

Private Lessons

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1: A Bitter Man

Chapter 1 of 18

50 years after HBP, Severus Snape has completed his sentence in Azkaban. Now the truth must be told...

The headmistress peered over the frames of her spectacles in silence for some time. When she spoke, her voice was neutral and precise, clearly in defiance of her monumental outrage.

"As I know you to be humorless, I will assume this is no joke."

The man before her desk shrugged indifferently and did not reply.

Another long, cold stare, then she sat back in her chair almost casually, as if relaxing before the curtain rose at the theater. "Very well, then. I am obligated by the Board of Governors to review all *serious* applicants. You may make your petition, Mr. Snape."

He exhaled loudly though his nose, then strode across the room to pull a chair from against the wall. Ignoring her flattened lips and piercing gaze, he placed the chair squarely before her desk and flopped into it with no pretense of formality, propping his ankle atop his knee. He opened her tin of shortbread biscuits and took not one but *two*. "A bit of tea would be *gracious* of you, Professor McGonagall."

Her hand shook ever so slightly as she raised her wand and summoned a silver tray from some unseen chamber to her desk. She decanted the teapot with a flick of her wand, rather than grasping the handle and further revealing her angry tremor. There was a hint of a sneer on the man's face as he appraised the contents of the delicate porcelain cup, but he nodded after taking a sip.

"These pretenses annoy me, Minerva," he finally said. "You are in need of a Potions professor; I am in need of a job. I am not about to plead my case. I know full well that you are familiar with both my qualifications and my *reputation*. You have undoubtedly made your decision already--far be it from me to attempt to alter it. And your old brand of shortbread was far superior to these."

She leaned forward at last, resting her forearms against the edge of the golden teak desktop. "Fifty years in Azkaban did nothing to improve your temperament, Severus."

"Was it meant to?" he said quietly, staring into the depths of the teacup.

"I am in rather a dilemma," the headmistress continued. "You are quite correct in that we have needed a Potions professor for some time now. There are so many lucrative careers in that field, it has been impossible to retain anyone on the faculty for long. And as you say, I am quite familiar with your qualifications to fill the post. I am also aware that your *reputation* basically eliminates the likelihood that you will abandon us in a few years for a better offer, as so many others have." Her voice had dropped to a scathing growl, but she sat up a bit straighter in her chair and adjusted it back up to its former level of mere stern reproach. "These are factors that would generally make a candidate attractive; however, I find myself wondering, Mr. Snape, why in the name of Merlin you would even consider teaching again."

He scoffed. "It is as you say, Headmistress. Although I have 'served my time,' the wizarding world has not seen fit to forgive me. Do you know, I have actually tried to apply for work under assumed names, in the hopes that I can be judged on merit alone? It never works. I have been blessed with a memorable face, it seems." He laughed again, a single bark of mocking disdain. "Funny, is it not? The choices of my youth have severely restricted my options for the remainder of my life, and yet if history had taken but a slightly different turn, my choices would be virtually limitless."

"If you still lived, that is," McGonagall said venomously.

Snape cocked his head. "Touche", Minerva. Death does put an end to freedom, or so we believe."

The headmistress sighed and allowed her shoulders to sag. This was exhausting. Contrary to Snape's assertion, she had not already decided whether to hire him or not, and had hoped that the interview would give her some idea of the man's motivation. But it was as if the past half-century had never happened, save a few wrinkles around his eyes and a lock of gray hair behind his left temple. He was as irascible and unfathomable as ever.

"So you think that Hogwarts may be desperate enough to overlook your sordid past and accept your service, even though no one else will. I must say, Severus, I hardly feel honored by the implication."

"Those are your words, Minerva. Perhaps I believe that Hogwarts may be a place of refinement and intellect, one which can rise above the baser, petty instincts. Perhaps I think that the people of this institution can comprehend that I have paid for my crimes and welcome me back into the folds of society."

She stared long and hard at him and still couldn't decide if he was telling the truth.

"If I were to hire you, Mr. Snape," she finally began, "there would be considerable controversy. Not that this is unusual for the faculty of Hogwarts; Professor Lupin's long tenure as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor continued to beget Howlers from irate parents even after he moved on. Nonetheless, I would expect exemplary behavior from you, Severus. *Exemplary*. Not so much as a hint of unfairness or prejudice, nor even a whisper of Dark magic. I would have enough on my hands, fending off the protests of parents who object to a war criminal teaching their children—I want no additional grief about insulting comments or biased deduction of House points. Are you even capable of that, do you think?"

Snape gazed thoughtfully into the teacup again, then sighed. "I am a middle-aged wizard, Minerva. Vengeance and outrage are for the young. I have spent fifty years practicing the art of quiet endurance and have become quite good at it." He rolled his lower lip between his teeth in an expression of frank distress. "I must have a place to live and work. If I can find it here, I have no intention of losing it over anything as inconsequential as House points."

She stood up and slowly made her way around the office, facing each of the portraits of former headmasters in turn. "You would be hired on probationary status," she said without looking at Snape, "with the option of dismissal at any time for any reason. This could last for years, perhaps even indefinitely."

"Understandably so."

"In addition, your contact with students would be restricted to the classroom and mealtimes, and events like Quidditch matches. I will not have you prowling about the corridors at night. Even your detentions would have to be chaperoned."

He gritted his teeth, but his voice remained calm. "Naturally."

She spun on her heel. "This is for *your* protection, Severus. I want no student left alone with you. In an accusation, no matter how ridiculous, if it came to your word against a student's, you know how that would end. This would require effort on your part, Severus, continuous effort. You would be the last to arrive in your classroom and the first to leave. Your office will be off limits to students. You will not even use the public bathrooms! Am I making myself clear?"

"Crystal."

Her shoulders dropped again, and even her expression softened. "It goes without saying that you would not be restored as Head of Slytherin House."

"I am happy to leave that honor to the current Head of House."

"Professor Potter will be relieved to know that you do not plan to challenge him."

Snape's eyes widened, but that was the extent to which he expressed his indignation. *Good, good*, she thought. *This may really be possible.*

"I have one more question, Severus." She returned to her chair and folded her arms, taking several deep breaths before uttering, "Why?"

Snape rolled his eyes and clicked his tongue against his teeth; she was not inquiring about his motives for teaching. "Really, Minerva. Don't you think that's a bit trite? Surely you read all the explanations in the old *Daily Prophet*."

She glared at him, cold and unmoving. He knew instinctively that he couldn't bluff his way beyond the question forever, but it was still worth a try.

"I was a soldier in the Dark Army," he said slowly and quietly. "I had my orders. I could carry them out or die."

Her voice was like a chip from a glacier, razor sharp and cold. "You were also a soldier in the Order of the Phoenix."

"And I had my orders there as well, Minerva."

He looked her straight in the eye and began to count inside his head. By seven, the comprehension dawned in her eyes. By twenty-three, she was shaking her head in disbelief. "What are you saying, Snape?" she gasped at thirty-four.

"Nothing. Nothing at all, Headmistress. Read the history books. The answer you want to hear can easily be found in them. Now am I hired or not?"

He counted to fifty-nine before she composed herself enough to reply, "Classes begin next Monday."

2: A Bitter Woman

Chapter 2 of 18

The inevitable staff meeting before the start of term yields acquaintances old and new.

The Great Hall was empty when Snape threw open the doors for the first time. He'd deliberately arrived much too early for the staff meeting, mostly because there was little else to do. It wouldn't hurt to engage in a bit of a pissing match by claiming his preferred chair before the start of the term, but his heart wasn't truly in it. At this point in his life, any chair would do.

Hagrid was the first to arrive, locking his eyes on the Potions master as soon as he stepped through the doors, but he did nothing untoward or aggressive. He also did not offer a word of greeting, which suited Snape quite nicely. They appraised one another silently across the long table. Hagrid was well into his hundreds and it showed, but even though he'd long exceeded the typical lifespan of giants, the wizard blood in his veins had aged him well. He still looked as though he could crack Snape's spine with but a casual flick of his wrist.

Others whom Snape had never met filed into the Great Hall and eyed him with varying degrees of curiosity and contempt. Some of the younger ones even gave him stilted smiles, which he interpreted as pure bravado. *Not afraid of me, then? You will be all too soon, you whelps*, he thought. He gave each new arrival the same disinterested glance, then returned to his face-off with Hagrid.

Potter came in a step behind McGonagall, undoubtedly begging her right up to the last second to reconsider her decision. Snape raised an eyebrow as he registered that time had not been as kind to Potter as it had to Hagrid. He had more gray hair than Snape, and one of his eyes bore a stellate fracture in its center, black spokes radiating through the green. Snape had met the witch who had given Potter that wound; she'd been lauded as a hero in Azkaban, right up until the day she was murdered by some rival for her position in the pecking order. Potter took the seat directly to Snape's right, even though there were still a few other chairs available.

McGonagall began with introductions as the last of the staff arrived. "You remember Hagrid, who teaches Care of Magical Creatures and serves as Head of Gryffindor House. And of course Potter, our Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor and Head of Slytherin." Having already received the shock of that revelation, Snape showed no reaction to the announcement, certain that Potter was eyeing him in anticipation.

McGonagall was moving on to the Astronomy professor when the doors to the Great Hall fell shut with a rather loud clunk. The straggler earned the elevation of both Snape's eyebrows, as she was quite possibly the most odd-looking witch Snape had ever seen. It wasn't so much that she was missing her right arm; amputations were fairly common after the Great War. It was the fact that it looked as though the arm and part of her shoulder and torso had been bitten clean off by an enormous, round mouth. In addition, whiplike blue scars extended from the empty shoulder of her robe to her throat and the right side of her face. They were unlike anything he'd ever seen, and when she took the remaining seat, directly to his left, he noticed that they were *moving*, slowly writhing below her skin like so many snakes.

Of all the faculty at Hogwarts, she was the only one who did not give Snape so much as a glance. He had no sense that she was deliberately avoiding his gaze, but that she simply wasn't curious or interested in the slightest.

Well, neither was he. He noted only that her name was Pendragon and she taught Charms. Later, when he grew bored with McGonagall's tiresome prattle, he found it rather convenient to prop up his head upon his left arm, for, unlike Potter, Pendragon could not attempt to bump his elbow from the table.

When the teaching schedules were finally settled and the meeting closed, she was on her feet and stomping coldly out of the Hall before he'd even pushed his chair back. Snape watched her for a few seconds out of sheer surprise at having been upstaged. With a sidelong glance to his right, he noticed that Potter followed her with his gaze all the way to the doors. "A bit late for you to rescue that one, Potter," he noted.

Though Snape expected a scathing reply, or perhaps even a hex, Potter only said, very quietly, "I know."

The students arrived that evening, herded in like so much unruly cattle by Hagrid. The Sorting ritual was in many ways the same as always, yet not quite so. It galled Snape more than he cared to admit to see Potter smile and applaud for the students Sorted into Slytherin. It was also downright disconcerting to realize that the fearful and loathsome glances from the children were not, for the first time in Snape's memory, directed at him, but the woman on his left.

Interesting, Madam Pendragon. Perhaps you are a contender for that coveted title of the most despised professor at Hogwarts? No sooner had he thought of it than he scoffed internally, lifting one edge of his upper lip in a faint sneer. *We shall see, young lady, we shall see. Potter may have stripped me of my House, but you'll be hard pressed to keep up with me.*

3: A Proper Introduction

Chapter 3 of 18

Snape takes a few moments to get to know the Charms professor, in his own unique way.

Snape had felt almost at home in Azkaban, for without the Dementors, it was just another dungeon. One damp stone wall was much like the next. The filth and mind-numbing boredom he could have done without, but at least he did not succumb to the madness of claustrophobia and sensory deprivation, as so many had. In addition, within the first two years of his interment, someone "Outside" had bequeathed the prison with a lovely library, and indeed, many of Snape's own books turned up, confiscated from his office and Spinner's End. He learned years later that the library was conceived by Hermione Granger as part of her meddlesome "reformation" of wizard society. The news was enough to make him boycott reading for almost six months, until unrelenting boredom forced his hand.

But now he *was* at home, in Hogwarts. Stone walls, fifty years of new books to peruse in the library, and the freedom to walk about utterly alone. The grounds became his sole province at night when the students were ensconced in the castle and no one could bother him as he took in the clean, cool air and moonlight. Snape virtually stopped giving detentions, as he wanted no truck with bothersome students taking up his quiet evenings.

He had a rather unpleasant shock one unseasonably warm October evening when he literally ran into someone during his stroll. Snape barely had time to register the collision when the other shouted, "OFF!"

"Patience, idiot! Who goes there, and what are you doing out on the grounds at night?" he growled as he regained his balance. The moon had not yet risen, and he still could not see whom he had struck. Memories of Potter and that Invisibility Cloak came rushing back to him.

"I'm Pendragon, you fool! Why don't you watch where you're going!"

"As if I can help the fact that you are dressed as dark as the night itself!" He felt uncomfortably foolish, having mistaken her for a truant student.

"Oh really? Pot, meet Kettle! Though I observed you coming long ago. Your vision must be deteriorating, old man."

Snape's jaw fell. Not only was she being insolent, but she was *right*, damn her; he could hear that she was directly in front of him, but he still couldn't see a thing. No, it wasn't *that* dark--he could see the white marble of Dumbledore's tomb a few paces beyond. She was playing some sort of trick on him, and Snape was infuriated. He reached toward her voice with his hand and came into contact with her forehead immediately. *Impossible!* He was practically standing on her and *still* couldn't see her.

"You are spelled for invisibility, are you not, Pendragon?" he snarled, patting the top of her head in search of a cloak.

She gripped his arm in her remaining hand, which was unexpectedly strong. "I am not! Stop groping me! Do you mean to say you can't see me?"

"Believe me, if I could see you, Pendragon, I most certainly would not be attempting to grope you."

He heard her breath catch in her throat just before she flung his arm away. A thin smile spread over his lips. *Easy as shooting fish in a barrel.* "Even I am not so desperate."

He knew he should be able to see something; he had not felt the telltale chill of a Disillusionment Charm when he touched her. He could hear her footfalls as she ran off over the lawn, but he couldn't even see her silhouette against the lights of the castle. It was very strange and disconcerting; this was a form of magic he had never seen before.

He told himself that the tiny pang of regret in his chest was his disappointment at being unable to witness the painful impact of his words.

Snape expected some sort of retributive comment at breakfast the next morning, but none came. Pendragon didn't vary from her regular routine. She ate dry toast with her left hand, drank her pumpkin juice in one draught, and stomped out of the Great Hall as students cleared a path before her. Snape realized that he could not tell whether she deliberately avoided his gaze because she had never once looked up from the table during a meal in all the weeks he'd known her. It occurred to him that perhaps she took her toast dry because she was unable to butter it one-handed. He sneered at himself for his sentimentality.

Potter leaned over the table and caught McGonagall's eye. Though they did little more than nod at one another, Snape found himself inordinately frustrated by this exchange taking place before him. "Secrets, Potter?" he growled.

"Nothing that would interest you."

"Try me."

Potter peered at him, his gaze intensified by his fractured eye. Snape wondered if he could actually see with it and was glad to have the distraction until Potter dropped his gaze to the tabletop and spoke. "It's Pendragon. She seems worse today."

"What do you mean? She behaved exactly the same as any other day. Worse in what way?"

Potter raised his eyes again. "Her scars. Have you never even looked at her, Snape?"

"I have noticed them before, Potter, yes. I find there are more pleasant things to look--" Snape's words were cut off by a nonverbal Silencing Charm, and he realized that Potter had his wand in hand below the table.

"Don't ever say that again." Potter's voice was low and firm, yet without a trace of overt threat or menace. It sent a chill down Snape's spine, for he knew it was the last voice that the Dark Lord and many Death Eaters had heard. Snape knew intellectually that Potter had become a great sorcerer, but he did not *understand* the extent of his power until that moment.

Snape felt the *Silencio* release his throat, but was still speechless. Potter stared at him a moment longer, as though appraising whether he should simply kill Snape now and save himself the hassle of needing to do it later, then he tipped his head unconcernedly. "You can believe whatever you want about her injury. But keep it to yourself. She's quite aware that people look at her in horror. Keenly aware. She doesn't need you or anyone else reminding her."

Snape found that he had lost the rest of his appetite. "I suppose not," he mumbled, after clearing his throat.

