *Daily Prophet* had reported later that day, and normally, such a headline would have triggered quite a reaction. But on November first, the news of Duncan McKibben's murder had drowned among bigger and more important ones. After all, James and Lily Potter had been murdered the same night, and You-Know-Who had gone at last. Hence, Snape doubted that anyone had really cared about how and why Duncan

McKibben had fallen victim to Dark wizards. And the one member of the Magical Law Enforcement who actually had questioned the possibility of McKibben having been murdered in that alley, had strangely enough misplaced his report only a few days later and then been overcome by the sudden urge to move to Canada. And with him leaving, the case had been closed and quite quickly been forgotten.

'Poor girl,' Snape heard an old witch to his right whisper to her companion. 'She's all alone now. Her father was the only family she had. What will become of her now?'

She will finally be free, Snape thought. Obviously, the old witch had no idea about what kind of life Nadezhda McKibben had led while her father had still be alive. Not that Snape knew much of it either, Nadezhda had never spoken of her life at home. But a few minutes spent in McKibben Manor had been enough for Snape to draw conclusions.

It was a cold house, filled with expensive drapes and curtains, dark wooden furniture and portraits of wizards and witches from the oldest and purest of Wizarding families. And despite all the pomp, Snape couldn't help but be reminded of his own childhood home at Spinner's End. There had not been any satin curtains or Mahogany desks, of course, and the walls had not been hung with portraits of important and influential people. But the feeling of the house at Spinner's End had been the same. Like McKibben Manor, the house where Severus Snape had grown up, had commanded silence and obedience, and all its inhabitants had known that insubordination would be as severely punished as the dragging of feet in the hallway, speaking too loudly in the dinner table or chewing one's food with one's mouth open. And Snape imagined that Duncan McKibben had been just as rough in applying his rules as Tobias had been when he had tried to beat the magic out of his son. If one listened carefully, one could still hear the echoes of leather belts and muffled cries.

At least, Snape thought mournfully, he had had his mother. Eileen had rarely stood up against her husband. She had been too afraid of his temper and his fists. But when Tobias had been away or passed out on the sofa, Eileen had spoken to her son, told him about the wonders of magic and spun tales about the wonderful life he'd lead once he entered the Wizarding world. And she had always mended his bruises and broken bones, hugged him and then rocked him to sleep. Nadezhda, however, had never known the healing and consoling touch of a mother's hand or heard tales of a better world. All she had known were the tales her father had told her, tales filled with lies and endless hatred towards the race that according to him was to blame for all the misery in the world.

Thankfully, and against all the odds, Nadezhda had at some point stopped listening to her father and learnt how to think on her own. For some reason, she had started to question her father's teachings, and he had not managed to poison her heart completely. And now her father was dead, and Nadezhda would finally be allowed to breathe, to express her own thoughts and live according to them. Hopefully, there was still time for her to learn how to.

'Such a sweet little thing. I am so glad Narcissa and I could help her through this hard time.'

Snape had to fight hard not to sneer at Lucius Malfoy's comment. As if the Malfoys really cared about Nadezhda McKibben. Narcissa might, but for Lucius, helping an orphaned young witch was nothing more than a publicity stunt. Merlin knew he needed to work on his reputation now. And as was to be expected of a Malfoy, Lucius was doing a great job!

When the Aurors had come knocking on his door, he had put on a show that had made the best actors in the Wizarding world go green with envy. And when he had been done, everyone had been convinced that poor Lucius Malfoy had been put under an Imperius Curse by a vicious Death Eater, who had threatened the lives of his wife and son, and that no one was more relieved than him to see Voldemort gone. Certainly, some bags of gold had also helped to make his story more believable, as had some well-placed threats. However, the opinion of the public was not as easily bought as certain Ministry employees, and so Lucius had been forced to find other ways to woo the masses. And what better way than to take care of the distraught daughter of a murdered, highly regarded wizard? So Lucius paid for a pompous funeral, and Narcissa had organised a tasteful wake. And everyone was touched and taken in by their compassion. Surely, such helpful self-sacrificing people could not be followers of the Dark Lord.

'You know,' Lucius continued in a conspiratorial whisper, 'once things have calmed down, I think we should marry Nadezhda off to Barty. They do like each other, after all. Can't you just imagine the beautiful, pureblood babies they will produce?'

Snape just gave a non-committal grunt. There were so many things wrong in Lucius' proposal, that he did not even know what to correct first. For starters, Barty and Nadezhda did not like each other. Barty was still under Bellatrix's spell and his infatuation just a side effect. And Nadezhda most certainly held no warm feelings for Bartemius Crouch, Junior. She had only used him to survive.

And besides, Barty had bigger problems at the moment. There were wizards some Aurors, for example who thought that he was associating with witches and wizards he should not be associating with. He was, after all, the son of the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and there was an unwritten code about the things he should be doing. But just because he was his father's son, Barty had so far been given the benefit of the doubt. So far, no one had questioned him about his associates. How long being his father's son would help him, however, was unclear, and for the time being, Barty would be well advised to keep a very low profile. Getting married to a schoolgirl was most certainly not on his current priority list.

'I hear the Potters are being laid to rest today as well.'

Snape felt a muscle twitch in his jaw. 'This is none of my concern,' he brought forth between gritted teeth. 'And I doubt it is any of yours, Lucius.'

