

Hooligans

by LivingTheDream

Severus survived the war and everything's going his way. It's probably just a hallucination.

One

Chapter 1 of 2

Severus survived the war and everything's going his way. It's probably just a hallucination.

Severus Snape growled.

I feel like I've been hit by a Bludger, dropped from the Astronomy Tower, and then run over by a mad hippogriff.

He heard vaguely familiar voices speaking excitedly around him.

"I think he's waking up."

"You know, he's going to be excessively displeased that we're here."

"That's the understatement of the year. Honestly, I don't care how displeased he is, as long as he's here to be displeased."

Snape opened his eyes with a new-found sense of dread. Apparently, not only was he alive, he was surrounded by Gryffindors.

"Potter. Granger. I knew it. I'm in hell." His voice was gravelly from prolonged disuse.

"Headmaster Snape. I'm so glad you're awake."

Granger. What on earth did she call me?

"Why are you calling me that? Where am I?"

"Sir, you're at St. Mungo's in a private room in the high security ward."

"Awaiting transfer to Azkaban as soon as I'm conscious enough to realize it?"

"Of course not. The Ministry and Wizengamot are taking forever to make decisions on things, and we want to make sure no one average citizen or rogue Death Eater tries to exact some sort of misdirected vengeance upon you while you're unable to physically defend yourself. There is always an Order member with you, and even then it's only an Order member that Harry or I personally know and trust."

"How comforting. And it's not misdirected if it's warranted. The last thing I remember is being bitten by Nagini. Why the hell did you call me Headmaster? How long have I been here? I suppose it's too much to ask if you just start at the beginning and tell me what happened."

Snape was glaring at her.

Why do they just keep grinning stupidly? Has the world gone mad?

"Now who's asking all the questions?" Hermione asked. "If you'll be quiet for a moment, we'll tell you what's been happening in the month you've been taking a little nap."

"Impertinent girl. A month?"

"Yes, a month. Now shush. Harry?"

"Headmaster, after you ejected your memories and I defeated the Dark Lord, Hermione went back to the Shack to get your body. The antivenin and coagulant you had apparently taken were somewhat effective, and you still had a pulse, but it was weak. Even with the coagulant you'd lost a lot of blood. She stabilized you with a bezoar and some Blood Replenishing Potion. We Apparated you to St. Mungo's and intimidated the Healers into helping you. Hermione went back to Hogwarts and fetched Draco and Neville while I guarded you there to make sure no "accidents" happened. When Hermione returned with Draco and Neville to guard you, I went to find Kingsley and to explain... well... about you. As the Ministry has a tendency to call the Dementors first and ask questions later, Kingsley signed the orders for you to be in the high security ward, and we worked out a schedule of Order guards. While you were unconscious, Kingsley and I compiled all of the evidence regarding your position as a spy to make sure no charges would be filed against you. It's taken a while for Nagini's venom to work its way out of your system and for your blood levels to come back to normal on their own, which is just as well, as the Wizengamot and the Ministry are still sorting some things out, but until whatever they decide is finalized, you're still Headmaster of Hogwarts."

"Well, that will be short-lived. I'm sure they won't overlook the fact that I smote the previous headmaster. Deserted my post. Allowed the Carrows to be on staff..."

"Actions considered necessary in the course of the war. The bottom line is you protected the students during a time of extreme peril. As I said, the Ministry is still sorting some things out, but right now, you *are* headmaster," Harry said with a conviction that surprised Snape.

"Also, these are yours. Thank you for letting me borrow them." Harry placed a flask full of silvery memories on the nightstand next to his bed. Snape stared at him with a dazed expression.

Hermione took pity on the shell-shocked Snape. "Headmaster, we realize this is a lot to take in at once. We'll leave you alone for a bit. If you need us, we'll be outside the door. As Harry said, you still need a guard. Neville will be here at four for his shift. I know you probably don't think much of him as a guard but not to worry. He killed Nagini. I think you'll be safe with him."

"Yes. Out."

Harry and Hermione sat in silence until Neville arrived. When Hermione had found Snape and determined he was still alive, he had become their project. As much as they knew he would loathe the idea of becoming a cause to be championed, he had been something to keep their minds occupied in the aftermath of the final battle. He was something they could *do* something about, unlike the countless other deaths that had occurred in the last year. So they had taken him up as their cause, someone to be protected and treasured, and they would let no harm come to him. Harry felt he had bollixed up things with Sirius, and too many people had died because of or for him. When he reflected on Snape's memories and his lifetime of sacrifice, Harry decided that if nothing else came of his having defeated the Dark Lord, he would protect Severus Snape, whether Snape desired it or not. Much like Snape had protected Harry for all those years whether Harry wanted it or not.

Neville arrived for his shift. He ducked into Snape's room to check in, now he was conscious.

"Headmaster?"

"Yes, Mr. Longbottom." Neville started at the use of the honorific. And the complete apathy in Snape's tone. Not boredom. Not anger. Just... apathy.

"I was wondering if you needed anything. If not, and you decide you need something later, I'll just be outside the door."

"There is something you can bring me."

