

The Secret of Hydra

by RedHH

Severus and Bellatrix had a single night together. The consequences would last much longer. Slight SS/BL, OFC, AU.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 9

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Severus Snape had made a poor decision, once in his youth.

Oh, it wasn't that he had decided to join the Death Eaters, or even that he chose to turn spy on them later. It wasn't the time he agreed to attend a Yule banquet at Hogwarts as a teacher, where Dumbledore had put a magenta cap upon Snape's head and fixed it there with a Sticking Charm, which meant Snape had never attended another Yule banquet since. No, it was that one time he had willingly slept with Bellatrix Black when he was nineteen years old and newly initiated into the Death Eaters.

It had been a one-time occurrence, since Bellatrix, at 28, had already begun showing signs of her imminent insanity, and Snape had wanted to get as far away from that disaster as possible. Not long after their liaison, Bellatrix had taken to acting very oddly around him, sometimes latching onto his arm with talons digging into his flesh, or ignoring him completely in favour of courting Rodolphus Lestrangle, who seemed overwhelmed by the attentions of an older woman. A few months later, she disappeared for several months, but the Dark Lord had seemed mostly mollified by whatever excuse she must have given him.

Rumours ran rampant.

Bellatrix had fallen victim to a curse that required long recovery. She had run off on mysterious reconnaissance work for the Dark Lord. She was having Lestrangle's baby in secret.

Then, six months later, she returned. Bellatrix outright ignored any questions as to her whereabouts, even from her sister. No longer did she cling to Snape's arm and blink her wide brown eyes up at him, but secured herself firmly to Rodolphus, who seemed resigned to his position in life. They were married within three weeks of her return.

Another year passed, and the Dark Lord fell. The Lestranges all went to Azkaban, and Snape found himself roped into teaching Potions at Hogwarts. His life fell into a frustrating pattern of teaching, marking and supervising detentions. All the while, the Dark Mark lay faintly in his skin, a reminder that his life as a Death Eater could not possibly be over.

Years passed. Harry Potter appeared in his classroom, infuriatingly bright-eyed. If only that had been the extent of Snape's problems that year.

In June, Potter had somehow finagled his way past that monstrous three-headed dog and the rest of the enchantments protecting the Philosopher's Stone, nearly getting himself killed in the process of facing down the Dark Lord's soul. The next year, he wiggled his way into the Chamber of Secrets and slew a basilisk, of all things. Snape was still upset about the loss of an endless source of basilisk ingredients, which could have been sold for a minor fortune, if anyone had just asked him. Then, two years later, the Dark Lord had regained a body, and Snape dreaded his future once more.

He bowed, he groveled, he brewed, he was hit by the Cruciatus more than once. And then, the Dark Lord announced that there would be a mass break-out from Azkaban, so that his most loyal followers would be released to him. And sure enough, Bellatrix was back, crazier than ever, with her husband at her side.

Snape paid little attention to her eccentricities; they would make his mind spin, and he honestly wanted nothing to do with her. But Rodolphus seemed to think that Snape was willing to lend an open ear to all his problems.

"She disappears, you know," Rodolphus said quietly as they sat in Malfoy's green wingback chairs, leaning over a chessboard. "For days at a time. Always a bit... happier, when she returns. I wonder, sometimes, if she's having an affair. Not that I mind, mind you. I'd just like to know. I hate being ignorant."

"Perhaps she has a book club to attend," Snape suggested as he moved his knight, removing the second of Lestrangle's bishops from the board.

"In Azkaban, she kept screaming this name, you know. At least, I think it was a name. Not a man's name, mind you. But a name, nonetheless." Rodolphus trailed off thoughtfully.

"Are you going to tell me this name or aren't you?" Snape asked after a long pause.

"Hydra." Rodolphus bumped a pawn a space forward.

"The sea monster?"

"I suppose so. I just don't understand why she would be so obsessed with it."

Snape took a moment to remove Rodolphus' pawn from the board. "Hydra," he said thoughtfully. "Just the name?"

"It's all she said. Sometimes called out for her mother, too. Asked her to care for something."

Well, that was interesting. The pieces on the board rattled around for another few minutes before Snape slid his queen into place. "Checkmate."

Rodolphus knocked his king over. "Never stand much of a chance against you, Severus." He didn't seem too upset about it. "Listen, you're a handy one for listening at keyholes..."

"I hardly listen at keyholes, Lestrangle."

"I was simply wondering..."

Snape pursed his lips briefly. "You want me to keep an eye on your wife." It was not a question.

Rodolphus nodded once, quickly.

"Well," Snape said, leaning back into his chair. "I might be able to rustle up an interesting fact or two for you."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 9

Severus and Bellatrix had a single night together. The consequences would last much longer. Slight SS/BL, OFC, AU.

It wasn't until two weeks later that Snape had the opportunity to make good on his promise to Lestrangle. Classes had been progressing at their normal pace, which meant that he was currently bogged down in a pile of poorly written and ill-thought-out essays from his third years. To be honest, he'd hardly given Bellatrix a spare thought. But the Dark Lord never let his followers forget that they were bound to his every whim, and he rarely let them go longer than three weeks without calling them to his side.

Sure enough, Snape was summoned to the Dark Lord's feet only an hour after his last class of the week, where he bowed and scraped before the hem he was meant to kiss. Bellatrix was located, as usual, at the Dark Lord's right elbow, waiting for the moment where she might be able to torture someone for him. Snape ignored her for now; he had to get through the summons before he could consider tailing her with the hopes of finding a juicy tidbit to throw to Lestrangle.

The Dark Lord was, admittedly, crazy. Bellatrix was perhaps more so. Her fingers curled around her wand as if she dreamed of cursing everyone around her. Her eyes were constantly open wide, as if she believed she might miss something important if she blinked just once. Her long black hair was no longer as lustrous as it had once been, although Snape had to admit she still put herself together well, considering the years she'd spent locked away in Azkaban. And she doted continuously on her spoiled nephew, Draco Malfoy, as if she missed not having a child of her own to coddle and cater to.

Snape didn't even want to imagine what a child borne by Bellatrix Lestrangle would be like.

The summons was brought to an end when the Dark Lord beckoned for Pettigrew to feed Nagini something that looked suspiciously human-shaped, and the Death Eaters began to drift from the room. Snape followed Bellatrix at a distance, so that he might merely be accused of going in the same direction as she. Bellatrix ignored her husband, who was making only a half-hearted attempt to gain her attention anyway, in favour of advancing to the fireplace, where she gathered a handful of Floo powder and tossed it into the hearth. Her black-booted feet stepped inside, and the green flames whisked her away.

Dammit. He'd been too far away to hear her destination. Well, there was nothing for it.

"Lestrangle," Snape said, striding up to Rodolphus. "I rather fancy a cigar."

Rodolphus glanced away from his brother to stare at Snape. "I have some Cubans at-"

"Excellent," Snape cut in. "Shall we?"

Lestrangle nodded curtly at Rabastan, then turned to the fireplace to leave. Snape followed moments later, the flames spitting him out in a darkly furnished sitting room. Rodolphus was already opening a box on his desk, removing two cigars and a clipper. A quick glance about the room did not reveal Bellatrix; Snape sunk into the proffered chair and accepted the cigar.

The men went through the steps of sniffing the tobacco before lighting the tips. They puffed a few times in silence, the smoke wafting about their ears. Finally, Rodolphus lowered the cigar to the ashtray, where it balanced neatly on the edge. "You didn't come here for cigars," he said. It was not a question.

"No," Snape agreed readily. "Where has she gone?"

There was no need to clarify who 'she' was.

"Her mother's, likely. Disappears there more than I like. Druella is a fine woman, mind you, but as harsh as Bella and not nearly as clever. A brutal woman, you might say."

Snape gave his cigar another puff before laying it down as well. "And where might the Black residence be located?"

"Unplottable, is my guess. Likely in London, near the other Black house. I think you know where that one is."

Oh, Snape was familiar with the other Black house, all right. Grimmauld Place was a musty, dank, rotting structure that hardly passed for a house, in his opinion. Not to mention it had, until recently, contained Sirius Black on a regular basis. Now Snape was forced to visit it regularly for Order meetings, which he could be not be less thrilled about.

He gave a small grunt in reply.

They sat in silence a minute longer, Rodolphus tapping his cigar against the edge of the ashtray as he stared into the flickering orange flames of the fire. Snape wondered if Bellatrix would be returning home anytime soon; would she accept his presence as easily as Rodolphus, or become even more suspicious of him than she already was? He wasn't sure if the answer was worth the hassle it would inevitably incur.

Snape pushed himself to his feet and made a small bow towards Rodolphus. "Thank you for the hospitality," he said generously. "But I fear I must make a journey to London tonight. I'm running low on bicorn scales, you understand."

Lestrangle nodded once. "Pleasant evening, Severus."

Snape gathered a handful of powder from the fireplace mantle and tossed it in. "Leaky Cauldron!" he called out, feeling himself pulled away from one location into another.

He stepped out into the pub, which was nearly as dark as the Lestrangle's household had been. Behind the bar, Tom was polishing glasses in preparation for a long night ahead. Snape exited into the small courtyard behind the pub, tapped the appropriate bricks with his wand, and stepped out in Diagon Alley. He strode to Slug and Jiggers, where he did indeed purchase some bicorn horn powder before stepping back out into the approaching dusk, unsure of where to head next. It was unlikely that anyone was at Grimmauld Place at the moment; Lupin was off to convince the werewolves against joining Voldemort, and the Weasley matriarch was long frustrated with trying to clean the house to any reasonable standard. The only person he would have to worry about, if you could call him a person, was Kreacher, who could be dealt with by means of a strict word and a bribe of Black cutlery.

Snape spun on the spot, vanishing from the alley and reappearing in the park across from Grimmauld Place, hidden by the overreaching tree branches and their drooping leaves. The house stood quiet before him, the windows dark. Snape stepped up to the door and let himself inside, creeping past the portrait of Walburga Black.