Lucius shrugged. 'I thought you'd be happy to see your arch enemy be put into the earth. In any case, it certainly explains why Dumbledore isn't here. One might think he would at least have the decency to show his support when one of his students loses a parent and attend the wake. But that old codger has never been one to hold on etiquette. I will have to see to it that Hogwarts gets a more suitable headmaster soon. I wouldn't want Dumbledore around once Draco is eleven. Imagine the ideas he'd put in the boy's head.'

Once more, Snape chose not to comment. In fact, he had not even heard the last bit of Lucius' rant. Dumbledore was, as Lucius had deduced, at Godric's Hollow, taking farewell of James and Lily Potter. They had been members of the Order of the Phoenix, after all. Hence, it was only natural for Dumbledore to attend their funeral. Just as natural as it was for Snape not to attend. How would it look if he showed up at the funeral of his arch enemy, as Lucius had put it so nicely, and the women who had refused to talk to him for far too many years? How would it look if he, Severus Snape, a former follower of Lord Voldemort, showed up at the funeral of the Dark Lord's last two victims? It wouldn't do, that much was clear. And so Snape had been sent to McKibben Manor instead, and Dumbledore had promised to come around later.

Thankfully, Lucius did not insist on Snape giving him an explanation about Dumbledore's whereabouts, but decided to continue rubbing some elbows. And Snape, in his turn, took his chance to slink into the shadows and out of the room.

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Much like the rest of McKibben Manor, the garden was a sombre place. It was well-kept, of course, just as it could be expected, but it was lifeless and loveless. Tall limewood trees towered over the gravel pathway that led down to the lake, and at its shore, an old willow tree cast its mournful shadow over the grey waters. There were no flowers blooming anywhere. Of course, it was November, and the season for flowers had long since passed for the year. But Snape doubted that there were ever any flowers at all. Flowers needed sunlight and love, two things which McKibben Manor was sorely lacking.

The mists hung thick over the lake, and there was a drizzle, and Snape regretted not having taken the time to retrieve his cloak. But after his talk with Lucius Malfoy, he had just wanted to be alone for a while. And there he was now, all alone, seeking refuge under the branches of the willow with no intention of returning to the house any time soon. He would get soaked, but for the time being, he couldn't even muster the energy to cast a Water Repelling Charm.

Leaning with his back against the trunk of the willow, he closed his eyes and let his mind be flooded with the memories of a night two weeks ago, the longest night of his life.

He had arrived at Godric's Hollow a few hours before sunrise on November first. He had not slept at all that night and had felt exhausted, both mentally and physically. But he had not had the peace of mind to rest after he had brought Nadezhda back to Hogwarts. He had needed to see with his own eyes what impact the Dark Lord's last spell had had.

Hidden from sight by a well-performed Invisibility Charm, he had lingered by the garden wall of the Potter house, watching the Aurors and other members of the Magical Law Enforcement going through the rubble, looking for clues to what had happened earlier that night. After they had left, Snape had himself approached ruins, treading carefully as not to leave a trace. Just like the Aurors before him, he had been looking for answers and explanations. Just like the Aurors, he had not found any.

How long he had stumbled around in the debris, Snape did not know. But when he had finally turned his back on the ruins, swearing that he would never return, he had been so empty and forlorn that he had not even noticed where his feet were carrying him. Aimlessly, he had wandered around Godric's Hollow and somehow ended up in the graveyard, under an ancient willow. There he had cried. Silently, the tears had rolled down his cheeks, and he had neither tried to stop them nor bothered to wipe them away. Eventually, the morning breeze had dried them for him.

Now, two weeks later, under the willow by the lake, Snape took a shuddering breath and squeezed his eyes shut even tighter. He would not cry any more, he told himself, bringing his hands to his face as to smother any treacherous tears that could have managed to escape from behind his lashes. But he found his cheeks wet from the drizzle, and he could not tell if the liquid on his fingers was drops of rain or tears.

Sniffing and shaking his head, he opened his eyes and let his gaze wander out onto the lake, where a flock of swans had gathered. They didn't seem to mind the drizzle. Majestically, they glided in and out of the mists, soundlessly, like ghosts.

'I found an injured cygnet down at the shore the summer before I came to Hogwarts. I had an elf help me nurse it back to health in the boat house. When my father found out, he presented the elf with clothes and wrung the bird's neck. I think he fed its corpse to the dogs later.'

Snape slowly turned his head. He had no idea how long Nadezhda had been standing beside him, and he did not care. There was a pain in her voice that made him forget that she might have seen him wipe away his tears, and a pleading look in her green eyes that prevented him from doing anything else but listen to her. She was looking straight at him, but Snape doubted that she really saw him. The ghosts of the pasts that were haunting her eyes surely prevented her from focusing on anything.

'I hated my father so much for so many years,' she continued. 'I hated the stories he told me and the way he treated me. But most of all, I hated the way he ignored me when he had no use for me. And so I did everything for him. For that, I hated myself.'

Snape understood her only too well. He knew how horribly wrong it felt to be glad to receive a beating, just because it meant that one had not been totally forgotten.

'When did you stop believing?' he asked quietly, almost afraid that the sound of his voice would break the spell that seemed to have been cast beneath the branches of the willow. But to his relief, Nadezhda kept on talking.

'The year Charles came to Hogwarts. As a Muggle-born he had no idea who the McKibbens were. He had no reason to endear himself with me because I had a lot of gold or an influential father. He just wanted to be my friend, and I learnt that Muggles weren't the monsters my father had made them out to be.'

'And then you started questioning.'

'And paid dearly for it.'

