

Madame Potion

by Snapekat

Harry Potter isn't the only thing to vex Professor Snape. The mysterious granddaughter of a former potions teacher, a dangerous desire for power and forbidden dreams tempt him to make promises he wishes he hadn't. Snape finds himself a pawn between two women and their own dubious ambitions. The story runs parallel with HP and begins the year before he comes to Hogwarts.

Year One: The Seed

Chapter 1 of 21

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Year One: The Seed

"Miss Davindra Collins?"

Snape's eyes fell on a young girl who sat nearly half a head taller than her classmates. She was pale and thin with straight, thick hair the color of obsidian and unyielding, pale green eyes. Her back was straight and her arms were folded gracefully on top of the desk. The stare between them didn't waver.

"Am I right in assuming you are related to Demelza Collins?"

He tried to look unimpressed when he spoke the name of a favorite Potions professor from his days at Hogwarts. Horace Slughorn held the position of Potions professor during Snape's school years and for nearly fifty years in total, but he had a habit of over indulging in many things which often left him unfit to teach. The usual substitute was a Hogwarts alumnus who found her fame by creating amazingly complex potions while leading a very quiet and private life.

Where Slughorn had doted and fawned over the likes of Lily Evans, Madame Collins seemed to favor Snape, which did his young and battered ego good. Often he had wished that Slughorn would quit or be deemed unworthy of the job, so that Madame Collins could be hired in his place. If, indeed, this new first year was the offspring he suspected, Snape might have to be more on guard than he ever imagined to be in front of simpering eleven-year-olds.

The girl smiled coolly and replied, "Yes, she's my grandmother."

Snape broke the uncomfortable eye contact and paced across the room, holding his hands behind his back.

"Then I can safely state that your other grandmother is Lillyth Sparrow."

"Yes, you can." Her voice rang clear in the large room where every pair of eyes flitted between the unusual girl and Snape's dark, towering form.

Year Two: Inevitable by Chance

Chapter 2 of 21

Harry Potter comes to Hogwarts, but so does Madame Collins with a task for Snape. A common ground is recognized with Davindra. And is it a dream or a reality that is so disturbing it dares to keep him from ever wanting to close his eyes again?

Year Two: Inevitable by Chance

Now was the time. It had come. Harry Potter was beginning his schooling at Hogwarts. Snape had known the event was out there; eventually it would be, of course. However, he found himself seething over it for most of the summer when he knew for certain. Snape wondered if young Potter looked like that arrogant little shit, James, or if he favored Lily, the Mudblood tart. Would Snape know him on sight? Or would he have to look for that famous scar? Cold comfort came from the fact that finally Snape could exact a small amount of revenge on at least the memory of James Potter by never letting up one iota on his son. Executing seven years of hard, unrelenting, driving pressure sounded like an exercise in ecstasy. Suddenly the upcoming year didn't seem so bad. He looked forward to it even.

Davindra Collins and her constant pestering from the year before hadn't entered his mind since he had bid her a hasty farewell on the last day of classes that summer. Tiring of the constant stare of those cool eyes and her presence like a nagging shadow around every corner, he had nearly shoved her out the door himself. It was as though a great calming dome of silence had finally descended upon his world again. He breathed freely for the first time in nearly nine months. Snape had sat in his cold, dark chambers and just listened to the stillness with the reassurance that it would not be broken by annoying students of any kind.

After a summer of isolation and much needed preparation for the upcoming year, Snape was also handed a special task by Dumbledore into which he was enlisted in order to help ensure the safe keeping of the Sorcerer's Stone. It was not a difficult spell to cast. It used more logic than complex potion making. Dumbledore didn't speak of the Dark Lord, but Snape knew that was who the Headmaster had in mind when he brought the stone to Hogwarts.

Snape's suspicions were strong, along with a certain gnawing in the pit of his stomach and a tingle on his arm. But he would wait and watch to see exactly what kind of trouble came from it. And he was expecting trouble.

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With all the distraction it was easy for him to be taken off guard when Demelza Collins herself appeared at his chamber door literally hours before the Hogwarts students began to arrive.

She appeared in a way similar to her granddaughter silently. Snape simply turned and found her standing in the open doorway.

"What is with those women, anyway?" his thoughts snapped when he saw her.

But he couldn't deny the curious pleasure that his mind gave rise to at the idea of seeing his old Potions substitute again. She had been instrumental in the shaping of his abilities, not to mention the position he held now. If only she had stood behind his bid for Defense Against the Dark Arts position, he might actually have had that achievement as well.

"Madame Collins," he said with the best forced, though still pained, smile he could muster. "To what do I owe this great pleasure?"

Though it had been some time since he had seen her, she had changed little. Her age, either held off by good potions or simply good breeding, made her appear no older than she was when Snape was her granddaughter's age. Now, he could see much of Demelza in Davindra. Both had the same cool green eyes and placid expression, a bit of mirth around the corners of the mouth. Same was their stance of a straight spine and firm shoulders, but with a casual air towards the world. She, as did Davindra, made him slightly uncomfortable. They were so bold in such understated ways.

Madame Collins smiled wider and descended the stairs into his dungeon classroom, looking about, surveying the realm that had once been hers.

"Severus, so little has changed, including you."

There was even the same pattern in their speech and lilt to their voice.

"I would know you with my eyes closed. The same boy as before, just a bit taller... and darker." Her eyes darted back to him with a familiar coyness. "I suppose you are surprised to see me."

"It is quite a surprise, but a pleasing one none the less," Snape replied cautiously. He could never pass a lie through her and probably couldn't even now.

As if to answer his own thoughts, she turned to face him fully and chuckled.

"No, I'm sure it is not. But I felt it important to have a few words with you before my granddaughter arrived."

She continued to circle about the room as she spoke.

"We are both in your gratitude for the extra help you were willing to give her in her first year at Hogwarts. And I know it was a great imposition upon you."

"No, really...", he began but she stopped him with a flick of her hand.

"Remember, I knew you well, Severus, and I see little change. You would not like the intrusion. However, it was a great favor you did me... and Davi. You see, I adore my granddaughter. She is all I could have ever wanted out of my own children and more." Madame Collins closed the gap between them and stood in front of Snape, coolly looking up into his face.

"Her talent was evident from the beginning," he spoke. "I never mind helping such talent along when it is so deserved."

She seemed to weigh the truth in the statement and find it passing before she moved on.

"I have great hopes for Davi. The future will hold such things for her we can hardly imagine. I've known it since before she was born." She had begun her slow strolling again, but had stopped to look back at Snape. "Wouldn't you agree, Severus?"

When Malfoy's group stalked off, Davindra's eyes immediately went to the dark corner Snape had hidden himself in to watch the event. She had felt him watching all along. They regarded each other with dim, knowing smiles and then moved on.

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The rest of the year prior to the Christmas break had proven busy for both of them. Their private times together became fewer as each had other things begging their time.

For Snape, the Stone and its protection, as well as keeping a tighter tabs on Professor Quirrell, had kept him literally running from one end of the Hogwarts to the other. The troll wondering the halls at Halloween was obviously a ploy to distract everyone long enough for the theft of the stone hidden under Hagrid's three-headed dog. Doing more than his part to ensure its security, Snape had dashed to the tower to check on it while everyone else was running about like hippogriffs with their heads cut off. The effort earned him a mangled leg that left him visibly hobbling about for several days. The Stone was safe for the time being. However, Snape let Quirrell know that he was aware of his intentions. The stuttering fool protested his innocence, but Snape read fear and greed in every twitch of his body.

Then there was the ever annoying Harry Potter and his little gang of misfits. He was a very popular attraction with everyone in the school, students and teachers alike. A fact that reminded Snape of James Potter and annoyed him no end. At every available chance, he would hack and swipe at Harry's ego and feel ever so slightly better.

Snape realized Quirrell had it in for Potter even worse than he himself did during the Quidditch match. Only his quick thinking on the counter curse saved the boy's life. His only thanks was a scorched robe and even more disrespect and insolence from 'the wonder triplets.'

'I should have let him fall to his death,' Snape seethed in retrospect. Surely now he was more than even with James Potter for any gallant life-saving attempts that may have been made.

These demanding tasks overshadowed the fact that Davindra was earning more favorable attention. Suddenly, Snape realized she no longer always sat, ate and walked alone. Often at least one or two of her fellow Ravensclaws would be near, exchanging a few words. There had even been several times where she and Hermione Granger, an equally unbearable over intellectual, had their heads together discussing something undoubtedly profound to their overly excited minds.

On one hand, Snape felt a small amount of pride that she would not have turned this new leaf if not for him. Another vein had him feeling jealous and angry for he had never been so lucky, at her age, to get a chance to improve his social standing. Also, if she found herself embraced by her peers and a top student on her own, would she still be at his feet begging attention night and day?

It was a ridiculous thought that he pushed from his head. Of course he would be happy to be rid of her. His time was stretched thin enough as it was *The end of her constant pestering would be a blessing, would it not?*

Snape shoved the uncomfortable knot of emotions deep into his gut to be ignored, hopefully forever.

In the new year, the stress surrounding Snape did not let up, and again he found himself feeling like an angry caged animal, ready to strike at anyone who came close enough.

Davindra's new social life had cut into the time she would have normally used for studies with him. He assured himself it was a relief, but somewhere inside him there was an annoyed, resentful sensation which was bubbling up to add to his accumulated seething wrath. Outwardly, he realized, he kept anticipating her dark, slender form clutching yet another book and questions bubbling from her lips at every corner.

Insomnia was a constant companion to Snape's life. But the small, dark hours of night at Hogwarts were some of his favorite times. He walked the corridors, officially to keep an eye out for curfew breaking students, unofficially to do some of his best thinking and snooping. Sometimes he would ride the ever-changing staircases to the various houses and test the anti-intruder charms at the entrances. Various pictures would wake and glare at him or tell him to put out his wand light, but he ignored their protests and continued on his nightly surveys, happy to interrupt someone else's sleep.

More often he was finding himself in the Ravenclaw tower entrance, the picture snoring contentedly, without a worry in the world.

What was she doing in there, he wondered? Was she sound asleep with the covers pulled up to her chin, a book of potions across her lap? Or was she still awake talking and giggling with her fellow roommates about boys, clothes and other girlish fancies? If he wished, he could see for himself. He knew many ways. A flutter in his stomach caused his breath to catch. Whatever he was thinking had to stop. He immediately sent himself back to his chambers for the rest of the night.

After that, Snape swore he wouldn't allow himself to pass anywhere near the Ravenclaw tower, especially during his night walks. Davindra's absence from her tutoring annoyed him enough that he considered contacting Madame Collins on the matter. He decided first to speak to Davindra herself. He was certain he could make her see that he was far from done with her.

Snape lay on his bed, fully clothed, with no expectation of sleep, and stared up into the darkness. Davindra, the Stone and Harry Potter danced around the edges of his consciousness. He closed his eyes to focus on the shelter of inky, black nothingness. Sleep began to tug at him and he allowed himself to fall.

Somewhere, far off, he heard the sound of his door open and a figure slowly step through. He willed his eyes to open, but they wouldn't. However, he could sense with the clarity of sight what was happening around him. He saw the figure walk silently, carefully toward his bed, knowing more than seeing, that it was Davindra.

She was dressed in her school uniform; he could hear the quiet wisp of her skirt against her tights. Leaning over the bed, she looked down at him. Snape demanded that he wake up and address just how this girl managed to get past his anti-intruder charms, but his body remained as immobile as if under a powerful sleeping spell.

She lingered above him for a time before he felt her place a knee on his bed, then swung herself over and sit astride him. Her weight was startlingly real. The sound of her breath and the smell of her hair assaulted his very alert senses. He knew she sat across him, looking down at him through a curtain of dark hair, and he was certain there was a smile of coy amusement on her lips. Slowly she leant down to him. Her knees gripped the side of his hips, and he felt her stomach rest against his. Her elbows were plopped under her chin and dug into his chest. Her breath brushed against his face. Was that a slight giggle he heard?

Snape's hands felt cemented in place, or otherwise he would have reached up to shove her off of him. Instead he was totally paralyzed to her dangerous, playful game.

Slowly she sat up. Did she just sigh? Her flattened palms ran down the length of his chest to his stomach. Inside a frightful flutter followed their descent. Her hands found the buttons on his jacket and began to unfasten a few at the bottom. Utter panic set in and Snape called out for some incantation that could break whatever evil hex had been put on him. Then, he felt her hand reach under his coat and stroke his stomach, her nails scratching at the fabric of the shirt underneath.

Snape felt he had stopped breathing, stopped thinking, and now only waited for what was to happen next.

She pulled at the shirt until it was free of his pants, and she was able to run her hand against his bare skin. With each stroke she reached a little further up. Her fingers felt like ice, like razors... like heaven.

Just as his mind was about to explode and he was nearly ready to surrender to the enchantment cast on him, all his power returned, and his eyes flew open; he sat up and his arms flailed about at nothing. His room was empty and he was alone. His clothing was as tightly buttoned as always. But his body still burned and tingled with the feel of her. Had she really been here? Had he dreamed it? Had he underestimated how advanced her knowledge of spells really was?

Snape was left with a hundred questions and an overwhelming fear of going back to sleep.

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The next day found him nervously checking the buttons of his coat repeatedly and utterly determined to uncover the truth about the events of last night. He felt angry and

After the exchange of several owls, it was arranged that Snape would come to Madame Collins's home. It was a rather hard to find, old manor, which was hidden behind high walls and overgrown flora. It was also Unplottable and wrapped with anti-intruder charms and protection spells. Snape wondered why there was all this need for security when just a harmless old teacher and potion brewer lived there. It added another question to his list.

Unable to Apparate inside the walls, he had to wait outside to be let in like a common servant. He wasn't even taken into the house itself; a large, cold, stone block, but around the back to an immense garden. The warm, bright sun assaulted Snape's eyes, and he hoped that there would be shade to stand under.

Demelza was indeed in a shady corner of the garden, sitting on a low stone wall. She looked not unhappy to see him but not pleased either.

"Severus," she said, with a cool smile, and nodded to a spot next to her on the wall.

"Madame Collins," he spoke in greeting and took his seat.

The woman sighed and looked around the garden with obvious pride. "It's a beautiful place, wouldn't you agree?"

When he didn't answer right away, she turned to give him an impatient look.

A twitch of his eyebrow gave away his annoyance at small talk, but she still waited.

"It's quite nice," he managed through tight lips.

Again the smile of the kind, gentle matron spread across her face. "Now, what is it that you needed to speak with me about, Severus? I'm assuming it's regarding Davi?"

"Yes, you assume correctly. I hate to inform you of this," he began, trying to sound casual, "but the past year's special tutoring of your granddaughter was quite a disappointment."

"Oh?" Demelza raised her eyebrows and, with a critical look, dared him to continue.

"As I had tried to tell you when you came to enlist my help, my year was an especially strenuous one. I'm sure you know all about the Sorcerer's Stone and the events around Harry Potter?"

"Yes," she scoffed. "But what does that have to do with my granddaughter?"

"After having taken valuable time away from some especially important matters to assist Davindra, it's apparent to me that she doesn't quite share your vision for her future. I had a very hard time keeping her focused on her extra studies. That is, when she even chose to be present."

"Severus, why wasn't I alerted to this problem earlier?" she said, as her hand fluttered to the clasp of her cloak, as if truly aghast at the news. "Davi never said a thing about this to me."

"I'm sure she would not," Snape said smoothly as he examined his nails for the effect of utter detachment. "I didn't wish to bother you with what I assumed was a minor matter at the time. But my efforts at control of her were met with resistance. If that is all the thanks I get for the sacrifice of my time, I would just as soon not be bound to continue in this exercise."

Demelza sat open-mouthed for a moment before she gathered herself and pursed her lips into a thin, angry line.

"Davi is quite young," she finally said, regaining her placid composure. "Children can get easily distracted, but she does realize the value of these extra lessons. In fact she told me just days ago how she was looking forward to next year's tutoring."

"Really?" Snape drawled. "I believe that your granddaughter is managing to pull one over on you."

"Severus," she snapped, "be careful of what you accuse."

"I honestly mean no offense," he lied and she knew it. "But I have serious doubts about your granddaughter's desire for this fame and glory you seem to be seeking for her. It appears that, last year, she actually managed to form a nice little gang of friends, who became far more important than extra time spent hovering over books or a cauldron."

"That's ridiculous. Davi knows those trappings are not of real importance," Demelza scoffed. "She understands the seriousness of her studies."

Snape sighed dramatically and enjoyed the meandering trip through dangerous territory on which he was leading Demelza's patience. He got up to stroll a few feet away and examine a stand of foxglove.

"You can't force this, Madame Collins, if Davindra doesn't want it."

"She cannot be expected to know what she wants," Demelza hissed angrily. "It is only I who can protect and guide Davindra. Not even her parents can know what is expected of a witch in the coming times. It is a job I have been entrusted with and I will not fail in."

Snape turned to give a surprised look to her sudden outburst. "And what times are these that you speak of?" he asked innocently.

Demelza narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't play dim with me, Severus. You know as well as I that the time of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's return is drawing near. You've seen the signs."

"Perhaps." Snape eased back to his spot near the garden wall. "But I have a feeling you know more about it than me. And I'm sure you know more than you would dare let anyone else suspect." He leaned in and raised his eyebrows for effect.

An icy mask seemed to fall over the woman's face. "What are you implying? That I am in league with the Dark Lord and plan to put my granddaughter at his side to rule all of the magical world together?" She let out a hollow laugh. "On the contrary, I plan to protect my granddaughter from all that could harm her, from any side, using the best weapon I know: knowledge. It's not fame and glory I'm seeking, as you mistakenly pointed out. It's security."

"That's very touching, Madame Collins," Snape commented casually. "But frankly, I'm far more interested in what this all has to do with me. Why pursue me so doggedly to be Davindra's counselor when you seem to have already mapped out her academic career as well as her life? You said it yourself that it was your sole responsibility. Why insist that I be a part of it? After all, I am just a lowly, half-blood Potions teacher."

"You can scrap the false humility, Severus," she sneered back at him. Then, with a lightning quickness she reached out and grabbed his forearm, her nails digging into his now quiet Dark Mark.

"This," she spat out like a snake, "is what makes you the most qualified for this job, my dear man."

Her sudden move and surprisingly strong grip startled him, and Snape felt a sudden panicky desire to get loose of her talons. Wrenching his arm free of her, he moved out of reach and kept his limbs carefully tucked behind his back.

"It's too bad you are not more up to date on your information, Madame," he snarled. "For if you were, you'd know that my connections with the Dark Lord ended when I turned spy against him. The Ministry has it on record if you have any doubts."

Demelza's eyes twinkled with a wicked mischief. "Yes, that's what I've heard. Double spy. Or maybe triple, or quadruple spy, even? That's just the thing, though, Severus. Despite all the praise and backing of Albus Dumbledore, no one is really sure on which side of the fence you are."

"How dare you insinuate "

"Oh, leave it, Severus," she said irritably. "It's far less important to me which side you stand on. What makes you valuable to me is that you know both sides. You've been in both places, you've seen everything. Therefore, you can prepare my granddaughter for whatever may come."

Her eyes were sparkling with the unveiling of her grand plan.

Snape crossed his arms and gave her a hard look from under his snarled brow. "Not even willing to choose a side for the sake of your own granddaughter. They have a word for that, Madame Collins."

"Oh, you want to call *me* a coward?" She let out a dry laugh. "Honestly, isn't that the cauldron calling the kettle black? Tell me, what was it exactly that made you decide to become a turncoat while in Azkaban? Was it the constant feeling of hopelessness and despair? Was it the fear of the Dementor's Kiss? Or were you just too scared?"

She ended with the same calm, coy smile Davindra often turned on him. The smile of smug confidence, of perfidious knowledge.

Snape shot icy daggers at the woman with his unwavering stare. The anger inside boiled too quickly for him to control, and before he even realized it, he stood before Demelza with his wand pointed inches from her nose.

"Old woman, be very careful of how you tread with me. I know twenty different ways to make you disappear from this earth, and I learned less than a quarter of them from you." The voice was steady and cold, but Snape's insides nearly vibrated with rage, fear and excitement.

Her gaze never flickered, and her amused expression never dimmed. "That's reassuring to know. Now teach them all to Davindra."

"I shall do nothing for you nor for your exasperating, arrogant, trollop of a granddaughter."

Snape spun to leave, but before he got more than two steps, she spoke.

"I have something that might interest you."

"I doubt it!" he snapped and attempted to move on. "Bog mist would hardly do the trick this time."

"There is a book of spells that I confiscated during my tenure at Hogwarts. I think you should see it before you decide to turn your back on me for good."

He stopped but didn't turn. "I have hundreds of books of spells."

"Compiled by Tom Riddle and found in the possession of James Potter?"

The book had been taken from James by Demelza as being contraband during his last year at Hogwarts, she explained. Many of the spells inside were considered forbidden for students to practice; some, criminal for anyone to attempt. Some were ancient spells long believed lost; some were never known to exist at all and perhaps created by the young Lord Voldemort himself. Demelza said that she never could get a clear answer as to where the book had come from, or how James ended up with it, or if he had attempted anything from it. She had not reported the infraction to Dumbledore because she believed the book might have been of use to her later, and if anyone else knew of it, she would have to give it over to the Ministry. She had held on to it all this time knowing its usefulness was to be determined.

"It's yours, Severus, if you agree to agree to help me to help Davindra," she said, holding the book in front of him. "I'll take care of her attitude and concentration on the tasks at hand; you are in charge of her instruction in all things dark and light."

Snape stared at her long and hard, his eyes only daring to dart to the book in her hand. It was ragged and water-stained, with a mildewed leather cover.

He held out his hand, and Demelza snapped the book away from him. "Well?" she asked.

"I'm not about to promise myself for a book of blank parchment or a witch's recipe guide," he said through clenched teeth.

Giving him an appraising look, she relinquished the book to him. Quickly he flipped through the pages and examined the scrawled writing *Memoria Inflecto*, a memory distorting curse. *Venenum Viscus*, the poisoned heart curse. *Necto Aduro Nota*, a branding spell that sounded suspiciously close to what inflicted a Dark Mark. And, *'Hmmm... a Horcrux spell.'*

"Interesting," Snape drawled. "Though not standard, everyday spells, they are not entirely unheard of."

Continuing to flip through, he saw that several pages had pieces missing, and many pages were gone all together. He held up the book at the missing pages and gave Demelza a questioning look.

"The rest and best parts have been hidden." She smiled while he glared. "You can have it all, if you help me."

"Where is the rest?" he asked.

Demelza shook her head slowly, her smile continuing. "Do we have a deal?"

Curiosity and a hunger for knowledge that perhaps no one but the Dark Lord and one dead Potter might have made him twitch with anticipation. It was also possible that what was written here was exactly what the Dark Lord was using to make his return. But could Snape tolerate Davindra for another year just for this? Perhaps, if he could only manage to gain more control over her.

"I'll do what I can to assist your granddaughter," he finally said, though he instantly second guessed his decision. "Now, where is the rest?"

"Hidden at Hogwarts." She looked smug and satisfied.

Snape let out a harsh, controlled breath and clenched his jaw to keep from screaming at the woman. "Where?"

"Most are in the catacombs below your classroom. Some are in the restricted section of the library." She tilted her chin up and gazed at him with amused, pale eyes. "Check under ancient spells."

"The catacomb store rooms? That place is packed to the ceiling with useless junk and you expect me to rifle through it all looking for a few scraps of paper? And there are millions of volumes in that library!" he bellowed.

"It may take some work, Severus, but I believe there is a stockpile of very powerful magic right at your finger tips," she concluded.

He felt had. If he had all the time in the world, he would be able to find almost anything at Hogwarts. But the castle was endless and held a thousand years of accumulated rubbish. Time was not always what he had a multitude of.

Snape took another look at the book in his hand. *'Horcruxes,'* he thought, *'and the Dark Lord is coming back.'*

"Alright," he snapped. "But there is one condition if I am to spend an extended amount of time with your granddaughter," Snape said leaning in toward Demelza. He did not wish to be misunderstood. "She is not to try any of her ridiculous, girlish love spells or seductions on me. I can only imagine where she learned such asinine hobbies."

Demelza gave him a curious look, but a smile danced across her lips. "What do you mean specifically?"

"You know what I mean. She must have picked up some of your talents for casting romantic incantations."

Still, Demelza looked doubtful. Snape rolled his eyes at having to drag up the embarrassing memory of Davindra sneaking into his chamber while he slept. But he recanted it with as few words as possible, and as quickly as he could. The woman stood with her arms crossed and a cynical look that soon spread into a smile, then into a bright, full laugh.

"I don't see what is so funny about your granddaughter breaking at least ten Hogwarts rules just to pursue a hopeless crush," Snape said tersely, feeling the humiliation settle in his stomach and churn uncomfortably.

"I can assure you I have not taught Davindra a single love potion or match making charm," she said. "I've offered repeatedly, but she has no interest. However, I do know what the problem is, Severus. Lillyth Sparrow, Davi's other grandmother, is part Veela. I've begun seeing more and more of it in Davi as she matures. And you know about Veelas, do you not?"

Her expression showed that she was enjoying this bit of information a great deal. Suddenly Snape had the feeling that he had turned a vulnerable hand that he couldn't take from the table. He did know of Veelas, the bird-like nymphs who could be both vicious and mesmerizing. The news didn't surprise him, and it suddenly made everything else he had questioned about Davindra make sense.

"Either way, I don't appreciate her attempting to throw her wiles upon me. It's highly inappropriate. And to even suggest that I could have any issue with a student..." Snape found it hard to finish the thought.

"Now, now," Demelza soothed. "It's not actually her fault. You see, she doesn't really know how to control it. It's like saying you can extract the Muggle part of you, and use it as you see fit, then tuck it away and go back to being a wizard when you are tired of it."

The reference to his half-blood roots caused a reflexive snarl to curl his lip.

"Veelas, in their more human form, don't have to try to seduce a man," she continued. "A man becomes seduced simply by being in their presence. They merely stand aside, and the man most susceptible to them literally falls at their feet. Now, if they are to put any effort into their charms..." Her eyes sparkled with amusement as she let the statement hang unfinished in the air. "And of course you know what happens when you make them angry."

"I am not susceptible," Snape spat out in resentment, "to a thirteen-year-old child, Veela or not!"

Demelza shrugged her shoulders with a confident smile. "I'll talk to her, Severus. Would that make you feel better?"

"Not much," he muttered, "but it's a start."

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Latin Spell Names:

Memoria Inflecto memory, warp or change

Venenum Viscus poison, heart

Necto Aduro Nota to bind, (*aduro/adustum*) burn, mark

Year Three: Book of Riddles

Chapter 4 of 21

Time spent in dark, mysterious places unearths many things. Snape thinks he's clever to enlist Davindra's help. But perhaps he is unwittingly following Madame Collins's carefully constructed plan.

Year Three: Book of Riddles

Safe in the confines of Spinner's End, Snape retreated to the dark corners of his sitting room to ponder of the mysteries of the book Madame Collins had given him. He did little else that summer. When his mind wasn't plotting new and interesting ways to torment Harry Potter and the memory of James, he would study the spells on the worn pages and wonder which ones had helped the Dark Lord in his rise to power and in his impending return.

Occasionally, his mind would wander to Davindra. Dread, annoyance, curiosity, and other dark, unnamed emotions boiled within him when he considered the new year and the task ahead of him. *'Perhaps'*, he soothed himself, *'she could be of use to me. If Madame Collins thinks nothing of using her as a pawn for her own advancement, then why shouldn't I?'* Then, he would forcibly shake himself to avoid delving further into such a treacherous topic.

Snape still lived in fear of his dreams, for he had no control over them. At best he could block them out completely with the right potion. A careless nap in his worn armchair brought about a most uncomfortable dream in which he found Davindra had decided she would rather have Harry Potter, the local celebrity, tutor her studies. He could see her clearly as she tilted her sharp nose into the air and turned from him so quickly that her hair fanned out to brush against his chest. She strode away, arm in arm with the victorious looking half-breed in glasses. Snape awoke fumbling for his wand to aim at a vanishing impression in his brain. After that, it was no more naps during the day.

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Once again his less than subtle hints that he could teach Defense Against the Dark Arts better than anyone else were ignored, and a total imbecile was brought in for the job. Snape seethed inside at the affront.

searching through filth and dirt before she decided to bestow us with this morsel."

Slamming *"Dark Draughts"* closed, Snape stormed off to find the Bornstock-Hallard book.

"Us?" Davindra spat. "I don't recall you spending all that time in those dungeons, pawing through rubbish and fighting off rats."

He turned with a snap of his cloak. "And you can thank your grandmother for that. If she would have simply told me where the lost parchments were, it would have spared us both a lot of energy and time. But I'm assuming she found this send-up much more entertaining."

A sound of exasperation came from Davindra as Snape began his search for the book.

Before either could make further comment, a sound from several rows down made them both freeze. Tentatively, with furrowed brow, Davindra headed to the end of aisle to peek around the corner. But something in Snape told him that even venturing that far was dangerous. He grabbed Davindra before she could expose herself to whatever might be prowling amongst them and dragged her away from the end of the shelves. One arm wrapped around her waist and lifted her feet from the ground while the other hand covered her mouth as she attempted a protest to his restrain. Quickly he shuffled them both into a dark corner between a forgotten display case and cobweb draped book stacks.

If it was another member of Hogwarts' staff, even Filch, Snape would have a great deal of explaining to do concerning his own activities there, not to mention the presence of a wayward Ravenclaw. If it was whatever was causing people to be petrified, they would have even bigger troubles.

In the cold dark of their hiding spot, Davindra twisted against him momentarily until Snape spoke very softly in her ear.

"It is imperative you keep silent. Our lives may depend upon it."

Her struggling stopped and her ragged, hurried breath against his hand slowed. She nodded her understanding, and Snape released his hand from her mouth. But he didn't let her go. He encircled her shoulders and pressed her tightly against him. There was a strange and powerful comfort in having his arms around her as danger skirted perhaps seconds away from them. His cheek continued to rest against the side of her head as his ears strained for more sounds. A noise like something heavy being slowly dragged across the stone floor traveled around them. Davindra stiffened, and her hands gripped the arms that held her.

Unable to see around the corner, Snape could only make guesses as to what could be out there searching for them. With a chilling certainty he knew it wasn't Filch nor any other person. He wondered if she could feel his heart as it beat harder and faster in his chest. Perceptible even through the heavy sleeve of his coat, hers was racing.

Davindra started to whisper fearfully. But he silenced her with a harsh, quick squeeze.

Again he spoke with barely an audible tone. "Not a word."

His lips inadvertently brushed against her ear, and a flash of the dream that assaulted him several months ago came rushing back. If not for the imminent danger awaiting them, he might have dropped her like an armful of fire. But he held on only tighter, telling himself this was not a dream to fear. The real danger was out there, searching for them. Perhaps closing in.

The dragging, rustling sound would pause, then continue, then pause, as if stopping to look, to search, before it moved on.

Both waited, neither breathed. Eventually the sound grew fainter until it wasn't heard at all. Still they didn't dare move. Snape and Davindra stood with their bodies pressed together, their arms entangled, in the silence of the library. He wasn't sure how long they waited, holding on to each other. And he wasn't sure if the reluctance to let go was fed by fear or by pleasure. Finally Davindra let out a long, shaky sigh of relief and let her head fall backward to rest on Snape's shoulder, her arms falling to her sides. Her body completely relaxed against his as if drained of all energy. He would have felt the same if not for the fact that the sensation of her weight against the length of his body sent a current of tension flowing through him.

"What was that?" she asked in a whisper.

Forcing his arms to unwind from around her, he felt the blood rush back into them as he gently pushed her away. He hated to admit that he didn't know what had driven an experienced dark arts practitioner and former Death Eater running scared into a dark corner. But he didn't dare speculate about what had been out there.

"I'm not sure," he said as he cautiously stepped around the corner to survey the surroundings. It once again seemed deserted and silent.

Snape knew they needed to get out of there. Davindra still stayed near the corner, her large green eyes darting about nervously. He had never seen her so unsteady before.

Quickly he found *"Wares for the Uncommon Witch"* and held it upside down, giving it a shake. Two pieces of parchment fluttered to the floor. Without even looking at them, Snape scooped them up and tucked them into his cloak. He then turned and motioned for Davindra to come to him. She scurried to his side and immediately latched onto his arm.

Together they navigated the rows of shelves, taking a few steps, stopping to look both ways and then hurrying on. The long walk back to Ravenclaw Tower was even trickier for they had to watch out for the other staff patrolling the halls. Twice they ducked behind large statues to keep from being seen. Once at the portrait entrance, Snape turned to address her.

"You have to get yourself in from here, and if you are caught, I will disavow all knowledge of seeing you this evening."

She looked at him solemnly but nodded.

Leaning close he spoke calmly but with resolute words. "Tell no one what happened tonight."

Again she nodded.

He took in one last look of her before he turned to make his careful way back to his chambers and to view the final two spells.

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Snape hadn't so much as glanced at the papers until he was safely in his office behind closed doors. Only then did he pull them from his cloak and sit at his desk to study them. Though the first potion Davindra had uncovered was quite intriguing, the second two were simple calming drafts. Snape wondered why Madame Collins had gone to the trouble of hiding them.

The two before him now were more peculiar. The recognizable scratchings of Tom Riddle were there, but also a few other hands had made notes on these spells. Ingredients and instructions were crossed out and others added. Someone had either corrected Riddle's work or attempted the incantations themselves and made their own improvements. Snape couldn't place the handwritings, but a bothersome thought crept through his brain when he considered Madame Collins's true intention when she gave him the spell book.

The first spell, for a Vision Well, had many notes written around it and several revisions made to its process. It was a spell Snape had heard of but never found complete instructions for. It worked much like a Pensieve, but instead of seeing things from someone's memory, one could see what another person was doing as of that moment. A spy glass, of sorts. It looked complicated and time consuming, and required a binding amulet, but it could indeed be useful one day.

The second parchment held not quite a spell or potion but notes on how to possibly reverse an Unbreakable Vow. Riddle had obviously been trying to reason out incantations, spells and other instructions that might repel the effects of a sealed promise. Again the different hand writings mingled together in an attempt to fine tune the process. Unlike the other spells and potions, this was the only one incomplete. And here it waited for someone to continue the search for the rest of the pieces.

Snape considered the thought and believed that it might be a more than worthy endeavor to try to finish what Tom Riddle had started.

The *Coacto Fides* potion was nearly cured, and Davindra hovered about every day to check its progress. They argued about how to test it. Davindra offered to be the test subject. Until she said it, Snape had briefly considered just slipping it to her. After, he realized that it was far too dangerous. Plus the enjoyment had been taken out of the subterfuge. It was best that she not be involved at all in the testing. She raged against his decision, but he was firm that using the potion on anyone in Hogwarts would raise suspicion, especially since the results were uncertain.

Snape slipped off to Hogsmeade to try it out on an unsuspecting wretch who wouldn't raise many questions if they turned into a rambling idiot or ended up dead. It wasn't hard to find and befriend a drunken sod as long as Snape's money kept flowing along with the Firewhisky. And of course it was never noticed when a small bottle was tipped into the man's drink. Carefully Snape watched the dirty, ragged, old warlock as he drank heartily and licked his lips. He smiled through tangled whiskers and seemed to drift into a calm, happy state.

"Now, who did ye tell me ye were again?" he slurred at Snape.

"Rita Skeeter, from the *Daily Prophet*," Snape said carefully.

Most everyone, especially in Hogsmeade, recognized the audacious and brash reporter. Even a down and out drunk like this one should be able to see the difference between a dark, brooding Potions teacher from Hogwarts and a loud, nose-y female.

But the man looked at Snape for only a moment before he gave a resolute, "Right! I remember now."

Snape decided to test further. "You know, drinking dog piss really isn't good for you," he said calmly, eyeing the raised Firewhisky glass.

The man's gnarled eyebrows furrowed with a puzzled look. Then he smelled the glass and made a revolted face. Tossing the drink on the floor, he reddened angrily.

"As much as I come here, ye'd think they'd treat me a mite better than that!" he spat.

Snape leaned in. "The bartender is laughing at the trick he just pulled on you. It's quite rude if you ask me."

The man turned around to glare at the bartender, who was doing nothing but cleaning a glass and seemingly lost in thought.

"Aye, he is!" the drunk blustered. "I'll teach him a thing or two about tricks!"

Getting up, the man knocked his chair aside and drew his wand to unleash a flash upon the bartender that knocked him against the back wall of shelves with bottles and glasses. A loud battle cry filled the air, and the drunk charged into the mess as other's joined in to either help the bartender or hold off the attacker.

Snape took that moment to slip out unnoticed, and with more than fair confidence that the potion was a success.

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On his return to the school, Snape's glee about the potion's success was dashed when he was informed that the Chamber of Secrets had indeed been opened, and a student had been taken into its bowels.

Ludicrous Lockhart was bragging on how he could easily defeat whatever had gotten loose and kidnapped the child when the staff called his bluff. His eyes had nearly popped from his head. Snape couldn't keep the wickedly amused sneer from his face as Lockhart attempted to smile and wave his way out of his own boastings.

There was a mad dash to round up students to send home the very next day for fear of their safety. Snape hurried to his office to set things in order to prepare Slytherin House.

Rounding the corner of his desk, he spotted Davindra curled up in his worn armchair in the corner. She looked as though she had been asleep, but her eyes blinked rapidly as she straightened herself and stretched.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed. "Everyone is to be sent home. You should be in your house tower."

"Send everyone home?" she yawned. "Why?"

"The Chamber." Snape began gathering his student log. "It appears it's open and a student has been taken there."

"But I thought you said..."

"It doesn't matter what I said!" he shouted at her impatiently. "You need to be in Ravenclaw, and I do not need to be standing here arguing with you."

He grabbed her arm and started dragging her toward the door.

"But I wanted to find out about the potion," she insisted, digging her heels into the floor. "Did it work? What happened?"

He stopped and looked at her. For a moment he himself had almost forgotten about the small victory.

"Yes. It seemed to have worked."

Her face lit up as though it were Christmas morning.

"But," he added strongly, "we don't know about the after effects. For all we know the poor sod is lying dead facedown in the street as we speak. However, the initial response was just as we had hoped."

Davindra beamed, and Snape was afraid she might try to throw herself at him again, so he tightened his grip on her arm.

"Go, Miss Collins," he commanded as he opened the door and shoved her out.

But something made him pause for a moment when he thought of Ginny Weasley taken from these very halls.

"Wait," he said.

Reaching to his desk, he grabbed the rest of his books, then headed out with Davindra, closing his door behind him. He took her all the way to Ravenclaw Tower without letting go of her arm for a second.

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Again Potter saved the day single handedly before anyone else could even devise a plan of action. There was great relief when it was learned the Basilisk of the Chamber of Secrets had been killed and could no longer cause harm to anyone. The Chamber would indeed be sealed for good this time.

Strangely, what had started all the problems was a diary owned by Tom Riddle. Snape thought it peculiar that, in the same year he acquired a book owned and written by Tom Riddle, Harry Potter should also do the same. The Dark Lord had made another attempt to return and had come much closer this time. It made the spell book in Snape's possession much more valuable and ominous. Intriguing still was the idea that he could be a link to the Dark Lord simply by having the book in his possession. Perhaps Madame Collins had known that when she gave the book to him. Perhaps it had been her intention all along.

Dumbledore returned to Hogwarts in time to bestow more honors upon Harry Potter. Lockhart got what he deserved with a Memory Erasing Charm gone awry and with the report that he had stolen every one of his grand adventures from the mind of someone else. He was a magnificent fraud. Snape waited until he was alone in his office with the door securely closed to let out a gleeful cackle and truly enjoy the irony of justice.

He anticipated Davindra making her usual stop by his office before she left for the train home. When he sensed a quiet presence at his door, he expected to find her standing there with her typical look of amused appraisal. Instead he found Madame Collins giving him the same look.

"Did I surprise you, Severus?" she asked with a smile.

"Hardly. Anytime I feel a prickle at the back of my neck I can generally assume it's you or that insufferable granddaughter of yours." Going back to the work at his desk, he tried to look as disinterested in her as possible.

"To what do I owe a visit this time? Is there another bribe awaiting me?" He now looked up at her with an icy gaze. "Perhaps it is straight forward blackmail for me to do your bidding."

Madame Collins gave her best expression of deep wounding at his words. "How can you think such cruel things about me!"

"Your acting is as bad as your granddaughter's," Snape remarked. "Best to just say what it is you want this time, Madame, and dispense with the dramatics."

"You are still such a spoilsport, aren't you?" She smirked as she sat on the edge of his desk. "Actually, I am here concerning something you want."

"If you were concerned with what I really wanted, then you wouldn't be here," he said through clenched teeth.

The woman sighed with frustration. "And I came all this way to give you a little bit of information that could prove very useful to you."

"Yes, yes, and in return I tutor your granddaughter. I've seen this melodrama before." He continued to appear engaged in the papers before him, though he hadn't even bothered to comprehend what it was he was looking at.

She leaned over him to say in a quiet voice edged with excitement, "There is an old friend of yours who will be paying a visit soon."

His head didn't rise but his dark eyes did. "What are you blathering about?"

"I have it from a very good source that someone from your past will be showing up at Hogwarts. And there could be trouble ahead."

Again he gave her his blank, cold stare.

She returned it. "Well, you won't be getting the Defense Against the Dark Arts position again next year, I'm afraid. I know because I actually came to plead your case to Dumbledore."

"And he already has someone to replace Gilderoy Lockhart? It wasn't a day ago they dragged him out of here babbling like a lunatic!" Snape raged mostly to himself as he angrily tossed the papers aside. Then he looked to the woman on his desk. "You were actually going to suggest me for the position? Was that so I would be ingratiated to return a favor for yet another year?"

Madame Collins smiled cleverly and hopped off his desk to prowl about his office, as was her practice when she wanted to draw out his attention.

"Yes, that would have been a neat little turn of events. But it's not to be. It seems that Remus Lupin has won the prized spot as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

"Lupin?" Snape gasped. "He's a werewolf! One week a month he's not be fit to be around human beings, much less children!"

Jumping up from his chair, Snape also walked the room to try to hide the nervous, angry energy that coursed through him.

"I swear, they will put Argus Filch in that position before I'll ever get a chance," he mumbled as he paced.

"Don't fret," Madame Collins cooed. "I will stay vigilant in my quest to vault you to that position you so greatly desire. And perhaps even beyond, if you wish."

She gave a little laugh as she started to leave and allow him to seethe in peace, but then stopped before she reached the door.

"I hear congratulations are in order."

Snape gave her a questioning look.

"*Coacto Fides*," she said with a knowing glint in her eye. "I thought that one might appeal to you foremost."

"Did your granddaughter keep you informed of all the interesting activities that happened this year?" It was hard to not sound as annoyed and anxious as he really was.

"Oh, you know teenagers," she said with the flick of her hand. "They never want to tell you anything."

It shouldn't have come as any shock that she would know everything that happened throughout the year, but he felt a knot in his gut at never knowing for sure just how she managed to find out all she did.

"Severus," she sighed. "Don't be upset. I knew you'd enlist Davindra to help you find the missing spells. And I counted on the fact that you would attempt at least one if not all of them. Marvelous learning experience for Davi, really."

His glare was all that answered her.

"Maybe I don't have the Defense Against the Dark Arts position to hand to you, but I do have this."

She held up a slender vial between her fingers.

If she expected him to come to her to retrieve it like a trained dog, she was mistaken. Snape leaned against the wall glowering until she finally dropped the glass tube on his desk.

She smiled all the while, her eyes dancing emeralds. "I ran across that the other day. You should find it informative. But you'll need a Pensieve. We'll speak again soon, I'm sure."

granddaughter has told me."

Snape bowed slightly in greeting and at her gracious words. "Mrs. Sparrow, your talent is recognized throughout the magic world. It would be errant to call myself a wizard of any distinction and not know you."

Her smile broadened and she stepped closer to him, close enough that he could smell a hint of bergamot orange and white jasmine. He found it and the intensity of her eyes quite arousing.

"This is quite fortuitous that I should run into you. Just days ago Davindra was telling me of all the excitement at Hogwarts this past year."

"Yes, excitement hardly covers it at times." Snape found he couldn't help but want to return her gaze and smile. "But I can assure you that your granddaughter was never in any danger."

"Oh, of course." Lillyth snaked her arm through his and began to walk them both towards the door as she spoke. "I've never worried for Davindra's safety at Hogwarts. However, I would like a word with you about our dear girl, if you would."

A spasm of dread and annoyance twisted through his guts as he wondered what this woman would want of him in honor of that child and how she might attempt to extract it. A wicked thought tickled his mind when he considered the infinitely more pleasurable trade-offs he would be willing to make with the beautiful creature at his arm in exchange. He didn't bother to hide the slight lascivious smile that the ideas spread across his face.

"Oh? And what would that be? For I can assure you that Demelza Collins has been quite persistent in the orchestration of Davindra's education."

By now they had made their way down the nearly empty, dark sidewalk and were stepping more and more slowly as they came to the end of the street until Lillyth pulled them both to a stop.

"I can just imagine how involved Demelza gets," she said with amusement. "Do let me apologize if she's attempted to run you over with all her meddling."

'If you only knew the half of it,' Snape thought.

"But she does mean well. Neither of us can help adoring Davindra and only wanting the very best for her."

Lillyth moved to sit down on an bench in front of a closed shop front and motioned for Snape to join her.

"Demelza sometimes forgets that Davindra doesn't come from the magic world," she continued. "When she's not at school Davindra spends most of her time at her parent's home, a very traditional Muggle home. My daughter, Abigail, did quite well in marrying David Collins, and he did quite well for himself, even by Muggle standards. So you see Davindra gets the best of everything no matter where she is. But she must exist in a dual life, which I believe, is quite difficult for her. I think Demelza forgets this and pushes too hard for her to be immersed in magic at all times. And it's just impossible for a young girl to manage."

Snape hadn't given much thought to Davindra's life outside of Hogwarts. But if she did come from two Squib parents, then she would indeed spend a great deal of her life living as a Muggle. For a moment he thought of his own upbringing and how he at times also had to straddle the line between the Muggle and the magic world. But he had quickly chosen which life he wanted to pursue and had turned his back forever on the other, purposely forgetting its substance and meaning.

"It's especially going to be hard for her now," Lillyth sighed sadly.

"Why do you say that?" Snape asked.

"David's sick," she said with surprise at his ignorance. "It's cancer. And it's just a heartbreak for the whole family. I'm not sure that Davindra even knows how serious it is. No one wanted to tell her while she was at school. But it's becoming obvious that he's very ill."

Snape thought back to when he had recently spoken to Demelza, and thought that she didn't look or act like a woman who was distressed over a terminally ill son.

"And how is Madame Collins taking the news?" he asked.

Lillyth again sighed. "Oh, Demelza is being stoic, optimistic and frankly a little dismissive. Either she refuses to believe that her son is actually a frail human man or she... well, of course she cares!" she seemed to say more to herself than to Snape. "Perhaps it just hasn't sunk in yet."

Again she turned her brilliant blue eyes to him. "Davindra is so fond of you. In fact I believe she is quite smitten."

Snape took in an uncomfortable breath of air. "I've discussed that with Madame Collins. I'm sure it is just a temporary teen-age issue that she will outgrow."

"Well, I'm sure you've handled this kind of thing before."

'Is she serious?' He gave a cocked eyebrow with his sideways glance.

"I was just wanting to ask that you remember that Davindra is going to be dealing with a lot in the next year," Lillyth continued. "Her father may not be alive in six months."

She placed a delicate, ivory hand on his sleeve as she leaned in to him.

"Do what you can to keep Demelza from pushing her too much. I fear that she has put all the hopes and dreams she ever had for her own children into Davindra, and I'm afraid it would be too much to handle even under the best circumstances. Demelza trusts you. Davindra trusts you." She inched even closer, her face coming sensuously close to his. "I trust you."

Snape was left with a complicated mix of feelings as she pulled away.

Gathering her pale robe around her, she stood. "I'm so glad we had the chance to meet and to talk."

He also stood, though thankful for the layers of camouflage his coat and cloak gave to the increasing bulge at his groin.

"Likewise, Mrs. Sparrow. It's been an honor."

She smiled and offered her hand to him. Claspng the alabaster fingers in his own, he slowly raised them to his lips and placed a gentle, yet purposeful kiss on the back of her hand. Her eyes stayed on his, and he felt an electricity pass between them.

Without letting go of him, she said, "If there is anything you ever need, Professor Snape, do let me know."

Before he could even begin to list all his needs that she would be more than capable of fulfilling, she turned and made her way back up the street.

Snape was left with the lingering sent of orange and jasmine as well as a growing desire to release some suppressed lustful tensions.

interesting article he had read on new uses for toadstools or advances in wand making. The tactic didn't keep her from his doorstep or from ambushing him outside the staff room with comments and further research on the topics.

It seemed that she was taking her grandmother's words to heart and throwing herself fully into her schoolwork. Every night she could be found in the library poring over books, polishing up her homework, and even offering her help to others when hers was done. Soon a weariness began to show that even the other teachers noticed.

Flitwick, Davindra's head of house, came to Snape specifically to inquire if he might ease up on the extra work that was assumed to be the cause for her constant slaving. Snape assured the diminutive Charms teacher that he had in fact limited the extra work and that Davindra seemed to be pushing herself of her own accord. Flitwick seemed quite worried and wondered if Dumbledore should be consulted. Snape stated that Davindra might be suffering from some lack of sleep, but she was a manic sort of child, who seemed to thrive on burying herself a multitude of tasks. If her health appeared to suffer further, or if there was a drastic change, then perhaps Dumbledore should be involved. In the mean time, the Headmaster was much too involved with the issue of Black's escape to be bothered with tedious subjects. Flitwick asked Snape to keep an eye on her, since she seemed to constantly shadow after him. There was a curious flicker to the dwarf's button eyes, and Snape glared in challenge for him to speak his thoughts. There was only an uncomfortable silence, which Snape broke by saying he would do the best he could to ensure Davindra didn't risk injury to her health. Pacified, Flitwick left with a quick, suspicious glance as he pulled the door behind him.

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At Halloween it was reported that Sirius Black had breeched the secure guard surrounding Hogwarts and made it behind the school walls. A thorough search found nothing, though Snape would have loved to have been the one to find Black. His first thought was to search under Lupin's desk, since it seemed that the most logical way into Hogwarts was to be let in by someone on the inside. Lupin and Black had been quite devoted in their youth. Even now, despite the charges against Black, Snape doubted that would have changed.

All through his hunt up and down the corridors and into rooms not entered for years, Snape's mind played with what it would be like to come face to face with another of his enemies from time past. It would be tempting to exact some revenge before anyone else even knew about his capture. But extracting some useful information would also be highly tempting. As the night dragged on, it became apparent, much to Snape's disappointment, that Black had fled Hogwarts. He was the Dementors' issue now.

Students all slept in the Great Hall for the night. Safety in numbers, Dumbledore said. And also to ease their minds. However, Snape suspected it was to keep an easier eye on Harry Potter. No one would dare take a swipe at him in a room full of witnesses. In the small hours of the night, Snape reported back to the Headmaster among the slumbering forms. They spoke of Black, and Snape's specific concerns about Lupin, but his eyes played about looking for Davindra's body among the many scattered over the vast hall.

When Dumbledore left, Snape allowed himself a moment to walk the rows of sleeping bags, his eyes casually in search of her. Quickly, she was spotted. She wasn't asleep, nor did she pretend to be as many of the students seemed to be doing. She rolled from her side to gaze up at him, her hair fanned about her like a cape, her long, pale arms rested outside the covers. The dim starlight of the Great Hall enchanted ceiling cast her in a soft, ethereal glow.

He resisted the urge to kneel, brush the hair from her forehead, and feel the warmth of her brow beneath his lips. Instead, he solemnly looked down, a single thought slithering its way from his mind to hers; She was not to worry, but to sleep, for nothing could harm her during his vigilant guard. A soft, slight smile, and drowsy eyes responded. Davindra turned to her side once again, her fingers brushed against his boot in a deliberate caress as she settled to pull the blanket over her shoulders. Snape dared only stand a second longer before walking silently on to continue his patrol.

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Strange occurrences were the norm for Hogwarts, it seemed. But not for Snape. His classes, Slytherin house, his students, and his rooms were in exact order so he always knew what went on where, and the exact location of everything at all times. It was the only way Snape allowed things to be in his life.

The moment he walked into his office, he could sense someone had been there. There was not a book or bottle out of place, nor anything missing, but he could feel the residue of someone's magic in the air. His first thought was of Davindra snooping in his personal belongings. But whoever did this was extremely careful, more so than a young, eager girl could ever be.

His next thought was of Sirius Black. But Snape doubted that even if Black managed to get back into Hogwarts he would have a desire for anything in Snape's office.

Curious as it was, Snape could not reason it out. Nor could he find anyone to pin the intrusion on, especially with no proof. Not even Harry Potter and his little tribe of followers could realistically be considered. Deciding he would mention it to Dumbledore when he had the chance, he set the matter aside and began using a heavier anti-intruder spell on his doors even during school hours.

Days later, when he noticed a few supplies missing from his closet, Snape felt renewed rage. Someone was taking him for a fool, and he was determined to put a stop to it. An elaborate intruder charm was placed on the supply closet. If anyone were to attempt to set foot in it, Snape would know. An Alarmist Crystal was carried with him at all times. When it felt warm and filled with black smoke, the charm would have been set off and the thief would be unable to leave the closet until Snape released them. He was quite anxious to get his hands on whoever the culprit might be. If it were Potter or any part of his crew, Snape had a variety of punishments set aside especially for them.

Davindra continued her tireless pace. Snape watched carefully, but from a distance, as she began to become hollow eyed and gaunt. Finally, Madam Pince found her passed out over her books in the library, and Davindra was forced into bed rest for a few days in the hospital wing.

A scathing owl from Madame Collins and another voicing careful concern from Lillyth Sparrow made Snape feel as though he were being held responsible for Davindra's ill health. He replied to neither message and instead sulked with a bottle of elf-made wine and contemplated whether he actually did shoulder any blame.

It took a while before Snape mustered up the nerve to go see her. He gathered the last few days of Potions homework, as well as the latest issue of *Potions Weekly*, to take her.

Cautiously, he walked into the hospital ward, glancing about in the hopes there was no one around to witness his visit. As he started toward the only occupied bed in the vast room, Snape saw that another person sat on the edge talking with Davindra. Draco Malfoy was perched close to her blanket wrapped legs, smiling as they spoke in quiet tones. Davindra also smiled, giving more life to her face than Snape had seen in several weeks.

He stopped to stare at the two who quickly realized that they were being watched. Both turned to look at him with almost startled expressions. Malfoy quickly got up.

"Well, I gotta be going, Davi," he said as he cleared his throat nervously and began to leave. "I'll catch up with you when you get out of here. Feel better, okay?" He gave a small wave as he walked on.

Malfoy stopped momentarily to exchange looks with Snape. Both eyed each other carefully before mumbling greetings, then moving on.

Snape's focus stayed on the boy until he left the room, then turned back to Davindra who sat in bed beaming at the sight of him.