"Her wound is magical, obviously," Potter continued conversationally. "They're not really scars, you see, they're the curse itself. It's trying to burrow deeper to finish her off. She's constantly Charming it back. Did you know that?"

Snape shook his head wordlessly.

"I've never seen it reach all the way across her throat before, and I've been watching her for over ten years."

Snape was about one sentence away from squirming in his seat, and it galled him. "What you're saying is impossible, Potter! What curse can last that long?"

The younger wizard's eyes lost their focus, and he sighed deeply. "Black Lightning."

Snape gripped the table with both hands until his knuckles were white.

4: Study

Chapter 4 of 18

Potter's unexpected revelations prompt a bit of research.

Snape truly had no need to assign detentions or deduct House points. His students were quite terrified of him without any extra effort on his part. Their parents or grandparents had instilled them with horrified expectations, and the history books had done the rest. Snape was a living legend, and this made his everyday existence so simple.

For this reason, Snape had no qualms about leaving his sixth-year Potions class to prepare their ingredients for the morning's lesson by themselves. He knew there would be no horsing around in the laboratory while he was at the library. He went straight to the archives of the *Daily Prophet*, miniaturized and tucked into rows of tidy drawers in the periodicals section. He pulled out the three drawers representing the last fifteen years and brought them back to the classroom.

He found no articles describing the Black Lightning or *Atra Fulminis* curse until an issue from ten years earlier. Naturally, it contained nothing useful, only that the new Charms professor at Hogwarts was afflicted by the curse once thought to be only legend. This led to a series of rather predictable letters to the editor, decrying the institution for subjecting children to the unknown risks of exposure to the vestiges of the curse, followed by high-handed moralizing about the zealotry of fear. Not one of the bloody idiots bothered to comment about the curse itself, how it had been cast or how Pendragon managed to both survive and contain it. Snape Reduced the newspapers and shoved them back in the drawers; they would sort themselves into order eventually, and he was too fed up to be bothered.

By then the third-year students had arrived, and although he knew they would behave themselves, he didn't trust them alone with their ingredients. Thus Snape was unable to return to the library until nearly lunchtime, and hauled his box of Charms and DADA journals right to the Great Hall. Pendragon had already dined and departed per her usual routine, and Potter eyed his selection of journals with a budding sneer.

"You know, you might try speaking to her sometime, Snape. All you have to do is ask her politely, and she'll tell you about it. You don't have to *research* her like some sort of specimen."

"I have a better idea, Potter. Why don't you enlighten me instead, since you seem to know so much about her?"

Potter drew his brows together until they nearly met. "I can't believe you would rather talk to *me* than... anyone else, as a matter of fact."

"Spare the dramatics, Potter. I've said barely twenty words to the woman since I arrived; I can hardly expect her confidence." *Particularly since all of those words were unkind*, he thought, then grimaced inwardly for being so maudlin twice in one day.

Potter's eyes narrowed. "Why are you suddenly so interested, anyway?"

Snape closed his eyes and drew a deep breath before replying. "Professional curiosity, Potter. A mythical curse has become real. The last time I checked, this institution supported study and research."

Laying both hands flat upon the table, Potter quietly said, "And last time I checked, Black Lightning was considered Dark magic." He leaned forward, keeping his hands in full view, projecting the obvious message that he needed no wand to enforce his point. "That, Professor Snape, is my field."

"Has it occurred to you, *Professor Potter*, that I might try to develop a cure for Pendragon's affliction?"

Potter's green eyes grew colder still. "Not even for a minute."

Snape smiled bitterly. "So cynical. You've practically snatched the pebble from my hand."

They finished their lunch in silence, and Snape retired with his stacks of journals to the relative peace of his classroom.

5: Discovery

Chapter 5 of 18

Research and investigation pay off on several fronts.

By the last day of the fall term at Hogwarts, Snape had read every credible article about the *Atra Fulminis* curse. There weren't many, and it took him considerable time to locate them. Pendragon had been in Peru when she was struck down twelve years ago, and the story was kept largely under wraps by more than one news agency.

Severus Snape, however, was nothing if not meticulous, and he had uncovered the pieces slowly. She was a citizen of Hong Kong, an Auror of some kind, in pursuit of a stolen artifact. She had trailed the unknown offender to the opposite side of the world and cornered him in the Andes mountains. By that time, he had found the keystone to the *Atra* curse within some Incan ruins and was eager to test it out. A bit too eager, as the act of casting it made him explode into many, many small pieces, most of which were recovered by the Peruvian magical authorities.

Apparently the act of disintegrating threw off his aim, and the curse barely grazed her right shoulder. It melted a tunnel into the mountain behind her that extended some thirty meters deep and left behind no trace of her arm. She was lucky, however, because either the heat of the curse or the vestiges of it that sunk into her flesh somehow cauterized the wound. She not only survived the amputation of her arm, but was able to stumble her way down the mountain to the Urubamba River, where she flagged down a boat full of Wizard tourists heading to Machu Picchu.

Both the Peruvian and Hong Kong governments were hardly eager to release details of either the criminal or the *Atra* curse, and in fact most of the information on the incident had been penned by the tourists. The last of their personal accounts had arrived by owl that morning, and had added very little to the picture.

But Snape was not seeking the name of the culprit, nor the secrets of constructing the curse. He already had that information. He knew it must be Peter Pettigrew, since Snape himself was in Azkaban when his research with Wormtail was finally completed, and only that imbecile would take forty years to solve the puzzle.

Snape smiled bitterly. Abandoning the research on Black Lightning had been part of Albus's plan. Dumbledore obviously did not predict that Wormtail would actually manage to work out the rest of the spell on his own, nor have the requisite power to cast it.

Snape was cleaning his laboratory for the last time that term when he knocked a knife from the granite countertop. Foolishly, he tried to catch it and closed his hand on the blade. He was unable to Heal the laceration himself as it was on his wand hand, so he had to visit the Hospital Wing. He had not ascended above the main floor since his interview with McGonagall, but, unable to even wrap a decent bandage left-handed, he had little choice in the matter.

The infirmary was empty, and the ligation spells took only a few moments before Snape was on his way back to the dungeons. As he passed the Charms classroom, however, he heard something both unusual and beautiful. Music of some sort, something he was certain he had heard a very long time ago. Frowning his brow with curiosity, Snape stepped into the empty classroom to investigate.

He knew of the hidden staircase at the back of the room, having served several detentions in the Charms professor's office back in his own school days. As he climbed the narrow stairs, the music grew louder. The door at the upper landing was closed, however, and though he longed to open it, he dared not disrupt the flow of the music.

The memory poured through him all of a sudden. The house in which he grew up shared a wall with a church--his bedroom wall, in fact. He had heard this melody many times. It was impossibly high for his vocal range, not that he wanted to hear himself sing, but the compulsion to accompany the solo piano was too strong. Closing his eyes,

he let only a hint of breath through his throat, barely making enough sound to carry to his own ears.

Ave Maria gratia plena

Dominus tecum benedicta tu

Snape had loved to listen to the Muggle music through the wall of his room, and he recognized the language of magic in the lyrics. For years he had suspected there were spells woven through the music, but he'd never been able to uncover one that he could recognize.

The music came to an abrupt and discordant halt, which was followed by a bit of vehement swearing, then the piece began anew. It was being performed live on a real Muggle piano, as far as he could tell. Snape rested his forehead against the door, mouthing the words and feeling the basso vibrate the wood. This time the pianist completed the piece, but apparently was still not satisfied. Snape jumped back as a loud clunk and the scraping of a chair on the stone floor hinted that the recital had ended.

He should have bolted down the stairs immediately, but he was still a bit overcome by the intensity of his reverie. He stood there, undoubtedly gaping like a cow in a pasture, when the door flew open to reveal Professor Pendragon. She leapt backwards and had her wand in hand before Snape had grasped the handle of his own wand in his pocket.

"What are you doing here?" she spat, pressing the tip of it into the hollow of his throat.

"I heard... something." He hated being caught off guard, and he hated saying foolish things even more, but there was nothing for it. Sentimentality had foiled him once again.

She pulled her wand back a hand's breadth, but her eyes burned into him angrily. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

What do you mean, 'what does that mean?' "It means nothing. I heard music and I... was curious." He berated himself internally for the weakness in his voice, but perhaps it was all for the best, as she seemed to accept that he meant no harm. She scrutinized him a moment longer, then lowered her wand.

"The music's over," she said coldly. "Now get away from my door."

Snape was not one to give in to such demands, but he took a step back before he even realized what he was doing. "But..."

"But what?" Her impatience drove the words through him like a nail, and yet he couldn't think of anything to say.

Mother of Merlin, you're making a fool of yourself! "I wanted to inquire... that is, your scars. Are they painful?" Snape would have gladly ripped his own tongue from its moorings to take back the entire conversation. He could normally improvise very well, but the circumstances had apparently drained his intellect.

She studied him warily, raising her wand again. "Constantly."

"Perhaps there is something I can brew that would help you."

"I would drink nothing offered from your hand, Snape. Get out of my way."

As he watched, blue threads spread over her skin like a drop of heavy tincture through water, widening and branching with alarming speed to her forehead and her left collarbone. A tendril appeared on the left side of her throat, and Snape realized with a sickening lurch in his abdomen that it had come from behind her neck, wrapping around her like a vine. "Very good, Professor," he said, and darted down the stairs, not caring that he looked and acted like a terrified child, for that was precisely how he felt.

He charged down the marble stairs to the first floor and burst into Potter's classroom. The first-years were having their last lesson of the term, but Snape ignored them completely, bellowing to Potter as though the room were empty.

"You must look in on Professor Pendragon. She is... worse today."

6: An Outing

Chapter 6 of 18

Snape returns to Diagon Alley for the first time since his release from Azkaban.

After breakfast the next morning, Snape Apparated to the public room of the Leaky Cauldron. He knew that this was rather gauche, but he had not been to Diagon Alley in over half a century and had no idea what it looked like anymore. He was fairly certain that the Cauldron's public room would remain unchanged, and with the exception of a few new chairs, he was correct.

There were several glances of disapproval, and some turned immediately into stares of outright loathing as he was recognized, but Snape ignored them completely. He tossed a Sickle into the glass bowl on the bar, the customary reparation for the insult of popping into the pub, and proceeded through the back to the Alley.

The Apothecary had moved from the building next door, which annoyed Snape greatly. He had hoped to make his appearance in Wizarding London as brief as possible. The new shop had obviously been there for some time, and he felt oddly self-conscious about going inside and inquiring as to where the Apothecary had moved. He finally pulled his hood over his head and decided to hunt it down on his own; surely if there was still a Potions supplier in the Alley, it would not be hidden too deeply for customers to find it.

Indeed, quite the opposite was the case. Potions had seen a resurgence in popularity and the new Apothecary was twice the size of the old shop. A flash of insight crossed Snape's mind: perhaps the renewed interest in Potions soon after his departure from Hogwarts had not been coincidental. The thought made him smirk, although he doubted he had all that much to do with it. Modern Healing had come up with a number of breakthroughs during the Great War out of pure necessity, and had rejuvenated the field--and most of those had been concocted by his former students. He smirked again. *The strange little ways one leaves an impact on society.*

Prices had certainly changed in the last five decades, and the Apothecary's proximity to Gringotts proved disappointingly convenient. Four months of Hogwarts salary was nearly gone after he finished, and although he had enough left to buy a text at Obscurus Books, he couldn't afford a hot drink to take the chill out of his hands. Snape sighed. It was a long walk to King's Cross Station, and sleet was falling.

Snape hated the sensation of being watched, and thus felt a bit of relief when he stepped out into Muggle London. The awkward glances of strangers at his clothing were insignificant compared to the glares he received in the Alley. In some ways he wished he could simply remain in this world, to become just another anonymous face on his way home to a coldwater flat and a cuppa. There was nothing for it, though; he had nearly starved to death in these very streets after being released from Azkaban, and after this afternoon's purchases, he was as penniless now as he had been then.

He paused before the window of a music store for a very long time.

When the Hogwarts Express pulled into King's Cross Station a few hours later, he waited until all the students had left the platform before stepping out of the shadows to board. He locked his compartment both manually and magically, even though it was most unlikely that anyone else would be making the return trip to Hogsmeade. The motion of the train would rock him to sleep, and after a good long nap, he could stay up all night experimenting with his new purchases.

Snape knew more about the *Atra Fulminis* than any other living being, now that Wormtail had truly been blown to bits. He was certain there was a way to stop its progress. It would be a fine way to restore his name, finding a remedy for a high-profile curse like this one. Potter would probably insist on being involved, and naturally would hog the limelight, but it didn't matter. The name of Severus Snape would not shine so brightly, but it would spread much further on the back of the Golden Boy's.

The fact that he might help that wretched woman was of no consequence at all, or so he told himself as he drifted off to sleep.

7: Alchemy

Chapter 7 of 18

Snape finds Pendragon in a rather dire condition on Christmas Eve.

Snape awoke to sunlight streaming through the windows of the compartment. He bolted upright, but recognized to his great relief the rear wall of Hogsmeade Station. *Of course, nitwit; they keep the train in a siding when it's not running.* He extracted himself and his purchases from the chilly compartment, ignoring the ravenous grumbings of his belly. He knew the pain of starvation, and this wasn't even a hint of it--and his next meal awaited only his presence at the staff table. Snape closed his eyes in awe that the world could be so miraculous.

For the next week, he spared time from potionmaking only for rushed meals and brief stretches of sleep. His mind was brimming with ideas and he was impatient to try them all before the holidays ended and the students returned. When the headmistress arrived to remind him of the Christmas Eve party, he made his best attempt to shoo her out of the laboratory.

"I assure you, Minerva, I shall put in an appearance; I have not forgotten."

"And when do you propose to do that, exactly? By the time you change, you'll be late as it is!"

Snape gawked at her, realizing she was dressed in her festive tartan robes. He knew better than to look around for a calendar--the nearest one was in his office up the corridor--but he made the effort anyway, certain that she was playing some sort of juvenile prank. "Are you saying it's Christmas Eve already?"

McGonagall rolled her eyes and folded her arms with a noisy huff. "Please do not suggest that you don't know what day it is."

"I developed a habit of ignoring the arbitrary passage of days a long time ago, Minerva," Snape said pointedly, while adjusting the flame under the nearest cauldron. "I found that it led only to madness. I have been engaged in my research of late, and I apologize for that. I honestly did not intend to avoid the party." He took in her skeptical gaze and set down his wand. "Honestly," he repeated contritely. "I can't leave now, but I will come upstairs as soon as I am able. I am sorry, Minerva."

He meant it too; he knew these idiotic rituals were important to the headmistress and did not wish to be petulant. She apparently saw the sincerity in his eyes, for her posture relaxed and opened again. "Very well, Severus. Do put on something... else. I know festive is far too much to ask, but you must have something a bit less... dour."

He had nothing else but the rags he wore as he departed through the gates of Azkaban. "I shall Transfigure this into something more presentable," he promised.

An hour later, everything that required his attention had received it and Snape dashed up the stairs to the gathering. At the entrance to the Great Hall, Snape realized he was still wearing his teaching robes and lab apron. He made an honest attempt to fulfill his promise, but current fashions were entirely out of his purview. In the end, he banished the apron back to the lab and removed the stains from his robes. *I'll just have to make up for my antiquarian appearance with my sunny disposition* With that thought, he was able to enter the room with a grin.

It was the typical drearily maudlin affair, with far too much sentimental music and gaudy decoration, but the hors d'oeuvres were actually quite good. By that hour most of the guests had already imbibed too much hot buttered rum and egg nog, so it was easy for Snape to slip into huddled conversations and make his appearance, then slip back out unnoticed. He reckoned he'd completed the duty rounds before half an hour had passed.

Unfortunately, McGonagall caught him during his attempted escape and foisted a platter into his hands. "If you must leave so soon," she said sullenly, "you can at least take this up to Professor Pendragon. She's not feeling well and could not join us this evening."

Snape had no wish to disturb Pendragon, as he was quite certain he knew why she was indisposed, but there was no way to get around this delicately. He hoped fleetingly that there would either be more music, or that her chamber would be dark; either would give him an excuse to simply set the platter on the landing and leave. But he was not that lucky; not only was her door outlined in thin blades of light, there was no music, only a rasping of labored breath. Biting his lip, Snape rapped the door with his knuckles.

"Pah... Potter?" Her voice was raspy. Something in the room fell to the floor with a clunk.

