

Orion's Pointer

by Faraday

The Potions Master is about to meet a bitch of unexpected dimensions.

Chapter One - Parr For The Course

Chapter 1 of 59

The Potions Master is about to meet a bitch of unexpected dimensions.

AN: Naturally, JKR owns all characters, except the ones I've invented. I've tried to keep this as canon to Goblet of Fire as possible, with which this story runs parallel.

Dumbledore paused for a second in the middle of writing the last note to look up at the silver-haired figure standing a few feet to his left; she'd not moved since he'd started writing almost fifteen minutes ago. She seemed to find the phoenix fascinating, and why shouldn't she? Few people, even in the wizarding world, had seen such a bird in their lives. For her, this was a mythology come to life right before her, and her eyes gleamed in barely-concealed excitement, mouth slightly open.

Fawkes seemed to share her innocent curiosity. He'd been flicking his head from side to side to look at her, first with one eye, then the other, his crimson and gold crest bobbing. Only due to their long partnership did Dumbledore know that Fawkes was amused about something. He shook his head slightly; the bird had the strangest sense of humour at times.

Sighing, the Professor went back the letter before him. His quill scratched away at the parchment, breaking the near silence of his office. The sun had not been up for more than an hour, and there was still a chill in the air that the small fire under the mantel had not been able to completely dispel.

Dumbledore signed the parchment with a flourish and then leaned back in his chair, waiting whilst the ink dried...it gave him time to think about the day ahead. He tapped a finger on his desk. There was still some doubt in his mind with regard to the woman's presence at the school, but in times such as these, choices were in short supply. They must make do with what options they did have. He nodded to himself. The timing was awful, though.

"He's so beautiful. I've seen them in books, but I had no idea!"

Dumbledore looked up, smiling, just in time to see Fawkes puff out his chest feathers. "He is pleased that you think so," he replied, his eyes twinkling in repressed laughter. Fawkes loved to be admired. It was the bird's only conceit.

The woman turned her face towards the Professor with a delighted expression, the two long locks of silvery hair on either side of her face swinging gently with the movement. "You can communicate with him?" she asked, surprised.

Dumbledore began to fold up the parchment on his desk. "In a fashion," he admitted. "We couldn't discuss the finer points of Wizengamot legislation, but we do have a reasonably good understanding of what the other is thinking."

The woman pursed her lips thoughtfully and turned back to Fawkes who was elegantly ruffling his feathers for her attention. Gathering up the small pile of letters before him, Dumbledore stood and walked around his desk.

"I see that you have been given school robes. I do hope that they will not make you feel too uncomfortable."

The woman gave a little start and turned towards him. Fawkes made a grizzling noise at the loss of his rapt audience.

"Enough concession has already been made for me," she pointed out, brows slightly raised. "It would be churlish of me to balk at wearing at least *some* item of standard uniform." She held out her arms and billowed the black material about. "Somewhat looser in cut than I am used to. I think I shall trip over them a few times before I get used to them." She smiled at the Professor. "But then, I always was a bit clumsy."

"I find that hard to believe," Dumbledore chuckled as he handed her the sealed letters. She looked through them and at the names on the front, a slight crease appearing between her brows. The Professor placed his hands on her shoulders. "You'll do fine," he assured her. "However, if you prefer, I can hold off your participation until tomorrow, until after I have a talk with the teachers."

She looked back up at him quickly. "No," she said firmly. "No, it's best that they see me as just a late-starting student, nothing more. Of course, that may not be possible. I am noticeably older than the other students, and from what I understand, there have been less than a dozen mature-age students here in the last fifty years. I'm almost certain none were of my kind. Questions are going to be asked before the day is out."

"Then we shall deal with them as they arise," said Dumbledore confidently.

"The situation is not ideal," she told him. "No one is more aware of that than I, and I realise that I have caused you great inconvenience." She tapped the wad of letters against an open palm. "Perhaps I can stay in the background as much as possible until your overseas visitors arrive, and by then I'll be old news. However, it's been many years since I've been in an educational institution. I am hard to wrangle at the best of times," she admitted wryly, "but I will do my utmost to... fit in." She seemed not to like that possibility, if the down-turned shape of her mouth was anything to go by. "So much for stealth."

"People may simply be curious as to the reason for your presence, but you'll find that they'll be most welcoming. I have utmost trust in all my staff." He dropped his hands from her shoulders and walked back to his chair. He didn't sit, but turned back as if a thought had just occurred to him. "The students may not be so circumspect in questioning you, but I'm sure you can handle it. Children blithely ask questions that others might hesitate to."

The woman tilted her head to one side. "Ah. Not to worry. I've dealt with difficult questions before, Professor! Or should I say, Headmaster."

The day was turning out to be one of the most intolerable he'd had for some time, and that was saying something. Between exercising phenomenal willpower to not shout at the first-year students for being so impossibly inept, delivering a blistering lecture to his NEWT students for shoddy assignment work that'd be lucky to scrape pass-marks, and having most of the second-year class wasted by one of the students breaking out in pus-filled boils after knocking over their cauldron and having to be taken to the infirmary, it was a miracle that his teeth hadn't splintered from all the grinding.

Snape's jaw tightened reflexively. There was still one teaching session to go, a double at that, and he had no doubt it was bound to be the worst of the lot. It was almost a given that Longbottom would manage to concoct some liquid monstrosity that would have everyone fighting to get out of the classroom before they passed out from the noxious fumes.

As he stalked along the corridor to the classroom, he had only the vaguest awareness of students scurrying to get out of his way before he mowed them down, either with his boots or with his tongue. A couple of teachers who were heading off to their own teaching commitments gave him a wide berth...Flitwick even about-faced and disappeared back into the room he'd just exited with astonishing speed, slamming the door behind him.

Word of the Potions master's approach had managed to travel sufficiently to clear the corridors ahead, and he traversed the final stretch to the dungeons without seeing another soul. Barging the door open to the classroom, he swept in, already drawing breath to let loose a diatribe on the assembled students.

"I cannot even begin to describe my disappointment at yesterday's efforts to create a simple yet successful Purging Draught. You have all outdone yourselves and dropped my expectations of your abilities to an all-time low." He grabbed a battered book off the bookcase as he stormed past and slammed it onto his desk with an ear-splitting crack in order to punctuate this opening statement in dramatic fashion.

"I have no intention of suffering the disgrace of having an entire class fail their end of year exams," he hissed, "yet despite my best efforts, that is exactly the result that you are all charging towards with reckless abandon!" He hooked a small cauldron out from the equipment cupboard with a long finger and smashed it down on his desk next to the textbook, putting a rather sizeable dent in the wood.

"Since you have proven yourselves incapable of handling even a simple potion without bungling it, I find myself forced to dumb it down for you even further." Ripping open the ingredients cupboard, Snape snatched out several bottles and a couple of pouches of dried animal viscera and swept back to his desk.

"It would be beneficial, and indeed something that would stun me rigid, if you all paid attention to what I am doing instead of allowing your minds to wander off to whatever distorted reality you currently find more worthwhile than your studies." He curled his lip, only just warming up for what was shaping up to be a truly magnificent rant, and flicked his eyes up at the students. It was only at that point that he realised that no-one was paying any attention to him.

Few things were able to stop him when he had the bit between his teeth, but this certainly qualified as one of them. Snape blinked in mild surprise. None of the students had noticed the pause in the verbal tirade. Every head was turned towards a figure seated slightly left of centre of the room. He blinked again. The woman was completely unfamiliar to him. Older than the students around her, she was of a comparable height, at least whilst seated. Silver grey hair framed a slightly rounded face, with two locks at least half a span in width falling to a level below the table in front of her. The rest, shorter at two hands length, was arranged in a somewhat messy mane behind her head. She was the only one in the room looking at him.

"Who are you?" he asked bluntly.

The woman did not answer straight away. If anything she seemed slightly surprised at his question. She pursed her lips before answering. "Chara Parr...sir."

"What are you doing here?" he snapped, irritated at this unexpected obstacle to the completion of his tirade. A vein in his temple started to pulse. Past experience told him that it heralded a skull-crusher of a headache. His shit of a day would be complete when that came home to roost.

The woman had risen from her seat and was heading towards him, a letter clutched in her hand. The heads of the students swivelled to follow her. Now that she was out from behind the table, he saw that her two long tresses reached down to hip-level. She was short for her apparent age, but not abnormally so. Still, there would be a number of students in the class taller than her at only half her years.

"I was told to give you this, Professor." She proffered the letter as she stopped two feet in front of him, the desk barring her way.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Longbottom, who, in his usual subtle style, had his mouth hanging open stupidly. Snape's irritation deepened.

"Longbottom, close your mouth or I shall stuff something in it...probably that disgusting mess you brewed yesterday!" The boy's jaw clicked shut.

Parr still held the letter out, head tilted to one side and one eye squinted half-closed as if studying him. Now that she was closer, he could see a faint scar running from her hairline down across her left eye and stopping just short of her ear. Part of the eye's iris was misted; the injury had obviously scratched the surface of the eye itself. She'd been lucky not to lose her sight in that eye. Whilst the scar was faint, it looked deep...something caused by a very sharp object.

Scowling, Snape plucked the letter out from her grasp and looked at the handwriting on the front. He grunted, recognising the style, and looked back at her. He thought he'd seen the corners of her mouth twitch up, but there was no evidence of it on her face now. She stood, waiting, her round eyes fixed on his. People didn't usually stare at him. His manner customarily had others averting their gaze. Black bored into grey as he opened the letter.

"Next time, Miss Parr, I would appreciate it if you could hand me important missives before the class begins," he instructed in a silky voice. There was a collective intake of

breath from the rest of the class. They recognised that tone as a forerunner to some spectacular unpleasantness from the Potions master. "I dislike being interrupted."

His rebuke seemed to have no discernable effect on Parr, other than an almost imperceptible lifting of her eyebrows. "Yes, sir. I'll be sure to remember that next time." She backed away a few steps and then turned to reclaim her seat. The other students continued to gawk.

"Page two hundred and twelve," he barked at them, "is what you should all be staring at. This time, try actually reading and comprehending what is written there and perhaps you will not botch today's lesson the way you did yesterday's!" As the class fumbled about with their books, he read through the letter.

The bearer of this letter, Chara Parr, has been granted a place at Hogwarts as a student. I apologise for the late notification and trust that she will not disrupt your class more than is necessary. Her tutors have informed me of her approximate skill level in your subject, but you are at liberty to reassign her to a different year-level class at your discretion.

Should you have any concerns, I will be more than happy to speak to you at the closure of the day's teaching.

Albus Dumbledore

Snape stuffed the letter in his pocket. Tutors? Was she some pureblood that had refused entry to Hogwarts at the usual age? It was rare that it happened, but not unheard of. However, her age appeared to be that of one who would ordinarily have passed through a tertiary educational institution and spent a handful of years in her chosen career already. That she was here, now, made Snape wonder why she would have returned to a high school level.

Would it be expected that she would receive special treatment? He huffed and folded his arms, glaring at his new student, determined that he would disabuse her of that notion as soon as possible. Although she had donned a school robe, the rest of her attire was certainly not standard issue Hogwarts uniform. Instead of a jumper, she had on a high-collared jacket fastened all the way up which almost hid what looked like a material binding around her neck. A bandage? Snape couldn't get a good enough look at it to determine. Unlike the other girls in the class, Parr wore charcoal grey trousers that stopped some inches short of her ankles in folded cuffs, and a pair of black, tight-fitting boots. At least the colours were similar to that of a Hogwarts uniform. Still, it was a mark of favouritism that her attire differed. This, coupled with her late arrival three weeks into the start of term, suggested that there were different expectations surrounding this student. Snape considered making a comment about it to her, but until he discovered the specifics of her circumstances, it might be unwise.

The other members of the class were starting to fidget, so it was time to get the lesson underway. He went through each stage of yesterday's lesson in painful detail, slipping in snide comments wherever possible. Perhaps guilt would force them to try harder, or even simply try. Situations like this were truly insufferable...idiot students stumbling about through the subject as if their brains had been removed.

Other staff members waxed lyrical on the "joys of teaching", harped on about the satisfaction of seeing their students flourish under their tutelage and clucked on incessantly about the bright futures they saw expanding in front of them. Such conversations had him staring in wide-eyed amazement in such a way that he was often asked if he was feeling alright. Flitwick was the worst; he let his students get away with all sorts of nonsense and they loved him for it.

"I want each of you to take a good look at what this Purging Draught is supposed to look like, and you'll notice that the abominations you created yesterday bear no resemblance whatsoever," Snape sneered and swept away from his desk. The students trudged disconsolately up to peer at the desired end result, spirits already flagging. Granger was the only one who seemed even remotely confident, but then her arrogance knew no bounds. Parr actually looked genuinely interested at the creation, but then she hadn't attended the previous class, so she didn't have the nervous disposition of the others as they scuttled back to their desks. He noticed that she paused longer than the others, sticking her head over the cauldron and taking a tentative sniff. Judging from the way she screwed up her mouth, she found the smell no less disgusting than most. Often the Purging Draught had the desired effect without even being taken internally. The threat alone of having to take a measure of it had people's digestive tracts clenching violently. Having to teach this class gave Snape the same sensation sometimes.

"Don't pair up with the same person you did yesterday," he snapped as the class started to segregate. "Perhaps different combinations will yield better results. Longbottom, you pair up with Miss Parr this time. I'm not sure Thomas could handle you trying to asphyxiate him again." He heard Malfoy snigger loudly.

Parr glanced about, trying to place a face to the name of her assigned partner. Longbottom crept towards her sheepishly, shoulders rounded forward defensively. She smiled encouragingly at him and he perked up a little. Snape smirked. Let's see how long that lasted. Longbottom's ineptness had the most patient of people tearing their hair out after ten minutes.

Ten minutes later however, Longbottom was chortling behind his hand over something that Parr had been whispering to him, and for a wonder their cauldron wasn't belching black acrid smoke. He quirked an eyebrow and rubbed a finger and thumb together, considering. Parr was handling being paired with the worst student in the class better than he had expected. Someone else would have to face his ire this time. Automatically he stalked over to Potter and Weasley, confident that they'd be struggling.

Snape had just begun to berate Weasley for not chopping his dried pokeweed roots finely enough when he heard a squawk behind him. Turning round he saw a red-faced Malfoy kneeling on the ground with his arm twisted painfully in Parr's grasp. She wasn't even looking at Malfoy, but her fist was clamped firmly around his wrist.

"Is there a problem, Miss Parr?" Snape understated, gliding towards Malfoy's crouched form.

Parr looked up from her cauldron in mild surprise. "No, Professor." Longbottom was gaping like a fish again, his eyes flicking between Parr, Snape and Malfoy.

"Then perhaps you can explain why Mr Malfoy is grubbing about on the floor with his wrist in your grasp." As if on cue, Malfoy started to squawk again.

Parr stared straight at Snape, eyes innocently wide. "Mr Malfoy and I are currently experiencing a disagreement, Professor."

"Do you usually solve disagreements by trying to break someone's wrist, Miss Parr?" The woman twitched her head to one side, obviously catching his tone but displaying no abashment. He loomed closer. "It would be advisable to let go of him before something regrettable happens."

"I would be happy to, Professor, as soon as Mr Malfoy opens his hand."

Snape widened his eyes. "Detention on your first day doesn't auger well for the rest of the year, Miss Parr. I suggest you let go of him now!"

Parr merely continued to stare at him with that mildly surprised expression. Malfoy was desperately trying to lever her fingers off his wrist with his other hand. His trapped hand was clenched shut in a white-knuckled ball.

"Miss Parr, I am not in the habit of repeating" He saw her fingers tighten and Malfoy yelped like a kicked dog as his wrist bones ground audibly against each other. The boy's tortured hand popped open, dropping something on to the floor. A second later, Malfoy hit the floor as well, cradling his now-free yet mangled wrist.

Everyone except Parr looked down at the object Malfoy had dropped. It was an innocuous-looking shrivelled lump that could easily have passed as a piece of twig.

"Mr Malfoy seemed to think that our potion needed something extra added to it," Parr explained calmly. "I disagreed."

Snape's mouth compressed into a thin line. Much as it pained him even to admit it to himself, Parr had done them a favour by stopping Malfoy from putting that piece of desiccated streeler into the cauldron. Everyone in the room within a ten foot radius would have been vomiting explosively for some hours.

Snape grabbed Malfoy by the collar, hauled him up off the floor and propelled him towards the door.

"Go to the infirmary," he hissed. "Anything that's broken, get it fixed!" He slammed the door behind the troublemaker. The rest of the class had frozen into tense, shoulder-

raised positions, visibly dreading what might happen next but perversely intrigued nonetheless.

"Anyone not attending to their work will find themselves responsible for losing house points," he threatened. Everyone suddenly decided to stare very hard at their cauldrons. Hooking Longbottom's collar with his finger, he pulled the boy aside and stood right in front of Parr, who was sniffing at her cauldron, oblivious to the wizard-shaped thundercloud.

"You, however, Miss Parr, will not be escaping punishment for disrupting the class." His eyes searched the left side of her robes. Instead of a house shield there was only the Hogwarts crest. "What house are you in?"

She looked up, rubbing under her nose with one finger. "I haven't been assigned to one."

Was she being obtuse? He waited a few seconds to see if she would suddenly "remember". She just stared at him; she seemed to do that a lot.

"Detention will have to suffice, then," he countered smoothly. "Quite an achievement for your first day, wouldn't you say?" Parr's face remained impassive. He swept back to Weasley to finish chastising the boy for his shoddy knifework.

What remained of the lesson time passed without further drama. Fortunately there was noticeable improvement on the previous day's efforts, so today was ending slightly better than he had forecast. Even Potter and Weasley's potion proved passable, although the consistency left something to be desired. Goyle had struggled on as best his could with Malfoy still in the infirmary, just narrowly avoiding an Unacceptable. Snape passed silent judgement on Longbottom and Parr's effort... only petulance would give them less than Acceptable grade. Parr paid him no attention whatsoever. She was scratching out some notes in a workbook, but she seemed to be having trouble with her quill.

"I want a sample of each of your potions on my desk and your equipment cleared away before you leave," he instructed, leaning against a column with his arms folded. "Additionally, on my desk no later than tomorrow, six inches of parchment on why your individual attempts yesterday went wrong and the possible consequences to a recipient of such a poorly-brewed potion." The students scurried to comply so they could exit as quickly as possible. Parr was talking to Longbottom earnestly, her hand on his arm. The boy looked confused...probably wondering why his arm bones weren't being broken...but then that was a frequent expression for him. He nodded vehemently at Parr and was rewarded with a smile that Snape didn't think that Parr was capable of: it was all dimples and white teeth. The boy blushed like an idiot and busied himself with tidying as Parr labelled their sample flask. Snape thought he lip-read a swear word as she struggled with her quill again, but she was already moving to his desk to deliver the flask. Longbottom shot out of the room before anyone else, and Parr wasn't going to be that far behind him. Stuffing her workbook and quill into her bag, she turned to follow the other members of the class.

"I sincerely hope you haven't forgotten your detention, Miss Parr."

She stopped three feet from the door. The other students flowed around her, picking up their speed as if to avoid any overspill of unpleasantness. Her head turned slowly in his direction.

"I expect you to be here straight after dinner," he announced. Her eyebrows drew down and her lips thinned in blatant irritation. She went to turn away again. "Next time I see you in here, you hair is to be tied back instead of draping near an open flame. It's worse than Granger's." Snape didn't bother to see the effect that statement had on her before pushing away from the column and drifting over to his desk. The heavy classroom door slammed with gusto in response.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, froggie_becky, who was both encouraging and swift. Feedback appreciated.

Chapter Two - Unknown Quantity

Chapter 2 of 59

Management of the unorthodox student.

It's all JKR's, except my OFC.

"I do realise that this is somewhat unorthodox, Filius, but I have been given an unorthodox student, and at this point in time, this is the best way of managing the situation."

"But almost all the students take my class, Headmaster. Why not Miss Parr?"

"I can assure you it's not a personal slight, Filius, but Chara is not able to cover some subjects during her time here at the school."

That response alone held two interesting statements, only one of which Flitwick picked up on, probably because he was still agitated at being denied the chance to teach the school's newest addition.

"Then she is only temporarily placed with us?" the diminutive professor pressed, even more disappointed than before. "For how long?"

Dumbledore spread his hands. "I'm afraid I don't know," he admitted. "Her presence here is dictated by factors outside of the school." He sighed and shelved the book he had been holding.

"Well, it's just not fair," Flitwick concluded, albeit good-naturedly. "The opportunity to teach a student that doesn't have a two-second attention span and that one might actually be able to have a coherent conversation with doesn't come up often. I had to spend the entire lunchbreak listening to Pomona rave on about how Miss Parr has more Herbology knowledge than her NEWT students."

"Yes, I understand her mother was a gifted horticulturist," replied Dumbledore mildly, heading back to his desk.

Professor Sprout was beaming at her fortune. "She's very good! She's already agreed to help me clear out Greenhouse Two for the OWL students' term projects. Oh! Providing that's alright with you, Headmaster," she added quickly.

Dumbledore looked up at her as he sat. "I see no reason to deny you an assistant, Pomona, as long as it doesn't interfere with Chara's current study commitments."

Sprout's smile widened, and Flitwick threw up his hands in mock defeat. "Then I am condemned to further post-prandial torture," he shrilled dramatically.

"Don't fret, Filius, you can sit with me during mealtimes," offered Professor McGonagall. "Miss Parr is not taking Transfiguration either." The prim set of her mouth left no doubt as to what she thought of that.

"If I may inquire, Headmaster," came a low voice from the behind the others, "is Parr to be treated differently than the other students?"

Dumbledore leaned forward and laced his fingers together, elbows on his desk and the tips of his thumbs tapping his upper lip. "In what sense, Severus?"

"She doesn't wear a standard uniform, her classes span across at least three different year levels that I know of, she arrives three weeks late into the term, and she's at least twice the age of some of our students." He paused. "Plus she seems to have a moderately serious injury around her neck."

Dumbledore's thumbs tapped a few more times before he drew his interlocked hands away from his face. "Her lack of uniform is due to a combination of medical necessity and personal request on her part, but I can assure you that it has nothing to do with vanity or aesthetics." He chose to ignore the disbelieving sneer on Snape's face. "The year levels she has been assigned to vary due to the differing levels of experience she has with the subjects she is taking, and whilst she is older than all the other students, she has assured me that this does not bother her in the slightest and seems bemused that it might bother others. After all, we have had older students before." His gaze sharpened as if he had caught a hint of an inference behind Snape's question. "I trust she has not proved disruptive?" he inquired, brows raised.

There was a long enough pause for the other teachers to turn and stare at the Potions master expectantly. McGonagall's lips had almost vanished in an accusatory expression levelled at him, Flitwick obviously thought there was some interesting trivia about to unfold, and Sprout actually stopped picking the dirt out from under her fingernails. Snape decided to downplay what had happened earlier.

"A mild altercation," he relented, brushing a speck of dust off his sleeve in an effort at nonchalance. He thought he heard Sprout give a snort of laughter, and he glared in her direction.

Dumbledore nodded. "Then I trust you have the matter in hand, Severus." He began to rummage about for some lost item on his desk, spilling a pile of parchments onto the floor in the process.

"Don't tell me you've given her detention already!" McGonagall's accusing expression distilled further.

"If I understand the Headmaster's response, Parr is to be disciplined in what manner I see fit," Snape shot back, narrowing his eyes. "Since she has no house to deduct points from, detention is a reasonable alternative punishment for disrupting the class!"

"No house?" Flitwick interrupted, catching a whiff of opportunity for Ravenclaw. "Why hasn't she been sorted into a house, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore looked up from the increasing mess on his desk, a quill in one hand and some bizarre metallic contraption in the other. "The Sorting Hat is unable to allocate her a house," he replied vaguely, his thoughts apparently elsewhere. Everyone else's eyebrows shot up at that revelation. Dumbledore decided that whatever he was trying to do was futile and dropped the contraption back onto the desk with a sigh. "I can't concentrate on an empty stomach," he announced. "I believe there is chocolate pudding tonight, and I should hate to miss the opportunity to have two helpings of that." He stepped over the pile of parchments strewn on the floor and headed towards the door of his study. "Shall we?"

It was avoidance he'd known the wizard long enough to recognise the technique. It was a foregone conclusion that Dumbledore knew much more than the scanty pieces he had fed the four heads of house, but they were interesting pieces of information nonetheless.

Picking at his dinner, Snape kept part of his attention on the surrounding conversation. It didn't have any relevance to what was on his mind, but long-standing habits made it easy to concentrate on several things at once. Flitwick was telling Vector about something he'd read in the *Daily Prophet* that morning. The Charms teacher, ever the gossip-merchant, was relating the meat of the story to the austere Arithmancy witch, punctuating his words by jabbing his fork in the air excitedly. Snape raised his eyebrow. If what Flitwick had read was true, then there had been a murder at St Mungo's the previous night. Deaths were not uncommon at the hospital, but murders? He filed the information away for later consideration.

He stopped torturing the food on his plate and put his knife down. He had no appetite this evening the headache had seen to that. The light in the hall was making his eyes hurt, increasing the need to retreat to his own quarters and nurse his head. Wretched students! He cursed silently and gripped the edge of the table as his anger increased his headache at least three-fold.

Squinting at the tables of students ahead, he noticed Finnigan fooling about with his empty plate, much to the amusement of the Gryffindors around him. He was flapping it about in the air like a tambourine, but his antics were short-lived as the plate slipped from his hand and crashed into Longbottom's still half-full one. Finnigan's audience roared with laughter, drawing McGonagall's head up from her own dinner. Tutting angrily, she rose from her place and headed towards the small chaos swirling around at her house's table.

Just as she reached it, Snape saw Malfoy enter the Hall, and to his surprise, Parr was with him. The boy still had his previously-injured wrist clamped in his other hand, though surely it would've been seen to by Madam Pomfrey. Both he and Parr were looking very serious, and Malfoy kept shaking his head at whatever Parr was saying. They both stopped a few metres inside the doorway with Parr making a curious gesture with her right hand: palm up, little finger extended in an upwards direction with the other digits curled closed. Malfoy was looking mildly incredulous and leaned away from her, his arms against his chest. Then, abruptly, he laughed out loud and shook his head again, this time ruefully. Parr said a few more words, shrugged, and then walked away from Malfoy and towards the Gryffindor table with a small smile on her face. Malfoy stared after her for a few moments with a slightly puzzled expression before joining his housemates at their table.

Longbottom's head popped out from behind the group of Gryffindors who were still getting a dressing-down from McGonagall, and he raised a hand in Parr's direction as she headed towards him. Acknowledging his wave, she gave him the dimples-and-smiles treatment and sat down on the bench next to him. Within moments, both their heads were together in deep discussion as Parr ate.

Snape stared at his plate. He would've liked to have known what Parr and Malfoy had been talking about, especially given the earlier drama during class. He sighed and bowed his head further, making his long black hair fall forward around his face, mercifully blocking some of the light from getting into his eyes. He catalogued the facts in his mind, shuffling them about in some sort of order of importance.

The woman was clearly more capable in some areas of magical education than others which was slightly odd if she had been provided with tutors prior to her acceptance into Hogwarts... or, as Dumbledore had phrased it in his earlier note, "granted a place at Hogwarts". That choice of words alone might suggest that her place at the school had been given grudgingly. Also, why the late notification of her presence to the teaching staff? It indicated one of two possibilities: it was a recent decision, one as recently made as this very morning, or Dumbledore was deliberately revealing as little information as possible about this woman. The Headmaster was given to secrecy at times, but this seemed a little extreme.

There was evidence of physical injuries: one relatively recent around her neck, the extent of which was hidden by the bandage she wore. The second was the healed cut across her face that had damaged the iris of her eye. It could be that she had more that were not immediately apparent none that hampered physical movement, so nothing structural or muscle-related. Whether or not her sight was compromised by the facial injury was yet to become apparent, but Snape suspected not, judging from the way she moved. Were the injuries a result of fights? Parr had already shown no hesitation in physically cowering another student, but one example didn't make a rule.

Her mother was reputedly talented with plant care. Not Herbology. Dumbledore had said "horticulturist" and referred to Parr's mother in the past tense, so the woman's mother was either no longer actively engaged in horticulture or possibly no longer alive. There was also the likelihood that her mother was a Muggle.

The list of subjects that Parr was taking needed some thought. It was true that students did get the opportunity to select which subjects they chose once reaching a certain grade level, and more often than not it was connected to the careers they would follow once they graduated. Parr was taking Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures, History of Magic, Astronomy, Muggle Studies and, of course, Potions. He needed to figure out the common thread through those subjects.

Then there was the inability of the Sorting Hat to assign her a house. Snape had never heard of that happening before. Couldn't assign or wouldn't assign? Reasons for both possibilities flicked through his mind as he pressed thumb and forefinger to his closed eyes. His headache was getting worse.

"Are you feeling alright, Severus?"

He kept his thumb and finger pressed into his eyes. "Yes, I'm fine, Minerva," he lied, "despite the fact that I must waste my evening with a student's detention."

McGonagall fussed with her skirt as she sat back down at the table next to him. "Well, perhaps that will discourage you from handing them out so blithely," she responded unsympathetically. That brought his hand down from his face. McGonagall steadfastly ignored the deathlook he gave her as she went back to her meal. Not getting the required abashment from her, he swung his black gaze back over to the Gryffindor table to find Parr gone. Longbottom was still there, this time talking to Granger. Parr must've bolted her food down and left the Hall because he couldn't see her anywhere else. He huffed and pushed his chair back. Might as well get the detention over and done with as soon as possible, as his headache wasn't showing any signs of lessening.

Chapter Three – Detention: Day One

Chapter 3 of 59

Detention is supposed to be unpleasant, but not for the one who gave it.

Gliding back into his classroom, Snape tutted in annoyance at Parr not being there. He'd thought that her hasty exit from the Great Hall indicated that she'd understood his instruction to serve her detention promptly. His mood soured and he decided to make this session more unpleasant than normal for Parr. Sitting down behind his desk, he started to scratch out a long list of potions that he intended Parr to prove that she could make. It would determine whether or not she should really be in a fourth-year class; he'd love to relegate her to a more junior level. Childish, yes, but he didn't really care. He paused in his writing, trying to dredge up some quite obscure potions to challenge her with. He flared his nostrils and frowned. He could smell purple coneflower. He looked up and found Parr standing less than four feet away from him with that bland expression aimed at him. He blinked. The woman must be able to move quieter than a cat to sneak up on him like that. Snape covered his surprise at her sudden appearance by calmly looking back at the list in front of him.

"You're late," he stated flatly.

"I've been standing here for two minutes, Professor," she cheeked back at him, her tone just as flat as his.

He swivelled his eyes back up at her without moving his head. At least she'd remembered to tie her hair back. "I find that unlikely," he remarked quietly and scowled as he saw the faintest ghosting of a smile appear on her lips. "Wipe that smirk off your face." Snape thrust the parchment at her. "I expect you to be able to make all these to my satisfaction in order to justify your placement at a fourth-year level. Most can be found in your textbook, but I do expect you to do whatever research is necessary to shore up any gaps in your knowledge." She took the list from his hand. "Fourth-years are expected to have stepped beyond the plodding by-the-book attitudes of the younger students, so believe me, Miss Parr, if I remain unconvinced that you are sufficiently capable, you will be demoted to the year-level I deem suitable for your abilities."

Parr looked down the list. "There're thirteen potions here."

"Professor Vector must be very proud of your arithmetic talent," he sniped at her.

"At least three of which I cannot complete in one evening," she continued, as if not hearing his caustic remark.

Snape leaned over the desk. "Then I suggest you start with those because you will return each evening in detention until you complete every potion on that list." Shit, why the hell did he say that? He would not only be punishing her, but denying himself the evenings as well. This bloody headache was fuddling his common sense. He expected some sort of tedious complaining from Parr at the unexpected length of her detention, but she was squinting at him with her head turned to one side.

"Is there a problem?" he hissed at her. Her staring had an agitating effect that he didn't much care for. Parr shut her eyes and twisted her head round further, brows drawn down. Snape opened his mouth to start shouting (something he rarely was pushed to) but her eyes popped back open before he could draw breath. Her mouth shaped itself into a silent "ah" as she turned on her heel and walked over to the supply cupboard. Snape stared after her for a few moments before turning his attention to the earlier efforts of the class in brewing a Purging Draught. Each sample would have to be tested and graded. Hopefully it would take his mind off the thudding pain behind his eyes. If it got any worse, he was certain his nose would start bleeding.

He lost himself in the task ahead of him, only occasionally checking on Parr's progress. She seemed to spend a lot of time in the supply cupboard, and there were an inordinate number of bottles and vials on the desk she was working at, even despite the fact that she seemed to be preparing four of the potions on the list. Her textbook was held open with a pair of tongs and a bottle of oxblood pellets. She was either able to concentrate on a number of things at once, or was a messy worker. Snape shrugged to himself; it didn't make much difference to him. If it was the latter, it would justify moving her down several grades. He'd also spotted her sniffing at some of the ingredients before using them. That was a bad habit in this subject, especially considering the toxic nature of some of the ingredients being used. It made it difficult for him to concentrate on what he was doing as he fully expected her to inhale something and pass out on the floor due to her own lack of caution.

At one stage, he'd paused in his critique on Brown and Patil's potion sample to find Parr staring fixedly at an open vial in one hand and the index finger of her other hand stuck in her mouth.

"Please don't tell me that's hellebore."

Parr looked up at him and removed the finger from her mouth. "Why?"

Snape put down his quill. "Because if it is, I have all the evidence I need to put you back to a first-year level."

"Why?" she asked, looking puzzled. "I need to use it for one of these potions."

He pressed the heel of his palm to his forehead in exasperation. "At what point did your tutor say it was acceptable to not only spend time with your nose in the ingredients, but to also put any of them in your mouth?"

Parr sighed and put the vial down. "Why would I need to put any of the ingredients in my mouth when I can already tell that a third of the ones I need to use are spoiled?" She removed one of the cauldrons from its flame with a pair of tongs and placed it on a heat-proof tile. "Where should I put the Strengthening Draught and the Wolfsbane Potion so they can sit until tomorrow evening?"

"Put them on the metal cooling rack in the back corner. What do you mean, 'spoiled'?"

"The knotgrass started to moulder before it was dried, the snake venom is old enough to have come from a viper alive during the reign of the pharaohs, the moonstone has traces of copper shot through it, and the hellebore has been contaminated with something, possibly dirt." Using the clamp-tongs again, Parr moved a steaming cauldron carefully to the rear of the room. "If my skills are to be assessed based on what I produce, then I'm sure you can understand my concern about the quality of the ingredients I have to work with." She settled the cauldron gently on the rack and returned for the second one. "Where can I find a porous clay jar, Professor?"

"Bottom shelf in the cabinet by the cooling rack. Are you suggesting that I allow my students to use substandard ingredients, Miss Parr?"

Releasing the clamp from the second cauldron, the woman returned to her desk. "I wouldn't have stated it that baldly, as that could be construed as being rude," she mused and struck a wooden stirrer sharply against the side of the cauldron that was cooling on the tile. The metal rang like a bell, and she nodded. She picked up a large marble pestle and thumped it into its accompanying mortar. "However, if what I see in your supply cabinet is anything to go by, it's no wonder some of your students have trouble meeting the standards you set." She continued to pound the contents of the mortar loudly.

Any thought that his headache had lessened over the preceding hour was unceremoniously crushed along with whatever was in Parr's mortar. "Stop doing that!" Snape demanded with some asperity. The pestle paused in mid-air as Parr looked up at him.

"The banging or the rudeness?" she inquired innocently.

"Either would be a start," he retorted stonily.

Parr shrugged and left the pestle in the mortar and turned to get a clay jar from the cupboard behind her.

Snape stood up slowly from his desk and made his way down the room. "Let me see if I can sum up your first day in my classroom, Miss Parr. You neglect to give me a note from the Headmaster before I begin teaching, you put a student in the infirmary with a crushed wrist, you turn up late to detention, you exhibit sloppy potion making practice by cluttering up your work area and snorting the ingredients, and then to top it off, you disparage the quality of the supplies I provide for my students. I can't wait to see what you'll do for an encore," he finished as he leant on the table Parr had been working at. She was still rattling about in the cupboard with her back to him. She gave a heavy sigh.

"I couldn't give you the note without interrupting your theatrical verbal treatise on the ineptitude of your students, Mr Malfoy's injury was preferable to everyone else emptying the contents of their stomachs on the floor, I arrived to serve my detention no more than a minute after you entered the classroom, and my work area is cluttered with all the spoiled ingredients I could find in the cupboard in the belief that you'd want them removed to avoid contaminating the rest." She turned on her heel and faced him, a small wide-necked clay pot in her hand. "As for an encore, how about I snap off one of your ribs and shove it up that ice-breaker you call a nose?"

Snape gaped at her. Supremely unconcerned, she started to spatula some greasy yellow concoction from the mortar into the jar. "You conceited, impertinent..."

"Is everything alright, Professor?" came Dumbledore's voice from the doorway.

Snape stood up quickly and removed the accusing finger he'd had pointed right in Parr's face.

"Yes, thank you, Headmaster," he responded with a rather impressive pretence of calm. "Miss Parr and I were... discussing the day's events." That failed to bring Dumbledore's eyebrows down from the general vicinity his hairline. "Is there something you needed?"

"I was looking for Chara, actually," the Headmaster continued after a pause, judiciously avoiding mention of the fight he'd just interrupted. "I'd hoped to catch her after dinner but it seems she was in too much of a hurry to serve detention." Parr gave a soft snort at that as she scribbled something on a small piece of parchment. "Has she nearly finished?"

Snape shot a look at Parr before answering. "For now, yes."

Dumbledore caught the implication straight away. "Ah, I see." His eyes flicked to Parr who was still scribbling away with her bottom lip tucked behind the smaller upper one. "How was your first day, Chara?"

Parr stopped writing and started to shuffle the bottles, jars, vials and pouches about on her work table. "Everyone has been most accommodating, Headmaster," she replied smoothly. "There is certainly a lot to learn." She picked up a cluster of receptacles and made her way over to the supply cupboard, face schooled into a mask of neutrality.

"Actually, on that note, Headmaster, I have some concerns over Miss Parr being in the fourth-year level of my class."

Dumbledore gave Snape his full attention. "Oh?"

The Potions master paused and gave a sidelong glance in Parr's direction before continuing. "I feel that perhaps... a first-year level would be more appropriate."

Dumbledore looked genuinely surprised. "First-year level, you say? Mmmm." He shook his head slightly and spread his hands. "Well, if you feel that Chara is best placed there, then you are at liberty to reassign her." He took a deep breath. "But Professor Fulgor will be very disappointed to hear that."

Parr returned to the table and started to tidy up, ignoring the conversation that was taking place.

Snape blinked. "Fulgor? As in Marconi Fulgor?"

Dumbledore scratched his ear as he squinted in thought. "Ah yes, that's right. Marconi was kind enough to be Chara's tutor prior to her arrival here at Hogwarts. He was very pleased with her abilities and has high hopes for her." He patted at his robes distractedly. "I shall have to find a way to let him down gently when I see him tomorrow."

Parr drifted away from the table again, and this time Snape followed her with his eyes more openly. Marconi Fulgor was regarded as one of the best potion makers currently alive, and some thought him amongst the very best that had ever practised the art.

"I thought that Fulgor was retired."

"Yes, he returned to Italy some years ago, but he was kind enough to travel back to England for the appointment. He's due to leave soon, which is why I'm meeting him for lunch in Hogsmeade tomorrow."

"I see." Snape actually saw many things stemming from this revelation. "Well, I have yet to see the results of Miss Parr's attempt to prove her knowledge in the subject, so perhaps it would be prudent to wait until then," he relented grudgingly, diverting his attention to his thumbnail as Parr returned to the table a third time.

Dumbledore raised his hands delightedly. "Wonderful," he enthused. He looked closely at Snape and frowned. "Are you feeling alright?"

Snape stared back and tried to stop wincing. His headache was ramping up again and making his eyes water.

"Yes, thank you, Headmaster," he spoke through gritted teeth.

Dumbledore tapped his lip with an index finger, looking unconvinced. He diplomatically didn't press Snape further. "Chara, are you ready?"

Parr was standing with an empty cauldron in one hand and a fistful of dirty utensils in the other looking lost. "Umm," she began, looking around the classroom for something.

"Ah, perhaps it'd be quicker if I...," Dumbledore stepped in smoothly, taking out his wand. "*Scourgify!*" The table and all the equipment rapidly turned spotless.

Parr looked relieved. "Thank you, Headmaster," she breathed and rushed to put the now-clean equipment away.

Dumbledore popped his wand back in his pocket. "Very much my pleasure," he replied, and held out his arm towards the door with a smile on his face.

Parr's movements got increasingly faster and she virtually threw three stacked cauldrons into a cupboard, stuffed her notes and her textbook into her bag, and nearly ran towards the door. Dumbledore set his hand on her shoulder and walked out with her.

"Professor Flitwick has asked me to talk to you about a proposal he has, and I have exciting news that you are to have a visitor this weekend..." The Headmaster's voice trailed off as they walked away from the classroom, leaving Snape standing alone in mild confusion, wondering what had just happened. He drifted back to his desk slowly, lost in thought.

Parr's family must have great influence to call such an accomplished potions maker back from his native homeland and out of retirement, but he'd never heard of a Parr family moving in the more exalted circles of the wizarding world. Pureblood families were usually given too much social exposure and didn't shy away from vaunting their status openly. Snape cast his mind back through fourteen years of teaching and couldn't recall any student of his having the surname. Of course, Parr could be from another country, although her accent was definitely British, as was her colouring. The hair was unusual but not isolated to a particular culture or race. He stopped in front of the blackboard, his eyes unfocused. She certainly had the arrogance and smart mouth of a pureblood, and that was definitely going to cause a problem in his class. Without a house to penalise, reigning in her behaviour was going to be tricky. He didn't want to have to spend every evening supervising detentions he'd given her. At least she'd kept the cheek in check whilst there were other students around, though that might not remain the case. Her denouncement of the contents of the supply cupboard was insulting enough when mentioned in private, to say nothing of the crack she'd made about Snape's nose. That thought snapped him out of his reverie.

Turning on his heel sharply, he strode over to the supply cupboard and wrenched the doors open. He'd always prided himself on having very high standards when it came to potion ingredients, and to have that called into question was galling to say the very least. He looked back at the table where Parr had stacked the allegedly inadequate substances. If she'd been telling the truth then he'd have to check all the ingredients he currently had, and that was a lot. Snape's shoulders slumped in exasperation. All he wanted to do was slink back to his private rooms, take something for his headache, and then, if he was lucky, pass out into a torpor that would blot out the memory of the day at least for a few hours. Now he'd have to check through all his potion supplies before the next day's classes and that would take hours. With a heave, he slammed the cupboard doors closed and was rewarded with the sound of many glass jars tipping over and smashing. He balled his fist and for a brief moment considered smashing it through one of the wooden doors in an unrepressed tantrum but thought better of it. He didn't want to be picking splinters of wood out of his hand in this kind of a mood. He forced his hand down to his side and stalked over to the collection of offending ingredients and proceeded to sift through them. A couple of minutes later Snape had confirmed what Parr had said. This was a disturbingly large cross-section of what he had, some of which had been acquired anywhere from a few days ago to several months before, but they all had the same thing in common. He leant forward with his hands on the table, one finger tapping the underside and stared at the wall opposite. He reached the disappointing conclusion that one of his suppliers had been taking him for a ride, but that wasn't what stuck in his throat. It was the fact that he hadn't noticed that angered him the most.

He pushed himself back upright and flowed back to his own desk. At least he'd finished assessing all those potion samples from the earlier class. A small sense of accomplishment but better than nothing. He picked up one of the three flasks that Parr had left of her evening's efforts and gave it a shake. Exhaling heavily, Snape put it back down. He really couldn't face checking on these right at this moment. They'd have to wait for tomorrow when, hopefully, his focus would be better. He nearly sat down to write a curt and impolite letter to that thieving, unscrupulous scab of a supplier but decided that he wouldn't give them man the benefit of any kind of warning. This transgression warranted a personal visit, but it would have to wait for the weekend. Quite frankly, everything else could wait until the morning. It was too late in the evening and he was too pissed off. His first lesson tomorrow wasn't until mid-morning so he'd sort everything out before then.

Snape was just about to turn away from his desk when he saw the small clay pot that Parr had been holding earlier. It was corked and placed on top of a folded piece of parchment, sitting apart in the centre of the table. Although it hadn't been sitting there for very long, there was already a small ring of oil that had soaked into the parchment from the porous pot. Hooking the jar around the neck between two fingers, Snape picked the pot up, at a loss as to what could be contained within it. None of the potions on the list he'd given Parr would contain the amount of oil that this one seemed to have, judging from the mark on the parchment. It had turned the paper semi-translucent, revealing slightly blurred ink marks. *Writing?* He picked the folded parchment up with his free hand, carefully avoiding touching the oil mark, and unfolded the paper awkwardly. It looked like a list of ingredients, presumably for what was in the pot: devil's claw, gotu kola, cyani flower, licorice ... It definitely didn't match to any of the potions she had to prove she could make. At the end of the list was a hastily scrawled set of instructions.

Not to be taken internally. Wait until the pot has leached enough oil to mark the paper in a circle twice the pot's diameter. Apply to neck at the point where the occipital touches the atlas. Unused contents to be discarded after 24 hours, but recommend using entire amount for the size of the headache you have, if not for your own good then for the sake of the people around you.

At least two of your neck vertebrae are misaligned. Drink one litre of water. Sleep on your back.

Had it been that obvious? Well, considering both Dumbledore and McGonagall had asked him if he had been feeling all right, his headache must've shown on his face in some fashion.

Snape found himself stuck somewhere between curiosity, bemusement and suspicion. He wasn't about to trust that Parr had listed everything she'd put in the jar's contents, but it would be very easy to separate the mixture into its original ingredients, especially since it had been made less than an hour before. Fetching a clean porcelain tile, he shook out a small blob of the jar's contents on to one corner of it. He fished his wand out from his robes and pointed it at the yellow paste.

"Discrimino."

The paste pulled itself along the porcelain, following the tip of his wand and distilled itself into a banded ribbon of its constituents. Snape checked them against the list in his hand. They were all there, no more, no less. None of them were toxic; in fact, they all had properties that made them suited for dealing with the symptoms of a headache. He stared at the tile. The proportions of the ingredients were a little strange: the valerian and peppermint oil were used quite heavily. The vetiver and olibanum were unusual only in that they were rarely used in his class. He shook his head. There was something about these ingredients that nagged at him, but he couldn't figure out what. Apart they were as unremarkable as they were together, and right now he was willing to try anything to get rid of this headache.

Chapter Four - Detention: Day Two

Chapter 4 of 59

Be careful of the questions you ask. You may not like the answers.

"What are you doing?"

"Warming the leaves."

"Why?"

"They give up more sap when they're warm."

"Why do you do it like that?"

"It's the way I was taught."

"By whom?"

"My mother."

"Was she a potions maker?"

"No."

"What did she do, then?"

Parr shrugged. "She was a healer of sorts." She unclasped her hands, dropped the leaves on to the chopping board and started to crush them gently with the end of her pestle. She leaned slightly to one side to get a better look at her open textbook.

"How do you know Marconi Fulgor?"

"He was one of my tutors."

"How long have you known him?"

Parr looked at the ceiling before answering. "Just over six months."

"Why are you here?"

"Can you be more specific?"

"Why are you here, at this school, now?"

"Do you ask all your students this many questions, Professor?"

"Other students don't turn up in dubious circumstances. Does it bother you, Miss Parr?"

She put the pestle down and picked up the bruised leaves carefully with her fingernails. "No. Should it?"

"Only if you're hiding something."

"Has something led you to think that?"

There was no reply to that. Parr laid the leaves gently on the surface of the liquid in the cauldron in front of her. Silence stretched out for some minutes.

"What did you do before you came here?"

"I ate dinner."

Snape tutted in irritation. "I mean before you came to the school!"

"I found things."

"You found things?"

"Yes, I suppose you could say that."

"I didn't say that. *You* said that."

"Did I? I don't recall. My mind must have wandered."

"Are you always this abstruse?"

"No, I'm doing it to annoy you."

"Miss Parr, I am not accustomed to rudeness from my students, even ones well-known to the Headmaster! I expect to be spoken to with a least a semblance of courtesy."

Parr fixed her grey eyes on him, face impassive. "If my honesty has offended you, then I apologise, Professor." There wasn't a hint of abashment in her voice. A crease appeared between her brows as she stared at him. "Your eyes are getting bloodshot again. Did you sleep on your back?"

"How I sleep is none of your business!"

"Are you going to see someone about your neck?"

"What for?"

"Your headaches will continue until you get your neck realigned. Don't use any of the ointment I gave you yesterday; it'll give you a rash if you use it two days in a row."

"What makes you think I have a headache, Miss Parr?" he challenged, folding his arms tightly.

"I can see it."

"Are you a medical practitioner, Miss Parr?"

"No."

"Then I shall consider your diagnostic abilities doubtful at best."

"Did it work?"

"What?"

"Did the ointment work?"

Snape's mouth twisted in the effort not to reply, but Parr nodded as if he had. She went back to her preparation, dismissing him from her attention. This wasn't going quite the way he had planned; he decided to give it a while before questioning her again. Parr didn't seem the least bit perturbed by the fact that he was standing just a few feet away opposite her.

He'd found her waiting outside the classroom with a bunch of greenery clutched in one hand and, strangely, the bottom of her school robes gathered in the other. Although she never said so, he was sure she was making sure he couldn't berate her for being late a second time. In fact, she hadn't said anything until he'd started asking questions, and that had been after forty minutes of staring at her from his current position.

Parr must've spent some time in the greenhouses that afternoon because there was a smudge of dirt on her left cheekbone that cut across her facial scar, as well as a drawn-out handprint on her coat front. No doubt that was where she'd procured the leaves she was using. Fortunately she hadn't the questionable habit of Professor Sprout in leaving half a bag of soil under her fingernails. He noticed that she was wearing what looked like fingerless gloves that stopped short of the middle joint of each digit and secured by adhesive tape. It made it a little awkward for her to write, though he had no idea why she should be writing anything during her detention. Whatever it was for, it involved a lot of crossing out and ambiguous symbols scratched all over the parchment she was using. She flicked through a handful of pages in her textbook and started writing in the margin.

"What's wrong with your hands?"

Parr stopped writing and looked up at him.

"Nothing... oh, I burnt my finger yesterday, if that's what you mean." She held up the index finger that he'd seen stuck in her mouth the previous evening. There was an ugly blister raised up on the pad.

"Why haven't you gotten it fixed?"

She shrugged and went back to her writing. "It'll remind me to be more careful next time."

Was she being obtuse or deliberately sidestepping his oblique query about her oddly bound hands? She didn't seem offended by the question, so it wasn't a taboo subject that she was reluctant to discuss. If she was dissembling, it was well hidden.

He eyed the bandage around her neck. If she treated her burnt finger didactically, what lesson was she learning from *that* injury, he wondered. Neck injuries weren't something that happened by accident as much as those on other parts of the body. More often than not they were the result of deliberate violence, self-inflicted or otherwise.

Parr stopped scribbling and turned her attention to the cauldron she had left cooling at the end of the table. She was proving capable of handling several things at once, although it wasn't a habit he encouraged in his students. Some potions needed careful and constant attention in order to come out right, and teenagers had notoriously poor attention spans. The three potions she had prepared yesterday had passed scrutiny, although one was an unusual variant on the version Snape taught to his students. Whether that was due to her tutelage under Fulgor or something she had learned from her mother wasn't clear. It was an acceptable variant, even if it wasn't often used. Slower-acting but longer-lasting in its effect. In all fairness, he couldn't mark her down for that. It would be interesting to assess the three she was working on this evening. One was fairly simple, something that he'd expect a first-year to be capable of, whilst the second often caught students out by being very reliant on timing, both in the addition of ingredients and in the length of time it spent at boiling point. The third he'd thrown in as a test of the extent of her knowledge. He didn't expect a fourth-year to know it; a Toxin Drain was something taught at a higher educational level usually to those who sought to follow a career in medicine. Sometimes one or two of his students were proficient enough to try it, but rarely did they manage to get something near the desired result. It was actually one of the potions that took the least time to make, but it was fiddly and temperamental. If it wasn't made perfectly, it metastasised the toxin, making the victim even sicker. It wasn't in the standard text for the subject, but it could be found in the library in a higher study manual. Parr, however, seemed not to be referring to any kind of textbook or notes for it, unlike the other two potions which had her flicking back and forth through the pages of her textbook numerous times.

Parr had decanted a sample of the cooling potion into a flask and was trying, dismally, to label it with a quill. Her teeth were gritted in concentration as the quill's nib slid about, defying her attempts to write something legible. Snape was flummoxed as to why she was having so much difficulty. Even idiot first years managed to use a quill, although their handwriting was frequently disgraceful.

The woman closed her eyes for a brief moment as if to find some scrap of temperance deep inside herself, brought her hand up and smashed the quill on the table. Point down. Crushing it into a mangled uselessness.

Snape raised his eyebrows at this fit of pique. Parr was mouthing something silently and repeatedly... and judging from the first word, it was less than polite. Scowling, she snatched up the pencil resting on top of her textbook and labelled the flask in one go. That done, she wiped the scowl from her face, stuck the pencil behind her ear and put the flask down with a sharp click.

Snape turned his head to watch her trotting off to the supply cupboard. She had the bottom of her robes clutched in her hand again. The length wasn't too great for her height, so it seemed unnecessary. His head turned back again as she returned to the table with two small bottles pinched between the fingers of her free hand.

"Do you have a problem with the school's uniform?"

She stopped in her tracks and swivelled her head to look at him, eyes catching the light.

"Yes," she stated, and took the last few steps to the table.

"Other students deal with it," he pointed out snippily. "Why should you be an exception?"

Parr took her time fussing about with her work area. Seconds passed. She took the cauldron off its fire and replaced it with another, this one empty. She referred to her textbook and made a few notes in the margin. More time passed. She was ignoring the question.

"Miss Parr?"

"Yes, Professor?" She picked up a jar of toadspawn and squinted at the label.

"Do you have a problem with questions as well as uniforms?"

She swirled the contents of the jar, mouth compressed into a thin line, eyes shadowed, nostrils flared.

"The standard uniform exacerbates my current injuries," she replied flatly, gaze fixed resolutely on the jar in her hand. "The materials make me itch and the cut is not conducive to ease of movement." She paused and her eyes became flinty. "And I will not be forced into a skirt!" Her mouth downturned with the contempt she forced into that last word. She unscrewed the lid of the jar and slopped half of the contents into the cauldron. Snape almost heard a click as her expression changed to that bland neutrality she'd used earlier. Her smoke-grey eyes flicked up from the table and travelled down the front of his coat slowly, mouth quirked into a faint smile. "You're either very dextrous or you take a long time to get dressed," she murmured almost inaudibly.

"I dress in a manner appropriate to my position," he snapped back at her. "Perhaps you should be paying attention to what you're doing, and just maybe you'll convince me not to put you into a first-year class!"

The look of confusion that cloaked her face had to be fake. "But I thought we were talking about fashion," she responded, head tilted to one side.

"If your potion-making abilities are anything like your ability to negotiate your way through a conversation, the first-year class will seem like a bunch of hyper-focussed prodigies in comparison!" Snape barked loudly at her and stalked off to his desk. It wasn't until he'd sat down that he'd realised what she'd done: she'd effectively driven him off by side-stepping some questions, responding to others in such a way that hid more than it revealed, and then needled him with personal questions and comments until he lost his temper.

The problem was that he was too used to dealing with young students. It was relatively easy to browbeat and wrinkle information out of them, so he'd gotten out of the habit of interrogation in this environment. Parr was obviously being deliberately evasive, and it was clear she was going to continue to avoid giving him the information he was after. It was likely he'd have to find it elsewhere.

Now that his bad mood was shifted into second gear, Snape began the tedious task of grading third-year essays. Some students obviously had trouble in disguising their plagiarism from texts in the school library, so it was like reading the same essay twenty times, the only differences being erratically bad spelling, shocking usage of punctuation (hadn't these half-wits ever learned how to use an apostrophe?), and sentences that segued from point to point like a drunk staggering down a dark laneway.

...ting... ting... ting...

Snape frowned and scored the tip of his quill into the parchment viciously, correcting a misspelt word.

... ting... ting... ting...

What did this sentence mean? He read it again. It seemed to cut off half-way through and ramble on about something else. The twit that had written it must've accidentally skipped at least two lines from the book he was copying from and not bothered to proof-read it. Snape looked at the name at the top of the parchment. Neworth... that explained a lot. The boy was a slack-jawed imbecile who spent more time with his finger up his nose than focussing on his studies.

... ting... ting... ting...

What on earth was this smeared down the bottom of this parchment! It never ceased to amaze him how disgusting Abercrombie was in comparison to her outward appearance. You wouldn't guess from her immaculately-kept hair, perfect fingernails, and clothes that looked as sterile as a medical dressing that she was a closet slob. Her work frequently turned up looking like it had been used to mop up whatever fetid substance was close at hand. It was enough to make a grown man cry... or retch.

... ting... ting... ting...

What the hell was that noise? He looked up from his desk.

... ting... ting... ting...

Parr was staring vacantly off to her right, left arm folded under its opposite.

... ting... ting... ting...

The silver knife in her hand tapped lightly against the lip of the cauldron, making the metal ring sonorously.

... ting... ting... ting...

She appeared to have lost interest in what was in front of her. The knife tilted down from her fingers towards the cauldron.

... ting... ting... ting...

Light flickered along the blade as her thumb pushed the handle down, bringing the point up into the air again. The knife paused, the tip wavering slightly in a hypnotic fashion. Parr stood frozen in that position, not even blinking. Oddball, he dismissed and flicked Abercrombie's essay away from him in distaste.

... ting...

... ting...

Snape spent the next hour becoming increasingly crabby as he waded through the bilge that was meant to pass as assignment work. He didn't think it was possible for students to get stupider, but they seemed to be giving it a damn good shot at proving it true. Rubbing one eye with his finger, he looked up to find Parr standing in front of his desk with three sample flasks held in her hands. She'd undone her hair now that she had finished the day's detention, the two tresses trailing down her front again like ribbons of pale silk. Dammit, he wished she wouldn't sneak up on him like that!

"Put the flasks there," he instructed, pointing at the front of his desk. "If you could make an effort to clean up as quickly as possible, I can salvage what's left of my evening."

"Where's the sink?" she asked with a slight frown. She placed the flasks down carefully and backed away a few paces.

He pushed aside the last assignment and put his quill down. "What sink?"

Parr's frown deepened and she cast her eyes to one side briefly. "I need to wash the equipment I've used," she explained slowly as if making a pointless statement and feeling slightly foolish in doing so.

Snape gawked at her. "Use your wand, for crying out loud! I'm not sitting about here any longer waiting for you to finish."

Parr pressed her lips together and touched the fingers of one hand to the bandage around her neck. "Erm," she began, eyes flicking from left to right.

"You don't have it with you." It was a statement spoken through gritted teeth. Unbelievable!

Parr tilted her head forward so that her face was in shadow. "Ah, not exactly."

"Are you saying that you came to the school ill-prepared for your studies?" The edge of anger in Snape's voice was unmistakable now.

The woman tapped her neck lightly with her fingers as if considering something. She wrinkled her nose ever so slightly before answering. "No."

"If you don't have a wand, then I consider you ill-prepared, Miss Parr," he hissed at her. "Being contrary does little to help your current situation, I might add."

Parr's features shifted into what could only be described as wonder. At least, that's what he thought it was. A second later the expression transformed into confusion, itself swiftly replaced by her usual inscrutable mask. Snape backtracked over what he had just said and couldn't figure out what had caused such strange and inappropriate changes of expression.

"I'm not allowed one."

"What?"

She blinked slowly, almost sleepily at him. "I'm not allowed a wand."

"What did you do? Stab someone's eye out with it?" he sniped at her with a twist to his mouth.