It was a long shot, what he hoped to find. The desks had long been cleared out by Molly Weasley and her gang of servants, or rather, her children. The tapestry on the wall, which clearly pictured Bellatrix sneering next to her much-younger husband, lent no clues as to her current whereabouts. If he wasn't so certain that Bellatrix would detect any tracking charm he might leave on her and then slaughter the wizard who dared to spy on her, Snape would have gone that much simpler route instead. But no, here he was, poking around for clues.

Nothing.

Snape prodded at the corners of the desk with his wand, hoping for a secret compartment that might have been missed.

Nothing.

He stepped back into the main hall, ready to leave before someone arrived and questioned his presence in the house. He was halfway out the door when a drawing voice spoke up behind him.

"Half-bloods never did learn their manners."

Snape froze in the doorway before turning. "Walburga."

"And what could you be doing, skulking around my home like a common criminal? Trying to decide what you'd like to steal on your next return?"

"I'll leave that to Mundungus Fletcher, not myself." Snape snapped the door shut behind him. "You're a paranoid old bat, although I understand your dismay at having strangers traipse through your home."

The portrait sniffed. "No respect for the old families anymore. Simply no respect at all."

"While this has been... lovely, I must be on my way." Snape was half-turned back towards the door when Walburga's pitiful voice transformed.

"NO! I will not have you leave until I know why you have been in my house!"

"I shall enjoy watching you attempt to stop me, you wretched spot of paint."

"Well, I never! It is my right as the pureblooded woman of this household."

"Mrs. Black," Snape interrupted, forcing his voice to ooze politeness. Walburga stopped her tirade, raising her eyebrows at him in surprise. "Perhaps you might bestow upon your grateful servant a small favour."

She pursed her lips as she stared down her nose at him. "A favour," she echoed.

"Indeed. I was wondering if, perhaps, you might know where Druella Rosier, pardon me, Black, lives. Your sister-in-law, if I am not mistaken."

"No, you're quite correct." Walburga paused, thoughtful. "And what is your business with Druella?"

Snape cleared his throat. "I had hoped to approach her on a matter concerning the well-being of her eldest daughter."

"Dearest Bellatrix? I do hope she is not in any trouble." Walburga seemed to have forgotten that she had been shouting at him not two minutes previous.

"None, you can be certain of that. But do you know where I might find her?"

"Bellatrix? Why-"

"No, her mother."

"Ah, yes, of course."

She paused. He waited.

"Madam?"

"And why on Merlin's green earth should I tell you? Did you really think I would give up my brother's address so easily, you stupid boy?"

It had been a long time since someone, besides Dumbledore, had deigned to call him a boy.

"My apologies. I see I was too forward in my request."

"Don't pretend at politeness with me, you filthy half-blood. Now get out of my house!"

Snape whirled in a flurry of robes and left.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 9

Severus and Bellatrix had a single night together. The consequences would last much longer. Slight SS/BL, OFC, AU.

Lestrangle seemed unsurprised that Snape had made no progress on gathering information of Bellatrix's whereabouts.

"The whole family's a bunch of nutters," he said. They were back in Malfoy's wingback chairs, waiting for the Dark Lord to finish torturing whoever was currently holding his attentions before the summons truly began. "Hiding their houses from everyone, always running hot and cold, shouting at you one moment and embracing you the next... there's nothing to be done for it. I suppose," Rodolphus inhaled deeply, as if steeling himself, "that I shall have to ask her myself."

"And risk life and limb?" Snape asked incredulously. His booted foot tapped nervously against the floor; waiting for the Dark Lord to grace them with his presence was more terrifying than actually standing before the Dark Lord, but only until one stood in front of the Dark Lord and realized how terrifying that was too. "I never took you for an idiot, Rodolphus."

"She's my wife," Lestrangle said firmly, clearly making a decision. "And even if she is a crazy bitch, I shall not allow her to dictate my life any longer. It's not proper for a woman to rule over a man, you know."

Snape kept silent. To warn Rodolphus against such a stupid move would surely just encourage him, and congratulating his display of confidence would likely do the same. Either way, Lestrangle would not come out of this unscathed.

Lucius Malfoy walked past them, his hounds tight to his heels, the tip of his serpent-headed cane striking the floor at regular intervals. The men in the chairs fell silent for a moment, neither willing to let Malfoy overhear a conversation that involved his sister-in-law, which he would invariably relay to Narcissa, who would become a bothersome pest about the whole situation.

"I've never even been to her family's house unless she's directed me there herself," Rodolphus continued, once Malfoy was on the other side of the room. "They say it's so no one who is not family can come in. Like I'm not family! Her husband!" Rodolphus humphed to himself. "Those Blacks, I swear they're all as paranoid as the next."

The only exception Snape could think of was possibly Andromeda Black, whose sense of self-preservation had outranked her familial pride, causing her to abandon ship at the earliest opportunity. Of course, she'd then gone on to marry a Muggle-born knowing full-well her family's inclinations towards people of such background, so who was Snape to say that she wasn't as crazy as the rest? Besides, bringing up Andromeda in this circle could only bring up old bitter memories. Not half the men currently in the room had once lusted after Andromeda Black, and she had offended them all by marrying a Muggle-born straight out of Hogwarts before birthing an odd little Metamorphmagus.

But that was hardly the point.

"But what bothers me most of all?" Rodolphus was getting into his rant, his eyes narrowing and his fingers clutching tightly at the arms of his chair. "That the elves can hop back and forth however they please, and I am the one who cannot enter of my own free will! I tell you, that is no way for a wife to treat her husband, I daresay."

"Your elves can find the Black residence?" Snape snapped back to attention.

"They transmit letters between Bellatrix and her mother. They don't trust owls to deliver them properly. And Bellatrix hates when the owls get feathers in her morning porridge."

Rodolphus grimaced at that. Snape would bet all his Galleons that Bellatrix had blasted an owl who had dared to fly too close to her plate once or twice before the elves had taken over the mail delivery services.

"Might I enquire as to why you didn't see fit to inform me of this before?"

Rodolphus blinked. "Well, one never really thinks of the elves until they're being a nuisance."

Somehow, this was not a surprising answer.

Snape was halfway through formulating a way to convince an elf to give him the location of the Black residence when Pettigrew scurried into the room. If he had any less self-control, Snape's lip would have curled at the sight of him. Bad enough that the wizard was a rat in Animagus form, but worse that he exhibited rat-like tendencies while still a man.

"The Dark Lord expects you all immediately." Pettigrew held out a silver hand to beckon them forward.

The men in the room walked together through the doorway and into the dining room, where the Dark Lord sat at the head of the table. Each Death Eater moved to a specific seat; everyone knew where they stood in the hierarchy of command, and sat accordingly. Snape lowered himself into a seat two down from the Dark Lord's left, folding his hands upon the glossy wood of the table. It was a mark of restraint, of trust, of submission, that he was placing his hands away from his wand. If the Dark Lord, or another Death Eater, attempted to harm him, he would be at the distinct disadvantage of being unable to quickly reach his only means of defense.

The red eyes quickly fastened themselves onto Lucius Malfoy, whose back stiffened noticeably in response. "Lucius," the Dark Lord crooned. "Have you had word from your son on his progress with the task I have set him?"

"Yes, my lord," Malfoy answered, with only a tiny stammer. "Draco continues to repair the Vanishing Cabinet."

"It is not yet finished?" The Dark Lord's voice was quiet but deadly. "And what is the reason for his delay?"

A dozen sets of eyes flickered between Malfoy and the Dark Lord, every body set on edge even as they tried desperately to remain casual in their seats. A sheen of sweat appeared on Malfoy's forehead, but he made no attempt to wipe it away.

"He must not arouse suspicion of his activities, my lord. If he is caught, he will be of no use to you. He goes as often as is feasible to work on the Cabinet, I assure you."

"He is of no use to me now, if he cannot repair something as simple as a Vanishing Cabinet!" the Dark Lord snarled, his red eyes narrowing menacingly at Malfoy. He steepled his fingers before him, his wand dangling lightly where it was caught between his thumb and forefinger. "Remind your son of the price his family must pay if he cannot complete this task for me."

Malfoy nodded briskly, once, but the sheen grew more pronounced.

"My lord," Bellatrix piped up from beside Lucius. The Dark Lord inclined his head at her. "I'd like to volunteer myself to enter Hogwarts for you." She gazed at him with such affection in her wide eyes that Snape would have sworn she'd have rather married Voldemort than Rodolphus.

"When the time comes, if the time comes, you shall go to Hogwarts in my stead," the Dark Lord promised. Malfoy paled slightly at the implication of his words. "Snape, of course, will already be there. He will act alongside you." Bellatrix's nose wrinkled, as if Snape were trying to infringe on her moment of glory.

Rest assured, he wished to tell her, I have no desire to be present when you infiltrate Hogwarts.

Of course, his desires had no input on the situation. He would be there. Hopefully he would have discovered just what the Dark Lord had instructed Draco to do by that point.

They were dismissed soon thereafter, Malfoy still a bit pale in the face. Snape strode purposefully towards Bellatrix, directing his steps behind her. Never stopping, his hand brushed against her robes lightly, the fingers curling as he came across a brass button. He mouthed a Slicing Charm, severing the button from her robes and clutching it in his fist as he continued towards the toilet. When he left it several minutes later, Bellatrix was gone. Snape stopped beside Rodolphus.

"She's not at our house, if that's what you're going to ask," Lestrangle said shortly.

"Summon your house-elf, Rodolphus. I have something that Bellatrix has unfortunately left behind."

"Oh?" Rodolphus raised an eyebrow. "Well, we can't have her going without..." He trailed off as Snape opened his fist. "Her button?" He shook his head as if to clear it. "Brouny!"

A house-elf with pale blue eyes popped into existence before them. "Yes, Master Lestrangle, sir?" it simpered, crushing the edges of its worn pillowcase in its wrinkled hands.

Rodolphus plucked the button from Snape's grasp, and handed it to the elf. "Your Mistress has forgotten this. Please take it to her immediately."

Brouny took the button and held it close to his chest. "Yes, Master Lestrangle, sir! Brouny will take the button right now!"