By Hecate! "It is... only me, Professor. Do you need help?"

"Go... 'way... away."

This is ridiculous. If she's found dead with my tray of sweets on the landing, I'll never hear the end of it. "No, Professor. You sound unwell. I'm coming in. Do not hex me." He steeled himself and tested the door, finding to his great surprise that it wasn't even latched.

"Pendragon." She was sprawled on the floor before the fire, pushing up on her remaining elbow in an apparent attempt to crawl. Her scars did not extend past the collar of her nightdress, but her lips were blue from cyanosis.

"Please," she coughed between breaths. "Potter."

He returned to the party and found Potter, who had also been hitting the buttered rum, but charged up the marble stairs unerringly when he heard the news. Snape followed but remained on the landing before her chamber.

"What is it, Pen? What's happening to you?"

"Moved...down...around." There was a long pause as she caught her breath from the effort of so many syllables. He heard Potter belt *"Diffindo!"* and a sound of rending fabric, then a steady stream of swearing. It was more than Snape's curiosity could bear.

Potter had propped her up against the ottoman but, judging by the wringing of his hands, he clearly had no idea what else to do for her. Snape understood what she had meant by "moved down." Apparently the curse had finally given up its attempts to strangle her, recognizing that there were other ways to cut off her breath. She looked as though she were in the crushing grip of a boa or python, for her chest was a mass of constricting blue coils.

Potter picked up his wand and set it down again, spreading his fingers like the tines of a rake, as though trying to fathom whether he could physically pull the scars apart. "Wait," Snape said. Pulling his wand from within his robes, he strode across the room and knelt beside Potter. He rested the tip of the wand on the center coil and softly muttered, *"Sectumsempra!"*

Potter gripped Snape's arm painfully hard, but let go as the blue scars split immediately along a vertical line and retracted, whiplike, to what remained of Pendragon's right shoulder. She uttered a weak cry of pain, followed by an enormous intake of breath.

Without a word, Potter picked her up in a single graceful swooping motion and carried her through a door in the back of the parlor.

8: Snape's Tale

Chapter 8 of 18

The Potions Master informs Professor Potter about a number of historical facts.

Snape remained where he was in a bit of a stupor until his knees instigated a painful protest. With a series of popping sounds, he shifted to one of the leather armchairs and awaited Potter's return.

"That was totally reckless, you know," snarled Potter as he fell wearily into the opposite chair. "I don't care that it worked; it could've killed her just as easily."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Need I remind you that you were at a loss for ideas? I had reason to believe it would work; I understand that spell far better than you do, Potter."

"That so? Which spell? Sectum or Atra?"

Snape swallowed hard against the tightening in his throat. "Both," he confessed.

Potter settled further into the chair, wordlessly Summoning the platter of party treats from the bookshelf beside the door. Snape raised his brows as it floated past; he hadn't even realized he'd set the thing down. "I think it's about time we talked," said Potter flatly.

Snape moistened his lips and drew in a deep breath. He was an Occlumens after all, and could keep his secrets if he so chose, but there seemed to be little reason anymore. "Very well. I suppose I must go first, assuming you are not too drunk to understand me."

"I never get drunk. I may act it at the occasional party, but that's just for appearances. Constant vigilance, remember?" Snape had to smirk; Alastor Moody was impossible to forget.

"Fine, then. I have no reason to lie to you, Potter. My so-called debts are paid in full. You will not want to believe that which I am about to tell you, but that will be your own folly. Do you give your word to listen, or will this be a waste of my time?"

Potter rubbed his hands together, then laid them flat on the armrests. "I'll listen and hope that you aren't wasting *my* time."

Snape shrugged. At least that was better than nothing.

"Easier matters first, then. I believe we both know the origin of the *Sectumsempra*. I was never able to prove that you somehow acquired my sixth-year potions text, but that is the simplest answer, is it not?"

A hint of discomfort played across Potter's eyes before he looked away. "Not just simple, but accurate. I didn't know it was yours at the time."

"Ah, yes. All the more reason to be casting untried spells at unsuspecting people." Potter glared at him, but Snape continued. "Being Dark magic, I knew it would have more affinity for the remnants of Black Lightning than it would for the... woman. I originally devised it to break other spells, such as those that resist the *Finite Incantatum*. I discovered later that in the absence of magic, it would also break flesh.

"As for my knowledge of the *Atra*, that is a much longer tale." Snape took a slice of bruschetta from the platter and ate it slowly, deciding where to begin.

"As you well know, I served in the Dark Army during the Great War. Voldemort gave me a number of assignments, which included spying at Hogwarts and keeping him apprised of your progress. I was only too happy to inform him that you were a poor student, defiant and headstrong, perpetually one step away from being expelled in disgrace but for the fact that no one could actually catch you cheating from Miss Granger's work--and of course that Dumbledore had an unnatural affection for you." Snape stared coldly into Potter's eyes, ignoring their contempt as he pressed on. "Naturally the Dark Lord took you for an easy mark. He was repeatedly astounded by your ability to thwart him, but even upon torture, I swore to him that you were nothing special, Potter, a substandard Mudblood blessed only with incredibly good luck and

Dumbledore's protections." Snape paused a moment, wondering if the message would sink in after all the years. He was pleased to see hints of shocked insight in Potter's eyes; perhaps the Golden Boy was capable of listening after all.

"But that was only one of my tasks. Voldemort's greatest foible was his impatience. He had lost ten years after your first... encounter, and he had already spent many years biding his time and 'creating opportunities.' When he finally had a strong, solid body again, he grew tired of the slow machinations of ascending to power. He wanted it to come to him easily and quickly, so that he could spend the rest of eternity enjoying it. Thus he attempted to reveal the Prophecy, and thus I was assigned to find him a weapon of incomparable power, one which would establish him as the indisputable lord of both wizards and Muggles. He ordered me to reconstruct the *Atra Fulminis* curse.

"Despite my protests, Voldemort also forced me to work with *apartner* on this project. Apparently he didn't trust me to hand over the curse like an obedient lieutenant when I was finished with it." Snape grinned fiercely. "He may have been greedy, but he was no fool. Unfortunately, that incident at the Ministry thinned out his trusted staff considerably, and I ended up saddled with the incomparable assistance of Peter Pettigrew.

"I cannot tell you, Potter, what a relief it was to place that dimwitted albatross around my neck, rather than someone intelligent like Malfoy or Dolohov. Wormtail came into this world unable to find his own genitalia with the help of a cattle prod, and living alone with the Master's attentions for two years had reduced him even further. My research was cursed with one bumbling mishap after another, thanks to Wormtail and my own sleight of hand. After a year, Voldemort was practically no closer to wielding Black Lightning than he'd been on the night you humiliated him at the Ministry.

"I, on the other hand, was quite close, as was Albus. The signet ring of Salazar Slytherin contained one of the elements--it gave Voldemort the whole notion in the first place. Like all of Slytherin's secrets, this one was not intended to give itself up except to his heirs, and indeed, it cost Albus his hand, in much the same way Pendragon lost her shoulder. The ring held the keystone to *Caerula Fulminis*, Blue Lightning. Albus and I unlocked it and destroyed it, so that the secret to the *Caerula* would be lost. That left he and I as the last two sorcerers that could cast Blue Lightning, and thus the only two that could ever conceive of progressing to Black.

Snape stopped for a triangle of spanakopita. "Does Pendragon have anything to drink in this office? I'm getting parched, Potter." The younger man leapt up from his chair and found a ceramic pitcher and two tumblers in a little cabinet by the desk. He filled the pitcher from a barrel by the window; apparently Pendragon liked to drink rainwater. *Odd bird, that one*, mused Snape.

"Well. I need hardly point out that this was a significant responsibility. Occlumens or no, I was not infallible, and Albus was growing weaker every day. He should have let me cast the *Caerula* and break the signet ring, the arrogant prat. He had never used Dark magic before, and to start with a Lightning curse... it was not worth the price." Snape stopped as his voice grew thick, and took a long draught of water. Potter remained at rapt attention, his eyes as round as saucers.

"Eventually Voldemort recognized that Albus had been wounded by Blue Lightning. My sabotage was nearly revealed, and Albus was forced to lie--to claim that he'd stolen the Signet Ring from me and unlocked the *Caerula* on his own. He and Voldemort had a powerful confrontation during your sixth year--of which you and the rest of the wizarding world remained blissfully unaware. Albus weakened the Dark Lord enough to slip into his mind undetected and steal the location of another Horcrux, but we both know that was all folly. The Horcrux in the cave had already been destroyed and Albus took that Dark potion for naught.

"That was why we agreed to end our pact that night, Potter. Our *pact*. We were the last paladins of the *Caerula* and we agreed to take it to the grave together. Albus was succumbing to Darkness--he called to me that night through my Mark! He knew Draco Malfoy was coming for him, knew that the boy was driven to spare his family. When the stupid child couldn't kill him, Albus tried to provoke his pride and the damnable prat went and caved in! Arrogant and defiant for sixteen straight years, and on the one night it mattered, the Malfoy scion developed a conscience. Fate sometimes deals the strangest hands.

"I was supposed to join the raiders and provoke my way into a fight to the death. Voldemort would perceive that I had served him faithfully to the end, and would appoint someone to continue my research. I had a whole series of false clues prepared for my successor. Obviously I ended up having to improvise and... take care of Albus, but that still worked nicely within the plan. You see, Albus and I both believed you would kill me, Potter; we had rather counted on it. I was to be a practice run for you, the whetstone upon which you honed your skill as a murderer before facing the Dark Lord. And as always, you were too distracted by the unfairness of your life's circumstances to concentrate. Damned fool! Between you and Malfoy, the two of you nearly cost us the war that night, fighting ineptly for opposite sides. What a farce!" He paused again for another draught, enjoying Potter's indignant expression as long as possible.

"To this day, I don't know why I ran. Force of habit, I suppose--always keeping up appearances for Lord Voldemort. Once I Disapparated at the rendezvous point, I realized my mistake. I had no more pretense for my slow progress on the *Atra*. Voldemort himself would supervise my research, and he would not fall for the subversive tactics that befuddled Pettigrew. I was *supposed* to die with Albus, not return to the Dark Lord like the Prodigal Son with the knowledge I had! Yet I was a coward, Potter. I couldn't bear to take my own life. I was betrayed by hope, by the belief that once again, I could fabricate my way through this disaster and live to see another sunrise."

Snape sighed deeply and stared at the fire for a moment. "I suppose that was precisely what happened. I had certainly 'proven' my loyalty, so Voldemort permitted me to survive in Azkaban. He undoubtedly expected to destroy the prison at some point and set me back to my task, but you managed to put an end to him, didn't you? Which was lucky for both of us, I suppose, though I questioned that every day for the past fifty years."

"Mother of Merlin," said Potter in a scraped voice.

"Spare me the sentimentality and don't interrupt, Potter. I'm just now getting to the part that matters. You see, I made a serious mistake, Potter. I underestimated Peter Pettigrew. I didn't think he could possibly comprehend the research I'd done, much less continue it. After all, the Blue was lost to all but myself--even if he could get that far, the critical prerequisite for the Black was missing."

Potter shook his head. "So how did he get past it?"

Snape closed his eyes in a pained grimace. "I learned something about myself in Azkaban, Potter, something I never even suspected."

Potter raised his hands with an expectant shrug.

"I talk in my sleep."

Potter gaped, then rolled his eyes and dropped his face into his hands. Snape reached irritably for a slice of orange but only held it in his hand and scowled.

"The price of too much Occlumency, I suppose," he finally grumbled. "When the other inmates complained, I quickly learned to suppress it, but it never even dawned on me that I'd done it in front of Pettigrew. He was such a perpetual whiner, I unthinkingly assumed that if I'd ever woken him up, he would have spent the next day making me painfully aware of the transgression. Wormtail spent one summer holiday in my old home with me, you see, which was precisely when we destroyed the Signet Ring. Apparently the little bastard was cunning enough to recognize an opportunity, and managed to glean the proper incantation from my mutterings." Snape sighed bitterly, gritting his teeth.

"It's a wandless spell, Potter; that's why it destroyed Dumbledore's hand. His very flesh rebelled against channeling that Dark energy. I could have done it without so much as a singed fingernail." Potter gaped again as Snape raised the heel of his hand to his eye and impatiently brushed away a tear. "Sodding sneaky bastard Albus gave me that bloody jolly grin of his and immobilized me. I was stuck there watching the whole ordeal, damn him to seven hells."

"I know how that goes," agreed Potter glumly. He held out his tumbler. Snape smirked humorlessly and clinked the rim of his own to Potter's in a grim toast. Potter froze with the tumbler halfway to his lips, however, and stared at Snape so intensely that the older wizard frowned and checked over his shoulder for some unknown mischief behind him.

"Someone step over your grave, Potter?"

"If... If the Lightning spells are wandless, then you..."

"Could have walked out of Azkaban at any time in the last half century. Yes, Potter. I'm impressed that you caught on so quickly; that couldn't have taken more than sixty seconds."

Potter shook his head. "Why?" he croaked.

In a rare display, Snape dropped his guarded expression and trademark sneer, gazing at Potter in sorrowful resignation. "What options did I have, Potter? I could cast the curse and walk away, and spend a lifetime being pursued by Aurors seeking to kill me, and by would-be tyrants seeking to torture the secret from me. I was never wealthy, but all I had was seized by the Ministry upon my conviction. How far could I run with no means, no wand, nothing but the clothes on my back? I believe your aunt and uncle impressed upon you that hunger is a powerful motivator, did they not? If I left those walls with no magic at my command but the *Caerula Fulminis*, I would end up forging a trail of blood for tea and biscuits. I have no taste for senseless murder, Potter. I never did." His upper lip curled in disgust, and the rest of his face quickly recognized the engram and followed suit.

"But why did you never tell anyone? Fifty years, Professor Snape!" Potter looked as though he might shed a tear as well, and Snape regarded him with cold disgust.

"If the Dark Lord thought that I'd betrayed him, not even the walls of Azkaban were thick enough to keep him from me, Potter. Particularly if I was his only hope to find Black Lightning. While he lived, I dared not speak the truth. And after that... well, you tell me, Potter, would you have believed me? I think not. You would believe I made it all up in a pathetic attempt to escape the sentence I so richly deserved, hmm?"

"Even now, there is a hint of doubt in your mind. By morning, you will have questions and counterarguments. If you are feeling charitable, you will pose them to me, and I will have the dubious pleasure of baring my soul all over again. If not, you will consult your colleagues, who will listen to the summary of my tale with bulging eyes and red faces, and remind you, correctly, that I am a *liar*. Every word you utter in my defense will make them click their tongues condescendingly as they take you for a gullible fool, at which point you will either stop defending me or stop believing."

Potter's jaw clenched. "Well, you have me all sussed out, don't you? I don't suppose--"

"I told you not to interrupt," Snape barked over him, shifting in his chair. "We've almost made it to the end. Thus: my own dreams betrayed my secrets to Pettigrew, and he had *all* the notes I kept for Voldemort--the false and the true. It apparently took him nearly forty years to decrypt them and complete the forensics, although perhaps he was incarcerated for part of it; I neither know nor care. I'm pleased to hear that he was too weak to contain the spell, although I wish Miss Pendragon had not been in the way when he made the attempt."

"It's not Miss Pendragon," Potter noted quietly. "It's just Pendragon."

9:Potter's Tale

Chapter 9 of 18

Harry adds some missing details to Snape's findings.

Snape frowned at the unseemly revision, glaring at Potter. "Regardless, she-who-is-called Pendragon is now the only living sorcerer to witness the *Atra Fulminis*. She may even be able to cast it. I feel somewhat relieved that she now owes me a life debt, but I fear the wisest course of action would be to let the curse take her. Who is she, Potter?"

The younger man's eyes flashed but he said nothing at first, opting to take his turn at staring into the fire and preparing his thoughts. Snape sampled a petits-four as he waited, raising a startled eyebrow at the first bite and quickly picking up another cakelet.

"She was an Auror before the accident," Potter began. "A damn good one, too. Smart, tough, tenacious... but she was more than that. You might as well know, I suppose, it really isn't a secret anymore."

"Your daughter?"