She shook her head slowly, her hair swaying gently, the light in the room catching the silvery colour and making it shimmer with the movement.

His frown deepened. "Did you curse someone with it?"

A slight crease appeared between Parr's brows, and she drew the tips of her fingers back and forth across the bandage at her throat. She shook her head again.

"Was it taken off you?"

She gave that sleepy blink again and shook her head a third time, fingertips crawling along the bandages lightly.

"Then why-?" Snape stopped mid-sentence as part of the puzzle clicked into something recognisable. He narrowed his black eyes at her.

"Come here," he ordered softly.

Parr just continued to run her fingers delicately across the bandage, nostrils slightly flared. Her head swivelled to one side incrementally, eyes half-closed.

"Is there something wrong with your hearing?" he asked with a hint of steel in his low voice. "Don't make me repeat myself."

Parr took a few steps towards his desk.

"Closer."

Another two steps. Snape wished she'd stop touching her neck; it was getting distracting. "Put your hand down," he told her. There was a noticeable pause before she did so that smacked of a challenge. Snape slowly drew out his wand from his robes and pointed it at her. Parr raised her eyebrows slightly, and her mouth quirked into a faint smile. He twisted his long fingers so that the wand turned slowly in a circle until the handle was pointed at her. The self-confident expression on her face vanished quickly and was replaced by a rather wide-eyed amazement.

"I can't use that," she told him in a scandalised tone.

"Why not?"

She pressed her lips together tightly for a few seconds before answering. "Wands are user-specific. It won't work properly."

He rolled the wand between thumb and forefinger, relishing the way she was backing herself into a corner. "True, but you'll get some kind of reaction from it, even if it isn't what you intend." He continued to hold it out to her.

Parr curled the fingers of her right hand as she brought it up to her chest, eyes still fixed on the wand as if it would bite her should she look away from it.

"It's bad manners to use someone else's wand," she countered back.

Snape snorted lightly. "An old-fashioned etiquette that few choose to observe these days," he admitted. "However, if permission is given, there is no breach of said etiquette." He twisted his fingers slightly, making the handle of the wand drift from left to right and back again. He watched her slate grey eyes follow the movement.

Parr exhaled out of her flared nostrils quickly and frowned up at him. They stared at each other for some moments in silence, the balance of wry amusement fully shifted from her to him. Parr's expression continued to darken until her face was a storm front.

The wand turned slowly back until the end was pointed at her like an accusing finger. It stayed there for a few heartbeats before disappearing back into his pocket. He stood up and flowed towards the door of the classroom.

"Follow me," he instructed stonily.

Parr half-turned in his direction. "But I still need to clean this equipment."

"Leave it!" he barked at her, throwing the door open. "You can come back later and scrub it all clean in cold water with your bare hands for all I care!" With that Snape swept out of the classroom, leaving Parr in his wake, scrambling to catch up.

Chapter Five: A Pain In The Neck

Chapter 5 of 59

A pain in the neck, in more ways than one.

"I'm sorry, Severus, I seem to be having trouble in discerning what the problem is. Can you be more specific?"

Part of him resented the fact that there was nothing within nearby reach that he could throw with sufficient force whilst another part was grateful that was the case. A petulant fit would do little to improve his argument. Snape closed his eyes briefly in a mixture of exasperation and the effort to keep a semblance of calm in front of Dumbledore.

"It was my understanding, Headmaster, that this school was for those in possession of magical abilities. Am I wrong in this summation?"

Dumbledore glanced up at the ceiling of his study in a brief gesture of thought. "One might interpret the rules in that fashion, yes."

"Headmaster, the rules you mention clearly state that ..."

"... that Hogwarts is a school of witchcraft and wizardry whose aim is to educate those in need of magical knowledge," Dumbledore finished for him. "I'm perfectly aware of the school's tenets, Severus, but I fail to see the conflict that you do."

"Parr is a Muggle! She shouldn't even be here, let alone be taught as a student."

Dumbledore scratched the side of his head and sighed. "Severus, the two worlds can't be as separate as you think they should be. There has to be some crossover between the two, no matter how much of an anathema it may seem."

"Why?" Snape asked bluntly.

Dumbledore squinted at him. "Because both worlds currently share the same space, and, might I also point out, some of the same problems." He held up his hand as Snape opened his mouth. "Severus, I will not be drawn into another debate centring on your opinions as to how magicfolk and non-magicfolk should interact. Chara has been accepted as a student here in full compliance with the school rules."

"But once you let one Muggle in..."

"Chara is not the first non-magical to be taught here," Dumbledore interrupted. "Two others have passed through during my tenure, and at least one I know of during Dippet's, so I can hardly be blamed for bringing the school into disrepute." He noted the slightly stunned expression on Snape's face. "There are times when a tighter collaboration between the two worlds is necessary. Things can't always be classified black and white...the shades of grey have a foot in both camps. I would think that you would know that better than anyone else." The slight sting of reproach in his voice was unmistakable.

Snape looked over his right shoulder to where Parr was standing. She'd drifted over to Fawkes' perch almost as soon as they had entered Dumbledore's study and hadn't moved from her gazing point. Snape and Dumbledore might very well have not been there for all the attention she was paying to the conversation.

"She's not a Squib, is she?" asked Snape shrewdly. He turned back to the Headmaster who, for once, was actually giving him his full attention, or at least giving the semblance that he was.

Dumbledore smiled benignly. "Not to my knowledge."

"Then why this Muggle? What is it that makes her so different from all the others that she must be here?"

Dumbledore pressed his lips into an even thinner pair of lines as he stood up. "Circumstances dictate it, Severus, and I might add that it is not customary for me to divulge the ins and outs of a student's prior history." The old wizard picked up a dusty book from his desk and drifted away, putting some distance between himself and Parr. "I have a book that you might be interested in, Severus. I found it during the summer break whilst I was in France. The condition is really quite superb."

Snape rolled his eyes in tired frustration and followed Dumbledore to the bookcase.

"Severus, I would ask that you do not discuss the situation with any other staff member, any student, or really, anyone else besides me," said Dumbledore under his breath as he slipped the book he had been carrying amongst its fellows on the shelf. "Non-magical students are always kept anonymous as much as possible, and I would not wish that long-standing practice to stop during my time here."

Snape blinked and shuffled some information about in his head. "Is there any danger to other students?"

Dumbledore paused in pulling out another book and narrowed his eyes at Snape. He paused noticeably before answering. "I don't believe so."

"Surely letting other staff members know would help keep the situation more tightly controlled."

The Headmaster gave a tight smile at that comment. "Alas, it has been my experience that some teachers, well-meaning though they may be, have some trouble keeping certain elements of information to themselves. That is why it is on a need-to-know basis, and that is how I can control the flow of information best."

Snape scowled, certain that Dumbledore was making a comment about his suspected role in Lupin's lycanthropy becoming commonly known last year that resulted in the man having to resign from his position as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.

"What about the board of governors?" he posed, reflecting Dumbledore's small smile with a twisted one of his own. "Are they apprised of the... situation?"

The Headmaster's features hardened at that. "You can rest assured that they know that Chara is here. In fact, I personally presented the five letters of recommendation for her to attend Hogwarts from rather prominent members of the wizarding world at a meeting of the governors last Sunday." He pulled the tome he had selected out completely from the shelf and handed it to Snape. "I believe it's a first print."

The Potions master looked at the front cover with its faded and cracked leather decorated with pale letters of gold. It was a copy of Truhillo's *Hallucinogenic Spores of the Western Thalophyta*. Very rare indeed, he admitted, suppressing a more noticeable indication of surprise at being handed so precious a piece of literature. The cynic in him whispered that it was more likely a tactic by the Headmaster to mollify him into not asking any more questions about Parr. Snape hefted the book in his hands slightly as if weighing up its efficacy in such a tactic and opened his mouth again.

The sound of Fawkes' melancholic trill stopped him before he could speak, and both men looked over to the bird. The phoenix was leaning over sharply on his perch, head outstretched towards Parr's crouched figure.

"Chara?" Dumbledore called, hastening over to her. "Are you alright?"

Parr was almost kneeling on the floor, one hand placed in front to steady her whilst the back of the other hand was pressed against her neck. Her face was hidden behind the pale hair that fell forward, obscuring her features but not blocking out her slightly hoarse reply.

"I believe that it might be a good idea if I went to see Madam Pomfrey, Headmaster." She remained hunched over, her school robes pooled around her. Dumbledore managed to coax her to a standing position, and it was as her head lifted slightly that Snape saw her hand was streaked with thread-thin lines of the bright red blood that had already soaked through the bandage around her neck. Her face had become a ghostly white that rivalled her hair, and dark circles under her eyes made her look thoroughly wretched.

"For how long has it been hurting?" Dumbledore asked her, prising Parr's hand gently away from her neck.

Parr's head drifted slowly to one side and down towards her shoulder. "About an hour, I think," she slurred, forehead rippling into furrows. "It got a lot worse than I thought it would, I'm afraid."

"Severus, can you make sure Chara gets to the infirmary?" Dumbledore asked him, "I'm not sure she can get there unaided." It was probably only his grip on her arm that prevented the woman from sinking back to the floor again.

Snape's first reaction would've been one of annoyance at the request had he not seen the degree of blood around Parr's neck. A bleed like that was potentially serious, and certainly something that required immediate and urgent attention. Fortunately, it appeared to be a sluggish bleed. A fountain of arterial blood would have caused far more alarm in him.

He pocketed the book and swept over. The noticeably greenish cast to Parr's face gave him pause. He wasn't very good with vomiting. Blood he had no problems with, but vomit took all his willpower not to heave up the contents of his own stomach. He'd have to keep her at arm's length as much as possible, but considering the way Dumbledore was holding her up, she didn't have much leg strength. Great. Just what he needed: trying to drag a disorientated, weak-kneed, pre-vomiting and dangerously bleeding student down two flights of stone steps and up another. Snape sighed and gritted his teeth.

"Can you stand by yourself?" he grated at Parr, earning him a disapproving frown from Dumbledore.

Parr squeezed her eyes closed and flexed her hands. "Ah, yes, I think so," she replied quietly. Her eyes opened again with a touch more focus in them than before.

"Severus, help her or she'll fall down and hurt herself further," said Dumbledore sternly.

Parr shrank away from Snape's outstretched hand. "No! I'm fine," she almost shouted with a wild look about her eyes. Both men froze at the outburst. "Excuse me, I meant to say I think I'll be fine to walk unassisted, thank you," she reiterated in a more moderate tone of voice. Dumbledore reluctantly released his grip on her arm.

"Well, if you think that..." he began, doubtful.

"The Headmaster is right," Snape interrupted. "We can't have you collapsing down stairs now, can we?"

Parr's eyes sharpened noticeably under her lowered brows as she drew further away from him. It seemed a foolish attitude considering her condition. Or perhaps, she just didn't want him touching her. Despite the severity of the situation, that possibility irritated him.

"I'm not an invalid, Professor," she hissed at him, fists clenched at her sides.

"I was thinking more of the floors. Filch complains incessantly at having to scrub blood out of stone."

"Then perhaps that can serve as part of my detention tomorrow," she shot back at him, the green cast to her skin counteracted by the angry flush in her cheeks.

"I think you have enough to do already without that," he parried calmly, getting ratty at her recalcitrance.

Dumbledore cleared his throat as a subtle indicator to stop the sniping. Snape took the hint and indicated that Parr should precede him to the door of the study.

"I'll check on you later, Chara," Dumbledore assured her as she gathered the hem of the robes up in her unbloodied hand.

"That's very thoughtful of you, Headmaster," she responded with a tired smile. She drew herself up straighter. "Sorry to have disturbed you so late in the evening." She turned carefully and made her way to the door.

"Try not to provoke her, Severus," Dumbledore suggested under his breath.

Snape stared at him. "Does she bite, Headmaster?" he asked just as quietly as he moved to follow Parr.

"Sometimes," was the almost inaudible reply, making him pause mid-step.

Parr quickly straightened from the wall she had been leaning against as Snape shut the door to Dumbledore's study behind him. Keen not to show any more weakness than necessary, he guessed. It would be interesting to see how long she could hold that up for. She turned her head and peered out of the corner of her eye at him warily as he walked up behind her.

"After you, Miss Parr, unless you don't feel you can make it down the staircase without somersaulting face first," he said tersely, looking down his nose at her.

Parr rolled her shoulders back irritably, making the tendon in the right joint click loudly, and walked slowly towards the stairs. As she reached the first step, she hesitated, head tipped forward to assess her footing. Seconds passed. Snape watched her silently as she wavered gently. He stuck out a long finger and pushed her in the back, making her tip forward, and had to grab her by the robes to stop her from falling headfirst. She barely registered what had happened and didn't even raise her head.

"Fine to walk unassisted?" Snape sneered at her and sighed loudly. He wondered if it would be easier to grab her around the middle and hoist her down the stairs like a rolled-up carpet, but he thought of the vomiting issue again and decided against it. He'd just hold her up by the fistful of material he already had in his hand. He twisted it to get a better grip and then pushed her in front of him. "Try and watch where you're putting your feet," he instructed stonily.

It was with some surprise that they got to the infirmary without Parr collapsing or spewing. There was a brief delay while Snape reprimanded a couple of second-year Hufflepuffs for being out of their house quarters close to midnight, but other than that the corridors had been deserted.

Fortunately, Madam Pomfrey had still been awake when they arrived. She took one look at Parr's sagging form and dropped the bandages she had been rolling with her wand.

"What's happened?" she shripped, hurrying forward like an aproned steamtrain.

"A student requires your attention," Snape replied laconically and thrust Parr towards the mediwitch. Parr tottered towards Pomfrey who latched on to her arm with a vice-like grip and drew her away to the nearest sick-bed. Sitting her down, Pomfrey started to fuss at the woman's neck bandages until Parr stopped her with a raised hand and spoke to her quietly. Snape couldn't make out any of the words, but Pomfrey flicked a glance up at him. A few hushed sentences were exchanged, and Parr nodded slowly. Pomfrey ducked into her little side-room and gathered up a few things. He watched her hand a small glass bottle to Parr and assessed that the opportunity for surreptitious information gathering was probably non-existent. Snape turned to go. This wasn't a place he wanted to be right now.

"Just a moment, Severus," Pomfrey called out behind him, catching him just as he reached the door. "I need to speak to you before you leave." He frowned at her, but she was too busy cutting off the bloodied bandage around Parr's neck to notice. He sighed audibly and tapped his foot, and lurked uncomfortably at the opposite end of the room.

It was hardly inconspicuous that Parr was not in the sort of physical health that permitted laxity or disregard. Whilst Snape didn't doubt that Madam Pomfrey was more than capable of dealing with the situation, common sense would dictate that Parr be restricted to a medical institution like St Mungo's instead of a poorly equipped school infirmary.

If Parr had a tutor before arriving at Hogwarts, it might suggest she had access to others. Therefore, magical education was available to her outside of Hogwarts. What did she gain by being here?

The tap of Pomfrey's footsteps brought Snape out of his reverie. He looked up to find the mediwitch approaching with a wooden chair clutched in her hand and a look on her face that could stop a Hippogriff in its tracks.

"I understand you've been experiencing headaches, Severus," she said flintily and placed the chair on the floor with a determined clack. "If you'll just take a seat, please." It wasn't a request.

"What for?" he asked suspiciously. "Surely you have more important medical conditions to attend to right now, Poppy."

Pomfrey tutted, lifted the chair again and swept around and behind him with an irritated rustle of skirts. The chair's seat being rammed sharply into the back of his legs made him sit down before he could stop himself. The impact woke the headache up from its sleep, reverberating nastily behind his eyes. The mediwitch clamped her iron claws on to his shoulders to stop him from getting up.

"What are you doing?" he snapped.

"Why didn't you come and see me before?" she demanded to know, seeming to exert no effort in holding him down in the chair. The woman had the strength of an ogre, and by the sound of her voice, the temper of one as well.

"I'm perfectly capable of handling a headache," he retorted.

"Well, you're here now, so sit still and hush up," she commanded and started to unbutton his coat from behind. A sharp slap knocked his hand away from stopping her. "It won't make the slightest difference to me if you choose to be difficult, Severus," she pointed out, "so you might as well keep the stubbornness in check, and I can fix this quickly." He almost yelped as she dug her fingers into his shoulders. Dammit, the woman had the bedside manner of Death Eater. No wonder she had gone into medicine. He glowered at the stone floor at his feet and suffered in silence as she tried to work the knots out of his shoulders. "Hecate's hat, would you *relax*! You're making this more difficult than it has to be," she griped.

Snape tried relaxing but he was never comfortable with people touching him, and Pomfrey tutted at his lacklustre effort. He rolled his eyes over to where Parr was still sitting with her back to them and both hands holding a plump medical dressing against the front of her neck. He wished he could smack her for mentioning his headache to Pomfrey. If she had any experience with Pomfrey's treatments, she'd have done it out of spite as the cures were frequently as bad as the symptoms they addressed. He clutched at the seat of the chair and the mediwitch slipped one hand over and down the back of his collar to get to his neck, transferring the iron-grip to the muscles there. Snape could really do without this nonsense.

"Yes, I can see you're doing a great job of treating this," Pomfrey huffed. "Maybe if you seen me before your muscles turned into stone you wouldn't have to put up with this."

Snape grunted at her, seething. He suffered in silence for a few minutes, trying to distance himself from the pain that was flooding through his tortured neck. A thought occurred to him and he mulled on it for a while. "Your brother still works at St. Mungo's?" he eventually asked, gritting his teeth as Pomfrey worked at the area above his collarbone. His shirt was beginning to chafe against his skin a particularly unpleasant way.

"Asclepius? Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I heard that there was a murder at the hospital." He suppressed another yelp as Pomfrey jammed her fingers into his scalenes.

"Mmm," she replied, non-committal.

"Does he know what happened?"

Pomfrey's fingers paused. "Don't you read the *Daily Prophet*?"

"That rag? Certainly not!" he retorted contemptuously.

The fingers of death started moving again. "Well, the rumour goes that one of the patients was found...shredded," she revealed quietly.

Snape started to turn to look at Pomfrey in surprise but she held his head still.

"Stop moving!" she snapped.

"What do you mean, 'shredded'?" he asked stupidly, wincing at a thumb pushing up under his skull roughly and inexorably. Shit, she was going to give him bruises at this rate!

"Asclepius said that one of his colleagues went into the patient's room and found...bits of her scattered everywhere like confetti."

Snape processed this new piece of information with a frown. "Do they know who did it?"

"No. At least I don't think so. There were people from the MLE in and out of the place barely minutes after the mess was found, mainly Aurors."

Aurors? Not surprising given the circumstances. Snape's eyes lost their focus as he tried to reconcile this piece of information with what he knew of the workings of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Considering the number of blunders that occurred under their jurisdiction, it was hard to come up with anything trustworthy.

"Who was the victim?"

"I don't know. Asclepius doesn't either, or he's not telling me, which is understandable." Pomfrey's palms smoothed their way along the sides of Snape's neck. That actually didn't feel too bad, he thought distantly. His headache was still there though, which was disappointing.

This time he did yelp as Pomfrey suddenly and sharply twisted his head up and to the left. Several pops sounded as his vertebrae moved back into their correct positions. "You could've given me some warning!" he proclaimed angrily.

"What for?" she replied with too much smugness in her voice for his liking. "You'd just tense up again if I did."

He stood up abruptly.

"Where are you going?" she asked, smugness turning quickly into annoyance.

"I think that's more treatment than I can handle right now, thank you, Poppy," he responded, buttoning up his coat again. "Perhaps you should attend to your other patient." With that he swept off, stiff-backed, in a billow of black.

Chapter Six: Reassessment

Chapter 6 of 59

Trying to assemble a puzzle when you only have a handful of the pieces is a difficult thing to achieve.

Snape stood looking at the Wolfsbane Potion on the cooling rack with his arms clamped tightly across his chest. It *looked* right, but that didn't necessarily mean it was right. Appearances were sometimes deceiving, and he wasn't about to lock off judgement on what was sitting in front of him until it progressed further. He'd gotten into strife before by making snap judgements, and the fall-out from those instances took a long time to fade, if ever. Such experiences made him hesitate before committing himself, but the natural tendency to speak his mind was never fully suppressed, and it usually ended up reasserting itself at some point.

He'd stalked off to his private quarters after Pomfrey had tried to wrench his head off his neck, slamming the door behind him in a satisfying and rather ear-splitting manner. It wasn't until he took a step away that he realised that he had shut the end of his robe in the door, resulting in him being yanked backwards unceremoniously as if an unseen hand had hold of the fabric. Snape stood still and fumed, a tiny part of his mind grateful that no-one had seen it happen. He took a couple of steps back so that he could open the door and free the material. He left the room in darkness as he leant back against the wood.

Flitwick's gossip about the murder at St Mungo's had deepened into something truly macabre, if what Pomfrey had told him was true. Shredded? That seemed surprisingly brutal...almost something a Death Eater would be inclined to.

What had the victim done to warrant such a gruesome end? *Whom* had the victim been? He doubted that the *Daily Prophet* would have such information, but it might be worth keeping an eye on it over the following week in case some other, more veiled clue presented itself. He couldn't shake the gut feeling that the act reeked of Death Eater involvement.

St Mungo's had been required some decades ago to restrict the areas in which visitors and patients could Apparate in and out of. Some patients had differing opinions to their Healers as to when they were well enough to leave the hospital; that had always been a problem.

However, the hospital's administration had to appeal to the Ministry to restrict magical access to the building when outside feuds that had caused injuries started to be brought into the hospital itself. It was amazing the depths of ill-will that some people bore. Such people didn't hesitate to use Apparition in a hit-and-run method to continue the feuds. Other than pre-designated areas, the hospital was blocked against Apparition. That would mean that the attacker would have to have entered through an area that was monitored by a hospital staff member. There'd been no mention of anyone else being harmed or killed in the incident, but if the MLE was involved, they'd more than likely squash any information they didn't want getting out into the public domain. It was actually a little surprising that any word of the murder had been allowed in the paper.

Snape pushed himself away from the door and hissed a spell to light the room. He stopped after a few paces as another possibility occurred to him: the attacker could have been another patient. He mentally scanned a list of Death Eater names. He'd not heard of any of them being injured to the extent that they would require medical attention at the hospital, but he was the first to admit that he wasn't privy to everything that went on amongst the group.

Again, this was assuming that the attacker was a Death Eater...after all, the organisation hardly had a monopoly on violent and vindictive behaviour. He shook his head and dismissed the matter for the time being.

Shrugging his robe off, he was about to fling it aside when a weight in the pocket reminded him of the book that Dumbledore had given him. He dragged it out before sitting heavily in his chair by the cold fireplace. Whatever motivation Dumbledore had in giving him the book, Snape was actually very interested in reading it. It'd make a welcome evening distraction from his headache. He blinked. Well, the headache he seemed to no longer have. Damn Pomfrey and her neck twisting; it had actually worked.

It wasn't until he was several pages into the book that he found the letter. At first he thought that it was just an old envelope that Dumbledore had been using as a bookmark, but when he turned it over, he found his name written on it in an unfamiliar hand. Snape stared at it suspiciously for a few moments. There was no doubt in his mind that Dumbledore had known it was there. In fact, it was more likely that the Headmaster had put it there himself. But why? Why hide it that way and make no mention of it?

With curiosity duly aroused, Snape put the book down and opened the letter. His expression darkened as he read. It was from Fulgor. Snape wondered if it was a coincidence that this letter had been passed to him after Dumbledore's lunchtime appointment with Fulgor the day before. He doubted it.

The letter was full of confidences in Snape's ability to teach Potions that ordinarily would have left him with a private flush of pride, but having it connected to Parr in any way seemed to soil the flattery. It was obvious from the letter that Fulgor seemed to rate the Muggle's abilities positively. Snape had no doubt that should Parr be relegated to a lower level than she was currently assigned, Fulgor would be one of the first to hear of it, most likely from Parr herself.

Very well, then, Snape thought as he folded the letter back into the envelope and threw it into the unlit fireplace. Rather than let her stagnate with the first-years, let's see how she liked drowning at a fifth-year level. If anything, that would give him greater pleasure: watching Parr flounder about, disappointing not only Dumbledore but Fulgor as well... very sweet. It would also absolve himself from possible blame. After all, coming with such high recommendations, how could he not have expected so much from her? The uncoiling of satisfaction in his gut cemented the decision.

The following afternoon, Parr had turned up for her lesson with the other fourth-years, thus providing a chance for even greater internal entertainment for Snape. Looking like a corpse that had been dragged backwards through a hedge, she had just sat herself down when he spoke without looking up from the notes he had been writing as the class had filed in.

"Miss Parr, this is not your assigned class time. I suggest you find one of your classmates and try to convince them to take pity on you and run through this morning's lesson with you, for I shan't waste the next lesson backtracking for your benefit. I also expect today's assignment to be completed without delay. Please close the door behind you on the way out."

Stuff *that* in your ear, he thought nastily, almost hoping she'd make the mistake of opening her mouth and saying something. However, that particular want was left unfulfilled as Parr exited silently. Not having looked up to see her leave, he couldn't tell whether her silence was due to illness, embarrassment or anger.

Unsurprisingly, Longbottom's face was the epitome of distress, and that only increased to desperation as Snape tore ten strips off him during the lesson as the idiot boy managed the flub almost every aspect of the practical.

The class literally fought each other to get out of the dungeon as soon as the lesson had finished in the barely concealed terror that he'd turn his vituperation on to someone else now that Longbottom had been reduced to an emotional wreck. It had brightened Snape's day to no end.

Dinner had produced no overheard insights from that diminutive bastion of gossip, Flitwick. Snape spent most of the meal stabbing his fork into his sausages and glaring at the Gryffindor table, purely out of habit. He realised that this was probably a bad idea and likely to put him in a foul mood, so he put his fork down with a sigh of regret and left the Great Hall.

Now, staring at the Wolfsbane Potion, he wondered where Parr had learned to make it. It had been one of the deliberately difficult ones he had thrown into her detention list. Like the Toxin Drain, it wasn't taught at high school level, although the method could be found in some of the dustier books in the library. It was the sort of potion that was difficult to brew if taken straight from a book, as was the case with most potions that were not in the school's curriculum. Getting students to follow instructions precisely was hard enough without throwing in idiosyncratic techniques, intuition and a trained sense of timing. His mouth compressed into a thin line. It seemed an odd thing for Fulgor to have taught her. There were plenty of other, more generalised and more useful potions to teach someone.

Snape hated smartasses, he hated favouritism, and he hated Muggles. That all three descriptors were combined in Parr made her a concentrated focus for his hatred. He'd suffered at the hands of all three and therefore relentlessly smashed down everyone with the traits of the first and the taint of the second to the same level of mediocrity that most deserved to be at.

Potter had been the most challenging in that category in recent times, and it had become a quite bitter obsession for Snape to rip away the façade that most couldn't, or wouldn't, see past to the truth: that Potter was, at best, an average and plodding student with no imaginative flair, no drive outside of Quidditch, with an unabashed arrogance that was surely a genetic inheritance from his father, and the total incapacity to realise that the only reason he was still alive was due to the actions of others and not through his own abilities. Merlin's balls, how Snape *hated* him! The intensity of the emotion made his stomach roil and his fists clench painfully.

He sniffed and almost kicked the rack in peevishness. He could only guess at how long Parr had been standing there.

"Get on with it," he snapped, turning away without deigning to look at her. He rubbed the back of his hand under his nose, trying to dispel the almost cloying scent of purple coneflower. "If that stuff hasn't worked for you up until now, then it's unlikely to be any more efficacious if you triple the dose."

Snape sat down behind his desk and scowled at Parr. Curiously, she was holding a steel bucket in her left hand; he hoped that it wasn't there for her to vomit into. She stared at the cooling rack for a few moments as if trying to fathom why he'd been standing in front of it when she had entered the classroom. If she discerned a reason, she gave no sign of it as she moved to one of the student tables and commenced her third day of detention, setting the bucket on the floor next to her.

It was the first time that day that Snape had gotten a good look at her, and it wasn't promising. If she'd looked wretched the evening before, twenty-four hours had not improved her state. The shadows under her eyes had not only deepened in colour but spread as well, encroaching upon the greenish pallor that sat high in her cheeks. Her shoulders slumped, and even her hair looked dulled.

This was obviously one very ill person, and he actually forgot his rancour long enough to wonder why on earth she wasn't in the infirmary. Snape tilted his head to one side and watched her for the entire detention in the sort of morbid fascination that grips bystanders at the scene of an accident.

He'd expected her to ask him if she still needed to complete her detention, considering he'd put her in a higher year level without prior warning, but she remained silent. He wondered whether it was due to stubbornness, martyrdom, or whether the thought had not actually occurred to her. It was possible that she was sharp enough to realise why he had put her into fifth-year level. If that were the case, then it was unlikely she was going to give him the chance to crow over her dropping the ball in the subject.

Despite her obvious illness, Parr managed to complete five more potions, including the Strengthening Draught that she had sat near the Wolfsbane Potion two days ago. Her movements had been slow and deliberate, face pinched in intense concentration. Each piece of equipment that she had used was carefully cleaned by hand using water that had been contained within the steel bucket, dried and put away.

She had actually begun to noticeably sweat towards the end, so much so that when she had drifted over to place samples of her evening's efforts on his desk, the hair around her face clung to her skin and the edge of her collar was darkened patchily. Snape watched her hand shake ever so slightly as she put down the last flask with exaggerated care. She fixed her gaze at some unspecified point on the table as she backed away and waited. A small trickle of sweat slid down from her hairline and along the contour of her temple. She either didn't notice or ignored it, remaining stock still, mouth downturned so that the lines at the corners deepened into brackets of distress.

"Go."

Parr turned slowly, picked up her bucket and left without a word, shoulders rounded forward, one hitched slightly higher than the other, leaving Snape wondering if that was the last he was going to see of her. The louder, nastier part of him wished it were so.

Chapter Seven – Prodding the Hornet's Nest

Chapter 7 of 59

Not every tree bends in the wind.

The fifth-years did not have Potions that day, so Snape did not see Parr during class hours. She hadn't appeared at breakfast, she was nowhere to be seen at lunch, and sitting at dinner, Snape still couldn't see her. Perhaps she had been too ill. He hadn't heard anything to that effect, and normally, teachers were notified if a student was too ill to attend classes. He was curious enough to raise the matter with Dumbledore.

"Chara? I've not heard anything, Severus," Dumbledore responded, not noticing his food drop off his fork as he looked up to the ceiling of the Great Hall in thought. "You'd be best asking Filius. He's her Head of House."

Snape gawked at that comment. "Her what?"

"Her Head of House," Dumbledore repeated, forking up his dropped beans.

"I thought that the Sorting Hat was unable to assign her a house," Snape pointed out with a frown.

"Filius thought it would be nice if Chara had an adopted house." Dumbledore chewed his beans for a bit before noticing the silent disapproval radiating from the man seated next to him. "I saw no reason to deny him. I thought it was a nice gesture, actually."

"If inappropriate," Snape added under his breath.

"I would say it was more inappropriate for Chara not to have a house," Dumbledore answered mildly, chasing a Brussels sprout around his plate with his fork.

Bloody Flitwick. Ever the opportunist. Still, it gave Snape the chance to finally dock house points off of Parr when the next chance arose, as he knew it undoubtedly would. Docking Ravenclaw would prove almost as enjoyable as docking Gryffindor. Perhaps he'd get his chance tonight if Parr failed to turn up to detention. Without any notification of illness, he was well within his rights to do so. He finished his meal almost with a smile on his face.

Parr scuppered that idea by turning up. He hid his disappointment in his lack of acknowledgement of her presence and continued with his assessment of his NEWT students' latest practical efforts.

The evening passed surprisingly swiftly, and he'd only looked up once when Parr had slammed a cauldron on her table. He noticed that she wasn't looking as ill as she had the previous evening. The shadows still shrouded her eyes, but her face was no longer that greenish colour, and she wasn't sweating. He went back to his work.

The next time Snape looked up, Parr was standing in front of his desk with her eyes so narrowed that at first he thought they were actually closed. She'd put three flasks on his desk without him noticing, and even her work area was clean. It was starting to be a game for her to do things without him noticing. He sighed heavily. Admittedly, he did have a bad habit of leaning too close when marking students' work. It tended to cut his peripheral vision down significantly.

"Are you going to have this all finished by tomorrow?" he snapped at her.

Parr shifted her jaw slightly, eyes opening fully. "Except for the Wolfsbane Potion, yes," she replied in a slurred voice.

Snape's eyes travelled to the Ravenclaw crest on her school robes, the distaste on his face plainly obvious.

"Very well. You may go," he sighed with a blatantly disingenuous beneficence and didn't bother to watch her leave.

The next morning during class, he went out of his way to aggravate her. Coincidentally, the class he had assigned her to contained Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, and she paired herself up with a Ravenclaw fifth-year called Opal Dian, who was as tall and dark as Parr was short and fair. Dian made Parr look like the younger of the two due to their disparate heights. Parr had decided to let Dian lead in their partnership, which surprised Snape considering how much of an unabashed know-it-all Parr seemed to be.

Still, it worked out well for him. He carped and sniped at them for the entire lesson, relentlessly haranguing any less than flawless effort they made in concocting a Dehydrator. Dian had been in tears by the end of the lesson, and the rest of the class had been pale and shaky since halfway through. Parr had tried her best to take over for Dian, as the girl had started to make increasingly noticeable mistakes, but the Dehydrator had suffered too much at the hands of the distracted and distressed student to be saved. The pronouncement of an Unacceptable grade had set Dian off into a morose puling that disgusted him sufficiently to dock house points from Ravenclaw for such a poor result. Dian had just cried harder, but Parr's face had gone stonily blank in defiance of his efforts to rattle her. Despite that, Snape considered it a great end to the teaching week.

He was rudely disabused of that conclusion at lunch when Flitwick proceeded to chew him out in the staff room. Snape couldn't have been more surprised if the table he had been standing next to had shouted at him. He'd never seen Flitwick so cross, which took the bite out of the Charms teacher's rant, because Snape was too wide-eyed with disbelief to really notice what Flitwick was saying. Even McGonagall was stunned. Sinistra had slipped out of the room the second Flitwick had started shouting, and Sprout and Hooch spent most of the five-minute diatribe over by the window, openly guffawing.

Snape had been too busy staring at the vein pulsing in Flitwick's forehead to hear the question.

"I'm sorry, Filius, I missed that," he admitted, shaking his head slightly, refocusing on the diminutive professor's face.

"I said what do you possibly hope to achieve by reducing a student to tears?" Flitwick repeated furiously, his hair in disarray and his stubby finger jabbing up at Snape.

"A much better effort next time," Snape replied mildly in stark contrast to Flitwick's temper. "It's never been my preference to coddle my students, Filius, and I'm not about to change that now."

Flitwick balled his tiny fists and pressed them to his temples. "I've defended you so many times, Severus, that I've lost count! I don't agree with the way you treat your students, but I've never said anything against it, no matter how many Ravenclaws I've had to console after one of your hissy fits. But the next time I have a student arrive at my class in the state you pushed Miss Dian into, I won't hesitate to go to the Headmaster and make a formal complaint. And if you don't like that, then do everyone a favour and try taking your balls out of the door that someone has obviously slammed them into!"

Flitwick flounced angrily out of the room, nearly knocking Hagrid over as he was coming in.

Snape had no idea when Flitwick had done it, but it took him nearly ten minutes to unstick his feet from the floor, which made him late for his first afternoon class. The fact that the other faculty members present made no effort to help him, with some actually laughing at his predicament, put him in such a bad mood that he gave a Slytherin first-year detention for stuffing half a Flobberworm down the back of a Gryffindor girl's blouse whilst his back was turned.

Parr had seemed mildly surprised at Shiffley's presence during her detention. Her eyebrows were raised and her mouth set in a pout as she watched the sandy-haired Slytherin boy struggle with gutting thirty brace of rock quails and separating the entrails into jars. Her silver knife spun in her hand as she watched him for some minutes, botching the job quite seriously by accidentally nicking the intestines and contaminating the other organs. She turned back to her own detention with a rueful shake of her head and started writing something down on a scrap of parchment.

Snape had busied himself with a paper he had been writing on bark-based tinctures for a medical journal and so had only occasionally looked up to check on both Shiffley and Parr. It might've been the third time he looked up that he noticed that Shiffley was handling the gutting significantly better than before. Snape looked suspiciously at Parr, who in turn was watching Shiffley out of the corner of her eye, a slight smile on her face. Had he not been looking up at that moment, he wouldn't have seen Shiffley look at Parr with a questioning expression, and her answering nod. Sly. She must have shown Shiffley how to gut the birds properly when Snape wasn't looking.

He threw down his quill and resolved to watch them for the rest of the detention in the hopes he could catch another exchange between them, but it seemed he'd missed his opportunity as the detention finished with no other contact between the two students. Shiffley noticed Parr cleaning her equipment by hand and looked at the wand in his hand dubiously, trying to figure out if he was allowed to use it. His inherent laziness won out.

Both students brought their evening's efforts up to him. Snape dismissed Shiffley and left Parr standing where she was. He stared at her, running the tips of his fingers along the edge of his desk. She stared back blankly.

"I find it interesting that Shiffley manifested such talent at gutting fowl, Miss Parr," he said after some time.

Parr tilted her head slightly and continued to stare back.

"I find myself wondering where he learned such a technique," he mused with a sneer on his face, tapping the edge of the table lightly with his long fingers.

Parr squinted at him.

"Twenty points from Ravenclaw for insinuating yourself into another student's detention," he determined, favouring her with a tight smile. "I am neither stupid nor unobservant."

Whatever reaction he hoped to get from Parr didn't eventuate. She just continued to squint at him. It was maddening! Did *anything* rile her?

"Get out of my sight before I decide that twenty points isn't enough," he snapped at her, scowling. He waited until she was at the door before adding: "And you can start the Wolfsbane Potion again, from scratch. The quality is insufficient."

Parr paused on the threshold. Yes, he could imagine that she wouldn't like that very much considering that the potion normally took a month to mature. He was about to find out just how little.

She dropped her bucket with a loud clang and swung the heavy door with a tremendous heave, slamming it into its frame with such force that a crack spidered its way straight down the middle. The momentum of her action turned her around to face him, robes swirling around her legs and her hair following suit around her shoulders.

"I think it's time you and I had a little chat, Professor," she announced quietly as the echo of the door-slam dissipated in his ears. There was a flush of colour high on her cheeks and her eyes narrowed under her drawn-down brows. Curiously, her hands were held in front of her with the first two fingers of each hand pointed horizontally at each other and overlapping. Snape had never seen a gesture like that before. Was it rude? He confessed to being ignorant of the fluidly changing gestures and insults that younger people swapped amongst themselves.

"I beg your pardon?" he responded snottily. "I'm really not interested in hearing your temper tantrum, glorious though I'm sure you intend it to be."

"No, I can't imagine you would be when the sound of your own voice carping on so obviously titillates you," she snarled back, teeth bared. Her hands dropped to her sides, the foreign gesture having done whatever mysterious job required of it. "That being said, I'm looking forward to hearing the reasons behind your rather reprehensible behaviour. I'm certain you'll couch it in quite an aureate fashion to disguise the malignant intent behind it, but I'm very good at sniffing out bullshit, so I like a good challenge!"

"Yes, I'm sure you can't wait to run to the Headmaster, bewailing your mistreatment and seeking absolution for your total lack of self control," Snape jeered at her, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms.

Parr's grin widened to display a rather impressive set of teeth. "Unlike the rest of your students, I am not a teenager who is cowed easily by your idiosyncratic sarcasm and vindictive attitude. I am also capable of dealing with my own problems without outside assistance, thank you very much." She spread her arms wide. "So consider this a *carte blanche* opportunity to let rip without the snide gloss. What's said in here, stays in here. Unless you feel the need for... outside assistance," she finished calmly with a smile that dimpled her cheeks.

"Do you suffer from some kind of delusion that you can say and do as you please whilst attending this school?" Snape barked back at her, his hackles rising swiftly. "It impresses me not one iota that you are able to flout rules that other students are required to obey!"

"Ah, so *that's* why you've got your knickers in a twist!" Parr trumpeted with a gleam in her eyes. "You don't like to see me getting away with something."

"Favouritism is a bastion for the spoiled and incompetent," he sneered back. "I fail to see why you should be afforded such graces when others who are more deserving have to *work* for theirs."

Parr actually grinned gleefully in the face of his accusation. "Yes, I can't imagine you favouring anyone from Slytherin over the other three houses, not when they're so clearly a studious, well-mannered and even-tempered bunch."

"Despite what you've been told, you are in my class under my sufferance," he parried smoothly, slouching back further into his chair with an air of insouciance. "It wouldn't bother me in the slightest to tell the Headmaster that you are incapable of functioning adequately as a student in my subject."

"No, I'm sure the lie would come quite easily," Parr replied with equal indifference. "After all, you had no trouble neglecting to inform me that you had changed what class I was allocated to until I'd missed the lesson yesterday. Very smooth."

"Physically injuring another student alone could get you expelled," Snape pointed out in a silky tone.

"Then why am I still here?" Parr countered and leaned back against the cracked door, her eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"Keep up this kind of insolent behaviour and you won't be," Snape retorted smugly.

"Ah, *that's* going to be the winning card you'll threaten to play, is it?" Parr realised, folding her arms. "The thing you fail to understand is that if I were to be expelled, it wouldn't make a jot of difference to me. Others would be more... disappointed."

"It doesn't bother you that you'll embarrass those who petitioned for your enrolment? How typically impudent of a Muggle."

Parr laughed out loud. "Oh, this is wonderful! So not only is it about favouritism but about prejudice as well!" She clapped her hands together once and raised her eyes to the ceiling. "What a magnificent duo!" She fixed him with a piercing gaze. "Sure there's nothing else? Misogyny? Bigotry? A short person kick you in the arse when you were little? Might as well get it out now while you have the chance. I've dealt with prejudice all my life, so nothing you can say would surprise me in the slightest."

"I think you'll find that any perceived prejudice against you comes from your shocking display of disrespect to authority and your lack of common courtesy to others," he informed her, looking down his large nose at her.

Parr's face went white. "I'll be sure to remember that the next time someone spits in my face with no provocation, underpays me for services rendered, or burns my home to the ground in the dead of night for my 'disrespect' and 'rudeness'."

Snape blinked at the bitterness in her voice and the paleness of her face.

"This is how it's going to work," she continued in that same acidic tone. "I will continue as a student in your subject until you can prove that I am more disruptive, incapable or dangerous than any other of your fifth-year students. Until that time, you will stop harassing any student I am paired with in your class simply because they are my partner. I also am neither stupid nor unobservant, Professor. If you have a problem with what I'm doing, you will say it straight out without dressing it up in snide remarks. If you have a problem with my work, be sure it's not misplaced antipathy for my lack of magical ability. I don't claim to be perfect, and I am here to learn, but if I think you are disadvantaging me or those around me based on your personal dislike of who or what I am, then I will not pause in saying so right to your face in front of other students. I will not be a punching bag for your vitriol."

Snape pushed himself back upright in his chair, leant on his desk and let her have it.

"Then let me be equally clear, Miss Parr. I have no need to seek recourse in my personal dislike of you in critiquing your abilities as a student. If you make any disparaging comments in my direction, you will be resoundingly punished. If you hesitate in doing *anything* that I tell you to do in my class, the house points will fall away from Ravenclaw so fast that you'll be a pariah amongst your housemates before a week has gone by. If you fail to achieve less than an Acceptable grade in *any* task or assignment, I shall push you down to second-year level. My tongue is faster, sharper and nastier than yours could ever hope to be, and whilst it's still in my head, I will use it as I see fit." He spat out the last words like poisoned seeds. "Now, I believe that chat time is over. Try leaving my classroom without breaking anything else, including the boundaries of my tolerance."

Parr gazed at him with an assessing air for some moments, completely unruffled by his retort. Then, with studied sedateness, she pushed herself away from the door and brought her hands together in that odd gesture again, but this time she swivelled her hands so that her crossed fingers pointed to the ground. With that, she picked up her bucket, opened the door, and walked out.

"That's twenty points from Ravenclaw for breaking my door," Snape called after her nastily. The door smashed closed, sending another large crack alongside the first.

"I think we'll make that fifty," he said to himself as a jagged panel of wood fell away from the door and hit the floor with a clatter.

Chapter Eight - Waxing

The mystery breathes in.

As instructed, Parr had begun the Wolfsbane Potion again. This meant that every evening after its initial creation, she had to check on the potion as it matured, occasionally adding an ingredient as necessary. Her presence was brief at each visit with no acknowledgement towards him.

The after-effects of their little face-off were minimal. Parr seemed to act as if it had never happened. Her attitude was neither bitter nor antagonistic, which was not what he had expected. Considering how many points he had taken from Ravenclaw that particular evening, Snape had thought that Parr would hold something of a vendetta against him.

The results of Parr's detention were varied. Some potions were very solidly made, with a couple being of surprising quality, whilst others were merely passable with one skating close to being of an Unacceptable grade. That had been one that she had made when at her most ill, so it was hard to determine if it were through lack of knowledge or lack of attention. Difficulty level seemed to have no effect on the results. It appeared that she knew some potions, such as the Strengthening Draught, the Toxin Drain and the Bone Fuser, much better than ones like the Forgetfulness Potion or the Shrinking Solution.

He'd actually been rather pleased that she'd finally taken the bait and lost her temper. It was a particularly favourite pastime of Snape's to needle people until they snapped, and she had proved something of a tough nut to crack. He'd wondered whether he'd lost his touch and so had turned his spite on Dian to try and prod at Parr that way. It had obviously worked. She'd acknowledged his use of that tactic and effectively quashed it by threatening to point it out in front of students, and no doubt be more than scathing in her denouncement of it. He grudgingly admitted that he wasn't altogether sure if his responding threats were enough to keep Parr's mouth shut. He suspected that it didn't matter how many points he'd rip off Ravenclaw, she'd still tell him exactly what she thought.

It wasn't until mid-way through the second week after their altercation that Snape started to wonder if there were much more to Parr than he had previously surmised. At first he thought he was seeing things, but by Friday there was no doubt in his mind that Parr had gotten taller... a fair bit taller. She tried to disguise it by crouching slightly whenever she was standing, but it wasn't sufficient to hide the fact that she'd increased at least a foot in height. Now he knew why she had the folded cuffs at her wrists and ankles: to compensate for the increase in limb length. This was obviously something that had occurred before.

This was no Muggle. Muggles didn't change their height once puberty had finished, unless you counted the inevitable shrinkage in old age, and Parr was definitely at least fifteen years out of puberty and thirty from old age.

Thinking back on his conversations with Dumbledore in the previous weeks, Snape realised that the Headmaster had never used the term 'Muggle' in describing Parr. Granted, Dumbledore had never liked using the term and had deemed it an impolite name on more than one occasion, so the lack of his use of it was hardly conclusive.

The other students had noticed Parr's height change, especially in the final Potions class for the week. They cast curious glances at her that had all the subtlety of a poke in the eye. Parr seemed to be pretending not to notice, but considering she kept her eyes downcast, it was possible that she couldn't see them staring.

Snape spent the lesson circling the room like a predator, trying to determine if a downed animal was dangerous or not. It was during one of his circuits that he also noticed that Parr's profile had changed. It was like someone had pulled her nose out further from the planes of her face, bowing them out in a subtly arched silhouette.

Snape continued his circling of the classroom, pausing only to deduct points from a Hufflepuff for scratching a rude symbol in the wood of the table with his knife.

There was no point in asking Dumbledore. Snape had already shown enough curiosity about Parr for the Headmaster to become guarded. He decided to cut out the middleman.

"Miss Parr, a moment, if you please," he requested firmly as the students filed out at the end of the lesson. Parr sighed, her back to him, before turning slowly and making her way back to her seat. She kept her eyes fixed on the floor and her posture bent.

Snape waited until the classroom door had closed and the sounds of the departing students had faded, leaning back on his desk with his arms folded. The silence in the room was oppressive.

"Is there something wrong with your back, Miss Parr?" he inquired, watching her like a hawk.

"No, Professor."

"Then why are you slouching?"

There was a pause. "A bad habit," she replied.

"One not normally associated with someone of your short stature," he pointed out. "And one that, until this week, you haven't previously shown."

Parr didn't respond.

"Is there something on the floor that is more worthy of your attention, Miss Parr?"

She cleared her throat before answering. "My eyes hurt in the light sometimes," she said quietly.

"Curious," he stated and pushed away from his desk. "Another problem not previously displayed." He drifted towards her slowly. "Wouldn't have anything to do with your recent... illness, would it?"

She flared her nostrils before answering. "No, Professor."

"It would be egregious indeed if you were to infect students around you."

"With slouching and sore eyes, Professor? Most of them seem to have that already. They don't need my help in manifesting those."

"Is your condition infectious?"

"No."

"You seem very certain."

"I am."

"I, however, am not."

"Are you a doctor, Professor?"

Smartarse. "No, but I am someone who expects the person I'm talking to to look me in the eye when I am speaking to them." Snape stopped alongside the table she was seated at. "Otherwise I might think you have something to hide."

Parr swivelled her head slowly towards him. He almost took a step backward. Her eyes had changed from grey to a vividly luminous green. "You seem persistently certain

that I am hiding something, Professor. Are we to have another talk about prejudice sometime soon?"

"Prejudice has nothing to do with it, Miss Parr," Snape countered after a moment, trying not to retreat from that glare. "When a student changes physical appearance, that alone is enough to make me question the cause behind it."

The woman's jade gaze never faltered. "You may rest assured, Professor, that my condition is not contagious, as Madam Pomfrey will attest to. However, if you require further information, I'm afraid that skirts into my personal business, and I am not at liberty to answer."

Afterwards, Snape wasn't certain what made him decide to do it. Perhaps because the opportunity was too good to miss. Perhaps because non-magicals were notoriously open to Legilimency. Perhaps because he hated it if someone kept information from him. Maybe it was a combination of all three. Regardless, he decided to try and get the answers he wanted non-verbally... and promptly hit a brick wall. At least, the mental equivalent of it. It was like throwing a tomato at a steel door.

Parr leant back sharply, shaking her head like someone had smacked her across the nose. Later, Snape wondered if he had looked as surprised as she had. Her shock didn't last long, though. She unfolded herself swiftly from her chair and reverted her gaze to the floor.

"If that is all, Professor, I must leave if I am to minimise how late I am for my next class." Not even waiting for a response, she loped towards the door in that bent over posture and slipped out of the classroom.

No, this was definitely no Muggle. He'd used Legilimency on a number of them and had never been blocked like that. There'd not even been any kind of struggle. The wall had already been there before he'd made the attempt, but judging from the surprise on her face, she hadn't anticipated that kind of incursion.

The thing was, if she wasn't a Muggle, then what was she?

Chapter Nine: In Hiding

Chapter 9 of 59

More mysteries than you can poke a stick at.

It wasn't long before the inevitable upheaval that heralded the start of the Tri-Wizard Tournament at Hogwarts. Snape had been dreading it, and the reality wasn't any better. He'd thought the Tournament was an unwise idea and had said as much. Numerous times.

It was scant compensation that the visiting students did not attend Hogwarts classes; the very sight of them alone was irritating, and their uppity attitudes just enhanced the unpleasantness. Large numbers of Hogwarts students seemed to have no qualms in fawning over the visitors with a total lack of dignity.

Although able to minimise any contact with visiting students, Snape was unable to avoid interaction with the adult representatives of Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. Dumbledore had left no doubt in anyone's mind that he fully expected his staff to make a concerted effort in making visiting teachers feel as welcome as possible. Snape's tactic was to limit his conversations with Maxime and Karkaroff to terse, one-word responses and to make himself as scarce as possible.

However, even some of his best efforts seemed doomed to failure. Karkaroff was able to sniff him out wherever he hid, and Karkaroff was the last person Snape wanted to talk to, or have talking at him. The man was as odious as his breath, and Snape really didn't need any reminders of his own past stuck before his eyes at every available opportunity. He found himself being ever watchful for Karkaroff's approach so that he could avoid the man's notice. Fortunately, the Durmstrang Headmaster seemed intent on parading Krum about the castle like a trophy, so it was fairly easy for Snape to wriggle away from him before the man had even spotted him.

Once his teaching duties were fulfilled, Snape would barricade himself in his own quarters, which suited him just fine. He had enough to keep him busy that didn't require him to be in the presence of others: marking essays, researching, reading just for the temporary enjoyment of it.

Despite the solitude, the evenings were not pleasurable. The Dark Mark on his forearm had started to burn not long before the start of term, and nothing he did seemed to alleviate the pain for longer than a few hours. The analgesic potion he took for it left him rather glassy-eyed and dull in his reactions, and the after effects put him in even more of a sour mood than usual.

The vexing situation with the spoiled supplies had still not been resolved. Snape had travelled to London the first weekend after the problem had been forthrightly brought to his attention to try and remedy the situation, and was immediately thwarted. The apothecary was firmly closed. A carefully lettered sign in the window had said: "Closed due to unavoidable circumstances. We apologise for any inconvenience caused to our customers." That was all. No mention of when the shop would reopen for business.

Snape had returned to Hogwarts in high dudgeon after being forced to secure appropriate supplies elsewhere. He hated dealing with new and unfamiliar suppliers; it took ages to break them into adequately meeting his requirements. Until the apothecary in Knockturn Alley reopened, he would have to make do with what other suppliers had to offer. Snape vowed that the very day the apothecary reopened, he'd be down there demanding both compensation and explanation. He sent a letter demanding to be notified of when that day was to be.

As suddenly as it had appeared, Parr's physical distortion slid away. The start of the week following her change saw her the way Snape had first found her in his class: short, grey-eyed, perhaps a little tired-looking, cuffs refolded, resolutely neutral expression fixed firmly in place. She neither volunteered an explanation nor acted as if anything unusual had occurred.

It was a peculiar mystery, one that Snape turned over in his mind whilst Parr was in sight, and then subconsciously when other things demanded his attention. He couldn't definitively attach such temporary physical distortion to a particular condition, be it medical, genetic or phenotypical. He didn't know whether her recent ill-health and her injuries were the cause or a symptom of such a physical expansion and contraction. They might have nothing to do with it at all; a pure coincidence, albeit an unfortunate one. There were too many ambiguities involved to allow him to make a clear judgement.

In the interim, Parr did her best to either blend into the background amongst the other students, or remove herself from their company entirely wherever possible. It seemed the students weren't sure what Parr's status was at the school, so their interactions with her were often muddled or inconsistent. The younger students were bolder in trying to find where the line was, occasionally pushing themselves forward in their ignorance with an ebullience that Parr tolerated with faint but gracious amusement. The older students were more wary, treating her with a cautious respect and often waiting for her to set the tone of the interaction. She only had to metaphorically bare her teeth once when a Slytherin girl in seventh-year had elbowed her sharply and deliberately in the ribs in the Great Hall. Snape hadn't actually witnessed it himself. He'd overheard Flitwick talking about it the following evening during dinner and had to suppress a flash of irritation at finding out about it in such a manner. Normally his house students were faster than whippets in reporting any alleged infraction against them, but there hadn't been even a hint from them about the incident. Apparently Parr had quite calmly

dragged Lancaster back out of the Hall and given her a few pointers about courtesy in a voice that, whilst never getting above a conversational pitch, must have conveyed something altogether alarming to the stocky Slytherin. It had taken several days for Lancaster not to flinch whenever she saw Parr. Word got around with its usual incomprehensible speed. All the students took a step back, uncertainty making them err on the side of caution once again.

The Tri-Wizard Tournament continued in a worrying vein with Potter's name being spat out of the Goblet of Fire. Naturally, the ridiculous brat claimed ignorance on the level that Snape would normally have believed, but the arrogance of the boy was enough of an indicator of delusions of grandeur that he couldn't discount that perhaps Potter *had* found a way to baffle the Goblet, outlandish though the possibility may have seemed. However, there was the stone cold fact that Potter was a moron. There was no way he could've found a way around the rules. The only other explanations were that Potter's name had been put in the Goblet by someone else, or someone else had charmed the Goblet to allow Potter to put his own name in. Either way, someone else was involved, someone unlikely to be a student.

Karkaroff and Maxime were up in arms about the whole thing, screaming accusations of favouritism and cheating without any gloss of politeness to their words. Snape couldn't blame them, but the bickering had become tiresome very quickly. Moody sticking in his oar in support of Potter didn't help; it had just set Karkaroff going again like a stupid little dog barking at shadows. The whole argument devolved into a slanging match that even Dumbledore had trouble controlling. Bagman just stood there like a certified idiot making banal statements like the useless politician he was, while Crouch summed it all up concisely if a little tersely: the Tournament must continue, with Potter as a fourth champion. There was no other option, regardless of how unpalatable the situation was. That just set the dogs off yapping again, making Snape want to throttle them all for being so fatuous. It didn't matter how long they stood there and shouted at each other, the outcome was the same. The only thing they could hope for was for the person who had aided Potter to make some kind of slip that would allow them to identify who it was.

Karkaroff and Maxime bitched and moaned for days afterwards with a tenacity that tipped into the realm of the ridiculous.

The weekend after the announcement of the Tournament champion selections, Snape received notification via a bad-tempered and dusty Strix owl that the apothecary in Knockturn Alley was once again open for business. Snape didn't even finish his breakfast, stuffing the letter in his pocket and sweeping out of the Great Hall immediately to box up his evidence and prepare for what he intended to be a satisfying trip to London.

Flinging on an overcoat to counteract the chill of the autumnal weather, Snape picked up the wooden crate and stalked off in the direction of the school gates with an implacable determination. The Headmaster's voice stopped him just before he stepped out of the castle. He ground his teeth before turning, stiff-backed, to face Dumbledore.

"Ah, Severus, I've been looking for you. I'd meant to speak to you at breakfast but you disappeared so quickly." Dumbledore sounded a little out of breath after his trot down the stairs to intercept the Potions master.

"Headmaster?" Snape tried steadfastly to ignore Parr trailing behind Dumbledore.

"I'm afraid I have a favour to ask," Dumbledore began. "I realise that it is rather late notice, but I'm hoping you'll be able to help me."

Snape suppressed a sigh. "Headmaster, ordinarily I would have no hesitation in assisting you, but I do have a rather important errand to run in London at this moment."

"Well, that is a stroke of luck," Dumbledore replied, patting at the end of his beard to try and settle it back into place after his rush towards Snape. "I was to take Chara to London this morning, but my time is being... ah, how shall I say this... resolutely requested by Igor and Madame Maxime right now. They're quite unwilling to allow my escape from their vigorous discussion regarding the Tournament."

Snape stared at Dumbledore, silent.

"Could you see that Chara gets to London for me?" the Headmaster found himself forced to ask directly. "She's due to meet Remus there."

Snape's eyebrows shifted upwards slightly. "Lupin?" He flicked a quick glance at Parr. She looked just as irritated at the situation as he felt. "Headmaster, is Miss Parr unable to make the journey unchaperoned?" he inquired frostily, making Parr's expression stonier.

"I'm sure Chara would be more than capable of finding her way there," Dumbledore replied mildly. "However, that is not the only favour I have to ask of you."

Snape exerted a not inconsiderable amount of self-control not to roll his eyes in exasperation at this whole exchange. Why was the Headmaster dumping this on him? Today of all days. Snape jealously guarded his weekends as a respite from having to deal with students.

Dumbledore dug into his robe pocket and brought out a hand-sized black pouch. Parr exhaled sharply through her nose and turned her head away from the Headmaster, her profile sharp with disapproval. Snape looked at the pouch being held out to him.

"I need you to give this to Remus," Dumbledore revealed quietly. Snape couldn't understand why the Headmaster was keeping his voice low. There was no-one else nearby to hear the conversation apart from Parr, and she was too close to miss anything that was being said. All the other students and teachers were either at breakfast, or no doubt still lolling about in their beds in true Saturday style. He looked back up at Dumbledore.