Snape had barely a moment to whip his wand out of his robe pocket before the elf was gone. He quickly flicked it at the creature just as it popped away again, hoping that the modified Tracking Charm he'd chosen for this purpose would work on a non-wizard. Then, with a prayer that he wouldn't end up Splinched at the end of this ordeal, he cleared his mind and simply Apparated on Brouny's coattails.

The squeeze was familiar yet different. He had no idea where he was going, just that he was. If nothing else, he'd learned a valuable lesson from this situation; house-elves were entirely capable of Apparating in and out of the Dark Lord's wards with a wizard. Very few magical folk relied on their servants for transportation, choosing to ignore that the so-called lesser creatures were capable of side-stepping magic that wizards could not. Yes, a valuable piece of knowledge indeed.

The squeeze abruptly lessened, but the feeling was replaced by the highly uncomfortable sensation of slamming against a brick wall. Snape bounced backwards, finding himself sprawled across a stretch of pavement, looking up at a row of townhouses that looked like miniature versions of 18th century manors all stuck together. There were cars parked out front and streetlights over his head.

A Muggle city.

Snape got to his feet and brushed off his robes. There was a sign at the end of the street, and he peered at it in the dim light.

Kingham Close.

A silly and pretentious name for Muggles to call a street. Possibly worse than Grimmauld Place. He paused, then turned back to look at the townhouses again. Could it be?

Yes, there. The numbers jumped from 47 to 49 with nothing in-between. Snape stared at the place where the two met, willing number 48 into existence. The only result was the slight beginning of a tension headache in the bridge of his nose.

Unlike Grimmauld Place, there was not a park across the street where he could hide himself among the trees. There was only pavement and parked cars and spotlights that shone down on him, making him as conspicuous as humanly possible, especially considering that he was dressed in his full robes. He turned away from the Fidelius house, intent on finding out exactly in which city he was, when the quiet sound of shuffling feet could be heard.

He stepped backwards, casting a Notice-Me-Not spell over himself. A girl came into view, her head down and her feet scuffling at the sidewalk. Snape couldn't see past her hair, as the dark length of it had fallen forward and was hiding her face, and could only guess at her age. Thirteen? Twenty-three? She wore Muggle clothes, but there was something unusual about how she held herself in them, as if she was not quite comfortable living in them.

The girl walked past number 50, then number 49. And suddenly, she turned towards the buildings and vanished.

Snape's lips twitched into a semblance of a smile. He'd been right, there was something there! And a young witch who lived in a house under the Fidelius Charm. But this was where the elf had thought Bellatrix to be. So who was the young witch?

He waited for thirty long minutes, hoping for the girl to reappear so that he might get a better look at her, but no one appeared from the space between 47 and 49. Snape slowly turned away and then Apparated; he'd learned something tonight, but he wasn't entirely sure what it meant.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 9

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Snape balanced the eagle quill across his fingers, allowing a single drop of jet black ink to fall from the tip onto the forest green blotter laid over his desk. There was a stack of pathetic essays before him, and while he could normally muster the fortitude to work through them, he could find no motivation today. The Fidelius house and the little witch preyed on his thoughts, but he had a mere minute's worth of memories to ponder over, and he was growing tired of analyzing the same slow shuffle of her feet, the same way she vanished between the houses, the way he couldn't help but think about the paranoid Black family and their habits of hiding themselves amongst the Muggles they proclaimed to hate.

The quill tipped precariously in his grip, and he tapped one end of the shaft to right it. Another dot of ink fell into the green felt and was immediately soaked in. The essays remained untouched.

Really, he had no way of getting any information unless he was able to get past the secret keeper, and there was no viable way of managing that feat of wonder. And since Snape had a healthy survival instinct, he had no desire to approach Bellatrix to ask her for the secret.

He hated the Fidelius Charm.

It reminded him too deeply of another family who had gone under the spell, believing that they were protected from anyone who might want to harm them. Their deaths were proof that the charm wasn't infallible. But someone could only get in if they were allowed in, and Snape could see no way past the enchantment.

He dropped the quill onto the blotter, lacing his fingers behind his head and stretching out in his chair. The muscles in his back protested mildly at the action before loosening and relaxing. His mind, however, continued to race.

There was a strong possibility that the Dark Lord was involved somehow, and prying into affairs of the Dark Lord never ended well for the person who decided to pry. Snape had very little desire to encourage the wrath of either of his masters. Bellatrix, if asked directly, would simply turn around and inform the Dark Lord if she thought it would benefit her and destroy Snape.

No, it would not do to be caught nosing into Bellatrix's affairs red-handed.

Snape tucked the quill back into its drawer, which slid shut into his desk with a quiet thump. Rodolphus had a point about the house-elves and their ability to access Bellatrix no matter where she was. There had to be a way he could use them without getting hit on the barrier that the Fidelius created.

He dragged a finger through a particularly large ink blot on the green felt, staining a fingertip that was already darkened by years of handling potions ingredients. Snape suddenly regretted not having learned more about house-elves and their capabilities. What if he was looking over something entirely simply because he had no idea it was possible?

Snape pushed back from his desk and got to his feet, pacing in front of his bookshelves. A quick scan revealed nothing that would contain useful information on house-elves, which was not entirely surprising, for he had never needed to know more than the basics of house-elf abilities. A trip to the library might be in order, although he despised having students around him while doing personal research. He snatched up his outer cloak and draped it over his shoulders, feeling the heavy cloth settle around him like a shield. His hand was inches from the doorknob when a sharp crack echoed through the room.

Two green ears poked out on either side of a silver tray, where a teapot and a cup balanced alongside a creamer and a bowl of sugar. The tray shifted until it was level with the small coffee table in the middle of the room and slid onto it. The two ears resolved themselves into a small creature with impossibly large eyes, who gazed up at Snape happily.

"Dobby brings Master Snape's tea things, sir!" he squeaked. Snape's eyes narrowed at him.

"I don't believe I ordered any tea from the kitchens." Snape stepped away from the door. In fact, he rarely ordered tea from the kitchens at all.

"Professor Headmaster Dumbledore sent it for Master Snape!" Dobby chirped, bouncing from orange-stockinged foot to turquoise-stockinged foot.

"Ah."

And really, that explained everything.

"Dobby will be back to fetch the tray," Dobby said, lifting his hand to snap his fingers.

"Wait!" Snape called out, and Dobby's entire body froze in anticipation. "No. You shall stay here, momentarily."

Dobby's hand slowly lowered. Snape sunk back into the chair behind his desk, then steepled his fingers under his chin to look at Dobby.

"I have a question for you," Snape began, "regarding the powers of house-elves."

Dobby blinked once, quickly, but didn't answer.

"I am aware that house-elves can bypass the Fidelius Charm if they have been told the secret. However, I am... curious to know if they can also enter a Fidelius house if they have not."

Dobby's large ears quivered. "Dobby does not know if house-elves are able to be doing such things, because Dobby has never tried!" He dropped to his knees and began pounding his head upon the stone floor.

"Desist that nonsense immediately!" Snape shouted. He took a deep breath and felt his pulse settle. "Could you try?"

Dobby paused in his self-abuse to peer up at him. "Try, sir?"

"To get past the Fidelius."

"Dobby does not know, sir. Which house does Master Snape be needing to get at, sir?"

At least he wasn't trying to impale his own forehead upon the floor anymore.

"There is a house," Snape said, "with the address 48 Kingham Close."

"Kingham Close!" Dobby said excitedly, jumping to his feet. "But, sir, Dobby does not need to get through the Fidelius Charm for Kingham Close!"

Snape stared at the elf, whose sudden transformation of personality was somewhat alarming. "And what do you mean by that?"

"Miss Cissy sends Dobby there always!" Dobby's ears drooped a little. "Miss Cissy *used* to send Dobby there always," he corrected.

"What for?" Snape demanded. "Why did Narcissa send you into a Muggle city?"

Dobby fingered the hem of his child-sized shirt nervously, his eyes shifting away from Snape's. "Miss Cissy told Dobby that Dobby was not allowed to tell. Not anyone."

Snape shoved the chair away from the desk and knelt in front of the small elf. "Dobby," he said carefully. "This is very important. There might be something... untoward happening on Kingham Close."

Dobby's eyes snapped up to meet his. "To Miss Hydra?" he asked tentatively.

Snape wished he could just shake all the information out of the damn elf. It would be so much easier than playing this ridiculous game.

"To Miss Hydra," Snape confirmed, unsure of what he was agreeing to.

Dobby's small chest expanded slightly as he took a deep breath. "Miss Hydra is Miss Cissy's niece!" he exclaimed, slapping his hands over his mouth.

Snape rocked back onto his heels, still crouching on the floor. His mind raced. Narcissa's niece, not Lucius'. That meant the child, because the girl he had seen could only be the Hydra that Dobby referred to, belonged to either Andromeda or Bellatrix. Andromeda had her child and was unlikely to leave a second child buried in a Muggle city under a Fidelius Charm.

Had Bellatrix had a child? A secret child, that not even her husband knew about?

It was impossible to tell just by the girl's appearance; Bellatrix and Andromeda looked quite similar, both with the same dark hair that the girl possessed. And who was the girl staying with? Snape knew for a fact that Bellatrix lived with Rodolphus, and she could not have left a child to raise herself from infancy.

"The girl, your Miss Hydra," Snape said to the quivering elf before him. "Who does she live with?"

"Miss Hydra lives Miss Cissy's mother, sir!"

Ah, and so it all came together. Brouny had indeed taken him to the Black family home, where Rodolphus had expected Bellatrix to be. The girl lived with her grandmother in secrecy, with occasional visits from her mother, because only Bellatrix could hide the existence of a child so thoroughly from everyone around her. And it was these very visits that had made Rodolphus suspicious enough to require Snape's time and attention to finding out the truth.

But it was time to discover the truth for certain.

"And Miss Hydra is Bellatrix's daughter?"

Dobby's whole body shook violently. But his head began to nod so strongly that Snape feared it would fly right off his shoulders.

Snape found himself sitting on the floor, elbows propped up on raised knees, staring at the elf. "Dobby, I need you to do something for me," he said after a moment. For several long seconds, he was sure that the house-elf would refuse, but Dobby nodded again. "If you are still able to get past the Fidelius, I want you to go to Kingham Close and tell me who is currently in residence there."