Potter's eyes flashed again. "No. But close. She was my godchild. You do know her parents, though: Ron and Hermione. They went to Hong Kong after the War, just to get a change of scenery. Ron was wounded pretty badly... Anyway, they both liked Asia, decided to move there for good, got married, Ron started coaching Quidditch, Hermione ended up deciphering a sort of Rosetta Stone that unlocked a rune-language that was thought to be lost... You're not even remotely interested, are you?"

"On the contrary, Potter. I'm just savoring yet another irony, that Miss Gran--pardon me, Mrs. Weasley--revealed the code that I needed to break in my quest for the *Atra Fulminis*. I should have guessed. Perhaps if I'd been friendlier with the silly cow she would have translated that stone for me while I had it at Hogwarts."

Potter turned a bit green around the edges.

"The written language was stolen from the Inca by Spanish conquistadors," Snape continued, "and it ended up being traded along the Silk Roads. By Muggles, of course; they regarded it as a mere novelty, just another plundered Aztec calendar. It was eventually bequeathed to a temple where, over the following centuries, its origins were forgotten and it became "sacred." Voldemort's signet ring led him to it, undoubtedly trying to help him uncover the *Caerula*. I'd imagine that the authorities were more than a bit surprised when the tablet turned up in the dungeons of Hogwarts."

"That was why Hermione picked Hong Kong in the first place," said Potter bitterly, "because of all the news articles regarding the 'stolen cultural artifact.' There was a big controversy about whether it belonged in its temple, or a museum, or back in South America. She just thought the pictures of Asia were so beautiful." Potter ran his hands through his hair, a familiar gesture that brought Snape a brief rush of memories of a more youthful time. "She took an interest in the tablet itself after they got settled in. It took years to decipher the thing, because the Wizard Incan was superimposed on the Muggle Incan in a complex way, through palindromes and Spoonerisms and what not--"

"I'm familiar with it, Potter," Snape interrupted, though without malice.

Potter gawked at him for a moment, then nodded. "I suppose you are. Well. She and Ron both slaved over some of the puzzles, and there had been damage to the engravings over time, but you know how Hermione is. When she finally broke it all open, you'd have thought she'd found a new Elixir of Life. She was the hottest topic on the lecture circuit for *decades*."

"I was so happy when their daughter was born! I even moved to Hong Kong for a while just to get to know her. She came to Hogwarts for one term and I blew two years' salary on her. She got Ron's sense of adventure and Hermione's brains. It was as much fun as having both of them around, without all the bickering. Perfect."

Potter noticed that Snape was peering down his nose at his reminiscences and sighed. "Yeah, well, long story short: She became an auror. Someone stole the tablet Hermione had worked on for so long. She demanded to take the case and went to South America. She reckoned the thief wanted to translate something in Wizard Incan, so she just went and searched through every single ruin, setting up wards to sound the alarm if the tablet passed them, all that sort of thing. Good, systematic detective work. And then she turned up at Machu Picchu."

Potter pinched the top of his nose as though his head suddenly ached. "She'd lost more than her arm. Her name was gone. None of us can remember it, least of all her--and every single place it had been written down went blank. Most of her memory was gone. She had no idea who I was, or Ron, but she at least recognized Hermione as a familiar face. The only person in her family that she could actually identify was her Uncle Charlie. He was the one that named her Pendragon. Nothing else would stick--we tried to agree on things to call her and an hour later no one could remember. But Charlie managed it.

"Sometimes at night, people can't see her. It's the same as her name--you know she's there, but she's just somehow beyond your perception. And her magic changed. She can't Apparate, can't Transfigure, can't make Potions. She can still belt out Charms like there's no tomorrow, and you do NOT want to be on the receiving end of one of her hexes."

"But the only thing that's exactly the same is her love of music. She was a virtuoso at the piano, Severus; it was so beautiful to hear her play, it was almost unbearable. But now, with only one arm... I can't believe that's a coincidence. That curse deliberately preserved her talent, just to torture her with the fact that she can no longer play."

"She does play, Potter. I heard her last week."

"She tries. She holds her wand in her teeth and spells the keys to play. I think it still sounds wonderful, but she can tell the difference. She gets so angry, but I try to encourage her. If the curse wants her to give up music in despair, then she should do the opposite."

Snape nodded. "I agree. I suspect it will not leave her except by its own will. She should make herself as inhospitable to it as she can."

Potter rolled his eyes. "Yeah, we reckoned as much. The trick is figuring out how to do that, exactly. At first it seemed to weaken when she cast jinxes and curses--almost as though it was draining out of her along with the other 'negative' magic. I used to let her curse me when her scars got really bad, and that would make them go dormant for a few months. But I finally had to accept that it just wasn't working the way I thought. Her curses kept getting stronger and stronger--she can put me under the Imperius, and not even Voldemort could do that! And her Cruciatus... It got to a point where I couldn't bear it, not even for a few seconds. We gave it up, and for a while her scars really punished her, but they eventually settled into a sort of steady background. Then they came back with a vengeance this fall. It's like all her resistance failed at once."

Snape felt a bit like an iron spring had been coiled within his rib cage and suddenly released. He had to wait a moment before he could speak, to be certain his voice would not waver.

"I would like to try to help her, Potter, for reasons of my own. I have already brewed some potions, and after tonight's... insights, I have a few more experiments to carry out. She has told me she will accept nothing from me, and I can appreciate her distrust. If you believe me, Potter, perhaps you can persuade her to take her medicine."

Potter's brows furrowed briefly. "I don't think so. Even without her older memories, she knows I'm no Potions Master." Both men grinned wryly. "It'll be a lot easier for you to convince her of your intentions than for me to do it 'once removed.' She knows you helped her tonight. Just talk to her, Severus." Potter's eyes narrowed in challenge. "She's bitter, but she's no Dark Lord, you know. She won't hurt you."

The spring in Snape's chest went off again with even more force.

"I am no kindly uncle, nor gentleman godfather, Potter," he muttered quietly. "It is not my own pain that concerns me."

10: Christmas

Chapter 10 of 18

With the holiday party and the latest crisis behind him, Snape sets back to work, but his major discovery takes place outside the lab.

Snape returned to the dungeons and spent the remainder of Christmas Eve searching for dragon parts. Aside from a dusty bottle of what appeared to be dried heartstrings (but had been inadequately labeled by some unknown predecessor and was therefore useless), there was nothing to be found, not so much as a single scale. Snape was certain that draconian magic was necessary for any hope of a curative; it was a logical deduction from the fact that Charlie Weasley seemed to penetrate the curse's hold on her. One can't manage dragons for sixty-odd years without a bit of their essence rubbing off.

Having broken the bank a week earlier, Snape was in a right foul mood at the state of his storeroom. When he'd taught at Hogwarts the first time, he'd amassed an incredible stockpile of ingredients. Of course, it helped that Voldemort had plenty of connections to the Dark market, as well as a considerable "professional discount," so things had come easily. Still, one would think that the subsequent Potions professors would at least *attempt* to keep the laboratory supplied. It was clear when he first arrived that no one had even raided the Hogwarts greenhouses in the last ten years, and that only required a sharp knife, a few botanical silencing charms, and a discrete bottle of Firewhiskey delivered to the Herbology professor. Snape concluded that the young people of today took no pride in their work.

He searched his old hidden caches in vain. Snape suspected the Aurors had shaken down every square inch of his office, lab, classroom, and quarters upon his abrupt departure from Hogwarts, and he was not mistaken. Aside from one very small cranny concealed not with magic, but a simple, clever series of levers and pulleys, they had all been uncovered. Snape had always thought of the non-magical hiding place as an ineffective novelty. He bitterly reflected that he should have guessed that the Aurors would search only for hidden Charms, not hidden levers. He had used the little nook for nothing more than his cache of horehound candies, which had long ago fused into a stale, unappetizing mass.

It dawned on him that "Uncle Charlie" undoubtedly had more dragon matter than he knew what to do with, and might lend some for his niece's sake. Unfortunately, no one answered at Charlie Weasley's Floo, and Snape wasted a scoop of Floo Powder in trying. Only afterward did he realize it was four o'clock in the morning, and Christmas Day besides. The extended Weasley clan was undoubtedly sprawled in sleeping bags around the parlor of their ancestral shack, awaiting dawn's first light to exchange their handmade sweaters. Pendragon would probably be joining them, for that matter, though she would have a terrible time knitting without both...

By the blood of Merlin, Severus Snape, you've reached an all-time low if the worst insult you can think of concerns her pathetically obvious amputation. Particularly since you essentially dealt her the injury in the first place.

He hung his head wearily. It was clearly time to get some rest.

Hours later, Snape awoke and climbed upstairs, frustrated by the fact that he could get nothing more done until the holiday was over and people resumed their business. There was no one else in the Great Hall for breakfast, but this was no surprise; when he still had a home, he did not remain in the castle on the Yule holidays either. He stood at the window and watched the snow fall as he ate his porridge in silence.

"Professor Snape!" Potter bounded into the Great Hall looking rumpled but cheerful. "Happy Christmas! I was just getting something for Pendragon before I head over to the Burrow. She's doing splendidly this morning, really. You've helped her so much."

Snape blanched a bit and pressed his back against the window; Potter looked chipper enough that he might come over and give him a blooming *bug* or something. "You could just as easily be condemning me this morning, Potter, if my hunch had been incorrect." That stopped the big lumbering oaf in his tracks.

"No," Potter said softly, after a pause. "I wouldn't fault you for trying. That's the sort of thing you do, not me."

Snape fixed the younger man with a withering glare, but it faded as he realized there was no enmity in Potter's face, only resignation.

As he reached the corridor of the Charms classroom, Snape's resolve began to falter. He'd agreed to bring a bowl of steamed rice up to Pendragon as a pretense for leaving the Great Hall and getting out from under Potter's gaze. It seemed like a clever solution at the time, but now he realized he'd only traded demons. *Well, perhaps she's still asleep*, he thought, but within two more strides he could make out the distant tones of her piano. *So much for optimism.*

It was louder and clearer this time, and also more beautiful. This was a piece he had never heard before, clearly too secular for the musicians on the far side of his old bedroom wall. He stopped at the foot of the stairs to her quarters. The door above was wide open. It was an embarrassing predicament; her breakfast would grow cold if he tarried, yet if he brought it up to her, there would be no more music. *Bugger. I can warm it up a bit with my wand once the piece is over. It will just be a bit sticky.*

He wondered what the piece was called. It seemed to be a bit like a waltz, having a basic sort of "one-two-three" rhythm. Even though Snape was no dancer, he thought anyone would be hard pressed to keep their footing straight in such a waltz, for on top of the steady triplets was a complex melody. It seemed to weave its way through the underlying repetition, barely confined to the pattern and yet never straying beyond it. Without even realizing it, Snape ascended the staircase and crossed the threshold into her room.

The melody suddenly switched from the upper clef to the bass--to her left hand. For a few brief measures, it took his breath away. *That was but a glimpse of what Potter was saying last night*, he thought, when the melody switched back to the more traditional treble notes. He had never noticed that the notes played by magic sounded dull and sterile until he heard the melody played by her hand.

With a start, he realized that the piece was ending; it had spiraled up to its pinnacle and the pace was slowing and settling into the bass. It was a bit late for a hasty retreat, and clapping seemed quite ridiculous, particularly with that confounded bowl of rice in his hands. As the last chords died away, he cleared his throat, hoping not to startle her into hexing him.

She was obviously expecting Potter as she did not jump at the sound, but when she turned around, her eyes went cold. The only sound was the lingering sustain of the last chord.

"Will you play more?" he asked, inwardly cursing his banality.

Her lip began to curl. "You wish to hear the notes I missed, then? Why don't you play the right hand, if you think you can do better?" She was reaching for the cover of the keyboard, undoubtedly planning to slam it closed.

"I can't play. That's not what I meant. I... didn't notice anything missing."

"You are either hopelessly ignorant, or a pathetic liar," she said venomously, and the clunk of the cover punctuated the end of the recital. "Rumor has it that you are one of the most accomplished liars alive, so it must be the former."

A girl after my own heart. "Impeccable logic, Pendragon. I know nothing about music, except that I quite like to hear you play it."

For a fleeting instant she looked disarmed, then her expression hardened again. "What do you want, Snape?"

A bit of gratitude for saving your life would be an excellent start. He let the idea die in his mind, for she need hardly be grateful that he tossed a line into the pit in which he'd shoved her. "I want nothing. Your breakfast, Pendragon; I am but the delivery boy for Harry Potter." She took the bowl, but held it at arm's length as though expecting the contents to leap out and begin burrowing into her at any second.

"It's not poisoned, Pendragon," he finally spat. "If I wished you dead, I could have been satisfied last night."

She finally bent her arm and set the bowl in her lap. "I have no reason to trust you, Snape. You are a vicious, vindictive man. My memory is not good, thanks to this curse, but I have no trouble remembering cruelty or pain. There are whole nights when all I can hear is your voice, over and over, reminding me that I will never be mistaken for something female." She tried to push back the piano bench and stand up, still gripping the bowl rather precariously in her only hand.

Knowing that he was being dismissed, Snape turned away, but spun suddenly and strode back across the room. He yanked the bowl from her hand and set it down a bit too hard on the top of the piano, causing an unpleasant twang. This was probably just as well, for it distracted her just long enough that he could shove the bench out of his way and pull her into his arms. She stiffened, but Snape anticipated the fight and pinned her arm tightly at her side.

"Let me go."

"In good time, Pendragon, I will. Be still a moment, though. Just be still." He repeated it softly as she tried to wriggle away, to free her arm: "Be still, child. Just be still." Snape hoped she wouldn't kick or bite him, but he was determined not to let go. "Be still." His voice was barely more than a breath, but it was loud enough; he held the back of her neck in his other hand and rested his head against hers. "Just for a moment, child, be still."

Somehow he *knew* this was the right approach. He felt the fight drain out of her and turn back into stiffness. Still he held on, never moving his hands, whispering in her ear, "Be still." Then the stiffness began to break as well, as she accepted that he didn't seem to have any harmful intent. "Just be still, child." Her head slowly tipped forward to lay upon his chest, and he said nothing more for a long time. On a whim, he set just the tips of his fingers against her hair and gave it a few delicate strokes.

"I have done as you asked," Pendragon said coldly. "Let me go."

Snape took one last deep breath and released her.

11: Dragons

Chapter 11 of 18

Snape does his very best to be persuasive.

Author's Note: Many thanks to Samael the Kind for allowing his lovely character, Dula, to make a cameo appearance in this story.

Charlie Weasley's Floo remained unanswered for another week, a fact which cost Snape fifteen pinches of Floo powder that he could not replace. *What kind of man takes an entire week's holiday from work at the most quiet time of year?* he grumbled internally, though the fact that it was quiet precisely because most people were visiting home and family escaped him.

On the eighth day, Potter reappeared in the Great Hall and Snape cursed the fact that he could have saved his Floo powder if he'd used his head. Reckoning that the party must be over if Potter had left, he tried Weasley's fireplace once more. This time a man answered--not Weasley, but another draconist by the weathered look of him. "I wish to speak to Charlie Weasley," Snape said bluntly.

"He is in the hatchery. Perhaps I can help you."

Snape swallowed hard. Politeness was always difficult to interpret. Either this git meant to trick him, or had no inkling who he was. Judging by his accent, which seemed vaguely Slavic in origin, Snape surmised the latter and responded in kind.

"If you are willing. I am... a Potions Master. I have heard a bit of history about Miss--about Pendragon. I would like to try to help her."

"Ah, of course. You have heard that Charlie's magic seems to penetrate the Black curse. I am afraid, sir, that many have already explored that avenue and turned up nothing of use. You are surely welcome to try, but you must not get your hopes up. Will some hair suffice?"

The man had an elegant, aristocratic bearing that reminded Snape of Lucius Malfoy. For that reason alone, he suppressed the urge to roll his eyes and make a snide remark. "No, not hair, thank you. I have a theory that the relevant link is draconian magic, not the blood she shares with her uncle."

The man frowned. "Ah. Pardon my presumption. Then what is your need, sir?"

Bugger. This prat is even more polite than the Blond Bastard. Snape felt acutely embarrassed--a most unfamiliar sensation--by his need to beg for supplies. "I am looking for... dragon egg shells." *Might as well ask for something difficult to come by; perhaps I won't look like a completely pathetic little leech.*

The other folded his arms and peered at him thoughtfully. "A valuable commodity. Perhaps you must speak to Charlie after all. You have not offered your name, and I do not know you, sir. I do not give such things to strangers, even for the benefit of little Pendragon."