"Severus, I cannot stress how important it is that this remains safely in your possession until it can be given to Remus," Dumbledore continued with an unmistakeably serious expression. "It would be grave should it be lost or, heaven forbid, opened. I'm trusting you to ensure that neither occurs." The Headmaster stared back at Snape with full authoritative force. Snape realised that he wasn't being given any choice in the matter. He took the pouch from Dumbledore and tucked it away in his coat, the contents making a faint metallic clinking with the movement.

"If you wish it, Headmaster," he relented with the barest trace of annoyance and a sigh. "I trust Miss Parr has Apparated before?"

"Ah, yes, that's another thing," Dumbledore replied, twiddling his fingers and screwing up his face slightly. "I'm afraid you'll need to go by train."

Snape closed his eyes and stopped himself from barking a swear word. Instead, he tried his best to talk through his teeth.

"That will slow me down considerably, Headmaster. I realise that Miss Parr cannot Apparate herself, but I am more than capable of towing her along."

"If you're willing to risk it, Severus, by all means," Dumbledore answered with an amused lilt to his voice. "However, Chara suffers very badly from nausea when it comes to Apparating. Rather explosively, as I understand it." He paused as he pulled distractedly at his ear. "I do distantly recall that you have an equally explosive aversion to vomiting, hence the need for alternative transportation."

Snape dragged his gaze from Dumbledore to Parr. Her face was still turned away from both of them, the knuckles of her right hand white on the strap of the cloth satchel that passed across her chest and rested at her left hip. The faint flush on her cheeks could have been from embarrassment or anger. Probably both.

"It seems a waste that the train must be pressed into service just for this, Headmaster," Snape pointed out, still staring at Parr.

"Fortunately there are others making a journey to London," Dumbledore revealed, bringing Snape's attention back to him. "There are two Beauxbatons students who are to visit a cousin and an aunt respectively, as well as the Jacobsons who are returning home for their grandfather's funeral tomorrow. I don't anticipate you having to keep an eye on them. I have explained in no uncertain terms that their behaviour is to be exemplary, regardless of the circumstances."

That would no doubt be a wasted effort, Snape thought. All students acted like two-year-olds in the absence of an authority figure. He had the solid suspicion that he'd have to explain the situation to them again in order to stop any thought of mischief from blooming into actuality. He was in no mood for breaking up squabbles or mopping up foolish accidents.

Snape tapped the crate tucked under his arm with his index finger and smiled faintly and fixedly at Dumbledore. "In that case, Headmaster, I don't see how I could reasonably refuse your request."

Chapter Ten - Back & Forth

Chapter 10 of 59

A winning shot is not always possible in a rally of words.

A/N: I must thank Angel Mischa for helping me eradicate numerous errors with my grammar and punctuation in this chapter. Just goes to show that Word can't fix everything automatically!

"What are you looking at?"

"You."

"Look somewhere else."

"Why?"

"It's intrusive and impertinent."

"There's nothing else to look at."

"Nice to know I'm a last resort, then." Snape picked up a book next to him and flung it at her without taking his eyes from his own reading material. "Look at that."

Parr caught the book nimbly and looked at the front cover.

"*Discussions on the Efficacy of Mycelial-based Anti-dotes*" she read out-loud. "Wow, that'll make the journey go faster." Snape glared at her over the top of his book. Parr thumbed through the first few pages noisily. "Don't you have anything that isn't as boring as chiroptera guano?"

"No."

"Well, that explains a lot." She wriggled around on the seat into a more comfortable position with her back propped against the outer wall of the train carriage, legs stretched out at an angle on the seat.

"Get your feet off the seat."

Parr rolled her eyes at him. "My feet aren't on the seat." She waggled them in the air and turned back to the first page of the book he'd chucked at her. The black glare narrowed to a laser-thin line that could've burned a hole through steel. Parr yawned.

The train continued its journey south and through a darkening afternoon. The storm clouds had begun to loom in not long before they had boarded, and the inevitable rain had begun within the hour, hitting the carriage with a metallic drumming that almost, but not quite, drowned out Parr's snoring.

Snape was a few seconds away from throwing another book at her when Parr's head snapped up, cutting off a particularly gusty snore.

"I'm hungry," she announced emphatically and stumped out of the compartment. A few minutes later she squeezed back through the door with an armful of food that would fill the belly of a troll.

"She didn't have any sour grapes, so I got you these." A small, white paper bag landed on the seat next to Snape with a small thump. "I thought they might sweeten your disposition."

Snape didn't take his eyes from his book. "I don't eat lollies."

Parr tipped her food bounty onto her seat opposite him. "Yes, you do," she stated calmly and crammed a pumpkin pasty into her mouth. She settled back into her former position with a rustle of packets.

"Get your feet off the seat."

Parr chewed her mouthful for a bit. "Do you have some definition of feet that differs from everybody else's?"

Snape exhaled loudly through his nose and hitched his shoulders. "Don't spill food on my book."

Parr brushed the crumbs off her front and poked through the food pile next to her. "Don't worry, not only am I keenly aware of where my feet are but also where my mouth is."

"Unfortunately, we're all aware of *that*," Snape muttered, turning a page and flicking a glance at her. "It's a wonder you can keep any food in your mouth, considering how often it's open."

"Ha!" Parr guffawed and picked up the book again with her free hand. Snape snapped his book shut with a crack.

"Are you going to read that or use it as a napkin?" he asked pointedly, raising an eyebrow.

"No, it's really interesting," Parr slurred with the end of a Liquorice Wand stuck between her teeth. "I'm zooming through it." She turned to page two. "Mmm, I'd forgotten that liquorice makes me drool."

Snape scowled out of the window and jiggled his leg in irritation. This was worse than babysitting. Not that he'd ever done that... unless one counted teaching. At least one could make children shut up or show some kind of respect.

The rain had turned into a strong squall that rattled the carriage in a frustrated series of shakes. It matched Snape's mood perfectly. If it were possible, he would have wrung the scrawny neck of the whole task that had been unceremoniously dumped on him.

The pulsed flash of lightning scrambled across the cloud bank in the distance. It made the afternoon seem darker and bleaker than ever. Snape sighed. He hated the rain.

"Why do you teach?" asked Parr abruptly around a mouthful of half-chewed liquorice.

Snape swung his gaze away from the window. "What?"

Parr chewed more of the liquorice into black mush, frowning at the book in her hand. "Why do you teach?"

Snape stared at her, wondering whether or not to answer with a lie, if at all. She didn't seem fussed one way or the other, as if it were not really of any interest to her, just something that one might feel duty-bound to say, like "how are you?" or "nice weather we're having." Parr jammed another pasty in her mouth, spraying crumbs everywhere.

"Do you always make this much mess when you eat?" he sniped at her.

"No, only when I'm riveted by literature such as this," she retorted without a pause.

Snape made an exasperated sound and reached for the book. "Give it back, then, and spare me the sarcasm." He missed the book by bare millimetres as Parr bent her wrist to keep it away from him.

"No, I'm at the good part," she replied, cheeks bulging like a greedy hamster. "The action's hotting up."

Snape pulled back into a slouching position and resumed his leg-jiggling.

"So?" asked Parr, turning a page.

"So what?" Snape muttered, throwing down his book on the seat next to him and folding his arms like a barrier.

Parr threw back her head and exhaled loudly, shoulders dropping. "Blah blah blah... the end!" She flicked over the pages with her thumb until she reached the back cover and closed the book with a snap. She held it out to him.

"Why... do... you... teach?"

Snape kept his arms resolutely crossed and stopped jiggling his leg. A staring match ensued. Parr still held the book out, waiting patiently. Somewhere nearby, thunder rolled, sending vibrations through the carriage. One of Parr's Chocolate Frogs fell onto the floor and bounced under the seat. Further down the train, some brief yet noisy fracas broke out amongst the Jacobsons.

Parr's mouth twitched into a faint smile. "My eyeballs are drying out. Let's just say that you won because I know it'll give you a thrill." She blinked her eyes a few times, swung her legs off the seat and stood up. Crumbs rained down onto the floor as she stepped over and placed the book next to him. The woman went back to her nest of wrappers and food and fidgeted snugly into the corner. She busied herself with sifting through the pile for the next snack and was just about to put some kind of lime green sweet in her mouth when Snape surprised her, and himself, by answering her question.

"I have limited options open to me. Teaching was the best one."

The sweet hovered near Parr's mouth as she stared at him in mild amazement. She brought her hand down slowly. "But you don't like it." It was a statement, not a question. She had that weird, penetrating look in her eyes that unsettled him.

Snape turned his head to avoid the grey scrutiny and squinted out into the gloom. He shrugged his shoulders slowly. "Like I said, I have limited options open to me." He watched the stream of rain slip down the outside surface of the glass.

"Surely there was an option that didn't involve so much contact with people, especially children? After old people, they're the most irritating of the lot, and you're not exactly bubbling over with interpersonal skills," Parr stated before popping the sweet into her mouth. "Eurgh, tastes like boot polish." She picked it out of her mouth and held it out to him between thumb and forefinger. "Do you want it?"

His head swivelled around, incredulity pasted across his face.

"It was a *joke*!" Parr emphasised, eyes innocently wide in the blast of disgust aimed at her. She discarded the sticky offender onto an empty packet that she scrunched up into a tight ball. "These limited options..." She paused to lick the stickiness from her fingers with an exclamation of distaste. "...do they have something to do with that thing on your arm?"

Snape didn't move, other than a slight tightening of his shoulders, but Parr immediately picked up that this was a bad question to ask. She went as still as if she had been Petrified, nostrils flared and lips pressed together.

How did she know about the Dark Mark? Snape's mind went blank, almost as if it had overloaded and short-circuited. Lightning flashed close by outside, increasing his mental confusion. Thoughts came back online in weird patterns, rather like hypnagogic dreams where unrelated objects and events meshed together in a bizarre pastiche. The tragic thing was that this was how his reality was at times: a series of seemingly unrelated events that balled together in a big mess he didn't like but had little control over. He shook his head to clear the nonsensical fog and was left with a peculiar sense of time distortion where a moment had expanded into days and simultaneously contracted into a fraction of a fraction of a second. How much time had passed since she had asked that question? Seconds? Minutes? Surely not hours or they would've reached their destination, but the feeling was that hours were just as likely as minutes.

The view outside the carriage window gave no hint as to whether it had been seconds or minutes...it was still the same unfocussed panorama of dark shapes sliding past through the curtain of rain like animals slinking away from a dangerous predator. Snape frowned and tried the bluff.

"What are you talking about?" he said in an even, flat voice that was a blatant contradiction to the anxiety burning a hole in his stomach.

Parr was looking at him with an assessing air, eyes squinted and brow furrowed deeply. She was chewing on something that he hadn't noticed her put in her mouth. She swallowed whatever it was and tilted her head to one side. There was a heavy pause.

"I thought the efficacy of mucilaginous waterfort was found to be overestimated."

Snape stared at her blankly. Had he missed a section of conversation here? He couldn't see how it related to her previous question.

Parr noticed his expression and pointed at the book she had returned to him.

"Your book is out of date." For the first time, at least that he'd ever seen, confusion rippled across Parr's face, and she brought her left hand up to her damaged eye, pressing her fingers into her face, as if something pained her. "I've read it before... in hospital." She pursed her lips and let her hand fall back to her lap. "Marconi said I should read it," she added quietly, looking at the floor with a now-watering left eye and flexing her fingers briefly.

Who would have told her? His arm was never uncovered, except in private. There were a handful of suspects. Pomfrey knew, but she had the silence of a medical

practitioner when it came to giving out private information, so it was improbable. Dumbledore? No, Dumbledore knew a lot of things, but he spoke about very few of them. The most probable suspect was Moody. The man had all the subtlety of a brick in the face and wouldn't hesitate pointing something out that he disapproved of, but Parr didn't take Moody's class, and he had never seen them talking together the way she did with other teachers. In fact, he had never seen her talking with him at all.

"Why were you in hospital?"

Parr looked up from the floor, and her left eye still squinted as if the light in the carriage pained her. "I'm sorry?"

"Why were you in hospital?"

Parr shrugged and blotted her watering eye with her sleeve. "Oh, for the reason that most people go to the hospital."

"Does it have something to do with that thing around your neck?" Snape countered smoothly.

Parr showed far too many teeth in a responding smile. "Touché," she noted gently, her red-rimmed left eye opening to gaze at him with its unclouded twin. She sniffed slightly and looked out of the window, her face painted with that bland expression she usually wore in class.

The unexpectedly dark afternoon was periodically punctuated by pops of lightning that freeze-framed the countryside in a confused series of stills. Parr started to hum a tune quietly and ran her hands down one of her hip-length tresses repetitively in a smoothing motion, head tilted slightly to one side. She seemed to have dismissed Snape from her attention for now.

The tune she was humming was a strange mix of minor chords that seemed to soothe her, her eyes closed, and hands on her hair moving in a counterpoint to the tune. There wasn't much of the journey remaining, and Snape was happy to have it pass without conversation. The woman had a sharp tongue and too fast a wit to let snide comments and subtle rebukes pass without some kind of retort. The last thing he needed was her asking him awkward and prying questions.

He stared at the bandage around her neck, wondering for the hundredth time about what kind of injury it hid. Snape's question about Parr's hospital stay had been asked reflexively, as a way of changing the subject from the Dark Mark on his arm, but he discovered that it was yet another topic she was close-mouthed on. He made a mental note to find an excuse to speak to Madam Pomfrey and slip in an inquiry about Parr's hospital stay. Pomfrey was pretty shrewd, though, and she'd clam up if she thought that anyone was being nosy about one of her patients. Snape shrugged slightly...nothing ventured, nothing gained.

He rested his head back on the seat and studied Parr's profile through half-closed eyes. The faint smile on her face caused a ghosting of a dimple in her cheek, and the muted light in the carriage threw a shadow just under her cheekbone and accentuated the contours of her face. The woman was not gifted with good looks. The best that could be said was that she was plain. The fact that her face was usually set in one of two expressions didn't help. The neutral, almost vacant look was most common, especially in his classes, but it often alternated with a hard, flinty visage that one could hammer iron on. In comparison to the girls around her at the school, there was little femininity in Parr, and she made no attempt to imitate any.

One thing she did that stood out in its rarity was the use of her nose. It was almost guaranteed that she'd test the air at some point, surreptitiously, with a flare of her nostrils. The sense of smell was poor in humans, especially when compared to animals, and it was one of the least-used of the five senses. Parr's was obviously more developed than most, and she seemed to rely on it more heavily perhaps because of that. Snape gazed at her nose to see if there was something that visually hinted at her heightened sense of smell, but it was just an ordinary nose, if a little straighter than most. Instead, he watched the hypnotic movement of her hands on her hair, the silvery strands shimmering in ripples. That, coupled with her continued humming, caused Snape's eyes to close, leaving him with an almost floating sense of bone-deep fatigue.

Snape could have sworn that he'd remained awake, but when he opened his eyes again, Parr had changed her attire from her customary pseudo-uniform to an unbroken black. He'd not heard her move at all, and he was usually a light sleeper.

Her overcoat was of a similar yet longer style to her usual jacket, fastened high and close to the left shoulder and extended down to mid-calf level. Her trousers still stopped short of her ankles, turned up in crisp cuffs. Parr's gloved hands rested on her lap as she stared at Snape's feet thoughtfully through slightly narrowed eyes. Folds of material rested on her shoulders neatly, like a cowl thrown back. Her hair made two silver stripes down her front, crossing over the strap of her bag.

"Fancy dress party?" Snape asked with an amused twist to his mouth.

Parr's eyes travelled languidly from his feet up to his face. She pouted her lips slightly before answering. "Outside of Hogwarts, I do not exist," she stated in a flat, emotionless voice.

Snape blinked at her, slightly flummoxed at her response. "I hope Lupin knows who you are then, Miss Incognito." He rubbed at his eyes and sighed.

"I should hope so; he's been my tutor for four months," Parr replied in a gently amused tone.

Snape stopped rubbing his eyes. Her tutor? "In what?" he asked before he could stop himself.

Parr cocked her head to one side and flared her nostrils delicately. "Defence Against the Dark Arts." Her grey eyes glittered at him under her slightly raised eyebrows.

Lupin was teaching her Defence Against the Dark Arts? Outside of Hogwarts? Snape realised that he was giggling at her like an idiot. "Is there something he can teach you that Professor Moody can't?"

Parr tipped her head back up and quirked a more open smile at him. "Does it bother you?"

"Why the hell should it?" he snapped back at her.

"Remus said you two didn't get along, especially after last year." She emphasised the last four words in verbal italics.

Snape smirked. "Lupin proved unsuitable to the position and was duly removed from the school." He looked out of the window dismissively to find they were minutes from pulling into Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$.

"Mmm," said Parr quietly. "It was my understanding that he resigned because of someone's loose tongue."

"Yes, tragic," muttered Snape without a trace of sincerity in his voice and stood up to get his wooden crate from the overhead luggage rack. He could feel Parr's eyes burning two holes in his back. "I hope I'm not expected to wait for you to finish your lesson," he pointed out, stuffing as much contempt into the last word as it could take. "I have other things to do than chaperone you about."

"Professor Dumbledore will fetch me tomorrow," said Parr's voice from the doorway. "Your reclusive evening will not be affected."

Snape scowled at the black-robed figure as she wandered out of view. He tucked the crate under his arm and stalked after her.

Chapter Eleven - Bark or Bite?

Chapter 11 of 59

They say everything has an equal and opposite reaction, so be careful how far you push.

Snape didn't know what it was that annoyed him most: that Lupin was late, that it was still raining, that he had less than half an hour before the apothecary closed, or that Parr didn't seem to be affected by any of the preceding facts. She still stood to his right, precisely one pace behind as she had since they left the train. He'd been worried that her attire would attract unwanted Muggle attention, but the bad weather seemed an adequate excuse for it, and people who had been out in the rain weren't about to stop and gawk at someone whilst a torrent was pelting down on them.

Parr had taken her anonymity to a rather extreme level. Her hair was tucked back and under her raised cowl, and her face was even shielded by a piece of cloth pitted with small holes that Snape guessed allowed her to see where she was going...she certainly didn't have any problems in following him. There was nothing to indicate who she was. Even her gender was ambiguous, except for the swell of her chest that the cut of the overcoat couldn't quite hide. Miss Incognito indeed, and for once, blessedly silent. She'd not drawn a second glance from anyone except himself.

The spot in the laneway off Diagon Alley in which they were standing allowed no protection from the weather, although with the rain starting to come in at such a sharp angle, there would've been few places that would other than actually inside a building. Snape made a snap decision...Lupin could just wait the way he'd made them wait.

He set off down the alley with Parr still stuck to his side. He'd half-expected her to make some kind of protestation, but she remained quiet, head slightly bowed, hands in front and tucked up opposing sleeves. Knockturn Alley wasn't far away. He wanted to complete what he'd set out to London for and get back to the school as soon as possible, and he wasn't about to let Lupin's questionable sense of time endanger that.

Snape frowned at the rain hitting his face and running off his oily hair like water off an otter's pelt and straight down the neck of his shirt. He distinctly felt the sodden cuffs of his trousers transfer their moisture to his socks. At least he'd be able to Apparate back to the school gates without Parr as unwanted baggage and exchange wet clothes for dry.

He turned a corner into Knockturn Alley and headed towards the apothecary, tightening his arm around the wooden crate he was carrying. Parr trotted after him like a dark shadow.

Snape elbowed the apothecary door open and slipped inside. He tried to shake a lock of wet hair out of his eyes but failed miserably. He merely succeeded in shaking a sizeable quantity of water into his left ear. Blowing a drop of rain off the end of his nose, he moved towards the unattended counter and put the crate down. Shit, he had water running up both sleeves as well!

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a rectangle of white cloth being held out to him between two black-gloved fingers. Snape stared at Parr suspiciously, but her head remained bowed as she stood one pace back and to the right.

"Thank you," he relented, slipped the handkerchief out from her fingers and shook the material out from its folds. Parr said nothing and hid her hands back up her wide sleeves again. Whilst he was still miserably soaked, the chance to wipe his face dry helped considerably in keeping his temper somewhat in check.

Fortunately, no one was waiting in the shop's front area to see Snape try futilely to make himself look less like a drowned rat. His hair was still channelling water down the back of his neck, so he ran the handkerchief over his it to try and blot some of the rain out of it. He noticed that the material smelled like Parr...an unusual mix of cloves, sandalwood and citrus with a hint of purple coneflower. He snatched the handkerchief away from his hair, feeling uncomfortable at this rather peculiar olfactory intimacy.

He was just stuffing the handkerchief into his pocket and wondering if he should use magic to dry himself off when the curtained doorway behind the counter was filled with the bulk of a richly corpulent man in a bottle-green set of robes. The figure paused a brief moment, taking in the scene before him before moving with unusual grace up to the counter.

"Good afternoon," came the mismatched high voice from a florid and overly plump face. "How may I serve you?"

Snape had better luck shaking that errant lock of hair out of his eyes now that it wasn't so damp. He stared at the fat wizard before him.

"Where is Todianus?"

The man behind the counter smoothed the front of his robes with a pudgy, be-ringed hand. "I am Todianus."

Snape's brows drew down. "I don't think so," he scoffed. "Timeus Todianus could stand in your shadow three times over and still have elbow room."

"Ah," sighed the fat wizard, running his hand over his bald, gleaming head. "That would be my brother. I am Isseacus Todianus." The man's beady eyes flicked a glance at Parr before returning Snape's gaze impassively.

"Where is Timeus? I wish to speak with him."

Isseacus pursed his thin lips together, considering, before answering. "My brother has taken ill, and in his absence I am... filling in for him, you might say." He gave an obsequious smile that dripped oil. Rancid oil.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "When will he return?"

Isseacus spread his chubby digits and gave an elegant shrug. "It's hard to say, I'm afraid." His eyes slid across to Parr and back again. "Perhaps / can help you?" He touched his rounded chest with the tips of his fingers for emphasis.

Snape gave him a flat, distrusting look, first impressions giving a distinctly negative flavour to the situation. He sighed heavily. "The supplies I'm being sent are substandard. I'm here to find out the reason why."

Isseacus' small mouth twitched as if it had a hook caught in it. "And you are...?"

"Severus Snape," came the hissed reply. Isseacus' face registered no recognition. He shook his head slightly, making his jowls wobble over his collar, and waved his hand a little for more information. Snape clenched his fists in irritation. "I teach at Hogwarts and have been a customer for many years." He emphasised the last two words heavily.

Isseacus clasped his hands together into a pile of pink sausages and bobbed in a spry little gesture. "Ah, of course, forgive me, Professor! I have so many customers that sometimes it's hard to keep track." Again, the oily smile.

"Yes, I can see that you're run off your feet today," Snape retorted stonily, observing the empty shop.

Isseacus' flabby features hardened slightly. "Well, it is nearly closing time, and my customers have the welcome habit of carrying out their purchases well in advance of said closing time."

"Then I'll make this quick, shall I?" Snape verbally stepped over him. "I am not accustomed to being supplied with poor quality product, especially considering the price I pay."

"It was my understanding that your purchases are taken care of by the school, Professor," Isseacus shot back primly.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "A majority of them are, yes, but I have paid for a not insignificant number myself for my own use, if memory serves me correctly."

"Yes, I recall a number of... interesting and, if I may say so, hard to procure items being requested by you," Isseacus noted, all trace of his oily smile now gone and replaced by a rather shrewd cast to his face. "Some of which might be considered questionable by the Ministry, I hasten to add."

Snape shifted his weight from one foot to the other, trying to ignore the squelch inside his boots. "If this apothecary is unable to supply certain items, then I am sure I can secure them elsewhere," he threatened silkily.

Isseacus gave an amused titter and touched his earlobe lightly. "I doubt other suppliers would be so..." He twisted his mouth. "... interpretive of current Ministry regulations as we are here, Professor. But of course, it is always *possible* you might find someone to risk heavy punishment *and* the closure of their business in obtaining some of your more... specialised requests." The apoth licked the corner of his mouth archly.

Snape was drawing breath to tell this disgusting toad of a man where to stick his merchandise and his inferences when Parr touched his arm lightly with one extended finger. Isseacus' eyes fastened on the shrouded figure with a small frown as Parr turned away and drifted over to the far side of the shop. Snape stared after her with a puzzled expression, and then followed her.

Isseacus watched them from behind the counter suspiciously. His eyes travelled over the small anonymous figure, trying to riddle out just who or what this hook-nosed bat of a professor's companion was. A woman, he guessed from the shape of her chest.

The apoth couldn't hear what they were saying to each other, but, judging from Snape's expression, it wasn't anything that made the man's temper any less waspish. He was shaking his head resolutely, his long blue-black hair swaying with the movement. The cloaked woman inched closer to him, making him stoop over her as she spoke to him with a raised finger. They seemed to stare at each other for some time, as if at an impasse. Then, reluctantly, the tall wizard nodded and returned with his diminutive companion in tow. He stopped a couple of feet before the counter as his companion slipped in front of him and just to his right. Isseacus frowned at them, trying to figure out what was going on here.

"These ingredients are below the standard I expect from this establishment," Snape continued, as if the whispered interlude had not taken place. "I am here to have them replaced with more acceptable ones, or, if that proves too hard to obtain, a complete refund," he sneered and pushed the crate towards Isseacus with a long finger.

The fat apoth stared blandly at him. "Are you certain that these were obtained from this establishment?" he asked tersely, using his thumb to twist a particularly heavy and gaudy signet ring on one of his fingers. He thought he saw the shrouded woman move incrementally further forward, but when he looked directly at her, she was as motionless as before, head still bowed and hands hidden away up her sleeves. Even her face was covered, he noticed now. Isseacus' frown deepened across his forehead.

"Unless I have lost over thirty years' experience in the skill of reading, the labels on these containers have your family's name on them," Snape snapped, his black eyes boring into Isseacus' fleshy face.

"The *containers* may have come from here" the apoth began in a snippy tone.

"Are you suggesting that I put substances from other suppliers in your business's containers in an effort to get free merchandise?" Snape hissed incredulously.

Isseacus gave a tight smile. "I would never dream of accusing you of that, Professor." He stopped as he caught a faint sound coming from the man's companion. He looked back at Snape. "Have you brought a Sniffer into my shop?"

Snape's face remained still but a slight crease showed between his eyebrows. "A what?"

"A Sniffer," Isseacus repeated. "A Striker, a Barghest, a Tracker, Orion's Pointer... whatever you want to call her."

The woman's head came up a fraction.

"Never you mind her," Snape barked. "I'm the one addressing you at this moment, and I would appreciate your full attention!"

The apoth's piggy eyes took him in, and the sour look on his face dismissed the demand with barely concealed contempt. "If you feel that our products are ill-suited to your needs, then the wonder of free enterprise allows you to seek your supplies elsewhere," Isseacus trilled snidely. "I hear that Masterton's is quite cheap. Perhaps that's more appropriate."

A rather horrible pain bloomed in the side of Isseacus' face, and for a fraction of a second he thought that the Professor had hit him.

There was a loud thunk, and a flash of metal in front of his face. Isseacus' thin lips tingled as the pain spread down from his temple like dye in a glass of water, and something trickled out of his left nostril.

"Do you always accommodate dissatisfied customers in this manner?" asked a low female voice close to his ear. The apoth tried to blink some focus back into his eyes, with no success.

"What the" he slurred before the words were choked off by his collar tightening dramatically like a garrotte.

"Let me make it clear to you, Mr Todianus, where you made an error in judgement," said the woman calmly into his ear. Isseacus' sinuses started to throb as his vision cleared to reveal the flat side of the blade of a very heavy knife stuck point down in the countertop barely an inch from his nose. *How did I get down here?* he wondered fuzzily. He started to pull away from the knife only to find that he was pinned to the counter by the woman's arm pressed across his upper back, cheek pushed into the wood, and his robes wrenched up painfully behind his ear.

"The first rule of business is that the customer is always right," the woman pointed out, so close to him that he could feel her breath on his skin. "The Professor patronises your family's business in the belief that you are better than your competitors. If that belief is ill-founded, then he is entitled to return unsatisfactory merchandise in the expectation that you will amend the situation."

The apoth made another break for it and was once again held immobile like an insect skewered to an entomologist's display card.

"With that in mind, I have a proposition for you that might just solve this awkward little problem."

Isseacus began to gasp for air as the material around his neck tightened slowly and inexorably.

"You will replace every item that the Professor has returned with something much more appropriate. And, if I may clarify this statement, Mr Todianus, I mean something of a truly mind-blowing quality. Do you follow me?"

Isseacus' eyes bulged towards the knife in front of his face. "Yes! Yes, I follow you!" he shrieked, tasting in his mouth the blood that had trickled out of his nose.

"And let me assure you, Mr Todianus, that if the replacement ingredients fall short in any shape or form, I will know of it."

The apoth squawked like a chicken and thrashed about futilely.

"The Professor expects the very best, and that is exactly what you will provide from this day forth," his captor breathed into his ear. "If I hear that he is unsatisfied in any way, I'll be back here to widen that slimy smirk of yours from ear to ear with my blade."

"That won't be necessary!" the apoth shrieked in a squeaky voice.

"I sincerely hope not," she replied in a flinty tone.

"Dis... dis... discount!" the apoth gasped desperately, one hand scrabbling at his collar in an effort to stop the fabric from crushing his windpipe. "I'll discount the price of future purchases for the inconvenience!"

"No, no discount," the woman refused. "The Professor pays good money for a good product, and I wouldn't want you to make the regrettable mistake of matching quality to a reduced price."

"Whatever you want. *Whatever you want!*" Isseacus shrieked, bucking and kicking his feet in the air to try and free himself from the prostrate position he was in.

"And remember, Mr Todianus, if I hear one negative thing about you, your merchandise or your service, if the Professor tells me you have even thought of giving him less than your very, very best, I will be down here again, and next time I will not be so reasonable."

The knife twisted on its point slowly with a splintering of wood so that the edge of the blade rested against the skin of the fat man's nose.

"I'll remember! I'll remember! I *swear* it! Please?!" The apoth started to sob pathetically, still trying to get the tip of his finger under his collar to relieve the strangling pressure.

"You will have the replacement items sent this evening," the woman stated, her face no longer next to his. "Enough of the Professor's time has been wasted here already."

The knife was wrenched out from the countertop, snicking the apoth's nose with a thin cut that beaded instantly with scarlet drops. The material around his neck became slack, and the apoth heaved in a blessedly sweet lungful of air with a ragged inhalation.

The fat man sagged against the counter, not daring to look up as his final customers of the day left without another word.

Isseacus realised that at some point during the incident he had wet himself in terror.

Chapter Twelve - Handover

Chapter 12 of 59

Keeping a dangerous object at arm's length can still get your hand blown off if it's not treated carefully.

Lupin was starting to panic. He'd been standing by the wall for just over twenty minutes, and there was still no sign of them. It was difficult for him to appear inconspicuous because he wanted to pace back and forth as an outlet for his anxiety. He stuck his hands in his pockets to stop himself from chewing his nails. It certainly wasn't for warmth; his pockets had so many holes in them that they let in the chilly air like a welcome guest, and the worn material was soaked from the rain.

Lupin had questioned Dumbledore's decision to let this meeting go ahead in his absence. Surely it could be left for another time, Lupin had asked, but Dumbledore assured him that there would be no problem and that Parr would be at the pre-arranged meeting place at the allotted time. When Lupin found out who was bringing Parr instead of Dumbledore, his sense of foreboding only strengthened.

Snape. Why did it have to be Snape? Lupin had asked as much.

"I don't have any other option, Remus," the Headmaster had replied from the fireplace, more than a little exasperated. "I need Minerva here to help me with this latest development with the Tournament, Alastor has to keep an eye on Harry, and no one else here is strong enough to keep Chara in check. Severus is the only one from the Order here who can do it."

"But what about Kingsley or Tonks?" Lupin countered. "They know as much about Chara as—"

"Remus, stop fretting," Dumbledore had interrupted. "It'll be fine. Chara will be fine."

"It's not Chara I'm worried about," Lupin had muttered after Dumbledore's head had disappeared from the fire.

He snatched his hand away from his mouth, realising that he had been chewing at one of his nails unconsciously, and stuck his hand back in his pocket.

Snape. Damn it, he'd turn up late just to annoy the spit out of Lupin. And then there would be the inevitable smirks and snide comments when he did turn up, and Lupin's patience was running short with only a week left until the full moon. He checked himself as he started to pace back and forth. At least the laneway was empty, thanks to the rain. He pulled his ratty coat a little tighter around him in a futile effort to stay dry.

Where the hell were they?

A thought occurred to him. Maybe Chara had lost her temper and given Snape a new scar to add to his collection? Lupin's mood brightened noticeably at that possibility. She knew that Snape had deliberately let slip about Lupin's lycanthropy so that he would have to leave Hogwarts, and it had taken Lupin some hours to convince Chara not to snap Snape's fingers backwards in retribution.

The Potions master could never resist a vicious dig at someone if the opportunity arose—perhaps he'd made that mistake with Chara.

There was a movement off down the dark end of the laneway that caught Lupin's eye, and he turned towards it hopefully. Sure enough, there was Snape striding along looking like he'd mow anyone down who had the misfortune to get in his way. Lupin saw Parr trotting easily behind him and immediately relaxed. In the back of his mind, he'd had the unsettling thought that she might've gone AWOL, leaving Snape with no idea why or what he should do.

"Where have you been?" Lupin said through clenched teeth. "I've been waiting twenty minutes!"

Snape stared at him sourly. "You're one to talk about punctuality. You're half an hour late, and now I'm soaked!"

"I got held up," Lupin stressed back.

"Lamp-posts to sniff?" Snape sneered at him, flicking his head to get his damp hair out of his eyes.

Lupin stared at him stonily. "Don't be fatuous, Severus." The man was looking even paler than usual, which usually meant he was especially angry about something or ill. Lupin honestly believed Snape ironed those lines into his face deliberately. Being out in the rain had no doubt soured his mood beyond the usual rebarbative manner. "You look unwell. Not had any trouble with your fingers, have you?"

Chara laughed quietly behind Snape.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Nothing," Lupin replied with a tight smile. He turned to Parr. "Chara, are you all right?"

Parr brought her gloved right hand up to her opposing shoulder, first two fingers extended.

"Yes, Remus, I'm fine."

Lupin mirrored her gesture to his right shoulder, bringing a suspicious look from Snape. Lupin held out his hand to him.

"What do you want, a tip?" Snape challenged.

Lupin exhaled heavily. "Dumbledore gave you something to give to me," he stated in as calm a voice as he could.

Snape's eyes glittered at him as he brought the pouch out of his pocket slowly and held it out just short of Lupin's outstretched hand. Lupin's temper broke, and he snatched the pouch off Snape.

"I'm sorry, Chara, I know that was rude, but the playground antics will go on all evening otherwise," he apologised quietly.

"It's all right, Remus, I quite understand," she replied, drifting over to him smoothly. She turned back towards Snape and crossed index and middle fingers of each hand over each other, fingertips pointed to the ground. Lupin wiped away a flash of surprise across his face while Snape just looked at Parr with an unreadable expression.

"Thank you, Professor. The inconvenience to you has not gone unnoticed." She bowed slightly in his direction before moving to stand behind Lupin on his right side. "Come on, Remus. Let's go and get drunk."

"Maybe *after* the lesson, Chara," he suggested with a smile and a sidelong glance at her. He nodded once at Snape. "Severus."

Snape narrowed his black eyes at him and said nothing. Lupin and Parr walked away from him, leaving him standing in the rain that had just begun to lessen to a Scotch mist.

Chapter Thirteen - A Slip Of The Tongue

Chapter 13 of 59

Even the most closed-mouthed can let slip.

Parr rolled up the parchment and set it to one side. *Another one down, two more to go* she thought wearily. It probably hadn't been a good idea to drink as much as she had the night before, especially seeing as Lupin appeared to have a hollow leg. Alcohol seemed to affect him hardly at all. At least, it didn't at first.

All right, where was I? Parr thought, tapping her fingers on the table and looking at all the books and paper strewn in front of her. Should she do her Arithmancy assignment on imaginary numbers and their influence or the History of Magic essay on the formative years of the governing bodies of the European magical societies?

Neither option seemed particularly gripping. Procrastinating, Parr made herself a paper hat, stuck her quill in it, and set it on her head at a jaunty angle. Imaginary numbers... governing bodies... imaginary numbers... governing bodies... achingly dull... relentlessly dry... achingly dull... relentlessly dry.

Parr tapped her fingers again, then took her paper hat off and placed it carefully on a textbook on Muggle Parliament and Ministry of Magic interrelations. She decided to do the governing bodies essay. Rearranging the mess in front of her and plucking her quill out of the paper hat, Parr set to work, the nib scratching across the parchment.

Relentlessly dull... relentlessly dull... relentlessly *dull!*

Not taking her eyes from her work, Parr reached out with her free hand to open the subject textbook to check a reference. The front cover hit the table with a thump. Parr held the required page down with her index finger while her quill continued to scrape across the parchment.

"Is there something I can help you with, Professor?" she asked aloud, starting a new line.

"What are you doing in here?"

"An essay on the formative years of the governing bodies of the European magical societies."

"Why are you doing it in here?"

"The library is closed, and my room is too stuffy to concentrate in." She looked at the open textbook and turned a few pages back.

"Isn't it too late to be doing this?"

"I don't sleep much."

"Students aren't meant to be wandering about at such a late hour."

Parr rolled her eyes and started writing again. "I'm not wandering about. I need to sit still to do this. If you have a suggestion as to how I should unjam the window in my room, I would very much like to hear it, as it's too cold in this hall." She finished the sentence she was writing and closed the textbook. "Are you giving me another detention?"

"You don't seem to be shying away from giving me reasons to do so. I'm starting to wonder if you *like* being given detention."

Parr put down her quill and twisted around on her bench to face him. "I didn't know you had a sense of humour, Professor," she said blandly.

Snape raised his eyebrows at her. "I was being serious."

"Ah, silly me," she replied with a straight face and turned back to her essay.

"I was also being serious about students not being up at night, Miss Parr. Is there something wrong with the Ravenclaw common room?"

Parr pushed the stubby candle aside and pulled another textbook towards her. She shrugged. "Too many distractions."

"At two o'clock in the morning?" Snape asked and walked over to the bench. "Pick up your stuff. You can't do your homework here or now."

"But I've got two more assignments to do," countered Parr, indicating the mess in front of her with an open palm.

"Tough," Snape retorted. "You can't be writing anything of quality at this hour. Your teachers, I'm sure, would prefer you to do your homework during normal hours when your attention isn't wandering." He picked up the folded paper. "Nice hat. Very artistic," he commended, contempt curling through his deep voice.

"Mmm," said Parr, pressing her lips into a thin line. She started to gather her books together.

"I trust it hasn't escaped your mind that your Potions essay is due tomorrow morning," he reminded her, putting the origami hat down. "And woe betide you if you write it in biro like you did the last one."

Parr reached across the long table to a rolled up parchment that had been knocked aside. She held it out to him. "I've already done it and in quill-ink."

He stared at her. "I'm not taking it now. Hand it in during class like everybody else."

Parr shrugged and stuffed the parchment into her bag with a loud crackle.

Snape winced. "Physical condition of assignments is as important as their contents, Miss Parr!" he barked at her.

Parr dragged the crumpled paper out of her bag and looked at it thoughtfully. She tried to uncrease it. "I suppose I could sit on it to try and flatten it out," she mused.

Snape snatched it out of her hand. "That's the last thing I need," he snapped. "Try moving with some alacrity!"

Parr jammed the rest of her books into her bag and picked up the candle.

They were just leaving the Great Hall when Parr stopped abruptly, nearly causing Snape to bump into her. He saw Filch's cat, Mrs Norris, frozen mid-stride towards them out of the gloom of the corridor, hackles raised and making a yowling sound in her throat, her luminous eyes fixed on Parr like two searchlights. Parr stared back at the puffed-up cat, expressionless. Mrs Norris continued to cat-growl at her for a few seconds before deciding that she needed to be somewhere else and bolting off back the way she had come like a furry streak. Although Mrs Norris wasn't an average cat, the behaviour seemed peculiar, even for her. Parr snorted.

"Don't you like cats?" Snape asked her.

She gave a start and hitched her bag up on to her shoulder. "I like them just fine," she replied and started walking again. "They just don't seem to like me very much, especially that one."

"Cats are very perceptive," he pointed out, following her.

Parr shook her head. "I never had any problems with Aristotle, and he was notoriously bad-tempered."

"You owned a cat?"

"No, he wasn't mine, he belonged to my Ha—" The words cut off abruptly as Parr closed her mouth suddenly. From his position behind her, Snape saw her cringe and miss a step. What did she nearly let slip there, he wondered.

"Belonged to...?" he prompted hopefully.

"It doesn't matter," Parr muttered, knuckles white on the candle she was holding. She turned up the staircase that would take her in the direction of the Ravenclaw tower.

Snape followed her, staring at her back. A seam ran across the high-necked jacket she wore, just below shoulder level. If it hadn't been for the fact that she wasn't wearing her school robes, that the strap of her bag was rucking the grey material, and that he was following closely behind her, he wouldn't have noticed that the seam was actually partially open at the centre.

He squinted and drew a little closer to get a better look. The opening was perhaps a hand's width with no indication that it was due to poor stitching. If anything, the needlework was such that it showed that the opening was deliberate.

Parr turned abruptly to her right, catching him off guard. Snape stopped at the top of the stairs.

"Where are you going?"

Parr stopped and turned to face him. "Back to my room."

Snape jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "The Ravenclaw quarters are this way. For someone who claims to 'find things' as a career, your sense of direction is about as sharp as a wet sock."

Parr hitched her bag up on her shoulder. "That isn't where I sleep." She turned away and continued away from him, forcing him to stalk after her.

She didn't sleep with the other Ravenclaws? Well, not especially surprising. After all, she was nearly twice the age of the students. Sleeping in a dorm with three teenagers

would be the kind of nightmare she'd understandably want to avoid. The castle, vast in its sprawling expanse, contained all sorts of rooms. Guest quarters did exist, although they were not often used.

Parr threaded her way through the tangle of intersecting corridors until she reached a dead-end with a ratty tapestry of a group of old wizards standing about looking dull as they proffered bits of paper at each other and pointed in different directions.

Parr shouldered open the dark wooden door and turned her head towards him.

"Are you any good with your hands, Professor?" she asked curiously.

Snape blinked at her. "I beg your pardon?" he responded after a pause, not knowing what to make of the question.

"My window." Parr pointed into her room. "I could ask Mr Filch about it tomorrow, but I still need to finish my assignments, and fresh air would be a plus."

"Carpentry is not one of my skills, Miss Parr," Snape grated at her, tugging one of his sleeves further down his arm. "Leave the door open."

Parr huffed. "That is an option, Professor. However, open doors tend to invite people to enter, and I dislike having people walk in on me unannounced when I'm in my underwear." She swung the bag off her shoulder. "Plus, if the door were open, I might be tempted to go wandering again." She disappeared into her room with her candle, dropping the corridor into shadow.

"I can't imagine anyone would either be able or would want to come down here to bother you, Miss Parr," Snape replied, frowning after her.

"Then you're not as aware of what goes on around the castle at this hour as you think you are, Professor," Parr called back with an unmistakably amused tone.

Snape's silhouette filled the doorway. "Are you saying that there are students regularly creeping about the corridors at night, Miss Parr?" he demanded to know, slightly outraged at this possibility.

Parr turned from her small study table that was pushed up against the stone wall to the left of the room to face him. She had a shallow bowl in her hand and a spoon in the other. Her eyebrows were raised and her lips curved into a slight smile. "I'm sure your night-time patrols are thorough, Professor," she replied calmly and stirred the contents of the bowl with her spoon. The candlelight caught a pale cloud of steam as it puffed up from the bowl, and she wrinkled her nose into it briefly.

Snape stared at Parr as she proceeded to shovel whatever was in the bowl into her mouth. "Do you ever stop eating?" he carped at her. "It's like watching a Muggle garbage truck."

Parr leaned her behind back on the desk and stirred her soup again. "I have a large appetite," she stated and stuck the full spoon in her mouth. "It didn't take much to convince the house-elves to slip me an extra meal whenever I'm in my room." She continued to slop soup into her mouth.

Snape shook his head as he watched Parr use a slice of bread to mop up the leavings. She ate like a teenage boy: fast, copiously, and with an unabashed lack of common table manners. It was a wonder that she didn't spill half of the soup down her front.

She set the clean bowl down on the table behind her and wedged the bread into her mouth with a spray of crumbs. She noticed a blob of soup on her thumb and licked it off in between chewing her mouthful and then looked at him with a slight squint of her misted eye.

"I thought about smashing the glass, but it'd make a lot of noise, and I don't want Peeves bothering me while I'm working. Plus it's a bit rude of me to damage school property." She swallowed her mouthful and dabbed with an exaggerated delicacy at the corners of her mouth with her fingertips.

"Intriguing that you hesitate in exhibiting behaviour that others might consider rude, Miss Parr. Any reason for the sudden upswing in courteous behaviour?" Snape leaned against the doorframe and folded his arms, sneering down his nose at her.

"It must be due to the impeccable manners I see in those around me, Professor," the woman responded dryly, raising an eyebrow at him and pushing herself away from her desk.

She reached for a sturdy metal ruler and stepped over to the window that was set in the wall three feet from the desk. With a thunk, she jammed the end of the ruler into the base of the window and tried to lever the sliding pane up.

Snape watched her for a few moments with an amused twist to his mouth until the metal bent with the force Parr was exerting on it. She pulled it free of the window and looked at the ruined ruler forlornly.

"Oh, well, I didn't really expect it to work," she muttered under her breath and tossed the bent metal on to the study table. She put her hands on her hips and sized up the window again, running through alternatives in her mind. She was about to try using the soup spoon in the same way when she heard Snape come up behind her.

"Spare the school cutlery," he told her. "The wood's probably just swollen from the rain." Parr stepped aside for him. She frowned as he slipped his long fingers into the metal rings at the base of the windowpane.

"You're not going to use magic?" she inquired, somewhat surprised.

Snape turned his head to look at her with a flat expression. "Unlike others, I don't find it necessary to use magic for every simple matter, Miss Parr," he replied frostily.

Parr held up her hands in a ghosting of a placating gesture and took another pace backwards, spinning the spoon between her fingers calmly.

Snape didn't need to look at Parr to know that she had a smirk splashed across her face as he struggled to get the window open. He'd thought that it would've just taken a sharp heave to un-jam the pane, but it sat in the frame stubbornly without even a hint of a squeak to indicate movement.

He ground his teeth and doubled his effort. The pane abruptly gave way without warning and banged upwards, the glass shattering from the impact with the transom. They both jumped back from the blanket of shards that rained down onto the floor with a cacophony of tinkling.

There was a pause.

"Smooth," said Parr, brushing a few tiny slivers of glass from her sleeve nonchalantly.

Snape glared at her sourly, but she returned his look serenely, the corners of her eyes crinkling in evidence of the laughter she was suppressing admirably. He pulled his wand from his pocket and hissed a repairing spell. So much for not using magic. Stuffing his wand back into his pocket, he bent forward to get a closer look at the wooden frame.

It was as he had suspected: the wood had swollen with moisture, and a light sheen of mould had taken hold. He sniffed at the spore-laden air around the window and scrubbed a knuckle under his nose.

"Tell Filch that this window frame needs to be replaced," Snape told her, standing straight again. "And no, I will not fix it with magic," he forestalled her and turned away from the window in a swirl of cloth. Her voice stopped him before he reached the door.

"I was wondering, Professor, if your supply problem has been resolved."

Snape stopped and half-turned his head so that he could see Parr out of the corner of his eye, still standing by the window. He didn't answer her.

"Will I be scrubbing the floor of your classroom with my toothbrush, then?" she added in a low voice.

He had to turn his head to hide the faint smile that found its way unexpectedly onto his face. Parr had bet him in the apothecary that she could make the fat apoth give Snape what he wanted, and if she failed in her claim, she promised to clean the floor of his classroom on her hands and knees with her toothbrush. He'd been caught off-guard enough to actually agree to the bet, especially since the apoth was being such a snide and difficult git. He made sure there was no trace of his smile in his eventual reply.

"It seems that you will not be required to carry out that penalty," Snape sighed offhandedly. That was a gross understatement. The replacement supplies that had been dutifully sent to him the same evening were of exceptional quality. The apoth was clearly, and wisely, taking the promise Parr had extracted from him very seriously.

Something glinted above the doorframe, and Snape lifted his eyes to it. There, with its point a few inches from the top of the door, sat Parr's knife; the one he'd seen her use in the apothecary in Knockturn Alley the day before. Well, two days before, he mentally amended, considering the current hour. The knife appeared suspended against the wall, held in place with a Fixing Charm. His eyes travelled along the length of the blade, noting the scratches and dints on the flat, and the keenness of the edge. Parr's voice just behind him made him jump slightly.

"Professor Flitwick was kind enough to oblige," she explained softly. "It was thought prudent to keep it out of reach whenever possible."

Snape suppressed an impulse to slide away from her close proximity; it made him feel uncomfortable in a way that hadn't been apparent when she had stood near him in London. He supposed it was the fact that he was standing in her sleeping quarters and not out in public.

"A wise decision on the Headmaster's part," he stated, noting the rusty orange and silver cloth bindings around the handle of the knife. "Students shouldn't go around armed with weapons."

That statement brought a clear laugh from Parr, making him stiffen in irritation. "I would've thought, Professor, that would mean that students would need to be stripped of their wands." He heard her retreat from her position behind him. "Besides, it was my idea to have the blade out of reach whilst I am on the school grounds."

That statement made him turn in mild surprise. Parr had her back to him as she stared out of her now-open window, combing her fingers through one of the long side tresses of her hair. His eyes slid to that mysterious seam on the back of her grey jacket.

Parr's performance in the apothecary was indicative of someone extremely proficient with a knife. Snape didn't see where she had produced it from, but he suspected it had been from somewhere up the wide sleeve of her black overcoat. Her hands had moved so fast that the apoth had been pinned to his countertop before Snape had realised Parr had drawn a weapon. It had made him jump back and clutch about in his pocket for his wand in a pathetically delayed reaction. Parr could have cut his throat with one sweep of her arm before he'd have been able to defend himself. That realisation had caused an instant and insistent palpitation that didn't fade until Parr and Lupin had left him standing alone in the alleyway. Like the students who'd heard about Parr's altercation with Lancaster, Snape had taken not only a literal step back but a metaphorical one as well.

The whole incident sketched in a few more details of the mystery surrounding Parr. Snape had seen her spin the silver work knife that students used during his Potions class with a lazy, effortless expertise on numerous occasions, sometimes unconsciously. He'd assumed it was a little trick that she'd taught herself to amuse or impress others.

Then there was the blade-mark scar across her face that had also scratched the iris of her left eye. A remnant of a knife fight? That seemed much more likely now. Snape wondered if the injury around her neck had also come from an opponent's knife. He was inclined to think this wasn't the case. Such an injury would have been easily attended to, one that certainly would have healed by now, especially under Pomfrey's steely treatment. He tilted his head slightly to one side as Parr's fingers nimbly twisted her finger-combed hair into a plait and inhaled deeply through his nose.

The scent of purple coneflower was evident in the air, although it was faded into a thinner bouquet, missing some of its high tones. That usually indicated that the scent had been in the air for some time. It was most likely that Parr had been using it as part of her injury treatment. Along with the cloves and the sandalwood that he could also smell, the purple coneflower would assist in clearing the blood of contamination, reducing inflammation and boosting her immune system.

It all pointed to the likelihood that her injury was infected. Again, this made little sense. An injury that rejected treatment. A cursed injury? That would certainly explain her time in hospital. He rubbed finger and thumb together in thought and dropped his gaze to the cuffs of her trousers.

Her hatred of skirts, the way she'd ball the hem of her robes up into her hand... She didn't like material hampering leg movement. Given how swiftly Parr had pinned that fat apoth down, she was no less skilled at fast movement than she was knife wielding. Snape's eyes flicked back up as Parr started to comb her other side tresses with her fingers. There had been no hesitation or faltering in her strong-arm treatment of the apoth. This was someone experienced in dealing with difficult, possibly dangerous people.

Silver strands wound together in Parr's fingers with the dexterity of a spider spinning a web.

Snape recalled that she had said that prior to her arrival she "found things". There had been no indication as to what those things were. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, considering.

A Sniffer. A Striker. A Barghest. A Tracker. Orion's Pointer, the apoth had called her, and Snape had seen Parr's head rise slightly at the words. He'd never heard of the last term. A Bhargest was another name for a Grim, and although there were some differing interpretations as to the original meaning of the word, it generally indicated a dog-like wraith whose sighting presaged the death of the one who was unfortunate enough to glimpse it.

He'd been through all the relevant literature in the library, plus that of his own personal collection after his return to the castle, to try and patch together all the pieces of information. Some bits didn't fit with others, and he had spent some time shuffling them about mentally as he'd eaten his dinner in the Great Hall in silence. The other teachers, sensing his mood, prudently chose not to bother him by attempting to engage him in small talk.

Snape turned his head to his right and saw a photo tacked to the wall next to Parr's bed and over the small bedside table. The lack of movement inside the frame indicated it was a Muggle photo. He drifted over to it and peered closely, frowning. Peculiarly, it was of Parr herself. His mouth twisted at such a display of vanity. Narcissism was a particularly distasteful human trait to him.

Parr's head was turned aside in the photo, as if her attention was drawn to something occurring outside of the frame. Her appearance was markedly different from her current one. Most noticeable was the rich copper colour of her hair, the absence of the side tresses and the broad, uninhibited expression of amusement on her face, caught for eternity in a moment of laughter. Still that same high-collared, grey jacket, though. His eyes scanned her face, trying to estimate how long ago the photo had been taken.

"Anything else you want to look at, Professor?" Parr's voice came from behind him. "Perhaps you'd like to grub through my sock drawer?"

Snape straightened and turned to face her with a complete lack of guilt at being caught. "People rarely hide anything of interest in their sock drawer, Miss Parr," he replied lazily in a dignified tone of voice, half-closing his dark eyes at her.

Parr quirked an eyebrow at him. "Are you experienced in rooting through a woman's drawers, Professor?" she asked smoothly.

His lips thinned at her question, and he swept past her with his considerable nose in the air.

"In light of your assistance this weekend, you can escape the detention you deserve for being out of your quarters past midnight," Snape announced icily. "Regardless of

age, you need to remember and adhere to the same rules as the other students." He deftly ignored the crawling sensation along his spine as he walked under Parr's knife and out of the doorway. He turned briefly. "The next time I catch you, you'll serve a detention that'll require your toothbrush." Parr's reply drifted after him as he stalked off down the dark corridor and away from her room.

"In that case, Professor, I shall ensure that next time I don't get caught."

Chapter Fourteen - Information

Chapter 14 of 59

Sometimes getting information is like trying to extract blood from a stone.

Autumn aged towards winter, and the castle became even colder, if that were possible. Rain was more often than not interspersed with sleet, and it was considered a clement day if the grey sky didn't weep. Students stiff-legged their way about the grounds encased in all manner of woolly accessories on top of their uniforms, their exhalations evident from the pearly clouds that were whisked away from in front of their faces by the cutting winds that gained speed from racing over the heath-covered hills and across the Black Lake.

The weather did little to dampen the mood of the students. The Tournament provided enough warming excitement to hold off the usual winter melancholy. It wasn't far from the end of November when McGonagall brought up the farce that was to be the Yule Ball to the rest of the teachers.

"I cannot stress how important it is that you all attend," she lectured with a prim set to her mouth. "This is not just some frivolous social event for the students. It is a tradition going back centuries, and regardless of the modernising elements that the Headmaster has seen fit to allow, I have no desire to see the Ball turned into some kind of drunken and debauched orgy." She ignored the noises of feigned disappointment coming from Hooch and Flitwick. "Personally I have no desire to give either Maxime or Karkaroff the continued opportunity to point out how much better their schools are than Hogwarts, so that means that all students *and staff*..." She looked pointedly at Hooch and Flitwick. "...are to be on their best behaviour, whatever the cost to enjoyment."

That brought a collective muttering from the teachers, who had been looking forward to downing a few and throwing some shapes on the dance floor... interschool relations be buggered! Sprout even let out a few colourful phrases that McGonagall pretended not to hear.

"Now, the Heads of House are expected to ensure that all their students are suitably prepared for the dance," the Deputy Headmistress continued in a voice loud enough to drown out some of the more persistent whinging. "No scruffy attire, no ridiculous and strumpet-like make-up on the girls, no shouting or squealing, and at least an attempt at mimicking the classical forms of dance. All students old enough to attend the ball are to be given firm guidance in correct etiquette and deportment, as well as dance instruction wherever required...Severus Snape, don't even *think* about leaving this room before I've finished!" McGonagall's finger shot out behind her, stopping Snape in his slide towards the door of the staffroom.

"I refuse to be condemned to teaching any students how to prance about, Minerva," Snape grated at her in a voice more chill than the north-westerly that was rattling at the windows.

"If you wish to have your students stumbling about like a bunch of oafish clubfoots, Severus, then I'm sure Karkaroff and Maxime would be a very receptive audience in witnessing the acclaimed sinuous grace of Slytherin House," McGonagall shrilled back at him, her face all sharp angles of disapproval. "I know that Filius, Pomona and I would also enjoy it."

Snape folded his arms and gritted his teeth, eyeing the door to freedom that sat less than five feet away.

"As it is, you have been lucky enough to draw the short straw and so will avoid scrutiny on the dance floor," McGonagall pointed out, her lips so thin that they were just a rumour.

"Short straw for what?" Snape asked with a due sense of dread scratching its fingernails down his back.

"Shag patrol," replied Sprout, swirling the dregs in her teacup before downing them.

"Absolutely not!" the tall man spat. "I'm not wasting my evening hunting out frenetically humping teenagers!"

"Funny, I would've thought that was right up your spiteful alley, Severus," Hooch clipped out at him whilst the other teachers snickered openly.

"Right, that's quite enough!" McGonagall interrupted before Snape could fire a verbal volley back at Quidditch mistress. "I look forward to seeing the fruits of your noble efforts representing our school in a few weeks' time." With that, she breezed out of the staffroom in a gust of tartan and with a twitch in her left eye.

For the second time, Parr's physical form shifted like a slow, inward breath. It attracted less attention from the students this time, but they still stepped around her carefully. If anything, Parr was far less challenging to deal with during this time, mostly because she kept to herself more than ever and spoke little to those around her.

Snape watched her during his classes with analytical fascination. Parr's movements were carried out with a deliberateness that spoke not of a need to control clumsiness; it was more a restraint of a surge of force, like someone managing a furnace that went through bouts of oxygenated flaring. Her face was frozen in something akin to a grim determination that would briefly thaw into what looked like consternation. It seemed unrelated to whatever she was doing, but it was hard to tell what was going on behind those eyes, grey or green.

Midweek, she was absent. Ill, if the notification from Pomfrey was to be trusted.

Just before lunchtime that same day, Snape made his way to the school greenhouses. He'd almost gone through his entire supply of painkiller in trying to stop the Dark Mark on his left arm from keeping him up at night. In order to make some more, he needed to ask Sprout for fresh leaves of mandrake and Kelp's nightshade. There was never enough natural light in the dungeons for him to grow his own supply, so he often relied on the Herbology teacher to provide what he needed.

He'd been just about to push the glass door to Greenhouse One open when a birdcall off to his left stopped him. Strutting about on the grass was a starling, the dull light coming through the clouds barely strong enough to reflect off the bird's glossy, almost metallic plumage. It cocked its head at Snape and belted forth another burst of avian chatter. It came closer with a stilted gallop and paced back and forth, one beady eye kept on him at all times.

Snape looked around before bending down towards the bird. It high-stepped over and stuck out a stick-leg. Tied carefully to it was a small roll of paper, the width of a finger. The second the roll was off its leg, the starling took off across the lawn to join some of its brethren who were busily stabbing the sodden ground for worms.

Snape stood straight again and carefully pulled the paper flat. It was blank. That was surprising. He had expected something by now, some indication. He looked over at the flock of starlings still grubbing about busily and wondered how long the bird had waited until he'd emerged from the castle in order to deliver its message. It knew never to enter the castle itself and to wait for the recipient of its message to be away from eyes of others before approaching.

