

Shelter

by averygoodun

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

AN: This was started for Ayerf for the 2007 SSHG exchange from this prompt: Partly DH compliant. What if Voldemort granted Severus a personal reward, in addition to becoming Headmaster: Hermione Granger to do with as he wished. Alternate version of the Malfoy Manor chapter. Bellatrix may still torture Hermione (particularly if she's jealous of Voldemort favouring Severus), but Severus comes to claim his prize. With him there, does Harry escape before Voldemort arrives? Only restriction is that Hermione's only way out is with Severus.

It is now nearly finished. (I gave her art, instead. ;-)

*One doesn't know, till one is a bit at odds with the world, how much one's friends who believe in one rather generously, mean to one:*D.H. Lawrence

Snape was tired. He couldn't remember ever being this tired before. He was so tired that he could feel even his smallest toes protesting in exhaustion, and that was over the aches and pains the rest of his body was screaming at him.

But the day was finally done. He made his way up the hill to the ostentatious manor with the thought that he would finally be able to lie down again and rest. To sleep. And with the Dreamless Sleep, there was no chance of dreams...

That, more than anything, was what made Snape smile. It had been a long day, following a long month, but it was all done for now. The Dark Lord was most pleased with him, and he would be even more pleased with the progress he had made. The information was falling into place, and that would make the Dark Lord very happy, indeed.

Severus always preferred it when the Dark Lord was happy. It was so much easier to hide everything.

The doors opened before him, and he staggered in. He didn't care whether the others were here and if they saw him or not. They knew better than to mock him now. Especially where the Dark Lord might hear them. Snape smirked slightly. There *were* benefits to being the Dark Lord's most trusted servant. He could see why Bella was so eager to regain the position. Granted being obsessed with her "master" helped that ambition, but the perks were quite nice enough to encourage even the laziest among them. Snape knew he would enjoy them even more if he didn't have a conscience, but there was nothing to help with that anymore. Lily had done that job too thoroughly.

He reached his room and started undressing the moment he closed the door, leaving a trail of shoes and clothes as he made his way to the massive bed. There was nothing he wanted more at that moment than to sink into the soft down and embrace oblivion; he knew he would be asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

He sat down on the edge of the bed with a sigh. Even that was an immediate relief. He undid his trousers' buttons and sighed again before he closed his eyes and reviewed what he would be telling the Dark Lord after his nap, and what he needed to bury deep, deep inside. Albus' portrait needn't have reminded him of the importance of sharing Potter's true departure date; he knew that very well. However, he thought it best to keep the departure of Tuney's family a secret. There was no need to risk her worthless, scrawny neck any more than it already was.

He sighed again, rubbing his burning eyes. Getting through the protective wards at Hogwarts was much more exhausting than he had anticipated. He half hoped the Dark Lord overthrew the Ministry as soon as planned, as it would make talking with Dumbledore's portrait much easier. Although he would have to be careful not to rouse the suspicions of the new headmaster. He *hoped* the Dark Lord would grant him the position, but he knew better than to count on it. The Dark Lord had a perverse sense of humor. He hoped that would work in his favor, this time.

Snape rubbed his face again, trying to concentrate some more. Organizing his mind was the first priority. He could sleep after that.

Potter... It all came down to Potter. Well, really it all came down to Potter, Weasley and Granger. Without Granger, the Boy Wonder would be lost. Probably wouldn't be able to find his own arse if it weren't for Granger's organizational and research skills. Not to mention that Granger's casting abilities were not trivial. She could probably even make most of the Death Eaters sweat a little before Potter's overwhelming good luck kicked in and swept them off to safety.

Safety being a relative term, of course.

Snape cursed Albus and his nefarious plotting once more. He wondered whether Albus really knew how cold-hearted and vile his actions were. He suspected that the old man did, which made it even less excusable.

Snape shook his head, trying to get back on track. His feelings about Albus could wait. Those were the fun ones to feed the Dark Lord.

As long as Potter got away from Privet Drive safely, the boy would be protected. His friends were already at the Burrow, so they would be safe until the Ministry fell. He hoped Granger and Weasley were prepared to run. He suspected that Potter only had the barest glimmer of what it would really be like on the run. To be fair, Granger probably only had the faintest glimmer of what it would *really* be like, but she would at least be a fast learner.

And, with her along, he could at least be sure that Potter's personal wards would be adequate, if not superb.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. The door opened silently, admitting the spitting image of his tall, fair-haired host.

"The Dark Lord would like a moment of your time, Professor."

Snape bowed his head, both in acknowledgment and despair. He had hoped to get rest first.

He was surprised when Draco didn't move. He wearily lifted his head to see the boy looking around the room with an uneasy frown. When his face returned to Severus, Draco frowned further and made a nervous gesture.

"Professor..." His voice was rough, so he stopped and cleared his throat. His eyes started darting around the room once more, as if searching for an escape, but he reined in the nervous tic and looked at Severus again. "He wants to leave soon, sir, so don't delay."

He then left the room. Severus frowned, not knowing what to think about Draco's behavior. He knew that the Dark Lord had taken to using the boy as his personal stress ball, but Severus was surprised that Draco would break so quickly.

He got up, pondering the small mystery, wondering what Draco had wanted to say. He summoned his clothes and pulled them on distractedly as he made his way down to the meeting room.

Voldemort was in the middle of the room, talking with the Carrows. Most of the Inner Circle were in the room, though the majority of them were happy to keep their distance from their lord and master. All except Bella, who hung back, but whose attention was riveted on the Dark Lord. The Carrows looked pleased about something, and just as Severus made his way into the throng, Voldemort looked up and spotted him.

"Severus!" he cried, looking rather happy. Severus took that as an invitation to approach and did so. "Thank you for meeting with me, Severus. I know how tired you must be, but I am off within the hour and I wanted to tell you of my decision before I left."

Severus bowed his head humbly but then looked up, curious. "What decision is that, my Lord?"

"Why of your reward! You have proven yourself to me most spectacularly, Severus, and Lord Voldemort always rewards his faithful. So, I have decided that when we take over Hogwarts, you shall lead the school."

Severus felt a small smile cross his face as he bowed. "You are most generous, my Lord!"

"You deserve it, my friend. However," he said silkily, making the room go silent again. Severus stiffened slightly, wondering what the Dark Lord had in store. "You have given me much, over the years, from socializing with people you would rather not, to following distasteful orders the old man gave to keep your position. I am most pleased with the results. Tell me, Severus, what you want, and I will grant it to you."

Snape's first thought was for Voldemort's head on a platter, but he instantly pushed that fantasy away, although not without the faintest glimmer of emotion marring his expression. Voldemort's lips curled up in speculation.

"There *is* something you wish for, isn't there?" Voldemort mused. "And yet you are reluctant. Why is this so?"

Severus hung his head, as much to hide his racing thoughts as to show deference. "I am ashamed, my Lord."

"Come, Severus. Tell me what it is that I can give you." Voldemort's voice was losing the playfulness and taking on an impatient edge. Severus braced himself, then looked up into Voldemort's eyes. The Dark wizard delved into his mind and saw a maelstrom of thoughts swirling about, but almost all of them centered on a pretty, bushy-haired girl.

Voldemort withdrew with a quizzical look. "What is there to be ashamed about that, Severus?"

Snape felt the edge of panic descend on him like a razor blade. What had he done? "She was a student of mine."

Voldemort laughed. "You've been teaching quite a few years now, my friend. I imagine a fair few witches have been your students."

The crowd snickered appreciatively, setting Snape's teeth on edge. "She was a sixth year last term."

Voldemort's brow creased, though, if anything, he looked even more amused. "We all have our particular tastes, Severus. What is her name?"

Severus bowed his head, took a steadying breath and cursed the situation he was getting himself and the wizarding world into. "Hermione Granger."

The room went still, and Voldemort's amusement faded into something speculative once more. "The Mudblood?"

Snape swallowed. "Yes, my Lord."

"Potter's friend."

"Yes."

Snape kept his head bowed and his eyes fixed on the floor. The room had taken on the eerie silence that usually preceded a torture session. He waited and braced himself for what would happen next. He was surprised, therefore, when Voldemort laughed. It was a slow, malicious laugh, but there was no mistaking the humor in it.

Severus dared to look up and found that Voldemort was grinning at him sharkishly. "Some spots never change, do they?" he cackled. Snape flinched, making Voldemort's smile broaden, but his laughter dim. He approached Snape and put his hand on Snape's shoulder in a brotherly fashion. "As I said before. We all have our peculiar tastes. If Hermione Granger is what you want to play with, then Hermione Granger is what you shall have."

He turned to face the rest of the room and said in a quiet voice that carried nonetheless, "I hereby declare Hermione Granger to be the property of Severus Snape, and as such, she is to be treated with care until she is delivered into Severus' deserving hands."

The room murmured their assent, and soon after the meeting broke up. Severus took his leave and quickly made his way to his room, though sleep was now the furthest thing from his mind.

He prayed fervently that Granger would remain safely in Potter's company till well after the Dark Lord fell.

1

Chapter 2 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

AN: First, this chapter includes the depiction of torture. A good portion of this chapter comes from the Malfoy Manor chapter, only from Hermione's point of view, so the torture is right there. Should you be squeamish, I suggest you skip to the next chapter.

Second, because it is from the Malfoy Manor chapter, and that chapter is central to the prompt and plot, I lifted most of the dialogue directly from the book. I tried my best to rephrase everything else, but basically, anything you recognize is JKRs.

Third, thanks again go to Septentrion and Ayerf for the proofing. Any mistakes are mine. Or JKR's. ;-)

Hermione struggled against the bonds that bound her and the others together, trying to fight the panic that was threatening to overtake her. They needed to get out of the Malfoy's house, but she couldn't see any way of doing so.

"What is this?"

Hermione saw Lucius Malfoy enter the drawing room, and it became even harder to breathe. She felt Harry stiffen beside her and hoped he had an idea of what to do. He always managed to get them out of tight situations, and she hoped that this wouldn't be an exception. She doubted she'd get out of it alive if Harry couldn't pull something off, not with the way Greyback was looking at her.

"They say they've got Potter," a cold, feminine voice said. "Draco, come here."

Hermione's stomach plunged, and she felt Harry tense further. She saw movement from the corner of her eye that presaged Draco's arrival. Greyback grabbed hold of her shoulder, and pushed, rotating the group so that Draco could see Harry better as he got closer, and then pulled her to stop them.

He didn't let go of her as he said, "Well, boy?"

Draco was well out of her sight now, but the tension in the room seemed to increase the longer Draco kept his silence. She wondered why he was delaying, as she knew the stinging jinx wasn't so good a disguise as to hide all of Harry's features.

"Well, Draco?" Lucius asked excitedly. "Is it? Is it Harry Potter?"

Hermione almost gasped when Draco answered, "I can't ... I can't be sure."

"But look at him carefully, look! Come closer!"

Hermione had heard the reluctance in Draco's voice. She waited breathlessly to see if he withstood his father's excitement, as there was no way he couldn't have recognized Harry by now if he were really looking.

"Draco, if we are the ones to hand Potter over to the Dark Lord, everything will be for--"

"Now we won't be forgetting who actually caught him, I hope, Mr. Malfoy?" Greyback growled, squeezing Hermione's shoulder painfully as he did. She worked to keep herself still, to not try and squirm away as she so desperately wanted to.

"Of course not, of course not!" Lucius shifted into Hermione's view as he approached Harry, observing him as if he were an interesting insect he'd just pinned to a board.

"What did you do to him?" he asked, looking at Greyback. "How did he get into this state?"

"That wasn't us." Greyback's hand tensed again, and Hermione could feel his claws digging into her.

Lucius had turned back to Harry. "Looks more like a Stinging Jinx to me." He edged closer to Harry's face, and she thought she heard a small intake of air, like a gasp, before he whispered "There's something there. It could be the scar, stretched tight... Draco, come here, look properly! What do you think?"

Hermione could almost see Draco now as he edged in close for a better look. She unconsciously held her breath, waiting for Draco's words.

"I don't know."

Hermione concentrated on keeping her breathing even. There was hope. Even if it was slim, there was hope.

"We had better be certain, Lucius," that feminine voice said from the direction Draco had walked. "Completely sure that it is Potter, before we summon the Dark Lord... They

say that this is his but it does not resemble Ollivander's description.... If we are mistaken, if we call the Dark Lord here for nothing... Remember what he did to Rowle and Dolohov."

The claws dug even deeper into Hermione's shoulder. "What about the Mudblood, then?" Greyback growled and shoved her the other way so the light was shining on her more directly.

Hermione saw Draco toying with something in his hands near the fireplace and frowning. Narcissa was close by, and her posture had suddenly grown far more alert.

"Wait. Yes yes, she was in Madam Malkin's with Potter! I saw her picture in the *Prophet*! Look, Draco, isn't it the Granger girl?"

Draco briefly looked up from the object in his hand. His expression was far more reluctant than Hermione had expected. "I... maybe... yeah."

Hermione winced, feeling betrayed for some reason, although she knew it was completely irrational for her to feel so. She was jarred out of her thoughts when Lucius yelled, "But then, that's the Weasley boy! It's them, Potter's friends Draco, look at him, isn't it Arthur Weasley's son, what's his name--?"

Hermione saw Draco's face twitch as he put the object in his pocket and looked their way again. "Yeah. It could be."

Just then, the drawing room door opened from behind Hermione, and another female voice asked, "What is this? What's happened, Cissy?"

Harry twitched in recognition, and Hermione felt her stomach plummet. If there had been any hope before, it was gone now. Bellatrix LeStrange circled her way into Hermione's sight, and stopped right in front of her.

"But surely this is the Mudblood girl? This is Granger?" she said quietly, eyes remaining focused on Hermione.

"Yes, yes, it's Granger!" cried Lucius. "And beside her, we think, Potter! Potter and his friends, caught at last!"

"Potter? Are you sure?" Bellatrix shrieked, looking over at Harry. At Lucius' quick, excited nod, she said with palpable excitement, "Well then, the Dark Lord must be informed at once!"

She pulled back her sleeve and was on the verge of touching the ugly mark on her forearm when Lucius grabbed her wrist, stopping her.

"I was about to call him!" Lucius said. "I shall summon him, Bella, Potter has been brought to my house, and it is therefore upon my authority--"

"Your authority!" Bellatrix sneered as she tried to free herself from Lucius' grip. "You lost your authority when you lost your wand, Lucius! How dare you! Take your hands off me!"

"This is nothing to do with you, you did not capture the boy --"

Greyback suddenly released Hermione and advanced on Lucius and Bellatrix. "Begging your pardon, *Mr. Malfoy*, but it's us that caught Potter, and it's us that'll be claiming the gold--"

"Gold!" Bellatrix laughed, still trying to tug one hand free, while the other hand went for her wand. "Take your gold, filthy scavenger, what do I want with gold? I seek only the honor of his-- of--"

Something seemed to catch her attention, as she stopped struggling even as her voice trailed off. Lucius, seeing his chance, revealed his own mark and made to touch it with his wand when Bellatrix screamed, "STOP! Do not touch it, we shall all perish if the Dark Lord comes now!"

Lucius started slightly but obeyed. He looked at Bellatrix suspiciously. She, however, wasn't looking at Lucius, but at whatever had caught her attention moments before.

"What is that?" she said softly.

"Sword," grunted one of the Snatchers.

"Give it to me."

"It's not yorn, missus, it's mine, I reckon I found it."

A loud bang and flash of light made Hermione jump.

"What d'you think you're playing at, woman?" someone yelled.

"*Stupefy! Stupefy!*" Bellatrix shrieked. She came into view again when she rounded on frozen, kneeling werewolf, the Sword of Gryffindor in her hand. Hermione thought that, for all her wrath, the Dark witch looked terrified.

"Where did you get this sword?" she whispered fiercely as she took his wand from his frozen hand.

"How dare you?" he growled. "Release me, woman!"

"Where did you find this sword?" she repeated, bringing the blade close to Greyback's face. "Snape sent it to my Vault in Gringotts!"

"It was in their tent. Release me, I say!"

Bellatrix waved her wand and Greyback jumped to his feet, although he kept his distance from Bellatrix, taking refuge behind an armchair.

"Draco, move this scum outside," Bellatrix ordered, pointing to the other side of the prisoners. "If you haven't got the guts to finish them, then leave them in the courtyard for me."

"Don't you dare talk to Draco like --"

"Be quiet! The situation is graver than you can possibly imagine, Cissy! We have a very serious problem!"

Draco looked at his aunt and mother before quietly moving to follow his aunt's orders. Bellatrix, meanwhile, had started muttering to herself. "If it is indeed Potter, he must not be harmed. The Dark Lord wishes to dispose of Potter himself.... But if he finds out... I must... I must know...."

She turned to Narcissa again. "The prisoners must be placed in the cellar, while I think what to do!" There was a desperate edge to her voice, making her sound more than a little unstable, but Narcissa wasn't fazed.

"This is my house, Bella, you don't give orders in my--"

"Do it!" Bellatrix screamed. "You have no idea of the danger we're in!" Her eyes were wide, and she looked as if she had crossed over into madness right then. A thin jet of fire was issuing from her wand, burning into the carpet by her feet.

Narcissa hesitated, but, eyes glancing down at the hole in the carpet, turned to the werewolf. "Take these prisoners down to the cellar, Greyback."

Greyback moved toward their group, but stopped when Bellatrix snapped, "Wait. All except... except for the Mudblood."

Hermione froze in terror as Greyback gave a grunt of pleasure. She felt Harry tense up beside her, but knew there was nothing he could do.

"No! You can have me, keep me!" Ron yelled from the other side of Harry. Hermione let out a very low moan.

"If she dies under questioning, I'll take you next," Bellatrix said. "Blood traitor is next to Mudblood in my book. Take them downstairs, Greyback, and make sure they are secure, but do nothing more to them yet."

She threw Greyback's wand at him and then took a short silver knife from under her robes. Hermione instinctively tried to back away as the witch got closer, and flinched when Bellatrix flicked the knife through the bonds, freeing her. Before Hermione had a chance to do more than blink, Bellatrix had grabbed her hair and pulled ruthlessly, dragging her away from her friends. Hermione caught a brief glimpse of the others being herded out of the room, but her attention was quickly pulled back to the witch who had a hold of her.

Bellatrix didn't say anything for a long moment, but just looked at Hermione through narrowed eyes.

"You probably think you're so special, don't you?" Bellatrix murmured, though Hermione wasn't sure whether it was directed at her. "We've all heard tales of you. Top in your class... friend of Potter... Even *Snape* is under your spell..."

Hermione felt a shiver of fear at the way Bellatrix had said Snape's name, as if she was naming the devil himself, although she didn't understand what the black haired witch meant.

Her thoughts were quickly diverted from Snape, however, when Bellatrix brought the silver knife up and trailed it lightly down Hermione's face. The shiver of fear turned to dread and sat heavily on Hermione's stomach.

"Well," Bellatrix whispered softly into her ear, in a sick parody of a lover, "I don't see the appeal. And I bet your blood is just as dirty as that skin of yours."

She drew back with a cruel smile on her face and raised the knife.

"Bella!" Narcissa shouted. "Don't!"

Hermione was confused by the look of resentment that crossed Bellatrix's face as much by the command of her sister's. She guessed there was much more going on than she was privy to, but didn't know where to look for clues.

"It's just a little fun, Cissy," Bellatrix said, mad eyes still fastened on Hermione.

"Tell us why we can't summon the Dark Lord right now!"

That brought Bellatrix's eyes back into focus and her expression showed a hint of fear again, although she otherwise ignored Narcissa's plea. Hermione shivered as the beast showed through Bellatrix's stare.

The witch's voice was almost sweet when she softly said, "But it's so rare to get such a perfect opportunity, Cissy. How often have we had a chance to play lately?"

Narcissa shook her head. "I don't like it, Bella."

Bellatrix smiled viciously and pulled Hermione to her so forcefully, Hermione whimpered. "My sister doesn't have the same taste for playing that I do. She's no fun at all, is she?"

Bellatrix forced Hermione to shake her head. Although the urge to beg Bellatrix to stop, to let her go was strong, Hermione bit her tongue. She did not want to encourage her.

"So, we'll just have to play by ourselves, won't we?" Bellatrix continued in the same sickly tone. "We'll just have to show her what she's missing out on, won't we?"

Bellatrix forced Hermione's head forward and back in a brutal parody of a nodding puppet. Hermione was appalled that she had started crying.

"So," Bellatrix said calmly before throwing Hermione to the floor, "let's have a little practice, shall we? Get in the right mood?"

Hermione tried to edge backwards away from Bellatrix, but the witch stepped on her hand, crushing it to the floor. Hermione whimpered, causing Bellatrix to smile. She lifted her foot, and Hermione snatched her hand away, but before she could bring it to her chest, Bellatrix had her wand pointed at her.

Without further warning, Bellatrix yelled, "*Crucio!*" and pain enveloped Hermione. She felt as if the skin was being torn from her body, and her nerves were being flayed. It lasted forever, and when the curse was finally lifted, she lay on the floor, panting and shaking, unable to move.

Bellatrix came to stand over her. "Now that you've had a taste of the game, perhaps you'll be cooperative? So tell me, where did you find the sword! How did you get it!"

Hermione moaned and shook her head again. "We found it."

Draco walked in just as Bellatrix raised her wand again. "Aunt Bella?" He sounded shocked and more than a little afraid. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to get the Mudblood to tell me where she found the sword!" Bellatrix gave Hermione a sharp kick in the ribs, punctuating her sentence.

"But, Aunt Bella, the Dark Lord--"

"--Need not know!" Bellatrix snarled, not looking at Draco. "If you value our lives, you will keep silent and let me work!"

Draco backed up, but he was shaking his head. "But Snape--"

Bellatrix turned on Draco fiercely. Draco staggered back several steps, fear distorting his face as his aunt advanced. "Snape be damned, boy! Do you not understand that this is a life and death matter for us?"

Draco nodded his head and Bellatrix sneered at him. "Unless you know of a better way to get her to talk, I demand you keep your mouth shut!"

"Bella!" Narcissa scolded, anger and fear infusing her voice. "I know you are angry but--"

Bellatrix shot her sister a glare that silenced her, then walked back over to Hermione, who had finally stopped shaking quite so much.

"Tell me, Mudblood, where you got that sword!"

Hermione shook her head. "I -- we found--"

Bellatrix hit her with the Cruciatus again, cutting Hermione off. Through her own screams, Hermione could hear Bellatrix screaming something at her, but she couldn't understand. The pain went on for ages, draining her of every thought and every sense but that of her nerves on fire.

Bellatrix lifted the curse and yelled, "I'm going to ask you again! Where did you get this sword? Where?"

"We found it we found it!" Hermione saw Bellatrix aim her wand at her again, her face a mask of fury. "PLEASE!"

The curse got worse every time it was cast. She felt like her body would explode. She had known intellectually that her life was at risk by continuing with Harry, but until that moment, she had never really thought she would die.

When Bellatrix finally lifted the curse, Hermione tried to roll over onto her side, but the dark witch wouldn't let her. She kicked Hermione in the gut and then forced her onto her back with her booted foot.

"You are lying, filthy Mudblood, and I know it!" Bellatrix screamed at her. "You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth! *Tell the truth!*"

Hermione screamed again as the curse descended once more, racking her nerves more forcefully than before. She felt like she was going to pass out from the pain, and desperately hoped that she would, but just as she felt the tendrils of oblivion reaching for her, the curse stopped, leaving her shuddering on the floor.

Bellatrix bent down and picked her up by the hair until she was sitting upright. Her scalp screamed at her to stop the pain, but her arms were too weak to lift. Suddenly, Bellatrix's face was in front of her, and she was brandishing the knife again.

"What else did you take?" Bellatrix yelled, spittle flying onto her face. "What else have you got? Tell me the truth or, I swear, I shall run you through with this knife!"

Hermione could do nothing more than mutter the word 'nothing' over and over again, but that wasn't an answer Bellatrix would accept. She dropped Hermione back onto the floor and cast curse after curse. Only when she canceled them could Hermione feel how raw her throat had become from screaming.

But she wasn't given time to assess her wounds. Bellatrix was in her face again, screaming at her.

"What else did you take, what else? ANSWER ME! *CRUCIO!*"

Hermione wanted to detach herself from the pain. She wanted, so much, to just let her body writhe and suffer while her mind went elsewhere, but the thought of the Longbottoms made her come back and suffer through it all the way. If she did make it through, she needed to be there for Harry. She was nothing without her wits.

"How did you get into my vault?" Bellatrix screamed the instant she stopped cursing. "Did that dirty little goblin in the cellar help you?"

"We only met him tonight!" Hermione sobbed. "We've never been inside your vault... It isn't the real sword! It's a copy! It's a copy!"

"A copy?" Bellatrix screeched, raising her wand again. "A likely story!"

"It is something of a relief that you never could conceive, Bella, if this is what you think of as 'care'." came a deep voice from the doorway.

Hermione, barely aware of life outside her painful aftershocks, registered that Snape, of all people, was there. The cursing and screaming had stopped, so she supposed she was even grateful for his presence.

She wanted to laugh that Severus Snape, of all people, was now her hero, but the world went black before she could muster even a wry smile.

2

Chapter 3 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

Snape scanned the room, but besides Greyback - who was salivating in a corner - there wasn't any sign of other participants, nor of the other two-thirds of the trio. He looked down at Miss Granger, who had apparently lost consciousness, and frowned.

"What part of the Dark Lord's instructions did you not understand, Bellatrix?" Snape asked, trying not to flinch as Granger's body continued convulsing with aftershocks. "And do not tell me that you weren't at that meeting."

"I don't know what you mean, Severus," Bella responded, her tone light and as innocent as she could make it, while her eyes snapped at him angrily. He could sense the fear in her, though. He decided to tread carefully as she was as unpredictable as a cornered cat.

"The Dark Lord ordered everyone, you included, to treat my *gift* with care. I don't think even you, Bella, could say the Cruciatus Curse could be termed as 'care'."

"Your gift?" Bella said, her tone still light. She looked down at the girl lying huddled on the floor, and gasped. "You mean *that* is Hermione Granger?"

Severus sneered, then raised his hands for a slow, mocking clap. "Bravo. I didn't realize you had acting ambitions. Perhaps you and your family could put on a show one of these days. I'm sure the Dark Lord would be... *interested* to see such skills in his ranks."

Bella dropped the act with a sneer. Snape smirked.

"So, perhaps you'll tell me what is going on? And where are Miss Granger's friends?"

Draco made a noise, but turned it into a cough when everyone in the room looked at him, Bella with a death glare. Snape raised his eyebrow as he observed their behavior, and a sense of unease started niggling at him.

"Well?"

Bella turned to him with her glare still on. "*Miss Granger*," she said mockingly, "was brought in by herself, wasn't she, Greyback?"

Greyback nodded warily.

Snape made a noise of disbelief. "You had her all to yourself and didn't give in to temptation? That was very controlled of you."

Greyback growled something before muttering, "As you said, the Dark Lord forbade it."

Snape smiled cruelly. "Yes, he did. And it's good to know that word got round to the underlings."

He looked around at the group and knew they were hiding something, but it was clear they were not going to say any more to him; he had displaced them in status. Draco was fidgeting, though, so he made a mental note to talk with him once school was back in session. If the boy's memory wasn't wiped, he could possibly be persuaded to tell something closer to the truth.

"Well, I will be taking Miss Granger off your hands now as I see she has been such a burden to you. Perhaps next time you come across something of mine, you will ask before playing with it."

He raised his wand to lift Granger when there was a loud crack from the cellar. Everyone looked at each other, startled.

"What was that?" Snape asked immediately, his eyes darting from one person to the next. They all fidgeted. "What is in the cellar, Lucius?"

Lucius looked rather worried. "Besides the Dark Lord's prisoners, nothing." He looked to his son. "Draco, send Wormtail down to investigate." Draco ran from the room, looking more relieved to be leaving the room than worried about the reason why.

Snape looked around at them suspiciously, but just as he was about to start questioning them more thoroughly, a sound from the floor drew his attention. Miss Granger was curling up into the fetal position and had started retching. Snape went over to investigate and scowled when he noticed blood in the vomit.

He glared up at Bella ferociously. "What did you *do* to her?"

Bella shrugged with a false smile which only aggravated Snape further. He physically picked Granger up and stormed to the door where he paused long enough to snap, "I shall return to... *discuss* your transgressions," before striding out of the house.

Once he was outside the gates, he Apparated to his sitting room and laid Granger down on the threadbare sofa. He quickly performed a few diagnostic spells and healed the internal bleeding caused, undoubtedly, by one of Bellatrix's kicks. When he'd done all he could to ensure her continued survival, he stepped back and looked at her, unsure of how to proceed.

Whatever he was going to do, he needed to do soon, however, as he would bet the contents of his vault that Potter and Weasley were with Granger when she was captured. That Bellatrix or Lucius hadn't called the Dark Lord was unexpected and more than a little worrisome.

He reluctantly took a small bottle of Veritaserum out of his coat pocket and forced Granger's mouth open. He let one drop of the clear liquid fall onto her tongue then returned the bottle to his pocket. Taking a deep breath and restoring his teacher's mask, he cast the spell to force her awake. She groaned and squirmed a little on the sofa. It took only three seconds for her to freeze and her eyes to pop open.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," Snape intoned, standing across the room from her. "I assume you are feeling better?" Granger, still frozen on the sofa looking terrified, nodded slowly. "Good. I need you to tell me where Potter is."

Her face hardened immediately, but her eyes belied her still unfocused state so he bit back his immediate desire to yell at her. "I assume that your friends were with you when you were captured, is that not so?"

She continued to look at him hatefully. He rolled his eyes and looked up at the ceiling in a show of exasperation. "For God's sake, girl, *Expecto Patronum!* A silver doe shot out of his wand and walked toward Miss Granger curiously. Granger stared at the doe, entranced, before looking wide-eyed at Snape, her face starting to slacken in amazement and relief.

Before she could say anything, though, Snape stepped forward, banishing the patronus as he did. "Now, I need to know, *where is Potter?*"

"In the cellar with Ron, Dean and Griphook," she croaked out, her voice sounding hoarse and painful.

"*Shit!*" he exclaimed, making her jump in surprise. He quietly snorted; she probably hadn't thought he was capable of swearing. Turning his mind back to the matter at hand, he asked, "Why were they torturing you? Why did they not call the Dark Lord immediately?"

Granger opened her mouth to talk, but only made a low croaking noise. He impatiently waved his wand, conjuring a glass and filling it with water. She sat up and nodded her thanks when he handed it to her and then began taking tentative sips.

"They saw the sword, and Bellatrix went mad. She kept saying something about it being a serious problem and how they were in danger. She thought we had got into her vault."

Snape's eyebrows rose. "Indeed?"

She nodded. "I told her the sword was a copy, and we'd just found it, but she didn't believe me."

Snape stared at her hard, impressed despite himself by the girl's resolve. He was just about to ask about the sword when she said, "I'm wondering if one of the Horcruxes is in the vault."

He frowned, the term ringing some distant bell in his memory. "Horcruxes?"

She looked at him, appalled, slapping her hands over her mouth. After a moment, she lowered her hands but still looked shocked and terrified. "Professor Dumbledore didn't tell you about the Horcruxes?"

"What are they, Miss Granger?" Snape growled, getting more annoyed by the moment.

She hesitated, looking very nervous for a moment before the trepidation disappeared and was replaced by resolve. She even sat a little straighter.

"Soul fragments. Vo-- You-Know-Who split his soul and stored them in objects. Harry can't even confront Vo...him until all of them have been found and destroyed."

Snape reeled back. *This* was what Albus had refused to tell him? And yet he trusted this information to Potter of the Open Mind?

"Destroyed, you say?" he asked faintly, still shocked.

"Yes. We've found and destroyed the locket, but we have no idea where Hufflepuff's cup might be, or even what You-Know-Who might have used of Ravenclaw's. So, maybe one of those is in Bellatrix's vault."

Snape stared at her, wide-eyed and pale. "How many Horcruxes are there?"

She bit her lip. "Well, Dumbledore thought there were seven. And he seems to be using relics as the holders, with the main focus on the Founders, except for Nagini and Riddle's diary. So there was Slytherin's locket, Slytherin's ring, Hufflepuff's cup..." she said, ticking them off on her fingers. "That leaves something of Ravenclaw's and something of Gryffindor's, except there are only two relics of Gryffindor's, and neither of them is a Horcrux, so we don't know if Voldemort succeeded there."

Snape started laughing. Everything now made sense to him. If ever he'd doubted that the Fates had a sense of humor, he doubted it no longer. He wondered if Potter would have been sorted into Gryffindor even without the soul fragment in his forehead.

When he finally regained control of himself, Granger was staring at him warily. Any lingering trace of humor faded away as the situation became clearer than it had before.

"I need to return to the manor. You will stay here." He conjured a blanket and tossed it to her. "I suspect you will want to rest."

He strode to the door, but stopped when her small voice called out, "Professor?" He turned to look around and found her clutching the blanket, staring at him with huge, scared eyes. She looked very young and very small, and not at all capable of withstanding torture.

She seemed to hesitate for a moment, but then said, "Be safe."

He nodded and stepped out, quickly protecting his house and his mind before Apparating back to the Manor.

*

Hurrying up the path to Malfoy Manor, he was unsure what exactly he would do if he found Potter and Weasley there. He cursed Potter for having his luck run out at this point in the war. It was very, very poorly timed irony. He was also thinking of what he could do to keep the information he had gained from Miss Granger from reaching the Dark Lord. If Voldemort chose to use her for information, Potter's mission would be doomed. And it seemed inevitable that the Dark Lord would look into her mind once he found out she was in Snape's possession.

Of course, if the Dark Lord had possession of Potter, then the point would be moot, and all would be lost anyway.

Frowning, he lengthened his stride once more, moving up the hill as fast as he could without actually running.

The doors opened reluctantly as he approached, and he reached the drawing room doorway just in time to see Weasley jump up and stagger a few feet in front of Potter. Half a second later, Potter, a house-elf and a lump draped across Potter's shoulder that looked suspiciously like a goblin all disappeared with a deafening crack.

Severus watched everyone in the room as they stared, completely shocked, at the spot Potter had been standing. Snape didn't know whether he was more relieved, amused or annoyed that Potter's luck had held once more. Looking back at the broken chandelier, he saw that while Potter's luck had held, Weasley's hadn't.

"What is going on here?" he asked, directing attention away from Weasley. He was definitely amused when everyone, including Bella, jumped at the sound of his voice.

They looked around at each other, fear blossoming in all of their faces. "I don't believe my eyes were deceiving me. I *do* believe that was Potter who just Disapparated out of here." The discomfort level in the room increased significantly. "And that leads me to wonder several things."

He walked toward Bellatrix who was still looking at the place where Potter had been standing with fury and fear and disbelief etched on her frozen face.

"Tell me, Bella, why you refrained from telling me when I was here last that Potter and Weasley were among the prisoners in your keep?" He turned his attention to Lucius. "Tell me, old friend, why you didn't immediately summon the Dark Lord? I know he would be here already if you had summoned him when you summoned me." A look of confusion crossed Lucius' face, telling Snape that Lucius hadn't been the one to send him the note. Snape's eye flicked to Draco and, catching the tension of the boy, returned his gaze to Lucius after glancing at Narcissa and Bellatrix first in the hopes of deflecting attention from the boy. "Tell me why you, all of you, permitted my gift to be tossed about and abused against the *direct orders* of the Dark Lord?"

He stepped up close to Bellatrix's back and stage whispered into her ear, "You know how the Dark Lord feels about his orders not being followed."

Bellatrix shivered and snapped out of her shocked daze to look at Snape resentfully, though Snape could see that she was also very, very scared. She licked her dry lips and swallowed before saying anything.

"They surprised us. We didn't lie to you. They showed up moments after you left, looking for the Mudblood."

Snape raised his eyebrow in disbelief, though mostly at his luck. It was a perfect story. He could modify Miss Granger's memory, and, with the corroboration of the Malfoys, the Dark Lord wouldn't look too closely. The Dark Lord was too arrogant to be very paranoid, and even if paranoia did cross his mind, Snape didn't think he would ever believe that he and Bellatrix would work together to deceive him.

"A likely story," he said quoting Bellatrix's earlier words. "One that I'm sure Greyback will be able to confirm should the Dark Lord not believe you?"

Bellatrix's face lost the sharper edges of fear as outrage took its place. "Why should the Dark Lord doubt me? I have been his most faithful servant--"

"Since you were born, yes, I know, Bellatrix," Snape interrupted in a bored tone. "But even you must realize that you are out of favor at the moment? Perhaps he does not see you as his most faithful servant any longer?"

Bellatrix's face contorted in rage, and Snape smirked. He loved baiting her.

Before she could say anything, though, Narcissa cut into the conversation. "It's true, Severus! That noise in the cellar was Potter and the Weasley boy Apparating in. They received help from our former house-elf, Dobby." She looked as if she had something foul smelling under her nose, she looked so disgusted at repeating the house-elf's name.

Severus turned to her, raising his eyebrow again, though this time not in disbelief. He was impressed, really, that Narcissa was able to cobble together such a convincing story on such short notice. If he hadn't talked with Miss Granger, he would have believed her.

He stepped back from Bellatrix, but nodded in Narcissa's direction.

"As you say. However, all of your behavior has been less than honest since I first arrived to claim my prize."

His eyes fell on Weasley, who lay as still as death. He didn't know whether the boy was alive or not, but it felt wrong to leave him there.

"I suggest you take the time to clean up and... think over the events of tonight before the Dark Lord comes visiting. I will tell him what you've told me when next I see him."

Bellatrix looked mutinous, but Lucius and Narcissa nodded in appreciation of the warning.

"We await the Dark Lord's return with anticipation," Narcissa returned, making Severus smile. Anticipation, indeed.

He nodded, then lifted Ron's body using Mobilicorpus. Bella made a noise of protest, at which Snape raised an eyebrow.

"None of you are exactly known for your prowess in bringing people *back* from the brink of death."

"Back!" Bella shrieked. "Why would you want him alive?"

Snape gave her a pitying stare. "Information, Bellatrix. Potter's disappeared, yet again, but it is possible that *perhaps* this boy knows where to find him. If you are very lucky, I will be able to bring him 'round long enough for him to..." Snape paused to look down at Ron's bloody form, and the dagger's hilt sticking out of his midsection. His mouth formed something that could have been a grimace or a wry smile as he continued, "...to spill his guts in a more useful fashion."

"You just want the glory of handing over the boy and getting all of our lord's praise," she hissed.

Snape snorted softly. "Yes, you would think that, wouldn't you?" he responded, looking at her and biting his tongue to keep any more of that thought from spilling out.

He waved his wand, and Ron's body obediently floated out the door. Snape and Bellatrix shared one last glare, and then Snape deliberately turned his back and walked out the door. He felt confident that Lucius would curb Bellatrix's more ruthless desires, if only because it was rather gauche to hex one's friend.

Severus took ten steps from the front door, then grabbed Ron's wrist, feeling for a pulse. The boy's condition looked very bad, but he was still alive, according to the faint rhythm he found. Lowering Weasley to the ground, he gently, very carefully, removed the knife from his abdomen, wincing at the amount of blood the boy had lost already.

Knowing that time was of the essence, he grabbed the boy's arm and Apparated back to Spinner's End.

3

Chapter 4 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

Thank you again, Septentrion and Ayerf, for the alpha and beta reads.

Snape Apparated into his sitting room noisily, startling Hermione out of her light sleep. Her eyes snapped open to find Snape kneeling beside a still, prone figure whose robes were drenched in blood.

It only took a second before Hermione realized it was Ron.

Letting out an inarticulate cry, she lurched off the sofa, scuttling along the floor desperately until she reached Ron's still form. He was as pale as death and unconscious, but she could see his chest rising ever so slightly for quick, shallow breaths.

She looked to the Professor for reassurance, but his face was unusually grim as he silently summoned more and more bottles to his side. Her attention was diverted when Snape's hand moved toward Ron's middle, and she gasped as he applied dittany to a seeping gash in Ron's stomach. Her stomach rolled over several times, and she fought the urge to gag. Taking quick breaths, she finally managed to control herself, and she tore her eyes away from Ron's stomach and looked to Snape.

"What can I do to help?"

Snape shook his head suppressively. She thought that was all the answer he was going to give until he shook his head again with a mild oath.

"Damn!" he growled. "She poisoned the blade."

He looked up at her then, his eyes hard and narrow. She didn't have time to come up with a question before he said, "Go to the kitchen and fetch a clean cauldron. We need to clean his wounds."

She was on her feet before he finished, pausing only to look around for the most probable door to the kitchen. His quick tilt of the head in one direction gave her all she needed to know, and she sped off. It didn't take long before she found the cauldron and heaved it back to Ron's side. She saw her wand sticking out of Ron's robe pocket. Grabbing it, she did a quick sterilizing charm on the cauldron before filling it with a quick Aguamenti.

"Hot?" she asked, looking to Snape.

"Warm. Body temperature." He was too busy with the wound to look up.

She tapped the cauldron twice, muttering a warming spell, then tested the water.

"Cloths?" she asked, hoping she wasn't distracting Snape from anything critical, as he muttered charm after charm at the hole that refused to close.

He pointed his wand at the bookshelf, which promptly moved aside. "Top drawer of the hallway dresser."

Again, she was on her feet before he finished, this time without the need to pause. It took only about thirty seconds for her to find the dresser, grab everything the drawer held and return to the sitting room, but it felt like it was taking much, much longer. Every second was drawn out to thrice its length.

When she got back to the sitting room, Snape was adding something to the water. It took only a moment to realize that it was Ron's blood, and she resisted the urge to gag again. She knew he was probably testing to see what poison had been used, but she still felt, deep down, that blood belonged inside a *person*, not in a pot.

She dropped down beside them, and before she could ask what came next, Snape said, "Clear Weasley's abdomen of clothing."

She laid the cloths down, careful to only let one or two touch the floor, then set to unbuttoning Ron's robes. She had fantasized about doing this before, but never under these circumstances. She tried to withhold a sob, but a muffled noise escaped her anyway.

"If you're going to be sick, move away!" barked Snape, grabbing her shoulder, prepared to pull her back. She shook her head, continuing to unbutton Ron's still form. Snape's hand relaxed, but his touch lingered. She wondered if he was trying to offer her comfort. She wondered what had happened to the world for Snape to give her comfort, and for her to be so very grateful for it.

Snape withdrew his hand after a few more seconds, only to use it to nudge her aside as soon as she peeled the last of the blood soaked clothing away. She moved so that he could dab the first cloth on Ron's skin, washing the blood away.

"Soak the clean cloth for five seconds in the brew, then copy what I'm doing," Snape ordered.

Hermione didn't even feel the bite of his tone, she was so intent on observing his motions. It was Ron's life on the line, nothing else mattered.

Once she was sure she knew what he was doing and would be able to replicate it, she took a cloth, and as soon as Snape was finished rubbing, she moved in. For the first couple of rounds there was a little awkwardness, but they soon found a rhythm that worked for them.

When Ron's wound was weeping a little less vigorously, Hermione let her mind wander onto other subjects, like Harry.

"Sir," she said tentatively, "What happened? Is Harry..." She couldn't finish the thought. Knowing that Ron might die was hard enough without asking if Harry was dead as well. Ron held her heart, but Harry held her hope.