"Professor," she purred as she drew her legs up in an invitation for him to take Malfoy's place on the bed.

Snape didn't accept the enticement. He remained at a safe distance, standing near the foot of her bed.

"Miss Collins, I assume you are feeling better?" he asked.

Her face had gained some color, and her eyes seemed to have recaptured a bit of their sparkle. Her black hair hung loose around her shoulders like heavy drapery. She smiled sweetly and hugged her knees to her chest.

"Please explain yourself, Miss Collins," he snarled. "Because finding that someone I actually trusted to respect my rules and property has insulted my generosity by stealing from me is most disturbing. I had no idea behind all that good breeding and intelligence lurked a common thief."

Snape pushed the wand's tip further into her flesh, causing her to wince, but still she said nothing.

He suddenly spied a bulge in her front jeans pocket. With two fingers he reached down and pulled a small bottle from her hip. Then reaching further in, but forcing himself not to linger, his fingers found another. He gripped the two bottles in his fist and held them in front of her.

"And how did these find their way into your snug little pocket?" His voice dripped with deadly sarcasm. "Mermaid cartilage and unicorn blood," he read from the labels. "And what were you going to do with these, pray tell?"

Without a reply, Davindra slowly reached inside the neckline of her shirt and pulled a paper envelope from inside of her bra. Snape plucked the packet from her hand, the warmth of her breast still perceptible to his fingers.

"Phoenix ashes." Snape eyed her carefully. "Any other items you wish to surrender, or shall I search you myself?"

The thought made him quiver inside, and he imagined he saw a shiver run through her as well.

"That's all," she replied quietly.

Snape looked again at the supplies then back to her. "These are rare and expensive elements you have attempted to swipe from me. I could have you expelled and back on your grandmother's doorstep by morning."

He continued to stare into her face with as much brutal intensity as he could muster. Though he loved the idea of executing a harsh discipline for her crime, he knew the last thing he would ever do would be to send her away from Hogwarts. But he also knew that would be the threat that would elicit the most fear and get a confession of her reasons for carrying out this offense.

"Now, answer my question," Snape demanded as he lowered his wand. "Why were you stealing these particular things from my supply closet?"

Davindra paused for a moment, her eyes cast down as she inhaled a steadying breath. She pushed her bangs from her eyes and her feet shuffled in place.

She spoke only a second before he would have lost his temper. "It's for my father."

The impassive cruelty didn't falter from Snape's gaze, though he now understood what she had been trying to do.

"He's so sick now. No one can do anything, no Muggle doctor anyway. I had read in one of the medical magic books that there were some potions created by Healers that had helped some Muggle diseases."

Davindra shrugged her shoulders in defeat. "I just wanted to do something to help because no one else will."

Snape thought for a moment. Should he involve Dumbledore? Should take care of this himself? Did her reasons justify her transgression?

"To my office, now," he commanded and motioned with his wand for her to lead the way.

He pondered the situation as he followed behind, and by the time they had reached the office, his brain was, unfortunately, no more clear than before.

Snape signaled for her to sit in the worn wingback by his desk as he paced.

"This isn't the first time you've stolen from me, is it?"

"I got into the closet one other time for Grindylow scales," she replied with very little remorse. "I was attempting a potion for pain relief and nausea, but it didn't work."

"And that is all? What about when you broke into my office? What did you take then?" Snape demanded.

She furrowed her brows. "I've never broken into your office."

"The time for lies is through, Miss Collins." He came to stand in front of her and stared down at her submissive form reclined in the chair. "My patience for your games has worn thin. You've been caught red handed..."

"I've never lied to you and you know it!" Davindra interjected as she sat up straight. "I might have taken those things from your supply closet, but I've at least confessed to it. I've never broken into your office nor stolen anything from it."

As Snape was about to light into the various things he believed she had lied about from the moment he'd met her, there came a knock at his door. He gave Davindra a cool promise of continuance with his eyes as he moved to fling open the door and severely chastise whoever dared stand on the other side. Albus Dumbledore was waiting on the doorstep, forcing Snape to take his temper down several notches and to realize his decision about involving the Headmaster had been made for him.

The old wizard smiled serenely as he stepped into the office and walked directly to Davindra as though he had total awareness of all that had transpired that evening.

"Is there a problem, Professor Snape?" Dumbledore asked with a look of genuine concern.

"Yes," Snape replied. "It seems that I found Miss Collins pilfering my supply closet."

"Is that true, Davindra?"

"Yes, it is, Professor Dumbledore," she answered respectfully.

"And," Snape continued. "I also believe her to be guilty of breaking into my office. Though I have no proof," he added quietly.

"I did not break into Professor Snape's office," Davindra announced fiercely.

Dumbledore held up his hands for silence. "Why did you break into the supply closet?"

Again she explained about making the potion for her ailing father. The wizard nodded as he listened to her story.

"I've heard of your father's health, and I'm truly sorry," he began. "Your wishing to be of assistance and aid is admirable, but unfortunately what you have been told by your family and the Muggle doctors is true. There is very little that anyone can do. Sometimes not even magic is the answer to every problem."

His words were kind and spoken in a compassionate way that seemed to finally bring Davindra's emotions to the surface. Snape saw her holding back tears and attempting to restrain her feelings.

"I know I can't cure him," she said. "I'm not that naïve. I just hate seeing him suffer. I just can't understand why people aren't doing more. The only thing Grandmother offered to do was make a potion that would keep his hair from falling out." She gave a sad chuckle, then looked at Dumbledore. "If he could only eat and sleep peacefully, then maybe the rest wouldn't be so bad."

Snape soon began the gathering of objects and supplies needed for the Vision Well. A trip into Hogsmeade was necessary to procure several items. The first part of the project required a binding amulet be created to link the seer and his subject. It took nearly two weeks for Snape to gather enough stray strands of Davindra's hair from her robes to weave with his own, which were to later be wrapped around a narrow crystal slab of beryl. A twin crystal would rest in the Vision Well itself to conduct the energies between the two of them.

She seemed anxious to delve back into their tutoring session. But Snape didn't want her doing too much nosing about his office in fear that she might stumble upon some of his preparation for the Well. He kept her occupied, instead, with assigned readings, reports, and cataloging supplies. It was nothing more than busy work that accomplished little other than keep her out of his way but under his supervision. Davindra didn't complain about the meaningless tasks and seemed happy to simply stay active.

Snape again had the feeling that his office was being searched. And now the suspicion also went to his private chambers, which had the unmistakable impression of a stranger's presence, when he walked into it in the evenings. It drove him to near madness to try to think of what someone could be looking for and what they might have touched or taken. Davindra would surely not be stupid enough to again attempt to steal from him when she was barely out of detention for her previous transgression. And another Alarmist Crystal and tougher protection spells seemed to do nothing to dissuade the intruder.

He decided it was time to inform Dumbledore. However, the Headmaster seemed less than disturbed that someone had brazenly broken into Snape's sanctuary and suggested he recruit Filch to keep an eye on things. The exchange left him feeling angry and insignificant. However, Filch seemed thrilled to be given a job that might promise a grand and miserable punishment for whomever he caught.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

In the midst of a deep, potion induced sleep, Snape almost didn't hear the Headmaster's call to arms for the staff. Luckily, he had fallen asleep fully clothed in his armchair and only had to splash icy water on his face to bring himself into full, clear consciousness. As he hurried toward the excitement in the Gryffindor Tower, Snape knew exactly what had caused all the distress. Sirius Black was back prowling the halls of Hogwarts, looking for something undoubtedly so important to him that he was willing to risk his life and hard-won freedom for it.

Again the mongrel bastard managed to slip away. Another entire night spent sweeping the castle from top to bottom produced nothing. Snape was about to personally question Lupin about his activities for the evening when Dumbledore intervened and directed him to see to his students in Slytherin. All he could do was send the tired and battered looking professor a blistering look of contempt and an unspoken promise of reprisal when the Headmaster wasn't so close by for protection.

The coming days saw higher security measures put into place. Everyone was asked to contribute in some way. Snape's first suggestion would have been to fire Lupin, if anyone would have listened. Instead, he was asked to help seal windows and doors with more resistant Impenetrable Charms.

He was waving his wand over one of the high, arched windows when Filch came running up to him in his floppy, gangly way and said in a dramatic stage whisper that he had just seen someone coming out of Snape's office. Filch said he would have stopped the person in their tracks and dragged them to the dungeon except that he didn't feel he could take those kinds of liberties with a teacher.

"Who was it?" Snape demanded firmly.

"Professor Lupin, sir."

"Lupin?" he spat with rage. Just as he was about to feel himself fly into a stark raving fit, suddenly several seemingly irrelevant pieces of the puzzle fell neatly into place.

"Of course," he said with a wicked, twisted smile. "Lupin."

Storming into his office, Snape retrieved Tom Riddle's spell book from its hiding spot inside the bottom of his bookshelf and made his way to the classroom for Defense Against the Dark Arts.

He entered without knocking and found Remus Lupin cleaning up an empty cage.

"Come to search my office for Sirius Black, have you, Severus?" he spoke cheerily.

"Not quite," Snape returned smoothly. "Actually, I believe I have something you've been looking for."

Lupin turned to survey him with amused curiosity. But when he saw the battered book Snape held in his hand, his face fell into a somber mask.

"Oh, is this not what you were ransacking my office and chambers in search of?" Snape asked with a placid lilt.

"How long have you known about it?" Lupin asked.

"Actually, it's a fairly recent acquisition. A gift, you might say, for helping out an old friend."

The two men stood staring into each other with calm, calculated malice when Lupin finally nodded with a slight smile.

"Ah, Madame Collins, I'm betting," he said with a wink and a shake of his finger. "I knew she wouldn't destroy it, and I just knew it had to be here somewhere. So, tell me, does this have anything to do with her granddaughter who I see trailing at your side all the time with wide, love-sick eyes? She's a devilishly clever girl, but her taste in men is rubbish if not downright illicit."

Snape kept his rising anger in check. "Spent so much time in the gutter sniffing for scraps that you can't seem to think outside of it *Professor?*" His lip curled with his snide words. "But you are half right. Madame Collins did present this book to me, and also a most interesting story about how she came upon it. Do tell me though, why, after more than twenty years, you would still be pining away for an old spell book? Sentimental reminder of your old chum, Potter?"

Lupin stood with his arms crossed, staring at Snape from under a furrowed brow, though a cynical smile sat crookedly upon his face. "I'm sure you are now quite familiar with that book and know exactly why I might be interested in it. For the very reason standing before me: *so you* wouldn't find it."

"Too late," Snape quipped with raised eyebrows.

"So, how long before that book finds its way back to its insidious author?"

"I sincerely doubt that Madame Collins would entrust me with this book if she believed I had plans to continue its evil foray."

"Either she doesn't know you very well, or you are both, as I always suspected, sitting on the same side."

It was obvious that Lupin was beginning to lose his temperate composure. He flicked his wand with a jerk, and the cage he had just been cleaning floated to a hook in the ceiling.

"Wouldn't it reason that what you really wish is to have the book so you and Black can continue your own dark work?" Snape challenged.

Lupin pocketed his wand but didn't remove his hand from his robe as he glared into his nemesis with bored disdain.

"For the last fucking time, I am not helping Sirius Black get into Hogwarts, kill Harry Potter, nor assist in Voldemort's return to power," he snapped angrily.

He pressed his hand to the lump on his head and found the blood indeed still damp. Davindra sighed and pulled a tissue from her pocket and pressed it into his hand, then his hand to his head.

"I'm sorry about that night in your office, what I said about Roger Davies," she said quietly. "I know I was being... a shit for picking a fight with you. But the truth of the matter is that I did want you to be jealous." She looked honestly embarrassed and sad. "I didn't mean to make trouble for you."

"Do you not understand the consequences of your actions?" Snape asked in a quiet, dark voice. "Neither of us would come out of such a scandal unscathed."

Davindra nodded and looked even more apologetic. "I'm leaving first thing in the morning," she stated.

He eyed her curiously out of the one inky-black eye that wasn't hidden under the tissue compressed to his head.

"They don't think the end is far." She again nodded sadly. "I don't think I'll be back before the end of term."

"What about your exams?"

"Professor Flitwick said that they could work something out for me."

Snape wasn't sure what to say. He mumbled a hasty 'I'm sorry' before he attempted to steady himself on his own feet again.

"Professor?" she began, her hand again going to his arm in support. "Remember when you asked me last year if there was anyone else I trusted more than you?"

He said nothing in reply but gave her a glance of irritation that didn't seem to impede her steps or speech. They began a slow, steady walk to his office, his hand trailing along the wall to give aid to his staggering stride.

"Well, we both know the answer to that," she continued with a sad chuckle. "My dad is going to be gone soon. All I've got left is my mother and grandmothers. I don't have anyone like you, no one who understands my life like you do."

She stopped talking for a moment, but they still moved on. Snape wasn't sure what she was wanting, but he didn't have the strength to silence her, plus his head was pulsing with enough pain that even talking was difficult.

"I know you'd just as soon be shot of me and I don't blame you. But don't chuck me out just now. I don't think I could handle what I've got to face at home knowing that when I did come back to Hogwarts next year that you wouldn't help me, much less speak to me. O.W.L.s are coming up. How could I get through those without you?"

"Miss Collins," he sighed irritably. "Must we discuss this now? I have some very important things to tend to immediately. I only have a moment to spare, and being waylaid by you and your incessant demands is taking patience I do not have right now!"

They were finally at the stairs to his office when he stopped and turned to her. Taking the compress from his head, he looked down his hawkish nose into her pleading face. Though she stood strongly before him, her eyes showed somber defeat, and also a sadness so resolute and proud that, for a moment, Snape found himself mesmerized by their icy-green depths. Silently he commanded her thoughts to be revealed, and he saw immense grief and fear. Also there was pain and regret; she was genuinely sorry about their quarrel and had felt deep panic at the idea that he could have been seriously hurt that night. Something else very strong and clear revealed itself from the shadows of her thoughts and startled him so violently that he retreated the instant he saw it.

She continued to look at him beseechingly, surely knowing what he had just done, but seeming either unfazed or unconcerned. Snape took a moment to compose himself before he spoke in a calm voice.

"Now is not the time for you to be concerned with next year's tasks. We'll deal with them later. Just go home, and do what you must. I'll be here when you need me."

He turned to hurry down the stairs, his cloak billowing behind him, but stopped after a few steps to look over his shoulder. She stood watching after him, her look now changed to one of hope.

"And, in the future, if you wish to relay a message to me, Miss Collins, I suggest that you do not depend on your grandmother." A cock of his eyebrow punctuated the meaning of his message, and then he continued his descent.

Once behind his closed door and with a long swallow of high potency calming draught in his body, as well as an incantation to heal the laceration to his head, Snape allowed himself to again visit what he had experienced in the recesses of Davindra's mind. A queasy, weak feeling came over him, and he sat in his chair, closing his eyes.

It was not a fleeting, temporary, or new emotion he had seen. It was one that had been deeply implanted in her for some time. It was startling to see something of that magnitude in someone so young. She couldn't truly know what she was harboring. She couldn't honestly understand what she was feeling. But he knew the mind doesn't lie. What he saw was real and true. Snape shuddered.

Love. She loved him. It was intense, bold, pure, and consuming. Not the innocent love of a juvenile crush or even the sexually driven lust of a hormonal teenager. It was a mature, devoted, unwavering adoration that could not be dampened by his cruelty or neglect. Jealousy fed its obsession. Time only made it stronger. It was embedded in conviction that glorified its existence as just and genuine.

He would have only a few short months to decide how he would handle her and this affliction next year. The most important thing was to keep this information from ever leaving the secure confines of her head. And also to keep a tight reign on himself. He could not let this new awareness change his feelings towards her or how he treated her. But she knew he had seen. She would know that he knew. There was no way to un-see it, though he wished more than anything that he could Obliviate himself and purge the sickening knowledge from his head. He would have to live with the awful secret. One of many he carried deep inside him that even the best Legilimens had yet to find.

Another drink of calming draught and another dab at the last traces of blood on his forehead, and Snape stood to return to the hospital wing. As he crossed the room, his eyes flicked to the cabinet that held the Vision Well and crystals. He stopped and stared.

'It is easily finished,' a convincing little voice spoke. *'And it is important to know if the spell works. Let her continue to be of use to you. Anything you find out will all be in the name of research.'*

Again he shuddered and walked from the room, the lyrical chant of the spell to command the crystals to merge as one singing in his head like an old, familiar song.

Word glossary taken from www.wikipedia.org

Cowbane (or Northern Water Hemlock) -- Native to northern and central Europe. Contains cicutoxin, which disrupts the workings of the central nervous system. Poison hemlock has been used as a sedative and for its antispasmodic properties. The difference between a therapeutic and a toxic amount is very slight

Beryl (Beryllium aluminum cyclosilicate). -- The earliest crystal balls were made from beryl. The druids used beryl for scrying (a form of divination). Green beryl is called emerald.

Year Four: Sights Best Unseen

Chapter 8 of 21

The Vision Well is activated and Snape sees things that will haunt his guilty conscience.

The letter came before Snape had left Hogwarts at the end of the term. He had been pacing his office, nursing a still-smoldering rage about Black's escape and the now dashed promise of an Order of Merlin from the Minister of Magic.

Harry Potter and his crew had staged it all. Lupin had backed them up. At least Snape had one morsel of cold comfort. The Defense Against the Dark Arts position was again open because someone, well, actually, HE had let slip to Cornelius Fudge that Lupin was a werewolf. He had informed Fudge that at that very moment, in fact, the man was running about the Hogwarts grounds, his mind wracked with the ravages of lycanthropy, hungrily hunting for his next victim. Snape knew this because Lupin hadn't been in his office to take the Wolfsbane Potion Snape had brought him the night of Black's attack.

He did stop to consider Potter's story. Peter Pettigrew not dead but living in his Animagus form for all these years. Pettigrew responsible for James and Lily's deaths, and Black innocent of all charges. It would be one way of explaining Black's survival in Azkaban all those years. A truly innocent soul could not be broken even by Dementors. Dumbledore believed the story, but Fudge didn't. Snape felt skeptical of everything.

He had made another round by the shelves of his office, then back to his desk, when he heard a thump at his door. Opening it, he saw an owl at the threshold, shaking itself to clear its head from the impact. A letter was secured to its leg. The writing was familiar and Snape immediately knew what the contents told.

Dear Professor Snape,

I hope this letter finds you. I miss the school, my friends, and you too. I actually missed getting to take final exams even. But anything would have been better than this.

Father died last night, here at home, quite peacefully, considering. We were all there. But it was the hardest thing I've ever had to see. I'm glad its over, but I haven't slept since.

There will be a funeral service in three days at St. Agnes Church near our home.

Yours,

Davindra

He decided not to reply. He wasn't even sure what he would say. He just continued packing and went home to Spinner's End. Once there, he re-read the letter several times and continued his pacing, but in new scenery.

Eventually, Snape went to his room and began digging in the back of his closet. He pulled out old robes and jackets and tossed them aside until he had created a jumbled, black carpet of clothes on the floor. In the corner of the closet, he found what he was looking for. It had gathered dust and moths for several years, but there wasn't any question that it was the best choice he had. Putting the old Muggle suit on, Snape surveyed his appearance. It seemed as though he was thinner than in years past. The clothing sat loosely on his frame. There was no hope in gaining weight in two day's time, especially with his cooking skills, and his knowledge of tailoring spells was scant. Also, the style was a bit out of fashion, but he would simply have to make do.

The day of the funeral came, and Snape set out early for the church. He checked himself in the mirror once more. The black jacket and trousers were now respectably clean and pressed. A plain dark shirt underneath was buttoned to the neck. Snape fidgeted and fussed with himself, feeling uncomfortable and exposed without his long coat and cloak. But if this were to take place in a Muggle church, he would have to fit in. As it was, his long, lank hair and ghostly complexion would get enough notice. And if there was one thing he did not want to do that day, it was draw attention to himself. He at least had confidence in his ability to keep his manner inconspicuous in a crowd. Patting the pocket that held the binding amulet of green beryl, and securing his wand up his sleeve, he set off.

It was a misty, cool morning at the old stone church. Its steeples rose menacingly high in the air casting long shadows over the grounds and nearby cemetery. But the partly cloudy sky gave tepid promise of sun by afternoon. Snape strolled through the cemetery, absent-mindedly reading the names on the weathered tombstones. Some were hundreds of years old and hardly discernable; some were from the time of the Dark Lord's rein. He wondered if any of them had been unwitting victims. There were many blocks of families, and Snape thought of his own father's grave and how he had seen it only once, sitting among a few other unfamiliar, long-gone Snape family members. He found himself hoping that when he did finally go, someone would have the good charity to burn his body to ashes and throw them to the wind. The idea of being carefully encased in a wooden box and ceremoniously set into the ground seemed utterly revolting and hedonistic. Besides, he heavily doubted there would be anyone to stand around his corpse weeping and mourning his death.

The distant echo of a car door slamming caught his attention, and Snape looked across the broad lawn to see people beginning to arrive for the ceremony. He continued to stay hidden at the edge of the cemetery furthest from the church, near a wooded area, and surveyed the activity. Car upon car pulled up, and clusters of darkly clad people began to filter into the church. The migration continued for some time. Snape could easily spot the wizards among the Muggles. They were notoriously bad at blending in, and he wondered how gifted people could be so dim. One man arrived wearing a tall black top hat and tails, but with a brightly flowered tie and golf pants. A woman showed up with a paisley housecoat and snow boots.

Near the last to arrive was the Collins family. The luxury cars pulled directly in front of the church, and the driver came around to open the doors. A woman who could be none other than Davindra's mother was first helped from the backseat. She was small, thin, and fair haired, much like her own mother, Lillyth Sparrow. Davindra emerged next. She was clothed in a straight, black dress, her hair pinned neatly at the nape of her neck. She looked stoic and regal as she put her arm about her delicate mother and escorted her toward the church. Not far behind were Demelza Collins and Lillyth herself, both dressed in tasteful yet elegant dark Muggle dresses, fur stoles, hats, shoes, and broaches all matched expertly. Other family members, unknown to Snape, appeared. Some looked like normal Muggles, others had the eclectic tinge of a wizard or witch out of their element.

When the crowds had stopped coming, Snape crept from his hiding place and silently slipped into the church. The service had already begun. A clergyman stood at a tall pulpit speaking in a drab monotone voice. Snape silently slipped in to an empty pew at the very back of the sanctuary. While the service droned on, Snape only half listened to the words being spoken about David Collins. He apparently was well thought of by the community and his friends; he was a successful businessman who did something with developing some part for something else, and he was active in many civic organizations; as well as a loving and devoted father and husband. As the words buzzed about his head, Snape made a game of looking around the church and deciding who was a Muggle and who was a wizard.

'Muggle, Muggle, Muggle, wizard, wizard, Muggle, Muggle but with very bad taste. It looks like she's wearing a flowerpot on her head. Muggle, wizard.'

The service ended, and the pipe organ began its mournful recessional. People rose and filed past the casket, stopping to speak words of comfort to the Collins's. Finally Davindra and her mother got up to exit the building, followed by the other family members. Both women looked red-eyed and shell-shocked. Neither seemed to be looking at anyone in their path, but gazing straight ahead as if fixing every ounce of concentration on leaving as quickly as possible. When they neared the last pew where Snape

now stood, Davindra's eyes snapped straight to him. Snape gave her an expressionless stare. Her mouth opened in surprise, and her watery eyes grew even larger. She slowed momentarily, but then seemed to remember her mother at her arm and continued on.

Snape slipped out of the church and walked back toward the cemetery. If he knew her as well as he thought, then she would escape the clutches of her family and find him. Even now he could feel her eyes on him as he wove his way between the headstones.

"Professor?" Her breathy voice sounded from a few rows behind him.

He turned to see her tentatively walking toward him, her eyes darting back to her gathering family near the cars.

"I didn't expect you to come. I wasn't even sure you got the message, since you didn't respond."

She was now as tall as he was, though today she was wearing heels. She looked graceful and lean, all in black, her hair drawn back to expose her swan-like neck. The young woman before him was a far advanced form of the coy, impish girl he had spent the past four years battling and struggling with.

Snape labored for what to say. Her expression spoke of great expectation in his appearance.

"I do hope you've managed to sleep," was all he could find to comment on. "I have some very good potions if you find you're still having trouble."

She smiled weakly. "No, Grandmother has made sure I'm well supplied. I've slept some, thank you."

The heavy silence was uncomfortable. Snape had no idea he would be so bad at this. He steadied himself behind a cold, stoic demeanor, and she stood bravely, her long, thin arms wrapped around herself. They regarded each other with careful looks.

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss Collins." Snape pushed the words from his mouth. "Your father sounded like an honorable man."

She smiled sadly. "He was. You would have found him... interesting."

He nodded slightly in return. "I know this last year was very hard for you, and for the one exception regarding my supply closet," he raised his eyebrows, "you handled this all very admirably."

Her smile grew slightly and she snorted, "Am I never to be forgiven for that mistake?"

He said nothing for a moment, and her eyes looked into his to see if he truly still harbored ill feelings.

"You're forgiven," he said quietly.

She smiled wider still and wiped at the fresh tears that began at the corner of her eyes. Snape noticed a dark smudge on her finger when she drew it away.

"When did you start wearing make-up?" he asked in shock.

Again she snorted a little laugh. "About two years ago, thanks for noticing. Although today isn't a good for it."

Again they were plunged into an awkward silence. She shuffled her black, heeled shoes in the damp grass, and he stood unmoving as a statue.

"There's going to be a lunch, some family members and such, at our house," she stammered. "Would you like to come? I know they'd like to meet you."

Snape nearly shuddered with horror at having to socialize with strange Muggles and wizards under such depressed circumstances.

"No, I can't stay." Glancing at the group of family gathered to leave the church, Snape saw Madame Collins looking about, most likely in search of Davindra. He had to be quick. "I have something for you."

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew the narrow slab of green beryl on a long, delicate chain. Wrapped around the crystal was a thin, tightly intertwined braid of their hairs. Snape held the charm up in front of her, and she gazed at it in curious wonder.

"What is it?" she asked as he slipped it over her head.

Silently he spoke the incantation that would activate the crystal's binding properties as the amulet nestled against her chest.

He had been rehearsing his explanation for the crystal for some time. "This is so you will never have to worry about me being there for you. As long as you wear this, I can find you, if you ever need me."

She looked from the charm she took in her hand to his face. He wasn't sure if she was trying to read into the gesture something he didn't intend or if she saw exactly what he did intend. However, he stood silently impassive, refusing to reveal any more.

Glancing again toward the gathering family members, he uttered, "Best keep it hidden."

Davindra nodded and quickly dropped the amulet down the front of her dress, squirming so it would situate itself between her breasts. "What will I need to do to use it?"

Snape couldn't keep his eyebrow from twitching as he replied, "Just concentrate."

Before he could react, she had thrown her arms around him, her whole body crushed to him in a tight embrace. Her face was pressed into his neck, her breath in his hair. A shaky sigh escaped her, tickling his skin and warming him to the core. For several seconds he stood frozen, unable to respond or move. Still, she didn't pull away. He could feel her body expanding and contracting as she breathed. He could feel her fingers gripping at his jacket.

Finally, he commanded his arm to move, thinking he could push her away. But instead he found his hand coming to rest against the small of her back. His other arm wrapped around her shoulders with no command from him. Snape remembered the times when one look from her could knock the breath out of his body. That was nothing compared to the intoxicating chaos that filled him now. He wondered if she could feel his heart hammering in his chest or the shaking that seemed to come from inside his bones.

A few airless, silent moments passed, as though they were standing inside a vacuum. When her grip began to loosen, Snape self-consciously drew his arms away and held her by the shoulders. Her face was red and damp with tears, more flakes of mascara dotted her cheeks. She sniffed and dabbed a tissue to her eyes. He couldn't resist gently brushing away the dark flecks with his finger.

They stood very close together, looking into each other's faces when the sound of approaching feet lifted them out of their private moment. Madame Collins and Lillyth Sparrow had found their hiding spot, and both looked vaguely pleased at having discovered it.

"Severus," Madame Collins spoke, "how kind of you to pay your respects today." There was a trace of venom under the sweet greeting.

Snape gave very slight bows to both women as he addressed each one. "I simply wanted to express my deepest sympathies to the entire family. It is a truly tragic loss."

"Thank you so much for coming, Professor Snape," Lillyth spoke in a soft, silky tone. "I'm sure Davindra appreciates it more than you could ever know." She reached out

and drew the girl to her, producing a fresh tissue from her pocket, which she tucked into Davindra's hand.

"We really must be going now, Davi," Madame Collins stated, eyeing Lillyth. "The cars are waiting. You two run ahead. I just want a moment with our dear Potions master."

Snape's stomach turned with dread.

"It was good to see you again, Professor," Lillyth spoke. "I do hope next time is under more pleasurable circumstances." Her blue eyes twinkled, and her smile was heated with promise as she turned from him, pulling Davindra behind her.

Davindra allowed herself to be guided away, but her gaze was reluctant to leave him. She left with her hand pressed against her chest where the amulet lay.

When finally alone, Demelza Collins looked up at Snape with amused scrutiny. "What exactly are you doing here?" Her voice was low and a shade darker than before. "Wearing your best Muggle suit even, which I dare say is about ten years past its prime. You look like the undertaker."

"As though I'd stand out amongst this lot?" Snape asked snidely. "I hadn't realized that wearing my slippers and robe would help me blend in better."

Demelza gave a soft chuckle. "Yes, it is amazing how socially limited wizards can be. I can't tell you how many times I've tried to pass along a Littlewoods catalog as reference on how to dress in the Muggle world. All they do is stand in amazement that the pictures don't move."

"Speaking of Muggles, Madame Collins, where is your husband?" Snape quizzed.

"Malcolm?" she replied in surprise. "Oh, he's been gone for years now. I thought you knew."

"The Collins women don't appear to have good luck with longevity in their mates, do they?" He couldn't resist the biting comment, despite its inappropriateness, nor its possible prodding of Demelza's wrath.

Surprisingly, she again chuckled. "It's those frail Muggles. I will never allow Davi to marry a Muggle. They are not worth the heartache. Now, back to my question, Severus. What are you really doing here?"

Snape twitched his brow and gave a slight shrug to his shoulders. "Can I not show my reverence for the father of one of my students and the son of a favored Potions teacher?"

"Oh, you could," she replied. "But I don't think that's the reason. Is it Davi you are wishing to impress? Because I suspect you were hoping to avoid me, considering you're skulking around in a graveyard. Or was it Lillyth perhaps? She told me you two met last summer. She was quite impressed." Demelza gave a slick smile.

"I resent all of your insinuations," he returned with a narrowed glare. "Firstly, is Mrs. Sparrow not a married woman?"

"Oh, yes, but she and Clive haven't lived together for ages. They have an understanding." Her eyes flashed lasciviously. "It works quite well for them both. So you see, she is always on the look out for... new company."

Though he found the information quite interesting and perhaps valuable for the future, the last thing he wanted to do was display his desires to the woman before him who would no doubt later use them against him.

"Still," Snape uttered with annoyance, "I do not make a habit of pursuing dalliances that appear so obviously fraught with danger. As for your granddaughter, her frail emotional and physical health over the last year were of great concern to everyone at Hogwarts. I only wished to ease my mind, and those of the faculty, that she is doing as well as could be expected."

"Oh, *now* you have concern for her health, you say?" A sharp edge returned to her voice. "When last year she was in the hospital ward due to exhaustion?"

"I think that had much more to do with your demands upon her than mine," Snape delivered darkly.

"What are you trying to say, Severus? Might as well just spit it out. My Legilimency is not what it once was."

Snape eyed the surroundings. This was hardly the place he would wish to get into a full-blown battle. There were still several Muggles milling about, and he felt inexplicably vulnerable at that moment.

"I meant no disrespect," he said biting back a desire to snap at her accusation. "Your granddaughter had implied to me that you had suggested she work extra hard to perhaps distract herself from the issues at home. Not an unrealistic suggestion, but one, I'm afraid, she took to heart."

"And what do I have you for, Severus, if you do not tend to the issues that I cannot intervene in when she is at your school?" Her eyes flashed a warning.

"I have done my best, Madame," Snape hissed through clenched teeth. His temper was getting harder to hold. "But as I keep telling you, your offspring is not my only responsibility. I have hundreds of other students to watch, lessons to plan and grade, as well as extra activities to supervise, and any special assignment Dumbledore entrusts to me. I can assure you, I give all the attention that I can spare to your granddaughter while not neglecting the numerous other things that call my attention."

"I can appreciate your loyalty." Back was the smooth delivery, the menacing front only slightly lowered. "But I think in time you will see where your effort is best spent and what rewards will be truly valuable in the end."

Snape gave her a questioning look and read there was a hidden meaning to her words.

"Ah, ah, ah," she said waving her finger at him. "No pilfering though my mind for details that would be none of your business anyway."

"Madame Collins, I'm sure..." he began to show a well rehearsed wounding.

"I must be going, Severus," she announced suddenly, straightening the fox fur stole that draped the crook of her arm. "I have an appearance to make at a luncheon."

Snape again swallowed his anger to calmly say, "Again, my deepest sympathies for the loss of your son."

"You doubt my grief, do you?" she asked with a note of offense in her voice.

"I would not be so bold."

"Yes, you would." Her eyes cut into him like swords. "But perhaps you're not feeling so brave today is all."

"Perhaps, Madame's Legilimency is better than she attests to."

Again she straightened her stole and looked into him with Davindra's pale, icy-green eyes. "What will your continued commitment to my granddaughter cost me this year?"

"I would have thought you had something well in plan by now," Snape replied.

"Could that be what flushed you out of hiding for the summer? You've come to expect as much from this arrangement as I have."

He continued to watch her, wishing he could use Legilimency while in the Well. She seemed to be thinking most fiercely.

Davindra dropped the amulet and closed her eyes, as though giving herself over to the lateness of the night and the chaos in her head. Again she sighed, a slow, breathy moan. She tucked her hands between her thighs and appeared to stretch. Another sigh.

Drawing her legs up, she climbed into the covers of her bed and lay still for a moment. Snape was reminded of when he had seen her lying in the Great Hall under the enchanted sky. He felt the familiar urge to reach out and smooth her hair and brush his lips against her sleepy eyes.

There were several moments of rustling and squirming, more sighing and moans. Suddenly Snape felt an icy sensation in the pit of his stomach. The mounds of covers, which were Davindra's knees, were splayed apart, and her hands had disappeared underneath. Closing his eyes, Snape silently screamed the words that brought him safely to his home. As he was pulled away from the horrific scene, his ears picked up the last of her soft, quickening moans.

Snape was left standing breathless and shaking in his silent, bleak room. Staggering away from the Vision Well, his quivering legs found a chair he was able to collapse in. He sat head in hands, fingers clawing at his oily hair, trying to steady his breath. Despite the sickening feeling that was still washing over him, Snape felt the unmistakable tingling and tightening of his groin. Instinctively his hand squeezed the hardening bulge when he remembered himself and what had inspired the illicit lust. Pulling his hand away, he felt the overpowering urge to wash it with very hot water and Bark Acid soap.

Pressing both his hands to his temples, Snape attempted to squeeze out the memory of what he had just seen and heard. If he had any sense at all, he told himself, he would destroy the Vision Well immediately. He had been narrowly avoiding something of this licentious nature for weeks. It was his own greedy, meddling fault.

He pressed harder, wanting to expunge the last sounds he had heard. The sounds he would spend a lifetime wishing to forget. The faint, urgent, begging sound of her whispering his name. "Severus... Severus..."

Year Five: A Raging Cold Fire

Chapter 9 of 21

To what lengths will he go for her? Worry, dread, and temptation grow nearer and clearer. Revelations of the Dark Lord's return mingle with visions of the Yule Ball.

Every day was a full-blown war for Severus Snape. A battle raged inside him that nearly equaled anything the Dark Lord could have inspired. An innumerable amount of times in every day he would find himself standing before the Vision Well. One voice would be saying, 'use it,' another would say, 'destroy it.' He couldn't bring himself to do either. So he did nothing but pace, rage, and wallow in utter misery at his own cowardice and weakness.

He didn't leave his house. He spoke to no one. Most nights he didn't sleep. He ate infrequently. All he did was sit and concentrate on not letting the images and sounds of his last venture into the Well replay in his mind. The harder he tried to stop them, the louder and more vivid they became. He would have begged on his knees for someone, anyone, to Obliviate him. He doubted that he'd even turn down Avada Kedavra at this point.

An owl from Davindra a few weeks before school only added color to the horror he suffered, though, the note said little of any consequence. It asked of his well being and spoke of her own, then went on to ask what she should do to begin preparing for O.W.L.s in the new year. She again thanked him for coming to the funeral and for his "gift." She mentioned that she looked forward to returning to Hogwarts and seeing him. Again, she signed it "Yours," and that was all. But Snape read between every line. He saw her unspoken emotions, her timid hope that he would one day return them, the uncertainty in contacting him, and the confusion at his silence.

He read the note several times before he crumpled it and, taking out his wand, set it aflame, saying, "I will not be sucked into this madness." And he didn't respond.

Finally, Snape did the only thing he could bring himself to do. He drained the shallow stone bowl and removed the crystal. He placed the crystal in a small box on his bookshelf. The bowl was buried behind some old cauldrons in the kitchen. It was the best compromise he knew. The spell had been effective. No point in being angry because it had done all it had promised. He just had to remember that all dark magic came with consequences and restrictions unique unto itself.

Snape listened to the last few games of the Quidditch World Cup, wishing he could see first hand what promised to be a spectacular match between Ireland and Bulgaria. But he had not the money nor the connections to get tickets. His love of the game had always been great, but constrained by his own insecurities. His fear of ridicule had kept him from trying out for the Hogwarts Slytherin team. Though his knowledge and reflexes were superior to many of the longtime players, his lack of popularity and brutal strength would have ensured rejection.

So he sat at home, nursing old wounds and cursing new ones until an owl from Dumbledore arrived. It announced that the Ministry had agreed to reinstate the Triwizard Tournament and that two schools had agreed to participate. There would be extra students and duties for all teachers and staff, but it would bring an invaluable bond between the students and the schools. With a tired sigh he began to ready himself for a new year at Hogwarts, the past thirteen times he had done so beginning to bleed together into nothing more than a well practiced exercise.

A slight tingle in Snape's left arm spoke of foreboding days even before Lucius Malfoy showed up at his door. Regal and haughty as always, the man attempted to pass the visit off as a social call. Though they had always been friendly, Snape would never have said that he trusted Malfoy as a friend. They had had many adventures together creating chaos and destruction on the orders of the Dark Lord. But there was carefully guarded mutual suspicion and revulsions between the men.

"Are you ever going to move out of this dismal hut, Severus?" Malfoy asked, not hiding a snarl of disdain as he sat on the worn, narrow couch. "Surely, even on a teacher's salary, you could find better."

"Little do you know of the generosity of the Hogwarts Board of Governors," Snape replied as he summoned tea from the kitchen with his wand and took his usual armchair adjacent to the couch. "Besides, I do not have your standards of comfort, Lucius. I find these surroundings possess the most important traits for a summer retreat: quiet, private, and, best of all, free."

Lucius smiled with biting patronage. "Ah, to have such simple pleasures."

"Indeed. Now please explain the reason for your visit. For I doubt it is to investigate my living conditions."

Malfoy adjusted himself on the couch, picking a few bits of lint from his rich, black cloak.

"Have you not noticed a change?" he asked, a meaningful arch to his eyebrow.

Snape continued with a flat, even stare until Lucius spoke again.

When she did not reply, he looked to find her gaping at him in astonishment.

"Have you gone completely off your broomstick?" she asked in shock. "You've never apologized to me for anything in five years, and you expect me to buy that load of dragon shit now?"

Snape returned a look of equal surprise to her, though he felt anger boiling up quickly behind it.

"Did my grandmother put you up to this? She must have really paid you off well to get that kind of sentiment out of you," she continued.

"How dare you..." Snape began in a rage. No amount of possible danger would allow for her to talk to him like that. But then he caught the old familiar look of victorious pleasure on her face as she bated him. There was a faint smile forming on her lips and a fire in her eyes. He hadn't seen this bold, defiant, wickedly cunning side of her since before her father became ill. He had forgotten what enjoyment she seemed to take in the game of antagonizing him. Suddenly it was rather funny that she had seen through his ruse. It was almost like a worthy and respected adversary had returned to challenge him.

He gathered himself up to his full height and looked down his nose at the brash young woman before him, who was still vaguely amused at his attempt at humility. A slight smile touched his own lips, curling them into wry smirk.

"So, you don't wish to accept my apology for something that you expressed egregious insult over just days ago?" he asked.

Davindra snorted a laugh. "It's more that I don't believe it. Why don't you try telling me what this is really about?"

Snape pursed his lips and thought as he stared down into her penetrating eyes, her inky lashes slowly blinking in an sensual manner he found uncomfortable, yet hard to ignore.

"Three more years I am going to have to deal with you," he said calmly as he walked closer, coming to stand immediately in front of her. "There is no way out of it. I don't *wish* to fight with you. I *do* wish for our times together to be succinct, productive, and drama-free. No yelling, no pouting, no tantrums, no provoking me just for sport. I don't have the energy for it."

They stood almost as closely as they had in the cemetery the day of the funeral. She looked at him with a soft expression that Snape now recognized as a bare flicker of the emotions that coursed deep within her. Her eyes seemed to search his, to travel about his face, settling on his lips as he spoke, then trail back to his unwavering gaze.

"Believe it or not, I do mean the apology I've given you. Perhaps it was a bit over-rehearsed, but the message is the same. I wish to put that behind us and begin this year without the trappings of previous transgressions and arguments hanging over us."

The heat from their bodies seemed to combine to make the normally chilly room suddenly stifling. Snape resisted the urge to throw off his robe and unbutton his high collar. Instead he stood firmly, returning her intense look, all too easily reading the slightly illicit tinge her thoughts had taken with him so close to her. It was requiring all his concentration to remember to breathe calmly and evenly. Her gaze seemed to be pressing into him like a weight, squeezing out disturbing, disjointed images from the Vision Well's last application.

"Do we have an agreement, Miss Collins?" Snape broke in.

Again her eyes dipped to his mouth and her tongue unconsciously slipped lightly over the corner of her upper lip. A most effective distraction Snape found his own eyes drawn to.

"Yes."

Her words brought him back from the edge of a very dangerous abyss. Snape nodded at her acquiescence and stepped away, feeling a weightlessness rush over him as he drew out of her hypnotic pull.

"However," he announced as he spun around and raised a finger before her face, "our time together will be handled with great discretion and propriety. I will not have the rumors of last year resurface, nor will I tolerate any more misguided contrivances from you."

Davindra seemed to blush slightly in the apples of her cheeks as he spoke, but her strong stare didn't break. Snape dared one step closer, though still keeping enough distance to not allow for a mixed message to be delivered with his words.

"The lessons and exchanges that happen between us take place behind closed doors only. There will be no ambushing me in hallways or outside the staff lounge. We will keep our interaction to a necessary minimum in class. Though I have agreed to see to your education and safety, I will not risk my career for it." He made sure his look matched the harsh, serious tone of his words. "Do I make myself clear, Miss Collins?"

Her gaze faltered finally, dipping to his feet as she replied, "Crystal, Professor."

"Good," he pronounced smoothly and turned away again. "Now, for your detention. Since you had such disastrous results with your potion this week, I think it would be in your best interest to try again, since it is quite possible that that particular concoction could appear on your O.W.L exams."

"Will you redo my grade?" Davindra piped in hopefully.

He eyed her reluctantly and considered her request. "I might *adjust* your grade depending on how well you do this time."

She smiled with an air of accomplishment at the compromise and set about gathering her supplies.

A peaceful familiarity settled in the room as she began her potion, and Snape focused on work at his desk. Periodically, he would sneak a glance in her direction. The potion seemed to be coming along perfectly this time with no anger and resentment to cloud her thoughts.

Suddenly, he realized that he seemed to no longer consider her presence distracting and unnerving. He felt more calm than he had in some time with her cozily tucked into the corner of his office. There was still a desire to be on guard and vigilant of her conduct toward him, and he certainly had no desire to be close to her because of the suffocating confusion it caused him. But her just being within his sight, so he could occasionally look at her or speak to her, felt right and safe. Yes, at least she was safe.

He cleared his throat to get her attention before he spoke. "Miss Collins, do you know Mr. Malfoy?" He began his quest casually.

"Draco's father?" she asked as she cleaned her chopping knife. "Well, I don't know him. I've seen him, been introduced to him."

"Where?"

"Diagon Alley," she seemed to think for a moment. "Last year, I believe. I ran into them at the bookstore."

"What did he say to you?" Snape pressed, though still careful to keep any suspicion out of his question.

"I don't remember," Davindra replied with an annoyed tone. "It was a while ago. It was probably just, 'nice to meet you,' and such. Why are you asking?"

"No reason," Snape said smoothly. "He seems to remember meeting you, that's all. Is there anything between you and Draco of a romantic notion?"

Davindra smirked. "You mean the boy who called me names and put me in a mud puddle? We're friends is all, which I figured you'd approve of since he is in your house. I

She returned a mischievous smile. "Oh, you mean all those *mysterious* balloons and presents? Today's my birthday."

He knew it was her birthday. Though he hadn't remembered the date, he knew it was during this time of year. But he liked her thinking he was oblivious to it.

"Was it important to make such a show of it?"

"That wasn't me! That was my friends' doing to surprise me at breakfast." She sounded exasperated at his ignorance, and he tried not to smirk and ruin the artifice.

"So you would be sixteen, is it?" he continued in a low, disinterested voice.

"Yes, most do turn sixteen in their fifth year. So are you trying to say that you didn't get me anything?" She tossed him an amused look over her shoulder that he pretended not to see.

"I'm allowing you to poke around my office while I help ensure that you don't miserably fail your O.W.L. exams," he said in a deadpan voice. "You're welcome, by the way."

"But we do *this* at least once a week!"

"So you're covered on birthday gifts from me until you are thirty-eight." Snape stood up from his chair and stretched.

"I suppose that's more than I expected," Davindra said with a snicker.

"Besides, last time I gave you a gift, it ended up being a point of contention," Snape murmured as he began searching his bookshelves for new material to quiz her on.

"I thought that was supposed to be behind us?" she asked, a tone of seriousness creeping into her voice.

He realized too late that he should have kept his mouth shut. "You're right," he sighed. "I shouldn't have said anything."

There was an uncomfortable silence in the room as they both went about their tasks, attempting to forget what had just been spoken.

Snape found a book he thought might be useful and took it down from the shelf when her quiet voice broke the air.

"You know, even if the amulet didn't do what I wanted it to do, I still found comfort in it."

He didn't turn to look at her, but he raised his head to listen.

"Just having something from you, something that reminded me of you," she continued in the same soft tone, "made me feel better. It made me feel close to you, even if you weren't there."

Again the heavy silence fell as Snape said nothing.

She gave a slight laugh and said, "Funny, but I guess I miss it because nearly every morning I reach for it around my neck and think I've lost it in my sleep. Then I remember, I don't ha... that I gave it back to you."

Snape shut the book he had opened but not actually read a word of during her speech. He walked over to another shelf and took down a box, sitting it on his desk. Inside was the amulet she had thrown at him the first day of class. He untangled the chain and walked to Davindra, again draping it around her neck and letting it fall against her chest.

A smile spread across her face as she took the crystal in her hand and squeezed it.

If there was truly danger ahead, it was best that Snape have all the help he could get in keeping a line on her. Though the Vision Well would have to be reconstructed, it wouldn't be as arduous of a task the second time around. He would just have to remember to heavily temper his use of it, if it even worked inside of Hogwarts. But if the amulet made her feel safe as well as build her trust in him, then it alone more than served a purpose.

"Happy Birthday, Miss Collins," he said, careful to keep his words removed and short.

Still she smiled and looked into him lovingly. He turned to go, but a hand on his arm stopped him. His heart quickened with dread at her touch. She leaned in and placed a soft, gentle kiss near the corner of his mouth. As soon as her lips left him, he felt the spot burn with heat and cold.

"Do you not remember our arrangement?" he spoke firmly, though he felt as though he were shaking. "There was to be no..."

"Shh, shh, shh," she soothed, her hand patting his arm. "It's my birthday," she whispered and again smiled.

Stepping away, Davindra tucked the amulet down her top and said, "I think I'll go now. But thank you, Professor."

She left him standing, fixed in his spot, the feeling of an out of control cold fire spreading through his entire body.

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Snape could have made quite an issue about what happened in his office, but going against his own gut instinct, he chose not to. He figured the best way to discourage any fractious behavior in the future was to pretend like the intimate moment hadn't happened at all. Surprisingly, his tactic worked. Neither of them made any more mention of it, and both continued in their amiable manners when alone together -- though Snape made sure to stay at least an arm's length away from her at all times for fear that she might take any bodily contact as an invitation to continue her advances. Instead, Davindra seemed happy to just have the time with him and her amulet back.

The announcement of the Yule Ball pushed the level of excitement in the school to maximum. The news had girls practically floating off the floor, while the boys nearly sank down into it. When Snape spoke to his house, there was no denying the division of enthusiasm. He told them he expected nothing but exemplary behavior and if anyone did anything to embarrass him or the name of Slytherin House, there would be heavy, severe punishment for all. As for learning to dance and finding partners, they were on their own.

He gave it little more thought until a week later when Davindra sat in his office, thumbing through a catalog and paying scant attention to him and the questions he asked her.

"What are you so engrossed in?" he finally demanded impatiently.

She gave an aggravated sigh and tossed the catalog to the floor, and took another from the pile she had brought with her.

"I'm trying to find a dress robe I like. Everything looks so ridiculous! They only make these things for children or old ladies."

"And must you do your shopping during our study time?" he asked incredulously.

"It's hardly three weeks to the ball, and I don't have any robes, or a date, or any idea what to do with this hair!" She sounded almost panicked.

Snape bored a contemptuous look into her. "I'm terribly sorry to have scheduled preparation for you O.W.L. exams right in the middle of your social crisis." Flipping the

book in front of him closed, he sat back in his chair to fume.

Suddenly he picked up on the word 'date.' She was concerned about looking just right for someone. She was thinking of herself paired up with someone for a night of dancing and perhaps fumbled kissing and petting in a dark corner.

Davindra continued turning pages as she perched crossed-leg on a high work stool, one foot jiggling nervously, one hand mindlessly twirling a strand of obsidian hair.

Snape was suddenly struck with the reality that she was still so young. So often he had seen maturity far beyond her years in her eyes and her expression. Her stature and composure fooled almost everyone who saw her. But she was nothing more than a sixteen-year-old girl with bright, fanciful dreams of an enchanted ball and fairytale romance.

"Who were you thinking of going with?" To him his voice sounded tight and entirely too interested.

"I don't know. No one has asked me yet."

"Who would you like to go with?"

She stopped flipping pages, bouncing her foot, and twisting her hair to look at him.

That was a stupid question, Snape immediately realized, considering what they both knew.

"What student would you like to go with?" He felt both embarrassed and irritated that it was taking this much work to get an answer from her. "Roger Davies, perhaps?"

"No, I don't think he likes me much since I broke up with him last year. Draco might be nice, but I'd have to lock Pug-face Parkinson in a cupboard to get a chance with him."

That would never do, Snape thought. Madame Collins's warning of the young Malfoy was still prominent in his mind. He had to make sure that she stayed well clear of him. Though he felt certain also that Pansy Parkinson would make sure that she was the one at Draco's side for the ball.

"You know, I hear Harry Potter is pretty desperate to find a date since he's a champion and all."

Snape's eye snapped up to find her smiling devilishly. "Don't even joke about it," he warned darkly.

"He is actually pretty cute," she continued. "Moppy hair, nice eyes, funny, the whole "Boy Who Lived" thing."

"Don't be perverse," Snape growled. "If I see you even glancing his direction, I will make sure you are serving a long, grueling detention the night of the ball."

He dared another glance to find she was smirking madly behind a catalog.

So there were plenty of other undesirables Snape would have to watch out for, such as the entirety of Gryffindor House.

Davindra hopped down from her stool, a catalog in hand and came to stand beside his chair. She dropped the catalog on the desk in front of him and leaned over his shoulder, pointing at a robe on the page.

"What do you think of this one? Do you think that would make me look too tall?"

Snape was suddenly hypersensitive to the feel of her hair as it dangled over his shoulder, the warmth of her arm, and the scent of vanilla and *...was it cherry?...* that softly wafted around her

He barely glanced at the garment being modeled by a preening, half-starved looking model before handing the catalog back to her. "I am not here to be your fashion advisor, Miss Collins. And for your information, you ARE tall. I don't think anything outside of sitting in a chair all night will disguise that."

She gave a sound of exasperation. "You didn't even look! Listen, I trust your judgment. Can't you just give me your opinion?"

Madame Collins didn't even come close to paying him enough for all the duties this child required of him. Snape held out his hand for the catalog, which Davindra placed in it. He looked at the robe momentarily, then handed it back to her.

"It's too low-cut."

"Really? You can hardly see past my throat!" Davindra looked at the picture again. "Oh, you really aren't any help, are you?"

"Since you are so obviously distracted, I suggest we discontinue study sessions until you have managed to overcome this bothersome little issue," he snapped.

"Just let me find a robe I like, then I'll feel better," she said in a distracted voice and went back to hop onto her stool. "I'm sure a date will turn up."

She spent the entire evening in the corner of his office, making a mess and periodic inane comments about fashion.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Snape watched the students closely during the pending weeks before the ball. Never before had he cared who was hooked up with whom or bothered to pay any attention to the absurd courting rituals teenagers orchestrated. But in watching who might have an interest in Davindra, Snape began to take in all of it. He remembered his own hormonal years with vague humiliation.

Very few young women had taken any notice of him, far fewer still were willing to be anything more intimate than a lab partner. There had been only a couple girls that he could count as liaisons during his Hogwarts tenure. A rather attractive, older Slytherin girl had gotten him into a broom cupboard and practically made a man out of him in his fourth year. He had found out quickly afterwards that it had been done on a dare. Though he had burned with rage and mortification, he found it interesting that the girl had been able to fake so much enthusiasm for just a dare. The second girl had been a rather homely but studious Hufflepuff who seemed to appreciate his mind as well as his company. Though she wasn't his ideal and he did much to dissuade her attention in front of his fellow house-mates, she did further his education of the female physis.

Snape imagined that the students now days were further advanced in the lessons of love and sex than he had been by the time he was twenty. Some could probably even tell him a thing or two now. So many seemed filled almost to the breaking point with a lusty drive to attract someone's attention and would do the most outlandish things to get it. The desire to pair up for the Yule Ball heightened the coupling.

Keeping a discrete eye on Davindra, Snape had not seen anyone pay her special attention. Though many boys gave her the usual long, lingering looks as she passed, it seemed none considered her a fair enough date for the ball. Friendly male students would greet her or even exchange a few words but then move on with no mention of the ball. He could spot the look of disappointment after each one left. A much younger Gryffindor did attempt to chat her up and seemed as though he were in the process of leading up to something when Davindra politely but firmly brushed him off. She walked away rolling her eyes with exasperation.