Scrunching the tiny scrap of paper up into a ball, Snape dropped it into his pocket and entered the greenhouse. The wall of warm, moist air hit him instantly, the smell of mouldering leaf litter and peat barely a second later. There were no students present; Snape had made sure that Sprout didn't have a class before his visit. The sea of green leaves shimmered with the outside air that gusted in after him, and a few midges swirled about in the eddies. He craned his neck to look over the table of purple-stemmed cowbane and caught sight of Sprout's crumpled hat crammed down onto her head of flyaway hair. Surprisingly, he also saw Pomfrey's white matron headscarf. Both women appeared to be in some kind of intense conversation at the far end of the greenhouse.

Sprout had a trowel in one hand that was slowly spilling dirt onto the floor as she listened to Pomfrey. The mediwitch had one hand tucked under the opposing arm and the fingers of her other hand fussing around near her own mouth. She kept shaking her head periodically as she spoke.

Taking a quick look at the layout of the greenhouse, Snape decided to make his way over to Sprout behind the screen of coughwort plants. The conversation appeared too interesting to miss.

"I really don't know what to do any more, Pomona." Pomfrey's voice floated between the large teardrop-shaped leaves. "I've exhausted most of the traditional treatments, and they're not having any effect."

"Have you tried using that cutseal paste? I've heard that the mediwizards down in Portugal have been getting some great results with it," came Sprout's reply.

"That's what they were using at the hospital," said Pomfrey. "It only worked for a little while, and even then it wasn't much good."

"I'm afraid I don't have anything that you haven't already tried, Poppy," Sprout sighed, dropping what was left of the dirt on her trowel into the pot in front of her. "I wish I did, but I'm all out of ideas."

"I'll just have to keep using the coneflower and fox cote, then," said Pomfrey, almost to herself.

"Fox cote's just on the end of that bench there if you want to grab some," Sprout told her, pointing with her trowel right where Snape was standing and listening. Realising that the opportunity for any further eavesdropping was about to be cut short, he walked around the end of the bench and almost straight into Pomfrey.

"Oh, Severus, I'm sorry, I didn't know you were here," cried Pomfrey, jumping back in surprise.

"That's quite all right, Poppy. I'm just here to pick a few things up from Pomona," Snape told her and sidestepped fluidly around her.

Sprout looked up. "I thought I heard the door open," she mentioned. "I thought it might be Longbottom. He's supposed to be helping me prune the shrivelfigs." She waddled over to another bench and picked up two linen wrapped packages. "Here's your mandrake and nightshade, Severus. The nightshade's a new strain, bit stronger than normal so just be careful you don't overdo it." Sprout handed the soft material to him, leaving fingerprints of dirt smudged on the fabric. "You might want to grab some of that cowbane to give to your students before the Ball," she added with a smirk.

Snape glared at her. "Very funny, Pomona," he snapped and swirled away from her before she could make any more smart comments.

He caught up with Pomfrey on the path back to the castle.

"I can assure you, Severus, I wouldn't allow Chara out of the infirmary if her condition were contagious," Pomfrey said in response to his questions, fiddling with the bunch of fox cote leaves clutched in her hand.

"I also have some concern that Miss Parr will not be able to attend classes in the frame of mind required for sufficient learning, Poppy. That she has missed her class altogether today just strengthens my doubts."

"Chara would have attended her classes today had she any say in the matter," Pomfrey revealed as they entered the castle. "To my mind she pushes herself more than she should."

"It seems strange that the hospital would discharge a patient that ill," Snape noted slyly, watching Pomfrey out of the corner of his eye.

The mediwitch stopped abruptly with an expression almost as severe as one of McGonagall's finest. "I sincerely hope you are not intimating that I am incapable of adequately treating Chara's condition, Severus!" Her head scarf fairly bristled with indignation.

"Not at all, Poppy," he replied smoothly in his most reasonable voice, blinking at her innocently. "I was just"

"I know what you were 'just' doing, Severus," Pomfrey countered sternly, the steel door dropping swiftly. "You know how I feel about discussing patients. Regardless of your training, I consider it inappropriate for you to try and winkle information out of me, and I do wish you wouldn't bother Chara about it either!" With that she marched off up the stone staircase with a disapproving sniff and a rustle of starched fabric.

AN: Cowbane was reputed to have ardour-reducing qualities, hence Sprout's suggestion of its use to Snape.

Chapter Fifteen - Waning

Chapter 15 of 59

Of the five ways to get through a locked door, the last is the sneakiest.

The next day was the breath out.

Snape circled the room of students like a bird of prey, pointing out mistakes and shortcomings in a steady, acidic stream. He'd slept poorly the night before and so was

especially ratty that afternoon. He rubbed at his left arm surreptitiously with the knuckles of his other hand. It felt like he'd whacked his elbow hard against the stone wall. As he had feared, the efficacy of the painkiller was lessening. Perhaps the new strain of Kelp's nightshade would help.

Snape watched Parr shift her jaw in that strange manner for the fifth time that lesson and frowned as she spoke to Dian with her head tipped up and to one side, left eye squinted slightly. Dian had been courageous enough to remain as Parr's Potions partner despite the strip-tearing Snape had given them both a few weeks back. Their efforts were... satisfactory, he determined reluctantly. Perhaps it was time to split them up.

He was just sweeping back to the front of the classroom to give the five-minute warning to finish up their potions when a pain like searing jagged metal shot through Snape's forearm. He flinched automatically and obviously, left shoulder dropping as the muscles along his side tightened in reflex, an inhalation hissing through his gritted teeth. Hard on the heels of that came a smash of glass behind him.

Swirling towards the sound, Snape found all heads turned towards Parr and Dian. Parr had her left arm bent up, fist clenched by her shoulder. Dian had both arms raised up away from her own body, head turned to the side, face scrunched up, splashes of ox blood up her blouse and down the front of her skirt. Shards of glass littered the bench and the floor like transparent teeth that had gone on a flesh-ripping frenzy.

"Oh, God, Opal, I'm sorry," said Parr, distress plain on her features. "The jar slipped from my hand. Are you alright?" She uncurled her left arm and touched Dian's shoulder tentatively.

Heads swung round to look at Snape, awaiting the inevitable backlash. Parr just bent down to pick up the broken glass from around Dian's feet with her fingertips, setting the pieces on the bench with a shimmering tinkle that seemed ridiculously loud in the hushed classroom.

Brows furrowed at the continued silence.

Snape waited until Dian bent to help Parr clean up with mess. "Miss Dian, I suggest you concern yourself with finishing up your potion. It will be the last you make with Miss Parr, so ensure it's a good one. After all, it'll be costing Ravenclaw thirty points."

Groans erupted around the room.

"I suggest silence unless you feel thirty points isn't enough!" he barked at them. "Four minutes. Get on with it!"

Snape watched the students give the blood splash a wide berth as they finished up, bringing the sample flasks up to the front of the room and scuttling away like rabbits, giving him an equally generous circle of personal space. Parr was futilely trying to mop up the ox blood with a handkerchief, but the fabric had already soaked up as much of the crimson as it could. She wiped the remainder into a small circle and made to take off her school robes.

"Dismissed," Snape hissed at the students, and they deserted the classroom in a blurred flurry of arms and legs.

Parr balled up her robes and moved to soak up the rest of the blood on the floor.

"Leave it."

She looked up at his words, forehead rumpled and mouth downturned. They stared at each other for some moments, black into fading green. The metallic smell of the spilt blood hung heavy in the air like a portent. Snape toyed slowly with one of the buttons on his coat with his middle finger, his face inscrutable. Time passed.

Parr started to fidget.

Snape said nothing. He just ran the length of his finger over the button, back and forth.

Parr began to sweat.

He stared at her meditatively, enjoying her discomfort... waiting.

Parr opened her mouth to speak, but Snape got in first.

"That was very clumsy of you, Miss Parr," he said softly.

The woman shifted her jaw. "A lapse in concentration, Professor," she replied in a slightly hoarse voice.

Snape raised an eyebrow elegantly. "A risky thing to admit. Are you certain it wasn't something else?"

Parr's eyes dropped from his face to the hand in front of his chest, his finger still sliding across the button. Her lips thinned before answering. "I can't imagine what you mean, Professor." She raised her eyes again and shifted her weight from foot to foot.

Snape ran the tip of his tongue over the sharp point of a back tooth and narrowed his eyes at her. "Really?"

Parr wrinkled her nose and didn't respond.

The trailing of fabric over stone sounded suspiciously like scales over dry earth. Parr's head tipped back to look up at him. Her height was greater than normal for her, but he still managed to loom over her with the years of practice of doing it to others.

Parr's nostrils flared briefly.

Snape's finger left his chest and extended towards Parr. The pad touched the underside of her chin and with a slight pressure tipped her head back further. He could see the natural grey of her eyes pushing the green into a circling border at the limits of the irises, flecks of darker colour shifting as her pupils contracted. He bent closer.

"Open your mouth."

Her eyes blinked a couple of times before complying. The ends of his long, black hair brushed her face, the tip of his nose nearly touching hers. He slid his other fingers under Parr's chin to tilt her head a fraction to one side.

"Take it out."

Parr blinked the question at him, her eyes slightly crossed from his closeness.

"Take whatever it is out of your mouth, Miss Parr," Snape repeated stonily and let go of her chin.

She dropped her gaze from his, shifted her jaw, and spat the bezoar into her palm. It glistened wetly.

"I expect students to enter and exit my classroom with nothing more in their mouths than they were born with, Miss Parr," Snape breathed at her. "Do I make myself clear?"

Parr dragged her lower lip under the top one, removing the sheen of moisture that had been there. "Perfectly clear, Professor."

Snape held out his hand. Parr sighed, blotted the bezoar on her sleeve quickly and placed the cherry-sized concretion of hair into his palm. He curled his middle finger up

to touch the underside of her hand, stopping her from drawing it back. She looked up at him questioningly.

There are four ways to open a locked door: use the key, force it open, pick the lock, or knock. A fifth way not available to most is to slide under it, something that Snape was particularly gifted at. His mind slithered down the barrier and made for the gap.

Parr's pupils dilated abruptly, and she snatched her hand back, breaking eye contact.

The distant sound of many footsteps down the corridor heralded the approach of the next class. Parr shoved her scrunched up robes and her books into her bag and turned away. She paused and cleared her throat.

"You're standing in the ox blood, Professor," she said in a flat tone and hurried out of the classroom.

Chapter Sixteen - Slip and Fall

Chapter 16 of 59

Fear is a most unpleasant adversary.

Disclaimer: JKR... thanks very much.

"Why is it in a wardrobe?"

Lupin shrugged. "It just is."

Parr looked at the carved wooden doors.

"Why not in a matchbox or a shoe?"

"A shoe? What on earth would it be doing in a *shoe*?!"

"What the hell's it doing in a *wardrobe*?"

Lupin sighed. "There aren't that many caves in London, so boggarts go for the next best thing, like wardrobes or trunks."

"All right, *that* makes sense," Parr relented and scribbled some notes down in her book.

There was a pendulous silence. Parr could feel Lupin's eyes on her. She scribbled harder and tried to ignore it, but it was like an itch between the shoulder blades.

Please don't ask me to do it, she pleaded mentally. *Please don't?*

"Chara."

Shit!

"Yes?"

"Are you trying to avoid this?"

"No, I just need to write some things down while I remember."

"It's just delaying the inevitable."

Parr dropped her pen and covered her face with her hands. She took a couple of deep, steadying breaths, scrubbed her face with her palms and stood up.

"I still think that this is a bad idea," she repeated for what seemed like the tenth time in the past hour.

With an impeccable sense of timing, the boggart chose that moment to make the wardrobe rock on its clawed feet. Parr let out a shameful squeak before she could stop herself. Hell, she could smack Lupin for putting her through this!

"Come on," Lupin pressed, indicating a spot a few feet in front of the wardrobe doors. "Anyone would think you were scared."

Parr shot him a dark look and a fistful of swear words. Lupin let them slide right past.

"Save the pillow talk for the boggart," he replied and gestured her over again.

Parr stumped around the table and glowered at the wardrobe, nostrils flared and brows heavy.

"Now," Lupin began, standing close behind her. "As you can't use magic, you can't repel the boggart the way magic-folk can."

Parr's gut started churning, throwing splashes of digestive acid up her throat and making her swallow convulsively.

"You'll need to rely on a calm, clear head and rational thinking in order to overcome the boggart's weapon of choice: fear."

Parr wondered distantly if the smell of her own steadily-increasing terror was noticeable to Lupin. She tried breathing shallowly. Another thought occurred to her.

"Have you ever tried this out?"

"What?"

"Have you ever taught a non-magical how to combat a boggart before?" Her voice sounded shrill in her own ears. This shallow breathing seemed to be making things worse.

"Ah, no," Lupin replied honestly.

Sweet Jesus tapdancing Christ!

"Then how do you know it'll work?" Parr started to gulp lung-fulls of air as if to make up for lost time.

"Chara, it'll be fine," Lupin tried soothing her. "The boggart's not going to *eat* you."

Parr swallowed awkwardly around her now-dry throat. "I mean, I can't think of a situation where I'd need to get into a wardrobe so badly that I'd need to take on a boggart. It can *have* the wardrobe...I don't care!" Her palms started to sweat.

The wooden doors shuddered briefly.

"Boggarts aren't exclusive to wardrobes, Chara," Lupin pointed out patiently. "They could pop up and out of anywhere."

Oh, hell.

"What if someone from the other side drove one towards you?"

Oh, damn.

"What if you got stuck in a room with one?"

Oh, crap!

The wardrobe rocked with a hollow boom.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

"Now, relax. Take a deep breath"

"Did I mention that I hate you? You're a boil on the arse of humanity. Have I mentioned that?"

Lupin rolled his gaze up to the ceiling. "Several times, but thanks for reminding me once again."

Parr blotted her hands against the sides of her trousers. The sweat from her palms had soaked through the bandages around her hands, making them damp and chill. Just inside the limits of her vision, she could see the tips of her hair quivering. She struggled to find some form of rhythm to her breathing and flexed the wrist of her left arm. A sullen ache had sprung up in her forearm.

Lupin bent forward slightly to whisper in her ear. "Remember, I'm right behind you."

"In front would be better, but okay."

"Close your eyes."

"Do I have to?"

"It's just for a moment."

"Okay."

"Just visualise a time when you were calm, in control, relaxed."

"Like that time I stuffed that dead bird in your mouth while you were asleep?"

"Yes, just like that."

"Okay."

"Can you see it?"

"Yes."

"Can you feel it?"

"Yes... sort of."

"It's important that you focus. Remember when we talked about Dementors? About how you need to fix a positive memory and feeling inside?"

"Yes."

"That's what you need to do here."

One of Parr's eyes popped open, and she peered over her shoulder at Lupin. "Can I tackle one of those instead?" she asked hopefully, fidgeting as a small river of perspiration flowed down the channel of her back. She surreptitiously rubbed at her forearm in an effort to quell the ache there.

Lupin reached around to grasp her chin and turned her head back to face the wardrobe. "Close your eyes and concentrate," he chided. "Now, I'm going to count to three, and then open the doors."

Shit.

"Okay."

"Are you ready?"

Stop asking that!

"Yes."

"Relaxed?"

No.

"Yes."

"Confident?"

No!

"Yes."

"Severus?"

What?

"What?" Parr's eyes flew open.

"Is there something I can do for you?" Lupin asked politely.

Parr twisted her neck towards the black-shrouded figure standing in the doorway.

"Dumbledore wants to see you in the kitchen. Now. That is, if you've finished playing teacher," came the surly response.

Parr's knees sagged in relief, and she crouched on the floor with one hand to her slippery forehead. "Thank *Christ!*"

Lupin bent to whisper in her ear. "Well, there's your Dementor. Be careful it doesn't suck your soul out, now." He wrapped one of her long hair locks about his index finger and gave it a gentle tug. "Remember, think happy thoughts." With that, he straightened and made his way to the door. Snape made no move to make the exit any easier, so Lupin had to squash past him awkwardly. "Thank you, Severus. Courteous as always," he muttered with only the faintest blush of sarcasm in his voice. The taller man sneered at him with the studied and fluid ease of years of practice.

Parr started to rock back and forth on the balls of her feet, fixated on the way her heart was clenching and relaxing like a rhythmic punishment in her chest. Narrowly escaping having to deal with the boggart had actually made her muscles shake even more than before, so it felt like her body was going through a kind of fleshquake.

The boggart, as if smelling the acrid aftermath of her fear, made the wardrobe jump up and down like a box with a frog in it.

Parr leapt up out of her crouch and scuttled backwards until her behind hit the table. She squawked and spun around, nearly tripping over her own feet. Damn it, she was going to *throttle* Lupin! Let's see how he liked having a dead bird stuffed in his mouth while he was *awake*.

Placing her hands flat on the table, she leant her weight on the palms, head bowed forward. This was ridiculous. She was becoming undone by a wardrobe. A *wardrobe!* Quite frankly, it was humiliating, especially since Lupin had been there to witness her turning into some pathetically whining child. It was a *wardrobe*, for Christ's sake! Well, it wasn't the wardrobe, really. Parr sucked in a deep breath that made her ribs creak and the inside of her throat complain. It wasn't the wardrobe that frightened her. It wasn't even the boggart... not really. She released the captured air in a loud gust from her mouth and screwed her eyes shut. It was what she knew the boggart would *become* that would unravel her in the most complete and embarrassing way, rather like a woman standing on a chair screaming at a mouse as it cavorted about on the floor.

Parr shifted her weight to one foot and tapped a finger on the table. She had to find some way of avoiding this exercise. Lupin would laugh in her face as if she were a spineless dog if she had to go through with it, and that would utterly mortify her.

Once again, on cue, the wardrobe rattled and slid half a foot across the threadbare carpet. Parr yelped and almost scrambled over the top of the table. Pens and books went flying everywhere with a clatter as she scuttled around and into her seat, the table a pathetically small barrier to the enormity of her panic.

What's wrong with you? You're acting like some kind of hysteric?!

Parr's face twisted, and she held her head in her hands, heels of the palms lodged under her brows, elbows on the table and shoulders hunched around her ears. She shook her head slowly, feeling so utterly ashamed of herself. It just couldn't get any worse unless she lost control of her bladder like a scared puppy.

She lolled her head to one side, resting its weight in one hand, and sighed. She plucked at her collar with the fingers of her other hand, trying to ignore the pain in her forearm. Her fingers froze. Ah, yes, she had forgotten about that. She slumped forward onto the table, pillowing her head on her folded arms and hiding her face before the stain of embarrassment became too noticeable.

It appeared that the situation *could* get worse.

"Go away," said Parr mournfully, her voice muffled by her sleeves.

"Why?"

"Because I'm telling you to."

"Does fear always make you this rude?"

Parr tipped her head up so that one eye could fix Snape with a baleful stare. "I am not at school at this moment, therefore I am not constrained to tamp down what I think. Go away." She let her head fall back, certain that her forehead was just as red as her cheeks felt.

"Lucky for you you're not," Snape replied, the distaste evident in his voice. "I can only imagine what your classmates would think of such a weak-kneed display."

Shut up and go away.

"Perhaps it's best that Professor Moody doesn't teach you Defence Against the Dark Arts," Snape rolled on relentlessly like a boulder just starting its spectacular descent down a steep incline. "He tends not to be as indulgent as Lupin. Did I say indulgent? I meant 'understanding', of course."

Shut up and go away!

"If you can't master even a boggart, I can't see you passing the subject at all, let alone dealing with such things in a real life situation away from the coddling of your tutor." Snape managed to make the last word sound like a heinous insult.

Snide bastard!

Parr sat up as if she had been jabbed in the back with a cattle prod, causing a couple of pens to go flying.

"How fortunate, then, for everyone involved that you will not be making the decision on whether I pass or fail in this subject," she barked at him, the red in her face now representing a rather nasty flash of temper. "I'm sure you spend your lessons nearly popping a seam hoping that some poor student will go to pieces so you could fail them and satisfy that strangled beast of perverted salacity you harbour!"

Hmm. Rather more than I intended to say.

Parr had to give Snape credit. He remained in that gallingly languid pose, one shoulder against the door-jamb, arms folded, looking down at her with amused disdain. She could smell the contempt coming from him from where she sat. Her embarrassment had been relegated further down the line of her emotions as anger elbowed its way swiftly and rudely to the front. That insufferable shit was *enjoying* her humiliation! Her accusation had obviously hit a lot closer to the truth than she had thought, and she regretted thinking that she might have overstepped the boundary.

"Well, I seriously doubt Lupin will fail you," Snape pointed out, the words sliding across the room on a slick of scornful derision. "He's notoriously soft-hearted, especially when the payment for his tutelage comes in something other than coin."

Parr wrinkled her forehead. What was he talking about? The cogs of her brain jammed around his statement, trying to grind the words into a digestible powder. She saw the edge of his mouth curl into a sneer.

Shock rammed its foot into the back of anger's knees and moved to the head of the queue.

He was accusing her of sleeping with *Remus*?

Amusement punched shock in the kidneys and assumed its rightful place at the start of the line.

Parr threw back her head and laughed until her eyes leaked. She drummed her feet on the floor in glee.

"You think Remus and I are sleeping together?" she guffawed at Snape, a hand pressed to her chest. The look on his face set her off again. This was the funniest joke she'd heard in a while. Parr started to run out of breath so she wrestled amusement back a few steps to give her room to suck in some air. She was becoming quite light-headed with all this laughing. She looked back up at Snape, and confusion started to scuffle with amusement.

"Oh, you were being *serious*?" Parr asked him, eyes wide at the irritation in his face. She held out for a few seconds before laughing even harder than before. This was turning out to be a fantastic antidote to the shambles the lesson had been.

"You seem to find the notion disproportionately amusing, Miss Parr," Snape spat out waspishly.

"Because the notion is *ridiculous*," Parr responded, still laughing, the red in her cheeks now a badge of her mirth.

"Why? Are you celibate?"

"No."

"Are you a lesbian?"

"No."

"Are you married?"

That sent Parr off into gales of laughter again. "Parr seevy don't *marry*!"

Shit!

It was out of her mouth before she realised it had been anywhere close.

Snape's awareness pounced on it like a starving cat. "What was that?"

Parr sobered up as if he'd thrown a bucket of iced water on her. "I said I can't see me being married."

Why didn't you shut up and go away?

A thump sounded from inside the wardrobe.

Parr and Snape stared at each other across the room. The tension that had been blown away by her laughter returned with an acidic vengeance, wrenching at her insides and startling her sweat glands into overdrive. Right at this moment, Parr could have easily crawled under the table like a child hiding from a misdeed; however, she was going to be damned if she looked away from those black eyes in guilt. Instead, she squinted at him, trying to figure out if he had manipulated her into making that slip. He just stared back flatly, nostrils slightly flared, obviously on the scent of something he found interesting.

The wooden doors of the wardrobe jiggled.

Parr wondered how long it would be before

There it is.

It was like an errant strand of hair that kept brushing against her face, a strand she couldn't see or find...the kind that tickled your nose or worried at the corner of your mouth whenever your hands were occupied. She went to brush it away, but it had gone before she'd even made the attempt. Parr tilted her head. It looked like he was going to start that game again. She needed to distract him, and quickly.

"Is it your belief that a woman is incapable of achieving anything without using her gender, Professor?"

"Where do you get that blatantly erroneous assessment from?" Snape replied, slipping the words to her as if pushing a plate of unappetising food back to its giver.

"From you," Parr parried, pushing the plate back under his nose. "You assume that if I'm not shagging Remus, I must be celibate, lesbian, or married! Not that the last one stops many people," she added scornfully and slouched back in her chair. "And that was *after* you inferred that in order to pass the subject, I just have to bang the teacher."

Snape was lucky that Parr had no object in reach to cast into the crooked teeth of the smirk he gave her. There was the table... perhaps she should try flinging that at him.

"Is that why so many of your students fail at Potions, Professor?"

That wiped the smirk off his sallow face as if it had been smacked off.

The wardrobe shuddered briefly.

"A student's failure is due solely to their own inadequacy at learning the skills necessary to remain in my subject, Miss Parr, and the failure rate in Potions is no greater than any other subject taught at the school." Somehow his eyes managed to look five shades blacker than before.

Parr snorted her disbelief gustily at him.

"I also find it fascinating that someone who accuses me of a form of chauvinism is so quick to cast dispersions on my teaching methods by hinting, twice, that I gain sexual gratification by debasing others." Snape marched over to the wardrobe. "Perhaps I should open the door so you can see what manners look like when they're not being shredded by your rancour."

Parr was up out of her chair like a shot. "Go ahead! I'd very much like to see a copy of *How To Win Friends and Influence People* fly out and hit you in the nose, you supercilious git!"

The table went flying to one side with a crash as Parr bolted for the wardrobe, scrabbling for the handle. Snape dropped his shoulder so it hit her straight between the collarbones and wedged his elbow just under her sternum. The amount of force he had to use to push her back from the doors surprised him, but not nearly as much as her fist clipping him in ribs.

It was pure accident that Snape stamped on Parr's foot, but she yelped in outrage and grabbed hold of the collar of his coat, twisting the black fabric tight around her fist and trying to drag him away from the wardrobe doors. He kept one hand firmly clamped on the handle and kicked her in the shin, accurately and deliberately.

Parr squawked a swear word right into his ear and pulled with the hand clutched on his coat with such force that his right knee slammed into the floor. The wardrobe rocked forward slightly, pulled by Snape's hand which was still grasped around the handle.

Parr caught sight of his other hand going for the wand in his pocket. She snatched the wood out of his fingers and pegged it across the room and out of his reach. Without missing a beat, Snape grabbed the wrist of her free hand and twisted her arm sharply, spinning her around so that her trapped arm was bent awkwardly behind her. Parr's grasp on Snape's collar was wrenched away by the motion, so she groped for the handle that he had let go of in order to pin her arm against her back. Her fingers grazed the metal as Snape wrapped his right arm around her front and yanked her away from the wardrobe, pivoting on his grounded knee.

Fortunately, Parr didn't have far to fall forward, otherwise her free arm could've snapped in two as she used it to brake her ungraceful descent face-first towards the floor. The downward momentum pulled Snape forward awkwardly, and his weight on her back made one shoulder grind in its socket and the other arm fold at the elbow. Parr got to taste what the carpet was like and how it felt to have the breath smashed out of her.

"What in Hecate's gusset is going on in here?"

"Remus, this carpet tastes like shit," said Parr, turning her head to one side with difficulty and spitting out a mouthful of hair, carpet fibres, and God only knew what else.

"I can't leave you two alone for five minutes without a fight breaking out?" Lupin asked incredulously from the doorway. "Severus, get off her!"

Snape pulled Parr up off the floor, refusing to let go of the arm twisted up behind her. He stumbled slightly as his knee twinged from being rammed into the ground. He spun her around so that they both faced Lupin. Parr continued to spit detritus out of her mouth.

"We were just continuing from where you left off, Lupin," Snape hissed at him, slightly out of breath from the scuffle.

"I don't recall brawling with students being part of the syllabus concerning boggarts, Severus," Lupin pointed out testily. "Nor do I recall asking you to substitute for me whilst I was out of the room." He looked at where Snape's right hand was clamped. "I'm sure Chara would appreciate you letting her go."

Snape looked down at his hand, noticing for the first time that it had a rather impressive grasp on Parr's left breast. He let go of her with both hands and sidled away from her.

"She punched me in the ribs," he said stupidly, flustered at being caught groping her. He straightened his coat from the twisted mess Parr had turned it into and flicked his head to get his hair out of his eyes. Lupin stared at him flatly.

Snape stalked past him to retrieve his wand from under the radiator over by the window.

"Chara, you shouldn't fight with Severus. You'll hurt him," Lupin admonished Parr sternly as she picked a hair that wasn't hers out of her mouth.

Snape spun on his heel, back ramrod straight. "Excuse me, but I wasn't the one eating carpet!" he spat.

Lupin closed his eyes and shook his head at Snape's uncharacteristically poor choice of words. "No, fortunately that'll be for another time when, hopefully, Chara and I won't see it." It took a phenomenal strength of will for Lupin not to laugh at the look of indignation Snape's face. "Dumbledore wants to speak to all of us." With that, he shepherded Parr out of the room, leaving Snape fussing angrily at his clothes.

A/N: Thanks to froggie-becky for being such an enthusiastic beta, and the readers for sticking with it.

Chapter Seventeen - Foetor Mortis

Chapter 17 of 59

If you keep pushing your luck, expect to have your nose smacked.

It smelled of death. Normally this wouldn't bother him, but his nerves were jangled and the lack of sleep from the previous night had left him jumpy. He picked at a fingernail absently and roved his eyes about the kitchen.

Old. It was all old. Except for the smell of death. That was recent, floating unmistakably beneath the stronger, more insistent bouquet of age... old furniture, old carpets, old dust, old people. Old people who had been dying for some years, as most old people did. A slow decaying of body and mind that tended to have an aroma all of its own. The living, slowly letting go. Musty, tired, distressed. The lines of life becoming sketchy, faded, blurred. The colours bleaching, slipping, falling into darkness.

Snape shook his head slightly, irritated at the maudlin line of thought and focused more sharply on what Dumbledore was saying in an effort to distract himself. The subject

matter being discussed wasn't much help in him achieving that aim, however.

Dumbledore had called them together on very short notice, the urgency in his voice uncharacteristically apparent. Due to the abruptness of the summoning, some members of the Order had been unable to attend without arousing suspicion in the circles they spent their days in. Snape also suspected that there were some members that Dumbledore wished to keep deliberately hidden from them. After all, that's what Snape would have done had he been in Dumbledore's place. He had to suppress a snort of derision at the ridiculousness of that thought. As it was, the others in the Order barely tolerated his presence, and many were openly disapproving of his role, so he could only imagine the barefaced outrage that would have been blasted towards him had any of them known that he'd even *thought* about standing in Dumbledore's shoes.

Those who could attend were now arranged together on mismatched and rickety chairs around a battered table, with a few others standing at the rear with their backs to the peeling wallpaper that may have once been graced with prints of what looked like ducks. Or dogs. It was hard to tell. Dumbledore had positioned himself, standing, in front of the sink with its leaking taps, the drip of water a rhythmic accompaniment to his voice. Motes of dust glinted in the air, catching the poor light valiantly as they spun about in the exhaled nervousness. The evening was darkening, the chill in the air increasing. It made the stink of death sharper, like a rotten sliver of bone that snicked cuts on the inside of the nose.

Snape suppressed an urge to scrub the back of his hand under his own nostrils. That smell was going to cling to him for hours if he didn't get out of here soon, and he didn't see being able to return to the castle until late, so he'd be dragging that damn death odour around with him like a clinging child. This time he was unable to stop the snort that slipped out. Eyes turned towards his position in the shadows of the corner of the kitchen, some showing surprise, but most radiating disapproval.

Snape wrinkled his nose at them. "Dust."

Blindness wouldn't have been a barrier to seeing the look of contempt on some faces, none more so than on that wretched pink-haired, snub-nosed ignoramus sitting next to Lupin. He glowered back at Tonks stonily until she turned back to Dumbledore with a silly little toss of her head. Parr had just glanced at him with her trademark vacant expression, but he noticed her knuckles rubbing her forearm briefly. What was she doing here? A Muggle had no valid function in this situation other than to get in the way and be ineffective.

"... really not sure that they have a plan," Shacklebolt was saying. "I'm concerned that if I direct them any more than I already am, someone's going to get suspicious and start asking how I seem to know so much." He scratched at a chin that was starting to stubble, considering something, the light glinting off the gold hoop in his ear. "Perhaps if the direction came from someone else, it might escape notice."

"One of us?" piped up Doge asthmatically at the back of the kitchen.

Shacklebolt turned slightly in his chair. "No. It'll need to come from someone outside the Order. It's too significant a development in the search for it to be attached to one of us. If questions start being asked, we need to be clear of them."

"Then who do you suggest?" Weasley asked the dark man.

Shacklebolt scratched at his chin again. "Coggerill, possibly. Perhaps Johnston, at a pinch."

"Johnston's too stupid to ever contribute anything of worth to the search," said Jones dismissively, a frown creasing her forehead. "If it comes from her, questions will *definitely* be asked!"

"Sometimes less shrewd people are unencumbered by the preconceptions of others, Hestia," said Dumbledore gently. "That can allow other lines of thinking to bear fruit that other, more common ones wouldn't. I think it's worth a try." Jones fidgeted uncomfortably at Dumbledore's more prudent choice of words than hers had been, and a slight flush bloomed in her cheeks. Dumbledore turned back to Shacklebolt. "How will you make the suggestion?"

Shacklebolt sighed heavily. "Johnston wouldn't be too hard to direct. The difficulty will be in channelling her line of thinking so that it doesn't skitter off course. Coggerill will be harder to lead by the nose, but once his mind latches on to the discovery, wild dogs won't be able to tear him away. The added bonus will be that he'll be the fastest to claim credit at the exclusion of all others. He'll leave no doubt in anyone's mind that he, and only he, was responsible for the development." He shrugged. "I'm going to have to feel my way through it, I'm afraid. Everyone at the MLE is a bit highly-strung at the moment, and I'm not certain how it'll go." He rolled his eyes. "I've already had to physically separate Tesla and Foggerty from each other's throats twice this week."

Snape's mouth twisted at that. It seemed that lack of self-control and a dullness of intellect were pre-requisites for working in the MLE. Idiots. It was a wonder that they achieved *anything*.

"I appreciate the awkwardness, Kingsley, but I have utmost confidence in your abilities in this matter," Dumbledore pointed out. "Time is critical here." Shacklebolt nodded.

Dumbledore had revealed that information had come to him regarding the whereabouts of Bertha Jorkins. Initially, the woman's disappearance hadn't caused much concern. Jorkins was a notorious Ministry dimwit who spent most of her time either poking her nose where it didn't belong, or getting lost. Usually both. As the weeks had gone on and no news had arisen as to why Jorkins hadn't returned to work from her holiday in Albania, there were some concerned mutterings at the MLE that Shacklebolt had notified Dumbledore of. When the MLE had started to receive reports of sightings of someone sounding suspiciously like Peter Pettigrew in the same region that Jorkins had last been seen in, alarm bells began to ring. Perhaps Jorkins' nose had poked somewhere rather more hazardous to her health than she had previously experienced.

The greatest concern was what information could be wrung out of Jorkins should she fall into unfriendly hands. Pettigrew alone was not a great concern. He had occasionally manifested a streak of cruelty when pushed to it, but it wasn't generally in his nature. He always sought the easiest path, and that was usually through submission to whatever greater power was in the vicinity at the time. When you held little sway yourself, the best course of action was to ally yourself with someone stronger.

Snape's mouth compressed into a thin line with that thought, the irony not lost on him. Nor was the importance of the next thing that Dumbledore revealed: that it was almost certain that Voldemort was also in Albania. That had set the kneazle among the niffers. The atmosphere in the kitchen had lurched abruptly into the realm of palpable terror, and Snape would've been lying if he denied that he contributed to that in no small measure himself. Heads had turned in concert to look at him in ominous silence while he continued to pick at his nails for a few moments before sliding his hands into his pockets smoothly and fixing his eyes on the bare light globe hanging from the yellowed ceiling of the kitchen, its rather brittle light imparting no warmth or comfort, no softness or appeal. It merely did its job of keeping the dark at bay when required.

Reitzell had been the first to break the awkwardness with a tremulous question aimed at Dumbledore, and after that, the rest were too busy squawking amongst themselves to maintain their attention on Snape.

His hands clenched in his pockets. It had taken a significant amount of control to prevent them from shaking whilst the others had been staring at him. Sticking them in his pockets had been necessary when the smell of fear in the room had become almost overwhelming. Fear and death: always guaranteed to provoke a visceral reaction.

Dumbledore at least had the foresight to let Snape know before the meeting that Voldemort was in Albania. He dreaded to think what the others might have seen on his face had the news come to him at the same time it had been delivered to them. It was bad enough that they had all turned and gawked at him from their chairs.

Snape hitched his shoulders irritably at the continued whining and lip-flapping coming from those assembled. That Voldemort had finally been located shouldn't have come as a shock to them. After all, that was why the Order was in existence: they were the only ones who believed that Voldemort could still be alive. Obviously the notion paled in comparison to the reality, and Snape had to admit that his own initial reaction hadn't been as controlled as it should have been. A wholly unpleasant sensation of being backed into a corner started to coil around his throat like rusty barbed wire, and his hands started to sweat. He rubbed his palms surreptitiously on the material inside the pockets to rid himself of this physical manifestation of his unease, an autonomic response that disgusted and shamed him. It had always been a matter of personal pride to him that his mind took precedence over his body, imparting a control that many found cold, exacting and, to his twisted amusement, frightening.

Was this where it started? Was this where his descent back into the pit began? Here, in this fusty, crumbling and empty house that sat squashed between equally decrepit clones of itself in a dirty part of London, where the pall of smog and stink of garbage never seemed to leave? A fitting starting point for the path that he'd unwittingly set himself upon nearly two decades ago.

Snape shifted his weight from foot to foot, feeling more bone weary than he had in some months. His time at Hogwarts had been a temporary reprieve, an almost cruel pause in his journey towards eventual and inevitable punishment. During quieter times, he had fooled himself into thinking that he might actually escape. After all, who would be more adept at self-delusion than he? A person who was so careful to hide anything he didn't want others to know, so reluctant to give anything of himself that could be twisted and distorted into a weapon pointed back at him, so skilled at manipulating others into doing what he wanted them to do in such a fashion that they would think it of their own volition.

Snape's mouth curled into a sneer, but this time it was directed at himself. Weakness disgusted him. It was something he never excused in others, and he wasn't about to allow it in himself. That had been something he'd vowed repeatedly as a child until it had become a mantra etched into the very fibre of his physical being: I will not be weak. I will not be a coward. I will not be like *her*.

Dumbledore's voice filtered into his awareness, arresting the slide towards an internal self-vituperation.

"...completely understand what you're saying, but we have no time. The risk has to be taken, Rory. I don't care much for it either."

Reitzell opened his mouth to speak again but Dumbledore didn't allow him the chance to get the words out, turning his attention immediately to Lupin and Parr. "Remus, we'll need you and Chara to ascertain whether what I have been told is true, before the MLE start moving in. How soon can you leave?"

Lupin looked at Parr, who considered Dumbledore's question with grey eyes tilted up in thought. "Less than an hour," she stated. "Thirty minutes, if the need is great."

"It is," said Dumbledore. Parr nodded, got up from her chair and left the kitchen without another word. Snape's eyes followed her, while Jones started bleating on about the Albanian counterpart to the MLE being recalcitrant about allowing them to conduct their search unchaperoned.

Parr was going to be an active part of this? Information slid about in Snape's mind rapidly. Her previous, albeit ambiguous statement came back to him: she *found* things. It would also appear that she could find people. Interesting. A Muggle tracker...something not found much any more. The soft, easy lifestyle of Muggles no longer required it. They knew where to find food whenever it was desired. Surveillance and security systems allowed them to relinquish the need to keep their own observational skills honed, preferring instead to leave it up to a small percentage of the population to deal with, and even *they* showed little instinctual abilities at tracking. Trying to find anyone in the stone and concrete jungle of Muggle cities relied on other people's memories rather than physical signs, such as you would find in the natural world: broken branches on a bush, footprints in the dirt, evidence of feeding, or the hollowed depression of a sleeping area on the ground.

There was the fascinating discipline of forensics that had the potential to identify who had been where, and when, but even that had a narrow focus that needed at least a guiding hand to point it in the right direction, once again relying on the shaky abilities of mental recall. Perhaps this had been the career that Parr had come from, but her sense of smell was something that needed to be used actively in the field. Snape couldn't imagine her stuck in a room isolated from the immediate environment of a search or investigation, and unless the department she worked in was especially violent, he was almost certain that her knife skills were those of a person leading others to the quarry, usually straight into a dangerous environment or situation. A vanguard.

Snape couldn't get the feeling out of his gut that involving Parr in this whole matter was a very, very bad idea. It wasn't just the surprising and uncharacteristic anxiety he'd witnessed in her in the living room just half an hour previously. A nasty suspicion had sprouted in his mind the previous day that Parr was hiding something a lot more dangerous than he had previously surmised.

"Now, I'm afraid I must leave you all before my absence at the castle is noticed," said Dumbledore, obviously winding up the meeting before it disintegrated into aimless and pointless statements of fact about the seriousness of the situation. "I needn't remind you that this could end badly despite our best efforts, but we must make the attempt nonetheless." He paused. "I think our reprieve ends tonight. You must prepare others for that, as well as yourselves, as best you can."

The assembled party shared dark looks of concern and trepidation amongst themselves like biscuits at an exclusive tea party, stood, and broke away into twos and threes, muttering amongst themselves as they left the kitchen.

Snape fixed his eyes on the light globe hanging on its frayed cord. Was it his imagination or had the light from it grown weaker? He could see the filament through the imperfect glass, burning with dogged determination, and setting an imprint of itself on Snape's retinas. *Why was there only one light in here?* he wondered distantly. It seemed a ridiculously inefficient way of lighting the room. Of all places, the kitchen needed to be well-lit lest someone cut themselves whilst preparing a meal. The filament's imprint started to blur and spread across the back of Snape's eyes, making the surroundings indistinct, lurking, and ominous. Perhaps if he stared at the light long enough, the halo of white would finally fill his entire vision.

"Severus?"

Snape squeezed his eyes shut, and sighed heavily.

"Are you alright?"

Snape left his eyes closed, perceiving the afterimage of the light as a faint, purplish cloud against the dark, the filament a lightning wound of brightness at the centre. The cloud billowed and morphed slowly, like ink in a tank of water.

"I know this must be difficult for you..."

His eyes flicked open. "It is of no consequence, Headmaster," he responded rather more quickly than he would have liked. "My feelings are no more relevant to the situation than any of the others you have spoken to tonight." Although Dumbledore was partially hidden behind the afterimage that was still fading from Snape's eyes, he could tell that the man was sporting a rather blatant expression of disbelief at Snape's statement. Prudently, and surprisingly, Dumbledore chose not to give voice to his doubts.

"Is it possible that you will be able to receive any confirmation through your own channels?"

Snape gave the illusion of considering the man's question, but he already knew the answer. "It's possible," he replied eventually, blinking a few times to try and bring Dumbledore into focus.

"How soon?"

Again, the unnecessary pause. "Perhaps tonight."

Dumbledore's blurry image nodded. "You'll let me know, of course, if you discover anything? It doesn't matter how late the hour."

Snape closed his eyes lazily. "Of course." He let the awkward pause extend out to a considerable distance between them, hoping that Dumbledore would take the hint and leave him alone. Naturally, he didn't.

"Is something else bothering you, Severus?"

What? Something other than the choke-chain being fastened back around my neck and the barbed whip set to my heels once more, you relentless and infuriating bastard?

Snape opened his black eyes and locked them on Dumbledore's clear blue ones, and said nothing. He almost hoped that the man had heard his thought, but if he had, he gave no indication of it. Dumbledore just continued to wait for an answer in that maddeningly patient manner that seemed to increase Snape's own frustration and ill-humour. He pressed his lips together tightly, realising the old man wouldn't leave until Snape replied.

"I have some concerns regarding Parr's involvement," he stated. There seemed no point in dressing the statement up in more roundabout terms. Dumbledore would just pick out the roots of it regardless of how many leaves were in the way. The old man's white, bushy eyebrows rose slightly.

"I see."

The awkward silence returned, this time in Dumbledore's employ. Snape blinked a few times, a little nonplussed at Dumbledore's minimalist reply. Normally the man never hesitated to explain things, even if the explanation caused more questions than it answered. Dumbledore took in a deep breath and opened his mouth. He paused and seemed to change his mind about something, drumming his chest with the fingers of one hand lightly.

"Do be careful tonight, Severus," the man suggested. "But then, I never need to tell you that, do I?" He peered at Snape shrewdly and then drifted out of the kitchen, pulling the airborne dust behind him in a swirling sweep.

The reticence wasn't a good sign in Snape's opinion. The Order's doyen was usually quite open to differences of opinion. Concerns were rarely dismissed readily without lengthy discussion. Diplomacy and democracy was more persuasive than railroading and intimidation, Dumbledore had once remarked during a vociferous debate they'd both had regarding the Ministry's lack of action on preparing for Voldemort's return.

In all honesty, Snape wasn't sure what to make of Dumbledore's response to his concern about Parr. The man could be as hard to read as an ancient Babylonian text if it suited him. Was it indifference, dissimulation, or prudence? Knowing Dumbledore, probably none of them. He had his own secrets, just as Snape had his.

It had been something of a coincidence that just that afternoon the starling had reappeared on the school grounds, another slip of parchment tied to its twiggy leg. This time, the parchment had not been blank. Perhaps to uninformed eyes, it was as good as blank, for the only thing marked on it were three small dots. To Snape's eyes, it represented information. Information that he had intended to gather this evening before the Order meeting had been called so unexpectedly. His eyes were drawn inexorably back up to the light globe, reigniting the bleed of light in his vision.

No matter. He could kill two birds with one stone.

Pulling his gaze reluctantly away from the light, Snape flowed out of the kitchen and into the hallway. A dark figure near the front door made him pause. He spent some seconds trying to translate the distorted image into something recognisable. The silver grey hair gave it away: Parr. She sat on a small chair, forearms on her knees, head bowed forward so that the tips of her long hair tresses touched the toes of her boots. Snape tilted his head. There was something strange about her, stranger than normal. He moved towards her slowly, his vision clearing. She'd changed her attire from grey to black, once again wearing the occluding garb she'd worn on the train, cowl resting on her shoulders. She gave no indication that she was aware of his approach, her face partially hidden by her hair.

Snape had been convinced that Lupin and Parr had been sleeping together when he'd seen the werewolf twist his finger in her hair. It was a curious gesture, and an intimate one at that. Parr didn't seem the type of person to willingly suffer an unwelcome physical touch or indication of affection, so Snape had assumed that there had been something more going on than a tutor-student relationship.

However, Parr had seemed to find the idea hilarious, much to Snape's chagrin. His judgment wasn't normally that far off, and having it guffawed at by Parr was especially insulting.

He stopped right in front of her, turning to face her bent form so that she couldn't fail to see his feet in her line of vision. She tipped her head up slowly, trailing bright green eyes up to his face. There was a faint sheen of perspiration on her forehead, and lines of strain around her mouth. The planes of her face bowed out in an almost graceful arc led by the prow of her nose.

She'd physically shifted her form in less than an hour. Snape had assumed that the metamorphosis he'd seen was involuntary, but it appeared now that wasn't always the case. The question was, if she was able to voluntarily control the change, why did the involuntary incidences occur?

Parr raised her eyebrows slightly at him.

"Are you experiencing discomfort in your left arm, Miss Parr?"

Her eyebrows climbed slightly higher at the question.

"It seemed to cause you trouble in class yesterday when you painted your partner and the floor with ox blood."

Parr's eyes glittered at him.

"I've seen you fuss at your arm at least five times this evening," he revealed quietly. "I wonder if you are in sufficient physical condition to conduct the role requested of you."

"My arm is uninjured, Professor," she replied smoothly in a voice an octave lower than normal. "I am sure that I shall be able to discharge my duties to the Headmaster's satisfaction."

There was no doubt in his mind that she was hiding something, if not outright lying straight to his face.

Snape awareness went for the gap faster than a cobra's strike.

The mongoose trapped him between teeth sharper than a razor-blade.

Parr unfolded herself from the chair and stood slowly, the twin moons of her eyes rising from the south until they crested the black horizon. Snape's mind twisted forcefully, only to find itself ensnared in a bramble of mental thorns. Pain stabbed into his head until he stopped trying to mentally wriggle out of the grip she had him in. He had to tip his head back slightly to look her square in the eyes. She loomed over him by half a foot, shoulders rounded forward as if to stop him from moving to either side.

For the third time in his life, Snape knew he had made a very bad miscalculation.

"The first time, I can ignore," Parr told him in a voice like metal drawn across stone, every word carefully enunciated. "The second time, I excuse because that is politeness. The third time I do not overlook." She leant forward a fraction of an inch, making him sway back, wide-eyed and nostrils flared, trying desperately to think of a way to slither out of the snare before his mind was cut to ribbons. "There will not be a fourth time."

The unseen jaws opened and dropped his awareness on the floor of his brain like a rodent in shock. Parr's mouth twisted into a smile as Snape slammed up the mental barriers. He braced himself, expecting her to batter them down, but the assault never came.

"Chara?"

Damn it! Lupin! How much had he seen?

"Is everything alright?"

Parr swung the beam of her eyes towards the hesitant werewolf. "Everything's fine, Remus," she replied gently, the tone a startling contrast to the one she had used before. "Are you ready to leave?"

Lupin shuffled from foot to foot, looking oddly shrunken in his oversized, moth-eaten coat. He obviously sensed the tension and wasn't sure if being anywhere close to it was a good idea. A part of Snape wanted to throttle the man with his bare hands for being a witness to the mental confrontation, whilst a larger part was perversely grateful that Lupin had appeared and taken Parr's attention off him. He fixed his own gaze on Lupin, trying to shake off any shred of apparent shock on his face.

"Is it time for your walk, Lupin?" he sneered, the words coming automatically to his lips. Normally, the comment would have marked Snape as having the upper hand, but in this instance it had the unfortunate effect of pulling Parr's attention back on him. So Snape did something he rarely felt he had to do: he averted his eyes.

"No, it's time for mine," said Parr, a silken cord of amusement wrapped around the words. She peered closely at him. "You have pretty eyes, for a man. Be careful they don't get you into trouble." With that she turned aside and opened the front door, letting in a winter air that couldn't match the arctic atmosphere that curled about them in the hallway. She paused on the threshold, tucked her hair back and covered her head with the cowl of her coat.

"Come, Remus. It's time to play 'fetch'."

Snape didn't notice as Lupin stepped around him to follow Parr out of the house. He didn't even know how long he stood there, alone, in the hallway, until his muscles unlocked enough to allow him to move.

A/N: My gratitude to froggie-becky, who finds time in her busy life to read my story and fix it up all nice.

Chapter Eighteen - Innuendo

Chapter 18 of 59

Sometimes what isn't said is more important than what is said.

"Well, well, well. Look who's crawled out of the dungeons and into polite company!"

Snape sighed slightly and didn't bother to look up from his plate. "Lucius."

"I didn't expect to see *you* here, Severus," Malfoy stated in his starched, upper-class voice.

"I'm sure there are many people you don't expect to see here, Lucius. However, food is served here, I was hungry, hence my presence." Snape stuck his fork into a slice of carrot as Malfoy slid into the chair opposite him. "Oh, do sit down," he offered sarcastically.

"Thank you," the blond man replied with an arched eyebrow. "You shouldn't eat alone. It's not good for your digestion."

Snape glanced at him briefly, chewing on his carrots.

"I haven't seen you around much," Malfoy noted, resting his cane across his knees and proceeding to remove his grey lambskin gloves finger by finger.

"Busy," said Snape around a mouthful of rare lamb.

"Yes, how is everything at the school?" his unwelcome dinner partner inquired, laying his gloves on the table and shifting in his seat.

Snape shrugged slightly, eyes fixed on his plate.

"I would've thought you'd be in a better mood with all those young girls around you every day," came the sly statement.

Snape paused mid-chew and tightened his grip on his fork. He really wasn't in the mood for this right now. Or ever, to be honest.

"Unlike some, Lucius, I don't harbour paedophilic tendencies," the dark-haired man pointed out, swivelling his eyes up to meet Malfoy's icy grey ones. "I do recall mentioning this before. Several times."

"Of course," said Malfoy with an indulgent smile and a lazy blink. He studied Snape's face silently, his eyes sliding over the man's large nose, across the wide philtrum, and down along the slippery length of his raven black hair.

Snape didn't even have to be looking at Malfoy to know it was coming.

"You seem uptight, Severus. Drought going on a bit too long, is it?"

Here we go.

"Not everyone needs to flood their garden on a daily basis, Lucius," Snape slurred out around his potatoes.

"Mmm," hummed Malfoy, toying with his cane lightly, eyes glittering as he watched Snape eat. "You don't normally have this much of an appetite. Been engaged in some strenuous activity?"

"No," was the laconic reply.

"I'm sure you remember the topic of our last conversation, but just in case..."

"Yes, I do recall it, Lucius, and the answer is still no," said Snape firmly, flicking a glance up at the man and tucking his feet under his chair to avoid contact with Malfoy's boot.

Malfoy rested his elbow on the table and propped his chin on his hand. "You know, you're an enigma, Severus. I still can't work out whether age has made you prudish, or that perhaps what I saw all those years ago was an act."

Snape didn't dignify him with a response and went back to his carrots.

"It's become quite a legendary story, one that I would have cause to disbelieve had I not been there myself," continued Malfoy doggedly. "I think you even turned Rosier's head."

"A goat would have turned Rosier's head," Snape stated mordantly.

"I know Bellatrix couldn't uncross her legs for a week, and for her that's a certified miracle."

Snape started to jiggle his leg in irritation.

"Narcissa remembers," said Malfoy softly with a streak of cold steel buried in the words.

"I was required to perform a task and I did," growled Snape, spearing another cut of lamb. "Nothing more."

Malfoy's huffed laughter floated over the table, and he tilted his head to one side in his hand, his pale blond hair swaying across his chest with the movement.

"And do you perform all tasks in such glorious manner, Severus?" Malfoy took his chin off his hand and reached for a runner-bean on Snape's plate. He was lucky not to lose a finger as Snape's fork slammed into the surface of the table, tines down, millimetres away from the digit.

"Let's just say I'm a very good actor and leave it at that, shall we?" the Potions master hissed, his large nostrils flared and an uncharacteristic flush of colour sitting on his cheekbones. "Is there something *else* that you wanted, Lucius?"

Malfoy stared at him mildly and drew his hand back into the safety of his side of the table. He settled back into his chair with the air of someone who had no intention of leaving any time soon. Snape wrenched the fork out of the table, wiped it on his sleeve and went back to his dinner again. Malfoy looked around the room calmly, as if bored, but his eyes ensured that there was no-one close enough to hear his next question, which he spent some time phrasing in his head.

The hour was not especially late, so there were still a number of patrons in the bar, some enjoying a repast, others a drink. Some were enjoying more than a few drinks, but they were keeping relatively to themselves. The barkeeper, Bruar, brooked no nonsense from his patrons, so the pub was well-known for a more civilised crowd than some of the dingier establishments in the surrounding suburbs. It also had the reputation of being frequented by the older wizarding families; some, it had to be said, with a light dusting of suspicion on their allegiances. Bruar would never allow anyone with obvious criminal tendencies into his pub, but that didn't mean that everyone in here was a saint, present company a supreme example.

Malfoy returned to staring at Snape and shook his head slightly. The man had never been one to eat much, unless he'd been hiding some kind of binge eating disorder all this time. It struck Malfoy as unusual that Snape would suddenly start manifesting an increased appetite. Obviously something unusual was occurring here.

"Have you been doing much travelling lately, Severus?"

Snape's fork stopped midway to his mouth, and he squinted at Malfoy. He seemed to consider the question carefully.

"No more than to be expected, Lucius," he eventually replied in an even voice, giving no indication as to his reaction to the question.

"Well, sometimes people submit to wanderlust when the circumstances dictate it," Malfoy stated softly with a half-smile.

Snape just stared at him.

"I know you know what I'm talking about," said the blond man, checking the fingernails on one hand nonchalantly.

Snape put his fork down and sat back in his chair with a slight hitch to his shoulders.

"Are you having trouble getting somewhere, Lucius?" he inquired gently, running one middle finger along the edge of the table absently. "Are you here to ask me for directions?"

Malfoy's face turned stonily sour at the question. He set his jaw and looked down his nose at Snape, which wasn't easy to do considering the man sat higher than he, in more ways than one.

"What leads you to believe I haven't already been where I needed to go, Severus?" Malfoy asked with a sliver of irritation in his voice.

Snape just smiled slightly at him, still running his finger slowly back and forth along the edge of the table.

"It must be trying to have your attention pulled in different directions," Malfoy continued smoothly. "I wonder if it leaves you a little unfocussed on current events."

That just made the corners of Snape's mouth turn up even more.

Malfoy tapped his fingers lightly on the table and looked up at the oak-beamed ceiling shrouded in shadows.

"One of the most perilous places to be is a foot away from the top of the mountain." He looked back at Snape to find the man's expression still unchanged except for one raised eyebrow. "It's so easy to miss the danger from below when you're only looking up, and perhaps even the pitfalls that could be right under your feet: ice, loose rocks, scorpions..."

"Back stabbing, hamstring-tearing treacherous animals..." Snape interrupted, shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head slightly. "I've heard there are a lot of those up mountains." He picked up his fork again. "Precarious footing doesn't bother the experienced climber, and should their foot slip..." He opened his eyes very wide to fix Malfoy with a pointed, midnight stare. "...well, their arm has sufficient strength in it to prevent the kind of mishap that might befall someone of lesser aptitude."

Malfoy's pale eyebrows drew down until a heavy line appeared between them, and his fist clenched until the knuckles went white. Snape smirked at him briefly and went back to the remainder of his meal, to all appearances unaffected by the air of spiky irritation wafting from the man opposite him.

"I confess to no small amount of curiosity regarding one of the new students at the school," Malfoy segued abruptly, no doubt in an effort to hide his little snit at Snape's last comment.

Snape failed to respond, teeth grinding away at his food relentlessly.

"It's been some years since Hogwarts has accepted a mature age student, especially one with such glowing recommendations from prominent members of wizarding society," Malfoy continued, watching Snape closely.

"Older students do tend to display greater intelligence than their younger counterparts, Lucius. That shouldn't surprise you."

Malfoy pursed his lips briefly. "Smart, is she?" He thought he saw Snape pause mid-chew, but he wasn't entirely sure.

"Most would seem smart in comparison to teenagers," came the dry response. Snape jammed the last bite of food into his mouth and set the fork across his empty plate. He drew the side of his long thumb across his mouth and then ran his tongue leisurely up it. He had to suppress a laugh at the way Malfoy's pupils dilated at the action. The man was so easy to provoke that there was hardly any challenge in it any more. Sliding sinuously out from behind the table, Snape loomed up over Malfoy, making

him look up awkwardly. "Forgive me, Lucius, but as stimulating as this conversation has been, I'm afraid I have a rather pressing need to attend to," he said silkily, making Malfoy blink. "I will, of course, convey your regards to Draco." With that, he glided off, with Malfoy's grey eyes following him all the way to the bathroom.

Pressing need, my arse, thought Malfoy, scowling as Snape disappeared through the doorway that led to the pub's bathrooms. The man always knew how to end a conversation by making the other person feel inconsequential. He'd moulded and honed the ability into a weapon, and his favourite target was Lucius.

Malfoy huffed. He wasn't about to admit that the reason that was the case was because he kept standing right in the blast zone, like an idiotic duck that careened into the air at the bark of a hunting dog. Before any conversation with Severus, Malfoy always determined that he wouldn't let himself get drawn into range, and afterwards he would curse himself for dancing straight into it. It was a compulsion that he had no control over, no matter how hard he tried. He drummed his fingers on the table, irritated. Severus was able to slip right past any resolve and jab straight at him in such a way that Lucius retorted before he could stop himself, and he always came off second best. It must be some perversity in his nature that made him keep trying to best the man verbally.

Watching the doorway to the bathroom like a snake waiting for a rabbit to emerge from its burrow, Malfoy saw a tubby, florid-faced man wheeze his way back into the pub's main room. Rostoff, Malfoy recognised distantly. No doubt trying to down another sizeable drink before he had to waddle home to his utter shrew of a wife.