"Yes, headmaster?"

"A list of all those who died in the final battle."

Neville pulled a crumpled piece of parchment out of his pocket.

"I'll be needing this back. I'll be just outside, sir, like I said."

"Thank you."

Neville went to sit outside.

The days came and went, and another week passed. Snape said little, ate less, and did what he was told. Neville, Hermione, and Harry found this worrisome. They had expected him to rail against them and throw them bodily out of the room as soon as he was physically able. They expected him to insult them and sneer at them and hex them as soon as he was given his wand. But, a week after being returned, the wand sat in the same place on the night stand, gathering dust.

On the ninth day after Snape had awakened, Harry entered his room.

"Headmaster, they're discharging you today. Hogwarts is still under construction. I need to know if you wish to go to the Burrow or to Spinner's End until closer to the start of term. Or, even Malfoy Manor, if you wish. Draco has said you're welcome to stay with him. Also, you have a meeting with Minister Shacklebolt in the morning to discuss the decisions of both the Wizengamot and the Board of Governors."

Snape sighed and closed his eyes. He knew this was going to come sooner or later. And he was tired of the horrible hospital bed. "Spinner's End for now, I think. I need to go through some things, and then I'll figure out everything else after my meeting tomorrow. I assume you're going to come with me and hold my hand?"

Harry smiled. This was more like the Snape he knew. He never thought he would miss Snape's biting wit, but Snape without sarcasm or insults was just plain wrong.

"Oh, sir, spending quality time with you at your house has always been a dream of mine, but I don't think we're at the hand-holding stage yet in our relationship. Don't worry, once I get you settled in and make sure the wards are set, I'll leave you to your own devices for a while. The school is being repaired right now anyway; it will be another couple of weeks before it's finished."

"Shacklebolt is Minister?"

"Yes."

"At least it's not a Weasley."

"I'll leave you to it then. I took the liberty of picking up some new clothes for you; they're in the wardrobe. They're probably a little big now, but I imagine you'll grow back into them. Your old clothes... well... they... anyway, I just thought it better that you have new ones."

"Fine. I'll meet you in the hallway in twenty minutes."

As promised, Snape appeared in the hallway in twenty minutes, looking pale and thin, but at least he was freshly showered and shaved, and his wand was in his hand.

"Lead the way, Mr. Potter."

After processing paperwork, Harry led Snape out to the Apparition point outside of St. Mungo's.

"Do you think you can Apparate without splinching?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. I suppose Apparating is *not* the way one wants to check one's magic after being ill."

"Well, come on then, I'll Side-Along. I know where you live."

"Brilliant. You do know this is all completely humiliating."

"Yes, I know, but it's only for a short while longer, then you can go back to stomping around the castle scaring ickle firsties."

"Goody."

"Hey, is that Severus Snape?" They'd been standing in front of St. Mungo's for too long. Snape whirled around defensively to see who'd noticed him... and promptly became dizzy and fell back into Harry.

"It is, it *is* Severus Snape! The tortured spy who helped Harry Potter save us all! *With Harry Potter!* Someone get a picture; look, it's Snape and Potter!"

Wizards and witches began to converge on where they were standing. Snape grunted as Harry suddenly grabbed him around the waist and Apparated them out of the grasp of the mob.

As they appeared on the lawn in front of his house in Spinner's End, Snape fell to his knees and retched.

"Told you that you needed a guard."

"You said it was because people wanted to kill me."

"No, you just assumed that. At the beginning, that was true. Some probably still do. But it's the ones who worship us who are the creepy ones. They're the ones I worry about."

"That's disgusting. Those people..."

"Headmaster." Harry interrupted what was about to become a diatribe and put his hand on the other man's shoulder. Snape had a desperate look on his face.

"As I said, headmaster, it's the ones who worship us whom I find really creepy. Now, come inside and rest. Hermione is waiting for us."

Snape sighed and let Harry haul him to his feet and guide him into his house.

Hermione greeted the pair in the sitting room.

"Headmaster Snape, it's good to see you again."

I find that hard to believe.

"Harry and I thought we'd have a spot to eat as an early lunch and then leave you alone for the evening. We'll come back in the morning to take you to your meeting with Kingsley. If that's okay. I hope you don't mind I did a bit of cleaning, but just in the kitchen and here in the sitting room. I also made sure your bed has clean sheets and the loo is in working order. I know you don't want people rummaging around in your things, so I tried to keep the intrusiveness to a mini..."

"Stop. You're giving me a headache. Let's just sit down and eat, so I can get you both out of my hair for at least a couple of hours before I have to deal with both you *and* the idiots at the Ministry." Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. "Please."

"Yes, headmaster." Harry and Hermione responded in unison. Snape eyed them warily.

"I made shepherd's pie and apple crumble. I hope that's all right."

"It's like we're in class all over again. Put your hand down, Miss Granger. I'm sure whatever you've cooked will be acceptable." Snape made his way to the table and sat down heavily. Harry joined him.