"I arrived just in time to see Potter Disapparating from the Manor alongside a house-elf and what looked like a goblin. From what I could see, he was fine when he disappeared. Weasley took the dagger for him."

Hermione bit her lip, looking at Ron. Snape was still wiping, so she gently ran her fingers through Ron's hair. "Oh, Ron, you wonderful, stupid prat." Blinking back tears, she smiled at his unconscious form.

She thought she heard Snape snort, and turned to him, but his face was blank and his attention was still on rubbing the potion on Ron's stomach.

"While I was there," Snape continued, to Hermione's surprise, "Bellatrix and Narcissa came up with an interesting story. They claimed you were not with your friends, but that your friends came after you'd gone, looking for you."

"What a load of rubbish!" Hermione exclaimed, taking over for Snape and applying the warm cloth with care.

"When next the Dark Lord summons me, which I suspect will be soon, I will need to tell him about this evening."

Hermione looked up at Snape curiously. His face was still a blank mask.

Hermione waited for him to finish his thought, but it seemed he had finished. She mulled it over for a moment, and came to the obvious conclusion.

"Will it be permanent?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"No." He sounded relieved. "Only until after he interviews you."

"What about Ron?" Hermione whispered, even more quietly.

"As I told Bellatrix, it is imperative that Weasley be kept alive for information on Potter, as you are regrettably not a good source."

"But if Vol -- he looks in Ron's mind..."

"He will see nothing more than a drug induced fog. He is far from being in stable condition, Miss Granger. I will warn you now that I do not believe his chance of survival is very high. I believe it will be best to keep him in a state of vegetation until he has stabilized."

Hermione nodded, hearing both the truth and the deception. She couldn't help but feel, once again, an overwhelming sense of gratitude for Snape.

Suddenly, Snape hissed and clutched his left forearm with his right hand. Hermione immediately took up his place wiping Ron, but she kept her eyes on Snape.

He compressed his lips together, but looked at her steadily. "I do not know how much time I have, so I will need to do this now and bind you."

"But... Ron!" Hermione protested.

"I will explain to him the necessity of getting back immediately. It should not hurt him much. As it is, the bleeding has stopped."

Hermione looked at the wound, and, sure enough, while the wound still gaped, blood had stopped flowing out. Ron's breaths were also a little less shallow and fast, so she could hope that he would survive.

She looked back at Snape to find him looking at her with an unusual expression. If it had been on anyone else's face, she might have called it pity, but that didn't quite fit. She nodded.

He took the washcloth from her hand and banished it along with all the other used rags. He suggested she make herself comfortable on the wingback chair by the fire and then pointed his wand at her. Without a word, he summoned her wand and then bound her. She was pleased to note that the ropes weren't too tight, and also to find that the fire kept the air around the chair quite comfortable. She hadn't realized how chilled she'd become on the floor.

"Did you place a warming charm on Ron, sir?" she asked as he raised his wand at her. He paused briefly and then flicked his wand at Ron. When his wand was aimed at her again, she swallowed.

"Be safe, sir. And... and thank you."

He raised his eyebrow at that, smirking ever so slightly. She closed her eyes and he muttered something under his breath.

Hermione opened her eyes to find Snape, the murderous bastard, smirking down at her. The last thing she could remember was his voice at Malfoy Manor, and then the absence of pain.

"I see you're awake, at long last," he drawled, tilting his head slightly to one side. "'Tis a shame the Dark Lord is calling right now. However, I suggest you not get too comfortable. I shan't be long."

He gave her an evil smile and then Disapparated with barely a sound.

Hermione sat frozen in place, terrified that she had gone from the proverbial frying pan straight into the fire.

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

Thanks again (and still) to Septentrion for the alpha read, and Ayerf for the betaing.)

Voldemort was at the gates of Hogwarts, waiting for Snape to let him in. It was rare to surprise the Dark Lord, but Snape seemed to have managed it, as Voldemort swung around from the gates, wand raised.

"My Lord," Snape said, bowing quickly.

"Severus!" Voldemort replied, annoyed. "What are you doing on this side of the gate?"

Severus straightened, brushing off his robes as he did. "There was an incident, my Lord." He brought out a large key and unlocked the wards keeping them out. "I was called to Malfoy Manor to collect your gift."

Voldemort raised his brow. "The girl?"

"Yes, they caught Granger."

Voldemort looked pleased. "Why did you not return here with her?"

"I'm afraid Bellatrix found the temptation to play with a Mudblood too much to bear. I walked in to find the girl in a damaged condition."

Voldemort stopped, looking at Snape in surprise. "Bellatrix? I must confess that I am surprised she would dare disobey my order."

"She says that she didn't recognize the girl."

"Was the Mudblood damaged beyond repair?"

"Thankfully, no, my Lord. I took her home and was able to heal her in only a few minutes. But that is inconsequential, my Lord, for when I went back to the Manor to question everyone more thoroughly on their behavior, I arrived to find Potter Disapparating. Bellatrix waylaid Weasley with a well aimed knife, but Potter escaped. They claim that Potter and Weasley showed up after I left with Granger, and, to be fair, I did hear a noise in the cellar just before I left the first time. It could have been the boys Apparating in."

Snape braced himself for the Dark Lord's fury, and, sure enough, the Dark wizard seemed to swell with anger. Voldemort wasn't moving, but the air around the two of them swirled in agitation.

"Do you believe them?" Voldemort hissed.

"Although I find it difficult to believe, when I looked in Granger's mind, her memories confirmed the story. It seems she has not been traveling with Potter for some time now."

Voldemort clenched a fist in a show of agitation. "This is unacceptable, Severus. This is twice they have let Potter slip through their hands."

Snape bowed his head in acknowledgment, and his thoughts drifted to Draco. "Master, although it is unacceptable on the part of the adults, I beg for your lenience on Draco. He was the one who alerted me that Granger had been captured."

Voldemort waved his hand distractedly. "I have no intention of doing serious harm to the boy, Severus. You need not fear."

"Thank you, my Lord."

They stood there for a few moments in silence. Snape didn't dare to interrupt Voldemort's thoughts.

"You said that Potter escaped, but not Weasley?"

"Correct. Weasley is currently decorating my sitting room floor. I have been trying to heal him, although it seems Bellatrix used one of her special blades, and the wound is proving difficult, even with my special collection."

Voldemort nodded. "After I have finished here, I shall stop by to see if I can gather any information from the boy."

"Of course, although I had to give him the Draught of Living Death, so there may be nothing to find at this time."

Voldemort nodded again, this time with impatience. "Very well. Go see to him, and I shall be by later."

Snape bowed and retreated through the gates. He didn't dare let his relief show until he was safely home again, and by then he had other things on his mind, such as the sobbing girl tied up in his chair, and the boy who lay dying on his floor.

When he looked at Weasley, he swore. The wound had started bleeding again.

He turned to Granger and freed her, though he didn't lower his wand. "You will follow my directions exactly. You will not try to attack me; you will not try to escape. If you do not obey me, Weasley *will* die. Do you understand?"

The girl nodded mutely, still sniffing, but quickly regaining the resolve and composure he'd been impressed by earlier. She didn't move except to wipe her nose with her sleeve, which seemed to disgust her as much as it did him. He conjured a handkerchief and tossed it to her. "Clean yourself up quickly then kneel beside Weasley, beside the cauldron."

He wasn't surprised when she complied without hesitation. He knew by the way she looked at Weasley that there was nothing she wouldn't do for him. He understood that feeling; he found himself sympathizing.

He knelt on the other side of the boy. He instructed her again on how to clean and treat Weasley, and soon they had fallen into the same rhythm they'd had before he'd been summoned. It would have been almost relaxing if the situation hadn't been so urgent.

"Sir?" Her voice startled him, even though it was so quiet as to be almost inaudible.

"Yes?"

"Why am I here?"

Snape stiffened, but quickly forced himself to relax. "The Dark Lord gifted you to me."

He heard a tiny 'oh' and then nothing. He tensed for the following 'why', but it didn't come. As the minutes passed, he kept half expecting her to say something else, but she never did. She just did as she was instructed and gave Weasley mournful glances. He was surprised she didn't ask more questions, although he was more than grateful she hadn't. He had a difficult line to tread until the Dark Lord had come and gone.

And, truth be told, he hoped she never did ask why. He wasn't sure he could explain without coming off as a gushing fool. Or a dirty old man.

They worked in silence, trying to regain the ground lost during his Summons, but it was slow going. Just as the wound was starting to knit together, there was a knock on his door. Biting back a curse, he instructed Hermione to continue while he rose to get the door.

As expected, the Dark Lord was waiting on the other side. Severus opened the door wide and bowed him in. Voldemort looked around the room, although his eyes seemed to remain on the boy and girl on the floor.

"Is he ready?"

"No, my Lord. As you can see, his wound is still fragile. I dare not revive him until the skin doesn't want to split apart anymore."

Voldemort nodded, not looking surprised. "I paid a visit to the Manor on my way here. Bellatrix admitted that the poison is one of her newer inventions. She hasn't yet developed an antidote."

Snape snorted. "Has she ever?"

Voldemort's mouth quirked up. "She does tend to lose her drive once she gets what she wants. I suppose her experiments are no exception."

Voldemort's eyes were fastened on Hermione, and Snape didn't like the hungry expression.

"You said you have looked in the Mudblood's mind?"

"Yes, Master, although you are free to look for yourself."

Voldemort nodded, but made no move to reach for Hermione. She was tense; Snape could see she was listening to them, but she kept her eyes down and continued working on Weasley.

There was a moment of silence before Snape realized Voldemort was waiting for something. Mentally cursing, he outwardly apologized and offered the Dark Lord a seat and some wine. Voldemort immediately took the chair Hermione had been in, but declined the wine.

Conversation didn't seem to be in keeping with the Dark Lord's mood, so Severus stayed silent. He maintained his obedient facade, although the way Voldemort's eyes never left the girl made him very nervous. Soon enough came the words he was dreading.

"I am afraid I do not understand your taste for Mudbloods, Severus."

"And I am afraid I can not readily explain it, my Lord."

"The Potter girl I could almost understand. You had been friends with her before entering Hogwarts, is that not so?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"And I could see she was a fiery sort, the kind to bring passion to the bed. Not to mention that bedding your enemy's wife must have been extremely tempting for you. Yes, I could see why you would have wanted her."

Voldemort paused, running his bony fingertips along his mouth for a moment, while still gazing at Hermione's back.

"This one, I am having more trouble understanding. Tell me, what was she like as a student?"

Snape glanced at Granger. Judging by her posture, she was as uncomfortable with this conversation as he was. "She was an overachiever. Always doing three times the amount of work required, always striving to be the very best."

Voldemort chuckled softly. "Yes, I can see how that could be appealing."

Snape smiled his greasiest smile, though he was feeling rather ill. "And, as you noted for Lily, Miss Granger has the added benefit of being close to our enemy. Close enough to hurt."

Voldemort nodded approvingly. "Yes. Bellatrix mentioned that she told him of the girl's fate. I hear he didn't take it very well."

Snape chuckled. "No, I imagine not. In fact, I expect this will tear him apart more thoroughly than even Black's demise did."

Snape was surprised to see Voldemort flinch just slightly, although he wondered if he had imagined it when Voldemort started smiling.

"Yes. I imagine this will hurt him even more."

Voldemort lapsed into silence which Snape did not dare break, though he was itching to know what punishment the Dark Lord had meted out. They both watched Hermione work, mesmerized by her rhythmic motions. Suddenly, Voldemort stood and strode over to Hermione to observe her motions more closely.

He inspected Weasley's wound from behind her, and Severus was impressed that she paused only a fraction. He wondered if it was courage or love that kept her going. He didn't stop to think that it could have been courage borne of love.

"It seems the boy's wound has finally closed. Stand up, girl."

At that, Hermione paused, the cloth in her hand dripping potion into the cauldron. Snape stood to force her up, but before he could reach her, she had discarded the cloth and stood up, looking directly at Voldemort's shoes.

"Look at me, girl," he said.

She obeyed and then tensed as Voldemort plunged into her mind. Snape waited, forcing himself to breathe normally and to suppress any fear he felt. The Dark Lord held her in his gaze for so long, Snape was starting to get nervous, though he kept his mind from wandering toward his doubts. Finally, after several more minutes, Voldemort withdrew, looking intrigued. Hermione immediately looked away, biting her lip as if to keep from crying.

"Bellatrix's story seems to be true, except for her fib about not recognizing the girl. Potter refused to tell the girl what he was planning, so one day, she left. I should warn you, Severus, she is a fiery one. She intends to fight you every step of the way."

Snape smirked. "Ah, but that is part of the fun, my Lord. And, if it grows tiresome, there is always Imperio."

Voldemort chuckled again, this time with less tension. "Yes."

He looked down at Hermione, who had taken up her post again as Weasley's wound was starting to reopen.

"It seems that Weasley was in on whatever Potter was plotting. Your potion is obviously only delaying the inevitable, though. Take him to Hogwarts. Pomfrey should be able to mend him well enough for our purposes in no time."

Snape bowed his head, not knowing whether he was relieved or worried.

"Of course, my Lord."

Voldemort smiled and put his hand on Severus' shoulder. "I am sorry you have to put work first yet again."

Voldemort made to leave, but Snape stopping him with a quick, "Master..." Voldemort turned back, curiously. "I know it is not in my place to ask, but has Bellatrix been punished for seeking revenge on me through the girl?"

Voldemort looked at Snape with an inscrutable expression for a long moment before responding, "She has been punished. However, she has yet to feel the brunt of my disappointment."

5

Chapter 6 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

Sorry for the lateness. Life got in the way. Thanks as always go to Ayerf and Septentrion. All mistakes are my own, however.

Hermione followed Snape up the spiral staircase to the Headmaster's office. She was glad it was so late at night or had it turned to morning already? that no one was about to see her humiliation. He had bound her again, this time with an enchanted chain around her neck, making her follow him like a dog. The only thing that would have made the humiliation even more complete was stripping her bare and forcing her to march through Hogwarts nude, but he seemed to be saving that humiliation for later.

She shuddered at the thought of what was coming, though she kept her eyes open. There had to be a way to escape. Maybe after Madam Pomfrey had seen to Ron, she would be able to smuggle them out somewhere... somehow.

Snape disappeared through the office door, levitating Ron before him. She had been impressed that he'd been able to Side-Along both of them concurrently without even the smallest sign of the strain she'd felt when she'd done it. It was depressing how powerful Snape was. It was more than depressing, really. It was scary.

A slight tug on the chain urged her to move faster, and she walked into the office to find Snape opening a door beside one of the portraits. She noticed that all of the portraits were awake and looking at them. Dumbledore caught her eye and offered her a small smile that she couldn't return. It made her angry that he could even think a smile was appropriate.

Another tug on the chain had her stumbling through the door and into a bedroom lined with bookshelves. The only thing to break the line of the shelves was a large four poster bed in the middle of the far wall. Snape floated Ron over to it and carefully lowered him.

She would have been touched by his care except she knew the reason for his care was anything but benign. As soon as Ron was on the bed, Snape turned and stalked out of the room, dragging her with him.

Her stomach clenched in fear, but she followed. She saw him swing the door to the stairway shut and then he made his way to the fireplace, throwing a pinch of Floo powder in.

"Poppy, I need your assistance," he called without sticking his head into the flames or otherwise leaving himself defenseless. Hermione let out a silent breath of relief. Calling Poppy in meant he wasn't going to rape her right there, in front of all the former headmasters. Calling Poppy meant that maybe Ron would be healed soon.

The flames turned green and out swirled the school matron, who looked less than pleased to see Snape.

"What assistance do you need, *Headmaster*?"

Snape scowled, then gestured for her to go into his bedroom. Poppy turned and gasped when she saw Hermione and the chain, before her face collapsed into a defeated scowl.

"Sooner rather than later, if you please," Snape said sharply.

Poppy turned her scowl on Snape and then haughtily preceded him into the bedroom, where Hermione heard her gasp again.

When she entered after them, she found Snape explaining Ron's condition in cool tones while Poppy waved her wand over Ron, her face growing more and more pinched with every diagnostic charm.

"Headmaster! Why did you not bring this boy in sooner? The poison has seeped into his bloodstream and is destroying his innards as we speak!"

"I had other business to attend to, Poppy. I'm sure you can appreciate how busy I am." Madam Pomfrey shot Snape a scowl that rivaled his worst. Her mouth was so tightly drawn it was barely visible.

"Well, *Headmaster*, I would appreciate it if you took your business elsewhere so I can try to heal the boy."

Snape gave her a sarcastic bow then turned to leave. Before he reached the door, he paused and said, "Oh, and if he regains consciousness, please do let me know. He has some information the Dark Lord and I need."

He then left the room, dragging Hermione with him by the chain. When the bedroom door was closed, he set himself down behind his desk and motioned for Hermione to sit

in a chair opposite.

Everything she had been through that evening, from the capture and torture to the conversation he'd had with Voldemort to the way Snape was treating Ron as nothing more than an inconvenience raged through her, and Hermione declined the seat, saying, "Are you sure you wouldn't prefer me to sit by your feet, sir? I hear that's what a dog is supposed to do."

He merely snorted and smirked at her. "Whether you classify yourself as a bitch or not, I would prefer you sit in the chair and pretend you are human." He flicked his wand at her and she found herself propelled backwards into the chair. "Of course, if you want, I would be happy to issue commands such as sit, stay and *don't* speak."

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, anything, but he shot her a warning look and gave her chain a warning rattle. She snapped her mouth shut and crossed her arms against her chest, leaning back to sulk.

He watched her with amusement before muttering, "Good girl," and turning to the paperwork on his desk.

She couldn't help but growl.

*

Her anger only kept her occupied for the first half hour. After that, worry started creeping in. Soon she had forgotten all about Snape and was only thinking of the friend beyond the door. As the minutes passed, her worry grew. Madam Pomfrey was able to heal almost everything within only a few minutes. Her transformation back to human during the Polyjuice disaster had taken so long only because Madam Pomfrey hadn't been able to do anything. She'd had to wait out the potion's ill-effects.

She brought her feet up onto the chair and held onto her legs as she watched the door. Every now and again, Snape would rustle a parchment which would startle her into looking at him, but her eyes always returned to the door.

It was starting to get light outside when the door finally did open, and a weary matron stepped out.

Snape put aside the letter he'd been holding and looked at her, although he did not stand. She shot him a nasty look before quickly donning her professional mask, though she did not speak.

Snape finally had to prompt her, "Well?"

"Alive," Pomfrey answered shortly. "I cannot guarantee his survival, or even a return to consciousness anytime soon."

Snape nodded, suddenly looking tired. "Very well."

"He will need care if there is any hope for survival. It would be best if he were moved to the hospital wing."

"No," Snape said, shaking his head. "If he needs care, Miss Granger can provide it, but he is not leaving my suite."

Poppy glanced at Hermione's neck shackle, and her face hardened again. Turning back to Snape she offered a very curt nod. "If that is how you wish it to be. I will be back later today to teach Miss Granger what to do."

Snape nodded. Poppy took that as a dismissal and left without another word. Snape turned to look at Hermione and leaned back in his chair, releasing a breath.

"And now for you," he said.

Hermione had been so worried about Ron, she had forgotten why she was with Snape in the first place. Fear filled her, and she looked to the door that Poppy had just gone through, wondering if she could make a break for it.

Before she could do anything, Snape waved his wand and she froze in place, unable to move. He came around the desk and conjured a stool only inches away from her. Hermione held her breath as he leaned in, locking eyes with her.

"*Restituo furtum recordatio*," he said, enunciating very clearly. Suddenly, everything came back to her. Him casting his doe Patronus, her telling him about the Horcruxes (she winced at that), him working feverishly over Ron, looking worried and sad... She drew in a big breath and was surprised that she exhaled a sob.

Snape relaxed backwards, and, with a quick wave of his wand, she was free of both the Body Bind and the chain around her neck.

"We will need to be very careful from here on out, Miss Granger," he said, rubbing his face as he returned to his desk chair. "And you will have to be very careful not to look anybody in the eye. If the Dark Lord comes to visit, I will sedate you. Do you understand?"

She nodded her head, still overwhelmed by relief.

"I suggest you go to bed, then. I dare say you need the rest."

She nodded again, stretching out her legs slowly, realizing with a wince that she had been sitting in that position for longer than she'd thought. While she let her legs adjust to having blood-flow again, she looked at the door to the bedroom and frowned.

"Sir," she asked tentatively, "what do you think Ron's chances are?"

He sighed and rubbed his face again, looking even more weary. "Not good. Even if Poppy managed to counteract the poison successfully, there was, as she pointed out, a lot of internal damage. And, to be frank, it would be easier for all of us if he did not survive. If he regains his health and refuses to tell what he knows about Potter, he will be tortured."

Hermione looked as stricken as she felt, but nodded bravely. "I see."

"I suspect that Poppy has given him something to keep him unconscious. If he should regain consciousness while in your care, *I do not want to know about it* you will tell me immediately. Understood?"

She looked at him shrewdly for a moment, wondering if non-verbal messages were communicated by Legilimency, before nodding. "Yes, sir. I will let you know when he's conscious."

She had just made it onto her feet when her stomach growled rather loudly. Snape looked up from his letter, raising an eyebrow at her. She offered him an embarrassed smile and started walking for the bedroom only to be stopped by Snape.

"I don't suppose the three of you ever thought to go into Muggle towns and nick food?" His tone was derisive.

She frowned at him and shook her head. "It isn't right to steal."

He rolled his eyes at her. "Save me the morality lesson, Miss Granger, and sit down." He pointed at the chair she'd just vacated.

Looking at him warily, she complied and was surprised when he summoned two big bowls of chicken soup with a full loaf of crusty bread.

"Besides," she said breathily, eyeing the food ravenously, "there was never much available where we wouldn't be seen."

He waved his wand again and her chair was pulled up to the desk cum table. He looked as if he wanted to grin at her expression, but he merely raised an eyebrow instead. He waved his hand at her for her to start, and she eagerly dug into her soup. Halfway through the bowl, she reached for the bread but, not seeing a knife with which to cut it, greedily broke into it with her hands. She caught Snape watching her, and offered him a chunk. He looked like he wanted to raise his eyebrow mockingly again but surprised her by nodding politely and taking the smaller piece.

They didn't talk, but their silence was surprisingly companionable. When she'd finished a third bowl of soup and the last bit of her bread, she found her eyes drifting shut. She leaned back into her chair with a contented sigh, and mumbled a sleepy thanks to a bemused Snape before falling fast asleep.

6

Chapter 7 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

Thanks again and still to Ayerf and Septentrion for their help. All mistakes are my own fault.

Snape watched Hermione sleep with mixed feelings. On the one hand, her falling asleep in the office meant he had to transfer her to the bed. He would have much preferred she had done that on her own steam as he wanted to expend as little energy on her as possible. On the other hand, it was nice to know that she trusted him enough to fall asleep in his presence. Almost everyone distrusted him now, so having someone who wasn't a dunderhead or insane trust him was... gratifying.

It was also rather gratifying to know that he was able to do something good for her. She had lost at least a stone since he'd last seen her, the idiot girl. He wondered what they had subsisted on over the winter. It couldn't have been either hearty or tasty though, judging by her weight, skin tone and the way she'd devoured the soup.

He would still rather she and Weasley were with Potter, though.

His mind wandered to Weasley, and he wondered if she had told the boy her feelings yet. He felt his heart ache a little for her, knowing what she would be going through soon. There was little hope Weasley would survive the wound. The only hope he had was to die without pain.

Snape snorted softly, realizing that the boy and he had something in common there.

"Was the chain really necessary, Severus?" a hushed voice questioned behind him. He turned to find Albus looking at Hermione with a somber expression.

"Probably not, but you never know when Amycus will be roaming the castle."

Dumbledore nodded in his frame, and finally turned his eyes to Severus.

"Minerva, Filius and Septima are not going to like this."

Snape snorted again, this time a little louder, causing Hermione to shift in her chair. Snape held a finger up to Dumbledore to pause the conversation, then aimed his wand at Hermione, floating her out of the chair, and into the bedroom.

It was fortunate that his bed was on the large side; she fit next to Weasley without making Snape worry about Weasley's health. Once she was curled up on the bed with a blanket covering her, Snape returned to the office, shutting the door behind him quietly.

Dumbledore beamed at him. He scowled back.

"Don't say it, Albus."

"But it is so good to see!"

"You're believing what you want to believe."

Dumbledore's beard twitched. "Perhaps, but you never could deceive me."

Snape's shoulder twitched as if wanting to shrug before he sat down at the desk with a sigh. "Getting back to the topic, I know bloody well that Minerva, Filius and Septima are going to be after my skin for this. I'm not sure that it won't be the final straw for them."

Dumbledore hummed in agreement. "You could stage a conversation to make them question your motives."

"You know very well that Alecto would like nothing better than to succeed me in this position, Albus."

"I was thinking you could have the conversation with her."

"Ah, yes, that's a jolly good idea there! 'Alecto, darling, don't you like how well I'm treating my pet mu--'" Snape's voice hitched on the word, and he stopped, shaking his head once more.

"I don't know if I can do this, Albus."

"You'll find a way, Severus. You always do." He could almost imagine Dumbledore's hand resting on his shoulder, supportively. Having it only a figment made it even more difficult to shrug off.

"And if I don't?" he asked to his desk.

"You will have done your best."

Snape groaned, thinking that was cold comfort, indeed.

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He woke up later that morning with a crick in his neck. He lifted his head up off the desk to see what time it was, only to come face to face with Poppy Pomfrey. She was observing him with an inscrutable expression, although he could discern both anger and hurt. The latter confused him, as he couldn't think what he had done that could have hurt or offended her personally. Besides the obvious crimes against humanity, that was.

Seeing he was awake, she pursed her lips tighter, as if trying to physically hold back the words she wanted to throw at him.

Feeling caught out and vulnerable, Snape donned his best sneer. "Is there anything I can do for you, Poppy?"

"You..." She shut her mouth tight again and took a deep breath. "I need to see to Mr. Weasley and then teach Miss Granger how to care for him, if you still insist on keeping him out of my care."

He bowed his head shortly and waved his hand at the bedroom door. "Be my guest."

She gave him another hard stare, sniffed, then turned and went about her business, leaving him to wake up properly.

He turned to Dumbledore and hissed, "You could have woken me!"

Dumbledore merely smiled. "She has sworn to heal, not harm. You weren't in danger, my boy."

Snape growled, an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. "You know very well what I meant!"

Dumbledore didn't answer, though. He just smiled and twinkled his thrice damned twinkle, while Phineas hid a chortle with a cough. Snape turned to glare at the Black bastard, but Phineas merely raised an eyebrow at him condescendingly.

Giving it up as a lost cause, Snape turned his attention to freshening himself up with a couple of charms. He then stretched and decided he had given Poppy enough time to secretly re-dope Weasley if needed. He entered his bedroom to find Hermione just waking up, rubbing her eyes and yawning widely, while Poppy muttered something under her breath over the boy.

"Will he be conscious today?" he asked in as cool tone as possible.

Poppy ignored him, still muttering. Hermione turned at the sound of his voice, but she only looked at him briefly before turning her anxious gaze to Weasley.

"How is he?" she asked Poppy in a hushed voice.

"Holding steady," Poppy answered, giving Hermione a sympathetic look. "At this point there isn't much we can do for him but make him comfortable, though."

Hermione's breath hitched and her hand flew to her heart. "He's d...dying?"

Poppy stopped waving her wand and looked at Hermione more closely, her shoulders slumping as she did. "That poison is a vicious one, dear. I will do my best, but..."

Hermione choked back a sob and nodded.

"So, what can I do for him?"

Poppy smiled and proceeded to show Hermione what she would need to do. Snape quietly exited, hoping Poppy would give Hermione a stash of the sleeping draught she'd plied Weasley with earlier that morning.

Letting out a big breath, a huff as much as a sigh, he sat down at his desk and finished off the remaining paperwork from the previous day.

He hated this job. He was starting to understand just why Dumbledore had been such a manipulative sod the job had driven him to it. Well that, and his natural talent for it.

The only good thing about the loads of paperwork the job brought every bloody day was that he had a built in excuse for ignoring Hermione. The Dark Lord had virtually told him to put work before pleasure, so all he needed to do was make sure he had sufficient work to keep him occupied. Or at least *look* occupied should anyone respectable visit. With the Carrows or Voldemort, all he'd need to say was that he'd chained Hermione to the bed.

He leaned back in his chair, feeling slightly ill at what the night had wrought. Before he could think much on it, though, Poppy came out of the bedroom, quietly shutting the door behind her.

She gave him a stern look, although it lacked the vitriol she'd been giving him ever since he'd killed Albus. She looked like she'd been crying.

"Severus," she started, warning Snape that something was off right away. She hadn't used his first name since he'd killed Albus, either.

He held up a hand and shook his head. "I will not have you lecturing me, Madam. I suggest you go back to the hospital and see to any students there and *leave me be*."

She pinched her mouth again, but nodded. "I was just going to say..." She paused, looking insecure for a moment, but then her face hardened as she looked up at the picture of Dumbledore behind Snape. "If you need anything, you know where to find me."

Snape snorted derisively, although inwardly he couldn't decide whether he was touched or appalled at this new development. "Yes. You are dismissed."

She nodded and gave him one last unsure look before leaving the office. Snape immediately turned to Dumbledore.

"What did you tell her?" he demanded, his dismay overruling any warmth he may have felt for Poppy's display.

Dumbledore raised his brows in mock surprise. "I only serve the current headmaster of Hogwarts. I am unable to tell her anything."

"Bullshit!" Snape growled, causing Dumbledore to chuckle while other headmasters and headmistresses berated him on his language. He waved them silent, still glaring at Dumbledore. "What did you do, if you didn't say anything?"

Dumbledore smiled down at his beard. "I *didn't* do anything." He then had the audacity to wink.

Snape growled again, but got the message. Poppy had figured him out when she saw him asleep at the desk, while Hermione and Weasley were sleeping comfortably, unmolested, in his bed. He couldn't have made his intentions clearer to her, could he?

He swore again, raising another round of chastisements which he ignored. "Albus..."

"She will be the soul of discretion, Severus. Do not worry on that front. You will need someone on your side, though."

"Miss Granger was one too many people in the know," Severus hissed angrily, "but at least I can be assured she won't have the chance to tell anyone! With Poppy... You are playing with *my* life, old man!"

"She won't tell."

Snape spun around to find Hermione watching him from the bedroom doorway.

"And how would you know that?" he snarled, directing all of his anger at her.

Her mouth thinned at his tone, but otherwise she stood her ground. "She promised me."

The absurd simplicity of that statement made Snape laugh. "And it is so difficult to break a promise!"

She and Dumbledore frowned in unison, making Snape scowl and throw up his hands. "You bloody Gryffindors think that everyone will stand by their word!" He advanced on her as he ranted until he was towering over her, forcing her to look up at him. "Well, shall this sneaky, slimy Slytherin tell you the truth? People *lie*!"

Hermione had her hands on her hips and was looking at him with a fierce expression. He braced himself for a diatribe, but was surprised when she said, "And thank God for that."

He took a step back to look at her better, speechless.

"If people didn't lie, then Bellatrix would know you had put the fake sword in her vault. If people didn't lie, then Voldemort would know that you're not loyal to him. If people didn't lie..." She seemed to run out of steam suddenly, although when she looked over at Dumbledore's portrait, her face grew hard once more. "If people didn't lie," she continued softly, "then different people might have died."

She sighed sadly and walked over to the chair she'd sat in the night before, collapsing into it with a thump.

She closed her eyes and leaned back, looking far older than nineteen. "Madam Pomfrey won't tell on you, Professor. She won't let it slip because she honestly cares for the students at this school. She honestly cares for the teachers. She honestly cares for you and me and Ron. And she knows that one slip is all it would take to kill us."

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. "And that is exactly what I am afraid of, Miss Granger! She now has the power to kill us."

Hermione laughed hollowly. "So did Dumbledore. "

"Yes, and look where that got him," he sneered. He was pleased to note her eyes widen and her breath quicken in fear, and then came the expected hardening of her features into a scowl. He was not expecting her to direct that scowl away from him and toward Albus.

"I hope you were properly ashamed of yourself, sir," she said to the portrait. Dumbledore looked as surprised as Snape felt. He also looked surprisingly contrite.

"Yes, Miss Granger. For Severus, for Harry and for many others, I was more than just ashamed of myself."

Shaking her head in what looked like disgust, she turned back to Snape. "You may think Harry is a fool, Professor, and judging by the way he acts at times, you may have a point. But he is right in having us trust one another."

"Ah, trust. I was wondering when that lovely term would be brought up. I see your point, Miss Granger. So clearly do I see it, that I will hold a staff meeting right now and tell them every secret I possess. And then we will hug and make up and tell the big, bad Dark Lord to go away so we can live in peace and harmony."

He shot her a glare. "Do grow up and join the real world."

She glared right back at him, and stood up. "I'll take your advice into consideration, sir," she said in a frosty voice. "But for now I need to go tend to Ron."

She then stormed across the room and shut herself into the bedroom. Snape looked up at the ceiling as if for guidance before kicking the foot of the desk.

He hoped to hell that Potter would kill the Dark Lord very soon. He didn't really want another murder on his conscience.

The worst part, though, was knowing she was right. He heaved a large sigh and turned to follow her.

7

Chapter 8 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

AN: I'm so sorry for being late again! This week was not a good one in RL. However, here's a chapter and I promise, barring any other emergencies, that the next one will be up on Monday.

Thanks, as always, go to Ayerf and Septentrion for giving this a read through. Mistakes are still my own intellectual property.

Hermione was shaking with rage as she sat down in the chair next to Ron, automatically brushing the hair back off his forehead. She looked away, taking his large hand in her small ones.

"Oh, Ron," she sighed shakily. "I wish you were better so that I could tell you everything he said. Then you would swear and curse him, I'd tell you to be respectful, and everything would go back to normal."

She rested her chin in her hands, staring their hands. "Please get better. I know there isn't much reason to get better, not with You-Know-Who still around and the threat of torture and everything, but... I want you to get better!" She sniffed and wiped her nose with the handkerchief Snape had given her the previous night. She looked at it with a faint frown and shook her head. "I need you to get better. I can't imagine not having you in my life, Ron. What'll we... what will I do without you?"

She reached out to stroke his arm, unable to keep herself from touching him. Finally, her hand stopped, covering his hand with hers.

"I'm worried, Ron. I don't know how Harry is going to find all the Horcruxes without our help. He's stronger than either of us now, but... I think he's going to take our loss

hard. I also don't know how Professor Snape is going to pull this off. Oh, he's one of the good guys, by the way. I'm supposed to be his prisoner or slave or something, but it isn't like that at all. He was the one who rescued you."

She paused, frowning.

"He scares me a little, and he's got a horrible temper, but I trust him. I'm worried that I shouldn't have told him about the Horcruxes, but perhaps Dumbledore was wrong not to trust him with that. Perhaps, with his help, we'll be able to find them all and end this miserable war.

"Of course, the scary part of his knowing isn't whether he'd betray us, because I'm sure he can see just as well as we can that he'd end up at the bottom of the lake faster than Regulus did if Vol-- if You-Know-Who found out he knows. The scary part is if You-Know-Who *does* find out. I'll have killed him."

"And that is why I wish Poppy didn't know about me," Snape said from behind her. Hermione screamed and jumped up, twirling around to see Snape leaning against the door frame. He looked vaguely amused at her reaction, but mostly he looked somber.

"Poppy now bears the same weight as you, knowing that lives depend on her discretion. I do trust her, probably more than anyone else in this castle, but it is unfair to burden her with the knowledge."

"It's not fair for you to bear the entire burden, though," Hermione replied, still breathing a bit hard.

His lips twitched up and he shook his head. "I don't. It would seem Potter bears a bit more of the burden than I do."

He walked forward, conjuring a chair beside hers and sat down. "The theory is that the fewer people who know anything, the fewer people will get hurt."

"That's rubbish! What about all the innocent bystanders? What about the Muggles who've been killed the last two years?"

"That is off topic as those are casualties of war. I am speaking of soldiers' lives."

"And it isn't off topic, because Madam Pomfrey isn't a soldier. She never signed up for anything."

"Until she was enlisted by knowledge."

Comprehension hit Hermione hard. "Oh."

Snape snorted. "Yes, 'oh.'" He looked away from her and his gaze came to rest on Ron.

"It galls me that Albus enlisted children in this war. And before you protest, I know very well that children are as capable of creating and fighting evil as adults. It's just appalling that it has come to that. Yet again."

Hermione watched as his face darkened, wondering what memory he was in. That 'yet again' was obviously personal. She didn't know what to say that wouldn't be inane or even insulting, so she remained silent.

Snape stared at Ron for a few minutes then shook his head and looked to Hermione. "Let me know when you are hungry."

He stood up to leave, making Hermione aware, for the first time since getting her memories back, that whether or not she was being treated decently, she was still a prisoner. Trapped and useless.

"Professor," she called out, stopping him as he made his way to the door. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

He didn't say anything but just looked at her for a moment. Finally he said, "Unless you have a secret link to Potter that I know nothing about, the only task I can give you is to tend to Mr. Weasley." He turned and walked to the door, where he paused and turned to face her again. "Besides," he said in a surprisingly soft voice, "I imagine you could use a bit of a break from worrying about the rest of the world. Focus on what's more imp... more immediate."

Hermione had the feeling that Snape was trying to tell her to cherish every moment with Ron. It was an absurd thought, though. Wasn't it? It was ridiculous to think that *Snape* would view time spent with an unconscious person as time well spent. Not only that, but it had sounded as if he was offering her comfort, and that was patently ridiculous.

She stopped herself there, realizing that although he had been brusque with her immediately after he'd rescued her, and harsh while her memory had been modified, he hadn't been overly cruel, and so far had done everything within his power to protect her and make her more comfortable.

What if he *was* offering her comfort?

His conversation with Voldemort the night before sprang to mind suddenly. Voldemort had said something about Lily Potter, about Snape having a penchant for Mudbloods. She ran through several theories, and although it seemed unlikely, the one that made the most sense in her current dealings with Snape was that he had been in love with Lily Potter.

Pondering it further, she realized that his loving Lily made a lot of things fall into place. Like why he hated Harry so very much. Why he did his best to protect Harry, despite hating the sight of him. Why Dumbledore trusted him. Why his patronus was a doe...

She released a big, heartfelt, romantic sigh. It was worse than Romeo and Juliet, because at least Romeo got the girl, however briefly.

Ron gave a low moan and she immediately turned her focus onto him. He wasn't moving much, but it looked like he was starting to get agitated.

"Ron?" she whispered, careful to keep her voice down.

He tried to blink his eyes open, but the sleeping draught Madam Pomfrey had given him early in the morning was still holding on.

"Shh, dear," she cooed, brushing a few stray hairs off his forehead. He calmed down, although he was still obviously trying to open his eyes.

"Don't strain yourself, Ron. It's better if you keep your eyes closed. It's better if you look like you're unconscious."

A miniscule line formed between Ron's eyes as his facial muscles tried to frown.

"I imagine you're wondering what's going on. We're safe at Hogwarts now, although we're not out of danger yet. Professor Snape saved both of us."

His eyelids struggled to pop open in shock, but Hermione shushed him again, stroking his hair comfortingly.

"Don't worry, he's on our side. I haven't asked for the details, but he sent us the sword. He will do his best to keep us safe, just as he's been trying to keep all the students safe. Why else do you think he sent Neville, Ginny and Luna into the forest with Hagrid last autumn? He knew they'd be safe with Hagrid."

Ron's movements stilled, and she didn't know whether he had gone back to sleep again or not, but she continued talking, relaying the entire story, ending with her latest theory.

"We were, once again, so wrong about him. He and Harry, they're the heroes. It's too bad their relationship is so lousy. Imagine what strength Harry would have gained having Snape as a mentor as well as Dumbledore?"

She paused, observing Ron closely. She smiled tearfully at him, knowing he was now definitely asleep.

She leaned down and kissed his cheek. "Rest well, Ron." The words, 'I love you,' hovered on her lips, but she held them back, hoping there would be another chance to tell him how she felt when he might remember it.

Giving his head one last caress, she got up. Turning, she was startled to find herself being observed by Snape.

He nodded to her and left the room, leaving her to follow in his footsteps.

When she reached the office, he was already seated. He scowled at her as she took a seat in what she now considered to be 'her' chair.

"Romanticism will get you killed, Miss Granger."

She frowned, confused. "Sir?"

"What ifs' and 'should have beens' lead down a murky path of sentimentalism. Sentimentalism leads to the creation of scapegoats, and scapegoats tend to be killed off. Hence the Muggle-born Registration Committee."

She snorted, and his scowl grew darker. "By your logic, sir, it won't be me who will be getting killed off. I would be the one doing the killing."

His scowl retreated slightly as he snorted in turn. "Yes, well, evil overlording has a fairly high mortality rate, as well."

"Well, given the choice between being a sacrificial scapegoat or an evil overlord, I might just choose the evil overlording. At least that way I might have a chance of making some social changes before being overthrown."

His lips quirked up into something resembling a smile. "Yes, I can just imagine what your regime would be like. Booksellers of the world would be very happy indeed."

She snorted again, rather embarrassingly loudly. His lips twitched up again, and he leaned back in his chair looking almost relaxed. She marveled that this was the same person who had bullied them for the last six years.

"You must hate teaching very much," Hermione heard herself say. She immediately clapped both her hands over her mouth, horrified by her gall. She was highly surprised when Snape did not scowl, but merely raised a mocking eyebrow at her.

"And it has taken you this long to figure that out? For shame, Miss Granger. I thought you more intelligent than that."

Stunned, she eyed him warily. "Who are you and what have you done to Professor Snape?" she asked, only half joking.

He did scowl at that. "If you would prefer--"

"Oh, no nononono," Hermione said, interrupting him. "It's not that at all! I just... You must admit that you've put up a very... erm..."

"Greasy? Monstrous? Vampirical?"

"...*Hateful* persona, so forgive me if I'm having slight difficulties adjusting to this other you. This other you who rescued me, then Ron, is looking after the safety of the students, and whom I am immeasurably grateful and indebted to."

His frown increased as he observed her. "And that brings us back to the dangers of romanticism."

She smiled nervously and blushed as she exclaimed, "Oh, don't worry about me forgetting your less than stellar traits, or your role or anything. I just want you to know that I am grateful for all that you have done for us. Thank you."

He continued frowning, but the lines around his mouth eased up a little. He cleared his throat discreetly, looking almost embarrassed. "You are welcome."

He then tried to distract her from his reaction by conjuring a delicious smelling lunch that didn't include berries, nuts or fungi.

8

Chapter 9 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

They settled into a routine of sorts over the last few days of Easter break. She would spend her time in the bedroom, tending to Weasley who would occasionally become almost lucid, while Snape stayed in his office, only calling on her for meals, although he discreetly observed her and the boy more often than he would care to admit.

Meals were something Snape found himself looking forward to. Not only did it serve to break the monotony of the day's routine, but he found himself genuinely enjoying the girl's conversation. She still asked too many questions, but at the same time, she asked them with such reverence for both the knowledge and the source, that he was hard pressed not to be flattered.