"Go... go back to Miss Hydra?" the elf asked in wonder. He stopped fiddling with his clothes. "Dobby gets to see Miss Hydra again?"

"See her, not talk to her," Snape clarified.

Dobby hardly seemed to care. "Dobby shall see Miss Hydra again!" he wailed happily. And before Snape could say another word, Dobby had cracked out of the room.

Snape stayed on the floor, rubbing at his temples with long fingers. Bellatrix as a mother. The idea was simply too much to comprehend. The fact that the Black family appeared to be hiding the child from everyone was only slightly more astounding. He cursed himself for not asking how old the girl was; it might give him a clue to her paternity. Surely Rodolphus was not the father, for there would be no reason for Bellatrix to hide a child born to her husband. Had the girl been born before or after their marriage? Did Bellatrix even know who the father was?

He had not moved by the time Dobby returned, a pleased grin on his face. "Miss Hydra is home, but Miss Black is not, sir!" he exclaimed, seemingly uncaring that he was blatantly breaking the rules his former mistress had set. Snape pinched the bridge of his nose once, then let go, climbing to his feet.

"I expect you can get me there?" he asked the elf, holding out his hand. Somehow, he expected that this elf's sheer desire to return to Kingham Close would allow Snape to pass the charm when tagging along after Brouny had not.

"Yes, sir!" Dobby said, grasping the pale hand with his own green one.

The crack was nearly drowned out by the squeeze of the elf Apparating them past the Hogwarts wards and through the Fidelius Charm. Snape stumbled only slightly upon arrival, finding himself on the inside of a small gate that led up to number 48. Dobby peered up at him.

"You will stay with me," Snape said softly. He did not want to find himself stuck in a Black family residence with no escape, should someone discover he was intruding on their property. He strode across the tiny yard to the front door, Dobby at his side. His fingers closed around his wand as he withdrew it from his robes, holding the tip up to the worn brass doorknob.

"*Alohomora.*"

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 9

Severus and Bellatrix had a single night together. The consequences would last much longer. Slight SS/BL, OFC, AU.

The latch clicked softly, the door shifting slightly in its frame. Snape pressed his palm to the smooth wood, easing the door open slowly. He paused, straining his ears to listen for an alarm, hurried footsteps or any indication that someone was aware he was breaking into their house.

Nothing.

He pushed against the door a little more until he could ease through the gap he'd created, placing one booted foot carefully upon the floor, hesitant to find any creaking floorboards. Dobby scuttled in behind him, fingers working nervously at the front of his too-large shirt. Snape slid into the house and let the door close with a quiet snap behind them.

The small hall he'd walked into was nothing particularly ostentatious and was thankfully lacking the screaming portrait that inhabited Grimmauld Place and would have given away his presence in a second. It was painted a dark green, so dark that he was sure it looked black on cloudy days when the sun wasn't able to find its way through the teeny window that sat at the top of the staircase. The umbrella stand in the corner looked oddly familiar, and it took Snape a moment to recognize it as the twin to the troll leg that occupied the other Black house.

He held his wand tightly at his side, fingers curled around the wooden length that was ready to snap to attention at a split-second's notice. Slowly, testing each step for silence before settling his weight again, Snape crept further into the house. Dobby grasped the back of his robes, and Snape allowed it; if he had to make a quick escape from the house, it would help to have an elf capable of bypassing the wards.

The kitchen was empty, as was the dining room and the sitting room. He climbed the stairs with trepidation, wondering if he would be able to escape the house unidentified. The Black family was notoriously quick with a wand and not shy about casting spells that would generally qualify as illegal. It was not wise to be caught on their bad side.

The top of the stairs presented four doors, three of which were shut. Snape edged towards the fourth, which was nearly closed but not latched. Like the front door, he pressed against it gently, letting it swing open another few inches nearly on its own.

He blinked against the bright yellow walls, which were vibrant with the colour of a sunshine Britain was incapable of getting. The furniture was whitewashed, and the floorboards were a honeyed hue. The room was the complete antithesis of the rest of the house, sunny and so undeniably alive.

The only dark spot in the room was the girl.

Snape withdrew his body slightly, hiding himself from view, allowing a wordless Notice-Me-Not charm to wash over him. It was the same girl he had seen the first night, he was sure of it, and that made her the infamous Hydra. She had seated herself in a large chair, draping her legs over one arm and resting her neck against the other. Her attention was placed entirely in a book that she held cradled on her thighs, and she turned the page with nothing short of reverence. Her hair was jet black, contrasting with pale skin that a poet would have described in loving detail as alabaster, dressed not in Muggle clothes, but a simple black robe that was unbuttoned near the neck.

Snape's pulse slowed as he realized she had not noticed him hovering in her doorway, and sat back to watch her. The girl appeared to be immersed in her book, her toes twitching slightly as she read. Her dark hair fell into her face, and she pushed it back with little grace and more irritation as she flipped a page. She blew a huffing breath at a strand of hair that insisted on falling into her sight. She turned another page.

He nearly cursed aloud when Dobby let out a high-pitched squeak, having peered around the doorframe as well and spotting the girl. Her head snapped up, her eyes narrowed at the direction the sound had come from. Snape raised his wand an inch, prepared to Obliviate the girl if worse came to worst. Soft footsteps padded towards him, pausing on the other side of the door.

"Who's there?" she called, and Snape caught the waver in a voice that otherwise tried to be strong and intimidating. In lieu of answering, he merely shoved Dobby behind him, hiding him from sight. "I said, who's there?" she called again to the silence.

The door was suddenly wrenched open, and Snape found himself standing two feet away from a slight girl with narrowed eyes and a wand in her hand, his wand pointed straight at her forehead. The Notice-Me-Not charm could not withstand her intense search for an intruder, and her sight fell upon him. Her eyes became very wide, and Snape noted that they were as dark as her hair.

"Drop it," he said, letting his voice take on that soft and dangerous quality that had served him well both as a Death Eater and a teacher. The girl's fingers tightened momentarily around her wand before releasing it to clatter on the floor. He Summoned it and pocketed it, ignoring the way the girl gaped at him. "Sit down," he said, gesturing toward the chair she had occupied only moments before.

"You're not here to hurt me, are you?" she asked, her voice full of false bravado as she returned to the chair. "You obviously don't know who I am, but there would be awful consequences if you hurt me."

"I fail to see what kind of dire actions would be taken against me if I touched your person," Snape sneered. "But seeing as I have no desire to do so, I cannot help but find your pleading to be pathetic and misguided."

The girl seated herself at the very edge of her expansive chair, every muscle quivering with the instinct to run. "I mean it," she said, her voice a little stronger. "My grandmother will be home soon, and you don't want to tangle with her."

"Yes, your grandmother. I'd be meaning to ask you about that." Snape brushed a bit of lint off his robes and seated himself at the end of the girl's bed. "She would be Druella Black, correct?"

The girl stared at him, her mouth clamped tightly shut. Then her eyes flickered to the open door, where they suddenly grew wide again. "Dobby!" she called out, sounding relieved and confused all at once.

"Miss Hydra," Dobby said, scrambling into the room from where he had been watching in the hallway. "You mustn't fear Professor Snape, miss! He wouldn't harm a house-elf, oh, no he wouldn't!"

Hydra glanced back at Snape with a reassessing gaze. "Did Dobby bring you here?" she asked. Snape nodded, a single incline of his head. "Why?"

"I asked him to do so, and he agreed to assist me."

"But why?" the girl pressed, sounding vaguely annoyed.

"I am attempting to solve the mystery as to why Bellatrix Lestrange finds herself at this humble abode more often than her husband can find her at their home."

"Ah."

They sat in silence as Dobby fidgeted with barely restrained energy between them. "Bellatrix is your mother," Snape finally said. The girl nodded much in the same manner that he had. "But you are not the daughter of Rodolphus Lestrange." It was not a question.

"No," she replied. "I'm not. I don't know who my father is." He wasn't sure if the blithe look on her face was truthful or if she was simply an accomplished liar. "Did you really come all this way just to ask me that? Wouldn't it have been easier to ask Bella?"

Snape let out a rough laugh. "It would be easier to convince a snake to give up its poison than to convince Bellatrix to give up a secret she did not wish to be made known."

The girl nodded in agreement. She slanted her eyes back towards Snape again. "Are you here to test me before my debut?"

"Your debut?"

"Into society, of course. Bella and Grandmother have been training me for it for as long as I can remember." She straightened her back, correcting her posture as if recalling lessons that had been drilled into her head.

"I test the dunderheads at Hogwarts often enough; there is no need to do so during my free time." She looked rather interested at this, tucking her legs up under her body as she turned to face him more fully.

"You teach at Hogwarts?" she asked, excited. "I've always wanted to go to school. Oh, can you imagine having a best friend? Sometimes I wish I had someone to talk to, but I only manage to get to the park once in a while, when Bella is away and Grandmother doesn't want to see me, and that's the only place where I ever see people my age." Snape was taken aback by the wistful tone in her voice.

He could not stop himself from asking. "Who educates you?"

"Grandmother, and Bella, when she comes around. Charms and curses, etiquette, managing a household, that sort of thing."

It was an education that belonged to the eighteenth century, given to a woman whose only goal in life was to snag a husband and then settle down and produce children, although apparently she would be cursing someone while she was at it. Snape got to his feet and paced the impossibly bright room, attempting to fit the puzzle together when he was still missing most of the pieces.

He paused when he spotted the overturned book, dumped upon the floor when she had heard Dobby outside the room. Crouching, Snape grasped the tome and turned it over. *Sense and Sensibility*, a Muggle novel with little relevance to the modern world. He handed it back to her and watched as she smoothed the crinkled pages with a careful hand.

"Miss Hydra," Dobby spoke up suddenly, apparently having had enough of being quiet in the background. "Dobby has been missing you greatly, miss."