Hermione put the dishes on the table, and everyone began to serve themselves. The succulent smell of home-made food suddenly assaulted Snape's senses, and he realized how famished he was for *real* food, not hospital food. He dug into his shepherd's pie with something akin to enthusiasm, which pleased Harry and Hermione no end. He even went so far as to close his eyes and savor the flavors.

"I had forgotten what real food tasted like. Miss Granger, you have truly outdone yourself."

"Sir, are you well? That sounded like a compliment."

"Well, you know what they say: the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. If all your meals are as divine as this, I just may have to duel Mr. Weasley for your hand."

Hermione's mouth dropped open. Harry's mouth was also agape.

"Sir, did you fall and hit your head when you Apparated? Do you have a fever?"

Snape rolled his eyes.

"Miss Granger, do you know how long it's been since I've had a home-cooked meal? Not house-elf made or TV dinner or something else unnatural? Twenty-seven years. And twenty of those years were spent as a spy. Do you know what spies eat? Not much, and when they do eat, it's rubbish. I had forgotten I was even missing it. This is probably all some sort of cruel joke anyway. When you consider I never thought to live through the war, *and* my idea of hell is being trapped in my own home with the Golden Trio... speaking of which... where *is* Mr. Weasley? I thought you two would get married when the Dark Lord hit the ground."

Hermione's features hardened perceptively and Harry looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"Ronald has decided being tied to one woman is too confining for someone of his stature."

"What stature is that? Empty-headed caveman?"

"Oh, no, sir, he's a professional Quidditch player," she said with mock innocence.

"Same thing. Now, Miss Granger, I believe you said something about apple crumble for dessert?"

Hermione fetched the apple crumble and everyone ate in silence.

"Ron was picked up as a reserve Keeper for the Chudley Cannons," Harry finally offered as way of explanation.

"A pillar of wizarding society, cavorting with groupies, then." Snape had risen and was now rummaging around a cabinet in the living room. Finding what he was looking for, he rejoined them in the kitchen.

"Indeed, sir."

Snape sat down back at the table and was tapping a pack of cigarettes into his hand absently.

"Well, I always thought you were too good for him, anyway. His loss, the idiot. Back to what I was saying. I think I've decided this isn't real. How else to explain those people back at St. Mungo's? I'm either going to wake back up still dying in the Shrieking Shack, or Seamus Finnegan is going to jump out and tell me this is all some Gryffindor prank, or I really am in hell. In any case, none of what's happening is real, and therefore it doesn't matter what I do. That said, tell me, Harry, are you still seeing that delightful Ginny Weasley? Much smarter and more talented than any of her brothers. Considering how powerful you both are, I think you're a good match magically." Snape pulled a cigarette out of the pack and put it in his mouth, lighting it with a Muggle lighter.

Hermione and Harry were horrified. Cigarettes? Compliments? Delightful Weasleys? Was it safe to leave him by himself? A bitter, mean, insulting Snape even a bitter, mean, insulting Snape who was smoking was expected. It was comforting. It was dangerous, sure, especially for those with thin skin, but it meant the world was how it was supposed to be. A delusional, polite, pleasant Snape was weird and scary, and each thought that possibly the end of the world was coming, or hell had frozen over.

Snape appeared to be waiting for an answer from Harry, who finally remembered to answer his original question.

"Oh, well, we took a break last year so I could look for the Horcruxes, and she's still grieving for Fred; I thought I'd wait and give her some time, and then hopefully, if she'll have me, we can pick up where we left off."

Snape took the cigarette out of his mouth and glared at it. "Stale. Figures. Oh, well. Harry, it sounds like you're putting it off. Miss Granger, how is it you excel at *everything* you do? That meal was simply fantastic."

Something in Harry's head snapped.

"Professor Snape, you are *really* starting to freak me out. I'm almost afraid to leave you here by yourself, even for the night. This *is* real. You *are* alive. You know Gryffindors can't lie to save their lives, so this is *not* a joke. Please start acting normally, sir; I don't know what to do with a nice Snape."

Snape chuckled and took a drag of his cigarette. Chuckled?

"Harry, this may not be a joke, but if this is a dream, which I'm sure it is, isn't that exactly what you'd say in the dream? No worries, you two take the afternoon and evening off; you've babysat me long enough. The wards will hold out against the Greasy Git Fan Club for at least twenty-four hours, and I promise not to play with anything sharp or poisonous. What time is the meeting tomorrow with Kingsley?"

Harry was shocked into answering, "It's at ten, sir."

"All right, so come by around half eight, and we'll all go get some breakfast before the meeting, my treat. Does that sound all right?"

Hermione and Harry nodded dumbly. Snape saw them to the door and politely let them out. As he shut the door, he leaned against it and slid down to the floor.

Alone, finally.

He sat there for a moment, enjoying his stale cigarette and contemplating his current circumstance. In his own house. A free man, to some degree, at least for now. Snape looked around his neglected house. Miss Granger had tried to clean the place up a bit but had been so concerned with not invading his privacy, she had only done the bare necessities to keep them from dying of dust inhalation while they ate. Mippy. He stood up and snapped his fingers and said the name. A very bewildered looking house-elf suddenly Apparated into his sitting room.