He noticed fairly quickly that she would come from the boy's bedside withdrawn and listless, but by the time the meal was over, her eyes would be sparkling again, and she would be prone to smiling. He found himself loathe to send her back in to tend to Weasley, although he knew it was safest for all of them if he did. By the end of the third day, he had decided to remain quiet, and let her choose when to return to her task.

So the end of Easter break found them spending more time together, talking or reading, than not. Snape knew it wasn't because Hermione didn't love Weasley; it was obvious she did. It was also obvious that it was the most painful thing she had ever experienced, having the love of her life die in front of her eyes. Watching her, he became grateful that Lily had died so quickly and, from what he knew, painlessly.

He also found himself awed that he was a source of comfort for the girl. It was rather disconcerting, but not wholly unpleasant. In fact, if he were honest with himself, it wasn't unpleasant at all.

He had almost relaxed into that role when his mark burned in warning of the Dark Lord's arrival.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked.

"The Dark Lord approacheth," he muttered sourly, getting up. He made his way into the bedroom, not bothering to see if she followed. He knew she would. He paused by Weasley, wondering what to do with the boy. Hermione took the decision out of his hands by conjuring a cot and gently floating him onto it. He nodded in approval then went to the bathroom to retrieve the sleeping draught he'd made for such occasions.

When he came out, Hermione was standing by his bed, looking nervous.

"After I leave the room..." he paused awkwardly as he handed her the bottle.

"I'll make it look real," she said, offering him a small smile and her wand. He frowned as he took the wand, but then nodded curtly and left the room without a backward glance. He nearly paused as he reached the doorway, wanting to tell her something, offer some more comfort, but the role was still too foreign and new for him to know what to say.

He gently closed the door behind him and took a deep breath as he made his way down to the castle gates, clearing his mind as he walked. He didn't know why the Dark Lord was visiting so soon, but it didn't bode well.

The Dark Lord looked calm when he came into view, but Severus knew better than most that appearances were often deceiving.

"My Lord," Severus said with a bow after he'd unlocked the gates.

Voldemort glided onto the grounds with a regal nod. He looked around to survey the grounds, dim as they were in the dusky light. He seemed to be satisfied, and Severus had to push back the desire to relax. Relaxing wasn't an option around the Dark Lord.

"It is good to be back, Severus," Voldemort said with a bit of a sigh before looking at him. "The students will be returning tomorrow?"

Severus nodded. "Yes."

"Good, good," Voldemort said rather distractedly.

The rest of the trip up to Severus' office passed in silence. Once ensconced in the safety and comfort of the office, however, Voldemort looked around with an appraising eye.

"Where is the girl?" he asked as he sat down in the chair nearest the fire.

"In bed. I'm afraid I've been tiring her out, so she spends a good deal of time sleeping nowadays."

Voldemort smiled cruelly and nodded, obviously pleased. "I'm glad you're finding the gift acceptable."

"It is a far better present than I have ever received, my Lord. Thank you."

Voldemort nodded again, although this time with a smidgeon of a frown. "I understand you've been spending most of your time up here? The Carrows didn't know of her presence in the school until I met with them last night, and they thought you had gone away as well."

Severus nodded warily. "Yes, my Lord. I'm afraid I have found myself preferring to indulge in the girl's *company* more than anticipated. I have been splitting my time between enjoying her and doing the paperwork the school generates. It hasn't left much time for socializing."

Voldemort nodded understandingly. "I understand, Severus. I am pleased you have found opportunity to enjoy your gift so greatly, but I do hope that, come term time, you will return to your visible role?"

"Of course, my Lord." Severus reassured him, trying to suppress the uneasy feeling in his gut. "I have no intention of letting pleasure interfere with my duties."

Voldemort smiled again. "I had not thought so. But... you needn't separate them so vigorously."

"My Lord?"

"It is merely a suggestion, but I think it would be good for the students to see that I reward those who please me greatly."

Severus swallowed. "Master, I am not sure it would be politic to flaunt her." Voldemort gave him a look demanding an explanation. "Granger was a favorite of almost every teacher when she was a student here. They will not react to her enslavement well."

Voldemort shrugged. "They know not to cause trouble. Jobs depend on my approval these days, and they know it." His lips rose into an evil smile. "Besides, it should be obvious to you the warning inherent in flaunting her."

Severus bowed his head in agreement and capitulation. "Indeed, I do see that."

"Good. But now onto the more important business. I have need of your Gringott's vault key."

Severus' eyebrow rose, but he dutifully got up and retrieved the key from a secret compartment in the large desk and handed it over to Voldemort.

Voldemort must have sensed his confusion, as he chuckled softly. "I am not in need of your gold, Severus. I have decided that the Lestranges no longer bear the right to protect one of my more precious possessions."

"I am humbled, my Lord," Severus said, trying to force his breathing to slow.

"It will only be temporary. I'm afraid that I do not trust even you with it, and so shall have to find a more fitting place to store it permanently."

"Of course. I am honored that you chose me for even this, my lord!"

Voldemort nodded, reassured and stood up looking to the bedroom door speculatively. "How is the boy?"

"Still unconscious and losing ground."

"May I see him?"

"Of course." Snape opened the door for him, allowing Voldemort to enter first. The room was darkened, although one dim candle burned on the nightstand. Hermione was asleep in the bed, her bare shoulders peeking out from under the covers offering verisimilitude to the situation.

Voldemort's eyes passed over her briefly, but he found Weasley more interesting, and approached.

"He does look to be doing poorly. What does Pomfrey say?"

"She has done all she can. Most of the care of the boy now rests with Granger."

"Do you think it wise to trust her with the boy's care?"

"She loves him. If it were within her power, she would give her life for his."

Voldemort shook his head. "That would be a waste, however." His eyes flicked over to Hermione again before returning to Weasley's still form. "There must be a potion to force consciousness. I suggest you start looking for it, lest the boy dies before waking."

"As you wish."

Voldemort nodded and left the room, Severus close on his heels.

"Even if you do not find any potions, I shall be working on creating one. Try to keep the boy alive for as long as possible."

"Of course," Severus responded with an inward shiver. The Dark Lord's creations were usually very powerful indeed.

Voldemort smiled at Severus and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I am glad you have found a bit of respite. It has done you good. And if any of the teachers should trouble you, let me know. I shall mete out the appropriate punishment should they be so unwise."

Severus forced himself to grin. "The Dark Lord's word *is* law."

Voldemort grinned back. "Indeed."

He then left, and Severus sagged into his seat, exhausted, elated and, somehow, numb. He didn't know if he dared to hope that it was the Horcrux Voldemort was moving. It was what made sense. And if it was, then it would be within reach. The end would be within reach!

Snape felt the hope unfurl, allowing his face to relax. Before he knew it, he found himself smiling.

9

Chapter 10 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

Hermione woke up spluttering with a foul taste in her mouth. Snape was looming over her looking rather amused. She glared at him, thinking he was amused at her expense, but he just smiled even more and stepped back.

"Dinner is served," he said almost jovially before handing over her wand and heading out of the room. She sat up in the bed watching him go, carefully holding the covers up to preserve her modesty. She swore his robes were billowing more than usual, and wondered if that was Snape's equivalent to a bounce in his step. He did look almost cheerful...

After he closed the door, she quickly dressed herself, then moved Ron back over to the bed proper. She didn't want to risk the failure of the transfiguration what with his delicate condition. All in all, it only took three minutes before she was out in Snape's office, staring at him eating with a gusto she'd never seen before.

He gestured for her to sit and join him, which she did, although cautiously. His mood was not one she had ever seen in him before, and it was more than a little unnerving.

She watched him cautiously for the length of the meal, and it wasn't until he leaned back with a satisfied sigh that she dared say anything.

"I take it the meeting went well?"

He raised his glass of wine to her and nodded. "In one aspect, it went rather well, yes."

"Only one?"

His smirk faded a little. "Yes. Only one. The other subjects broached were less than thrilling."

"Dare I ask?"

"I suppose so, as they pertain to you. The Dark Lord has decreed that I should flaunt you. He was rather unhappy that I've kept you hidden away so well. He didn't spell it out explicitly, but I am assuming that he will want you present for the return feast tomorrow night."

"And I'm assuming that means I'll be on display like some slave-girl?"

Snape nodded, looking disgusted. "Nothing extreme, with the exception of some obvious bondage." He sighed. "I think it would be best if you stood by the wall behind my chair for the meal. Will that be adequate?"

She frowned unhappily. "I suppose so. I'd rather be standing against the wall than kneeling at your side the entire meal. And at least that way, I won't be in the other teachers' faces."

Snape nodded. "Yes, that's what I was thinking as well." He drew a breath, looking hesitant. "I also thought that perhaps you would come down to breakfast with me. It would be best to let the other teachers know you're here before the children get back, and I'm hoping to stage some sort of conversation with Alecto to try and assuage the other teachers' outrage about the new situation."

Hermione nodded wordlessly, fruitlessly trying to think of some way to let the other, good, teachers know that she wasn't being mistreated. That it wasn't as bad as it looked.

"Will Poppy be there?"

Severus shook his head. "No. I'm afraid that she rarely attends meals with us, preferring to stay in the hospital wing in case of any unexpected accidents. Especially this year."

"Doesn't she have friends on staff?"

"Of course she does. As I gather, she and Minerva are quite close."

Hermione felt a little smile peek through her gloom. "Good. That means McGonagall will be likely to take her tales of horror to her after breakfast."

Snape, however, looked horrified. "You don't think Poppy would tell them not to worry or anything as blatant as that?"

Hermione shook her head quickly. "No, but she's in a better position to subtly assuage their outrage than you are."

Snape looked doubtful. "Perhaps I should talk to Poppy just in case..."

"Just trust her, sir."

Snape's face contorted into the sneer he wore whenever he saw Harry, but Hermione was saved from a scathing retort by Dumbledore's portrait.

"Miss Granger is right, Severus. Poppy will not give you away needlessly."

Snape whirled on the portrait. "Needlessly? *Needlessly*? I do not want her giving me away at all!"

"She is not going to stand by and see you lynched, my boy."

"If that's what happens, she should!"

"That wouldn't be in the best interests of the students, or Harry, or the wizarding world, though, sir," Hermione interjected quietly.

Hopes of Snape having not heard her quailed as she saw Snape tense up, then slowly turn to face her. His face was frozen with rage.

"How would revealing my true role be a benefit to the war effort, Miss Granger?"

Hermione took a nervous step back, but lifted her chin defiantly. "If it were a case of you either being a dead Death Eater or saved Order member, saving you would mean we'd still have you alive to help us."

Snape gave her the glare reserved for the dimmest dunderheads. "Oh, and that would be so helpful, I can tell you. The only role I can see myself being helpful in is as a decoy, and pardon me if I find that a less than appealing role."

"Oh, give yourself some credit, sir!" Hermione cried, losing patience. "You've got to be one of the most powerful wizards alive! And not only are you powerful, but you're brilliant. Even if it was just as an adviser, with your help we could win the war."

Snape didn't immediately bite her head off as she'd expected. Instead, he just observed her coldly.

"What did I tell you about romanticism, Hermione?"

"Well, we might as well be dead without hope, sir."

"You overestimate me."

"You underestimate yourself."

"I could be playing you right now. I am not a good man."

"Bullshit, sir."

He raised his eyebrow at that, caught by surprise. Hermione pressed her luck, swallowing before saying, "Yes, I suppose you could be playing me, but if you were, wouldn't you have changed your Patronus to a phoenix, or something equally obviously associated with Dumbledore and the Order? But you didn't. I don't think that's because you think I'm smart or cynical enough to doubt such an obvious symbol, because you had never given me any indication that you thought I was anything but a know-it-all who had a good memory. No. Instead, your Patronus was a deer. The same deer that led Harry to the *real* Sword of Gryffindor. And if you were playing me, then you would have to be playing Voldemort as well, because I seriously doubt he would want you to be giving us help like that!"

"Patronuses can't--" He stopped and seemed to think better of what he was about to say. Instead he spat, "You could have been Confunded. It could have been a goat or a dog, but you only remember it as a doe."

"But I never saw it! Only Harry did. And if you were close enough to Harry to Confund him, why didn't you stun and deliver him to your 'master'? Besides which, what is a loyal Death Eater doing casting Patronuses in the first place? It is a spell for the protection against Dark Arts. As far as I know, it isn't possible to use a Patronus evilly."

"I could be in the practice of casting Patronuses because I search for potions ingredients in lethifold territory. I could be handy at the charm because I was sent to spy on the Order. There are many reasons why a loyal Death Eater would cast a Patronus to fool a naive girl into believing he was loyal to her side."

"And arguing about them with me is the best way to keep up the game?" Hermione asked snidely.

He smirked. "If what I want is to keep you on your toes, yes."

Hermione was unconvinced. "Well, if that's what you want me to believe, you'll have to provide more persuasive arguments than that. As it is, I am considering you innocent until proven guilty."

Snape stared at her, nonplussed for a moment before swelling in rage. Hermione stepped back, suddenly alarmed, though also confused as to why her statement would be angering him so.

He stared at her from his ashen face. "You stupid girl!" he yelled. "You are completely at my mercy right now, and you blindly, stubbornly, *recklessly* endanger not only your life but your boyfriend's life by believing me innocent until proven guilty? You are a fucking idiot to do so on such paltry evidence!"

She stepped forward, throwing her arms wide to present an open target. "Well if I'm an idiot, here you go! Do your worst!"

Snape flexed his hand and raised his wand, aiming it at her heart. She held her breath, wondering if she had pushed him too far, but then he lowered the wand, still looking angry.

"Go tend to Weasley," he said through tight lips. She hesitated, prompting a harsh, "NOW!"

She bolted to the bedroom, closing the door behind her forcefully, not sure whether it was from fear or anger. She heard what sounded like furniture being thrown about and flinched, edging away from the door. When something crashed against the door, she jumped back, quickly casting a shielding and locking charm on the door to protect it from being broken in the face of his temper.

She backed up to the bed and only when she turned to look at Ron did she realize she was crying. She blinked and wiped her eyes until he came into focus, and then collapsed onto her knees, sobbing into the duvet on the bed.

10

Chapter 11 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

AN: *Thank you again and always to my lovely alpha and beta readers, Septentrion and Ayerf. Any and all mistakes are me not listening to their good advice.*

It took Snape a long while of destroying everything within eyesight (books excepted) before he was able to calm down. He didn't quite know why Hermione's pronouncement had enraged him so fully. Perhaps it was because she was being trusting to the point of foolishness, just when he'd been starting to think of her as his intellectual equal. Perhaps it was because she was withholding judgment in sharp contrast to what the rest of the world was thinking and plotting against him. Perhaps it was because deep down he knew he didn't deserve her trust. He'd betrayed too many people...

Perhaps it was because she didn't argue with him about not being a good man.

He fell to his knees amidst the rubble and pulled his hair in frustration, letting out a low moan of frustration and despair.

He was appalled with himself. He had relaxed and had allowed himself to think of her as an equal, and as a consequence had become close to her. Close enough for her opinion to matter. Close enough to hurt him. Close enough to hurt *her*.

He knew he had scared her, despite her protestations of his innocence. He knew she had doubted him in that moment when he'd raised his wand at her. She must have doubted him he'd doubted himself. That doubt scared him more than anything had since he'd learned of the threat to Lily's life. It made him question what kind of person he really was. It made him doubt that he would make the right decisions.

He screwed his eyes shut, hoping that he could escape from the world but the rubble dug into his knees, and the smell of dust and disruption lingered in the air. He unclenched his hands, letting his hair fall forward, before raising himself up to face the masses. He flicked his wand almost carelessly and brought the room to rights easily. He then lifted his chin and faced the portraits, facing their condemnation.

He was unprepared for Albus' kindly smile.

"You deserve her trust."

Snape closed his eyes and fought against the tight feeling in his throat and chest. He shook his head as he breathed away the emotion.

"I almost hexed her," he said, his voice rough.

"But you didn't," Albus stated simply.

"I wanted to kill her," he whispered.

"She's an insolent swot. Of course you wanted to kill her!" Phineas responded snidely, startling a snort out of Severus.

He shot a knowing look at Black's ancestor. "Be that as it may, it would have been highly imprudent."

Niggellus snorted in return. "Yes, the paperwork is rather tedious, as I recall."

Albus coughed in a less than discreet way, shifting the attention back to him.

"Whether you feel you deserve her trust or not is actually irrelevant at this point, Severus," Dumbledore said, a small smile pulling at his lips. "You know as well as I do that the girl is notoriously stubborn. There is no way, short of harming her, to convince her that you aren't trustworthy at this point, so you might as well accept the gift of her loyalty."

"Use her blind trust, you mean," Snape growled, more upset at the thought of abusing her trust than he was at knowing the extent of her trust.

"I do not doubt you."

Severus glared at the painting, unsure whether the old man meant that as an affirmation of trust, or as an insult. Knowing Albus, probably both.

"There are days, old man, when I am so grateful to have been the one to kill you."

"It was a pleasure, I'm sure."

Snape growled and turned away, lest he try hexing the portrait. Harming Hogwarts property was not the best idea. Even Voldemort frowned upon that.

His attention was caught by the closed bedroom door, and he grimaced. He didn't know how he was going to apologize to her, but he knew it needed to be done. Even if it weren't the right thing to do, it would smooth the way for the unpleasantness that was coming in the morning. He grimaced again at the thought.

Sometimes he really did hate being the bastard. It was fun most of the time, but it always ran the risk of inducing shock when he did the decent thing. Although, the benefit of her trust in him was that it would take a great deal more than just an apology before she went catatonic. He'd have to do something insane like hug her. Or kiss her.

He smirked at the thought of what she would look like should he do so, before hastily pushing it out of his mind. Now was not the time or place for such frivolous thoughts.

Especially not such thoughts concerning a girl less than half his age, whose heart was breaking over another.

Giving himself a mental shake, he cleared his head and approached the door. He knocked three times, but when no answer came forth, he thought she was childishly ignoring him. However, when he tried to open the door and found it locked, he started to worry. Perhaps he had given her proof enough to break her trust? Perhaps he had scared her more badly than he thought. There wasn't a visible exit, but if determined to escape, and with her wand at her disposal, she would find the hidden door in no time.

He quickly opened the door and strode in, only to find the girl kneeling by the bed, fast asleep. Getting closer, he saw she had cried herself to sleep. He swore softly under his breath, then gently floated her onto the bed. He conjured a chair and sat watching the two students asleep on his bed, though his eyes rested on Miss Granger's face more often than that of the boy's.

It seemed like hours before the girl's eyes fluttered open, confusion evident, though quickly suppressed. He allowed himself a wry smile before softly saying, "You are a fool."

She frowned, looking his way sleepily. "You don't fool me, sir."

He leaned back in his chair, having been unaware that he'd been hovering over her. "It is not wise to trust so blindly, especially in wartime."

She yawned and stretched, being careful not to jostle Weasley. "But what choice do I have at this point? Either I trust my instincts and other small tells that I'm safe with you, or I live in fear of what you're planning, wearing myself out so that I won't have the energy to feel betrayed. I think I'll risk the heartache, sir."

She paused, looking at him critically. "Besides which, it's not like I haven't thought about this. I'm not about to ignore any signs of danger should they present themselves. I am not an idiot, no matter what you think on the subject."

Snape sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "No, I don't suppose you are an idiot, although I maintain that you are a fool."

She shrugged nonchalantly.

"Thank you for moving me onto the bed, by the way. I imagine my knees would be very unhappy with me right now if you hadn't."

He rolled his eyes and let out a sigh. "Your skills in subtlety could use work."

"If I'm too subtle, it goes over the boys' heads."

Snape snorted. "Point taken."

They sat there in silence for a minute, neither moving, neither looking at the other. Hermione finally took a breath and broke the silence.

"Do you have any ideas on how to approach tomorrow's conversations?"

"I do."

Hermione looked mildly pleased. "I'm not surprised, but I am relieved. Although I should warn you that I'm lousy at manipulating people, so don't count on me for much."

Snape snorted but didn't say anything to contradict her. After a few moments, she got restless and looked back at him.

"It's going to be terribly demoralizing for the non-Death Eater students, isn't it?"

Snape closed his eyes and leaned back against the chair. "I haven't seen a way to avoid that consequence."

"Do you think they'll act out?"

"I'm afraid they will stop acting out and start making war. Although, if they retreat to plan, perhaps they will move slowly enough that the war will be over before they get a chance to act."

Hermione looked at him sharply. "War over? Do you think it could happen so quickly?"

"That depends highly on Potter, but it is looking more and more possible, what with the new information I gleaned last night."

Hermione sat up straighter. "You did say the meeting went well, didn't you?"

"Extraordinarily well." Snape smirked. "The Dark Lord has decided that he cannot trust the Lestranges to hold something precious of his anymore. He has told me that my Gringotts vault will be holding this precious item temporarily while he finds a more secure hiding place."

Hermione clasped her hands together excitedly. "The Horcrux?"

"I think so, yes."

She smiled broadly at him. "Oh! That's brilliant!"

"There's still the issue of retrieving it, and, more difficult still, destroying it--"

"Destroying it shouldn't be a problem, sir, as long as we can get it to Harry. Assuming Harry still has the Sword of Gryffindor, that is..."

"Last I saw him, he did. But that is the other problem. I cannot be seen by Potter. His mind is far too open to know that I am helping him, which means that you cannot be seen to be helping him either. And, once we have possession of the Horcrux, I do not want to hand it over to an intermediary."

Hermione nodded with a sigh. "Yes, I can see your point. But I'm sure there's a way... I could send Harry a Patronus--"

"That would be the equivalent of him seeing you."

"Or I could send someone else, like one of the Weasleys, a Patronus."

Snape didn't bother replying, instead just looked at her. She pressed her lips closed, obviously suppressing a huff.

"Fine! But as it stands, Harry's probably figured out that the Horcrux is in the Lestranges vault, and he'll probably go looking for it. Who knows, Griphook might even help him break into Gringotts. And if he dies doing so..."

"I am well aware of Potter's skill in getting himself into trouble, Miss Granger," Snape said dryly. "However, my fears are not contained to merely the boy's safety. I do not know when the Dark Lord will remove the item from my vault for its final resting place. I *do* know that he would detect a fake. If he got wind that I had nicked his prized possession, he would be sure to retaliate most... painfully. And I doubt he would start with me."

Hermione blushed slightly, making Snape wonder if she read more into his protection of her than there was.

"What we need, right now, is to plan the end game."

He was surprised when Hermione's face fell and she looked over at the boy. "I never did learn how to play chess very well."

Snape pursed his lips, remembering that the Weasley boy was supposed to be reasonable at the game.

"Fortunately, we are not relying on your skills. I happen to have some experience in the game."

Hermione blushed again, this time more forcefully, and he smirked.

"I suggest you get up and come have some tea. We have planning to do."

She nodded, looking upset. He turned to leave, but she stopped him with a quiet, "Sir?" He turned to face her again. "... You don't have to humor me."

He didn't say anything, instead just giving her a look. Her lips quirked up at that even as she looked somewhat abashed. "Right. Sorry, I forgot."

He nodded sharply. "Come," he said, then turned and exited the room before she could utter another word.

11

Chapter 12 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

Hermione had felt rather useless at the planning session, seeing as it was obvious that Snape didn't need her there. When they'd called it quits for the night, she'd sarcastically asked if that was all he needed of her, and she was surprised when he'd looked at her intently, replying snidely, "Do not underestimate your usefulness, Miss Granger. I may not have asked your opinions, but that is simply because you couldn't hide them if you tried."

Hermione didn't know whether to be flattered that her opinions counted, or offended at his phrasing. She decided, as she snuggled under the covers, that it didn't matter one way or the other what she felt. She just hoped his plans panned out.

Fortunately, her mind was so focused on that hope that she forgot about what the morning was to bring.

She was woken up quite early by a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Miss Granger," Snape's quiet voice said. "We cannot delay any longer."

Her eyes shot open, and she found Snape watching her with an almost apologetic expression.

"I can't do this," she whispered. Snape's face grew hard, but before he could snap at her, she added, "They're going to kill you."

Snape's face relaxed in shock, but then the harsh look came back. "Your confidence in me is touching."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but he held up his hand. "We have no time for this. Dress yourself and meet me in the office in five minutes."

He turned and left before she could even nod. She sat staring at the door for a few moments before recalling that she was supposed to be getting dressed. She stretched, yawning, and then reluctantly got up, dressing in the plain brown robes Snape had provided. She was trying to tame her hair when he knocked on the door, letting her know her time was up.

She walked into the office, parting her hair so as to braid it at the same time. He watched her with a peculiar expression on his face, one that she couldn't quite decipher. He didn't say anything, however, until she'd finished plaiting her hair and waved her wand at the ends to hold them together, and then it was simply, "Your wand."

She handed it over with a frown, hating that she had to be so defenseless, although she trusted Snape to keep her safe. She also knew, rationally, that she was not the one in danger for this meal the majority of the staff wouldn't be after her blood but she still felt nervous being wandless.

Snape seemed to sense her anxiety, and he made sure she saw in which drawer he placed her wand. When he was done, he paused before pointing his wand at her.

"I'm sorry."

She nodded, biting her lip nervously. He flicked his wand and suddenly there was a weight around her neck, much like the night they came to the castle, only this time, it was softer and far more comfortable.

She put her hands up to feel the shackle, but it felt like hard steel to her light touch. She looked at Snape in query, and he rolled his eyes at her.

"There is no reason we need to add injury to indignity. Besides, chafing paste is a tedious potion to brew."

She smiled, swallowing the tears of fear and gratitude that were threatening her. "Thank you, sir."

She didn't know whether he looked offended or pleased. She supposed he could be both.

He motioned for her to exit the office, and she took in a big breath. She knew they had to do this, but she was finding it difficult to leave the safe haven the office had become.

"We need to leave now, Miss Granger," Snape said softly, sympathetically.

She nodded and stepped forward, knowing this must be as hard for him as it was for her. She wouldn't make it any harder on him than it needed to be.

They made their way quietly down the spiral staircase, but just before they reached the door, Snape touched her shoulder, making her stop.

"Why didn't you braid your hair magically?" he asked.

She choked back a laugh. "My hair doesn't react well to that spell. It... it sort of has a will of its own and doesn't take being forced well at all."

Snape smirked and reached out to tug on a stray lock of hair before tucking it behind her ear. "Not surprising."

He turned and the door opened, but Hermione stood there, shell-shocked and wondering what had just happened. A slight tug on the chain reminded her that she was supposed to be moving, but she walked in a bit of a daze, trying to figure out Snape's motivations.

By the time they reached the doors of the Great Hall, she figured he must have done that just to provoke that reaction from her. When he looked down at her before opening the doors, she glared at him. His smirk was all the confirmation she needed.

"That was horrible of you!" she whispered.

His smirk grew and he opened the doors. "I'm so glad you appreciate my kindnesses, my dear."

The sound of a utensil hitting a plate drew her angry gaze off Snape and into the room at large. Everyone at the head table was staring at them, and all but two of them wore expressions of shock and dismay. McGonagall looked like she was about to faint.

Snape strode through the room to his seat in the center of the table, and Hermione followed reluctantly, moving just before a tug on the chain was required.

She felt everyone's eyes on her. Everyone but the two Death Eaters were unnaturally still. She wanted to send them a smile, let them know she was okay, but that was not an option. Not with the Carrows watching.

Mindful of the Carrows, she turned her eyes to the floor, and followed Snape meekly. When he reached his seat, he motioned for her to stand against the wall, as they had planned. She was about to take her place, when Amycus said, "Now, Severus, don't be churlish! If she's standing against the wall, we can't see her. That's not fair at all."

Snape's mouth thinned. "She was not gifted to you, Amycus. I shall do with her as I please."

Hermione heard several gasps, and felt the tension at the table increase.

"I don't know why you want to look at her, Amycus," Aleto said. "Let Severus put her where he will. I certainly would be more comfortable knowing she wasn't behind us, but I don't really relish the idea of looking at her, either."

Hermione peeked at Snape again and saw a muscle in his jaw twitch, though he was wearing a slight smile.

"I hadn't thought of her as a threat, but if it would make you more comfortable..." Snape motioned for Hermione to move to the front of the table, holding the chain up as she walked around it. "And since you would prefer not to see her, she can sit."

Hermione sat down with relief; she hadn't been sure her legs would have held her up for much longer. She decided to look out at the empty tables rather than face the teachers, but she could still sense how upset they all were. Conversation was nonexistent. She didn't know how Severus was going to stage any conversation. But just as she wondered that, Amycus said, "So, the Dark Lord said you've got the Weasley boy. Any luck with him yet?"

Once again, all movement stopped at the table.

"I had thought the Dark Lord meant to keep Ronald's captivity a secret," Snape replied coolly. "But, since you so blithely bring up the subject, he is still unconscious and showing no signs of regaining consciousness." He paused as if to take a sip of pumpkin juice. "I don't have much hope of his recovering consciousness, actually, though judging by the way my pet keeps talking to him, you'd think he was alert all the time."

"You let her around him? Isn't that..."

"She's not going to harm him. Besides, if she expends all her verbal energy on him, I don't have to deal with casting silencing charms ad nauseum."

Alecto and Amycus both gave appreciative chuckles, though the rest of the table remained in stony silence. Hermione tried not to feel hurt. She knew he was just telling them that to stay in character. She hoped.

"Still, don't you think it's a bit risky?"

"I think the known benefits outweigh the possible risks."

"But what if she decides to put him out of his misery?"

Snape snorted. "As amusing as that would be, I don't think my pet's up for that. It's not the done thing in Gryffindor, and believe me, she is a Gryffindor *through* and *through*."

Hermione heard McGonagall choke and start coughing, while most of the other teachers rustled uncomfortably at the innuendo.

"Does the Dark Lord know about your arrangement?"

Hermione smiled when she heard Snape's long suffering sigh and could almost hear him calling Amycus a dunderhead in his head.

"Of course he knows. He has seen and approved of everything. If he had taken issue with it, the boy would be locked up in the hospital wing, as Madam Pomfrey requested he be. Instead, the good woman has trained my pet to be his nurse, and Weasley and his memories remain secure."

No one said anything else, as it had been clear by Snape's tone alone that he was finished talking about the subject. It wasn't long after that Snape stood and yanked on Hermione's chain, indicating it was time to go. Hermione stood and, as meekly as she could, followed Snape out the giant doors of the Great Hall. She hadn't dared look at the table, fearing she would give everything away if she did.

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

AN: *My abject apologies, dear readers. I thought, since I had prepared everything in advance, that I would be able to update while I was on vacation. Ha! Turned out I got about 10 hours of computer time for the entire length of the vacation (2.5 weeks), and that was mostly spent trying to connect to LJ or FB, which both seemed to be on the wonky side then. But that is why I did not warn you that there wouldn't be updates - I thought there would be.*

As for not updating since getting home... well, jet lag hit me hard this time, and I'm only just starting to readjust. Not to mention Exchange stress... But that's over now.

However... I fear there may be a delay for the next chapter or two, as well. My beta, the wonderful Ayerf, is doing her own set of travels and has better things to think about than betaing at the moment. I am far from willing to begrudge her that. When she returns the next few chapters, I will post them immediately in an attempt to catch up. :-)

Snape strode through the castle to his office, fuming at himself. Filius knew. He wasn't sure what he'd said, or how the munchkin had figured it out, but Filius *knew*. For ten months, he had managed to have THE best kept secret in Britain, and then, in less than one week, three people knew.

He crashed into his office and slammed the door shut, only to have it rebound noisily off the chain attached to Miss Granger. He had forgotten about her. He had *forgotten*.

He vanished the chain, magicked the door shut and, with a roar, picked up the nearest object and hurled it at the wall.

"**FUUUUUUUCK!**" he screamed at the ceiling, trying to expel all the rage and panic he felt as the situation spiraled out of his control. Unfortunately, all it did was make him aware of the girl by the door, who jumped at his exclamation.

He lowered his head and took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Closing his eyes, he swore again, this time with more despair.

After a moment, he couldn't stand the feeling of Miss Granger's eyes burning on him anymore.

"Mr. Weasley needs checking."

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Go tend to Weasley."

"Not until you tell me what is wrong. If Vol- You Know-Who is going to appear in the next few minutes, I have the right to know."

Snape opened his eyes and turned to look at her. Her eyes glittered with anger and yet to be shed tears. And, for some reason, those tears infuriated him all over again.

"You have the right to know?" he snarled, and turned the rest of his body to face her. "You have the right to know?" He took a step forward. She stood her ground. "What makes you think you have a right to *anything*?"

She winced, but only stood taller.

"I have the right to know because it will probably affect me and, well, and I might be able to help."

He laughed rather bitterly. "Help? Help me? Help yourself? Help your boyfriend? Who the hell do you really think you can help?"

"Any and or all of the above," she cried, shrilly. "I thought you were brilliant, but you're an idiot if you push me away right now! Use me! Throw ideas at me! Ridicule my ideas until you calm down, but don't just push me away when you are clearly **losing it!**"

She closed her mouth tightly, breathing so hard through her nose that her nostrils flared. She looked ridiculous. She also looked like she was ready to hex him.

"And there you have it," he said with mocking bow. "I am, as you say, clearly *losing it*. Flitwick now knows I'm acting. He'll have figured everything out by now, including why I killed Dumbledore. And if he figured it out, then Alecko almost certainly has, too. She's no one's fool."

Hermione stood there, her face still pinched, and just stared at him. Accusingly. 'How could you be so dumb' was written all over her face. She looked at him like that for several moments, and then, without a word, shook her head and walked away. She went to tend Weasley, leaving him to think for himself. Just as he'd asked.

When the bedroom door snicked shut, he closed his eyes and whispered, once again, *Fuck*."

He wanted a Firewhiskey. He wanted to get drunk and lose the feeling of immense failure that had settled on his shoulders. But a Firewhiskey was the last thing he needed. He was useless drunk. So, he took several deep breaths, then circled around his desk and sat down, sighing.

Placing his head in his hands, he tried to think of how to remedy the situation, what spells could be used, what excuse could be given. But, without knowing what it was that Filius had responded to, he had no ideas. No thoughts came to him at all except a string of repeating expletives.

He heard the door open, and a moment later felt her standing a few feet away.

"Why do you think Professor Flitwick knows?"

Sighing again, he leaned back in his chair and looked at her. "He looked like he had four aces."

She blinked, but then asked, "And what does that look like?"

"Like he's Occluding."

She let out a half amused huff. "At least he knows how to Occlude," she muttered. "What does he look like when he has nothing?"

"His normal, excitable self."

"And would either of the Carrows know his tell?"

"I sincerely doubt it, but that is not the point. His behavior changed! Alecko *will* notice that."

"And not just ascribe it to my presence?"

Snape paused. "She will be suspicious."

"Why?"

"BECAUSE SHE ALREADY IS, YOU SILLY GIRL!" he screamed, suddenly standing over her. He noticed she did not remain unaffected, as she backed up a bit and bit her lip. He sat back down and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I have subverted too many detentions. I have been too lenient with my colleagues' repeated subordinations. I have been *soft*." He spat the last word like a curse.

Hermione sniffed, and it sounded almost disdainful. He shot her a look and found her glaring at him.

"Madam Pomfrey was shocked, not just surprised, but *shocked* to find out you're on our side. When she came into the bedroom after finding you asleep out here, and us in there, she looked as if the world had tilted. You do not get that kind of reaction out of a person unless they truly do not suspect anything."

"Poppy was willing to believe the worst in me from the beginning."

"Fuck that. Surely you can see she was upset because she felt you had betrayed her? Harry really hates you for killing Dumbledore, but he's had good reason to loathe you all along. You did not betray him; you lived up to his expectations. Everyone else in the Order, however, felt betrayed."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Even if everyone did find me a delight before I murdered their hero, it doesn't matter. They are a bunch of trusting fools, whereas the Death Eaters are playing a much slier game. Alecto is looking for power, and I'm in her way. She has been observing me very closely ever since the fucking school year started!"

"But it doesn't follow that she's been looking for signs that you're not a loyal Death Eater! She'll have been looking for signs that you aren't worthy of the position! That's all!"

"You do not know of what you speak."

Hermione let out a frustrated noise. "And you are being deliberately obtuse! Even if you're right and she suspects, do you really think she's going to go reporting to Snake Face before she has definitive proof?"

Snape blinked and stared at her in bemusement. "You think of him as that, too?"

Hermione blinked back, still on the defensive. "*What?*"

"Snake Face. I thought I was the only one."

Hermione blinked again a few times before she visibly made the mental shift. "I expect most of the wizarding world calls him that behind his back. Probably half the Death Eaters, too."

Snape snorted lightly as he sat down. "Only the ones who can Occlude."

A bark of laughter came out of Hermione's mouth, though her face was still rather grim. "Yes, I imagine there's a short life expectancy for those who think it without protection."

"Indeed."

They lapsed into an uncomfortable silence which Snape refused to break. Instead, he watched as she examined him.

Finally, she said, "So that's it? You're not worried anymore?"

Snape shrugged slightly. "You made a good point. One does not summon or even approach the Dark Lord without ample cause. She suspects, of that I am sure, but I can not think of one item of hard proof she has against me."

Hermione sagged against the desk.

"So can we now talk about how Professor Flitwick can help us?"

"Help us? I think not. I will be Obliviating him before the students arrive back tonight."

"Oblivia-- Are you *mad?*"

He stood and slammed his palm down on the desk. "Yours is NOT the only life on the line, Miss Granger! I would thank you to remember that."

"But he's a Ravenclaw! He can help us find the artifact!"

"And I'm a Slytherin, so I can talk to snakes," he said, deadpan. "Your logic is faulty."

"Will you at least ask before Obliviating him?"

Before Snape could say anything, there was a chime. A moment later, the staircase was heard quietly moving. Snape waved his wand and the chain reappeared on Hermione's neck. He scowled when she knelt by his desk subserviently, but before he could protest, there was a knock on the door.

Giving Hermione a look of disgust, he said, "Enter."

He was less than surprised to see his diminutive colleague enter the room and stand there looking at him shrewdly.

"Morning, Headmaster."

"Flitwick. Do you have an appointment?"

Flitwick looked over at Hermione, and, just like that, he smiled radiantly and started bobbing up and down on his toes. "Ha ha! I knew it!" he exclaimed, and ran over to shake Snape's hand.

Snape gave Hermione a look, to which she reluctantly nodded defeat.

Snape waved his wand again and the office door shut itself, while Hermione got up, dusted off her knees and moved over to her chair. Flitwick, meanwhile, continued pumping Snape's hand.

"I am so glad we were wrong about you, Severus!" he squeaked. "It was terrible of us to just assume the worst like that, even if the proof that was in the pudding was rather substantial."

Snape rolled his eyes and extricated his hand. "That was the point, Filius."

"Of course it was! Of course! And a bloody brilliant plan it was. Dumbledore's, I assume?" Snape bowed his head in acknowledgment, while Filius looked up at the "sleeping" portrait. "Devious bastard if ever there was one, but bloody brilliant."

He waved his wand and a small, high chair appeared, complete with steps. He climbed up and then looked at Snape expectantly. "So, what can I help you with before you

Obliviate me?"

"How did you know--" Hermione started before a jerk on the chain cut her off. She glared at Snape, and he shook his head. Filius, meanwhile, laughed.

"Oh, there's no way I can keep this a secret, Miss Granger. Severus knows that, as do I. I wholeheartedly wish I were adept at the art of subterfuge so I could be of more use, but I'm not, so there's nothing for it but a quick bit of Obliviation."

Snape's lips quirked up at Hermione's look of horrified awe. "*A quick bit of Obliviation?* A quick bit of..."

She sat back, looking disturbed.

"Oh, I assure you, it's nothing. At least, not when so much is at stake, right Severus?"

"Indeed."

"So, we'd best find out if I can be of any assistance before that happens, shouldn't we?"

Snape spread his hands to relieve Flitwick of any duties, when Hermione cut in, "Do you know of any artifact of Rowena Ravenclaw's that has survived?"

Snape sent Hermione a death glare while Flitwick went into a thinking pose and hummed.

"Hmm, not that I know of. I mean, there were rumors of her diadem throughout the centuries, but nothing substantial that might help find it. It's one puzzle we've never really been able to solve, to our

continued embarrassment."

"Diadem?" Snape asked before Hermione could.

"Mm. A crown-like thingy she made. It was said to make the wearer wiser. But it was stolen away before she died, so I have no idea where it might be, or even if it still exists."

Both Snape and Hermione sat back in their chairs, digesting this news. Flitwick beamed at both of them.

Hermione glanced at Snape with a dare in her eyes before asking Flitwick, "If you don't mind my asking, sir, how did you figure out Snape's allegiance?"

He laughed delightedly. "By you, of course! You turning so meek and mild mannered, not even trying to talk once! There's no way anyone could have broken you of that without killing you. Or putting you under the Imperius."

Snape broke into laughter as Hermione pushed herself as far back into the chair as she could, blushing.

Flitwick, realizing the faux pas, said, "Combined with your intelligence and focus, it is a most commendable and endearing trait, I assure you, Miss Granger. It was a delight to teach someone who was so enthusiastic!"

Snape, who had only just stopped laughing, snorted. "That's not what you said every time you graded the girl's essays."

Flitwick looked uncomfortable. "Now, now, Severus. Don't be cruel."

Snape and Hermione snorted in tandem, then eyed each other suspiciously. Flitwick coughed to hide his chuckle.

"Yes, well, time is running short, Headmaster. If I might suggest an *Imperio* for social calls from now on, I shouldn't become suspicious again."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but Snape shot her a repressive look. She subsided with crossed arms and an angry frown.

"See?" Flitwick crowed, after having hopped down from his perch and banishing it. "That's the real Hermione!"

Even Hermione managed to crack an embarrassed grin. Snape took that moment to Obliviate and Confund Flitwick, making sure the Charms professor thought he'd been called into Snape's office for yet another lecture on insubordination.

Flitwick looked around with a confused look on his face, almost squawking in indignation when he caught sight of Hermione with the chain still around her neck. Looking back at Snape, he puffed up in rage. Before he could actually verbalize, Snape said, "You're on your last warning, Flitwick. The next offense will reach the Dark Lord's ears. Now, was there something you wanted to add?"

Flitwick snapped his mouth shut, and, with one last pitying look at Hermione, left the office in a huff.

Both Hermione and Snape sagged in relief as soon as he was gone. Neither said anything as they mulled over the information they'd gathered in that short meeting. After a bit, Hermione grimaced.

"Are you going to Obliviate everyone who suspects, or just the lousy poker players?"

Snape's lips twitched, but he didn't look at her. "It depends. I would *consider* sparing McGonagall if she's sensible about it, but everyone else here is an unknown, and therefore a liability."

Hermione nodded slowly. "Would it be possible to modify the Carrows' memories? Or would that be too risky?" Snape gave her a look, which made her say rather hastily, "Right, forget that, then. But then, how do we fix this morning's blunder without making it obvious we're fixing a mistake?"

Snape put down the quill he'd been playing with and looked at her. "I put you under the Imperius. Filius is right in that it's the only way. If I make sure you behave as you did this morning, the Carrows will have no reason to suspect anything when I let it slip to the teachers that I am controlling you magically."

"But won't they wonder why you didn't tell them that this morning?"