Snape nodded. He knew that Nadezhda bore many scars, both on her body and in her soul, many of them as ugly and infected as the one on her left wrist. It was still festering and needed to be treated with dittany two times a day.

Slowly, Snape reached out and wrapped his hand carefully around Nadezhda's bandaged wrist, covering it as if the warmth of his hand could speed up the healing process. But he knew it would do no good. As was the case with most wounds caused by Dark magic, this one would never fully heal.

'Some wounds never heal, Nadezhda,' he told her. 'All we can do is learn to live with the scars and be proud that we lived through the pain.'

'I know.'

Her voice was as soft as a breath of spring, and as Nadezhda put her right hand onto his, Snape was reminded of warm summer rain that gave life to withered plants and dried-out fields. And somehow, he had the feeling that Nadezhda's touch had given him life before.

'Thank you for being here, Professor Snape.'

'It is the least I could do,' he answered, still staring down at the little hand that was lying on his. 'As your Head of House, it is my duty ...'

'I realise that you'd rather be somewhere else today.'

'Somewhere else?' Snape frowned and looked up. 'And where would that be, Miss McKibben?'

Nadezhda shook her head. 'Forgive me, sir. It's none of my business. It's just something I have overheard. Mr Malfoy mentioned the Potters and ...'

'And?'

Any other student would have flinched at the sudden iciness in Snape's tone, but Nadezhda didn't. She held his gaze steadily, and Snape could see a compassion in her green eyes he had not believed her being capable of.

'Their funeral is held today. I ... I somehow assumed you would like to take farewell of your peers. Then again, they were Gryffindors, so ... I'm sorry, sir. As I said, it's none of my business. Pretend I didn't ask.'

As she let go off his hand, Snape let go off her wrist in turn.

'The Headmaster has arrived,' Nadezhda announced, lowering her eyes to the wet ground and taking a step backwards as if she were preparing for flight. 'Your duty has been fulfilled, Professor. You are free to leave.'

She didn't look at him anymore, and as she turned to go back to the house, Snape had no words to call her back. And somehow, he had the feeling that the young witch knew more than he wanted her to know.

11: The First He Couldn't Persuade

Chapter 11 of 12

Severus Snape has been teaching at Hogwarts for only a few weeks when he realises that being Head of House is not

going to be as easy as he had hoped.

Chapter 11: The First He Couldn't Persuade

'Bellatrix is acting like a woman possessed,' Lucius said, rolling his silvery grey eyes. 'I tell you, she will not rest until she has found the Dark Lord.'

He took another sip of his wine and then leant in, dropping his voice to a whisper. 'She doesn't need to hurry for my sake, however. Between you and me, I am quite pleased he is gone.'

Snape wiped his mouth with his expensive-looking linen napkin and then placed it slowly onto his lap again. He was trying to win time, since he had no idea what to say. Should he admit that he, too, was more than glad that Voldemort seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth? Or was Lucius just testing his loyalties?

Luckily, however, he was spared having to answer, as Lucius himself continued talking. 'I think Bellatrix has turned over every single stone in Britain over the last month, without success. And some of her theories about the Dark Lord's whereabouts were plain crazy. But tonight, I think she might just be on to something.'

'Who is she interrogating tonight?' Snape asked, feigning interest while refilling his glass. 'A Seer?'

Lucius snorted. 'Maybe we should gift her with a crystal ball for Christmas. Do you think she would appreciate it?' Then he grew serious again. 'Her newest trace leads her to an Auror,' he explained. 'For some reason, she thinks that he was present at Godric's Hollow the night the Dark Lord vanished. Which is ridiculous, of course. No one was there.'

Snape almost choked at his wine, suddenly realising his mistake. According to the *Daily Prophet* and the Auror office, there had indeed been no witnesses to the murder of the Potters and the attack on their son. But Snape knew better. In fact, he had known since the early hours of November first. Nadezhda had told him.

'Barty was there and the Lestranges,' she had said. 'They were fighting another man, but he Disappeared when he saw Bellatrix.'

Snape had never told Dumbledore. In fact, he had all but forgotten about Nadezhda's words. And even now, when he did remember them, they seemed hazy. Every time he tried to focus on them, they seemed to slip away. It was like trying to catch smoke. Still, he knew that he needed to act quickly.

Quite inelegantly, Snape pushed back his chair.

'Are you leaving already?' Lucius asked. 'We have not had dessert yet.'

Knowing perfectly well that it was the lamest excuse in the world, Snape claimed that the wine was going to his head.

'Lightweight,' Lucius muttered, but other than that, he did not object to Snape leaving so suddenly. The two men had known each other long enough for Lucius to know that there was no point arguing with Snape. And Snape in his turn could be quite confident that Lucius would never demand an explanation for why he had left so unceremoniously.

He Disappeared from right outside the kitchen door of Malfoy Manor, knowing that there was no time to lose and praying that it wasn't too late already.

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YOU-KNOW-WHO'S CLOSEST FOLLOWERS CAPTURED

With an inaudible sigh, Snape put down his copy of the *Daily Prophet* and let his gaze wander over the four House tables in front of him. He knew that quite a few of the older students were subscribing to the *Prophet* and that they were reading the same headlines as he was, but there were only a few reactions to be observed. There was a seventh-year Ravenclaw nudging his mate and giving him a thumbs-up in front of his copy of the *Prophet* and a sixth-year Slytherin trying to set fire to the paper, but other than this, few of the students seemed to care. And who could blame them? Over the last six weeks, the front page of the *Prophet* had been about little else than Death Eaters who had been killed, captured or sent to Azkaban. Today's capture, even if it was claimed to be the one of 'You-Know-Who's closest followers', was just one of many for the students of Hogwarts. They neither knew nor cared who had been captured and why. Snape, however, knew only too well and cared more than he wanted to admit even to himself. And while he was glad that Bellatrix was finally behind bars, he wished that her latest crime could be undone. He wished that he had reacted more quickly.