"Oh, Dobby, I've missed you too." And she opened her arms to let the house-elf run into them, gathering the small creature up in a hug. "Brouny is no fun at all, and he doesn't keep my secrets like you do." Dobby began to look fearful at that pronouncement, his eyes darting back and forth between the young girl and Snape. He appeared to come to a decision and wrenched himself from her grasp in order to throw his body upon the floor and beat his head against the floorboards.

"Bad Dobby!" he shouted. "Bad Dobby!"

"No, Dobby!" the girl cried, pulling at his hands and feet in her desperation to make him stop. "Why are you punishing yourself?"

"Dobby has told Miss's secrets!" Dobby wailed. The girl froze.

"Who have you told? What have you told them?" The elf continued to moan. "Dobby!" she shouted. "Who. Did. You. Tell?"

"Dobby told Professor Snape!" he cried, slumping bonelessly to the floor. The girl whirled to face Snape, who stood behind her.

"That wretched elf only told me who you were and your relation to the Black family, that is all. If you have made the error of telling a house-elf your deepest secrets, then it appears that he is still holding them close to his chest," Snape snapped. Her shoulders slumped in relief.

"Don't, Dobby," she crooned to the pitiful elf. "It's alright. I didn't mean to shout." She pet his back softly until the moans ceased. "There, there."

She was an awfully sentimental creature, for having grown up ensconced in a Black household with little escape. She was helping Dobby to his feet and patting his cheeks dry with her sleeve, murmuring to him fondly the entire time.

"What is Bella preparing you for?" Snape asked as she settled back into her chair.

The front door slammed.

The girl jumped to her feet, stashing her book under the seat cushion and pushing him towards the elf. "Go!" she hissed at them. "Before she comes upstairs! Go!" she repeated when they did not immediately disappear. Snape reached down to clasp Dobby's tiny hand, only just catching the girl's last words-

"But please come back and visit!"

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 9

Severus and Bellatrix had a single night together. The consequences would last much longer. Slight SS/BL, OFC, AU

Snape landed hard on his feet, panting, taking only the time to look around him and judge his surroundings as safe before closing his eyes tightly and letting the panic and confusion rush through him. Dobby had deposited them back into his rooms at Hogwarts, and the small elf was now skittering around at Snape's feet, banging his head against every available surface.

"Desist, Dobby," Snape ground out through clenched teeth. The elf paused his self-destructive behaviour to stare up at the wizard with wide eyes.

"Master Professor Snape is not displeased with Dobby?" he asked tentatively.

"No. You have done quite well, tonight."

The elf flushed a bright green in pleasure, then bowed deeply. "Dobby must thank Master, sir, for he brought Dobby to Miss Hydra again."

"Yes, yes," Snape said dismissively, waving a hand at him. "Away with you, and do not speak a word of this to anyone, do you hear me?"

"Yes, Master Professor Snape, sir!" Dobby chirped cheerfully. He winked away, leaving Snape in the blissful quiet of his own sitting room.

In the frustrating manner that is known to researchers everywhere, the answering of one question had opened up a host of new questions that Snape was not able to answer. The girl was Bellatrix's daughter and had been hidden from the world. But she claimed that she would be experiencing an introduction to the wizarding world; had it been a lie on Bellatrix's part to quell the demands of a teenage girl who wanted to see beyond the walls of her own house, or was it a truthful statement? And if so, what sort of debut was Bellatrix planning for a girl who appeared to have little education and less common sense?

It was enough to give him a throbbing headache.

He let his body fall into a wingback chair, stretching his booted feet before him, staring blindly at the scuffed toes as he considered what little he did know.

Despite being Bellatrix's daughter, the girl appeared not to hold her mother's greatest and most dangerous trait, ruthlessness. In fact, she had been downright congenial and quite the hostess, once she had decided that Snape was not a threat. Perhaps she was being groomed to become a doting, dutiful pureblood wife? But if the girl was a pureblood, why would Bellatrix have hidden her from sight?

There were simply too many variables that could change the situation. It was hardly worth spending the time puzzling over, but despite trying to fix his attention to a new potions journal, Snape found his mind creeping back to the enigma that was Hydra Black.

Was that even her last name? It was simply too frustrating to be borne.

There was nothing to be done, other than take the girl's advice, and return.

TSoH

Classes and a summons from the Dark Lord commandeered most of his attention for the next week, but Thursday night was blessedly uninterrupted. Snape Apparated at the corner of Kingham Close, not daring to land too closely to a house that he knew held members of the Black family. He had forgone his typical teaching robes in favour of black trousers and a matching turtleneck, and in his hand he held a folder of essays from his fifth-year Hufflepuff/Ravenclaw class. He turned away from the Fidelius house, striding down the street and peering both ways once he reached the corner. It had been a long time since he had lived in a Muggle neighbourhood, but two things had not escaped his memory: beware of speeding motorcars, and a park is never far away.

As a child, he had spent much of his time in the park near Spinner's End, hiding from his drunken father and the dark corners of the cramped house. It was at that park where he had met Lily Evans and befriended her as an scrawny eight year old, and he had held a fondness for the small patches of green space ever since. There was little doubt in his mind that Hydra used her local park for much the same purpose, although she was altogether too cheerful to have ever been at the hard end of a slap.

It took a mere five minutes of walking to find the park, a tiny square of land where grass strained to grow. There was one bench and a set of two rusted swings, where two teenagers leaned against the metal poles and attached themselves at the mouth. Snape sneered in their direction, but they took no notice of him.

He seated himself at the bench and crossed one leg over the other, using his knee as a desk on which to scribble scathing comments onto the essays. It was strange, doing this activity out in the daylight, when he was so used to completing it behind his massive desk in the dim lighting of the dungeons. The breeze nibbled at the edges of the parchment, and Snape wondered if he could be charged under the Statute of Secrecy for bringing papers describing intrinsically magical processes out into the Muggle world.

No matter. The Wizengamot would be more likely to put him into Azkaban for association with a terrorist group and treason before breaking the Statute.

The Muggle couple had long been gone when Snape next looked up from his marking, an uneasy feeling prickling the hairs at the back of his neck. The sun was setting low on the horizon, warm red rays fanning out across the sky for the last few moments of the day. He pocketed his quill and stacked the essays neatly, absently considering the fact that he had spent all afternoon in a Muggle park on the slim chance that a certain witch might walk past. He certainly was getting ridiculous in his old age.

He moved to stand, stretching out the stiffness in his knees and hearing them pop loudly in succession. Snape turned to leave - he couldn't Apparate from the park directly, there was too large a chance someone might see him when he caught sight of it.

Or rather, her.

Two large, dark eyes, hidden amongst the three lone trees at the edge of the park, set into a pale face. He paused mid-step, unsure what she meant by hiding in the distance instead of approaching him. When she didn't turn and run, he raised a slender hand and beckoned to her, curling a single finger towards himself in an unmistakable gesture.

Like a wary fawn stepping out of the woods, Hydra moved away from the safety of the tree trunks and towards the bench. Snape reclaimed his seat on the wooden slats, watching as she tentatively made her way over to him.

"And how long have you been crouching amongst the trees?" he asked, forcing his voice into a drawl rather than a demand. Hydra slipped onto the bench next to him, folding her hands neatly into her lap and crossing her ankles delicately beneath the seat.

"Not long," she answered, smoothing her hands over her skirt.

They sat in silence, Snape unwilling to frighten her away with a barrage of questions, hoping that she might speak first so that he wouldn't have to.

She made a soft noise that he belatedly recognized as her clearing her throat. "I had a feeling that today would be a good day to visit the park, but Grandmother refused to let me leave before now. I think mostly because she was feeling particularly... spiteful, today." He had a feeling that 'spiteful' was not necessarily the word she would have preferred to use, but a polite young lady did not swear in public. "And I was right."

He hummed his agreement. They sat in silence a little while longer.

"You're not frightened of me, are you?" he asked, feeling inane even as the words left his mouth. What child wasn't? But she gave her head an immediate shake.

"It's not often I get to watch a real wizard doing wizard things," she said.

Snape blinked. "I was simply grading the most impossible essays I have ever had the misfortune to look upon."

"But you have a quill. How does it not run out of ink?"

"A simple charm that... well, never mind that for now." It would be too easy to get into an endless stream of questions, and then he would never get the opportunity to ask his own. "I believe we were having a conversation," he began slowly, "the last time you and I met."

"The first time we met, you mean," she said, and when Snape glanced over, her eyes were sparkling with mirth.

"A technicality," he dismissed with a wave of his hand. "You said that Bellatrix is preparing you for something."

Hydra hummed softly. "Marriage. Of a sort."

"Ah, I see." The appropriate roles for women never went out of style. "To whom?"

Hydra gave a little half-shrug, looking down at her feet as she kicked at the ground. "A man."

It was like trying to cut a soporiferous bean without it flying across the room. "Is there a specific one in mind yet?"

"Mother says that he's very important, and is going to be even more so shortly, and that I will have to be prepared to become an essential part of his life and legacy," she announced, sounding much like Hermione Granger reciting a textbook word-for-word. "I've never met him," she confessed.

Snape racked his brain; who could she mean? There were few men that Bellatrix would consider to be important, and fewer to whom she would willingly give part of herself.

"Surely you can't be expected to marry quite yet, you hardly look fifteen."

Hydra snickered. "I'll be eighteen in April," she replied. "Which is apparently plenty old enough to get married to a complete stranger."

"And your father?" he asked, trying a different tack. "What does he say to all this?"

"I've never met him, either," Hydra said. "Mother calls him the 'Potions master', but she's never said a name. I think she thinks I'll try to find him, if I know who he is, and she doesn't want that."

"Why ever not?" Snape asked, his voice sounding strangled even to his own ears.

"Because he might want to take me back, I suppose. I think that he told Mother he didn't want anything to do with me, when she became pregnant, and that's why I have to live away from everyone else. It would be shameful, see, for Mother to bring me home, because Mr. Lestranger isn't my father, and everyone would know I was born out of wedlock, from an affair." Her nose wrinkled. "I'm not sure how she's going to cover that up to the man I'm supposed to wed, but maybe she's already told him and he doesn't mind."