Snape began to believe he would need to take a hand in things when he noticed one of his own house members eyeing her heavily but only when her back was turned. Theodore Nott wasn't popular nor was he an outcast. He was more of a loner. Not ugly nor attractive, stupid nor an exceptional student. He was someone who seemed to slip through the cracks of observation. For that, Snape found he rather liked him. His father had been a Death Eater, who like his son, didn't command a lot of attention, but seemed to always be taking in and contemplating his surroundings.

Snape couldn't walk in to the Slytherin common room without receiving notice, so there was no way to have a private conversation with young Nott about anything there. He sent word that he wanted to see the boy in his office. He showed up a short time later, looking a bit worried and perplexed. He had never gathered particular attention from Snape or any other teacher for anything good or bad.

Knowing it was cruel but unable to resist the temptation, Snape didn't speak right away, but let the boy stand in his gaze, fidgeting fretfully.

"What did you wish to see me about, Professor?" Nott finally asked bravely.

Giving a cool, amused smile, Snape began. "Were you planning on attending the Yule Ball, Mr. Nott?"

The boy shrugged, his entire thin frame seemed to flow with the movement. "Don't know, sir. Hadn't thought about it."

"You weren't thinking of asking someone in particular to accompany you?"

Nott returned a cool gaze. "As I said, sir. I hadn't thought about it."

"You're a decent student, Nott. A decent Quidditch player, you stay out of trouble. Should you not reward yourself with a little festive diversion?"

Though he might have been getting more exasperated with what could be viewed as harassment over his social life, Nott's demeanor only became more detached. Snape again found himself impressed with the lad.

"Really, sir, I hadn't..."

"Yes, yes," Snape snapped at him, "you hadn't thought about it. Well, think about it now, Nott!"

He rose from his desk to approach the boy. Crossing his arms inside his robes, Snape sat on the edge of his desk.

"I noticed that you seemed to fancy a certain Ravenclaw."

Only now did the boy show any break in composure with a flush to his face.

"Now it's nothing to be embarrassed about," Snape continued smoothly. "I'm sure you've noticed most everyone in the school pairing off for the upcoming ball. Have you considered actually talking to her? Asking her to go with you?"

Nott truly broke now. He smiled, then frowned, then laughed nervously as he shuffled his feet and scratched his head. "Uh... she's... Uh... No, actually."

Snape raised his eyebrows and gave him a demanding look. "What's wrong with her? Besides being Ravenclaw?"

"Nothing!" Nott interjected. "She's... Uhm..." He rubbed his face, then stuck his hands in his pockets to keep them still. "Draco Malfoy said he might be interested in her, so I thought I had better..."

"Draco Malfoy will not be able to enter that ball with anyone besides Pansy Parkinson on his arm and you know it," Snape said. He gave an exasperated breath and decided he would get nowhere being coy about this endeavor.

"Mr. Nott, I am very close friends with Davindra Collins's grandmother. She has asked that I keep a protective eye on her granddaughter while she is at Hogwarts. Perhaps you heard, Miss Collins lost her father this year. Things have been quite difficult. As far as I am aware, she has had no offers for the ball, and I know she has aspirations of going."

"You're kidding," Nott said softly with a look of surprise.

"I can assure you, I am not," Snape continued. "I'm sure you can understand my desire to keep Miss Collins from associating with the wrong people." He gave a meaningful squint to Nott. "Her grandmother would be most displeased. The best way to assure that she gets to attend the ball as she wishes, while not being placed in a situation where uninvited advances could be taken upon her, is to ensure that she goes with the right young man. I believe you are that man, Nott."

Snape finished with a thin smile as Nott continued to stare at him with open-mouthed wonder.

"Have you not found her attractive and intelligent?" he continued to press when the boy said nothing.

"Uh, yeah... she's gorgeous, she's wickedly smart," Nott stammered. "But what makes you think she would go with me? I've never really even spoken to her."

"As I said," Snape uttered with exasperation, "no one else has asked her. But it may not remain that way for long."

"I don't know, sir. There's probably other blokes who would be better... I think I'm going to skip it..."

Snape came off the desk and grabbed Nott's shirt. "That's not an option," he said with icy calm. "You're going to escort Miss Collins to the ball, you are going to be a perfect gentleman, and you are going to show her a perfectly lovely time, and that will be the end of it. Do you understand, Nott?"

Nott's wide brown eyes blinked rapidly as he attempted to lean away from Snape's menacing form. "Well, if I really don't have a choice."

He let the young man go. "I'm doing you a favor, Nott," Snape reinstated his calm delivery. "It's obvious you like Miss Collins, you yourself are a very amiable boy, and she is in need of a date. I don't see how a more perfect arrangement could ever be created."

"How do I ask her? What do I say?"

Snape honestly wasn't sure about the details of that endeavor. His own tactics for finding a date usually just required an exchange of money and the use of a spare room for an hour.

"Have one of the other boys help you, if you must. But, Nott," he continued in a silky, menacing voice, "there are some rules that you must adhere to or else dire consequences will befall you. I mean it when I say you are to be a perfect gentleman. If I find you've laid one finger on her outside of a dance or a polite gesture, I'll hand you over to Filch for an unofficial detention. After the evening is over and I hear that she had a nice time and all went well, you will find great favors bestowed upon you. And tell no one about this arrangement, Nott, especially not her." Snape stepped closer to him. "Death Eaters keep their word and their silence. Your father would know that."

Young Nott had stood staring at Snape with concerned wonder, but there was no doubt he had taken in every word.

"So, what will you be doing now, Mr. Nott?" Snape asked with a twisted smile.

He cleared his throat and returned a look of consigned certainty. "I guess I'll be asking Davindra Collins to the Yule Ball."

Year Five: The Broken Fall

Chapter 10 of 21

Disaster follows all of Snape's best efforts as his battles grow to consume him. The longest fall lies ahead.

□

But I fear

I have nothing to give

I have so much to lose

Here in this lonely place

Tangled up in our embrace

There's nothing I'd like better than to fall

Fear--Sarah McLachlan

Severus Snape stood before a mirror in his chambers, surveying his appearance. There was a strange nervousness in his stomach, which he dismissed as an absurdity. He smoothed his still-damp hair. His scalp and body felt dry and uncomfortable from the thorough scrubbing he had given himself in preparation for the Yule Ball.

He peered closely at his face. Snape had always known that his looks were distasteful. All of the least appealing features of his parents had been bestowed upon him. His lank hair, thin face, and sallow complexion came from his mother. His hawkish nose, tar-black eyes, and lean, angular body were curses from his father. It had never bothered him to be called "ugly," since he knew it to be true. Therefore, he had never felt the need to care about his appearance. It was perfectly comfortable hiding behind the long, unkempt curtains of black hair and layers of dark clothing. It made him feel invulnerable and fierce. Appealing to anyone had never seemed important. That made it all the more distressing that it should matter now.

For the third time he checked the buttons at his cuffs. His dress robes didn't look much different than his regular robes. They were just cleaner and less worn. There was still a crisp newness to their folds and seams that he couldn't help but enjoy. If it could ever be said that Snape could cut a striking figure, now would be the time. He turned from the mirror to make his way to the entrance hall and oversee the beginning of the evening.

Davindra had agreed to accompany Theodore Nott to the ball, but not without some persuasion. She had come to Snape saying that Nott had asked her, but she was unsure of accepting since she didn't know him and thought his sudden offer peculiar. She admitted with more than an air of disappointment that he wasn't quite who she had in mind. Snape need not even ask to know that the list was probably topped by Draco Malfoy.

"It is barely three days before the ball, Miss Collins," he had told her. "No one fitting your taste has asked you yet. I suggest you take this more than suitable offer. I can vouch for Nott's manners, bloodline, and relative intelligence. You could do much worse."

"I should have gone with George Weasley when he asked me," she had muttered.

"If you could do no better than a half-witted, carnival freak Gryffindor, then you'd be best off to not go at all," he'd retorted.

Davindra accepted Nott's offer but with much less enthusiasm than Snape had seen since the announcement of the ball.

The entrance hall was crowded with people Snape could hardly identify. It seemed that the majority of the students cleaned up nicely, many almost unrecognizable in fact, in their finery. His eyes continued to sweep the hall until he saw someone whose beauty and grace outshone everyone and everything around her. Many other eyes gazed upon her approvingly, though she stood alone, speaking to no one, and looking almost miserable.

Davindra wore a long dress robe of green so dark it almost looked black. An open, plunging neckline exposed an inviting view of satiny, ivory skin. Her hair was drawn into a complicated arrangement held in place with an ornate clasp.

However, her look brightened when Snape approached her. She smiled warmly, and he forgot for a moment that the hall was filled with a noisy crowd.

"Miss Collins," he said softly as he drew close, "you look enchanting." The words had come out before he could stop them, and he quickly recovered by adding an airy, unimpressed look to his face.

But she seemed to know him too well and increased her smile. "You look most dashing also, Professor."

He gave her an unconvinced sneer and returned his gaze to the growing crowd of students.

"Where is Mr. Nott? I hope not backing out of your date."

Davindra began to reply when they both spotted Nott running toward them, his dress robes flapping about him.

"I'm sorry I'm late. I had some trouble getting ready," he panted.

Then he seemed to take in the young woman standing before him. He looked even more impressed than Snape had felt.

"Wow, you really look amazing," he said, still breathless.

Davindra smiled in return but said nothing.

It was time for Snape to leave them on their own, but he couldn't ignore his reluctance. He kept a hard eye on Nott, hoping the boy would recognize it as a reminder of their agreement, but he was still too taken with the beauty of his date to notice anything.

McGonagall called for everyone to go into the Great Hall. Nott offered his arm, and Davindra tentatively took it with a forced smile. Before they got too far, Snape moved close enough to the boy to growl in his ear, "Remember our deal, Nott." Nott gave a nod over his shoulder and continued on.

The Tournament Champions then cued up to make a grand entrance. Snape took a few steps to stand beside McGonagall who gave him an appraising look.

him square in the chest, knocking the wind out of him.

"Stay away from me," she growled. "Never touch me again unless you get the guts to do it properly."

While he struggled for a breath, Davindra ran from the Owlery and into the dark night. Shame, dread, anger, and confusion poured over Snape. Quickly he constructed his thoughts. He would give Davindra time to calm down, and then he would convince her that it had all been done with her best interest in mind. She would surely understand reason. But first, he had to find Nott and inflict the most heinous punishment Hogwarts rules would allow.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Nott insisted that it had been a harmless slip that led to Davindra finding out about their arrangement. He said he only wanted to tell her that he had liked her all along, but in his nervousness he had mentioned Snape's conversation about the ball. She had immediately picked up on the detail and had demanded to know everything. He swore he revealed it all only when she threatened him with an irreversible Bat-Bogey Hex, which he was convinced she could produce. Nott seemed as thoroughly miserable about the matter as Snape, so he let the boy off with cleaning out old flobberworm barrels and a lengthy report on irreversible hexes.

Davindra herself remained scarce during the rest of the holiday. He hardly got glimpses of her during meals, and if she spotted him, she seemed to vanish like smoke. She was truly enraged with him.

When classes resumed, she continued to ignore him, even though he stood in the same dungeon classroom, leaning over her bubbling cauldron, and handing out steadily declining grades. It appeared her animosity toward him was not going to soften so easily.

And yet again, Snape walked into his office to find that someone had tampered with the protective magic he used to safeguard it while he was away. Alastor "Mad Eye" Moody stood in the middle of the room, bold as brass and completely unflustered to be discovered. The one-eyed lunatic then said that Dumbledore had encouraged a search of everyone's office.

Snape heavily doubted it. And his own lack of indignation at the intrusion amazed even him. He had actually been expecting this all year. His certainty that Moody would find nothing out of the ordinary gave Snape a confident feeling of immunity. Also, the knowledge that Dumbledore prized his service above almost anyone at Hogwarts, save Harry Potter, gave bittersweet comfort. Just let Moody try to find fault with him to Dumbledore now.

It was harder to explain how his supply closet had been pilfered once again. Snape wondered why he even bothered with protective magic. He might as well hang an "Open for Business" sign on the front of it for all the traffic it saw. His suspicions turned again to Potter after Snape saw how he conquered the second task of the tournament.

Davindra's grades continued to slip, and her performance in class began to almost make Neville Longbottom look talented. He would have to speak to her. But always after class, she would hurriedly gather her things and leave before he could even announce that he wanted a word with her.

On a restless evening in late February, Snape prowled the halls in hopes of catching her. Eventually, he ended up in the library and happened upon a quiet conversation taking place between Davindra and Draco Malfoy as they sat at a table removed from the other groups of studiers. Stealing behind a row of books, Snape strained his ears to pick up their conversation.

"I felt sorry for Ted," Draco spoke. "Whatever Snape did to him sure made him miserable. Or maybe that was just him nursing a broken heart over you."

Davindra gave her typical unconvinced snort. "I doubt that. He'd never said a word to me, and Snape expects me to believe he's got a crush on me."

"I can vouch for it. Ted doesn't say much, but I've seen him watch you. And when I mention you, he gets all nervous and red in the face."

"Why do you mention me?"

Draco seemed to give a soft chuckle. "Maybe just to see if I can get a rise out of him."

"That's cruel, Draco." But there was amusement in her voice.

"Listen, I'm sorry the ball was a disaster for you. If it makes you feel any better, I didn't have that great of a time either. Pansy and her friends had a flask of dandelion wine they sneaked in." He made a sound of disgust. "She ended up drunk and puking in the bushes."

Davindra laughed out loud. Draco shushed her. Her giggling continued but in a muffled way.

"She's really not that bad most of the time," Draco continued. "She understands a lot of the stuff about me... you know... with my family."

"You mean she's pureblood," Davindra said, no longer laughing.

Draco didn't answer ,and Snape peered through the books only to see the back of the boy's head obscuring the view of Davindra.

"We probably would have had a better time had we gone together," he said finally.

"Yes, well, that's sort of a moot point now, don't you think," Davindra uttered with an edge of bitterness.

"Anytime I even try to get near you anymore, there's Snape giving me the evil eye. What's going on with him?"

There was a sound of indignation before Davindra spoke. "He's been well paid to keep an eye on me by my grandmother."

"Really?" There was a sound of keen interest in Draco's voice. "So that's what all the arranged dating is about. How long has this been going on?"

He was getting too curious, and it was making Snape very nervous. He had to break up this little conversation quickly, but he wasn't sure how without appearing to have been listening in the whole time.

Just as he was about to create a diversion with magic, help arrived in the form of Pansy Parkinson.

"There you are!" she snapped. "We're supposed to doing Herbology homework. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, we're just talking. I lost track of the time, sorry." Draco sounded like a hen-pecked husband already.

"Hi, Petunia," Davindra said brightly.

Snape could see Pansy growing purple with rage and glaring at Davindra who sat calmly smiling.

"It's Pansy, bitch."

"Right," Davindra drawled. "Pansy Bitch, that does ring a bell."

Before a full-blown catfight could ensue, Draco began pulling Pansy away, saying over his shoulder, that he'd talk to Davindra later.

"What do you want?"

More silence, but at least she looked at him, into him even. Her pale eyes appeared to be trying to swallow him up, and he felt breathless and confined, but mesmerized. Reaching up, she slowly pushed a few strands of black hair from her eyes, never breaking their look. It was a familiar habit he had seen many times but which never failed to hypnotize him.

"I want honesty," she said with a breathy quietness.

"And you believe I have been dishonest?" he replied.

"I believe you hide things from me."

"What makes you think I have any obligation to disclose myself to you?"

"Is there anyone here you trust more than me?" She asked this with great seriousness.

Snap was taken aback with the familiar question. He laughed at the absurdity of the idea. But before the sound had died on his lips, it occurred to him that she had made a very astute comment. Everyone and everything around him was divided into areas of black or white, good or bad, with the Dark Lord or with Dumbledore. She was the only person whose only allegiance seemed to be with him. Whoever or whatever he was didn't seem to be an issue. He recalled the examination of her emotions for him and the unwavering faith she seemed to have in him for no other reason than she loved him, right or wrong. It was an extraordinary rarity for him to be at the center of such unbridled devotion.

Still she stared, awaiting his answer.

"What do you want to know?" he asked quietly.

Davindra took a breath and began. "Why did you insist that Nott take me to the ball?"

"To ensure that you didn't associate with the wrong sort."

"And who is the wrong sort?"

"There are many here not worthy of your time or attention and several who could even be considered dangerous."

"Like who?"

"I will not say at this time."

"Is there someone at Hogwarts that you need to protect me from?"

"Perhaps."

"Who?"

"I will not say at this time."

She glared hard at him. He returned cool, impassive eyes normally reserved for the Dark Master himself.

"What has my grandmother paid you this year to tutor me?"

"She's paid me with information."

"What information?"

"I will not say at this time."

"Is that why you do it? For the money or the rewards?"

"No."

"Have you made an Unbreakable Vow?"

"No."

"Why then?"

"It's complicated."

"Is she blackmailing you?"

"No."

"Then WHY?"

"Loyalty."

"To who?"

Snap felt his throat close tightly on any words that he might attempt to say. Who indeed. Where did his loyalties lie? Suddenly he wasn't even sure.

"To those who expect it from me," he finally uttered, not doing as well to hide the bitterness as he had wished.

"I never asked for this, Professor," she said.

"Didn't you? I seem to recall a very eager first-year coming into my office clutching a floxinium dragon seed and bartering like an accomplished broomstick salesman."

"That wasn't my idea."

"You could have fooled me."

"She said we needed you. She told me you were important. She made you sound bigger than life to me."

There was an almost desperate, pleading look in her eyes as she spoke.

"End of the year!" Draco protested. "Professor, this really isn't... it's not... "

"Unless you would like it to carry over to next term, I suggest you move, Malfoy!" His fury wouldn't hold much longer if the boy did not get out of his sight.

No doubt, Draco was not used to this kind of abuse from a teacher he believed to have in his pocket simply because Snape was friends with his father. But Snape would deal with any arguments from Lucius Malfoy later. Now he simply wanted to be rid of the hormonal brat and deal with the real problem at hand.

The young man started to move, buttoning his shirt, when he stopped and looked at Snape. "You won't tell anyone, will you, Professor? My father, the other students... "

Davindra gave an incredulous look of shock and outrage to the boy who would not meet her eyes.

"A truly chivalrous concern, Malfoy," Snape said with silky venom. "If only you had thought of it before you began this little affair. Now get going. I'll take care of Miss Collins."

Draco walked from the room and disappeared down the hall. Snape turned back to Davindra who stood with her shirt tightly wrapped around her body and a look of embarrassed acrimony. He realized he still had his wand raised in her direction, so then lowered it.

They stood staring at one another. Snape's mind was a chaotic jumble of vengeance, jealousy, and rage he wanted to enact upon her. He wasn't sure which one would win out, but he would decide in due time.

Without speaking he grabbed her arm and began the march to his office.

"Where are you taking me?" she finally asked when she saw the way was clearly not toward the Ravenclaw tower.

He didn't answer, for he was afraid that when he did finally open his mouth, he might not be able to control what came out. Simple answers were not possible right now.

Soon she could see where they were headed to and gave a slight sound of apprehension and attempted to walk slower. A violent jerk brought her up to pace.

Throwing her inside his office, Snape slammed the door behind them and began a frenetic pace around the room. Davindra sank into the corner, as though wishing to disappear from the situation. With nervous fingers she buttoned her shirt and straightened her clothes.

After several moments, when he felt he could speak, Snape began in a low, deathly calm voice as he stomped around the furniture in an attempt to hide the shaking of his body.

"What exactly was the point of this evening's little tryst? Were you just trying to infuriate me, or are you really that interested in proving yourself an easy piece of ass for Mr. Malfoy's benefit?"

She glared at him from the safety of her corner. "If you're going to give me detention or report me to Professor Dumbledore, can we just get on with it?"

Snape spun about to cast her a vehement stare. "Oh, no, you will have no authority in this. I've allowed you too much control for far too long. It will stop tonight."

He continued his pacing of the room, his mind a whirling mass of confusion laced with frightening impulses.

"How often have you sneaked off to have dark liaisons with Mr. Malfoy or anyone else for that matter?" he asked.

"Since you've been spying on me, you should already know that!" she accused angrily.

"And if you didn't want to be caught, you wouldn't have worn the amulet," he raged back. He realized too late that he had given away his secret. "Besides, it is my right to know what goes on in this school, especially where my students are concerned," he added defiantly.

Davindra pulled the amulet from inside her shirt and looked at it accusingly. "So that's what this *gift* was all about."

"Oh, stop acting like you haven't wanted me constantly looking at you," he spat. "For years now you've paraded yourself in front of me in every conceivable way in hopes that I would take notice of you."

She scowled bitterly at him. "You're depraved."

She attempted to cross the room and reach the door, but Snape was in front of it, blocking her way before she was half way there.

"That is exactly what you have wanted me to think," he hissed. "You and that psychotic hag of a grandmother have done nothing but try to play me for a fool from the very beginning."

Suddenly the plan seemed very clear. He *had* been a fool. He had allowed himself to be beguiled by his most base and primal urges. They had administered careful manipulation of his dreams, thoughts, and desires all along. They had plotted to make his life nothing but torment and agony for their own benefit from the moment she stepped foot in his classroom.

"Do you know what hell I have lived through because of you?" he continued to unleash his fury upon her. "Do you want to know what hell is, Miss Collins? Five years of gut wrenching nightmares and hallucinations in which I had become the worst kind of deviant, preying on my own students."

Davindra began to back away from his menacing form. Her wide eyes held him in horrified wonder.

"I don't know what you are talking about," she said. "I've never done anything to you."

Snape moved forward still. "Haven't you? What were all those accidental touches and looks? What were the innocent kisses and clutching embraces? Surely you were never that demonstrative with any of your other teachers. No, I think not."

She was now pressed back into the corner, unable to escape his cutting words or his vicious, accusing stare. Honest fear now leaped from her eyes, and her breaths came quick and short.

"Twelve years old and you knew exactly what you were doing climbing onto my bed," he growled lowly.

"I... no... I never... I told you," she stammered, near tears.

Snape's hand closed around her delicate throat, and he found himself squeezing gently until she made a strangled sound and he released his grip. "You've never been an innocent little girl, have you, Davindra?" His voice was now a desolate, evil whisper. "What are you?"

Exhibiting surprising strength, Davindra suddenly drove her knee up into his groin. Snape released her and crumbled to his knees with a gasp of shock and pain. But he was quicker with his wand than she was and had the door locked and secured before she reached it.

She pounded on the heavy wood and pulled on the handle, which didn't budge despite her angry grunts and curses.

Slowly Snape rose, moving tenderly and struggling to get his breathing under control while blocking out the pain. At least her sudden assault on him had brought him back

to reality, cleared his head, and given him a moment to truly understand the situation. Despite the sharp pain between his legs, which had begun to ebb to a dull ache, it was suddenly obvious what he should do. A feeling of calm lucidity filled him. Everything was finally so clear.

"How dare you," he said in a quiet rasp. "After all I've done for you, after all these years. After all the promises that have been made to me which never materialized. After all I've endured and sacrificed, this is how you repay me." He moved closer to her as she continued to pull at the door, though her eyes were on him.

"I don't appreciate you giving away for free to Draco Malfoy what I have been indentured for all these years." Still his voice was calm, but icy. "Your grandmother saw fit to prostitute you to me from the very beginning in exchange for my services. You were brandished in front of my face like an illicit bribe kept just out of reach. And you played your part so well. Tempting me at every turn, driving me to madness." His fingers reached out to stroke her cheek. She flinched at his touch.

"I think it's time I collect on the debt."

Her eyes widened at his words, and her mouth opened to protest, but Snape had grabbed her arms and turned her in the direction of his chambers before she could form a reply. He shoved her down the dark, narrow staircase, his wand giving scant light to the murky depths. Though she stumbled, he pushed her on until they were through the door.

When the door closed, Snape commanded every protective spell he could think of to keep all sound in and people out. With his wand he drew the outline of the door and slashed an X through it. Nothing would disturb them now.

Davindra stood shivering in the dark, cold room. She had wrapped her arms around herself, and her eyes flitted about the walls and corners as if looking for an escape route. As he approached, she turned her frightened stare to him.

"Professor, don't do this." Her voice was a sad whisper. "Please, not this way."

Snape shrugged his robe off and tossed it onto a chair. "But isn't this what you've always wanted? You said if I were to ever touch you again, it had to be done properly. Or would you really prefer Draco Malfoy's inexperienced fumbblings?" He spoke casually, his heart finally beginning to quicken with the thought of what he was about to do.

"But not like this," she said desperately. "You know how I feel, you've seen. It shouldn't be like this!"

Snape trailed his wand down the long line of buttons on his coat, which fell open at his command. The coat landed in the same spot as his robe.

Davindra continued to back away from him as he approached.

"This is no longer about what you want," he replied. "It is what I want and what you owe me."

With a snap reflex he grabbed her wrist and pulled her to him, the feel of her warm, quaking body vivid against the thin fabric of his shirt. Taking her face in his hands, he stared deep into those ice-jade eyes he had felt trapped inside of for five years. He knew them so well. She stared back, wide-eyed with fear and fascination.

He could stop, he told himself. But all the gold in Gringotts didn't seem worthy of what he was about to have. If he hated himself tomorrow, so be it. Tonight he would finally know release from his self-sentenced prison.

Snape crushed his lips to hers and roughly forced his tongue into the soft, wet depths. Her protests were muffled, and her struggles were limited against his arms. She tasted soft and sweet, her body felt small against him. And although his technique was forced and brutal, eventually she allowed herself to become pliant in his hands. Then she no longer struggled against him at all and seemed to wilt into his arms. It allowed him to let his hands travel about her body as he tasted her lips, face, and neck. All the years of watching her had made her body a familiar map in his mind. Now there was the sensation of touch to add to all the knowledge he possessed about her beauty.

Somehow they had moved against a wall. Snape pinned her between the cold stone and his own body. Once more, but with weak reluctance, Davindra's hands attempted to push away from him. But his strength and desire overpowered her. Vague whispers of "no" and moans of "don't" came from her between his assaulting kisses, which he ignored and pressed on.

He began pulling at her clothing, not bothering with magic or buttons to free her from them. Satisfying rips and pops sounded as they gave way to expose her satiny, alabaster skin. He raked his fingers over the same spots Draco had dared touch not long before. He wanted to claim her as his own, mark her as his. But what if he were not the first? What if someone else had already taken that honor? Cold dread twisted through Snape's gut at the thought. If it were true, then someone would pay a heavy price for their thievery.

There was a rhythmic moaning that Snape suddenly realized was his own as he ground his insistent erection against Davindra's hip. He could have her right there, against the wall, and be satiated. The desire to rush, take, and satisfy was driving him. But a need to savor and enjoy called to him. This might very well be the only time he would get to experience taking something so pure that he wanted so badly and that was intended for only him. No, he would relish every exquisite second of his conquest.

Taking her wrists in hand, Snape dragged the stumbling girl to his bed. It had not been made since he last slept in it. He only allowed the Hogwarts house-elves in once a month to clean. He preferred his own filth to someone else's rummaging of his possessions.

Pushing her onto the bed, he began a frenzied stripping of the rest of her clothes. Strangely, she didn't fight him, but let her body be limp and agreeable to his directions. The last thing he removed was the binding amulet that hung between her pale, round breasts. Finally, she sat bare on the edge of his bed, her dark curtain of hair falling over her shoulders and into her eyes. Snape could have melted into a puddle from the perfect sight before him. When he reached out to touch her, he noticed a slight tremor in his hand that he wasn't sure emanated from desire or fear. His fingers traveled her body, exploring every hollow, plane, and angular bone, every expanse of supple skin, and the long, lush cascade of hair.

Pushing her back onto the bed, Snape hovered over her form, again drinking in the beauty before him. Falling upon her, he buried his face against her firm breast, his tongue memorizing the shape and taste of her delicate nipple and his fingers tracing the line of her ribs. A strangled whimper came from Davindra when his mouth touched her, but she didn't move.

His hands then traveled down to her hips and the soft, firm flesh of her backside. He thrust himself against her until he thought he would burst at any moment. Instead his fingers moved on to the downy, dark area between her legs. This time she did squirm and writh away from him. But his strength was at a zenith and could not be challenged. Two fingers found their goal, and she gave out a shaky cry as he penetrated her. Disjointed adjectives swept his mind as he tried to comprehend what he felt. *'Warm. Tight. Damp. Soft.'* He wanted to bodily crawl inside. But he intended to do the closest thing.

Fumbling with one hand, Snape freed his weeping, hard shaft from his trousers and pressed it against the spot just abandoned by his fingers. Davindra attempted to wiggle free, but he held her firm. He wanted to look into her eyes as he entered her, see her face as he claimed her.

As he attempted to push inside, she cried out, and he was surprised at the resistance her body gave. A couple more slow, forceful shoves, and he felt the flesh around him give away to accommodate. Her gasps and groans were now accompanied by damp eyes and a bitten lip.

"Oh, indeed I am the first," he breathed raggedly with satisfaction into her ear.

'Slowly, slowly,' he reminded himself. He must savor this precious thing. Looking down into Davindra's face, Snape saw her staring back in watchful wonder and surprise, a single tear sliding back into her hairline. His strokes were measured and purposeful, her breath caught with every one. She kept locked on his gaze. Her lips seemed to move in silent words he could not hear.

Slowly, he became aware of the unexpected sensation of her hand on his back. She had slipped under his shirt and was stroking his skin. Her other hand came up, and

Snape awoke in the morning feeling as though he had drunk an entire bottle of Firewhisky. His aching, naked body was tangled in sheets that still smelled of Davindra. It all came rushing back to him, and he lay back down with a groan of horror.

He placed the heels of his hands against his swollen, tired eyes and said, "Oh, why did you do it, you ruddy, stupid fuck!" to only himself.

For a few more minutes he lay in bed, steeping in remorse and guilt. Why had he allowed things to get that out of control? Why had he allowed himself to sink to the lowest level? He realized that it had all been a matter of time in the making. Eventually he would have snapped, and it would have happened anyway. It had to be that he was just looking for an excuse. Last night he found one. For once he hadn't been concerned with consequences. Which was good and well for enjoying what he had. But now he would have to deal with the backlash. He would have to ensure that this latest dirty little secret of his stayed hidden and, more importantly, wasn't repeated. However, it wasn't only himself he needed worry about. He would have to stay vigilant of her.

Pulling himself out of bed, he finally washed the last traces of her from his body, though he still caught hints of her wafting around him during the day. It was unclear if he would be permanently stained with her scent as a mark of guilt or if it was just manufactured by his own mind.

With O.W.L.s so close, Davindra was kept distracted from her attentions of Snape. Though her looks were long and full of expectation, she didn't dare confront him during class or with anyone around. During breaks and in the evenings, she along with her fellow students were too engrossed in feverish studies to think of anything else.

The third task of the Triwizard Cup loomed ahead also. Dumbledore seemed to be feeling greater concern for this last event than any of the previous. Snape even had to admit that there was an uneasiness in the air. His Dark Mark had been growing increasingly bothersome, as was Karkaroff who seemed near insanity at times. The strange disappearance of Barty Crouch was the final odd twist to the unfolding suspicious events.

Snape watched the proceedings of the O.W.L.s from a distance. Students always emerged looking stunned and exhausted from their hearings. After her Transfiguration exam, Davindra was seen walking the hall like a zombie, murmuring something about her teacup still having ears.

The last task of the Triwizard Cup took place on a clear, beautiful evening outside of the now maze-covered Quidditch pitch. Snape took his place in the stands with other faculty and staff. He had just been thinking how glad he would be when it was all over and the extra people would leave and he could return to Spinner's End for a much needed solitary rest.

A strange silence descended over the field after the champions went in. Everyone seemed anxious and nervous. Dumbledore paced and stared at the overgrown hedges as if attempting to look through them. It wasn't long before red sparks signaled one of the champions' defeat. He hoped it was Potter. Then later again, another champion fell. It appeared that Diggory and Potter were fighting it out to the end. Snape had a dreadful feeling that Hero Potter would again come out victorious.

Time ticked on quietly and everyone waited. Suddenly the Dark Mark on Snape's arm burned like a branding iron, causing him to jump up and clutch his sleeve. People around him stared, and he brought every ounce of composure into play as he excused himself and left the stands. Away from prying eyes, he pulled up his sleeve to reveal the Mark in darkest black and burning like fire. It was the call. One he hadn't received in thirteen years.

Panic swept through him as he thought of what to do. He looked around to observe that Karkaroff was nowhere to be seen. Quietly and calmly he sidled up to the fidgeting Dumbledore and whispered into his ear.

"The Dark Mark has been activated. I've been summoned."

Dumbledore turned to give him a startled but fierce look. "You're certain." His voice was firm.

Snape nodded darkly. "Karkaroff has disappeared. I imagine he has fled in fear."

The Headmaster looked around to see for himself. "We've got to find Harry and Cedric."

Calling Hagrid, McGonagall and several others, he ordered them to find the last two champions in the maze. Several more minutes passed by with an eerie silence now tinged with the electricity of fear.

Snape's Mark burned and writhed in its unanswered call. He felt nervous and fearful in ignoring it. But Dumbledore had not told him to leave. He felt reluctant to do so on his own. Ignoring it would mean his death, but so could answering it.

Suddenly there was a flash of light, and Harry, Cedric, and the Triwizard Cup appeared out of oblivion at their feet. There was a moment of stunned silence, and then the crowd ignorantly erupted in cheers. But Dumbledore hurried over and knelt next to the prostrate boys. Cedric wasn't moving and Potter seemed hysterical. Snape caught bits of Potter's strangled words. "He's back, he's back."

It was true. Snape needed no more convincing to believe the worst. And the worst still was yet to be uncovered. "Mad Eye" Moody was actually Barty Crouch Jr. under Polyjuice Potion and the primary orchestrator of Potter's entry into the tournament. It was meant to bring the boy to the Dark Lord for the purpose of implanting his withered spirit into a body and destroying the one person who could possibly defeat him. He was now flesh and blood, but still immortal.

The Minister of Magic, Fudge, would not be so easily convinced. He had not heard the story from Crouch's lips. But even if he had, he might still have found reason to disbelieve. As it was, he had Crouch sucked soulless by Dementors before anyone could protest. He would be of no use to anyone anymore. Snape couldn't remember ever seeing McGonagall so livid with rage. And Dumbledore was no happier about it.

Not even the display of Snape's Dark Mark was proof enough for Fudge. He left Hogwarts even more embedded in his delusion that all was still safe and that the faculty of the school had lost their minds.

After the Minister left, Dumbledore began to give his orders.

To Snape he turned and spoke, "You know what I must ask you to do. If you are ready... If you are prepared."

Snape kept a steady eye and a firm posture, though he felt his insides turn to water. "I am."

He swept from the castle, black cloak and mask in hand. Finding the best spot from which to Apparate, Snape closed his eyes and said a quick prayer to whomever might control the fates from above and cast himself into the heart of darkness.

Year Five: No Fury Nor Rage Denied

After school was dismissed, Snape didn't get to return to Spinner's End, as he had hoped. Instead he ran between the temporary housings for the Order and the Dark Lord. The Order's first few participants met in Hogsmeade, then later at a spot near the Leaky Cauldron. Eventually Sirius Black had the grand idea to use his family home, which was in his possession but which he had not returned to since a very young man. Snape found it hard to believe that there was an inhabitable house more dismal and decayed than his own. It was hard to see how the Black family home could have ever been impressive. And it was no wonder that the youngest son left home at sixteen never to return until desperation forced him to.

The Dark Lord continued to change venues also in hopes it would keep talk of his return to rumors. The graveyard was abandoned and never used again, though it sat close to Tom Riddle's own family manor. Instead, he chose empty caves, abandoned houses, and deserted factories as the summoning spots for Death Eaters to come and pay their respects and serve their orders.

Snape was called back to answer more questions of his time spent in Hogwarts and to divulge more information about Potter and Dumbledore and the new formation of the Order of the Phoenix. He suffered from the Cruciatus Curse on occasion, but with less frequency as time passed. The Dark Lord was still suspicious of him, but he soon began to realize that of all his Death Eaters, Snape was not only the smartest but also the most brave and cunning.

Small bits of information began to trickle into the Order: estimates of locations, possible plans, names of Death Eaters, and their tactics for recruitment. It wasn't much, but it made them feel as though they were gaining some ground against the Dark Lord. Snape was just thankful to be able to appear useful to both camps. If he were ever to lose favor with one, the other would surely turn him out, if not exterminate him immediately. Sometimes he thought it too much work to try to stay alive.

It was near mid summer before he was finally able to take a few days and return to his home. The moment the door closed and he was immersed in the dark, dank silence of the house, Snape let out a deep sigh of exhaustion and relief. He was hardly three steps up toward his bedroom when a rattle at the door stopped him.

For more than a moment, he considered ignoring whomever or whatever might be on the other side. But a nagging worry that it could be word from Dumbledore made him take the three steps back down and wrench the door open with impatient fury.

An owl sat at the stoop, a scrap of something red affixed to its leg. Snape couldn't remember the last time he had received a Howler. He stood holding the scarlet note in his hand, mentally listing the number of people who could want to yell at him, when it popped open and the unmistakable voice of Demelza Collins filled the hall.

WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?! I have been trying to track you down for days! I am positively sick with worry, and you are nowhere to be found!

Davindra has disappeared. She left my house three days ago for a stay with Lillyth Sparrow, but she never appeared. We have searched everywhere for her. We've contacted everyone we know, the Ministry, even Hogwarts, but everyone is either too busy to help us or completely unsympathetic to our troubles.

With Death Eaters and possibly the Dark Lord himself running loose, there could be no end to the horrors that Davindra has faced. I have no possible idea where she could have gone off to, so my only other recourse is to assume she has been kidnapped.

*Severus, you have GOT to do something! I beg you! You are her protector; you must do something **immediately!** And though I can assume you are quite "preoccupied" with all the new developments, I beseech you to give this matter your utmost attention. An innocent girl's life is at stake. I cannot bear to think the worst. You have to help us. I trust you above all others. Do not fail me, Severus! Contact me the moment you know something.*

Snape slumped against the wall when the note was finally silenced and lying lifeless on the floor. This was the last thing that he needed. Another task that he was bound to accomplish under penalty of death. When his anger and annoyance subsided, Snape had to admit that there was a cold ball of dread in his stomach at the thought of Davindra being lost out there amongst the danger that now oozed from every dark corner. Could it be Malfoy? Or possibly just some derelict deviant who saw an opportunity?

Forgetting his tiredness, Snape rushed to gather the Vision Well and supplies. Hopefully, Davindra still had the binding amulet around her neck. It took a frustratingly long time to have the Well operational again. Snape feared that in the precious time that was squandered, any number of horrible things could have befallen her.

Finally, the smoky substance rolled about the bowl, and Snape placed the beryl crystal inside. He spoke the words that connected the twin stones and then concentrated on Davindra and the spell that would bring her to him. The room around him disappeared, and he felt the sting of being peeled away from his surroundings. Snape found himself in a heavy fog, which cleared only slightly to reveal a rundown street shrouded in rainy mist.

Just ahead of him a figure walked hunched forward, a jacket pulled tightly around her, her damp hair clinging to her body. The street was bordered on both sides by empty, rubbish-strewn lots, sagging fences, dilapidated houses, and closed store fronts. Everything was some shade of gray. A dingy film seem to blanket everything in an oppressive coating of permanent misery.

Davindra paid the scenery no notice but forged on with purposeful steps. She also hadn't seen the two young men who had taken up pace behind her. They stayed back but didn't let her out of their sight as they scurried around the curves and corners of the buildings. Snape looked around frantically for signs of where they could be. It could be any depressed, industrial town in England. Turning a corner, they passed a weathered street marker. The crossing of Shinbone Alley and Blue Avenue. Why was that familiar? Snape focused all his concentration on remembering, though he watched the two youths watching Davindra from half a block back.

Suddenly the realization hit him. It was his town. But on the opposite end from Spinner's End. He should have recognized the depressed aura of the place immediately. Snape flung himself out of the vision and back to his home, not even noticing the routine sharp sting. Outside his home, he Apparated to the corner of Shinbone and Blue. Davindra was now several blocks ahead and moving further away while the two thugs closed in.

They looked like so many of the youths who populated the dried up mill town: hollow, bored, and hopeless. But there was an edge of keen hunger as they eyed the young girl ahead of them. It could be that they wanted just a bit of entertainment, or perhaps they assumed she had money. Worse yet was the idea that they planned to take what Snape had already had of her.

Snape clutched his wand firmly within his cloak and hurried his steps until he was directly behind them. Within a flash, both hoodlums had turned to see who had so swiftly and silently snuck up behind them. One was thin and pale with dirty blonde hair and straggly facial hair. The other had dark skin, eyes, and hair, cropped close to his head. They seemed surprised to see a man clothed in head to toe black, looking even more menacing than them.

"Who are you, Count Dracula?" the dark one asked with amusement.

Snape narrowed his eyes back at them. "Sort of."

Giving an icy, sinister glare, he moved smoothly between them to catch up with Davindra. He heard no more approaching footsteps from the set and assumed that his appearance had thwarted their plans.

She was only steps ahead. Snape quickened his stride. Finally, he was close enough to reach out and grasp her shoulder. With amazing reflexes, Davindra let out a small shriek and spun around to attempt to drive the heel of her hand into the face of whoever stood behind her. Snape caught her wrist just in time.

When she saw him, she seemed to go limp with relief. "Oh, Professor, I'm so glad to see you."

"So it seems," he hissed. "Miss Collins, I am going to want the whole story of how you came to be so far from home and in such a dangerous place, causing no end of worry to your family, but not just yet. Right now, I want you to say nothing. I am still recovering from the screechings of your grandmother's Howler."

Snape grabbed her arm and began the march toward a better district of town where he hoped he could procure a taxi for them. It was growing dark, and the rain seemed to be coming in intermittent bursts of spray.

When they finally reached the safety of Spinner's End, they were both soaked through and tired. Davindra shivered and tried to find shelter and warmth against Snape's body. But he held her a hand's-width away from him at all times.

"Where are we?" she asked weakly as they climbed the worn, creaky steps to his door.

"The place I assume you were headed all along," he answered in an equally weary voice, "my home."

Still keeping a firm grip on her arm, Snape led her through the door, then closed it behind them and secured it with anti-intruder charms. It was almost as dark and damp inside the house as out.

"You live *here*?" Davindra's voice came close to him.

'This is why I don't have guests.'

"Yes, this is where I live," he spoke with clipped words.

Leaving her near the door, Snape started a fire in the fireplace and lit a few candles with quick flicks of his wand. Davindra took timid steps toward the living area as her eyes surveyed the dim surroundings.

"Actually, this *is* very YOU," she yielded.

"As soon as you are dry, you are going to your grandmother's," he snapped, ignoring her comments.

She made a disparaged sound. "I just got here! And I'm not leaving until you talk to me."

"I am not the one who needs to do a lot of explaining!" Snape shouted from across the room as he lit the last of the candles. "What in God's name did you think you were doing setting out alone during a time like this? Look at you. No proper coat, no bags. Do you even have your wand with you?"

"Yes," she hissed back. "But I don't know what good it would do me because I'm not allowed to use magic outside of school."

"You could defend yourself. Expelled is better than dead." Snape spun around to summon tea from the kitchen and a bottle of Firewhisky. "Did you even know that you were being followed by two delinquents who were only steps from overtaking you?"

"I saw them! I was just ignoring them, hoping they'd go away."

"Oh, good plan." Snape let his voice and his eyes ooze sarcasm, then took a long pull from the bottle in his hand.

The tea came to rest on a table near the fire, and Davindra took Snape's usual chair near it. He continued an angry pace about the room as he watched her pour herself a cup of tea and huddle around it for warmth.

"I was worried about you," she finally spoke. "You haven't answered any of my owls, you haven't spoken two words to me since... that night. And I know that if You-Know-Who is back, then that must mean..." She stopped and looked over her cup at him with haunted, weary eyes.

Snape stared back blankly. *'The pathetic, stupid, misguided, sweet child.'*

"Miss Collins, I am a grown man. I can take care of myself in most every situation," he stated. The Firewhisky had now soothed his jangled nerves enough for him to speak reasonably. "I have been extremely busy and doing a great deal of traveling. I did not receive your owls. And yes, the Dark Lord is back and that means a great many things to a great many people. Taking off and telling no one where you were going is the most foolish thing you could have ever conceived. I don't have time, especially now, to go chasing after you."

Davindra lowered her eyes and ran her fingers through her still damp hair. She uttered a soft, "I'm sorry," into her tea. "I just needed to know you were alright."

Snape moved to sit on the couch across from her. "Tell me, what did you think you could do if you had managed to find me on your own and I was in some dire situation?" He cocked his eyebrow and drilled a grim stare into her.

She looked back with a tired but intense gaze, and her words were soft but determined. "I'd do anything I had to."

Taking another drag from the bottle, Snape then set it on the floor. He let his body come forward on the couch and magnified his cold expression. It was best to set things straight now rather than later, he decided.

"You know what happened was a mistake, don't you?" he began. "It was a terrible lapse in judgment on my part. I accept the responsibility for losing control, and you have every right to be angry..."

"Don't." Her voice was suddenly bitter and strong. "Don't you dare say you're sorry for it."

"It can't happen again, Davindra," he continued in an imperturbable way. "If it bothers you, I could Oblivate the memory, though it would be harder to do since some time has passed."

She stood up so quickly the cup in her lap fell to the floor with a sharp pop that sent the pieces scattering.

"You contemptible prick," she snarled. "You weren't so calm and matter-of-fact the night you dragged me to your bed. So, don't sit there and talk like it was a meaningless fling. The very idea that I let Draco Malfoy touch me sent you into such a jealous rage you couldn't even see straight! You couldn't bear the idea that someone besides you might have me."

Snape looked up at her blandly, through lank strands of damp hair, pursing his lips in an attempt to hide his surprise at her shrewd insight.

"Language, Miss Collins," he drawled. "That's a very romantic idea, but a bit fantastical. You have bombarded me with sexual advances for years now. I simply gave in, inappropriate and wrong as it was."

Davindra continued to glare at him with incredulous malice. "You think you are so cool. You think you have everyone fooled. Well, I haven't spent the past six years watching your every move and not learned a few things about you that I doubt even you are aware of." She leaned down to look him in the eye. "You can lie about a lot of things, Severus Snape, but not about this and not to me."

Snape stood up. "It's time for you to go. I'll let you explain to your grandmothers where you were and what you were doing, though I do still expect discretion about our little mishap. Tell Madame Collins no thanks is necessary."

Snape found his seldom used box of Floo Powder. He hoped it was still good. Holding it out before her, he continued his impassive blank expression. Davindra's eyes still smoldered darkly, and her lips stayed pressed into a thin line.

"This isn't the end of this. Not by a long way," she said with dangerous calm, taking a handful of powder. Throwing the powder into the fire, she gave him one last lethal look as she stepped into the fireplace and spoke the name, "Sparrow Manor." With a burst of green flame, she was gone.

Year Six: The Truth Enslaved

Chapter 12 of 21

The walls of Hogwarts have ears and eyes. There is little safe haven for Snape as Davindra spins her clever web of temptation.

The reprieve was only a couple of days. Only a few short days for Snape to sequester himself in his house and see and speak to no one. He spent hours upon hours lying in bed thinking and periodically dozing. Dumbledore, the Dark Lord, Davindra, and Madame Collins floated in and out of his consciousness.

Sometimes he would hold his bare forearm up and stare at the Dark Mark stained onto his skin. Snape would allow his mind to go back to those years right out of Hogwarts when he wanted recognition and respect so badly he was willing to do anything for it. So he had sold himself cheaply to a master who gave him quick and easy promise of it. Now he was forever indentured for something he would never attain. His arm felt heavy, like it was bound in lead chains. He would let it limply fall to the bed. Snape doubted he would live to see freedom again.

When his brain got too overwhelmed with things from the Dark Lord and Dumbledore, and he began to forget what promises belonged to whom, he would allow himself to crawl into the delicious memory of Davindra. His hectic life had kept him from putting much thought into the trust they had experienced. There wasn't enough of his brain or heart left free to devote to dwelling upon the matter. Mostly, he was glad of it. But in those quiet times when his thoughts would nearly drive him mad, it was glorious comfort to take himself back to that incredible moment when nothing else mattered and no one existed besides the two of them.

He couldn't blame her for hating him. It was exactly what his words were intended to inspire. It was better that way, rather than her go on attempting to trail behind him because of some stupid concept of love or devotion. She would only get hurt, perhaps even killed. Loving him was detrimental to anyone, it seemed.

When even these thoughts became too much, there was still the memory of her flesh. The warmth and softness still registered in his fingers. Her light, sweet, fruity-vanilla scent still resided in his senses. The texture and taste of her skin and lips danced tauntingly on his tongue. The ring of dark green around the icy, pale iris of her eyes, the way her body fitted against him, the smell of her hair, her kisses, her kisses, her kisses, her kisses.

In the end, that memory would no longer inspire contentment but instead a gnawing, ardent hunger for something that he could never again have. He would soon find himself feeling spent, exhaling ragged breaths, and holding a wilting erection, covered in his own fluid.

Eventually the Dark Mark sang its fiery beckoning, and Snape knew he could linger no more in his own sanctuary of self-pity. Bidding his dreary home another seasonal good-bye, he headed off to fall at the feet of a merciless master.

Always the Dark Lord wanted information that Snape didn't possess and was reluctant to believe Snape's ignorance. Dumbledore did him a favor by not telling him many sensitive things, such as certain members of the Ministry who were Order contacts or the hiding places of certain weapons. The wise Headmaster knew that even the best Occlumens could be broken, and therefore, no one person, outside of Dumbledore, knew everything.

Even though the Dark Lord was not relying on Snape to the fullest extent, that didn't mean that Snape wasn't privy to important information. Death Eaters were vain, insecure parasites who felt the need to brag to each other about the amount of trust the Dark Lord put in them. This supplied most of the best information Snape had to give the Order. And because Lucius Malfoy was the biggest braggart of them all, Snape was able to come to Dumbledore with the most useful piece of information yet.

The Dark One wanted the prophecy. He wanted it in its original, completed form. And he planned to take it from its safe-keeping in the Department of Mysteries. It seemed that the Lord still smarted from Snape's partial delivery of the prophecy fourteen years earlier and now felt like he could undo the mistakes of the past if he only possessed that which had brought him down. At last the Order would have a clear mission to follow.

Dumbledore ordered Snape to make a full, detailed report to the Order as soon as possible. It would mean a trip to Sirius Black's house and surrounding himself with people who neither liked nor trusted him. Sometimes he hated Dumbledore for his insistence on his faith in him and the wizard's stubbornness that others accept Snape as readily as he with no proof of allegiance. Though everyone would listen to Snape's reports and seem eager for the information he gave, he had the feeling that without the Headmaster's backing, he would not be allowed in their midst. In fact, they would probably have him on the top of their list to eradicate, right under the name of the Dark Lord himself.

As usual, meetings of the Order always ended up in debates over the protection of Harry Potter and who was on guard next and who had seen what when they'd last guarded him. Snape generally shut out this particular discussion because he felt that he paid his dues guarding the obnoxious prat during school time.

After another weary gathering of bickering, discussion, and pep-talks, everyone stood about in groups discussing everything from gossip at the Ministry to how their garden was suffering from the lack of rain. Snape talked to no one and was organizing his notes to leave when he felt the eyes of Sirius Black and Remus Lupin on him. The two old friends would look at Snape then speak in quiet tones to each other. They made no attempt to hide their blatant slandering. Snape glared back and finished gathering his notes.

"You're welcome to stay and have a bite to eat, Severus." Molly Weasley appeared at his arm, tying on an apron. Her wide, childish face held a smile of trepidation not unlike the simple expressions he had seen on her offspring.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Weasley," Snape replied grimly, casting a scowl in the gossiping pair's direction.

He attempted to move on through the small clumps of people in the dim kitchen, but the clearest path took him right past Black and Lupin.

"You know, you look like you could use a good meal," Lupin said casually when Snape walked near. "Mrs. Weasley is an excellent cook. Does things with potatoes that I didn't think possible."

"Thanks for the warning, Lupin," he sneered in reply. "But I don't think any of us can stomach a meal whilst in present company."

"Quite right," Black piped in, leveling a dark glare at Snape. "I suffer from enough indigestion as it is listening to Snivellus's reports."

The two men stared at each other viciously for a few seconds.

"So," Snape began with a wicked smirk, "how's the cleaning coming, Black? That house-elf managed to teach you a thing or two about dusting and sweeping, especially since you can't be of any real use to the Order?"

Immediately Lupin put himself between the two wizards who had started for each other, their wands out, and looks of murder in their eyes.

"Alright, you two, I think that's enough," he said in calm yet firm voice that Snape had heard him use on students while he held his position at Hogwarts. "What would Dumbledore say about a full-blown brawl here in the middle of headquarters. There was supposed to be a truce, wasn't there? His orders were for no open hostility."

"It's his fault," Black hissed through clenched teeth while jabbing a bony finger in Snape's face. "He shouldn't even BE here!"

Snape started to throw an equally scathing retort when Lupin again intervened. "Sirius, that's enough! We don't need to rehash this old tripe here. Severus was just

leaving, weren't you?" The question was issued in the form of a command which Snape hated to obey on principle alone, though he did greatly wish to escape from the suffocating den of suspicion.

"Ever the peacemaker, aren't you, Lupin?" Snape uttered silkily with a narrowed gaze. "How honorable. Perhaps you could even learn something from your flea-bitten friend here, Black. That is, something besides urinating on trees and licking your own balls." He delivered his best chilling smile to both, though Black again made a move toward him against Lupin's protective arm.

"Maybe if you could lick your own balls you wouldn't have to coerce pretty, young students to do it for you!" Black said with incredulous triumph.

Snape cast an eviscerating look at the wolfman standing between him and Black. "Do you need to be muzzled to keep from spreading lies, Lupin?" he snarled viciously.

Lupin returned a dim smile. "Let's call it payback for you not being able to keep your mouth shut to the Minister of Magic about my furry little secret."

Before Snape could retaliate, a firm hand had him around the waist and was pulling him towards the door.

"A'right boys, grand show, grand show indeed," Mad Eye Moody piped in gruffly as he strong-armed the group apart. "Now save the rest for the real battle ahead."

Snape was escorted to the door of number twelve, Grimmauld Place by the ex-Auror with people looking on as though he were a drunk being tossed from a pub. In the hallway, Snape shook Moody loose.

"I can walk without assistance, thank you." He did little to keep the vitriol from his voice.

"You just make sure you keep that greasy head 'o yours cool when you're in here," Moody said firmly, his artificial eye spinning about watchfully. "We don't have time to be puttin' out little fires under our feet when the whole blame world is set to explode. If you can't play nice with Lupin and Black just stay the bloody hell away from 'em."

"I will if they will," Snape said gritting his teeth and casting an evil look back at the kitchen.

"They will and so will you, my dark friend," Moody stated with a pinky finger crooked in Snape's direction, "or/// settle the score betwixt the lot of you once and for all."

Snape turned on his heels and left the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix with a bubbling, hot rage in his chest.