He had found Dumbledore within minutes after his departure from Malfoy Manor, and it had not taken Dumbledore more than a few moments to sound the alarm. Less than a quarter of an hour later, a group of Aurors and Order members had stormed into the Longbottoms' house. But it had been too late. Bellatrix had already held her interrogation and gotten away. Frank and Alice had been rushed to St. Mungo's, where the country's best Healers had taken care of them, but after a few hours they had already given up hope.

Snape blinked fiercely in order to fight back the headache that he knew would threaten to split his skull in a couple of hours, but with no success. He could fight the pain just as little as he could fight his guilty conscience.

'You must not blame yourself for this,' Dumbledore had told him. 'Halloween was a stressful night for all of us. It is only natural that your mind has blocked out certain information. And even if you had remembered earlier, I am not convinced we could have stopped Bellatrix. She was quite determined.'

But Dumbledore's words did nothing to ease Snape's mind. He was a spy, for goodness' sake! Keeping all kinds of information and details in his head was what he was good at. How could he have forgotten? How could he not have remembered Nadezhda's account of what had happened at Godric's Hollow?

He should have alerted Dumbledore already on the morning of November first, and Dumbledore in his turn could have taken steps to protect the Longbottoms. With any luck, Bellatrix would have been caught before she had found them. But he had not told Dumbledore. And by the time he had remembered, Bellatrix had already hunted down the two Aurors. And now Frank and Alice were at St. Mungo's, had been there for almost two weeks. Most probably, the damage that Bellatrix had caused to their brains could never be reversed. For the time being, they did not even recognise their little baby boy.

Taking a deep breath to fight back the nausea his headache was causing, Snape once more picked up his newspaper, this time ignoring the front page, and started leafing aimlessly through the pages in order to occupy himself. But he did not get far. He had only just opened the *Daily Prophet* when there was a commotion at the Slytherin table. A cup was knocked over, a plate fell to the floor, and Nadezhda McKibben had vanished from the Great Hall even before Snape had really understood that it had been her dishes that now lay broken. But when he approached the Slytherin table to demand an explanation from her peers a few moments later, he quickly understood what had made her flee the breakfast table. Soaking wet with pumpkin juice, lay an issue of the *Daily Prophet*, opened on page two:

SHOCKING REVELATION ABOUT BARTEMIUS CROUCH, JUNIOR THE SON OF THE HEAD OF MAGICAL LAW ENFORCEMENT CARRIES THE DARK MARK

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Snape resisted the urge to bang his head into the nearest wall and took to staring at the two women in front of him instead. This day just kept getting worse!

Certainly, what the matron had just told him had a good side: it meant that Nadezhda McKibben fleeing the Great Hall at breakfast did not necessarily mean that the news about Barty's capture had upset her to tears. But the reason Madam Pomfrey had just presented him was at least just as disturbing.

'As Miss McKibben's Head of House, it is now your duty to take further steps,' McGonagall picked the thread after the matron. 'Her schedule will have to be adjusted at once. Flying is out of the question, of course, and so is Apparition. Furthermore, certain practical lessons may need to be replaced by theoretical ones. It is, for example, not recommended that expecting mothers spend more than thirty minutes at a time in a Potions classroom.'

It is not recommended? Snape's expression of shock turned into one of slight disbelief. There were guidelines for situations like this? How often did this happen?

'I am fully aware that this is the first time you have to handle a problem like this, Severus, and that it is not the most easy task to take on,' McGonagall continued, more than a little uncomfortable herself. 'You are young. You are a man. And ...'

'And if you feel that you cannot talk to the girl, I will try again. Or even Minerva ...'

'Dear Madam Pomfrey,' Snape interrupted the matron. 'I am more than capable of talking to one of my students.'

'I don't think Poppy is doubting your verbal skills, Severus,' McGonagall defended her colleague. 'I think what she is worried about is ... your sense of tact.'

Snape raised his eyebrows and stared incredulously at the Deputy Headmistress for some moments before letting his gaze travel back to the matron without commenting on McGonagall's statement.

'I assume, Madam Pomfrey, that you have already talked to Miss McKibben about her options?' he enquired.

'Yes, of course, I have,' the matron replied. 'I went through all the medical aspects with her.'

'And I have informed her about her options concerning the continuation of her studies,' McGonagall butted in once more. 'After all, she has one more year to complete before her NEWTs.'

'Then what, if I may ask, am I to talk to Miss McKibben about?' Snape wondered. If he were honest, he would admit that talking about a pregnancy with any of his female students was a task he would rather not be given. It was far too ... personal.

The two women in front of him looked at each other and shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

'Well?' Snape pressed.

'Severus, the girl is in a vulnerable state right now,' McGonagall started hesitantly. 'Her father has been murdered less than two months ago. I do not think that she is capable of making the right decision at the moment.'

'Has Miss McKibben made any kind of decision yet?' Snape asked.

Once more, the two women looked at each other, each silently imploring the other to speak. And Snape prepared himself for the worst.

In the end, it was the matron who plucked up the courage to talk: 'Severus, the girl made it quite clear that she intends to keep the baby and not finish her education.'