"Master Severus, sir!" she cried in delight and threw herself at him, hugging his leg. "You's alive!" The elf suddenly looked at him and batted his hand. "You is *not* supposed to be smoking, Master Severus!"

Snape put the cigarette back in his mouth and said, "That's what they tell me. Mippy, get off me. And don't punish yourself; we've talked about that." Mippy let go and peered up at him adoringly.

"Mippy, I need you to get to work cleaning this house and making it fit for human inhabitants. And visitors. Make sure the guest rooms are cleaned and there are fresh sheets on all the beds. Clean the loos and the kitchen, and dust all of the shelves. Open the windows and let some fresh air in. Merlin, this place is like a tomb. Don't touch the potions lab; I'll do that myself tomorrow or the next day. I'm going to go out for a while."

"Where is you going?" Mippy asked.

"Muggle London. I'm going... shopping."

A/N: New and improved, I think. Thanks to my betas, ladyinthecloak, sempra, and sunny33, who put up with me.

Two

Chapter 2 of 2

Severus survived the war and everything's going his way. It's probably just a hallucination.

At half past eight the next morning, Harry and Hermione dropped the wards to Snape's house and knocked on the door. They stared in confusion at the house-elf who answered promptly. Who knew Snape had a house-elf? In all the times they had been to his house before, they had never seen one.

"Mr. Harry and Miss Hermione, please come in. Master Severus is waiting for you in the sitting room."

Harry and Hermione walked into the sitting room and looked around, stunned. The shelves had been dusted, the draperies and rugs had been replaced, and there was sunlight coming in through an open window. Flanking the fireplace in the sitting room were two state of the art big screen televisions with theatre surround sound one with a Sony Playstation plugged into it and games stacked neatly to the side. Snape was sitting in an expensive looking recliner, smoking a cigarette and reading the current issue of *Ars Alchemica*. He looked up at them with a gleam in his eye.

"Honestly, if you two are going to walk around me with your mouths hanging open all the time, people are going to think you've both been Confunded. And then they're going to start saying it's my fault, because even in a dream, it's always my fault, and then they're going to start throwing things at me for Confunding two-thirds of the golden trio. And THEN I'm going to have to start hexing people; the first two people hexed will be YOU TWO!"

Both sets of jaws snapped shut... until they focused on him. He was wearing Muggle clothes. But not just any old set of Muggle clothes: *new* Muggle clothes, which were tailored to his extremely thin frame. A fine gray dress shirt with the top button open and a pair of black trousers. His hair, which had grown out over his five weeks of convalescence, no longer looked greasy and was tied back. He was still way too thin, way too pale, and there were still fresh scars where Nagini had bitten him, but he looked relaxed and better than he had, well, ever.

"You look quite dashing, Headmaster," Hermione blurted out.

"Oh, yes, that's how I know this isn't real."

"Why is that, sir?" she asked.

"Because pretty young women would never tell me that in real life, no matter how many ways I'd changed my attire. Let's go and eat. I'm famished." Snape put his cigarette out in an ashtray on the table.

Hermione blushed and headed for the door. Harry followed, still trying to come to grips with a well dressed, well-groomed, delusional Snape.

"Potter, let's Apparate to the visitor's entrance of the Ministry; it's close to where I'd like to eat, if you don't mind. And wipe that stupid grin off your face. What's so funny?"

"Headmaster, you called me Potter. I feel so warm and fuzzy inside. Maybe you *are* the real Snape and not some Polyjuiced game show host."

"If anyone's being a Polyjuiced game show host, Potter, it's *you*, pretending that you *like* me."

They walked outside in the warm summer air and disappeared with a pop.

When all three reappeared in the alley near the Ministry's visitor's entrance, Snape looked himself up and down.

"Good, no splinching this time, either."

"This time?" Hermione asked.

"How do you think I went shopping last night?"

"Headmaster, you attempted to Apparate without any of us being there?" Harry asked, alarmed.

"Oh, Harry, please, I practiced around the house first before I actually *went* anywhere."

"Hermione, he's calling me Harry again, I think he's regressing." Snape rolled his eyes.

"Shush, Harry. Sir, where did you want to eat breakfast?"

"Yes, breakfast. Come, the both of you. As we're all essentially Muggles when it comes down to it, I think we will *all* enjoy this."

Snape took off down the street, and the other two followed. They walked a few streets through Muggle London before they stopped.

Snape looked up at the giant white sign with red lettering and green trim.

"Sir?" Hermione and Harry asked.

"Krispy Kreme Doughnuts. A divine import from across the pond. North Carolina, to be exact. Come."

They followed him into the doughnut shop. Snape ordered half a dozen chocolate covered custard-filled, half a dozen glazed cream-filled, a dozen original glazed, and three bottles of milk. He also picked up a copy of the local newspaper.

"Sir, isn't that an awful lot?" Hermione asked.

"Whatever we don't eat we'll take to Arthur at the Ministry. He'll think they're fascinating."