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After Harry Potter was attacked by Dementors, the Order put itself into high alert. Unless the Dark Lord had already got to the guards of Azkaban, which could be assumed untrue since most of its cells were still filled with Death Eaters, then that would mean the Ministry itself set the ghoul upon Potter. Dumbledore had indeed been correct in his assessment that the governing body of the wizard kingdom was now plotting against the Hogwarts Headmaster and his small band of soldiers. Snape hated the sound of those odds.

Worse still was when Dumbledore called a meeting to announce that the Ministry had unabashedly placed a spy in Hogwarts. An inane decree had stipulated that the Ministry could fill any vacant faculty or staff position they wished. And since the Defense Against the Dark Arts position remained free, and the real Mad Eye Moody refused to take another go at it, the Ministry had placed their own in the spot. A boot-licking, draconian toad of a woman named Dolores Umbridge who sent a shudder through everyone she spoke to. When her appointment was announced, every Order member who also held a Hogwarts position let out an audible groan of protest.

Dumbledore held up his hands for quiet. "I can understand your displeasure. Believe me, no one is less happy about the Ministry's attempts to run Hogwarts than I. As most of you know, this woman is dangerous. Oh, she may look like someone's maiden aunt, but she is as cunning and cold-blooded as any Death Eater we will face. She's simply on the other side. I will warn everyone to take great precautions in dealing with her. Be careful in the classroom, be careful in the staff room. Say nothing in front of her that you wouldn't say to the Minister himself. With great subtlety remind your students to be equally cautious in her presence. She is looking for ammunition for the Ministry and for chinks in our armor. Let's not allow her to find any. In fact, if we pay attention, I would expect to be rewarded with some valuable insight to the Ministry's plan of attack."

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So the school year began with flurry of suspicious rumors and nervous fear. Some parents didn't want their children to come back to Hogwarts at all. For half of those, it was because they feared the Dark Lord's return. The other half feared the insanity and delusions that seemed to have taken hold of the teaching staff.

Equal unrest settled upon the teachers who knew what they were facing in the year ahead. Dumbledore hid his displeasure and worry masterfully from everyone as he approached the new year with his usual display of enthusiasm and whimsy. But several of them knew the truth that lay under the twinkling eyes and festive robes.

Snape considered himself lucky that his constant dour disposition allowed him to never have to pretend to be or feel something he didn't. Though often, "dour" was just exactly what he did feel.

The night of the welcome feast, "tired" and "distracted" could be added to his list of visible emotions. He paid attention to little besides the food on his plate, which he pushed about glumly with his fork, and the table of chattering, squirming Ravenclaws.

Davindra sat amongst her usual group, talking as normally as ever, except for those times when she would feel Snape's eyes on her and turn to look at him. He would then look away and pretend to be heavily engrossed in his steak and kidney pie. Soon he would have the sensation of being watched and look out to find her staring back at him. They would hold their exchange for a second, and something almost like a smile would dart across her face before she would look away and continue her conversation.

Snape had expected a much chillier reception from her after their last exchange during the summer. In fact, he meant to check his bed for snakes and his tea for poisons after she returned to Hogwarts. Her fury had been nearly as unsettling as the Dark Lord's. Her calm manner and slight smiles only added to his suspicion.

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Dumbledore had been right about Umbridge's presence at Hogwarts. She made every room she inhabited nearly unbearable to be in. The moment she appeared in the staff lounge, people would begin making lavish excuses for things they had to do and places they had to be. If the staff were to get pinned in the same space with her long enough, Umbridge would get around to asking a lot of personal questions about their past and the subject they taught and their views on Ministry regulations and Albus Dumbledore.

Some showed more grace in their escape attempts than others. The best yet was Flitwick, saying that he suddenly realized he'd left something levitating, before his short legs carried him from the room unusually fast. Snape would simply open the door, and if he caught sight of the sweater-wearing toad, he would turn on his heels and walk out, often with her simpering voice sounding from behind the closing door, "Oh, Professor Snape, I was wondering if I might... hem HEM!"

It was no surprise to find Davindra Collins in his sixth-year Potions class. Her O in the Potions O.W.L. ensured her continuance in the study of potion-making. There was a disconcerting, satisfied smirk on her face as Snape began the class on the rigorous education in advanced potions. He found himself not wanting to turn his back on her all during the time he prowled about the room surveying everyone's progress.

Stopping by her cauldron to see that the concoction she had created was the exact shade of gold required, their eyes met over the steam.

"Everything look alright, Professor?" she asked with feigned innocence.

"Strangely enough, yes," he spoke quietly. "And I find it most troubling." He gave her a sinister scowl as he moved on.

The first day of classes was barely over and Snape was sitting in his office wondering if it was too early to start drinking when a knock at his door interrupted his dark thoughts.

Getting up, he stomped to the door to wrench it open and see Davindra standing at the threshold, smiling pleasantly.

"Hello, Professor," she nearly purred. "I was wondering if you had a moment."

Ever tall and willowy, her ash-black hair tucked into a haphazard coil, and her metal-green eyes flashing, Snape couldn't help but find an unearthly beauty about her that made him uncomfortable.

He glared back at her, but said nothing as he left the door open and returned to his desk.

"I'm surprised you're speaking to me," he said. "Why the change of heart after that histrionic exit you made from my fireplace this past summer?"

Davindra had closed the door and walked into the room. She began a slow pace of his shelves, reminding him of Madame Collins when she had something especially savory to reveal to him.

"Are you sorry I'm not still angry?" she asked.

"More confused and suspicious," he replied, sinking back into his chair.

She spun on the balls of her feet to face him, her face still shining with untold surprises.

"Well, for your information, I am still angry. You were very mean and hurtful. But after a few days I came to realize something about us."

Snape had begun digging in his desk for a bottle of anything to get him through her speech.

"And I don't suppose there is anything I can do to stop you from sharing it with me?" he uttered distractedly.

A faint chuckle left her as she sat herself on the tall work stool in the corner, hiking her skirt up to reveal pale knees over which she leaned to survey him.

"Every year we do the same thing. Have you noticed?" she began. "One of us gets angry at the other, and we spend weeks or even months avoiding each other, but eventually one of us breaks down and comes crawling back to the other with some excuse of why we have to spend time together."

Snape had found his bottle of elf-made wine and was pulling out the stopper when he replied harshly, "I've never crawled for anything in my life. The reason I have to keep reining you back in is because it's what your grandmother has paid me for."

Giving her an especially dark look, he searched about for a goblet or cup and, when finding none, drank directly from the bottle. The alcohol began to seep into his tight, coursing veins, relieving only a shred of the tension she inspired in him.

"I thought you said it wasn't about the payment," she said smoothly. "Loyalty, wasn't it? But you never said to who."

"Never is any loyalty or payment enough to deal with your insipid, insistent pestering," he snarled at her, feeling the wine already beginning to thicken his tongue and mind.

Again she laughed, a dismissive, knowing laugh. "Don't you see?" she insisted. "We're inevitable. We keep trying to push each other away, but we just end up back at the same spot."

"That sounds like more of your romantic, fantasy life getting mixed up with reality. I've told you there can be nothing between us."

"But for all you protest, you know it's the truth."

Snape would never allow her to see that her words were not unfamiliar to him. Ever since their encounter last year, he too had wondered how much fate and destiny had to do with their constant gravitation to each other. Usually he told himself it was just his own pathetic weakness that made him unable to resist her.

He sat the bottle of wine on his desk and stood. "This is a ridiculous conversation, Miss Collins. I told you what happened was just an unfortunate misjudgment on my part. Outside of that, you only have yourself to blame for the emotional outbreaks that make you so miserable."

"Are you a gambling man, Professor?" she asked brightly.

"What?" Snape looked at her, bemused.

She stepped down from the stool and walked to stand in front of him. She was nearly tall enough to look him in the eye.

"You and I never seem to go backwards, no matter how bad we may fight. In the end we just move ahead."

Snape still had no idea what she was talking about and had started to turn away with a grunt of annoyance when her question stopped him.

"How long do you think it will be?"

"How long what will be, Miss Collins?" he snapped with clenched teeth.

"Before you give in to how badly you want me again?"

There was a look of satisfied wonder on her face that he wished he could wipe away with one slap. His hand twitched to do so, but instead he stared back at her with menacing promise.

"I've told you, you hopelessly pathetic, obtuse child, that that will never happen again. It was a mistake the first time."

"So you've never given it a second thought?" she asked with wide-eyed interest. "Never fondly thought about any of the details, never fantasized about what it might be like again?"

Snape grabbed the bottle on his desk to keep from grabbing her throat. He then leaned in to her and snarled, "You weren't that good."

"Is that why you keep trying to drown yourself in wine?" she asked with a slight smile. "Besides, it was my first time! I told you I just needed a little tutoring."

"And I told you I'm not interested!" he shouted at her. "Now get out."

While he stomped back to his desk and flopped down into his chair, she sighed tiredly.

"Professor... Severus," she said in a quiet, honest tone. "I love you. You know it. We don't know what the future is going to bring. Can't we just stop playing this exhausting game? Can't you just be honest with me?"

her jaw unhinging as she devours them whole."

"We knew she would be a thorn in our sides," the Headmaster said calmly.

"Going through our mail is one thing, but inflicting physical harm to students for punishment?" McGonagall continued to rage as she approached the desk behind which Dumbledore sat, his fingertips touched together in front of his nose. "Harry has done at least two weeks of detention with her. God knows what she's done to him under the guise of Ministry approved torture."

"That is disturbing," Dumbledore spoke. "And you have reminded him that he must tread carefully with Umbridge?"

Another sound of disgust escaped the witch. "Yes, but without going into too much detail I'm afraid he might not understand the extent of danger he places himself in."

"He has always been thick-headed when it came to rules," Snape couldn't help but comment. "It isn't surprising that he has gotten himself into hot water with her."

Both pairs of eyes turned to him. "Of course Harry is a target for her," Dumbledore said. "Fudge's cronies at the Ministry couldn't remove him from Hogwarts, so it is her job, one of many I'm afraid, to break him. I'm sure she's easily finding his buttons and antagonizing him just to set an example."

"Can't you talk to him, Albus?" McGonagall said desperately. "You're the only one he'd listen to."

The old wizard sighed. "I don't think that's a good idea right now, Minerva."

"I think he's feeling abandoned," she said sadly.

"I don't disagree," he replied in equal somber. "But it's for his best interest that he and I don't associate as much for the time being."

Snape and McGonagall stared at the Headmaster for a moment before exchanging their own looks.

"There's nothing we can do to protect any of our students?" she asked with faded hope.

"Minerva, there is little we can do to protect ourselves at this point," Dumbledore replied.

"Well, I refuse to let that reptile of a woman bully me!" McGonagall sputtered, drawing herself up defiantly.

"Be careful," Dumbledore said with a finger pointed for emphasis. "One word from her and even you would be gone."

"I'd like to see her try."

Snape rarely saw the Transfiguration teacher this impassioned. He had to admit he felt more than a bit impressed with her courage.

She then looked at Snape as if expecting him to echo her sentiment. Snape looked back and pursed his lips in consideration of speaking out.

"I'll do whatever the Headmaster asks of me," he replied.

"My orders stand," Dumbledore said. "Watch out for yourself, watch out for the students, and don't give Umbridge anything that she can take back to the Ministry."

McGonagall again looked to Snape. "Will Davindra be alright?"

"She'll be fine," he replied. "Her pride was perhaps more wounded than her flesh. She isn't used to such reprimands."

"If Demelza Collins finds out about this, there will be hell to pay," McGonagall said truthfully.

Dumbledore nodded. "Do you think she knows yet?" he directed toward Snape.

"If she did, either you or I would have had a Howler at our doorstep first thing this morning. I will say that Miss Collins does not tend to cower at her grandmother's skirts. She prefers to fight her own battles, which in itself has proven to be a point of contention between them."

"I didn't know you knew her so well," the witch at his side commented.

"Madame Collins has requested Severus take such an interest," Dumbledore replied, saving Snape from creating his own lie. "If you can find a delicate way to suggest that she not recount this episode to her grandmother, it would be most beneficial," he continued to Snape.

Snape returned a nod and commitment to the effort. The two teachers left the Headmaster's office and walked down the hall together.

Suddenly McGonagall startled him with the exclamation, "We'd all better off if someone would just strangle that woman with one of her own damn sweaters!"

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A discrete word with Davindra was not hard to manage. She seemed to somehow stay in the peripheral of his presence without ever looking as though she were trying. A crook of his finger and mumbled whisper to meet him in his office after class was all that was needed to guarantee her compliance

Not a moment later, she appeared at his door, eager for whatever he might have to impart to her. Standing in front of his desk, she twirled her wand between her fingers as small blue sparks emitted from its tip.

Finally, Snape took the wand from her hand. "Stop before you inadvertently conjure a demon onto my desk," he snapped. "Now, Miss Collins, about what we spoke of the other night. I'm afraid I must ask a very important favor of you."

She cocked her head and smiled mischievously. "A favor, Professor?"

"It is of dire importance that you not tell your grandmother of last night's incident. Tell no one, in fact."

"And why not?"

"Because we both know that Madame Collins would be quite upset by it and probably attempt to take matters into her own hands."

"And would that be bad? Especially since you've already said you would do nothing," Davindra stated.

Snape bit his lip to keep from screaming in his own frustration. "I said *could* not do anything. That doesn't mean that I didn't wish to."

"That's a fine hair you're splitting." The roguish smile remained. "Suppose you tell me why my keeping quiet is so important."

"I'm afraid I am unable to divulge exactly why, Miss Collins. I simply need you to trust me when I say it is of a life or death matter."

Davindra looked at him with fierce contemplation, her frost-shaded eyes narrowed in scrutiny. "And what do you have to barter for this pledge of my silence?"

Dread coursed coldly through Snape's body. He should have expected no less from the conniving little witch.

"I am not in a position to offer anything of any real interest to you," he said through a jaw tightened with displeasure.

"Then how can I be expected to not mention this horrible incident to my most beloved relative?" Davindra said with a dramatic lilt in her voice and a flutter of her eyelashes.

"You tell your grandmother as little as possible about your life as it is," Snape said darkly, glaring into her amused face. "I seriously doubt you would be tempted to now if it weren't just to find pleasure in spiting me."

"Then why ask?"

"It is imperative that I get your word on this, Miss Collins."

"What is my word worth?"

They stood at an impasse, which Snape knew he could not cross alone. There was no way of forcing his will outside of Obliviating the entire episode from her head, which could prove more damaging to the cause if Umbridge found out. Dumbledore should not have asked him this. If only the old wizard would have taken on the task himself, there would have been no question of her obedience.

Snape sighed, closed his eyes for a moment, and then opened them to stare at her with bleak disfavor. "What do you want? And keep in mind what I have already said I cannot and will not give."

Her face showed not one nerve of tension or worry. A look of scheming pleasure soon spread over her. She stepped closer to speak softly.

"Ten minutes." Her eyes burned into him like acid. "Ten minutes just to touch you. Nothing lewd," she assured, "nowhere intimate. Just ten minutes to let my fingers comprehend what my eyes have memorized for all these years."

If she had asked for the moon on a gossamer thread, he could have consented more easily. She stood barely a breath's width from him, her eyes not allowing him to pull away, silently demanding he acquiesce to her proposition.

The words, 'no, absolutely not,' were in his head and on his tongue. But when he spoke, he heard, "FIVE minutes, one hand only, from an arm's length away, nothing more than your finger tips, and nowhere even remotely intimate."

Dumbledore had no idea what Snape risked with his loyalty. All around him were deadly traps set to ensnare him.

A smile of triumphant delight began at the corners of Davindra's lips and moved over her whole face. Snape conjured an hourglass that sat on his desk, five minutes worth of sand hanging in the top chamber, ready to fall at his command. He then held out his arms in a gesture of agreement that payment should begin.

"Alright?" he snapped impatiently.

Quickly she looked about the room, as if to try to decide how to set the stage as best to enjoy her award.

"Uhhh, here." She pulled Snape so he stood directly in front of his desk. Her hands on his shoulders pushed him to sit on the edge, bringing him just under her own eye-level.

He sighed with exasperation. "Will you get on with this embarrassing demonstration. I do have other things to do."

Davindra came to stand between his open legs. It was entirely too close to allow Snape to even breathe comfortably. With firm hands he moved her to just outside of his knees. A final flick of his wand sent the hourglass in motion.

For several seconds she didn't move, but simply stared into his face. Just as he was about to comment that her time was running out, the slow rise of her hand caught his eye. With glacial speed, her fingers came to rest lightly against his temple. There was a soothing coldness to her touch that seemed to both relax and stimulate him. With equal pace, her hand trailed back to rake into his hair. A shivery sensation followed along behind it.

Her eyes were no longer on his but lingering after the path of her touch. Perhaps it would be more bearable if he closed his own eyes, Snape thought. But in doing so, he found that the sensation of her fingers only intensified to consume all of his senses. The sound of her touch and the smell of her body mingled with the old memories of her taste and sight of her flesh. He allowed himself to fall into the fantasy. It was only five minutes, after all.

Her caress continued from his hair down to his neck, then to the line of his jaw. The raspy sound of her fingers over the late day growth of his beard was the loudest thing in the room. Up his hollow cheek to trace the arch of his eyebrow, across the closed lid of his eye, down his crooked nose, and softly brushing against his lips, she moved. Snape found himself exhaling a breath he hadn't realized that he was holding.

The gentle movement continued on down his chin and neck to his heavy, black coat. Her fingers stopped at the buttons, and she touched them as sensuously as she had his face. He felt the top button near his throat release, and he opened his eyes to remind her of the rules of this enterprise.

Her face held no lascivious intentions or traces of wicked deception. She was awash with enraptured wonder and longing, as though she were setting her eyes upon the sun for the first time. Never had he known anyone to look upon him in such a way. Never had he known a touch so gentle or desperate.

At the high collar of his shirt her fingers tugged to get access to the skin beneath. He stilled his own restless hands by gripping the edge of the desk to keep from reaching up and exposing himself to her to quell the longing he now felt for her touch.

A light flutter of her hand against the pale flesh of his neck was as intense as any punch to the gut he could ever experience. And his breath disappeared from his body just as forcefully. With maddening slowness, her fingers explored his Adam's apple and the hollow at the base of his throat. The following button was a hindrance of which she made quick work of and then continued on the journey of his skin. His collarbone was the next fortunate piece of flesh to savor her exploration. The few sparse hairs upon his chest prickled when she grazed against them.

The next button lay ahead but with a swift, nimble flourish of fingers, it too gave way. Her hand pushed inside his shirt to rest, palm down, against his thundering heart. Davindra herself had moved closer, her breath shallow gasps rushing past her parted lips. Snape watched her from a state of unexplained paralysis, feeling drunk in his desire and helpless in the tide of yearning her artful play had summoned.

A 'pop' from behind them startled them both from their mesmerizing dream. Snape realized that the hourglass had signaled the end of their session.

"Time's up," he uttered in a thick voice.

"If you say so," she murmured, her eyes forced back to focus on the reality around them.

Davindra backed away from him with a look of grave mourning, as though her last meal had been pulled from her grasp.

Snape also had to demand his mind shake the spell he had been under and tend to the business at hand before he could allow himself to collapse into a quivering pile of caged, salacious, carnal urges. He buttoned the coat that lay open with Davindra's eyes still hungrily raking over his skin.

"Do I now have your word that you will speak to no one of Professor Umbridge's activities, no matter how abominable they may appear?"

By the end of the year, everyone was becoming like caged animals, with too little freedom and too many demands. Many were agitated and resentful and small squabbles broke out amongst students and even some of the staff.

Snape knew his Christmas break would not be one of relaxation. The Dark Lord didn't celebrate Christmas, so then, neither would the Order. Since he had never cared for holiday celebrations, he supposed he would miss nothing except the grateful quiet of Hogwarts when few inhabited it.

As he busied himself about his office, checking to see what supplies would need to be restocked for the new year ahead, Davindra came to his door. She hadn't come to his office since the intimate buy-off, though they had exchanged some very heavy looks and uttered several comments laced with double meaning to each other.

"What do you want, Miss Collins?" he asked in his usual brisk tone.

"Only a word or two," she replied closing the door behind her and strolling comfortably about the room as he continued his tasks.

"Professor Umbridge hasn't been doing anything more to traumatize that alabaster flesh, then?" he asked with a libidinous hint.

Davindra took a stool nearest the storage cupboard from which he worked and gave him an equally flirtatious smirk.

"I've behaved myself and so has she. But I still loathe the fat, old cow. I'd like to rip that stupid bow from her head and shove--"

"Now, now, Miss Collins, I cannot tolerate such disrespect spoken about a fellow teacher in my presence." But he gave her a slight smile with his words.

Davindra smiled back. "Well, actually what I've come for is to ask if you've heard from my grandmother lately."

"Mercifully, no," Snape replied finishing his list and closing the cupboard. "Not since she came to my home to interrogate me about your foul mood and disappearing act over the summer."

Her thin, dark brows furrowed together. "So she didn't make arrangements for my tutoring, even?"

"Since you have not been ceaselessly haunting the corner of my office, we can assume not."

"But isn't that odd?" she asked.

It actually was, and Snape had thought it over many times. For six years Demelza Collins had somehow managed to get him to agree to keep watch over her granddaughter, but this year she had remained unnervingly silent.

"Perhaps not so odd," he replied. "You did quite well on your O.W.L.s. Eight, I hear? It could have been nine. So it could be that she sees no further need."

"But I have N.E.W.T.s next year," Davindra offered. "And every year I've been at Hogwarts she's written to me nearly every week. But I can count on one hand the number of letters I've gotten from her so far this year. When I've asked what she's been doing, she ignores the question. Mother and Granny Lilly don't have anything to say about it either."

"Well, then, it's a mystery," Snape said with a tired boredom.

"No, it's more than that. Even this past summer she was acting strange," she continued to murmur, still pondering the situation.

After a few quiet moments where Snape didn't speak and continued looking through lists of things that either needed doing or needed restocking, Davindra finally moved from her chair to stand close to him.

"So you're staying here for the holidays?"

"Yes," he replied absently.

"Would you like for me to stay?"

He looked up from the papers in his hands. "Why would I want that?"

She shrugged, but continued to give him a coquettish smile.

"I'm sure your family would appreciate your company much more than I. Besides I keep myself quite busy during the bit of peace and quiet I get with all of you pesky ankle-biters gone," he replied tersely, going back to his lists.

"Don't you ever get lonely?"

"No."

"I don't believe you."

"Believe what you like, Miss Collins," he said with a weary sigh of annoyance.

He felt her move closer against him. Her breath rustled against the hair that hung against his face. Standing immobile, trying to ignore her was becoming more difficult. When she reached her fingers up to stroke the strands of lank hair from his face, Snape grabbed her wrist.

"When are you going to stop this absurd, futile game?" he asked sharply, looking into her face.

"When are you?" she replied with an arch of her eyebrow.

Snape dropped her wrist and strode to the other side of the desk.

"I grow tired of telling you over and over that there can be nothing between us," he growled.

"Oh, and I'm tired of hearing it!" she said with a small laugh. "Especially since you can't convince me it's true."

She walked to join him on the same side of the desk. "When I touched you," she began softly, staring deeply into his eyes, "did you not feel that suffocating ache for it to never end?"

"Don't push me," he said darkly. "I don't think you would want me to lose my composure again."

"Actually, I think it's what we both want." There was a lusty invitation to her words that Snape had a growing desire to act upon.

But he stared back, not letting the intensity of her gaze or her words dismantle him.

"Davindra, I've won't lie about the fact that I find you attractive and that you do affect me. I'm a normal man, with normal desires. But let's not pretend that what you are really looking for is something that I can give you. For I don't even have the ability to produce that kind of sentiment. You are confusing time spent in my bed with love and

affection. Yes, I felt that ache. I feel it every time you come near me. But that doesn't mean that more will ever arise from it. I'm afraid you will just wind up bitterly disappointed."

Only slightly did her look harden into one of self preservation. "I suppose the fact that I love you doesn't even count for anything?"

Snape turned away from those demanding, inscrutable eyes. "It doesn't matter that you love me," he replied blandly.

"You know I can only hear you completely disregard my emotions so many times." A sad amusement settled over her.

Snape sighed and ran his hand through his hair as he tried to think of some way out of claustrophobic box she had cornered him into.

"I am not trying to hurt you, Davindra," he said from behind closed eyes. "Believe it or not, I'm actually trying to protect you." He looked at her once again. "You would experience a far worse pain if I allowed you to become involved with me than you ever will suffering your love from afar."

"You have no idea what I suffer," she said softly with a glassy redness beginning to tinge her eyes.

"I know more than you think."

Slowly Davindra reached her arms around his waist and moved closer. Though he didn't allow any other part of his body to touch her, Snape did let his forehead come down to rest against hers. For a few silent moments they remained this way, eyes closed, listening to the sounds of each other's breaths. Every second Snape reminded himself that he mustn't touch her, or there might not be any going back.

Eventually he pulled away, extracting her arms from his body.

"Go home to the people who love you, Davindra," he said quietly. "I will see you when you return."

Pulling in a strong breath to clear her expanding emotions, she nodded, and then gave him a weak smile. She left the office taking with her the only bit of heat or light that ever gave him any true warmth.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

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Year Six: A Flash of Eden in Hell

Chapter 13 of 21

Desires of an inconvenient and unavoidable nature finally have Snape in Davindra's grasp. And even giving Harry Potter Occlumency lessons doesn't shield Snape from scorn and treachery.

"Severus, Harry has to learn Occlumency; it's the only solution."

The Headmaster sat at his desk looking at Snape with a serene ferocity. Snape sat in the chair across the way looking horrified.

"Then you teach him!" he spat back at the old wizard. "First of all, he hates me. Second of all, the feeling is mutual. Third, he isn't even remotely prepared to concentrate to the level that is required of an Occlumens. Fourth, I don't have time. Fifth, and probably the most viable reason of them all, I just won't do it!"

Dumbledore allowed his chin to rest against his hand as he surveyed the Potions master with a wry smile.

"You know I can't teach him, Severus." As always the man's voice was soothing and calm. "If Voldemort wanted any access to me, he could easily get it through Harry. After this episode with Arthur Weasley, we are now certain that Harry's mind is an open door for Voldemort."

"It could be useful," Snape suggested tentatively.

"It would also be deadly."

"I can't teach that boy *anything*. He barely passes in Potions," he insisted. "And did you stop to consider that teaching Occlumency requires a fair amount of trust between teacher and subject? Potter wouldn't trust me as far as he could hex me. Frankly, I have to say I feel the same towards him."

Dumbledore sighed. "I realize that I have asked a lot of you and that I have no right to ask yet another favor. But only you can do this, Severus. You and Harry are both very important to this cause, whether you like it or not. You're just going to have to learn to work together. Though I must say that your lack of effort to ebb the flow of vitriol towards Sirius and Remus has been dismaying."

"Sir, they have done more than their part to antagonize me and imply that I do not have a right to even be amongst the Order of the Phoenix," Snape replied with burgeoning anger.

"And being a grown man and not a hot headed young boy anymore, you know not to give in to their taunts. All that matters now is that everyone works together for the common good." There was a firm command to the wizard's words. "Please, Severus, think of what we will accomplish in the long run."

Snape seethed inwardly. *'Of course, disregard the past transgressions and deal with all of the present and future ones same as you did the old; ignore them as childish*

folly.' And he was supposed to forgive and forget?

"Well, then, you had better explain to Sirius Black that it is I who will be teaching his precious godson Occlumency and that he is not to interfere," Snape snapped at the Headmaster.

Dumbledore thought for a moment. "I'll do that, Severus, but you need to tell Harry yourself. He's at the Order headquarters along with the Weasleys."

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Snape came back to Hogwarts in a fiery mood. Black was still an egotistical ass, even after all the years in Azkaban and two years on the run. Nothing would break his smug arrogance. He dared challenge Snape in front of Potter. Once again trying to impress someone like he used to nearly tie himself in knots to impress James. It was uncountable, the number of times Snape had been the target in their attempts to outdo each other. At least young Potter didn't egg Black on as much as his father did. What would Dumbledore say if Snape had come back with the terrible news that he had just had to kill them both? Snape allowed the chilling thought to soothe him.

He prepared for his first session with Potter by again borrowing the Pensieve from Dumbledore so there would be no worry that the boy might stumble across some embarrassing and private moments best kept unseen.

The knock on his door was too early for Potter, who would no doubt put off coming down to the dungeon for as long as possible. Instead Davindra stepped through.

"What do you want?" he asked with far less irritability than normal, for he actually felt a slight pleasure in seeing her again.

"I had a lovely Christmas, thank you for asking. And you?" she replied brightly with a smile.

Snape rolled his eyes. "I have an appointment in a few moments, Miss Collins. Pardon my being rude, but what do you want?"

"Well, I guess I'll skip asking if you missed me, then."

"Please do, the answer would only disappoint you."

"I want to ask you something, and I want you to give me an honest answer."

"This isn't about dress robes again is it?" he replied with a flippant air.

"No, it's about my grandmother." There was a seriousness in her tone that made Snape stop what he was doing and look at her. "Is she a Death Eater?"

The question was so startling, blunt, and absurd that Snape actually chuckled. Then he saw the solemn look on Davindra's face remain in place and knew that she wasn't joking.

"What makes you ask such a thing?"

"I spent most of Christmas at Granny Lilly's with my Mother. Grandmother only came for a little while on Christmas day. Normally we are either at her house or our home, and she is there constantly. No one even talked about the change this year. But when she was there, she mentioned the Dark Lord several times."

Snape considered the story. "The Dark Lord is a timely topic amongst a lot of wizard families. That's not unusual in itself," he replied calmly.

"But she talked about it like it was exciting. She didn't come right out and say she supported him, but she kept talking about all these changes that could happen and how some of them might be good. And she still wouldn't say what she had been doing for the past few months. She ignored all my questions on it. And Granny Lilly and Mother just acted uncomfortable around her. That's never happened before." Davindra began to sound more agitated as she continued. She started a nervous pace about the room.

Snape had heard at one time that Demelza Collins was suspected of working subversively for the Dark Lord. But nothing was proven, and as far as he knew, she'd never been brought before the Ministry on any charges. Davindra's allegations were intriguing, and Snape did stop to consider their validity.

"There was talk at one time, many years ago," Snape said honestly. "But nothing was ever proven or even investigated. I think it was just residual paranoia after the Dark Lord's fall."

"I asked Mother about that." Davindra sat herself on her usual stool. "She said that Grandmother had made a special potion for someone who was later found to be a Death Eater. But Grandmother didn't know it at the time, and she even believed the potion was for personal use and not for Death Eater activity."

"That sounds reasonable," he uttered, his mind still turning over all the possibilities but not wanting to cause undo alarm to her.

Davindra was slowly shaking her head, staring at the floor, and chewing her bottom lip in furious thought. "Something just isn't right."

"Miss Collins, I'm really not able to answer your question on this, and besides, I told you, I'm expecting someone." Snape needed her gone so that he could concentrate on Potter, but also her intrusive meddling was getting uncomfortable.

"I asked you to be honest with me, Professor," she demanded firmly.

Snape felt his temper beginning to fray. "How would I know such things to be honest about them?" he bellowed.

"Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater," she replied with a candid stare.

He loathed that phrase and that mentality. Though he expected such sentiment from the likes of Black and Lupin, he hadn't expected such a traitorous insult from her. It was exactly the attitude that forced him to take shelter behind Dumbledore's robes and kept him a slave to the Order.

Snape glared at Davindra murderously. "You impertinent little bitch, what would you know about it?" he growled viciously. "I suggest you leave now before I throw you out, and stop bothering me with preposterous ideas."

Davindra gave a sound of impatience. "I know that you're not really one of them," she said, completely disregarding his furious words. "I know that you work for Dumbledore now, but you have to stay a Death Eater or else they wouldn't give you any information. They might even kill you."

She spoke as if this was all common knowledge she'd attained from the front page of the *Daily Prophet*. Snape stared at her with stunned horror.

"Where do you hear these things?" he shouted incredulously.

"Grandmother told me years ago about your past," she again spoke casually.

"Davindra, get out. I'm not going to tell you again." Snape walked over to the stool she sat on and took her arm in his grasp to begin pulling her toward the door. His quick movements kept her struggling to a minimum.

Before he managed to slam the door in her face, she gave him a incensed look. "You know, I came to you because I trusted you, and I thought this might even help you."

Astute as always, Davindra noticed quickly that Snape's eyes followed her more than he usually allowed. She would return his look but with a shade of coolness still echoing the pain of their last encounter. And it wasn't long before she herself began to exploit his captured attention to her own benefit. Suddenly almost any boy within her reach was worthy of lavish attention. All Snape had to do was walk in her direction and Davindra was suddenly enraptured with the words of her latest companion. To make matters worse, she sought out some of the most vexing choices she could possibly find. Outrageous flirting with Gryffindors of all ages, a resumed friendship with Draco Malfoy, and even smiles and playful greetings to Hero Potter himself were part of her dastardly plan to drive Snape mad.

Within just a few weeks, he overheard the conversation of a small cluster of seventh-years talking about Davindra's spiraling reputation and the ease at which she could be had. Resisting the urge to physically wring their scrawny, hormonal necks, Snape simply made his presence known, which broke up the little boasting party and sent them scurrying.

Though most of it was undoubtedly exaggerated bragging of teenage boys, it still made Snape's stomach turn. The one soothing thought was to know that no one else but him could take the bragging rights of being her first.

After a day of annoying classes with imbecilic students creating disappointing messes out of valuable potion ingredients, Snape opened his classroom doors to find Davindra hanging about the entrance to the dungeon in the arms of a rather quiet, unremarkable Hufflepuff. They stood with their heads together, talking quietly. The boy seemed quite pleased to be in his fortunate position, one in which he probably had not been before. He smiled shyly and took quick, coy looks into Davindra's enticing eyes.

Snape approached slowly, feeling a burn begin in his chest, and his fingers automatically searching for his wand. The boy noticed the approaching teacher and attempted to straighten himself. But without even a look in Snape's direction, Davindra grabbed the boy and planted a firm, lengthy kiss on his unprepared lips. Startled at first and unsure which required his attention, the angry approaching Potions master or the girl clinging to him, the boy seemed to struggle between wanting to pull away and wanting to return the kiss.

Davindra only allowed the kiss to be broken when Snape slid quietly beside the couple. The three stood together in silence for a few moments. The Hufflepuff looking mortified, Davindra looking innocently amused, and Snape doing his best to look disinterested and vaguely repulsed.

"If you two are done with your lascivious display of germ exchanging, then I suggest you move along." Snape kept his voice smooth and dark. "The dinner hour is approaching, unless devouring each other's faces has spoiled your appetites."

The boy murmured a hasty, "Sorry, sir," and a mumbled excuse to Davindra, then took off, not looking behind him. Davindra remained at her spot against the wall, but with her arms crossed and a look of angry impatience aimed at Snape. He leveled a wicked smirk back at her and crooked his finger in command that she follow him.

With a sigh of disgust, she picked up her book bag and followed him down to his office. Once inside she put on her best surly attitude and didn't look at him or speak.

Snape found himself wishing for a shot of calming draught or Firewhisky to make his unconcerned exterior easier to hold. But he dare not partake in front of her because she undoubtedly would see it as weakness.

"Miss Collins," he started in a business-like tone, "after some consideration, I believe that your concerns regarding your grandmother may indeed be worth investigating. I too have noticed increasingly odd behavior from her and have wondered of its nature. Again, I'm sorry for my abruptness when we last spoke, but you did catch me at a bad time. On reflection, I think any information you could relay to me would be beneficial in ensuring your protection as well as that of your family."

He ended with a slight, thin, pained smile that he knew never came anywhere close to settling in his murky, black eyes.

Davindra cocked her head and shot him an unimpressed look. "Really, now? Another apology. That means either you are terribly slow on the up-take and actually feel bad for being a prick or you want something from me. I vote for the latter!"

Snape felt his smile turn into a sneer. "Language, Miss Collins. You could garner an unpleasant detention for insulting a teacher so viciously."

She rolled her eyes and dropped her bag to the floor. "Do your worst, *sir*," she said with a dramatic opening of her arms and shake of her hair. "But first tell me what it is that you are wanting from me this time."

An insolent fury began to brew inside Snape, and he found himself sliding around his desk to face her, his eyes burning slits of malice and his teeth bared.

"And what exactly were *you* attempting to gain with that lewd display right outside my door?"

A cock of her eyebrow and an unflappable smirk told him that she was not concerned with his rage. "Actually, I think I got what I was hoping for by the looks of you."

Snape gave her a deathly glare. "I have no idea what you are talking about except that I am finding your childish games tiresome and pathetic. It will be your own problem if you transform yourself into the Hogwarts whore."

She only chuckled at his bitter words, causing him to feel even more violent loathing for her.

"Remember I told you that after six years, I have learned quite a bit about you," she said calmly. "Just last summer I realized you had a trait that was going to be most useful to me in my quest. And funny, it's been in front of me all the time! I just didn't recognize it."

Her eyes sparkled triumphantly as she spoke, and Snape felt a cold nausea uncoil in his stomach when he realized how much she reminded him of Madame Collins just then.

"You, Severus Snape, are insanely possessive of whatever you assume to be yours. And strangely enough, you don't even care about it or feel territorial until someone tries to take it from you." She was starting to speak in an animated, precise way much like a lecturer would do in a great classroom. Her enthusiasm for the dissemination of this bit of insight into him was vaguely frightening.

"But if you perceive any threat to your property, you become single mindedly obsessed to keep it within your grasp at all costs. It nearly drives you insane until you've annihilated all challengers to your rights."

She stepped a little closer to him and continued her knowing smile. When she again spoke, her voice was alarmingly low and soft.

"You know what I want from you, Severus. And if I have to snog every boy in this school to get it, I will."

Still closer she came, leaning in to whisper into his ear. "And if that doesn't work, I'll fuck anyone who will have me."

Davindra pulled away, a self-satisfied smirk on her lips. "Maybe if that doesn't do it, it will at least erase the memory of you from my mind."

Before he knew what he had done, Snape had flown at the girl and slammed her body into the door several feet behind them. His hand came over her mouth to stop any more disgusting filth from spewing forth. She seemed stunned at his sudden attack and struggled for breath beneath his hand, her eyes wide with frightened surprise.

It took several seconds for him to even find his voice amongst the furious chaos inside his head.

"You vindictive little cunt," he snarled between panting gasps for air. "Your punishment should be to have exactly what you wish for."

He took his hand from her mouth only to immediately cover it with his own in a hard, suffocating kiss. Muffled gasps for air sounded from under her lips as Snape forced his

Down the dark stairway to his personal chambers they went in equal silence. Once inside they still did not speak for several moments. She looked around at his room, perhaps remembering the last time she was there.

It wasn't a large space but it was comfortable enough. A small sitting area with a few worn chairs and a small table for eating. Set off to the side was the sleeping area with his bed and wardrobe. A large fireplace gave enough warmth for the entire room, though Snape liked it cool when he slept, so it wasn't used much. It was furnished sparsely but cluttered in various spots with books, papers, potions supplies, and clothing. The house-elves weren't due back in for another week. But he hadn't wanted it to look as though he had prepared for this event anyway.

He moved to take off his robe and drape it over a chair. "What did you tell your friends today?" he asked.

"I said I didn't feel well and that I was going to see Madam Pomfrey," she replied.

"You don't look bad enough to be ill," he commented.

She smiled. "I stopped at one of the bathrooms on the way."

"It's not as though that were necessary." He put a sneering edge to his voice, but deep down he was slightly flattered.

They stood the room's width apart, their eyes darting about everywhere but on each other.

'Fuck, this was so much less awkward when I just forced myself on her! This is why I don't date. Snape raged to himself.

Davindra wrapped her arms around herself. "It's rather cold. Do you think we could have a fire?"

Grateful for something to do, Snape nodded and waved his wand at the empty hearth. A blazing fire immediately began to fill the room with added light and a radiating warmth.

She moved closer to it. She appeared to be shaking, though Snape doubted it was honestly from the cold. Suddenly, he *did* feel guilty and he *did* feel ashamed.

"Miss Collins, perhaps you really aren't well," he said quietly. "Perhaps you had better go back to your dormitory."

Davindra looked at him with a startled expression. "No! No, I'm fine. I'm just... nervous," she ended with an unsure smile.

Snape sighed. "I'll give you one more chance to walk out of here," he said. "Then after that, there will be no turning back. You must be very sure of yourself, Davindra."

Her eyes finally found his, and she nodded with a serious manner. "I know." Her voice was soft and light. "I'm sure."

Turning from the fire, Davindra walked to his bed. Snape's eyes followed her. She began stripping off her clothes in a casual way, as though she were preparing herself for a night's sleep. The top came over her head, revealing a white bra. The shoes were kicked off and her pants unfastened and pushed down her legs. Free of everything, she began straightening the bed linens and finally sat down, pulling the sheets to her chest.

Snape hadn't moved from his own spot near the fireplace as he had watched her routine. She sat looking at him expectantly. It was his move now. Slowly he began unbuttoning his coat. Doing it by hand instead of using his wand was buying him some time to think, to calm himself. She watched him with growing warmth and reverence as he moved closer and finally slid the heavy coat from his body and tossed it to a chair.

At the side of the bed, he stood staring down at her. Her skin looked like creamy velvet in the soft light of the fire; her eyes flickered not unlike the flames that cast its reflection in them. Again she smiled with assurance. Snape reached out a hand to touch her and found her cheek pressed against his palm, his fingers in her hair.

He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her face near him. For several seconds he examined her from a perspective so close that her features blurred. In that blurry moment he shut off every sound of regret or worry that had spoken to him since she had arrived. He wanted to again lose himself in pure unadulterated need and desire as he had done the first time she had been there. It wasn't hard to find. The moment his lips touched hers, he found the aching passion rose in him so swiftly it nearly made him breathless.

Next they were intertwined together; her naked body, the sheets, his long limbs, and his disheveled but unshed clothes. Hungrily they pawed and clawed at each other, their mouths seeking sustenance of some higher nourishment than mere food or drink could ever give.

Davindra's passion overtook any lack of experience she suffered from, and Snape found her touches and exploration startlingly mature. If it were possible for him to be any closer to ecstasy, she would undoubtedly take him there simply with the stroke of her hand against his flesh.

Hoping to slow the pace of adventure, Snape pinned her wrists to her side as he let his mouth taste, kiss, and discover every part of her body. Sounds of surprise, pleasure, and even discomfort spurred him on his path until he found himself pressing his lips into the dark, silky curls between her legs. Any doubt or mistrust in his intentions was forgotten as his tongue began to stroke in alternating flicks and circles.

Soon her hand was in his hair and her breathless, pleading voice begged him not to stop. At that point he would have pledged his life to the pursuit of her pleasure. Her heat and wetness drove his own need to almost the breaking point.

In desperate, trembling cries she came. Snape thought with satisfaction that it was probably for the first time at the hands of someone else.

Immediately he was prepared to enter her and again experience the intoxicating sensation of her young, tight body. This time she was far more ready for him, and any cries she gave were of continued pleasure and want.

He kissed her wildly, the residual salty moisture on his face from her pleasure now smeared onto her own. She responded in equal fervor, either uncaring of the mess or enjoying the lewdness of sharing each other so intimately.

Snape felt himself climaxing far more quickly than he would have liked. But the building pressure was advancing at a rush that he felt powerless to control. When the rapturous event was over and he overcame the brief moment of not even remembering where he was or who he was with, he looked down at the face below him.

Hair snarled about her head and make-up smeared, she was undeniably still beautiful. Snape slid from her body to lie beside of her. Immediately he missed her warmth and held out his arm for her to rest against his chest. She snuggled into him contentedly.

Neither spoke and the only sound in the room was the crackle of the fire. Finally she rose up on her elbows to look at him. Keeping his face expressionless, he gazed back.

Her smile was both demure and wanton. "That was bloody fantastic." She laughed and blushed at her own candor.

Snape resisted his own smile and simply raised his eyebrows in apathy. "Your participation level has improved at least," he replied in a dry manner.

"So it does get better," she said, the smile still plastered upon her face.

"As I said, it depends."

Reaching out, Davindra stroked a few strands of his hair from his face. Her fingers floated into his hair, then traced a line down his face. Snape allowed the attention without rebuke or response. She ended her caress with a soft kiss to his cheek.

"Remember our last conversation regarding your grandmother's possible Dark activities?" he asked informally.

Davindra nodded and continued her trail of touches to the open area of his shirt. When her fingers began to trace the outline of an old hex scar, Snape took her hand in his to still its progress.

"Is there anything more you can tell me? Do you know anything about who she may have met or things she may have done?"

Lazily entwining her fingers in his, she sighed. "I can't think of anything else, really. The thing is she won't talk about anything, which is what is so unusual. Normally, she is full of gossip and stories about the people she sees or work she does. That's what's so odd. She's suddenly become secretive."

"You know you can trust me with anything," he reminded her. "There is no reason to be afraid. We can make sure you and your mother are protected."

"We?" she asked with interest.

"We as in others besides just myself," he replied.

"So you really are working against the Dark Lord," she asked, worry tinged her words and eyes.

Snape pulled her body on top of his. "There are many thing that you will be best kept ignorant of. The things I do outside of Hogwarts are one of them."

He put his hands in her long hair and combed them through, ignoring the look of sadness on her face.

"Now, tell me," he asked casually, "are you familiar with the term fellatio?"

She wasn't. But true to her character, she was a very quick study.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

And so it began. They dove into the most dangerous relationship conceivable during the most difficult time and in the least private environment possible. It was intoxicating. Snape felt drunk on bootleg liquor, giddy from illegal hallucinogens. He found himself looking at his entire week's schedule with a sharp eye for any time he could sneak Davindra into his chambers for just a few hours.

When he could find the time, it was like injecting a calming draught directly into his veins. Potter was no better in his Occlumency skills. Umbridge was on the verge of taking over the school, which was plagued by rebellious pandemonium. The Dark Lord and fellow Death Eaters demanded more proof of his loyalty, and the Order demanded more information as to the Dark Lord's plans. The Slytherin Quidditch team was performing appallingly, and Neville Longbottom had almost single-handedly destroyed the Potions classroom.

But when Snape held Davindra's long, lean body against him, slipped inside, and felt her hands roam about him and her breathy moans in his ear, the entire world could have disintegrated into ash, and Snape could not have cared less. It was time that was solely his and only about him, for him. It was the one truly selfish, hedonistic pleasure he had allowed himself in some time.

Pleasantly surprising was the fact that she seemed as sexually voracious as he, despite her inexperience. Her curiosity and interest in sex allowed him to suggest and do most anything he pleased. In most instances it was a successful endeavor, which was added to the expanding repertoire of activities to be drawn from later. There was only one request from her, which came a few weeks into their arrangement.

They lay in the bed after another gloriously fulfilling round of sexual exchange, when she said to him, "Why don't you ever take off your clothes?"

He gave her an unexpressive look and in a dead-pan voice said, "I'm shy."

Normally, he had no inhibitions, but for some reason the awareness of his aging, scarred, thin, pale body seemed unworthy in her presence.

Davindra rolled her eyes. "Right. I am always completely starkers, and you remain almost fully clothed. That's not particularly fair. Is it the scars and tattoos? It's not like I don't know about them. So, I don't understand what you're trying to hiding. And it's not like I didn't spent the last six years wondering and fantasizing about what was under all those layers of black."

Snape gave her an aggravated look. She returned one of equal impatience. If she really wanted to see it all, he shouldn't deny her the ugly truth. If she ran screaming, he swore to himself that he wouldn't be affected. Giving a growl of annoyance, Snape sat up and tugged the shirt over his head and tossed it aside. The already open pants, he pushed down his legs and sent them over the edge too. Now as bare as she, he laid back down, giving her a full view and a wave of his hands in invitation to judge.

She did look slightly taken aback. But instead of turning away, she gently reached out and touched a tattoo of a snake that started near his stomach and coiled around his side to end on his lower back. Then her hands went to a long scar that ran diagonally across his chest. Next she traced the faded, squiggly numbers over his heart that were inked into him after his arrival at Azkaban. A flourish of very old cigarette burns on his upper arms caught her attention next.

Snape watched for signs of revulsion and horror, but instead saw only amazement and sad awareness.

"I don't need your pity," he reminded her darkly.

Davindra looked to his face, shook her head, and smiled softly. "You're beautiful," she whispered.

His first response was to toss her bodily from his bed for such cheek. Then he almost felt the urge to laugh. But her face held so much honesty; he feared worst of all that she spoke what she really believed.

To accentuate her words, she leaned down to place a gentle kiss on the numbers on his chest, then the nearest scar, then down his stomach. Finally she spied his left forearm and pulled it up to gaze at the inky Dark Mark. Snape felt an urge to pull away from her, his most shameful defacement now under her scrutiny. When she leaned in and placed an equally delicate kiss against the now quiet serpent and skull, Snape felt his breath catch. Her tongue began to trace the outline of the Mark, and he felt his blood grow hot under her caress. For nearly an hour she explored and worshiped every part of him that captured her eye, never once seeming anything but in awe and reverence at the inscriptions of cruelty that he bore.

However, there was another, surprising side to these stolen moments of carnal consumption. When time allowed, they talked. Snape thought it the most unusual aspect of their relationship for he had never both fucked AND talked to any woman in his life. But she inspired it in him. Sometimes it was conversations about potions and ingredients. Other times the topics were as broad as the history of alchemy or ancient wizards and legends. And there was the endlessly fascinating topic of Hogwarts gossip, in which Snape always insisted he had no interest, but could never help getting caught up in the sordid details of the various rivals, love affairs, secrets, and catastrophes of the student body. And though he would never divulge such information about his fellow staff, Snape did sometimes repeat old stories about former faculty that had been passed on to him. Occasionally she asked of his childhood or his years at school, but he often cleverly avoided answering her, instead inquiring of her own experiences.

Soon, their precious time would be gone and Snape would order her to go, but with words far more harsh than his heart required. During one lazy weekend afternoon, Davindra seemed especially resistant to leave his bed. She stayed sprawled out on her stomach under the sheets even after several orders to dress and long after Snape himself was fully clothed.

Madame Collins nodded and seemed to take a moment to calm herself. "I thought we had a much better understanding than that, Severus. Why, after I even gave you Tom Riddle's book," she said softly, her eyes darting to Dumbledore.

Snape could have struck her dead. Instead his hands remained clenched behind his back.

"You did tell Albus about the book, didn't you?" she asked with shock.

Now both the Headmaster and Madame Collins eyed him with interest.

"Sir, a few years ago, Madame Collins gave me a book she claimed belonged to Tom Riddle. One which she had confiscated from none other than James Potter, but had decided to keep for herself. Perhaps she had grown nervous about its possession, and she asked that I keep it safe and I have done so."

Madame Collins managed her own glare at him for attempting to drag her down with him in the story.

"My not mentioning it was an oversight on my part," Snape continued. "And also an attempt to protect Madame's misjudgment. In all honesty, Headmaster, it had slipped my mind since I have had it hidden away for nearly five years now." Snape remained calm and humble in his speech.

"Perhaps I should see this book, Severus," Dumbledore said firmly.

Snape nodded and left the room, but not before he gave Madame Collins a look that promised a worse revenge than she could ever conceive in that twisted mind of hers.

When Snape returned with the book, Madame Collins had gone, much to his relief.

"Where did she go?" Snape asked suspiciously.

"She said she wanted a bit of time with Davindra since she hasn't seen her much lately," Dumbledore replied.

He held his hand out for the book, which Snape relinquished.

"Severus, why didn't you tell me about this?" There was honest disappointment in the old wizard's voice.

"I would have eventually, sir," Suddenly he did feel sheepish about keeping it from the Headmaster's knowledge. "But I have no excuse for my delay."

"Anything that can give us any insight into Lord Voldemort's mind is extremely valuable," Dumbledore reminded as he leafed through the book. "Have you done any of these potions?"

Snape froze. "I tried a calming draught that is actually a hallucinogenic nightmare potion and the *Coacto Fides* a few years ago."

"Did they work?"

"I can unequivocally say the nightmare draught works quite well. I didn't have a chance to do a proper test of the other." He purposefully didn't mention the test subject of the belief potion or the Vision Well and hoped Dumbledore suspected nothing more.

"Horcruxes," the Headmaster muttered in amazement. "Oh, great Merlin."

"Sir?" Snape noticed the old wizard looked a little more pale than normal.

"Of course, this is how he did it. I've always known." He then said loudly, "Severus, do you realize what this is?" he then asked firmly, waving the book at Snape.

Snape continued to stare at the Headmaster, afraid of what the answer was.

"This is basically Voldemort's playbook! Everything he compiled while at school which he planned to use after his rise to power." There was a sudden excitement and electricity in the Headmaster.

"Had I realized..." Snape began, but Dumbledore cut him off.

"It doesn't matter now, Severus. We have much to do. I'll need this book for now. But am I right in assuming that you've copied every potion and spell in this book for your own records?" There was an accusing yet mischievous twinkle in the old man's eye.

Snape felt himself grow hot and was thankful that he had yet to blush in all his life. He pursed his lips and stared at the omnipotent old wizard. "Of course."

"You are nothing if not predictable in your quest for knowledge, Severus," Dumbledore smiled.

"Sir, I apologize..."

"Don't, there's no time for it now," Dumbledore said, holding up his hand. "But this won't be a mistake you will make again, I'm sure."

"No, sir," Snape seethed in anger hot enough to boil his blood, though he kept it completely contained. "Sir, about Madame Collins," he began.

The Headmaster had gone back to flipping through the book. "Yes, I know. This is as much her fault as yours. She gave you this book and told you to tell no one, which you kept your word on. Then when she felt you might have reason to turn on her, she decided to beat you to the punch and turn you out to me," he commented almost absent-mindedly as his eyes stayed on the pages in front of him. But he raised them when he continued. "A most cowardly action that speaks mountains about her character and sways my belief in her integrity greatly. We'll continue to watch her."

Dumbledore paused and then nodded slightly, which was a signal that he was done with the Potions master. Snape turned to leave, his first thought was to find Madame Collins before she left the school.

"Severus," the Headmaster's voice called out before he had reached the door. "I will have no need to watch you, will I?" There was a dark promise in his voice, which made the question sound like a command.

Snape turned. "I have always assumed you did anyway."

The majestic wizard nodded his head just once with a knowing smile and then returned to his new possession.

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Snape never did catch up with Madame Collins, but he found Davindra sitting in the chilly courtyard looking almost shell-shocked. With new, more guarded care of his manner towards her in the open, he slowly walked to her and stopped several steps in front of the bench she occupied.

She looked up at him with wide, worried eyes. "What was she doing here?" There was a hollow panic in her voice.

"Selling me out to Professor Dumbledore," he replied.

Davindra got up with a hiss of breath and did a caged pace of the walk nearest them. "Does she know about us?"

"I was going to ask you that."

"She was acting very strange. She said that Mother and Granny Lilly had plans to go to Croatia or someplace like that for dragon watching this summer and I'd be with her for most of the time. She said she would help me prepare for my N.E.W.T.s. But there is something going on. She was different, cold and brusque." Almost as in reaction to her own words, Davindra shuddered.