"They might, but I doubt *they* will think much of it. Imperio is rather common these days."

"So common they'll know I wasn't under it this morning?"

"Did either of them look into your eyes?" Hermione shook her head. "Then we have little to worry about. Hopefully this will put to rest everyone else's suspicions, as well as Filius'."

Hermione nodded. "Okay. I hope this all works out. I would hate to think I ruined everything just because I forgot to be myself."

Snape looked at her a moment oddly before saying, "There is always the question of whether you are behaving as who you think you are, since this is not your normal circumstance."

"Hm, perhaps, but then, who would I be if not me?"

Snape conceded the point wordlessly while she got up and stretched. "I should go tend to Ron now. Please let me know if there's anything I can help with."

Snape nodded her out and then sat looking at the fire in his grate without seeing it.

"She's a remarkable girl," Dumbledore said over his shoulder. Snape nodded.

"Too trusting by far, though. Did you notice she didn't even question my using an Unforgivable on her once she knew its purpose?"

"She believes in you."

Snape nodded once, still staring through the flames. "I can't say I like the pressure, old man. It will only make failing that much worse."

"But perhaps that much sweeter when you win?"

Snape closed his eyes and imagined her face throughout the morning, from her fearful waking through her angry retorts, and ending on her wide-eyed look of trust. His gut gave a lurch at the thought of betraying her.

"Perhaps." He lapsed back into silence for another minute, before softly repeating, "Perhaps."

13

Chapter 14 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

Huge thanks to Ayerf for betaing! Any mistakes are my own responsibility, however. The next chapter will be up in the next couple of days. Now onto the story!

Hermione sat down beside the bed and looked in Ron's direction. Her mind was too busy cataloging everything that had happened, or would soon happen, to actually see the redhead. The scenarios, risks and embarrassments whirled around her like a dervish until she had to shake her head in an attempt to focus.

"This is madness, you know," she muttered, taking Ron's hand and rubbing it mindlessly. "Absolute madness. We are getting closer and closer to winning the war, and yet we're so bloody close to the edge of disaster. The fact that *Snape* is starting to crack shows just how insane this is."

She stopped rubbing and gripped Ron's hand a bit more firmly. "It scares me, Ron. It scares me so much. Snape was almost as irrational as he was in the shack third year. I forgot just how scary he can be. But even when he regained control... Snape and Flitwick were tossing around the idea of Obliviation as if it's nothing to meddle with a mind. Or meddle with mind control, for that matter..."

"I don't want to be Imperiused! I trust him not to do anything amiss, but, oh, Ron, I don't want to go through that again. It was bad enough in class, but now... Now it will be nearly real."

She bent over, touching her forehead to Ron's hand in a gesture that seemed reverent until she started crying. "I don't want to lose my mind! It's all I have left now! You're dying, Harry's lost out there, and I'm in here with nothing but a shred of hope. I'll be a puppet soon, my thoughts and actions not my own to control, and, oh God, Ron, how am I to get through this? How am I going to stay me throughout all this? How am I going to stay on this side of useful if I lose all control?"

Ron's finger twitched, prompting Hermione to sit up and actually look at him. He remained unconscious, but she gripped his hand in both of hers with as much hope as if he'd opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"Listen to me ramble on. I'm as bad as Snape, just rather more pathetic. There's no use worrying about losing, because if we lose, then we lose and we die. That is one good thing about You-Know-Who, though. He's so afraid of death for himself, he thinks it's the worst punishment he can mete out. And, well, the joke's on him. If he really does win, then death is a pretty good option for all of us."

"It would be a waste, though," Snape said from behind her.

Hermione jumped to her feet with a squeak that immediately turned into a growl.

"Can't you knock?"

"Of course I *can*, I just choose not to."

Hermione bit her lip and closed her eyes, counting to ten before scrubbing her face and looking at Snape. "Was there something you wanted, other than to spy on me?"

A muscle in Snape's jaw twitched. "As a matter of fact, yes. I have asked one of the house-elves to collect a few books from the library on Rowena Ravenclaw and the diadem."

Hermione looked up at him, eyes wide with hopeful disbelief.

"You want me to research?"

"You seemed to have a penchant for it in school."

Hermione sniffed and beamed up at him. "Oh, thank you!"

He snorted. "Don't thank me yet, girl. It's very possible the texts will be in Old English, or possibly Latin."

Hermione waved that concern aside, still beaming. "Oh, don't worry about that, sir. I still have a decent grasp on both of those and on Middle English, which is actually far more commonly found in the Hogwarts' texts."

She noticed he was looking at her oddly again. "What?"

He shook his head. "The elf has been instructed to wait until after Irma leaves for the night, so you will have to curb your enthusiasm for a few hours yet. In the meantime, though, I have found a few texts that might yield some information from Dumbledore's collection."

He stepped to the side and waved his hand at a small pile of books she hadn't seen floating behind him. At Snape's direction, they moved over to her, and settled themselves on her chair.

"And remember, time is of the essence."

She nodded her head, though she had already picked up the top book from the stack and eagerly opened the cover. "Of course, sir. And thank you."

She was vaguely aware of Snape shaking his head at her and then leaving the room, but most of her attention was focused on the book. It was heavenly to be of some real use again, to try to glean vital information from a book.

The joy of reading something new was so heavenly, in fact, she lost track of time. She was only made aware of the time when Snape cleared his throat from the doorway.

She looked up at him curiously and immediately wished she hadn't. His face was stony and cold, which presaged nothing good.

"The students will be arriving shortly."

Her shoulders slumped, but she nodded and closed the book. She stood up and faced Snape, whose demeanor hadn't changed.

She flinched despite herself when he aimed his wand at her, causing him to scowl and drop his arm slightly. "It will not hurt."

She gritted her teeth and nodded. "I know. It will, in fact, be indecently pleasant."

He nodded and raised his wand. "Imperio."

Everything went dim and cushy. Hermione felt as if she was floating on a very pleasant cloud, warm and snug with nary a worry to bother her.

A slight weight came to be around her neck and upper shoulders, and then a voice was telling her to follow him down into the Great Hall, meekly.

She didn't really understand the point of being meek, but she couldn't see a reason against it, either. And it was so easy, so *nice* to just follow orders and not think.

She was only vaguely aware of her surroundings, but knew when she entered the Great Hall. There were people there, and the voice inside her head was telling her to be aware of them, to react to them by hunching in on herself a little.

She peeked at them shyly and thought it was strange how they frowned at her. She was their star pupil, wasn't she? What had she done to displease them? The thought gnawed at her, slowly nibbling the comfortable clouds away.

The voice told her to stand at the wall behind his chair and listen closely to everything. She did as told, but she wondered why she was asked to listen to silence, as there wasn't a sound to be heard in the Hall, except for a chair scraping the stone floor.

It wasn't long, however, before she heard someone McGonagall? hiss, "What do you think you're doing, Snape?"

"Whatever do you mean, *Professor*?" The voice sounded different outside of her head, Hermione thought. Much colder. Meaner.

"I mean how dare you subject the children to your sick perversions?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand your meaning." The voice was colder still.

"Oh, come off it, Snape! You know as well as I do that it is completely inappropriate for you to parade Miss Granger around here like she's your pet!"

"And how is it inappropriate, madam?"

McGonagall made a spluttering sound, then yelled, "Because she is only a child herself!"

Hermione heard a great intake of air from all sides, then nothing.

"Your *tone* is inappropriate, Madam. You will see me in my office after dinner to discuss what is and isn't appropriate." Hermione sort of wanted to shiver; the voice was so very cold.

Silence again. The silence lasted until a faint rumbling sounded outside of the hall. Suddenly, the Hall was filled with young voices, which grew curiously mute as they got closer. Soon, Hermione could tell the Hall was full, but again, there was silence.

Look, but discreetly, the voice said in her mind. And so she looked. The Hall was indeed full of students, and all of them were staring at her. The vast majority of the students looked ill, while the rest looked uncomfortable. Only a few students at one table Crabbe and Goyle? And another she didn't recognize looked pleased to see her.

She knew that was odd, but couldn't think why.

Observe the Slytherins for me, especially Draco, the voice commanded. So she watched the Slytherin table. She noticed that even the few who did not initially show discomfort, soon began to squirm under her emotionless gaze.

A low susurrant of whispers was taking over the Hall, but they stopped as Snape stood up.

"Good evening and welcome back. As you have noticed, we have an old... *friend* amongst our number tonight. Miss Granger here was foolish enough to think she could evade the law by hiding in the forest like an animal. She was not, however, clever enough to evade the Snatchers who are, as you should know by now, roaming the countryside in search of fugitives such as her.

"Fortunately for her, the Dark Lord gifted her to me, so she need not die or spend the rest of her life in Azkaban. I present her here tonight and every night hence, as a living example of what is not acceptable.

"Look at her, under my *complete* control, and consider your options very carefully."

Snape sat down and started to fill his plate, while the Hall again filled with a buzz of uneasy whispers. Hermione watched the Slytherins and noticed they were the chief whisperers. Every student was sharing their thoughts whether happy or uneasy with their neighbors, very quietly. Everyone, but Draco. He was sitting up and looking at her. He looked rather ill at ease. When she looked him in the eye, he flinched and shifted his gaze over to Snape before bowing his head in an unusual show of interest in his food.

The rest of the meal continued in the same way, with the whispers never growing beyond a dull drone. Soon enough, Snape stood and with a curt, "Whenever you are

finished," aimed at Professor McGonagall, compelled Hermione to follow him five paces back as he strode down the middle aisle and out the double doors. She followed him mindlessly without any complaint.

Once inside his office, he bade her stand beside him. He sat at his desk and shuffled papers restlessly for five minutes until he suddenly stiffened, and moments later the staircase began to move. Hermione listened to Snape's breathing change, and watched his hands tense.

There was a knock on the door. Snape said, "Enter," and Professor McGonagall came in. She looked between the two of them, then closed the door behind her.

"If I am wrong, I ask that you kill me rather than report me to your Dark Lord, but, Severus, was it all an act?"

Snape muttered something, and Hermione opened her eyes wide and breathed deeply. Exhaling, she shuddered. McGonagall watched with suddenly watery eyes. Before Snape or Hermione could react, she had rushed over and taken Hermione in her arms.

"Och, I am so glad you're alright!" she crooned, surprising Hermione. She hugged her professor back, however, and became a bit teary-eyed herself.

"The Headmaster has taken very good care of me."

McGonagall withdrew and patted her cheek fondly for a few seconds before turning to Snape.

"And you!" she said, harshly. "How could you do it?" His eyes became cold before they relaxed in surprise when she added, "How could you cut us off like that?"

"No one was supposed to know, Minerva. It was essential that no one knew."

"Dumbledore?" Snape nodded. Minerva looked like she wanted to spit on the former headmaster's tomb. "I imagine his plan was impeccable, but I've found myself rather disliking the man!"

Hermione and Snape both snorted, though Hermione's was more of surprise.

"But I imagine that time is tight and we should discuss what's to be done now, unless you plan to sack me?"

Snape relaxed slightly, and his lip twitched up. "I wouldn't do that to you, Min. You're much too invaluable."

"Meaning the paperwork alone would strangle you."

"Just so. But you're right in that time is tight. I expect that one of the Carrows will be up shortly to gloat, and I'd rather you were gone by then."

"What do you need me to do?"

"Only one thing: Make sure the students don't take unnecessary risks. Suggest that they create an end-game plan, and stress that immediate action will only get them maimed or killed. I cannot protect them if they revolt more openly than they already have, especially since Hagrid's defection."

McGonagall frowned and opened her mouth to say something, but Snape raised his hands in placation, even as he said, "Defection may be a strong word, but you have to admit he was damned foolish, protesting as obviously as he did. He was lucky to get away, even with my stalling the Aurors."

McGonagall nodded briskly, though still didn't look pleased. "I will try my best to reign the students in, though I don't know how long they'll wait. Miss Granger's appearance..." Hermione smiled wryly at McGonagall, who only frowned.

Snape nodded. "With luck, none of us will have to wait much longer."

"Are we really nearing the end?"

"It's looking that way. But, for God's sake, don't get careless! And don't let anyone else know, including Potter."

McGonagall gave him her best insulted look. "That rather goes without saying."

Snape nodded. "I'm glad to hear it, as I'd rather not Obliviate you tonight. I'm rather tired for such finicky work."

McGonagall smiled tightly. "I'm glad we were wrong about you, Severus. I hope, when this is over, you'll consider resuming our weekly chess game?"

"If we both survive with our wits intact, that sounds... acceptable. But now you need to go back to making my life exceedingly difficult."

McGonagall nodded briskly. "Good night, Headmaster."

"Good evening, Professor."

McGonagall left after patting Hermione on the shoulder one last time, as if to make sure she was real. Hermione looked at Snape curiously.

"I didn't realize you were on such good terms with Professor McGonagall. I'd always thought you hated each other."

Snape leaned back in his chair and looked up at her. "She was the only teacher to protest Dumbledore's handling of the shack incident. She felt he had been far too light on Potter and Black. Granted, she didn't tell me that until after I had joined the teaching staff, but... I appreciated the gesture, even if I rather resented the timing."

"It must have been horrible to have lost her good opinion."

Snape shrugged. "I've suffered worse."

Hermione snorted at the understatement. "Should I be out here for the Carrows?"

Snape shook his head and sighed. "No. And given all my recent visitors, I'm afraid we should make it seem as if..."

Hermione grimaced but nodded. "Give me two minutes."

She turned to leave, but Snape stopped her with a light touch on her arm. Looking back, she saw he was reaching into a drawer in his desk. "Hide the books," he said as he brought out her wand. "Just in case."

She nodded and couldn't keep a smile from her face as her wand touched her palm. "Of course."

Gripping her wand tightly, she returned to the bedroom and smiled. She would never have described Snape as a nice man, but his thoughtfulness, when no one else was watching, was quite touching. She wondered why he was being so nice to her, but she wasn't going to question it too deeply. He wasn't a Trojan Horse, of that she was sure, so there was no need to examine his small gifts more closely.

She smiled and hurriedly stripped and got into bed, casting a quick Disillusionment charm on Ron. She didn't want to move him unless it was necessary, and she hoped that the Carrows wouldn't be getting more than a quick glimpse in, anyway.

She waved her wand wordlessly and the books floated over to her side; she reached over to manually push them under the bed, keeping the one she'd been reading handy.

She heard a cough, and looked over to see Snape by the door, looking away from her. She hastily covered herself to her shoulders with the sheet and then called out to let him know she was decent.

He cautiously looked over, saw that she was covered, and came into the room, mostly closing the door behind him and casting a Muffliato. She noticed he'd taken the time to dishevel himself. Her mind immediately skittered away from the parts they were playing, focusing instead on finding something safe, something comfortable to get them through.

Snape, however, managed to find a relatively safe topic first.

He nodded at Ron's side of the bed and said, "Well thought out, Miss Granger. Does that mean I may give Carrow a glimpse of you?"

She nodded. "I assumed that's what you wanted."

He made a waffling motion. "It has its merits, but could be avoided if it makes you too uncomfortable."

She smiled gratefully. "Thank you, but it's okay. I'd rather reduce any suspicion you might be under."

His face skewed in a show of relief and regret. "That is... kind of you."

"It's nothing, sir. You've shown Ron and me great care. I can only hope to help you as much as you've helped us."

He'd slowly approached the bed, finally reaching it and sitting on the foot's edge. He looked like he wanted to say something, but was having trouble finding the words. Just as he opened his mouth and started saying, "I-" he stopped and looked inward, as if hearing something she couldn't.

"Forgive me," he said, conjuring comfortable magical ties securing her to the bed. She blushed and raised her brows in surprise while he grimaced. And grew red. He then disillusioned her wand and placed it in her hand with a significant look.

"Severus?" It was Amycus. Hermione shivered, earning her a sharp look of concern. She smiled bravely back. He scowled at her expression, and she took the hint and started sniffing. At that, he smirked.

"One moment," he called, having canceled the muffliato. He made motions as if he were buttoning up his robes, and turned to see to Carrow, whose shadow was trying to crawl through the slight crack in the doorway.

Snape didn't look back as he left, shutting the door securely behind him. She let out a big breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and twitched her wand, releasing herself.

She grabbed the book she'd been reading before dinner and settled in under the covers. In her eagerness to resume the research, she forgot that she was free to dress if she so desired. She also missed that a tray of food had appeared on the bedside table, making up for the meal she'd only watched.

14

Chapter 15 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

AN: Huge thanks to Ayerf for betaing! I will apologize in advance for any corrections she made that were missed in my hurry to get this posted, for lo! A tired Avery is a lazy Avery.

Snape felt like his face was still flaming as he closed the door behind him and faced Amycus. The Death Eater grinned lasciviously and slapped Snape on the shoulder in a congratulatory way.

"I had no idea you would be on her already, otherwise I would have made an appointment."

Snape smiled tightly. "Yes, well, seeing as you have interrupted me, do me the favor of being quick?"

Amycus winked. "Righto. Whatcha gonna do about that bitch, McGonagall? Her outburst tonight was pretty outrageous."

"I've warned her that should she challenge my authority one more time, she will be dismissed without a recommendation."

"That's all? She's been fighting us all year!"

"This is your first year here as a teacher, Amycus. I assure you her behavior has been similar to that of previous years. She was putting the students first, which is also as our Lord wishes. Had she confronted me in front of the children, then it would have been a simple challenge of authority and she would have been dismissed then and there."

"But--"

"She's an excellent teacher, Amycus. The Dark Lord and I would be hard pressed to find someone who is as dedicated and adept at pounding such difficult magics into the dunderheads we teach."

"Yeah, but she's been subverting us every which way!"

"And she has been told that should she voice her opinion so publicly again, she will be sacked."

"But what about the detentions? She actively helps that fucking Longbottom kid and his gang!"

"Do you have proof of that?"

Amycus opened his mouth, but shut it with a growl. "Not solid, no."

"Then there is nothing I can do. I will not fire a well-respected pureblood on hearsay."

"But--"

"That is my final say. Should you get proof of her subversions, then bring it to me and I will make sure she gets what she deserves. Now, is that all?" Amycus nodded resentfully. "Then I respectfully ask you to mind your duties while I mind mine." He forced his mouth into a dirty smirk, which garnered a return smirk from Amycus.

"Of course, sir. Have an enjoyable night."

"I intend to."

As soon as the door shut behind Amycus, Snape let out an angry huff. "He is as arrogant as he is stupid."

"They tend to be the most dangerous. Watch him carefully," Dumbledore said from behind him.

"I know that, Old Man," Snape growled back, not bothering to turn around.

"Now Severus--"

"No!" Snape yelled "No lectures, chastisements or such. Not right now." He sank down into his chair, defeated.

"You handled the situation very well."

Snape gripped his hair in frustration and growled out, "Just leave me alone, Albus."

After a few moments of silence, Snape dared to peek at the painting, sighing in relief when he found it empty.

He couldn't face Dumbledore right now. Not after getting an erection from seeing one of his students.

He groaned, further disgusted at himself. It wasn't even the shock of seeing that hint of breast as she'd reached down to the floor that had made him hard. No, he had to react to her willingness and trust as he shackled her to the bedpost. To her almost amused, innocent surprise.

He groaned again and put his head on the desk, feeling rather ill.

"Sir?"

Snape sat up as if shocked and looked to the bedroom doorway and found her looking at him in a concerned way. The guilt rushed in again, forcing his mood even further south.

"What is it?" he snapped.

She frowned, but still looked too concerned. He inwardly cursed her for being so damned empathetic. and waved for her to speak with an impatient, "Any day now!"

She pursed her lips, but approached the desk. It was only then that he noticed she held one of the books clamped to her chest.

"I may have found a picture of what the diadem looks like, sir," she said tentatively, laying the book down on his desk.

There was a small illustration of a slight, older woman with a curious tiara on top of her head. The caption stated it was a reproduction of one of Rowena Ravenclaw's portraits. Severus was struck by how sad she looked.

"I suppose that will help us should we come across a stash of relics, but I don't see the immediate importance of this information."

Hermione pulled back as if struck. Snape looked back at Rowena's sad smile.

"No, sir, it doesn't help at the moment. I was... Well, there was always the possibility that you had seen

the diadem and not known it, seeing as hiding things in plain sight is often the best strategy."

Snape sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, suddenly worn out. "It is perhaps a good strategy for most, but trust me, Miss Granger, the Dark Lord does not think that way. He would never have found the Chamber of Secrets had he only been looking for the obvious."

Hermione opened her mouth and uttered a stunted huff before saying, curtly, "Of course, you're right. He's a megalomaniac with a penchant for grandeur and showboating. He makes sure all his followers know just how sneaky and clever he is, at all times, and then controls them with ham-fisted fear. He would never do something as simple as hide something where everyone would look through it and smirk to himself about how everyone is such an idiot compared to him."

Snape clenched his fists in anger at Hermione's snide tone, but forbore responding, tempting though it was to vent his anger on her. Especially as she was the cause.

The guilt swirled again, and he tamped down on his rage.

"You forget," he bit out coldly, "that his *soul* is at stake. Not even the most openhearted, idiotic Hufflepuff leaves their soul out where others may find and destroy it. You tend to keep that close to the vest. Especially with Dumbledore watching your every move."

"But that's just it! He would love to have a one-up on Dumbledore. No, he may not have shared the knowledge with anyone, but to be able to think to himself, 'I'm better than Dumbledore, the blind old fool,' would have enormous appeal."

Snape considered her words. The logic was sound.

"It wouldn't be 'in plain sight,' however. He did not underestimate Dumbledore."

"Alright. But I suspect it would have been too tempting to not hide it in Hogwarts somewhere."

"Agreed."

He looked up at Hermione to find her smiling down at him as if he had just awarded her the House Cup.

"What?"

She shook her head and muttered, "Nothing," but continued smiling at him happily even as she leaned in to look at the book.

"You do realize," he said repressively, "that Hogwarts is very possibly one of the best places to hide anything? Even if we are correct, our task is still rather daunting."

"Oh, I know," she replied cheerfully. "But couldn't we use the house-elves' knowledge?"

"Yes, but even they are mortal and..."

They looked at each other with identical expressions and as one, said, "The Grey Lady!"

Snape stood so suddenly, Hermione jerked back to avoid him.

"I will go find the Lady and ask what she may know of the diadem."

He took several steps forward, but was stopped by a hand on his elbow. Looking at Hermione, he found her shaking her head at him and looking uncomfortable.

Snape understood even before she said, "You... you're supposed to be here. With me."

He gritted his teeth and nodded. "You're correct, of course. That would be suspicious in the extreme. I will have to ask Minerva to question her tomorrow."

"Couldn't you send a Patronus?"

He shook his head. "They are infrequent, but the Dark Lord has been known to perform wand checks."

"What about my wand?"

Snape looked at her, breathless from shame at his oversight. "Yes," he said curtly. "That would work."

She beamed at him and ran to the bedroom. A moment later, a shot of silver flew through the office and disappeared through the stone wall.

Hermione came out of the bedroom looking rather pleased with herself, though when she looked at him, her good mood wilted a fair fraction.

"Now we need to hope that no one is with Minerva when she receives the message."

Hermione put her hands to her mouth and blushed. "Oh, God. I... I didn't think."

He was rather aghast to see her eyes start to fill up, and he closed his eyes in a bid for patience. At the first snuffle, he bit out, "It matters little if someone is with her. She is as adept at memory charms as I am."

Another snuffle, along with a quiet, "I'm sorry, sir."

He opened his eyes and nodded. "Try not to let Boy Wonder's influence rub off on you quite so much in the future."

He smirked at the glare he received, and his heart felt a bit lighter when she responded to his smirk with an annoyed huff, a roll of her eyes and an exaggerated flounce out of the room. His heart lightened even further when she came out of the bedroom only moments later, carrying a tray of food and books.

At his look, she shrugged, placed the tray on the corner of his desk and said, "I hate eating in bed. Crumbs, you know."

He snorted softly. "Indeed." He plucked a biscuit and a book off her tray and sat down again, feeling almost content. Things were looking brighter than they had in many, many years. In fact, he hadn't felt this level of hope since he'd first found Lily.

He sighed, his mood destroyed. He hoped everything went better this time around.

"Sir?"

He looked up at the bright, pretty face before him and almost cringed. "Yes?"

"Thank you. I'm... almost glad things have turned out as they have. As glad as is possible."

His chest tightened painfully and he willed himself not to lash out at her. "Yes, well, let's finish killing off soul bits before we get too comfortable, shall we?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir. But thank you, anyway. I'm glad you rescued me. I'm glad to have had this chance to work with you."

He shook his head, and looked back to the arcane book in his hand to hide his growing despair and anger. "You're an odd one, Granger."

Her giggle only cemented the feeling of hopelessness in his chest. He was going to kill her. Just like he'd killed Lily and Emmeline. And what a fucking waste that would be.

15

Chapter 16 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

Thanks to Ayerf and Septentrion! *smooches*

Both Snape and Hermione were fully ensconced in their research when the fire flared green. The two raised their heads in unison, and Hermione shrank out of the fireplace's line of sight. Snape waved his wand, lowering the ward he'd placed on the Floo, and McGonagall's head appeared.

"Headmaster," she said, sounding primmer than usual. "I have the Transfiguration curriculum you demanded to see."

"Excellent. You may bring it through."

Hermione came out of hiding, still gripping her book to her chest as the fire twirled and Minerva stepped out, brushing her robes automatically while looking around. She visibly relaxed after her cursory inspection and offered the other two a tight smile.

"It took a bit of searching, but the Grey Lady should be visiting you after the Carrows have gone to bed."

Snape nodded. "Thank you, Minerva. I trust there were no issues in receiving the message?"

"Fortunately, the Carrows aren't in the habit of taking evening tea with me anymore."

Hermione fought showing her surprise when Snape sniggered. "No, I imagine they aren't fond of what you served."

McGonagall's eyes twinkled merrily. "Kibble isn't to everyone's taste, I grant you, but it was the finest kibble in Scotland!"

She and Snape shared a look before breaking down in laughter.

"Oh, Severus, it is so *good* to have you back."

Snape leaned back in his chair. Hermione couldn't quite read his expression, but it seemed guarded again. "I'm surprised you missed me at all. I was gone hardly a week before you yourself left."

McGonagall waved his comment away. "You know very well what I mean, young man. I am glad our faith in you - our prior faith in you," she added at a sour look from Snape, "was merited. It hurt terribly to think the headmaster had been fooled."

"And it didn't hurt to think you'd been fooled?"

"Severus Snape..." McGonagall pursed her lips with a huff. "Of course it hurt personally, but it hurt far more to think that we had placed our trust in Dumbledore if he could be fooled so easily."

Snape snorted. "Trust me, Minerva, there is nothing easy about deceiving."

"No, I imagine there isn't," she said softly.

A stubborn silence descended before Hermione lost patience and moved toward her chair. She placed the book on the desk, making McGonagall twitch visibly.

"Sorry if I startled you, Professor."

McGonagall shook her head. "I owe you an apology, Miss Granger. Severus and I have been carrying on as if no one else was around. Please do come join us."

Hermione saw Snape raise his eyebrow at McGonagall. "I believe it is *my* office, Minerva. I should be the one offering the invitations."

McGonagall waved his words aside again. "Yes, but we both know you're hopeless when it comes to social graces with the students."

Snape opened his mouth to retort, but closed it again when Hermione said, "He's been very gracious to me, Professor."

McGonagall opened her mouth, looking flustered, when Snape, surprisingly, came to her rescue. "Ah, but you aren't a student right now, are you Miss Granger?"

Both women nodded in concession, rather sheepishly.

Hermione thought Snape looked amused, but his voice betrayed nothing when he switched topics and asked McGonagall whether she'd had any luck talking with the rebelling students.

"I had a quick word with Mr. Creevey, but I didn't have time for much warning or instruction. I did suggest that careful planning would be advisable."

Snape's mouth twisted. "I suppose that's all that can be expected. I assume they've all disappeared?"

McGonagall nodded. "The dormitories are empty."

"Good."

Hermione looked between the two teachers, confused.

"The students are gone?"

"In hiding, yes," McGonagall said distractedly.

"But... where?"

Snape grinned. "I have not tried to confirm it, but my guess is the Room of Requirement?"

McGonagall nodded. "I believe so." She saw Hermione was still confused and explained. "The Carrows have brought with them a rather barbaric standard for punishing children. After the first serious hospital visit a first year Hufflepuff who nearly died the students began hiding each other. I believe Mr. Longbottom is the official leader of the rebellion, but I think it was Miss Weasley who thought to use the Room as a sanctuary. Mostly it's used by those students who are particularly active in the rebellion, as they are the ones at most risk now. Needless to say, most of the students who take refuge there are either Gryffindors or Hufflepuffs."

"Hufflepuffs?" Hermione said in surprise, before she could stop herself.

"Fierce loyalty is not something to be trifled with, Miss Granger," Snape said with a wry smile.

"Of course. I just..."

"Was overwhelmed with Gryffindor superiority? I know."

Hermione and McGonagall both huffed, though rather half-heartedly.

"So, do the students come out at all?"

"A few don't dare anymore. Mr. Longbottom, for example, is supposed to be brought before Severus for immediate and severe punishment should he be captured. I dare say he wouldn't survive the encounter, as there's no political merit to his survival, unlike with Miss Lovegood."

Hermione looked at Snape in time to see him wilt just a little. Not much, but the burden became obvious, and it was heartbreaking to see.

"How do they do it?" Hermione mused, as much to herself as to the teachers.

"The castle was built with sieges in mind. I do not doubt there is an emergency exit hidden nearby, or possibly even within, that room."

"But food?"

Snape smiled with what looked like true satisfaction. "The house-elves take orders from me, not the Carrows."

Hermione blinked. She then shook her head slowly. "Amazing. And yet, I imagine that every single one of them hates you more than they hate Vo-- Snake Face."

"Which is as it should be. They have been carefully trained to see me as the villain. I do not want them seeing me as anything else."

Hermione accepted this, but still looked down with a frown. "Still," she said to her hands, "it must be terrible living that role."

"Sentimentality, Miss Granger."

She snorted, but nodded and looked up, meeting his eye with a wry smile. "Yes. Can't forget you truly are a bastard, can we?"

"Never."

They shared a smile, though soon remembered they had an audience, an audience who looked terribly intrigued, though slightly suspicious.

Snape rolled his eyes. "You can relax, Minerva. I have not touched your cub, nor do I plan to."

"And has she touched you?"

Snape and Hermione both gaped, wide-eyed at the old witch. "NO!" they cried in unison.

She chuckled. "That's good, then."

"Minerva, so help me..."

"Oh, save it for the Death Eaters, you scoundrel," she replied with a soft smile.

Snape shook his head, looking disgusted, though Hermione couldn't tell if he was disgusted, or merely trying not to smile.

She didn't really have time to think about it, however, because in the next moment the ghost of a beautiful woman slipped into the room, curtsying to all of them.

"You wished to see me, Headmaster?" she said stiffly.

"Yes. Thank you for coming, my lady."

McGonagall stood. "Should I leave?"

Snape thought for a moment before shaking his head. "You are my eyes and ears now."

Minerva smiled, and Hermione noticed her eyes had a rather misty look to them as she sat back down and turned her attention to the Grey Lady. Hermione tried to give the ghost her attention, but found her eyes kept veering back to Snape.

"My lady, I was wondering if you might be able to help us. We are looking for Ravenclaw's diadem and thought perhaps you might know of its whereabouts."

The Grey Lady paused a fraction too long before saying, "I cannot help you."

"Cannot or will not."

"I have no knowledge of where it now resides."

"So you once knew?"

A cold, bitter smile crossed the lady's face. "Yes."

Snape took a breath in and released it slowly. "My Lady, it is imperative we find the diadem. Without it, the war is lost."

"I care not whether your lord wins."

"Do you care if he is defeated?" Hermione cut in, seeing Snape's face grow taut.

The Grey Lady looked down at her, and Hermione was forcefully reminded of Narcissa Malfoy. She fought the urge to sneer back.

"I would like nothing better than to see him suffer for all he has done."

"Wonderful! Then please tell us what you know of the diadem. We need it to help destroy him."

"The wisdom it bestows is unlikely to help you win a war."

Hermione shook her head impatiently. "We don't want to use it, but it's essential that we find it."

"I cannot help you."

"I understand you don't know where it is, but anything you can tell us could be of use. I mean, where did you last see it?"

The Grey Lady looked down at all of them, then said, keeping her eyes on Hermione, "He," she flicked her hand toward Snape, "wears the mark of his lord. I will not tell you."

"Why? He is loyal to Dumbledore. And to us."

"I will not tell him."

She turned to leave, when Hermione sprang up and shouted, "Stop!" The ghost paused. "Please, will you tell Professor McGonagall and me?"

The Grey Lady paused before looking over her shoulder and saying, "You are wasting your time." She then disappeared through the stone wall.

Hermione gaped at the wall, irrational anger rising in her. "Of all the unhelpful... just..." she spluttered, becoming incoherent. A light touch on her fist brought her attention back to the room in general, and Snape in particular.

"It is to be expected, Hermione," he said, withdrawing his hand. "She is just trying to protect Hogwarts."

"From you, you mean." Hermione didn't know whether she was angrier at the Grey Lady for her attitude of superiority or at Snape for his blithe acceptance of everyone's expectations of villainy.

She shook her head and tried to breathe through the anger, though she felt her face take on a pugnacious look.

"She knows something. I know it."

"But whether that information would be of use to us is another matter," Snape pointed out caustically. "We know several things, after all, but none of them is the location."

Hermione pursed her lips and leaned back in her chair. "Fair enough. But surely the more information we have, the clearer the picture?"

She noticed Snape and McGonagall sharing a look and pressed herself further back into the chair, unamused.

McGonagall got up. "I can't think of anything to offer at the moment, so I will hie myself away to bed. Should you have any tasks, please let me know," she said to Snape. She rested a hand on Hermione's shoulder for a moment, saying, "We will prevail."

Hermione clenched her jaw to prevent herself from saying anything she might regret. As it was, she was rather overwhelmed with disappointment.

She did not look up to watch McGonagall disappear through the Floo, though she heard the flames roar to life then quieten. She instead sat and stewed.

She had been so certain that the ghost would be the key to locating the diadem, but instead, it was another dead end. It was almost more frustrating than running around with no leads whatsoever. Almost.

With that perspective, she took another deep breath and raised her head.

"Done sulking?" Snape asked sarcastically.

"No, but I can put it off till later."

"Good." Snape hesitated. "Minerva may be right, for all her idiotic Gryffindor sentimentality. We are close to the end."

Hermione smiled bitterly. "Yes. So *very* close."

Snape handed her book back to her, but she shook her head. "The answer isn't in there. I think Professor McGonagall has the right idea. I'm going to go get some sleep."

She felt Snape's eyes on her as she made her way to the bedroom, but couldn't bring herself to look at him. She couldn't bear even one more dram of disappointment from the day.

16

Chapter 17 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

AN: *In honor (and preparation for) what will be Tropical Storm Irene, I am posting this chapter early. Should I still have power on Monday, then I will post the next chapter in celebration. If not, well... *shrugs* ;-)*

Thanks as always to Ayerf and Septentrion for their eyes and advice.

Snape watched with concern as Hermione left for bed. It had been a long and tiring day, to be sure, but he was surprised by her pessimism. She hadn't seemed so invested in the potential of the Grey Lady's knowledge to account for such an uncharacteristic display.

His gut twisted when it occurred to him that he might be rubbing off on her.

Snarling whether at himself or at Hermione he was not sure he got up and grabbed his cloak. It had been too long since he'd roamed the castle grounds. While his skin itched for the freedom of the dark halls and empty corridors, his soul sought the solace of fresh air.

He made it out the front doors unpestered, though he'd seen the Bloody Baron hovering near the dungeon's stairs. He was glad the Baron had kept his distance, though it would have surprised him had the ghost actually approached him. The Baron only talked when there was an emergency; the students were all too wary of the Carrows nowadays to require the Baron's assistance.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to release thoughts of the students as he did so. It didn't work. It never did. He slowly walked down the front steps, heading toward the lake, trying, once again, to find ways to subdue the Carrows.

Alecto wasn't too bad. Her curses were nastier than Amycus', but she preferred to use the children's imaginations against themselves. She terrified the children with her sociopathic spells, but she only used the physically taxing curses on the older ones.

Severus knew the psychological scars the children bore were terrible, but it was easier for him to bear if only because he couldn't see them. The children had always looked terrified around him anyway. However, he couldn't erase the memories of the children screaming under the Cruciatus from his mind, especially when the scars from the curse formed on their faces.

Snape shuddered, and took another long, deep breath. The wind picked up and pressed his clothes against him, sneaking through the layers and reminding him that winter hadn't let go just yet. He looked around. The lake was beautiful in the moonlight, but so dark and bleak under the clouds that covered the sky now. It looked like a void in space and time. He almost wished it were, as then it would be easy to solve his problems.

He sneered at himself. His time would come soon enough. No need to rush things. Especially since Hermione's fate was in his hands alone. The thought of what would happen to her without his guardianship was enough to make him shudder again and look back toward the castle.

His eyes were drawn to his tower. It was one of four lit windows throughout the entire castle, so it was easy to distinguish. He hoped that the ever burning light wasn't drawing suspicion, but decided it didn't matter if it was. No one would question him to his face, and even if they did, they wouldn't ever think of the right questions to ask. No one would suspect him of chivalry.

He scowled, but his eyes soon softened, thinking of Poppy, Minerva and Hermione. No, there were a few people who just might believe in him. There was even one who believed the best of him, as silly and foolish as it was of the girl.

His heart clenched with emotion as he let his feet take him back to the school. He figured he might as well start searching for the diadem, though he still had no idea where the Dark Lord might have put it. Hogwarts hid so many secret spots, and Snape was afraid that only Dumbledore had a better knowledge of them than Voldemort. But the sooner he started looking, the sooner he could set Hermione free.

No one sentient was around as he entered the castle, much to his satisfaction. He let his body go on autopilot as he prowled the corridors, wand in hand, stretching his senses to pick up magical signatures beyond those that belonged to Hogwarts.

He was relieved that as he reached the halfway point of his patrol, not one student was lurking out of sight. He was especially relieved because as he came to the kitchen's entrance, he met Amycus coming out.

Amycus raised his brows as he looked at his outfit, and Snape inwardly cursed his lack of foresight. Stashing his cloak somewhere would have been intelligent, but it was too late now.

"Night, Severus."

"Good evening, Amycus. Have your patrols been fruitful?"

Amycus looked back at the painting of the fruit bowl and started laughing. He found the pun a little too funny, wearing on Snape's patience, so he started walking away. He wasn't surprised when Amycus followed. "It would have been more fruitful if you'd been that Longbottom brat, but I suppose this snack will have to make up for it."

"It's a shame we don't always get what we want, isn't it?"

Amycus gave him a sly look. "You did."

"Mmm. And it only took twenty years to get it."

Amycus raised his brows and tried to be witty. "You been lusting over the Mudblood that long?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "Don't be disgusting, Amycus. I was talking about the headmastership."

"But the Mudblood is what I was talking about."

Snape raised his brow. "You seem very interested in her."

"I'm more interested in why you wanted her, her being a Mudblood and all."

"She was also one of the banes of my existence, and seeing as she was the only female bane..."

"Alecto says it's transference."

Snape snorted. "She would."

Amycus was silent for a while, seeming to sense the conversational dead end he'd reached. He wasn't completely done with the subject, however.

"I'm surprised to see you out and about, though. It seemed like you were in for a good night."

Snape twisted his lips up. "I had a good night. And then when she was worn out, I found myself missing the solitude of my evening walks. I've been rather neglectful of them the last week or so."

"But... Do you think it's a good idea to leave her by herself? What if she tries to escape?"

Snape didn't hide his scorn as he said, "Do you really think I would leave her alone if she were conscious?"

Amycus took it the way he would, and he broke out in a lascivious grin. "You lucky bastard."

"Yes. Yes, I am," Snape agreed with a smirk.

Snape had been subtly steering them toward Amycus' quarters, and as they reached them, he stopped. Amycus looked around in mild surprise.

"I'll take over your shift, if you don't mind, Amycus. I have a yen for patrolling tonight."

Amycus looked pleased. "Sure thing, Snapey. I'll warn you, though, it's a really slow night. Haven't even seen any familiars about."

Snape nodded gravely. "Yes. I imagine it's the calm before the coming storm."

Carrow nodded thoughtfully, suddenly tense. "Imagine it is. Well, well... Maybe your gift will give the rest of us something, too. Maybe it'll draw out those lousy kids once and for all."

"I think it will indeed. But not tonight, I think."

"No, probably not. Not if they have any brains, anyway," Amycus agreed, relaxing again.

Snape nodded at him with a smirk. "And I believe a few of them do. Good night, Amycus. Sleep well."

"Night, Severus." Amycus entered his quarters while Snape continued on his way, hoping that would ease Alecto's suspicions of his duplicity once she heard it. He didn't really want either of them on guard for attack, but he was pretty sure Alecto already was expecting it. He was also convinced she wasn't keeping an eye on just the students.

Snape continued through the castle, probing for magic as he went. When he came to the seventh floor, his skin crawled as he felt *something* different. The Room of Requirement was along here, but that wasn't what he was sensing.

His heart sped up in excitement; could it be this easy? Could the Horcrux really be here somewhere? Could he go back to his room and wake Hermione to triumphant news?

And then he heard the whispers.

"What are you doing here? Do you have any idea what danger you're in?"

"Don't make me hex you, Malfoy. Just run back to your dungeon where you belong."

"Potter, I... you never know who will come by. Granger's not worth"

"Expelliarmus!"

Snape groaned to himself as he felt his Oath twitch. There really was no way to win. He walked toward the whisperers, making no effort to mask his footsteps. He found it interesting that Draco was *warning* Potter, though. Very interesting.

"Someone's coming! You need to get out of here!"

Snape heard footsteps, and rounded the corner just in time to see Potter disappearing around the other end of the corridor. He lowered his wand and stared at the frightened blond boy who stood before the absurd tapestry.

"Professor Snape!" Draco exclaimed, paling even further.

Snape waved his wand, binding Draco so he couldn't do the runner he was thinking of doing.

"Well, well, well. Aiding and abetting, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco's skin turned ashy as he gulped, but Snape was proud to see that his mouth snapped shut. He wasn't going to talk willingly. He also remembered Occlumency existed.

"Good boy," he said with his nastiest smile, feeling a little sorry for the boy, but not willing to risk anything at this point.

He looked around him already knowing there was nowhere nearby to safely stow the boy while he went after Potter. He was glad there were no witnesses, however, as he flicked his wrist and levitated Draco through the hallway to the nearest empty room.

Plopping Draco down on one of the chairs, he reinforced the bonds and applied a powerful *Silencio* for good measure.

"I will deal with you after I have found and dealt with Potter."

He swept out of the room, taking care to close and lock the door behind him. He took a step away, paused and then cast another, more dangerous, ward around the entire room. Thus reassured of Draco's safety and silence, he set off for his office and Potter.

17

Chapter 18 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

AN: I've got power! Never lost it, actually. Yay! Thanks as always to Ayerf and Septentrion. *smooches*

Hermione tossed and turned for about half an hour before giving up on sleep. She was still upset over their setback, and she couldn't seem to relax. Even though the bed was very large, she didn't want to risk upsetting Ron, especially if she continued tossing and turning once asleep.