It was no small aggravation that despite Lucius' pure-blood status, his not inconsequential wealth, his connections to important and powerful members of wizarding society, and his standing amongst the Dark Lord's followers, that Severus had been favoured equally if not more than he, by the Dark Lord. It rankled that an impoverished half-blood should be such strong competition. Even the other Death Eaters seemed to have trouble distinguishing which of the two of them stood higher. Lucius tried to ignore it when the deference paid to Severus was greater than that paid to him... at least until a carefully chosen time later when Lucius could show the offender the error of his or her ways. If there was one thing that Lucius could do superlatively, it was intimidate. After all, it had been his abilities in that area that had allowed him to manipulate the Hogwarts board of governors into removing Dumbledore from the school two years ago. Regrettably, it hadn't been long lasting, and to his disgrace it had gotten him removed from the board himself. He fidgeted angrily in his chair at the memory, noting a tired-looking, sandy haired man coming out through the bathroom doorway. He shook his head slightly, not recognising the man, his eyes automatically scanning him from head to foot as the stranger stood at the bar, waiting for Bruar to serve him. Another movement pulled Lucius' eyes back in the direction of the bathroom. Just Tesla: one of the idiots from the MLE.

Lucius had managed to regain some influence with the board, albeit much reduced. He had been intrigued by the acceptance of a mature age student to the school. Levitin had slipped him a copy of the woman's application, the contents of which Lucius found more than a little intriguing. He'd never heard of the woman, or anyone of the same surname. He'd been interested enough to prod his son into giving him titbits of information about the woman, but Draco had been rather lacklustre in his efforts, if truth be told. He reported that Parr had been placed in Ravenclaw, that she studied across several year levels (most curious!), that she told lewd jokes, seemed to be on a more friendly basis with some of the teachers than students normally were, and, oddly, that she was incredibly strong. That last description had raised Lucius' eyebrows. He wasn't really sure what to make of it. Had she been lifting the dinner tables up with one hand? He'd replied to Draco's letter with more questions buried amongst the usual father-son correspondence, but had yet to receive a response. Severus had been typically vague when Lucius had questioned him about Parr. True, the query had been just as vague, but it wasn't necessary to be blatant when asking Severus about anything; the man was well versed in innuendo and intimations.

The door swung out to allow another patron back into the main room. Lucius recognised the face, but couldn't attach a name to it. He'd seen the man a few times, usually in the company of some of the lower-ranking ministers, and therefore not important enough to know. Damn it, what was Severus *doing*? Had he fallen in and drowned? Lucius snorted. Chance would be a fine thing. He tapped his foot impatiently. Surely Severus wasn't hiding from him? In the toilet, of all places. He snorted again. No, it was much more likely that the man had Apparated out of the pub in an effort to prevent any further contact with Lucius. Very frustrating. Lucius had only been able to get a hint of what he wanted to know out of Severus, which, although better than he had expected, was still too little. He resisted a sudden urge to fuss at his forearm.

That the Dark Mark had begun to burn had thrown Lucius into a spin. After a number of years of being nothing more than a pretty pattern in his skin, it had reinstated itself on his awareness a few months ago by stinging like a thousand mosquito bites. At first, Lucius had thought that it wasn't the Dark Mark at all that was the cause of the pain, and he'd scrutinised his arm closely, looking for symptoms of a rash or an infection, both equally unlikely considering how fastidious he was about his physical health. Had he knocked his arm without realising it? Possible, if unlikely. When no bruise appeared after a couple of days, the creeping realisation that the pain was coming from the Dark Mark itself caused the bottom of his stomach to drop to some unknown depths below ground level. Narcissa had been perceptive enough to notice her husband's unusually anxious mood. To her credit, she had waited until he was ready to discuss the matter with her rather than steamroller on in with badgering questions.

"What will you do?" she had asked inevitably. Lucius didn't know and said as much. His wife seemed to consider his response carefully, her blue eyes regarding him steadily.

"Is it a summons?" she finally asked evenly. The question dropped the floor of his stomach beyond the level of hell. She saw the change in his expression and knelt before him as he sat on the edge of their bed. "Do you have a reason to fear it?" she queried.

Lucius had returned his gaze with a slightly panicked one of his own. "Do I have reason to fear it?" he repeated quietly. "After fourteen years? How else am I to react to it?" He'd scrubbed his hands over his face.

"Then you must go to him," Narcissa had replied firmly. "You cannot risk hesitating. You must go." Her hand wrapped around his.

"It isn't a summons," he had denied. "It feels... different." He shrugged. "It feels..." He wrinkled his forehead in his efforts to find the appropriate description. "...ominous, unfocused." He shook his head slowly. "I don't know what it means." He stood up abruptly and stepped around Narcissa, his hand slipping away from hers. "What am I to do? Go to a man I'd thought dead? I can only imagine what he'd have in store for me. The Dark Lord is singularly unforgiving." He looked out of the bedroom window, out on to the grounds of the manor that were shrouded in the dark of a moonless night. "Attendance could spell as great a punishment as absence, and I've learned never to misinterpret his wishes." Silence fell between them. Narcissa waited, watching her husband patiently, allowing him time to think. "It is a test," he said finally. He turned to face her, his unbound hair swaying. "I do not know how to pass it."

He still didn't know, and Severus wasn't about to let him look at his answers.

Stebbins went into the bathroom, Hawkins came out. A stranger went in, a different stranger came out.

Lucius tutted and pulled on his gloves. Very well. The asp had escaped him once again, it seemed, so there was no point hanging around.

The sandy-haired man watched the blond wizard leave the pub with his nose stuck in the air with the hauteur of an aristocratic snob. He drained the glass before him with a grimace, left the required coin on the countertop, and walked purposefully over to a table around the other side of the bar.

"You're late," said the man seated at the table without bothering to look up from the book he was reading.

"Not by much," was the response.

The seated man closed his book with a sigh and looked up. "But late nonetheless," he said in his gravelly voice, heavy brows drawn low over muddy brown eyes. "My time is no less precious than yours. You can patronise the bar after our appointment, not during it."

That sparked a flash of irritation in the hazel eyes of the other man.

"After all, you were the one who pressed for haste, not I."

He seemed to like that comment even less, but sat down opposite, lips thinned in annoyance. "Then I shall dispense with the pleasantries," he announced tersely. "What have you found?"

The heavier-set man sat back in his chair casually and rubbed his chin with his fingers, the stubble making a slight rasping noise.

"The incident at the hospital..." he began, casting his eyes about the pub cautiously.

"Yes?" prompted his tired listener.

"It seems that it has been... incorrectly reported," said the informer with a thoughtful expression on his olive-skinned face.

The other man stared fixedly at him. "How so?"

"From what I have been able to uncover, there was a murder at the hospital, but the victim was male, not female."

The hazel eyes blinked. "Quite an erratum, even for the *Daily Prophet*," was the dry response.

"What's even more intriguing is that the victim was the intruder, not the patient."

That scored a point of interest, if the slight raising of the man's eyebrows was anything to go by. Over the years of their association, if one could call it that, Trint had learned that the man opposite was not given to overt facial expressions. Once that had been established, he'd trained himself to catch even the slightest movement of brow, mouth or lid. It was often quite a challenge to translate such minute movements, but one that Trint felt more than capable of handling.

"What of the intended victim?"

Trint removed his hand from his chin, and squinted at the man, noting the slightly flared nostrils. Yes, this seemed to be of particular interest.

"No longer at the hospital." He saw the man's eyes dart briefly to the left: an indication of thought. Trint waited.

"What was the reason for the patient's admittance?" was the next question, shrewd eyes fixed on his once again.

Trint mulled this over, distilling the snippets of information in his mind. "Uncertain. All I could discover was that the patient was suffering from a number of physical injuries that resisted usual treatment."

The eyes flicked to the left again, accompanied by a faint tightening of the jaw. Interesting.

"The identity of the intruder?"

Trint noted that his companion's eyes hadn't returned to his own. He wasn't sure what to make of that. It was either disinterest, or he didn't expect Trint to know the answer. The man always stared him straight in the eye when asking questions.

"There weren't enough pieces large enough to make a positive identification," said Trint. That brought the man's gaze back, quick smart.

"And?"

Trint sighed. "That's about the extent of it. My sources of information appeared to be... out of the loop, so to speak. Aurors appeared on the scene very quickly. Suspiciously so, in my opinion. It could also suggest that some of the hospital staff have been Obliviated. It would explain the paucity of information."

The man's mouth tightened slightly at that. "What of the other matter?"

This wouldn't be well-received. "Nothing."

The sandy-haired man's nostrils flared. That, coupled with the crease between his brows indicated extreme displeasure. "Unprecedented," was the verbal response. His eyes bored into Trint's as if looking for some evidence of dishonesty. Trint just returned the gaze impassively. Much as it pained him to admit, he had indeed found nothing, which caused him some degree of consternation. He didn't often fail to obtain information required of him.

The man's eyes flicked to the left again. He spent some time considering something. Trint waited, accustomed to this behaviour.

"I have additional information that may assist you," the man revealed, squinting slightly at him.

Trint raised his eyebrows in a subtle question.

"The hair may be copper-coloured, eyes green." He paused. "The height may also be different."

Trint's eyebrows edged up higher.

"Anywhere up to six and a half feet."

The informer didn't bother to suppress the exhalation of exasperation. "Is this a different person you're asking me to source information on?"

The man blinked. "No."

Trint snorted lightly. "It certainly *sounds* like it. Hair and eye colour I can accept; they're easily changed. But height?" He shook his head, ruefully. "I can't work with sliding scales or fluid definitions. You know that."

"Nevertheless, that is the information I have."

Trint exhaled heavily. "Is there any other parameter you want to change?" he asked a little curtly.

The man returned his look with a frosty one of his own. "No."

"You'll be double charged, then," Trint pointed out bluntly.

The other man's eyes narrowed, but he didn't protest. *So, important enough to warrant the extra expenditure, eh? Very interesting.*

"I have another job for you," said the man smoothly, his voice belying his apparent annoyance at the increase in fee.

"Oh?"

"Someone in the Department of Magical Games and Sports has gone missing."

"Name?"

"Bertha Jorkins."

"Missing for how long?"

"At least two months."

"Last known location?"

"Albania."

Trint's heavy eyebrows twitched up. "A bit far afield from London."

"Indeed. A holiday, I believe."

"In Albania?" Trint shifted in his seat with an expression of distaste. "I can think of more pleasant places to holiday," he muttered. "Salient features I may not be able to find in a photograph?"

"A predilection for gaudy footwear," said the man. "Smells like dust and cheap musk. Small mouth, slightly crooked teeth, and larger than average ears that she hides behind her hair. Notoriously nosey."

Trint pursed his mouth. "Potential dangers?"

The man huffed in a parody of amusement. "Not from her. However, the circumstances of her disappearance suggest she may have stumbled into something dangerous."

Trint sighed. "Risk goes up, price goes up," he stated, eliciting a scowl from the man. "That, in addition to the remote location sets the fee at triple the standard." Trint could almost hear the wall behind him erupt in flames at the man's stare. "How soon?"

The man continued to glare at him for a few moments before responding. "As soon as possible."

"Quadruple the standard fee, then," Trint amended, with a half-smile.

The man actually bared his teeth slightly at that. *Wow, that had really pissed him off* thought Trint.

"Very well," came the reluctant reply through gritted teeth, pinpoints of anger speckled through the deep voice.

Trint smiled more broadly. "I'll let you know," he stated unnecessarily.

Chapter Nineteen - Pieces

Chapter 19 of 59

Sometimes it takes a long time to sort through the pieces to find what you want.

It had to be Parr. Of course, the evidence wasn't overwhelming, but there were enough hints for him to make the guess: appearing three weeks into term with little explanation; right on the heels of that was the reported murder at St Mungo's, more than a handful of instances that showed proficiency with a knife, the unexplained and stubborn neck injury...

Someone had been sent after Parr, someone who had circumvented the usual rules regarding visitation at the hospital. If the visit were to be an innocent one, the person would have attended the hospital during normal hours. So the only explanation was that the person didn't want to be seen by anyone. Whether they had wanted to be seen by Parr was another matter. If she had indeed been the one who had shredded the 'intruder', then it suggested she did not want to be found. Had the intruder been there to cause her harm, perhaps even kill her? It was possible, but not conclusive.

Snape recalled thinking that it was odd that the MLE had allowed any information regarding the incident to fall into the untrustworthy hands of the *Daily Prophet*. True, the department was staffed by idiots, but even that didn't explain such a lapse in information security, unless... unless it was deliberately leaked. Leaked by the MLE? He stopped in his tracks, eyes staring in thought at the dirt path that led to the Hogwarts gates.

The leak would have to be someone from the MLE. Anyone else would have been Obliviated. For the MLE to have appeared so suddenly after the attack indicated that they were well aware not only of Parr's presence at the hospital but also of her abilities...abilities that were still unclear to him. Describing her was akin to describing a vampire as someone who was nocturnal, didn't care for the usual forms of nutrition, and had slightly elongated eye-teeth. All true, but failing to convey the real nature of the creature.

Was that what Parr was? A creature? Snape started walking again, his eyes still downcast. Technically, all living beings were creatures, but he knew that certain prejudices singled out some individual living beings as 'creatures' more than others. He shook his head slightly. Semantics. One person's creature was another's pet, was another's food source, was another's loved companion.

Regardless of what she was, Parr had been removed from the hospital while still significantly injured and transferred to Hogwarts. Why? Snape's pace slowed as he neared the school gates, and he looked through the metal bars to the huge stone building beyond: an Unplottable fortress that sat in the middle of nowhere, apparent only to those who were meant to see it. She was there for protection; isolated from the outside world, never allowed off the grounds except in the company of another. Hidden. Her death reported in the *Daily Prophet* would be noted by those involved in the attempt on her life, if that was what it had been. The MLE wanted it thought that she was dead.

Outside of Hogwarts, I do not exist she had said.

Who was she hiding from? Snape stopped at the gates. He had sent Trint looking for someone who was supposed to be thought dead. He curled one long-fingered hand around one of the metal bars. The man had given no indication that he thought that the patient who had been reported murdered at the hospital and the woman with the 'fluid definitions' were one and the same, but Trint wasn't stupid. Far from it. It would only be a matter of time before he worked it out, and that was assuming he hadn't already. Snape replayed the meeting over in his mind. He shook his head slightly. If anything, Trint had seemed irritated at the new information Snape had given him. There'd been no pause in speech or flicker of recognition in his eyes, nothing to indicate the man was withholding information. Snape grimaced, hissed the appropriate spell, and pushed the gate open. That didn't mean that Trint *wasn't* withholding information...just that Snape couldn't tell. He'd learned to be careful around Trint. The man was too sharp sometimes, but then, that was why Snape employed him. He was one of the most adept informants that could be hired, and one of the most expensive. Snape frowned as the gate swung closed behind him. It wasn't the money that bothered him. After all, Dumbledore paid such expenses out of his own pocket. It was the

principle of the thing. If Snape allowed Trint to start raising his fees, it would be harder to buy his services in the future once the man realised he could start charging more for the same amount of information. Much as he disliked it, Snape knew he couldn't find everything out himself. He didn't have the time. It was risky using someone else, but sometimes risks had to be taken.

He approached the castle silently through the darkness. The waning moon was hidden behind a heavy bank of cloud that threatened rain, and only a few windows were lit. Most would be in bed by now.

Should he allow Trint to continue to search for information on Parr? It could throw up a flag to those who had sent the intruder into the hospital, and whilst Snape was suspicious of who and what Parr was, he wasn't prepared to be responsible for alerting anyone to Parr sidestepping her own murder. That Dumbledore allowed Parr at Hogwarts and actively used her abilities outside of it meant that the Headmaster trusted her. He was obviously privy to information that Snape wasn't, and whilst that rankled, Snape had to trust that Dumbledore was using sound judgement.

However, if he called Trint off the search, that would make the man suspicious, perhaps suspicious enough to try and find out why he'd been called off the search. Snape swore under his breath as he entered the castle. Stalemate. Both action and inaction were likely to cause unwanted results, but the truth was that he really did want to know what Parr's story was.

Before the meeting at the house, she'd made a slip. She'd tried to cover it up, but he hadn't been fooled. At first, he'd thought she'd said some peculiar bastardisation of his given name, but the context in which it had been used didn't make sense. Seefy? Seevy? It had sounded like 'seevy', but he'd never heard of the word before and couldn't attach any meaning to it other than it was a noun that Parr ascribed to herself... or at least her family line. That in itself was interesting. It suggested a family trait, something passed through the genetic line rather than a condition acquired from environmental circumstances.

Snape's footsteps echoed through the quiet, stone-skinned corridors, the charmed torches in the wall-brackets alighting in the main thoroughfares at his approach and extinguishing in his wake. He barely noticed them. As he travelled up through the castle, he moved increasingly through darkened passages, past sleeping portraits and dusty tapestries. Light wasn't necessary for him to find his way. A combination of good eye-sight at night and memory served sufficiently to get him to the Headmaster's study.

"Headmaster, I seriously doubt that my source will find out anything of note within the next twelve hours."

Dumbledore didn't move from his position next to the Pensieve, his bent form silhouetted by the eerie light emanating from the object. Something had captured his attention there, so he appeared to be giving only a slice of his attention to what Snape was saying.

"That may be true, Severus, but I cannot afford to discount any possible source of information at this time."

"I take it that Lupin and Parr have not yet returned."

Dumbledore sighed. "No. Although, I doubt the news they bring will be positive, so I confess to be somewhat apprehensive of their return."

"What is it you expect to hear?"

Dumbledore straightened. "That Jorkins is dead, probably at the hands of either Pettigrew or Voldemort." He turned wearily to face Snape. "I have a contact in the Albanian MLE, or at least their equivalent of it. They were able to alert me before the rest of their department moved in to smother the situation." He walked slowly over to his desk, one hand tapping its fingers on his chest. "I can't imagine that the Albanian ministry would be happy to discover that the greatest threat to wizardkind... possibly humankind as well... has been murdering innocent people within their borders. Or our ministry either, for that matter." He sat down rather heavily into his chair, eyes lost in thought.

The room fell into a silence, broken only by the faint snoring coming from the paintings on the walls. Snape was certain that the inhabitants of those portraits were feigning sleep. He was never comfortable with them lurking in their frames like vultures waiting to feed on the scraps of current events. Who knew what they really thought, whom else they spoke to, or what they got up to in their two-dimensional world? It was that distrust which prevented him from having portraits in his own rooms. He didn't need them leering and criticising his every move. Plus, he didn't have any portraits of people he cared enough about to put up with their constant gawking.

Dumbledore had seemed only mildly interested in what Lucius Malfoy had told Snape earlier. It merely confirmed his suspicion that the Death Eaters knew that something was afoot, but were unable to base any course of action on the pain emanating from the Dark Mark. Snape had been adamant that it was not a summons. There was no pull to the pain, no focus or direction, and the fact that Malfoy had been prodding Snape for information suggested that he was in just as much doubt as to what it meant. Obviously, with the recent alleged sightings of Pettigrew in Albania, it reinforced the possibility that the Dark Lord had not only returned, but was growing stronger. The question was, was Voldemort deliberately signalling his return to his followers, or was it something unintentional?

The Headmaster had been a lot more concerned with the fact that Malfoy had intimated he knew of Parr's presence at the school. He'd fixed a very sharp gaze on Snape and asked how this particular topic of conversation had arisen.

"Of Malfoy's own volition, Headmaster," Snape had replied innocently.

"Hmm." Dumbledore continued to stare at him for some moments as if testing the veracity of the reply. The older man was one of the most adept Legilimens alive, perhaps even stronger in the talent than Voldemort, but unlike the Dark Lord, Dumbledore didn't use the ability like a bludgeon. His use of it was often so subtle that it was difficult to detect even by someone expecting its use. It was that realisation some years ago that had made Snape wary of ever lying outright to Dumbledore, instead favouring to withhold information if it were ever necessary to keep the truth from the Headmaster.

"I trust you realise that Chara is not to attract attention outside of the school, Severus," Dumbledore mentioned shrewdly, tapping the arm of his chair with his index finger.

"I had surmised that to be the case, Headmaster," Snape replied with a faint air of feigned disinterest. He dreaded to think what Dumbledore's reaction would be if he learned that Snape had been actively poking about for information on Parr. No doubt it would result in a rare, albeit rather frightening display of anger that Snape was not keen to experience again.

"Well, no doubt Lucius has heard something of Chara from Draco. Oh, yes, I'm fully aware of the nature of their altercation in your class two months back, Severus," he added, noting the change in Snape's expression. "Chara felt it necessary to tell me, although I have made it clear to her that unless you feel it important to inform me, such matters remain in your purview." He sighed and rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. "However, I suspect it more likely that Lucius has been receiving information from someone of the board of governors...I've had my suspicions about Levitin for some time." He dropped his hand from his face. "I realise there is little left of the night, but perhaps you can still salvage something of it. I do appreciate the fact that you've given up half of your weekend, Severus."

No doubt it'll end up being the entire weekend Snape thought irritably as he turned to leave the Headmaster's study.

"Incidentally, have you spoken to Alastor recently?" Dumbledore called after him, stopping him some distance short of the door. Snape did his best to hold his temper in check as he turned to face Dumbledore again.

"As you are aware, Headmaster, Moody and I do not get along," he said flatly, trying not to scowl. "Interactions between us are... fractious at best. I do not engage him in conversation, or he I."

"Hmm," said Dumbledore. The old man looked distracted.

"Was there something specific you wanted to know?" Snape asked reluctantly.

Dumbledore appeared to consider this momentarily with a slightly worried expression before dismissing it with a gentle wave of his hand. "It is of no moment," he replied

lightly. "Sleep well."

Snape nearly pulled a face at that and tried not to stalk frostily out of the door.

Sleep well?

Snape couldn't remember the last time he did that. He was lucky to get more than an hour of uninterrupted sleep at any one time. He did, ever so briefly, consider trying to find that hour before sunrise, but it seemed pointless. He'd only wake feeling like a troll had stomped on his head and with his stomach in an indigestion-induced knot. Besides, he had other things to attend to first.

The library refused to yield any of the information he was searching for. Snape had spent some time checking through the more likely sources, thankful that the early hour meant that there was no-one else awake yet, let alone using the library as well. Knowing the contents of his own literature back to front, he'd hoped that the school's collection might have been of assistance where his own had failed. It was likely that Madam Pince's encyclopaedic knowledge could have steered him in the right direction, but as her involvement in the search would be unwise, he had to search unaided.

Snape had been half-heartedly flicking through a tome on theriomorphs, trying desperately to ignore the insistent hunger gnawing a hole through his stomach, when he heard a faint tapping sound coming from one of the windows. The silhouette standing on the ledge turned out to be a rather cantankerous-looking tufted owl scrabbling impatiently at the glass pane. The little bib of white feathers gave it away as one of Kettering's owls, which meant that Trint had sent a message.

Snape opened the window and let the owl flutter into the library in a cloud of bird dust. It slipped about on the back of a chair while trying to stick its leg out at him, keen to get its message delivered so it could be given the treat it expected. This particular bird was well aware of what Snape kept in his pocket for Kettering's message owls, and it tended to be rather pushy in its enthusiasm. It fidgeted about as the scroll was being untied, like a child with a burr in its underpants. Its amber eyes tracked Snape's hand closely as he fished out a hand's length of string from his pocket and Transfigured it back to its original form. The mouse twisted futilely, its tail trapped firmly between Snape's fingers, its beady little eyes wide at the sight of the owl. There was barely enough time for the mouse to let out a despairing squeak before the owl lunged greedily for it and sailed out of the open window to enjoy its reward at its leisure somewhere in the Forbidden Forest.

The message was short. It didn't need to be any longer than what was scratched on the parchment: a three, with a line crossing diagonally through it.

What Dumbledore had suspected was true: Jorkins was dead.

It appeared he wasn't the first on the premises to know this. Rounding the corner of the corridor, Snape saw Lupin and Parr heading towards the stone gargoyle guarding the staircase that led to Dumbledore's study. Even in the dim light, he could see that Lupin looked like he was in some degree of shock, and although it was a bit hard to tell due to the angle, he guessed that Parr had a hold of Lupin's coat in the middle of his back to prevent him from slumping to the floor. The werewolf's face was as white as a face could possibly go without being made of alabaster, and there were charcoal coloured circles under his eyes. In contrast, Parr had a flush of colour in her face that enhanced the angry set to her features and a small nick down the side of her nose that, whilst not large, appeared deep. Both of them paused at the sight of Snape, although it was dubious as to whether Lupin actually registered anything, judging from the blank and unfocused look in his eyes. Parr bent down and whispered something in Lupin's ear, turning him to face the gargoyle. The man must have had enough awareness to recall the password, for they gained access to the staircase before Snape reached them. He reached the top of the stairs just as the door to the Headmaster's study closed behind Lupin... with Parr standing resolutely in front of it, effectively blocking Snape's attempt to follow him in.

"First come, first served, Professor," Parr stated firmly, squinting down at him from her full and imposing height. "You'll have to wait your turn, I'm afraid."

"Have you been employed as a bouncer, Miss Parr?" Snape asked, trying not to lean backwards as he looked her in the eye. "The Headmaster has never required one before, and I seriously doubt he requires one now. If you'll stand aside and stop wasting my time..." He tried to shoulder around her, but she moved to block him again.

"No."

"I beg your pardon?"

Parr pointed at her mouth. "Watch my lips: no. You will wait." With that, she fixed her gaze on the opposite wall and ignored him.

"Miss Parr, if you don't get out of my way, I will be forced to physically move you aside," Snape pointed out with a bravado he wasn't feeling, but he was going to be damned if he let her cow him again.

"I think we both know who would come off the worse, Professor," Parr grated, eyes still fixed on the wall.

Before he'd even got the wand fully out of his pocket, Parr had grabbed hold of it and lobbed it down the stairwell without even shifting the focus of her eyes.

"Next time, I'll clean your ears out with it," she promised.

Snape clenched his teeth to splintering point and considered the possibility of moving her with wandless magic. He formed the words in his mind to deliver something with a sting in its tail when Parr's nostrils flared.

"Don't even think about it, Professor," she warned, eyes flinty and lips thinned.

"Are you a Legilimens?" Snape asked bluntly.

Parr's mouth formed a moue as she thought about his question. "I find that remark... insulting." She blinked and fixed him with an emerald glare down her bowed nose.

"I fail to see what in the question could be considered as rude, Miss Parr. Being the queen of politeness, perhaps you can enlighten me."

Parr's eyebrows climbed slightly, giving her a faintly surprised expression.

"At first, I didn't realise you were being rude through ignorance," she sighed, with a small shake of her head. "Now, I'm starting to think it's some perverse family humour that I can't follow. Your colleagues must have saintly patience," she added drily. "It takes years of practice to act like a cantankerous old shit so flawlessly."

"The enormity of your hypocrisy obviously escapes you," Snape retorted venomously. "And you still haven't answered my question."

"No, I haven't," she agreed lightly. "How frustrating for you." She peered at him curiously, clearly waiting to see what he would do in response.

Snape's mouth compressed into a line of irritation. "What's wrong with Lupin? He looked like he'd had the blood leached out of him. Did you treat him to one of your spectacular displays of manners and deportment?"

Parr gave him a withering look. "Very droll. Been practising that line, have you?"

Snape stared back at her flatly, desperately suppressing the childish urge to punch her. Parr stared back just as emotionlessly.

"Are you going to fetch your stick, Professor?" she asked innocently.

Fortunately, the door opened before Snape had the chance to finish casting a particularly vicious hex on Parr. Lupin wobbled out, looking like he'd been stuffed in a troll's

trousers for a week.

"Ah, Severus, sorry to keep you waiting," Lupin slurred, bleary-eyed. "I think Dumbledore said you can go in now." He weaved off down the hallway towards the stairs with Parr firmly holding him up by a fistful of coat.

Snape stared after them as his wand was tossed back up the stairs, landing right next to his foot with a clatter.

Chapter Twenty – Options Few & Far Between

Chapter 20 of 59

The most obvious option is rarely the best one to take.

Snape flicked through the last few pages of the appendices dispiritedly and shoved a forkful of bacon into his mouth. This was the last of eleven books he'd been through since dawn, and he'd still not been able to find anything that mentioned the word 'seevy'. He put his fork down and drained his mug of tea. It seemed he'd have to go farther afield to find information, and he'd have to do it himself...there was no way he was going to use Trint for this.

Snape sat back in his chair and stared at the ceiling that roiled slowly with bluestone grey clouds. The day was going to manifest some truly ugly weather. He sighed and went back to his plate, only to find it empty. He blinked in mild surprise, shrugged and refilled it entirely with sausages.

There was a bookshop in Diagon Alley that stocked rare and unusual books...perhaps he should try there, but it would have to be some other time. What with it being Sunday, the shop would undoubtedly be closed. *No matter*, Snape thought. He was actually looking forward to going to bed for a few hours, since he hadn't slept since Friday night, but first he had to get rid of the empty feeling in his stomach. He'd already eaten two platefuls of food and it hadn't made a dent in his hunger.

Snape looked at his plate in consternation. He'd never been a big eater. When young, it was because his family was so painfully poor that there was rarely enough for even half-sized meals. So Snape had grown up accustomed to the almost permanent sensation of hunger, which had then faded away as his appetite decreased, giving him a lanky, angular body shape that never filled out as he reached adulthood. It didn't bother him. He'd resigned himself long ago to being a lost cause, physically. Years of snide and sarcastic remarks from his peers had cultivated in him the same contempt for his appearance that others had. Even when a student, the literally bottomless kitchens of Hogwarts had never compelled him to eat more than the smallest amount of food. Maybe he was coming down with something. However, most illnesses decreased appetite rather than increased it.

His gaze travelled along the Ravenclaw table until they reached Parr's back. She was seated on her own, as the hour was still on the early side for most students, who tended to stagnate in their beds until gone nine. Parr had limped into the Great Hall not long after Snape had seated himself at the staff table. He'd watched her make her way slowly to her house table, favouring her left leg, face stonily blank. Snape wondered if Lupin and Parr had both gotten into a fight during their search for Jorkins. The Headmaster hadn't mentioned anything to that effect when Snape had finally been allowed to see him. In fact, Dumbledore had avoided speaking about Lupin and Parr at all, but based on Lupin's pale features and wobbly disposition, as well as the scratch on Parr's nose and her limp this morning, some sort of physical altercation had occurred. Surely they hadn't come up against either Pettigrew or Voldemort? If that had been the case, Dumbledore would have said something. Wouldn't he?

Snape looked down the staff table out of the corner of his eye. Dumbledore was talking to Hagrid about something mundane, giving no indications of worry or concern. Snape squinted back at Parr. She was jamming porridge into her craw with all the social grace of a warthog. He hoped she'd stuff too much in and choke on it.

He'd spent most of the morning seething at the way she had treated him outside of the Headmaster's study...like a lackey, someone of inconsequential standing. Snape hated a lot of things, but high up on that list was disrespect, and Parr had given him a sizeable dose of that recently. He should've known that her obedience in class was a sham, no doubt employed to prevent any further detentions. Since she paid him no deference outside of class, Snape had two options open to him that would restore the balance of control in his favour: make her time in his classroom more unpleasant than ever before, or make any interaction with her outside of school time more caustic. Snape's eyes bored into Parr's back. Well, why choose only one option when both together would be more than doubly effective?

"Severus?"

He never let anyone get one over on him, and he wasn't about to allow it now.

"Severus?"

Parr would realise soon enough that if you kicked dirt at a snake, you'd only get bitten. Usually several times.

"*Severus!*"

His head snapped to the right to face McGonagall. "What?"

"Is everything alright?" she asked, her eyebrows shaped into a symbol of disapproval.

Snape noticed the faces of the other teachers present turned towards him. He refocussed on McGonagall. "Yes. Why?"

McGonagall exhaled heavily through her nose and vanished her lips. "You were shaking the table and stabbing your breakfast rather loudly."

He blinked at her and realised he must have been jiggling his leg against the table without being aware of it. McGonagall's goblet of pumpkin juice had tipped over, spilling its contents half on the table and half on her tartan-covered lap. She was mopping up the worst of it with her napkin, but it was likely she'd have to change her skirt or cast a Cleaning Charm on it.

"Was I? I hadn't noticed," Snape said blankly and relaxed his grip on his fork.

"Are you sure you've got enough sausages on your plate?" McGonagall muttered in an irritated tone. "You're supposed to eat them, not disembowel them."

"It's either the sausages or the students, Minerva," he replied acidly, picked up his book, and left the table.

Karkaroff jumped out at him barely ten feet out of the Great Hall.

"Not now, Igor, I'm not in the mood," Snape hissed at him, one hand clenched on his book in an effort to restrain himself from striking the man with it.

"Severus, it's important that I speak with you," Karkaroff told him in his oily voice, almost trotting along beside Snape.

"Important by whose definition?" Snape bit out, not bothering to slow his pace to benefit Karkaroff.

"I'm serious, Severus," Karkaroff stressed, his voice starting to take on a whiney tone. Snape curled his lip and rolled his eyes. "Something's going on, and whatever it is, I'm being kept in the dark."

"And it never occurred to you that it might be for a good reason?" Snape retorted, not in any way masking his annoyance.

Karkaroff managed to slip in front of Snape, forcing him to stop. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked sharply, his beady eyes glittering.

"That I need to explain myself to you is a perfect indication of your inadequacy at being involved in anything of monument, Igor," Snape told him through clenched teeth. He took a slow step forward, forcing Karkaroff to back away. "Don't go thinking that I've forgotten about how your tongue flapped like a hummingbird's wings to the Wizengamot." He took another step forward, and again Karkaroff shrank back from him, his eyes flicking nervously from side to side. "You couldn't get my name out fast enough to try and save your own worthless hide from rotting in Azkaban." Karkaroff's shoulders connected with the stone wall of the turn in the corridor. The man flinched as Snape closed the gap between them until the buttons of his coat were nearly touching Karkaroff's chest. "So you'll understand if your fretting is a matter of supreme indifference to me." Karkaroff started to open and close his mouth like a carp drowning on land. "If your arm hurts, deal with it. I have far more interesting and worthwhile things to attend to than being your nursemaid."

Karkaroff managed to find his voice again. "Don't try and obfuscate me, Severus. I'm not that stupid. You know perfectly well that's not what I'm talking about."

Snape narrowed his eyes at him and sneered. "Igor, half the time, you don't even know what *you're* talking about, so spare me the self-righteous indignation."

"If Brachoveitch and Macnair think they can keep me out of the loop, they're sorely mistaken," Karkaroff blustered, but the paleness of his face and the quivering of his weak, bearded chin gave lie to his attitude.

Snape cocked his head to one side and gave Karkaroff a nasty smile. "Then go ahead and stick your head into that loop, Igor. Just be careful it doesn't tighten around your throat." With that, he turned and walked away, leaving Karkaroff still pressed against the wall as if he had been nailed there.

The small glass bottle captured and contained the poor light, giving it a glow that ordinarily it wouldn't have. There were no impurities in the liquid at all. In fact, it was so clear that it was as if there was nothing in the bottle. He almost wished that there wasn't; then he wouldn't be going through this agonising vacillation.

The truth was that he didn't like taking drugs. Sycorax's toenails, he didn't even like *drinking*...it usually had embarrassing consequences that he could do without.

Snape put the bottle back on the table for the fourth time. He'd seen enough examples of what happened when a person became reliant on drugs or alcohol in order to get through life. Lupin was a prime example of a person who drank too much. Three times out of five in coming into contact with the werewolf, Snape could guarantee that Lupin would be drunk...if not almost paralytic, then at the very least mildly inebriated. The man chose to deal with his problems by drowning them in alcohol, which Snape found not only stupid but pathetic as well. Such people deserved to be scorned.

However, it was the people who were drug addicts that elicited the strongest revulsion in him. Snape was never able to forget the time that Slughorn took his sixth-year Potions class to St Mungo's to see the victims of such addiction. It illustrated the frightening reality of the consequences of drug reliance. Snape had wondered if Slughorn knew that a number of sixth-year students were already beginning to sink themselves into that world. It was hard to believe that he couldn't be...after all, Slytherins were usually the worst for delving into the Potions supply cupboard for ingredients for some recreational experiment. Slughorn would have to be blind and obtuse not to notice the occasional dazed expression and dilated pupils on some of his house's students. If the slack-jawed, drooling shells of humanity that were dumped at St Mungo's were not enough of a deterrent to substance abuse, then little else would be.

The students filed through the ward, allegedly called the Rubbish Bin by the mediwitches and mediwizards who worked there, in utter silence. There was something disturbing, almost embarrassing in seeing what people had voluntarily done to themselves: an obscene abuse of mind and body, the detritus that was left behind incapable of an autonomous existence.

That little field trip had been a distressing necessity for any student seeking to pursue a medical career. The temptations only grew once commencing higher education in that field, and the obstacles correspondingly fewer until it was hard to find a reason *not* to make drug taking a part of everyday life.

Slughorn had one of the mediwitches run through the case history of at least five of the ward's permanent inhabitants. There were unmistakable similarities in all of them. The thing that Snape found the most shocking was that at least two of his classmates continued with their foolish dalliances, despite having come face to face with people who had started down the slippery slope at roughly the same age as they. He had trouble finding any pity for them, even after one caused herself irrevocable damage to her intestines after Hell Riding...a popular practice at the time amongst the more reckless students that involved ingesting a potent blend of hellebore, digitalis and rat-ear clover. The rumour was that Boswell had been found on the Slytherin common room floor, bleeding profusely from both ends and tearing at the stone with her fingers like an animal. She never returned to Hogwarts, and the fallout from that episode took months to subside. In a perceptive move, the Headmaster decreed that the blood stain on the stone floor of the common room be left there as a reminder should others make the mistake of thinking they could sniff through the drug cabinet with impunity. Every single student in Slytherin was made aware of what that blood stain meant, and there were few who had any doubt in their mind as to what Snape would do to them if he found *any* Slytherin even *thinking* of taking something they weren't legitimately prescribed. The last cynic was delivered an epiphany that had most of the first years in tears once rumour had gotten out.

Snape sighed. The undeniable fact was that his body had gotten used to the painkiller he'd been taking. Taking something stronger would only temporarily fix the problem. No, this was not how he wanted to deal with it.

Snape put the index finger of his left hand on the bottle's stopper and delivered a sharp flick with the fingers of his other hand, catapulting the bottle across the table and into the cold fireplace. It shattered with a sharp, high tinkle. A small shadow started to pad across the floor towards it.

"Leave it, Folter."

The house-elf stopped and turned her large eyes back towards him. "Sir?"

"That's where it belongs."

Folter looked back at the fireplace briefly, brushing a wisp of her hair behind her pointed ear, as if to buy herself some thinking time. There was an almost imperceptible sigh before she replied. "Yes, sir."

Snape stood up and turned away. "Don't let me sleep past two." He didn't wait for her answer before he closed the door to his bedroom.

That morning was when the nightmares began.

Chapter Twenty-One - Questions

Chapter 21 of 59

They just keep coming.

Dumbledore fiddled absently with a ratty-looking quill while the other two men waited in silence. The Headmaster had been unusually pensive for the past couple of days, and it seemed that whatever was behind it might be the reason he had asked to see both Lupin and Snape together.

Lupin, wonder of wonders, was actually sober and not looking like he'd spent the past three nights lying in a damp ditch alongside some remote country lane. He sat calmly in his chair, legs extended out in front of him with one ankle crossed over the other, and watched Dumbledore without the remotest inkling of impatience. That was very much Lupin's attitude: if things took time to eventuate, he'd just sit on his scrawny backside and wait for it. The man was about as proactive as a tree stump.

Snape just wished Dumbledore would hurry up and get on with it. Sitting here in silence was making him drowsy, and it wouldn't be much longer before his head was lolling about like a bladder on a stick. Not only was he painfully exhausted from barely sleeping the past week, but he had a stack of third-year assignments to mark that he'd already put off dealing with for three days. Probably the only thing that would make his mood even worse would be if Goyle set fire to his own hair for the fourth time this week. Snape made a mental note to question the Headmaster about the wisdom in teaching the Incendio spell to children.

"I'm starting to think it's possible that there may have been someone sneaking around Alastor's home," Dumbledore stated, without any preamble.

Lupin shifted slightly in his chair. "I thought Mad-Eye had admitted it was probably nothing... just a cat prowling around in the night."

Dumbledore put down the quill with a level of care not warranted by its appalling condition. "Yes, he has said that, and on more than one occasion," he admitted somewhat reluctantly.

"You think he's lying?"

The Headmaster gave Lupin's question a considerable amount of thought before answering. "I find his response... odd."

Lupin chortled and sat up slightly in his chair. "Forgive me, Albus, but a lot of Mad-Eye's responses are odd. What makes this one especially notable?"

"That he changed his mind," Dumbledore replied simply, running his finger lightly across his bottom lip. "I've known Alastor for a long time, and I've never known him to adopt a more reasonable stance once his mind was set."

"Perhaps age has brought him some wisdom and temperance," said Snape wryly.

"It hasn't for you," Lupin muttered, folding his arms and hunching his shoulders.

"You're one to talk about temperance, you wine-soaked flea-bag," Snape hissed back snottily under his breath.

"Enough!" Dumbledore announced sternly. "I didn't ask you both here so you could take nasty pot-shots at each other."

Lupin dropped his eyes to his shoes to avoid Dumbledore's reprimanding gaze and twiddled his thumbs. Snape just stared about two feet over the Headmaster's head with a slight scowl.

"Alastor only changed his mind after I had offered to look into the matter for him," Dumbledore continued. "That, by itself, is slightly unusual. However, once I told him that one of the neighbours had reporting seeing an intruder lurking about in the area to the local police, he seemed agitated and repeated his dismissal of the whole incident."

Lupin sat up and leant forward. "You think he's hiding something?"

Dumbledore seemed uncomfortable at the question. "I think there's a distinct possibility." He sighed. "But as to why, and about what..." He shrugged.

"What should we do?" asked Lupin, his concern furrowing his brow.

"Is it possible to determine if there was actually an intruder?" inquired Snape shrewdly.

Lupin flicked his gaze to Snape briefly before looking back at Dumbledore. "I thought you had said..."

"That was a lie," Dumbledore admitted simply.

Snape could almost hear the gears grinding in Lupin's head.

"To what end?" the werewolf asked.

"A test," Snape provided for him with a slight sneer for the man's obtuseness. "To see Moody's reaction."

"I don't see how we could tell if there actually had been someone snooping about," said Lupin. "It's been some months since the whole thing happened, and who knows how many people from the MLE have traipsed in and out of the location." He shook his head slightly and sat back in his seat. "I could ask Chara, but I'm not sure she'd have much luck. Have the Muggles in the surrounding houses been questioned?"

"Yes, and to no avail," Dumbledore replied. "The neighbourhood is rather, ah, how shall I phrase this... insular and uncommunicative. It seems that no-one looks very closely at what their neighbour is doing."

Snape snorted. "Perfect location for Moody, then."

"Well, I'll see what we can do," offered Lupin, doubt at success plainly evident in the tone of his voice.

"There's something else," Dumbledore added. "Kingsley says he thinks that Macnair is up to something, although he can't tell what...at least, not without Macnair noticing. Apparently he's been in and out of the Ministry more than usual and causing his colleagues in his department no small amount of irritation at his frequent absences. His movements don't appear to correlate to anything that the Committee for the Disposal of Magical Creatures is currently involved in. Severus, when was the last time you spoke with Macnair?"

"Not for at least three years," said Snape. "There hasn't been cause to." He pointedly ignored Lupin's light huff of disbelief to his right.

"I'm afraid there is cause now," said Dumbledore. "I need you to find out what Macnair's up to."

"Perhaps he has a mistress," Snape dismissed lazily. "It wouldn't be his first."

"No, it's something more than that," interjected Lupin quietly, inspecting his fingernail rather intently.

"Remus thinks he may have seen Macnair in Albania," Dumbledore explained.

Snape blinked. "From the state Lupin was in, I'm surprised he didn't see flying pigs that night," he said snippily.

Lupin started to chew on his fingernail rather enthusiastically in order to stop himself from making a nasty retort in Snape's direction.

"There is a Ministry function tomorrow evening to celebrate the announcement of the revised Statute of European Trade and Negotiations," Dumbledore continued, "which ministers from all the departments are expected to attend, not just those from the Department of International Magical Co-operation. Severus, I need you to try and find out from Macnair what he's up to."

Snape jiggled his leg briefly and exhaled heavily. "A Ministry function. How riveting."

"Severus, if you think you can get the information from Macnair some other way, then by all means spare yourself the agony," said Dumbledore reasonably. "I only wish I could excuse myself from attending. Kingsley can provide a cover for you, if you require it."

Snape hitched his shoulders slightly. "No, that won't be necessary. I'll need to speak to him *outside* the Ministry. He won't let anything slip whilst he's there, no matter how much he drinks," he added, looking askance at Lupin with a slight sneer. Lupin pretended not to notice, but the quirked eyebrow gave him away.

"...disappeared right up his backside."

Snape blinked at Lupin. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

Lupin shook his head wearily. "Severus, I can't understand how you can get through life with such a complete lack of humour. You're the only person I've told this joke to who hasn't laughed."

"Perhaps it's because my sense of humour isn't attuned to puerility," Snape responded with a crotchety tone and pushed the door to the storeroom open.

Lupin slouched against the doorjamb and stuck his hands in his pockets. "Well, that's what I get for trying to cheer you up, I suppose."

Snape squinted at the bottles on the shelves in front of him and pushed a lock of hair out of his eyes. "You always were exceptionally slow to learn, Lupin." He slid some jars aside to get to the item he was looking for and thrust the amber glass flask at Lupin. "Kindly keep in mind that this isn't one of your bottles of rot-gut. You don't need to down half the contents in one gulp."

Lupin took the flask from him. "Solicitous, as always," he said with a smile.

Snape squinted at him. "Considering how much you rely on this, I would've thought it prudent to stuff the sarcasm where the sun doesn't shine. You could upset me enough to cause me to forget to brew it properly."

Lupin laughed. "That's not your style, Severus," he dismissed, pocketing the flask carefully. "You'd never go for something that obvious... or easy."

"No doubt the reason why I wasn't sorted into Gryffindor," Snape shot back and turned away from Lupin. He stared at the shelves for a few moments and frowned. Something didn't look right.

"Are you not sleeping? You look terrible."

"Actually, in comparison to you, I look sensational." Snape pushed a jar aside with one finger. "You've got your Wolfsbane Potion. Any chance you might go away now?"

Lupin folded his arms and stared at Snape's back. "It's a serious question, Severus."

Snape's head tilted to one side and he sighed. "So was mine, Lupin. I'm not in the mood for your banal chit-chat." He picked up a jar and shook it. The contents were less than he remembered. "Isn't there a gutter awaiting your illustrious arrival?"

"Alas, not tonight," Lupin replied, not in the least bit annoyed at the dig. "I never fly when drunk."

Snape put the scrutinised jar back on the shelf and turned to face him. "Any reason for the shockingly out-of-character behaviour?" He peered at Lupin. Sober. Clean-shaven. A moderately unrumpled shirt. "Merlin, who's the unfortunate female? Or male?"

Lupin ignored the question. "I realise that this will fall on deaf ears, Severus, but I am grateful for the Wolfsbane Potion." Snape just grimaced at him. "Don't forget to iron your party dress for tomorrow night." He had to jump back to avoid getting his face squashed by the slamming door.

Macnair lay, alone now, staring at the ceiling, and came to the conclusion that it was a rather good end to what had previously been shaping up to being an excruciatingly tedious evening. He was very much the sort of person that believed he should be rewarded in the same quantity as the amount of effort he had to expend in order to discharge his responsibilities. It was true that there were significant benefits to being a Ministry-appointed executioner, but there was also the bureaucratic nonsense that went with it. Macnair was, by nature, a 'hands on' man. He smiled briefly at that thought and scratched at his moustache with a blunt finger. Yes, this evening had turned out to be particularly pleasurable.

He sat up, swung his legs off the bed and planted his feet on the wooden floor, his mind already having moved on to more permanent matters. He picked his clothes up from beside the bed and began to dress automatically, turning over the discussions he'd had earlier at the Ministry function.

Macnair had become a Death Eater as a part of a natural progression. He was a man with simple, often brutal tastes in just about all aspects of his day-to-day life. Working at the Ministry had, by necessity, forced a veneer of taciturn civility on him, but anyone who really knew him was fully aware of just how very thin that veneer was.

Fortunately, very few people *did* know him. His colleagues in his department considered him almost preternaturally suited to his role, and as long as he continued to carry out the tasks assigned to him, they delved no further into his character than absolutely necessary. If they had, Macnair would have been resolutely turned out from the Ministry and possibly marched straight into Azkaban itself. However, it was easier... safer... not to ask the sort of questions that would unearth skeletons.

He never had a second thought about the decisions he made. Every action, every word was delivered with cold exactitude and clarity of purpose. Vacillation and regret were foreign concepts to him. This didn't mean that he was oblivious to the subtle current changes that flowed around him, but he was usually the boulder that dictated how the streams coursed...his position never changed. He simply channelled the events around him to suit his purpose.

The itch between his shoulder blades warned him. He spun around, his wand clamped firmly in his fist and at least three different hexes ready to fly from his thin, bitter lips.

"Now, now, Walden. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were unhappy to see me."

"How the hell did you get in here?" Macnair snapped.

Snape raised his eyebrows incrementally. "The way I normally get into a room," he replied with a quirk to his mouth.

Macnair failed to lower his wand...a fact that wasn't lost on Snape.

"Relax, Walden. If I'd wanted you dead, you'd have been on the floor before you'd even turned around."

Macnair bared his brown teeth. "How long have you been standing there?" Snape just stared impassively at him, arms folded, one shoulder against the gaudy mantel. "Get an eyeful, did you?"

"You flatter yourself if you think your perverse nocturnal activities are of any interest to me," was the amused response.

"What do you want, Snape?" Macnair growled, finally lowering his wand, but still keeping it in his left hand. He wasn't prepared to take the snake at his word. He trusted Snape about as much as he trusted anyone. Probably even less so.

"Just a friendly chat, Walden...a light conversation between friends."

Macnair's laugh held not one iota of humour in it. "Spare me, Snape. I've heard enough bullshit for one evening already." He jammed his foot roughly into his shoe. "Say what you've come to say, then fuck off."

Snape tutted. "You never used to be this rude, Walden."

Macnair wedged his other foot into its matching shoe and glared at him with undisguised contempt. Whilst *some* seemed not to have progressed noticeably in their social standing, Macnair had worked methodically and ruthlessly to secure himself a more prestigious place in wizarding society. Being a Ministry executioner opened up an amazing array of opportunities that had previously been resolutely closed to him. Amazing how the power of death persuaded others that you were someone not only to know, but be in the favour of as well. Naturally, Macnair exploited this mercilessly, mostly for his own personal gain. There were few luxuries he couldn't afford now, and he made sure that it was known to others. His clothes were well-tailored and expensive, his amusements selective and elitist, and his appetites more than adequately indulged. Snape, by contrast, seemed to have spat on the very notion of social standing. Very little about him had changed. He still wore the same attire...that ridiculously restrictive straightjacket of an outfit as black as his eyes and only a little blacker than his disposition...its monotony broken only by the accents of white at cuffs and collar. He eschewed the company of others and sneered at purebloods and Mudbloods alike, and judging from his cantankerous, sallow mien and greasy hair, there were several appetites going unsated. Cold disdain ran up Macnair's spine and seeped from his mouth with brazen satisfaction. "Circumstances are rather different these days. I'm not required to kowtow to you anymore."

Snape actually surprised him by laughing at that. "Afraid I'll step on that gossamer thin neck of yours, are you?"

"No, just thinking of ways to wring yours!" Macnair snarled, wiggling his foot to settle it cleanly into his shoe.

"Dream on, Walden," Snape spat back, switching from amusement to tetchiness in the blink of an eye. "I doubt you have the imagination for anything that would truly surprise me."

They stared at each other venomously for a number of drawn out seconds, sizing each other up. Frustratingly for Macnair, Snape managed to tip the balance in his own favour by smiling nastily at the Ministry's executioner. Although he would've been the last to admit it, it was a dangerous sign if Snape ever smiled. Wise people became nervous. Even wiser individuals turned and ran as quickly as possible. The intervening years since he'd last come into contact with Snape had done nothing to lessen that automatic and visceral reaction in Macnair, despite the obvious social and influential superiority he'd gained over the tall git.

"You've gotten sloppy," Snape pointed out, tilting his head to one side so that the light in the room ran along the length of his oily hair. "I really don't appreciate having to make excuses on your behalf to someone like Karkaroff, and if he knows you're up to something, then you must have been making absolutely no effort to conceal your activities," said Snape, staring fixedly at the stocky man opposite him.

Macnair's eyes narrowed to thin lines. Karkaroff knew? No, that wasn't what Snape had said. Karkaroff just knew that something was going on...something without him being involved, which was no doubt driving the stupid man berserk.

"If you and Brachoveitch can't avoid drawing attention to yourselves, you'll be on the end of a rather eloquent reminder that the Dark Lord dislikes having his followers threaten his position by blundering about like buffoons."

Macnair's mouth pursed into a small, white sphincter. Karkaroff didn't know, but did Snape? If he did, it would be decidedly inconvenient. Was it also possible that Snape was in contact with the Dark Lord? That would be even worse than if he knew the details of the plan. All the Death Eaters knew that Snape stood very high in the Dark Lord's favour, perhaps even higher than Lucius Malfoy. They also knew that the Dark Lord was a very jealous person. No-one made the mistake of allying themselves with another except with his express permission. Macnair could feel his sinuses starting to flare up...a common indicator of agitation for him. There was an ominous sensation of a precipice located somewhere just in front of him.

"The next time I have to cover your hairy backside, Walden, I will come back and hack it off with a blunt instrument," Snape rolled on in a tone sharper than a razor. "Or perhaps I'll arrange for you to be placed somewhere in the vicinity of Remus Lupin the next full moon. He was asking after you, and it wasn't about providing a recommendation for accommodation in Albania, I can assure you."

Fuck! He knew.

"Yes, I know, despite your patently-wanting abilities at subterfuge." That nasty, crooked-toothed smile was back.

Macnair had to fight the urge to back away in the direction of the door and away from the precipice. He was going to strap Brachoveitch for this. There was no doubt in his mind that was where the fault lay. Greyback would eat their intestines straight from their bodies if the plan unravelled. He briefly considered the option of removing Snape from the whole equation...that way he could still get the result he was working towards, with a few additional benefits thrown in for good measure. Macnair had been waiting for years to strike that slippery bastard down.

"Don't even think about it, Walden," came the warning statement, made even more dangerous by the calm way it was delivered. "It could have nasty consequences that haven't even danced fleetingly across that shallow mind of yours."

Macnair's sinuses throbbed in concert with the burn of indigestion that scoured the inside of his stomach. No, now was not the time. Not now. Not yet.

Snape frowned at Macnair momentarily and then drifted towards the door, pushing his hair out of his eyes with one hand. "Next time, you won't get the courtesy of conversation. I'll slice your legs out from under you before you even realise you've annoyed me." He stopped and turned his head. "I would also appreciate it if you could tell Levitin to be more careful in whom he leaks information to. Hogwarts is my jurisdiction, and I don't like Levitin stamping on my toes." The end of the one-sided conversation was punctuated by the sharp slam of the door behind Snape.

Snape Apparated as soon as the door closed behind him. He'd seen Macnair raise his left hand slightly and decided not to leave it to chance that the man wouldn't strike him down whilst his back was turned. Macnair was not the least bit influenced by notions of honour or ethics...he was an executioner, after all, and a Death Eater to boot.

Snape tried to shake off the crawling sensation between his shoulder blades. He hated being anywhere near Macnair and always felt soiled whenever he had to speak to the amoral cur.

Macnair had definitely become bolder and more inflexible in the past five years. Snape supposed that operating under the protection of the Ministry had something to do

with it.

The alleyway he had Apparated into was deserted, which was not surprising considering the late hour and the fact the garbage strewn all over the cobbles absolutely reeked. It was powerful enough to check Snape's hunger, although it was a close fight. The putrid stench succeeded in turning appetite into a roiling queasiness. Snape slipped into the main street and headed towards the safe house.

He had chosen his timing very carefully in order to catch Macnair as off-guard as possible. The man was slow to adapt to sudden changes, and rattling him straight after he had spent himself on some unfortunate whore was the best way to shake information loose. Macnair was normally very adept at physically radiating an impenetrable front, but he'd never learned to match the ability mentally. This made him susceptible to Legilimency, and he rarely picked up when it was being used on him. However, his thoughts had been somewhat hard to follow, so perhaps he'd been working on ways to avoid being clearly read.

One thing was very clear, though: Macnair was involved in something that he didn't want the Dark Lord to know about. Obviously, Brachoveitch was also mired in it. Snape didn't know much about Brachoveitch, who was something of a fringe-dweller when it came to the Death Eaters...not brave (or stupid) enough to step fully into that circle, but courageous enough to flirt with it provided he could easily dance back without losing anything.

Mentioning Levitin had been something of a gamble. It wasn't conclusive that Macnair and Levitin were more than passing acquaintances. Levitin certainly wasn't a Death Eater. He was meddlesome, susceptible to bribery, and considered shady in business dealings, but that was the extent of it. If Snape hadn't spotted Macnair talking to Levitin for a considerable amount of time outside of the Ministry, he wouldn't have taken the risk in mentioning Levitin's name at all. There was some connection there, but the exact nature of it would have to be determined, and soon.

What was most surprising was the reaction from Macnair at the mention of Lupin's name. There had been a confusing blur of images mirrored by a distinct sensation of alarm. Most of the figures in those thoughts were unfamiliar to Snape, but the hulking, grim face of Fenrir Greyback was not one of them. That psychopath would scare most people, but Macnair seemed especially concerned about him. Another possible connection that would need to be verified and examined, but Snape had few connections to that particular group. Werewolves were edgy at the best of times and extremely mistrustful of outsiders. Perhaps Lupin would be better suited to handling that, although knowing Lupin's overwhelming fear of Greyback, there'd be no guarantees the man would put himself in a position useful enough to glean any important information.

Snape reached the block where the safe house was located just as he summed up his thoughts on his visit to Macnair. Firstly, the man *had* been in Albania. There had been a faint squeeze of recognition in his thoughts when the country had been named. Second, he was involved in some plot that he didn't want anyone else knowing about, especially Voldemort, which therefore meant that thirdly, he was not in contact with Voldemort. Had he been, there was no possible way Macnair would have been able to keep the plot from the Dark Lord, who raked through people's minds like a rabid bear's claws as a matter of routine. Also certain was that Fenrir Greyback was involved in the plot, but as to whether he was one of the orchestrators or a target was unclear.

It raised more questions than it answered. However, one thing was evident: Macnair was going to strain his fat guts into a knot to find a way to kill Snape.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Ghosting in the Peripheral

Chapter 22 of 59

Some things that are just out of sight are lethal. The trouble is learning which ones they are before it's too late.

Lupin hadn't moved since Snape entered the dilapidated kitchen; he was either asleep or in pain. His untouched breakfast sat in front of his folded arms, a few strands of his greying hair stuck in the bowl as if he'd collapsed there unexpectedly. In stark contrast, Parr had never looked so alert as she worked her way through a ridiculously high pile of toast. Even the sight of food made Snape want to heave, let alone the smell. It took all his concentration to keep his mouth firmly clamped shut against the rising sensation of nausea as he walked over to the sink to get himself a glass of water. How much had he drunk last night? He'd lost track sometime early on, and it had gone rapidly downhill after that.

Parr studied Snape through narrowed eyes as she folded a piece of toast into her mouth with a spray of crumbs. He tried to ignore her as he mentally strained to recall some scrap of memory from the previous night. He'd walked in on Parr and Lupin having a loud debate in the fusty-smelling living room over whether socks should be ironed, which then spontaneously became an arm wrestling match that ended in the window getting broken and Lupin jammed into the fireplace with a wrenched shoulder and a chair leg stuffed down the back of his trousers.

"Are you both drunk?" he'd asked accusingly as Lupin extracted the chair leg and hauled himself up out of the fire-grate. "Do you think that's entirely appropriate right now?"

"Oh, for crying out loud, Severus," Lupin said, dismissing him by flapping a hand at him and collapsing into an armchair in a cloud of ashes. "Chara and I are having a discussion about laundry, that's all."

Snape rolled an empty bottle out of the way with his foot. "Yes, I can see how drinking yourselves into a stupor could make that subject more interesting," he sneered. "Must this discussion involve the both of you yelling at the top of your lungs? It has obviously escaped your memory that we are surrounded by Muggle dwellings, and you're supposed to be avoiding notice, not getting paralytic and destroying the house!"