"She said nothing to Professor Dumbledore or me about any suspicions, but she knows that she is suspected of alliance with the Dark Lord. She attempted to prove her favor by divulging to the Headmaster one of our private agreements." There was still much bitterness in his voice as he spoke of it.

Davindra turned and looked at him with nervous horror. "Did you get into trouble?"

Snape rolled his eyes. It wasn't as though he were a student dragged in for cheating on a test. "The Headmaster might not have been happy, but he also saw through your grandmother's scheme. We are still very aware of her dualities."

She stepped closer to him to whisper, "Severus, I'm frightened. I don't want to have to spend a whole summer alone with her."

The fact actually frightened him too. He resisted the urge to hold her or even touch her.

"We'll try to figure out something before the time comes," he said, knowing it wasn't nearly comfort enough. "Right now I have my own crisis to tend to."

Before he left, he took one more glimpse at her, standing helpless and unsure, looking for him to protect and guide her through a mess he wasn't sure he himself would ever come out of.

"For the time being, we should lay low," he said very quietly. "I'll tell you when I think the circumstances have changed."

He didn't stay around to watch her melt into disappointment and confusion. But he knew it existed in her even from across the distance he quickly walked to separate them.

The Lake View

Chapter 14 of 21

On a nice afternoon Ron and Harry take in a view of the lake and a lot more. An amusing, short ficlett with a brief observation of Snape and Davindra from a third perspective.

It was a nice Sunday afternoon. Too nice to stay cooped up inside. Ron and Harry had prowled the grounds talking and exploring until the sky began to turn gray and the wind threatened hostility.

Spending a few more moments enjoying the last glimmers of sunlight before it was swallowed up by the rolling chrome clouds, the boys lounged against some rocks that overlooked the Black Lake. The dim and rolling water reflected the turbulent sky.

Neither spoke as they surveyed the beauty of the land, the water, and the mountainous peaks beyond. Suddenly, Ron nudged Harry with the back of his hand and pointed to a look out point near the edge of the lake.

"Hey, is that Snape down there?" he asked.

Harry's eyes followed the line of Ron's finger to the back of a tall figure, clad in black from head to toe, standing stock straight, seemingly entranced with the view of the lake. The only movement came from his cloak fluttering slightly behind him in the rising breeze.

"It looks like," muttered Harry.

"I didn't know he went out in daylight," Ron quipped. "Figured sunlight might turn him to dust."

The boys looked at each other and laughed. From this distance it felt easy and safe to make disparaging comments about their least favorite teacher.

"I didn't know he liked the water," Harry added. "Do you think if he fell in he'd melt?"

Again they laughed.

Suddenly Ron stopped and again pointed in the direction of Snape.

"Who's that?" he asked

A tall, slender female had stepped out from in front of Snape. They stood close without touching and looked at one another for a moment before the girl walked away along the lake's shore. She continued until she picked up the path that led to the courtyard and then into Hogwarts.

"Isn't she that Ravenclaw, Davindra Collins? Hermione knows her. She helped me with my Potions homework once," Ron said.

"It looks like," Harry replied, his eyes still following the girl as she made her way up the path until she was out of sight. "But what was she doing with Snape out there on the lake?"

"Awhh, she's his pet, don't you know?" Ron sneered. "I think he may even like her better than Malfoy. I sure like her better than Malfoy!"

"Yeah, but you don't see Malfoy taking strolls by the lake with him either," Harry stated.

Ron eyed Harry suspiciously. "You don't think....." he began, then stopped when Harry simply raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders.

"EWWHHHHhh!" Ron exclaimed, his whole body convulsing with a shudder.

Harry had to smile, though he felt a similar reaction to the thought.

Soon Snape turned from his position against the lake and began to make his way up the hill toward the rocks at which Ron and Harry stood. They looked at each other, wondering if they should run, hide, or stay in place. But he had seen them before they could decide. So they remained and tried to look casual and as though they hadn't been watching him. Both prepared for a verbal lashing.

But Snape simply walked between the two, uttering a calm and only slightly sneering, "Weasley... Potter," in greeting as he passed.

Harry and Ron exchanged looks of shock, stunned to be dismissed at a time when Snape could have unleashed any number of scathing insults their way.

Looking after him, they saw Snape continue into Hogwarts with the same measured, intentional gait.

"Harry," Ron finally spoke. "Did he actually look... relaxed to you?"

Harry looked into Ron's puzzled face and burst out laughing.

Year Six: The Shadows Unravel

Chapter 15 of 21

Madame Collins takes great strides to keep Davindra under her control, even if it means double-crossing Snape with all his own secrets. But neither he nor Davindra will go down without a fight.

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Year Six: The Shadows Unravel

"I don't have to talk to you," Snape muttered distractedly as he kept his eyes focused on some third-year Potions essays and attempted to pretend that the two-way mirror on his desk didn't have Remus Lupin's scowling face staring at him.

"You do and you will," Lupin replied, his voice slightly tinny and his reflection rather faint in the old mirror. "How can you have stopped Harry's Occlumency lessons now of all times? Especially when Dumbledore's final order before he left Hogwarts was for him to keep studying with you."

"It's very easy," Snape replied, still calm and disinterested. "I just told him to get out and never come back."

"This is bigger than your pride, Severus," Lupin continued. "Harry is very sorry for what he did; he knows it was wrong to snoop through your memories."

"Oh, that makes it all better," Snape quipped with a curled lip.

"You can't blame him for being curious though. Anything that gives him a feeling of being close to his father and mother is going to be irresistible to him."

"Well, then I hope he got a good look at what a big hero James Potter was back then, picking fights just to entertain his friends and impress girls." The memory, to this day, still burned like acid on Snape's tongue when he spoke of it. "But perhaps Occlumency lessons are not what young Potter needs most. Perhaps some pointers on impulse control would be best."

Lupin gave a hiss of annoyance and took a breath before he tried again. "What did Dumbledore say about this?"

"I wouldn't know since he disappeared from the school without a word to anyone but Potter and McGonagall." Snape went back to his essays.

"He doesn't know you've stopped the Occlumency lessons?" Lupin's anger was renewed.

Snape rolled his eyes and finally turned to address the mirror. "Though the boy is as dense as Devil's Snare, he did manage to procure enough knowledge of Occlumency to be able to resist the Dark Lord's intrusions IF he wishes to. However, I cannot make him practice those skills. I've done all I can and all I'm going to. Now, if you will excuse me, Lupin, I have work to do."

With that, Snape reached over, and with one finger, flipped the mirror face down on to the desk, silencing all communication. He sighed with relief and returned to the work before him, though his mind still turned over many events that did not pertain to grading.

Dumbledore had left in a dramatic fanfare of suspicion after Fudge had tried to take him in for conspiracy against the Ministry. He now hid himself away where no one could find him but he could still keep an eye on Hogwarts and the Order's activities. Unfortunately, that left Dolores Umbridge in charge of the school, and mutiny on a grand scale had ensued. The massive and endless fireworks display was actually quite creative, and Snape knew that it had the Weasley twins' signature all over it. There was no denying they had brains and balls as well as a sense of style to their mayhem. Most faculty also knew who was responsible, but all kept their mouths firmly shut and let Umbridge and her new stooge, Filch, enjoy their supreme power and clean up all the messes which sprang forth completely unaided.

Still, the old horrors remained, brought back to life in that one moment just nights before. Coming into his office and finding the arrogant brat standing inside one of his most private and painful memories, which he had stupidly thought would be safe in the Pensieve, had nearly pushed him over the edge. The Headmaster didn't know how close he had come to losing the lone savior to the wizarding world that night. All Snape knew was that he didn't ever want to look into those snide, boastful green eyes and know that one of his weaknesses was being carefully contained and analyzed inside that head only to be used against him later. If and when Dumbledore found out Snape had stopped the lessons, he would deal with it. For now, he would enjoy the return of his solitude and continue to sit back and watch Hogwarts fall down around Umbridge's ears.

For several weeks Snape had stayed away from Davindra. The weeks felt like months or even years in a desolate desert with no water, food, or shelter in sight. She managed a calm, unaffected exterior when around him in class and he did the same. But it was not without its price. There were the long, barren stretches of night when Snape would lay in bed, not sleeping and unable to turn his thoughts and desires away from her. His own forms of self-satisfaction hardly compared to her company. But his concerns of being turned out or chased out of Hogwarts like Trelawny and Dumbledore kept him chaste. And with so many spies about, most of whom were in his own house, he knew he could spare no chances.

There was plenty to keep his mind occupied, if he simply focused. There were always demands of his time and energy. Part of his concern was still Madame Collins's peculiar activities and Davindra's situation of being left in the care of her grandmother for the summer. He imagined that part of Davindra's cool manner to him involved some disappointment in his dismissal of their relationship and presumably her problems. If she only knew how he pondered what would be best for her and how he ached

for their time together to resume. But as he had always claimed, he would not risk his livelihood for his own hedonistic wishes.

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Strolling the aisles of the sixth-year Potions class, Snape stopped to peer at Davindra's work. She had seemed particularly distracted today and had nearly added the wrong amounts of water and boomslang skin. As he watched her now, her fingers seemed to tremble as she tipped in a small amount of rose oil. Snape gave her a quizzical look, which she returned with nervous eyes.

"I need to talk to you," she said in barely a whisper. "I got a letter today."

He let nothing register on his face as he softly replied, "After class," and walked away.

As the class left the dungeon after being dismissed, Snape moved on to his office. Davindra followed, and without anyone's notice they disappeared behind his closed door.

For a moment they stood staring at one another, sharing their first private moment in nearly a month. She looked tired and pensive. Her hair drawn into a haphazard bundle at the back of her head made her neck look long and fragile and her haunting, smoky eyes more noticeable. Snape held out his hand for the letter she said she had received.

Fumbling in her book bag for a moment, she withdrew it and held it out to him. But they were almost across the room from each other. Someone would have to submit to the other. Davindra finally took careful, slow steps to close the gap and come to stand directly in front of him. When he took the letter from her hand, she threw her arms around him in a crushing embrace. Her face was buried in his hair, and her groan of relief tickled his neck.

Snape pulled her head back so he could kiss her, his own sounds of release reverberating low in his throat as he savored her taste and texture. For several moments the letter was forgotten, and they reacquainted themselves with each other's bodies and touches. As Davindra began a slow, seductive nibble of his ear and neck, Snape let his eyes fall to the letter still in his hand. It was Madame Collins's writing. With the nimble fingers of one hand, he unfolded it and began reading, though Davindra's expert tongue was making it hard to concentrate.

In blunt, succinct words, Madame Collins said that she had submitted an application for Davindra to finish her last year of schooling at home under her grandmother's tutoring and return to Hogwarts only to take her N.E.W.T. finals. Nothing was said about why or how she planned on surpassing or even equaling Hogwarts's education at home.

Snape found that as he read, he had pulled away from Davindra, who by now figured that the impact of the letter had set in.

"She's taking you out of Hogwarts?" Snape summarized incredulously. "How does she plan to prepare you for N.E.W.T.s on her own?"

Davindra shook her head. "I've written to Mother and Granny Lilly this morning hoping they can change this. I don't want to leave here. I don't want to leave..."

Snape knew she was going to say 'you,' but he ignored the comment. "Why is she doing this?" he asked her.

"I don't know!" Davindra again shook her head more fervently. "I was hoping you could tell me."

Sitting on the edge of his desk, Snape again read the letter, but it revealed no more. "You are seventeen-years-old. You are of age and can make your own decisions. You don't have to leave Hogwarts just because she tells you to."

"You try going against what Demelza Collins has planned for you," she replied wryly. "The scary thing is, I think she knows I'm going to fight her on this. And I think she's ready for the battle."

"Are you sure she doesn't know about us?" he asked suspiciously.

Davindra slumped against a nearby bookcase. "I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. If Professor Dumbledore were here, I'm sure he could sort this out. But I wouldn't trust that Umbridge woman meddling in my affairs for all the gold in Gringotts."

"Davindra, a lot of people remove themselves from their parents' home when they reach seventeen, even though they still attend school," he reiterated. It seemed the most logical plan to him at this point.

She sighed with exasperation. "I have no problem with my parent. It's my grandmother who wants to run my life."

"And she's not your legal guardian; she has no say," Snape replied in a loud, frustrated voice.

Davindra gave him a hard, impatient look. "You do what Professor Dumbledore tells you, right? Even if you don't always agree with it?"

He didn't respond. He knew what she was getting at.

"You fear, respect, love, and hate him, and the last thing you'd want is to be on his bad side," she continued. "And he knows it, so he knows he can ask anything he wants of you. It's the same with her."

Snape pursed his lips as he thought. Mindlessly his finger stroked his bottom lip as he considered her astute assessment of the parallels of their relationships.

"If I felt that being under Albus Dumbledore were a detriment to my life and health, I could get out."

"Could you?" she asked skeptically. "How?"

The conversation was starting to make Snape's head throb. He rubbed his temples and closed his eyes, wishing he could block out her and her incessant problems.

"Don't you have another class?" he asked tiredly.

"Yes," she replied with equal fatigue. "I'm already late."

"I'll write you a note," he said moving to his desk. "We'll discuss this later."

"The end of term isn't far away, Severus," she reminded.

"I know," he said with dark irritation. "We'll think of something."

Handing the note out across the desk, Davindra reached out to take it. Grasping her chin in his hand, Snape brought her lips in for one more sweet, forbidden kiss before he relinquished her.

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The Weasley twins had departed Hogwarts in a blaze of chaotic glory, which everyone then continued on their behalf. Snape spent as much time trying to undo curses and hexes as he did teaching these days. Slytherin had completely blown their chances for the Quidditch Cup, and Snape had been summoned to the feet of the Dark Lord twice recently to account for Dumbledore's whereabouts and who was now watching Harry Potter.

It was on a rare instance that Snape called it a relatively early night, downed his usual wine and sleeping potion, and was in bed, sound asleep, that the anti-intruder charm in his office woke him. At first, completely disoriented about where he was and what time it was, it took him a while to realize it was the middle of the night and he was in nothing but his old, worn night shirt. Stumbling up the stairs, he made it to his office and looked around, his eyes squinting against the light. Nothing seemed out of place and no one was there. That was then he went to the door to pull it open and found Davindra on the other side, casually leaning against the door frame with crossed arms.

"I knew that would get you up," she said and walked passed him into the office.

"What are you doing here?" he finally barked when he comprehended the danger she had just tempted to get there. He poked his head out the door to look up and down the hall, but saw no one. Closing the door he turned to her, but found she had disappeared. The only other exit was down to his chambers. He took off after her, his bare feet smacking against the cold stone of the stairs.

She was standing in the middle of his sitting room, waiting for him, with the same care-free look and crossed arms.

"It is the middle of the night," he began in a low snarl through clenched teeth. "Umbridge keeps patrols in the halls at all hours. You could have risked expulsion or worse coming down here! Do you know how stupid an idea this was?"

Davindra remained unfazed by his tirade.

"So tell me," he spat with disdain, "what was so important that you had to risk your neck and mine to get down here?"

"I've missed you," she stated firmly with a piercing stare.

Snape let out a gasp of disgust and rolled his eyes. He then walked to his sleeping area to look for clothes to put on.

Davindra followed. "It took me an hour to get down here. I kept having to hide every time someone came around. But no one saw me."

"And you think that makes you clever?" Snape sneered as he looked for his pants.

"Perhaps it's more lucky, but I'm here at least."

"Well, you're just going to have to get yourself back to Ravenclaw tower the same way," he replied as he drew the nightshirt over his head and started to step into his pants. Then he felt Davindra's arms wrap around his waist and her body press against his back.

"Haven't you missed me just a bit?" Her breath came against the back of his neck, and her lips brushed his shoulder.

"I didn't say I hadn't." He attempted to keep his voice as calm as possible, though his cock was already starting to twitch and rise from her touch.

"So, you did miss me?"

"I didn't say that either."

Her hands slid down his slender, bony hips to brush against his quickly stiffening shaft. He let out a breath and reached back to tangle his fingers in her loose hair as her lips traveled his neck. Tossing his pants aside, Snape turned and clutched her body to him, covering her mouth with his. If she was there, and if she was willing, who was he to push her away, he reconciled with himself. Slowly her hands and mouth began a descent down his body until she set upon his now completely prepared erection and took him into her mouth. A slow hiss of pleasure escaped him as he looked down at her.

He had taught her this talent. Her mouth had known only him; she had experienced only his body. There was a thrill of pride in him when he thought of it. And he realized that she had been correct. He did have a terrible possessive streak that he chose to ignore. The idea of settling down and being confined to one woman had never appealed to him, but the thought that she would only know his touch and only find pleasure in him was a comforting one. He just wasn't sure that it was logical. Possession required a lot of care and attention, more than he would want to devote his life to.

By the time they had finished with each other, and were properly spent and draped across the bed and each other as though de-boned and haphazardly cast there, it was well into the wee hours of the morning.

"Davindra," Snape murmured sleepily. "You can't stay here. You have to go back to your room."

"Mmmmm," came a vague reply next to him. "Just let me rest a while, then I'll go."

He felt her arm come across his chest and a sigh of her breath on his shoulder. "Don't worry," she mumbled. "I won't let her come between us."

Snape was about to ask what she was talking about but found his mind was shut down by sleep before the words made it out of his lips.

He woke with a start as he often did, but this time there was a swell of panic in his chest when he realized he wasn't alone. It was already daylight, and Davindra was still sprawled in his bed, her head and pillow buried under a wild mass of ebony hair.

"Wake up!" he shouted as he shoved her.

She woke with a jump and grunt. "What?" she asked in a startled voice from somewhere under all that hair.

"It's morning!" Snape yelled as he began searching for his clothes. "You didn't leave last night, so not only do you have to figure out a way to sneak out of here, but also to cover for the fact that your bed was empty all night!"

Davindra gave an exhaustive cry of dismay but only fell back into the bed.

"UP!" Snape physically shoved her body from the bed, and she hit the floor with a squeak of surprise and a thump, followed by an "ouwww."

Crawling about the floor, she finally found her clothes and began pulling them on. Snape was nearly ready to leave for the Great Hall and breakfast. He stepped from his bathroom after a quick shave, a splash of water to his face, and a hurried combing of his hair.

"What will I say?" Davindra finally asked in horror as full consciousness set in. "Do you think anyone even noticed I was gone? I left the curtains on my bed closed."

"That's not my problem," Snape hissed as he stomped his foot into his boot. "Now go, before I bodily throw you out. And don't let anyone see you!"

She got up to leave, but as always, stopped to kiss him before she exited. It was a silly habit in which he indulged her in.

He counted to thirty before he exited his chambers himself. Not far out of the dungeon he heard voices, one of which he disappointingly recognized as Davindra's.

"It's hardly seven a.m., young lady," a voice dripping with sweet vitriol said. "Now tell me just exactly what was so important that you had to be out so early? Or was it that you are just now attempting to sneak in?"

Snape casually walked up to find Umbridge holding on to Davindra's arm and gazing at her through suspicious eyes. Davindra in turn looked haughty yet slightly panicked.

said something to her that changed her mind."

"What did she say?"

"Sarah didn't know. She only said that it made Davindra go quiet and start packing."

Again Snape paced. He had a nauseating feeling as to what Madame Collins could have threatened her with. His own name was probably attached.

"Do you know what she might have said, Severus?" Dumbledore asked. There was something in the lilt of his voice and the look in his eye that told Snape he suspected he did.

"I wouldn't know, sir," Snape uttered calmly.

The men held each other's gaze for a while until Dumbledore finally spoke.

"I'll send a letter and attempt to reason with Madame Collins. But I'm not sure how much good it will do. And honestly, Severus, I don't have much time to spare to pursue this matter. And neither do you."

"I understand, Headmaster." Snape reeled in his temper. Any more impassioned outbreaks and the old man would surely know that an ulterior motive was behind his designs. "Please let me know of any progress you make."

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Snape sat on his knees, his nose pressed to the cold wood floor of what was once an orphanage. He could smell the mold, decay, and rodent droppings in its porous texture. For some time he stayed curled into a position of subservience at the feet of his Dark Master, waiting to be told his exaltation was adequate enough so he could rise. But he was kept on the floor as the Dark Lord sat by a dim fire, lovingly fondling the giant snake that wrapped around the chair.

"I do so hate mistakes," the dark wizard spoke lazily. "You do know how much Lord Voldemort hates mistakes, don't you, Severus?"

"Yes, my lord, I do know," Snape's voice came from the ground.

"And there were so many mistakes made at the Ministry," he continued in a deceptively calm way. "I think what I hate the most is the waste. Some of my best Death Eaters are again behind the walls of Azkaban. And what of the prophecy? Smashed to pieces, heard by no one. Forever lost to Lord Voldemort." A melancholy tone seeped into his words as he spoke. "Almost a year of hard work squandered on nothing but defeat."

Snape dared a glance at the master before him. He saw the pale, corpse-like form reclining in languish, backlit by an eerie red glow. The Dark Lord caught Snape stealing his look and suddenly sat straight in his chair.

"You have not earned the honor of laying eyes upon your master!" he roared at Snape, who quickly tucked his head back to the floor. "There is no reward to be imparted to those who fail me!"

"My lord, I did all you requested of me," Snape dared from his crouch of submission.

"You did nothing!" the Dark Lord continued. "Your efforts at keeping young Potter's mind free to me were pathetic! It took months longer than intended because of it. And your alerting the Order only caused more trouble."

"I'm truly sorry, my lord," Snape said in earnest. "His Occlumency skills were never strong. I truly believed his curiosity would bring you in sooner. And I waited as long as possible before I contacted the Order members. I believed the group would have completed their task by then."

"I grow so weary of excuses upon excuses upon excuses!" he again roared. "*Crucio!*"

A jolt of white hot pain ran the length of Snape's body and exploded in his head, knocking him completely to the floor. When it mercifully subsided, he lay panting and shaking.

"Oh, it is not all your fault, Severus," the Dark Lord then continued in a suddenly sympathetic way. "The real thorn in Lord Voldemort's side is Albus Dumbledore. Without him, my reign would never have ended and my body never broken. It's him who should be suffering instead of my devoted disciples." He let out a sigh of mock sorrow. "But I cannot get near him. We would spend the rest of our lives locked in a duel, each blocking the other's advances and never landing a solid blow. The element of surprise is the only thing that will bring him down."

Finally back to his knees, Snape's heart now raced with fear.

"Tell me, Severus, how strong is your dedication to your master?"

"There is no measure to my devotion," Snape said in a creaking voice. "I will do anything you ask."

"Will you even take down the one man who saved you from Azkaban and the wrath of the entire wizarding world and employed and housed and trusted you for the past fourteen years?" the Dark Lord asked this with a bit of whimsy in his voice, as though enjoying the possibilities the idea would inspire.

Snape swallowed hard and forced his mind to calm before he spoke. "If that is what my lord asks of me."

The dark wizard slowly strolled in front of the kneeling man in black. "We shall see, we shall see. There might be another way, but I do like knowing the extent to which I may rely on my servants." He gave a sickly, wet chuckle. "In the mean time, I have a little task you may do for me. You will take Wormtail into your home. He will be of more help to you than he is here with his simpering, useless bootlicking."

Snape could not hold back the snarl of revulsion as he said, "But, my lord, I am home so little, I have so many duties with the Order that could be..."

"Do you DARE deny your lord his meager request? Was your pledge just now a lie, my clever Occlumens?" the Dark Lord again raged.

"No, my lord!" Snape insisted. "I will be honored to perform this favor. The details will be mine to arrange."

"Indeed," he snapped in return. "Now, go back to your cozy dungeon, Professor Snape, until you are needed again. I will send Wormtail on his way shortly."

Snape backed out of the room on his hands and knees and did not stand until he was on the other side of the door and could flee the condemned old building as fast as his feet would allow.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

"I don't know how you can be so cavalier about this!" Snape paced the length of Dumbledore's office for the tenth time since his arrival. His story of the Headmaster's possible demise was met with hardly a shrug of the old wizard's shoulders.

"Severus, I've always known that Voldemort wished me dead and was only steps away from figuring out how to accomplish it." His voice was as placid as if he were discussing next year's school curriculum.

won't discover I'm not really there until sometime tomorrow morning."

"How did you get here?"

"Apparated. I passed my test this past spring."

"So what made you desperate enough to leave again this time?" Snape asked crossing his arms and looking down his nose at her.

"There is something very wrong happening," she said wearily, untying her cloak and taking it from her shoulders. "She was drugging me at night. It took me a while to figure it out. I'd be so sleepy, and then I'd go to bed and feel like I'd hardly shut my eyes, and it would be mid-morning the next day. I started to fake drinking the tea she gave me a few nights ago. And then, the other night I heard someone come to the house very late. I snuck downstairs and saw three or four people talking to Grandmother."

"Who?" Snape demanded, suddenly very intrigued with the events she spoke of.

"I don't know. They were all wearing black cloaks and hoods or hats. And I couldn't hear them very well, but I know I heard my name mentioned several times." Her eyes stared into him fiercely. "I know I heard it. That's when I decided to go."

Snape let out a breath of air. "Well, you can't stay here." His eyes darted to the kitchen. "I'll contact Lillyth Sparrow, and if we can't find her, I'll talk to Dumbledore."

He began to walk to the sitting area to find parchment and a pen to begin his letter when her hand on his arm stopped him.

"Just let me stay tonight at least." Her voice was only slightly pleading, but her eyes were begging.

Stepping closer so he could speak softly, Snape said, "I don't know that it is much safer here." Again his eyes went to the kitchen door. Her eyes followed and seemed to understand his meaning.

"Where will I go?" She looked positively lost and hopeless at the prospect of going into the world alone.

He had no answers. Instead he continued on his search of parchment and began his letter to Lillyth Sparrow. As he wrote, she told him of her time at Madame Collins's home and how, for the first time, she had felt like a prisoner. Madame Collins refused to discuss Davindra's return to Hogwarts in the fall but neither would she say how she planned for the girl to pass the upcoming N.E.W.T. exams. All she would comment on was the promising future Davindra would have if she would only trust her grandmother. She also refused to allow Davindra to help in any of the potions she worked on, which had always been a point of bonding between them. If Davindra dared to venture outside she said she constantly felt watched and guarded. Her requests to visit the nearby town were all rejected. In fact, Madame Collins said little of anything to her granddaughter, making her feel even more lonely, isolated, and paranoid.

By the time he had procured an owl for delivery and sent it on its way, it was quite late, and Davindra sat in the corner of the couch, her head listing to the side, and her eyes heavy with sleep. Snape knew that he couldn't with good conscience turn her out, and, deep down, he didn't want to. The sight of her was strangely comforting and refreshing.

He leaned down over her, his hand bracing his towering form against the sofa arm. Her eyes widened at his closeness.

"One night," he said softly, "no more. Go upstairs."

The soft smile that never failed to melt him appeared, and she reached her hands up to take his face and pull him close. He allowed a light kiss to his lips before he moved away.

He watched her climb the stairs behind the bookcase before he headed to the kitchen to find Wormtail still at the table, nursing a bottle of Snape's Firewhisky. Resisting his possessive urge to reclaim his drink, Snape allowed him to keep sipping in hopes it would soon lull the little pest into a deep sleep.

"We will have a guest for tonight only," he informed the half drunk rat. "You will not leave this kitchen until tomorrow and until I have managed to straighten out the particular predicament that brought her here."

Wormtail smiled in a nasty way. "I'm smarter than you think. I know who she is," he said with slurred words. "And you shouldn't be diddling where you don't belong, Severus."

"I'll thank you to keep your insipid concerns to yourself," Snape hissed. "Now go to bed before you pass out."

Halfway up the stairs Snape spied Davindra standing outside the one door that was obviously his. He had forgotten about the ward he put up to keep Wormtail out. She had watched his ascent with a look of hunger. He stopped in front of her, his body almost brushing against hers. The familiar heat and electricity passed between them, raising a flood of insistent craving inside of him.

Their eyes raked over each other. Their tongues dared to moisten lips that yearned for touch.

"I've missed you," she breathed.

"Don't you ever get tired of saying that?" he asked as his hand went to her waist.

"Oh, yes," she sighed.

The desire could be held off no longer, and their mouths found each other with their bodies quickly following. Wet, lush, gluttonous kisses only continued to drive the desire inside them. No matter how deeply he kissed or how hard he ground his body against her, it would never be enough. Snape pulled away only to grab her arm and disengage the ward to continue to his bedroom.

Inside the sparse room he had called his own since childhood, Snape hurriedly stripped her of her clothing as she fumbled with the buttons of his coat. Their lips and hands hardly parted from one another as they finally fell into the rumpled bed and began a frenzied claiming of each other. Quickly Snape pushed himself inside her, not bothering with the formalities of foreplay. The past month had been nothing but a building of rapacious, unheeded desires that a few minutes of touching and kissing had sent into a raging torrent of need. Luckily, it must have been the same for her, for Snape found her eagerly accepting him into her hot, wet core.

He had never remembered their encounters ever being so hurried, forceful, and demanding before. But it felt erotic and primal to completely lose himself in something so base and yet so perfect. It would be a quick endeavor for him, he realized, when the tingle of pleasure began deep in his groin. However, her own quickening moans and rubbing of her pelvis against him told him she too wouldn't need long. Snape forced himself to back off but keep his thrusts strong until she cried out and writhed beneath him, signaling he could finally follow.

Snape wondered, as he lay tangled in the sheets and her limbs, if they had managed to last a whole five minutes. He supposed it didn't really matter for those few moments had eased weeks and weeks of pent up lust. She squirmed to nestle closely to him. The feel of her long body against him was at once soothing and familiar. He could tell she was about to speak, and he feared to hear what she might say. Often it was whispered words of adoration and declarations of love to which he could not respond to.

"So who's the house-elf?" she asked, surprising him. "Is he a relative?"

A snort of disgust suddenly escaped him. "Hardly. Just someone I am supposed to shelter for a while."

"You can't keep her from me. You have no right!" With that Madame Collins attempted to find the staircase behind the walls of books.

"Davindra! Davindra Collins, you come down here this instant!" The woman began to yell at the unyielding shelves. Her face was now a furious red, and her hands shaking.

"Madame Collins, please control yourself," Snape said. "You will do your health no good to get so upset. Davindra won't come down until Lillyth Sparrow and her daughter, Abigail, arrive." He ended with a slick smile.

"Lillyth and Abigail?" she asked with surprise. "They're in Croatia dragon watching. They shouldn't be bothered with this."

Snape allowed a look of feigned concern to wash over his features. "Well, they seemed very alarmed in their letter, which said they would be here this morning to retrieve Miss Collins."

"What lies did you tell them?"

"Only what Miss Collins told me herself. And I must say it all sounds very distressing." Again he smiled as he announced, "I think some tea is in order. Do have a seat, and we shall wait together for Mrs. Sparrow and Mrs. Collins to arrive."

Snape left Madame Collins stunned into silence by anger and shock. In the kitchen he found Wormtail finally beginning to move about, though it appeared the activity was a slow, painful one for him. With another reminder for the rat to stay hidden and quiet, Snape left the kitchen with another tray of tea bound for the sitting room. He was beginning to feel like a waiter.

By now Madame Collins had found her way to the fireplace and was attempting to stand in a proud, stoic manner, though her flushed complexion and fidgeting fingers said she was far from calmed.

"I don't know what she's told you, but I'm sure it is all a mistake," she began in a remote voice. "I don't know why she has turned on me so. All I've ever done has been for her, and now she fights me and says I'm attempting to do her harm. It hurts me so." Tears began to spring from the woman's eyes, and Snape couldn't help but suspect it was more of the fine acting he had witnessed in years past.

"Then perhaps when our other guests arrive we can sort this all out," Snape replied as he commanded the tea to pour itself for each of them. "In the mean time, why don't you sit and relax."

She eyed the tea suspiciously but didn't move to take it in hand. "Is she alright at least?"

"She's perfectly fine."

Madame Collins narrowed her gaze at Snape as if to question his assessment when there came a knock at the door.

"Ah, they're early," Snape said with more enthusiasm than he had ever had for anyone who had appeared at his door.

Lillyth Sparrow looked as lovely as ever, though with a bit more worry etched around her vivid blue eyes. Abigail Collins was, surprisingly, dressed much like her mother, in traditional witch's robes and also with an expression of anxiety. Immediately they began questioning Snape about Davindra's well being and demanding to see her.

After ushering them into the sitting room, they took notice of Madame Collins.

"Demelza, what are you doing here?" Lillyth asked.

"Yes, I'm sure you are surprised to see me." There was venom in the witch's voice for her old friend.

"It's just that..." Lillyth exchanged looks with her daughter.

Abigail turned to Snape. "Where is Davindra? I want to see her."

Snape waved his wand and the case of books swung outwards to reveal a stairway and signal for Davindra it was safe to come out. She immediately came down the stairs, fully dressed and carrying her cloak.

"Mum! Granny!" she said with relief and allowed herself to be pulled into a tight embrace by the small, fair-haired woman as Lillyth also fawned over her presence.

"Are you alright, really?" Abigail asked, sounding as if she were afraid for the answer.

"I'm fine now," Davindra assured.

"You gave me a horrible fright, Davi, you should be terribly ashamed of yourself, doing that to me," Madame Collins spoke from her place across the sitting room.

All eyes turned toward her and none were anything but cool. And she had the audacity to look confused.

Abigail wrapped a protective arm around her daughter, though she stood nearly a head shorter. "Davindra is going to come home with me now."

Still Madame Collins seemed aghast. "What about your trip? You had reservations until August. Davindra was supposed to stay with me."

"The plan has changed."

The delicate woman suddenly took on a strong, steely quality. Snape could tell that she was set for battle if need be while Lillyth remained silent but equally unyielding.

"How can you do this?" Madame Collins demanded. "How can you just shut me out of Davindra's life after all these years. After all I have done for her."

"What *have* you done?" Davindra suddenly said. "What about drugging me at night? And what about those men who came in the middle of the night? Why were you talking about me? Why wouldn't you let me out of your sight?"

Still Madame Collins looked shocked at the accusations. "The potion was just to help you sleep." A condescending smile crept onto her face. "I knew you haven't slept well since your father died. The people who came were clients. All they did was ask about you. All my clients ask of you. I have just been worried about you, Davi. You haven't been yourself."

"I think you've done enough now, Demelza," Abigail started in firmly. "David and I allowed you take on Davindra's education because we believed that being Squibs made us unable to decide the best course for a witch's schooling. But she is an adult now and can make her own decisions, and I trust her in it."

"She is still a child! She can't know what she wants or what is best for her at seventeen. And look at what leaving her to her own devices has brought." Madame Collins turned her infuriated glare to Snape, which the other women followed. Snape felt his blood suddenly turn to ice water.

"What do you mean?" Lillyth asked.

"Our dear Potions master, who I trusted to look after Davi during her education, has taken the most obscene and reprehensible liberty imaginable," she replied with satisfied insolence. "I've recently learned they have been having an affair for sometime now."

If he could have Disapparated on the spot, he would have. Instead he was left with giving the most loathsome death glare he had to the smug looking old witch. The other two women stared in disbelief, and Davindra simply looked ashamed.

Lillyth's lips moved but nothing came out until finally she managed, "This can't be true. Davindra? This has to be a mistake."

While his mind searched for what to say to protect himself from the possible onslaught of vengeance, Davindra came forward.

"It's not his fault." Her voice was strong, and her features set in a stubborn line. "I was the one who instigated it. I've been in love with him since I was eleven years old. I did everything I could to gain his attention."

This only made the women's eyes grow wider with horror, and Snape began to go for his wand believing the only way out of this was to Imperius Davindra or Obliviate them all.

"How long has this been going on?" Abigail demanded.

"Just this last year," Davindra assured them. "He never forced me to do anything I didn't want to do. If anything, I tricked him into it."

Lillyth and Abigail now looked at her as though they had never seen her before in their lives. Suddenly it was her honor he needed to save.

"That isn't quite true," he finally spoke. "I take more than an equal share of the blame. I realize I have abused my position as a trusted teacher and protector, and I never intended for anything of this nature to ever happen. But I have grown quite fond of Miss Collins over the years. My job can be a lonely one at times, and I'm afraid that in a weak moment I did allow for the affections of a beautiful young woman to sway me into a situation I would normally abhor the thought of."

Snape kept his expression humble yet serene as he spoke. Davindra watched him with trepidation as Madame Collins kept dark loathing in her eyes for him.

"You should be relieved of your post, Professor Snape," Lillyth said boldly.

"Indeed, it would be a fitting and just punishment," he consented. "One I would rightfully deserve for the magnitude of my crime. I would likely hand in my own resignation if it were not for one important thing."

Madame Collins let out a sound of disgust at his words. "Don't listen to him. Don't you realize this is exactly the smooth kind of talk that got Davi into his bed in the first place?"

"My employment at Hogwarts has had a dual purpose," Snape began, ignoring the blistering comments. "My service to Albus Dumbledore is in more ways than just a Potions teacher. In being there, I serve a great duty in the resistance against the Dark Lord. A role made more important as of late, as I'm sure you can surmise. Though my leaving may give you peace of mind, it would undoubtedly leave a glaring and possibly fatal chink in the armor of the rebellion."

"You're saying that if we turn you in for having an affair with a student, then it leaves us in danger of being over taken by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" There was disbelief but yet a tinge of fear in Lillyth's words.

"It is an unlikely and ridiculous story he's concocted in hopes of saving himself," Madame Collins interjected.

"Wait a moment! Just wait!" Abigail now stood in the middle of the room, her hands held up to quiet the argument.

"Davindra," she turned to her daughter. "You can't really be in love with this man."

Davindra's eyes quickly darted to Snape before she nodded. Snape again felt a chill of horror run through his body.

"But he's twenty-years older than you! Old enough to be your father." There was desperate disbelief in her voice. She sighed heavily as she looked from Snape back to her daughter. "Do you want to go back to Hogwarts in the fall?"

"Yes," Davindra said emphatically. "I want to go back, take my N.E.W.T. exams and take the apprenticeship at St. Mungo's."

"But we had arranged for Davindra to finish her schooling at home," Demelza insisted.

"I will let this be Davindra's decision," Abigail addressed her mother-in-law before turning back to her daughter. "But there will be one condition. And that is that this relationship ends right now."

Snape and Davindra exchanged glances.

"I agree that is for the best," he said smoothly, still playing modest. "It was an inevitable end. Miss Collins, I'm terribly sorry for the hurt and confusion I have caused. I never meant to exploit your affections. You do have my deepest respect."

Snape knew if he didn't back off a bit, then everyone would soon recognize his obsequious fawning for what it really was. It was looking for the moment that at least Abigail was convinced of his regret. Madame Collins still looked murderous. Lillyth Sparrow seemed disappointed and shocked. Davindra's face was a mixed mask of sadness, worry, anger, and determination.

"I beseech you, Abigail," Madame Collins came from her corner to take the woman's arm. "Do not let your only child go back to that school. She was locked in a dungeon as punishment. And who knows what other unabated debauchery goes on there ignored by the staff. They can't prepare her for the future the way I can."

"The woman who inflicted that punishment on your granddaughter has been removed from Hogwarts," Snape assured. "And my own actions aside, there has never been a tolerance for corruption of any sort. Hogwarts is one of the finest schools in the world. I doubt any one person could equal its standards of education."

Abigail shook her arm free. "If this is what Davindra wants, then it is what her father would and I will support. But I do mean it, Mr. Snape," she again turned to him. "I appreciate to no end you being there for Davindra when she needed you, but this inappropriate relationship stops right now. What happens between you two after she has graduated and is no longer your student might be another thing. But for now, you will keep a civil and decent distance, and I will not report you Albus Dumbledore. Do we have a deal?"

"Absolutely," he replied with a slight bow. "I very much appreciate your leniency in this matter."

"Just see that you stick with your end of the bargain," she reminded firmly, her blue eyes snapping in warning. "We're going home, Davindra."

The woman took her daughter's arm and began pulling her toward the door.

"Davi," Madame Collins finally addressed her granddaughter with pleading eyes, "how can you turn your back on all we've done, all we've accomplished. Don't you know how much I adore you and want only the very best for you?"

Davindra looked at her grandmother with a pitying sadness. "I know you do, Grandmother. But I can't live your dreams anymore. I have my own."

She turned then to Snape and regarded him with a calm face that seemed to scarcely hold back a flood of emotions. To his surprise she wrapped her arms around him in a tight embrace, pressing her lips to his cheek and whispering, "I'll love you no matter what," before she pulled away, avoiding his eyes totally.

They exited, leaving Lillyth Sparrow behind to give him a long, contemplative look with narrowed eyes. She came close and said in a dark tone, "And when you could have had a real woman. Honestly, Severus, you do disappoint me."

Pulling the hood of her pale blue cloak over her platinum hair, she too left, not waiting for his reply.

Last remaining was Madame Collins who still shot daggers from her cold green eyes as she too approached him.

"You will be very sorry for this, Severus Snape, for it isn't only me you've crossed." Her voice was low and menacing. "And you will stay away from Davindra, or I will not only make sure that everyone from the Ministry down to the *Daily Prophet* knows of your perversion, but I will make sure that you never have the desire or ability to accost another young woman again." She gave a meaningful glance down to his crotch to accentuate her point.

"A very fine performance today, Madame Collins," he sneered back. "You almost had me convinced that you cared about your granddaughter's virtue. When we both know it has been your weightiest bargaining piece thus far." Snape let his smile grow to one of obscene villainy. "But since I have already relieved you of that possession, I wonder what you will barter favors with now?"

"If I am ever foolish enough to need you, Snape, I'm sure I won't have to look far to find a little shred of something to bind you to my bidding." She returned an ugly grin. "Your desperation prices you cheaply, Professor. The only honest thing about you, by the way."

With no words, he let his cold, black eyes sink into her like a knife delivering a lethal jab. Though she didn't falter under his savage glare, she did pull away and move through the door very quickly.

A wave of his wand slammed the door and sealed it from any further intrusion. Snape let out a hiss of anger and exhaustion along with a mental resolution to never involve himself in domestic disputes ever again.

He headed to the kitchen in search of something to ease his frayed nerves and furious panic. A bottle of Firewhisky and a rat to kick repeatedly would be meager yet adequate consolation for his rage.

Year Seven: A Misery More Beautiful

Chapter 16 of 21

What is expected of Severus may be more than he can give.

□

what ravages of spirit

conjured this temptuous rage

created you a monster

broken by the rules of love

and fate has lead you through it

you do what you have to do

...

every moment marked

with apparitions of your soul

I'm ever swiftly moving

trying to escape this desire

the yearning to be near you

I do what I have to do

...

but I have the sense to recognize

that I don't know how to let you go

Do What You Have to Do -- Sarah McLachlan

~*~*~*~

'No, I won't do it. I won't do it. I won't do it. No, no, no, no, I won't do it.'

"I won't do it." Snape sat across from Dumbledore, his wand lying limply in his hands. The old wizard cradled a withered, black claw that used to be his left hand.

"I don't see any other way, Severus," Dumbledore said with a pained, weak smile.

"You're essentially asking me to sign my own death warrant." Snape's black eyes flashed viciously, and he stood to stride across the damp basement that served as his

workshop at Spinner's End. He began a hurried recapping and re-shelving of bottles and boxes that had been strewn from one end of the long work table to the other in their vain attempts to save the now useless appendage at the Headmaster's arm.

"You may as well just hand me over to Potter and the Order afterward, for my life will have no value from that point on." Snape's voice almost shook with the reality of the request just made to him. He noticed his hands trembled as well, and the jars clinked together as he handled them.

"I'll make sure that you are protected." The old wizard tried to sound soothing, though his own voice was shaky and feeble.

Snape turned furiously to face the man. "I. Won't. DO IT!" he yelled.

Dumbledore sighed piteously. "It's going to be done, if not by you, then by someone. It needs to be done. I would rather leave it in the hands of someone I trust implicitly than cast it to fate."

With a visibly shaking hand, Snape reached up to wipe the sweat and spittle from his upper lip as he considered the wizard's words.

"Voldemort has ordered my death," Dumbledore continued. "There is a small army of dark wizards positively drooling with anticipation for the honor of being the one to cast the curse. And I, foolishly enough, have managed to fatally poison myself." He looked down at the charred hand in his lap.

"I told you, I don't know for certain..." Snape attempted to break in.

"I know," Dumbledore said more strongly. "I can feel it this time. It was stupid of me to go off searching for the Horcrux alone and think that I alone could destroy it."

"But you did destroy it," Snape reminded him.

Dumbledore nodded. "And at such a cost. I may not live long enough to find the next one."

"Sir, if you just give me more time, I'm sure I can find something to stop the effects of the curse, maybe even reverse it." There was desperation in his voice that Snape hated the sound of.

"If I were younger and we had unlimited time, maybe," the old wizard said. "But we have neither. No, Severus, I would rather that you put your energies elsewhere. And unfortunately I still have many things to do before I can go."

He began a slow rise from the chair he occupied. Bracing his good hand on the chair arm, it seemed as though the man's legs might not comply. Snape hurried over to assist.

"If the challenge is yours, Severus, it allows us much more power than Voldemort realizes. When and how will be very crucial."

"Do you think the Dark Lord would allow anyone that kind of control?" Snape asked, anxiety and anger creeping back into his voice. "Whomever he assigns this task will be at his mercy. If it is not fulfilled to his specifications, then they too will suffer the same fate as you, if not worse."

Dumbledore turned to look at Snape's scowling, hard face. He again lapsed into a calm smile and rested his good hand on Snape's arm.

"I know you always thought that James Potter and Sirius Black were my favorites," he began. "And I won't deny that they were special in my heart. But I had to worry about them and never felt sure they would find their way out of their own trouble. I never gave you the same attention, Severus, because you were always stronger and more clever and resilient than any of them. My love for you was always based in respect and admiration for all that you overcame and for the fact that you never needed me until that one time."

Snape felt uncomfortable and embarrassed hearing these words from the Headmaster, even though they were the things he had needed to be reassured of since he was a child. He found himself unable to keep the stare between them unbroken.

"This isn't something I could have ever asked of James, or Sirius, or even Harry. This is something that I could only trust to you."

It felt as though Snape's voice had left him and what came from his mouth wasn't discernable as his own when he choked out another weak protest. "Don't make me, sir."

"It will be the last thing I ever ask of you, and then you will be free." The man reached up and clasped his hand to Snape's pale cheek.

"I'll never live to see freedom," he replied solemnly.

"Then let freedom be my last promise to you." Dumbledore removed his hand and began to move away toward the stairs. "I'm very tired, Severus, as I'm sure are you. I believe a good rest is in order for us both. The new year is hardly a few weeks away, and I don't even have a new..." He stopped and turned to look at Snape.

Suddenly an ominous realization came over Snape, and he felt himself unconsciously backing away from Dumbledore.

"How about taking a crack at Defense Against the Dark Arts this year?" the old wizard asked with as much informality as if he were inquiring if Snape wanted milk with his tea.

In all the years past, Snape would have lunged at the phrase and nearly fallen over himself in gratitude to accept the offer. Now, he cowered from the words still hanging in question before him.

"I think it's time. And I can think of no one else for the job, but I can think of someone I might be able to persuade to take on Potions," Dumbledore continued.

Snape's first thought was of Madame Collins, and he almost protested when the Headmaster answered with, "Slughorn."

Mutely, Snape nodded. It was obvious that he was being placed on the fast track out of Hogwarts and free society. He might as well go out with one meager consolation.

"Consider it a small token of my gratitude," Dumbledore said as he began a slow climb of the stairs.

"Isn't it more fitting to call it what it actually is? Another nail for my coffin." Snape's words came out bitter and sharp.

The man on the stairs stopped and turned. "I'll keep my promise, if you keep yours."

"Haven't I always?"

"I wouldn't be here if you hadn't." Another fair smile touched the old man's lips before he continued his journey to the main floor and out of the house.

Snape stayed where he was for several moments before he gave in to the feeling of complete physical and mental exhaustion and sat in the chair that Dumbledore had relinquished. A tickling sensation brushed his cheek, and when Snape reached to wipe it away, he found a salty dampness on his fingers.

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Hearing that Draco Malfoy was now the intended assassin of Dumbledore would almost have been a relief if Snape hadn't felt so piteously sorry for the boy. After learning of his father's imprisonment after the fiasco at the Ministry of Magic, young Malfoy had raged and screamed that he would take the place of his fallen father amongst the

Death Eaters in order to avenge him and exact punishment upon Harry Potter. Snape had witnessed the initiation with a twist of dread in his gut. The boy had a look of sickened shock on his face until the branding of the Mark on his arm contorted his features in pain. Afterward, Draco had exchanged a look of resigned fear with his mother as he accepted others' congratulations.

He could only imagine what the look must have been on the boy's face when he was informed that his first duty as a Death Eater would be to bring down the most powerful wizard in the world. It was almost a joke amongst the rank and file. They would have even laughed if it hadn't been so tragic in its design. The boy was a pawn to be sacrificed in order to punish Lucius Malfoy for his failings at the Ministry. When Snape was told it was his job to make sure the boy succeeded, he was sure it meant that the job would fall to him when Draco failed. It looked as though there was no escaping Dumbledore's last wishes after all.

Narcissa Malfoy at his feet, begging for his pledge to protect her son at any cost was a most interesting turn of events. Snape wished that Lucius could see the desperation in his wife's eyes. And, what was that? Could it be a slight hope that Snape would demand payment in flesh for his services? A wicked little fantasy involving the gratitude of both the proud sisters of the most noble house of Black crept into his mind as he heard Narcissa's pleas and felt Bellatrix's glare of contempt and envy.

His Vow completed, Snape felt no less condemned than before. But sharing the burden seemed to make him feel less lonely. However, it was news Dumbledore found quite unsettling. He ordered Snape to spare Draco the obligation of becoming a murderer at the tender age of seventeen. The old wizard said that every effort must be made to ensure that Draco would fail in his duty and that the charge would fall to Snape. Though he did agree with Dumbledore that the young man's pride was misplaced and leading to a life of horrible misfortune, Snape hardly wished to be sacrificed in his place. Once again, he was alone in his miserable battle of survival, doomed to fail and become a victim of his own outstanding debts.

However, Draco was not interested in Snape's help. When Snape had attempted to speak with him about his plans and offer assurance and suggestions, the young man had turned cold, hard eyes to him and announced that he could do it all himself. He even had the audacity to accuse Snape of wanting to take the glory from him to remain in the Dark Lord's favor. Being all too aware of the stubborn resolve of a young ego, Snape didn't press him. Draco was following the Dark One's plan completely unaware.

Back at Hogwarts Snape prepared for the new year with dread. He had tossed Wormtail from his house and locked the door behind them both, claiming he cared not where the rat went or what the Dark Lord said. Snape would not leave anyone unsupervised in his home during his absence. Wormtail muttered something about loyalty and abuse, then morphed into his honest rodent form to skittered away for refuse bins unknown.

At first Snape stood in his office trying to figure out where to start when he remembered he was teaching a whole different course this year. The idea of moving his entire office and living chambers to the one connected to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom was too daunting to even imagine. Dumbledore allowed him to stay in familiar surroundings and placed Slughorn elsewhere.

Seeing the corpulent old Potions wizard again was curious. Snape had never been a favorite student of Slughorn's though he had out-performed most anyone in his class. It was his lack of connections, famous family, or natural charm that left him out of the nauseating little gatherings referred to as the Slug Club. Even now, Slughorn seemed hardly impressed with the man who had held his former position for fifteen years. They exchanged a few formal words before the round codger waddled off to firmly plant his nose up Dumbledore's ass.

Escorting a very late Hero Potter into the school and deducting house points before the feast even began helped improve Snape's mood. The boy's loathing of him had only intensified after Sirius Black's death, and Snape didn't find it surprising nor disturbing in the least to have never made friends with "The Chosen One." He actually anticipated another year of battles and detentions ahead. If Snape had remained in Potions, Potter wouldn't be an issue because he didn't make the O.W.L. required for the upper level study. But he had managed an O in his Defense Against the Dark Arts final and would probably assume himself to be the star pupil. A happy sneer spread over Snape's face when he thought of the shock Potter would suffer when he realized it would be him teaching the class this year.

The announcement of his reassignment as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was met with very mixed reviews. The Slytherins cheered, and Harry Potter pitched a predictable fit right on the spot. Snape didn't know whether to laugh or order detention. Over at the Ravenclaw table, a tall, slender, black-haired beauty sat with her mouth open in shock. The horrified look didn't leave her face all night.

A pounding on his office door not long before curfew came as no surprise. He opened the door and gave Davindra a look of bored annoyance. Her alarmed expression had now hardened into anger.

"How could you do this?" she asked incredulously as she stomped passed him into the office.

Snape remained cool as he closed the door and went back to the books he was still poring over for the next week's lesson plan.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Miss Collins," he said with total disinterest.

She stood wide-eyed and rigid. "Defense Against the Dark Arts? You're a Potions master! You can't change now." Her words were desperate and heated. "This is my last year. And after all I went through so I could come back here for my last year. Now you just change classes like a pair of socks?"

Snape rolled his eyes at her dramatics. "Oh, for God's sake, I didn't run off and join the circus," he snapped in reply. "I'm still right here, teaching a class that you still have to take. Professor Slughorn was my own instructor in Potions during my time here. He has a total of fifty years teaching experience, which makes him more than adequate for the job. I don't see what has your tail in such a twist."

"But Potions was ours!" she announced with exasperation.

"Excuse me?" Snape looked up from his books with an eyebrow cocked in surprise.

Davindra sighed and placed her hand against her forehead as she began a pace of his room. She seemed to wilt under an invisible weight before she continued in a much calmer voice.

"It was my passion. It and you. I haven't separated the two in seven years, and I can't imagine doing it now."

He hid a smirk before he replied. "Flattering as that is, Miss Collins, I can assure you that I and the art of potion making are exclusive of each other. You needn't have one to find the other."

"But I don't want one without the other," she said softly as she approached him. "You're the best there is in most anything that is important to me. How could I accept anyone else?" Her hands slid around his shoulders, and he felt her face press into his hair and against his neck.

A familiar excited tingle began in his stomach as he wrestled with what to do next: throw her on the table and enact what he had fantasized about every night for weeks, or push her away with some vague excuse of promises and self-restraint.

Her fingers in his hair and her lips at his ear were making it hard for him to logically choose.

"Davindra," he finally managed, taking her hands from his body, "you have to stop this. It's over."

"Oh, you stop." She laughed playfully at his rebuke and attempted to again take her place against him.

"I mean it," he said more forcefully as he gripped her shoulders with arms locked to keep her from touching him. "I always said that if anyone found out, it would be over. Several people know. So it's over."

She looked at him with disbelieving, pale eyes. "Only my family knows," she assured him with an uneasy smile. "No one else knows. We aren't in any danger of being discovered here."

"It doesn't matter." Snape used his coldest voice to convey a bleak statement that he found he didn't have total faith in. "I said if anyone knew. Three people know. Three people who have threatened my job, my freedom, and even my body parts if I come near you again. I'm not stupid enough to tempt that."

He walked away from her to return some books to his shelves and try to gather some clarity about how to spend the next year rejecting a very persistent, clever, salaciously beautiful girl who wanted nothing but to adore and please him.

"You're being ridiculous!" Davindra said in exasperation. "I can't believe you are letting them frighten you."