She got up with a sigh and muttered a quiet *Lumos*. She looked over at her friend, but he seemed as undisturbed as ever. The potions Poppy provided were doing their job nicely, keeping Ron in a painless, unconscious state. She found it strange that it was so difficult to look directly at him. It wasn't as if he had a Notice-Me-Not charm on him; it was something within herself.

Not liking what that said about her, she held her lit wand over him and looked at him really looked at him as he was now, and not as she knew him from before their capture. Before he ran away. Before he broke her heart.

And, as she cast aside the memories, it suddenly struck her that he wasn't going to last much longer. He was starting to wither. His cheeks were sinking. His skin was getting a papery look to it. His eyelids were surrounded by dark, dark bruising.

He was dying. And it would be soon.

She tore herself away from the bed, terrified at the realization. Yes, she'd heard Poppy say as much, but... She had known it, but it wasn't real until right then.

Taking a deep breath, she looked over at Ron again. He was still lying there, peacefully. There was nothing threatening about him except that he was completely helpless. She walked over to his side of the bed and looked down at him, bringing her hand up to touch his cheek. She almost cried out in relief at finding it still warm.

"Ron," she said, kneeling down to be closer. "Ron, I don't know if you can hear me, but I want you to know... I love you, Ron. I hated you for leaving us in the woods, but that's because you were our strength. We needed you to be there supporting us. Without you, we weren't complete. I wasn't complete.

"And I don't want you to leave me now," she said, starting to cry. "I don't, but... but I forgive you if you do. I understand. I won't hate you this time. I'll understand."

Tears dripping down her face, she bent down and kissed him on the lips. They were warm, dry, and completely unresponsive. She held herself there for two seconds before pulling away and standing up. She gently brushed a lock of hair away from his forehead, and then turned and walked out of the bedroom. She didn't know what Snape's mood might be, but she couldn't take the oppression of the death bed's room any longer.

At the door, she paused and flicked her wand, setting a ward to let her know if Ron's condition changed in the least, then braced herself for the varying moods of Snape...

Who wasn't in his office.

She looked around and found the only people to be seen were snoozing representations of dead people. Her mind went into overdrive thinking of all the horrible possibilities until it occurred to her that had something horrible actually happened to Snape, she would have been the next person to know.

Her five seconds of panic thus played out, she grabbed the book she'd been reading and settled into her chair.

Time passed relatively quickly, so when Hermione heard the stairs moving, she was surprised to find two hours had passed. She thought maybe it would be better to retreat to the bedroom, but she quickly dismissed the thought as cowardly and unproductive. She needed to apologize for her behavior, and now was as good a time as any.

So she laid her book down on the desk, and as the door clicked open, she said, "Professor, I..." but the rest of her words died on her lips as she beheld a very different dark haired wizard.

"Harry?" she whispered, her eyes widening. She brought her shaking hands up to her face. "Is it really you?"

Harry smiled in that charming, lopsided way of his. Hermione let out a gush of air, that might have contained a squeal, and leapt up to hug him.

"Oh, Harry! I am so glad to see you safe and sound! You are safe and sound, right? You haven't been hit with any hexes or jinks or Imperio or other nasties, have you? Because you shouldn't be here! It's not safe, not with the Carrows running around Cruciating everyone, even first years, and you being at the top of the wanted list, it's a really, really bad idea for you to be here! I can only imagine how angry Snape is going to be at you risking yourself this way!"

At the mention of Snape's name, Harry pulled away sharply, and his face became set in anger. Hermione understood at once what had brought her friend here, and shook her head, trying to forestall his outrage.

"No, Harry, listen! Snape's a good guy. He really is! He's taken very good care of Ron and me. Poppy and Minerva both know now, and Flitwick figured it out, though he *asked* to be Obliviated so he wouldn't give the game away. Snape is protecting all of us. It was his Patronus that led you to the sword! He was the one who gave you the sword!"

Harry still looked angry, though Hermione could see him processing the information. "He's been very decent to me, Harry. He's made sure that Ron is kept sedated, so You-Know-Who can't look into his mind or torture him for information. He's given me books so I can research. He's treated me with respect. Honest to goodness, he's on our side, Harry, and he has been all along."

Harry's face hardened. "Then why did he kill Dumbledore?"

"Because I asked him to, Harry," Dumbledore's portrait said, looking down at the two of them with a somber face.

Harry frowned at the portrait, looking very confused. "But, why?"

"He was already dying," Snape said from the doorway.

Harry made to hex Snape, but Hermione yelled, "No!" grabbing Harry's wand hand and forcing it up just as a nasty curse shot from it. Harry roared in frustration and pushed Hermione to the floor, taking aim at Snape again who continued to stand there. His wand was in his hand, but the only thing he aimed at Harry was a fierce glare.

His lack of defense made Harry pause.

"Are you alright, Miss Granger?" Snape asked into the pause, though he never looked away from Harry.

"Yes," she said, getting up and turning to her still furious, though now equally confused, friend.

"Harry, please, *please* think about this," she begged. "He's not the bad guy. You-Know-Who is. The Carrows are. He's *our* man. He's the one who's been keeping us alive all these years. Killing him will only set us back, set the entire war back, because then there would be nothing and no one between Snake Face and... and the world. He's not going to just hand you over to You-Know-Who now, not after all this."

Harry kept his wand aimed at Snape. "What do you mean he was already dying?" he asked, ignoring Hermione.

Snape leaned back against the wall. "The ring was cursed. I was able to trap the curse in his hand, but it was powerful and would have overtaken him within one or two months. Surely you noticed his growing fatigue?"

Harry blushed slightly, and Hermione guessed he hadn't. Not that she had, either.

"But you hated him! I saw it on your face!"

Snape broke the staring contest and looked over at the portrait. "I did hate him. I hated what he was forcing me to do. I hated his fatalism, and his oh-so-*fucking*-clever plotting. I hated that I had to kill the only man who trusted me with his life. I hated that he thought he needed to beg for me to uphold my promise to murder him."

Snape looked back at Harry, his eyes burning. "Yes, I hated him, Potter. I hated him with my entire being for manipulating me, you and the entire wizarding world into and through a war he could have prevented had he been a little less noble. And quite frankly, I still hate him for that."

"If you hated him so much, why should I trust that you were loyal to him?"

"Harry, you've seen Snape duel. You've duelled him yourself. Do you really think you would still be armed if he weren't on our side?"

"He could just be playing for time! He could have summoned Vold--"

"Stop!" Hermione cried, though it wasn't needed. Harry shut his mouth before he could finish the word.

"While I appreciate your belated prudence," Snape drawled, looking mildly amused, "it wouldn't have mattered much had you said his name here in the castle. Longbottom and his gang make liberal use of it just to tease the Snatchers."

"As for your accusation, I leave it to you to decide, based upon what you have observed, whether that is the case or not. But since you never have been particularly observant, I will deign to point you in the direction of your friend. Does she look abused? Starving? Cowed? Is she armed? Imperiused? Does she seem her rational self or have I cast a powerful Confundus on her?"

Hermione sighed as she saw Harry look at her and grab onto the darker possibilities. "You aren't helping yourself, you know," she said to Snape. She looked back at Harry and pursed her lips in impatience at his slow and thorough appraisal. He had the grace to quirk his lips in apology, before he frowned again.

"You've been crying. Why have you been crying?"

Hermione's lip trembled for a moment, but she swallowed the emotion. "Harry... Ron's dying. He's not going to last much longer."

She saw hatred harden Harry's face, and, for an instant, she was afraid Harry was actually going to attack Snape. But then the fury went out, and Harry slumped, dropping his arm. He looked hollow, which scared her even more.

"It was my fault," Harry whispered. "I killed him."

"Oh, Harry." Hermione gathered him into her arms and held him.

Snape took that moment to say, "As I recall, it was Bellatrix who threw the knife, Potter."

Harry broke the embrace to throw a glare at Snape. "But I put him there!" he yelled. He slumped again as he added much more quietly, "And I left him there."

"And had you not left him, he would have died that night in excruciating pain."

Harry continued glaring.

Snape sighed in exasperation. "Potter, I saw your exit from Malfoy Manor. Weasley is dying because he *chose* to protect you. If I could save him, I would, but I can't. All I can do is make sure he remains reasonably comfortable. What *you* need to do is not let his sacrifice go to waste."

They glared at each other until Hermione lost patience at the posturing, and touched Harry's arm. "Do you want to see Ron? I don't know if he can hear, but I bet it would ease his spirit to know you're safe."

Harry gulped audibly, but nodded. "Yeah."

Hermione started leading Harry into the bedroom, but he stopped and pointed his wand at Snape, and motioned for him to lead. "If you would, *sir*, I'd like you to stay where I can see you."

Hermione opened her mouth to berate Harry for his pig-headed rudeness, but Snape retorted first. "It's good to see you growing some semblance of sense."

Hermione rolled her eyes and tugged Harry into the room, letting Snape follow them in, much to Harry's displeasure. However, the moment Harry saw Ron, he forgot about Snape.

Letting out a low moan, Harry stumbled to the bed, dropping down onto his knees as he neared the bed. He stayed there, almost motionless, as he watched Ron breathe. Hermione could feel the disturbed magic pouring off of him and moved to pull him away from Ron when Snape grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back.

"It won't hurt Weasley, but it will help Potter," he said very quietly. "In fact, I think it would be best if we leave him to... leave them alone."

She glanced nervously at her friends, but didn't resist Snape when he guided her out of the room with his hand on her back. Hermione went sightlessly to her chair and sat, not even thinking of the book within her grasp. She distantly noticed Snape was similarly unengaged, but neither said anything as they waited for Harry to re-emerge.

18

Chapter 19 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

AN: *The chapters will be getting longer from here on out. Because of that, the posting schedule might become a bit irregular, though I hope to keep it at once a fortnight at the longest.*

Many thanks to Ayerf and Septentrion for their time and talents.

Severus struggled to stay awake. It had been a long, stressful day, and his body was starting to cry out for rest. He hadn't had much in the way of sleep since Hermione and Weasley had taken over his bed, but even catnaps were better than nothing.

However, there was no way in hell he was going to let himself fall asleep when Potter could come up behind him at any moment. He just wished the damned boy would hurry up and get his emotions under control. He could see Hermione needed sleep as desperately as he did.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk and pinching the bridge of his nose. The headache that had been looming all day was starting to grow, and all he really wanted was to lie down in the dark and sleep. He closed his eyes for just a second and when he opened them, Potter was sitting before him looking thoughtful. For once those green eyes were not loaded with venom.

"Thank you."

Snape suppressed a yawn and scowled at the boy. "For what, pray?"

Potter's lips quirked up in a bitter smile. "For everything."

Snape's scowl grew as he thought about what was yet to come. He glanced over at Hermione and saw her dozing. "Don't thank me yet, Potter," he muttered very quietly, returning his gaze to the boy, earning a suspicious look. "The war's not over."

Potter's brow cleared and he nodded wearily. "I know." He leaned back, face troubled but still so fucking open that Snape knew the question before Potter could ask it. He restrained himself from antagonizing the boy, however.

"What do you know of my quest?"

More than you do. "Everything."

Potter nodded without surprise. Snape wondered at that.

"Hermione said you let her do research?"

"She seems to have a talent for it."

Potter snorted inelegantly. "And she's looking for?"

Snape barely managed to not raise his brows in surprise. The boy *had* learned something about circumspection! It was a miracle! "The location of a diadem, which we think is the Ravenclaw artifact. We have no leads at this point, though she's found a picture of the blasted thing."

"May I see it?"

Snape looked over to see where the book was only to find Hermione watching them with tears in her happy eyes. Snape didn't bother to repress his brow as it arched up.

She didn't say anything, though. She just sniffled, picked up the book and handed it to him, beaming.

Snape gave her a hard look before turning back to Potter, who was looking at Hermione with amusement.

"You're not going to bring us into a group hug, are you?" he asked jokingly.

Hermione shook her head, eyes still shining, then rushed to the bedroom. Presumably for handkerchiefs, judging by the sob that escaped just before she shut the door on them. Snape turned his attention again to Potter. Potter shrugged with a soft smile. "She thinks the two of us are friends now."

"She is delirious from exhaustion."

Potter snorted and Snape felt some of the tension in his shoulders ease just slightly. "Yeah, pretty much. You look like you could use some sleep, too."

Snape arched his brow at Potter, who simply shrugged. Snape decided to test the water.

"I can sleep when I'm dead. Till then, there is a war to end."

Potter nodded, his smile now grim. "Yeah. Can I see the picture of the diadem now?"

Snape opened the book to one of Hermione's markers and handed it over to Potter. The boy looked at it with a frown.

"That looks familiar."

"It was a popular style for a time."

Potter shook his head. "No. It's... I think I've seen it before, but I..." He rubbed his forehead as he tried to think, bringing Snape's attention to the scar. It looked as livid as ever, and now that he knew what it was, Snape found his fingers itched to eliminate it once and for all.

Potter cleared his throat, and Snape returned his eyes to the boy's, feeling caught out. Potter seemed not to have noticed the intent behind the stare, however, as he said, as if from habit, "It's nothing."

"You should practice Occlumency."

Potter shook his head. "There's no way Vol-- he knows I'm seeing his thoughts. And I've got some useful information from the connection, like where Hufflepuff's cup is."

Snape did his best to look bored rather than smug. "In my vault."

Potter shook his head and said slowly, "No-o. It's at the Riddle House. His dad's family house."

Snape shook his head impatiently. "No. He told me he was putting something of value in my vault. I was going to retrieve it tomorrow."

Potter looked at him shrewdly, still shaking his head. "No. He went to some vault, but he didn't put the cup in there. He put in a gold statue of some sort. No, he took the cup to his dad's place and put some nasty protection spells around it. It's in the dining room, where he murdered them."

Fear crept down Snape's spine as he thought about it. Yes, the Dark Lord trusted him, but there were sure to be whispers of doubt circling around the Inner Circle. Who knew what Bellatrix had said while he was torturing her. Was it possible she had told him something to incite suspicion?

"You are positive that information isn't a trap for you? You've been known to fall prey to them."

Potter's shrewd look had transformed into something pugnacious. "This was different."

Snape pursed his lips until he felt his surge of anger recede. "And you have such a wonderful track record for being able to see the truth through the lies."

"And I said this is different!" Potter said, his voice rising. "You'll have to trust that I know more about Voldemort's brain than you do right now!"

Snape opened his mouth to snap back, but then closed it tightly. The boy's arrogance was profound, but he and the Dark Lord *were* linked at the soul, so perhaps...

"Provide one logical reason why you think the Dark Lord isn't filling you with misinformation."

"Because he's too full of himself."

Snape couldn't help it he blinked. "Considering the source..." he muttered, receiving a scowl in return.

"Look. Do you think he wants me to know he broke into Dumbledore's tomb to get the Elder wand after breaking into Nurmengard to kill Grindelwald?"

"When was this?"

"The night... just after I escaped from Malfoy Manor."

Snape recalled Voldemort's Summons. His fists clenched involuntarily.

"That proves little. He could have been trying to unbalance you."

"I felt his rage when he found out I'd escaped." Potter shrugged his shoulders wearily. "I always feel his rage."

"That doesn't help us determine whether he is playing you, or not, though."

"I can sense his emotions really clearly now, Snape. When he put the statue in your vault, he was smug. When he tortured Bellatrix and the Malfoys for letting me go, he was furious and exasperated. When he asked you about your interest in Hermione, he was suspicious."

Snape's eyes widened. Potter looked disgusted, but surprisingly calm. He also looked dangerous.

"It's not true, is it?"

"Is what not true?"

"Your interest in Hermione."

Snape wanted to look away, but he didn't dare show such weakness. "No, it isn't true. I made a mistake, Potter. I hoped your luck would hold and Miss Granger would stay with you for the length of the war, as I know how essential she is to you. It was actually my thoughts of how essential she was to your safety that put us in this mess."

Potter nodded, but didn't relax. Snape could see he was working himself up to ask something else. Something worse. Snape quickly thought back to that conversation with Voldemort and couldn't help the despairing sigh that escaped.

"Ask it, Potter."

"Your Patronus..." Snape closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. He could get through this. He would get through this. "Did you... *love* my mum?"

Snape opened his eyes to glare at the boy before him. "Do you really need an answer to that?"

Potter shook his head slowly. "No, sir, but... Is that why you hate me?"

Snape snorted. Of course, it would always be about Potter. Some things never changed.

"I hate you because you set my teeth on edge. You are hailed as our personal savior, when all you did was get your mother killed. You are disrespectful, arrogant, self-centered and thoughtless. You endanger your friends needlessly more times than is sane, and yet, they go along with you each and every time. They would and *do* die for you, because they believe in you and your role in saving us all from our bogeyman. Your life is sacrosanct, and all others can be damned, no matter how much more valuable their contributions are compared to your fumbling about mindlessly."

Potter looked rather pale, and Snape took a long breath in through his nose, trying to calm himself enough to rectify the situation. He had obviously touched some buttons he shouldn't have, and now he had to reel the boy back in. "I hate you, Potter, because you have everything that I never got. Loving parents, loyal friends people who will protect you, even beyond death. All I got out of life is this lousy tattoo."

Potter's lips twitched, but he still looked rather grim. Snape sighed.

"Plus, you look like your father. The reaction was rather ingrained in my psyche."

The boy nodded and looked down at his hands.

"I don't want anyone to die for me, Snape. I never did." He looked up and Snape was surprised to see maturity facing him. "I didn't ask for any of this, but that doesn't matter, does it? I have to do it, whether I want to or not. I'm the *Chosen One*, after all.

"It scares me that people believe in me so fiercely that they are willing to die for me. Because, yeah, I'm not as smart as Hermione or Dumbledore. I'm not particularly talented at anything except flying and defense. And I do make stupid mistakes. I'm no savior, I'm just... a boy."

Snape braced himself for what he had to say. He hated having to correct Potter on this. He hated it so much. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he sighed and said, "No, Potter, you're not 'just a boy'. You *are* their savior, whether you like it or not. The Dark Lord made sure of that the night your parents died."

"I know."

They sat there a few moments in silence, before Potter got up and looked to the bedroom door. "I wonder what's keeping Hermione."

Snape thought that was a fairly stupid question, but went with it just to avoid further conversation.

"I imagine she fell asleep."

"But I need--"

"She had a rough day, Potter. Let her rest." He sighed at the suspicious look that garnered. "She had to face the entire school in chains and then suffered a few setbacks in the search for the diadem as well as finally recognizing her boyfriend is dying. Your arrival, while providential, is... enough to overwhelm her."

Potter perked up suddenly and inexplicably.

"The diadem!" he exclaimed. "I know where I saw it!" He smiled triumphantly at Snape, then leapt up and headed for the door. Snape had to act quickly to ward the door against egress.

"Explain," he said when Potter turned on him furiously.

"I know where I saw the diadem!"

"So you said. Where is it?"

"It's here in the castle! In the Room of Requirement!"

Snape felt something that might be hope rush into his gut. "You're sure?"

"Yes! Almost positive!"

"Do you still have the Invisibility Cloak?" Potter grabbed at his waist, then nodded. "Good. Put it on. I will escort you there."

"I don't need..."

"I have to see to Draco anyway, and I do not want to leave you alone in these halls."

"Draco? What about Draco?" Potter's eyes widened as he came to the wrong conclusion and raised his wand. Snape rolled his eyes.

"I need to talk to the boy and determine his loyalties. He probably has passed out by now thinking about what I'm going to do to him for defending you."

"And what are you going to do to him?"

"It depends on what he says." Snape grinned evilly, but seeing that Potter's righteousness hackles were raised, he turned it into his familiar scowl and explained: "I will either Obliviate him or recruit him."

Potter's face cleared in understanding and he nodded.

"Oh. Right. Can we go now?"

"Cloak yourself."

Potter did so with bad grace, and only when he was completely covered did Snape unward the door. It was rather odd to see someone using an Invisibility Cloak so overtly, but it tickled the punch-drunk part of his brain into a smothered grin.

"Please, for the love of the wizarding world, stay with me, Potter. I can not hope to defend you if you're off by yourself."

"And who says I'll need defending?" Potter's voice said from a few feet away.

"Seven bloody years of experience," Snape muttered, and walked out the door.

*

Snape led Potter to the room where Draco was being held, glad to see his wards were still untouched. He gestured for the boy to come close, then cast a privacy spell around them after making sure they were alone with a quick *Homenum revelio*.

"When you have retrieved the diadem, bring it back here. I will need your assistance with Draco should he prove willing to help us."

"And if he isn't?"

"Be careful not to run into him on his way out."

Potter snorted. "Right. Excellent advice. I'll be back shortly."

Snape canceled the privacy spell and felt Potter leave. Taking a breath to prepare himself, he slowly took down the wards on the room and entered. He was surprised to find Draco still awake, though looking very peaky.

He made sure his robes billowed as he strode over to loom over Draco. He noted that Draco shrank back, but his Occlumency shields were up. Snape removed the silencing charm and discreetly cast *Muffliato*.

"You will be interested to know that I captured Harry Potter, and plan to summon the Dark Lord at dawn."

Draco paled further, now looking green, but didn't open his mouth.

"I would be interested to know what you were doing trying to protect Potter."

Draco kept his mouth shut.

"You have been behaving strangely for a while now, Draco. You were honored when the Dark Lord brought you into the Inner Circle even before you reached your majority, and this is how you repay him? By turning traitor? Have you been Imperiused?"

Draco lifted his chin in defiance and, surprisingly, did not take the easy out.

"I want to help you, Draco. I do not want to see you harmed, but I cannot overlook this transgression without knowing your reasons for doing it."

Draco just glared. Snape sighed and brought out his bottle of Veritaserum.

"Open your mouth or I will open it for you."

Draco gulped and swooned in fear, but opened his mouth. Snape carefully put two drops in, just enough to force the truth, but not enough to overwhelm his consciousness.

"Why were you helping Potter?"

"Because he's our only hope."

"Whose hope?"

"My family's and mine."

"And why is he your only hope?"

"Because he's supposed to be the Chosen One. He's the only one who can kill the Dark Lord."

"And you want the Dark Lord dead?"

"Yes."

"Do you see the Dark Lord as a threat to you and your family?"

"Yes!"

"And are you willing to die to protect your family from the Dark Lord?"

Draco looked surprised when his answer turned out to be, "Yes."

"I am going to offer you a choice, Draco. Think the options through before answering, as more than your life depends on how you answer.

"I can overlook all of this recent reticence of yours and let you carry on with life as it is. With that option comes the knowledge that you will need to toe the line very carefully, and even that will not ease the Dark Lord's wrath where your family is concerned. The only thing that will tempt the Dark Lord to forgive *you* is if you handed Potter over yourself, which would only happen if you killed me."

Draco swallowed and trembled just slightly.

"Or you can turn sides completely. Take an Unbreakable Vow that you will help Harry Potter and myself in whatever way you are able to bring down the Dark Lord."

Draco's eyes widened.

"Needless to say, if you choose the first option, I will Oblivate you," Snape drawled lazily.

"But... But why? He favors you!"

"He does now. I was your age when I joined the Death Eaters. It took me about as long as it took you to learn what that meant, and that his promises mean nothing. I lost more than you after joining and have regretted it ever since. So I have been working against him for nearly twenty years, and the end is finally near. Should you choose the second option, you will be given a task, a very important, very dangerous task, that could limit the Dark Lord's reign to a matter of weeks, if not days."

"I'll do it," Draco said, then added, in a rather small voice, "Just... just please don't make me kill anyone."

"I cannot promise anything in that regard, though you could review your defensive spells and practice the non-lethal ones. Many are quite effective."

Draco nodded, still looking up, wide-eyed, at Snape. Snape looked down at him, amused. Finally Draco asked, "How did you do it?"

"By heeding the advice of a master manipulator. For all his flaws, Dumbledore was much cleverer than the Dark Lord could imagine."

"But, then... that night?"

"Dumbledore had that planned out nearly a year in advance."

"So he really did know all along?"

"Yes. I suspect he would have known even had I not been the one to inform him. His ability to collect relevant information was uncanny. Then again, the Dark Lord wasn't particularly circumspect in his anger. Anyone with an ounce of cunning could see what was coming."

Draco flushed.

Snape was going to soothe his ego a little, when there was a soft knock on the door. Snape gave a tight smile and went for the door. Opening it, he saw no one there, though he felt Potter's presence. He made a show of looking around, then closed the door. Two seconds later, Potter's head was floating in the middle of the room.

Draco let out a moan of mild outrage. "So that's how you did it? You've got a fucking Invisibility Cloak? Merlin, Potter, you are such a wanker."

Potter looked nonplussed for a moment before letting a boyish grin through. "Yeah, well, I can't get by on money alone, can I?"

Draco blinked, shocked. Snape coughed, drawing Potter's attention back to him. "Did you get it?"

Potter nodded, a triumphant smile erupting. He held out not only a tarnished crown, but also the sword of Gryffindor. And then he stepped forward, presenting them to Snape.

Snape waved away the sword, but took the diadem from Potter, examining it closely. He had a difficult time believing that such an ordinary, harmless looking item could house such potent magics. He felt a slight pull to try it on and see if it still bestowed wisdom, but thinking of Dumbledore's experience with the cursed ring was enough to quell the impulse. That and the fact he'd look utterly ridiculous.

Instead, he brought out his wand and tapped the crown, bringing to light the spells woven into it. And there, amidst the beautiful blue and purple filigreed network of mental enhancement charms, was an ugly green mass. The Dark Lord had made it integral to the magic of the diadem.

He tapped the crown again and the lights disappeared. He handed it back to Potter, who was looking at both him and the diadem with a satisfying tinge of awe.

Potter looked down at the artifact in his hand and then back up to Snape. "Don't you want to be the one to...?"

Bemused, Snape stepped back, shaking his head. "I think you should have the honor, Mr. Potter."

Potter looked disappointed for some reason, but nodded, stashing both the diadem and sword beneath his cloak again. "Perhaps we should let Hermione do it, instead. Without her, we wouldn't be this far ahead."

"A fine idea."

"Um," Draco said, looking between the two of them, "Speaking of Granger, where is she?"

"Sleeping."

"And, is she... is she okay? I mean..."

"She is fine now," Snape said kindly.

"And the Weasel?"

Snape saw Potter scowl. "Dying. Your aunt's blade was poisoned."

Draco paled, then turned to look at Potter. "I'm sorry, Potter. I... I would do things differently if I could."

Potter surprised Snape by simply saying, "I know. I would, too."

It seemed they reached some sort of silent accord, which Snape accepted as a good thing, but it was all still rather extraneous to current events.

"Potter, will you be the Bonder of an Unbreakable Vow?"

Potter looked at him, startled, then quickly looked between the two of them. "Um, what would I have to do?"

"Hold your wand to our hands."

"I suppose so, but, do you really think it's necessary?"

Snape gave him the *you are being an idiot* look, but Potter just frowned back. "Seriously, sir, it's pretty drastic."

Snape and Draco both snorted at the understatement.

"It's okay, Potty," Draco said. "I understand the need. If I were in either of your places, I wouldn't let me leave the room without one, either."

"But, why not a wand oath?"

"Because," Snape said, "they are breakable. Draco knows his life is forfeit. With an Unbreakable Vow, he protects the secret and his parents from retribution should he be caught. Also, this way there is no way for him to double cross us."

Potter frowned. "I don't want coerced help."

Snape let out a sharp breath. "It isn't coerced if he agrees to it. Besides, we are too close to the end of this dirty war to let idealism bring us down."

Potter looked down on the bound boy in the chair and back up to Snape, eyebrow raised in disbelief.

"Potter, he gave me the choice. I want the Dark Lord dead."

"Why?" Potter asked, genuinely curious.

"He's mad. He's also destroying... our way of life. I want to be on top, but not... not this way."

Potter nodded. "Okay. As long as it's your choice."

"It is."

Snape flicked his wand and the magical ropes disappeared, allowing Draco to stretch out then stand up. He then knelt on the floor, and motioned to Draco to do the same.

When they were positioned, they clasped hands. Snape motioned for Potter to touch his wand to them.

"Will you, Draco, do whatever is necessary to bring down the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters."

"I will."

One thin cord of flame wrapped itself around their hands.

"Will you, to the best of your abilities, protect those who side with Harry Potter?"

"I will."

The second cord crossed the first.

"And will you protect the secrets we share with you, letting no one except myself, Harry Potter or Hermione Granger know until such time it is agreed that you can divulge said secrets?"

"I will."

The third and final cord of flame shot out of Potter's wand, wrapping itself around their hands in a blaze of red. The room glowed for three seconds before the flames died away, leaving their hands unmarked.

Both the boys looked shaken, but neither said anything. Snape stood up, feeling far too old, and shook out his robes.

"And now Potter will tell you your task."

Potter looked at him then at Draco, eyes wide. "You want to send Draco? But--"

"You are too valuable to send, and anyone else I would trust to the task would be missed."

"But it's *my* task! Dumbledore gave it to *me* to do!"

"He also led you a merry chase, Potter. At this point, we need to get the cup so we can confront the monster, before said monster figures out all is not well in his realm. I still have information you need, and trust me when I say you need to be the one to confront the Dark Lord. We can **not** risk you."

Potter clenched his mouth shut, obviously biting back angry words.

"I know you do not like it. Nor do I. But as you said earlier, it matters not whether we like it, this is what needs to be done. Give me the benefit of my experience and trust that I know how to get us through this portion better than you do."

Potter eyed him angrily, but did nod after a moment. Without breaking his expression, he turned to Draco. "I need you to get something from Vo-- You-Know-Who's family house. There are a lot of protections around it, so you're going to have to be careful."

Draco waited for Potter to continue, but silence reigned. His brows rose in alarm. "That's it? That's all the information you're going to give me as I go out and risk my life for you? Do you *want* me dead?"

Potter frowned in thought, but it was Snape, as usual, who came up with the answer.

"There is a Pensieve in my office. Perhaps Potter could put the relevant memory in it so we can analyze it for your mission."

Draco nodded, and Potter looked relieved. "That's a good idea," Potter said sounding amazed.

"I have them on occasion," Snape replied dryly.

Potter had the grace to look slightly abashed, but it wore off quickly. "While we're there, we can catch Hermione up on everything."

Snape nodded just as a sudden wave of exhaustion hit him. It occurred to him that getting Hermione's opinion on all that had happened seemed like a very sensible thing at that point. It also occurred to him that the last time he'd been this tired, he'd been thinking of her, as well. Not wanting to think of the implications of that, he refocused on the boys, who were looking at him expectantly.

"Potter, cloak your head. Draco, I will be escorting you at wand point. You need to look caught out. I will be letting it be known in the morning that I caught you aiding and abetting the enemy, though of course I will imply it was Longbottom, or one of the girls, you were helping."

Draco nodded. Potter nodded as well, then disappeared under his cloak.

Snape nodded back and headed for the door, where he motioned with his wand for Draco to precede him. He then proceeded to frogmarch Draco to his office, keeping his face as stern as he could manage it.

Once they were on the moving stairway and the gargoyle had closed the door behind them, he lowered his wand. Potter took the cloak off, revealing the sword and diadem. Snape looked at them, and then looked up at Potter, unable to suppress an excited smirk.

"We're close."

Potter grinned back, almost vibrating with excitement. "Yeah. We really are."

Draco looked between them and the artifacts and grinned in an abstract way. "Will you tell me what those are?"

Snape and Potter looked at each other. Snape nodded minutely, giving his opinion. Potter nodded back. "Yeah. Just let us kill it first."

"Kill it?" Draco asked, now thoroughly confused.

"Yes. We need to kill the crown."

Draco looked bewildered, but held his tongue. Potter grinned happily and was trying, unsuccessfully, to not laugh outright. Even Snape was having a difficult time not smiling. Snape found it odd to be a part of Potter's giddiness, but it was not as awful as he would have thought.

They moved into the office proper, and Potter rushed off to the bedroom to wake Hermione. He stopped suddenly as he opened the door, and, looking around the boy, Snape saw Poppy hovering over Weasley. Hermione, standing at the foot of the bed, turned to them with tears streaming down her face.

19

Chapter 20 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

AN: My apologies for the delay. I've been holding onto this for more than a week now, but I never seemed to have time (or inclination - computer time means homework now) to make the revisions suggested by the lovely Ayerf. I consoled myself with the knowledge that you all are probably too busy reading the SSHG exchange over on LJ right now to think about this story. And honestly, I don't know whether to hope that's true or not. ;-) Next update will be soonish.

Hermione heard the door open behind her, and turned to see Harry standing there. She tried to smile, she really did, but there was no way to hide her misery.

It took only a moment before Harry was beside her, wrapping his arms around her in an awkward hug. She felt herself fall apart as she leaned on him, and started keening with grief. He started rocking her gently.

"Is he..." he asked tentatively, though his voice cracked, unable to finish the question.

She shook her head against his chest. "No," she hiccupped. "You're just in time."

Harry slowly pulled himself away from her, and walked to the place Madam Pomfrey had just been. Hermione looked at the mediwitch, but she just shook her head sadly.

Hermione's head sank down. She felt a hand rest itself on her shoulder, and she turned into the body behind her, burying her head in Snape's chest. She was vaguely aware of how stiff he was, but she was too wrapped up in grief to notice how long it took him to wrap his arms around her. All she noticed was that the chest and arms were there; comfort was being offered.

"I'm afraid I need to see to Weasley." She heard his voice say the words, and heard the rumble in his chest as he said them, but the meaning didn't connect until he was pushing her away from him. "I'm sorry."

She nodded blindly then found herself wrapped in Harry's arms again. She could tell he was crying, too. She hugged him back fiercely. A moment later, she heard Snape say, "I'm done." She released Harry and looked up to see Snape's ashen face directed at them, before he turned and left the room.

She stared after him for a second before joining Harry at Ron's side. She reached out and touched Ron's face with one hand, and felt Harry's hand slide into the other one. And there they stood for what seemed like years, until Ron's labored breathing stopped.

Hermione bent down and kissed Ron's forehead one last time, then took hold of the sheet. Looking up at Harry to see if he was ready, she gently covered Ron's face.

She turned to hug Harry again, but he shook his head and backed away a step. "This needs to end, Hermione. It needs to end now."

Hermione gulped, trying not to let the grief swallow her whole. "You're right. And as soon as we find the diadem--"

"I found it." He looked at her, and she saw triumph peeking through the grief. "It's in the other room waiting to be destroyed."

"Oh. Well. That's good then."

"Do you want to kill it?"

Hermione shook her head, and reflexively tried to back up, but the bed stopped her. Realizing what she was doing, she shook her head again with a small smile. "No, thanks, Harry. You should do it. Or Snape. I... I can't. Or I don't want to, anyway."

Harry nodded understandingly. "Well, I should go do that. Then we need to tell Draco what's going on and... Oh, Hermione, we're close. We're really close."

Hermione smiled half-heartedly. She was glad to hear they were so much closer. She really was. But it was hard to celebrate when feeling so numb.

"Let's go, then."

Harry smiled back and headed out of the room. Hermione took a last look at the form on the bed and followed. Pomfrey met her at the door, gave her a quick hug, then proceeded past to tend to Ron... To tend to the *body*. Hermione took a deep breath and continued forward.

It was only as she entered the office and actually saw Draco that Harry's words sank in.

"Malfoy?"

"Granger." He didn't sneer, he didn't make a crack at her expense. He just stood there, somberly, and nodded at her. Respectfully.

"And..." She shook her head a little, frowning. "Sorry, but why are you here?"

He smiled wryly. "Snape caught me trying to save Potter. I'm on your side now."

"Oh. Okay."

Draco's eyebrows went up. "Just like that, you accept me?"

She blinked. "Well, besides the fact that neither Snape nor Harry would accept you into their confidence without very good cause, you did try to help us... at your house."

He winced. "I'm sorry you had to go through that, Granger."

She nodded. "I know."

"You were the one to notify me, weren't you?" Snape said suddenly. Draco gave a single nod. "Why?"

Draco laughed bitterly. "I was hoping to curry favor with the Dark Lord through his lieutenant. Aunt Bella kind of hexed that plan to hell."

"Well, you have curried favor with his lieutenant, and if all goes according to plan, you won't need his favor ever again." He looked at Harry. "Your memory?"

Harry put his wand to his temple and concentrated. Pulling his wand away, there was a silver spiderweb, which he placed into the Pensieve on the desk.

Snape swirled the Pensieve with his wand and the image of a house came up. Snape looked at Harry, who nodded. "That's the one."

Snape then looked at Draco. "Ready?"

Draco swallowed. "Yeah."

"Perhaps you should join us, Potter. You might have insights to the Dark Lord's spell work that we need."

Harry nodded reluctantly and joined them around the desk. Hermione watched as they approached the bowl, touching it in unison with their hands. The next moment, all three of them were immobile. A wave of grief threatened to overwhelm her; she fought it back by concentrating on observing the men before her.

Draco... she wasn't sure she would say he was a man yet, but he wasn't the same boy she'd gone to school with. He'd obviously started thinking things through rather than just repeating the party line. He looked like his ego had been brought down several notches, and with Voldemort living in his house with a vendetta against his family it was no wonder. But his presence in the room with them marked a decided change in views. He might still believe in blood purity, but his behavior toward her said he might even be rethinking that. No, he was definitely growing up, even if he wasn't a man just yet.

Harry was a man now, though. It wasn't just that his face was getting scraggly, either. His insecurities had melted away, leaving him holding himself with pride now, with a sense of purpose. He also looked like he had aged twenty years in the week they'd been apart. There were lines on his face that she wasn't sure would be erased by sleep and relaxation. And his eyes...

He radiated power, and that power was now, finally, backed up by prudence. She was very proud of him.

Snape... looked exhausted. His skin had gone pasty and grey, and the circles under his eyes made him look like he'd been in a fight. She didn't remember him looking quite so drained in the bedroom. Tired and pale, yes, but not on the edge of collapse as he was now.

He was a puzzle to her. She gathered that he was intensely lonely, especially this last year, and yet he tried his best to keep everyone away. Except her.

That was what really puzzled her he had more or less invited her into his life. Granted, he had little choice about her being in his rooms now, but he could have encouraged her to stay as far away from him as possible. He was a master at pushing people's buttons. He could easily have made sure she knew she was unwelcome, but he hadn't. Instead he had, well, basically welcomed her. He had taken care of her. He had talked to her, sought her opinions, treated her like an equal. He had acted as though he respected her.

It was all very confusing. Nice, but confusing.

She found that she liked him. She'd always respected him when he was their teacher, but she hadn't liked him very much. He'd persecuted Harry so mercilessly and vindictively that it had been impossible to like him then, even as she did continue to respect him. (Trying to get through to Harry the difference between someone being "nice" and "good", however, had been beyond her capabilities.) But now...

It wasn't even that he was behaving better toward Harry. She thought she would probably still like him even if he were as horrid as ever, because she'd seen behind the mask. He had a loving, loyal heart. Actually, he was very similar to Harry in many of the essentials, no matter how much either of them would protest that statement.

The bedroom door opened, and Hermione tore her eyes away from Snape's face to see Madam Pomfrey coming out looking tired and worn.

She stood up and said, "Thank you."

The mediwitch looked up suddenly, as if Hermione had surprised her.

"Oh, my dear, I am so sorry for your loss," Pomfrey said as she walked up to Hermione and pulled her into an embrace.

Hermione swallowed as they parted. "Is he... is his body still in there?"

Pomfrey shook her head. "I asked the house-elves to prepare him for burial. Do you think his parents would prefer he be buried here or at home?"

Hermione's breath left her in a rush. She hadn't even spared a thought for the rest of the family. They would be devastated.

"I have no idea. How long... um, that is... I'm not familiar with wizarding burial rituals."

"Usually, the bodies are buried within a day or two of death. The Headmaster was a... a special case."

"Ah," Hermione said, feeling as intelligent as her word.

"I would like to send an owl to Molly and Arthur, but considering the circumstances, I don't know if that would be wise."

Hermione rubbed her eyes and sat back down, suddenly exhausted. "You should ask Severus. From what I gather, the war might be over very soon."

Pomfrey looked at the three gathered around the Pensieve. "I know it's not my place, but... *is* Harry the Chosen One?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. And if all goes well, he might be able to confront You-Know-Who this week."

"So soon?" Pomfrey said in a whisper.

"If all goes well."

Pomfrey stood as if in a daze, and before either of them collected themselves, the men regained animation.

Hermione was concerned at how pale both Snape and Draco were.

"Return here after dinner and I will escort you out of the castle. In the meantime, practice the necessary spells," Snape murmured.

Draco swallowed and nodded.

"Do you think it's a good idea to escort him out publicly? I could sneak him out the same way I got in," Harry said, watching Draco with concern.

Snape considered that option, but didn't make a decision. Instead, he looked to Hermione. Surprised, and very concerned at the deference, Hermione nodded. "I think it would be best to keep his absence a secret for as long as possible."

Snape nodded rather dumbly.

Hermione saw she wasn't the only one who was concerned by Snape's behavior. Everyone was looking at him with varying degrees of worry.

"Severus!" Pomfrey barked after whipping out her wand to do a diagnostic spell, "When was the last time you slept? You are on the verge of collapse!"

He waved her off, even as he sat down gracelessly. "There's time enough when the war is over."

"But--"

"Poppy, I can take care of myself."

"Judging by your state, you obviously can't! Severus, you are nearing dangerous magical depletion levels! I have no idea what you've been doing to exhaust yourself so, but you need to stop!"

"Magical depletion? That makes no sense. Your spell must be wrong."

"I don't think it is," Hermione said quietly, coming up on his side, "You look worse than I felt after the Cruciatus. You're not acting yourself, either. You need to sleep." He frowned. "Please."

His frown stayed, but after several moments, he nodded. "Well, if people would leave my de facto bedroom, I would go to sleep much sooner."

Hermione shook her head. "Severus, take your bed back. I can make do out here tonight."

His frown deepened, but he allowed Hermione to help him up. He staggered a little on the way to the bedroom, but with Draco's help, Hermione guided him to her side of the bed. He collapsed onto it, gathering her pillow in a bundle between his cheek and arm, and then shooed them out with a muttered, "Begone, demons."

Smiling fondly, Hermione left him in peace, though she was aware that Draco was looking at her oddly.

"Yes?" she asked him, as soon as she'd quietly closed the door behind them.

"What did you do to him?" Draco asked, completely thrown.

"What did I..." Hermione spluttered, incensed. "How dare you accuse me of hexing him into this--"

"No!" Draco interrupted, "Not the energy thing, but the mood thing! What did you do to get him so wrapped around your finger?" Then Draco blushed, and quickly amended, "Don't answer that."

Hermione gaped at Draco, torn between revulsion and anger. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Malfoy! We're *friends*. *Friends* are nice to each other."

The familiar Malfoy sneer came back, but before he could say anything, Harry grabbed his shoulder and gently pulled him away from Hermione. "I think we all need sleep, don't you think, *Draco*?"

Draco scowled, but quickly wiped his face of everything but a particularly supercilious sneer. "Of course. I do need my beauty sleep, after all."

Harry chuckled and patted Draco on the back, earning an almost wistful frown from Draco.