But of course.

Had he been alone, Snape would have let out a heavy sigh and buried his face in his hands. But he was not alone, and McGonagall and Pomfrey were in quite a state already. There was no use in him losing his composure as well.

'Are you telling me,' he growled instead, 'that you want me to talk to Miss McKibben in order to make her change her mind? Do you want me to talk her into having an abortion?'

'Of course not!' Madam Pomfrey exclaimed. 'Far from it! Trust me, Severus, unless the health of the mother or the child is in danger, I would never suggest ...'

'And there are ways for young mothers to continue their magical education,' McGonagall added. 'She could get a private tutor. We could adjust her schedule ...'

'Would you two please make up your mind?' Snape snapped, quite rudely interrupting the Deputy Headmistress. A minute ago, she and the matron had told him to talk to Miss McKibben because she had decided to keep the child and drop out of school, and now that he had mentioned the possibility of an abortion, they were getting all upset. What, by Merlin's beard, did they want from him?

'Severus,' McGonagall started again, twisting her hands and obviously fighting to regain control over her emotions, 'The decision lies, of course, with Miss McKibben. Poppy and I have given her all the advice a matron, a Deputy Headmistress and two caring women can offer. But we feel that the girl has difficulties opening up to us. You, however, she might talk to. You are her Head of House, after all.'

Snape snorted. 'Are you suggesting that a seventeen-year-old girl would rather discuss her pregnancy with her male Head of House than the matron or the Deputy Headmistress? What will you have me do next? Talk about menstruation with the second-years?'

'Severus, please,' McGonagall said imploringly, gracefully ignoring the Potions master's sarky comment. 'Give it a try. Talk to the girl. If nothing else, you talking to her will scare her enough for her to come running to Poppy later.'

'Thank you for that kind assessment of my social skills, Professor McGonagall,' Snape replied sourly, realising that McGonagall had once more outsmarted him. She had set him a challenge and knew he would take it, just as any Slytherin would.

'I need some more information before I talk to Miss McKibben,' he pointed out, turning towards the matron. 'How far along is she?'

'About six weeks in,' Madam Pomfrey informed him. 'If she decides not to keep the baby, I'd recommend that she take the potion before the new year. It's the easiest and least painful method. After that, we would have to use spells and ...'

Snape raised his hand to stop Poppy. Now that she was talking about a termination, he suddenly understood why she and McGonagall had reacted so vehemently when he had mentioned the same option. This was an innocent life they were talking about. Two innocent lives, actually: the life of the unborn child and the life of the young mother. Was there even a way that they could both be saved? Could anyone demand that Nadezhda gave birth to the child of a Death Eater?

Stealing himself for one of the worst conversations he had ever held, Snape bid the matron and the Headmistress goodbye and headed for the dungeons.

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Less than five minutes after he had sent an elf to fetch her, Nadezhda McKibben was standing in front of her Head of House. As always, her appearance was immaculate: her robes were unwrinkled, her black hair carefully braided and her eyes chastely cast to the floor.

Snape looked at her for a few moments before greeting her and then rose to ward the door. What they had to discuss was not for anyone else to hear, nor would either of them appreciate any form of interruption.

On his way back to his desk, Snape pulled up a chair. 'I believe it is custom for a man to offer a pregnant woman a seat.'

As he had expected, Nadezhda's head snapped up, and she came to look directly at him. But when he looked into her eyes, Snape wished that he had never made her

look at him. He had expected surprise, embarrassment maybe, or a plea for help. But instead, he was once more gazing into a pair of green eyes that were just as void of any warmth and life as the gems the Dark Lord had once compared them with.

Slightly taken aback, Snape rephrased his offer. 'Please, have a seat, Miss McKibben.'

She did as she was told, and by the time Snape had returned to his own chair, Nadezhda was sitting with her back straight and her hands neatly folded in her lap. The look in her eyes, however, had not changed.

Snape leant back in his chair and crossed his arms in front of his chest. 'As your Head of House, I am responsible for you while you are at this school. Thus, I have been informed of your ...'

He paused, not wanting to pronounce the word pregnancy. It made the whole situation far too real.

'I have been informed about your medical condition,' he continued. 'I have also been informed about your intentions of keeping this baby.'

For a split second, he could see something in her green eyes. A shadow, the ghost of a question, maybe. But he never had the time to figure it out, as the emeralds were almost immediately covered with dark lashes.

'Too many innocent people have died already,' came Nadezhda's quiet response. 'I will not be responsible for the death of another one.'

Silly little witch, Snape thought, biting back the words. He could understand her argument, but at the same time, it made little sense.

'You are still in school,' he pointed out patiently. 'Are you planning on brining the infant to Potions class in September?'

'I am not planning on coming back in September at all.'

Snape nodded. 'Professor McGonagall informed me that there are ways for young mothers to continue their schooling. I doubt you are the first one to be in this situation. There is no reason for you to not finish your magical education.'

'I do not want to, sir,' Nadezhda replied, and Snape could see her shaking hands disappear in the folds of her robes. 'I have seen what magic can do. I am tired of it.'

'And what exactly, are you planning on doing once your child is born? The wizarding world is rather old-fashioned, Miss McKibben. Young single mothers without a proper education are not exactly able to pick and choose between job offerings.'

'My father left me a well-filled vault at Gringotts. And I have already spoken to Mr Malfoy about selling the manor. He already has a potential buyer and assured me that he will get a good price. The money should sustain me and my child for a good couple of years. By the time I run out of money, I will have figured out what to do with my life.'