Snape turned. "And who was it that was afraid her grandmother was trying to drug her and keep her prisoner?"

"And she was! But who was it that said he was a grown man and could take care of himself in any situation?" she tossed back snidely.

"Something you haven't learned about being an adult is knowing when to challenge and when to back down. This just isn't worth the risk."

"You lie," she said with bitter contempt. Her eyes bore into him in accusing scrutiny.

Snape gave her a threatening glare as he slowly approached. "I do hope that you are not implying that I am weak in my convictions, Miss Collins. Choosing one's battles carefully is not the same as... cowardice," he spat out the last word with revulsion.

As usual, even his harshest words failed to crack her ardent tenacity. She glared back in challenge. There was a heavy, measured silence between them for several moments as they stared one another down. It was becoming tiring and rather dull when Snape finally consented.

"I never said that I would enjoy giving up the pleasure of your company," he finally uttered. "But however desirable you are, I cannot justify sacrificing my employment and reputation for it. It's an unfortunate circumstance, but we knew going in that this was a tenuous endeavor. We can't be surprised that the end came so soon."

"Well, at least you are now admitting that you like it," she said with a bitter edge.

Snape backed away with a sneer and continued with his thumbing of a book. "Would you even believe me if I said I faked all my orgasms," he said flippantly.

"Considering that I've seen your eyes roll back in your head on more than one occasion, no, I wouldn't buy it," she answered with equal sarcasm as she moved closer.

"And there were times you came so hard I feared you were in the throes of a seizure," he replied with slow coolness.

Again, Snape felt her hands caress his shoulders. "And you want to give all that up?" Her voice brushed against his ear in a throaty whisper.

Actually, Snape deeply resented the idea that he would have to give up the one luxury he allowed himself. The one thing that took away his thoughts and worries, even if only for a while. This time he didn't push her away as her fingers began a soft stroking of his hair, though he told himself it was dangerous to allow her to touch him. Her hand traveled his chest, stroking past the buttons on his jacket and wiggling her way into the spaces in between to scratch at the shirt underneath.

"It was an impossibly long month and a half," she spoke again, her words tickling the inside of his head. "I never agreed to end this relationship, Severus. So I break no promises by doing this."

She turned his face toward her and kissed him in an open, wet, sensuous way that almost took his knees out from under him. His body responded without consideration and immediately they were pressed together in a clenching, mauling embrace. When he had agreed to end his involvement with Davindra, he had forgotten that she was nearly impossible to resist when she exerted the slightest effort for his attention. He had foolishly assumed that she would honor her mother's wishes after being rescued from Madame Collins and allowed to resume her schooling. It was a stupid assumption and he knew better. But the demands of Dumbledore and the Dark Lord had pressed many reasonable thoughts from his mind.

Davindra pushed him down into his chair and crawled onto him to straddle his lap. The frenzied kisses continued as Snape felt her guide his hand into her open blouse and inside her bra to grasp the warm flesh underneath. She moaned at his touch and pressed her body closer to grind against his rapidly hardening erection. In an insatiable hunger, he pulled her clothing away to reveal the pale mound with its delicate pink nipple and set his mouth upon it with ravenous delight.

He wasn't sure which broke him from his enthusiastic application. It might have been the sound of his door opening, or the gasp that came not from Davindra, or perhaps just the sensation that they were no longer alone. Snape looked up to find Draco Malfoy standing in his doorway with a look of disgusted shock on his face. For a few frozen seconds, the three of them stared at one another in equal horror. Davindra tried to cover herself but not before Snape had shoved her from his lap, and neither moved quicker than Draco who bolted from the room.

Snape took off at a run to catch the sprinting boy, calling after him to stop. If he made it back to the Slytherin common room, there would be no talking with him. Drawing his wand, Snape commanded, *Incarcerous*, and magical ropes shot forward to wrap around the boy's legs, bringing him down to the hard stone floor with a thud.

Draco struggled to free himself, but Snape got to him first, grabbing the front of his shirt and dragging him to a standing position against the wall. Both of them panted for air after their chase.

"What happened to knocking, Mr. Malfoy?" Snape asked in breathless ferocity.

Draco wouldn't meet his eyes but held a snarl of scorn on his face. "It didn't occur to me that you'd have *company*." He said the last word with malice, as though speaking it polluted his tongue.

"It wouldn't be any of your business if I did nor who that company may be," Snape hissed threateningly.

"Then why act so guilty?" The boy finally met his eyes with challenge. "Or don't you have all your students serve their detention on your lap?"

Snape jabbed his wand into the soft, fleshy pallet under Draco's chin causing the boy to wince and look fearful.

"What's the matter, Malfoy?" There was snide contempt in his voice. "Jealous?"

"Hardly, since I was the one who dropped her. I could always do better than a Mudblood. But what about you?" A twisted little smile started on the boy's pale face. "Can't find women your own age?"

"I have no reason to justify myself to you," he spat in reply. "Especially since I am going to Obliviate this whole nasty incident from your memory."

Just as he was raising his wand, Draco interrupted.

"There's no need, you know. It's not like I'm going to tell anyone." Despite his words, his tone was still acidic. "I mean, it would be pretty stupid of me to get you thrown out of Hogwarts now. I don't think the Dark Lord would appreciate it much."

It was a valid argument. And it wasn't as though Snape didn't have his own leverage to keep the boy in line. One word from him and the Dark Lord would give Draco a fate much worse than that his father suffered.

"And how am I supposed to trust that?" Snape asked cautiously.

"I give you my word as a Death Eater," he replied with an obvious pride.

Foolishly the boy believed there was honor and nobility in a Death Eater's word. Snape smirked at the absurdity.

"And will you even be able to keep your emotions clear and unaffected for the task at hand if I allow you this knowledge?" Snape pressed.

"Why should I care who you fuck?" There was a serrated edge to the words Draco spat at him, which said that the boy did care.

"Language, Mr. Malfoy," he said smoothly. "If you didn't care, why did you run like you'd just been hexed?"

"You think I want to stay around and watch someone as old as my father molesting one of my old girlfriends?" he replied, his lip curled in disgust.

"Pity, you might have learned something," Snape said with a wicked smirk as he backed away and took the rope hex off of Draco's legs.

"I will allow you to keep your memory on this. But I do warn you, if you dare cross me, I will make sure that the Dark Lord hears some very disappointing news in regards to your progress here at Hogwarts." He narrowed his eyes into a chilling scrutiny. "Keep your word and I will help you in your task, and there will be great reward in the end for you and your whole family."

"I don't need your help." Draco snarled back as he shoved his way free from Snape's cornering. "I'll bring honor to my family and my father's freedom on my own. I'll keep your dirty little secret, but not because you threatened me. But because I won't gain anything by squealing."

The boy stalked off down the deserted hall to the Slytherin quarters and left Snape glowering after him before he too returned to his office.

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Although there was an invigorating rush in teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, Snape had trouble letting go of his claim on Potions. Slughorn was back to his old habit of fawning over certain students and had resurrected his little ass-kissing club. And strangely enough, now Harry Potter, who would not have even been allowed in Snape's upper level Potions class, was Slughorn's top student. Snape's tea nearly went up his nose when the old Potions master informed him of the perfect specimens of brewing the boy was turning out.

"Potter? Harry Potter?" Snape pressed in shock.

"Oh, yes, an amazing talent," the man's beady eyes twinkled in his fat face. "Must have gotten it from his mother." He then gave a chuckle.

Snape returned a scowl. Lily Evans had been his nemesis in Potions. His work was often superior, but perhaps the fact that he didn't have flashing green eyes and an effervescent wit made him so easy to overlook.

"But I can't seem to get that Potter boy to come to my little gatherings," Slughorn continued. "You may remember the Slug Club?"

Snape gave him a narrowed look of contempt. "Vaguely."

"Oh, well, just a little get-together of similar minds. Harry would be a perfect addition. But it seems this time he says he has detention with you. Now, I can't imagine what the fine boy could have done to warrant such a thing. You don't suppose you could put it off for a night and let him enjoy a little refreshment and camaraderie, do you?" There was jovial challenge in the man's voice, which Snape found insulting.

"Hardly. I've already had to give him one reprieve for his flagrant disrespect in my class. He won't be getting another. I'm afraid your little party will have to go on without him," Snape ended with a patronizing sneer.

"Oh, well, that is such a shame," Slughorn said with a furrowed brow. "He's always a perfectly behaved lad in my class. But do you know who else I cannot persuade to join our group," he pressed on in continued cheer, "is that mesmerizing little Ravenclaw, Davindra Collins."

Reflexively, Snape's eyebrows went up when he heard that Slughorn was trying to recruit Davindra into his club and that she was resisting.

"I hear she is a bit of a pet project of yours, you being so close to Demelza Collins and all," Slughorn continued, unaware of Snape's obvious revulsion in his company. "She's quite clever, though. But I'm afraid I'm having a bit of a hard time winning her over from your ways of teaching. She keeps reminding me of how Professor Snape did things."

He smirked. *'My little pet indeed. I'll have to remember to reward her loyalty.'*

"Miss Collins is rather a loner. I doubt she would be much interested in joining any groups," he said casually. "She's always been a studious, determined girl not prone to frivolous engagements or insipid fraternizations. Pressing her will only make her more stubborn on the fact. I would invest my efforts elsewhere, if I were you."

Snape gave Slughorn a quick, slight smile, then turned to leave him with mouth agape and thoughts confused as to if he had truly been insulted or not.

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After being caught by Draco Malfoy, Davindra had been less insistent in her affections. Though Snape had assured her that Malfoy would keep quiet under threat of retaliation, she still seemed anxious. Personally, Snape didn't wish for any more close calls either. That one had been enough to take years off his rapidly decreasing life span. So, though she did frequent his office for short periods, no physical intimacies had been exchanged. But Snape felt the tension building in them both. The glances got longer and more intense and the attempts to find reasons to touch were almost embarrassing in their ludicrousness. He resigned himself to the idea that in the near future, he would crack, and the relationship would resume with as much uninhibited passion, if not more, than before.

N.E.W.T. level Defense Against the Dark Arts required that each student take on a research project for the year that would ultimately coincide with their career choice after school. Snape set up private meeting times for the student to discuss their ideas for the project. A sign-up sheet outside his door listed the times that he was available and each student was responsible for choosing a time and showing up. It was unsurprising to see that Davindra chose the last time slot available right before the dinner hour. No doubt she was wanting to monopolize his attention for as long as possible.

After hearing some painfully inane and completely undeveloped ideas on projects, Snape was about to start on the bottle of Firewhisky that occupied the lowest drawer on his desk when Davindra came into his office without knocking.

Too busy massaging his temples to even scold her, he just allowed her to roam about the room as usual as he prepared to hear her idea.

"Rough day, Professor?" she asked with a knowing smile.

His answer was a dark look and continued pressure to his throbbing head. Suddenly Davindra was behind him, her fingers firmly pressing into the tight muscles of his shoulders and working her way up his neck.

"What are you doing?" He attempted to sound annoyed, but the groan of relief took all the sting out of his words.

"Sounds like you're a little tense," her voice purred into his ear. "Granny Lilly taught me some Shiatzu techniques to get rid of headaches."

Her precise kneading went up his neck to the base of his skull, then back down his shoulders, around his shoulder blades and down his spine, focusing on certain

acupressure points that nearly made him jump from his seat. It was heavenly to simply let his body give in to her skilled fingers.

"If you can talk while you do this, we can kill two birds with one stone," he said as his head rolled to the side and he let his eyes close.

"The idea for my project?"

"Mmmm."

"Well, I thought I would research and document the long term effects of the Imperius Curse."

His eyes flew open. "What?"

"Granny Lilly knows someone at St. Mungo's who is studying some of the patients in Ward 49 who have had long term exposure to the Imperius Curse. If I can get permission to visit St. Mungo's just a few times to meet with him, he will give me some of his research which I can use in my project and hopefully develop some new theories of my own. After I'm done at Hogwarts, he said there might be a place for me in my apprenticeship in his research group."

As she spoke she had become very enthused and her fingers punched and pinched his flesh too hard. Snape moved away from her hands.

"That sounds like very advanced work, Miss Collins. Are you sure you could handle that with all of your other upper level class projects?" Indeed her idea was the most complex but also the most well thought out he had heard all day.

"I think so," she said coming to sit on the end of his desk facing him. "My other class projects are much simpler. This one could actually help me in my career as a Healer. I mean, what if I actually got published before I finished my N.E.W.T. levels?" There was new excitement in her eyes as she pondered future fame.

Snape's eyes couldn't help but be drawn to her long legs as she sat before him, her knees slightly parted and her skirt half way up her bare thighs.

"You're expecting a lot from this, it seems. But I caution you," he said, "research is exhausting, thankless work. Though it is an admirable endeavor for your N.E.W.T. project, I wouldn't expect to hang your entire career upon it." Again his eyes went to the inside of her knee and up her pale thigh into the dark terrain under her skirt.

Davindra seemed to notice his distraction for she scooted closer down the desk until she was nearly in front of him and raised her foot to rest on his chair, giving him an almost unobstructed view of her cotton panties. Snape felt his mouth go dry.

"I appreciate the concern, but I think I can handle it." Her voice was annoyingly calm. "If I can get permission from Professor Dumbledore to do the day trips to St. Mungo's, will you support my project?"

"I suppose I would have to agree to it if you got Professor Dumbledore's permission." His voice was thick and his mind suddenly clouded. He could not pull his gaze away from the sight before him. And perhaps he was imaging it, but he was almost sure he could even smell her arousal as she continued the bawdy display.

Lifting her foot from the chair so the loafer could drop to the floor, Davindra then squirmed her toes in between Snape's legs to nestle against his crotch. He found himself stroking her slender calf as her foot pumped against his already hard and hot erection.

"So, I hear you're not interested in joining the Slug Club," he said as his fingers delicately slid their way up her leg to the inside of her thigh.

She scooted closer, opening her legs more. "No, Slughorn's a bombastic old wind-bag. He doesn't teach a bad class, but he lacks your style and intelligence. And the way he falls all over himself around some of the students is just pathetic. All anyone would have to do is offer him the right bribe and they wouldn't have to lift a finger in Potions class to receive a passing grade."

Snape couldn't suppress a slight chuckle at her quick and correct evaluation of the hedonistic old goat as the knuckles of his hand brushed against the warm, moist fabric of her underwear. Her breath caught softly.

"Grandmother always said that if he hadn't been such a glutton, he might have been a great Potions master. But then again, she wouldn't have had a job teaching if he had known any self control," she went on, though with a slight moan behind her words.

But she groaned audibly as he caressed his thumb in small circles over the slight nub behind the fabric.

"I appreciate your loyalty to my teaching style, but Professor Slughorn will offer a valuable alternative view of many things." Snape placed a soft kiss against the inside of her thigh causing her legs to move even wider apart and her back to arch. Finding the edge of elastic, he slipped his finger inside and was instantly met with slick, wet heat that made them both sigh with pleasure. "Although, I will say that Madame Collins was the true influence in my pursuit of my Potions education."

"Why was that?" Davindra gasped as Snape plied her inner thigh with more kisses and strokes of his tongue and his fingers entered the tight confines of her body.

"She wasn't impressed with pure-blood or charm. She only appreciated raw talent," he said against the white flesh of her open legs. "She encouraged me to pursue my interests whether they be dark or light, as long as they were relevant."

"That sounds like her." Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "And you also."

The agonizing game they were play was beginning to tear at the edges of his sanity. Grabbing the sides of her panties, he pulled them down her legs. She raised her hips to allow the progress. Once free, Snape dragged her to the edge of the desk and sat before her open body, staring down into the crux of his obsession, the dominion of his desires.

"Just remember to ward the door this time," she said with a jesting lilt.

Snape raised his eyes to give her a sardonic look from between her knees, but did take his wand to the door and secured it against intruders.

When he finally set his mouth upon her, he found himself dripping with as much wet anticipation as she. Hungrily he gorged upon her essence until she clawed at his forearms and emitted a trembling cry of release.

She lay across his desk, awaiting his entrance into her. Snape could hardly get himself exposed before she began pulling him on to her, wanting his pleasure to mingle with her own. Deep in his mind he had always had the fantasy of having her this way, and he let his imagination soak up all the sensations around and in him to give life to an illusion he knew would sustain him for years to come.

His orgasm was quickly reached, and he grabbed the far edge of the desk to assist in the last few powerful drives of completion. After delirious, dizzying waves of pleasure finished shooting through his body, he lay against her, struggling for breath and focused thought.

Davindra remained silent except for her own slowing breaths. Her legs stayed locked around him, her hands still traveling his back and through his hair. When enough energy returned to extract themselves from one another, Snape realized they had just enacted their lust on top of the fifth-years' essays and ruined over half of them.

He cursed and she giggled. A flick of his wand repaired the damage; another cleaned them both of the excessive mess.

"Honestly, Miss Collins," Snape said as he straightened his clothes and she searched for her underwear beneath the desk. "I guess you don't have the heart of a Slytherin after all."

"Oh?" her curious voice came from below.

"If you did, then you would have waited until I was inside you to ask for my support of your project," he replied mundanely.

She stood, her found panties clutched in her hand. "Oh, Professor, I know your buttons. Did you think I was giving you the free show up my skirt for no reason?"

He gave a twisted smirk. "I stand corrected. That Sorting Hat has lost its touch, I believe."

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A bitter fall day found Snape alone in his office, wishing he had asked for Davindra to skip the Hogsmeade trip and spend the afternoon in bed with him. They had not had a leisure day of that nature since the previous year. He found he missed the companionship as well as the sex to occupy his time. Especially now that his quiet hours were spent in miserable contemplation of his newest tasks. He had to protect and guide a young man who would barely talk to him and ignored all requests of meeting, as well as kill the most admired and respected wizard in the entire wizarding world. Even if he managed to survive those duties, then his life wouldn't be worth a leprechaun's Knut. He was about to find the biggest bottle of poison he owned and down the entire thing when Filch appeared at his door with a strange necklace and a story about a student being put under a terrible curse.

The necklace was familiar, and after a few moments thought, he recognized it as a cursed piece that had resided at Borgin and Burkes. After more of the story surfaced, it was obvious that this was Draco's pathetic attempt to kill Dumbledore. Not only was the Dark magic on the necklace easily detected, but the plan of getting it to the Headmaster was sloppy and now involved an innocent student as well as witnesses.

Snape's attempt to find Draco and talk reason to him was met with sullen obstinance. His voice of concern and warning was only met with disrespect and acrimony. In the few short, quiet words they exchanged, Draco refused to admit to any involvement with Katie Bell's unfortunate accident. He swore an alibi for the entire day. However that alibi was Crabbe and Goyle, who were known to sell their souls for peanuts if told to do so.

Snape was left with going to the only other person he could speak frankly with, Dumbledore.

"So you think this was Draco's work?" the old wizard asked casually of the plot to end his life.

"I'm afraid so," Snape replied miserably. "I don't know what distresses me more. The fact that he's actually attempting to go through with it or that he is doing such an appallingly pathetic job of it. You would have felt the curse on this piece from across the room."

"I'm sorry my demise is not going better for you," Dumbledore spoke with a mischievous smile.

Snape rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean," he snapped. "And this isn't funny. "

The Headmaster chuckled. "I do know what you mean, and it isn't humorous that a boy's life hangs in the balance of my fate. For I fear it isn't a fair exchange. Can't you talk with him?"

"He won't answer my summons, he will hardly speak to me in the halls," Snape recounted with annoyance. "I can't make him accept my help. He is being stubborn and willful. And I'm afraid it will only be his downfall in the end."

"You have to keep an eye on him somehow. Keep him from making any more stupid mistakes that could cost a lot more than just one life." Dumbledore mindlessly toyed with the withered hand that rested on the desk.

"How is it doing?" Snape asked, motioning to the dead appendage.

The old man sighed and shook his head, though he attempted a smile. "Not well. It's advancing."

With that, he raised his sleeve to show that the dead tissue had risen to midway up his forearm.

"You're taking the potion I gave you?" Snape asked accusingly.

"Of course. But I told you, Severus, I don't think this can be stopped. However, I believe I have found a way to turn my destruction into a powerful weapon against Lord Voldemort. Ancient magic is often dismissed as ineffective in modern times." Dumbledore smiled at Snape's confused look, but expressed no more on the topic. "But as far as this," he said holding up the blackened hand, "it's just a matter of time before it devours me whole. Neither you nor Draco may need to fulfill any trusts at this rate."

"We could only be so lucky," Snape said bitterly. "Sir, you only need a stronger dosage. I'll make one up as soon as possible. Take it three times a day instead of two," he said, standing up and starting for the door. "And don't argue that it won't do any good, for I'm certain it may be the only thing keeping you from withering into a shriveled fig before my very eyes."

He left the office with a new task to set his mind on instead of the gnawing issues that clutched and clawed at his brain every waking hour.

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Despite what one might believe, being called to the feet of the Dark Lord was not a common occurrence. The master did not like being constantly surrounded by his groveling, scraping underlings and actually hated having an audience. He preferred the silent sanctuary of his own thoughts and plans, the only exception being the snake, Nagini. Usually one was only called when there was an assignment at hand or a punishment to be administered. Both good reasons to fear the call of the Dark Mark.

Most of Snape's rendezvous to the Dark headquarters at the abandoned orphanage were to meet with other Death Eaters to exchange information and keep each other updated on activities, spies, and recruits. It was also during this time that Snape heard the most valuable gossip. Though many might believe that Snape was the most trusted servant of the master, Snape himself did not delude himself with the thought that he knew all that happened or that would happen. Doing his own part to keep himself informed was what made him appear far more powerful than he actually was. It was a crafty illusion he let everyone believe.

However, hearing of a valuable, long-planned weapon being resurrected was an uncomfortable surprise to Snape. The first he heard of it was in vague whispers amongst some of the long-time members and even they possessed scant details. All that could be gathered was that it was old, dark magic that would ensure the Dark Lord's health and strength, rendering him undefeatable. It was only known as "the Vessel." Other gossip said that Lucius Malfoy had known the most about it. But he languished in Azkaban, unable to provide any answers. Knowing what an unadulterated bragger Malfoy was, Snape found it hard to believe that if Malfoy had known anything about a secret weapon, he would have been able to keep quiet about it.

Assuming that the Vessel had something to do with the Horcruxes that Dumbledore was chasing, Snape took the information to him, only to be surprised to find the Headmaster stumped. Research turned up intense amounts of references to "vessels" in ancient, dark text. But none of it seemed likely to have been used by the Dark Lord. They were both left to nervously ponder the mystery.

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In spite of all Snape's predicated vows and stubborn insistence, the consuming relationship between he and Davindra seemed to re-infect them like a familiar plague. It began with the encounter on his desk and continued with no forethought, as though promises otherwise had never been spoken. The next time she had appeared at his door with a sultry shadow in her eye and hands that seemed impatient in their quest to be on him, he hardly bothered with a reproachful word. Instead he greedily partook of her generous affections and administrations. It didn't even occur to him that he had done something that could have disastrous affects until he lay spent and floating in an exquisite daze. By then it didn't matter anymore.

even if the delivery was stiff and formal.

"You're welcome," she said with the return of her sweet smile. "I hope the nightshirt fits. I guessed on the size."

"I'm sure it's fine."

He guided them to an out of the way alcove that was flooded with a prism of colors as sun splashed through a tall, narrow stained glass window. Indicating for her to take the window seat, Snape made sure no one was around to hear or see their exchange.

"I'm not sure what you must think of me for not reciprocating your kindness," he began quietly.

Davindra gave a quizzical look, and he continued.

"I assume you received many lovely things from your family and friends. But you surely can't pretend that you didn't notice that mine was not among them."

"That's not what Christmas is about," she said in a slightly scolding tone. "I only got you a nightshirt and a picture anyway."

"Still," he interrupted, "there is something that I want you to have, and I felt it best to give it to you in person. But I do apologize for my tardiness. "

Snape pulled a small wooden box from his pocket and handed it to Davindra. She took it with a curious smile and looked up through her black lashes at him.

"Thank you, Severus."

He nodded in a slightly embarrassed, curt way and motioned for her to open it. When she did, she gave a breathy exclamation at what lay inside.

Snape's mother, Eileen, could never have been confused for anything but a plain woman. But that was not of her choosing. Cruel genetics, neglect, and more pressing responsibilities pronounced her unfit for such fineries as jewels and fancy clothes. But Snape knew that in her heart she had always longed for them. He had seen her looking at such things regretfully in shop windows, though she never dared set foot in the stores let alone consider buying such treasures.

With some of his first earnings as a young man, Snape had gone out and bought his mother something truly frivolous and impractical for a woman who mostly wore plain sack dresses and second-hand robes. A brooch with a large garnet stone, inside of which was the raised image of princely crown. Eileen Snape had at first thought the item was a mistake or a joke. But when she had realized that it was a gift from her son, she had burst into tears, declaring it the most beautiful jewel on earth and her son more kind and generous than she deserved. Snape had only seen her wear it a handful of times. She said she would only wear it when the occasion merited. But he knew she had spent many nights looking at its details and holding it to the light, perhaps thinking of the rich ornaments that could have been hers if she had only made different choices with her life.

Going back to Spinner's End to retrieve this item from her long disused room had flooded Snape with so many memories that he felt he would suffocate if he did not get out as soon as possible. Once outside, Snape was then awash in relief, not just for leaving the past behind a locked door, but for also finding a way to leave a bit of his mother and himself to live on in case he met the fate he feared await him. And, for finding the perfect present twice in his lifetime, and on Christmas day even.

Davindra now took the brooch from the box and held it up to the light to better see the intricate crown nestled inside the stone, just as his mother had done.

"It was my mother's," he finally told her.

She looked back at him with an open-mouthed expression of wonder.

"Oh, Severus, I can't take this if it was your mother's," she said, placing the brooch back in the box.

"She's been dead nearly twenty years," Snape said as he sat down next to her on the window seat. "It's been in the back of a drawer gathering dust all this time. I think even she would consider that a shame."

Davindra continued to look at the piece in her hand. "But don't you want to keep it to remember her by?"

"No," was all he replied in a quiet, candid voice.

"Is it a heirloom? Isn't it valuable?" she asked, again taking it out of the box.

"No." This time he chuckled slightly. "It was just something I bought her when I had a little money. It's probably worth far less now than what I paid for it. But she put quite a bit of sentiment in it."

Snape took the brooch in his hand. "Her maiden name was Prince, so I thought the crown fitting. They were a fine and noble wizarding family that fell on hard times and has since basically died out."

He pinned the brooch to Davindra's shirt just under her collar. She reached up to touch it and smiled at him.

"Thank you. I'm proud to have it. It's definitely the best Christmas present I got, and all the better that you gave it to me in person."

She reached up and gently stroked his face. Snape almost leaned in to kiss her when he realized they were out in the open. Instead he removed her hand from him and squeezed it once quickly before he stood again.

"Christmas dinner will begin soon," he said formally as he straightened his robes. "I suppose I will see you there."

The corner of his mouth twitched with a slight smile as he left her. Very quietly under his breath he found himself humming "Coventry Carole." He stopped as soon as he realized what he was doing.

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The holiday was all too short. Snape and Davindra managed several deliciously languid hours in each other's company, feeling comfortably sequestered from the rest of existence in his dungeon quarters. They were free to lounge in bed or in front of the fire, talking, eating, or sleeping. Snape realized he should have felt more wary of all the time they devoted to one another, so obviously absent from the small numbers left at Hogwarts. But he allowed himself the feeling of entitlement to the few scraps of pleasure his life afforded him. He viewed those days as a last meal of sorts before his final journey to the gallows.

Immediately when the first wave of students rushed the old castle doors after the break, the precious cold, quiet that had settled in the corridors and rooms of Hogwarts was shattered and replaced with a busy, distracting pandemonium. It seemed that the new year pulled everyone in many directions at once. Suddenly Davindra was as scarce as a Thestral . Her various projects and preparation for the upcoming N.E.W.T. exams demanded more attention and energy than any human could possess. It was unsurprising that their time together suddenly dissipated.

It might have bothered Snape more if he himself wasn't so overwhelmed with his own duties, the most taxing of which was trying to keep an eye on Draco Malfoy and his challenges. The boy came back from Christmas at an undoubtedly subdued Malfoy Manor no less gaunt and anxious than before. Snape knew that reprimands from the Dark Lord himself had been an unwelcome present during the holidays. Again, he felt pity for the boy who was doomed to fail, though he bravely struggled in vain.

For all Snape's attempts at finding a truce between the two of them, Draco still regarded him as an unwelcome adversary in his personal ambitions. The boy would not talk

about what he was doing wandering the school halls at all hours nor what any of his plans were. He would not admit to the caper with the necklace and refused all offers of help. And he had no issue with tossing out vicious, cutting comments to his own head of house and once-favorite teacher. When he really wanted to shake loose of Snape, Draco would give him a particularly nasty sneer and say, "Aren't you late for a date with your girlfriend? Wouldn't want to keep her waiting. If I remember, she's the impatient sort."

It would be all Snape could do to keep from hexing the cheeky brat into a smoldering cinder of ash. But he would let it go because putting up more roadblocks to the Dark Lord's plan would only come back to torment him. However, that didn't mean that Snape couldn't find other ways of uncovering Draco's secrets. Crabbe and Goyle were easy marks. It took little manufactured angst to find reason to keep them in detention, to which Draco would rage righteously. The two beefy, beady-eyed simpletons were never sure of whom to be more afraid of, Draco or Snape.

Draco was being very careful, though. In Snape's attempts to extract information from the witless sidekicks, he only discovered that they knew virtually nothing. Their only orders were to keep a look-out while Draco tended to business. What he did while behind a closed door was as much a mystery to them as it was to Snape.

The only person Snape dreaded facing more with his limited knowledge of events than the Dark Lord was Dumbledore. But he could not ignore the summons to the tower office any more than he could the burning mark on his arm.

"So you know no more of his plans?" the great wizard asked him in what felt like an overtly patronizing tone.

Snape resisted the urge to disseminate a chilling glare when he replied, "No, sir. He's keeping it all very close."

Dumbledore continued his own unwavering stare. "Harry overheard you two arguing during Slughorn's party, it seems."

"What? How?" Snape asked in dubious horror. "Oh," he groaned, "that damned invisibility cloak. Headmaster, you should never have let him have it. It's just given him license to run amuck in this school at his own whim. He's an invisible menace."

"It has proved more valuable than not in most instances," Dumbledore said. "Though I will admit he has perhaps taken some liberties that were improper. But it was rightfully his anyway. Who was I to keep it from him?"

"You're the Headmaster. You can do whatever you like," Snape reminded tersely.

Dumbledore chuckled. "If only I actually possessed that much power. Some things are even bigger than me, Severus. Now, back to the issue of Draco."

A long familiar cold ball of dread rolled in Snape's stomach.

"You must continue to stay vigilant of Draco's activities," Dumbledore said with quiet seriousness. "It doesn't matter if you have to don an invisibility cloak yourself and creep along ten paces behind him. It's for his own safety and that of everyone in this school that we know what he is planning."

"Do you think I don't know this?" Snape snapped darkly. "I've devoted as much attention to that obstinate little whelp as I dared without completely shirking all my other responsibilities. But while he may not be successful in his tasks for the Dark Lord, he is quite well practiced in being subversive."

The old wizard sighed loudly and gave Snape a piteous look over his half glasses. "I realize that your position is the most dangerous and precarious of us all. But it is also highly consequential."

"I am well aware of what I risk by failing." Snape's gaze narrowed further, and his voice plummeted to an arctic tone. "But what of you and your search for the Horcruxes and the Vessel?"

Dumbledore gave a nod of acquiescence to Snape's charge. "I've set Harry to work on the last piece of the puzzle to find the next Horcrux. The Vessel is still a mystery. I take it you've heard no more?"

Snape shook his head slightly. "Either everyone is being uncharacteristically silent about it or no one honestly knows anything. Of course, it could all just be codswallop. Gossip is as rampant among Death Eaters as it is among a coven of old witches."

Again, Dumbledore nodded solemnly, and there was blissful silence in which Snape could allow his anxious fury to cool to a seething agitation.

"What are you going to do about *her*?" The Headmaster's voice finally sounded.

Snape looked at the old man behind the desk with dull inquiry. "Who?"

"The one you've been protecting all these years." His tone was matter of fact, but Dumbledore's expression was stern.

The two wizards held each other's intense look for a moment. Snape's heart took on an accelerating rhythm in his chest as he considered what to respond with.

"You're referring to Davindra Collins?" he asked in total calm. "She has nothing to do with any of this."

"But yet there is danger for her," Dumbledore replied.

"If you're speaking of Madame Collins, I believe that Miss Collins has finally managed to break that suffocating bond with the help of her mother." Snape kept his manner relaxed as he spoke. "She did, after all, return for her final year at Hogwarts."

"I was speaking more of the bond between you two," Dumbledore interjected with a leisurely point of his finger in Snape's direction.

Again they challenged each other with sharp, keen eyes under a heavy silence before Snape finally spoke in a careful voice that was laced with warning.

"And what do you mean exactly?"

"It's more than obvious that your interest in her has gone beyond teacher and pupil." Dumbledore held up his hand before Snape could erupt in objection. "I will save the lecture on morality if you will have the decency to consider the risk you have put her in by allowing yourself to become so intimately involved with someone at this particular time."

Snape forced restraint of all his emotions so that he showed the Headmaster nothing but a placid face and stoic composure. Though he wasn't certain how to respond when being both challenged and excused of his transgression in the same breath.

"I have given Miss Collins no promises, and I have shared no confidences," he spoke. "She has never and need never be an issue in regards to my duties for the Dark Lord or the Order."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, crossing hand over withered claw above his stomach and continued his visual assessment of the dark man before him.

"Then I feel quite sorry for her, for her heart will surely be broken," he said with blunt gloom.

Snape did little to keep the sardonic curl of his lip in check. "A broken heart can heal especially quick in the young."

"The best armor you possessed was your untouchable resolve, Severus. The thing that makes so many of us weak against our enemies, even me, is our love for those in

nose.

Snape leveled an equally firm look in return. "I'm certain that Draco was simply attempting to defend himself against his aggressor. But I myself have made sure that Potter stays out of our way. He has detention every Saturday until the end of term." He couldn't help but give a grim smile.

"Oh, Severus, the House Cup," Dumbledore sighed regretfully.

Snape shrugged. "Boy Wonder should have thought of that before he went around casting Slicing Hexes at fellow students."

The Headmaster sighed again. "I suppose there are more important things at hand right now. And exactly where did Harry learn such a spell?" Dumbledore asked.

There was no way that Snape would allow the truth to get out, but the lie wouldn't be so far removed to appear suspicious.

"He said he read it in a book. However, there was nothing out of the ordinary amongst his school books. But who knows what bad habits he may have picked up from Black and Lupin."

"Funny, I think they would have said the same thing about you," Dumbledore replied as he inspected his charred, skeletal left hand. "Trust me when I say that Harry is not prone to violence. I'm sure his horror at what he has done will be his own best punishment and deterrent from ever doing something like that again. However, I won't challenge your detention," he assured Snape. "Draco will recover completely?"

"Perhaps a faint scar or two, but I was quite quick with the healing counter-curse." Snape eyed the withered hand. "How much worse is it?" he asked tilting his chin in its general direction.

Dumbledore pulled his wide sleeve up to almost his shoulder to expose his entire arm blackened and stick-like. Snape nearly grimaced at the sorrowful sight.

"It won't be much longer," Dumbledore said calmly as he lowered his sleeve. "And about that. There are just a few things we should formalize."

'Finally!' Snape thought.

The Headmaster got up and came around the desk to face the wall of paintings in which the Hogwarts Headmasters of the past slept peacefully.

"Armando," Dumbledore spoke. But the portrait he addressed continued its slumber.

He cleared his throat and again called to the sleeping man in a louder voice. Still no movement. With faint annoyance, Dumbledore rapped loudly on the edge of the frame with the knuckles of his good hand.

"Dippet! Wake up."

The picture jumped with fake surprise and snorted most convincingly. "Dumbledore, what's this all about?"

The Headmaster gave Snape an eye roll before he went back to the portrait. "We are needing your assistance, Armando."

"Yes, well, of course," the painted man said, straightening himself in his chair and adjusting his jacket. "Anything I can do to help the Headmaster of Hogwarts. What do you need? Advice on addressing the Board of Governors? Perhaps on dismissing an insubordinate teacher?"

Snape ignored the less than subtle slide of the man's eyes to him.

"No, what I need is a witness," Dumbledore stated.

"To what?" Dippet inquired.

"My last will in testament and my confession." Dumbledore smiled pleasantly while Snape and Dippet exchanged looks of suspicious surprise.

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Snape headed back to the hospital wing to check on Draco. But his mind still turned over all he had just heard. Dumbledore was going to trust a portrait of an ancient, slow-witted, historically ineffective former Headmaster to vindicate Snape's actions and explain the old wizard's motives by way of a dispatched phoenix. It sounded as ludicrous as his ideas of transferring some form of protection to Harry at his death in a way similar to what his mother did. Perhaps the curse that was slowly killing his limb had made it to his brain already, Snape thought miserably. None of it would work.

Stepping inside the large infirmary with its rows of bed, it was easy to spot Draco as he was the only one there with Madam Pomfrey still tending to his scars.

"Give us a moment, would you, Madam?" Snape asked quietly.

She gave him a wary look, but gathered her supplies and left in a silent, spectral-like walk cultivated by stepping around the sick and dying for so many years.

Draco still held a disgruntled look, though his face was edged in worry and fatigue.

"I'll kill him," he said through gritted teeth. "I'll make him pay."

"You'll do no such thing," Snape replied, his eyes still searching to ensure they were alone to speak freely. "He belongs to the Dark Lord. Your job is not to concern yourself with him but to stick to your own responsibilities. I have made sure that he won't bother you again."

"I can take care of myself and my own responsibilities," Draco snarled. But his enthusiasm must have pulled at the still healing wounds for he flinched slightly and gingerly cradled his chest.

"Being left to your own devices would have found you bleeding out on a bathroom floor, a ghost heralding your passing, and the Chosen One marched off to Azkaban," Snape uttered with dark sarcasm. "Not to mention my own subsequent demise. A complete and total sabotage of the Dark Lord's plan, all for your own pride."

What little blood was left in Draco's pale, angry face seemed to drain away. But he made no reply.

"I need to know how much longer," Snape continued in a more quiet but deadly voice. "When will it be ready? He grows tired of waiting, and I grow tired of giving excuses for the delay."

"I don't think it will be too much longer," the boy said with some hesitation. "I just need a little more time."

"We are all running out of time, Mr. Malfoy," he reminded.

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Detention with Potter did little to ease the nervous wait. But there was great satisfaction to knowing that the arrogant little beast was being forced to read over and over the many transgressions his father and friends committed in their years at Hogwarts. Snape would know when Potter came to a particularly disturbing one for he could almost

feel the dark cloud of indignation and shame rise from the boy.

But the detention was ineffective at wrecking Gryffindor's chances for the House Cup. Snape had to find out from a glowing McGonagall that even without the great Seeker and with the least skilled team Hogwarts had seen in years, the silver cup would remain in her office to be admired by him at any time he chose. A tight lipped, slightly snide "Congratulations" was all Snape could manage, and since he didn't have the stomach for the old witch's gloating, he confided himself to his office and drowned his sorrows in Firewhisky and dark thoughts.

When Snape looked back, he could recall that there was a peculiar energy in the air that day, starting very early. He has awakened with a nearly blinding headache that several doses of potion barely held at bay. His nerves felt ragged and hypersensitive. Several times he had to control a strong desire to draw his wand and blast an obnoxiously annoying student into oblivion for a miniscule mistake or tardiness.

Unsettling still was the sudden look of triumph and sly smile Draco Malfoy sported. His smug expression told Snape that he was closing in on the task at hand. Little did Snape know how close. Further pressing of the matter only got him a cool smirk from the boy and the foreboding words of "just get ready." A cold knot writhed in his stomach for the rest of the day.

In his office Snape held his impatient nervousness hostage with a bottle of wine and a stack of essays on which he could hardly concentrate long enough to make a single mark upon. As the evening progressed, the silent, charged atmosphere around him seemed to thicken and pulse with a life-force of its own. When Flitwick finally burst into his office to announce that Death Eaters had invaded the castle, Snape didn't even flinch. Calmly he asked of their whereabouts and then stunned the little man and left him on the floor of the office.

The two students stationed outside the dungeon did manage to throw him off his guard. Hermione Granger and Luna Lovegood stood staring at him with curious horror as though they knew of what he was about to do. In order to keep them from asking any questions or trying to follow him, he instructed them to see to Flitwick who was still unconscious.

Snape's first priority, as he flew out of the dungeon, was to find Draco. Almost running directly into Gibbon, a rather cowardly and twitchy dark soldier, as he rounded a corner surprised even him. Though his mind knew that Death Eaters had finally found their way into Hogwarts, seeing them within the once-safe walls was still hard to comprehend. Snape covered his flustered emotions by barking sharp orders and sending him in the opposite direction to give himself more time to search for Dumbledore and the boy.

By now students and other staff were beginning to converge in the halls because of the shouts, screams, and exploding hexes that filled the air. Snape moved quickly and silently through them all with no question or rebuke from anyone. The fools thought he was there to help. He almost wanted to scream at them that they were ignorant, trusting, and hopeless. Part of him even wished to run into Harry Potter himself, who might actually attempt to stop him from the terrible task he was rushing toward.

Up and down staircases he went, finding periodic clusters of frightened students and marauding Death Eaters reveling in their terrorizing of children. Snape would order them on to less cowardly tasks with words harsh enough to be interpreted by fearful bystanders as authoritative threats against the enemy.

Just as he was about to conclude that Dumbledore had escaped Hogwarts safely, he approached the Astronomy Tower. A new, more powerful foreboding washed over him. Ignoring the painful stitch in his side and the dry, rough breaths he hungrily sucked in, Snape ran up the winding staircase until he found the wooden door to the top of the tower.

Bursting through, Snape found Draco in a faltering stance and near tears while the Carrows, and Greyback looked on with pleasure. Then he saw a most piteous sight that he wished to have ended his days and never seen. Albus Dumbledore, the most powerful wizard the modern world would ever know, was slumped weakly against the wall, his breath labored and wet, his face an ancient, grey mask of death.

For a few frozen, suspended seconds, the two wizards held each other's gaze. A flash of relief flitted through the old man's fading eyes, and Snape decided he'd rather throw himself from the ramparts than raise his wand to his only advocate.

Then the Headmaster's weak, pleading words reached his mind,, and he felt the last energies of the dying man converging to encourage and bolster Snape's resolve.

'It's time. You can do this. You have to'

"Severus... please..." The external voice was weak and pleading.

'You've never been a coward before. Don't fail me now.'

As though an outside force suddenly took control of his body and mind, Snape found his wand poised and the words flowing from his mouth.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The body flew into the air after receiving a brilliant burst of green light and then dove in a graceful arc to the ground below.

Seconds. It had taken seconds for him to walk onto the tower and kill the greatest man he'd ever known, to seal his fate, and pronounce his own life worthless. But it had felt like an eternity.

Then suddenly everything began to move at the speed of light. He was running down the tower stairs, Draco shoved along in front of him, and the sound of spells and rushing feet coming after him. Who had been on top of the tower? Who had seen his crime?

Not feeling he had a spare second in the swirling madness around him to investigate, Snape pressed forward and soon found more Death Eaters coming to his aid in tardy, sheepish fashion.

"It's over, time to go!" he bellowed at them as he swept out of the tower, leaving others to battle whomever remained behind.

Snape ran past familiar faces who gave him hardly a glance as he rushed passed. The likes of McGonagall and Lupin were in heavy battle along side several students. None even bothered to ask him where he was going or what had happened at the tower. They all believed he was fighting with them. With any luck he could get out without having to hurt or kill again.

"We need to get back through the cabinet," Draco finally spoke in a panicked, high voice. "It's in the Room of Requirement."

Snape grabbed the boy by his robes. "Are you stupid?" he barked. "We report back to the Dark Lord immediately. Going back to Knockturn Alley will be like stepping directly into jail cells in Azkaban. Unless you wish to reunite with your father tonight, I suggest we Disapparate outside the castle walls."

Draco didn't argue, so Snape shoved him roughly on toward the main hall and freedom. Snape hurried on, dodging stray spells and clouds of disintegrating stone until a hand snatched at his robe, nearly pulling him flat on his back. His wand raised and a curse on his lips, Snape spun about to find Davindra clutching at his arm, her eyes wide with shock.

"What's going on? How did the Death Eaters get here?" Her voice was as horror filled as Draco's, who had run on ahead. "Where are you going? I'll come with you!"

Snape shook her free and applied his stoniest scowl. "I'm going no where you are needed."

"Severus, what's happened? If you're leaving, I'm coming too. You can't stop me." The stubborn furl of her eyebrow and tilt of her jaw told him that she was serious.

The sound of heavy feet to the rear signaled the approach of the rest of the Dark Lord's troops in retreat from Hogwarts; the task complete. As their faces rounded the corner, they spied him standing with a female student, her hands still trying to keep hold of him.

With as much strength and fury as he could muster, Snape raised his arm and delivered a wide arching backhanded slap to Davindra's face, sending her reeling against the wall. Her gasp of surprise was echoed by the Death Eaters behind him, though they closed in with depreciatory interest. Davindra slid down the wall, moaning and holding her cheek. Snape stood over her still dazed form, the snarl of disgust carefully imbedded in every line on his face, his hand throbbing from the force of the blow.

"You stupid, simpering, little whore," he growled. "Did you really think you meant any more to me than just an easy lay to pass the time? Go back home to Grandmother, where you belong."

He allowed himself one last look at her astonished eyes brimming with tears and the trail of blood beginning to run from her nose before he curled his lip in amused revulsion and stepped away. The small cluster of Death Eaters cackled and jeered his performance as they shuffled past, taking their own shots with swipes and kicks to the downed girl.

Snape didn't stop or look back. He continued on until he could see the massive doors, open to the dark, forgiving night. He ran on until he could taste fresh, cool air in his burning lungs. His heart thundered so viciously in his chest it was painful, and he wondered if it was his own body's rebellion against what it had been forced to do that night. Perhaps he might spontaneously explode from self-loathing. Or he might just crumple to the ground, an empty shell, suddenly devoid of all attributes of a human being.

But he pushed on. His feet ran and his chest pushed out a breath after taking one in. His mind still directed him to the Disapparation spot outside the school walls. A withered flutter in his breast reminded him that he still lived, though his heart was so irretrievably broken, spoiled, and deteriorated that he wished he could rip out the wretched, useless thing and toss it away, never to be bothered by it again.

Year Eight: Cut Loose the Fire

Chapter 18 of 21

Snape goes into exile, but the isolation and quiet is more torture than soothing. The mystery of Davindra and Madame Collins is finally solved. However, the cost of the knowledge seems hardly worth the price.

When the world stopped spinning and Snape's feet found solid ground, he knew his battle was only half over. But there would be no rest yet. There were still services to be rendered and groveling to be done. Pressing forward at least kept him from mulling over the events that he had just witnessed.

A searing pain suddenly caught his attention, and Snape reached over his shoulder to feel the split in his cloak and jacket that went through to the torn flesh beneath.

"Bloody, fucking hippogriff," Snape snarled to himself as he also inspected his shredded and bleeding forearm.

A whimper at his feet distracted his self consumed search. Draco Malfoy sat on his knees, panting and whining like a frightened animal.

"I can't believe you did it," he blathered. "I can't believe it. And I failed! Oh, God, I failed."

"Get a hold of yourself," Snape snapped at him impatiently as he looked about for other Death Eaters returning from Hogwarts. "We have to report to the Dark Lord and take whatever praise or punishment there is to be had. Best get it over with."

"I don't want to do this anymore," the boy continued to whine in tears.

"Not an option, Malfoy." Snape grabbed Draco by the scruff of the collar and hauled him to his feet.

"I can hide, I can run away," the boy rambled hysterically. "Take me some place he can't find me!"

"There is no such place," Snape spat as he shook Draco violently to help establish reason back into his traumatized brain. "And if you were to flee and find safety for yourself, that would just leave your mother to accept the Dark Lord's vengeance on your behalf. Do you really wish to be an orphan as well as a coward?"

The threat of retaliation on his last family member seemed to do the trick. Draco's pale eyes slowed their frightened scanning, and his body calmed its hyperactive twitching. He seemed to sink down into himself despondently. Pulling himself free of Snape's grasp, he straightened his robes the best he could and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Alright," he said in an empty, hollow voice. "Let's go."

Inside the old orphanage, the usually silent building seemed alive with activity. Already celebrations had broke out. The Death Eaters who had returned ahead of Snape were quick to spread the news of the success of the battle. But the only person who could truly pronounce the night a victory was yet to be addressed.

Ignoring the loud conversations and offers of liquor, Snape and Draco moved on to the room occupied by the Dark Lord in the dark recesses of the building. Before they even set foot on the threshold, the door silently swung inward and a smooth voice beckoned them to enter.

It took a firm shove from Snape to move Draco into the room. Another reminder that his place was on his knees was issued once they were at the feet of their master.

"The task has been completed, my lord," Snape spoke with his nose pressed to the dank, dusty floorboards.

"I know," came the dangerously silky words of the dark wizard. "Everyone seems quite pleased with themselves."

Snape and Draco remained silent, wondering what consequences their master would invoke upon them.

"The one person who has been the biggest obstacle in my success since my youth is now gone," he finally spoke.

Again he fell silent, and the bowing pair were forced to listen to nothing but their own nervous breaths while they awaited his words.

"Have we displeased you, my lord?" Snape dared from his submissive crouch. "All of our orders were accomplished. Potter was left unharmed."

The silence continued to hang about them, but the Dark Lord finally moved from his chair and came to stand in front of them. Snape could see the bare, dirty feet with their long, talon-like toenails without raising his head.

"My expectations have not been exceeded." His reply was void of emotion. "Young Malfoy was predictably inadequate in his endeavors, and my faithful servant, Snape, was predictably over-exuberant in his zeal to prove himself worthy of my favor. However, the job is done; for that Lord Voldemort cannot express disappointment. But the manner in which it was executed and the time in which it took to happen is all very unsatisfying."

The feet moved on, and Snape couldn't help but feel a held breath escape his body, though he knew the reprimand was far from over. Beside him, he could feel Draco's body quiver under his robes.

"I will say I am slightly impressed that Young Malfoy even made it out of Hogwarts alive," the Dark Lord spoke more strongly. "I suppose I should give credit where credit is due. But our war is far from over. This battle has been conquered, but the fight has only begun. Right now Dumbledore's legions are weak and confused without their leader. It will take them a while to reorganize their ranks and create a new plan of defense. But we won't have much time to celebrate our victories. We must continue to strike and strike hard until they are all beaten down and our path is unobstructed. Soon will be the time for Lord Voldemort to finally have Harry Potter at my mercy. Now go and tend to your injuries, and leave me to enjoy this sparse moment of vindication," he concluded going back to his chair by the empty fireplace.

Snape and Draco backed from the room, and when the door had closed before them, they exchanged looks of relieved surprise. The Dark Lord was taking the news of their success much less enthusiastically than even they had anticipated. Wild rejoicing or bitter scorn had been expected. Perhaps even both delivered at once.

'Could it be that somewhere in that corpse-like body beats a withered heart that aches slightly to know that the man responsible for who he is has finally left this world to thwart him no more?' Snape wondered silently.

By the time the pair had made their way back to the main floor, they were intercepted by a nearly hysterical Narcissa Malfoy with her sister trailing behind with unexcited interest.

"Draco!" she shouted, her voice sounded piercing even amongst all the celebratory noise.

She flung herself at her son and grasped him as though he might try to get away. But the boy allowed himself to be hugged and sobbed upon with no words of admonishment nor attempts to escape.

"Mother, I'm alright," he murmured as he attempted to return soothing assurance.

Snape hated to be witness to such extreme displays of emotion and started to move away and perhaps finally tend to the lacerations that were beginning to ache down to his bones. But he hadn't moved a step when Narcissa seized him after letting go of Draco.

"You did it," she said with grateful passion. "You kept your word. My son is safe." Her lovely, pale eyes looked up at him with damp adoration, and he feared she might attempt to smother him with the same affections as she had Draco.

"Of course I did," he replied. "It was not only your Vow I was bound to, but also service to my master and his grand plans."

"But I am still so grateful," she continued. "You took such a dangerous chance taking the Vow. If Lucius could know of all that you've done, he'd have no way to even begin to repay his gratitude."

She gripped his arm too forcefully and caused him to flinch from the pain. Narcissa then noticed the blood beneath her fingers.

"Oh, you're hurt, Severus! Let me heal you," she insisted, taking her wand from her robe.

"No, you spend your time with Draco." Bellatrix Lestrange finally stepped from behind her sister and took hold of Snape's uninjured arm and began pulling him away. "I'll take care of our hero." There was a dark, lascivious sparkle to her eyes as she raked them over him in a hungry fashion.

"I can take care of my own wounds, Bellatrix," Snape said, though he didn't struggle against her firm hand as she continued to lead him down a darkened hall to a quiet, empty room.

"I can do a better job," she stated in a husky drawl, "at reaching places that you cannot."

Inside what had once been one of many dormitory style rooms, Bellatrix flicked her wand and brought a soothing, warm light to the peeling, dirty walls. The gentle shadows fell against the angular lines of her face, making her appear as beautiful as she had in the days before she had known Azkaban. Snape knew it was an illusion made from gentle light and clever charms.

Bellatrix began pulling Snape's cloak from his shoulders and examining the slash across his back.

"Slashing hex?" she asked curiously.

"Hippogriff."

She laughed boldly and came around to begin unbuttoning his jacket.

"I can undress myself," he said coolly, though he found himself not pushing her hands away.

"Of course you can." She smiled rakishly. "But are my hands so foul that you cannot bear to have them even heal your flesh?"

She continued her task, and Snape found his eyes going to the long, sleek black hair that lay over her strong shoulders. It looked so much like Davindra's.

'No! That's over and done. You'll think of it no more,' he chastised himself.

His coat removed and in a heap on the floor, Bellatrix's hands next began pulling the thin, once white shirt from his trousers and over his head.

He knew what she was doing, but he felt numb to it. Numb and ambivalent. If she fucked him or killed him, he cared not and would do little to stop either.

Her cool hands on his chest made him shiver. For a moment she stared into his fathomless, black eyes and seemed to lean in as though to kiss him. But she stopped and seductively pulled away and began an examination of the long gash to his forearm.

A mellow, low rush of words bubbled from her lips as she drew her wand over the wound. After just two passes, a scar wasn't even visible.

"Perhaps you missed your calling as a healer, Bellatrix," Snape quipped with less vigor than he hoped. *'Would Davindra go on to be a healer as she had always wanted? Stop it!'*

She gave a hearty chuckle as she vanished the blood stains and moved on to this back, her fingers trailing up and down his body in an almost ticklish fashion.

"I never had the patience for book learning, as you did," she replied. "I wanted to get out and do and feel and experience everything. So we are both clever and talented in our own ways."

Snape could feel her breath against his back as she again spoke the counter curse that knitted his flesh back as whole. The pain had finally gone, but an empty, exhaustive ache still coursed through his body, which had nothing to do with physical injuries.