"Thank you, Draco," he said as they approached the door. "You're doing the right thing."

Draco sniffed. "Yeah, well... Doing good isn't reserved for Gryffindors alone, you know."

"Wait a minute," Hermione interjected, earning her a sneer.

"Granger, I can make a list of non-Gryffindors if--"

"No, I know of plenty of examples, Snape being in the lead. No. I'm just thinking, wouldn't it be better if you went on the mission tonight? The portraits will have seen you coming here with Snape for punishment, and so your being missing, even if it goes through the morning, could be explained away through injuries. Madam Pomfrey could cover for you."

Hermione looked over to the mediwitch and saw her nod reluctantly in agreement.

Hermione looked back at the boys. Harry had his general's face on, while Draco looked pale.

"I'm not ready."

"Why? Is it just that you're scared--"

"Of course I'm bloody well scared! There are spells I haven't used in ages that I need to brush up on, some that I've never even heard of! I'm not going out there without arming myself!"

Hermione placed her hands on her hips and rolled her eyes. "And you didn't let me finish, did you? I was going to ask if there were things that needed to be done first. Needing to practice is definitely a good reason for delaying, and if you let me help you, you'll go off more prepared than if you study by yourself."

Harry nodded. "No one is better at cram sessions than Hermione, Draco. I wouldn't have survived the first task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament without her helping me learn summoning spells."

Draco backed down with a pouty frown. "What about sleep?"

Hermione examined him critically. "You don't look deprived."

Draco sniffed at her opinion, so Madam Pomfrey came over and waved her wand a few times. "You could do with a bit of rest, but a nap should suffice."

Draco swallowed hard. "Okay."

Something about his demeanor touched Hermione, making her soften her tone as she said, "You don't have to go on the mission tonight, but don't go back to your dormitory. We can use this time to get you up to speed with everything you need."

Draco nodded, still looking grim. "Fine."

"So, tell me about the spells you need to practice. Or, better yet, tell me about the spells you don't know so that we can get the books for those while you are practicing the spells you already know."

Draco looked over at Harry. "Is she always like this?"

Harry grinned widely. "Yep."

Draco sighed, and recited a list of spells, most of which Hermione did happen to know, and if she didn't, she remembered where she'd seen mention of them. A house-elf was called and dispatched to the library, returning a few minutes later with a substantial pile of books.

Harry and Draco moaned a bit, but Draco reached out and grabbed the top book anyway. Hermione noticed Harry backing away from the pile in an almost comical fashion, until he turned to find Madam Pomfrey examining the diadem on the desk with a frown.

"Do you think Snape's going to be okay?" he asked her, as she prodded the air around the crown with her wand.

"I believe so," she answered distractedly, then asked, "What is this?"

Harry hesitated.

"It's something we need in the fight against You-Know-Who," Hermione answered.

"Hmm," she said, in the universal tone of adult disapproval. She continued examining it critically by eye. "It feels very Dark. Are you sure you should be using something like this?"

"Oh, don't worry, we'll be using it in a perfectly safe way," Harry said with all sincerity. Pomfrey gave him an acidic look over her glasses and hummed disapprovingly again. Draco snorted in the background.

"Really!" Harry insisted, though he seemed to understand his lack of credibility on the subject of safety where the school's mediwitch was concerned. "I'll be very careful."

"It's not you I'm worried about, Mr. Potter. It's been your friends I've been treating for serious injuries these past few years."

Harry's face fell, and Hermione could see the weight of the world descend once again.

"Harry's right, though, Madam Pomfrey. We will be very careful with this. In fact, we are plotting out how to do without it altogether, as we don't trust its magic, either."

Pomfrey looked at her strangely. "If that's so, why are you letting it grow?"

Both Harry and Hermione stood very still before unconsciously stepping toward the matron in unison.

"Growing?"

"What do you mean?"

Pomfrey looked between the two of them nervously. "Whatever curse is in there, it's getting stronger."

Hermione saw Harry look at her anxiously. "Can it do that?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. There's so little information available..."

"But, he's still alive. He can't... I mean... It's not possible to have two..."

Hermione blanched at the thought of two Voldemorts in one world at the same time.

"Oh, God, I hope not," she whispered, bringing her hand to her mouth.

"You two picked a fine time to be in such a mess, as the person who would know what to do is out like a light right now. And you'd best not disturb him!"

Hermione looked at the bedroom door, then back at the diadem. Everything clicked. She raised her eyes to meet Harry, and whispered, "Snape!" He understood immediately.

"Where's the sword?" he shouted, suddenly springing into action. Hermione pulled Pomfrey away from the table as Harry scrambled around it, grabbing the sword from its resting place on the shelf behind Snape's chair. With a grunt, he swung the sword over his head, and brought it down with a crash, splitting the diadem in half.

A high-pitched, inhuman scream split the air between them, and Hermione watched, horrified, as the diadem halves *writhed* in agony. The ramifications sinking in, Hermione grabbed Madam Pomfrey again and pulled her toward the bedroom. When the matron protested, Hermione exclaimed, "We need to check on Snape!"

Pomfrey's eyes grew wide as she deduced what was going on, and suddenly Hermione was no longer pulling the matron, but was pushed aside as Pomfrey hurried to the bedroom. The matron threw the bedroom door open with a flick of her wand, and was at Snape's side in three steps. Hermione watched anxiously as Pomfrey waved her wand again and again until the matron relaxed with a sigh.

She turned to face Hermione with a smile and led her out of the room as Snape muttered something unintelligible and rolled over, quietly saying, "He'll be fine. His magical energy is now almost back to normal. A good night's sleep should restore what's missing."

Hermione exhaled and felt the need to cry increase suddenly. She sniffed and nodded. "I'll be sure to not let him be disturbed."

Pomfrey patted her on the shoulder. "Not until breakfast time, anyway. Now I think I've had all the excitement I can handle for an evening." She looked at Draco, who was slowly returning to his seat while still staring in horror at the remains of the diadem. "If you need a place to rest, I will set up a warded cot in my office." Draco glanced up at her and then back at the diadem, giving her a distracted nod. She shook her head. "Good night." She headed to the fireplace and, with a friendly wave, left them in a swirl of green.

Hermione turned and gave Harry a relieved smile, which he returned in full. Hermione looked down to Harry's hands, which were wrapped around the hilt of the sword which was still between the two halves of the diadem, and gave him a questioning glance. His smile turned bashful, and he released his hands. The sword did not move. Looking closer, Hermione saw that the sword was lodged very securely in the desk.

She looked up at Harry again. "Well, at least you were thorough."

Harry grinned and rubbed his hand through his hair. "Yeah. I hope Snape doesn't have too much of a fit."

Hermione giggled, imagining Snape's face if the sword were still there in the morning. "Yes, well, I think it would probably be a good idea if you weren't here when he wakes up."

Harry laughed. "Wiser words were never said."

Hermione gently smacked the back of his head, which he playfully overreacted to. Hermione smiled as affection for her friend swelled within her.

"I suppose we need to remove the sword, in case anyone comes up here?"

"Yes, I think it would be a good idea."

Harry nodded, and started working at removing the sword, rocking it back and forth. "Funny, it was just about this difficult to get out of the pond, too."

Hermione hummed. "At least you aren't likely to die of hypothermia this time."

"Mm, but now I feel like sodding King Arthur."

Hermione giggled again. "Though with the trouble you're having, perhaps you aren't the Chosen One after all, Harry!"

Harry grunted and tried pulling the sword out with one more great effort, but gave up a few seconds later, wiping his sweating brow.

"I now think Arthur's historians fudged the truth. I think the sword was whacked into a table, and everyone was too embarrassed to admit they couldn't get the blasted thing out, so they only said it was stone."

Hermione laughed. "Nice theory, Harry, but the records are all pretty unanimous on Excalibur being set in stone. Besides which, we all know that Merlin manipulated the whole thing, since he wanted to rule without consequence, and so trained Arthur to be his puppet."

Harry gave her a look, and she smiled innocently. They maintained their expressions for two seconds before cracking up.

"God, I missed you, Hermione!"

"I was gone less than a week," Hermione said, echoing Snape's response to Minerva hours before.

"Six days. Six bloody long days. Luna is nice, but she's no substitute for you."

"Luna?" Hermione asked, excitedly. "You've seen Luna?"

Harry looked shocked and mildly abashed. "I never said, did I? Yeah, Luna was in the Malfoy's basement along with Ollivander. Dobby got them and Dean out to Shell Cottage before he came back to rescue us."

Hermione's eyebrows crept up her forehead. She involuntarily looked over at Draco and saw his shoulders were hunched defensively. "Oh. Are they okay?"

Harry nodded. "A bit worried about you and Ron..." he swallowed suddenly, then nodded and visibly pulled himself together. "But, yeah. They're alright."

Hermione slumped against the desk. "I am so glad. Snape will be terribly relieved as well. Luna's capture was weighing on him heavily."

Harry made a face, and Hermione scowled at him. He shook his head. "I... I'm sorry, Hermione, but... It's difficult to switch so suddenly from believing Snape was worse than You-Know-Who, to being happy that he's happy. I get that he's a good guy and I'm happy he is, really I am but, it's not like we're friends now, or ever will be."

Hermione tried to hide the flash of disappointment she felt, as she knew it was unreasonable to expect otherwise, but she wasn't quick enough. He looked at her with a shrewd look on his face.

"You *don't* fancy Snape, do you?"

Hermione spluttered. "No! He's... ew! He's my teacher! He's my *captor*! Ew, Harry! Ew!"

Harry's shoulders relaxed a little at that. "Good." Hermione gave him another warning look, and he amended, "I mean, you can fancy anyone you like, but, well... It's... erm... Oh, look at the time! Neville will be wondering where I am!"

Hermione gave a huff of amusement and let him off the hook. "I should probably give Draco my attention. We have some pretty serious practicing to do." She waved her wand and enlarged the crevice where the sword was trapped. It fell onto the desk with a dull clank, and she waved her wand again, trying to heal the rift, though it refused to close all the way. She shrugged and left it, and only then caught Harry's amused and annoyed eye.

"You could have told me."

She shrugged. "I thought you wanted to do it the hard way."

He opened his mouth to argue, but snapped it shut with a shake of his head. "Right. I really do need to get back to the Room of Requirement. I don't want them sending out scouts on my account."

"No. Keep them safe, Harry. And, try to discourage them from outright war just yet?"

He smiled grimly. "They won't be held long."

"I know, but we need to wait for... well, maybe they can provide a distraction if someone does start asking after Draco?"

Harry hummed thoughtfully. "Not a bad idea. I hate to ask them to sacrifice themselves, though."

"Well, let's just make sure the battles are as minimal and important as possible."

Harry nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow sometime."

"I'll send you a Patronus when Draco is ready to leave."

He smiled. "Brilliant idea! What would I do without you, Hermione?"

Hermione forced a laugh, though she knew that was what Harry would have done. "Night."

Harry threw the Invisibility Cloak over himself and disappeared. Once the office door opened and closed, she found herself being observed by Draco. He shook his head and clucked patronizingly before returning to his book.

"Yes?"

"You Gryffindors lack any trace of subtlety, don't you?"

Hermione took a deep breath in and forced herself not to roll her eyes. As she exhaled, she smiled at Draco. "Alright, then, where do we lack subtlety?"

"Your plan. Sending Longbottom and the rebels out to make a big to do when my absence has already been noticed will only draw attention to the fact that I'm gone and your side doesn't want their side to know it. You'll have to create the diversion before that, if you want to keep my involvement a secret."

Hermione frowned. "You may have a point."

Draco sneered. "Oh, thank you for your condescension, my lady."

Hermione glared back before a thought made a slow, wicked smile spread across her face. "How about we practice those spells now?"

Draco's sneer disappeared.

*

The sky was starting to lighten by the time Draco could disarm and incapacitate Hermione on a semi-regular basis. Hermione finally called a halt to their practice session with a weary smile.

"*By Jove, I think you've got it!*" At the blank look her change of accent brought, she waved the previous comment away and said, "Good job, Draco. I think you're ready."

A spell flew at Draco from the bedroom doorway, surprising both of them. Draco barely managed to dodge the jinx, then fired a hex back. Hermione turned just in time to see Draco's spell deflected by a silent *Protego*. Half a second later, Snape rippled into sight as he canceled his disillusionment spell.

"Acceptable. Definite improvement, Draco."

Draco glared at Snape, while Hermione beamed at him. "Sir! How are you feeling?"

Snape gave her a slightly quizzical look. "I feel as if the end is nigh."

Hermione's smile dropped as fears for his health reared back to life. "Oh no! Shall I call for Madam Pomfrey? Do you want to sit down? Tell me what you need, and I'll do it!"

Snape looked at her as if she had gone mad. "What are you on about, woman?"

Hermione was bringing out her wand to cast the diagnostic charms Pomfrey had taught her when she felt a hand on her elbow. Looking over, she saw Draco was shaking his head at her, wearing a mocking smile as he did so.

"She's misinterpreting your meaning, is all," Draco explained to Snape. To Hermione he said, "He means the war, Granger, not his life."

Snape glared at Hermione. "Of course I mean the war! What idiocy would make you think otherwise?"

Hermione wanted to snap back at him, but found herself choked up, and turned to look out the window, instead.

"To be fair," she heard Draco say after an awkward pause, "you were in pretty bad shape last night, sir. Turns out that crown thingy was sucking up your energy."

Hermione heard a bit of rustling, as if things on the desk were being moved about, but otherwise the office was oppressively silent for a full minute. She was surprised, then, when Snape's voice came from right behind her.

"I didn't realize. Thank you for your concern."

She tried to swallow her tears, but it was too much. Conscious that he could see her face, she turned away from him as she tried not to snifle. A hand on her shoulder, however, overthrew her defenses, and she turned into his chest with a sob.

"There, there," he said awkwardly, though his arms went around her far less reluctantly than before. "You've had a hard time of it," he added, and as if there were some magic in the words, the remaining stiffness left his posture, and he embraced her fully.

Something about his release, his welcome, stirred Hermione's grief even more, and so she clung to him as if he were her life line. And he held onto her.

It was a few moments before Hermione calmed down enough to be aware of anything outside her pain, but when she did, she became aware of Snape's heart beating strongly beneath her ear. Then she became aware of Snape's arms around her, and that he was rocking her just a little. She became aware of his wordless, innate magic seeping out of his hands into her back, calming her. She realized anew just how powerful Snape was. But for the first time, she saw how beautiful that power was.

She also became aware of the third person in the room, who was pointedly ignoring them as he studied a portrait's detailed brushstrokes.

She took a big breath and reluctantly withdrew from Snape's embrace. He let her go and conjured a handkerchief before she thought of the need. Bobbing her head gratefully, she wiped her face and nose, then looked up at him.

"Thank you."

"You should go get some sleep. I assume you haven't had any this evening?"

"A few minutes back before... before I called Madam Pomfrey, but no, I haven't had much."

He quirked a solemn smile at her. "Then now is a good time. There are still a couple of hours before breakfast."

She nodded, suddenly aware of just how exhausted she was. "Good night, sir."

"Sleep well."

She made her way to the bedroom, taking care to give Draco a smile of gratitude and encouragement before she closed the door behind her and fell into the bed. The space was still a little bit warm from Snape, and, as she snuggled into the sheets, she found the remnants of his smell reminded her of the comfort he had given her.

She drifted off hoping she could one day provide him the same feeling of shelter he'd offered her. He deserved it.

20

Chapter 21 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

AN: Thanks to Ayerf and Septentrion.

Snape took a moment to gather himself before turning to face Draco. He felt raw from absorbing Hermione's emotions. He hadn't felt so heartsick since Lily died, but this was different. This wasn't his own grief, though it felt just the same. It took him back to that horrible day more powerfully than any guilt trip Dumbledore had ever wrought.

He rested his clenched fists on the windowsill and took one deep breath, exhaling it as silently as possible. It managed, barely, to focus his attention enough for him to reinstate his Occlumency shields.

He turned to find Draco looking at him curiously. There was a hint of pity in the boy's expression he did not like, but he chose to ignore it for the time being. He decided a distraction was needed, and cast his Patronus, summoning Potter. He hoped the boy would understand the message, given there would be no words.

That done, he said to Draco, "Do you feel up for the mission or do you need to rest?"

Draco hesitated, and Snape could see the fear creeping in. "I can give you an invigoration draught if you need one. I will stress that the sooner you go, the sooner you return, and the less suspicion is aroused. There are few things on our side beyond Boy Wonder's fair fortune, and the element of surprise. And I fear that the latter is in grave danger."

Draco swallowed and nodded. "I think an invigoration draught would be a good idea, but otherwise..." He stood straighter, as if the proper posture would provide courage, "I'm-- I'm ready."

Snape snorted mentally, thinking, *Like hell you are.* Aloud, he said, "Good." He grabbed a small parchment-weight off his desk and cast the Portus spell, then handed the object to Draco. "You will need to tap it with your wand to activate it, but it will bring you back here. Do not delay in activating it."

Draco nodded, more decisively this time. "I will be back as soon as possible, sir. I promise."

Snape eased his posture slightly and smiled at the boy. "I know you will. I have faith in you."

Draco's eyebrows shot up. "You do?"

Snape smiled. "Yes, Draco. Even if I weren't about to give you this," he said, pulling out a small bottle of golden liquid, "I would trust that you would do your utmost to complete this task. Your family's lives are at stake, and I know that is no small matter to you."

Draco's eyes widened when Snape brought out the Felix Felicis, but his face fell a bit at the words that followed.

"That's the only reason?"

Snape snorted aloud and shook his head. "If I didn't think you capable, I would not be sending you."

Draco paused. "Ah. Right."

The stairway chimed its movement in his head and Snape handed him the bottle. "I would suggest taking this as soon as you leave this room. There is no telling who will be roaming the halls this morning, and I only trust the invisibility cloak so far."

Draco nodded, looking at the small vial with a wistful wonder.

Snape understood. He stepped behind his desk, and sat down before saying, "It wouldn't have helped you complete your previous mission. You are not a killer."

Draco's jaw clenched, but he gave a small nod. "I know."

"Good. And I hope you also know how valuable that is."

Draco shrugged, but before Snape could explain anything, the door opened. No one appeared until the door shut itself, when Harry Potter's panicked head came into view.

"What's wrong? Where's Hermione?"

"Calm yourself, Potter. Nothing is wrong." Seeing Potter was still looking rather wild-eyed, he added, "Miss Granger is asleep, so was unable to summon you."

Potter looked over at the bedroom door, and heaved a relieved sigh. "Oh. Okay. What's up, then?"

"Draco is ready to go."

Potter looked at Draco with something like surprise. "You sure?"

Draco sneered, though Snape noticed him stretching and clenching his hands in anxiety. "Of course I am."

Potter smiled in a reassuring fashion. "Just making certain, Draco. This is a really big thing you're doing, and I wish I were going with you." Snape closed his eyes in despair, knowing how Draco was going to take that. He was surprised that Potter must have realized the implied insult, as he hastily added, "It would be better than being cooped up, useless in the castle."

Draco snorted. "I hope you're better at saving the world than you are at pep talks, Potter, as that was dreadful."

Potter laughed. "Yeah, well, I'm usually trying to tell everyone to let me do the big, dangerous things by myself, so I don't have a lot of practice at this."

Snape and Draco both snorted. Potter must have seen the disbelief in Snape's face, as he grumbled good-naturedly, "Not that anyone ever listens to me, so my 'stay safe' speeches can't be that good, either."

Feeling perilously close to laughing *with* the boy, Snape barked, "Time is not standing still. Take Draco by the infirmary for an invigoration draught on your way out. Draco, take the Felix now."

Potter's eyes went wide as Draco brought out the vial of Felix Felicis and popped the top. Snape was preparing himself to abash the boy, when Potter smiled broadly and relaxed.

"Oh, brilliant! Now that's good thinking!"

Snape felt wrong-footed, so he scowled repressively. Potter continued smiling at him, though, even as he said cheekily, "I doubt even Hermione would've thought of that!"

Snape sniffed. "Hermione is not a Potions master with Felix at her disposal. Now go before I give you a well deserved detention."

Potter gave him an odd smile, then opened his cloak and motioned for Draco to join him. Draco balked for a moment before stepping into Potter's space with a grimace.

"If I'd known this was part of the plan, I might not have agreed," his disembodied voice muttered.

"Well, if you *want* to walk through the halls, fully visible, attracting who knows what attention..."

"Okay, okay. Now shut it. It's too hot in here to have you adding more hot air."

Snape opened the door for them and shoed them out with a harsh, "Quiet, you fools!" before he could give in to the impulse to knock their heads together. There was a trifle more shuffling and violent fabric rustling, but then they seemed to figure things out. The stairs started moving down, and Snape closed the door with a tense sigh.

He figured that if nothing else, the Felix would get Draco out of the castle without notice. Though with Potter as his guide, even that was not necessarily so if the two continued to act like six-year-olds. He shook his head wearily and walked back to his desk. Sitting down, he leaned his head back with a groan, realizing he should have told Potter to come back after the task. Snape needed to tell him about the seventh Horcrux.

He debated with himself on whether to include Hermione in that knowledge and decided he shouldn't. He couldn't trust that she would think with her head rather than her heart in this matter. Especially now that Weasley was gone.

He sighed mournfully, and wondered how things would stand had he been a little less tired on that fateful day last summer. He wondered if Hermione would have died in the course of Bellatrix's torture session, or would Potter's luck have managed to save them yet again? He selfishly hoped that his mistake had saved her life. That having her here, trusting him, befriending him, caring about him, was his reward for that good deed.

He feared, however, that her comforting presence and her reintroducing him to the joys of friendship was punishment for what was to come. He couldn't see how she would feel anything but hatred for him after he led her best friend to the slaughter.

He stared blankly at the items on his desk for a few moments before getting to work. He removed the diadem halves, putting them in a hidden compartment in the lower drawer of his desk. It was a dead object now, no magic left, but he didn't feel right destroying the evidence completely. Not yet. Not unless they failed.

He then tried to heal the rift in his desk, though he found the wood pieces did not want to heal. He assumed the sword had made the gash, and it was probably the basilisk venom that was preventing the two sides from joining up. He debated on leaving the desk as it was, but decided it would be better to transfigure a filler so as to avoid pesky questions in the event that things did not go as planned.

He spent a fair few minutes perfecting the wood grain of the transfigured parchment to match the desk, and he was just sitting down to work on the new paperwork when the stairway chime rang. He looked at the clock, but found it was still unreasonably early. Could something have gone wrong? Was it one of the Carrows come to report a Potter sighting? Or worse, had Potter been captured? His Occlumency shields were still nonexistent.

Palming his wand, he braced himself in a defensive position as the door opened slowly. When no one appeared, he relaxed and returned to his seat. "If you would shut the door, I would appreciate it."

Potter shut the door and took off the cloak. "How did you know it was me?"

"I didn't until no one came in. And notice I still didn't address you by name in case someone had taken your cloak from you."

Potter frowned thoughtfully. Snape didn't point out that his lack of surprise at an invisible enemy would have given him away, nor that Potter's breathing was rather distinctive after a run.

"I am pleased you came back here, as there is a matter I wish to discuss with you."

"Yeah, well, I want to talk to you about something, too."

"Is your subject to do with the war?"

"Not directly. It's about Hermione."

Snape grimaced. He'd hoped that the previous evening had allayed any suspicions or apprehensions Potter might possess on that front.

"Speak your mind, then," he said with a sigh.

Potter looked rather... conflicted. Finally, after Snape waved at him to hurry up, he blurted, "Do you care about Hermione?"

Snape frowned as anger took over. He couldn't believe he had put aside better sense and trusted the boy to be reasonable! He opened his mouth to rip him to shreds when Potter continued.

"It seems like you do, and I know she trusts and likes you. It's just... I don't think I'm going to survive this war. It doesn't seem like I should, anyway. And, with Ron gone, Hermione won't have anyone left, I mean, not really. And so, if you care about her like I think you do, would you, you know, look after her? Be her friend?"

Snape blinked. An unnamed emotion crushed his throat and chest in its iron grip. He wanted to call it hope, but that wasn't quite right. This was bigger than hope. It was closer to awe. Or perhaps he was in shock.

He cleared his throat. "What makes you think my chances of surviving are better than yours?"

Harry shrugged. "You're smart, powerful and knowledgeable. Why wouldn't you?"

Snape wanted to tell Harry that those things didn't guarantee anything, not in war, but refrained. "I have made many enemies on both sides. I have little to... It would complicate things were I to survive."

Harry's eyes grew wide. "You're planning to die?"

Snape released a breath as he realized that wasn't the case anymore. "No. Not precisely. I just don't expect to live. There is a difference."

"But you have to live! You can't..."

"Just because you do not want something does not mean it will not happen. However, it seems I now have something to live for, as I will gladly look after Hermione in your

stead, should I survive."

Harry opened his mouth angrily, then closed it again looking nonplussed. "Good. Just, please don't tell her I asked you to. She'll get stroppy about it."

Snape snorted. "I can only imagine."

Harry stood there, looking around the room awkwardly. "And, of course, it's always possible I'll survive..."

Snape sighed, his somewhat good mood vanishing. "That is what I needed to talk to you about." He swallowed and tried to gather the words, but they remained uncharacteristically absent. He had paused long enough to catch Harry's attention, and the boy was now looking directly at him.

"I know where the seventh Horcrux is."

Harry's face lit up. "You do? That's wonderful! So where is..." His speech slowed down as he noticed Snape's face remained grave. "I'm not going to like the answer, am I?"

Snape shook his head.

"It's me, isn't it?"

Snape raised his eyebrow in surprise. "You suspected?"

Harry sat down hard in Hermione's chair, letting out his breath in a gush. "No-o... not exactly. It just... makes sense, I suppose. The connection to his mind, Dumbledore's evasiveness, your... Well, actually, I would think you'd be dancing with glee about this."

Snape shook his head. "I wish many things, Potter, but not your death."

Harry swallowed, looking ill. "So... What happens now? Do I go off myself?"

Snape shook his head again. "No. The Dark Lord must be the one to kill you. Dumbledore was most insistent on that point. He thought it better to wait to tell you until after the Dark Lord started protecting Nagini, but his plans did not involve us being on speaking terms, or my having the knowledge that I do."

"He was a bit of a control freak, wasn't he?"

Snape snorted. "Beyond belief."

They sat there for a couple of moments before Harry said, "So, do you have a plan?"

Snape looked at Harry and saw a man-child who was desperate to unload the burden of responsibility from his shoulders. So desperate that he was finally willing to cede his power to Snape. Snape basked in the deference for a moment, then sighed ruefully.

"I do." Snape summoned a bottle of Firewhiskey and transfigured two glasses. He poured a single shot into both, then handed Harry one. "I plan to summon the Dark Lord and hand you over to him."

Harry looked at him, then at his drink and back at him again. He nodded and threw the liquor back like a pro. His amateur status was quickly revealed, however, in a harsh bout of coughing.

"So," Harry said in a raspy voice, "is this before or after Draco gets back?"

"After, of course. Doing so before we get the cup would be rather foolish."

"And... what then?"

"Well, that rather depends on the circumstances. If Nagini is with the Dark Lord, then we'll somehow create a distraction and kill her."

"My death would be a good distraction, I would think."

"Yes, I imagine it would be." Snape tossed back his shot and poured another shot for each of them. "My concern, however, is if the snake is not with her master. If that is the case, we will need to send someone to find and kill her, preferably before you die."

"Is there any way we could know in advance?"

Snape snorted. "Not without alerting everyone to my duplicity. However, it is possible we could manipulate events to make the Dark Lord aware of his missing soul fragments. If he becomes aware that Nagini is the only spare he has, he will not let her out of his sight. Or so Dumbledore thought."

"How do we do that, though?"

"We sacrifice someone."

Harry had been swirling his whiskey around his glass, but stopped suddenly as he looked up. His face was surprisingly hard.

"No."

"It wouldn't be the first time."

"No. I am not going to send someone out to die."

"It might not be up to you."

"It bloody well is up to me."

"Are you in charge?"

"I guess so, yeah!"

"Then what's your plan?"

Harry set the untouched second drink on the desk. "Misinformation. You'll send out word that some student who is a close friend of mine has gone missing, and that student's friends heard him or her talking about going out to find Slytherin's locket. That should get Vol-- him anxious enough to check."

"And who should this friend of yours be?"

"Ginny. Ginny Weasley. She's safely hidden."

"She didn't come back from the Easter break. I need a student who is here."

"Neville, then. He's known to be my friend, he's an active rebel, and even though he hasn't been seen, he's still in the castle."

Snape leaned back. "Longbottom... Now that could work. It could work very well. I suggest you go put this plan into action with Longbottom and his friends. I will do my part at breakfast."

Harry stood up abruptly and then swayed in place. Snape smirked.

"Perhaps you should sit back down and wait a few minutes for the alcohol to dissipate a touch first."

Harry sat, looking vaguely ill. "I think that's a good idea."

Snape summoned a cup of coffee and handed it to the boy. "Drink this."

Harry sniffed the drink before tentatively sipping it. He grimaced at the bitter taste, but continued sipping, nonetheless.

"Did you get me drunk on purpose?"

Snape snorted. "Yes," he said, sarcasm dripping off his tongue. "I wanted my wicked way with you."

Harry snorted as he grimaced. "Ew."

"Indeed. I didn't realize you were a lightweight."

Harry scratched the back of his neck. "Yeah, well, I didn't know it either. Otherwise I might not have drunk that sh-tuff."

Snape raised an eyebrow, and Harry shrugged. The next moment, Harry's face dropped. "What are we going to tell Hermione?"

"I was rather thinking we wouldn't tell her."

"Oh... I don't think that's a good idea. She'll hate you for it."

He sighed unconsciously. "She'll hate me anyway, so that's of little consequence."

"How do you figure that?"

"She has just lost the love of her life whom I could not save, and the next day I break her trust by taking her remaining best friend to the slaughter. What is there not to hate?"

"No, you don't get her. She won't hate you for that. She'll understand. She doesn't blame you for Ron. She won't blame you for me. But she would blame you for not trusting her with the knowledge."

"She is overwrought with grief. She is not thinking clearly."

"Never underestimate Hermione's brains. I don't know anyone who can think under pressure better than she can."

"Your loyalty is touching, but--"

"No, you don't get it. I am *alive* because of her! She saved us countless times because she can think in any situation! She might break down in tears, but her brain keeps going. She *will* see the necessity of this."

"She won't be pleased."

Harry's eyes nearly bugged out. "I'm not exactly thrilled with this plan, either! But you told me!"

"You are rather central to the plan, however."

"Hermione will need to know so that she can organize the troops here! We need her to know."

"I was figuring on Minerva for that role."

"Professor McGonagall won't understand! She doesn't know about the Horcruxes!"

Snape was about to say that she did, but realized they hadn't discussed the reasons why they needed the diadem.

"Fine. However, I suggest we wait until the last possible moment to tell her."

"Agreed."

Harry drank the last of his coffee, set the mug down on the desk and got up without wobbling. "I'll go let Neville know the plan. We'll make sure the school is buzzing by breakfast."

"By the by, what are you telling him about these meetings?"

"That I'm talking with a member of the Order who's on staff. I've implied it's Professor McGonagall."

Snape nodded. "Good. Too many people know of my involvement already."

Harry gave him a thoughtful look, which made him add rather forcefully, "The more people who know, the more there are who are at risk."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I understand."

He headed to the door, unfurling his cloak from the bundle he'd bunched it into and slipping it on. His disembodied head looked over at Snape one last time, and there was something in his expression that worried Snape.

"Don't do anything rash, Potter. We could still lose if we get careless."

He pulled the cloak over his head and disappeared. "I know, Professor. I'll be careful."

Not reassured in the least, Snape watched the door open and close. He suspected that Harry was about to do something very stupid, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He couldn't even restrain Harry, as then Longbottom *et al* would set out looking for their missing leader, and everything would be fucked up beyond saving.

He really hated teenagers.

A clock in the cupboard chimed a waking hour, and he stood up and went to the window. He looked out over the misty grounds and tried not to give in to the feeling of helplessness that was threatening to engulf him. Hope was not lost yet. He had survived long enough to do everything that had been required of him by Dumbledore. Now it was just a matter of surviving long enough to see the end of the Dark Lord.

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He woke Hermione up fifteen minutes before breakfast with a gentle shake of her shoulder.

"A new day has risen," he said as she groaned and tried to burrow under the covers. "And whether we like it or not, it must be met."

"Mmnrrdy."

"Ready or not, we need to be in the Great Hall in fifteen minutes."

Another inarticulate groan met this, followed by a fairly clear, "Go'way."

"Not until you show signs of movement."

She raised her hand and wiggled her fingers. He couldn't help but chuckle; it was a rather evil sound.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

She threw the covers off her face and glared up at him.

"You are an evil bastard."

"Ten points to Gryffindor for being correct, and ten points from Gryffindor for stating the obvious. Now get up!"

She continued to glare, but he saw the corners of her mouth twitch in amusement as she tossed off the covers and got up.

"I was having a good dream, darn you," she said as she stretched her arms over her head and yawned. "I dreamt that Snake Face was nothing more than a metaphor for the evils that we're faced with, and that he was vanquished by tickling his funny bone."

Snape raised an eyebrow and gave her a disgusted look. "And that was a good dream?"

"He had a really silly laugh."

Snape maintained his disgusted look as he shook his head. "I fear for the future of wizarding kind."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Witch-kind will be just fine, however. What time is it?"

"Breakfast time."

She dropped her playful attitude in an instant. "Oh. I guess I'll get ready, then."

Snape cringed inwardly at the change, and wished he could bring back the playful girl. Instead, he watched as a somber woman walked away from him.

"We need to be down there in five minutes," he called out gently, as he left her to her ablutions.

Three minutes later, she entered the office looking rather worn, but tidy.

"I'm ready."

He reluctantly raised his wand and was simultaneously gratified and disturbed that she didn't flinch at the action. Casting *Imperio*, he sent a quiet thanks for her bravery through the link, and then commanded her to meekly follow him after putting her on the chained leash.

As he walked down the stairs to the Great Hall, he felt disgusting. He was pleased his scowl was commonplace, as he didn't think he would be able to hide it. Practice was only making things worse.

"Morning, Severus," an unwelcome voice said at his shoulder as he entered the Hall's side room. He turned to give Alecto a small smile.

"Morning."

"I hear you had a busy night."

"Indeed I did. Much busier than I expected."

"I heard mutterings about you escorting Draco Malfoy to your office?"

"Mm. I caught the boy helping out one of the rebels," he said, and gestured for her to precede him into the Hall. "It turns out, he's been a rather naughty boy."

Alecto gave a small, incredulous laugh. "Really? And here I thought he was too weak and cowardly to live up to even the fallen Malfoy name. Of course, his being caught does live up to their name, doesn't it?" she added with a laugh.

Snape gave Alecto a quelling look as he sent instructions to Hermione to take her place along the wall as he sat down. He was slightly disappointed to have Alecto choose the seat beside him, but knew this was a good opportunity to pass on the misinformation.

"You judge him on that one failure?"

"No. I judge him by that failure combined with his behavior here this year. He is worthless."

"I beg to differ. He is only seventeen, Alecto. A boy still, even if he has reached his majority. Given time and better circumstances, I could have seen him becoming someone of great worth."

"His circumstances are what he deserves."

"For his father's mistakes? For shame, Alecto."

"Are you questioning our Lord?"

"On this, yes. But then, I am biased. I have known Draco for most of his life and have grown rather fond of him. It pains me to see him abused."

"Hm," Alecto said, serving herself some runny eggs. "What you call abuse, I call justice."

"Our definitions of justice differ. However, last night proved he is not as 'worthless' as you deemed him. He gave me some very interesting information amidst the punishment."

Snape smirked when Alecto's eyes lit up in curiosity. Snape instructed Hermione to inconspicuously watch the teachers for a reaction. "Oh?"

"Indeed. It seems that Neville Longbottom is no longer in the castle. He managed to sneak out unnoticed. Draco overheard a couple of his friends discussing his plans to help the elusive Mr. Potter find something of Salazar Slytherin's."

Alecto's eyes widened. "Something of Slytherin's? But... Did you, he hear what?"

"No. But how many items of Slytherin's can there be left after all this time?"

"The Dark Lord should be made aware of this."

"I agree. However, I find myself loathe to disturb him over this. He hasn't lifted his Summons ban yet, to my knowledge."

"I'll take the message to him tonight, if it's okay with you," Amcyus said, leaning across his sister. "I need to chat with Bella anyway."

"That would be most appreciated, Amcyus," Snape said, trying not to purr with pleasure. "Give Bellatrix my best."

Both of the Carrows chuckled.

The rest of breakfast went by without incident, though Snape noticed there was a little more activity amongst the students than usual. He hoped it was the rumor mill doing its job. After he'd finished his meal, he stood up to go, giving a mental nudge and a physical tug on the chain to Hermione. Then some male student, he couldn't tell who, had the nerve to yell out, "Pervert!"

Snape stopped, turned and glared, even as his stomach dropped and twisted painfully. The entire hall was silent now. Half the students were looking at their plates, probably to hide their smiles, while the other half were looking around, trying to figure out who the culprit was.

"*Prododarium*," Snape uttered, quietly. The offending word reversed itself in the hall and returned itself to the Gryffindor table. Seamus Finnigan looked up at him with disgust mixed with defiance.

"Jealous, Finnigan?" Snape drawled clearly. He saw Amcyus jump out of his seat and run for the stationary Gryffindor. "I'll want to have an additional word with the boy after you're done, Professor," he called out, then turned and led Hermione out of the Hall.

He held his pace steady until the gargoyle closed, and then he cast a quick Finite to cancel both the Imperius and the mock bondage before lengthening his stride and running full tilt to his bathroom. He barely managed to fall to his knees before retching into the toilet.

Time was immeasurable in that state, but he noticed at some point gentle fingers pulling his hair back, and a cool, wet cloth being laid on his neck. He felt gratitude for the attempt at comfort, even if it didn't really lessen the misery of the moment.

Finally, his stomach stopped contracting, and he sat back on his heels. Hermione wordlessly let his hair down and handed him the washcloth from his neck. He bobbed his head minutely in thanks, and wiped his face with shaking hands.

"Does this happen every time?" Hermione asked quietly.

He shook his head, keeping his eyes closed. He didn't want to see her expression. He couldn't stand to see disgust in her face, too. His face must have shown his emotions, for he felt a small hand rest itself on his shoulder.

"I'm surprised none of the students have noticed how you *do* protect them," Hermione said gently. "It was very clever to put a limit on what the Carrows can do by promising more punishment."

"He'll still be tortured to within an inch of his life," Snape rasped.

"I know."

His memory flashed to the condition he'd found her in at the Manor, and he found his hand had reflexively gone to hold hers.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he said thickly, trying to repress his emotions and failing. "I can't... I have to..."

"Shh," she said, gripping his shoulder. "I know. Shhh."

He felt her other arm come around him, and he tried not to cry. He tried so hard. Everything that had happened, everything he had done, everything he was seen to be and everything he was gathered around his heart and squeezed. He couldn't stop the tears leaking out. He couldn't stop the low keening. He couldn't stop clinging to Hermione. He couldn't keep from rocking.

Hermione held him through it all, cooing comforting nonsense at him until there wasn't a need for it. Even as he regained possession of himself and felt the embarrassment seep in, he found it very difficult to let go of her. Part of him wanted to ascribe it to having absorbed her emotions earlier, but he knew the need for this comfort, for any human touch, came from deep within himself.

"I imagine the Carrows will be coming soon."

"I imagine so," Hermione replied quietly.

He finally dared to open his eyes and look at her, and he was shocked to see tear tracks on her cheeks. He reached out with his free hand and gently rubbed one cheek. "Why?"

She smiled at him in a bemused fashion. "Because you're hurting." She said it as if it was self-evident.

He stared at her in disbelief for a moment, then hoisted himself up.

"I am not your burden," he said, offering his hand.

She took his proffered hand, but didn't let go once she was up. "Of course you are. You're my friend. If you hurt, I hurt."

He stared at her some more. "How do you live like that?"

Her face softened in a gentle smile and she gave his hand a squeeze. "Because when you're happy, I'm happy, too."

She let go of his hand and stepped out of the bathroom. Snape followed a step behind, still unsure of what had happened, and what was happening. What he was sure of

was that Hermione was special, and there was no way he was going to let her out of his life.

He was almost smiling in the knowledge of what true friendship felt like, when all of sudden, Draco appeared. Snape's mouth widened into a true smile for one moment but vanished when Draco fell onto the floor like a lifeless rag doll.

21

Chapter 22 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

AN: *My apologies. It seems, what with school and other RL commitments, I don't register time in the same way anymore. Hopefully I won't let you linger for more than two weeks, though.*

Thanks as always go to Ayerf and Septentrion for their insights.

Hermione jumped when Draco appeared, and felt her heart stutter when he fell. She looked at Snape reflexively, and was shocked to see him just standing there, frozen. It had never occurred to her that he *could* freeze.

Realizing that everything was up to her, she rushed over to assess Draco, and was about to put her fingers to his neck to see if he was alive, when Snape barked, "DON'T touch him!"

She withdrew her hand and looked up at him. He was no longer frozen, but was like a dark avenging angel, all fury and strength.

"Get back," he ordered, and she scrambled away, watching with a tinge of awe as he cast diagnostic charms then spelled Draco into a supine position. Draco's head lolled, and he swore under his breath, then pointed his wand at the bedroom. Two seconds later a valise flew at him. He caught it and knelt down beside Draco in a fluid motion, opening the case to reveal dozens and dozens of bottles.

He plucked out several little vials, and tipped the contents into Draco's mouth. She didn't know the spell he used to make Draco swallow, but she hoped Snape would teach it to her once Draco was dealt with.

Shaking her head at the callousness of that thought, she tried to think of something to do to help. Nothing came to mind, however, so she sat back and watched, hoping for the best.

Minutes ticked by and Snape continued to cast diagnostic charm after diagnostic charm, dosing Draco with a potion here or there as results differed. He'd gone through a dozen bottles before he pushed up one of Draco's eyelids and relaxed back.

"Call Poppy," he said, not looking away from Draco.

Hermione did so without hesitation, and in the seconds between the call and Pomfrey's arrival, she asked, "Is he going to be okay?"

Snape sighed again. "I don't know. I think so, but the curse that hit him is devious, so I can't say for sure. Poppy will have a better idea of his chances."

Hermione swallowed and looked at Draco. For a moment, just one second, it struck her as grossly unfair that Draco had a chance of survival where Ron hadn't, but she quickly chastised herself for that thought and sent a little prayer that Draco would be all right.

Madam Pomfrey came through in a swirl of green, and promptly shooed Snape away from Draco. Hermione's attention stayed on Draco for several more moments, and when Pomfrey's lips unpursed enough to offer the smallest sliver of a smile, Hermione looked up at Snape, triumphant.

Snape, however, was no longer paying attention to Draco, but was frowning at some object on the floor. Hermione looked and saw a golden chalice lying at Snape's feet. Helga Hufflepuff's cup.

She got up and walked to Snape's side. "Shall I summon Harry?"

He shook his head no. "The Carrows will be coming by soon. No need to tempt fate."

"Is it cursed?"