Snape sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. The girl sure had thought it through, and her plan seemed watertight. What was he to tell her now?

Knowing that it was a dirty trick, he grasped for his very last straw of hope. 'And what, Miss McKibben, are you planning on telling your child the day it's old enough to ask about its father? Are you going to admit that he was Death Eater?'

'All this child ever needs to know about its father is that he was nothing but kind to me even though he didn't have to and that he looked out for me when I was in danger.'

'Isn't that a bit romantic, Miss McKibben?' Snape enquired.

The breath caught in Snape's throat as Nadezhda lifted her head to look at him. Like on the day at McKibben manor, under the willow by the lake, her eyes were now filled with a compassion and an honesty that was beyond anything he had ever seen.

'It is nothing but the truth, sir.'

Unable to break eye contact, Snape nodded, feeling his heart go out to the young woman in front of him. He was certain that she keep her word. She would tell her child that its father had been a good man. He was also certain that she wholeheartedly believed it herself.

12: The First He Had To Let Go

Chapter 12 of 12

Severus Snape has been teaching at Hogwarts for only a few weeks when he realises that being Head of House is not going to be as easy as he had hoped.

Chapter 12: The First He Had To Let Go

Bellatrix Lestrange was sent to Azkaban the day before Christmas along with her husband, her brother-in-law and Barty Crouch, Junior, after all four of them had been found guilty of torturing Frank and Alice Longbottom to insanity by means of the Cruciatus Curse and given a life sentence.

The Lestrange brothers accepted their verdict silently, but Bellatrix once more displayed her devotion to the Dark Lord: she stood tall and proud in the courtroom, proclaiming loudly that her lord would rise again, that he would come for her and reward her and her companions for their loyalty. Barty, however, did not share her conviction. He was nothing short of petrified, pleading with the judge his father to listen to him. But Barty Crouch, Senior, did not listen, and neither did the jury. They didn't believe the boy when he declared his innocence over and over again. And so he, too, was sent to Azkaban, despite his pleading and his mother's tears.

'Do you believe that Barty is innocent?' Dumbledore asked later the same day, peering at his Potions master over the brim of his tea cup.

Snape shrugged. 'You once pointed out that maybe the boy did not have any choice when he became a Death Eater. Maybe, he did not have one in this either.'

'You think Bellatrix forced him to come along and take part in the torture of Frank and Alice?' Dumbledore frowned. 'Why would she have done that?'

'Revenge?' Snape suggested.

'Revenge for what?'

Snape took a deep breath before he spoke again. His theory wasn't one he liked, and he wished he didn't have to divulge it.

'As grateful as we should be for Barty getting Miss McKibben out of harm's way on Halloween, I doubt it was a smart move. That night, Bellatrix must have understood that her spell had failed and that Barty was the one who had ended up infatuated, not the girl. Her very own spell had made the boy so loyal to another female that he abandoned Bellatrix in the middle of a duel. This must have been a hard blow to her ego.'

'Are you suggesting that Bellatrix took Barty along in order to punish him?' Dumbledore asked.

'Either that or she threatened him to go after his bride should he not do her bidding. Barty does not seem the type that enjoys torturing people.'

Dumbledore nodded pensively. 'Barty risked a lot for Nadezhda. Now he will pay dearly for it.'

He poured himself another cup of tea. Snape, however, declined a refill.

'How is the girl taking the news, Severus?' Dumbledore asked after a few sips. 'Bartemius Crouch sending his own son to Azkaban has been quite well covered in the Daily Prophet. I doubt she managed to miss the headlines.'

'Miss McKibben's relationship with Barty Crouch can hardly be described as a classic teenage romance,' Snape started. 'I do not even know if she cares for him at all.'

Slightly uncomfortable, Snape shifted in his seat and wished that he had not turned down that second cup of tea. Sipping on it would give him something to occupy himself with, and it would win him time. He wasn't keen on discussing Nadezhda's feelings with Dumbledore. As far as he was concerned, the girl cared far too much for Barty.

'Miss McKibben is not one to carry her emotions on her sleeve,' he finally went on. 'I doubt anyone is allowed to look behind the protective wall she had built up around herself.'

'No one except Mr Herrington, perhaps,' Dumbledore commented. 'Those two are thicker than thieves nowadays.'

They were indeed. They arrived at in the Great Hall together at mealtimes, ate together and left together. They could often be found studying in the library together or playing chess in the Slytherin common room. And more than once over the last couple of weeks, Snape had been forced to deduct points from his own House because Charles was skipping his own classes in order to accompany Nadezhda to hers. It was a sweet gesture, but totally unacceptable, of course.

'Do you think,' Dumbledore carried on, 'that Miss McKibben has confided in her friend?'

Even though he had no idea, Snape shook his head. He really wished that Nadezhda had plucked up the courage to pour her heart out to her friend, but he more than doubted it. Nadezhda McKibben was not only reserved but also very proud. Asking for help or comfort did not seem like something she would do. Just like her Head of House.

'Sooner or later she will have to talk to him,' Dumbledore pointed out. 'Once she starts putting on weight, Mr Herrington will start wondering. And seeing how close the two are, rumours about the father will spread quickly. I think many will point to Charles.'

Snape was just about to tell Dumbledore that Nadezhda was more than capable of casting a Concealment Charm that would hide her pregnancy from her peers, when he was prevented from doing so by a knock on the door. The two men turned around and came face to face with Madam Pomfrey. She looked flustered and was out of breath but managed to pull herself together the moment she laid eyes on Snape.