They sat down, and Hermione and Harry began to eat. Snape began to read the paper. In his shopping and cleaning frenzy the night before, he hadn't had a chance to read a newspaper. He wanted to orient himself to what was going on in the world at large before he set foot in the Ministry. Just stories about the upcoming world cup tournament in France and new legislation in Parliament. It was a Muggle newspaper, but at least he would know what day it was.

"Sir, you should eat. You've lost a lot of weight, and you didn't have much to lose to begin with. If you don't start taking care of yourself and eating properly, we'll bring in reinforcements, and you'll be at the mercy of Molly Weasley." Hermione put her hand on the paper and pushed it down to the table so he would have to look at her.

"Point taken, Miss Granger." Snape put the paper away and went for a chocolate-covered first. He bit into it carefully to keep the custard from making a mess. He then made his way through two glazed cream-filled and two regulars. Harry and Hermione ate their own doughnuts and watched in amusement as the normally repressed man ate with such abandon and then chugged his milk like a school boy.

When he'd finished his milk, Snape leaned back in his chair.

"Amazing creatures, Americans. Only they could deep fry lard and granulated sugar and then export it to the rest of the world as a proper breakfast. I'm going to go get some more milk, anyone want anything else?"

Harry and Hermione shook their heads. Snape paid for his milk with a Muggle credit card and came back to the table. Harry and Hermione stared at the piece of plastic in his hand.

"Oh, use your heads. You're both reasonably intelligent, or so all of your professors always said. How do you think I survived as a double agent for twenty years? 'Hi, Griphook, I know I'm wanted for the murder of Albus Dumbledore, but can you let me into my vault?' I may be the most powerful wizard currently inhabiting this dream world, but I'm also half Muggle. Did you think I went to Gringott's yesterday? By myself? After that debacle in front of St. Mungo's? I went to Muggle London. I went to my Muggle bank. I have a Muggle bank card. You're both idiots!"

He picked up another doughnut before packing up the leftovers in a napkin to take to Arthur.

"One for the road."

He handed the napkin bundle to Harry and began munching on the doughnut as they walked out of the shop.

Harry sulked. "You are *not* the most powerful wizard alive. I am. And you're going to make yourself sick. And this is *not* a dream world, this is *real*."

"Whatever, Harry." Snape sneered and led the way back to the visitor's entrance eating his doughnut and drinking his milk.

Snape finished his doughnut and milk and tossed the empty bottle and wrapper into a bin. He licked the sugar off his fingers before they entered the phone booth that also served as the visitor's entrance to the Ministry of Magic.

They were still fairly early for their appointment with Kingsley, so they went to drop the doughnuts off at Arthur's office. He had been promoted to Kingsley's second-in-command. Harry and Hermione greeted his assistant, who led them back to Arthur's messy office. Harry poked his head through the door.

"Mr. Weasley, Headmaster Snape has brought you a gift."

Arthur's head shot up, and he looked at the three in awe as they entered his office.

"Snape? Gift? Good Lord."

He looked Snape up and down, and his mouth fell open.

Snape took the bag of doughnuts from Harry and handed them to Arthur.

"We thought you might enjoy these as a treat. Krispy Kreme doughnuts from Muggle London. You might want to warm them up a bit, they've gone a bit cold. Close your mouth, Arthur, you look like a fish. You know, I'm really tired of that reaction. If this is my dream, you'd think people would stop looking so stupid all of the time."

"Dream?" Arthur asked the other two.

"Yes, Headmaster Snape has decided none of this is real, and he can behave however he wants, since this is an alternate reality. I think he's just faking, though, because sometimes he slips up and calls Harry 'Potter'," Hermione explained.

"I see." Arthur looked as if he really didn't. He reached into the bag and pulled out a regular with cream. Biting into it, his eyes widened at the marvelous confection.

"Muggles," he said, sighing with rapturous joy.

"Well, I think our work here is done. Let's go and find Kingsley and find out what's to be inflicted on me next," Snape said.

Harry led the way to the Minister's office, and they were ushered into Kingsley's austere office (Kingsley refused to be associated at all with the previous administrations and kept his office simple and tidy).

"Severus!" Kingsley came from around his desk and greeted Snape with an enthusiastic hug.

Snape looked decidedly uncomfortable and didn't really respond. In fact, he looked like he was trying to will himself to leave his body.

"Kingsley," he responded stiffly.

"Harry, Hermione, it's good to see you again as well. Please have a seat." Kingsley motioned the three to his visitor's chairs. "Tea, anyone?" A house-elf began serving the tea.

"Well, then, Severus, I see all three of you are fully intact with all of your limbs, so you must have been getting along fairly well. This is fortunate, because the three of you will be spending a lot more time together beginning this autumn."

Snape took this opportunity to glare at Harry and Hermione. They peered back at him with innocent expressions on vacant faces. He didn't believe their innocence for a minute.

"Let's get right to the point. You will not be charged with any crimes related to Albus Dumbledore, your history as a Death Eater, or your position as the Dark Lord's right hand man during the last weeks of the war. You have Harry to thank for that. Had he not been so speedy in finding me and hiding you away, you probably would have been killed by an over-enthusiastic Auror once they found you were still breathing."

"Thank you, Harry Potter," Snape said through clenched teeth.