He waved his wand at it, and layers of magic became visible. Hermione oohed at the gorgeous network of lines that were woven in and around the cup. In the center, however, was an ugly green mass.

Snape frowned. "I cannot see any hexes within it, but I also did not see the curse in the diadem."

Hermione nodded. "Do we dare touch it?"

He shook his head, still staring at the cup. "Not with our bare skin, no." He then turned and strode over to his valise and dug out of the depths a pair of dragon-hide gloves. Putting them on, he gingerly touched the cup. When nothing bad happened, he picked the cup up by the rim and quickly carried it over to the bedroom. He reappeared a moment later, stripping off the gloves.

"It should be safe in there for the duration."

Pomfrey drew their attention to her with a polite cough. "Severus, I need to take Mr. Malfoy to the infirmary promptly."

Snape nodded with a frown. "He cannot be seen in the hallways. Can it wait an hour or so?"

Pomfrey scowled and pursed her lips tightly. "I suppose, but he needs to be off the floor."

Snape smirked. "Of course. Is he safe to transport?"

She nodded. Snape flicked his wand and, with a *Mobilicorpus*, moved Draco to the bedroom.

"You are free to fuss over him in there."

Suddenly, Snape stilled. "And, if you need to fuss, do it now. There is someone coming."

Pomfrey hurried into the bedroom, and Snape looked at Hermione, with distant eyes. "You should go, too." His gaze focused. "You will provide Poppy with an excuse for being here."

Hermione nodded and rushed to the bedroom, closing the door just as she heard the office door open. Backing away from the door, she turned to face Pomfrey, finding the matron tucking Draco into the bed where Ron had lain. Hermione's heart clenched, but she managed to stop herself from voicing her objection. It wasn't as if Ron was still there.

Taking a deep breath, she walked over to the bed. Silently, she stood by Pomfrey's side until the matron finished her work and straightened up.

"Is he going to be alright?"

"He is very, very lucky to be alive. I believe he will be fine, though only time will tell for sure. He has a long recovery period in front of him, however, as a good part of his nervous system has to be regrown. There is a potion for it, but it takes weeks for the regrowth to be complete, and weeks after that for the pain to diminish."

"Oh, God," Hermione exclaimed. "I don't know whether to be horrified or amazed."

"I think both are suitable. If the amazement outweighs the horror, you might want to consider becoming a healer."

Hermione blinked. "I... hadn't really thought I'd do well in that career."

"It's not for everyone, but I think you have the heart for it."

"Oh."

Pomfrey smiled at Hermione, and Hermione offered a small smile back.

"Well, I ought to get back to the infirmary. Heaven knows I'll be needed there."

"Right. Um, Snape said to use me as an excuse for your being here."

Pomfrey smiled and shook her head. "He plays the villain so well, and yet..."

"And yet he's such a good man."

Pomfrey nodded. "Take care of yourself. And watch young Malfoy for shock or fever. There shouldn't be a problem, but if there is, Floo me right away."

Hermione nodded, then hid from sight as Pomfrey returned to the office.

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Half an hour later, the door opened, and Snape came in looking pale and upset.

"I've summoned Potter."

"Good. Are you okay?"

He gave a terse little nod and looked away, ostensibly at the Horcrux.

"Did Poppy give a prognosis?" he asked, not bothering to turn around.

"That he's lucky to be alive, and his nervous system has to be regrown."

Snape's shoulders twitched a little. "I will start the potion after lunch."

"Okay." Hermione felt wrong-footed by Snape's standoffish behavior, but she persevered. "And is Seamus going to be okay?"

Snape's shoulder's twitched again, though only minutely. "Yes. He will have yet more scarring, but he will be as fool-hearty as ever in no time," he said, his voice taking on an icy quality.

Hermione winced. That had definitely been the wrong thing to say.

"It's not..."

He rounded on her with a horrible smile. "It's not what? It's not my fault? Is that what you were going to say?"

"Yes, but--"

"But you realized that it is very much my fault, didn't you? You realized that patronizing me is a bad idea in the best of times, and that this is nowhere near the best of times?"

Hermione frowned at him. "Stop it. It's not entirely your fault, and I don't appreciate you attacking me as it isn't my fault, either!"

"Oh, but it is as much your fault as it is mine, my dear! After all, if you were not here, everyone would think of me as an evil, traitorous piece of shit, but now they think I'm a evil, *perverted*, traitorous piece of shit!"

Hermione gaped at him, anger rising. "And how is that my fault? I certainly did not ask to be imprisoned here! I did not ask to be flaunted like a... a bauble! I have done nothing, *nothing* to warrant this!

"If you want to yell and scream and vent at me, then do so, but don't you DARE blame me for YOUR mistakes!"

Snape recoiled slightly, looking rather stricken.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it," he rasped out.

"Oh, don't give me that. Of course you meant it! Why else would you say it?"

He turned away, looking as if a nightmare had become real. "I *am* sorry."

Hermione's anger eased a little at his obvious remorse. "I know, and I forgive you. But don't ever expect me to lie down and take that kind of thing, not here in private! I'm sorry if I've hurt you, but any hurt I've caused you has been completely unintentional on my part. I would appreciate it if you did not deliberately try to hurt me."

He nodded, still not meeting her eye. It was only when he raised his hand to push his hair back that she noticed he was shaking.

She went up to him and caught his hand between hers. She looked up at him, and with her other hand guided him to look at her. When she'd caught his eye, she asked, "What is this? What's wrong?"

He swallowed, then cleared his throat. "I... I am repeating past mistakes. I do not... I can not bear to see your life end as needlessly as hers did. Because of me."

"Hers... You mean Lily?"

"Yes."

"You're comparing me to *Lily*?" Her voice squeaked involuntarily, making her blush.

He smiled ruefully. "There's no need to worry yourself, Miss Granger. I am not in love with you. I do, however, consider you to be a friend. A good friend. And it galls me, and shames me, that not only are we only friends because you are my prisoner, but that I have not been able to think of any way to make things right."

She squeezed his hand. "You *are* making things right. Every day. And I would like to think that we would have found each other's friendship at some point even without this situation prompting it. You are a good man, and, until today, you have treated me only with respect. I have valued that very much."

He looked at her with awe again. It was unnerving.

"You are a remarkable young woman."

She fidgeted uncomfortably at the praise and dropped his hand. "Thank you. That means a lot coming from you."

He snorted. "Yes, I imagine it does, seeing as I was the only teacher who didn't fawn over your talents."

She laughed. "I can't imagine you even being capable of fawning over someone!" He flinched. She sighed internally, knowing she'd somehow managed to hit another raw nerve. She shrugged outwardly. "But then, this week has taught me nothing if not that you are as human as the rest of us."

"Only smarter."

"And sneakier."

He chuckled. "And perhaps luckier."

She snorted. "No, that title goes to Harry. I still don't know how he managed to survive all this time."

"Don't you?" Snape asked, eyebrow raised.

She blushed at his implications. "Well, anyway, I still maintain that Harry is luckier than you, so you'll just have to make do with being smarter and sneakier than most everyone."

"I can live with that." He smiled down at her in a way that made her think she'd somehow made him very happy. She didn't know why, though she was glad she had. He needed a bit of happiness.

His smile suddenly turned into a frown.

"Someone is on their way up," he announced. "Wait here."

He closed her in the bedroom, leaving her to contemplate the butterflies in her stomach. His affection made her nervous, even if it was nice. And flattering. But it was definitely nerve-wracking having someone like Severus Snape look at her with something like adoration. It didn't seem right. Not only was it not healthy to adore another person like that, but shouldn't she be the one with the hero-worship? He had saved her life, after all! He was the brilliant spy! He was the man who was almost single-handedly bringing down Voldemort's regime from within, for heaven's sake!

And yet, he was the one looking at her as if he'd been saved.

She shook her head, not able to make sense of it. But then, emotions rarely did make sense. She was just glad he didn't love her. She wasn't sure she could take that much emotion. Not just yet, anyway.

And not from him... Probably.

The bedroom doorknob turned, and instinct brought her wand out before the door cracked open. Her caution proved to be unnecessary, however, as the door opened to reveal Severus and Harry.

"Harry!" she cried. She ran over to hug him, irrationally relieved to see him.

"Er, sorry it took me so long?" Harry said, giving her a couple of stilted pats on her back. "Is everything okay?"

Hermione pulled away, embarrassed. "Sorry. No, nothing's wrong."

"Ah. So, why'd you call me?" he asked Severus.

Snape merely pointed at the cup. Harry's eyes widened and a smile burst forth. "Oh! Draco got it alright, then! Is he back in his common room already?" His smile dimmed as he read the expressions on their faces, and dropped altogether when he turned in the direction of the bed.

"Shit. Is he alive?"

Hermione nodded. "Madam Pomfrey says he'll be okay eventually, but she also said he was really, really lucky to have survived."

Hermione saw Harry and Snape share a significant look.

"I'm glad to hear he'll be alright. And, while I'm glad to know he's back with the cup, erm, is there a reason you called me?"

Hermione half-snorted as she saw Snape give him a scathing look before pointing to the cup.

"Oh, right! Oh. Right. Erm, the sword is back in the Room of Requirement."

Snape scowled. "Why, precisely, did you think I was calling you, then, if it wasn't that the cup was here to destroy? For a chat?"

Harry scowled back. "Look, I was in the middle of something. I assumed it was an emergency or something."

Hermione saw Snape open his mouth to deliver some scathing remark, but she forestalled him and the resultant blow-up by stepping between the two with her arms out.

"Severus, don't. Harry does have other things he needs to think about, and I'm sure they're just as important." She saw Harry fidget slightly and inwardly groaned as Snape smiled that nasty, triumphant smirk of his. She thought quickly.

"Classes are in session, aren't they?" Snape gave her a 'you are being a dunderhead' glare. "Good. That means not many people will be about. You could use Harry's cloak to take Draco to the infirmary."

"And my excuse for my dereliction of duty?" Snape said sourly.

She gave him her best exasperated glare. "I don't know. Maybe you need to fetch something for me for whatever I'm suffering from?"

The muscles in his jaw twitched, and she felt sorry for her volley, but refused to back down. Not until Harry was safely away. Harry, she noticed, was looking between the two uncomfortably.

"I could just run back to the room and fetch the sword..." he suggested.

Snape scowled. "Miss Granger is right," he bit out. "This is as good an opportunity for moving Draco as we will get before midnight."

He held out his hand to Harry with a resigned sigh. Hermione saw Harry's confusion and nudged him with a whispered, "The cloak, Harry."

"Oh, right," Harry said rather dumbly, blushing slightly in acknowledgment of his slowness. He pulled his cloak out of his jeans' waistband and handed it to Snape with only a hint of hesitation.

Snape took the cloak with a look of distaste, then waved his wand at Draco, casting *Mobilicorpus*. He carefully draped the cloak over Draco's floating form, then tucked his wand into his arm holster.

"Miss Granger, if you would cast *Abracadabra* in that direction," he said, pointing toward one of the bookcases on the eastern wall, "it would speed things along."

Hermione gave him a questioning look, but did so and was impressed to see the wall open up.

"Precede me and open the door to the third floor."

Hermione gave him a look that expressed her opinion on his manners, but did as he asked, casting *Lumos* in the dim stairwell. She found the charm lit a series of torches as well as her wand and provided quite enough light. Hearing Snape behind her, she made her way down the stairs.

Snape instructed Hermione to skip the first shadowed alcove as they passed by, prompting her to wonder where it led. Her wonders increased as the second landing was much larger and more obviously a landing. Her curiosity was not relieved when she looked back to Snape, however. He simply told her the password to open the door and waited rather coolly for her to wave her wand.

Scowling a bit, she did so. She was a bit surprised when the wall opened, rather than the door. She was not surprised to notice Snape smirking with satisfaction at her expression.

"Thank you, Hermione," he said in a rather smarmy tone. His expression, however, had turned sincere.

She nodded and watched him till the wall closed behind him. "You're welcome, Severus," she whispered, then made her way up to the bedroom where she found Harry pacing in agitation.

"Hermione, what's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"You and Snape. You were... were you fighting?"

Hermione let out a small huff of amusement as she looked down. "Yes, we had been arguing. I told him off for trying to pick a fight with me."

Harry blinked and gaped a bit before his mouth turned up in an amused smirk. "Seriously?"

Hermione giggled. "Yes."

Harry laughed. "I can only imagine how well he took that!"

Hermione's smile faded. "Yes, well, he's... He's had a rough day."

Harry snorted. "That's what Snape said about you yesterday. If I didn't know you so well, I'd say you two were covering for each other."

Hermione smiled wryly. "I think I'm his best friend right now."

Harry's expression sobered. "Really?"

She nodded. "Really." Suddenly, she was overcome with emotion, and she wanted to fall into Harry's arms and tell him how mixed up everything was now, with Snape seeing her as his angel and comparing her to Lily and her being scared stiff of disappointing him, because there was no way to live up to such ridiculous expectations, and she really did want his friendship for longer than it would take for her to fall off the pedestal he'd placed her on.

But she didn't. She breathed in deeply and blinked a couple of times, then smiled at Harry, who was looking at her curiously.

"Did he tell you about my mum?"

Hermione's smile faded. "What do you mean?"

"He loved her."

Hermione blinked. "And he told you that?"

Harry shuffled his feet. "No-o. I, er, heard him telling Tom." Hermione stared hard at him, and he added bashfully, "Last week."

"Harry! You're letting Voldemort into your head? Do you know how dangerous that is? Do you--"

"I needed information!" Harry yelled. "And I've got a lot of good information from the connection! We wouldn't have the cup or Snape without this bloody connection, so don't lay into me about it, Hermione!"

"But, Harry! If your mind is open to his, then HE CAN SEE INTO YOURS! He'll know Snape is a traitor!"

"And I'm telling you, IT'S SAFE! HE'S NOT LOOKING INTO MY MIND!" He took a deep breath in and added much more quietly, "It hurts him too much."

Hermione stepped back and took a deep breath in. Softening her voice as much as possible, she asked, "How can you know that, Harry? How can you be sure you haven't given the game away?"

"Would he have let me see the cup's true location?"

Hermione tried to think of a reason he would have done that and had to shake her head. "No."

"Well, I saw it. That's why it's here."

They both looked over at the cup, lost for words. Hermione was the first to articulate what they both were thinking.

"You're almost done, Harry. The war will be over soon!"

Harry smiled in a muted way. "Yeah. A day or two."

Hermione eyed him suspiciously. He was withholding something important. Harry must have sensed her mistrust, however, as his smile grew brighter and he said, "So, I guess now's as good a time as any to plan the end!"

Hermione continued to eye Harry suspiciously, but nodded acquiescence. After all, Harry had always had his reasons for not sharing information right away. Even if they were occasionally very silly reasons.

Harry opened his mouth, but shut it quickly as they heard the office door open. Hermione hurriedly looked around, then motioned for Harry to hide in the bathroom. He ran in there silently, and Hermione retreated to the bed and ducked under the covers, wand in hand.

The bedroom door opened, and Hermione heard light steps that were definitely not Snape's. She concentrated on breathing normally as the person neared, but it was difficult. The person was only a foot away when Hermione heard the office door open again. The person hastily retreated, though not to the bedroom door, but in the direction of the bathroom.

"Hermione?" Snape called from the office.

Cursing to herself, she opened her eyes in time to see someone Disillusion themselves. Snape entered the bedroom and paused with a thoughtful look at seeing Hermione in bed.

Hermione looked at him and whimpered. "Please, sir. Don't."

Snape drew himself up and looked at her in a calculating manner. "I will do whatever I wish to do, *Hermione*."

Hermione whimpered again, this time with a fake half-sob. "Please, not now. Madam Pomfrey said..."

"Don't be so tiresome. You are supposed to be somewhat intelligent, after all."

Hermione ducked her face under the covers up to her eyes to hide her nervous grin. She didn't dare look in the intruder's direction, but she noticed movement out of the corner of her eye.

"I just... I can't. Not now."

Snape advanced and loomed over her, his face icy cold. "You will do as I wish!" he said as he drew out his wand. Hermione gestured with her eyes to the bedroom doorway, where she last saw a trace of movement a second ago.

Snape whirled and cast a series of silent Stunners through the door, and they heard a rewarding thump as someone fell down.

Hermione breathed in deeply and let it out in a shaky exhale.

"Are you alright?" Snape asked, his voice warm with concern.

Hermione nodded. "Yes. We should find out who that is, though."

Snape frowned and turned to his office. He kicked around the floor, not particularly gently, Hermione noted, until his foot came in contact with something. He pointed his wand at that part of the floor and, with a *Finite*, revealed Alecto Carrow, sprawled unflatteringly beside his desk.

"Well," Snape said, his frown deepening. "This presents a problem."

"Can you Oblivate her?"

"I could, but I'm not sure that's the wisest course at the moment. Cover your ears."

Hermione hesitated until Snape pointed his wand at his throat. Even with her ears covered, she could hear his amplified voice calling for all students to return to their dormitories and for the teachers to meet in the staff room.

Hermione looked at him. "What are you thinking?"

"I am thinking that it is time to see what everyone is holding."

"Now?" Hermione's voice shook.

"Yes. Is Potter still here?"

"Yeah," Harry said from the doorway. Snape turned and nodded at him. "Good. I will need you to stay here with Hermione. I will be telling the teachers I suspect your presence in the castle."

"But, we haven't killed the cup yet."

Snape's face twitched. "That will have to wait until after I've determined who is loyal to whom. The battle has begun."

"I should go with you."

"Not on your life, Potter."

"But--"

"NO! You need to stay here, where there is no chance of you being discovered. My plan is not foolproof. We cannot risk you being taken to the Dark Lord now."

Harry backed down with a frown.

Hermione looked from Snape to Alecto and back. "What about you?"

"McGonagall will be there."

She nodded with a breath of relief, knowing the Transfiguration professor would defend Snape. "Oh, okay. Be careful."

Snape offered her something between a smirk and a smile. "Always."

22

Chapter 23 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

Many thanks to Ayerf for her keen eyesight (all mistakes are mine, however). And thank you to those of you reading. (Those of you who read AND review get my thanks with an exclamation mark tacked on! =)

Snape floated Alecto through the halls with as furious an expression as he could muster on his face. The few students still returning to their dorms broke into runs at the sight of him and their unconscious Muggle Studies professor.

He smiled grimly, wondering what their conclusions would be.

He entered the staff room to find everyone there, as expected. They all gasped at the sight of Alecto.

"Ali!" Amycus cried, hurrying up to her. He turned on Snape with a growl. "What did you do to her?"

Snape raised his eyebrow and Amycus backed up a step. "This is how I found her in my office. I also found that Miss Granger is missing." Several more gasps came, though they were of a different cadence. "I suspect Harry Potter has found his way into the castle."

The room was completely silent, but he noticed only two of the staff twitched their arms at the news, Amycus and Aurora.

"Amycus, I need you to go to headquarters directly and give our Lord all the news."

"But surely you can--"

"I am not going to summon him until I have Potter in my grasp. The boy is more slippery than oiled gillyweed. But the Dark Lord needs to know about Longbottom and Potter now."

Amycus nodded. "What about Alecto?"

"I will attend to her. Go!"

Amycus nodded again, and hurried out of the room, leaving Snape free to regard the rest of his colleagues.

"Aurora, would you fetch Poppy, please?"

Sinistra nodded somewhat reluctantly, though it was hard to determine the reason behind the reluctance. She made to leave the room, but Snape shook his head. "The Floo is more expedient."

She smiled tightly and turned to the fireplace. As soon as her back was turned, he whipped out his wand and Stunned her.

Immediately, there was a huge outcry among the rest of the staff, with only McGonagall looking at him with a question in her eye rather than accusation. He gestured to his left arm and then at Sinistra, making Minerva's eyebrows shoot up. She turned to check out Sinistra's arm while Snape defended himself from a growing flurry of hexes and jinxes.

"STOP!" Minerva's voice rang out, and everyone paused in their attack. Minerva drew everyone's attention to the ugly mark on Sinistra's arm, and there was a collective gasp.

"A spy?" Filius said, looking not at Sinistra, but at Snape.

Snape nodded.

"What happens now?"

"I am afraid I cannot let anyone else leave the room until they have confirmed their loyalties. After that, you will be free to either help lead the students to safety or stay and fight. The Dark Lord will be coming, however. And soon."

"Is Harry actually here? In the castle?" Pomona asked. Snape nodded.

Excited murmurs filled the room, as Snape surveyed the crowd, looking for anyone else who might be acting the spy a little more cleverly than Aurora had. Everyone seemed genuinely pleased, though. Pleased and worried.

Snape sighed and brought out his bottle of Veritaserum. "Who will be first?"

Filius stepped up. "I'm glad we were wrong about you, Severus!" he said, then opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue.

Snape snorted softly as he gave the diminutive man three drops. He looked for the next person while waiting for the potion to come fully into affect. Fortunately, everyone seemed willing.

Twenty minutes later, Veritaserum and Legilimency had confirmed that no one in the room, besides Sinistra, was on the Dark Lord's side. He sent a Patronus to Harry and then gave each of the teachers a drop of the antidote. As they came to, they looked to him as if for instruction.

"The children need to be taken to safety. I have summoned Longbottom; he will lead you to a safe egress. Make sure none of you mention my allegiance to anyone outside this room," he added, looking at Slughorn sharply. "The outcome of the war may depend on it."

Every head nodded in understanding.

As if he'd timed it, there was a knock on the door. He went to open it, expecting Longbottom, but found Kingsley Shacklebolt on the other side, aiming his wand at him.

"Shacklebolt!" he said, backing up several steps hastily.

"Snape." Kingsley's face was hard and furious, and Snape tried to figure out how to get through this without hurting him.

He was rescued by an unlikely source, however.

"Snape's on our side," Longbottom said, coming around and placing himself between them.

Snape groaned aloud. "Potter can't keep his mouth shut to save anyone's life, can he?"

Neville turned to face him with a hard, wry smile that suited his disfigured face. "He only confirmed my suspicions. *Sir*."

Snape nodded, suppressing the urge to swallow or flinch. "I see."

Neville's smile became a little softer as amusement flooded his face. "How can Hermione stand being around you?"

Snape snorted. "Hell if I know," he muttered, earning a complementary snort from Neville. Those seemed to be the magic words, as Kingsley finally lowered his wand.

"Where is she?"

"With Potter."

Kingsley nodded reluctantly, obviously displeased with the lack of specifics.

"They're safer than any of us at the moment," Snape added, trying to smooth any wrinkles of discontent. Kingsley nodded again, but Snape could tell he didn't fully trust him. Not that Snape could blame him.

"This is beside the point. Mr. Longbottom, please show the Professors how to leave the castle undetected. The children need to be evacuated."

Neville stood just a little bit straighter, having caught the compliment. "Of course. So it'll be soon?"

"Yes."

"Has there been time for the plan..."

"No. I reminded Amycus, and hopefully he will pass it on, otherwise we will be in a difficult spot. But now is not the time to discuss this. We need to get the children out now."

Neville nodded. "Right." He looked at the teachers and motioned for them to follow him. "Let's go," he said, then paused and turned back to Snape. "Oh, and Harry's Patronus said to give you this."

He brought out the Sword of Gryffindor from under his robes. Snape took a deep breath in and let it out with a ghost of a smile. "Thank you, Neville."

Neville gave a fraction of a nod then left the room. Everyone except Minerva and Kingsley filed out after him. When the last teacher was out of sight, Snape turned back to them, only to find Kingsley's fist connecting with his nose. Not expecting the attack, Snape fell to the floor, unbalanced.

"Kingsley! No!" Minerva shouted.

"Fuckink hell, Kinksley! What the fuck was that for?" Snape yelled, holding his nose.

"You know you deserve that and more. If anyone deserves the Kiss, it's you."

"*Kingsley Shacklebolt*, stop!" Minerva said firmly, her emerging brogue indicating how upset she really was. "Severus is on *our* side. And he is rather essential to our winning this war. If you really feel the juvenile need to engage in fisticuffs and name calling, I think the wizarding world would appreciate it if you'd wait till after the war is over!"

Snape snorted, then winced. He fixed his nose with a quick *Episkey*. "Thank you for your overwhelming support, Minerva."

Minerva offered her hand with a sniff, which he accepted with a scowl. He flinched when she pointed her wand at his face, but she just tsked and murmured, "*Tergeo*." He gave a sharp nod of thanks as he felt the sticky blood disappear.

"I need to get back to my office."

"What shall I do?"

"Deal with those two," he said, motioning to the stunned women on the floor, "and make sure they can not touch their marks. Afterwards, prepare the castle for attack. I hope it won't come to a direct assault, but we need to be prepared."

Minerva nodded briskly. "I'll let those remaining know."

"Thank you, Minerva."

She smiled and patted his cheek affectionately. "Be safe."

He tried not to blush, but wasn't sure if he was successful. "Yes, *Mum*."

She snorted and shoofed him off. He was disconcerted to find Kingsley following him.

"What are you doing, Shackbolt?"

"I need to see Potter."

"No."

"It's not for you to decide, Snape."

Snape stopped and turned to face him. "Why are you here, Kingsley? How did you even get into the castle?"

"I'm here to fight for the right side, Snape. I got in the same way you're getting the kids out."

"And how did you find out about that?"

"Tonks."

Snape's eyes widened marginally. "How many people are here?"

"Everyone still *left*."

Snape tensed at the obvious accusation. "We don't have time for games or resentments, Kingsley. You need to cooperate or get out of the way."

"I'm answering your questions, aren't I?"

Snape thinned his lips to prevent his anger from escaping. He gave Kingsley a hard stare. Kingsley just stared back. Reminding himself that there really wasn't time for showmanship, Snape shook his head and continued on to his office, Kingsley following. If he wanted to see Harry, then Harry he would see. However, he wasn't going to make it easy on Kingsley.

He sent a Patronus ahead, warning the two to be on their guard.

"Snape?"

Snape didn't respond, except by increasing his pace just slightly to hide his growing smirk. He heard Kingsley huff in annoyance behind him, which only increased the size of his smirk.

They reached the office not long after that, and the Gargoyle slid out of the way with what could only be deemed an evil grin. Snape gave it a friendly pat and ascended the stairs. As they neared the office door, he managed to school his face into an annoyed and worried scowl.

He opened the door and walked through, saying, "One question, do you really think Potter would be here?"

He could tell the second Kingsley walked into the room, as a jet of red came from the side of the room, and there was a gloriously loud thump behind him. Letting his smirk surface, he turned around and looked down at the former Auror.

"Kingsley?" Harry's shocked voice cut through Snape's pleasure a bit, but it wasn't until Hermione chimed in with a, "What's going on?" that Snape's smirk turned bitter.

"Fair's fair," he muttered, barely refraining from kicking the downed man.

"Is Kingsley a spy for Tom?" Harry asked, urgently.

Snape was tempted, oh was he tempted, to answer in the affirmative, but he shook his head. "No."

"Then why did you have us hex him?"

Snape turned to Harry with a raised eyebrow. "I said nothing of the sort. I told you to be on your guard, that is all."

Hermione huffed. "Don't give us that, Severus. You made us think we were in danger!"

Snape turned to her and felt a brief prick of guilt, but squashed it ruthlessly. "I was. That bastard broke my nose just now in an unprovoked attack."

"Really." Hermione said, her tone changing to something slightly more sympathetic, though still skeptical.

"Yes, really. I was just shoofing Longbottom and the teachers off to evacuate the students, and when I turned around, he punched me."

Hermione frowned, and he braced himself for the inevitable doubt of his moral character. He almost stopped breathing when she said, "Well, I suppose he did deserve it, then."

"I... Yes. He did."

"Still, we had better revive him."

Snape looked down at Kingsley's form with a sneer. He watched Harry point his wand at his former friend when he remembered the sword in his hand.

"Perhaps, though," he said, interrupting Harry's spell, "we should wait until after the cup has been destroyed? Everyone left in the castle now knows of my allegiance. I think the artifacts should remain between the three of us."

"Well, it's really the five of us, because while they might not know precisely what was going on, both Madam Pomfrey and Draco saw Harry kill the diadem."

"Fine. The five of us. Whom we all know and trust. Kingsley no longer has my trust."

Harry looked at him and Kingsley with a frown and hummed, but thankfully kept his mouth shut.

"That's probably a good idea," Hermione said. "Do you have the sword?"

He brought it out of his robes where he'd been holding it. Harry got up slowly and held out his hand, but Snape shook his head. "If you would let me..."

Harry nodded with something akin to relief and backed up again.

Snape held the hilt out to Hermione. "Unless you would rather?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, thanks. I think you deserve this one."

Snape bowed his head and went to his bedroom, where he'd last seen the cup. He was almost prepared to find it gone, as everything had been going so well, but there it was.

He put on his dragon-skin glove and placed the cup on a bare spot of the floor. Holding his breath, he raised the sword and then plunged it into the cup till the sword met the floor.

A piercing cry rent the room, knocking him back a step, and he watched in horrified fascination as a dark something oozed up and around the sword. He pulled the sword out hastily, prepared to shake the ooze off the sword, but the sword came out clean, while the ooze fell silent and dried up into dust.

Feeling nauseous, he staggered out of the room and laid the sword on his desk before he turned to face the others.

"You okay?" Hermione asked gently, offering him a freshly conjured mug of tea.

He took the tea gratefully and nearly scalded his throat as he gulped down half of it, but then he was able to nod an answer to Hermione. "I am fine, thank you."

Harry snorted, and Snape was hardly able to repress a snort himself at such a bald lie. "The tea has helped tremendously. Chocolate would help even more."

Hermione placed her hand on her forehead in the universal sign of forgetfulness and then waved her wand again, bringing forth a delightful looking mousse.

"Here."

He smiled at her with a huff of laughter and accepted the mousse as gratefully, if more gracefully, as the tea. "Thank you, Hermione." He turned to Harry. "And now if you would Reenergize him, Harry, we might find out why he felt he needed to speak with you."

He noticed Harry started slightly at the use of his first name, but then concentrated on his spellwork. A moment later, Kingsley was attempting to sit up. Once he was upright, he looked around the room and quickly assessed what had happened.

"What is going on?" he said, getting up and picking up his wand. "Why in the blazes did you hex me?"

Harry looked to Hermione and then they both looked at Snape. Snape raised his eyebrows in innocence. "I wasn't the one who threw the Stunner."

He wasn't surprised when Hermione frowned at him, but he was surprised by Harry's choked laugh.

"I'm sorry, Kingsley," Harry said, trying valiantly to regain his composure, and failing. "We didn't know who was with Severus, and as he'd already had one intruder today, we were just being extra cautious."

Snape was mildly impressed, though he was careful not to show it. Kingsley, however, looked far from impressed.

"Look me in the eyes and say that."

Harry's eyebrows rose, and his mien sobered at the implication of Kingsley's request. He looked Kingsley straight on and said, "Constant vigilance. We were practicing it."

Kingsley stood back with a frown. "You're not Imperiused."

Snape nearly guffawed at Harry's exaggerated eye roll. "No. We're not Confunded either. Snape really is on our side, he really did kill Dumbledore on Dumbledore's orders, and he really has been working harder than all of us combined trying to off You-Know-Who. Can we now all trust each other, please?"

Snape was rather gratified to see Kingsley look abashed until he squared his shoulders, turned to Snape and held out his hand. "Sorry about that Severus. No hard feelings?"

Snape looked at the hand and back up at Kingsley with a sneer. "Whyever would there be hard feelings, *Kingsley*? You only disregarded all evidence in your prejudice against me and then as good as attacked me behind my back. Why should I have hard feelings?"

"Severus!" Hermione cried. He ignored her, keeping his hard eyes on Kingsley's.

Kingsley drew his hand back, his face blank. "Good to know that you haven't changed your personality, then."

"Heaven forbid."

Kingsley's mouth twitched. "After all, who knows what you would end up with should you try."

"With my luck, it would be akin to Mulciber's. Or, Merlin forbid, Lockhart's."

Kingsley's deep laugh filled the room, and Snape relaxed slightly. "Am I forgiven for doubting you on the very good evidence that was presented, old friend?"

Snape took a deep breath and pondered for a moment. "I suppose I must. If only for the sake of the wizarding world, you understand."

Kingsley laughed again and conjured a chair. Making himself comfortable, he said, "So, what's the plan?"

Snape and Harry looked at each other. Snape nodded at Harry, even as he tried to ignore Hermione's presence pressing on him. This was not what they had planned, but it needed to be done.

"Hermione, Neville and the teachers are going to go out front to confront Voldemort. There need to be enough people in the entrance hall to look like it's everyone, but we'll need as many people as possible at strategic sniper locations throughout the castle. The main point being that if it looks like it's just a Hogwarts student revolt, the Death Eaters might get cocky.

"Meanwhile, Neville will be waiting for Snape to offer a distraction, when he, Neville, will attack Tom's snake. It's really important that the snake dies before Tom. But once Nagini is dead, Tom is the main target."

Kingsley nodded, though it was obvious he'd noticed what was missing in the plan. "And where will you be?"

Harry shot a guilty look at Hermione. Snape observed from the corner of his eye how her face fell even before Harry said, "I will be... dead. Snape is going to hand me over to Tom before this happens."

Kingsley stood up with a shout, "WHAT?!" and pointed his wand at Snape again.

He was loud enough that Snape almost missed Hermione's quiet, heartbreaking, "Harry?"

Harry looked at her with pleading eyes. "I'm sorry, Hermione. If there were any other way... but I'm the seventh one. He has to kill me."

Snape couldn't ignore Hermione's choked sob and reached out for her hand, but she shook her head forcefully and backed away.

"When were you going to tell me? Or were you not going to tell me at all?"

"No, we were going to tell you, honest, Hermione," Harry said.

"And are we not telling you right now?" Snape added.

It was, he reflected, probably the wrong thing to say.

"Yes, and I can tell neither of you planned on it! You wouldn't have told me if Kingsley weren't here!"

Harry and Snape both protested at the same time. "That's not true."

"We had every intention of telling you."

Hermione stared at them with betrayal written all over her. "Harry, how could you? I've stood by you through everything! How could you keep this from me?"

"Hermione, please," Harry pleaded.

Snape decided to do right by the boy. "Harry insisted we tell you. I did not want to. I didn't feel you would accept the necessity so soon after losing Ronald."

Hermione looked at him, then at Harry, and back to him again. Her face was a mess as she cried openly before them, and Snape's heart hurt at seeing her in such pain, especially knowing he was causing a lot of it.

"O-of course I-I accept the necessity," she said through her sobs. "It all m-makes perfect s-sense."

He reached out for her hand again, and this time she didn't pull away. Enclosing her small hand in both of his, he looked up at her with as open a face as he could bear.

"I'm sorry to have doubted you," he managed to say in a normal voice, even though his throat felt suspiciously tight. "Harry was right not to doubt your amazing intelligence. I just wanted to protect you from any more pain."

Hermione's tenuous grasp of control failed. She pulled her hand out of his and slapped him rather hard, at that and then burst into uninhibited sobs. Snape stood up and found it was now almost natural to wrap his arms around her as she grabbed on to his robes. He looked to Harry and found him looking at them with a bittersweet expression. Kingsley, however, was as close to gaping as he got. Snape saw him open his mouth as if to say something, but a warning glare was enough to make him mind his own business.

"You sweet, daft, git," she cried as she continued to weep into his chest.

He smiled wryly down at the top of her head, tempted to kiss it. "I blame it on Potter. His bad influence has rubbed off on me."

The rhythm of her sobs changed slightly, and he hoped it was because he'd made her laugh. When she squeezed him gently, he knew he'd guessed correctly. Soon, her sobs lessened to mere sniffs, and only a minute later she was drawing away from him, her head down with her hair hiding her face.

He conjured up a handkerchief, which she accepted with a tiny, "Thanks."

He was trying to think of something pithy, but not scathing, to say, when Kingsley said, "Are you alright, Harry?"

Snape looked over and saw Harry was much paler than usual, and his hand was clenched on top of his scar.

"Harry?" Hermione said, suddenly alert, though still sniffing.

Harry gritted his teeth and paled further, worrying Snape. "He's found out about the missing Ho-- artifacts." Harry stopped to breathe through the pain. "He's... furious."

"Shall I summon him now?"

"No!" Harry bent over, clutching his head even tighter, and Hermione rushed around the desk to be at his side. She hesitated at touching him, though; Snape could sympathize, even as he recognized the illogic of it. She looked at him, and he nodded to do it. She squared her shoulders and placed her hand on Harry's shoulder.

Almost immediately, Harry's breathing became easier, and his body relaxed. It was a few moments before he sat up and placed his hand on Hermione's. Still breathing heavily, he said, "Thanks, Hermione."

"It's getting worse, isn't it?"

Harry nodded. "It's now harder to pull out of the visions."

"You have all the information you need. Can't you... you know, stop it? Practice Occlumency?"

Harry laughed hollowly. "I think that opportunity has passed."

Snape stood up and loomed over Harry. "If you delve too deeply, Potter, he will sense you. Especially if you are in close proximity. If he senses you, he *will* use the link to your disadvantage, torturing you with your own guilt. I think now is the perfect time to learn."

Harry looked up at him with haunted eyes. "I can't do it. I've tried."

Snape glared down at him. "Obviously not hard enough. Think of what you were doing when I summoned you last night. I will look for it in three, two, one..."

He pulled out his wand and cast *Legilimens* and was in Harry's mind for long enough to get a glimpse of red hair and the feeling of elation before Potter threw him out with a roar of outrage.

Snape frowned down at him. "You need to do better than that. You gave me enough information to torture you with, if I were so inclined."

Harry looked at him with that all-too-familiar look of loathing. He hadn't noticed how nice it was to interact with the boy without that barrier. He raised his eyebrow in challenge, and then noticed Hermione frowning at him, too, with her hands on her hips.

"Is this how you taught him back in fifth year?"

Snape sneered, defensive. "Of course."

"Well no wonder he didn't learn! Humiliating him isn't going to teach him anything but to loathe you!"

Snape frowned even as he saw Harry nod in angry agreement.

"It is the fastest way to learn to defend yourself."

"Only if given the basic methods first, Severus," Kingsley said in his holier-than-thou tone of reason.

Snape shot his 'friend' a glare. "Fine. If you know of a better way, then you teach the blighter! God knows I haven't ever managed to get the basics through his skull."

He decided he would be better served leaving the room than suffering the fools within it, so he stalked off to his bedroom quickly enough to make his robes billow. It was only with supreme effort that he did not slam the door behind him.

Once in his room, he looked around with fists clenched and wondered what he should destroy. None of it mattered, or would matter soon. He would be discovered as a spy and tortured to death. Hermione would be made an example before everyone. Harry would die, and who would that leave to kill the Dark Lord? Longbottom?

Snape hung his head, the anger draining out of him along with his hope. Albus had given them all a fool's errand. There was no way to win the war. Not in any acceptable way.

A click of the lock had him spinning in place and aiming his wand at the door, though he dropped his arm with a snarl as he saw Hermione's hair precede her. He turned his back to her and said, "Go away."

The door snicked shut, and he blew out a sigh of relief. Or despair. He wanted to be alone, and yet he yearned for her gentle companionship. Her compassion. But it was not the right thing to do, to use her friendship for his comfort. Not when he didn't deserve comfort.

There was a knock on the door, and his shoulders slumped. He should have realized she would be persistent. He turned around and stopped suddenly, seeing Hermione leaning up against the door.

"It seemed like you needed someone to yell at. Since Harry's busy learning Occlumency from Kingsley, I figured I was the best choice. Unless you'd like me to fetch someone else? Filch, maybe?"

Snape snorted weakly. "You'll do."

Hermione's expression changed from cocky to worried. "What's wrong, Severus?"

He closed his eyes and shook his head in despair. "Don't call me that."

"Why not?" She sounded hurt. He opened his eyes and cursed himself; she looked hurt, too.

"Because... It's pointless getting close to me."

"I don't understand."

He opened his eyes and looked at her. How had she managed to worm her way into his affections so quickly and resolutely?

"I don't expect to survive through the night, and I don't want to add any more weight to your grief."

She looked at him with a slight frown for a long moment, then said, "Well, that's too bad."

"What?"

"I already care about you. Whether I use your surname or your given one won't change the fact that it's far too late to take back my friendship. You've got it whether you want it or not, and rejecting it now is only going to add a layer of pain should you die. But as for not surviving, I'd say your chances of survival are slightly better than mine, so let's not count bodies before they're rotting, shall we?"

Snape grimaced in distaste at her choice of words. "So, anything I do to try to protect you will only add to your pain?"

"If you do it by withholding, then yes! It's... it's cheap. It assumes I have no say in the relationship, and that's... insulting."

"I hadn't thought about it in that way."

"Well, you'd better start, or you *will* lose my friendship. And that would hurt me an awful lot."

Snape snorted again. "Your subtlety still needs work, but your point is made. I won't try to push you away for your benefit again. I just... I'm afraid for you."

"Oh, and I'm afraid for you!" Hermione cried, nearly running up to him. "I'm terrified. But I guess that's been my *modus operandi* for several years now, so I'm more accustomed to it?"

"Perhaps."

Snape didn't know what to say beyond that, and they lapsed into a somewhat awkward silence. After a few seconds of not quite shuffling their feet and not quite meeting each other's eye, Hermione finally said, "Well, perhaps we should go see how Harry and Kingsley are progressing?"

Snape nodded. "Yes. That's... as good an idea as any."

Hermione gave him an odd smile, and walked back to the door. At the door she looked back at him, her expression asking if he was coming.

"I'll be out in a moment."

She nodded, and exited the room, but not before giving him another odd smile.

He made his way over to the bed and lowered himself down on to it, thinking through everything that had happened so far that day. It wasn't even lunchtime, and the end of the war, one way or another, was on its way to their doorstep. He wanted nothing more than to run away. But he couldn't. That would betray everything he'd worked for over the last twenty years. It would invalidate everything he'd put up with. It would disappoint everyone he cared about...

Before Hermione's arrival, the only person who might have been surprised at his defection would have been the Dark Lord himself. Now...

He took a deep breath and stood up. It was time. He could feel the wards around the castle shift into something foreign and out of his immediate control. That meant the students were gone, and only those who chose to stay and fight remained. It was time to face them.

As if to confirm his conclusion, a silver cat Patronus flew through the wall. "All students not of age have been evacuated," it said in Minerva's voice. "Flitwick is warding. Meeting in Great Hall in fifteen minutes."

Snape nodded and the cat dissolved. Walking into the office, he saw Kingsley heading for the door.

"Did you get the message?" he asked.

Kingsley nodded. "I'm off to help Filius."

"Good. Be inventive."

Kingsley smiled. "I'll try my best."

Snape turned to Harry, who was looking rather worn, and said, "It occurs to me that with the warding in place, and the Dark Lord already on his way, our plan needs to change. I think I was taken captive along with Alecto and Aurora."

"Professor Sinistra's a Death Eater?" Hermione cried, looking genuinely distressed.

"So it seems. She and Alecto Carrow have been captured and restrained. And, I think, I was as well when the teachers rose up against me after I alerted them to your presence in the castle, Harry. Now, either the Dark Lord will assume that you and the teachers will have killed me, because that is what he'd do, or that they have kept me alive as a prisoner.