Gritting his teeth, Snape replied, "Of course. If you could tell 'Charlie'--"

"Tell me what?" A new, louder voice echoed through the chimney. An unmistakable Weasleyesque red head appeared at the hearth, its cheery grin disappearing as it recognized the face in the Floo. "What the hell do you want?" Weasley spat. The other draconist looked utterly scandalized, but Snape felt at home at last.

"I want to help your niece, Weasley, if you can bite back your contempt long enough to hear my request."

Weasley's face soured, but he composed himself quickly. "Harry told us you... pushed the scars back," he said grudgingly. "With Dark magic, of course, Merlin-only-knows what the long-term consequence will be--"

"Considering that the immediate consequence was death by asphyxiation, it seemed like a reasonable alternative at the time. Did Potter also explain that I would like to try my hand at some potions for her?"

"He mentioned it. And that he wasn't sure she trusts you enough to take them. Which I can completely understand, mind."

It was Snape's turn to speak grudgingly. "I'm working on that."

The other wizard, the one with dignity and upbringing, finally found his tongue. "Charlie, who is this man? Is he a Potions Master or not?"

"He's a traitor, Dula. A murderer from the Great War. But yes, he's the Potions Professor at Hogwarts."

Dula did not try to hide his startled frown, but like a true patrician he continued to speak with a cool, even tone. "A war criminal. He has paid the price for his crime, yes?" Weasley nodded, averting his eyes as Dula nodded and continued. "Obviously. One does not betray their way into such a position. Minister of Magic, perhaps, but not a professor at Hogwarts." Dula's eyes crinkled with mischief as both Weasley and Snape broke into cynical grins.

"You know, one of these days you're going to be wrong about something, and I really hope I'm there to see it," grumbled Weasley at last.

"As you have said for years, Charlie. Now, will you trust this man or not? It is freezing in here and I would have the fire back in 'heat' mode if you can end this bloody argument."

As Weasley turned back to the Floo, the snarl returned to his face, but his voice remained level. "Meet me in Diagon Alley tomorrow at the Apothecary. I have a delivery to make at one o'clock. We can discuss it."

Snape knew he would regret it in a few hours, but he would not be caught dead in London (or anywhere else) carrying a picnic basket. Tossing his last Sickle grudgingly into the glass bowl on the bar, he stomped through the Leaky Cauldron without regard to stares, still munching on the remnants of an apple. It would be his last meal for the next thirty hours.

Weasley was already standing in front of the Apothecary, and glared at Snape through the freezing rain as he approached. "Given up on punctuality, then?"

"I assumed you would take a bit of time to complete your business. If I must spend the night here, then the later I arrived the better."

Weasley ignored the comment, clearly unconcerned about Snape's whereabouts once they parted ways. "Dula said you're looking for eggshells. Interesting that you need the most expensive materials. Why do I have a feeling, Snape, that you're handing me a bill of goods about helping Pen, just to get your hands on something you can't otherwise get?"

Snape's teaching robe was not made to keep out the wind, and he folded his arms tight across his chest in an effort to warm his fingers. He walked as he answered, hoping to find a more sheltered spot to stand and argue.

"Perhaps I am, Weasley. You know what an accomplished sneak I am. It would be so in character to rush to Pendragon's side just in time to spare her from suffocation--"

and of course, cleverly positioning Potter to witness the act--all to create the illusion that I'd like to help the girl so that I might obtain dragon eggshell *gratis* from her uncle. By Jove, you've sussed me out. Clearly I lost my edge in Azkaban."

Weasley halted right at the edge of a building; the wind whipped bitterly down the alley through Snape's clothing. "You know, I wouldn't put it past you. You've certainly cooked up more twisted schemes in your time."

"You don't know the half of it. However, I'm afraid my glory days are over and I am reduced to sincerity. I may be able to help the girl, Weasley. Such an effort could create a mote of goodwill for me in the Wizarding world, that I might walk the streets of London without being spat upon by strangers. Does it comfort you to learn that ultimately, my motives for helping her are selfish?"

"Actually, it does. At least I can believe that part. What's your plan, then?" Thankfully, they continued to walk on at that point.

"I doubt that I can remove the curse, but I may be able to weaken it. I'm fairly certain I can stop the pain."

"All guesswork, of course; you'll have a wholesome alibi if none of it works. So tell me, why should I just hand you a valuable eggshell when, for the price of it, I could hire a dozen potionists to work on Pen's problem?"

"Because none of them would be *me*, Weasley. You can search the globe and you will not find another with an intimate understanding of Black magic. I know this; I watched all of my contemporaries die in Azkaban." Well, mostly; old Hilarity Giggles, the most unsuitably-named witch he'd ever met, had succumbed to dementia and could no longer find her way out of her cell, much less brew a potion.

Weasley wrinkled his nose in contempt but kept walking.

"If it's a matter of cost, a scale would suffice, I'm sure," Snape continued. "For that matter, a trimming from a claw or a vial of blood would do. Far be it from me to deprive you of the profit on an eggshell, even if it is on Pendragon's behalf."

That got a reaction. Weasley halted, grabbing him by the elbow and leaning in close to his face. "How dare you? You know damned well this isn't about profit! I'd give a hundred shells to help Pen."

"Then perhaps I should ask for one hundred instead of one. How much audacity would it take to convince you of my intentions?" Snape was glad for the rush of anger; perhaps Weasley would think he was trembling with rage instead of shivering.

The two men locked each others' gazes for a long moment, until Weasley set his jaw and turned back, wordlessly, toward the Apothecary. "Come on, then. But I swear, if I find out you've misled me, Snape..."

"Yes, yes, I'm quite filled with dread."

They walked back in silence and Snape's shivering began in earnest; his clothes were quite soaked through from the slushy rain. The warm air in the Apothecary felt good for a moment, but it soon became painful as Snape's frozen fingers awoke and recognized how severely they'd been insulted by the cold. He would have given anything to be able to stop shaking, but Occlumency was limited only to his thoughts, not the automatic reactions of his body. When Weasley returned from the delivery bay, he jerked his head in surprise at first sight of Snape.

"You look like a drowned rat."

Snape rolled his eyes but did not speak. *Why give the bastard a chance to hear my teeth chatter?*

Shouldering a heavy pack, Weasley held out a leather pouch, watching him with narrowed eyes. Snape snatched it as quickly as he could, but speed could not disguise the tremulous path of his hand. "Why aren't you wearing a coat, Snape?"

"Supply and demand, Weasley. I was sent to Azkaban in the summertime. No coat in, no coat out. Quite simple." It was hard to sound snide when your breath rattled around in your chest and mouth as though being stirred by hummingbird wings.

"And they don't pay professors anymore at Hogwarts?"

"One cannot brew counterpotions to Black magic out of coats, Weasley. Good day." Snape didn't want to hear another word. It was bad enough knowing that the contents of that pouch could easily buy him a coat, a meal, and a warm bed for the night; the last thing he needed was Charlie Weasley gloating about his poverty.

The wind felt like it would cut him in half as he stepped outside, but at least the rain had stopped. He might get away with loitering in the Leaky Cauldron until his clothes were dry, although they would expect him to buy something. Snape pondered whether to return to the Apothecary and sell a few chips of that eggshell, but he knew it was foolishness. The trade in dragon materials was highly regulated and he could easily end up back in Azkaban. He recalled that Albus used to have a lovely warming spell, and Snape wished he had taken the time to learn it.

The pub was crammed with young people. There was a live performance of some popular band going on in the main room and they were charging an admission fee just for the right to go inside and be crushed by the throng. Snape pressed his way to the Muggle entrance and stepped back out into the wind with great relief. Crowds were intolerable after Azkaban. He'd seen too many people drop dead from a "shiv" thrust anonymously into their thigh, tipped with a poison that he himself had most likely brewed in the dead of night in his cell, trading someone's life for a fresh orange.

He had just turned the corner onto Shaftesbury Avenue when he heard footsteps pounding up behind him. "Professor!" Snape tucked his wand back in his sleeve; it was only Weasley. He spun around, hating the other man for delaying him yet again in the freezing cold, but his admonishment stuck in his throat. Weasley's breath was forming puffs of mist in the air as he held, at arm's length, a long, lined, woolen cape.

"Here," he panted. "It's Dula's. He insists."

Snape eyed it suspiciously. "Your friend... Does he intend to send a magistrate to detain me for stealing cloaks?"

"How about stolen dragon matter, you tosser? No. Dula is both wealthy and generous. He also believes that war criminals are so named only because they happened to side with the loser." Weasley looked away as he said it, but he continued to hold out the cape. "Take it. You can't help our Pen if you freeze to death in Muggle London."

"Tell your friend... that I thank him." Snape took the cloak without another word and stomped off, hoping that if he had not expressed sufficient gratitude, Weasley would improvise an appropriate supplement.

12: Conspiracy

Chapter 12 of 18

Snape's stroll through Muggle London proves that an old dog CAN learn new tricks.

The cloak proved to be more than met the eye. It had obviously been imbued with an all-weather spell, for within seconds of donning it, Snape's clothes were dry. Upon raising the hood, his hair dried out as well, and every time the fabric brushed his shoes, the water seeping through the worn soles sloshed back out to the pavement where it belonged. The Malfoys had owned such things, but would not have given them away offhandedly to strangers by any stretch of the imagination.

No longer shivering, Snape actually began to enjoy the walk. There was no need to hurry, that was certain; the train would not be departing until the next morning, and though the cloak would surely improve the experience of spending the night on Platform 9 3/4, it still would not be pleasant. He found a discarded Muggle newspaper and read the entire thing on a park bench as automobiles and pigeons gaddled around him like a grounded Quidditch rally. He stopped to peruse the art in every gallery he passed. He peered casually into every shop window, ignoring only restaurants and grocers.

He came to the same little music shop he'd found a fortnight earlier. *What harm in stepping inside for a moment?* It was strange to be surrounded by pianos and clarinets and other Muggle instruments. He kept expecting them to break into song at any moment; it seemed impossible that things so sleek and bright would not make a sound until touched by a human hand.

"Good afternoon, sir. Would you like assistance?"

Snape looked up from the flute he was examining, realizing the clerk was addressing him. "What? No, young lady, I am... just looking."

"Very good, sir." As she turned away, Snape noticed the white cane. Tilting his head, he watched her navigate back to the counter, sweeping the cane before her with practiced ease, never striking the merchandise or display racks despite the somewhat cramped environs. He found it fascinating, and continued to watch as she felt along the countertop for a Braille book, then set it in her lap and began scanning it with her fingertips.

She doesn't even know I'm watching her, he thought, marveling that anyone could go through life blissfully unaware of the stares of others. He felt a rather childish impulse to perform Legilimency on her, having never attempted it on a blind person. *With my luck, she'll be some sort of Squib, just magical enough to be aware of the spell.* Scientific curiosity was not worth the risk of being drop-kicked back into Azkaban. Nonetheless, he found himself drawn to the counter, just to study her further.

"And may I help you now?" she asked, though he was quite certain he'd not made a sound as he approached her. He felt foolish for being startled when she spoke to him.

"How did you know that I..."

She made a wan smile. "Little things. There was a small rush of air, for one. The acoustics in the room changed--the sound of traffic is muted when people stand between me and the window, for example. The fact that you went so suddenly quiet made me wonder if you weren't sneaking up on me." There was a hint of playful reproach in her tone, but no animosity.

"I beg your pardon, young lady." His cheeks were growing warm and he was utterly relieved that she could not see him blush.

"It's all right, sir. Most people don't know quite what to make of me, and that often leads them to say or do awkward things. One can't be sure how to react to the unknown, after all. Everyone needs a moment to get used to the novelty. I've learned to trust second impressions more than first." She smiled again, this time with warmth.

"Perhaps you can help me with something after all," Snape said, out of an unexpected longing to continue speaking with this unusual woman. "There is a... friend; she lost her arm in an accident. She plays the piano. Played. That is, she still tries... she was very good. Is very good, in her remaining hand..." *Bollocks, Severus, are you thirteen years old again?*

"Such a tragedy. Which hand was lost?"

"The right."

"Oddly enough, that is often the case. I suppose it has to do with the right being more commonly dominant, and more commonly in use when such tragedies strike. The right is, of course, the more utilized hand in piano, being in charge of the melody while the left has more of a supporting role. Sometimes the very idea of the left hand dominating their play is too much to accept; it shakes people's confidence to suddenly place all their trust in the 'runt,' so to speak. What does your friend play now?"

"I... I fear I am hopelessly ignorant. I know nothing of composers, or titles. She played one a few weeks ago that I remembered from... the church. 'Ave Maria' would be the likely title."

"The Bach?" she said, her spine straightening in surprise.

"I couldn't say." Snape had never felt so unprepared in his life.

The clerk jumped up and rounded the counter, one hand grazing the top gently. Snape stepped back to let her pass, and she settled immediately onto the bench of the nearest piano. She briefly placed a hand at either end of the keyboard and drew them together, fingering the black keys as her hands met in the middle and placing them into an automatic stance. She began to [play his 'Ave Maria,'](#) flawlessly and beautifully, the music of his youth.

"That's it."

She finished the chord and stopped. "That was the common arrangement, in F major. The piece was originally written by Bach in C major. Did it sound more like this when your friend played it?" She replayed the same few measures in the higher key, and though he could certainly hear the difference, he was amazed that it could sound just the same from a different starting point.

"How did you do that?"

The clerk laughed. "Many people know the 'Ave Maria,' but few can sing it from middle C. It becomes rather soprano. An agreeable pianist would transpose the tune to a more hospitable key, particularly for a church service. Many voices wishing to join in, after all." She played the first measure in yet another key, and Snape laughed out loud in his amazement.

"But how does your friend manage to play this with only the left hand?" she asked.

"She... misses some of the notes." It was as accurate an explanation as any he could offer a Muggle. Nodding, the clerk seemed to take it in stride.

"We have some sheet music that is written for left hand alone. Wittgenstein--he lost the right arm in combat--commissioned many pieces; Ravel's *Concerto for Left Hand* is a fine example. Ravel himself had to play it with both hands when he demonstrated it for Wittgenstein! I believe I also have the Godowsky *Paraphrases of Chopin* in one of these boxes. Perhaps your friend would be more satisfied if she had a few pieces that would fit her hand, rather than trying to play both hands at once? She can't hope to succeed at the latter, it simply cannot be done to perfection and she will just get more and more frustrated."

"Ah, I see that you have met her, then."

The clerk laughed too. "Possibly, but I definitely have met the archetype. Shall I help you look for the scores?"

Snape's stomach churned with shame; he could no more buy a sheet of music than a cup of tea, despite his pouch of dragon eggshell. "Another time, perhaps," he mumbled, then thought of an excuse. "I doubt she would appreciate my meddling."

"Quite true. It would be better if she *happened* to hear about such music and explored it on her own. Somehow that takes a bit of the sting out."

"Your study of the piano has apparently given you a keen insight into levers and strings."

She laughed heartily at this comment. "That may be, kind sir," she said, bowing her head in exaggerated humility. Snape glanced down at her hands, still poised above the keyboard, flattening his lips in the slightest of frowns when he observed her wedding ring.

"There was another that she played recently," he stammered anew. "It was very beautiful. I had never heard it... I am being ridiculous, it would be impossible to learn its origins without more information. Forgive me."

"No, no, don't give up so quickly. Perhaps if you hum a few bars?"

"Hum..." An image of the blue bands constricting Pendragon's ribs flashed into his mind, as he suddenly felt as though his lungs had frozen solid. Snape cleared his throat. "I do not hum."

She cocked her head. "Don't be silly. I can't sing either; there's no shame in it. Just try. Chances are I'll recognize it, even if it is a half-tone off." She smiled so expectantly that, for a moment, he believed her. He replayed her music in his mind and let his voice follow along with the memory.

"This one?" she said, and played it perfectly. Snape closed his eyes, nodding, then snapped to as he realized she could not see his reply.

"Yes."

"Beethoven!" she said, aghast. "Surely she doesn't attempt to play the sonata with one hand?"

"As I said, she misses some notes."

"She must! Poor dear! You really shouldn't let her torture herself, trying to force her hand in this way. No matter how much she loves the music, she has to be realistic."

"Would you do something for me, miss? I would love to hear it the way it was written. Could you..." He suddenly felt foolishly presumptuous, and wished he could just take back the words.