She peered at the horizon, where the sun was sinking so low that the few rays of sunlight left were dim and weak. "Time to go home, I think. Will I see you here next week?"

The only thing Snape could do was nod.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 9

Severus and Bellatrix had a single night together. The consequences would last much longer. Slight SS/BL, OFC, AU.

How could he have been so stupid?

A booted foot smashed into the small table that sat beside his fireside chair, sending it toppling arse over teakettle into the wall. Snape clenched his fists together tightly, feeling the nails dig ruthlessly into his palms and his knuckles go numb from lack of blood. His hands unfolded only long enough to grab hold of the chair and send it flying after the little table, leaving them both crumpled and pitiful in the corner.

Surveying the damage was much more satisfying and infinitely easier to deal with than trying to make all the puzzle pieces fit together inside his head. Snape sagged against the far wall, feeling the fight go out of him as quickly as it had come. His knees buckled, and he slid to the floor where he stopped with an audible thump.

The back of his head rested uncomfortably against the stone wall, but it was no matter. The whirling sense of unease in his stomach was far more unsettling. With a sound somewhere between a groan and a sigh, Snape finally let his head fall into his hands and closed his eyes.

A daughter.

There was nothing for it; she simply had to be his. Oh, how *could* he have been so utterly *blind* and *stupid*? Memories from long ago that had been forgotten over time were dredged up with little difficulty, now that he had ample reason to remember. Conceived in 1979, of course, when he had been foolish enough to engage in a tryst with a Slytherin, a Black, a woman who was above him both in years and carnal knowledge. Oh, if only he had known! Born in 1980, making the slight girl a grand total of seventeen years old.

He squeezed his eyes so tightly shut that he was nearly certain his eyelids would bruise from the abuse.

A daughter. With *Bellatrix*.

Of all the harpies to have unwittingly tied himself to. He briefly considered himself lucky to have escaped her affections, since it would have been all too easy for her to demand marriage when she carried his child. Snape gave his head a rough shake; no sense going down that dead-end road.

But then, why *hadn't* she chosen to pursue that path? Had it been his half-blood status that dissuaded her? Or was there a more sinister plot in her mind that was slowly growing and hatching beneath him, ready to erupt when he least expected it?

He was going to drive himself batty with all these unanswered thoughts roaming through his head.

The girl was too sweet, too gentle, to be the product of a liaison between a Black and a Snape. He must be wrong, there was another Potions master, maybe one from South America! No, of course not, it was useless to think that way.

He had expected to die childless, the end of the illustrious Snape line, such as it was. And yet, a girl from nowhere, hidden away in a townhouse under the Fidelius Charm, waiting...

But not for him. Her husband.

Instinct told him she could have only meant one person, even if she didn't quite know it, but his brain refused to look facts in the eyes. It would be too devastating, finding the girl now and then knowing the fate she was resigned to. It was better not to know; he would find it unbearable and then try to rashly fix it, and that could only leave him dead. Oh, yes, Bellatrix would have to answer for that, make no mistake.

She could have bled the baby out. She must have known that Snape would brew her a potion to do so, better than anything she could have make or purchased herself. And to keep the girl hidden from Rodolphus for all those years... it was unthinkable. Snape straightened slightly, pressing his back more firmly against the wall that held him upright.

Rodolphus.

He imagined shaking his hand, offering him a whisky, then handing him a slap in the face alongside the drink. "I know you've wished for an heir these many years," he imagined saying, "but I'm afraid I impregnated your wife already. Perhaps she only had one good use in her and I used it up?"

He'd end up flat on his back under a wash of green light. Rodolphus might seem harmless and even timid in comparison to Bellatrix, but the first person who forgot that a less fearsome creature than Bellatrix was still mightily fearsome indeed would quickly receive a demonstration to correct their thinking.

With an outstretched hand, Snape wordlessly summoned his bottle of Firewhisky from a cabinet that had escaped his wrath. He uncorked it with his thumb and drank directly from the bottle, not caring that he was being hopelessly *déclassé*.

Hydra.

An unusual name, to be sure. There was likely a meaning behind it, the most simple being that the Blacks enjoyed naming their children after constellations, and Hydra was one of the largest constellations in the sky, stretching her length over the horizon.

The water serpent.

A snake, of course, to honour Slytherin House and the Dark Lord's heritage. There was no mistaking that. And a significant part of mythology, a beast who could not be defeated since its heads grew back as quickly as they could be cut off, and always two heads where there once was one. It had poison in spades, making it deadly and dangerous. It did, however, have a weakness; only a single of its head was immortal, and if this head could be removed permanently, the monster would die.

Herakles, of course, had solved this problem with the simple matter of cauterizing the neck stump immediately after he had delivered the beheading blow, but the monster had wreaked havoc across Lerna long before that moment.

He shivered at the thought of the smiling girl beheaded with only a smoking wound where her slender neck had once been.

Snape had half a mind to find Bellatrix, grab her by the shoulders and shake her until all the answers he desired spilled out of her and tumbled to the ground around her feet, where he could pick them up and peruse them at his leisure. It was just like her to put him through all this trouble, even if she didn't realize she was doing it.

What was he going to tell Lestrangle?

Rodolphus would not be satisfied with a simple dismissal, a declaration that there was nothing interesting to be found. For God's sake, Snape had promised him information! And Snape was nothing if not a good listener, especially if the listening had to be done secretly and from behind closed doors. Lestrangle would never believe that he hadn't discovered anything.

His arse protested at his choice to sit on the cold stone floor, and his knees felt a moment's strain as he heaved himself to his feet, sloshing a bit of the Firewhisky over his hand. Pushing the dark hair away from where it hung in his face, Snape strode to the fireplace and stared into its depths, wishing that the flames could consume this knowledge like they consumed the logs piled high in the hearth. The bottle dangled loosely in his hand, a little too close to the fire. His knuckles warmed uncomfortably, and the bottle heated in his grasp. The next swig he took was too hot to stand, and Snape spat it out into the fireplace, which heaved momentarily with the alcohol.

Snape looked at the drink in his hand, for a moment at a loss as to where it had come from. He propped the bottle back onto the shelf it had come from, unsure where the cork had vanished to. A quick Summoning charm sent it flying out of a corner and into his hand, and he stoppered the whisky again. It would do him no good to get absolutely smashed before the job he had to do. No, best to have his wits around him.

His bedroom lay through a door on the opposite side of the room from the hearth, and Snape passed through the doorway on a mission. His robes, first, followed by a cloak, both drawn out from the towering wardrobe. His fingers manoeuvred easily over the many buttons, long since accustomed to performing this task twice a day. Once he was clad from head to foot in black, he gathered his courage around him like another layer of clothing and walked purposefully to his fireplace.

The little urn on his mantle appeared as if it should hold ashes, perhaps those of a family member, but instead it contained a heap of glittering green powder, which he scooped up and tossed into the orange flames, turning them emerald instead. Drawing his cloak closer to his body in an effort to keep them clean, he stepped into the fireplace and called out his destination.

"Lestrangle Lane!"

It seemed too innocent a name, considering who occupied it. The manor, for indeed it was not merely a house, was not even located on a lane, but Snape imagined that some long-deceased Lestrangle had liked alliteration just a little too much. He stepped out, amid a small puff of smoke, into the same study that Rodolphus had last entertained him in. His feet had barely touched the ground when Rodolphus came through the doorway, hand in his pocket and face hard.

There was a tense moment when Snape was certain that Lestrangle already knew, that he was going to be struck down in the most ridiculous way possible for anyone named Snape: in the heat of a lovers' quarrel. How appropriate that the affair in question had long since passed and retribution was only now being delivered.

But then Rodolphus removed his hand from his pocket, no wand in sight, and his face lightened into a more pleasant grimace. "Snape, what are you doing here?"

"I have word, Lestrangle," he said smoothly. "Word of your wife."

"Oh?" The other man seemed hesitant to ask. "Well, you might as well have a seat. She's off with our Lord, and I don't expect her back for some time."

Snape accepted the chair and the cigar that Rodolphus held out, lighting the tip with a flick of his wand. He enjoyed two large puffs, wondering if he would die with the smell of smoke still in his mouth.

Lestrangle settled in the other chair, lighting his own cigar and tapping off the ashes into the tray that sat between them. "What have you discovered? It doesn't have anything to do with this secret plot that Bella has to raise us up in the eyes of our Lord, does it?" he asked without preamble.

Oh, he wouldn't be surprised if he knew just what that particularly plan entailed, and who was meant to be the sacrificial lamb for the cause. Snape rolled the cigar between his long fingers, then set it down on the edge of the ashtray, where it balanced and burned slowly at the end. Lestrangle watched it all with calculating eyes.

"I'm afraid I don't yet have all the details I wish to gather, but your wife... she appears to be visiting a child."

Rodolphus coughed, thumping his chest hard. "A child? I suppose you don't mean that nephew of hers?"

"Draco? No, decidedly not. A young girl. Well, a teenage girl. Seventeen years old." Snape folded his hands across his lap, presenting himself as innocently and non-threateningly as possible before delivering the news. "She is Bellatrix's daughter."

Lestrangle leapt to his feet with a shout; he had dropped his cigar in shock, and the lit end had burnt his robes through to the flesh of his leg. He swatted angrily at the smouldering hole in his clothes, then shifted his gaze back to Snape. "Bella can't have children."

"I assure you, she may not be able to now, but she has in the past."

Rodolphus cursed, either at his ruined clothes or his wife, and sat back down again heavily. "Seventeen, you say?" Snape nodded. "So not mine." He had done the math easily enough, that was for certain. "And where is this girl?"

"At the house of Druella Black. I believe she has not been introduced to the wizarding world beyond her grandmother's house, and so it is little wonder we have never heard of such a girl before."

"Her name?"

"Hydra."

"Ah," Rodolphus said knowingly, as that particular piece of the puzzle fell into place for him. "Yes. I had wondered what she meant by that name."

He seemed to be taking the news surprisingly well, considering he had just learned that his wife was hiding a bastard child who belonged to another man from him. Speaking of which, was it entirely necessary to divulge the paternity of the child? Perhaps it would be safer if he simply left the matter for now...