Bellatrix again came around to stand in front of him, her body pressed against his, her hands trailing down his chest in a whisper-like touch.

"What was it like?" she asked breathlessly, her eyes burning into him intensely. "What was it like to take down Albus Dumbledore? How does it feel to know that you have the gratitude and admiration of our dark master?"

The sound of his name brought a new sensation of queasiness to Snape's gut.

"I'm not surprised to find that death turns you on," he said dryly.

She smiled wickedly. "Not death, **power**. The ultimate aphrodisiac. Better than any potion or curse."

Her hand continued its downward descent until it came to rest between his legs. Firmly she cupped his flaccid penis with rhythmic squeezes. Attempting to keep the look of distaste from his face, Snape held her gaze and forced his mind to empty of the disturbing issues that writhed about inside.

"Not interested in me?" she asked in regard to the softness she still felt. "I would think you would enjoy such a reward, especially after all the years of verbal foreplay we engaged in. Can you honestly say that you do not desire me even now?"

Snape gave a wry smirk. "You demand a lot from a man. I single-handedly take down the most powerful wizard of the age, and you expect instant sexual fervor."

Bellatrix rubbed her body against him. She radiated a suffocating heat that made him uncomfortably warm. He gripped her arms in an attempt to keep her from smothering him.

"If it were me, I would feel so alive and ecstatic after such an accomplishment I would need to find something to do with all the energy," she said with a smile, her hand not giving up on its tasks.

"Well, forgive me if I'm not a ball of energy right now," he replied. "I don't quite have your morbid fascination to invigorate me."

"Oh, is this Severus Snape suffering from remorse?" she chided.

"This is me suffering from fatigue," Snape quickly corrected.

"I can assure you I work better than a Pepper-up Potion or a Calming Draught." Her lips brushed his ear. "Let me give you what you have earned and deserve."

Snape found himself backed against the wall and her hand inside his trousers, her nails scraping against his sensitive flesh as she roughly fondled him. Her lips and free hand moved down his bare chest until she was kneeling in front of him, taking him into her mouth.

'I have got to find a way to get through this,' Snape told himself. *'Think of anything! Think of anyone, even HER, if you have to. Just perform and get it over with.'*

If he stared down at the smooth black hair and squinted his eyes just a bit, it could be Davindra. Though the mouth was harsher and quicker but exceptionally skillful. If he focused, he could take himself away from the bare, filthy room and the harsh woman before him to the quiet comfort of his Hogwarts chambers and the intoxicating memories of a sweet, innocent touch that could make him burn with need and desire.

He felt the coiled tension build in his groin and thought it would soon be over. But Bellatrix stopped and rose from her knees to quickly begin disrobing. Before Snape could ask what she was doing, she had pushed him onto a nearby bed that issued a cloud of ancient dust and nearly gave way under their weight.

Immediately, Bellatrix climbed onto his recumbent body. Her once firm, voluptuous form had withered away to look slack and wasted during her time in prison. But the feel of her heat engulfing him shut off his mental critique. He gasped loudly and she followed with a throaty groan.

Snape gripped her hips and allowed his mind to accept the pleasure his body felt, closing his eyes to block out the vision of her bucking and grinding on top of him. Each and every thrust dove him deeper into her body until he began to believe he would be consumed by her and the lust they enacted. Again he reached his peak, and this time she allowed him to come. If the circumstances had been different, Snape would have considered it an especially satisfying shag. But directly after he felt the last spasm course through his body, his thoughts reminded him of the reality in which he was existing.

Bellatrix took another minute to complete her own orgasm. By the look on her face, she was no more focused on the man beneath her than he had been on her. Snape wondered who had been the object of her fantasy. Perhaps the Dark Lord himself. Mercifully it was over, and she sat still, her head rolling forward and her cascade of dark hair brushing against his chest.

'That hair. So much like hers.' Snape couldn't stop himself from stroking the silky strands between his fingers. His reverie was broken when Bellatrix flung her head up and the hair revealed the true face underneath.

"I feel much better," she sighed. "How about you?"

"No worse," he murmured.

That earned him a narrowed look of scorn as Bellatrix rose from his body and began gathering her clothes.

"I would like to know when you would have had better," she commented in the cutting tone Snape was more familiar with hearing from her.

"I'm sure you would, but it would actually be none of your business," he replied as he reached for his wand to cast a cleansing charm.

The haughty witch fastened the rest of her clothing while giving him a lethal glare.

"Your gratitude is overwhelming," she hissed sarcastically. "Let me assure you that pity fucks are not my normal forte."

"I'm sure," Snape said casually as he attempted to repair his torn and bloody shirt. "But if you ever find yourself in the need of one again, I'm sure I could be persuaded to assist." He allowed a cold, little smile to touch his lips as he gave her a look of contempt and mocking.

Bellatrix's lip curled in furious disgust. "Not if you were the last wizard on the planet."

The door flew open, and she started to charge through it when Snape again spoke.

"Oh, Bellatrix, thank you for the healing."

He kept the contemptuous smirk on his face until she had delivered her last deadly look and her quick, snapping footsteps disappeared down the hall.

Only then did Snape allow himself to fall back onto the sagging mattress and his mind to completely collapse in a crashing, swirling, black chaos into which he sunk like a stone until exhaustion finally quieted his body and brain.

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eyes peered from a refined alabaster face. She stopped not far into the room to stare at him with blank serenity.

"Well, well, Miss Collins," Snape said in a smooth voice he reserved for his most vexing students. "You're as tenacious as a niffer. I really must stop underestimating you."

"And I you," she replied with no break in her placid expression.

"How did you find me?" he asked as he moved from the safety of the far side of the table to stand in the open floor space.

"Is that important?"

"Quite. For if the Dark Lord realized that my refuge had been compromised, he would be greatly displeased. So I need to know how you managed to track me to an unplotable, concealed location in the middle of nowhere."

"You shouldn't be surprised," Davindra said with the barest hint of a smile. "You're the one who bound us."

A few moments silence reined as Snape mentally kicked himself for forgetting that he had fled with their connection still in tact. It would be he who would suffer if the Dark Lord ever knew.

"How long have you known?" he asked, matching her calm.

"Since not long after you gave me the amulet."

He nodded slightly and strode to stand directly in front of her. Their eyes stayed locked on one another as Snape reached his hand down into the scooped neckline of her robe, his fingers aching to savor the flesh he rushed past. Instead he quickly grabbed the beryl green amulet, snapping the delicate silver chain with a quick jerk. A faint wisp of breath hitched in Davindra's throat when the frail links gave way under the pressure. With hardly a glance to the crystal, he pocketed it.

"That was careless of me," he spoke. "I won't make the same mistake again."

Snape turned and again put the width of the room between them. "So, to what honor do I owe such effort and energy? For even with the assistance of the binding amulet, your task was not a simple one. You can't have gone to the trouble of finding me just to give an update on your Imperius Curse research."

"Hardly. They closed Hogwarts after Dumbledore's funeral. No one has decided what to do about the N.E.W.T. students or exams."

"How disappointing for you," Snape interjected with sarcastic disinterest. "So why are you here?"

She didn't respond, and Snape intensified his bleak, cold stare to coax an answer.

"So I could tell you to your face that I know you're a liar," she finally stated with resounding certainty.

A mirthless chuckle escaped him. "Really now? And what, pray tell, brought you to this stunning realization?" Snape sat himself in an uncomfortable and rickety chair to hear her citation.

"Oh, I'm not talking about your dual role as spy and traitor," she said with more animation. "This has to do with your parting words to me."

"And what about their meaning confused you?" Snape asked with a condescending sneer as he hooked his arm around the back of the chair languidly. "For I thought I was quite clear in my delivery."

"It was a very good performance! Quite convincing," Davindra said with enthusiasm as she began a slow walk closer toward him. "I even believed it for a while. I had the fat lip and bruised face as proof for many days afterward. But then, after I stopped crying and feeling sorry for myself, I started thinking."

"Always a dangerous endeavor where you are concerned," Snape muttered as he watched her approach, then circle his chair.

A soft snort of laughter sounded from somewhere behind him where she stood looking out a thick-paned window. "Ah, but this time it did me a world of good. Because I started seeing how none of it made sense. The things they say you did and the plans you orchestrated just did not coincide to the man I have known for seven years."

Quickly she turned to lean over his shoulder to add, "And before you insist that you spent all that time carefully constructing your lie to me, remember how well and how intimately I have known you, Severus."

Snape examined his fingernails with bored concentration. "Once again you are confusing sex with love. I never said I loved you, Miss Collins. I never invited you into any of my confidences. You were of use to me. You were a service I indulged in. If you've come looking for an apology for striking you, then I can construct one. Otherwise you've come a long way for no reason."

"You did all of that for *their* benefit," Davindra said, coming around to finally face him in an uncomfortably close, dominant stance. "You actually did it to protect me. You couldn't very well let anyone know that you were leaving behind someone of any importance to you. As it was, I got a fair amount of questioning from McGonagall. I simply told her I had tried to stop you from leaving. She was too busy planning the funeral and the school closing to investigate further."

So she did know him. Far better than he even knew himself. He had felt confident that his actions, the cruel words, and the murder, would have forever turned her from him and convinced her it had all been a meaningless affair and him unworthy of her affections.

Snape rose from his seat to stand toe to toe with her. His pitiless black eyes burrowed into her.

"You're very clever still, Miss Collins," he spoke smoothly, his eyes unable to keep from descending to her lips. "However, you are also still prone to romantic fantasies that have no bearing in reality. Though as discerning as your little visit is, I cannot say that you have ceased to be a vision to behold."

Snape stroked a long section of her hair that fell in front of her shoulder and ended above her breast. He could feel a tremble move through her body at his touch, and her eyes immediately melted from icy spheres to molten pools.

"The nights here are very cold, boring, and lonely," he continued in a low, silky voice. "It would be a shame for you to have made this trip for nothing."

The tips of his fingers lightly stroked the warm, soft flesh of her collar bone and chest. Both of their breaths quickened when he traced across the gentle slope of her breast.

At that moment Snape would have given his wand to have her. To say that the nights were cold and lonely was an tragic underestimation. They were inhuman exercises in bitter anguish that froze the blood in his veins and nearly drove him past the edges of sanity. To have her once more, to feel her warmth and affection, to satiate his need just once more, would surely get him past the empty, bitter feelings of hopelessness that haunted him continually in that desolate God forsaken place.

She was about to melt against him. Snape felt her breath brush his cheek and had moved in to taste her lips. Poised with such an open expression of surrender to him, he was certain she would grant his wish. But before the breach was closed and they could delve into each other, Davindra suddenly lunged forward with a gasp as though she had been stabbed in the back.

Snape grabbed her arms to steady her. For a fraction of moment, she stayed draped upon him, her hand clutching the small of her back.

"What's wrong?" he demanded. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

"This is the Vessel you speak of?" Snape asked.

"It is indeed the Vessel," he replied with a reptilian smile. "The blood of my heir and its mother combined in a powerful potion that will give me ultimate strength. Harry Potter's meager sacrificial protection could not hope to match my own."

"An heir," Snape commented thoughtfully. "A most interesting strategy, my lord. And what lucky woman will have the honor and blessing of birthing the child of our most powerful master?"

The Dark Lord raised his wand and commanded a small door at the other end of the room to open. Well hidden in shadows, Snape could only see that a form stood on the other side, which began a slow emergence into the light. Even after the figure stepped into a bright pool of sun, Snape's mind still didn't wish to recognize what he saw before him and what it could mean.

Davindra stood with customary straight, calm composure. But unqualified misery radiated from her as she stared at Snape with what he assumed was a silent apology. He returned nothing but blank scrutiny.

"I hear you two are well acquainted," the Dark Lord said as he walked around Davindra, eyeing her closely.

"Quite, my lord," Snape answered in a casual tone that completely hid the effects of the shock and horror that burned in his chest like a hot poker. "Davindra Collins was one of my more talented students. She is, I'm sure, an excellent choice for you."

"She was promised to Lord Voldemort at birth," the dark wizard went on as he continued to examine the girl before him. "Madame Collins was generous enough to offer her when she heard I was researching such magic. I have not seen her in many years, but I have heard of her great promise as a witch and also of her clever charm and pleasing appearance. She is quite lovely, is she not, Severus?"

Snape narrowed his gaze back at Madame Collins with a silent threat clearly visible in the black depths of his eyes.

"Of course, my lord," he answered.

"And I hear I have you to thank for her education and protection," the Dark Lord continued.

Snape bowed his head slightly in reception of the compliment. "Had I known what I was truly guarding, I would have placed even greater value and enjoyment in my task."

"Your enjoyment is hardly in question. Good thing I don't need a virgin's blood." There was mocking, accusation, and contempt in the flippant comment.

Again, an eviscerating look was tossed to Madame Collins who smiled in what could only be construed as amusement over Snape's embarrassing position.

"My lord, if I had known any of the details of Miss Collins's fate or of Madame Collins's plans, I can assure you I would have acted differently. As it were, I simply believed I was being paid and later blackmailed to tutor and watch over a bright, albeit capricious and conniving, young lady. Despite anything Madame Collins may have reported, if anyone was taken advantage of in this matter, it was I."

"You dare to feign insult and abuse?" the Dark Lord hissed.

Snape lowered his eyes and prepared for any number of curses to be leveled at him. "Forgive me, my lord. But in regards to Madame Collins's actions, I have indeed felt used and deceived."

He took a quick glance at Davindra to see that she still stood as if rooted in her spot, but her eyes now rested on the ground, and a shameful flush tinted her cheeks.

"Your petty bickering is of no consequence now," interrupted the dark wizard brutally, spitting his words like venom. "What's done is done. We will move ahead with the plans, and there will be no more philandering nor secrets between the four of us."

The Dark Lord moved back to Davindra and began a slow stroking of her hair. She stiffened slightly at his touch but did not move further. The repetitive movement seemed to sooth the agitated wizard, and Snape felt jealousy for the luxury of indulging in such a sedative at that time. He was forced to simply relive the familiar memory in his mind for any shred of comfort.

"Madame Collins assures me that she is working quite diligently on the potions," their master continued. "However, we have hardly a month to prepare, and I have not seen even one simple fertility potion. Severus, you will take over the preparations. Madame Collins will turn over her notes and supplies to you forthwith."

"What? My lord," Madame Collins finally joined in. "I am nearly done with all of my preparations. For Severus to come in now would only set us back and confuse things! The fertility potions are not needed until the month before the coupling. I've told you that taking it for too long prior reverses its effects."

"Silence!" the Dark Lord shouted, making his wand visible as a threat. "You will do as your master commands."

Madame Collins glared violently at Snape, her chest rapidly rising and falling with furious breaths. It was his turn to smile with amusement.

"The coupling takes place on the new moon," he continued. "If my instructions have been followed and all goes as planned, in nine months I will have my heir, and the life sacrifice can be made to create the final potion."

"Life sacrifice?" Madame Collins again spoke. "Don't you mean *blood* sacrifice, my lord?"

The dark wizard looked to the old witch and gave a nasty smile. "It is indeed a blood sacrifice, but I will need all of the blood. So in the end, it becomes a life sacrifice. And a most noble one, might I comment."

Snape felt his own chest tighten and the blood in his veins turn to ice water. But he said nothing.

"Their lives?" The witch's voice had risen to nearly shake the crumbling rafters overhead. "You are planning on killing my granddaughter and great-grandchild? You never told me this! If I had known..."

"You would have what?" the Dark Lord's voice boomed over her. "You would have denied your master his immortality? You would have gone back on your promise?"

Snape could see the panic and horror in Madame Collins's eyes. He looked to Davindra and saw equal fear.

"I would have done all I could for you, my lord. But not at the life of my children. There must be another way," she insisted. "Severus and I together hold more knowledge of potions than any wizard library in existence. We, together, can find another way. Something that will not require so much blood, perhaps."

She had moved closer to Snape as if to signify unity between them. But as much as Snape would do anything to save Davindra's life, he didn't wish to be brought down with the same curse that Madame Collins was fated to suffer if she continued her argument. As it was, he moved away from her minutely. Though his own mind began to think of ways to change Davindra's fate.

"Insolence!" shouted the Dark Lord as he encroached on Madame Collins. "Insubordination, insurrection, mutiny. It is all around me. You wish me to disregard meticulous planning and diligence because you misunderstood my words eighteen years ago? The success of Lord Voldemort should be thwarted for the sentimentalities of a faithless, deceitful witch?"

"There has to be another way," she insisted with both fear and obstinance.

"*Crucio!*" the Dark Lord commanded angrily.

The old woman withered to the ground in convulsions of agony. He let her stay under the curse for many long seconds.

Davindra gasped and attempted to rush forward. "No! Please..."

Snapped grabbed her arms and pulled her against him to stop her progress. "Don't," he whispered into her ear. "You'll only make it worse."

They were both forced to watch the Dark Lord inflict the torture curse on Madame Collins in muted horror.

Finally he released the spell, but the witch hardly moved. Her heavy, labored breathing was the only thing indicating survival.

Davindra struggled to be free and run to the aid of her grandmother, but Snape held her firmly against him. It was wrong to take any pleasure in physical contact at such an inappropriate time, but being able to have his hands on her and exert some control over her made the situation much more bearable to Snape.

"You eagerly made your promise eighteen years ago," the dark wizard snarled over Madame Collins's crumpled body. "You didn't even think to question the details of my plan. You were too busy looking for ways to ride my coat tail for success. Now you try to demand change? After the extravagant wealth of connections Lord Voldemort has afforded you? You are a foolish, greedy, ungrateful witch."

Weakly, Madame Collins raised her head from the floor. Her face was an ashen gray, the whites of her eyes completely blood-filled. Even Snape was shocked at the damage she had incurred.

"You can't take away the only thing that matters to me." Her voice was nothing but a feeble rasp. "I did this all for her. I thought you wanted her."

Snape felt Davindra sag at the words. He tightened his grip and let her body rest against him.

The Dark Lord barked a bitter laugh. "You thought I wanted a wife and child? How pathetically quaint and stupid. I have enough wretched, mewling pests clutching at my robes, demanding attention as it is. What I need is blood." He straightened up and walked gracefully around the room again. "Now, you can cooperate and continue to share in the prosperity of Lord Voldemort's reign or you can be disposed of and we will carry on without you. It matters little to me when I have Severus who surpasses your talent and demands no special favors."

Madame Collins replied nothing but sank into nearly silent weeping.

The dark wizard came to Snape and extracted Davindra from his grip, as though suddenly realizing that his possession was in danger of being absconded.

"Please escort Madame Collins out, Severus, and see if you cannot put some reason into her. And if not, then take care that she troubles us no more." The Dark Lord's red eyes glided between Snape and the crumpled woman on the floor threateningly.

Snape knew immediately what he meant, and he also knew he had no choice but to obey.

"Yes, my lord."

"Davindra and I will spend some time getting to know one another," he continued in a more cheerful tone as he guided her away from Snape. "Come back tomorrow to discuss the plans for the potion and coupling."

She looked back at Snape with intense pleading and fear in her eyes. *Don't leave me,* he knew she was silently screaming.

"I'll return first thing tomorrow," Snape answered to both the Dark Lord and her.

Reaching down, he attempted to haul Madame Collins upright, but found her to be almost completely dead weight. It took a great amount of strength to get her on her feet and lead her from the room.

No one appeared to them again before they escaped into the open, overgrown courtyard of the old orphanage. The sun was now being swallowed up by churning, dark storm clouds. Distant thunder echoed around them.

"No, wait," Madame Collins croaked. "I have to rest."

Thinking there was really no time for such luxuries, Snape begrudgingly found an old fallen tree that provided enough of a seat for the wilting woman. Though he did have to admit that dumping the uncooperative weight he had been carrying was a relief.

Snape looked around nervously in hopes of not being approached by other Death Eaters.

"You have to do something, Severus. You have to stop him," Madame Collins spoke between wheezing breaths.

Snape turned to give her a flat look. "I believe I am no longer obliged to do your bidding."

"You can't stand there and tell me that you are willing to watch her die," she replied desperately.

"It was not my foolishness that got her to this end," Snape shot back.

"I know, it was mine! And I would accept the consequences dutifully if they were only mine to suffer. But she's an innocent in all of this!"

"You should have thought of that long ago."

"I know I was foolish, Severus. I loathe myself more completely than you ever could imagine. And he was right. I was greedy and impulsive. I saw a way to elevate my own standing and secure a place of importance for the one off-spring who I believed could actually be someone." Madame Collins then broke into a fit of coughing that spewed flecks of blood into her hand and down her chin.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, stepping closer. "In the beginning, why didn't you inform me of the plan?"

Madame Collins raised her once mesmerizing, now damaged eyes to him. "I wasn't sure what side you were on. I know I said it didn't matter, but in truth I was trying my damndest to discover where your loyalties really lay. And I was never honestly sure until after I heard about Dumbledore. Even when Lucius Malfoy came to me to devise a plan to test you, I just could never be sure."

"Lucky for Lucius Azkaban protects him," Snape snarled to no one in particular. He then crossed his arms and glared down at her. "And if you are so sure of my loyalty now, why are you asking me to betray my master? I could kill you without so much as a warning for such treason."

The old woman gave a pitiful laugh that quickly deteriorated into a hacking, retching sound. "Severus," she managed in a weak, hoarse voice, "you'd be doing me a favor if you drew your wand on me at this point. But I ask you because I know that she means something to you. She always has. You're standing there right now trying to think of a way out of this."

Snape snorted a sound of contempt.

"It's true. That girl would happily give her own life for yours if the situation were reversed. And you love her for it. Deep inside your devotion to her eclipses anything you feel for the Dark Lord."

"There is *nothing* inside!" Snape turned and yelled at her, surprised at his own quick rage. "And I will not sacrifice myself for you, her, or anyone else."

Madame Collins seemed to be fading instead of gaining strength from her rest. She listed to one side and seemed hardly able to raise her head.

"Back at my home are all the notes for the potions. You will find a way to make this process fail and keep Davindra alive," she said with as much authority as her voice allowed. "I needn't threaten or bribe you, Severus. Your heart will allow you no other choice."

Before he could refute the charge, the sound of snapping twigs took his attention and he turned away to catch the sight of a squirrel dashing across the ground to get to another tree. Thunder sounded again, but closer. Fat, cold drops of rain began a relentless assault.

Taking in a sigh of relief, Snape then turned back to Madame Collins to tell her that they had to move on or suffer being soaked to the skin. His words froze on his tongue when he saw that her lifeless body had slumped to the ground.

Year Eight: To Burn in Heaven

Chapter 19 of 21

Snape is now left as Davindra's only hope of salvation. Sequestered blissfully alone together, he searches for a way to save them both and finds he must turn to the one last, desperate resort he knows.

and when we're done

soul searching

as we carried the weight

and died for the cause

is misery

made beautiful

right before our eyes

will mercy be revealed

or blind us where we stand

will we burn in heaven

like we do down here

will the change come while we're waiting

everyone is waiting

Witness -- Sarah McLachlan

"I'm afraid I have bad news."

Instead of warm sun, rain poured through the damaged roof of the old orphanage sanctuary in weak streams, pooling into dirty puddles on the ancient wood floor. For nearly 24 hours, the rain had continued unabated. Finally, the weather mirrored the atmosphere in Snape's mind: turbulent, dark, and oppressive.

The Dark Lord walked in circles around the water as though surveying its progress. Snape stood silently, awaiting acknowledgement.

"I do dislike bad news, Severus."

"I understand, my lord. And though it is most unfortunate, I don't see this as being a problem we cannot overcome." He paused for a moment, and after receiving no more comment, he continued. "Madame Collins did not survive the after-effects of the Cruciatius. She expired shortly after we left here. It was sudden. There was nothing I could do."

The Dark Lord didn't modify his pacing at the news. He seemed to hardly acknowledge the words at all. And Snape again waited for some sign of comprehension from his master.

"Not a surprising turn of events," the dark wizard finally spoke in a calm lilt. "And perhaps even for the best. She would never have allowed us to progress with our plans unaltered. No bother. You will be in charge of the potions, ceremony, and of course, the Vessel herself."

Snape felt a hot, excited flutter in his stomach. "Of course, my lord. It will be my honor to serve you."

"In fact, you can take her with you now," the Dark Lord replied as he waved his wand and summoned Davindra through the open door. "She is a rather morose young woman. She does nothing to soothe my nerves. I needn't see her again until the coupling."

Davindra walked slowly into the room. Her hair was disheveled and her robes rumpled. It looked as though she had received no more sleep than Snape had. He wondered

what other tortures she had endured. Tired, bloodshot, pale eyes gave him a weary look of relief at his presence.

The Dark Lord approached Davindra and reached out to smooth her gnarled hair with his bony, colorless hand. She no longer flinched, Snape noticed.

"Tell me, Severus," the wizard asked. "Were you quite fond of Davindra during your time together?"

Snape measured his words carefully. "She was intelligent and pleasurable. I suppose I thought no more of her."

"You weren't in love with her, then?"

He let out an easy chuckle. "No, my lord."

"That's interesting," the Dark Lord continued with smooth elocution. "For it appears that she is quite in love with you."

Obviously he had spent quite a bit of time prowling about the corners of Davindra's mind to discover all of her secrets. Snape chastised himself for not thinking to teach her Occlumency instead of focusing so many obscure potions.

"And it seems that you two spent a fair amount of time in each other's company."

"She was quite persistent in her pursuit of my attentions, my lord."

"And you never worried of Dumbledore discovering your illicit little secret?" There was suspicion in the question.

"He knew," Snape replied plainly. "There have always been many illicit secrets at Hogwarts. It is an unwritten rule that most get ignored unless someone complains."

"You are lucky your job was never in danger," the Dark Lord said darkly. "If you would have lost your easy access to Dumbledore, all of our plans would have been risked."

"Indeed, my lord. But it was never an issue. I would have never allowed it to be."

Davindra had remained silent and still during their exchange, and both men looked to her now. The subject of their discussion looked back with tired disinterest, as though she had grown accustomed to being discussed as a static entity.

The Dark Lord then gave her a firm shove in Snape's direction. "You will be under Severus's care from now on. I do not want to hear of any trouble from you." He then turned to address Snape with chilling cynicism. "Just remember to whom she belongs now, *Professor*."

Silently Davindra allowed Snape to lead her from the Dark Lord's presence. After they had made many steps away from the sanctuary, she seemed to wake from her silent trance.

"Where's Grandmother?"

Snape paused in his stride to look at her. *'Might as well be blunt and get it over with.'*

"She was far too weak to withstand a Torture Curse of that magnitude. She died before I could even get her home." He spoke frankly but with a modicum of reverence.

"Dead?" Davindra said the word as though it were foreign to her.

Snape nodded. "There was nothing I could do."

"And how do I know that you didn't kill her yourself?" Her accusation was clipped and cold as she crossed her arms and stared him down.

"You saw how she had to be carried out of here," Snape replied. "She didn't even make it out of the courtyard. I transfigured her into a single bone and buried her in the garden behind her home. We're going there now. You can see for yourself."

Sadness and anger seemed to charge through Davindra as she turned from him and continued down the hall with quick, snapping steps.

Snape had to hurry on to catch up with her, but just as he did, Bellatrix Lestrange appeared before them in a quick, silent manner. The pair stopped short to keep from running into her.

Snape gave her a tight, lethal smile. "Bellatrix, if you don't mind, we are in a hurry."

In return, she smiled a slick, wicked smirk as she focused on Davindra. "So this is the little pretty who was awarded the honor of giving the Dark Lord his heir?" Bellatrix circled her with critical eyes. "And a Mudblood, even," she sighed disappointedly.

"Jealous?" Snape asked with a twitch of his eyebrow. "Though I hardly think even magic could bring that decrepit body of yours back into fertility."

Bellatrix glared. "This body seemed more than adequate in pleasing you, Severus. Or have you forgotten our little celebration after you returned from killing Dumbledore." The woman gave a mean smile to Davindra.

Davindra shot a look of deadly contempt to Bellatrix before she then turned it to Snape.

"Actually, it has appeared to slip my mind totally," Snape quipped.

"Then perhaps you need a reminder," Bellatrix sneered, leaning in to him. "It seems that cavorting with children has dulled your senses to what a real woman can do." Again she narrowed her eyes at Davindra.

With what sounded like a snort of fury, Davindra pushed past Snape and Bellatrix to exit the building, slamming the door behind her.

Bellatrix watched while making sardonic tsking sounds. "I think I've stepped on her pretty little Mudblood toes. Why do men of talent and power always choose cheap youth and beauty over brains and breeding?"

Snape gave her a hard leer as he moved to follow. "Interesting change of philosophy considering that before Azkaban you yourself were little more than cheap youth and beauty."

He left Bellatrix snarling promises of retaliation and undoubtedly reaching for her wand. A quick exit shielded him from her wrath as he hurried to catch Davindra making her way down the crumbling stone stairs to the overgrown walk.

Finally reaching her, he firmly grabbed her arm, which she immediately shook loose of his grip.

"I do not need to be man-handled," she snarled at him.

"You heard the Dark Lord," Snape warned. "He said there was to be no trouble."

"Davindra *Daphne*?" Snape asked snidely. "Sounds like a French poodle."

"I know," she said with resigned embarrassment. "So what's your middle name?"

"I don't have one."

"Yes, you do, *Severus Tobias*," she replied with amusement.

He turned to give her a sharp glare. "I can only assume you found that out by snooping."

"Of course," she said with a slight smile.

"It was my father's name. The less mention I hear of him, the better." Snape let the comment drop after. He didn't wish to get into a diatribe on how much he loathed the man who sired him.

"I think my mother was reading a lot of tragic, historical romances when she was pregnant with me," Davindra said. "Daphne was probably some wretched woman who died of a broken heart or for some noble cause."

'Let's hope that legacy isn't continued,' Snape couldn't help but think.

"It's getting late. You should get some rest," he said to her.

"When was the last time you slept?" she asked, still leaning against the doorframe.

"I'll sleep later," he replied as he went back to the books he had covered the worktable with. "I want to do a bit more work."

"Severus, you haven't slept in days. I can tell." There was familiar scolding in her voice. "You won't do either of us any good if you drop from exhaustion."

"There are potions for that," Snape snapped back at her. "Now go to bed, Davindra, and leave me in peace."

An exasperated sigh escaped her, but she left him. Immediately he missed her presence and wished he hadn't be so cross with her. Maybe he did need some sleep.

Somehow he did manage to force a couple more hours of work out of himself before his eyes refused to focus. Too tired to even look for Pepper-up Potion, he went in search of a bed. The downstairs settees were too short or narrow to hold him. So he went upstairs looking for an empty bedroom.

An ajar door at the end of the hall caught Snape's attention, and he went toward it. Inside he found a small light coating the room in a dim glow and the bed already occupied by Davindra. She was curled into a fetal position with her back to him. Hoping to escape unnoticed he started to back out.

"I'm not asleep, you know," she said softly. She then turned over to look at him. "Stay with me."

Snape stayed rooted in his spot, staring at her, his hand still on the doorknob, and weighing his choices.

'Just turn and go. Sleep in a broom cupboard if you have to.'

Strangely though, Snape found himself inside the room, shrugging off his coat and tugging off his boots while sitting on the edge of the bed. His eyelids suddenly felt like leaden window shades. Firm, gentle hands on his shoulders pulled him down on the bed until his head landed on a pillow. Unintentionally, he let out a long groan of relief at the feel of his spine relaxing against the soft mattress.

Her body lay next to him, but not touching. He could sense her closeness and hear her breath. He could feel her eyes on him and it was the one thing that kept him from drifting off.

"Why did you kill him?" The question was delivered in such a soft, gentle voice that it actually seemed bearable to hear.

Slowly his eyes opened and Snape stared at the ceiling. "Because I had to," he answered.

"Why?"

"Because he ordered me to. He was weak and dying. He knew that he was becoming an easy target for the Dark Lord and a detriment to the rebellion."

"You didn't want to." It was a statement of observance rather than a question, for which Snape was grateful.

"No, I didn't want to. But he allowed me no other choice. I owed him far too much."

"Then it was very brave of you."

For all his exhaustion Snape managed a weak chuckle of scorn. "Brave. Haven't heard that word in a long time."

"What are you going to do now? Everyone thinks you're a murderer. You're a spy without a faction."

"Try to stay alive."

He felt her body melt against him, her head rest on his shoulder, her arms encircle his waist. It was probable that Snape fell asleep before his eyes actually closed.

When consciousness next came to him, he was sure that he had only slept for a few moments. But the room was flooded with brilliant sun, and he realized he has slept a very long time without moving a muscle. His body felt slightly stiff as he sat up and surveyed the room. It was a cozy space obviously decorated with a female flair due to the floral patterned wallpaper, delicate furniture, and light draperies that fluttered in the morning breeze. At that point Snape realized that the space next to him on the bed was empty. Davindra was gone.

Panic swept over him as he climbed out of bed and ran out of the room calling her name. What if she had escaped him? What if she had Disapparated to some remote spot he could never trace? What if she had been taken? Down the stairs he flew. He was suddenly regretting taking the amulet away from her. If they were still bound, he could have found her anywhere.

The double doors that led to the garden were wide open, and Snape rushed through them to see Davindra dressed in Muggle summer clothes bent over a stand of weedy stalks with yellow flowers. She turned to him as he approached and gave an easy, warm smile.

"I saw that you might be needing some St. John's wort," she said shaking a fist full of dewy herb at him. "These are slightly past prime harvest time, but still good. So, since I was up anyway..." She gave a shrug of obvious conclusion.

Snape found himself breathing a sigh of relief and almost laughing at his over-active paranoia.

"What's the matter? You must still be tired. Why don't we have breakfast?"

Before Snape could even comment, Davindra rushed into the house in a manic pace.

'I hope she isn't always this lively in the mornings,' he thought with annoyance.

They stood in the kitchen, Davindra handing him a mug of tea, then toast and jam. They ate silently. It was almost normal, the two of them starting a morning routine, quietly accepting each other's preferences and moods.

After Snape finished, he headed for the workshop. Davindra followed closely behind. He turned and looked at her.

"I have to deliver a dose of fertility potion to the Dark Lord by this evening," he said.

She nodded.

"You'll have to start yours tonight also."

Again she nodded.

"I've brewed the weakest dose I dared."

"When you're out, try to get some groceries. That is, if you don't want tinned meat sandwiches anymore."

She turned from him and went back to the kitchen.

Davindra stayed scarce for most of the morning, leaving him to finish the brewing process in peace. He continued to think and ponder what could be done to change the events that awaited them. If only he had access to some of his notes and books from school. Suddenly, he remembered Tom Riddle's spell book. It would surely have secrets to the process in it. Snape had no idea what had happened to the original he had give to Dumbledore. His own copy was hidden in his office. But he was certain that Madame Collins would have kept a copy for herself. Knowing her, he was more than certain, in fact.

He began looking through every shelf he found, flipping through every book and examining every object. Davindra came in and found him nearly destroying her late grandmother's library.

"What are you doing?" she asked in alarm.

"I'm looking for something."

"Obviously! But do you need to tear the place apart to find it?"

Snape glanced over his shoulder to give her an exasperated scowl. "There isn't time to be fastidious. I have to find a certain book. Do you remember an old, worn journal with hand written spells and potions like what I had you digging for at Hogwarts?"

"That describes most of Grandmother's collection," she quipped dryly.

He stopped his pillaging when he realized it wasn't there. "Where would she have kept something very valuable and secret?" he asked Davindra.

Looking bewildered, Davindra appeared to be thinking. Then her eyes went to a corner of the adjacent sitting room. With a furrowed brow of uncertainty, she moved into the room and began feeling about the panels. Snape followed with great interest.

"I used to find her in here, at this spot, always looking a bit suspicious and trying to hide whatever she was holding," she said.

Snape drew his wand and spoke an incantation at the wall. There was heavy magic protecting something. It might take months to figure out Madame Collins's system of charms.

"Any ideas?" Snape asked Davindra with little hope of an answer.

Again her brow knitted together in an intense stare at the spot on the wall. Extracting her wand from her back pocket, she raised it.

"Sub Rosa," she spoke and waved her wand in a swirling movement.

A small click sounded and a panel popped away from the wall. Snape looked at Davindra with impressed surprise.

Davindra gave him a slightly shocked smile. "It was a guess."

"A lucky one indeed."

Inside the shallow, hidden cabinet was a collection of books, bottles, boxes, and trinkets. Normally Snape would have enjoyed going through every item to discover what illegal and interesting secrets Madame Collins had been hiding away. But now he was too set on finding the book to take the time. The first few books were nothing but personal notes and records of potions she had done. The next one bit his finger. He threw it against the far wall, and it squeaked in pain as it landed. At last a familiar one fell into his hands. Immediately he recognized the scratchy scrawl of the handwriting. An exact copy of Tom Riddle's book. Or perhaps even, the original. This book felt heavier and darker than the one he had kept hidden for several years.

Immediately, Snape started leafing through the pages, completely forgetting about Davindra until she demanded to know what he had found.

"Something that might actually save us," he murmured as he hurried back into the workshop.

He scanned through pages until his eyes caught something that might be of interest. Only then did he notice that Davindra was leaning on his shoulder reading along with him. After giving her an impatient, waspish glare, she backed away and paced about the work room.

Though Snape saw many familiar potions and spells he had studied before from his own copy of the book, he also saw things that were not in his. Madame Collins had been holding out on him. She had planted a decoy for him to find and use but kept the best magic secret for herself. This included some scattered notes on the "Vessel Sacrifice." No concrete instructions were listed. It was mostly a rough outline and unfinished thoughts with various tries at a coherent recipe. Snape wondered how the Dark Lord ever perfected the process. Amongst the scribbles were scratched out ingredients, measurements, and incantations. It seemed that too much of certain ingredients inhibited the absorption of the fertility potion. Perhaps trace amounts of several of these could do the same.

Davindra still paced about him. "What?" she asked expectantly when he put the book down and stroked his lip in thought.

Taking the St. John's wort she had picked earlier and a sharp knife, he indicated for her to go to the table and begin working.

"Do a fine chop, but be sure not to bruise the pedals," he instructed.

They both set out working to finish the potion he would deliver that night. Quietly and quickly they labored. It felt almost like being back in his office or classroom, her gentle presence soothing him and distracting him all at once.

"It will need a short curing time," he finally pronounced, capping a bottle and setting it aside.

Davindra sighed and sat down. "I'm going to actually have to have sex with that man," she uttered in a depressed tone, her chin in her hands.

"You just now realized that?" Snape asked as he began clearing away some of the mess he had made over the last two days.

"No, I've known. I just didn't let myself think about it."

"I'm trying everything I can to keep it from coming to that. But until then, I suggest you continue to not think about it until the time comes."

"The thought probably doesn't bother you in the least, does it?" she asked, sounding more than wounded.

Snape pursed his lips and gave her a narrowed glance. Of course the thought had bothered him. It had torn and slashed at his mind and heart from the moment he had learned of the whole plan.

"It is simply an act of procreation. I can assure you that the Dark Lord would probably find little pleasure in it except for the thought that it would lead to his immortality," Snape explained.

"If he were any other man, would you feel the same way?" She gave him a deep, pleading look.

'I'd kill anyone who attempted it.' Snape placed his hands on the table and leaned toward her.

"He would just be using your body for a very brief time," he said quietly. "It isn't your soul and it isn't your heart. You would be giving him nothing of yourself."

She snorted with bitter disbelief. "Is that what you did with Bellatrix Lestrange?" Her gaze turned accusing and harsh.

Snape returned a scowl. "Basically." He waved his wand and commanded the piles of books to resshelf themselves. "Your mind can get you through any number of horrible encounters if you only use it. It was my fault I never taught you Occlumency."

"So how did you get through such a *horrible* encounter as shagging that old beast?" she asked snidely.

He spun around sharply to face her, his nose inches away from hers, and glared into her chilly green eyes. "I thought about you."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" she spat back resentfully.

"THAT is only meant to show you that your body and mind are separate, and they never have to be in the same place at the same time if you do not wish it." His words were sharp, and his voice was bitter. Not only did he wish to forget about the humiliating night with Bellatrix, but he loathed the idea of groveling to Davindra out of guilt.

She stood up abruptly. "How would you have any idea of what it's like to not only submit to a rape, but also to know that you are to bear the devil's spawn and that your life will end after nine months of carrying it."

"I won't let that happen," Snape replied.

She shook her head in disgusted defeat. "It's hopeless. I don't know why you think you can fight him. No one else can."

With a quick turn she stormed from the room and up the stairs. Her hurried, stomping footsteps sounding all the way to her bedroom.

For several moments Snape stood and just swallowed down calming breaths. Honestly, even he wasn't sure he could stop it all from happening, but he knew he would die trying rather than give up. It might not mean anything to her, but it was the one thing that kept him going.

Finally, he climbed the stairs after her. Slowly he approached her room. He was surprised to not find the door locked against him, but standing open, as though she had hoped he would come after her.

She sat on the bed, facing a window that framed the sun setting over the distant trees. He knew his presence was recognized though she didn't move. Snape made his way to the distant side of the bed to sit next to her and take in the same view.

For several moments they didn't speak nor look at each other.

"Do you want me to just give up?" he asked. "Do you think I've lasted this long dancing between Dumbledore and the Dark Lord by quitting when it got difficult?"

"Frankly, I don't know how you've done it," she replied tiredly. "I'm about to throw myself in front of speeding truck just to end the agonizing worrying and waiting." A faint chuckle escaped her as she pushed the hair from her face and dragged her fingers through its length. "Actually, that would solve most of the issue right there, wouldn't it?"

Snape gave her a hard stare. The very idea that she could even consider it was horrifying.

"Don't even joke about that," he snapped at her. "There is enough laying down of lives in this useless war as it is."

"If there is honestly no other way, if everything else fails..." she began.

Snape grabbed her by the arms to force her to look at him. "I will not allow it. Not now and not ever. I had to watch and participate in Dumbledore's sacrifice of himself because of the Dark Lord. I will not do the same for you."

She looked into him with bottomless sincerity, and before Snape could react, she kissed him. Her lips stayed upon his own in firm pressure, which he did not admonish, for several seconds. Though he knew he shouldn't, that they were skirting a dangerous venture, that he might not have the resolve to stop himself if he went further, Snape cupped her face and opened his lips to deepen the kiss.

It was like heaven was seeping into his veins. The months of hunger for her could no longer be denied. Her response seemed to say she felt all the same emotions and longings as he. Soft moans of pleasure and contentment reverberated from her throat at each plunging stroke of his tongue. Her hands clutched and grasped at his body and hair.

They found themselves rolling upon the bed, limbs entwined, bodies grinding against one another, hands stroking and pulling clothing aside.

Then, from out of the fog of lusty desire, the words of the Dark Lord echoed inside Snape's head. *'Remember to whom she belongs now.'* He sat up as though he had been hexed. Still panting and tingling with expectant pleasure, Snape attempted to gain some control over his raging mind and body.

Confused at her sudden abandonment, Davindra sat up also and reached out a hand to touch him. "What is it?"

He flinched away from her and shifted to the edge of the bed. "We can't do this, Davindra," he said tightly. "You are not mine to have."

She scooted beside him, and, taking his chin in her hand, forced him to look at her.

"I've always been yours," she stated plainly with fierce resolve etched into her face. "I always will be. There is nothing and no one on earth or in heaven who can change

that."

"I think the Dark Lord would beg to differ with you," Snape replied tersely. His eyes could not be prised from her lips, the softest place in existence and to which he begged to return.

"I won't allow him to take the last bit of pleasure from my life. He's taken everything else: my family, my freedom, my future, even control over my own body. I am left with very little but my love for you. I won't let anyone tell me I don't have a right to it."

When she made another attempt to close in on him, Snape didn't retreat. Her impassioned words seemed to fill his heart with a heavy sensation that made it impossible for him to move. He remained frozen as her hand gently brushed through his lank, oily hair and her lips brushed his cheek.

"I belong to no one but you," she whispered near his ear.

Snape was filled with a rebellious urge to revolt against the chains that bound him to do the Dark Lord's bidding. Wasn't his ultimate goal to assist in toppling the evil wizard's reign and free not only himself but all of the wizarding world from the Dark Lord's imperious enslavement? Snape owed him no honor and no sacrifice. Likewise, Snape knew little pleasure in his life but for her. Until he could slash at that vial creature's crumpled body and stomp on his broken bones in sanctimonious revenge, Snape would satisfy himself with taking back what was rightfully his.

Renewed passion overtook Snape when Davindra's lip again found his. The idea that he was defiling the Dark Lord's most cherished weapon only spurred on his lustful longing.

This time, the extracting of clothing was successful and soon they lay skin to skin. The sensation of her warm flesh felt like coming home to Snape, and he resisted every urge within him to whisper of his delirious gratitude. Her firm, supple flesh and gentle, teasing strokes drove all memories of Bellatrix Lestrange's assault from his mind.

Savoring every aspect of her that he had spent months fantasizing about took him to every part of her body. His fingernails raked over her thighs as he kissed the outline of her ribs. His tongue swirled around her breast until it peaked upon her hardened nipple. His teeth nipped and dragged across her flesh. All the while she squirmed and writhed against him, her hands clawing at his arms, back, and hair in a slow, deliciously sharp fashion. But always he returned to her lips as though to remind himself that sheer perfection was available for him to partake. The softness, pliability, and moist texture of her mouth made her the most intoxicating kisser he had ever encountered, his own skills considered far from expert.

Soon her insistent directing took him to that warm, wet area of his most desperate desires. Greedily she begged for his fingers, then his mouth, and then for all of him. He was more than willing and ready to oblige any request she made of him. As her heat slid around him, he stared into her eyes and remembered when feeling lost in them gave him a sense of disturbed panic, causing him to retreat from her presence. Now he would happily drown in those pale pools of ash, jade, and emerald.

The closer they approached to their release the more she whispered her words of eternal adoration and devotion. Snape almost requested she be quiet when amongst her breathless, tumbling words, she uttered, "Before I die, I want to hear you say it just once."

The comment broke his rhythm. "I won't let you die," he replied, then continued in his labor.

Moments later, quivering waves of ecstasy washed through him and then her, leaving them both blissfully weak.

"It would be worth it," she later said softly.

"What?"

"Dying. To hear those words from you."

"That would be a ridiculous thing to waste your life for," he replied with well-practiced apathy as he moved to lie next to her.

Davindra looked at him solemnly. "You wouldn't know because you haven't starved to hear it."

If only she understood how his whole life had been a barren wasteland of unspoken words and unrequited emotions. She had been showered with love and praise since she was born. What did she know of true neglect and isolation? But no quick, sharp reply sprang from him to insult her.

"When I finally found you at Payne Hollow," she began in a quiet voice as she curled onto her side near him, "I wasn't sure if I would spit in your face or fall at your feet. But I took one look at you, and nothing else mattered. What you said and did to me at Hogwarts didn't matter. Killing Dumbledore and serving the Dark Lord didn't matter. I would have submitted to anything you asked of me."

Snape just stared at the ceiling as her words trickled into his ear and seeped into his soul.

"Do you know I became yours the first time you touched me, showing me how to properly stir a cauldron in slow semi-circles during my second year? I pledged myself to you that day and waited four years for you to claim me."

"I am no more worthy of your pledge than the Dark Lord," he replied, letting the back of his hand rest against his forehead. "And using you like I did when you were hardly sixteen was little better than what he has planned for you."

"Don't you dare compare yourself to him," Davindra gasped, rising up on her elbows. "You are risking your life at this very moment to try to save me. You are nothing like him."

"It's not because I didn't want to be," he stated darkly, old memories sliding past his mind's eye. "I wanted it very badly. I had plans to be his second in command, to lead an army of the most fearsome Death Eaters. But I wasn't strong enough. I couldn't bear the death, torture, and destruction. I went crawling to Dumbledore on my knees. I begged. *Begged* and pleaded with him to take me in. I said I would spill every secret I possessed about the Dark Lord and all his followers if he would only allow me refuge in his fold. And he let me grovel and barter until he was satisfied with my degradation. It came far less easily than handing myself over to the Dark Lord. I've paid for it ever since. Dumbledore never let me forget that I owed not only him but also the entire wizarding race restitution for all the damage I had helped inflict. Cleverly, I made the Dark Lord think it was his idea that I become a double spy when he found out I'd been sneaking over to the other side. I lived in sheer terror for months until his supposed death. But I was no freer then, for I now had a debt to Dumbledore, which I was certain I would never be out from under. I pictured myself dying in that dungeon, teaching a room full of thick-headed children. Now, I crave that peaceful end instead of what awaits me."

Snape stopped speaking and looked at Davindra who gazed at him with sad eyes.

"So, you see," he added quietly. "It wasn't valor or righteousness that kept me from being like the Dark Lord. It was cowardice. I am noble only by default."

Throwing back the covers, Snape got up and began searching for his clothes.

"Would you be any happier if you had managed to become what you aspired to?" she asked, sitting on her knees and drawing the sheet around her.

Pulling his shirt over his head allowed him to avoid her interrogating stare. "Happiness has never been my objective nor my destiny. Success and power were all I craved in those days."

His boots were next and he sat on the bed to stomp his feet into them.

"It is far too risky to contact anyone," Snape commented. "One owl from here would be like handing the authorities a map to our location. And if they find us, I will be sent straight to Azkaban, if I'm even left alive, and you will be no more safe from the Dark Lord's plans."

She looked crestfallen but convinced at his argument.

"Now, get dressed and meet me downstairs," he again ordered and left the room.

Out in the dark garden, Snape stood looking into the star-filled northwestern sky. One of his last conversations with Dumbledore replayed in his head.

"You'll need to wait a while, Severus. I don't know for how long. We'll have to just trust Dippet. Though once Fawkes is dispatched, the Order will know the truth. Our conjoined Patronuses will be the signal of a valid message. But use it wisely and sparingly."

'I hope to hell the old man knew what he was talking about,' Snape thought. *'If not, I'm handing us both over to a death sentence.'*

Pointing his wand into the midnight sky, Snape spoke the words *'Nuntius Patronum!'* A wispy form shot forth and swirled around until it fell into the shape of a phoenix with out-stretched wings, followed by a coiled serpent.

The message was short and to the point. "I have the Vessel. Request a meeting and secured confidence." There was no point in explaining anything more. If they knew the truth, then they didn't need any more. If they did not, then it would be best to give them no more. The glimmering, hazy bird swept the serpent into its mouth.

'Transporto Patronum!' And the vision set off into the night.

A half hour was all he was willing to wait, he had decided. With the last shimmer of the phoenix's tail swallowed up by the inky darkness, Snape turned back toward the house to gather some necessities and to watch the clock, their fate less sure with every silent slip of the minute hand towards an undetermined destiny.

In Rome, a wild rose would be placed on the door of a room where secret or confidential matters were discussed. The phrase *sub rosa*, or "under the rose," means to keep a secret, derived from this ancient Roman practice. --Wikipedia.org

BTW, Daphne IS the name of my poodle! Homage to my Daphne-dawg!

Tear at the Darkness

Chapter 20 of 21

Snape and Davindra must turn to an unlikely place for help and protection as the dark date with the Dark Lord draws near.

Author's note: I had always planned to continue this story, even after Deathly Hallows came out. But I wasn't sure if I would continue with my own storyline, which has been laid out for some time, or follow canon. After reading DH it was obvious I had built in NO background information to support the DH story. In fact I contradict it in many places. So, even though I wasn't happy to be going in the direction of "alternate universe," I find I must. I hope the alternate ending to the Harry Potter story, and most importantly, the Snape saga, is just as enjoyable in its own unique way.

□

Though I've tried I've fallen

I have sunk so low

I messed up

Better I should know

So don't come round here and

Tell me I told you so

Fallen--Sarah McLachlan

Muggy night air enveloped them as soon as they were released from their Apparation. The surrounding street was silent and the houses dark. A faint electric hum of life existing under a quiet slumber was all that could be detected in that early hour of morning before people began to stir and begin their average, daily lives.

Snape and Davindra stood for a moment looking at the innocent suburbia. It was a bit hard-worn and unkempt, but the dark, thin pair immediately felt exposed and out of place.

"What are we doing here?" Davindra asked quietly, drawing her cloak more firmly around her though the heat was nearly oppressive.

"We're here because we don't have any other option," he replied blandly.

"We're left to living in the streets?" she quipped with dark humor.

"Close," he answered with equal bleakness. "Very close."

Snape began moving toward a particularly disreputable looking set of houses where he stopped at a collection of rubbish tins. Bending down he lifted one of the bins to retrieve a bit of paper fixed to the bottom of the can.

"Crude and careless, unsurprisingly," he muttered at the simple plan.

He then held the piece of paper out to Davindra. "Read it."

"Number twelve, Grimmauld Place?" she asked as she examined both front and back of the small scrap.

"Not out loud!" Snape hissed at her as he snatched the paper back. "Just remember it."

After a shabby, dark building emerged from between two existing houses, Snape and Davindra walked toward it.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" Davindra again ventured.

"You'll see soon enough," Snape answered as he knocked on the door.

Immediately it opened a crack and an eye surveyed them, and then the door snapped shut only to next open widely to reveal a dark interior.

Snape quickly shoved Davindra through, then stepped in behind her. The door closed behind them, sinking them into total blackness, though it was apparent that they were not alone.

"What is your Patronus?" a voice demanded.

"A serpent," Snape answered tiredly.

"That was too easy," another familiar voice snapped. "What name did you sign in your Potions textbook?"

"Potter, it's ME," he snapped impatiently. "Can we please desist with this stupid game?"

But it continued to stay dark and tensely silent.

"The Half-Blood Prince," Snape finally said through clenched teeth.

Finally a dim light filled the foyer. Snape found himself standing almost uncomfortably close to Remus Lupin. Behind him, Harry Potter stood glaring at the new visitors. Lurking further back in the shadows were Potter's familiars, Weasley and Granger. Mad-Eye Moody was leaning over the banister of the nearby stairs. Every pair of eyes burned into Snape with brutal distrust and accusation.

Snape lowered his hood and returned the visual confrontation. Davindra moved closer to him, obviously reading the hostile emotions that pulsed around them.

"One can never be too careful now days," Moody said casually. "It's hard to tell who's friend and who's foe."

"I do hope I need not answer any more inane questions to prove which of those I am." Snape addressed the group, though his eyes landed on Potter.

"No, Severus," Lupin finally spoke in his typical tired manner. "I think we are all still trying to comprehend the latest revelations about you. Any more would be overwhelming. Now, what was this about the Vessel?"

"Not even inviting me in for tea first?" he quipped.

"You wouldn't have even gotten in this far if it were up to me," Potter snarled quietly, but with assurance that Snape would hear him.

"We've been over this, Harry," Lupin spoke out of the corner of his mouth at the boy behind him. "You heard the message just as we all did."

"But I still don't believe it." His mean, little, green eyes narrowed angrily behind his round glasses. "I know what I saw on that tower."

I should have known he was there somewhere under that bloody Invisibility Cloak! "You apparently don't know anything, you insufferable hothead." Snape interjected.

Potter had started to charge through Lupin, his wand raised, when the werewolf stopped him. "Harry, let me handle this! The Vessel, Severus. Maybe you should just hand it over to us."