"Who's paralytic?" Lupin had laughed, rolling a bloodshot eye at him. "Stop being such a stuffed shirt, Severus. It'll give you ulcers."

"Stuff your own shirt, Lupin," Snape had spat back.

"Well, it's giving *me* ulcers, then," Lupin sighed as Parr laughed heartily from her vantage point: cross-legged on the rickety table. "He wasn't this uptight at school," he told her with a wry smile. He sat up slightly as if a thought had occurred to him. "Oh, no, hang on, yes, he was." Parr laughed harder and tried to stifle it by jamming her face into the crook of her elbow.

"Let's not start the wonderful trip down memory lane," Snape hissed, trying to ignore Parr's muffled laughter off to his left. "Just shut the hell up and stop drawing the attention of the neighbours."

"Aw, come on, Severus, have a drink," Lupin suggested lightly. "It might help you to relax enough to let that pole out."

"What pole?"

"The one that's stuck up your arse," Lupin elaborated, pouring a drink out of a bottle of green sludge and toasting him. Parr had to clamp both hands over her mouth and

went red in the face with repressed laughter.

Snape fixed Lupin with a black glare. "Fuck you, you cirrhotic runt!" he announced clearly and turned to leave.

"I win!" Parr shouted gleefully and leapt off the table. "You owe me a Galleon, Remus. Come on, pay up." She stuck her hand out toward him.

"Add it to my tab," he told her and downed his glass of fruity green sludge in one gulp.

Parr blew a raspberry at him in disgust. "One day I'm calling that tab, wolf-boy, so you'd better start winning some bets to try and even the stakes a little." She turned away from him with a prim little sniff and perched back on the table again, fussing at the folded cuffs of her sleeves.

Lupin tilted his head to one side and squinted at Snape, who was still standing in the doorway watching the exchange. He looked back at Parr. "Double or nothing."

"Absolutely not," said Parr and started to comb her fingers through one of her long tresses of hair.

Lupin made chicken noises at her from his chair.

"You'll only regret it, Remus," she sang at him, twisting her hair around her index finger and looking at the ceiling. "He won't do it."

"Then you have nothing to worry about," Lupin said, smiling at her, balancing the heel of one foot on the toes of the other, legs stretched out in front of him.

Parr stopped combing her hair and pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I'm going to love being disgustingly wealthy," she said happily before kissing the extended index and middle fingers of her right hand. "You're on!" Lupin refilled his glass and toasted her. They both turned and looked at Snape hopefully.

What were they expecting him to do? He opened his mouth to tell them where they could stick their gambling, but Lupin started to smile broadly as if he'd already won, so he shut his mouth again. Lupin's smile faded as Parr's grew. Snape stepped back a pace out of the door only to have Parr uncross her legs and start towards Lupin again with her palm out. Snape stopped moving, and so did Parr. *What the hell was this bet about?* They were both staring at him again like he was a circus freak. He composed the sentence carefully before unleashing it on them both with as much venom as he could.

Lupin stuck his finger in his ear and twisted it. "I'm sorry, Severus, did you say 'galloping knob-rot' or 'rollicking fob-watch'?" He tried to fend off Parr who was diving for his pockets eagerly. "Get off! You haven't won! You haven't even *asked* him yet!"

"I don't need to, he won't do it!" Parr argued, scuffling with him and making him spill his drink.

"Triple and swap!" Lupin yelled, grabbing her sleeve in a vain effort to stop her from ransacking his pockets.

Parr snatched her arm out of his grasp and leapt back. "Now, *that's* a challenge!" She rolled her shoulders back and rubbed her hands together. She looked Snape up and down with a measuring expression. "Remus reckons you can't drink four glasses of firewhisky without passing out or puking up."

Snape stared back at her without blinking, turning her statement over in his mind. He should've known that Lupin would have made some comment to Parr about his lack of ability to deal with alcohol...the temptation at ridiculing him behind his back would've been too tantalising for the werewolf to resist. "Quadruple and claim," he challenged smoothly while his brain screamed at him that this was, most likely, an extremely bad idea.

It wasn't until after the sixth glass (*or was it the seventh?*) that he'd found out that wasn't the bet. Things got very hazy after that and the next thing he remembered was waking up face down on a saggy-springed bed with one boot missing, his sock on his hand, all his clothes on backwards and a rather large bruise on his hip.

Parr had stopped eating toast and was looking at him expectantly. Lupin still hadn't moved from his slumped position.

"*What?*" Snape spat at her and then had to stifle a moan as the pain from his hangover flared vivaciously through his skull like a hyperactive child on a sugar high.

Parr opened her mouth but was forestalled by Lupin's muffled voice emanating from the pile of creased clothes strewn over his side of the table. "Don't even think about it, Chara."

Parr's shoulders slumped slightly. "Aw, but why not, Remus?"

Lupin lifted his head slightly so that his bloodshot eyes peeked over his folded arms. "We discussed this already, and you agreed not to mention it."

Parr pressed her lips into a thin line before responding in a sulky tone. "Only because you made me."

Lupin barked a laugh and then winced as the pain of his own hangover increased tenfold at the sound. "I can't ever recall a time that I made you do something that you didn't want to do," he pointed out in a strained voice and rested his head back onto his arms.

Parr mulled this over for a few seconds. "Yes, I think that's true," she agreed. "In which case" She turned back to where Snape was standing by the sink. "can you do it again?" she asked, a broad grin pasted across her face.

He stared at her uncomprehendingly. "Do what?"

"Chara! *Don't!*" Remus cautioned sternly, his face screwed up in consternation.

"That thing you did last night with your *umph*" Lupin clamped his hand over Parr's mouth, cutting her off mid-sentence.

"You promised you wouldn't mention it!" Lupin hissed at her.

She pried his fingers away easily. "How can I not mention it? It was the high point of the evening!"

"What are you both talking about?" Snape had a sinking feeling in his stomach that had nothing to do with his hangover. They stared at him, wide-eyed. A stupid grin bloomed across Lupin's pasty features.

"Are you saying you don't remember?"

Parr started to laugh quietly in her throat.

The sensation of panic started to rise in Snape's body, and he squinted hard as if it would help him recall the part of the evening they were sniggering about.

"Well, I have to say it was something of an eye-opener," Lupin mused. He frowned at Snape. "Are you *sure* you don't remember? I know it's burnt on *my* memory... unfortunately." He brushed his hair back and realised it was soaked with milk and crusted with cornflakes from being stuck in his breakfast bowl.

"Was it before or *after* the table got broken?" Chara asked Lupin innocently.

Lupin wiped his sleeve across his milk-sodden hair. "Before. After. During." He sighed heavily. "I honestly can't recall; it blended into one long circus act."

"I broke the table?" Snape asked hesitantly.

Lupin passed a hand over his mouth to hide a smile. "No, we *all* did."

Snape gaped at him stupidly. *What the hell had gone on last night?!*

"You *have* to do it again," Parr insisted, eyes gleaming at him. "I've never seen anything like it!"

Lupin grabbed her arm and started to drag her out of the kitchen. "Enough. It's time we were going."

Parr wriggled in his grasp determinedly. "No, I have to see it, Remus! Without the aid of alcohol!" Lupin continued to pull her across the floor and towards the door of the kitchen.

The expression on Snape's face mutely asked the question of Lupin as he managed to wrestle Chara out through the doorway with some force. "Well, let's just say that now I know the reason why you're in Slytherin," the werewolf revealed. The door banged shut behind him, muffling Parr's squawking protests and leaving Snape in a heightened sense of paranoia and utter confusion.

It began as all the others did: with disorientation. Wherever he was standing, it was dark, or perhaps his eyes had not yet become accustomed to such a low light level, because the longer he waited, the more details the surroundings yielded.

Had he been here before? He didn't know. Outlines of objects were vaguely familiar, but the complexities foreign as if these objects had only ever been glanced at peripherally. The juxtaposition of the recognisable and the strange was jarring and unsettling, as if one mocked the other merely by existing in such proximity.

Ah, yes, he did know this place. It was the contradiction that jogged his memory. He sighed, slightly irritated. Why was he here? Now. Again. There was nothing new here, no fresh detail, no reason for him to be back in this doorless room. It all seemed such a waste of time.

Ribbons of dust glittered like swathes of minute stars through the dimness. He watched them for a while, but even they had become tedious and uninteresting some years ago. You could only look at the same stuff so many times and pretend that it wasn't dull.

He turned to face the wall behind him where the boarded-up window was. That was where the light that caught the floating dust was coming from. It snuck in through hairline cracks and chinks between the splintered wooden planks, more determined than it had reason to be. It was just a dark room, full of junk. What the hell did it want to get into here for? Maybe they could swap places? He was sick of getting dragged back in here. It was like a vapid person's idea of purgatory.

He bent down slightly to try and peer through one of the cracks. Perhaps there was something more exciting outside, but it was too bright to let his eyes actually see anything. What if he levered one of the planks off?

Inexplicably, a gnawing sense of dread flared up inside him, and his hand stopped midway to the pitted wood. No. He should leave it. The window was boarded up for a reason, but whatever that reason was, it eluded him. He sighed and stepped a pace back, looking forlornly at the window like an option that he'd briefly considered as part of some unrealistic delusion.

There was a slight sound behind him, like the shift of a foot on stone. The dread turned into an icy panic. There wasn't supposed to be anyone else here! His nails dug into the palms of his hands until he thought he could feel blood leak out along the knuckles, although it could just as likely be sweat. He didn't dare look to see which it was because he knew that if he moved, whoever was behind him would know he was there.

Idiot! a part of him hissed. *You're standing right in front of a badly boarded-up window! How can they not see you?*

But in the way of such nightmares, the part of him that was wholly here knew...*knew* that if he remained completely still, he wouldn't be seen.

How does that even make sense? the conscious fragment persisted. *If they can't see you, then why are they coming towards you?*

No, no, no, they can't be! He screwed his eyes up tight as if that would hide him even more completely from this... lurker, this intruder that had somehow found their way into this room that had no door.

The air turned thick.

His body turned to stone.

The intruder stopped right behind him.

He couldn't see it. After all, his eyes were shut and he was turned away, but he knew... he felt the intruder reach out towards him with a hand that, when it touched him, would burn straight through him, would sear his flesh straight to the bone and turn him to ash.

If he touches you, this is where it ends.

A finger brushed his shoulder.

Snape sat bolt upright in the chair, almost tipping it backwards. He had to grab at the kitchen table reflexively to stop the chair from skidding across the tiles and dumping him on the floor. The movement slammed his brain against the inside of his skull like an overripe fruit. He doubled over with a groan, pressing the heels of his hands to his forehead.

A whole new world of hatred for Lupin opened up to him. He vowed to put a particularly effective laxative in the next bottle of Wolfsbane Potion he gave the bastard. He might even hold him down and force feed it to the moth-eaten stray to make doubly sure he got the full effect.

He reached out towards the kitchen table and stuck a hand straight into a pile of drool. Yes, Lupin was going to spend the next three months on the toilet, crying, and that was just for starters.

Snape raised his bloodshot eyes from the floor and wiped the side of his face with the palm of his hand. How could he feel like this and not be dead? Or not bleeding out of his nose. Or drenched in vomit.

His stomach imploded at that thought, and he stuck his head between his knees. Perhaps he should just stay like this for a few minutes.

Considering how he'd felt after Lupin and Parr had left, he'd thought it unwise to try Apparating back to Hogwarts while sporting a hangover the size of a Quidditch pitch. He'd probably end up in the Black Lake, twenty feet from the surface. So he'd put his head down on the kitchen table to stop the room from spinning and promptly passed out.

He had no idea how much time had slipped by. It didn't seem to matter. If anything, he felt ten times worse than before, and sitting here, bent over with his head between his knees and his hair brushing the floor wasn't helping.

He spent the next five minutes trying to stand up. It took him another five to get out of the kitchen. Even the sound of his feet moving across the threadbare carpet sounded blaringly loud. Judging from the painfully echoing silence, the house was empty except for him and his unnaturally loudly churning stomach.

Snape edged carefully into the doorway of the lounge room, focussing with some difficulty on the pieces of broken table scattered everywhere. He let his head fall forward into his hand. It wasn't the fact that he didn't remember what had happened last night that was the problem. It was that other people *did*. He rested his shoulder against the doorframe and sighed. Hanging around here at the scene of the crime was just morbid.

Fortunately, he fell over only once on his way out of the house.

The woman continued to look at him with a slight frown and her small, rosebud lips pursed into a plump little pout, the open book in her hand forgotten for now. Snape was pretty sure he'd wiped all the drool off his face back at the house, but her expression made him wonder if he was mistaken. Perhaps it had been a bad idea to come here.

He'd been to this bookshop before, but it had been many years ago. The inside hadn't changed much...a lot less dusty and disorganised, but he had no recollection of this woman being here then. He supposed that it was possible that the owner had just relegated the odious task of serving customers to someone else.

Snape cleared his throat and tried not to wince. "I'm looking for literature on theriomorphs."

The woman's eyebrows floated upwards, and she stared at him with her large, blue-green eyes.

Several seconds of unpleasant silence passed, which ordinarily he'd favour as he was usually the one instigating it, but right now he felt that if he stood still for too long, his legs might give out. This woman didn't look like the kind of person who'd welcome a crapulent wizard collapsing in her shop. He gritted his teeth and waited for her to respond. She gazed steadily at him and gave a peculiar cough that went off like an explosion deep in the centre of his brain. He tried not to flinch and stared back. He noticed her eyes flick briefly past his shoulder before refastening on his face.

Snape turned, with only a slight wobble, to find another woman standing a foot behind him. He recoiled in surprise, backing into the shop counter. The second woman seemed more surprised than he was. With the same coloured eyes and hair as the woman behind the counter, she had to be a relative. Her mouth was wider, and her nose bent ever so slightly off to one side, but the similarity was unmistakable. Perhaps a cousin, or even a sister from the apparent similarities in age. He hadn't noticed her upon entering the shop, but it was possible she had been lurking amongst the bookshelves.

It was like having four skewers jammed into his head with those two women staring at him. He tried straightening his coat surreptitiously and cursed himself for not being under better control, hangover or not. He saw the woman in front of him flick her eyes quickly at her relative and shake her head. Then she stepped back several paces, touched two fingers of one hand to her lips briefly and waited, eyes fixed on the floor.

"Arla will show you the appropriate section," said the woman behind him in a voice that was lower than Snape had been expecting out of such a porcelain face as hers. She probably only barely reached his shoulder in height and was finely boned like a bird with shoulder-length, dark blonde hair. He noticed she didn't blink very much.

Arla cleared her throat gently to prompt him. Snape didn't like the idea of the other woman's eyes drilling into his back like augers, but he turned and followed Arla nonetheless.

"We have several works on theriomorphs, mostly by English authors, although there are two or three from the eastern countries, and if memory serves, one by Cuaron that came in from Mexico earlier this week." Arla had the same timbre of voice as her relative, though the latter had said nothing beyond that one sentence since he had entered the bookshop. "Most of the books discuss several theriomorphic lines, but we do have some that handle specific shifters. There's a particularly thorough collection of essays on kemaloids and sobaki, and a two-part tome on ailuranthropes." She turned into a narrow corridor between two imposing shelves and tipped her head back to read the book spines at the very top of the shelf on her left. She edged along the floor on tiptoes. "Is there a specific shifter you need information on?" she asked in a slightly strained voice, wiggling her fingers slightly as she searched for the required section.

"Yes."

Arla turned her head and gazed at him with that slightly surprised expression, waiting for him to elaborate.

Snape stared at her hand. He noticed the nail on her third finger was missing. Arla realised where he was looking and closed her hand into a fist calmly and let it fall by her side. There was a very good imitation of her sister's pursed mouth expression on her face. They had to be sisters...the likeness was too strong for something more distant. The silence stretched out, punctuated only by the sound of Arla's sister turning a page in her book and the muted noise of the crowd outside in Diagon Alley.

Frustratingly, Arla seemed patient enough to actually wait for Snape to extend his response beyond one word. However, he wasn't in the mood for a staring match. Quite frankly, he just wanted to be left alone.

Arla wrinkled her button nose at him and dropped her gaze to the floor. "Ah, well, the books are on the top shelf. I'd get them down, but I'm not able to right now. I think you're tall enough, but let me know if you need a ladder." She swept back around him, eyes still averted, and disappeared around the corner.

It took Snape less than half an hour to discover the bookshop didn't have what he was looking for. However, he was starting to feel better now, the shop was very quiet, and the book of ailuranthropes was quite intriguing. He got some way through it before he realised that it must have passed closing time.

"I'm sorry you didn't find what you were looking for," said the porcelain-faced woman behind the counter as she handed him his change.

"What makes you think I didn't?" he asked flatly, picking the ailuranthrope book up from the counter. Now that he was feeling better, his customary rancour was back.

The woman arched her eyebrow. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

Snape thinned his lips. "No."

The woman spread her delicate hands. "QED," she replied with the ghost of a smile and a glint in her eye.

He was glad his headache was gone because it meant he could slam the shop door behind him as loudly as he wanted.

Chapter Twenty-Three - Temper

Chapter 23 of 59

Even the most patient will snap and let slip.

Lupin was trying his best to write legibly despite the fact that the quill he was using should have been thrown away some months ago. He sighed and pushed the splintered end together with his fingernail so that it didn't splay out so much and muddy up his writing. Sometimes you just had to make do with what you had. Acknowledging that fact didn't make it any more palatable, though. He'd said it so often to himself that its effectiveness was starting to lessen rather markedly. He went back to his research.

Make the best with what you had. It had become an adage graven into his bones. It was the only way he was able to pick himself up each morning and trudge through the day. He'd spent most of his life dealing with his lycanthropy alone. Oh, he'd had friends who supported him when he was at school, and for a few years beyond that, but they'd treated it like some glorious secret that injected spice and excitement in their lives. Lupin knew they didn't really understand how pervasive and destructive the condition was to him. Maybe Sirius understood more than the others. Peter went along with it because everyone else did...that had been Peter's style. James just treated it like an excuse to flout school rules. Lupin shrugged to himself slightly. It was an ungenerous summation, but accurate. Regardless, it did make a difference to have them there every month.

But now, with Sirius on the run, James dead, and Peter hiding like the craven rat he always had been, there hadn't been anyone to prop him up. It might not have been so bad had he not been in such dire straits financially. With no family to support him, Lupin had to make his own way through a world that aimed an emphatically jaundiced eye at lycanthropy. It was bitterly hard. Nobody trusted you...they automatically thought you were either violent or mad, often both. With the ever-present risk of infecting others, werewolves found themselves kicked to the side of society, if not actively stomped on. Such treatment bred more than light antipathy amongst werewolves to non-lycanthropes, which in some had developed into a full-blown hatred. Greyback was one of those, although he was undoubtedly mad as well...a combination that had seen many die in a truly awful and degrading manner and others survive to eke out a half-life on the pity of others, as well as their own ingenuity and determination. It ground even the most strong-willed down until their spirits fractured.

Losing his teaching position at Hogwarts the previous year hadn't come as any surprise to Lupin. In fact, he had been expecting it to happen much earlier than it did. He'd tried not to let it get to him, but it had. Such injustices were getting harder to bear, not easier. There were some who were sympathetic to his plight. The Weasleys often sheltered and fed him, but although Molly fussed when he thanked them for their generosity and said his farewells, he made sure he never overstayed his welcome. If that meant that sometimes he went without food or a warm place to sleep, so be it. He grimaced. However, that was due in part to his drinking, which was starting to get out of control again. If it came to a decision between food and alcohol, he found himself choosing the latter. It was a bad choice, and he knew it full well, but drinking made him happy, at least for a short time, and short times of happiness were all he could get these days.

He stopped writing. No, that wasn't entirely true. Things had gotten a little better. He had work, albeit poorly paid, from the Ministry, a place to sleep, and people who knew what he was going through...perhaps one of whom that showed more compassion than she should. His mind skittered away from that thought quickly.

"Colloquial has three ells, Lupin."

Lupin jumped and splattered ink all over his carefully lettered parchment. "Shit, Severus, I wish you wouldn't *do that!*" He dragged his wand out and fixed the mess as best he could. He squinted at the result. It wasn't too bad, he supposed. He looked up at where Snape was standing over him and slid another page of parchment over the one he had been writing on. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to see that your spelling hasn't improved since fifth-year," Snape replied snidely.

Lupin's eyes dropped to the book Snape was holding. "Ailuranthropes? Are you thinking of getting a cat?"

"No, you imbecile, it's about theriomorphs that shift into cats," Snape shot back in a derisive tone.

"Didn't know you were into reading about that sort of stuff, Severus," said Lupin politely.

"They didn't have what I wanted. Apparently all the copies of *Why Lycanthrope Males Turn Into Whining Bitcheshad* sold out."

Lupin gritted his teeth in a parody of a smile. "Next time try looking under the editions of *Tall Git Monthly*. I take it from the downswing in courtesy...look, I can spell *that* ..." Lupin grabbed a piece of scrap parchment and inked the word in large letters. "...that your hangover has abated?" He waved his spelling in Snape's face, narrowly missing getting his fingers snapped off as the parchment was snatched out of his hand.

"Yes, no thanks to you," Snape retorted with a sneer. "And if you think that rubbing alcohol with dirt in it was firewhisky, then we should hold a funeral for your tastebuds. Probably in the cemetery plot right next to your liver."

"Strange how I recall you downing rather more of that rubbing alcohol than someone who claims to have such a fine taste in beverages normally would, Severus," said Lupin, rolling his eyes.

Snape screwed up the bit of paper in his hand and flicked it so that it hit Lupin smack in the middle of his forehead. "Here's your spelling test back." He stalked off and sat heavily in the dusty armchair by the fireplace.

"That's three for dinner, is it, then?" sighed Lupin, returning to his research.

"There's no way I'd touch anything you've cooked," Snape pointed out, most of his face hidden behind his now-open book. "It'd probably have hair balls in it."

Lupin's temper broke. "Well, f..."

A loud shriek from somewhere upstairs interrupted his long-overdue tantrum.

Snape lowered his book and peered at Lupin over the cover. "What the hell's going on up there?"

The sound of something breakable impacting on an immovable object followed.

"Shit!" barked Lupin and nearly knocked the table over as he launched himself at the doorway. He was halfway up the stairs, with Snape not far behind, when Parr shrieked again.

Lupin skidded round the corner at the top of the stairs just as the bathroom door virtually exploded outwards in several jagged pieces, stopping him in his tracks. A volley of objects followed, smashing against the opposite wall: a hairbrush, the bathmat, two bottles of lotion, the toilet seat and a sock that flopped pathetically onto the carpet.

"Merlin's bollocks, what are you standing there for?" Snape hissed at Lupin, his wand clamped in his fist. He shoved past Lupin who grabbed at his coat.

"Just wait a minute!"

Snape gawked incredulously at him.

A mirror flew out of the bathroom and shattered loudly on the skirting board.

"What are you: insane or frightened, you ridiculous man, and I use that noun in poor context, Lupin," Snape noted, narrowing his eyes over his shoulder. "Get your grubby paws off my coat!"

Lupin refused to let go. "Just shut up and wait," he snapped testily.

A bar of soap, a boot, and the shower curtain rail blasted out of the bathroom as a fat black spider scuttled out and over the debris littering the floor of the small hallway. It scabbled its way up the wall a couple of feet and stopped.

Several seconds of silence passed.

Snape tried to move forward again but Lupin held onto the back of his coat resolutely. They both stared at the spider.

"Wait for it," Lupin whispered.

The spider started to dart to one side, but it made it no further than an inch before Parr's knife skewered it to the wall with a reverberating 'thunk'.

Lupin let go of Snape's coat and chuckled. Snape turned to look at him.

"She never misses," Lupin explained with a wide grin.

Parr stalked out of the bathroom, barefoot and clad in little more than her underwear. Snape reflexively slapped his hand over Lupin's eyes. Lupin tutted and tried to pull Snape's hand away from his face.

Parr wrenched the knife out of the wall, and the now-dead spider dropped to the floor with a small thump.

"Sorry about the mess, Remus," she said, scowling at the dead arachnid and wiping the flat of the blade on the seat of her underpants. "I'll clean it up afterwards." It didn't seem to bother her that there were two men staring at her in her underwear. "I might need help fixing the door, though." She padded back into the bathroom, her profile sharp with irritation.

"No problem," Lupin called after her, still trying to wrest Snape's hand away. "Severus, what are you *doing*? I've seen her with less on than that. If anything, you should be covering your own eyes." He turned and went back down the stairs.

He was halfway through writing a sentence when the inevitable question came.

"What do you mean, you've seen her with less on than that?"

Lupin exhaled heavily through his nose before answering. "It's not what you think, Severus."

"How could you possibly know what I'm thinking, Lupin?"

Lupin stopped writing and looked up at Snape, who was loitering ominously in the doorway with suspicion tainted on his every feature. "Ah, how many years have I known you, Severus?" he asked rhetorically. "I think I can make a fairly good guess at what goes on in your head." He went back to his writing.

"Thankfully it isn't what goes on in your febrile mind," came the retort.

Lupin's earlier crankiness returned like a shot. "Well, I don't know about you, Severus, but I don't consider seeing someone who is unclothed, beaten black and blue and with a shattered leg as an object of desire! I assure you that sexual thoughts were the last thing on my mind at that point," he snapped. "Now if you don't mind, I'm *busy*!" He angrily scratched out the rest of the paragraph.

"When was this?" Snape persisted relentlessly, like a child fixated on a new toy he knew he couldn't have.

"Oh, for fu..." Lupin dropped his quill and put his head in his hands. "Just forget it, please? I've neither the time nor the inclination to put up with this right now, so let me save you the trouble when I tell you that it's none of your business!"

Snape drifted into the room, planted his hands on the rickety table, and leaned towards Lupin. "My, my, how tetchy. Now I'm *definitely* intrigued."

Lupin glared at him over his fingers. "Don't... bother!" he said clearly and emphatically.

Snape blinked and tilted his head to one side. "What's Greyback up to?"

Lupin had Snape's collar clenched in his fist before the question had finished leaving the man's mouth. Snape was treated to one of Lupin's rare bursts of temper from two inches away.

"*Never* mention that name in this house!"

Snape tried to look at Lupin without going cross-eyed, but it was difficult with the man's face so close to his own. "You really need to get a grip, Lupin, otherwise I might think that you're a pathetic coward."

Lupin shook him like a dog with a rat in its mouth. "Idiot! I'm not the one you need to be concerned about!"

The heel of Snape's hand caught him sharply in the chest, pushing him back and breaking his grip on Snape's collar.

"Threaten me again, and I'll bind a choke-chain around your neck until you learn some manners!" Snape spat at him, his black eyes burning.

"Out!" Lupin yelled at him, his temper fragmenting into even smaller pieces. "Or this table will be broken once again, but this time it'll be across your face!"

Snape deliberately took his time in straightening his coat prissily, fetching his book and sweeping haughtily out of the house.

Chapter Twenty-Four - Seevy

Chapter 24 of 59

Linnaeus never intended to cause confusion.

After many years of leading the type of life that he did, Snape had learned to trust his instincts. They'd saved him on numerous occasions and let him down in less than a handful of incidences. Right now they were telling him that he was missing several very important pieces of information...the sort of information that kept a person out of trouble. He stared blankly over his interlaced fingers, elbows propped on the table, managing to ignore the complaints of his stomach, at least for a short while. The other teachers at the table were still only halfway through their midday meals. He hadn't even begun his own yet.

Lupin was being uncharacteristically secretive about something. It was uncharacteristic in that the man was actually being successful in maintaining the secrecy. Normally Lupin had all the guile of a used teabag, and whatever it was about, he'd gotten extremely cranky at Snape for showing interest.

Snape hadn't been standing in the lounge room of the safe house for long before he'd let Lupin know he was there, but it was long enough to see that the werewolf had been scratching out something rather unusual at the rickety table. From what Snape could tell, it had looked like research of some form. The language had been academically dry and with at least one footnote. Unfortunately, there hadn't been much written on the page beyond two paragraphs, so the actual content had been fairly ambiguous in terms of the subject matter. He'd sensed that Lupin had been about to look up, so had given his presence away in an attempt to disguise the fact that he'd been reading what Lupin had written for longer than was polite. He hadn't missed the way Lupin had covered the parchment surreptitiously to conceal his writing.

Whatever it was that Lupin was working on must be important. The man wasn't naturally a scholar. He read and had quite a good memory for facts, but that was about the extent of it. He'd been a fair student...certainly not one that went above and beyond the requirements. So there was one tangled mystery that needed unpicking.

Snape tapped his front teeth with his thumbnails, filtering bits of lunchtime conversation out from amongst the general cacophony in the Great Hall. Flitwick was gassing on about some trull that'd been exposed in the *Daily Prophet* for peddling talismans to stupid tourists, claiming they protected the wearer against disease and enhanced virility. The only thing the trinkets had protected against was common sense and the wearer's ability to hang on to their Galleons. Morons. Vector was droning on about not being able to attend an Arithmancy conference in Sweden. Something to do with square roots and backstabbing that was incomprehensible to Snape. Tedious. Maxime was displaying her total lack of grace in complaining about the fish course being too awkward...*awkward?*...while that moving mountain Hagrid made sympathetic, if overly-loud, noises back at her. Behemoths. Karkaroff was going for a world record of self-serving flattery aimed at Dumbledore, who was valiantly rebuffing some of the man's more pointed questions about the Hogwarts curriculum and attempting to steer the conversation to the latest development in stay-up socks. Dull. The only one who wasn't flapping their lips about trivialities, apart from himself, was McGonagall, although she was giving him cautious looks in case he decided to start knocking stuff off the table and into her lap again. He stopped jiggling his leg and looked up at the ceiling in thought.

It was also apparent that Lupin knew a lot more about the cause of Parr's injuries than he was willing to reveal. It was obvious by now that Parr had been in some sort of accident or fight, if not several. It hadn't escaped Snape how many injuries she was actually nursing, to say nothing of the scarring. When she'd emerged from the bathroom, he'd seen that she owned a veritable road map of scars over her body. Some had been fairly light and neat, but a few were keloidal and ragged, suggesting that they had come from serious tissue trauma or had healed badly. There had been a particularly ugly one running down the length of her left leg, which agreed with Lupin's mention of a shattered leg. Both arms were bandaged from knuckles to elbow, her neck was still wrapped, and one foot sported a small dressing just behind the toes. The woman looked liked she'd gone through a meat grinder and somehow survived. One doubt that had been removed was whether or not the scar that slashed across her left eye affected her sight. There was no way she could have skewered that spider to the wall so accurately with damaged vision.

From her physique, it was likely Parr had a very strong constitution. Where some women turned androgynous or bullish from an excess of physical exercise, Parr had gone curvilinear. She was short, but the contours in her legs represented the sort of muscle that would allow her to kick through a wall with little resistance. Snape made a mental note to stay clear of her feet when goading her; otherwise, he'd probably end up with a shattered leg himself.

After that unfortunate weekend, he'd found it a little awkward to look at Parr during class. He wasn't in the habit of seeing his students in their underwear and therefore was not entirely sure how to process the experience. Being Head of Slytherin did mean that there was occasion...thankfully rare...where he would catch his students in some misdemeanour that involved a state of undress, whether intentional or not. In such incidences, the troublemakers managed to look idiotic more than anything, often because it tended to be the boys who had a problem in dressing appropriately as the situation demanded, which had Snape either grinding his teeth in irritation or shouting in outright anger.

But Parr wasn't a teenager and she certainly wasn't a boy...he hadn't needed to see the generous swell of her chest or backside to know that, although it had been an interesting reinforcement of fact. He smirked briefly at that thought. The few female students who'd had the misfortune of being seen by him whilst they were partially undressed had been mortified and continued to be so for some time after the occurrence. Parr had stared straight at Snape during class without a shred of embarrassment at having been seen in her underwear. In fact, the only time she had gotten even vaguely flustered was when he'd caught her staring at his nose and he had absolutely no idea why. He'd experienced a brief bout of panic, wondering if it had something to do with what he'd done whilst inebriated, but covered it by snapping at her to pay attention to what she was doing. Snape liked to think that had restored the balance of power in his favour, but not knowing just exactly how he'd disgraced himself whilst inebriated meant that the effect could have been negligible. He still succumbed to wiping his hand under his nose when no-one was looking, just in case there had been something there that shouldn't have been. In the end, he decided to ignore what had happened over the weekend, since Parr seemed to be giving every impression that she was doing the same.

He flicked his eyes over to the Ravenclaw table where Parr was sitting. She was writing a letter at the same time as eating an apple, the elbow of the arm not writing pinning the parchment to the table ineptly. She was making a mess of at least one action that he could see. Merlin's beard, she ate like a pig! Snape shook his head and started on his own lunch.

He hadn't gotten that far into it when an owl landed on the staff table in front of him. The tiny bib of white under its beak identified it. Snape relieved it of its message scroll and fished out a piece of string from his pocket. McGonagall made a sound of disgust as he Transfigured it into a mouse and tossed it to the owl.

"Severus, do you have to do that at the table? It's terribly unhygienic!"

Snape rolled his eyes at McGonagall. "I notice it never bothers you when that fluffball bird of yours shakes its feather-dust and mites all over your food, Minerva."

McGonagall's lips pursed. "That's different," she countered primly.

"Obviously," Snape responded drily, unrolling the delivered message. He frowned at the symbols on it: three dots, a six, and a circle with the right hemisphere blackened. Trint had found something nothing urgent, judging from the numeral. He shrugged slightly and stuffed the message in his pocket.

He was about to go back to his meal when he caught sight of Moody loitering near the doors. It looked like he was haranguing a group of Hufflepuffs about something: no doubt in over-reaction to some minor infraction. Hufflepuffs rarely did anything on the scale of mischief that Gryffindors or Slytherins did. However, Snape had looked up just as Parr was leaving the Great Hall and passing by Moody. She got a few feet beyond the grizzled lump of a man and then stopped abruptly. She stood there for a few seconds and then slowly backed up until she was right behind him, her left side facing his back. Inexplicably, Moody gave no indication that he knew she was there, though with that ridiculous charmed glass eye of his, Snape couldn't understand how that was possible. Parr's head turned slightly to the left, and he thought he saw her nostrils flare. Her head turned back towards the doors. Moody started to punch his finger in the air in front of one of the Hufflepuff's faces, oblivious to Parr's proximity. Was she listening to what he was saying? It would have been hard not to. The man seemed completely unfamiliar with the concept of volume control when it came to speaking. Shouting seemed to be *de rigueur* for Moody's style of communication.

"You mean whisper?" Moody had bellowed once when Snape had suggested that the man didn't need to yell and tried introducing him to the notion of lowering his voice. "What are you, hypersensitive in the eardrums? Not everyone needs to slide about, hissing like you do, Snape. If you don't like it, stuff a Niffler in your ear!" The conversation, if it could ever have been described as such, had ended at that point.

Parr finally drifted slowly away from Moody and out of the Great Hall. Snape narrowed his eyes. What on earth had that been about?

"and if you cast your pallid and feeble minds back to fourth-year, you'll recall the significance of ensuring that you have not only the correct genus but the appropriate species as well. Errors on the part of stupidity are no less damaging than those made maliciously, and I expect each and every one of you to study sufficiently to prevent

such an error from ever occurring."

Snape paced slowly back and forth in front of the blackboard, his thumbnail scoring a line around the stick of chalk he held in his fingers and the hem of his teaching robes trailing behind him across the stone floor in a sibilant counterpoint to his voice. The scratch of quill on parchment gave the impression that his students were diligently noting down what he was telling them, but he'd noticed that Lynaghan was nodding off. The boy was pretending to review his notes, forehead propped into his hand between thumb and forefinger. Unfortunately, the spread of his hand, whilst covering his undoubtedly closed eyes, couldn't obscure the slack mouth that had begun to drool ever so slightly out of one corner.

Snape continued his leisurely pace to the right side of the classroom, pausing briefly to turn on his heel so he could head back in Lynaghan's direction. "The first part of chapter fourteen in your textbooks lists some of the more common adverse reactions to an Anti-Nausea Potion that has been brewed with the incorrect *Canis* hair. Be sure to familiarise yourself with each one. The remainder of the chapter covers some of the more common uses of this ingredient. Of particular note is the use of *Canis simensis citernii* hair over the past three centuries due to its efficacy in reducing and correcting erratic peristalsis in the small intestine. However, due to increasing rarity of the Ethiopian wolf in the Rift Valley, *Canis mesomelas* has become an acceptable alternative." He snapped off the end of the chalk stick and flicked it at Lynaghan. The white pellet hit the boy square in the chin, startling him back to alertness. "Ten points from Gryffindor's already meagre tally, Mr Lynaghan. It seems that *Canis simensis citernii* is not the only thing becoming pathetically low in numbers," Snape added acidly with a twist to his mouth. He swirled towards the blackboard.

"Now, for your homework, I expect you to write six inches of parchment on each of the following *Canis* species with regard to use of their hair in various potions and with particular emphasis on the reasoning behind their usage." The groans of disappointment were especially noticeable. Snape turned slowly. "We can make it ten inches, if you prefer," he added smoothly, raising his eyebrows slightly. The sudden silence made him sneer. "I didn't think so." He turned back to the blackboard and began writing in large, angular letters.

"*Canis aureus syriacus*..." The chalk screeched sharply across the surface of the blackboard, making everyone wince. "...*Canis latrans lestes*, *Canis lupus cubanensis*, *Canis latrans thamnus*... do not confuse *C L thamnus* with *C L texensis* or you will automatically receive a failing grade... *Canis epitos paredes*, *Canis vitric*..." The chalked stopped its torturous slide. The students looked up at the sudden halt in Snape's recitation, wondering if someone else was about to get used as target practice. The Potions master remained staring at the blackboard for several long seconds before tilting his head to one side. The students began to fidget, unsure as to what was going on. Snape lifted the end of the chalk off the blackboard and used the side of his palm to slowly rub off some of the letters. Some students craned their necks to get a better look. Snape rolled the chalk between his fingers, still looking fixedly at the blackboard.

The students stared at each other. Was this good or bad? Not having a previous experience to such a pause in their lesson meant that they reached for the logical conclusion based on what experiences they *did* have in Potions classes: it was, most likely, bad. Was Snape suffering from a mental glitch? He continued to stand there, considering the remaining two letters of the last name on the list with an intensity that befuddled the students. Their eyes roved over the two initials, trying to discern why they seemed so important to Snape. After all, how much information could the letters cee and vee hold?

The class know-it-all, Ellie Ritter, was just considering whether or not to clear her throat as a subtle prompt when Snape continued speaking as if nothing strange had occurred. "*Canis vitriculos destro*." He filled in the rest of the letters roughly and tossed the chalk onto his desk with a flick of his wrist. "To be handed in on Monday, without exception," he added with an irritable hitch to his shoulders. "The day's agony is at an end. Out."

Snape turned back to the blackboard, ignoring the exiting students. He stared blankly, running the pads of his fingers over his thumb for a few minutes before striding out of his classroom in a rustle of black fabric.

Hagrid was just about to take Fang out for a turn about the grounds when a knock on the door of his cabin sounded. Fang, ever alert to even the vaguest indications that he was about to go out for a walk, whined slightly in consternation.

"s alright, boy," said Hagrid, ruffling the dog's head with a large hand. "Don't think it'll be anythin' that'll take too long." Perhaps it was Harry. Hagrid smiled to himself. He always enjoyed it when Harry visited. It made him feel... wanted.

Hagrid had been pleased as punch and proud to boot when Dumbledore had asked him to take over as the teacher for Care of Magical Creatures. After all, Hagrid had been overjoyed at being taken on as Keeper of Keys and Grounds at the school, especially considering that whole mess with Aragog all those years ago. Jobs were hard enough to come by for a half-giant like him. But to be a teacher? Well, that had made his head spin. If only his dad had been there to see it.

Taking the teacher role hadn't been easy, as he knew it wouldn't be. Some of the other teachers regarded him with suspicion and a little disdain. Hagrid was perhaps not as learned as they, but that didn't mean he was stupid. No-one was outright dismissive of his knowledge, but he noticed the looks of unease or exclusion that came his way. He tried to ignore it, but it hurt nonetheless. A few seemed pleased to have him alongside them. Hooch was always beaming at him and asking how he was doing. Dumbledore was encouraging, of course, but then that was Dumbledore. He encouraged everyone to do their best without making them feel like they were under pressure. The most surprising ally had been Filch. Hagrid had always been a little wary of Filch. The man tended to appear at the most awkward times, such as just after Hagrid had knocked something over in a hallway or tracked in a trail of muddy footprints through the castle, which tended to elicit a breathless stream of admonishment and tetchiness from the man. But when he'd heard that Hagrid had gotten promoted, he'd nodded approvingly and congratulated him with what seemed to be genuine sincerity. Hagrid had been a little confused, wondering if he were missing something. For a brief, yet shaming moment, he had wondered if Filch had been happy because it meant that some of the duties that Hagrid had held were to be passed on to Filch. However, he'd shaken that thought away as he had shaken Filch's hand and thought no more of the reasons behind the approval.

Hagrid tried his best to integrate himself into the Hogwarts faculty, but he was perceptive enough to know that it couldn't be rushed. The faculty was a beast with complex and convoluted behaviours, mysterious motivations and proclivities. It needed to be handled gently, patiently. It was very much like dealing with a particularly skittish animal that was unused to human contact. So, Hagrid stood back and waited for it to come to him. What that meant was that he was stuck somewhere between two worlds...not an uncommon sensation for Hagrid. He was sort of faculty, but sort of... not, which meant he never knew for sure where to put himself outside of class time, so he tended to retreat to his cabin. Having Harry, Ron and Hermione visit him always put a smile on his face and made him feel a part of something. He was sure none of the other teachers had students visit them willingly, although Flitwick seemed to have a good rapport with his students.

But it was the last person that he expected that had knocked on his door. Hagrid blinked in surprise and experienced a knot of confusion. He tried not to let it show.

"Oh, hallo, Professor Snape," he began haltingly. "Is... uh... everythin' all right?" He looked past the man, wondering what had brought him here.

Snape stared up at him with those inscrutable black eyes. "Yes," he replied laconically, the word taking on an ethereal form in a puff of fogged breath. The day had been bitterly cold, and the evening was shaping up to be frigid, even before Snape's appearance.

Hagrid shuffled from foot to foot in the doorway, unsure of how to handle the situation. Snape always made him feel off-balance. The man was tall...well, for a human, Hagrid supposed...and carried a valid reputation for being notoriously bad-tempered, but he was indiscriminate with that quality, treating almost everyone with an irritated acerbity. So in that sense, Hagrid never felt singled out for a larger dose of scorn over anyone else. Being dressed almost entirely in black gave Snape a forbidding, ominous appearance that did nothing to improve his sallow complexion, and the style of his clothing mirrored his very closed attitude, keeping as much as possible hidden from others. He managed to exert a silent authority and did it effortlessly. Hagrid thought he was very much like a cat in that ability. He knew the students called Snape the bat of the dungeons, but Hagrid thought they had the wrong mammal in mind. He shook his head slightly and realised he'd been staring.

"Is there somethin' I can do fer yeh?" he asked, a doubtful twist to his shaggy eyebrows.

Snape squinted at him out from behind the greasy locks of his hair, his face pale in the fading light. "Possibly."

"Oh," said Hagrid. "Er..." He stepped to one side and held the door open wide. "Well, best come in, then." It seemed the polite thing to do, but Hagrid had no idea where this

was going and couldn't help but feel he was about to be reprimanded for something.

"Thank you," replied Snape faintly and swept past him. Hagrid tried his best not to stand on the man's long teaching robes as he followed him inside. On seeing this visitor, Fang tipped himself out of his chair and padded heavily over to investigate. Hagrid winced slightly. Fang was a good guard dog when the mood took him, but more often than not, he was overly enthusiastic in meeting people and had a tendency to slobber over people's clothing in the process. Dumbledore never seemed to mind, but Hagrid couldn't imagine Snape welcoming such a thing.

"Fang," said Hagrid with a light warning in his voice. "Don't yeh go botherin' the professor, now." Who knew what Snape would do to Fang if the dog dribbled on his boots or put dog hair all over his clothing? Fang stopped and sank to his haunches a couple of feet away from Snape, looking up at the man with his plaintive brown eyes.

Snape stared back at Fang. "He's... very large," was the eventual comment.

"Oh, I can send him outside, Professor," said Hagrid hastily, keen to avoid a hexing incident.

Snape held up his hand, but didn't take his eyes off the hulking dog that had already started to salivate in anticipation of snuffling around this new and potentially interesting object. "No, that won't be necessary. It's likely I will not be here long."

Hagrid thought he stifled his sigh of relief well but suspected he wasn't as successful at it as he thought when Snape raised an eyebrow in his direction. "Oh?" said Hagrid, trying to make the lone syllable sound innocent.

Snape narrowed his eyes and studied Hagrid for a few moments. "I find myself in the interesting position of needing your advice, Hagrid," he said eventually.

"Er," said Hagrid, somewhat flummoxed. Was this a trick to lure him into admitting something he had no idea he had done?

"Since you are the resident expert on magical creatures, it seemed wise to seek the required information from you," Snape continued, still squinting at Hagrid as if looking for evidence of guilt that, inexplicably, Hagrid was starting to experience.

"Ah," said Hagrid, patting at his jacket nervously. Fang was starting to shuffle towards Snape without getting off his haunches, his head straining towards the man's pocket. Snape feigned obliviousness to it.

"How extensive is your knowledge of the canids?" Snape asked abruptly, tilting his head to one side and watching Hagrid with the intensity of a hawk about to break a pigeon's neck.

Hagrid blinked a few times. Was this a genuine question or a euphemism for some perceived infraction on his part? "I'm fairly familiar with 'em," he began, a little hesitant. "It's probably one o' the mammal classes I know most about, Professor." He toyed with the flaps on his coat pockets. "Was there... uh... somethin' specific yer wantin' to know?" Fang had edged about a foot closer to Snape and was starting to drop splatters of drool on the floor, dangerously close to the man's boots. Hagrid tried not to look at the dog in case it alerted Snape to how close Fang was getting to ruining the shine on his footwear. This was going to end badly if Hagrid couldn't get Fang away from Snape as soon as possible. "Perhaps yeh'd like to sit down, Professor?" Hagrid asked suddenly, attempting to guide the Potions master away from the slobbering canid right next to him.

Snape ignored the offer. "What canid species do you know that have a species or subspecies name starting with vee?"

"Hmm," said Hagrid, tapping his chest with his stubby fingers, trying his hardest to keep Fang out of his direct line of sight. "Well, there's *Canis latrans vigilis*, *Canis latrans var*, *Canis vetriculos destro*, *Canis vortexia cantus*, *Canis lupus vulagaris* they're extinct, though and..." Hagrid frowned, trying to dredge up the required information. "...*Canis niger varis*."

Snape seemed mildly annoyed about something. Had Hagrid missed something in the question and misunderstood what was being asked of him? It wouldn't be the first time, but he'd rather it not happen with Snape.

"There are no others?" Snape asked, running the tips of his fingers over his thumb slowly.

Hagrid tried to get his mind working faster, but it was like pushing a dragon up a stone wall with a piece of straw. "Erm, there may be, but I can't think of 'em." Wonderful. Of all the people to prove his failure to provide the necessary knowledge to, it had to be Snape. "Is there somethin' else yeh can give me?" he asked hopefully.

Snape huffed and looked away briefly as if considering the question. Fang went to lick Snape's coat whilst the man's head was turned. Hagrid gestured frantically at the dog, who looked at his owner with mild surprise and licked his chops noisily.

"A canid with theriomorphic capability," Snape provided reluctantly, looking back at Hagrid with a frown as he caught the half-giant waving his hand rapidly.

"Um," said Hagrid. "Technically, there are no true canids with tha' capability, Professor. There's *Homo sapiens lupus*, o' course." He saw Snape shake his head slightly. "Ah, but beyond tha'..."

Snape sighed pointedly and stepped away from Fang just as the dog opened his mouth a second time to get a good idea of what the Potions master's clothing tasted like. Fang looked confused as his tongue met nothing but air and glanced about rather unhappily. "Never mind. It seems the identity remains a mystery. I'll have to track the Tracker elsewhere," Snape muttered, heading for the door.

A small candle lit in Hagrid's head.

"A Tracker?" he asked, interest piqued. "Yeh're looking fer a Tracker?"

Snape stopped and turned back towards Hagrid, a keen glint in his dark eyes. "Possibly," he said cautiously. "Are they known by other names?"

"Well, yeah, but that's not really my field, Professor," Hagrid replied apologetically. "Maybe yeh should ask Professor Moody about"

"I'm asking *you*, Hagrid," Snape interrupted with that effortlessly authoritative voice that left no room for even the thought of arguing.

Hagrid fidgeted under that relentless scrutiny, the nervousness increasing a notch as he felt himself getting a little out of his depth. "Well, ah, er, sometimes they're called Pointers, or Strikers, or seevy"

"Why are they called seevy?" Snape interrupted again, his large nostrils flaring. Hagrid started to get anxious, wondering if this was an indication of an approaching outburst of temper and desperately trying to think of a way to avoid that possibility.

"Er, I think it's from *Canis venaticus*, Professor. Hunting dogs," said Hagrid, hunching his shoulders ever so slightly.

Snape stared at him. "And the reason you didn't mention this before was...?"

Alarm bells went off in Hagrid's head at the skeins of irritation woven through Snape's voice. "Well, technically, *Canis venaticus* isn't an actual recognised species. And Seevy aren't canids, Professor. I guess it didn't occur to me that it mightn't ha' been a canid that yeh were lookin' for."

"What do you know about them?" Snape inquired, drifting away from the door, the full force of his attention on Hagrid once again.

Hagrid shook his head. "Very little, I'm afraid. They're very hard to find. In fact, many people don't think they actually exist."

"And what do you think, Hagrid?" Snape asked.

First advice, and now an opinion? Hagrid was definitely confused and in such instances, Hagrid's default position was always honesty. "Well, I think that one could pass right under my nose an' I wouldn't know it, Professor."

"Indeed." Snape seemed to find that comment amusing, if the unfamiliar upward curve to his mouth was anything to go by. "What else?"

Hagrid sighed, rubbing his hands together as he thought. "I've heard that they always track in pairs, but if yeh ever need to hire their services, yeh have to go through a third party. They're very prickly about ritual an' formality."

"Are they human?" That hawkish look was definitely back. Snape was paying more attention to him than he had in the past five years, and Hagrid wasn't certain that he was enjoying the experience of having the Potions master put him under his scrutiny.

"Oh, well, I think so, Professor," said Hagrid, trying a jovial tone to try and lighten the atmosphere. "A friend o' mine once mentioned somethin' about 'em bein' similar to other theriomorphs in tha' respect."

"And just what is their theriomorphic ability?"

"Oh, ah, er, I think they must have some shiftn' ability that makes 'em similar to dogs, if the adopted name *Canis venaticus* is anythin' to go by."

Snape opened his mouth to ask another question, but Hagrid forestalled him.

"I'm afraid tha's all I know, Professor," he said apologetically. "I'm sorry I couldn't be o' much help."

The dark-haired man studied Hagrid for a few seconds before responding. "You've been... surprisingly helpful, Hagrid. I shan't forget it." He squinted up at the half-giant. "Good night."

With that, Snape turned and left Hagrid's hut like the shadow of a mountain's pinnacle that had taken solid form.

Hagrid stared at the closed door until Fang whined gently. The big man roused himself. "Come on then, boy. Let's take yeh out, eh? Mebbe go into the Forest for a bit." *Might be safer in there*, he thought anxiously and let the dog out into the night.

Chapter Twenty-Five - Vindictive

Chapter 25 of 59

Some people have a relentless ability to jab at another's sore spot.

He'd been around the room three times. At least, he thought it was three. It could have been more. It could have been less. Time had the odd habit of dilating and contracting in this place in fathomless and unpredictable ways, leaving him disorientated and cranky.

He started around the room once again (or was it for the first time?), but as his fingers slid across the walls, he knew that he had indeed already done this. Trouble was that in this instant he couldn't remember what he was looking for. Reason and memory were as malleable and ephemeral as breath here.

He stubbed his foot on a dresser that he had forgotten was pushed up against one of the walls. He didn't have to look at it to know that it was the dresser he'd had as a child. It had been an ugly, squat thing that took on a hulking, threatening appearance in the shadow of night. Somewhere in his then-immature brain, he had formed the peculiar and rather petrifying idea that he could never turn his back on this soulless piece of furniture, that if he slept with his back to it, something clawing, choking, suffocating would come for him, and he would never see it sneaking up on him until it was too late. So he would force himself to face the lumpy, ominous shadow as he lay cold and tight in his bed, for a terror seen was less controlling than one unseen. He sighed at that thought. A child's mind was more than capable of inducing its own paralysing fear without the help of outside influence. It wasn't until he was much older that he realised that reality was actually more dreadful than anything the imagination could come up with.

Was he looking for a way in or a way out? He didn't know anymore. His hands dropped to his sides. He didn't even know what he was *doing* here! A bubble of frustration welled up inside him, and he gave up on his search, as he knew he would, as he knew he had, and would no doubt do so again.

He turned to face the boarded-up window. Was this the exit denied him, or the entry denied others? The light slipping through the cracks in and between the boards was cold, like moonlight in winter: blue-tinged, hard-edged and brittle, like shards of frozen water. He didn't like it when it was like this. He preferred it when it was like sunlight in the first flush of summer that thawed flesh long-chilled from the barren months, light that rippled with green and gold and smelled like a beginning. He had no memory of ever smelling such a thing. Endings were all that ever seemed to crowd in on him, bitter, stark and sere, leaving his stomach nailed to the earth and an intimidating void inside him.

It was pointless to cross over to the window to try and peer through the cracks, for he never saw anything...the light was always too bright, whether cold or warm. It had been a cruel torture, this window. A chance for something... anything that would take him from this place, this place that should have been a refuge but instead was nothing more than a prison. A prison within a prison. The thought made his chest tight with a kind of claustrophobia that wrapped around him like barbed wire.

A darkness bloomed in the shadows, like an inky stain across the floor, circular, hollow, rotten. It had come back. Or it had always been here. Perhaps this was the first time...he didn't *know*! It didn't belong here, that much he was certain of. Not here. This was where it was never meant to be, yet it had found its way into a room that had no door.

It crept along the floor like a sickness, a sticky mouldering of substance, the very fabric of being becoming putrefied and sinking into an abyssal depth, into a compacting nothingness...an end. Yet another ending. But beyond this finality was silence, blackness, infinity. Beyond this, even emptiness was inadequate to describe the absence of all that was familiar, both hated and loved.

The room went frigid, and the light from the window faded as someone stepped in front of it.

He looked up, straight into eyes that almost saw him, eyes redder than blood, harder than stone and more merciless than life itself.

"Who are you?" he asked, knowing the answer before the words had even left his lips.

The scalding gaze passed over him, through him, and though he couldn't see it, he knew that below those eyes twisted a cruel parody of a smile that was a hair's breadth away from being the snarl that would tear his throat into a shredded mass of mortality.

"I am death."

The words plunged him back into consciousness as if he had fallen from an impossibly high place, sweating, shivering and drowning, the sheets bound around his wrists in a sodden grip like manacles, the stench of terror in his nostrils, the silence of the dead hour a canvas on which his nightmare lay stark and jagged.

It took hours for sleep to return, and when it did, it brought something as far from a nightmare as it possibly could. It made him sweat nonetheless.

McGonagall was an early riser. She always had been, ever since she had attended Hogwarts as a student. True, that was many, many years ago now, but it was a habit that had stuck even if the reason for it had long since faded away. Ellucinda Silbert had been a shockingly loud snorer. Sharing a room with her in the Gryffindor tower had been an aural nightmare until McGonagall had twigged that getting up at four in the morning meant missing the worst of the laryngeal flapping. It also meant that she had to go to bed earlier than the other girls, but since she wasn't much of a socialite, a curtailed evening never fazed her. Studying in the quiet hours of the morning was preferable to trying to concentrate in the noisy and frequently smelly chaos of the Gryffindor common room in the evenings.

So, it was a regular occurrence for McGonagall to be the first at the staff table for breakfast. She enjoyed the relative calm and silence that floated over her until the other teachers arrived.

Dumbledore was often not long to appear after her. He was always jovial and light-hearted in his conversation choices, keen not to linger on topics of a dark, dull or complicated flavour. Hooch was usually next, having been already outside to run through her self-imposed fitness regime. Cheeks flushed, hair windswept, she injected the first obvious energy into the day. Then, in varying order, came Flitwick, Vector, and Sinistra. The three of them, plus Hooch, would then launch into one of their incomprehensible analyses of the latest scandalous pap from the *Daily Prophet*. Well, Flitwick and Hooch did most of the talking, while Sinistra nodded a lot and Vector looked faintly surprised, as if the convoluted theories that the notorious gossip twins of Flitwick and Hooch came up with had never occurred to her. Then there would be the general mishmash of faculty members drifting in, culminating in Sprout dragging herself to the table, looking like an exhausted bloodhound with breath that could cut steel. Talking with her was dicey, at best...Sprout definitely wasn't a morning person. In fact, at times her cantankerousness rivalled that of Snape. He was likely to turn up at any point, from before McGonagall to after Sprout, but usually favouring the earlier hours. Sometimes he never turned up at all.

His integration into the faculty had been rocky. Most of the other teachers had been suspicious of this allegedly former Death Eater already. His complete non-conformity to the social niceties had added discomfort and not a little dislike to the flow of the stream of ill-will towards him. Eventually, McGonagall began to wonder if Snape deliberately set out to upset people. She'd lost count of the number of times she'd had to intervene in some fractious little squabble between Snape and another teacher. More often than not, it was the other teacher doing the outraged squawking, while Snape just stared at them with those midnight eyes and a wry twist to his mouth, looking like a spectator who had come across a half-mad primate exhibit at a Muggle zoo.

"Why can't you at least *pretend* to be nice at mealtimes, Severus?" McGonagall had asked him after breaking up a particularly vitriolic spat between him and Kettleburn.

Snape had simply gazed at her impassively. "Why?" he'd asked in that infuriatingly sour tone he saved for his finest moments of contempt.

"Because I'm sick of having my meal interrupted in order to stop one of the others from stabbing your throat with a fork, that's why!" McGonagall had shouted crossly at him.

Snape raised an eyebrow at her fit of pique.

"You never used to be this disruptive as a student," McGonagall steamrolled on. "Are you catching up on years of pent up frustration?"

He blinked at her. She got the impression that he was judiciously refraining from smirking at her. It was a sixth sense she'd cultivated since becoming a teacher herself.

"If you can't restrain yourself from working your colleagues up into a snit, sit next to me during mealtimes!" she shrielled. "That way I might actually be able to finish my meal in one go." She hadn't bothered to wait for his reply before marching, stiff-backed, out of the Great Hall.

Ever since then, if Snape was ever to sit anywhere at the staff table, it was usually next to McGonagall. The other teachers breathed a sigh of relief at being spared the Russian roulette of his proximity.

Truth be told, it wasn't as bad as she thought it would be. At first, she'd limited conversation with him in an effort not to get dragged into the same reactionary squabbling that the others had. McGonagall wasn't one for banal chit-chat, so she never invented reasons to talk to Snape. Silence was preferable to aimless gassing about trivialities, in her opinion. Any words they did exchange usually centred on academic matters or his eating habits. She could usually draw him out of his self-imposed taciturnity with the former, but the latter would either close him down or make him ratty, depending on his mood at the time. McGonagall found that she actually enjoyed the power that verbal switch gave her, but she used it sparingly, like a trainer disciplining a feisty animal that had its own ideas as to how it should behave.