"Her father?" Rodolphus asked quietly. Snape paused, and Lestrangle looked up at him. "Her father," he repeated, more forcefully. "Don't tell me you have come to me without that gem of information."

"Her father," Snape echoed, "I am afraid to say... well, she's mine."

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 9

Severus and Bellatrix had a single night together. The consequences would last much longer. Slight SS/BL, OFC, AU.

His fingers itched to clutch his wand. Not to curse someone, but to have it readily at hand in the event that someone might want to curs***him***.

At this moment, being cursed was not an unlikely scenario. The corner of Rodolphus' eye twitched, only slightly, but enough to make Snape just a bit concerned. His fingers tightened around each other more forcefully in his lap, fighting against his instinct to just grab his wand and duel it out with Lestrangle if the need arose.

The eyelid twitched again.

Rodolphus' hands clenched into fists, then released, the fingers stretching in a clear attempt to calm himself. "Yours?" he repeated, as if perhaps a bit of earwax had disrupted his hearing and he had simply misunderstood.

"Mine," Snape confirmed.

This time, a vein in Rodolphus' forehead throbbed at the same time that his eyelid twitched. "Do you care to explain?" he asked, his voice strangled with the effort not to shout.

"Do not forget that you did the math yourself; the girl was born before you married Bellatrix," Snape began, hoping to sooth the wild beast. "It was a one-time occurrence, I believe a bit of rebellion and experimentation on her part and a simple desire for sex on mine, and neither of us approached the other for a continuation of those events once they had concluded."

Rodolphus did not appear to take the notion of his wife sleeping with another man well, even if it had happened before he had any claim on her. "How long have you known about the child?"

"Two weeks," Snape said. "And that was only of her existence, not her parentage. That I discerned only tonight."

"How?"

"She told me."

"Bellatrix?" Rodolphus demanded, his eyes flashing. "She dares to talk to you on this matter before myself?"

"No, her daughter, the girl."

"Ah." Lestrangle settled back into his chair. "And why has this girl not sought out her father before?" This was said slightly mockingly, and Snape bristled at the tone.

"She has been told little, not even my name, only that her father was a Potions master. Bellatrix clearly wanted to hide her parentage, for whatever reason."

"So why keep the girl if she did not want to acknowledge her?"

Snape did not answer immediately, letting the silence stretch between them. "I have a theory," he said slowly. "I have yet to confirm it, but I owe you the truth as far as I know it."

"Yes, yes, go on," Rodolphus urged, impatient and irritated.

"The girl said that is being groomed to be presented to the wizarding world, but she is unclear in what sense she is to be presented. However, she seems certain that she will be attached to a man of high standing, someone who Bellatrix informs her will become very powerful in a short time." Snape paused again, wondering if it was truly the right thing to say what he suspected. "I believe your wife intends to marry her daughter to the Dark Lord."

Rodolphus laughed, the sound harsh and jarringly loud in the quiet room. "To the Dark Lord, are you mad?" He chortled some more, but there was little humour in it. He quieted after a short while. "The Dark Lord. Do you really think so?"

"The only alternative, based on her wording, is Harry Potter, and I much doubt that Bellatrix would send her own flesh-and-blood to wed that bloody Gryffindor."

Lestrangle let out a short laugh at that. "No, I dare say she wouldn't." He drummed his fingers against the arm of his chair, staring off into a corner that held nothing particularly of interest. "Perhaps Draco Malfoy, if he manages the task the Dark Lord has set out for him, but I don't believe he has the balls necessary to achieve it. And besides that, they'd be cousins, although I'm not sure that would be enough to deter Bellatrix from arranging it." He laughed again, dryly. "It would explain all the time she's spent away. She's with the Dark Lord right now, probably talking about how she's ready to hand over her own child without a second thought." Rodolphus grimaced. "I'd have taken her in, you know," he said, his eyes finally snapping back up to meet Snape's. "Even if I'd known she was yours, I would have taken the girl in and made her my heir. If I'd known we'd never have our own children, well, it wouldn't have been a hard decision to make."

"Even with her sullied blood?" Snape asked, slightly astounded.

Rodolphus chortled, and Snape wondered if he truly looked so shocked. "Even with your Muggle father's dirty blood running through her veins. But you're a Prince, too, Snape. It might not mean much anymore, but I remember when the Prince line was rather prestigious."

Snape wished he could remember such a time, but the only Prince he had known had lived in squalor and allowed a Muggle to take away her wand.

The two men sat in silence for some time, Snape watching the other with wary eyes, hoping that the calm would last long enough for him to escape with his head still attached and his heart still beating. Rodolphus fished another cigar out of the box at his elbow, lighting the tip and taking a long drag.

"I can't imagine what she's thinking, giving a girl to the Dark Lord."

It was quite possibly the closest thing to treason that Snape had ever heard Lestrangle say.

"And I have to admit, I wonder if our Lord would even be capable of, well, engaging in the sort of activities one indulges in with a wife."

Snape wished desperately that he'd never have to imagine that particular situation ever again. It was simply too nauseating to bear.

Rodolphus tapped the ash into a tray and brought the cigar back to his lips. "Curious, though, that the Dark Lord would want a child when he claims to be immortal."

Dark eyes met pale blue, and the two men stared at each other.

"What *does* an immortal man need with an heir?" Snape mused aloud, turning the thought over in his head. "Dynasty and succession are unimportant if you can live forever."

But neither could come up with a suitable answer, and so they continued to sit in the quiet room across from the fire, watching the flames flicker against the stone and charred wood.

Then suddenly, the flames flashed green, and Bellatrix stepped out of the hearth, her wild black hair framing her face in a tangled riot of curls. The fire faded back to orange, and she stepped closer to the two chairs before her.

"Rodolphus, what *were* you thinking, letting this half-blood tramp through our house?"

"He's sitting, not tramping, and I hardly think your objection to him is due to his blood status."

Bellatrix sniffed. "Giving him your best cigars, even. What has this world come to?"

Rodolphus' eyes narrowed, and Snape suddenly wished he had a clear route from his chair to the fireplace. What he wouldn't give to be able to leave before Rodolphus undoubtedly told Bellatrix what he knew and the whole situation went to hell in a hand-basket.

"What has this world come to, indeed. Did you know, Bellatrix darling, that I found out the most intriguing bit of information today?"

She looked suspiciously at her husband, who had leaned forward in his chair and stared down the witch before him. "I'm sure anything that intrigues your little mind is positively too boring to mention."

"Nonsense. I think you'll quite enjoy it. You see, Severus here informed me that you have a child."

The moment that Rodolphus had named him, Snape had reached for his wand. He'd only just managed to free it from his pocket when Bellatrix whirled on him, pointing her own wand in his direction and firing a Blasting spell. He ducked, letting the back of the chair take the blast, and rose to his feet, conjuring a Shield while casting to disarm her.

It had to be sheer dumb luck that Bellatrix's wand flew from her grip and into his own, but his joy was short lived. The witch charged at him physically, her talon-like fingernails straining to claw his face. It was Rodolphus who flicked his wand and pushed her away, giving Snape enough time to conjure a length of rope to restrain her.

"He speaks lies!" Bellatrix screeched, trying madly to shake off the ropes. "You dare listen to his treacherous words?"

"Snape knows better than to lie to a Lestrangle," Rodolphus said softly. "But it appears that you have not learned the same lesson."

"There's no girl!" Bellatrix shouted at him.

"Ah!" Rodolphus exclaimed, smiling broadly at his wife. "I didn't say anything about a girl, did I?"

"You... I... that is..." Bellatrix stuttered, ceasing her rocking motions. "Well, it's not a boy, either!" she proclaimed, thrusting her nose up in the air.

"A pathetic response," Rodolphus said. "The girl, Hydra, you've been keeping her at your mother's for seventeen years. She knows nothing of the wizarding world, and I blame you for that, Bellatrix. The only children who grow up that ignorant are Mudbloods, and even they are introduced to our society at eleven. You plan to give her away to someone, but you haven't told her who. Snape believes that you've arranged for her to wed the Dark Lord, and I'm inclined to believe him. Ah, yes. That's right. Snape. He's the father of your little half-blood mongrel, isn't he?"

Rodolphus had slowly made his way across the carpet to where Bellatrix sat bound on the floor, finally kneeling before her to stare her in the eyes. "Don't lie to me, Bellatrix. I won't have the truth hidden from me any longer."

She swayed once, her dark eyes rolling towards Snape where he stood by the fireplace. He met her gaze with unblinking eyes, determined not to let her frighten him. She looked back at Rodolphus, who remained where he was, crouched before his wife.

"The Dark Lord wouldn't let me destroy it," she finally snapped. "I appeared before him with the hopes of obtaining a potion or a charm to bleed the child from my body, but when he heard who the father was, oh, he was *pleased*." Bellatrix smirked at the two men. "Can you imagine? My loyalty, my beauty, my talent, my lineage, combined with Snape's ability with potions and his sharp mind? He might be a half-blood nobody, but no one can deny that he has intelligence. The child could only be a marvel to behold, could only be a dedicated Death Eater with the ability to do anything and everything. And so when the Dark Lord asked that I keep him, to raise him to become his right-hand when he was grown, I could only say yes. And then when he turned out to be a girl, I improvised and promised the Dark Lord a broodmare of a wife who would provide all the basic genetic material he needed to spawn a Dark Line. And I would be there with her every step of the way, declaring my rightful place as the girl's mother, the grandparent to the Dark Line, the one who had transformed a useless half-blood into the girl the Dark Lord could have at his side."

Her breath was coming in harsh pants, her dark eyes gleaming. "And she's very nearly ready. I will have her presented to the Dark Lord on the Ides of March, and she will have borne him a son by the New Year."

Snape closed his eyes for a moment, wishing that he'd never heard of Hydra, that he'd never been stupid enough to sleep with Bellatrix Black, that he wasn't in this horrible position of listening to a mad woman talk about giving his daughter away to the only thing he truly hated in this world. He opened them again to see her staring right at him, a smile pulling at the corners of her lips.