"Of course," he answered smoothly and nudged Davindra toward them.

She stumbled briefly before retaking her footing and realizing that she was now the center of attention. As he had seen her do many times, she only spent a second looking horrified before a resolute pride took over and she straightened her shoulders and lowered her own hood, allowing them all to see her clearly.

Potter and Lupin exchanged puzzled looks with Moody.

"Your new sidekick?" Lupin asked.

"The Vessel," Snape said with a lean, dark smirk.

More looks were passed between the Order members.

"She's the Vessel?" Potter spoke, pointing at her. "A Ravenclaw is Voldemort's secret weapon?"

"You're the 'Chosen One' and you're surprised?" Snape commented glibly. "You never figured out exactly what the Vessel was, did you?"

"The closest we got was that it was part of his Horcrux plan," Moody said. "Dumbledore didn't even seem to know the whole story."

Snape gave a look of dim amusement with a slight raise of his eyebrows. "No, he did not."

"Enlighten us." Lupin made the demand while crossing his arms and narrowing his suspicious gaze.

"The Vessel isn't an object," Snape began. "It is a person, a woman specifically, who will carry the Dark Lord's heir. That heir and the mother are then used as a sacrifice for a powerful, dark spell that will grant immortality. Miss Collins was marked soon after birth as the Dark Lord's property for this purpose."

Lupin now had a look of vague horror. "When did you find out about this?"

Hiding his chagrin, Snape answered curtly, "It's actually fairly new knowledge to me and also a recent shock to Miss Collins, I'm afraid. Her grandmother made the arrangement with little awareness of the details. Madame Collins, though she was agreeing to something akin to an arranged marriage. Unfortunately, a more detailed explanation of the contract was not to her liking, and she and the Dark Lord parted ways in a most permanent manner."

"Meaning he killed her," Moody concluded in his usual blunt manner.

Snape gave a slight nod of acknowledgement. "That is how I came to be her guardian, as luck would have it."

Potter finally interjected. "How do we know that she is really the Vessel, as you say? How can we trust you?"

"Oh, Severus, I don't care," she moaned against the hollow of his throat. "Just do something to me, anything. I just want to feel you."

He could think of twenty different things that would fulfill every need between them. And though he knew it was a dangerous venture, he found himself wanting to lose himself in raw physical sensation as much as she. Before he could protest further, she had begun a very persuasive demonstration, and he had nothing more to debate. Indeed, many things can quench desire, but Snape still found himself missing the intimacy of being inside her. It took great restraint to not throw caution to the wind and indulge. Later as he lay next to her, listening to her slumbering, easy breaths, he felt himself beginning to fall into a deeply relaxed state. Flickering worries of the Dark Lord and the looming coupling edged about his consciousness but nothing stuck. Soon he mercifully slipped into a deep sleep, his hand still wrapped about Davindra's waist and one leg pinning hers to the bed. She wouldn't so much as move without him knowing.

As soon as he saw daylight peaking around the edges of the shabby draperies, he was unable to sleep anymore. Snape untangled himself from the sheets, leaving Davindra sprawled over her usual three-fourths of the bed. It was later than he thought. He dressed and headed downstairs in hopes of a quiet cup of tea.

As he reached out to push his way through the kitchen door, the sound of quiet voices stopped him. He paused with his ear to the door to ascertain whom his morning company would be and if he could tolerate them.

"It's fine, I mean, I don't really have any problem with her being here," Potter was saying in a hushed but clearly frustrated voice. "And I've been damn thankful he's been gone so much. But I still can't stand the sight of that greasy bastard. I know Sirius would never have allowed it. Nothing anyone could have said about noble gestures and mercy killings would have changed his mind. I feel guilty about even having agreed to it."

"It was the right decision, Harry," the voice of Hermione Granger spoke. "Even if Sirius didn't like Snape, he would have believed that this was the right thing to do. Besides, he tolerated Snape coming here when they were all in the Order."

"But he didn't like it," Potter reminded her.

"What I don't get is how *she* can stand him." Ron Weasley was also in the mix. "They've been together for a couple years now. Remember when we saw them by the lake?"

A sound of disgust came from what had to be Potter.

"Well, I don't know," Granger spoke again. "He might be the sort some women would go for. Dark, mysterious, and he IS brilliant."

There was a heavy silence in which Snape imagined her getting stares of horror and revulsion.

"I didn't say that it was MY type," she added in a nervous, hurried voice. "Just that some women might like it."

Taking the smirk off his face, Snape decided to disrupt the debate by pushing his way through the door. The threesome turned in unison, looking only slightly guilty. No one spoke as Snape found a mug and poured himself tea.

"Still alive, are you?" Potter commented bleakly.

"For now. Sorry to disappoint you," Snape replied. "Begging the Chosen One's pardon, but would it be alright to at least have breakfast in his presence?" he asked flippantly.

"We aren't going to have to watch you swallow whole rabbits or bite the head off a live chickens, are we?" Potter asked.

"Not this morning," Snape answered smoothly as he sat at the far end of the table.

At that moment Davindra ambled into the kitchen, yawning and looking hardly awake.

"Good morning, everyone. Severus, have you been up long?" she asked.

"Not long," he replied. Then with a mischievous smirk, he said, "Well, here is the one person to answer your question, Weasley. Go ahead and ask her."

The ginger-haired ape looked at him dumbly. "What?"

"You were wondering how Miss Collins could stand my company," he reiterated calmly. "Now is your chance to find out."

He gave a slightly panicked look to his friends. "Well, I wasn't... That wasn't meant... It was sort of rhetorical, in a way."

"What's this?" Davindra asked, still sounding sleepy as she sat down next to Snape and cradled her mug of tea.

"Mr. Weasley here was wondering how it was that you have managed to tolerate such an intimate relationship with someone so thoroughly repellant as I," he informed her with great pleasure at everyone else's discomfort.

"That wasn't what I said exactly," the boy muttered sheepishly.

"Though Miss Granger suspects it is my dark, mysterious, and brilliant mind that lured you in." This time the girl blushed eight shades of pink before she buried her face in her cup.

"Oh," Davindra finally seemed to understand and put on a very serious face to address the trio. "Oh, well, I suppose there were many things that drew me to Severus. Yes, he is extremely intelligent and talented. And I do suppose there is something appealing about his dark manner and secretive ways."

She turned to look at him as though searching for reminders of why she began her devotion to him seven years prior.

"But I think it must have been his strength and intensity. I just knew that there wasn't anything he couldn't do. And I always knew he'd look after me. Nothing could harm me if he was there. I'd always be safe."

She looked at him with the same devotion and adoration she reserved for the intimate moments between them. Snape returned a slight smile at her sentimental, silly prose then looked up and found Potter looking ill, Weasley looking confused, and Granger looking wistful.

Davindra also seemed to shake herself free of the enchantment of old memories and displayed an impish grin as she wrapped her arms about his shoulders.

Resting her chin against him, she gave a sly look to the group and said, "And he's a wickedly, fierce shag."

"Really?" a weak inquiry came from Granger who sat looking at them with flushed, wide-eyed curiosity, her tea half raised to her lips.

Potter groaned and dropped his own mug to the table. "Oh, God," he moaned, "I can't listen to this." And he left the room hastily.

"Curious, are you now, Granger?" Snape asked with a lascivious twitch of his eyebrow over his own raised cup.

"No, she isn't!" a red-faced Weasley answered for her. Granger ignored the accusatory stare of her jealous companion and went back to her undoubtedly cold tea.

judgment on the Astronomy Tower was fatally mistaken also."

"I wasn't the only one who thought the obvious," he replied hotly.

"You were the only one who saw it all."

"I saw you use the Killing Curse on a defenseless man. What would anyone think of that?"

Snape gave Potter a flat, level look, keeping all emotion out of his face, though he did understand how that visual on top of his previous actions could be judged.

"Just stay out of my personal life, what little I have. Go back to bed, Potter" he said, then turned away to follow Davindra's steps upstairs.

"Snape," Potter called. When the retreating man didn't stop, he called his name again with more demand.

Snape finally stopped on the stairs and whipped about with an infuriated look.

"Listen, um... Thank you for everything you did last night. Looks like once again I owe you my life." There was grim regard to the statement, and the boy looked none to pleased to say it.

The admission surprised Snape, who did his best to mask his reaction behind a stoic glare from between lank curtains of dull, black hair. He simply gave Potter a bare nod of acknowledgement, then returned to scaling the narrow stairs.

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It was down to days now. Days before Davindra was to go off to the Dark Lord for the fated coupling. Everyone seemed edgy and irritable. Davindra became more quiet and reclusive. Snape longed to talk to her to ease some of her worry, but he felt lost when it came to words. He found that all he could do was dispense potions, callous instructions, and stern lectures. Feeling inadequate and frustrated at his social shortcomings that proved him completely unable to soothe her, Snape found he sometimes avoided her. For seeing her cry or stare vacantly into space and know she was pondering what she had to do was too heartwrenching for him.

In comparison, seeing the Dark Lord in an almost joyous mood over the impending fulfillment of the sacrifice was chilling. In his master's presence, Snape had to force jovial congratulations and reassurances, though he felt physically ill afterward when he let the guard down from his mind and allowed the horror of what was to happen become vivid.

At night he would lie next to her for a few hours at a time. Neither would speak and neither would sleep. Eventually Snape would no longer be able to stand the grueling tension and get up to go back to his restless pacing in the cellar and continued assessment of the final potions for the sacrificial coupling. As it stood, the minor alterations to the Dark Lord's original sketchy notes on the process had gone un-noticed by him thus far. The best Snape could hope for from his efforts were a slight decrease in the evil wizard's magical strength and a hindrance to reproductive ability. He prayed to whomever considered themselves the highest of deities that it would be enough.

Eventually, the only comfort came from drinking. In those hours when he couldn't sleep and could no longer bear to think, he would drown his misery in Firewhiskey and solitude. He felt so useless and futile. After all the years of watching her and ensuring that no harm came to her, she was now out of his reach. Snape turned over old memories in his mind. He remembered healing the wounds on her hands after a tumble in the mud thanks to Draco Malfoy as he told her how to best avoid being the target of cruel pranks. He recalled all the times that his tutoring resulted in her excelling beyond even his expectations. Holding her against him as they hid in the library from the basilisk gave him a rush of valiant protectiveness that he had never been able to shake since. She was his drug. His only joy in life came from knowing she existed for him and because of him. Now it seemed she might die for the same reasons. He couldn't endure the injustice and the frustration.

Snape sat at the kitchen table nursing his third glass of Firewhiskey. It kept him warm when the fire burned down to glowing embers and the kitchen grew dark.

Lost in his own thoughts about the coming event and careful examination of his own self-loathing, the sound of the door opening and footsteps didn't register until after Lupin had taken the seat across from him.

In his hand he had a glass into which he poured a small amount of the drink. For a while he said nothing and both men just stared into their drinks. If Snape had to suffer company at this time, this was the best way to do it.

"Need I even say 'a knut for your thoughts?'" Lupin finally said.

Snape only gave him a dark glance for an answer.

"You're not the only one worried about her," Lupin continued in a quiet and annoyingly soothing voice.

This time Snape snorted in disgust.

"I know how you must feel. With the way things are, this isn't the best time to care about someone else." It seemed the werewolf wasn't taking the hint that Snape didn't want to talk. "Tonks and I..."

"Lupin," Snape interrupted, "I REALLY don't want to hear about your love life right now, and I can assure you that you know nothing about what I'm going through."

"Fair enough," he replied, taking a drink. "Why don't you tell me?"

"It never occurred to you that I was drinking alone in the dark for a reason?"

"Yes, it's because you feel miserable, depressed, and worried. But that's rarely the best time to be alone."

"It's always worked for me so far."

"Has it?"

Again, Snape gave him a look of warning.

"This isn't your fault."

Now Snape stared at him in abject insult. "Isn't it?" he snapped. "I am responsible for her. I have been since she was eleven. It was my job to protect her then; it's my job to protect her now. I should have known something like this was afoot years ago. But I was blind." Snape took a drink and murmured into his glass, "to many things. I'm useless to her now. I can't get myself out of this situation. How could I possibly get her out?"

There was a dense silence as each man contemplated this last statement. They drank and stared at the dark.

"What do I do?" Snape asked, his tongue beginning to thicken from the drink and his lips beginning to loosen about the hundreds of horrible things whirling about his imagination. "What do I do if this doesn't work? What do I do if he figures it out and kills her? He'll come for me then. And I won't care if he does. You're so full of wise words and wisdom, Lupin. What do I do then?"

Lupin sighed. "I don't know, old man. I honestly don't know."

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The day of the coupling dawned in a vague, unremarkable way. The house seemed quiet and few people were around to herald its coming. Davindra didn't emerge from her room until near noon. Snape knew he would have to leave soon to meet with the Dark Lord, but he wished for a moment to speak to her, and even more, he wished for the right words to say. She stood staring out a window in the dim, dank, old library. Snape knew she heard him enter and was aware of him standing behind her, though she didn't so much as blink in acknowledgement.

Swallowing every bit of stoic pride he possessed, Snape wrapped his arms around her. Gently against her ear, he spoke, "If I could take Polyjuice and go in your place, I would."

"I'd never let you," she replied dully.

"I lied to you. I told you that it wasn't your soul or your heart that you were giving over to the Dark Lord, that it was only your body. But I know how your heart and soul are suffering. So it may as well be all of you. I'm sorry for that."

Her arms wrapped about his own. "There isn't any need for apologies now, Severus. You've done all you can."

"It's not enough." His voice sounded hollow and choked. "I have to go. I'll be back to escort you tonight. Try to stay calm, focus on emptying your mind. Take the sedative draught. Do everything you can to keep yourself relaxed. He'll know if you're afraid."

Snape pulled away and turned her to look at him. But again words vanished from his mouth before he could speak them. Her pale eyes pleaded with him for something he did not possess. Perhaps she wanted assurance. Perhaps she wanted to hear that he loved her. He could say none of it. So he left her and was almost thankful for the reprieve.

The Dark Lord was in a celebratory mood. It sickened Snape. But he joined in the enthusiastic plans and administered the last of the fertility draughts. The Dark Lord hungrily drank the potion and threw the bottle against the fireplace, cackling as it shattered into a hundred shards. He paced about the room and raved of his unlimited powers. He spoke of grandiose plans for luring out Harry Potter and destroying him slowly and painfully. It was the deranged ranting of a mad man. It gave Snape a sliver of hope that the traces of poisons had begun to take effect and unhinge the wizard's depraved mind. When night finally became as dark as pitch, the Dark Lord commanded Snape to bring Davindra to him. He bowed deeply and left the orphanage.

Inside Grimmauld Place he found them all waiting for him, gathered around Davindra like a human wall of protection. Their accusatory gazes cutting him down further than he already knew himself to be. But she disentangled herself from them and walked to him.

"I'm ready," she said calmly, looking steadily into his eyes.

Snape raised the hood on her cloak to cover her head and started to go.

"Snape, are you sure this will work?" Potter came forward with a worried furrow to his brow. His arm was still bandaged from the snakebite and he still looked pale. But his stubborn determination to question Snape at every turn had not abated.

"No, Potter," Snape replied. "I am not at all sure. But it's the best we've got. Once he's weakened, then it will be your charge to answer."

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Snape wasn't allowed to present Davindra to the Dark Lord himself. She was to be left in a room alone and Snape was to leave, only to return when summoned. It was time for him to surrender her and he found he couldn't do it. His breath came short and his heart pounded wildly. He grabbed her shoulders too roughly as he gave her the last few instructions.

"Remember to keep your mind empty and calm. And remember the incantations," he found himself babbling hurriedly. "It shouldn't take long."

She trembled under his hands and looked at him with desperate fear. Her lips quivered with tightly constrained sobs. He longed to kiss them away, but he didn't dare. Instead he gripped her face in his hands.

"Come back to me," he said in a whispered yet forceful voice.

She nodded, her beautiful face shockingly pale and haunted looking. Snape tore himself from her and forced himself to walk calmly from the orphanage. He didn't Apparate directly to Grimmauld Place. Instead he took himself to the jagged cliffs near Payne Hollow and screamed into the raging wind until his voice was nearly gone.

Silence met him back at Order headquarters, though everyone seemed to be present. No one wished to speak. Instead they all paced about the house in respectfully claimed spaces. Every once in a while someone would ask how long it had been. Someone would answer.

Snape wished to soak every fiber of his body with alcohol or something stronger but didn't want to turn into a stumbling drunk in front of everyone. Besides, he might need his sharp wits yet that night. A thud on the porch sometime after midnight brought them all into the foyer. Without even doing the usual precautionary checks, Potter wrenched the door open to have Davindra stumble in and fall into him. Snape immediately reached for her but somehow found Lupin there first.

They guided her into the sitting room and put her on a small settee. She sat on her own but still looked pale with shock, her eyes dilated to fathomless black pools edged in murky green. Snape hung back and let Lupin continue with her. He was caught between the astonishment of her being alive and the cold dread of hearing what she had to go through. It froze him in his spot and made him unable to even approach her and express his relief and fear. Everyone situated themselves in the room to hear the tale, Potter, Weasley, Granger, Tonks, and Moody. Snape wanted to scream at them to get out and stop staring as though she were the evening's entertainment.

"Davindra," Lupin asked in a firm, but kind voice. "What happened?"

It took a while, but eventually her eyes seemed to slowly focus on the man before her.

"Davindra, what happened?" he asked again. "Are you alright?"

She nodded slowly. "He kept me waiting, but he finally came," she began in a very soft, slow voice. "He told me to remove my..." She seemed pained to speak the intimate words. "...my under things and lie down. I did what he said. And I tried so hard to keep my mind clear and open. I couldn't see what he was doing. I was just staring at the ceiling. He took so long. I began to think he forgot about me. But then he came to me and held his wand over me and said some incantations. I don't know what it was, but I felt warm inside. I was too scared to move so I just lay there. I tried to think of the protective incantations, but I couldn't remember the words at first."

Davindra stopped talking and seemed to drift off into her own head.

"What happened next?" Lupin prodded.

Snape moved closer in order to hear what was surely the worst part. His hands clinched and unclenched behind his back.

A vague, funny smile began at her mouth. "I just kept waiting," she started again. "Finally, I could feel something going on, but it wasn't right." A little laugh escaped her. "He couldn't... you know... it wasn't... hard. And he kept muttering things and trying again and it wasn't working." She started to laugh more. "And I kept thinking, 'this is ridiculous.' And I must have laughed or something."

"Oh, God, Davindra, you didn't," Lupin moaned, letting his head fall into his hand.

Snape hissed out a sharp breath. No man liked to be mocked for his inadequacies, especially in the bedroom. He imagined the Dark Lord liked it no less. Snape also cursed himself for not anticipating the mix of aconite and valerian could cause a problem.

Almost unable to speak through her growing laughter she said, "I didn't mean to, I think I was just relieved. But then he got really angry." Now nearly hysterical and breathless she was almost doubled over.

"What did he do?" Lupin demanded. "Davindra! What did he do?"

Struggling to take in enough breath to speak, she finally spat out, "Cru... Cru... Crucio. Th... Then he suddenly was hard as a rock and... and..." Tears were running down her red face as she could no longer speak through the loud screams of laughter.

Snape strode forward and slapped Davindra with strength powered by rage and disgust. The loud smack stunned her into sudden silence in which she looked at him with wide eyes. Everyone in the room seemed to flinch then hold their breath. Finally she wilted into real tears and sobs.

"Leave us. Everyone," Snape commanded in a bitter voice still ragged from his cliff top fury.

The group seemed eager to escape the uncomfortable scene and began moving out with no further request. Snape sat next to Davindra and took her into his arms. She grabbed on to him like a drowning person struggling to stay afloat and cried loudly against his coat.

Potter closed the door behind him as he left, but not before he took a long look at Snape, as though trying to catch another glimpse of Snape's normally hidden emotions. When the sound of the latch catching was heard, Snape began to stroke her hair and murmur some vague words of comfort.

"It's over now. You're back here with me. You don't have to worry anymore," he crooned in a low voice. "You'll take the contraceptive potion and you won't have to think about it again."

"I'll never s-s-stop th-thinking about it," she sobbed in a muffled voice against his shoulder. "His eyes as he looked at me. Oh, it was awful, Severus."

Before he could comment further, the Dark Mark on his arm screamed its calling with a searing pain. Snape couldn't keep from flinching.

"I have to go now," he said calmly.

Davindra looked at him with horror. "No! No, don't go! He'll kill you. It's because of me." She clung to him even tighter.

It took a fair amount of strength to pry her arms from around him. "He will kill me if I don't go. It could be that he only wants to confer about the potions," he lied. They both knew the chances of Snape being called to answer the Dark Lord's rage were high.

Still she tried to reach for him, to stop him from going. "Please, don't leave me again," she pleaded and cried harder.

It tore him to shreds to see her beg, her hand stretched out like a lost child seeking comfort. He took the hand in his and held it to his heart.

"I'll be back as soon as I can. In the meantime you have to rest and take your potions. It's imperative that you follow my orders." His words were firm and commanding and deceptive of his true, panicked emotions.

Quickly he turned and walked from the room, easing his torment by not looking back despite the urge within him.

Outside the door he bellowed for Lupin, who came quickly down the hall from the kitchen.

"I've been summoned," Snape stated as he drew on his cloak. "Make sure she gets her potions and make sure she rests. She's still very traumatized. You should probably put a Dreamless Sleep down her too."

"She won't rest as long as you're not here," Lupin said, his eyes darting to the closed door.

"Then double the draught," he snapped. "Just keep her calm. I'll be back as soon as I'm able. If I don't come back, get her out of here and somewhere safe."

Lupin's hand on his arm stopped Snape's exit.

"Make sure you come back. I don't think any of us are prepared to deal with the consequences if you don't." The werewolf's gaze was a steady bead meant to imply many things.

A brief smirk tipped the corner of Snape's mouth, and he gave a very slight nod of acknowledgement.

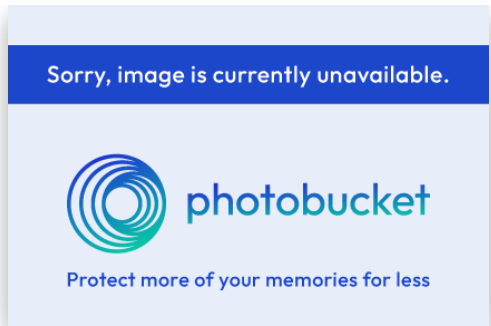
"I can handle everyone else's sentiments but yours, Lupin," he replied. "And you'll do what you have to if the situation demands. You are nothing if not predictably noble."

He left the relatively safe confines of Grimmauld Place and flung himself into the night to answer his master's call.

Heaven Bend to Take My Hand

Chapter 21 of 21

FINAL CHAPTER: The final battle awaits. What will the future bring? Will victory mean happiness or bitter misery for Snape and Davindra.



Heaven Bend to Take My Hand

If it takes a whole life, I won't break, I won't bend

It'll all be worth it, worth it in the end

Cause I can only tell you what I know

That I need you in my life

And when the stars have all burned out

You'll still be burning so bright

Cast me gently into morning for the night has been unkind

Answer -- Sarah McLachlan

"You've got to do something, Snape," a breathless, frightened looking Death Eater said as soon as Snape came through the doors of the orphanage. "He's gone mad, he has."

Snape's gut clenched, but he charged on. It was like running to the gallows. If the Dark Lord was angry, it would surely be Snape he would be looking to take it out on.

The screeching wails reached his ears long before he came to the doors of the wizard's chambers. He entered without knocking and was met with the sight of the Dark Lord crumpled into a heap on the ground, screaming like a wounded animal and clawing at his head.

"My lord!" Snape gasped as he too went to his knees. "What's happened? Are you hurt?"

Turning his red, burning eyes to Snape, the Dark Lord bared his fang-like teeth.

"YOU!" he snarled. "What did you do? What is happening?"

Instinctively, Snape slid back from him. "My lord, if something went wrong during the coupling..." he began.

"It was the potions!" he roared. "What did you put in the potions!"

"I followed your instructions exactly, my lord," Snape insisted, trying with all his might to keep his conscience guilt free and his mind subservient. "Even when I questioned the ingredients and procedures, I did just as you directed me."

The piercing eyes held him, scanning him for deception. "I think you lie, Severus. I think you and that damnable whore lied and conspired against Lord Voldemort!"

"No, my lord, how could we?" he pleaded. There was no effort in sounding appropriately terrified because he was.

"I've allowed you far too much. I should have never trusted you again after my return." There was a ferocious threat in the wizard's face, though he was still hunched over like a dying bug. "I know too little about your clever mind, my *faithful* servant. There are things you hide from your master."

"I hide nothing, my lord," Snape insisted. "Anything you wish to know or see is yours."

Snape felt a weak attempt to enter his mind from the dark wizard. But hardly had his carefully controlled thoughts been touched when the pilfering retreated. The Dark Lord groaned from the drain of energy the magic expended.

"My lord, there was a combination of several ingredients that I feared would have a negative effect on your powers," Snape began cautiously. "It is reasonable to assume that this handicap is only temporary and in time your powers will return at full force. And of course this was all in effort to gain the ultimate power of immortality. That is surely worth the risk."

"I know why this was done and the risks involved!" he snapped in reply. "But I recall no errors in my original plans."

"This magic was untested, my lord," Snape reminded. "In theory it may have seemed perfect, but that is never a substitute for execution. I remind my students all the time..."

"I AM NOT ONE OF YOUR STUDENTS!" raged the Dark Lord. "And you are no longer a teacher! Do not question me, and do not lecture the most powerful wizard of the age about rudimentary potion making."

"I'm sorry, my lord," Snape murmured, backing away farther.

"You will fix this," hissed the man as he began to uncoil himself and sit straighter. "You will be on a very tight, very short leash, and you will do exactly as you are told. If my powers do not return to full strength very soon, you will be punished beyond recognition."

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As Snape hurried from the orphanage, he found two mongrel Death Eaters, Runyon and Koontz, at his heels. He whipped about to face them. They remained in place, staring him down.

"The Dark Lord said you needed... assistance," Runyon said in an oily tone.

Snape glared at the retreating man and then at the door that slammed after him. If he thought he could, he'd take Davindra and leave that house right then. Let them fight their precious, holy battle themselves. Sickeningly enough though, he knew even his hard, stubborn conscience wouldn't allow him to abandon the cause.

For now they would wait. They would give Potter a few days while they made their plans. But the end was coming soon. Snape knew he should at least begin the pretense of making the healing potion for the Dark Lord, but his feet would not carry him to the cellar work-room. Instead he climbed the stairs and wrapped himself around Davindra's peacefully resting body and fell asleep with his nose buried in her soft, warm hair.

The next day was the beginning of the end, Snape surmised as he started his day in the cellar. Davindra had taken the potion that would purge her body of any possibility of conception. She spent the day curled into a ball, fighting vicious cramps and heavy bleeding. But she did it silently and without complaint. Her tears seemed to have run dry, but her mood was no less depressed. He found it hard to even look at her. When she asked if the plan had worked, if the Dark Lord was truly weakened, Snape found he took little pleasure in telling her 'yes.' Likewise, she looked no less relieved.

Though he tried to force his mind to the work in front of him, all he could do was wonder how badly he had permanently damaged her. Something was gone from those imperturbable, pale eyes that had always before burned like ice on fire. Would she never be the same? Would she ever forgive him? Could he ever justify it within himself? No matter if the Dark Lord fell or if they all were sentenced to wither under his oppressive, tyrannical rule, could they live with what they were forced to become? What was truly worth sacrificing? He gave up, his mind too full of unanswerable, philosophical, emotional questions. Maybe Davindra did have the right idea. Maybe a dive from several stories up would be the best answer for them both in the end.

Back upstairs, he sat stiffly on the bed. She lay next to him, her fingers laced through his. Every time another wave of cramps would attack, she would bear down on his hand, digging her nails into his flesh. He didn't utter a word. He deserved much more than this minor share of the pain.

Davindra let out a breath she had been holding, and her grip eased. She looked up at him.

"I know you're sitting there hating yourself. I want you to stop it."

"Who would you suggest as a more fitting target?" he asked.

Pulling herself up, she sat against him, leaning on his shoulder. "At this point I don't know if being angry is even of any use."

Snape looked at her finally. Her eyes were clearer, but the haunted look had yet to totally leave her. He pulled his arm free and put it around her, nestling her against his chest. It was such a familiar, comfortable thing to do.

"What do you see happening after this is all over?" she asked.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean you, us. Say the war ends tomorrow. Then what?"

A snort of ironic amusement left him. "I've hardly given it any thought." His brain was too enmeshed in trying to figure out how to get through the task at hand. Mostly he hadn't been so bold as to assume that he'd live to see the end of the war.

"I've needed to think about something," she continued. "I need to have a reason to try to make it through. There's still going to be a world out there after this is all over, and I still have to figure out where I'm going to be in it."

She moved her head to look up at him. "Let's just say that the Dark Lord is defeated. We can go about our lives however we wish. What would you like? What do you want?"

Snape sighed. "I don't waste my time with daydreams."

An exasperated sound rose from her, and she sat up straight next to him. "Damn it, Severus, why do you have to be so obtuse?" she said angrily.

"Obtuse?" His eyebrows nearly met his hairline.

"Why do I have to do all the work in this relationship?" Davindra threw her hands into the air in frustration. Then a cramp caused her to wince and clutch her abdomen. Snape reached out to ease her back down on the bed, but she shoved his hand away.

"What are you on about now?" Snape asked impatiently.

Still biting her lip to get through the pain, she raised her pale eyes to him, and when she spoke, her voice was barely more affable than a snarl.

"When this is all over, you had better marry me, Severus Snape."

He wondered exactly what expression he made when his mind affirmed what his ears had heard.

"Marry you?" he finally sputtered in disbelief. The look on her face told him he shouldn't dare laugh or mock the command he had just been issued. She had had to suffer enough abuse already.

Though he could hardly imagine a day of his life without her, the last thing he had ever considered was uniting them eternally as man and wife. There were simply too many impediments on that particular path.

"Davindra," he began with as much sympathy as he could summon. "I'm nearly twenty years older than you."

She shook her head. "I don't care and that hasn't stopped us yet."

Snape looked for his next objection, but each one could be easily deflated by her, he was certain.

"Under the best circumstances, my reputation will never be viewed as honorable," he attempted. "I'm not even sure how I would support myself, much less a wife or a... his eyes darted to her stomach, which she still held tenderly, and he swallowed hard. "...family. I simply don't have anything to offer you. I've never even considered myself a marrying man."

She gave him a look that simmered between stubborn child and determined woman. "Do I need to recount everything I have sacrificed? Everything you've ever asked of me, I've done." There was a fierce threat in her voice. "This is the only thing I want. The only thing I've ever wanted. After it is all over, I deserve at least this."

She certainly knew how to dismantle his defense. How could he put his pledge as an eternal bachelor against her argument? Actually, she deserved far more for her sacrifices than a lifelong commitment to a ruined Potions teacher and professed murderer. But there would be no persuading her otherwise at this point.

"There is still a long way to go yet," Snape started with great caution and calm. "No one can yet foresee what or when the end of this war will be. We have no way of knowing what the future will bring. I think this is a topic best put aside for now. We'll discuss it later when things are less uncertain."

Davindra gave him a frown, but another cramp caused her to redirect her energy. Gritting her teeth, she said, "Maybe you'll get lucky and someone will hit you with a Killing Curse before then."

He had to smirk at her sarcasm even during such an emotionally and physically painful time. A glimmer of hope that a bit of the old Davindra could once again emerge soothed him. Reaching out, he pulled her to him, and she reluctantly settled against his chest.

"One can only hope," Snape replied coolly. "Though that does remind me that I should probably sleep with one eye open around you."

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After two days there was still no word from Potter or his friends. Snape was summoned back to the Dark Lord, and with him he took a weak formula he would hope to pass off as a strengthening potion. The Dark Lord looked better than Snape had hoped. It appeared that he had regained some of his strength on his own. He took the potion from Snape, but with a suspicious eye. He didn't consume the draught, but set it aside.

"So, the boy is at Hogwarts," the Dark Lord said smoothly with a thin smile.

"Is he, my lord?" Snape asked with mild interest.

Runyon and Koontz stood off to the side, having come in with Snape. Still Imperiused, they would cause him no problems. The Dark Lord paid them no attention.

"Why do you not know this?" the wizard hissed at Snape.

"I have done only as you've told me, my lord," he answered serenely. "I have worked on strengthening potions for you and kept an eye on the Vessel's progress. I haven't left my home."

"And is she with child?"

"It's only been a few days, my lord. I cannot tell as of yet."

Barely a grunt was returned from the master. "If she fails to conceive, kill her," he muttered airily. "Lord Voldemort can find another."

"But I thought she was special," Snape said, concealing his bewilderment and anxiety. "I thought she was selected from birth specifically for this purpose."

"Any pureblood witch would do," the Dark Lord replied, adjusting himself in the worn chair he occupied as though it were a fine throne. "She was no more special than Madame Collins made her to be. We see that now. A more willing participant might be a better selection anyway. If this girl does not produce an heir, she is of no use. She's a detriment. Get rid of her."

Snape's stomach dropped, but he bowed respectfully and replied appropriately. Though he would kill himself before he'd raise his wand at her.

Rising from his shabby throne, the Dark Lord walked the room, but slowly and carefully, as though his steps had to be planned.

"Now there is something more important. Potter is at Lord Voldemort's disposal. He waits at our old alma mater and we know he waits for me." The skeletal wizard spoke maniacally as he moved about the room. "We'll dispatch him, and the rest of civilization will crumple at my feet. When The Boy Who Lived dies, so too will their pitiful hope. When we have total subjugation, we can then recreate my immortality."

"But my lord, your Horcruxes are destroyed," Snape probed carefully. "Do you not have concern for your life? You're vulnerable."

"Lord Voldemort is not an ordinary wizard!" shouted the Dark Lord as he spun about to Snape. "And Lord Voldemort is not a boy running about the countryside playing a dangerous game of hide and seek! You dare question my powers for bringing down a paltry group of children?"

"Of course not. I mean no disrespect," Snape attempted to soothe. "I simply am concerned for the timing of this conquest. Would it not be better executed when you were stronger?"

"And wait for the resistance to grow? And wait for those children to organize themselves into something of an army?" The wizard again began to look crazed and ill. He wobbled back to his chair and sat. "We do this now, tomorrow. Lord Voldemort grows tired waiting for success to be delivered. I will capture it myself."

Snape left the orphanage. Runyon and Koontz followed. Walking away from the orphanage, the two had to jog to keep up.

Snape turned down an alley, and the two trailed like obedient, curious dogs. But as they rounded the corner, they faced Snape's raised wand and a Killing Curse. He transfigured them into bones and tossed them into nearby rubbish bins.

If it was war the Dark Lord was seeking, let it begin now, Snape decided.

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The small group of Order of the Phoenix members heard Snape's report and went to pass it on to others. Tomorrow they would gather at Hogwarts to defend Harry, the school, and everything they held sacred. It gave them only a few hours to prepare and say good-bye to loved ones.

Davindra sat in the back of the kitchen listening, but not saying a word. After the meeting adjourned, she retreated back upstairs.

When Snape had finished all of his arrangements, he followed her. She was again standing by the window, but this time only looking out, an intense, fierce look upon her face.

"I'm going," she announced to him.

"You're not," he answered as he closed the door and took off his cloak.

"Yes."

"NO."

"You can't stop me."

"Can't I?" Snape gave her a threatening glare.

She was undaunted as usual by his threats. "You can't ask me to watch you go out that door and just sit here and wait to see if you return!"

Approaching him with her arms crossed, she looked so much like the obstinate girl he had argued with so many times in his dungeon office over grades, opinions, and most of all, their relationship.

"That is exactly what you will do because I will forbid you to go out there and risk your life for this hopeless cause," he snapped.

"If it's so hopeless and there is no chance for any of us, then let me at least be with you. That's where I'd want to spend my final moments anyway."

He snorted sardonically. "More of your hopeless romantic hyperbole."

She glared at him, then attempted to storm past him out of the room. But he caught her arm as she passed him and held her there.

"This isn't how I wanted to spend this evening," he said quietly. "I don't want to argue, I just want..."

There was a flicker of panic deep in her eyes as she regarded him. It gave Snape a fleeting glance of her worst fears. The one thing about them that always worked was now tainted. The same sickening guilt that had plagued Snape ever since she had come home from the Dark Lord's ravages engulfed him stronger than ever.

Taking out his wand, he pointed it at her, and her eyes widened in concern.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her breath obviously held.

"Something I should have done days ago if I hadn't been such a coward. *Obliviate*."

Like a pencil erasing lines from a paper, the events of the past few days were smeared and smudged away. Not gone completely, but faint enough that she would not be tormented by vivid memories every time a man touched her. So too were the memories of wanting to throw herself out a window, vicious cramps and blood, and the discussion of marriage. One couldn't pick and chose what would be wiped out with the *Obliviate* spell. It was all or nothing.

Davindra's face and body relaxed. Her eyes seemed dreamy and unfocused for a moment. Finally she fixed her gaze on him, and as if having just woken from a deep sleep she asked, "What happened?"

"You'll be fine," he assured her, pulling her to the bed. "Just rest a while."

She obeyed and laid down, but then raised herself up again. "What day is it?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter," he replied as he unbuttoned his coat.

Stroking her forehead, she quietly asked, "What did you do? Why is it all so fuzzy?"

Snape sat next to her on the bed. "It's better this way."

Reaching out, he gently swept her dark bangs from her eyes. His fingers brushed against her brows and down her cheek.

A soft smile touched her lips and she lightly stroked his arm. At last the icy, jade eyes melted into warm, familiar pools that welcomed the sight of him.

She was right, he realized. If there was no hope and this were the last night of the world, there wouldn't be anyplace else he'd rather be. There was no other person he would rather spend his last living moments with.

When she pulled him against her and guided his lips to hers, the world could have ended and Snape wouldn't have cared. As in the early days of their affair, they took time to peel each other from their clothing and experience every inch of flesh bared to them. Caresses and kisses went from slow and luxurious to deep and forceful as their passion heightened.

Buried deep inside her and rocking against her soft, warm body, Snape realized he was actually very scared. He was terrified. This made him want to live. She made him want to fight not for freedom or for honor, but just for the chance to come home and see her face and know that this bliss awaited him.

Their hands wound together and Snape kissed her fingers. She let go and threaded them through his hair. Her moans reverberated through his chest, sending tingles down his stomach. Every sensation was amplified and exquisite. Would it be their last? Would this moment sustain him through brutal battle and even death? Or would he live to put a ring on the hand that trailed down his back, pulling him into her further?

At last their quaking, sweating bodies collapsed together in a breathless heap. And as Snape's heart began to slow and his mind began to once again gather the worries around him, he couldn't help but hold her tighter.

"You're leaving again, aren't you?" she asked, her lips against his forehead.

"Yes," he answered dully.

"Promise me you'll come back." She squeezed him hard enough to catch his breath.

"It will be my greatest ambition."

She whispered her love for him over and over until they both fell asleep, wrapped tightly around each other.

It was still dark when a wild pounding at the door sent him scrambling out of bed and reaching for his wand before his eyes were even open.

"Snape! Get up! There's been a message!" a voiced called. "We're leaving as soon as everyone is assembled."

"I'll be down directly," he replied. But instead of speedily dressing, he sat back on the bed, his head in his hands. Seconds ago he had been secure and happy in his ignorant slumber, Davindra's silky, warm body draped over his. Now the cold, brutal world was calling him out. There was no going back.

Davindra's hands stroked his back, and then her cheek came to his shoulder.

"Let me go with you," she said.

"No." His head snapped up and he stood to dress.

"I can't bear it if something happens to you," she said as she watched him gather his clothes. "I can't sit here in this horrible house waiting to hear the outcome."

"No, Davindra," he said more firmly.

"I'm brave. I'm a good fighter," she insisted, now getting out of bed herself. "I can handle a wand better than Hermione Granger or Ron Weasley."

"That I have no doubt of," he said, pulling on his boots. "But the fact of the matter is: I don't want you there! Do you think I will be able to do my job when all I can do is wonder if you're lying dead somewhere or, worse, captured by Death Eaters?"

"This is unfair, Severus," she said. "It's cruel."

Snape stood and went to her, taking her beautiful face in his hands. He pushed a few wild strands of black hair away.

"If you truly love me as you say, then you will do this for me."

Downstairs, there was a brief meeting. A stag Patronus had arrived to announce that members of the Dark Army had already infiltrated the school. There were more than the ill-equipped teachers and students could fend off. There was talk that the Dark Lord was on the grounds and awaiting his moment to strike.

Order members came and went through the door of Grimmauld Place without caution. Hurried, last-minute orders were shouted left and right.

Davindra was dressed and standing helplessly as she watched everyone assemble themselves. Mostly she watched Snape. Her eyes hungrily took him in as he spoke with various groups. It took all of his concentration to not allow her pleading looks to take him away from the tasks that the Order depended upon.

One by one, they left the house and Disappeared on the street. A few were remaining behind, mostly those too young or too old to fight. Then there was Davindra and Mrs. Weasley, who had both been given orders to stay behind by the men they loved.

Snape was about to leave. He thought once of just walking out the door and not looking back. But a choked sob stopped him, fixing his feet to the floor. The whispered cry of his name made him turn.

There had been many times that Snape had had to look at that shattered expression on Davindra's face. The one that told of her heart breaking and her dreams being crumpled. And almost every time it was because of him. Once again he was leaving her with pain and misery. This time he wasn't even sure he would be coming back to attempt to make amends. Why did she love him when all he did was abuse her affections?

For once he was glad that she did. He was glad that someone had stood next to him and devoted themselves to him despite his wretched moods and temper. He was glad that someone had bothered to know him enough to see that he needed to be loved. And he was glad that she was there, on the eve of his destruction, with tears in her eyes and her heart breaking because she loved him.

Snape strode forward and grabbed her, crushing her body against his in a fierce grip. Resting his mouth near her ear, he spoke in slow, deliberate words which only she would hear.

"I'll only say this once, so remember it forever. I love you with all my body and soul, with every fiber of my being, and above all others including myself."

He felt her body convulse with silent sobs and her arms squeeze him powerfully in return. With great effort he pulled himself from her. Her hands were reluctant to let go, so he had to forcefully pry them from his cloak. But he would look at her no more. Snape turned without another glance and nearly ran out the door. More fearful than the battle ahead was the possibility that she might see the tears he thought were forever dry were threatening a return.

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The battlefield was frenzied anarchy. Acidic smoke of burned stone and flesh filled the air. His body ached and stung from the blows of innumerable curses. Screams and yells came from everywhere. Another hex came inches from his face. A familiar cackle arose from the din. She looked no better than him, but her eyes were wild with blood lust. "Filthy traitor," she screeched. "I have you now!"

He raised his wand. 'Davindra...' A vivid green light filled him. 'Davindra...' It was almost like drowning in her eyes. 'I'm sorry...'

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The hours ticked by minute by long, painful minute. Davindra and several other minor Order members sat around the kitchen table awaiting news. Mrs. Weasley put pot after pot of tea on the table that no one could drink. An elderly wizard paced in front of the fire. A few younger children silently passed in and out of the kitchen, never settling anywhere for long.

A sudden, cold sensation spread through Davindra's body as she sat with an equally cold cup of tea in her hands. She shivered and looked about to see if anyone else had felt it. Everyone sat as they were. Davindra couldn't breathe. Something had happened. Something was wrong.

She got up to leave. She could join the battle. But they stopped her. Mrs. Weasley reminded her of Severus's words.

"But what if he needs me?" she asked, panicked hysteria threatening to drive her insane.

"There's nothing you can do that the Order members can't," the kind woman soothed. "He'll need you here when he comes back."

Davindra sat back down with a heavy sensation of dread and grief pressing upon her heart.

Finally, a weasel Patronus snaked its way in to announce that the Dark Lord had fallen. The Weasley family members in battle were accounted for, but so many others had fallen. They were to prepare for wounded and dead.

"But who?" Davindra asked the fading specter. "Who died?"

Mrs. Weasley began to cry. "Oh, Harry," she sobbed.

Why was she crying, Davindra wondered? They had anticipated Harry's death. If the Dark Lord fell, then it was because Harry had sacrificed himself. But what of Severus?

The first person through the door was a young man Davindra recognized as a student from Hogwarts. He had little information except the Dark Lord was dead and his living followers were being rounded up for Azkaban.

The next group gave the shocking information that Harry Potter himself had overcome the pronouncement of death and actually lived after striking down the evil wizard who shared his soul. There was such amazement and relief in Grimmauld Place that for a second even Davindra had to feel grateful for the victory.

"But what of Severus?" she still asked.

They didn't know.

Fred and George came in, dragging their father with them. They had seen Severus fighting Death Eaters but didn't know what had become of him. Talk quickly turned to the defeat and Harry's miraculous survival. Mrs. Weasley cried more, but this time tears of joy at seeing her family.

More came and went. Only tiny bits of news followed. When Mundungus Fletcher hobbled in, Davindra grabbed him.

"Where is Severus?" she demanded. "No one will tell me. Where is he?"

The dirty, ragged man looked at her nervously. "Las' I saw he was still out there," he muttered.

Lupin entered behind him and gave the man under her interrogation a look of warning. Davindra turned her focus to the werewolf.

"You know!" she pronounced. "Tell me! Is he alive? Is he dead? Where is he?"

Lupin started to speak but seemed unable to find the words. Instead he just sadly shook his head and looked at her with tragic, watery eyes.

"Where is he? WHERE IS HE?" Davindra screamed and clutched Lupin's jacket, shaking him with all the strength she possessed.

Still that piteous, sorrowful look didn't flicker from his face, and he could only shake his head in silent apology.

Something in her had whispered that dreadful news hours before. But she had insisted upon ignoring it because it was too horrible to imagine. Now it seemed impossible to

Harry had taken her into the kitchen and sat her at the table. He pushed a cup of beef broth into her hands and sat across from her, encouraging her to take another sip every few moments, which she did automatically. It was nice having someone else tell her what to do, for she didn't believe that she had the capacity to instruct herself in even the most basic tasks.

When her throat began to feel soothed and her stomach growled in appreciation of food, Davindra looked at Harry and actually saw him for the first time in days. He looked gaunt and sad. His injuries were healed and even the scar on his forehead seemed more faint. But he seemed more wounded than ever before.

She asked him to tell her what happened. It was obvious he didn't want to. Perhaps it was too soon to speak of it all, but she had to know. She insisted that she had to know. It wasn't fair. He had been there, he had perhaps even seen Severus's last moments. She needed to know something about it.

Slowly, Harry reconstructed the scene of the final battle at Hogwarts. Briefly, he talked about the students and teachers who had shown to make their stand. There was chaos, destruction, and death everywhere. So much so that Harry couldn't keep track of it all. He saw friends fall and was never sure if they were dead or just injured. Some he was still unsure about.

Snape had come in under the guise of helping the Death Eaters, even at the risk of attack by those he supported. Subversively he was able to take down many of the most dangerous before it was discovered what he was doing. Voldemort himself screamed of Snape's demise when he realized he had been fooled for years.

Harry had been surrounded by Death Eaters, he could hold them off no more, when Snape broke in. He hexed and detained the mob long enough to pull Harry free and drag him toward Voldemort. Some might have thought Snape was taking the boy to his death, presenting him to Snape's dark master. But he and Snape both knew Harry was the only one to finish the job. The battle would never be over until the twin souls faced each other.

He wasn't sure how, but Harry knew Bellatrix Lestrange had delivered the killing blow soon after. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen him fall. But Voldemort had called his attention and Harry knew that he couldn't give precious seconds over to thinking of the guilt and sorrow he felt. It wasn't until the battle was over that he allowed himself that.

"Bellatrix Lestrange, you say?" Davindra asked after Harry finished. There was renewed strength with a bitter undertone in her voice as she pronounced the name.

"You needn't worry about her," Harry replied. "I found her. I used Sectumsempra just enough to make her unrecognizable but not enough to kill her." There was a vicious, cold darkness in Harry's eyes as he described his vengeance. "I let Neville have that honor."

Davindra nodded once her approval. It would save her the task of hunting the witch down and doing the job herself.

For a while they sat in silence, contemplating their long, empty lives which stretched out before them.

"You know, you don't have to make any decisions about anything for a while," Harry offered. "You can stay as long as you like here. I know it's going to be very hard for you."

Davindra didn't say anything. She didn't know what to say. For the time being, she didn't think she could move from her seat much less contemplate where to live or what to do next.

"The thing I always hated, after Sirius died, was people telling me they understood how I felt," he continued. "That made me so mad. How could anyone understand? But now that I see you, I think I have to say that I can at least sympathize with what you are going through. Losing someone hurts."

Vaguely, she did appreciate his sympathy, but she too felt offense at someone daring to assume her emotions were typical. To her they were the most unique and complex thing she had ever felt. And they were about to destroy her.

"What I don't understand is how do I do it?" she asked softly. "How do I wake up every day and go about living when he was what I lived for? What do I think of now when he was my first thought every morning and my last thought every night? How do you exist when something so vital is gone?"

Harry was quiet for a while. He stared down into his cup, then slowly shook his head. "I don't know how to answer that. But you've got to do it somehow. What would he say if he knew that you just gave up? He might have said he did all this to save the world or because Dumbledore wanted him to. But I think he did it because of you. I don't know if he would have even cared that Voldemort was destroying everything and everyone in sight if it wasn't for you. You made him care. Do you want it to be that he died for nothing?"

"But he should have lived!" she exclaimed, tears threatening a return. "That's what I can't get over. He should have lived. Everyone thought it would be you. But it was him!"

The look on Harry's face stopped her from saying any more. She didn't mean the words to be as harsh as they had sounded. She didn't really wish Harry dead. Davindra put her face into her hands so she wouldn't have to see the stricken expression he tried to hide by nodding and looking sympathetic to her outburst.

After another round of silence he spoke again.

"Tell me something about him. Something I don't know. Something most people don't know."

Davindra raised her face from her hands and wiped her wet nose. The request seemed too painful to comply with. It would cause her to search her mind for precious details that would only remind her that he was gone. Also her brain felt so foggy and dull, she wasn't sure she could construct any clear descriptions of the man she knew as well as she knew herself. She sighed and ran her hand over her face, pressing her cold fingers against her eyes, feeling her pulse pound behind them, reiterating the annoying fact that she still lived, even without him.

"He never slept well. He had horrible nightmares all the time." A single memory emerged from the fog. "In fact, he feared sleeping. It was that bad."

Davindra looked up to find Harry's vivid green eyes gazing at her encouragingly. Once again she waited for another thought to solidify.

"He drank too much and took too many potions to try to combat it."

She paused to think and decided maybe it wasn't as hard as she feared. It was more like seeing old, long-lost friends.

"His childhood was terrible."

"I knew that," Harry replied softly.

Davindra nodded and thought some more.

"Do you know why his hair always looked so awful? It's because he washed it with this rough, bar soap that he said protected his skin from all the elements he worked with in the dungeon."

Harry's eyebrows raised slightly at that bit of information and a slight smile touched his lips. Davindra allowed herself a very slight quiver of a smile when she remembered trying to get him to use actual shampoo and his annoyance at her desire to intrude upon his long established routine.

"Every Sunday morning he would sit in his night shirt and slippers and do the Sunday Prophet Deluxe Crisscross Word Puzzle in ink." She could see him so clearly right then.

"When he graded papers he chewed his lip. I once caught him dissecting a Weasley Wildfire Whiz-Bang to see how it worked. When he did sleep he snored terribly but

always swore he didn't. And even if he was annoyed with me, he's still let me kiss him goodbye. He said he loved me only once. But I'll remember it forever. He told me to."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

15 Years Later

She had gotten up early so she could have some precious quiet time to drink her tea and look at the *Daily Prophet* before submerging herself in the deluge of noise and pandemonium. But soon she realized there was no use putting it off any longer, and she began to dress.

The dungeon living quarters were chilled after the cool night, and she moved quickly to cover herself in the traditional robes she always wore for teaching. As she completed her usual morning habits, she could feel a stare upon her. Though she didn't look in its direction, she smiled at the familiar sensation. At last she pinned a garnet red brooch with inlaid crown at her throat and surveyed her appearance.

Reflected in the mirror was the portrait of a dark man who also watched her image. His eyebrow minutely raised when their eyes connected in the glass. The last item of her traditional ensemble was a long, worn, black cloak.

As she headed for the door a silken voice uttered, "Give them hell, Madame."

Giving a knowing glance to the portrait she replied, "Don't I always?"

After ten years, the first day of classes was always the same. First years sat in wide-eyed wonder and horror at everything that was delivered to them. They were so fun to toy with. She understood now why Severus had sometimes been such a terror. It relieved some of the tedious boredom.

Davindra swept into the dungeon classroom, walking smoothly but with a quick pace. When she turned to face the class, the black cloak swirled about her body in an elegant caress. She regarded the young group with a slight smile. They looked back with a mixture of trepidation and curiosity.

"Good morning and welcome to your first lesson in Potions. I am Madame Collins. Here you will learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making. I don't expect many of you to truly understand the beauty in a softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes or the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the sense..."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*The End~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Author's note: I'm sure there are going to be many people who aren't happy with the ending of this story. Let me quote the immortal Bugs Bunny: "What did you expect in an opera, a happy ending?" Could anyone really logically expect Snape to come to a happy ending? He himself said in chapter 19 of this story, "Happiness has never been my objective nor my destiny." What he wished for most was peace. I hope there is some comfort in the fact that he at least attained that.

This was a very hard chapter to write. The hardest of them all. I had intended for it to be done before the start of 2008, but I just couldn't get myself to do it. I found myself avoiding it. I think I didn't want to face the end, not Snape's end, nor Davindra's, nor the fantasy that I created for myself. Also some of the hardest scenes I had created came in this last chapter. Don't think I didn't shed my own tears over them! But NOT writing the story didn't seem make the ending any less true. I found I still thought of the final events as real and inevitable, even if they weren't typed onto a page. (I think I see a little how JKR must have felt!) So I realized I must deal with it head on and finish what I started nearly two years ago.

This has been an amazing learning experience for me as a writer. I have grown and improved by leaps and bounds. I may still not be able to use a comma right all the time, but I think I found my "voice" and my style. And I'm terribly proud of this little thing I've accomplished. I MUST thank my beta, Logical Quirk, who took me on when I was certain no one would (and I have a list of about 15 who wouldn't!!!) and was also so kind and encouraging. Also an immense amount of praise must be bestowed upon Southern Witch 69, who took me under her wing and used so much patience in helping me create a better product. Those are two amazing and wonderful ladies I just couldn't do without. Also I have to say thank you to my small group of loyal fans. Your encouragements really kept me going. Special thanks to Carolyn and Ginny for their friendship and enthusiasm through it all. I also must thank Ginny for her special beta services in time of need! And I must thank my "muse," Sarah McLachlan, for creating such beautiful musical poetry that inspired the mood of much of my writing and even the chapter titles. Maybe some day I'll get the chance to tell her that myself.

To everyone who's come with me on this journey, I thank you and appreciate your company. I'm sure I have another adventure in me trying to work its way out. I hope you'll join me again.