"So now we need to plan how to approach both assumptions. I think if he does assume I'm dead, I should go into the battle in your invisibility cloak. That would give me an edge in distracting him when it becomes necessary."

"That's a good idea. In fact, I think we should tell him you're dead anyway."

Snape eyed Harry. "He can sense lies like no other."

Harry grimaced. "Maybe he won't ask?" Snape gave Harry an exasperated look coupled with a sigh. "Okay, well, I can tell him that you got killed in the scuffle. Or, that you were gravely injured and needed Pomfrey's attention. Or you're hiding! You escaped capture and I have no idea where you are!"

Snape tapped his finger against his lips as he thought about the last option. "That could work. That could work very well. Then, when I come out, he'll think I've come to rejoin and support him. And seeing as I *have* evaded capture, and I will be wearing the invisibility cloak, you *won't* have any idea where I am. Not after five minutes, anyway."

Snape smiled at Harry approvingly, which seemed to startle the poor boy. "Yes. I like that very much."

Harry looked round at Hermione with a worried look, and she slapped him on the back of his head. "Be nice, Harry."

He smiled cheekily up at her, and he looked so much like his father in their last year of school that Snape had to look away. That look had been reserved for lowering Lily's defenses. And, judging by Hermione's giggle, it worked as well on her as it had on Lily.

"We should make our way to the Great Hall," he snapped, annoyed with himself. It did no good to dwell on the past, and he knew it.

"Right," Harry said, turning back into the somber man-child Snape had reluctantly learned to respect. He felt a bit of a shit for not letting Harry enjoy a longer respite from his responsibilities, but time was growing short. And, whether any of them liked it or not, Harry was central to both the direction and the execution of all plans.

Snape drew the cloak out of an inner pocket and draped it around his shoulders. "Remember to take the sword with you. There may not be time to fetch it later."

Harry nodded and grabbed the sword by the hilt while Snape grabbed the hood and prepared to cover his head. He paused when Hermione said, "Stay safe, Severus. Please. For me."

He looked at her and once again saw the scared child he'd seen at Spinner's End. She looked lost, vulnerable and unable to withstand the beatings life was sure to deal in the course of a normal life, let alone battling evil to the death. And yet, he could smile at her encouragingly, for he knew that of the three people in the room, she was the most resilient. She would survive with or without him.

"I will do my best. For you."

He covered himself fully and opened the office door, stepped through to activate the stairs, but did not go down. He stepped back where he could see into his office and waited as Harry and Hermione looked at each other for a long moment. Harry came round the desk and approached Hermione.

"Will you be okay?"

She nodded, though her tears claimed otherwise.

"Will you look after Snape?"

She nodded again then promptly burst into tears and lunged at Harry.

"Oh, Harry!"

Harry wrapped his arms around her, and Snape could tell he was clinging to her as much as she was clinging to him. Neither said anything more, but just held onto each other desperately. His heart clenched as his mark burned with a summons.

It took a few minutes, but finally Harry drew away from Hermione. Hermione wiped her nose on the handkerchief he'd given her earlier, and looked soulfully at Harry.

"I love you, Harry. I hope you know that."

He heard Harry give a shaky chuckle. "I love you, too, Hermione." He paused for a big breath. "Please tell Ginny..."

Hermione nodded. "She knows, but I'll tell her."

"Thanks. I don't think I could go if..."

Hermione nodded again and stepped forward to put her arm around his waist. "I know," she said in a choked voice.

Harry nodded and said, "We should go. Vol-- Tom is on his way."

Hermione nodded and they walked out of the office with his arm around her shoulder, and hers around his waist, separating only at the doorway. They went down the stairs without even a glance sideways. Snape waited until he heard the gargoyle move before following them down.

He kept his distance all the way to the Great Hall, but then there were enough people around that he needed to creep up close to Harry, who was joining Neville and Minerva on the dais.

He watched as Harry gave the sword to Neville, with the caution, "Remember--"

"Kill the snake before Voldemort. I know." Snape saw Neville swallow hard and thought it strange that he be experiencing fear now, but then he said, "You're the bravest person I've ever had the honor of knowing, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "Nah, you're wrong there, Neville. Snape is the bravest. I'm just doing what I'm told."

Neville laughed disbelievingly and shook his head. "Good luck, Harry. We'll be with you in spirit."

Harry nodded and smiled dimly back. "Good luck to you, too."

Snape looked around the Hall for Hermione, and smiled sadly to see her in the middle of a tearful Weasley gathering. He didn't envy her the position of news bearer, but he was glad to see she was with people she loved and who loved her back.

He took a last look at the Hall, crowded with Harry's supporters, and felt a niggles of hope in his chest. It was possible they would win. It could happen.

Minerva took the dais, which Snape took as his cue to leave, but just then, the Dark Lord's voice pierced the Hall, and everyone jumped, screamed or looked around in fear.

"I know that you are preparing to fight. Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood."

The Dark Lord paused, and the silence in the Hall was absolute. No one moved.

"Give me Harry Potter and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and you will be rewarded.

"You have one hour."

Silence descended again, and Snape could feel the tension in the room vibrate.

He looked around for Harry and was unsurprised to find he was already gone. Figuring he had gone to the Dark Lord, he made his way outside just in time to see a Death Eater scout on broomstick rush away toward Hogsmeade. Harry stood looking after the rider for a minute until, pressing his palm to his forehead, he turned toward the forest.

Snape followed at a distance until Harry stopped at the edge of the forest. As he approached, he could tell Harry was wrestling with something around his neck, so he lengthened his stride in case he needed to help the boy. He slowed down, however, when the struggle stopped and he could see a glint of something golden. Edging a few steps closer, he was able to discern that it was a Snitch.

Wondering what on Earth Harry could want with a Snitch at that moment, he had to muffle a gasp when Harry placed the Snitch next to his mouth, whispered something, and the Snitch popped open like a locket. Focusing carefully, he saw Harry pull out something small and black. Harry placed it in his palm and turned it three times, though not quite as if examining it.

Then Harry went very still. Snape almost swore aloud, thinking the boy had unleashed an unknown curse, but then Harry looked around himself with a look of awe and longing so intense, Snape had to wonder what it was he was seeing.

"Does it hurt," Harry said in a small voice after a moment. Snape looked around, but saw no one else, even though Harry seemed to be listening to someone with great intensity.

Suddenly, Harry's face crumpled with grief, as he said, "I didn't want you to die. I'm sorry."

Realization dawned slowly. Snape thought of the ring Dumbledore had foolishly put on, despite knowing of the curse on it. The ring had had a small, black stone set into it. Dumbledore had ranted, while still delirious with pain, about needing to talk to his sister. About needing to know if he was forgiven.

Something about that memory sparked another memory, this one from when he was a small child. His mother had told him a story of three brothers who outwitted Death, and Death gave each of them a magical object. A wand of great power, a cloak of invisibility and a stone that would bring the dead almost back to life.

Snape's eyes widened in wonder as he heard Harry say, "You'll stay with me?"

The Deathly Hallows were real? Dumbledore had known it? No wonder the old man had tried on the ring!

He almost missed Harry squaring his shoulders for courage, though his quiet, "Stay close to me," alerted Snape to his departure.

They trekked through the forest for ten minutes before they heard movement ahead. Harry wisely hid behind a tree and waited as Yaxley and Dolohov approached. Snape stood utterly still, though his eyes darted back and forth between the Death Eaters and Harry.

When the Death Eaters got close enough to smell, Snape raised his wand. Harry had a similar idea, as he disillusioned himself before edging around the tree, wand raised.

A moment later, Harry cried, "*Stupefy!*" at Dolohov while Snape quickly fired off a Stunner at Yaxley, who had quickly figured out where Harry stood and was about to fire at him.

Harry looked down at Yaxley with a frown, then looked around. "Snape?" he whispered. "Snape, I know you're there."

Snape chose to remain hidden, not wanting to admit to having followed Harry.

Harry sighed. "Thanks for the help, and all, but I need someone to lead me to Tom." He looked around for Snape again, then shrugged and took Yaxley's wand. He backed away out of Yaxley's reach and aimed his wand at Yaxley. "*Rennervate*," he said, then kept his wand steadily aimed while the Death Eater came to.

"Hello," he said to Yaxley quietly but with an air of control. "I have your wand, and I wouldn't feel the least bit guilty restunning you and leaving you to whatever roams this forest. Like the Acromantulas."

Snape noticed Yaxley grow pale.

"So, I suggest you do what I want without any trouble. Okay?"

Yaxley nodded his head slowly.

"Great. Well then... I can't believe I'm saying this, but, take me to your leader."

Snape grinned despite himself. It was clichéd, yet so appropriate. The Dark Lord even looked a bit like the aliens of old.

He watched as Harry told Yaxley to walk ten paces ahead at a steady pace, making as little noise as possible. Snape kept his wand trained on him in the off chance he was stupid enough to run.

Slowly, they made their way through the forest until they heard voices in the distance. Harry surprised Snape then by Stunning Yaxley again. He continued forward a few paces beyond Yaxley's body and ducked down to peer around a bush.

A few moments later, he straightened, turned around and held up the stone. He dropped it where he stood, then walked around the bush. Snape came forward even as he heard raised voices. He squatted down where Harry had been and looked through the bush. There was a little clearing down a hollow where all the Death Eaters were gathered. He saw Harry standing on one side, everyone's wands aimed at him.

Snape found he couldn't watch what was about to happen. He hadn't been clear on his motivation to follow Harry, except for possible knowledge. But now that he was there, he just couldn't bear to see Lily's son struck down.

Thinking of Lily, he looked to the ground. There, lying a foot away, was the fabled Resurrection Stone. He reached for it and was surprised at how unremarkable the stone was. The only thing that marked how special it was was the etched symbol around a crack.

He blotted out the sound of the Dark Lord speaking and raised a shaking hand to turn the stone in his palm. Once, twice, three times, and he nearly dropped the stone as he felt her presence appear.

Turning around slowly, he lost his balance and fell onto his rear as he looked up to see her smiling down at him. He opened his mouth to exclaim, but she put a finger to her lips.

"Thank you, Sev," she said in that lilting voice of hers. "Thank you so much for helping Harry."

He swallowed, trying to master his emotions, but found he couldn't resist. "Can you forgive me?" he whispered.

Her smile turned sad. "Do you still need my forgiveness?"

He opened his mouth to cry out that of course he needed her forgiveness! He had killed her and her husband, orphaning her son and marking him to be hunted his entire life. How could he not need her forgiveness?

But something in her voice, and her phrasing, gave him pause. So he didn't answer, but just looked at her. She was just as he remembered her, only happier and less worried.

"I am so sorry, Lil. For everything."

She nodded and smiled her sweet, sad smile again. "I know, Sev. You've proven that."

Snape felt tears threaten to overwhelm him, and he looked down at the stone with a frown, hiding his face from her.

"Protect Harry just a little longer for me, Severus. It's almost done."

Snape dropped the stone, unable to bear the pain her presence wrought any longer. He stared at it lying on the ground beneath him with longing and loathing, not quite sure which was strongest. He was debating whether he should bury the artifact when he became aware of a hum of murmuring coming from the clearing. He turned and peeked through the foliage, but had difficulty deciphering what was going on.

Harry was lying dead where he'd stood, but everyone was ignoring him. Instead, all the Death Eaters were gathered around the spot the Dark Lord had been. Someone in the gathering moved, and Snape could see a pair of feet lying in the middle of the gathering. He wondered if Harry had managed to kill the Dark Lord again, and how that would play out in regards to Nagini... Though, looking around, he didn't see the snake. However, his view was obstructed from many angles.

He was distracted from the search when he heard Bella yelling at everyone to make room. "The Dark Lord is stirring!"

Snape watched as the Death Eaters all took their places, except for Bella, who remained at the Dark Lord's side, murmuring, "My Lord...*my Lord*..."

The Dark Lord sat up slowly with the help of Bella, who again murmured, "My Lord."

He shrugged off her arm with a terse, "That will do," and stood up on his own. He wavered slightly, but soon was standing steadily enough to look around. Once he caught sight of Harry, however, his eyes narrowed.

He took an unsteady step forward, and Bella stepped close, saying, "My Lord, let me--"

"I do not require assistance," the Dark Lord replied without even looking at Bella. Snape smirked as Bella withdrew looking hurt. "The boy... Is he dead?"

Everyone in the clearing looked at Harry's body, but no one moved. Everyone stayed as silent as possible, fear surging forth at the possibility that Harry might *not* be dead. That the Dark Lord had failed yet again. Snape held his breath, *hope* welling up inside him.

"You," the Dark Lord said, and sent a stinging jinx at Narcissa. "Examine him. Tell me whether he is dead."

Narcissa obeyed wordlessly, though as soon as her back was to the Dark Lord, she rubbed her arm inconspicuously and scowled in worry. She knelt beside Harry, keeping her head held high, and felt Harry's face and chest. Her hand resting over Harry's heart, she leaned over him, and stayed like that for several moments.

Snape pondered the meaning of that move, even as she stood up and said, "He is dead." Everyone else in the circle roared with triumph, but Snape saw Narcissa's face; she was relieved. He didn't know whether the relief was from the Dark Lord's success, or his failure, though he couldn't imagine she would have much to be relieved about with the Dark Lord's success. The Dark Lord would not forgive their family any time soon...

Hope refused to abandon him, even as he knew, logically, there was little cause for it. And he supposed it was the hope that made him cringe as the Dark Lord cast *Crucio* on Harry's body in a barbaric display of showmanship. Harry's form twitched, but no more than most dead bodies did. Snape sighed as his rising hope was dampened.

The theatrics went on for a full minute before the Dark Lord called out, "And now we shall take Potter's body to Hogwarts, where they are planning a rebellion. We will show them, once and for all, that I am the most powerful wizard. That I shall **always** succeed!"

A roar of approval met that statement, and the Dark Lord instructed Lucius to Levitate Harry's body above the woods as if he were a banner for their army.

AN: I am so sorry about the incredibly long delay in posting this. Midterms and the flurry of assignments afterward took over my life for a few weeks there. However, that will not happen again. In fact, the last (yes, the next chapter is also the very last) chapter will post tomorrow or Thursday at the latest.

Thanks as always go to my alpha and beta, Septentrion and Ayerf. *hugs them*

Hermione stood tensely beside Neville and Professor McGonagall, facing the closed front door. They were waiting for a signal of some sort, which would surely come soon. Harry had disappeared nearly an hour ago, and she couldn't imagine that Voldemort wouldn't take the opportunity to show off his conquest. He would need to smash that last bit of hope out of everyone.

She clenched her fist, digging her nails into her palm, in an effort not to think about Harry being gone. It was inconceivable, and yet...

An arm came around her, and she looked over at Neville, who was looking just as sad and worried as she felt.

"He said he needed to," he said in a low voice. Despite his tone of confidence, she could hear the question.

She nodded. "Yes, he did need to. And he did it for us. All of us."

He nodded and gave her a squeeze. Neither of them could think of any reassurances they could give beyond that pale token of comfort. Just because he needed to sacrifice himself didn't ease the pain of his loss.

A few moments passed before Neville asked her, "Where do you suppose Snape is?"

Hermione forced herself not to look around and just shrugged. "I don't know. My guess is he followed Harry under the Invisibility Cloak."

She could feel Neville's question, long before he actually said, "You're sure he's on our side?"

She looked up at Neville and waited till he was looking directly at her before saying, "Yes. I would stake my soul on it."

"So the chains and stuff..."

"Was purely for show. He was probably more uncomfortable with the charade than I was. I know he blames himself for every student who was harmed this year."

Neville scowled, dropped his arm back to his side and looked away. "Didn't stop the punishments, though, did he?"

"He couldn't. He had to keep up appearances, and he... He was so afraid Alecto was going to report him. He was so sure she suspected him of being a spy, and what with everything Dumbledore planned hinging on him keeping his role secret..."

Neville's face was still so hard. "Neville," she whispered earnestly, "he *threw up* after he caught out Seamus yesterday he was so upset, and that was before he saw the damage. He blames himself for *everything*."

Neville's face softened enough to frown, though he didn't say anything. Hermione looked back at the door with a sad sigh. Neville's arm came around her once more, and she leaned into him with a smile, relieved he was willing to accept her defense of Snape at the very least.

A moment later, a silver lynx appeared and said with Kingsley's voice, "They're on the lawn with Harry's body."

Hermione, Neville and the teachers all looked at one another and then nodded. Neville and Dean opened the doors and, with Hermione and McGonagall leading, they made their way down the front steps to meet Voldemort and his army.

They saw a mass of black emerging from the forest, with something floating high over them, like an odd-shaped balloon. As the Death Eaters approached, a wave of gasps rolled through the gathered fighters as they realized that the balloon was actually Harry.

Hermione wanted to retch at the sight, but she kept her head high and breathed heavily through her nose. This was the reason they were fighting today there was no *living* in a world where people were treated without dignity or honor. There was merely existence.

Voldemort and the Death Eaters came to a stop, leaving a gap of several meters between the two groups. Hermione noticed with alarm that Nagini was nowhere to be seen. She was distracted from that, however, when Voldemort casually flicked his wand and Lucius Malfoy grunted in pain. Suddenly Harry was falling.

While most of the people on the steps screamed, Hermione cast a cushioning charm. Voldemort laughed at her.

"There is no point in protecting your precious Potter, Mudblood. He is beyond feeling now. You would do best to return to your master's bed and wait to do his bidding."

She raised her head and jutted her chin out, even as her heart beat so fast it hurt. "I have no master. None of us do."

Voldemort smiled cruelly. "So he hasn't managed to break you yet... Perhaps that's for the best. I shall do it for him." He threw a spell at her, but she was expecting it and blocked with a strong *Protego*.

As if that broke a dam, the battle started. McGonagall and Flitwick sprang ahead of Hermione, shooting curses at Voldemort in retaliation for his attack on her. Within a second, hexes of every color and strength filled the air. Hermione pushed her fear aside and sprang into the fray at Neville's back. Immediately, they were surrounded by Death Eaters. At first she cast shielding charms while Neville threw all the jinxes and hexes he could, taking out a couple of the Death Eaters right away before the others wised up and stopped treating them like kids.

There was no time for thought, only reaction as she fought to keep the Death Eaters too busy to cast the killing curse. Wordlessly, she sent out Stunners, Reductor curses, *Expelliarmuses* and everything else she could think of in the scant moments between shielding spells.

One *Expelliarmus* worked, taking her so much by surprise that she nearly missed the opportunity to hit the Death Eater with a Stunner. She did note that his body made a satisfying thud even as she turned to his companion.

There seemed to be no end of Death Eaters, though every now and again, she would have a moment to look around. In those brief moments, she saw McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout and Vector keeping Voldemort busy. Ginny and Seamus were battling two fierce, elderly Death Eaters, while Lavender and the Patil sisters had taken on Greyback.

But while she was scanning the battleground, her attention was caught by Bellatrix Lestrange, who was casting killing curses left and right. Hermione gasped as she saw Terry Boot fall from a shot to his back.

"Cover me, Neville," she panted, and sprinted for the cover of the front steps. Huddled next to the castle and the stairs, she thought of Ron's arms around her as he comforted her at the Burrow before the wedding. She nearly cried as she realized that couldn't be her happy thought anymore, not now that there wasn't any hope of more.

She sniffed back her tears and resolutely went through her best memories, trying to cast the Patronus with each one. She was curiously unsurprised to find that the first one to work was of Harry asking her to take care of Snape.

Her otter appeared and danced around her playfully, and it took her a moment before she realized she hadn't given it a message or location. She quickly thought the message, 'Next wave now,' and sent the Patronus off to the castle.

That task done, she focused her vision on the battle before her, looking for the best place to rejoin. Her decision was made for her when the school doors opened and dozens of people hurried out. At the same moment, Snape appeared leaning over Harry's body.

Hermione's pulse quickened; the moment was near. She looked around for Neville, but couldn't see him amongst the nearest fighters, so she stood up to get a better view. She was so busy looking for Neville, she didn't see the curse that hit Snape. All she saw was him falling down across Harry.

She wasn't the only one who saw him fall. Voldemort let out a scream of fury at seeing his lieutenant go down, and the wave of magic that poured out of him knocked everyone nearby off their feet. Hermione stumbled at the force of his magic, but managed to keep her feet as she scrambled over the lawn to where Snape and Harry lay.

When she reached them, she felt for Snape's pulse at his neck. She let out a shaky breath to find it was still strong. She hoped he'd only been Stunned.

Moving aside the Invisibility Cloak, she gently worked her hands underneath his torso in an attempt to roll him over, but as she put her weight into doing so, she heard a small groan. And it was not from Snape.

Eyes wide, she looked down at Harry. His eyes were closed, but she swore he was frowning now when he hadn't been before. She immediately withdrew her arms, and his frown decreased. She grimaced at the realization she'd been digging her elbows into Harry's gut.

She frowned worriedly at the two of them, wondering how she was going to get Snape off of Harry, when a curse flew past her ear. Flinching away, she rolled her eyes at herself and nearly slapped her forehead; was she a witch or not?

Pulling out her wand, she lifted Snape and moved him over to the grass beside Harry, turning him over as she did. She also cast Notice-Me-Not Charms on all of them before casting a basic diagnostic charm on each of the men, grimacing at Harry's results. Despite the cushioning charm, he'd suffered several broken bones. Fortunately, neither seemed to have internal bleeding.

Thankful that she'd done her homework before the camping trip, she carefully set Harry's bones and healed them. Almost the instant she'd finished, Harry groaned and opened his eyes. She beamed down at him, and he managed to muster a small quirk of his lips at her in return.

He moved his lips as if he were speaking, but the sound of the battle overwhelmed his voice. She leaned down and put her ear next to his mouth.

"Do I have to wake up?" he croaked quietly.

She sat back up and tried to scowl at him, but her joy at knowing he was alive was so great, she couldn't keep her smile suppressed.

"I'm afraid you do."

He screwed up his face, but nodded. He was about to sit up, when Hermione had the clever idea of covering him up with the cloak. He disappeared from sight, but his using her shoulder to heft himself up to his feet told her where he was.

"What's happened so far?" he asked.

"Voldemort is still alive, and I couldn't see Nagini," she said, pretending she was talking to Snape. "I don't know what happened to Neville. I was looking for him when Snape was hit."

She felt Harry's cloak brush her other arm.

"He's there," he said, then with more urgency, "He's fighting Bellatrix with Ginny and Luna!"

Hermione looked around and, sure enough, there were her friends, battling for their lives. This time, however, it looked like Bellatrix was being kept on her toes. Neville was throwing everything he had at her, fighting with ferociousness Hermione would never have guessed was there. But then, it had been Bellatrix who had tortured his parents to insanity. He might have a bone or two to pick with her.

Ginny was also fighting with a vengeance. Though they hadn't discussed Ron when they were reunited in the Great Hall, Hermione was sure Harry had told Ginny about Ron. All the Weasleys had looked far grimmer than she would have expected, and Molly's hug had had a somewhat desperate feel to it. She swallowed and silently wished her friend luck.

Hermione was surprised that Luna was actually the one who was keeping Bellatrix unstable, however. Hermione watched as Luna threw the oddest hexes, jinxes and charms at the Death Eater. She was sure that one of the ones that hit the witch was a Cheering Charm...

"Was that a Cheering Charm Luna just cast?" Hermione asked Harry. When Harry didn't respond, she said, "Harry?"

She looked around even though she knew she wouldn't see him. "Harry?"

Frowning at his sudden, silent departure, she turned her attention back to Snape. The diagnostic charm hadn't shown anything seriously wrong with him, but *Rennervate* didn't reawaken him. She cast another diagnostic charm, but again, nothing showed up. It was as if he were only sleeping, except even as she looked, he was growing paler.

She leaned over and rested her head against his chest to make sure his heart really was beating. It was, though more and more slowly.

"Snape?" she said, placing her hands on his cheeks. "Snape, you need to wake up."

He remained completely unresponsive.

"You still have a part to play! So wake up right now!"

She wiggled his head slightly, but still nothing. She looked around to see if anyone who might be able to help were nearby, but only students and Death Eaters were within hailing range. Panic started to well up within her. They were so close to the end! He needed to distract Voldemort! He needed to be there to hold her hand when the battle was over! He needed to yell at her for being such a naive fool as to believe that he would survive intact.

"Severus Snape! If you think you can die because Harry survived, you have another thing coming!"

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she took hold of his shoulders and shook him. "WAKE UP!" she yelled.

"Hermione, dear," she heard Molly say through the din of battle, and then she felt the warmth of her hand on her shoulder. "You need to let him go."

She shook her head. "No! He's still alive, Molly! But he was cursed, and now he won't wake up. And he *needs* to!"

The hand on her shoulder became two that tried to pull her away, but she wrested herself out of Molly's kindly meant grasp, and fell onto Snape's chest, crying openly.

She heard Molly gasp and felt a hand on her shoulder again. She tried to shrug it off, but it remained, patting her. Then poking her.

"Miss Granger," Snape's exasperated voice rumbled from under her ear.

She shot up and looked down at him with wide, blurred eyes. He was looking up at her with a bit of a wry smile.

"While it is nice to know that there is someone who would mourn my death, I think you're being rather premature about it."

Hermione laughed with a tinge of hysteria, and slapped his arm half-heartedly. "You git! You scared me!"

His smile became soft and warm. "My apologies. I see now I should have chosen to be hit with a disemboweling hex."

She hit his arm again, this time with a bit more strength. "Fine, be that way. But rest time is over. There's a war to be won."

His eyes shifted to something behind her, and his smile disappeared. He nodded somberly.

"Molly."

Hermione looked up and saw Molly regarding Severus with a conflicted expression. Hermione smiled up at the matron sadly as she wiped her tears on her sleeve even as she fended off a stray spell.

Molly seemed to make up her mind and stuck out her hand to help him up. "Severus."

He gave Molly almost as warm a smile as he'd given her, and accepted the hand. Once up, he bowed his head, and said, "Thank you. And my condolences."

Hermione saw Molly's eyes fill up, but she sniffed and nodded back briskly. "You'd best get to doing what needs doing."

"Indeed."

Severus raised his wand and looked to Hermione, and Hermione nodded. They set out for the battlefield in step with each other, but didn't go more than three feet before Hermione was grabbed by the arm. She raised her wand to hex her attacker, but aborted her shot when Harry's voice said, "It's me!"

Hermione grabbed Severus' arm to stop his progress. He looked at her curiously, but she gestured with her head for them to retreat again. They made their way to the corner beside the stone stairs, where Harry revealed his head from a crouched position.

"I can't find Nagini. I don't think Voldemort brought her."

Snape nodded. "I believe you are correct."

"What does that mean?" Hermione asked, looking between the two worriedly.

Snape and Harry looked at each other with varying degrees of worry.

"We can't let Voldemort go," Harry said slowly. "He would just go and make more... artifacts. We'd be back where we started, only without Dumbledore."

Snape nodded again. "Agreed. This incarnation must die today. Perhaps we could send someone out to kill the snake..."

"It would have to be with the sword. Otherwise we're just freeing the fragment, not killing it," Hermione pointed out.

Snape looked at Harry, who shook his head. "Neville has it."

"Then have someone find and contain the snake till we can get there."

Harry nodded while Hermione sent off a Patronus to Kingsley with the urgent message.

"In the meantime, we need to make sure as few Death Eaters make it out of here as possible. I think it's time to use all our forces," Harry said.

Hermione nodded. "We have it all set up. Neville, Snape or I are to send a signal, and they'll start firing."

"Question is, should we make Voldemort the prime target or the Death Eaters, to begin with?" Snape asked.

Harry paused in thought for a moment, then said, "Death Eaters. We need this to be a demoralizing rout for Voldemort."

Snape nodded and looked around. "The most dangerous Death Eaters still standing are Dolohov, Mulciber and Bellatrix." He paused and cringed, then said a quiet, "Fuck."

Hermione looked around just in time to see Luna fall. Bellatrix laughed and threw up a shield to block Ginny's curse, but she wasn't quite prepared for Neville's Blasting Curse. It hit her left shoulder and suddenly, half of her was gone.

Hermione turned her head away quickly, trying to quell the urge to retch. She heard and felt, rather than saw, Voldemort's second blast of rage, though Snape shielded her from half of it.

Swallowing, and trying not to cry in horror, she silently sent four Patronuses to the rest of the teams within the castle, implementing the new plan. She then slid down the wall of the steps and tried to breathe.

"Hermione?" Harry's voice was worried, but she couldn't look at him. She just shook her head.

"Are you okay?"

"Of course she isn't *okay*, Potter!" she heard Snape say from next to her. "She just witnessed a bloody horror, for fuck's sake. I'd suggest you go see if Longbottom is in need of care right now!"

Hermione shook her head again, though this time in denial rather than disbelief. "N-Nagini as Bathilda... w-was more horrible."

She remembered that awful night probably the most horrible night of her entire life. She still had nightmares about the very concept; she couldn't fathom how Harry dealt with actually having seen Nagini shed the human shell.

Ironically, though, the memory calmed her. *That* was the evil they were fighting. There were worse things than death, even as gory a death as Bellatrix had been dealt. *They* had suffered worse. She could fight because she could not give in to such evil. That was not an acceptable option.

She raised her head and looked Snape in the eye. "I'm okay now. Let's go fight."

Snape's wide smile was her reward. She took his hand, and they stood up, ready for anything.

24

Chapter 25 of 25

AU. Fatigued, Snape makes a mistake that could cost the wizarding world everything.

AN: Thank you to Ayerf and Septentrion for their eyes and opinions, Ayerf for the original prompt, and everyone who has read and reviewed this story. I suspect you won't be thanking me, but this is how the story ends:

Hermione was still smiling and holding his hand as she stepped forward to join her friends. He didn't know quite why, but it reminded him of Nagini. Of how, after this battle was done, the war would not be over. Not quite yet. And how, if the Dark Lord was to rise again, it would be far better he think Snape was still a loyal follower.

She took another step and looked back at him in question when he did not move. She tilted her head quizzically.

"If I fight now, I will reveal my loyalties to everyone."

She frowned up at him, as if he were stating the obvious, but he saw when she realized the problem.

"Oh."

"Mm."

He could tell she was thinking hard, though he didn't see the point. With McGonagall, Kingsley and Harry as character witnesses, he wouldn't spend much time in Azkaban, if any. That the world would think he was getting off lightly was nothing new. He would survive. He might even be able to get his old teaching job back, if he played his cards right.

"I'll get Harry's cloak. You can fight without being seen, then!"

He blinked, brought out of his thoughts by the absurd suggestion.

"Pardon?"

She frowned at him again, but this time with a little disapproval. "We need your help, Severus. Even if it's just on the sidelines protecting our backs."

Snape looked around the field of battle and quickly came to the conclusion that she was right. "Of course, the problem of finding Potter still remains..."

Hermione smiled again, albeit with a small roll of her eyes, and released his hand. "Leave that to me."

And off she went. She was damn near *skipping* into a scene of violence and gore. He didn't know whether to worry, scorn, laugh or approve, though he found his lips were quirking up at the absurdity of the incongruity.

He backed up against the castle wall, doing his best to blend into it. He raised his wand and reapplied the Notice-Me-Not Spell Hermione had apparently put on him while he was unconscious, and refused to think about the feelings that had erupted to the surface knowing she cared enough to break the Sleeping Beauty Curse. Now was not the time.

Now was the time to watch as she ran through the field, dodging the hexes she saw, and keep an eye out for hexes she might not see. Checking to make sure no one was looking his way, he discreetly hexed Avery in the back when his former brother's head turned to follow Hermione's progress. Five seconds later, and just as Avery was about to fire off a hex, he fell to his knees, grasping at his chest.

Snape smiled in vindictive satisfaction. He'd wanted to do that for years.

Snape looked again for Hermione, but couldn't see her. He was still searching for her when there seemed to be a pause in the battle. Everyone turned toward the Dark Lord, who was looking with disbelief at Harry fucking Potter.

Snape's satisfied smile broadened. He had waited a very long time to see fear in the Dark Lord's eyes.

The Dark Lord did not waste time, but waved his wand. Harry already had his wand out and was shouting something *Expelliarmus*, probably when a killing curse came from above. The Dark Lord blocked it, but as he waved his wand to attack Harry, another killing curse came from the other side of the castle. Snape wasn't sure if Voldemort even saw it coming.

A hush fell as everyone watched the Dark Lord's body fall to the ground. There was a momentary lull as the Death Eaters still standing sought to grasp the reality that confronted them. A few dropped their wands right away. Others took a bit longer to surrender. But more than half of those remaining were not about to give up easily. And Snape knew a few who were going to kill as many people as possible before they were killed themselves.

The fighting resumed with a desperate kind of fierceness. Snape saw Macnair cursing everyone he saw, including his fellow Death Eaters. He was killed from on high quickly, though not until he'd killed or maimed more than a dozen people.

Mulciber's tactic was a little more intelligent as he sought cover and aimed at the snipers above. Snape groaned as he saw several seventh year Gryffindors charge Mulciber's position and fall almost immediately afterwards. He let out a breath of relief when he saw McGonagall send a squadron of animated suits of armor in his direction, while Flitwick snuck around and blasted away his cover.

Satisfied that Mulciber would be occupied for a fair while, Snape resumed his search for Hermione. He still couldn't see her, and he was starting to become concerned that she'd put on the invisibility cloak herself and been struck down by an errant curse.

Just as he made up his mind to go search the field for her, he felt something brush against his arm. A breath later, she was standing there, handing the cloak to him. He let out a sigh of relief, but resisted the urge to hug her.

"What took you so long?" he snapped.

Her smile faded a bit, but she didn't retreat. "I was guarding Harry."

He cursed at himself for his tone. "It's good to see his luck has rubbed off on you."

Her eyes narrowed, and her tone turned cold. "Yes, his luck has served me and Ron very well so far."

He took a deep breath in and let it out slowly. He couldn't understand why she was so dear to him when she was so incredibly infuriating. Though, the fact that she continued to stand up to him was a strong point in her favor.

"I meant--" But at that moment, he spotted a stream of green light heading straight at Hermione's back. Without thinking, he pulled her roughly aside, and they fell to the ground.

She looked at him with a frown, and he pointed at the scorch mark on the wall above them. Her eyes got rather wide, which only infuriated him further. He didn't have time for comforting her now. He placed the cloak over himself and sneered, "We can argue when this is over," and then strode into the battle without a second glance at her.

It was probably not a coincidence that his first target was the person who had tried to kill Hermione, but he didn't let the whys of his motivation bother him. He also didn't let himself think about why his progress through the field led him to Harry, or why, when he found himself there, he stayed at the young man's back, besides the fact that most of the Death Eaters were concentrating their effort on killing Harry, of course.

It wasn't long before most of their attackers caught on to their invisible foe and Snape himself became a target. They fought hard, though, and managed to hold their own. And, after a few minutes, they got reinforcements in the form of Hermione. Snape saw her slash her way through the fold of Death Eaters with a fierceness he didn't know she had. He had to cover for her, though, when she bumped into him, and nearly stumbled into the arms of his old friend Mulciber as she started backwards.

He grabbed her with one hand, pulling her into his chest, while aiming a quick Conjunctivitis Hex at Mulciber. She immediately figured out the situation and was soon standing beside him, hexing and shielding with as much verve as Harry and him. It wasn't long before he was grateful she was there.

It seemed to go on forever. There were moments when he felt they were the only three people fighting the horde of Death Eaters, though when he could spare a second to look around, he saw many more battles around them. And he also saw that they were winning. Slowly, but surely, the Death Eaters were being taken down.

And then, all of a sudden, it was over. The three of them stood there with their wands raised and looked around at everyone else left standing, all of them on their side. Death Eaters littered the ground. Many were dead, but some were just bound or unconscious.

Neville was the first one to crack a smile. Finnigan was next, and soon the whole crowd was whooping with victory. Snape did not smile, though. He noticed Harry and Hermione didn't either. Like him, they were looking at the fallen. Snape's breath caught when he noticed Minerva's motionless form on the ground in the distance.

"So many dead," he heard Hermione whisper.

"Can you see Ginny?" Harry said with a note of panic.

They all three looked around, until Hermione said, her voice wobbling, "Over there."

Snape and Harry looked in the direction she was pointing, and Snape had to swallow a cry of despair. The entire Weasley clan was gathered around Hagrid who had been crushed by Grawp's fallen form.

"No," Harry whispered. "Not Hagrid."

Everyone else seemed to be realizing the cost of their victory as the cheers died away. Snape felt cold seeping into his bones as he saw more and more of his few friends among the fallen. Even more chilling was the number of students lying still.

Snape felt despair wash over him, as he thought of all the people who had died, not just that day, but throughout the war against the Dark Lord. The people who had sold their souls, his own among them, for the illusion of power. The lives that had been wasted, the accomplishments squandered or misused... All this waste to fell one wizard, and yet, the next wizard to make trouble on this scale was almost certainly already alive.

What was the point?

Snape let out a shaking breath, and looked around with sightless eyes. Though the day had been bright, the sun seemed to go out suddenly. Darkness overwhelmed the field, and he watched in curious detachment as people all around them fell to their knees in grief. He could feel Harry and Hermione beside him shaking with misery as well. Harry fell to his knees with a muted wail as the emotions finally overwhelmed him.

Snape felt like a fool. He'd believed in Lily, but she'd betrayed him for his enemy. He'd believed in the Dark Lord, but he'd killed Lily. He'd believed in Dumbledore, but the old man had made him tear his soul in two. He'd actually brought himself to believe in Harry, and now he was useless at his feet.

There was no point. There was no point in anything. He felt Hermione claw at his shrouded arm, but he didn't reach out for her. What was the point? If he placed his trust in her, she would betray him too. That was how the world worked. Everyone betrayed everyone else. Hell, he was the star betrayer.

He had betrayed Lily by being seduced by the illusion of power. He honestly hadn't cared that the power would be gained by smothering the rights of others. He hadn't cared, not if it meant he wouldn't be on the bottom anymore. He hadn't cared.

He had betrayed the Dark Lord, to whom he'd sworn his fealty. His word was worthless even before he'd turned spy by continuing to love Lily even though it was counter to the Dark Lord's creed. His promises were always so empty.

He had betrayed Dumbledore. He had endangered the plan and the entire wizarding world in a moment of weakness. He had let the Dark Lord see Hermione. He hadn't even cared about her at that point, except as a protector of Harry, but by thinking of her, he'd laid waste to Dumbledore's careful machinations and manipulations. He'd destroyed forty years of planning with one thought. He was so weak.

"D-Dementors."

The word was a mere breath before Hermione fell to her knees. He looked down at her, curling up into the fetal position, and thought about how he'd betrayed her. He was supposed to be her hero, her protector, her rock of strength, and yet he had shown her nothing but weakness. She was the one who had comforted him. She was the one who had challenged him. She was the one who had protected him by placing her trust, her body and her mind in his control. And where did it get her? Curled into a whimpering ball.

His knees hit the dirt hard, but it was the least of his pains. He had failed Hermione. He had let her into his heart, let her befriend him, and all he was doing was shrugging her off as if she were a pest.

But she wasn't a pest. She was the best thing in his life. She was his friend.

He looked down at her again, this time actually seeing her. Her face was in a rictus of grief as she sobbed and moaned weakly for Ron and her parents. She seemed caught in the worst memories of her life.

Her hushed last word came to mind and he looked around. Dementors were everywhere. There were so many, they blocked the sky from view. He could see a few of the

students who had been members of Dumbledore's Army trying to cast their Patronuses, but most petered out before they made it out of the wands.

Snape summoned his strength and cast the spell. "*Expecto patronum!*"

Only a pale thread of silver came out. He concentrated on Lily laughing with him in their heyday and cast it again, but with no difference. He swallowed as the Dementors neared. He could feel all the scraps of joy he'd found in this miserable life being sucked out of him. It was getting harder and harder to think of anything good that had ever happened.

It was like his friendships had never existed. Minerva was dead, Flitwick might be as well. He'd killed Lily and Dumbledore, and Hermione was about to get Kissed...

He looked down at Hermione, and his face softened as his heart filled with warmth. She was still there. She'd been there for him, and he would be there for her. Her and the world she'd fought so bravely for. She had to survive, if only so he could see where she would go. Besides which, they had an argument to finish!

"*Expecto Patronum!*" he cried again, and this time, a silver being shot out of his wand. It sped for the nearest Dementors first, but soon was circling the entire field, warding off the dark creatures. As the Dementors were forced to retreat, he saw more Patronuses joining his. Soon, Harry raised his head and his stag joined the widening perimeter.

"Hermione, you've gotta see this!" Harry said, reminding Snape that she hadn't yet moved. He looked down and saw her pale face looking up at his fearfully. He offered her the smile he felt within, and held out his hand. Her smile back was tentative, but her grip was strong.

He watched with an awed smile of his own as she looked around them in wonder. The Patronuses had combined into a dome of undulating silver, circling around all of them in a great shield. Outside the dome, they could see the Dementors were finally fleeing.

Another great roar went through the crowd, though this time it had a ring of pathos to it. It was also rather short-lived; everyone grew quiet as their Patronuses returned to them. Snape could see Harry's stag coming toward them along with another, shorter creature.

The three stood up to greet the Patronuses, and a moment later Snape heard the other two gasp as they saw what the new form of his Patronus was.

"Erm..." Hermione said. Snape could tell she was looking up at him, but he refused to look back. He wasn't sure how to react yet.

Harry cleared his throat and said, "Um, it's rather--"

"Potter, if you say *noble*, I will hex you."

"No-o, I wasn't going to say *that*..."

"I think it's very fitting," Hermione said. Snape looked down to judge her expression, but saw she was serious. His lips thinned and he frowned.

"How so."

Hermione looked up at him with clear, guileless eyes and smiled. "Well, it's a very dangerous animal, for one thing."

He narrowed his eyes at her. She smiled even more, a glimmer of amusement there. "I think it was highly prized, as well."

"Dead."

"Well... yes, but they're not that easy to kill! Which is why they were highly prized."

"Humph."

"Oh, Severus, it's not a pretty doe, but then, you *aren't* a pretty doe. You are a fierce warrior, wild and dangerous and underestimated only to your foes' detriment."

Snape harrumphed again, though in a slightly mollified tone. Of course, she had to add, with a damned twinkle in her eye, "And of course, your temper matches a boar's pretty well, too."

"Not to mention the snout," Harry added sotto voce.

Snape aimed a stinging hex at Harry and smirked at the yelp. Hermione tried to glare at him, but couldn't keep her laugh under wraps.

His smirk twitched into a brief smile, which softened at the edges as he looked back at his new Patronus. It was the ugliest Patronus he'd ever seen, and yet Hermione was right: it did suit him. He liked it. It looked up at him and wriggled its nose with what would have been a snuffle in a real boar before dissolving away.

Their eyes were drawn up and they looked around themselves, at everyone left standing.

"Do you think they've captured Nagini?" Harry asked after a long moment.

Snape raised a shoulder in a shrug. "Perhaps. But if not, there is little Voldemort can do without hands, followers or a wand just now. We have the upper hand this time."

"Constant vigilance?" Hermione asked.

Snape looked down at her with a smile. "I was thinking more along the lines of knowledge and time. But yes, constant vigilance will help. As will friends."

Hermione smiled back at him and grabbed his hand. He squeezed her hand back.

"Let's go tend to the fallen. We can worry about the future another day."

The End