"You're not upset that I hid her from you, are you, Sevvie?" she cooed. "Your poor baby girl, all tied up with a ribbon and given to the Dark Lord before you could even know her. You would have held her back, you know, made her ordinary just like every other witch in Hogwarts, and you would have held me back right with her."

"The least you could do was educate the girl before dropping her at our Lord's feet," he snapped, unsure why he'd chosen this point above all to be furious about.

"She will be a blank slate for him to write upon, the truest tabula rasa in existence, and he will thank me for it."

"I rather think he won't," Snape said, and in a single fluid movement, he turned and thrust a handful of powder into the Floo and left the Lestranges behind.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 9

Severus and Bellatrix had a single night together. The consequences would last much longer. Slight SS/BL, OFC, AU.

Snape emerged in his own quarters in Hogwarts, fists clenched and shoulders tense, wishing that there was something substantial to smash against the wall. He imagined that sinking his knuckles into Bellatrix's face would be incredibly satisfying, although he had never fancied himself a woman-beater. Instead, he made do with throwing his entire set of whiskey tumblers against the stone walls, where they shattered into a glistening waterfall of tinkling shards of glass. When he'd thrown the last one, Snape turned and rested his forehead against the fireplace mantle, closing his eyes.

For several long moments, he focused on keeping his breathing smooth and even, hoping to calm the raging anger that flowed through him. When his pulse had settled, he opened his eyes and found himself nose-to-pot with the ceramic container he kept his Floo powder in. Snape's long fingers reached up and caressed the sides of the small pot, wondering how easy it would be to slip into the Black household and simply spirit the girl away. He had gone so far to lift the lid and dip his fingers inside when a soft pop behind him caused him to whirl about.

Dobby was crouched alongside the broken glass, carefully piling it together and waving his green fingers over it all. The shattered glass came together in a gentle motion, separating clearly into six sections before settling back into their original forms. He had picked up two of the glasses to set them back in their proper place when he noticed Snape watching him.

"Pardon Dobby, Professor Potions master, sir, but Dobby was only wanting to help clean the mess before Master Professor Snape steps in it, sir."

"Yes, yes," Snape said irritably. "Get on with it, then."

It was somewhat frustrating to see that his anger had not had any lasting consequences, although it was likely for the best. The small elf placed the last of the tumblers back where they belonged before bowing deeply to the wizard.

"Dobby was wondering, sir, if Potions master Professor has been to visit Miss Hydra again?" The elf's ears twitched with barely suppressed hope. Snape sneered at the creature.

"I have, not that it is any of your business."

"Master Professor has found a way past the blocking enchantments!" Dobby exclaimed joyfully.

"I have not done any such thing," Snape said grouchy. "I merely saw her in the park."

Dobby's left ear twitched harder. "Meaning no offences to the Professor, sir, but Dobby would be honoured if the Professor would allow Dobby to take him to Miss Hydra whenever the Professor is wanting to go see her."

There simply had to be a way to teach elves to talk in the first person instead of the third.

Snape rubbed at his forehead roughly, willing away the headache that threatened to overcome him. Then, suddenly, he looked back up at the elf, who was shifting from foot to foot as he waited for an answer.

"As a matter of fact, you may take me to see the girl right now."

Dobby let out a gasp of delight and instantly lunged forward to grasp Snape's robes in his small hand. Snape pulled his wand from his sleeve and let Dobby whisk him away.

They appeared with a pop back onto the doorstep of 48 Kingham Close. "Can you tell me who is currently inside this house?" Snape whispered.

"The young miss, of course, and her grandmother."

Bellatrix had not yet returned to her daughter, and that was more than Snape could have hoped for. He let himself into the house again, closely followed by Dobby, wand extended before him. He narrowly missed running into the troll leg umbrella stand and crept up the stairs with a Silencing Charm on his feet.

The door to the yellow room was shut, and he pressed his ear against the dark wood. For a moment, he could hear nothing inside, but then the faint sound of tuneless humming reached his ears. She was awake, then, and likely on the right side of the room.

Snape's hand closed over the doorknob, and he felt Dobby's fingers tighten on his robes at the same moment. "Apparate us out the moment I have hold of her," he hissed to the elf, who nodded silently.

The knob turned under his grasp, and the humming stopped short. The girl opened her mouth to say something, her eyes wide and alarmed, but Snape covered the distance between them with two long, quick steps and grabbed her wrist. Dobby awkwardly bounced along beside him, keeping grasp of his robes. The first note of a shrill scream had erupted from the girl's mouth before Dobby snapped his fingers, and they were away.

She continued screaming when they appeared back in his rooms, a long, high note of despair. Snape released her immediately and cast *Silencio* upon her, wondering why he had not thought to do so while still in the house. Her grandmother would have heard the beginnings of the scream quickly cut off, and she would investigate. Within minutes, Bellatrix would know that her daughter was no longer in the custody of her grandmother. And while it was unlikely that Bellatrix would think her daughter had simply run away, the scream made kidnapping, and Snape's involvement, much more obvious.

The scream died away as the girl appeared to realize that nothing horrible was happening to her beyond being transported away from her bedroom without warning. Her face was pale, and her eyes darted around the room nervously.

"You've nothing to fear," Snape said finally, feeling unaccustomed to having to soothe someone. Even when the homesick Slytherin first-years approached him, he often gave them a mug of hot chocolate before sending them off to the seventh-year prefects. He was not well-versed in comforting others, preferring to make them quake under his glare instead, and it was not often possible for children to both fear and trust you. When faced with the choice, he nearly always chose for children to fear him rather than trust him. It was easier that way.

She appeared to recognize him, finally, and the utter terror faded to mere fear. She stood barefoot in front of his sofa, her entire body quivering. "Where am I?" she finally managed to say, although her voice was as shaky as her limbs.

"Hogwarts, in my quarters."

This was clearly the right thing to have said, because the remainder of her fear seemed to melt away instantly. "Hogwarts?" she asked, perking up noticeably. "Like, Hogwarts School?"

"As I know of no other Hogwarts, the answer seems to be obvious."

Her toes scrunched in her excitement. "I never thought I'd see it!" She gazed around his sitting room as if everything she needed to know about Hogwarts was located in that room. "You have an awful lot of books," she added, her eyes falling on the two walls that were filled with books from floor to ceiling.

"I am a scholar: it comes with the territory."

"Dobby!" she exclaimed, spotting the elf where he was half-hidden behind Snape.

"Miss Hydra!" Dobby chirped. "The Professor permitted Dobby to visit you again!"

"I'm glad he did," the girl said, smiling fondly at the elf. Snape chanced a small step forward, but she seemed to ignore him in favour of chatting with Dobby. "Would you like to sit down?"

"Am I here for tea, then? I've never been so far from home without permission. Or did you ask my grandmother and she forgot to tell me? She's so forgetful sometimes, I don't know what she'll do without me to remind her where she put her wand. Of course, then she uses it to try and jinx me, so perhaps it's all for the best."

Oh, lovely. Bellatrix had left her daughter with a crazy, senile old woman.

Tea seemed to be a decent idea though, and he sent Dobby to fetch some. The girl folded herself onto the furniture, her long limbs tucked neatly beneath her. Snape sank into the chair beside the fireplace, the headache that had only threatened before now racing through his skull at full speed.

Dobby popped back in with tea, and Snape sent him away once it was served. The girl dosed her cup with two spoonfuls of sugar before cradling it between her palms. "So did you ask my grandmother?" she queried.

"I did not."

"My mother?"

"No."

The girl took a long sip of her tea before resting it against her knee. "Did you ask anyone for permission to take me away?"

"I believe that it is fully within a father's rights to see his daughter when he so wishes."

There was a long pause as they stared at one another. She blinked slowly, then set her cup down onto the tea tray.

"I suppose that's true," she said. "Although I'm not entirely certain how that applies to you."

"Don't play daft with me; I know you've figured it out," Snape snapped.

"I'm not being daft; I just want to be certain before... before I get my hopes up," the girl said, her voice tapering off at the end. "You're my father then? The Potions master?"

"I am."

They sat in silence once again. The girl swung her bare foot, the delicate sole scraping against the floor.

"You must be cold," Snape said abruptly, rising to his feet. The chit was sitting there in nothing more than a sundress without even a pair of shoes to keep her toes warm.

"Oh," she said, as if surprised. "I am, a little."

Snape strode through to his bedroom, opening the wardrobe and finding one of his black teaching robes within. A search through the bureau presented him with a pair of socks that he Transfigured into black slippers. He returned to the sitting room and handed her the clothes, which she immediately donned. She looked rather ridiculous, drowning in his too-large robe with fuzzy slippers on her feet, but he would not be responsible for her freezing to death.

"I am going to ask you some questions, and you will not evade them this time," he told her sternly. "Your mother has told me some things, and I want to know how much she has told you."

The girl gave him a rather imperial nod, giving him permission to continue.

"The man she plans to marry you to---"

"I don't think it's marriage, precisely," she cut in.

Snape raised an eyebrow at her.

"I'm to be a companion, I think. And give him children, if he asks for them. But beyond that, I'm really not certain. Why are you so hung up on this subject anyway?"

Not a wife, just a consort and a broodmare. Hardly the future little girls dreamed of. "The man that your mother has chosen for you is not... appropriate."

The girl's eyes narrowed, and her forehead wrinkled. "Why not?"

"He is... well, frankly, he is not mentally stable." Ah, the beauty of understatement.

"Then why...?"

"Your mother, you may have noticed, is not entirely within her mental capacities either."

The girl didn't deny it. "Is that why you've taken me? So that I don't have to go to him?"

"That is part of the reason, yes."

"And the other part?"

Snape didn't answer at first, attempting to choose his words carefully. "A father's duty is to protect his children from negative influences, even if the bad influence is that child's own mother."

The girl gazed at him with wide brown eyes. "Do I get to stay here with you?"

He scoffed. "Merlin, girl, I have no idea what I should be doing with you, besides ply you with tea and keep your toes from getting frostbite."

"My name is Hydra, not girl."

"Hydra," he repeated, rather doubtfully. She beamed at him.

"Daddy," she replied, the smile still firmly fixed across her face.