However, that switch had lost something of its normal sting as Snape had recently decided to eat anything that came in reach of his plate. He'd also gotten jittery and even more waspish than usual. Of late, he'd radiated a dichotomous air that switched from irritated distress to cold suspicion, sometimes in the space of a minute, which McGonagall found a little unsettling. Normally, it was just cold suspicion. She tried to ignore it, thinking it was just a phase brought on by having Karkaroff at Hogwarts for the Triwizard Tournament. That man would try the patience of a rock, and she knew full well how the Durmstrang headmaster had implicated Snape in order to get himself released from Azkaban. It did concern her, though. Snape tended to vent his frustrations on the students, and McGonagall had already had to deal with three slightly hysterical Gryffindors who'd had run-ins with the Potions master and come off second best. It was unclear to her which event would force her to say something to him about it: another sobbing student or that wretched leg-jiggling habit of his knocking her beverage onto her lap for the third time this week.

Today, he sat next to her at lunch, staring off down the Great Hall, spinning his fork between his fingers slowly as if waiting for something. His food lay untouched on his plate. A palm-sized book sat open near his left hand. McGonagall couldn't see what it was about. Snape often read at the table, which she found somewhat rude, but as rudeness seemed to be one of Snape's permanent character traits, she'd given up on ever lecturing him about it. After all, he wasn't a student any more, and she could only reprimand him so many times without overstepping the boundaries of professional courtesy.

McGonagall had no idea what he was staring at. Perhaps it was nothing. She turned her thoughts to her afternoon classes and continued eating her lunch.

At one point, she thought she heard Snape mutter something, but before she could ask him to repeat himself, a shriek turned her attention elsewhere. Her eyes focussed immediately on a swirl of chaos at the Ravenclaw table where plates and food were flying everywhere and students were beating a hasty retreat from a particular section of the table. A few of the girls were squealing and cringing behind whatever body they could find.

McGonagall resisted the urge to sweep down there herself to find out what was going on. Technically, Flitwick, as head of Ravenclaw, had that initial responsibility, and the Deputy Headmistress was always extremely mindful of not treading on a colleague's toes. Indeed, the diminutive Charms Professor was already trotting towards the mêlée, his small hands gesticulating at his students.

"What on earth was all that about, Filius?" McGonagall asked when he returned to the staff table.

"Oh, one of the students decided to set loose a bunch of Diamond Orb spiders to scare the girls," Flitwick revealed, climbing up onto his seat.

"Who was the culprit?" asked Hooch, a gleam of interest in her golden eyes.

Flitwick shrugged. "No one owned up to it." He giggled. "Actually, it was quite funny. I think Miss Parr nearly fainted in terror!"

McGonagall thinned her lips in irritation. Flitwick was too lenient at times. She would never have let that sort of thing pass without interrogating the usual suspects. She turned away from the chortling gossip twins with a sigh.

Snape was paying no attention to what had happened. In fact, he'd started on his lunch, eyes fixed on his reading material, seemingly oblivious. McGonagall wasn't sure, but he seemed to have a ghost of a smirk on his face about something.

Gaelina picked up the teapot and emptied most of its contents into Hagrid's mug. There wasn't enough left to fill her own cup, but that was never a problem...she wasn't a big fan of tea, and Hagrid never noticed that her cup remained empty during his visits, despite the fact that he had been a regular visitor to her home in East London for the past ten years. They had met through a mutual acquaintance when Hagrid had been searching for information on quilin. Having seen the unicorns in the Forbidden Forest, Hagrid had become quite enamoured of the creatures and had heard that the Chinese unicorn, or quilin, was even more impressive. He'd set out to London and Diagon Alley heartily convinced that he'd be able to get one through his usual contact, but his optimism had been struck down almost immediately.

"Quilin?" his contact had said in a hushed yet squawking tone, and with rather round eyes that searched the Leaky Cauldron's main taproom for eavesdroppers. "You must be joking. If the Ministry caught even a whiff of a rumour I'd brought one into the country, they'd snap my wand in half."

Ever persistent when he set his mind to it, Hagrid harried the suddenly chary beast-dealer until he conceded he knew someone that might *might* be able to point Hagrid in the right direction. That was where Gaelina had come in.

She was a cheerful, unassuming woman who had been unfortunate enough not to inherit any magical ability from her pureblood parents. Being a Squib was difficult, as many in the magical world either dismissed them or were rather unsure of how to act towards them. So they were stuck in the twilight between two worlds, never truly able to belong to either. It was a position Hagrid, as a half-giant, understood, being in the same limbo himself.

Gaelina had been unable to get Hagrid the quilin he was so dearly wishing for, but it was not through lack of trying. They were simply too rare and too skittish to catch, even for her most experienced connections overseas. It had taken many cups of tea and more than two plates of sticky buns to console Hagrid, who always felt disappointment very keenly.

Since then, they found that they both shared the same passion for magical creatures and could converse for hours on end on the best way to gather phoenix feathers or argue about the most effective treatment for bark rot in Bowtruckles.

Gaelina set the pale blue porcelain pot back down on the table with a faint click and smiled at the large man opposite her who was trying his best to be at ease whilst seated on one of her slender legged chairs and looming over the table like a hairy mountain.

"I must say that I was surprised to hear from you, Hagrid," she began, her short fingers gently turning her empty cup from side to side on its saucer. "I can't recall a time that you wanted to meet mid-week."

Hagrid experienced a flash of guilt at the statement. "I hope I didn't put yeh out, Gaelina," he said hastily, his saucepan-sized mug paused halfway between the table and his mouth.

Gaelina blinked her large brown eyes at him and laughed warmly. "Not at all. Your visits are always welcome." She made a tragic face. "No-one else ever wants to talk about magical creatures for hours on end, so I'm usually forced to endure tedious chitchat about weather patterns and politics." She waited politely as Hagrid threw back some tea and then began to cast his eye towards the plate of sticky buns. Gaelina pushed the plate towards him encouragingly. "And so," she began again, "what news do you bring me on this cold day?"

Hagrid picked up the smallest bun he could find on the plate. It was customary for him to do so, and somewhat pointless considering he always ended up eating all of whatever was on the plate. Gaelina never ate, claiming she already consumed more than she should, gesturing to her generously padded frame, a small, wry smile gracing her round face. She reminded Hagrid of a plump little hen sitting on her nest, calm but alert, a merry little glint in her eyes.

"Well," said Hagrid, raising the sticky bun in a toasting gesture, "things are so busy a' the school, I've had little time fer much else, to be honest. In fact, I can't stay long...got a class in an hour." He popped the bun whole into his mouth and destroyed it with a couple of chews. "Although, yeh'll never guess what I've got back a' the cabin!"

Gaelina leant forward slightly. "Surely not another dangerous creature?" she posed conspiratorially in a whisper. "I would've thought the Skrewts would have satisfied your need for danger."

Hagrid waved an enormous hand dismissively. "Nah, somethin' much better, an' much prettier than Skrewts!" He chuckled to himself and selected the next smallest bun from the frilly plate.

Gaelina pushed her clean cup and saucer to one side so she could lean even further forward. "Don't keep me in suspense, Hagrid," she prompted in a good-natured tone. "Is it rare?"

Hagrid's eyes twinkled under his bushy brows. "Oh yes," he replied, brushing a few bun crumbs out of his beard. "Very."

Gaelina's smile widened in anticipation. "Is it illegal?" she asked with the eagerness of a small child.

Hagrid laughed, jiggling the table and threatening the teapot with a possibly floor-bound destination had Gaelina not caught it deftly in her tiny hands.

"I think I've had enough of illegal animals," Hagrid chuckled, not having noticed his unintentional rearrangement of the tabletop contents. "A' least fer this year." He looked about theatrically, as if checking for eavesdroppers. It was purely for show...Gaelina lived alone. He leaned towards her, and the table creaked in agony at the weight of his arm on it. "Pewtinellas."

Gaelina's jaw dropped open slightly. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah," said Hagrid proudly, and in his moment of delight forgot his protocol and picked the biggest bun off the plate. "Two of 'em."

Gaelina sat back in her chair, one perfectly sculpted hand pressed to her ample bosom. "Oh, I would so love to see them, Hagrid!" she told him in a wistful voice. "Where did you get them?"

Hagrid finished his mouthful before answering. "Don't know," he said honestly, with a slight shrug. "A' least, I can't be certain."

He'd found the bamboo cage hanging from the rafters of his cabin after he had finished walking Fang that morning. At first he didn't see the tiny birds sitting on their perches, their silver feathers puffed up, making them almost spherical in shape except for their long tail feathers. Fang had actually been the first one to notice them, padding over to sit right under the cage, looking up with a plaintive whine. As Hagrid crossed the floor to see what had captured his dog's attention, the Pewtinellas had burst into tinkling song, startling both dog and master. In fact, Hagrid had stood there for some time, mesmerised by the cage's inhabitants and wondering where they possibly could have come from.

It was true that he didn't know for sure who had put them there, but he could make a guess, ludicrous though it seemed.

"Actually, tha's why I'm here. In a roundabout way," Hagrid explained, forgetting about the sticky buns for a few moments.

Gaelina tilted her head to one side, the heavy braid that ran down her back swinging gently with the movement.

"Remember a few years back when we were talkin' about dogs, and we had that argument about whether they were th' best animals to track somethin' down?"

Gaelina pursed her lips slightly and frowned. "I... think so," she said hesitantly.

"An' you said that Strikers were better than dogs?"

The dark-haired woman fussed with her green woollen cardigan for a moment. "Vaguely," she said, squinting at him keenly.

"Well, I was wonderin' if yeh could tell me a bit more about Strikers," Hagrid asked, raising his mug to his mouth for another slosh of tea.

Gaelina looked at him for some time, a thoughtful crease across her forehead and the tips of the fingers of one hand tapping her chin lightly. Hagrid put down his empty mug and waited expectantly. The seconds stretched out between them, and somewhere in the house, a clock chimed.

"Odd that a conversation from years ago suddenly resurfaces," Gaelina mused after an audible intake of breath. "Why would this be, Hagrid?"

"Ah, someone I know is lookin' fer one," said the half-giant, shrugging slightly and completely missing Gaelina's suddenly guarded manner.

"I see," said Gaelina, bringing her hand down from her chin and resting it on her lap with its opposite. She blinked a few times, lips pursed.

"I thought tha' perhaps you might know where t' find one," Hagrid revealed, a broad smile on his face. "After all, no-one knows more than you do about magical creatures!"

Gaelina shifted her shoulders and sniffed. "You flatter me, as always, Hagrid, but I'd be hesitant to claim that honour." She smiled slightly to take the sting out of her words. "And I'm not sure that Strikers would be happy at being described as magical creatures."

"Oh," said Hagrid, his smile fading. "I didn' mean ter"

Gaelina held up her hand. "Of course not," she interrupted and widened her smile into something less frosty. "I'd just be careful of describing them as such. They get upset easily." She paused and pressed her lips into a thin line. "This... friend... of yours. They have need of a Striker?"

Hagrid puffed out his cheeks, scratched at his voluminous beard as he considered this question. "Well, he was askin' about 'em, but didn' say why," he admitted. "He thought I might know somethin'." He shrugged. "He kind o' brought it up out of the blue."

"Hmm." Gaelina interlaced her fingers in an effort to keep her hands still on her lap.

Time passed like a rambler on a mountain path. It was at this point that Hagrid started to notice that something was amiss, but couldn't determine exactly what. Had he said something stupid or insulting? He sincerely hoped not. Gaelina was one of the few people he could talk to for hours on end about the things that interested him, since they seemed to fascinate her just as much. She knew more than he did about magical creatures, which was a lot. In fact, she was now the one who managed to track down the more exotic species that he used in his classes at Hogwarts. He never asked her where she got them, since some of them were either illegal or extremely rare. He suspected that she managed to by-pass some of the Ministry's more stringent rules surrounding magical creatures in less than honest ways. Gaelina had effectively admitted that, being a Squib, she had little else to fall back on in terms of making a living. She had simply continued a childhood love into adulthood and saw no harm in earning an income from it. Hagrid had never felt the need to question her about it; that was her business. He looked at her nervously, noting the narrowed eyes, stiff shoulders and slightly pale face.

"I... er... didn' tell 'im much," he said. "After all, I don' know much meself."

"Do you trust this friend of yours, Hagrid?" Gaelina asked suddenly.

Hagrid blinked at the question. A couple of things concerned him. First, he wasn't sure that 'friend' was the right word, and second, something seemed to be going on here that escaped his immediate comprehension. He was the first to admit that he wasn't a person of nuance, both in its use and in its detection. He found it a double-edged sword and had no skill in wielding it, so he tended to shy away from it and employ honesty and forthrightness wherever he could; it was much simpler and less fraught with potential misunderstanding.

Hagrid decided that brevity and honesty would serve best at this moment. "Yes."

Gaelina stared at him intently. "I've known you for many years, Hagrid," she said seriously. "Your word is good enough for me." She sat back in her chair. "I think something can be arranged," she decided, "but perhaps you should tell me a bit more about your... friend." She smiled encouragingly, and Hagrid breathed easy once more.

Snape waited for a few moments before continuing the campaign.

"Is there a problem, Miss Parr?" he asked from the front of the classroom. Parr's partner, Toby Perkins, looked up at the question. Parr didn't. She continued to stare at the glass case that sat on the front table, lips pressed together tightly and a rather sickly cast to her face.

"It is not an option to answer a question asked of you, Miss Parr. Five points from Ravenclaw, unless you can prove to me that you have gone spontaneously deaf," Snape decided, toying lightly with one of the buttons on his coat.

Perkins had to jab Parr in the ribs with his elbow to get her to answer. "There is no problem, Professor," she replied reluctantly, nostrils flared to such an extent that their edges had gone almost white.

"I should hope not," Snape sneered at her. "Therefore, that being the case, you can come up here first."

Parr finally managed to drag her eyes away from the container of Hook-Backed Net Weaver Spiders. "I'm sorry?" A sheen of sweat had sprung up on her forehead, and a crease had appeared between her brows, giving her a faintly distressed expression.

Snape stared at her. "Perhaps you should practice that phrase so you can relay it effortlessly to your housemates after class in response to another five points being deducted from Ravenclaw." A hiss of irritation rose up from the students of the penalised house. "I believe I have made it clear on a number of occasions that I expect students to pay attention during my classes, in addition to evincing my disapproval at having to repeat myself unnecessarily. You will be the first to come up here and select a specimen for today's lesson." He placed both hands on the glass case and tapped it with an index finger. The palm-sized spiders inside jittered about in response to the vibrations in the glass, scarlet bodies swaying pendulously between their long, orange-speckled legs.

Parr's glare was as cold, hard and sharp as flint, though her face was beginning to go as white as her hair.

"Your hesitation is interesting, Miss Parr, and costly," Snape pointed out, drumming his fingers on the glass. The spiders rearranged themselves in response with a silent flurry of legs. "Another five points from Ravenclaw that will increase to ten if you continue to waste class time." The angry mutterings around the room increased in volume. "Surely you're not afraid of spiders?" he asked smoothly, evoking a rapid switch in her expression from distress to a spasm of suppressed choler. It came as little surprise to him that ridicule in front of her classmates would be a far stronger motivator than the removal of house points.

Parr got up, stony-faced, from her chair, and stiff-legged her way towards Snape, one hand clutching an empty, stoppered glass cylinder. The other clamped itself around the hem of her robes to keep it clear from her legs in that idiosyncratic habit which had failed to abate as the weeks had passed.

Her progress had begun resolutely, if not enthusiastically, but her pace slowed noticeably as she got closer to the front table. Snape didn't think it was possible for someone to go so pale that their skin would start to look transparent and wax-like, but Parr was proving him wrong. He wondered if any of the other students could see the tremor that was running through her, making the tips of her hair quiver. It was likely that they themselves were not relishing the thought of having to handle the arachnids.

Live spiders tended to elicit nervousness in people that dead ones failed to, but it was necessary to use live Hook-Backs for the Wound-Healing Potion that they were going to be focussing on in this lesson...the spinnerets of dead Hook-Backs lost potency with exponentially increasing degree, making the efficacy of the potion correspondingly poor.

This lesson was always a difficult one for students, especially the girls who were prone to the irritating habits of squealing and crying that Snape found particularly tiresome. And that was even before the boys decided to cause even greater distress by 'accidentally' allowing the spiders to escape into someone's school bag or down someone's shirt. Or up a skirt. The quantity of deducted house points was invariably high in the lesson which was normally left until much later in the school year when student energies were much lower and the propensity towards mischief curtailed by the impending exams. However, with the Triwizard Tournament, the usual order of things had been turned on its head, and Snape had decided to bring the lesson forward to today. Yes, of course that was the reason.

Parr stopped at the table, her eyes like two bulging duck eggs fixed on the glass case. The spiders had settled back down again, barely moving now except for the occasional twitch of a leg. Their inertia failed to reassure Parr...she seemed to be experiencing a rather marked breathing difficulty that Snape found amusing.

"Time is short, Miss Parr," he noted. "Luckily for all involved, this lesson does not go on forever, so let's subtract one point from Ravenclaw for every second you continue to waste, shall we?"

Parr's eyes did a fascinating alteration from impossibly large to incredibly narrow. Snape stared back at her impassively, picked up the glass case and banged it loudly on the table. The interior of the case turned into a blurred chaos of arachnid.

Snape smiled nastily at Parr. "Make sure you get your hands on a big one, now," he instructed. Her expression could have ignited water into a blazing inferno. "One... two... three..." He began to count out loud.

Parr's face went grey, then pink, then white again. Snape wondered if she was going to get out of the class by fainting and dimly realised that he would be rather disappointed if she took that option.

"... four... five... six..."

She unstopped the glass cylinder and wedged the glass lid between index and middle fingers of the hand holding the container so that she could seal it back up the second the spider was in there.

"... seven... eight... nine..."

Parr sucked in a lungful of air, reached out her free hand and flipped the lid of the glass case up. The already agitated spiders came boiling out and made for the nearest cover. The class dissolved into total anarchy as the students shrieked and managed to knock over anything in their path to get away from the scuttling escapees. Bodies ricocheted off each other, the walls and the storage cabinets, and a textbook went flying across the room, hitting Perkins in the ear. Snape realised that things had gotten too out of hand for mere shouting to be of any use in regaining control of the situation.

"Immobulus!"

The bedlam stopped dead. A chair teetered on its back legs before falling to the stone floor with a crash.

Snape clenched his teeth and lowered his wand. "Imbeciles! Have you completely lost your minds? They're not even venomous!" He left everyone frozen in place until he'd returned the spiders to their glass fortress using a Locomotor spell, noting with rancour that Parr had indeed managed to grab the largest spider and trap it in her now-stoppered cylinder. He scowled at her and frowned harder when he thought he saw her move ever so slightly. Impossible. He shut the glass case with a snap.

"Finite Incantatem." Several students fell to the floor heavily. "You have thirty seconds to return this room to the state it was in prior to your childish outburst," Snape told the room stonily. "Failure to achieve this will result in something that will justify your pathetic recreancy." Threat delivered, he turned his attention to Parr, who remained standing in place, her eyes studiously averted from the glass cylinder in her hand. "It looks like I'll be suffering the dubious pleasure of your company in detention this evening, Miss Parr," he sneered, "and at the relatively cheap price of nineteen points from Ravenclaw." He nearly laughed in the face of her tight-mouthed indignation. "Here's hoping it's worth the price."

Chapter Twenty-Six – Malicious

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Fortitude in the face of malice is character-building. Apparently.

The door to the classroom banged open with an echoing crash, making the nib of his quill skew right across the paper he was marking in a frenzied line.

"What in the hell..." Snape began, looking up from his desk, his mood switching from irascible to outraged at the interruption. Outrage mutated into loathing when he saw who was standing in the doorway. "What do you want?"

"Inspection time, Snape," Moody growled, a craggy grin pasted across his ugly face.

"I'm busy," Snape pointed out between clenched teeth.

Moody pulled a face at him. "Busy, eh? Working on some sick and twisted little scheme, are you?" The man stumped into the classroom, his carved, wooden foot thumping loudly on the stone floor like a stake being hammered into a vampire's chest. "Not busy with something I should be looking into?"

Snape glared at him sourly. "I would have thought, Moody, that you would have enough marking to deal with without feeling the pressing need to involve yourself in mine." He threw his quill down on his desk and sat back in his chair. "And the last I recalled, it was your leg that had been amputated and not either of your hands. Next time, try knocking before barging into my classroom like an ill-mannered oaf."

Moody's charmed eye rolled slowly in its socket until both eyes were fixed on Snape through the man's straggly mane of grey hair. "What, and miss the chance to catch you doing something you shouldn't be doing, Snape?" he growled, baring his teeth. "I think not." He clumped his way up to the front of the classroom.

"I wonder," Snape began, running the tips of his fingers along the edge of his desk slowly, "if you impose yourself on the other members of faculty with such shining rudeness."

Moody snorted at him, his magical eye roving slowly around the room. "Auror's privilege, Snape. Let's not go through this again, shall we? It's just a waste of time and it makes me cranky." He stopped right in front of Snape's desk, leaned on his staff and leered down at him. "And you don't want to make me cranky, now, do you?"

Snape sneered at the twisted lump of a man in front of him. "Your disposition is a matter of supreme indifference to me, Moody. Just get your snooping over and done with." At that, he picked up his quill again and went back to marking assignments.

It was difficult not to react to the sounds of breaking glass as Moody rifled through all the cupboards in the classroom, discarding bottles and potion-making equipment in as wide a radius as he possibly could. He even wrenched one of the cupboard doors off for no reason other than to annoy Snape. It hit the floor with a wooden clatter.

Snape had been through this tedious charade four times already since Moody's arrival. He'd complained vociferously to Dumbledore the first time it happened, but the Headmaster had merely looked aggrieved.

"Alastor is only trying to discover who was responsible for putting Harry's name in the Goblet, Severus," he had explained with an apologetic shrug.

"By destroying my classroom and ruining all my supplies?" Snape had almost shouted in frustration. "I fail to see how that is a particularly inspired piece of investigation on his part!"

Dumbledore had sighed. "His methods are... unorthodox," the Headmaster admitted. "I will speak to him."

And indeed, Dumbledore must have done so, for the next time Moody pulled a surprise visit on Snape, he was even more thorough and destructive. So Snape had resigned himself to putting up with Moody's intrusions since words from the Headmaster had failed to quell the Auror's rabid zeal in singling Snape out for persecution. It was like being a student again...the flagrant disregard for his personal dignity, the snide comments about his background, the utter disrespect for his possessions and personal space. Complaining about it just fired Moody up even more, so Snape tried hanging on to the shreds of his deportment as best he could and ignored Moody's encroachment on his territory. He hated every second of it though, and it left a reek of hypocrisy in his nose. His life was a litany of examples of how some people were allowed to ignore rules that bound others into the servitude of civility and compromise. It seemed he was destined never to escape such face-slapping incidences of preferential treatment where he had no recourse except to bite down and take it.

Snape scratched out a particularly vindictive comment on the assignment he was grading. When was it going to end? The neck-bending, the sufferance, the erosion of what little standing was left to him? It didn't seem to matter what he did; it always resulted in him being metaphorically spat in the face. His mouth twisted. Some might say that he was fortunate to even have what little autonomy he had, that it was an egregious error that he had avoided incarceration in Azkaban for the damage he had caused. Typically, those that shouted their outrage the loudest usually had the most to hide themselves. That was what made it especially galling. Stupid, double-faced, spineless cowards crowing and pointing fingers, so eager to direct attention away from their own grotty, disgusting and questionable actions. Snape may have escaped Azkaban, but the prison of prejudice and persecution locked him into this miserable existence he eked out for himself, pushed into a fringe-dwelling torpor that was grey with public scorn and pitted with the acid of contempt from people who were too craven to hold themselves to the same standards they measured him by. Petty, obtuse, small people who lived lives of ignorance and privilege. They were almost too pitiful to hate. Almost.

A particularly loud crash of glass made his shoulders tighten. He longed for the day when the opportunity to wipe Moody's self-satisfied smirk off his haggard face presented itself. Snape still hadn't reached the decision as to whether it would be with a curse, a knife, or his fist. Perhaps all three, and that was just for starters.

"You really should do something about this mess, Snape," came Moody's gravel-rasped voice. "One might consider is hazardous to the students to have to study in such a pig sty."

Snape swivelled his eyes up from his marking. Moody stood calmly amongst the detritus of his search like the self-righteous brute he'd always been as if daring Snape to complain. His fingers tightened on his quill, but he judiciously kept his mouth shut.

"Perhaps I should mention the laxity to the Headmaster," Moody mused aloud, his magical eye spinning gaily in response to his poorly suppressed glee. "I'm sure he'd be most disappointed to hear that his tame Death Eater was becoming an embarrassment to him."

It took all of Snape's self-control not to hex the shattered glass scattered across the floor right down Moody's throat. Sideways.

With a parting gloat, Moody kicked a miraculously unbroken flask aside with his clawed, wooden foot and lurched out of the classroom.

Snape looked at the state of the classroom and sighed heavily. Moody had been as thorough as always, the vindictive bastard. It looked like he would have to make the trip to London once again this weekend to replace the spoiled ingredients and glassware, though some of the former would take weeks to prepare to a stage where they would be useful.

Snape ran the tip of his quill under his chin slowly. At some point in his past, he had found that it tended to calm him down during the more fractious incidences in his daily life, so he continued with it for some time, staring blankly at the mess on the floor. That was until Parr turned up, and whatever serenity there had been inside him fled.

She stood in the doorway and stared at the glass-littered floor with a faintly surprised expression.

"You're late," Snape pointed out tersely, removing the tip of his quill from under his chin.

Parr looked at him, silent, her expression now turned neutral.

"That was an effective little stunt you pulled earlier," he began, as if the ransacking of his classroom had never occurred and that there weren't the contents of an apothecary strewn across the floor like rubbish.

Parr blinked.

"Although it is curious that you would be willing to risk dealing with twenty spiders instead of just one in order to prove a point."

Her mouth tightened at the corners.

"Some might think that courageous. I consider it idiotic."

Her nostrils flared ever so slightly.

"And since you are so obviously adept in creating chaos, I consider it fitting that you tidy this one up," he decided, widening his eyes in expectation of a verbal objection that never eventuated. Truth be told, he was angling for a fight and getting increasingly bad-tempered that Parr was refusing to rise to the bait.

"You have one hour to tidy this classroom to my satisfaction before I penalise Ravenclaw one point for every minute past that hour, Miss Parr, so standing there looking vacuous is ill-advised." That, at least, invoked a glare, which suggested if he pushed a little further, he might get the fight he was spoiling for.

Unfortunately, yet another of his least favourite people turned up.

"Wow, who had the temper tantrum?" asked Lupin from the doorway, his eyes goggling at the explosion of potions ingredients on the floor.

"Step one pace inside my classroom and I'll hex your rancid foot into your flapping mouth, Lupin," Snape warned frostily.

The shabbily-dressed werewolf shrugged and stuck his hands in his pockets. Parr had a stupid smile pasted across her face that made Snape want to throw something at her.

"It appears lack of wisdom is catching," Snape continued stonily. "I wonder what the Headmaster would say to having a werewolf parading around the school premises after being so resoundingly fired from his teaching position."

Lupin leaned against the doorframe without bothering to correct Snape's statement. "Ah, I believe he said, 'Oh, you need Chara? I think she's downstairs being rudely abused by Severus. If you hurry, you might get there before someone gets hurt.'" He smiled. "Or words to that effect."

"Your drollery fails to impress me, Lupin," Snape pointed out snottily and sat back in his chair. "And Miss Parr has a detention to discharge, so if you don't mind"

"Ah, er, I'm afraid that will have to wait," Lupin interrupted with a questionable look of what might have been regret on his unshaven face.

Snape tossed his quill on to his desk and stood up slowly. "For one unfortunate moment there, I thought I heard you overriding me, Lupin, and in my own classroom." He leaned forward with his hands on the desk. "But perhaps I was mistaken?" he added in a dangerously quiet voice.

Lupin looked very hard at him with a rather steely glint in his eye. "For some reason, the Headmaster feels that the tragic death of a Ministry member outweighs your personal need to transfer your pent-up frustration on to one of your students, Severus," Lupin replied in an uncharacteristically terse manner. "Time is in short supply, so if the rancour could be delayed until another time, it would be appreciated. We need Chara right now."

Parr looked back at Snape, eyes wide and shuffling from foot to foot.

"I don't know why you even bother waiting for me to dismiss you, Miss Parr, since it is obvious that my authority isn't worth a brass Knut!" he snapped. "You can spend every evening next week dissecting Hook-Backs since you are incapable of serving detention now. Get out!"

Parr raced out of the door, briefly touching her hand to Lupin's forearm on her way past.

"Five minutes! Front gate!" Lupin called after her. He sighed, and looked back at Snape. "Severus, I *am* sorry, but this is really"

"Spare me, Lupin," Snape hissed at him, sweeping away from his desk. "I've never been graced with explanations before, so why start now?" He righted a glass jar that had tipped over on the top shelf of the supply cupboard. It was perhaps the only thing in there that hadn't been destroyed.

"I'd be careful of pushing Chara too far, Severus," Lupin commented to the black-robed figure that had his back resolutely facing him.

Snape gritted his teeth and turned slowly with the sound of glass grinding beneath the heel of his boot. "You forget yourself, Lupin, and your opinion means even less to me now than it ever did. I will treat my students as I see fit."

Lupin deflected the repressed fury with another of his shrugs. "Fine." He pushed himself away from the doorframe. "Just be aware of where the boundary of your jurisdiction ends, is all I'm saying."

He jumped back as Snape slammed the door shut in his face with a hissed *Colloportus*.

Dumbledore tapped his thumbs together and regarded the glowering man opposite him.

"Severus, I appreciate your dissatisfaction at the situation, but it was an emergency," he pointed out gently. "You know that I wouldn't interfere unless it was so."

Snape thinned his lips and shook his head, making his long black hair sway. "That isn't what I am objecting to, Headmaster," he said in a snippy tone. "It's the negation of my authority by others, one of whom does not even have a position here at this school! Bad enough that I have to deal with Moody and his frenetic destruction of my property in one of his 'Auror's privilege' snap inspections, but now I have Lupin swanning in and pulling a student out from detention. I confess I am at a loss as to the point of me even *pretending* to have any control in my role here."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and sighed. He pressed his fingertips to his forehead briefly and then gestured at the chair on the opposite side of the table. "Severus, perhaps you should sit down."

Snape squinted down his long nose at him. "I prefer to stand."

"So be it," Dumbledore replied mildly, wondering how Snape was going to react to what he was about to say. He pushed some parchments about on his desk for a few seconds to buy him some thinking time. "It hasn't escaped me that you are unhappy with Chara's presence here." Snape's expression got even stonier at that remark. "I have also explained to you that it is necessary she be here, but admittedly, not the reason why. I'm starting to think that perhaps I should do so now." He gestured hopefully at the chair once more. "Please?"

Snape remained where he was for a moment before reluctantly relenting. He sat, stiff-backed, in the chair and sniffed, fussing at his teaching robes until they sat in a manner he deemed acceptable.

"No doubt" Dumbledore paused and fixed Snape with a shrewd gaze. "No doubt, you are aware that Chara has spent some time at St Mungo's for her injuries and that she was brought here whilst still significantly injured." Snape failed to reveal any indication of surprise and didn't even bother to feign any. He knew better than to dissemble ignorance in front of Dumbledore. "You are also undoubtedly aware that the reason for that was because an attempt was made on her life whilst she was being treated at the hospital." Snape opened his mouth. "Please, Severus, I've known you long enough to know that you are more than capable of piecing together information into something less fractured and filling in the gaps with the most logical options, but for now let us pretend that I am unaware of your surreptitious investigations." He noticed Snape's eyes lower to the floor briefly, confirming what Dumbledore had merely suspected was true. He waited a few moments before continuing. "Had the person who had been sent to kill Chara been an enemy, I would not have been as concerned. However, the intruder was one of Chara's most trusted confidantes. Whilst it is true that even the closest of companions can turn into the bitterest enemy over the mildest of infractions, in this case it appears to have been due to an *Imperius* Curse."

"Why would anyone try to kill a Muggle with a person under an *Imperius* Curse?" Snape inevitably interrupted, his nostrils slightly flared.

"Chara is more than capable of defending herself, as I am sure you are aware," Dumbledore mentioned with a small smile. "I am guessing that the perpetrator correctly determined that the best way to catch her with her guard down would be to use someone that she knew well and trusted implicitly. Unfortunately for them, they didn't count on the would-be murderer to fight off the curse long enough to warn Chara of the plan." Dumbledore shifted in his chair. "Whilst it is true that Chara does not possess magical abilities as witches and wizards do, she is not without uncommon ability, and she is not alone in this. Her world is a hidden one from necessity, but its potential is incalculable."

Snape blinked. "And what world is that, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore studied the younger man seated opposite him who had the suspicious nature of one twice his years, weighing up which words to use and which to leave aside. "An old one, perhaps one as old as ours, though not nearly as populous. It is one that I have considered for some years as essential to our cause against Voldemort." He

noted the reactive tic in Snape's face at the name. "And in such times, I must make effort to gather potential allies to us, not only to aid us, but to shield them from possible control by darker forces. Indeed, it appears that efforts by the other side have already been made in drawing some of the more disparate societies under their control, Chara's among them.

"She is our first reliable and direct contact with her kind for at least four and a half centuries, and that alone is reason enough for me to have had her brought here to Hogwarts in an effort to keep her safe. Some know her kind as Strikers or Trackers, though Chara ascribes a different name to them. I believe that, in times past at least, the Ministry has used them and not always honourably, and that is one of the things that has made them extremely wary of magicfolk. There is always a middle party between the Strikers and those seeking their assistance, so most theories on Strikers are guesswork at best because of this lack of direct contact.

"Chara has agreed, albeit unwillingly, to assist us in some of the more dangerous exploits of the Order, as well as provide us with certain information that may allow us to make an overture of friendship towards other Strikers. The price she has asked in exchange I believe to be fair, although I am certain that some members of Ministry will not." He rubbed his lower lip with his finger and frowned. "For that reason, amongst others, her presence here at the school is unbeknownst to the Ministry as a whole. The MLE is the only department who know she is still alive, as well as certain other officials who are also in the Order. In fact, the report of the murder in the *Daily Prophet* was as much to fool the Ministry as it was to fool those who had sent Chara's companion to kill her. If both parties believe her dead, then we are at a distinct advantage."

"But the board of governors..." Snape began, "... as well as the parents of students here that *work* at the Ministry will know she is here."

"They know only of a mature-age student by the name of Chara Parr, nothing more. There is no connection between her and the unnamed, now deceased, patient at St Mungo's."

The sneer portrayed what Snape thought of that. "A fine line to be dancing along, Headmaster."

"Life is drawn in fine lines, Severus," Dumbledore replied simply.

"Is it altogether wise to have her under the same roof as Karkaroff?" Snape inquired smoothly.

"Whilst I have never claimed Igor Karkaroff to be an idiot, despite his poor decisions in life, I believe him to be suitably distracted by his own problems to remark on Chara's presence. In fact," Dumbledore smiled wryly, "you have been the only one to cause a fuss at it, Severus."

That earned a snort. "I find that hard to believe," Snape muttered, looking at the floor again.

Dumbledore shook his head. Sometimes the man was like a child with a sweet-tooth that considered it a heinous insult that the biscuit jar was kept out of his reach.

"Nevertheless," said Dumbledore, judiciously refraining from voicing his thoughts on some of Snape's behavioural tendencies. He noticed that Snape hadn't looked up from the floor. "There is something that concerns you?" he prompted.

"As you know, Karkaroff has mentioned to me, with some agitation," Snape rolled his eyes in a gesture of sufferance, "that he is being kept in the dark about some plot going on between Macnair and Brachoveitch." He tapped his long fingers on the arms of his chair. "I am... still unacquainted with what this plot could be," he added with some reluctance. "However, considering that Macnair works in the Committee for the Disposal of Magical Creatures at the Ministry, and therefore has access to and knowledge of many creatures of remarkable abilities, I wonder if the plot has something to do with overtures being made to potential allies or... potential servants," he added. "It is also my suspicion that Greyback is involved somehow, but precisely how, I do not know. Macnair's recent presence in Albania is also of some concern, if that is where the Dark Lord is suspected to be."

"Do you believe that Voldemort is directing Macnair and Brachoveitch?" Dumbledore asked with some anxiety.

Snape considered this possibility while trying to ignore the way his pulse had sped up at the second mention of the Dark Lord's name. "I don't believe so. If anything, Macnair seems worried that the plot could be known to the Dark Lord, which suggests it is being carried out independently." He paused. "I did mention Greyback to Lupin in the hopes that he would be able to determine what that maniac's involvement could be, but his reaction was less than helpful." He straightened the sleeve of his coat primly, a look of distaste on his long face.

"Ah," said Dumbledore, nodding slightly. "Then I will endeavour to bring the subject up with him."

"As you wish," Snape replied, one eyebrow arched. "One thing concerns me, though."

Dumbledore waited expectantly.

"If Macnair is trying to avoid the Dark Lord's notice, why was he in Albania?" When no reply was forthcoming from the Headmaster, he continued. "If the Dark Lord wasn't the reason, what was? It can't have been Jorkins." He paused again, his black gaze set unwaveringly on Dumbledore. "Who did Lupin and Parr get into a fight with that night?"

This time it was Dumbledore who dropped his eyes momentarily. "Chara believes it was another Striker." He looked back up again. "An English one."

There was another silence between them. "In Albania? And why would that be?" Snape inquired.

"Either to find Voldemort or"

"to find other seevy," Snape interrupted. "Is it possible they were after Parr?" Dumbledore nodded. "To what end? That they were attacked by this Striker suggests one of two things: that the Striker was intending harm to Parr, possibly mortal harm, or that the attacking Striker was caught by surprise doing something they wanted kept secret. Either way it represents a conflict of some description amongst Strikers, which bodes ill in your plans for their alliance with those who might stand against the Dark Lord unless the nature of the conflict can be determined and catered for."

"Something that Chara has mentioned to me on more than one occasion," Dumbledore admitted. "It is one of the more pressing developments that she and Lupin are attempting to clarify. Brunton's death earlier this evening is another."

"I am unfamiliar with the name," Snape admitted, tilting his head to one side.

"A junior secretary in the Obliviation Department," Dumbledore provided. "He was found with his throat torn out in an alley in West London. Kingsley managed to get word to me as he was on his way to the scene. I know nothing beyond this," Dumbledore said, raising his hands in a gesture of uneasiness.

Snape sighed and rubbed his temple with the knuckle of one finger. First Jorkins and now this Brunton. He wondered how many more Ministry employees would be picked off in such seemingly random fashion, how many that had already been that he had not been told about. When people started to turn up dead in suspicious circumstances, panic inevitably started to work its own brand of pervasive magic. In such an atmosphere, people who would normally talk clammed up and became guarded, keeping all sorts of secrets and vital snippets of information to themselves.

"You've not been sleeping." It wasn't a question, so technically Snape felt no need to respond to it. He just stared at Dumbledore impassively and suppressed an urge to jiggle his leg in annoyance.

"Are you having bad dreams?" the Headmaster asked, his eyes sharp.

Snape tried to find a way around the question but couldn't. "Sometimes," he conceded warily.

"Is there something I can"

"No." Snape cleared his throat slightly and blinked. "Thank you, but no," he amended.

Dumbledore sighed. "Severus, it isn't necessary to deal with such things alone. I believe we have discussed this on a number of occasions."

Snape remained silent.

"Accepting help from others is not a sign of weakness," Dumbledore pointed out.

Snape raised his eyebrows incrementally. "Another discussion we have had on a number of occasions, Headmaster," he mentioned dryly.

"Quite so," Dumbledore agreed. "I am guessing this occasion is, once again, to end in you eschewing the opportunity to make the burden lighter." He folded his hands in his lap and smiled sadly at Snape, already knowing what the response would be.

"Quite so, Headmaster."

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Sly

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Sometimes you pass the test, and other times you fail.

Lupin looked away politely as Parr emptied the contents of her stomach into the gutter. She remained crouched on the ground for a few moments until her innards stopped knotting themselves up like tangled skeins of wool, one hand on the frigid concrete and the other pressed to her mouth.

"I'm sorry, Remus," she sighed, hunching her shoulders and shuddering.

"I should be the one apologising, Chara," Lupin pointed out, calmly watching the small group of people milling about a couple of hundred yards away near the mouth of the alleyway. "I know how ill Apparating makes you, but there wasn't time to go by broom."

Parr cleared her throat and stood up slowly. "Needs must," she said simply and sighed. "My breath's going to smell like a drunk's bathroom the morning after a particularly vigorous night on the town, though. I wish I'd brought some mints, and so will everyone else." She looked down as Lupin held out half a roll of Shivers' Mouth-Scouring Spearmints to her.

"This drunk has been in that bathroom a few too many times," he mentioned as Parr crunched up three of the mints gratefully.

She sniffed loudly as her eyes watered from the spearmint. "Well, let's get this sorted, shall we?"

They headed over to the mouth of the alleyway.

"Has anyone been in since you found him?" Lupin asked Shackbolt, nodding to Hestia Jones and Tonks.

"Not since I've been here, but as to before that..." Shackbolt shrugged. "You'll have to be quick. I couldn't wait too long before sending a message to Scrimgeour, or it would've looked suspicious. He's bound to bring at least one Hit Wizard with him, so whatever you've got to do, make it fast!"

Parr slipped past him before he'd finished speaking and made for the slumped figure that was wedged up against the brick wall in the shadowed dead-end. The others hung back, watching the surroundings nervously. This was a bad part of town, and the late hour was making it more threatening than usual. Somewhere down the main street, the silhouette of Elphias Doge stood guard against any wandering Muggles. Lupin wedged his hands up under his armpits to keep them warm as he walked slowly over to where Tonks was standing.

"You alright?"

"Better than Brunton, at least," said Tonks with a weak smile, her breath pluming out in a pale white stream into the night air. "Great night for a murder."

"What was he doing over in this part of town?" Lupin asked, wriggling his toes in his boots to try and keep the blood circulating in them.

Tonks shook her head and shrugged. "No idea. He lives over on the north side, and he's not exactly one of the shady sort that hangs around here." She gestured to the environs with a tilt of her head.

Jones and Shackbolt were talking quietly together a few feet away. Tonks rubbed her hands together and did a funny little jig on the spot. "Fuck, it's cold!" she complained, her hair going a bright shade of icy blue. "I think one of my toes just snapped off."

Lupin chuckled. "I'd give you my coat, but it's got so many holes that I doubt it'd help."

Tonks looked sideways at him. "That's... sweet of you, Remus," she noted shyly, glancing away again. "I'd probably manage to put another hole in it, though!" she joked, trying to cover an awkward pause.

"Um," said Lupin, squinting at her. He edged a little closer to her. "Listen, I was thinking"

"Remus?" Parr's voice floated out of the alleyway.

"Excuse me a moment," said Lupin with a crease of frustration across his forehead and headed down the alley. Tonks looked after him with a slightly disappointed expression on her face, her hair turning a deeper shade of blue.

Lupin reached Parr just as she was draping Brunton's cloak across his face and mangled throat. She was crouched next to the body, the hem of her coat gradually soaking up a dark, viscous puddle by her foot.

"We have to go." She twisted her head to look up at him, her grey eyes tinged with green, and the planes of her face bowed outwards. "Now." Straightening up from her crouch, she took Lupin by the elbow and pulled him along the alleyway.

"What is it?" Lupin asked worriedly, looking back over his shoulder at the body.

"Not here," Parr whispered harshly, dragging him along faster, their feet hitting the cobblestones loudly. She kept her face turned to the alley floor

The three standing at the mouth of the alleyway surged towards them. "What did" Shacklebolt began before Parr cut him off.

"Later, at the house," she told him, mouth downturned and brows low. "Best you know nothing for now in case anyone asks." She paused, as if deciding whether to mention what she said next. "Watch your back. I'm not entirely sure the murderer isn't still nearby." She lifted the hood of her coat and covered her head. "Remus, we have to go. Now. Please don't ask me any questions yet."

Less than a minute later, Parr was vomiting into the gutter of the street round the corner from the safe house.

"Dear God, I think I spewed up my socks," she moaned, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She stood up straight with only a mild case of the wobbles and half dragged Lupin along to the safe house.

The front door banged shut behind Parr, the sound echoing like a gunshot through the empty house. She stood with her back against the door, her hand clamped on the handle.

Parr and Lupin stared at each other, the former grimly, the latter expectantly. Parr's mouth was twisted into a crooked line of distaste that was only partially due to the coating of bile that was currently souring her tongue. Somewhere in the house, an old pipe groaned and gurgled, though Lupin thought it might have been Parr's stomach judging from the amount of vomiting she'd done in the past fifteen minutes.

"Greyback," said Parr quietly. Lupin suddenly felt like the contents of his own stomach were about to resurface.

"Are you sure?" he asked after a long pause in which the house shifted its walls incrementally, as if a shudder had gone through it.

Parr nodded once. "I've seen it done like this before," she remarked flatly, pulling the hood of her coat off her head. She sneered. "I could smell the revolting bastard, even over the stench of my own puke and that poor dead sod's bowels." She pushed herself away from the door and walked past Lupin.

"Why didn't you say something to the others before we left?" hissed Lupin, following Parr to the kitchen.

"If he was still hanging around and saw me there, things would've gone very bad," Parr muttered, wrenching at the sink taps. Air burped out of the tarnished pipe before splashes of distinctly rust-coloured water fired out, splattering the sink. Parr let the water run until it was relatively clear before thrusting a glass under it.

"You think they're not already very bad?" Lupin asked incredulously, clutching onto the back of one of the mismatched kitchen chairs.

"To be perfectly honest, Remus, I hope you never get to experience the level of brutality I've seen that monster manifest," said Parr, her hand shaking as she lifted the glass of water to her lips. She drained the glass in three huge gulps and then rested an elbow on the edge of the sink so she could rest her head in her open hand. She remained in that position for some time as Lupin waited anxiously behind her. "Why would he do it?"

Lupin blinked a few times. "Brunton was new to the Oblivation Department," he began, shaking his head slightly. "His position was junior... inconsequential."

"Not inconsequential enough, it seems," Parr pointed out, her voice echoing up from the sink. "Although I am willing to entertain the idea he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, I can't help but think there's more to it than that. Greyback is... unhinged. Psychotic." She straightened and turned to face Lupin, her face pale and tinged with an ashen hue, making her silver hair seem positively warm in colour. Her face had started to recede back into its normal shape, and there was only the merest hint of green left in her eyes. "But there were times he did things for reasons I thought beyond his capabilities to understand." She clutched the empty glass tightly in her hand. "There were moments he was so lucid that I thanked whatever god would listen that they came rarely." She sighed, and her shoulders slumped. "I was more frightened when he was sane than when he was insane." She put the glass down on the washboard and rubbed her face with both hands. "What will the Ministry do?" she asked, peering through her fingers.

Lupin sat down on the chair he had been clutching. "Act as if it never happened, if the last two murders are anything to go by," he guessed. "Bad enough that there are rumours that He Who Must Not Be Named is back. Now Fudge has three deaths in suspicious circumstances of people from his own government to handle, to say nothing of the Muggle murders." He gave a humourless smile. "I can't imagine that he'd be willing to let word spread of what's happening on his watch."

Parr barked out a harsh laugh. "Politicians," she said, making it sound like a swear word. "All the same: spineless cowards more concerned about their reputations than doing anything worthwhile. Not worth a pinch of spit."

The silence returned as each thought their own disturbing thoughts.

"What if this is a sign?"

Lupin looked up at Parr who had voiced what he had just been turning over in his mind. "You think it's possible he knows you're alive?"

She nodded slightly.

"Then we'd all best watch our backs," Lupin pronounced and realised in that moment just how badly he needed a drink.

"There's a problem."

The sandy-haired man raised his eyebrows slightly.

Trint closed his book with one finger and squinted at the man sitting opposite him. "It would appear I am not the only one looking for your mystery woman."

The eyebrows edged up higher.

"Let us just say that some of the more..." Trint paused and flicked a glance up at the roof of the pub. "...disreputable elements seem to be after her as well."

"Such as?"

Trint pursed his lips and sniffed. "Hard to say."

The raised eyebrows drew down into a line of disapproval. "Spare me the euphemisms," said the man frostily. "Am I about to be informed of another of your glorious price hikes?"

Trint smiled in defiance of the irritated tone. "Well, when one has to compete against others for highly sought after information, there tends to be... additional expenses."

The man tipped his head back and stared down his nose at Trint, a markedly cold glint in his hazel eyes. "Is that so?"

"Quite so," Trint agreed pleasantly. He locked eyes with the man unabashedly, waiting for the next move...it wasn't what he expected.

The man smiled. For the first time since Trint had known him, the lanky bastard smiled at him. He immediately realised that this wasn't going the way he wanted it to.

"It is fortunate, then, that you are not my only source of information," said the man, running one finger along the edge of the table between them.

Trint tried bluffing his way back into a better position. "Have you been wasting my time?" he threatened, his dark brown eyes matching the coldness opposite him. "If you're attempting to get me to jump through hoops for your amusement"

"You'll do what?" the man interrupted, pulling each word out into a long line of snideness. "Raise your prices?" He stood up slowly, making Trint lean back slightly in his chair. "I don't think so." He took a step away from the table.

"You pay for the information I have, regardless of whether or not you want to hear it," Trint pointed out in a voice like chilled stone sliding across splintered bone.

The man pivoted on his heel and leaned on the table, looming like a person experienced in intimidation. "Then we have an interesting dilemma, don't we?" he pointed out, his face less than half a foot from Trint's. "I consider extortion to be a grievous insult, the kind that requires its own form of compensation," he hissed. "And you won't like the price I'll demand." He stood upright again, a look of distaste on his face. "I'd say our business is at an end." With that, he turned and left the pub.

Trint watched him go, a scowl on his face that he turned on the woman seated at a table near the door. She'd been watching the exchange between the two men, one tiny hand clasped around the stem of her wineglass and the other lightly holding her green shawl at the neck. She returned his look with an impassive one of her own, picked up her glass, and drained it in one gulp. Then she stood, nodded in his direction, and glided out of the pub and into the grey afternoon, the heavy chestnut braid down her back swaying with the same rhythm as her generous hips.

Arrogant scum, thought Snape angrily. He'd had to put up with Trint's reprehensible penchant for blackmail for too long. This last example of carrot dangling had been more than he could stand. It had taken a great deal of restraint on Snape's part not to clamp his hand around the man's neck and squeeze the life out of him. It was an abominable end to what had been a teeth-grindingly frustrating day.

It had taken twice as long to purchase replacements for everything that Moody had ruined the day before, and Snape was convinced that he'd been overcharged for the glassware. Not that it really mattered, since the school was footing the bill, but it was the principle of the thing. He wondered if someone had managed to hex the word 'mug' into his forehead without him noticing. He'd had to deal with more disrespect over the past week than he had in the past year, and the trend appeared to be continuing unabated.

He walked along the streets, stewing in his own vexation and trying to pace out his irritation until the familiar tingle of the Polyjuice Potion wearing off began. He ducked down an alley and behind a large dumpster, out of sight.

Truth be told, he was interested to know who else had been asking around about Parr, but he wasn't about to let Trint hold him to ransom for that information. The man was good, very good, and he knew it. However, his confidence had tipped over into an audacity that had raised Snape's hackles. He sighed, trying to ignore the stench of rotting garbage wafting from the dumpster, and held himself as still as possible as his assumed form shifted turbulently back to his normal appearance.

Long-standing habit made him wait a few more minutes before emerging from the alley. He stared at his boots blankly, his hair falling forward off his shoulders. He really needed to end this day on some form of a high note, otherwise he'd find himself in the grip of a snit that would take a week to dissipate, and right now he was too tired to entertain that possibility as being beneficial to anyone, least of all himself.

A small movement in his peripheral vision lifted his eyes. He blinked, and an idea coalesced in his mind, the kind of idea that would indeed end his day on a high note. He smiled and made a grab for the star performer before it could scuttle away and out of his reach.

Lupin blotted the piece of parchment he'd finished before his sleeve managed to smudge it.

"Severus, I'm at somewhat of a loss as to why you're here. Surely you can read your literature elsewhere where I don't have to listen to you making snotty comments about whatever I'm doing." He pulled out a fresh piece of parchment wearily. "If my company is that odious, go back to your dungeon."

"All in good time, Lupin," said Snape from behind his book.

Lupin squinted at him suspiciously. "What are you up to?"

Snape stared at him darkly over the top of his book. "Page ninety. Go back to your chicken scratch."

Lupin tutted. "That's not what I"

There was an ear-busting shriek from upstairs.

Snape stood up abruptly, closing his book with a snap. "Goodbye."

A loud bang in the hallway made Lupin knock his ink bottle all over his notes. "Ah, sh"

The lounge door crashed open to reveal Parr with a face like hell's fury, teeth bared to the molars, and her hair in disarray. She shot a pointing finger straight at Snape. "You! You evil, conniving string of black grease!"

He stared down his long nose at her. "Good evening to you, too."

"I'm going to kick your scrawny backside into next week!" Parr bellowed, waving a clenched fist at him that had something sticking out of it at various angles.

"What the hell's going on?" asked Lupin, mopping futilely at his now ink-ridden notes with a handkerchief.

"Someone thinks it amusing to hide a spider in my bed," Parr hissed, eyes fixed on Snape.

"Well, do let us know when you find out who this someone is, Miss Parr," replied Snape mildly with a bland expression. "I'm sure the revelation will be riveting."

"Stupid git! You think I don't know it was you?" Parr shouted, alarmingly close to apoplexy.

Snape sneered at her. "You're mistaken. It must be your arachnophobia dropping your IQ to single digits."

"How about I ram my single digits right down your lying trap?" Parr seethed at him.

Snape laughed humourlessly. "Keep dreaming the dream, Miss Parr."

"Aaaaargh!" Parr shrieked insanely and launched herself at him, using the table as a platform to gain greater height. Lupin was resoundingly knocked backwards, parchments and books flying in all directions as the table tipped over.

Snape hadn't been fast enough to dodge aside before Parr collided with him. He heard the shoulder seam of his coat tear along the stitches a fraction of a second before he hit the floor. Pain bloomed along his arm as his elbow cracked against the leg of the armchair. It was all he could do to hold Parr's hand back from his face.

"Open wide, Professor," she growled. "I've always wanted to stuff something down that acidic maw of yours, and if I have to go through your yellow teeth to do it, that's

exactly what I'll do!"

Turning his head to the side to avoid having a dead spider jammed forcefully into his mouth, Snape tried levering his knee up into her midriff to open some distance between them. "My teeth are not yellow!"

Parr put an extraordinary amount of force into getting her hand closer to his mouth. "Oh, please! Have you looked in the mirror?"

Lupin untangled himself from the shattered remains of his chair and looked forlornly at the mess that was once his painstakingly assembled research. Ink had splashed over almost every piece of parchment, rendering the past fortnight's work illegible. He uttered a number of choice phrases that would have had a Knockturn Alley whore blushing.

"That's rich coming from you, you trouging termagant!" Snape shouted as best he could while Parr's free hand forced his turned head roughly onto the ratty carpet. "You have more food spilled down your front than the contents of a pig's slop tray!" He managed to get his fist into just the right position to ram her in the sternum mercilessly. The air whooshed out of Parr's lungs, and it gave him enough of an opportunity to shove her to one side. For one glorious yet brief moment, he thought he was going to escape. Parr grabbed the tail of his coat and dragged him backwards before he'd even risen from his knees.

"My research!" Lupin moaned, not far off sobbing in frustration, picking up an ink-sodden parchment gently. "Why can't I just work in peace?"

Snape managed to twist around, coat strangling his torso, and propel Parr back against the wall. The woman's eyes focussed on the tip of the wand he had pointed right in her face.

"Well, well, well, isn't this interesting?" he hissed nastily at her, sandwiching her between his body and the wall. "You're not the only one with a wish list, Miss Parr. I've lost count of the number of times I've wanted to stopper up that smart mouth of yours with something. I think *Silencio* is particularly appropriate right now!" He pulled the wand away just in time before Parr's teeth snapped the end off it.

"You're over-reliance on that stick is nothing short of astounding, Professor!" Parr replied, laughing rudely at him. "You're about to find out what it feels like to have it jammed where the sun doesn't shine."

Snape narrowed his eyes, and smirked openly, pointing the wand straight at her mouth. "*Silencio*."

Parr guffawed at him and punched him hard in the stomach.

His impact with the floor was nothing compared with the jolt of surprise he received at the complete ineffectuality of the spell he'd just cast. He stared stupidly at Parr from his position on the floor.

"Dear God, this is going to be fun!" Parr vowed with glee, advancing on him, dead spider clutched in her hand.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Snape tried, scooting back awkwardly, wand pointed directly at Parr. He watched in horror as the spell fell dead the second it touched her.

"I don't think third time will be lucky, Professor," she mentioned with the kind of glint in her eye that suggested he was about to get skewered like a prawn.

Snape scrambled to his feet, knocking Lupin backwards, and slipping on the inky parchments. He couldn't believe it! Parr was immune to magic. Why hadn't anyone told him this?!

A hand grabbed a fistful of his hair, yanking his head backwards.

"Lupin, forget your damned research and help me!" Snape hissed, kicking his foot back to try and connect it with Parr's shin. His neck was starting to hurt from the angle Parr had pulled his head back at.

"You made your bed, Severus, you can lie in it," Lupin muttered, gathering up the pathetic remnants of his study.

"Why didn't you ever mention she's immune to magic?!" Snape yelled, arms pin-wheeling to stop himself from tipping backwards.

Lupin picked up the empty ink bottle. "It must have slipped my mind," he sighed, feeling terribly exhausted all of a sudden. He narrowly avoided getting hit in the face as Snape's wand went flying across the room and clattered against the window. The gossamer-thin tendrils linking his patience to his temper broke. "That's it! I've had enough, Chara! If you can't resolve the issue with even pretence at restraint, take it outside while I clean this mess up!"

"Certainly, Remus," Parr replied and jammed her hand up the back of Snape's coat to grab hold of the waistband of his trousers. She propelled him forcefully out of the lounge room and straight into the wall below the banister of the stairs, her other hand still gripping his hair. Snape swung his arm around and caught her in the temple with his elbow. It unbalanced her enough to release her hold and to allow him to sweep her feet out from under her and push her face first into the carpet. Planting one knee squarely between her shoulder blades, he wrenched her left arm back, his grip on her wrist not as sure as it could have been due to the bandage she had wrapped around it. The dead spider's legs sprouted from between the fingers of her clenched fist, its podgy body mangled beyond recognition.

"I do believe we've been here before, Miss Parr," Snape panted in her ear. "I don't need magic to truss you up by the feet, you know."

Parr laughed derisively at him. "And I need less than ten seconds to cut every scrap of clothing off you and whip you down the street, Professor. Play time is over!" Using her free hand as a lever to push herself up and backwards, Parr slowly raised herself up off the floor like a leviathan from the deep, dislodging his knee from her back. Twisting her shoulder, she pulled her wrist out of his grasp and spun on her heel to face him.

The complete and utter certitude on her face decided it for him. Snape reached out his hand towards the lounge room.

"*Accio wand!*" The length of wood clipped Lupin on the ear on its way out, making the man squawk in pain. Snape caught the wand out of the air effortlessly and backed away.

Parr's eyes widened in outraged incredulity. "Don't you d"

Lupin heard the crack as Snape Apparated from the house, which was closely followed by Parr's shriek of rage as she threw the dead spider at the wall. The crushed carcass plopped ludicrously to the floor.

Lupin waited a few moments for the dust to settle. He pushed a piece of splintered table with the toe of his boot and sighed.

"Are we still going out to eat, then?" asked Parr innocently, fussily refolding the cuffs of her jacket.

Chapter Twenty-Eight - Receptive

Chapter 28 of 59

It's a race where the finishing line keeps moving.

Snape stood motionless in the shower, his hands clamped on the taps behind him as the frigid water sluiced down his body. He'd ceased to notice the perishingly low temperature of the water some minutes ago...he was too absorbed in keeping the freight train of his mind from skewing across several different tracks.

Immunity to magic? Not many creatures had that. Giants were amongst them, of course, but Parr was far from being a giant. Did all Strikers have this trait? Hagrid had not mentioned it, but then, there was probably plenty that Hagrid hadn't mentioned, and not through any reticence on his part. It was more likely forgetfulness.