'Good that you are here, Severus,' she started. 'There has been a development both you and the Headmaster need to know about.'

She took a shuddering breath, and Snape could see her eyes fill with tears.

'Miss McKibben has just been to see me,' she started tentatively. 'She has asked me for the potion.'

'The potion?' Dumbledore asked, rising from his chair. *The* potion?'

The matron nodded, her jaws clenched. It was clear that she was anything but happy with Nadezhda's decision.

'She asked permission to take the phial to her dormitory, so she could take the potion in her own time. I said it was alright.' Her eyes darted towards the Head of Slytherin. 'I hope I made the right decision. She seems like a sensible girl. I trust she'll come to see me if there are any complications.'

Snape nodded quietly. Nadezhda McKibben was indeed a sensible young woman. Certainly, she would be cautious and do exactly as she had been told by the matron. He was therefore assured that Madam Pomfrey had made the right decision in giving the girl her privacy. But all of a sudden, he wasn't certain anymore if Nadezhda, in her turn, was doing the right thing.

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Snape didn't sleep well that night. Whenever he drifted off to sleep, he saw a pair of emerald green eyes that were looking right at him. Sometimes, those eyes were cold and filled with accusations and disdain. Other times, they were filled with tears, fear and desperation. And Snape could not tell for the life of him if they were Lily's eyes or Nadezhda's. What he did know, however, was that they haunted him and refused him any rest.

Giving in at last, he left his bed before sunrise, dressed and headed for the grounds, not caring that a storm was raging outside and that the snow was drenching his heavy cloak. He needed to clear his mind and hoped that the icy winds would help him to do just that.

'Too many innocent people have died already,' Nadezhda had said only a fortnight ago, the night when she had argued for her keeping the baby. She had seemed so certain then that her decision was the right one. And Snape had been just as certain that it was the wrong one. But now, when the life of an unborn child was hanging on a thin thread, he wasn't that certain anymore. What did it matter if the child's father was a Death Eater? Worse people had fathered children, after all, Tobias Snape and Duncan McKibben just being two of them. Wasn't it enough that the child grew up with a mother who believed that there was still hope, that there was still some good in the world?

Whatever had made Nadezhda change her mind, Snape wondered, fighting a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach. She had seemed so convinced about keeping her child only two weeks ago. She had planned it all so carefully and had seemed so strong. And now, on the very day that Barty had been sent to Azkaban, she had crumbled and given in. Had she secretly hoped that Barty would be acquitted? Had she hoped that he would go free, change his ways and take care of her and the baby? Had she really been that foolish? Did she really care that much for the boy?

Should he talk to her, Snape wondered as he made his way back to the castle, his feet cold and his hair white with snow. Should he call Nadezhda to his office and tell her that she would do just fine even without a father for her child? Did he have the right to, after having told her two weeks ago that having the baby might not be that good an idea after all? And was there even any point in talking to her now? Magical potions worked fast, and if she had taken hers right after Poppy had given it to her, the abortion might already be well under way. It might just be too late to change anything.

Twenty minutes later, Snape entered the Great Hall, his hair dry but the hem of his robes still slightly damp. He noticed immediately that something was amiss. Certainly, there were only seven Slytherin students staying at Hogwarts for the holidays, and most of them were probably enjoying a well-deserved lie-in. It was quite natural that their House table should look abandoned. But the fact that Charles Herrington was sitting there all alone, without Nadezhda, was more than alarming. Had something gone

wrong with the potion, Snape wondered at once. Was the girl in the hospital wing? After all, Madam Pomfrey wasn't sitting at the staff table either.

Resisting the urge to turn around and head directly to the infirmary, Snape made a beeline for the Slytherin table instead.

'All alone for once, Mr Herrington?' he asked in a low tone. 'That is rather unusual.'

The boy choked on his pumpkin juice and coughed. 'Sir,' he brought forth. 'I ... I can't ... I mustn't ...'

'You mustn't what, Mr Herrington?' Snape asked quietly, his black eyes fixed on the stuttering boy in front of him.

'I ... I ... I'm not supposed to tell ...' Charles broke off and swallowed. Several students from other Houses as well as members of the staff were looking over to the Slytherin table now, curious about what reason Snape had to scare a member of his own House on Christmas morning.

'You will either tell me now, Mr Herrington,' Snape growled, 'or we will test my latest batch of Veritaserum on you. And Merlin knows what other secrets would be revealed in that case.'

'Naddie's gone,' Charles blurted out. 'She sneaked out last night before the curfew. She ... she put me on a lookout. I ... I don't know where she went. I thought she'd come back, but she hasn't ... She said I mustn't tell you!'

'Foolish boy,' Snape spat, not caring that Charles was terrified of him and not giving the boy any credit for his obvious concern about his friend. He shouldn't have let her leave the castle in the first place. But then again, it would have taken a much braver man than Charles Herrington to stop Nadezhda McKibben.

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It was one of the biggest searches ever conducted at Hogwarts. The whole staff was involved and so were the ghosts and elves. And when Hagrid ventured into the Forbidden Forest, even the Centaurs offered their help, even though they didn't like being employed by wizards. They knew what dangers were lurking in the shadows of the trees and would protect any innocent life that had lost its way. But they didn't find Nadezhda, and neither did anyone else. It seemed as if she had vanished into thin air.