"I'd be happy to [play it for you](#)." Which she promptly did, leaving him spellbound by the music as if she'd cast the *Petrificus Totalus*. Near the end, when the melody moved into the left hand, she nodded at him.

"How can anything be so beautiful?" he whispered as the last note faded.

"What a dear! How can you have such appreciation and yet be unfamiliar with Beethoven? That's but the first part of the sonata--and I'm certain your friend would not attempt the third. May I?"

Snape nodded again, and again felt like an imbecile. "Please."

[She proceeded to play](#) a piece of music so stunningly complex and passionate that he grew faint before realizing that he was holding his breath. When she finished, his heart was pounding. "What manner of man can write such music?" he asked in a scraped voice.

"Beethoven was quite remarkable, yes. Such fire. That he of all people lost his hearing--"

"What?" Snape's voice returned in full. Surely he had misunderstood the clerk; the world could not be so devastatingly ironic.

"It's true. By the time Beethoven wrote the Moonlight, he was nearly deaf--and that was neither his last nor finest piece (although that latter point is arguable). In my mind, a champion for perseverance. Perhaps that's why your friend continues to play?"

Snape would have answered, had he heard the question, but he had not. Or more accurately, he heard it but did not register any meaning, for he was lost, not in thought, but in a whirlwind of unfamiliar pain. Just as a Potions Master never quite knows which elements will combine perfectly to yield a new magical elixir, none but Fate could predict that a blind clerk, an armless pianist, and a deaf composer could interlock at one critical point in time to break the heart of a heartless man.

13: A Bitter Potion

Chapter 13 of 18

Snape gets back to business, and once again demonstrates this strange ability to soothe the dragon.

Once again, the Hogwarts Express was a godsend. Having spent the night on a hard wooden bench, (warm enough but with a tumult in his heart), the luxury of a soft, flat surface and the repetitive clacking of the wheels finally soothed him into a much-needed sleep. This time he was fairly certain the arrival at Hogsmeade would be noisy

enough to waken him, and he was correct. Though hungry, he waited to disembark until all the students had left the station, not at all eager to be spotted amongst them.

In retrospect, he supposed he could have Apparated with the eggshells, but it wasn't worth the risk. He wanted them to arrive at Hogwarts with all of their magical properties intact, and the best way to assure it was to hand-carry them. Draconists like Weasley had special Portkeys for transporting materials, but their methods were a Guild secret. It was quite a monopoly, but a necessary one; the dragons would be harassed to extinction by poachers if all one had to do for a tidy profit was snatch up a bit of their flesh and Apparate.

Regardless, he was home again and that was all that mattered. Snape had twelve hours to go before the inevitable piling-up of essays and lesson plans; he intended to use them efficiently. Once again, he was grateful for the genius of Salazar Slytherin, who had cleverly put both the laboratories and the kitchens in the dungeons. Coffee and sandwiches would get him through the night.

Snape's first love was Potionmaking, and though he had strayed in Muggle London, his art embraced him without judgment or reproach. By dawn he had used half the eggshells. Several concoctions had to be discarded, but these had paved the way to better experiments and thus were regrettable but not worthless. He brought a few cauldrons to the classroom and kept busy as the students prepared their own draughts, and by lunchtime, he was ready for the first test.

He took the tumbler to her room, knowing full well her precise routine for eating lunch and exiting the Great Hall at the same time every day. He expected that she would return to her room, and he was correct; a series of scales were already issuing from the piano, undoubtedly a warming-up exercise. Snape knocked on the jamb of her open door.

This time she jumped, nearly upsetting the piano bench as she apparently tried to leap to her feet and turn to face him at the same time. "Sneak!" she shouted, pointing her hand as though she meant to hex him into some abandoned level of Hell, if only her wand had been in it. This time, however, Snape wasn't having any of it.

"Pendragon, I *knocked*," he observed crossly, closing her door and traversing the room. "I daresay you'd just now be discovering my presence directly behind you, if I were *sneaking*. Why do you leave your door open, silly girl, if you are so easily startled?"

"Potter sometimes comes to listen. He's too polite to interrupt." She glared at him pointedly.

"Fortunately, I am not," he said with a wry grin. "I'm sure if I just came in and sat down, waiting for an appropriate point to make my presence known, you would become quite undone when you discovered me." He pushed the bench out of his way with his knee, edging between her and the piano.

"What are you doing?" she snarled, backing away. He set the tumbler on top of the piano and pulled her close, one hand again on her neck, the other firmly clamped on her hipbone.

"Quieting you down, child. Be still now."

"I tire of this, Snape! I should never have cooperated the first time! Let me go!" She pushed against him with her remaining arm and nearly wriggled out of his grasp, but he had survived a half century of courtyard scuffles though nonviolent self-defense. The punishment for fighting in Azkaban was severe, and the only way to avoid it was to leave one's attacker unharmed. For many, that meant simply taking the beating, but Snape was quite certain that he would not survive for long if he chose that tactic. He persuaded Lucius Malfoy that the two of them should study a Muggle martial art called Aikido, and Narcissa had obligingly sent them manuals from every Muggle shop she could find. It hadn't saved Malfoy's life in the end, but it spared them both from considerable torture.

It was also proving quite useful now. Pendragon managed to knock his chin rather hard with her head, but he restrained her more tightly so that she couldn't repeat it. Once again, her thrashing slowed, then stopped, but she continued to arch away from him, nearly pulling him off balance. "If I let you go, young lady, you shall fall right onto your back," he said. "Is that truly preferable to my embrace?"

"If I concede again, you'll continue to impose this on me. A bruised behind is well worth it, to be rid of you."

Snape let her slip from his grasp. In a rigid arc, she fell away like a logged tree and did not attempt to catch herself, not even grasping at his sleeve. *She'd really do it!* he thought in amazement, even as he flicked his wand to prevent her head from cracking on the stone floor. Another flick and her trajectory reversed, swinging her upright, whereupon he caught her in an even tighter grip.

"Enough nonsense, child. Be still."

She sighed in an angry huff. "Why do you harass me, Snape?"

Taking a deep breath, he knew it was time for honesty. "Because, child, unlike anyone else living on this earth, I *understand* the curse that has touched your mind. And... I would help you."

"No one can help me."

"Perhaps not, child, perhaps not, although the spell I cast on Christmas Eve seemed to do some good."

She was already too tense to stiffen further, but she lurched in surprise. "You lie! That was Potter, I saw him! He carried me to my room!"

"Yes, he carried you, after I broke open the curse that was stealing your breath. Ask him the next time you see him, and you will know the truth. For now, though, all that matters is that I do mean to help you, child, and I *can*. But you must find your focus. Now be still!"

"But--"

"SILENCE, child," he admonished, pushing her face into his robes and holding her there, motionless, until the stiffness broke down and once again she laid her head quietly on his chest. He didn't move a muscle, having learned her limitations on the first go-round. Once her breathing, too, had slowed to a calm pace, he spoke in a direct, no-nonsense tone.

"Can you think clearly now, Pendragon?"

"Yes." She sounded quite surprised at her admission.

"Good." He maintained his hold a few more minutes before continuing. "Can you consider the possibility that I want to help you?"

"Um... Can I... What?" She shook her head like a wet puppy, as though attempting to dislodge a loose thought. He expected he would have to quiet her again, but she sighed and pressed her forehead against his chest, hiding her eyes. "I can see that it would be foolish of you to hurt me, unless you're homesick for the confines of Azkaban. I doubt that you want to help me *per se*, although I'm sure you'd love to be recognized and rewarded for helping me. Have I answered you?"

"You have. I have no desire to return to prison, Pendragon. I would not risk my freedom by harming you." *Yet, anyway.* "I've brought a potion. It is not poisonous, and I think it will help you. I ask you to consider taking it."

She stiffened, but he expected as much and held on tightly, careful not to move. Once again, he waited in silence until she composed herself.

"I'll take it, Snape, if you tell me the meaning of all this. How do you make me feel so... coherent? For that matter, how do you know so much about the Lightning curse?"

"Fair enough, child. I will explain those things, and more--after you take the potion. I will let go of you now, to Summon the tumbler."

"Only with one hand, if you can manage it, Potioneer. As much as I hate to admit it, I much prefer your hands on me." Snape smiled weakly; he knew this was but a hint of her true demeanor, but he could already see why Potter was so fond of her. He silently performed the *Accio*, realizing that he had no choice but to drop his wand in order to catch the tumbler without calling his left hand into play. It didn't matter; he'd become accustomed to wandlessness in Azkaban and was never truly unarmed, after all.

"Calming Draught?" she asked dubiously, sniffing the contents.

"Modified. Taking it by nose is not sufficient, Pendragon. Drink." She frowned, but she took the tumbler and sniffed again. The dragon shells made it sulfurous and pungent and she wrinkled her whole face with disgust at the smell, but she resolutely emptied the tumbler in several quick gulps.

It worked a bit too well, as her eyes immediately glazed and she slumped against him like putty. Snape made a sincere but ineffective attempt to catch her, but there was no right arm under which to brace his grip, and he was instinctively loathe to take hold of the remaining flesh on that side. He ended up lurching her rather awkwardly to the piano bench, but once it took up her weight, he managed to tug her left arm around his shoulder and hoist her over to the armchair.

"Who'zere?" she slurred, patting his face as he pulled away from her. She caught hold of the end of his nose and gave it a rather obnoxious wiggle. "Snuffles? Goo' boy," she mumbled with a wide, giddy smile, presumably mistaking him for some childhood pet. She slouched deep into the chair with her knees wide apart to keep from falling to either side, singing something in Chinese (or horribly garbled English, it was hard to tell). Snape rolled his eyes, mentally calculating which ingredients he would cut back for the next attempt at this potion.

He heard young voices echoing up the staircase; it was time for afternoon classes to commence. Snape dismissed her students and quickly put up a cancellation notice on the blackboard, then dashed back up to Pendragon's chambers. Fortunately she had some Floo powder, so he was not forced to run down the marble stairs to the dungeons. He decided to teach his first afternoon class since it was clear that Pendragon needed to recover a bit, but he cancelled the remainder and returned to her office after the hour was up.

She answered his knock with a weak "Enter," and he let himself in. Her eyes were tired but bright, with a spark of cheer that he'd never before seen in them. "Good!" she said, surprising him even further. "I wasn't sure if you'd be back!"

"I promised an explanation if you took the potion, did I not?" he chided, albeit gently.

"You did," she said with a pleased grin. "Sit down and live up to your word, then." She undulated her upper body and Snape knew she would have indicated the other chair with a broad sweep of her right arm, if it had been present.

14: The Lightning Curse

Chapter 14 of 18

Snape reveals his speculations about what plagues Pendragon, but the discussion is interrupted.

"As to how I know about Lightning curses: This should provide a general explanation." As Snape spoke, he tapped his left wrist with his wand, reversing the enchantment that he meticulously kept on his sleeve. The buttons on the cuff slid open immediately and he pushed both robe and shirt away to reveal his Mark.

Pendragon leaned forward to examine it, apparently fascinated rather than repulsed. "I've never seen one in real life before," she commented. "It must be, what, ninety years old? Strange that it hasn't faded or blurred over time, isn't it?"

"Closer to seventy, child. I am not that old. But it isn't strange at all, for this Mark was made with Lightning, though the maker of it did not realize the true nature of the magic he wielded. Fortunate for all of us, I suppose."

"You were his servant. Why?"

Snape waved his hands brusquely. "Another time, Pendragon. I don't know how long this potion will work, and there are more important things to discuss than the motives of a young fool threescore and ten years ago. I want you to understand what I am attempting with you."

"Fair enough," she said, in mimicry of his own words earlier that day, and settled back in her chair.

"The Dark Lord spent decades searching for powerful Dark magic. He held the *Rubra Fulminis* without recognizing it for many years, using it to Mark his followers, among other things. It gave him the power to create multiple Horcruxes, which had not been attempted in recorded history. By the time he learned the true nature of this tool, he'd become habituated in its use. Complacent, if you will--he'd become so accustomed to using it in the limited ways he'd devised that it didn't occur to him to simply apply it further. The Red Lightning, after all, is the weakest, the lowest in energy of the spectrum. Black Lightning isn't really black, it's ultraviolet. But I digress.

"Once Lord Voldemort realized that he was trafficking in extraordinary magic, he began seeking its more powerful counterparts. It turned out that his ancestor, Salazar Slytherin, had mastered Green Lightning and was striving towards Blue by the end of his lifetime. That little fact has been rather conveniently left out of *Hogwarts: A History*, as well as that abominable Professor Binns's syllabus (may his soul please rest in peace at some point). We can't have our beloved institution tainted by the fact that one of our Four Founders was Darker than Asahel Durmstrang, can we?" Snape scoffed in disdain and paused briefly to help himself to some rainwater from her barrel.

"So," he continued, settling back into the chair, "Voldemort confiscated Slytherin's many diaries and notebooks from the Chamber of Secrets, and eventually understood that the Lightning curses were not myth. He was astounded to discover he'd been operating one of them for years, having learned the incantation from a recluse in Tibet or some such place. He was eager to continue Slytherin's research on the Blue, for immortality was his ultimate goal, and obviously Slytherin was unable to achieve it. Red, Green and others were therefore beneath him.

"That was how I came into the ranks of the Death Eaters, child; the Dark Lord needed a scientific mind to trace the Lightning curses, and I arrived in the right place at the right time. Fortunately, I had an opportunity to... rethink my position, before making any significant gains. By the time he returned from his first fall, I was quite determined that he would never have them. Unfortunately, the best way to ensure that was to master the spells myself."

"Now wasn't that convenient?" Pendragon grumbled, but he silenced her with a cool glare.

"If you can devise a better plan, child, do let me know, but I was in a rather precarious position--a double agent, assigned to this research with an expectation for results, under penalty of torture! 'Know thine enemy,' they say, after all. And I was not alone in that decision; Albus Dumbledore took on that burden with me, that we could keep

each other in check.

"I learned how to wield it, child, the Blue Lightning, though I have never used it. Some of the instructions were encoded within one of Voldemort's own Horcruxes, unbeknownst to him. Albus chose to destroy the object using the Blue, to ensure that no trace of the message remained. I was present when this was done, and the power was... quite impressive. I can only imagine what it was like when that idiot Wormtail cast the Black."

"It was horrible," Pendragon said quietly, almost whispering. "Beyond horror. It was just utterly *wrong* in every sense; it made me want to run screaming, freeze in terror, and erupt with rage, all at once. I wanted it to kill me, because I couldn't stand to be in a world where such things could exist. I *laughed* when that little man exploded. I'm not *like* that, Snape. But I was thrilled to watch him die for bringing such a thing into reality. And I didn't even mind that my arm was gone--because it saved me the trouble of cutting it off myself. It would never be clean again after the touch of that magic."

She sat up suddenly at the edge of her chair. "Snape! It did so much more than that! This is the first time I've been able to think straight in years! What has it done to me--and how did you stop it?"

"Sit back, child," he admonished, noting the hints of panic in her eyes. "Already the potion's effects are waning. I will tell you what I can, while you can listen."

"There is no remaining description of the mechanism behind the *Atra's* effects, but I found an ancient text that described the Violet Lightning. It spoke of dissociating self from mind, and mind from magic. Abstract terms which sounded like so much blathering, but I read them carefully at the time, and now I am glad of it."

"It's rather amazing what sort of cast-off, esoteric material ends up in a prison library, child. Books that sit unsold on shelves for years in the secondhand shops. Books long forgotten in attics and cellars, rediscovered by heirs hoping they will be worth something, and finding to their disappointment that no one wanted them in their grandparents' day and no one wants them now. But a man with fifty years of empty time on his hands will open any book, and in dry, unappreciated "psychiatry" texts, I discovered some familiar themes."

"If you were a Muggle, you would long since have been labeled 'autistic,' or perhaps 'schizophrenic.' And such labels would not be entirely inaccurate, for they have been applied to the symptoms Muggles show when remnants of the Lightning curses propagate through their ranks. I spent many years making that deduction, and it is admittedly a hunch, but I believe it to be accurate."

"When that curse touched you, Pendragon, it fractured your mind and your magic into separate shards, only some of which are still able to function without the others. You lost some of your magic, but kept some. You lost your name and identity, indeed, so strongly that it was taken not just from you, but the world as well. Parts of your memory, parts of your personality, parts of your very presence were walled off. In a way, you've become your own Horcrux, for the splitting of the soul is accomplished in the same way. In your case, however, the missing pieces are still within you, just... inaccessible."