"And had it not been for Hermione, you would have died anyway. Even though you'd taken the antivenin, you probably would have bled to death had she not acted so quickly with her ministrations."

"Thank you, Miss Granger," Snape parroted again, although not as harshly this time. "I'm sorry, Kingsley, but am I supposed to be presenting these two with my own personal Order of Merlin or something? I didn't ask to be saved. In fact, I'd been quite looking forward to death. One might say I'm a little put off by them thwarting my plans, actually. And I *did* buy them breakfast. Shall I get down on my knees and praise them, too?" He moved to get down on his knees before Harry and Hermione. They both rolled their eyes.

Kingsley would have none of it. "Severus! Stop being ungrateful. You've been given a second... er... third chance. I suggest you take advantage of it. Now, you are still headmaster of Hogwarts. However, there are some conditions you will have to agree to, going forward."

"I knew it."

"First of all, despite the fact you are a war hero and will be receiving the Order of Merlin First Class at a ceremony in August and yes, you *will* be there to receive it there are some who still view it as completely inappropriate that you're allowed to teach children, much less be headmaster of a school. So Hogwarts will be taking on a number of apprentices this coming year, all young men and women who proved their mettle in the final battle, with the exception of Mr. Malfoy, who is a force of his own entirely. All of the apprentices received O's on their NEWT in their subject, including Mr. Potter and Miss Granger, who took their NEWTs this month. Mr. Potter will be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts. Since he already has a year of teaching under his belt, albeit underground teaching, he is thought to be fit to teach all years, although he may come to you for assistance with the more advanced classes. Miss Granger will be apprenticed to Professor Vector in Arithmancy. Mr. Longbottom will be apprenticed to Professor Sprout in Herbology and also will be groomed for Head of Gryffindor. Mr. Malfoy will be apprenticed to you in Potions and will be Head of Slytherin. Miss Lovegood will be Professor Flitwick's apprentice as both Charms professor and Head of Ravenclaw. Mr. McMillan will be apprenticed with Minerva in Transfiguration and also to Professor Sprout to become Head of Hufflepuff. All apprentices will be teaching years one through to three and working on special projects with their professors to

prove themselves able to take on the advanced classes next year. All professors with an apprentice will teach years four through to seven. You will be headmaster and Mr. Potter will be your assistant, so obviously you will have help. Minerva is still Deputy Headmistress, and Miss Granger will be her assistant. Any questions about this first part?"

Snape looked like he was going to pass out. He turned to Harry. No longer flippant, there was a desperate look in his eyes again.

"It's real, isn't it, Potter?" he asked in a whisper. "Nothing in a dream could make this little sense and be so convoluted and humiliating."

He began to slide out of his chair and his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Catch him, Harry, he's passing out!" Hermione cried.

Harry dove to catch Snape and keep him from hitting his head on something hard.

Kingsley came around his desk and helped Harry get Snape back into the chair. He then looked at Harry and motioned him to step out of the office while Hermione attempted to revive him.

"What did he mean when he said it was real?"

"He's been acting really weird ever since we left hospital. Friendly. Smiling and making jokes, calling me Harry. I think he's been coping with everything by telling himself none of this was really happening, that he was still lying on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, dying, and this was just a delusion or, at the very least, that we're playing a joke on him before we summon the Dementors. I guess the layout of teaching responsibilities was just so realistically generated by the Ministry it snapped him back into reality. He really thinks he deserved to die, so the fact he lived, it's just too much. He pretends this is all a joke."

"Do you think him stable enough to be headmaster and oversee the school? One of the reasons we want him there is because through *everything* he always protected the students and somehow managed to keep everything running and students were still learning things. Imagine what he could do in a normal school year? But with his record, we have to surround him with people everyone else trusts explicitly. And he needs to stay at Hogwarts; he's protected there."

"Yes, I forgot to mention when we were leaving St. Mungo's, a hero-worshipping mob descended on us. That was probably the final straw, really, when he decided this was not real: that people think he's a hero and want a piece of him. But I think with Hermione and me there, sir, it will be all right. And Draco and Neville will help also. He'll come around. It's just this is a huge shock for him, to not only have lived, but to not be in Azkaban and to be revered as a hero... He just doesn't see himself that way, and it will take him a while to get used to the idea. But once he does, I can assure you, he'll be more obnoxious than we ever thought he could be." Harry reassured Kingsley with a smile.

While they were talking, Hermione had been trying to coax Snape back to consciousness. She stroked his cheek as he lay sprawled out across the chair.

"Sir? Please say something. I can't stand to lose you again, please come back. Severus? Really, it won't be that bad, I promise. We'll all be in it together, and we'll help each other."

Snape roused a bit, confused that someone was touching him.

"Hermione?"

She pulled her hand away as if burned.

"I'm sorry, sir. I was just making sure you were okay."

"I'm not, but you may tell the other two I'm at least awake. Although, I may Unforgiveable myself at a later time today."

Hermione gave a weak laugh and went to get Kingsley and Harry.

As she walked to the door, she said softly, "Please don't, sir. I, for one, would miss you terribly." She looked back at him, and their eyes met. She then turned and let the other two back in.