In the evening, after almost ten hours of searching, Snape didn't take part in the Christmas feast in the Great Hall, which was held as planned. Even though he had not eaten all day, Snape wasn't hungry and doubted that he would be able to eat anything even if he forced himself. There was a knot in his stomach which he believed would prevent any food from staying down. Hence, even trying to eat might not be worth the effort. Instead, he retreated to his study, warded the door against unbidden visitors and started pacing back and forth, his frown deepening with every step he took. The question of Nadezhda's whereabouts was the only thing on his mind. He did not even think about why she had disappeared. He didn't want to think about it. And when she was found, he wouldn't question her about it either, he promised himself. He just wanted to have her back in the castle, safe and sound.

'Merry Christmas, Severus!'

The blazing flames in the grate and Lucius Malfoy's voice made Snape jump. He had not expected anyone to contact him tonight, least of all Lucius Malfoy. Certainly, the blond aristocrat had better things to do, like entertaining guests, for example. And indeed, Lucius was holding a glass of mulled wine in his hand and looked impudently merry.

'You know, Narcissa said that I would not be able to catch you, it being Christmas and all, but I knew better,' Lucius explained. 'I was convinced that you'd not be celebrating. But that scowl you're sporting ... Dear Severus, this is very un-Christmassy even by your standards.'

'What do you want?' Snape growled. He had no desire whatsoever to make small talk with Lucius at the moment. And if Lucius should have the audacity to ask him to join his party, Snape would most certainly hex him.

But Lucius didn't seem to take notice of Snape's foul mood.

'I want nothing from you, in fact,' he pointed out. 'I tried the Floo in the Slytherin common room, but no one is answering there, of course. I guess they are all celebrating in the Great Hall. I'd like to talk to Nadezhda.'

'And why would that be?' Snape spat.

'I want to congratulate her,' Lucius responded, beaming broadly. 'Her manor is sold, and at a generous price. As of today, young Miss McKibben is a very rich lady.'

'As of today, young Miss McKibben is also missing.'

Lucius' jaw dropped. 'Missing? What do you mean, she's missing?'

'She left the castle last night and has not been seen since,' Snape informed him.

'Last night?' Lucius seemed confused. 'Nadezhda spent the night with us. I thought you knew that.'

Snape's eyes flashed dangerously. The last thing he needed now was to be told that he didn't have any control over his students. But luckily for the both of them, Lucius didn't make any comment of that kind.

'We signed papers last night,' Lucius went on. 'Nadezhda gave me power of attorney where the selling of her manor was concerned. And she gave me the number of her new vault at Gringotts. She left shortly after breakfast this morning. Then she wanted to check her vault. I assumed she would return to Hogwarts after that. How on earth can she go missing at Gringotts?'

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Two hours later, Lucius Malfoy, Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore were sitting in the office of the head of security at Gringotts Wizarding Bank. Lucius had made his influence felt, and within an hour after his conversation with Snape, he had had several senior members of the Gringotts staff lined up in front of him, among them the goblin who had led Nadezhda to her vault earlier that day. But said goblin was in quite a state. He remembered Miss McKibben arriving at his desk and him congratulating her on her deal. He also remembered taking her to her vault. But he did not remember opening it or doing anything else. Neither did he remember closing it again or leading Miss McKibben back to the entrance hall. And there was not a single mark of ink in the thick leather bound ledger where the goblin should have written down any kind of monetary transaction that had taken place. But vault two hundred and forty-seven had been empty when they had checked it, except for a thin parcel that was now lying on the desk of the head of security.

'Amazing,' Lucius exclaimed when Snape pointed out Miss McKibben's proficiency when it came to Memory Charms. 'Such a clever little witch.'

Clever she was, indeed. According to the goblin's log, she had arrived in at Gringotts at a quarter to twelve, half an hour after the payment for her manor had been deposited in her vault and fifteen minutes before the bank had closed for Christmas. After that, the trail had gone cold.

'She cannot be carrying all those Galleons around with her,' Lucius pointed out. 'She must have transferred them to another vault or something.'

'There are no records,' the goblin pointed out. 'I've been through all the ledgers. There has not been any deposit made that would be in accordance with the sum that was in vault two hundred and forty-seven. In fact, the only transactions made between a quarter to twelve and twelve were exchanges from Galleons to Muggle money, but those were three separate exchanges and quite independent of each other.'

'Are you quite certain of that?' Dumbledore asked.

'Yes, I am certain,' the goblin pointed out, holding up his ledger and looking insulted.

'As certain as you are of whatever happened after you've escorted Miss McKibben to her vault?' Lucius remarked snidely. He was in a sour mood, but it was doubtful that it had much to do with his concern for Nadezhda. Most probably, he had expected to be paid a commission for his services, and her vault being empty now meant he wouldn't get a Knut.

While Lucius continued questioning the procedures and security protocols at Gringotts, Snape rose from his chair and moved closer to the desk, where he picked up the parcel, unnoticed by anyone. It was thin, about six inches long and very light, wrapped in simple, brown paper. There was no tag. Whatever could it contain?

With shaking hands, Snape untied the strings and opened the parcel. He found a wand, eleven inches, elder, snapped right in two. Nadezhda's wand. The ultimate proof that she had turned her back on the wizarding world for good.

A/N: I promise that I will tell you where Nadezhda has gone. I will also tell you if she had an abortion and who fathered her child. For the time being, however, Real Life demands that I take a break from fan fiction for a while. But I hope you will be patient and join me when the tale of Nadezhda McKibben and Severus Snape is continued in *There Will Always Be Hope*.