"My name... my magic. They're all still inside me?"

"Yes, child. The proof is right here before us--just this one potion has restored some connection or balance in your mind."

"But you did it before just by squeezing me!"

Snape nodded. "Something I read once, by a Muggle with autism. She described how sensations often overpower her, rendering her unable to think clearly. Being squeezed and blinded to the external world relieves the anxiety, allowing her to make internal sense again. I thought it might work for you, and it did."

Her shoulders sagged. "Perhaps I need to move into a very small box."

"That might help," he agreed sarcastically. "A rather impractical strategy, however. I think I can devise potions for a longer-term solution... for a price."

Her eyes were definitely getting wilder, but she was still coherent enough to understand his statement. She furrowed her brow, tilting her head in confusion.

"And what price is that, Professor Snape?"

The words were spoken with cold suspicion, but not by Pendragon. Snape turned to regard the owner of the voice.

"That is a matter between myself and the young lady, Professor Potter."

15: The Rate of Exchange

Chapter 15 of 18

Snape takes an opportunity to vent some frustration onto Mr. Potter.

Potter's interruption was most unwelcome, but probably for the best. Pendragon was still coherent enough to flash him a welcoming smile, which, mercifully, stunned him into silence. When she said, "Hi, Harry," his eyes filled immediately with tears, but the potion's effects had waned too much for her to withstand such a show of emotion. She collapsed back into herself with an almost physical snap. Her smile transformed into a scowl and her eyes narrowed with confusion and distrust.

Snape watched her regression with clinical detachment, having expected it at any minute. When he glanced back up at Potter, however, he felt an uncomfortable twinge in his stomach. Potter looked so bloody *wounded*, having caught a glimpse of the Pendragon he once knew, only to vanish before his very eyes. That his joy was so fully turned to grief made Snape wince; he wondered if this was compassion. *And if so, it certainly isn't as warm and fuzzy as it is reputed to be.*

Potter glanced back and forth between Pendragon and Snape, trying to make sense of what just happened. Snape recognized the futility of this endeavor, but still felt rankled by the tone of Potter's question, so he merely folded his arms and waited. *If you would presume the worst of me, Potter, then I am only too happy to oblige.* It soon became obvious, however, that Potter's distress was agitating Pendragon, and it was pointless to make her suffer. "Sit now, Pendragon, and play your piano," Snape ordered in a firm but emotionless voice, then, rolling his eyes disdainfully, he motioned to Potter to follow him out of the room.

They had barely cleared the doorway when Potter grabbed his shoulder and yanked him around. "What happened in there? She *knew* me!"

"Calm yourself, Potter," Snape said coldly, before resuming his descent to the Charms classroom. "I gave her the first potion today. It had a good result but wore off fairly quickly--a process you accelerated by introducing tension. Had you exercised a modicum of discretion, you might have seen more than a few seconds of her improved

state." He had reached the landing at that point and glanced back at Potter; the younger wizard had stopped in the middle of the staircase, his face a tormented grimace.

Serves you right, you faithless prat.

"Your office, Potter?" Snape asked drily when they both reached the classroom. He really should have forced Potter to extend an olive branch, but Snape was eager to get this inevitable discussion over with and return to his laboratory. Potter nodded and led the way to the second floor.

Snape coughed in order to hide his surprised chuckle at his first sight of Potter's territory. It looked more like the office of a Quidditch coach than a Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. Five broomsticks hung on one wall, each a top-notch make and model, and there were two additional empty hooks within the arrangement that undoubtedly held regular occupants as well. A grindylow tank that had once belonged to Remus Lupin stood in the corner, its occupant sullenly gnawing on a crawfish. There was also a small hutch that Snape recognized from the old Order Headquarters at Grimmauld Place; it had been in the drawing room on the mantel. The original collection of Dark objects remained within it, although the top shelf had been cleared off to make room for a small gold cup, a damaged book, a larger red book with beautiful runes on the cover, a silver locket, the signet ring of Salazar Slytherin, and a single long braid of black hair. Snape caught his breath as a sharp pain stabbed through his stomach; he had never seen all of the Horcruxes together before, and the signet ring alone was enough to give him nightmares.

Potter sat in an armchair before the fire and stared at him, but Snape's generosity had run out. He settled into the other chair, interlocking his fingers over his belly as though they had just come from a heavy meal. A raised brow was his only concession.

"Don't give me that look," said Potter coolly. "You know damn well that she'd normally be helpless and vulnerable in that type of situation. I didn't know you'd given her a treatment; what was I supposed to think when I heard your proposition?"

"Do I detect a certain resentment that I would presume to treat her without notifying you?"

Potter's eyes grew even colder. "We'll take that up later in the discussion. I'm not going to argue this point, Snape. What 'price' were you going to ask of her?"

At times, Potter was so easy to aggravate that there was practically no enjoyment in it. "I told you, Potter, that is a matter between Pendragon and myself."

"The hell it is! Not if you wait until the very end to begin negotiations--when she's becoming addled and confused again. For that matter, I don't know that she was capable of making any decisions before that point. Make no mistake, Professor," he added, leaning forward and speaking very softly, "we are all very grateful that you're trying to help our Pen, but gratitude has its limits."

Snape stared at him for some time, trying not to smirk, before replying. "This is an interesting insight into your character, Potter. It's quite obvious that you have assumed my price would be unreasonable. What did you imagine I would demand of 'your' Pen? Don't be shy, Potter; I'm most curious about your perceptions of my dark desires. An exorbitant number of Galleons? Her firstborn child, that I might drink its blood? Some perverse act of sexual debauchery?"

Potter blanched at his final suggestion. "I'm no gambler," Snape continued, his voice silken but poisonous, "but I'd wager you envisioned the latter, didn't you? It's been over fifty years, after all. What fantasies do you suppose one can dream up in that length of time, sequestered in the nurturing confines of Azkaban? Particularly a Legilimens surrounded by every sort of twisted deviant imaginable. Have you pictured her being forced into some unspeakable act, stoic and miserable as she waits for me to complete it and let her go?" Snape smiled viciously and lowered his voice even further. "Or worse, perhaps, begging me to continue?"

Potter's wand was at his throat in the blink of an eye, but Snape didn't flinch. This was even more amusing than toying with Charlie Weasley (not to mention much more warm and comfortable).

"I swear by the blood of Merlin, Snape, if you even--"

"Watch your mouth, Potter!" he hissed. "I would hate to lose interest in this project entirely!"

Potter inhaled deeply and slowly settled back in his chair, calming his features and setting his wand casually on the tea table beside him. "I've let you rattle my chains too much, *Professor* Snape. Strange, isn't it, how certain people can erase fifty years of history and send you spiraling back into adolescence? But not forever, Professor. Not forever. I concede defeat in that round. Now we move on."

For the first time since Lucius Malfoy's death, Snape smiled with genuine camaraderie. "What do you know," he said. "I am relieved to see that Slytherin House has been left in capable hands."

He sat up and crossed his legs, then continued in a brisk tone. "I had no idea whether the dragon matter would produce a relevant effect. There seemed no point in making a to-do about the first test; in fact, a group of anxious onlookers might have created enough stress to mask any slight improvements. I underestimated the effectiveness of this first brew, which was, admittedly, a pleasant surprise, and I appreciate your... disappointment at being excluded from her first coherent period in years. Had I thought for a moment, Potter, that the potion would restore so much of her sanity, I would have invited you to witness it, perhaps under the cover of your Invisibility cloak."

"How did you know I--"

Snape waved brusquely. "Albus told me, the day he gave it to you. He suspected you would eventually use it to spy on me, though the stolen Boomslang skin came as a surprise to all of us." He scowled at the younger wizard as a warning against further interruption. "There were a few side effects I did not anticipate. I will need to make many adjustments, to titrate it to her unique constitution. I also hope to prolong the effects, though I doubt I can make them permanent. She may end up dependent on very expensive potions, but at least her uncle can ease the burden of that addiction."

"Expense will not be an issue," said Potter flatly.

"An interesting statement, considering the way this entire discussion was initiated. Are you offering to compensate me *yourself*, Potter? Perhaps I will have to rethink my asking price." Snape fingered the collar of his robe in a deliberately sensual way, and the look on Potter's face was worth ten years' salary. He knew he was being spiteful, but such opportunities are so rare, it would be a crime not to exploit them.

"Get on your knees, Mr. Potter." Neither man moved, save for Snape narrowing his eyes and smirking. "What, now--have you changed your mind again? Or shall we revert to the original plan, whereby Pendragon compensates me herself for services rendered?" Potter said nothing, his expression hardening into a furious mask as his knuckles turned white on the arms of his chair. "I told you to kneel!" Snape hissed, planting both feet firmly on the floor and shifting himself to the front of the seat.

Potter slowly leaned forward in his chair as though to rise, then with a look of pure loathing, slid to his knees before Snape's chair.

"You'd do anything for her, wouldn't you, Potter?" he asked with an unconcealed smirk, placing his hand under the younger man's chin and raising it, forcing their eyes to meet. "She's not just your godchild anymore, is she? You fell in love with her, and then she was taken from you, by Peter Pettigrew of all people. He killed your parents, locked away your godfather, and now he's devastated the woman who restored your will to live. How ironic, that such a pathetic little specimen of humanity could exert so much power over one of the strongest wizards alive. But do you know what is even more ironic, Potter?" he asked, bringing his face so close to the other man's that they nearly touched. To his credit, Potter didn't flinch, not even to bat an eyelash.

"That despite all this time, and all that you have learned, your suspicion... and your *hatred* remain focused upon me."

Snape stared into Potter's broken eye for a final moment, then rose and returned to the dungeon without another word.

16: Trial and Error

Chapter 16 of 18

As Pendragon's condition improves, her wit and her perceptions sharpen.

There were so many variables. Generally, this did not bother Snape in the slightest, for his understanding of potions and their ingredients was beyond scientific--it was magical as well. It was the magical factor that separated the Potions Masters from the rank-and-file: the ability to intuitively comprehend the full properties of the components on the basis of their smell, taste, and feel alone, and to predict with reasonable accuracy the way they would interact in combination. While others might be attuned to the physical properties of matter and have the ability to shift it to a new shape or function, Snape had an innate grasp of chemical and magical properties and could bring them out to their best advantage within the womb of a cauldron.

Dragon eggshells, however, had a wild, ancient aspect which defied prediction and stability. Snape had long hypothesized that this was ultimately caused by the embryonic stem cells that invariably clung to the shell, for it was possible to "tame" them somewhat with extensive acid washing. Such treatment also diminished their magical effects, however, and was generally deemed uselessly destructive. Snape had read Muggle texts about molecular biology back in Azkaban, and had wondered if dragon stem cells might be washed from the eggs and multiplied via those strange, non-magical techniques. If he were correct, a single line of cloned, identical dragon cells could provide endless opportunity for study. The properties of each particular breed might be identified, not to mention that a single egg would produce enough stem cells for every Potion Master in Britain to have their own supply.

Sighing, Snape shook his head as he ground up yet another bit of shell with his pestle. Such things would never be within his means; as always, he had to make do with what he had available.

He began a new ritual with Pendragon, coming to her every evening with her potion and taking careful notes of the effects and their duration. She had lobbed a brass candlestick at him the first night, having forgotten her relief from the first potion after enduring a painful day of retribution from her scars. He supposed he was fortunate that her wand was resting inconveniently on her desk at that moment, but the candlestick had hurt nonetheless. He'd been forced to tackle her and hold her prone on the stone floor. When she peeped, "Well, I can't help it if that nose of yours is an ideal target!" he knew she had calmed enough to remember his true intent.

By the end of the first week, however, the novelty started wearing off and she even began to accept his arrival at her door. Snape wasn't sure what to make of that--whether it was an effect of the potions, or simply an adjustment to the new routine. The following Tuesday, she spoke to him for the first time in the Great Hall (barking sharply at him not to touch her napkin, but a milestone nonetheless), and he felt certain that his efforts were bearing fruit. Potter had avoided him, which suited Snape immensely, but even the Pest Who Lived noticed her demand at the table and looked dangerously close to admitting his approval.

Snape was stunned that evening to find her standing beside her piano when he arrived for that night's potion, as though she had *anticipated* him. This was confirmed when, still scowling, she raised her arm in a stiff, grudging *welcome*. "Good evening, Pendragon," he said, though he normally did not speak until she had taken her potion. He was caught off guard by the strange sensation of connecting to her as a human being without the aid of magic.

He pulled her to his chest in the usual fashion, and when she seemed calm enough, he gave her the tumbler. He'd been cutting back the more stupefying ingredients, with good results; tonight she barely sagged after drinking the potion. Now he would see if they were still potent enough for a good clinical effect...

All scientific thoughts precipitated from his mind as he realized that although he had let her go, he could not back away. She had hooked her arm around his waist, and one foot was twisted behind his calf.

Mother of Merlin, don't let Potter walk in now!

"Pendragon!" he purred, caught up in the pleasant surprise of the moment. "Are you feeling faint, perhaps?" he added in his more customary sneer.

"Pfft!" she sniffed. "What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think." *And that is the most truthful statement I have ever uttered.* He tentatively returned his hands to her back, a bit unsure of how to touch her without his usual clinical brusqueness.

She wriggled at his touch, settling closer to him. "Well, you seem to be catching on."

"Pen." He barely managed to say that much, having caught his breath and lost it in the same moment. It didn't help that she put her forehead against his chin and gently nuzzled his collar. When he finally managed to draw a breath, it came in a rapid series of staccato gasps. "Pen... what are you doing?" he said, though the question was inane and the answer was clear.

She pulled her head back just far enough to look him in the eye. "Now, now, I'm the one with the altered perceptions, remember? I know it's been a long time, Snape, but if you concentrate, I'm sure you'll recognize it." She brought her hand to rest against his cheek, letting her thumb brush his lips.

Oh, I recognize it, he managed to think, before the delicate sensations stole his breath and his rationality again. For a moment, he said nothing, thought nothing; the entire world vanished except for the points of contact he made with her body. When she dragged her hand across his cheek and studied his lips with her fingers, the world became even smaller. Snape let his mouth fall open; indeed, he could hardly have prevented it by that point.

"Perhaps you *are* so desperate, then?" she breathed, bringing a fingertip to the innermost edge of his lip. The words stung, but the actions set him on fire. He curbed the insane urge to drive his head down onto her hand and devour it, but couldn't stop himself from just one little taste. And a slightly deeper one when the first produced a flare in her eyes that he couldn't ignore.

"Pendragon," he hissed, leaning closer despite himself, "Morgan le Fay, what are you up to, child?"

She narrowed her eyes in scrutiny, and Snape suddenly felt a lurch of panic somewhere in the middle of his chest. *Don't pull away,* he thought desperately, even as he cursed himself for wanting her, wanting any of this, so much. But it already seemed that the intimacy was shattered, leaving his life all the more painful for having existed that brief moment.

"I don't know," she finally said with disarming incredulity. "Being an idiot, I suppose."

"Stop." She frowned. "Pen, please. I... I've been extraordinarily unkind to you. I don't understand why... you would..."

"Why I want you?"

Great Goddess, I never thought I'd hear such words again."Pen." It was more of a moan, merely shaped like a word.

She looked up at him with a little half-smile, leaning against him once more. "Odd, isn't it? But there it is. I suppose I've had to forgive your earlier insult in lieu of how much you've done for me. Though I'm sure your actions have been fueled a bit by guilt. And perhaps mine are fueled by some trite archetype, you know, falling head over heels for one's rescuer."

Her eyes glazed ever so slightly, and a hint of blue scarring shadowed her throat. "But you do desire me, don't you?"

The response from his throat was too primitive to form a word, but it was still an unmistakable answer. Her doubts assured, Pendragon's eyes regained their focus and, more importantly, their heat. Her smile suddenly took on a predatory timbre, and she laced her fingers into his hair.

"Good! That's all settled, then," she whispered, and with an indelicate yank, brought his mouth to hers.

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Yellow. Her room was yellow; the walls, the bedding, even the ceiling looked like the inside of a banana. She was draped over him, relaxed and catlike, down to the smugly contented expression on her face. Snape rolled a tuft of her hair between his fingertips just to enjoy the unfamiliar texture.