"Headmaster, are you all right?" Harry's concern was apparent.

"Sir, it really will be okay. I know it seems like a complicated mess, but Hermione's great at organising things. She'll set up colour-coded time-tables for all of us, and we'll all be in it together, helping each other. Really, it won't be so bad." He echoed Hermione's words without knowing it. Snape forced a grim smile.

"I'm sorry, Kingsley, it's just it's been a while since I've had to live with Ministry logic. The force of such... profound... deep thought...was overwhelming," Snape explained with a sigh.

"You're sure you're all right?" Harry asked.

"Of course, Potter. So, we have a convoluted class and apprentice schedule that Miss Granger is going to sort out with flow charts and colours, right? Maybe some happy charts and graphs? Let's move on, as I'm sure that's not all the good news you're going to share." Snape looked mutinous.

"Just a couple of other things, Severus, although, with your demeanor here today, I'm not as worried about them now as I was before our meeting. You haven't tried to hex me yet. Maybe I *should* be concerned. I know you're not a warm and fuzzy man, but the Board of Governors has requested, well, demanded really, that you not be as harsh with your young charges as you've always been before. Now, again, truly, I know you're not a happy-go-lucky type, so I'll settle for you refraining from gleefully terrorizing people just because you're having a bad day. Also, while you have been vindicated and you are NOT a criminal, there are those who would take their revenge on you. And, as you've already experienced, there are also those who have a hero-worship complex, and will try to touch you and ingratiate themselves to you. You are protected at Hogwarts. Should you decide to go out, to Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley, or anywhere else for that matter, I would request you take one of your apprentices with you. There is safety in numbers, and I'd rather you not skip through Hogsmeade hexing people left and right, no matter how well deserved those hexes may be. That's it. Other than those requests, you're free to go about running Hogwarts as you see fit."

Severus had an odd look on his face.

"As I see fit? Strip me of everything that makes me *me*, bind me to two Gryffindors, and imprison me with idiots but not allow me to point that out? Shall I prance around in purple tights as well? The only conclusion I can draw about *why* you would have me there at all, if these are the conditions, is that I AM being punished. Why not just send me to Azkaban?"

Kingsley opened his mouth to respond, but Hermione cut him off angrily.

"Severus Snape, you are NOT being punished. You did *not* deserve to die, and you do NOT deserve to be in Azkaban. You made a mistake when you were younger than me and based on your life's experience up to that point, one could see why you might go down that route. It's true it was a rather *large* mistake to have made, and nothing can ever bring those people back, but you have since spent every minute of your life attempting to atone for that mistake, and you have been used and mistreated by people who were supposed to be on your side and truly are not worthy to grovel at your feet. I went back to find your body so no one would desecrate it and you could be properly honoured. When I found you were still alive I was overjoyed and I prayed to all the gods you would be permitted to live a new life, free and happy. You are not *bound* to us. We're not trying to punish or humiliate you; we're just trying to get Hogwarts our home back in working order again and we feel you're the best man to lead

us. I know spending extended lengths of time with Harry or me is your idea of hell, but if you can put up with it for a couple of years, you truly *will* be free to live as you want, and you can then go and crawl under a rock if that's what you wish. The conditions are not ideal, but it's the best we can do with the idiotic population we serve. Harry, I'll be waiting down in the lobby when you and Kingsley have pulled Snape's head out of his arse."

She slammed out of the office. Harry, Kingsley, and Snape stared at the door for a moment before turning back to each other.

"Well. That was unexpected," Kingsley said.

"Everything she said was true, though," Harry said.

"It's fine. Whatever, Kingsley. It's fine." Snape said.

"Well, that's settled, then. Good. Severus, I really am glad to see you and glad you're taking this on. I expected a temper tantrum but am pleased to see you're amenable to the plan. Good luck, and I'll see you next month at the Ministry Ball. Dress robes and all that, but I promise not to drone on forever." Kingsley smiled and extended his hand to Snape. Snape's face had gone completely blank, and he shook Kingsley's hand mechanically. Harry sensed Snape's almost catatonic state and steered him to the door mercifully, calling, "Bye, Kingsley. See you next month," as they left.

Once they'd left the office, Snape shuddered and seemed to come back into himself.

"After that, I feel like I need a shower," he said.

As they headed back down to the lobby to meet Hermione, Snape turned to Harry and smiled. Harry groaned inwardly. This didn't bode well.

"I'm sorry, Harry, for worrying you. I think the sugar high I had going crashed out at a most inopportune moment. Let's collect Miss Granger. She's probably worked herself into a state of mortification at the idea of shouting at her employer."

They found Hermione waiting for them in the lobby. Snape was right. Hermione started trying to apologise to Snape as soon as they were within range. Snape put his finger on her lips to stop her. She looked startled.

"Stop. There is no need. You said what needed to be said. Let's go get some lunch."

Snape lit a cigarette and took off, leaving a bewildered Harry and Hermione scurrying after him as he headed back towards Muggle London.

Again they were shocked when they realized where he was heading. Harry looked at Hermione.

"Who would have thought Snape was a secret fast food junkie?"

Hermione giggled as she looked at the golden arches. "Who would have thought Snape was a secret American fast food junkie?"

"Yeah, weird. Wonder if he'll get the Happy Meal and keep the toy?" Harry and Hermione were laughing hysterically now, unable to stop. Snape seemed to realise he wasn't being followed any longer and turned to see what the holdup was.

"What's keeping you two?"

"Sorry, sir, we've just never pictured you as a fast food junkie."

"There's a lot you don't know about me. Now come on."

"So, you're admitting you *are* a fast food junkie?" Harry teased.

Snape glared at them and went inside the restaurant. Hermione and Harry followed him to the counter.

"One Filet-o-Fish, one Big Mac, large French fries, large Coke, and an apple pie. And whatever these two want as well."

They placed their own orders, and Snape pulled out a wad of Muggle money and paid. They took their food to a table in the back and sat down. Harry looked at the large amount of food Snape had ordered.

"Honestly, Snape, you're going to hurt yourself."

Snape pounced on Harry.

"I knew it," he spat, "I *knew* you still called me Snape in your head. All this 'Headmaster this' and 'Headmaster that' nonsense. *Bugger off!*" Snape began eating his food.

"Oh, good, there you are. I was afraid the real Severus Snape had disappeared again. Well, if Horace Slughorn is your mentor, far be it from me to stop you from attaining your goals."

Harry chuckled and began eating his own food.

Hermione watched the exchange between the two of them. Snape's mood swings were becoming more erratic than usual. He'd always been moody and difficult, but his moods stayed on one side of the pendulum, alternating between surly, angry, really angry, and downright mean. This new Snape now encompassed smiles, polite manners, and nauseating pleasantness as well, and Hermione was truly worried this new addition to his personality might be indicative of a man pushed over the edge. While she and Harry had both known it would be a difficult transition for him to make from spy walking the knife's edge to somewhat normal wizard about town, neither had expected the hybrid man who sat across them, alternating between sullenly shoving French fries into his mouth and pleasantly asking her about her NEWTs.

"Miss Granger?"

"I'm sorry, Headmaster; I was wool gathering. What were you asking?"

"Your NEWTs. Did you find them challenging, having missed your NEWT year at school?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I did revise quite a lot during May, but it was a challenge doing it all on my own, of course. I got O's in everything except History of Magic... probably because my practical application of said History of Magic over the last year did not have much in common with the standardised exam." She laughed at the irony and looked up at him. He smiled back but it wasn't the maniacal, unnatural smile he'd been using for the past two days. It was a smile of genuine warmth. Hermione blushed, dropped her eyes, and changed the subject.

"What do you want to do this afternoon, Headmaster? Did you need anything from Diagon Alley? Harry and I were planning to go there anyway, if you'd like to join us? Or, we can start planning sessions for the next term or... Sorry, sir, I'm rambling."

Snape smiled again. Then his expression turned thoughtful. "Not to worry, Hermione. No offence... to either of you, really... but I think I'd like to spend some time alone, sorting through everything. It's all a tad overwhelming, and I need a serious holiday. In fact, I think we *all* deserve a holiday. You two are barely eighteen, you shouldn't have to be worrying about curriculums and classroom supplies. The school is still under construction, right? Let's take about a month and meet back at Spinner's End

around the middle of July. That will give us six weeks to finish getting our plans together for the coming school year. If you get bored with a life of leisure, work out the schedules for the faculties and apprentices, Hermione, and work out your DADA syllabus, Harry. You can owl me with your notes and questions. But let's take a break from trying to save the wizarding world for a while. As I said earlier, I promise not to play with anything sharp or poisonous, and I promise not to go anywhere. I just need to be with myself for a little while. Plus the Muggle satellite man has to come over and hook up my dish."

Harry and Hermione started laughing.

"Do you want to borrow some films, sir?" Hermione asked with a giggle.

Snape was unable to stop himself from laughing "Maybe. If they're not total rubbish. I didn't get any last night, although I did get a VCR. Feel free to owl me any titles you think I might find interesting."

Harry and Hermione stopped laughing. "Um... really?" Hermione asked.

"Yes. Now, really, I must get back to the house, the Muggle service man is supposed to be there between two and six..." Snape shoved the last bit of apple pie into his mouth. "Come on, let's get out of here."

They left from McDonald's and headed to a safe Apparition point. As they Apparated onto Snape's front lawn, Snape realized he'd definitely overdone things today. He'd only been released out of hospital the day before, and now he was wandering all about London. He suddenly felt completely exhausted.

"Headmaster, are you all right?"

"Just need to sit. Too much activity. I forgot I was just in hospital yesterday," Snape said as he collapsed into the chair.

"Sir, did you want me to make you a potion?" Hermione began to fuss.

"No, no. I'll be fine. Just go. Mippy is here. She won't let me die. Have fun in Diagon Alley. I'll see you in a month."

Hermione cast one last lingering, worried glance at him, and then left with Harry.

A/N: As always, my deepest gratitude to my betas sunny33, shiv, and sempra.