"I infer that you like yellow, then," said Snape. *Strange*, he thought, *I'm usually not one to find silence disconcerting.* That made him smirk; he was also not one to find himself basking in a woman's bedroom.

She wrinkled her nose with a blissful grin. "I find it calming. Harry painted it for me." She paused and sighed. "Poor Harry. You'll stop picking on him, won't you?"

The theme of the evening seemed to be "Extremely Unlikely Events," as Snape thus found himself utterly at a loss for words. "*Picking* on him," he finally managed.

"Pick, pick, pick," she agreed, emphasizing each word with a little pinch along his collarbone. "You know," she added coyly. "He told me."

Potter had so many potential complaints against him that it was impossible to guess which one he'd brought up. "Did he, now? Perhaps you can tell *me*, lest I admit to the wrong crime."

She raised her head with an impish grin, then scowled in mock ferocity. "On your knees, Potter," she growled, grinding her hips against his ribs, then laughing. "Shame on you! My debts are no one's but my own."

Her debts. Something very, very bleak and cold swept through him, and despite the fact that she hadn't moved a muscle, her body suddenly felt miles away. "Your payment..."

She grinned again. "Well, you can consider it the first installment, if you like." Her smile faded quickly as she gazed at him. Snape was a master of disguising his emotions, but the circumstances clearly got the better of him this time.

He realized with a start that the potion was due to wear off at any time, and her lucidity would soon vanish. Unfortunately, anything he might have to say at this point would only hasten that process. "I think I should take my leave, Pendragon," he said neutrally. In one brisk motion, he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, retrieving his shirt from her nightstand.

She sat up too, and he could see her in the periphery of his vision, shaking her head incomprehendingly. "What... what... Did I say something wrong?" It wasn't just her head--her whole body began to rock back and forth. He knew there was no point in replying; she was already relapsing into hysteria and panic.

"We will talk more tomorrow," he said quietly and calmly as he continued to dress, "when I bring you your next potion." He didn't want to look at her, but he knew she would be distressed if he just walked out the door, even in her current state. When he finally met her gaze, a clinical, rational part of him noted with satisfaction that she was still holding herself together, much more than she could have achieved a week ago. For that, he gave her a stilted smile.

"No, Pen, you've said nothing wrong. But we must speak a bit more the next time you're... coherent. I need to make my intentions more clear." Snape steeled himself and kissed her cheek. "Goodnight, child."

Though her eyes were glazed, she still managed to squeak, "Goodnight, Severus."

17: Lessons

Chapter 17 of 18

Harry and Severus have another little talk. No kneeling involved this time.

"What did you tell Pendragon?"

Green eyes glared over the book. "Ever hear of *knocking*?" Though Potter didn't appear to move, his wand was at the ready in his right hand.

Snape closed the door much too loudly, then strode across the room and snatched the book from Potter's hand, slamming onto the nearest flat surface. Potter watched this impassively with one brow raised. Snape knew the wand was trained on him, but did not look at it; his eyes were fixed on Potter's. "You and I are due for a conversation."

The lower brow joined the first. Potter gestured to the chair on the other side of the hearth. "And it's off to an excellent start," he observed, but set down his wand and laced his fingers over his waist. "I don't care how angry you are; in the future, do not barge into my chambers."

Snape acknowledged him with an irritable wave, as though batting away a pesky wasp. "What did you tell her, Potter?"

Potter studied him a moment before replying. "I always tell her the truth," he said matter-of-factly, drumming the tips of his thumbs together.

"I am in no mood for games."

The younger wizard spread his hands, palms toward the heavens. "Then maybe you should tell me what you're going on about, as I have no earthly idea."

Delicacy was never Snape's strongest suit, but in this case even he could see that it was necessary. He stared coldly at Potter, grinding his teeth quietly and searching for the proper phrase. "Pendragon is of the impression that I require her to perform for me... sexually... as reparation for these potions."

Potter shrugged with a look of contempt. "Your point?"

So many times Snape had wanted to wring Potter's neck, but they all paled in comparison to this moment. "My *point*, Potter, is that you have made *assumptions*, as you have always made, all your life... and as usual, they are *incorrect*."

Potter shook his head slowly, smiling humorlessly. "Don't try to wriggle your way out of this, Snape. You were crystal clear with me last week--"

"You incredible idiot! How in seven hells can you be immersed in the culture of Slytherin House, yet remain ignorant of such a simple process as taking the piss out of someone?"

Potter barked in incredulous laughter. "Pissing? *Pissing*? Barging into my office without knocking is pissing. House points and detentions were pissing." He leapt to his feet, but his voice dropped to nearly a whisper. "Ordering a man to kneel and suck one off on behalf of the woman he loves is *not* pissing, Snape. I don't care *what* House you're from."

Snape closed his eyes and tilted his head back, forcing himself to stretch out his neck and shoulders, relinquishing the tension of his fury. He unclenched his fists for the first time and took hold of the arms of his chair. Potter was still standing when he opened his eyes again. "That may have been a bit extreme," Snape admitted grudgingly. Potter shook his head and returned to his seat, but said nothing. "You noticed I didn't actually make you *do* it?" he added defensively.

"Yeah, I definitely caught that part," Potter snarled. "It didn't exactly erase your intention, at least in my mind."

"You know damn well that, had it truly been my intent, it would have happened on the spot. You of all people should comprehend that my deeds carry more weight than my words."

Potter exhaled slowly, folding his arms over his chest. "You'll have to pardon me for taking your words at face value. I'd *assumed* you and I had passed the need for games and pissing matches."

For the second time that evening, that cold, bleak sensation cut through his chest. For a moment, Snape wanted nothing more than to stalk out of the room, but he kept his grip on the carved wooden handrests until he was certain he could speak without a break in his voice. Nonetheless, it came out in a mumble until he gained some momentum.

"I have spent a long time away from polite or civilized conversation, Professor Potter. I... apologize."

Potter averted his eyes uncomfortably, and his expression softened. "Accepted." He stood up and took a black kettle from the hearth, tapped it lightly with his wand to fill it, and hung it upon a hook in the fireplace. He then busied himself fetching two cups and saucers from a hutch in the back of the parlor and setting them on a plain silver tray, along with a ceramic teapot of Asian design with a bamboo handle. He poured what looked like pebbles into each cup, then set the tray on the hearth to await the hot water.

Snape looked at him quizzically. "Jasmine pearls," said Potter. "Green. Good tea for this time of night." He flopped comfortably into the leather chair, as if he were simply returning to his book. Snape glanced involuntarily at its spine where it lay on the end table.

"Kafka," he remarked in surprise. "You *have* changed, haven't you?"

Potter smiled grimly. "Most people do." He started to slump even more cozily into the chair, then apparently remembered the kettle and propped himself on the armrest.

"Pen's been improving. I've seen a little more every day. It's amazing. She *smiles* sometimes. I've wanted to Floo Ron and Hermione, but I'm not sure what to tell them--I don't know what to even hope for, and I don't want to build their expectations too much."

"I cannot say. I'm still learning how the dragon matter augments the other ingredients in the Calming Draught. I suspect it will produce different reactions in each type of potion. Some may not even brew true with that addition, though I believe many will; dragon eggshells and their magic are not nearly as mercurial in their properties as, say, heartstring or blood."

The kettle began to whistle, and he paused while Potter filled the Asian teapot and brought the tray to the end table. "It needs to cool a few minutes," Potter explained when he did not fill the cups. "Don't want to scorch the tea."

Snape nodded. "She responds very well to the Calming Draught. I would say that already this has been a success, even if that is the only positive result we ever see. Assuming that she does not develop any resistance to its effects over time, we may be able to count on at least a few hours of lucidity every day. I, too, have noticed a few improvements outside of the time she's fully under the influence, though whether these will continue, peak out, or fade away, remains to be seen."

Potter filled the teacups. The tea smelled lush and floral, and the little balls unfurled into clusters of leaves in the hot water. "Don't even joke about reading my future," said Potter as he slumped contentedly in his chair. Snape snorted, thankful that he didn't have a mouthful of hot tea prior to the reminder of Sibyl Trelawney.

When they had settled again, Snape looked at Potter shrewdly, but spoke softly. "What did you tell her?"

"I went to her room after you left my office," he began softly. "I reckoned I'd find you back there too, but she was alone. She... the potion was still working. She called me Harry again." Potter's eyes were suddenly misty; he took off his glasses as if they were at fault and rubbed his eyes.

"I could see she wasn't upset, so I just sat while she played the piano. She finished the song and then started talking to *me*. She asked where you and I had gone. I told her we had a talk, and she asked, 'About what?' I... I've always been honest with her, even before. She has this sixth sense of knowing when people are lying--I think she gets it from Hermione."

"Anyway, I told her what had happened back in my office. I tried to put everything very gently; I wanted her to stay... herself as long as possible. It didn't seem to upset her. In fact, I thought at one point that she was going to laugh, but she didn't."

"Did you speak of my parting comment?" Snape asked pointedly.

Potter bowed his head. "No. But I've given it a lot of thought this past week."

"Taxing, I'm sure."

Potter scowled. "Oh, give it a rest. It didn't add up, you know. You implied the worst, and refused to tell me what you really intended to ask of her. I mean, if it was benign, why keep it from me? I didn't know what you were up to, and I..." He paused to clear his throat. "I don't want her hurt any more, as you've noticed."

Potter's gaze was questioning, almost pleading, but Snape's face remained impassive. When he finally spoke, his voice was slick and cool, a verbal scalpel cutting away a retributive pound of flesh. "Tell me, Potter: How long did the two of you have together, before she was cut down by the Lightning curse?"

Potter smiled bitterly. "None. There was no 'two of us.' She wouldn't have me." The disbelief showed in Snape's face before he could mask it. "It's true. I was Good Old Uncle Harry in her mind, and nothing was going to change that. She loved me, but not the way I love her." Potter stared into his teacup, finding no answers in the unfurled

leaves. Snape said nothing at all.

With a heavy sigh, Potter finally spoke again. "So I do my best to make sure she's taken care of. I try to help her control the scars. I listen to her play the piano. I persuaded Minerva to let her teach here. She likes the students, even though she can't really show it, and she needs to be around people. She's got to keep connected to human society or she'll just collapse into her own little world.

"I know she hates being touched. She's shown no interest in any... physical companionship--not with anyone, not even a pet--since the curse. So I go with her when she leaves the castle, just to make sure no one jostles her, or worse. When you implied..." Potter stopped himself and glared angrily at Snape, still uncertain about his intentions.

"When *you inferred* that I would demand her body in compensation for my efforts," Snape drawled, "you naturally sought to protect her from what would surely be unbearable. A noble gesture, Potter, had that been my intent."

Potter bolted upright in his chair, setting his teacup on the table nearly hard enough to break it. "Damn it, Snape, what was your intent, then? What were you going to ask of her?"

Snape quirked his eyebrow, but refrained from sneering. "I found some Muggle piano music written for left hand alone. I will insist that she learn to play it."

Lifting the Blindness

Chapter 18 of 18

Things begin to look a little brighter.

It was one of those rare, pleasant days when events and circumstances flowed smoothly. Minerva was not only willing to give Snape an advance on his salary, she even happened to have some Muggle money on hand. When he Flooded to the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic, it was as empty as a tomb. That by itself was hardly unexpected, it being a Saturday, but even the security desk was unmanned, the guard apparently fetching a cup of coffee. The sky was clear and the air brisk for his short walk through Muggle London; rain had been pouring at Hogwarts.

The blind woman in the music shop flipped the "Closed" placard to "Open" just as Snape approached, and she smiled warmly at him, recognizing his voice. "I just knew you'd be back," she confided as she led him to the counter. She patted the shelves behind it for mere seconds before bringing up a manila folder stuffed with sheet music. "My clerk pulled all the scores I have for the left hand and put them in here. They were filed under their composer and that's rather silly; they belong in their own category." Her cluck of disapproval amused Snape; here was a kindred spirit in compulsive organization. He bought the sheets she recommended, then asked to be let out the back door. She led him to a windowless alley perfect for Apparating. The entire outing took less than an hour--quite a difference from the day trips for Potions ingredients. Snape would never have guessed that shopping could actually be enjoyable.

Upon reaching the landing outside Pendragon's chambers, his good mood immediately evaporated. It took a moment to gather up the resolution to knock.

She answered the door herself, another first. "Snape," she said, neither a welcome nor a reproach. She spun on her heel and stomped over to an armchair, holding her hand out expectantly after she sat. It took him a moment to realize she was waiting for her potion.

This is quite a change! He diligently concealed his surprise until the tumbler was empty. "It appears I need no longer hold you down to make you take your medicine," he drawled as the sharpness returned to her expression.

She held up her hand and closed her eyes a moment, collecting herself, then grinned impishly. "Then perhaps I'll keep putting up a fight." Her eyes sparkled. "Come here, Severus."

"No."

Snape had no idea how she would react, and he braced for the worst. Were he superstitious, he might have crossed his fingers at that moment, but Snape believed only in magic, not luck.

Pendragon blinked, then squeezed her eyes shut tight. Snape began counting silently, as he had done since he was a very small boy, during times when calm and patience were the only way to evade grim punishment.

When her eyes finally opened, they were still focused. She cocked her head. "Excuse me? Problem?"

For a few seconds, Snape let himself smile, let the tension run off like molten stone from his shoulders. She was *indignant*, not hysterical. The potion was not just working, it was working *well*.

"No problem, Pendragon. I've brought you a gift." He handed her the small sheaf of music. She shook her head, puzzled, but accepted it and studied the first page.

"What is this?" she mumbled. "Some sort of error in the printing? There's no treble, just the..." She frowned, peering at the document more closely, then raised her eyes in a suspicious glare. "What do you want me to do with this?"

"It's just what it looks like. I want you to play it."

Her expression could have turned the sun into a black hole. "You're joking."

"Do I appear amused?" It was actually a trick question; he found her chilly reaction rather droll, but he knew not a mote of it showed on his face.

She folded her arms, crimping the sheet music in the process. "Forget it. If I'm going to play, it'll be real music, not this--"

"This what, Pen?" Snape barked sharply. "I'm told this is fine stuff, technical and elegant. It also happens to accomodate your physical limitations."

For a moment, he thought he'd gone a little too far. Every muscle in her face and neck tightened into cords and he was not close enough to envelop her in a suffocating hug. Snape instinctively glanced around the woman for any heavy or sharp items within her reach. To his amazement, however, she stayed rooted to the spot, lashing out only with words.

"It's for freaks! Not music! No! I won't--" She gasped for air, stamping her feet and crushing the paper in one hand. It was all right, though; the outburst gave him time to get around the armchair and yank her to his chest. Although she shook with anger, she made no attempt to withdraw from him, even mashing her face into his robes. She was trying to calm down, trying to let him help her. He found it quite touching, and had to remind himself not to speak or stroke her hair.

"You enraged me on purpose, didn't you?" she finally said, in a wry, muffled voice.

He scoffed, cautiously loosening his grip and resting his chin against her head. "Because I so love being assaulted with the nearest blunt instrument." He moved his hands to a more comfortable position. "Pendragon, try very hard to think once more about the sheet music. I'll hold you this time. Stay calm and speak to me when you can. Why do you resist playing it?"

Her body tensed anew and the loose pages clattered to the floor. When that wave of hysteria passed, she spoke without looking up, making him feel the words vibrating in his lungs. "Those pieces... They're an insult. Mockery." She quieted again for a few moments, then picked up again as though only a breath had elapsed. "My music is the only *whole* thing I have left. Don't you get it? If I give up the treble, that's it. It's over. The curse wins. I lose. I'm broken everywhere."

Had Pen been free to look him in the face, she would have seen a scowl that had historically been reserved for her Uncle Harry. "What a pile of centaur shite," he finally said aloud, noting rather proudly that she merely stiffened with everyday affront. "That may have seemed true in the past, young lady," he went on, "but I won't hear any of it now. Look at yourself, Pen! Look how far you've come these past weeks. You can't tell me you're irreparably broken."

She remained quiet for so long that Snape began to wonder offhandedly if she'd fallen asleep, but he didn't mind. Holding her was a chore he quite enjoyed, but for the fact that he couldn't let his hands roam. At last she raised her head, sliding her arms around him. "Severus."

That brought a warm smile to his face. "I'm here, Pen. Play the music for me now."

The recital had to be postponed, however, until she could clear the tears from her eyes and read the music.