Snape had decided to jog the memory of the Care of Magical Creatures teacher further through an imbalance of obligation. He hadn't given Hagrid the Pewtinellas for the scraps of information he'd managed to drag out of the half-giant's extensive, albeit ponderous recollections. The birds had been a metaphorical carrot to encourage Hagrid to find out more about Strikers on Snape's behalf. Not that Snape would ever outright admit that to Hagrid, or even suggest it. It was far more subtle to manipulate Hagrid's ingrained sense of fairness. Whilst he had little dealing with Hagrid on a day-to-day basis, Snape had noticed that the huge man had a very clear idea of right and wrong, fairness and injustice. It was a very simplified idea, certainly, and one that had gotten him into trouble on more than one occasion, but Hagrid stuck with it regardless.

Snape knew that Hagrid wasn't stupid, just honest and perhaps overly optimistic about the world around him. There was certainly no way that Hagrid was going to sit back and allow the overly-generous gift of the Pewtinellas to go unmatched by effort on his own part. It would be interesting to see what came of the manoeuvre.

Screwing his eyes closed against the rivulets of water running down his face, Snape turned his thoughts to Trint's earlier revelation that others were looking for Parr. Based on what the Headmaster had told him, Strikers were right in the line of sight of the Death Eaters, so that was most likely who also had their feelers out for contact with Strikers. However, was it Strikers in general, or Parr specifically that they were interested in? If her immunity to magic was idiosyncratic, it would explain why others were so keen to get their hands on her in particular. But was it to kill her or to yoke her? The incident at St Mungo's suggested the former, but that may have been at the behest of a different party. Parr was as gifted at putting other people's noses figuratively out of joint as she was at brawling. His mouth twisted at that thought.

The options were too varied for Snape's liking. One, Death Eaters were attempting to find Parr for some as yet unclear reason, though it may be linked to her immunity to magic. Two, some other party was looking for Parr in order to kill her, again for unknown reasons. Three, Strikers had their own internal politics that were unknown to any outside their own kind that could hinder the Order's overtures of alliance toward them, or assist the Death Eaters in pulling them apart into a confused and disunited group that would be easier to control and direct. Four, Macnair could possibly be involved with options one or two...it was indeterminate at this time which was the correct one. Five, Snape still didn't know the exact reason why Parr was here at the school. Dumbledore had said protection, but if that were the only reason, why was she enrolled as a student? She could simply remain within the walls of Hogwarts, hidden from the students and the faculty. The Headmaster had mentioned that Parr had asked a price for her assistance. What had that price been? Obviously one that the Ministry would have balked at, but that wasn't saying much.

He sighed and turned the cold tap until the water stopped falling. Every time some new piece of information turned up, it caused a sprouting of more questions like weeds gone mad in fertile soil. It was aggravating to the extreme.

Snape waited until most of the water had drained off him before he stepped from the shower carefully. The circulation in his feet had almost stopped from the cold, so it was like walking on nerveless marble instead of flesh and bone. He scrubbed a towel briefly over his damp hair and scowled at his reflection in the mirror over the sink. The cold shower had pushed the colour of his already pale skin into the blue range, giving him a near ghostly appearance. He bared his teeth for a few seconds and then huffed. They were not yellow! Not much. Well, perhaps they were, he admitted angrily and wound the towel around his waist. It was that damned Polyjuice Potion that did it, and up until this point, Snape hadn't cared less if it made his teeth yellow, for the same reason he didn't care that his hair was greasy, his nose was too big, and his skin was too pale...hereditary blessings from his parents. He snorted and worked his left arm, trying to get both movement and feeling back into the elbow joint. He had managed to crack it fairly hard against the leg of the armchair at the safe house when Parr had leapt on him, and it had started to throb harshly even before he'd Apparated out of her reach. He rotated his arm to get a look at the bluish black bruise and sniffed, hoping that he'd managed to give her one just as large.

So much for the high-note he'd hoped to end his blight of a day on. The perverse satisfaction he'd gotten from preying on Parr's arachnophobia had been disappointingly fleeting. In the fracas that had followed, Snape had found himself ill-equipped to deal with a woman who harboured a startling physical strength and the hair-trigger temper to use it. He wasn't a person who had succumbed to an over-reliance on magic as a tool in his life, since there were other tools that were just as sharp and effective. However, none of them had been at hand when Parr had shrugged him off her back like an annoying child and turned on him with the promise of retribution in her eyes. He'd decided at that point to make a calculated retreat, comprehending the meaning behind Lupin's earlier comment back at Hogwarts about boundaries and unwilling to suffer any further nasty, unforeseen surprises.

Snape sneered at his reflection and walked out of the bathroom. He saw Folter standing by the trail of clothes he'd left on his hurried path to the bathroom, his coat in her hands. She was looking closely at the ripped seam on the shoulder, her calloused fingers poking through the hole curiously. He walked straight past the house-elf and over to the fireplace to warm up.

The souring of his day had contained a peculiar, though not unwelcome sting in its tail which had caught him unawares, tipping him between mild astonishment and suggestive captivation like a slowly rotating hourglass. Snape never feigned an interest in others unless it benefited himself in some way. He'd become selfish through his experiences and didn't care if people thought ill of him because of it. Such people were usually tediously dull, whiningly pathetic and terminally obtuse. Any investment on his part into interactions with others frequently weighed up as a bad deal, so what was the point?

A damp lock of hair clung to his face, so he pushed it behind his ear and wriggled his toes to try and get some feeling back into them. The heat from the fire was almost painful on his icy skin, but he remained where he was, staring at his feet.

Many people seemed fixated on trivialities, as if the minutiae of their lives were of importance to others. It was rare that anyone said anything to him that truly interested him, or even surprised him, so Snape trod through his days under sufferance of listening to people bleating on about wholly wearisome nonsense, leaving him wondering if this was the closest to the pinnacle of human interaction that he was ever going to experience. Most of him had a suspicion it was. After all, he could hardly immerse himself in the scholarly community with his reputation. As it was, anything he wrote at an intellectual level had to be done under a pseudonym for it to be even considered by editors and publishers and not burned to ash on the spot.

Being devoid of anything even remotely resembling a social circle, Snape's peers at Hogwarts were really the only adults he conversed with on a daily basis, but even they had their own little worlds of mediocrity that they revolved in like a roast on a spit. Dumbledore was something of an exception to this, but Snape found his conversations exasperating at times, especially when the they steered around to him and his lack of sleep, or the Dark Mark on his arm, or whether he was feeling all right... it went on and on like a litany of parental nagging. As if he didn't have enough to be paranoid about without Dumbledore bringing it up, fearing that Snape would forget what a totally harrowing situation he was in if not reminded of it at least twice a week! McGonagall was perhaps one of the most interesting to talk to, provided she didn't feel that her side of the conversation was being overridden by Snape's logic, because then she, too, would start harping on at him about how little he ate, or how ratty he sounded. He dreaded the day Dumbledore and McGonagall would team up and hammer him into the floor with seemingly solicitous comments that he was sure were engineered to drive him round the bend in order to shut him up about something that they didn't want to hear. Lupin was a pain in the backside, but at least he provided Snape with the entertainment of needling him until the werewolf's steely patience snapped; that was always fun, albeit brief. The rest of the faculty just wasted hot air talking to him, as far as he was concerned. Outside of Hogwarts, anyone he spoke to had some kind of agenda that they tried to measure him against or incorporate him into. Malfoy was like that, the aristocratic snob! His machinations were deadly and merciless, so Snape preferred any contact with him to be kept to the barest minimum. He could lump the rest of his adult contacts into a flipbook of disinterest and irritation. Merlin, it was depressing! And that was even *before* he took into account the sheer agony of having to deal with children five days of the week! He hissed and picked at his thumbnail at that thought.

Perhaps if he'd had a different upbringing, he'd find that having better social and interpersonal skills to be of some advantage, but when you grew up in the household that he had, it was hard to see anyone else in anything except a suspicious light. Snape had heard his classmates whine on about their parents and families like the spoiled, over-protected brats that they were, never realising just how hideous their childhoods *could* have been. The way his had been. Coming to Hogwarts had seemed like a blessed escape from the coldness of his parents, but, just as with all things in his life, it hadn't been the shining salvation he had thought it would be. From the very first day there had been comments about his nose, snide remarks about his heritage, laughter at his awkwardness, bullying by older students...even the girls!...indifference from his teachers, isolation from his Housemates. Except for the actual learning, it had proved a heartbreaking disappointment. So, with study being the only thing that hadn't let him down, that's where his energies went. Anything else was a distraction and a potential threat to what was left of his dignity.

The end of the school year was a time of dread for him, for regardless of the bullying and the carping he suffered on a daily basis, it was nothing in comparison to the cold indifference or explosive brutality that would find him at home. Despite the fact he had no siblings, no relatives (none that visited, anyway), and almost no friends, Snape always knew that there was something profoundly wrong with the way his family operated. His mother was a witch and his father a Muggle, and ordinarily that would have caused some problems, but what went on between his parents was a mystery he was never able to solve to his satisfaction. There was an animosity that was so well-rehearsed that Snape had absolutely no clue as to why his parents had even considered pairing with each other, let alone actually *marrying*.

His father was a heavy-fisted, sour-faced and bitter-natured man who toiled at his job six days a week and spent most of the time remaining to him at the local pub. It was better that way, for the man seemed devoid of anything even remotely resembling compassion or empathy. He was the human version of the stone wheel in a mill, mindlessly grinding down the seeds of his day into a bland, uniform powder that had no substance, that blew away into cold air and vanished, only to be replaced by the flavourless dust of the following day. The rare times he blighted the house with his presence ended in one of three scenarios: a confrontation with his wife that involved a lot of shouting on his part that would degenerate into a physical abuse, the viciousness of which depended on the amount of alcohol he had consumed or the nature of the perceived infraction on the part of his wife; a relentless haranguing of his son who, like his mother, would stoically withstand at least one damaging blow to the face and try not to buckle under the vituperation on his filial shortcomings and inadequacies as a human being; or the man would lurk in the house, silent, glowering, radiating an edgy aura of pent up rage and frustration that could end in unforeseen ways a broken window, a smashed table, a meal flung at the wall, or a beating delivered in a silence that was terrifying in its stark iciness and twisted malice. Inarguably, a man worthy of hatred. And fear.

Snape's mother had always been broken to him. Something inside her was ruined, something that he found whole in others, once he actually got to experience contact with other people. It wasn't until his teenage years that he could put a name to what it was. His mother's spirit was broken, fractured like brittle bone, the shards sharp and cruel, biting into the softness of her will and the fabric of her personality. Having never known his mother any other way, Snape couldn't tell if that breaking had been caused by his father, or by someone or something else. Perhaps she had always been that way.

Whilst at school, he found himself drawn to those who radiated an air he'd never experienced before, to their confidence and self-assuredness that came from an upbringing that he never had. It had simultaneously intrigued and shamed him. He had always disliked his parents, but then, he had begun to hate them. His father who was a mindless, brutal Muggle, and his mother, who could have struck her abusive husband down with her magic and yet never did. His mother, the broken one. His mother, who accepted her subservient role to a cruel, furious man. His mother, who made a mockery of her heritage by her weakness. His mother, the coward.

His pity turned to disgust, which then turned to shame, which then turned to contempt.

Thusly, warmth and affection had been foreign concepts to him, which made friendships nigh impossible, except for one, and that had ended sourly anyway. He didn't want to think about that now.

Snape turned away from the fire to allow the heat to dry his back and watched Folter pick his discarded clothing up off the floor.

It had always been rare that someone of the opposite sex piqued his interest, but whenever they had, it was often on the basis of him being outdone in some fashion. Admittedly, it did seem a peculiar form of attraction, but considering the female role model he grew up with, it was a wonder it wasn't something more stunted or perverse. Anything that his mother was repelled him, so seeing aspects of her in other women was at best a turn-off and at worst an instigator of contempt. Crying was a stellar example of something that made him want to turn on his heel and head in the opposite direction, but this was not to say that Snape found all instances of crying pointless or aggravating...just most of them. Being stuck in an environment such as Hogwarts meant that there were frequent tears, the causes of which seemed so trivial as to be laughable. Teenage girls cried at anything...studies, arguments, hair, who sat next to whom at lunch, being popular, being unpopular... it was mind-boggling. Snape recalled a protracted drama that he was forced to try and rectify between three of his female House students that appeared, to him at least, to revolve around outrage at someone borrowing someone else's hairbrush that then jack-knifed into a squabble about inappropriate smiling at certain members of the opposite sex and who had the shortest skirt. Snape had been flummoxed as to why the situation warranted his time being wasted and said as much. That just made all three girls cry at once, confirming his suspicion that it was an unspoken tactic to punish him for not being able to navigate his way through the convoluted maze of the female mind.

The infrequent times he did understand tears shed made such squabbles seem even more pathetic and annoying.

Snape was much more receptive to a woman pitching an anger fit over something. Not the sort of insane conniption that Bellatrix Lestrange tended to manifest. He might be emotionally stunted, but he was able to tell the difference between temper and certified madness. He liked strong women, women who could hold their own in a conversation by using their brains and not their appearance, women who weren't afraid of challenge. He knew they existed and most likely in large numbers. He just hadn't experienced that many, and perhaps it was that faux scarcity that had made the enjoyment develop into something beyond an intellectual form. Snape rolled his eyes at that thought. Just as likely it was down to some idiosyncratic emotional dysfunction on his part. Either way, the result was the same...the harder they pushed at him, the more interested he was. It had caused problems for him. There were numerous times where getting into a verbal contest with McGonagall had left him glad he was sitting down, and he'd never been attracted to her in that way. The first time it had happened, he hadn't even realised that he'd been smiling slightly at her until she snapped at him for smirking, so ever since then he'd been careful to keep his face as neutral as possible. When it got too much for him, he would feign ill-humour and retreat before the situation became too awkward. Sometimes he'd instigate the conflict simply because he felt like it, and he soon realised that repetition didn't dampen the resulting reaction in him, especially since McGonagall was sharp-tongued and fiery-tempered when the mood took her.

Snape supposed there were worse things to be stimulated by. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, staring blankly at the wall.

He'd never been bested physically by a woman before. It was definitely a new experience for him, and he realised he liked it. A lot. He had cynical thoughts about what that said about him, but his body really didn't care what his mind theorised. He sighed and walked back to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Folter jumped slightly as the door banged shut. She draped the clothing over the arm of a chair and tucked a strand of hair behind her large ear with a faintly surprised look on her narrow face as she heard the water falling in the bathroom again. It was merely a slight accentuation of her normal expression, but for once the house-elf was surprised.

She had served at Hogwarts her entire life, as her mother had before her, and her mother before that. Folter wondered if her mother had been somewhat disappointed with her daughter. Her skills must have fallen short in some fashion, for her mother frequently berated her up until her death some years ago.

"Folter is not fast enough... Folter doesn't show enough respect... Folter's bows are too shallow... Folter calls this clean?... Folter smiles at the wrong times... Folter's attention wanders too much... stop embarrassing the rest of us with your questions... practical jokes are not house-elfin... Folter's cooking has no flair..." It went on and on.

Folter was never trusted with anything important. Deemed a maverick by the other house-elves, she was relegated to the most menial of tasks and told that she should be grateful for it. It didn't matter to Folter. She just did what she was told but suspected that the others expected her to feel shamed that she was not allowed to interact with any of the castle's human inhabitants. It was a matter of pride amongst the house-elves that they were responsible for the care of those that dwelt in the school. House-elves were meant to feel honour to serve any, but there was no pride as great as what came from being personally assigned to one of the faculty.

Many years ago, whilst assigned to scrubbing floors by hand in the kitchens, Folter had been in a prime position to witness an unusual burst of concern amongst the house-elves when one of them had returned to the kitchen in a state of extreme agitation. Despite her proximity, she had been unable to make out what they were all whispering about and thought no more of it. The following day, the same thing occurred, but this time with a different house-elf...one of the more senior and experienced of them.

There had been much hand-wringing and lamentation that Folter thought was overly dramatic, even for house-elves. The same thing happened the next day, and the day after that. A lengthy meeting had then occurred amongst the senior house-elves that Folter had been ignorant of until she was dragged unceremoniously into it by Kapshot, the Chief Allocator, and told that she had been assigned elsewhere. Folter knew that the rather furtive looks from the other house-elves boded ill for her, but she said nothing.

Standing in front of her new charge later that day, she wondered if it would've been wiser to have said something when she'd had the chance. He'd stared at her with a barely concealed annoyance that left her unsure of how to proceed. Her lack of experience in dealing with humans directly gave her nothing to fall back on, so she stood in his long shadow and kept her mouth closed. It turned out to have been a wise move as he tersely informed her that she was the fifth in a line of eventual disappointments that seemed to have trouble performing tasks to his satisfaction, and that she would most likely be succeeded by a sixth by the end of the day. Folter tried to ignore the repeating recitation of her faults spoken in her mother's voice that echoed through her head and did her best. She got a lot wrong, and as the sun set she had resigned herself to scrubbing kitchen floors again.

Her mother had been outraged that her misfit and slapdash daughter had been foolishly assigned to a faculty member and had browbeaten Kapshot into revoking her decision to assign Folter to serve Professor Snape. Folter had just shrugged and went back to her scrubbing brush, allowing the sound of her mother's continued harping to roll over her like steam.

The next day, her replacement had trailed into the kitchen behind Professor Snape, head down and hands twisting the fabric of his flour sack attire in consternation.

"I don't want this one," the Professor had told Kapshot acerbically. "Where's the one I had yesterday?"

"Ah, Folter has been assigned to tasks more suited to her abilities, Professor," Kapshot had replied nervously, rather wild-eyed at his question.

Snape's head had swivelled unerringly in Folter's direction where she was stoically attempting to remove a beetroot stain from the stone next to one of the preparation benches, and then back to Kapshot again. "She is sufficient. Please find someone else to attend to the crucial task of floor scrubbing." With that, he had left, and Folter hadn't scrubbed floors again.

The first week had been a challenge, to say the least. He was unfailingly picky, frequently cantankerous, and occasionally contrary. Folter tried her best to get things right and anticipate his needs, but she wasn't certain she was succeeding. She expected to be back in the kitchens again at any given moment.

The first week turned into the second, and the second turned into a third. It was the fourth week that cemented her permanence.

"Why do you never speak?" he'd asked her. "Are you mute?"

Folter had tucked her hair behind her ear, giving herself a moment to phrase her first vocal response.

"No, Professor, but Folter has been told that she is incapable of appropriate conversation," she replied hesitantly.

He'd raised an eyebrow at that. "Appropriate by whose definition?"

Folter guessed, correctly, that it was a rhetorical question.

After the teething problems had gone away, she found her assignment quite simple. The Professor liked routine, didn't prevaricate, and proved capable of attending to some of his own needs without her assistance. He accepted her reticence, and it got to the stage where, occasionally, neither of them had to speak at all. Usually it was because there was nothing to say, but sometimes it was because Folter didn't know what to say. House-elves were tight lipped about and to those they served, for that was part of their service and their loyalty to their masters, but Folter wondered if perhaps she should have spoken. Her mother's voice echoed with disapproval inside her head: house-elves did not ask unnecessary questions; they just did as they were told.

Folter had a suspicion about her charge, something that took her a while to pin down, but once she had, it certainly explained a number of things. Folter was not like other house-elves...she was too curious, too interested in knowing the why of things, too ready to step outside the accepted behaviour of her kind, but she also knew when to keep silent. That didn't mean she always followed that instinct, but to the best of her ability at self-restraint she did. The questions would still form though, teetering on the edge of being spoken when she saw that he slept poorly or couldn't sleep at all, when he isolated himself from others and lost himself in his work for hours at a time, when he forgot to eat or failed to notice the position of the sun outside the castle walls, when he'd disappear for days and then return in a state of physical deterioration that he feigned not to notice even as Folter held his head whilst his body tried to turn itself inside out through his mouth or when she tended an injury he couldn't reach.

However, it was not all maudlin. Once the Professor had discovered Folter's penchant for mischievous behaviour...an instance that Folter honestly believed would see her kicked out of Hogwarts in disgrace, but she hadn't been able to help herself...coupled with the perfectly composed expression of innocence on her face whilst being blasted by his ire, she found herself carrying out all manner of misconduct on his behalf. It was never blatantly asked of her, coming normally in an aloud musing as to the solution of a hypothetical problem that involved another person being, in the Professor's opinion, uncooperative. It was a competition to see who could come up with the most innovative solution that, of course, remained hypothetical right up until the moment Folter executed it. The latest seemed to involve spiders.

She took a close look at the torn seam of the Professor's coat and wondered what had caused it. Except for his teaching robes which Folter had to repair the hem of on a weekly basis, he was never hard on his clothing, and if anything, seemed inordinately prissy about it. Folter had seen the huge bruise on the back of his left arm and concluded that he must have gotten into a brawl, which seemed extremely out of character. He was also eating more in a week than he would normally in four and seemed to be relapsing into nightmares.

Folter shrugged to herself and ran her finger along the split seam which knitted itself together tightly. Her mother would have made her use a needle and thread, which Folter always found pointless when house-elf magic was just as effective and a lot quicker. Giving the coat the once over to remove any dirt or debris, she then draped it back across the arm of the chair, and left to fetch the Professor something to eat. If he ever got out of the shower.

"Well, if it isn't the Ministry's Chief Executioner," Greyback rumbled, picking his teeth with a ragged fingernail. "What brings you down here to grace us mere mortals with your illustrious, moustachioed presence?"

Macnair pretended to ignore the laughter behind him and stared impassively at the werewolf sprawled in the chair before him. The place stank like an animal's den, and most likely hadn't seen daylight for some years judging from the smattering of toadstools that marked the wavering path of rising damp along the bottom of the walls. What looked like an old leg bone was rammed into the brickwork, with a piece of rotten, oil-soaked cloth wrapped around the end of it and lit to provide a lurching, flickering light that threw jagged shadows along the floor and twisted the faces of those around him into an even more ugly façade than normal.

Greyback stared back at Macnair from under his straggling brows, looking for the entire world like he was the senior of the two of them. Perhaps he believed that, but then Greyback always had been arrogant and stupid. Tonight had been a supreme example of that.

"I fail to see the advantage of killing Brunton," Macnair mentioned stonily. "And even less at dumping him where he could have been found."

Greyback snorted and flicked whatever disgusting thing he had picked out from between his teeth at Macnair's feet.

"Brunton? Who's that, then?"

Macnair's moustache jumped as his lip curled in contempt. "Don't play the ignoramus, Greyback. I know perfectly well you were responsible. I want to know why."

Greyback bared his nasty teeth in a parody of a smile, as if he'd never understood the mechanics of the expression and was approximating with what little knowledge he had.

"The world's full of incomprehensible actions, Macnair. That's what makes it so interesting."

"Surely you're not so feeble-minded as to expect that murdering a Ministry employee will go either unnoticed or uninvestigated, you noxious, tick-ridden cur," Macnair snapped.

Greyback was up out of his chair like a shot, his brutish face pushed forcefully into Macnair's, his foul breath gusting into the other's nostrils.

"You would be wise to temper that snobbish mouth of yours!" the werewolf hissed, splattering little flecks of saliva on to Macnair's skin. "This is not your territory, and you have no authority here!"

Macnair steeled himself to remain as still and unyielding as possible, despite the fact that the stench of the werewolf's halitosis was making his stomach roil.

"The Ministry is my territory, Greyback, so I think the issue at hand is your rather fluid notion of where your territory ends," Macnair pointed out, trying not to inhale. "Your little penchant for throat ripping could quite possibly have placed our plan in jeopardy."

Greyback laughed heartily. "How fortunate for us, then, that we have such a superlative diplomat in you to smooth things over," he retorted sarcastically and returned to his chair with a nonchalance that Macnair knew was a sham. He felt those behind him press a little closer, and it made his skin crawl. Angry as he was at Greyback, he knew the werewolf was right. This was his territory, and Macnair would have to tread carefully if he was to leave with his skin still attached.

Taking a moment to scratch his armpit with a graceless gusto, Greyback settled back into his chair with one leg flung over the arm.

"I grow tired of waiting for you to inch your way towards being useful, Macnair," he growled, squinting his bloodshot eyes. "I have also noticed that I seem to be doing the lion's share of the dangerous work, which leads me to wonder if your participation in this little endeavour is really necessary."

"If you feel my protection from the Ministry is of little importance to you, Greyback, then by all means, forge on ahead without me," Macnair said with a sniff. He flicked his eyes over to where a fat, bald man crouched over what looked like a pile of rags. "I cannot say how long you'd last without it, though." That made Greyback's eyes go flat. "I would have had the information we needed from the Obliviation department without having to resort to an artless killing."

"Squeamish, are you?" Greyback jeered, eliciting another round of sniggers from his followers that hemmed Macnair in and away from the room's only exit.

"No, just more capable," Macnair replied with an unmistakeable tone of scorn in his voice. "I sincerely hope the death was worth it, Greyback."

The werewolf ran his tongue over his teeth slowly. "It always is, Macnair, even if the man was deficient in the required information."

"Something that I could have told you if you had had the common sense to inform me of your intentions," Macnair pointed out. "Brunton was too junior to have been privy to any information about the incident at St Mungo's."

"Well, if you want something done, it seems you have to do it yourself these days, regardless of the consequences," Greyback noted in a bored tone. "If everything were left to you, we'd still be flapping our lips ten moons from now."

"I had made it extremely clear to you that I was going to handle the St Mungo's incident!" Macnair snapped.

"Oh really?" Greyback replied with a cold glare. "Then I am eager to hear where the man you sent to kill the Striker has disappeared to! What has it been? Three... four months? Swift progress indeed!"

"Perhaps if you hadn't allowed her to escape in the first place, we wouldn't be in this mess!" Macnair countered.

Greyback made a dismissive sound and spat a glob of phlegm on the floor.

Macnair looked over at the bald man again. He was pouring out a liquid from a small glass bottle on to a wad of linen, sweat running down his chubby face and soaking into his green robes. "I can see you're making stellar progress," Macnair noted sarcastically.

"You see what I want you to see, Macnair," Greyback replied calmly, but the glint in his eye betrayed the even tone. "While you sit on your plump backside, I have been busy with my side of the bargain. I don't like having to point out that you're woefully behind in executing yours." He folded his arms. "And you have a hell of a lot more to lose than I do."

It was at that moment that the bald, sweating man stood up and shuffled over, his eyes fixed on the floor in order to avoid tripping over the litter and debris, a sizeable portion of which seemed to be made up of human bones.

"So, *Toadianus*," Greyback began, emphasizing a portion of the man's name that he found amusing. "I trust you have found a way to revive our guest?"

The fat man flicked a nervous glance at the werewolf and then one at the pile of rags in the corner.

"Possibly," he replied cautiously, twisting a signet ring around his finger with a stubby thumb.

Greyback blinked. "Well, that doesn't sound very convincing," he said tersely.

"What I meant to say is, I do have a way, if I can secure the ingredients I need," Todianus clarified quickly.

Greyback clacked his teeth together a few times and scratched his chin with a dirty finger that had dried blood caked under the nail. "Lucky, then, that you are in a supreme position to do so."

"Just so," Todianus agreed with a little bow in the werewolf's direction. "However..." He paused as Greyback's eyes widened dangerously. "... there is the matter of the account." He bobbed and puffed apologetically. "I am experiencing difficulties in securing certain items due to... cash flow issues."

"Spare me the jeremiad, *Toadianus*," Greyback snarled. "I recall your brother whining about such trivial issues a few too many times for my liking. If you want to get paid, speak to the Ministry boy about opening his purse. He's pretty quick to do so when he wants to go whoring."

Macnair felt the blood rush to his face in anger like a flower blooming. "How dare you..."

"That's not the only thing I'll dare!" Greyback shouted, surging out of his chair. "Until you can prove to me you are making a concerted effort in making this plan work, I will see to it that every whore you fuck turns up dead with your stink still on her!" He leered at Macnair. "I can't imagine you being able to escape from that unscathed."

"Unlike some, I can control my urges when it's required, Greyback," Macnair retorted hoarsely through gritted teeth.

The werewolf bared his splintered teeth. "We shall see. Now get out and take the fat man with you."

Chapter Twenty-Nine – Evasion

Chapter 29 of 59

An exercise in wriggling out of a trap.

"I don't believe there's another student at Hogwarts that has such an insouciant attitude to their studies as you do, with the possible exception of Potter."

"Yes, Professor."

"Are you sure you should be in Ravenclaw? I would've thought that bone-idle Gryffindor was more your style."

"Yes, Professor."

"You've got two Potions assignments due next week, and they had better be more thoroughly researched than your last one was."

"Yes, Professor."

"I don't consider an Acceptable grade as sufficient, especially considering the amount of effort I put into teaching."

"No, Professor."

"I confess to be at a loss as to why Fulgor thinks that you have any potential beyond that of a test subject, because as yet you have failed to impress me with any kind of aptitude at Potions beyond that of mediocrity."

"Yes, Professor."

"And you can wipe that stupid smirk off your face!"

"Yes, Professor."

"Are you even paying attention to what I'm saying?"

"I *am* capable of doing two things at once, Professor."

"What are you reading?"

"Porn."

Snape tutted. "I seriously doubt that." He strode over to the couch, snatched the magazine out of Parr's hands and studied it closely. He flicked a page over slowly with an exaggerated crinkle of shiny paper. Then another. Then another. He turned the magazine on its side and squinted at it. "That's disgusting," he finally announced and thrust the magazine back at her.

"I know," agreed Parr happily. "Good, huh? I've never seen moving magazine porn before!"

He sneered down at her. "I thought you had some modicum of dignity, but I guess I was being overly generous with that assumption."

"Hey, it's not mine. It's Remus's."

Lupin sagged at the table. "Oh, thanks a lot, Chara."

"Ah, I can well believe *that*," muttered Snape, looking at Lupin as if he were a particularly noisome creature that had trodden a mess into the carpet.

Lupin dropped his quill and turned in his chair. "Shocking though this revelation might be, Severus, not everyone's sexually repressed the way you are!"

"And unlike some, I don't feel the need to flagellate my genitalia every two hours, Lupin," Snape shot back snottily, straightening his coat primly.

"Perhaps if you did, you wouldn't be so uptight," Lupin pointed out and turned back to his research.

Parr laughed gustily from her reclined position on the couch.

"I don't know what you're guffawing at," said Snape, turning his irritation on her. "I expected better out of you. Don't you have any self-control?"

Parr sighed and rolled her eyes as she tried to find her place again in the magazine. "You make it sound like I'm humping the chair leg with reckless abandon. I'm just looking at some tastefully done nude photos, that's all."

"What a bizarre notion of 'tasteful' you have," Snape carped, trying to avoid looking at the pictures. "And subjecting yourself to prurient imagery like that not only sets up unrealistic expectations, but also desensitises you to reality."

Lupin snorted as he scribbled away at his research. "If I didn't know you better, Severus, I'd think you were speaking from personal experience."

Snape stuck his large nose in the air. "And knowing better, as I do, Lupin, I'm almost certain you're dead from the waist down."

"Not if he's reading stuff like this!" interjected Parr, bringing the magazine closer until her nose was almost touching the page.

"How about we stop talking about my below-the-waist area, please?" Lupin asked tiredly, shuffling parchments about awkwardly.

"Hey, Remus, this guy looks like you!" announced Parr, jabbing her finger at the magazine.

"Shush, please, I'm trying to concentrate here," Lupin pleaded, feeling a flush rise in his cheeks.

"Ah, I see. Is that how you're managing to cover your expenses, Lupin?" said Snape snidely.

"Don't be ridiculous, Severus," Lupin answered through his teeth, bending the nib of his quill with the pressure he was forcing it into the parchment.

Snape bent down slightly to look over Parr's shoulder and snorted. "Looks nothing like him."

"Ah, look at the jaw!" said Parr.

"Oh, you were looking at his *face*, were you?" Snape stood up straight again. "I seriously doubt that Lupin is proportioned like that," he mentioned with a nasty smirk.

Lupin's face went redder, and he hunched his shoulders in an effort to try and avoid any further notice. Perhaps if he concentrated harder, he could block out what they were saying.

"That's a bit ungenerous," Parr noted, looking up at Snape, one eyebrow raised.

"I'm sure Lupin's used to hearing *that*," said the tall man, widening his smirk even further.

Lupin's quill nib broke, flicking little splatters of ink all over the parchment. "I really hate you sometimes, Severus," he muttered, rubbing his eye.

"It's not necessary to be hung like a horse, you know," Parr stated patiently with a small shake of her head.

"It obviously *is* in order to get into that magazine," retorted Snape, pointing a long finger at Parr's reading material.

"Feeling inadequate, Severus?" came Lupin's amused voice.

Snape sneered back at him haughtily. "Hardly."

"That would explain what's written on the Ravenclaw bathroom wall, then," muttered Parr.

Snape gawked at her. "What was that?"

Lupin threw his head back and laughed.

"I don't understand this fixation you men have with the size of certain parts of your body," Parr continued, turning a page. "You're supposed to use it for sex, not to drill a core sample through the tundra."

"That's a picturesque analogy," Lupin murmured, fossicking about for a new quill.

"I've never had any complaints," said Snape, staring thoughtfully at the magazine out of the corner of his eye.

The silence was deafening. Parr twisted around to look at him, open-mouthed.

"Well, I haven't!" he maintained angrily when Lupin snorted in disbelief.

"I didn't think there'd be a topic I'd less want to hear about than my below-the-waist area, yet here we are," said Lupin, squinting at the nib of another quill he'd found sandwiched between the leaves of a book.

"Feeling inadequate, Lupin?" Snape shot back snidely.

Lupin grunted and went back to his research.

"Well, being the sex god that you so *obviously* are, perhaps you can give Lupin a few tips," said Parr, rustling her magazine. "I know I'm dying to hear them."

"I doubt there's anything Severus can tell me that I'd really want to know on that subject, Chara," said Lupin, "and since we're less than an hour away from lunch time, I suggest you might not want to know either, if you want to keep your appetite intact."

"Well, that depends which appetite you're talking about, Remus," sighed Parr, turning to the centrefold. "Bloody hell!" She stared, wide-eyed at the sight before her. Pushing herself up on her elbows, Parr got up from the couch, stood on the armrest and shoved the magazine under Snape's nose. "Is that *real*?"

He leaned back and peered up at her suspiciously, studiously avoiding looking at the magazine. "How would I know?"

"You do *have* one to make a comparison, don't you?" Parr asked pointedly.

Snape looked slightly confused. "A porn mag?" he asked hesitantly.

Parr growled. "No, a d"

"Chara, do you mind?" Lupin interrupted. "I am, in all honesty, trying to *work* here. Is there any chance you can keep the verbal foreplay to a minimum?"

"Bah," said Parr and flopped back onto the couch again. An uneven cloud of dust rose up from the cushions at the impact of her body, making her sneeze. "All talk."

Snape stared at her back, rather wide-eyed. In his albeit scanty experience, women were frequently more than a little frosty when it came to pornography. Yet there was Parr flicking through a dirty mag nonchalantly as if she were reading the *Daily Prophet*. He shook his head slightly. He shouldn't really be surprised. Parr was the sort of person who didn't hide her thoughts, opinions or wants unless she thought it absolutely necessary. This obviously extended to porn. That she was reading *Lupin's* porn seemed even more surreal. Had she *asked* him for it, or had she just found it lying around? Snape had a sneaking suspicion it was more likely to be the former. He didn't know whether to be disgusted or intrigued.

He watched her hands as she turned another page, his head tilted to one side like an inquisitive bird. For some reason, he was finding the proximity of her hands to the erotic imagery rather arresting.

Stop gawking like a schoolboy, he reprimanded himself.

Parr tilted the magazine up to the light so she could get a better view. It had the effect of the shiny paper becoming occluded from the reflection of the light. That should have lessened the eroticism of the scene before him but it didn't. He started to jiggle his leg in frustration, abruptly realised that this was a bad idea, and kept both feet planted firmly on the ground. Parr was spending an inordinate amount of time studying that particular page. He blinked and wondered what an ordinate amount of time was. He supposed that women had the advantage of being able to hide evidence of arousal much better than men. That thought just skewed his mind even further down the path of licentious contemplation.

Parr tilted the magazine back upright again.

Snape had been rather insulted by the reactions of both Parr and Lupin in regard to anything sexual concerning himself. They seemed to treat it as something ludicrous or unbelievable. They could have at least *pretended* that his sexuality wasn't a joke. True, he was no Gilderoy Lockhart, but he was hardly a troll. He hoped. That addendum just made him angrier and more offended.

All talk, Parr had said. An idea bloomed in his mind. Very well. If the notion of his physical sexuality was so ridiculous, all talk he'd be.

Snape inched up behind Parr and bent down until his mouth was level with her ear.

"I confess to being very disappointed in you, Miss Parr," he revealed in his smoothest, darkest and most provocative tone of voice. "In my experience, women are unlikely to relinquish the advantage of four of their senses in favour of just one when it comes to sexual satisfaction. Visual stimulation is such a... male reliance." He folded his arms across his chest and leaned forward so that his forearms rested on the arm of the couch, touching Parr's back ever so slightly. "Women know instinctively that being open to oral, aural, tactile and olfactory stimulation can make the erotic experience so much more... penetrative." He increased the pressure on her back slightly. "All sensations are perceived in the brain, so what better way to reproduce them than with your imagination?" He couldn't help but notice Parr blink several times rapidly in response to his words, mouth slightly open. The magazine sat, forgotten, in her hands. "You don't need your eyes to perceive the touch of fingertips trailing across your bare skin, slipping down your body like water that pools in hollows of shivering pleasure, or the gentle pressure of a lover's teeth fastened on the curve of your neck, or the languid glide of his tongue along the soft skin of your thigh." He moved his mouth a little closer to her ear, half-closing his eyes. "You don't need pictures to hear his breath as he covers your body with his own, or to catch his moan as you draw your nails down his back, or even to listen to your own voice urging him on relentlessly." Parr's hands tightened, making the pages of the magazine crinkle. "Sight can't show you the taste of his mouth on your own, the savour of his skin as you consume it again and again, or the tang of salt in the sweat of passionate exertion." She still hadn't moved, so he leaned into her even more until her hair tickled softly along his jaw, and his chin nearly rested on her shoulder. "Eyes can't see the scent of desire that curls around you like a mist at dawn, or catch the spice of two bodies so entwined together that they seem bonded, or the unmistakable essence of pure, unabashed, lascivious lust." He hissed the last word in a whisper, and Parr's breath hitched in her throat. Snape drew away from her just enough so that he could reach out his hand and pluck the magazine from her fingers. "You can't get any of that from this, Miss Parr," he purred. He threw the magazine contemptuously across the room and moved in so close that his mouth could almost taste the soft, plump lobe of her ear, the black strands of his hair interlacing with her silver ones. "Don't let Lupin lead you astray, now."

With that, he stood up, making sure that his arms kept contact with her back for as long as possible, and glided out of the room.

"What the hell was *that*?" said Parr after a few stunned moments.

"I don't know, but I think I need a cigarette," Lupin answered, looking at the second ruined quill nib of the afternoon.

"I'm certain it'll come as no surprise to you that I have discovered very little."

The sandy-haired man continued to watch the flock of starlings marching about on the grass a few metres away and did his best to suppress a sigh.

"However, what I do have may be of some use."

He swung his gaze away from the chattering birds and to the severe looking woman sitting next to him on the park bench. She was looking off into the trees that grew in front of the metal railings that bordered the park, a faintly glazed look in her eyes.

"There is an indication that the woman has worked for a handful of organisations, some of which are less than reputable, although most notable is her indirect assistance to the Metropolitan Police force."

The man tilted his head slightly at this, and his bench companion blinked and refocused her eyes.

"She worked for them?"

Kettering shook her head slightly, making her shoulder-length plaits shift across the front of her suede coat.

"No. My guess is that she was... a consultant or advisor of some description." She squinted at the birds on the grass as they veered in one direction towards a patch of ground that seemed indistinguishable from any other and began stabbing at the earth with their beaks. "Her name is listed amongst their informants, but with no information beyond that and a contact number. Whatever she did for them, they don't want a written record of." She fell silent as a young couple walked past, arms linked and shoulders rounded against the increasing chill in the air, and waited until they were some distance away before continuing. "The only other regular appointment she seems to have had is for a nightclub in Leicester Square. Door security, according to the owner, who is quite aggrieved that she has disappeared. His best bouncer, he claims." Her quirked eyebrow spoke volumes, even if the rather flat tone to her voice didn't.

The man stared at her profile, all sharp edges and hard planes. One could have used the perfectly straight edge to her fringe as a ruler, and there was nary a crease in her clothing. He wrinkled his nose slightly, picking up the faint scent of starch in the dry winter air.

"I have no information preceding nineteen ninety-four, suggesting that she may have come from another area of the country, or perhaps from overseas." She turned her head to look directly at him for the first time since he had sat down on the other end of the park bench, her eyes unwavering under their long, dark lashes. "I can search further, if you like."

The man considered this for a moment before shaking his head. "Not just yet. I'm more interested in who else is looking for her."

Kettering blinked and turned back to face the trees again, their branches bare and stark against the almost white afternoon sky. He could just see the faint opacity of her exhaled breath as the temperature began to drop further with the approach of evening.

"There appear to be three other parties," Kettering revealed, tilting her head a fraction to one side and drumming her gloved fingers on her thigh briefly. "One I cannot identify, the second has connections to..." She pouted as much as a woman with very little in the way of lips could. "... those that stand in the dark, shall we say?" There was a pause during which she whistled a little trill at the starlings. Three of them broke off from the main group and galloped over to the park bench, looking up at her expectantly. "The third is the werewolves." She stood up and turned to face him, her mouth a thin line across her unmarked, pale skin that contrasted so sharply with the deep auburn colour of her hair. The white opal pendant that hung over her coat and above her heart glinted in the weak light, distracting him momentarily, and he wondered at the significance of it. All her owls were marked in the same fashion: a white triangle on the breast, point down. Both they and she wore the sign like a badge of office whose purpose was unclear, but he had trusted her for many years and hoped that trust was not misplaced. She seemed to hear his thought.

"I have never lied to you, and I am not about to now. I would just as soon as not pursue this matter further, but if you wish it, I shall."

He stared at her, faintly surprised.

"I have seen some terrible things done to those who have come under the scrutiny of those who also look for Chara Parr, and I am not keen to become one of them. It is best that your association with Trint ended."

The man raised his eyebrows a fraction.

"He has kept you dangling on more than one occasion." She laced her fingers together, pushing the soft fabric more tightly in between the digits and running one thumb over its opposite.

"Why did you never tell me?" he asked, not bothering to hide the irritation in his voice.

Kettering shrugged slightly. "I didn't think you'd be happy that I knew more than I should have." She noted the set of his features and nodded. "However, he was close to uncovering the triple blind, and more than one of my owls paid for it. I felt it prudent to find out why."

That sent a mixture of anxiety and anger through him. "For how long has this been going on?"

The gangly woman rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet, thinking on this question carefully.

"Perhaps a month. Hartford mentioned to me that she'd seen Trint sniffing about her roost, so he must have followed one of Pothrington's owls after he released it. I had wondered if you were being overly cautious, but it seems you were right to have so many message stops between him and you. I think he has been collecting from two parties for the same information."

He looked at the three starlings at her feet, and they cocked their heads at him, their dark eyes unreadable. He made his decision.

"Don't pursue it any further. Distance yourself from it, even if it means you have to disappear for a time." He looked up at her. "I can pay you whatever amount you will lose by doing so."

She smiled at him, managing to make her harsh features a touch less precise and austere. "I appreciate that, Severus, but I think it's time for a holiday anyway." She nodded to herself, her eyes lifting to the darkening sky. "Somewhere warm, I think. I've never gotten used to this season, even after all these years," she sighed. "You'll know when I return." With that, she turned on her heel and walked away. The three starlings took flight and overtook her, three silhouettes against the grey clouds, three corners of a triangle that pointed down.

Avella was nearly finished completing her record of the day's trading in her ledger when the shop door crashed open, waking her dozing sister, Arla, with a start so that the book on her lap slipped to the floor with a thud. They both stared at the broad figure in the doorway.

"I've found her," said Gaelina.

"Do my eyes deceive me? Is it possible that you're actually doing your homework, Miss Parr?"

Parr grunted and didn't look up from the table.

"Chara does her homework, Severus. Just not when you're here," Lupin pointed out, flicking a glance up at him as he leafed through one of his many books that were stacked up around him like a child's fort. "Are you going to be disruptive again? Only I'm in the middle of a very convoluted reference chain and Chara has to finish her Arithmancy assignment before Tonks and Kingsley get here, and I just need to know if you two are going to start brawling or breaking furniture again so I can get out of the line of fire."

Snape peered over Parr's shoulder. "I think you'll find that isn't Arithmancy, Lupin. It's sudoku."

Lupin stuck the tip of his tongue under his incisors and jutted his chin forward, taking a deep breath to try and overcome the surge of agitation that rose in him. He put down his quill and shifted in his chair so that he was facing Parr.

"Is this true?" he asked in a deceptively calm voice. Parr looked up at him with a guilty expression. He held out his hand. "Let me see it."

She handed the paper over, and he studied it intently.

Snape drifted around the table to try and get a look at what Lupin had been writing, as well as put himself in a position where he could smirk at Parr without the werewolf seeing.

Lupin handed the paper back to Parr. "Your bottom line is incorrect. You've got two fours in it."

The smirk changed into a sneer. "Is that your idea of disciplining a student, Lupin?"

"How would you like a sharp poke in the eye with my foot, Severus?" Lupin snapped, fixing him with a glare that distilled the twist to Snape's mouth to a more impressive concentration of contempt. "And you!" He stuck out an accusing finger at Parr. "You seem to forget all too easily that whilst you may be an adult, you are also a student of Hogwarts and therefore required to attend to your studies with diligence and responsibility instead of frittering your time away! You were the one that pushed for it, so I find your laxness extremely disappointing."

Parr actually hung her head at that, a slight flush sitting on her cheeks.

"I won't hesitate in telling Professor Vector that you find her subject unworthy of your focus," Lupin rolled on, getting into quite a snit. Having Snape standing behind him, no doubt smirking the entire time, was making him even angrier. "Maybe you can spend your weekends at the school where, perhaps, you'll take your studies more seriously!"

Parr looked up at him from under her furrowed brow, like a puppy being shouted at for chewing its owner's shoes.

"I'm sorry, Remus," she said in a very good approximation of contriteness, making Snape blink. "I didn't mean to upset you." She clutched her hands onto one of her long tresses of hair, managing to make her eyes look twice their normal size.

Snape couldn't believe it. She was pulling the winsome little girl trick on Lupin! Parr, who could stab a person as soon as look at them, who could overpower a fully-grown man as if it were second nature, and who manifested as much femininity as a stone gargoye.

And Lupin fell for it.

"Just don't do it again," the werewolf muttered, looking flustered and sitting back down in his chair.

Parr stuck her tongue out at Snape, who glared stonily at her.

"So, you'll be wanting a set of replacement balls for the ones that Miss Parr is currently keeping her brass Knuts in, will you, Lupin?" the Potions master sneered nastily at his back.

Lupin's quill bent in his fingers. "Why do you ask, Severus? Are you going to divide yours in half and bless the world with the unfettered abundance?" he shouted at the ceiling. "God knows we could all do with yet another shining example of your generosity in that department!"

Parr tried, poorly, to stifle a laugh with her hand.

"You'd have to change your inseam measurement to something a bit more noteworthy, then," Snape shot back.

Whatever Lupin was going to parry with never eventuated. From outside the house came a peculiar, coughing bark. Parr's hand dropped from her mouth.

"Oh, shit." Both she and Lupin looked at each other in alarm. Parr stood up so quickly her chair tipped backwards and hit the floor with a crash. "We have to get out of here. Now!"

"What are you" Snape began.

"We have to get out of this house, now!" Parr hissed, grabbing Lupin's arm tightly and dragging him to a standing position.

"Severus, just do it!" Lupin snapped, his face pale and his wand clamped tightly in his hand. "Get back to Hogwarts before they find us!"

Parr had her eyes screwed shut, her grip on Lupin's left arm so tight that her knuckles were white.

Snape tried to Apparate. The air in the room turned solid for a fraction of a second, and then went cold as if a torrent of frigid water swirled around them.

"Shit!" Lupin hissed. "Shit, shit, shit!"

Parr's eyes popped open. "What is it?"

"Someone's cast a Nullifier," said Snape, locking gazes with Lupin. "Who the hell"

"We can't Apparate out?" Parr asked, incredulous.

"We can't do *any* magic until whoever it is that cast the Nullifier dissipates it," Lupin told her. "We have to get outside of its coverage." He made for the door of the lounge room. Snape grabbed for the werewolf's coat, yanking him back.

"What are you going to do?" he hissed. "Walk out the front door? Use your brain. They'll have the exits covered!"

Parr cast her eyes about the room. The curtains were closed against the night, covering the window that faced the street outside.

Someone turned the handle of the front door.

"Remus, is that boggart still in the wardrobe?" she whispered.

Lupin shook his head, still clutching his now useless wand.

Parr wrenched the wardrobe doors open. "Get in!" she mouthed at him. He stared stupidly at her. She grabbed his arm and forced him into the wardrobe. He began to protest, but she shushed him. Striding across the room, she got a fistful of Snape's coat and steered him in the same direction.

"Are you insane?!" he grated out as she squashed him into the wardrobe, making him press up awkwardly against Lupin. "We have to get out of here, not stuff ourselves into a cupboard!"

"There *is* no way out!" she pointed out quietly and fervently. "Just get in there and shut up, or we'll all be dead." She elbowed him back further into the wardrobe and got in. Lupin found himself crushed up against the side, his nose pressed against the musty, moisture-warped wood. Parr pulled the doors closed with her fingertips.

Snape tried to flatten himself against the back of the wardrobe, but his head was pushed down by the shelf above him, and Lupin's elbow was managing to push his ear painfully against his skull. Parr had one foot on either side of his left boot, her back pressing into his ribcage, and his knee bent out between both of hers. He didn't think that there was a more ungainly permutation of limbs between three people in a confined space.

Why in Merlin's balls had she got them all in here? There was no way out! He briefly considered shoving her out of the wardrobe so he could be in a better position to confront whomever it was that was closing in on them and... what? Throw a chair at them? Throw Lupin at them? Snape had no idea who he'd be facing, and without magic. Whoever had cast the Nullifier was very adept. It was a difficult spell, prone to destabilising itself, the convolutions of its casting quite extensive. It required a great deal of focus and not a little strength in wielding magic since it required the cooperation of two witches or wizards in casting it. It was occasionally used by certain members of the Death Eaters, and it was a spell jealously guarded. After all, it was a very effective tactic against those who fought with magic. Take away the weapon, and the quarry was at your mercy. He knew. He'd seen it used.

The front door opened.

Parr wedged herself up against Snape, trying to get into a position where she could see out through the crack between the wardrobe doors.

It was strange what came to the forefront of one's mind when stuck in a highly precarious situation. Usually it was the most banal detail that really had no influence on the situation at hand. In this case, Snape's attention was not fully focussed on the sounds made by the cautious intruders of the safe house, or on the potential courses of action they could take if they were discovered. No, his brain decided to fixate his awareness on two things he really could have done without being conscious of at this point in time. One was that there was something decidedly pointed and uncomfortable sticking out of Parr's back and into his chest, and the other was the way in which she had her backside jammed in the hollow of his hip. He let loose a silent vituperation at himself and tried to move his head so that Parr's hair wasn't tickling his nose.

There was a creak as someone went up the stairs in the hallway. The three of them went still and held their breath. Snape felt Parr tense up. He had a slightly oblique view of the lounge room through the crack between the doors due to the position his head was stuck at, but he did see a figure cross that narrow field of vision. It was too brief an appearance for him to see who it was, or even roughly what they looked like. In order to get a better view, he'd have to shift his position noticeably, and he wasn't certain that the movement would escape the hearing of whoever it was in the room.

Slowly, Parr leant forward and brought her right arm up so her hand reached between her shoulder blades. He saw her fingers disappear into the open seam in her jacket that stretched across her back and pull out her knife. With the hilt hooked between her index and middle fingers, she lifted it up and past his nose, missing it by less than a centimetre. The tip of the blade scraped lightly across the underside of the shelf above them as she turned her hand, relaxing her fingers just enough to allow the hilt to slip into her palm.

The intruder moved around the room. The sound of parchments sliding across each other slipped through the narrow gap between the doors, and a gentle hiss of breath escaped from Lupin.

Seconds stretched out into minutes. There was the tinkle of glass in the kitchen, the tread of someone upstairs, and a muffled swearword from the hallway. In no position to see anything of importance, Snape found his eyes locked on the blade of Parr's knife, poised just in front of him, light flickering down the sharp edge as it vibrated with each thud of her heart, desperately trying to ignore the way Lupin's elbow was crushing the cartilage in his ear.

All three of them jumped as a voice sounded a few steps to the left of their hiding place.

"There's no one here. Are you sure this is the place?"

"Positive," came the reply. A cold rage swept through Snape. He recognised that voice. "They were here, and not that long ago. The ink is still slightly damp."

"I can't find anyone," came a third voice from out in the hallway. "We had all the exits covered. They must have gotten out before we got here."

Someone hissed an epithet.

"Then two of you will remain here in case they come back," was the icily calm decision. "Perhaps one of the others will fall into the net."

A shadow passed across the gap, blocking out the light briefly, floorboards creaking as feet pressed down on them through the thin carpet as their owners left the room.

The wardrobe's inhabitants waited a minute. Then another five. Time shifted towards the ten minute mark until Lupin got an agonising cramp in his back and started fidgeting.

"What do we do now?" Parr breathed, turning her head slightly, the faintness of her voice reflecting off the flat surface of the doors.

"They'll hold the Nullifier for as long as they can," Lupin whispered quietly in a strained voice, his body shaking in the effort to stay as still as possible despite the painful spasm his back muscles were contorting into. "We still have to find a way out of the house."

They fell silent again as they wracked their brains to find a solution.

"The upstairs bathroom. It has a window that faces the house next door. There's a slanted roof that we can reach if we climb out the window. It should allow us enough distance from the range of the Nullifier. Then we can Apparate."

The other two considered Snape's suggestion for a few moments.

"I don't know," sighed Parr. "It means we have to get up those stairs unnoticed, and they creak more than a tart's bed." She paused. "Think you can get your fat arse out that little window, Remus?"

"If your monumental rudeness can get through it, anything can," Lupin retorted, trying not to drool down the inside of the wardrobe.

Parr flexed her shoulders and placed her free hand on the doors. "Let's see if I can find someone to sharpen my knife on."

She pushed the doors open.

Chapter Thirty - Blame

Chapter 30 of 59

Lecture time.

Their escape from the safe house had, typically, been a narrow one, and one that could have been stymied the second after Parr opened the wardrobe door. She'd taken one step out and had to suppress a yelp as her head failed to move the same distance as the rest of her. She twisted around awkwardly to glare at Snape.

"What the hell are you *doing*?!" she hissed at him, eyes wide.

He stared back at her, still jammed in the wardrobe with Lupin's elbow crushing his ear. Tendrils of her long hair had anchored her like a struggling fish to the front of his coat. Their close proximity in the wardrobe had managed to snarl her hair around one of his buttons. Parr was glaring at him as if he'd done it deliberately.

"Stop moving!" he mouthed at her, trying to unwind the hair and free the both of them.

Lupin didn't help by shoving him out of the wardrobe, fussing about his cramped back. Once the werewolf caught sight of what had happened, he further complicated matters by trying to help separate the two of them. Parr kept pulling backwards, tightening the knot and gritting her teeth, one hand pushing at Snape's torso. They were all making a ridiculous amount of noise for three people who were trying to make an escape undetected. Parr must have realised this for just as Snape had slapped Lupin's hand away and was close to ripping the button off his coat to save time, Parr yanked her head back sharply and tore the trapped hair straight from her scalp. It made a small but unpleasant sound that caused Lupin to wince.

Luckily, there had been no-one in the hallway, and from their vantage point, the kitchen also appeared to be unoccupied. Going up the stairs was like running the gauntlet. Every step creaked; it was just a matter of degree. They had to settle for a wide-stanced tread that put their weight on the outer edges of the steps. It didn't stop the creaking, but it did minimise it somewhat. The effort was ruined by Lupin tripping on the top stair and falling with full force into Snape, who had been mid-step at the time and therefore unable to prevent himself from staggering forward heavily. The sound of the two men's fumblefootedness was extraordinarily loud, like a stack of books falling off a shelf.

The front door opened.

All pretence at stealth went down the metaphorical toilet, and the three of them charged towards the bathroom. Getting out the window would have been a farce in any other situation. It was ridiculously small. Lupin had to be bodily shoved through it in such a fashion that he nearly plummeted to serious injury. Fate smiled on him, and he managed to get a precarious footing on the slanted roof of the house next door. The structure groaned alarmingly once all three of them were standing on it.

Lupin dug his wand out of his coat and cast his Patronus, which leapt away from them, its bluish-white brightness painful to their eyes and a shining beacon to whomever was watching the safe house.

Snape swore at him.

"Kingsley and Tonks are supposed to be here any minute," Lupin whispered harshly. "They have no idea that the house has been Nullified!" That was a bit of unexpected foresight from the werewolf in Snape's opinion. At that point, the bathroom door had crashed open, and with Lupin's Patronus indicating they were outside the Nullifier's range, they Apparated back to Hogwarts, though whether it had been before they had been spotted by whomever had entered the bathroom was unclear.

Parr's vomiting after the Apparating was especially spectacular. She promised Lupin she'd buy him new pairs of trousers and shoes.

Snape, Lupin and Parr had been in Dumbledore's study for less than a minute before Moody had come barging in like a shabby ox, demanding to know what had happened. Apparently he'd seen them crossing the school grounds and felt it his duty to get involved. *So typical of the man*, thought Snape, his lip curling in a sneer. The Auror was probably outraged that something had been going on without his participation. Moody was always jumping into the fray with scant thought as to how it would affect the outcome. Even now he was pushing himself forward, chin thrust out pugnaciously and finger jabbing in the air. Much of his success relied on determination and persistence rather than any particularly brilliant flashes of insight. It was miraculous that the man was still alive...his self-preservation skills seemed to be almost non-existent.

With a sniff of disdain, Snape realised that this was probably due to the fact that the man had never been in the sort of situation that required careful or subtle treatment of circumstance. If Moody had the choice, he'd have his entrance into a room heralded by blaring trumpets and explosions.

It was a frequent, if brief, squabble between Snape and Moody. The latter would accuse the former of sneaking about, lurking in shadows and prevaricating in his responses to direct questions. The former would then point out to the latter that not everyone needed footnotes and crudely drawn diagrams to know when silence was better than shouting, that belligerence was an inferior tool to subtlety, and that standing back wasn't automatically an indication of guilt. He knew that Moody hated it when Snape stood behind everyone else where he couldn't be easily seen. It was interesting that it bothered Moody so much since the man would have been able to see Snape

with that ghoulish charmed eye of his no matter where he was standing.

Snape had learned the hard way not to stand forward. Standing forward was how one got singled out. Standing forward allowed everyone to see where one went wrong, where one was different from them, where one's weaknesses were. Standing forward could mean pain. That lesson had only been reinforced as he had gotten older. The Death Eaters were a supreme example of people trying to find the best place to stand. Most of them desperately wanted to be in front, to show how impressive they were, how much *better* they were than others, but not too much better, not to be threatening to the Dark Lord. Useful. Important. But not threatening. The blending of dominance and submission was an art, a skill that most of them never fully mastered...a deficiency that left them dancing back and forth like fools with a Jelly-Legs Jinx.

So Snape stood off to the side, watching from a vantage point where he could see everyone in the room. Most of them were clustered in front of Dumbledore's desk, content to let Moody speak, if not for them, then over them. Shackbolt and Tonks had turned up a handful of minutes after Moody, and they'd all clumped together like frog spawn, agitating in unison. That was until Moody started his diatribe.

"We're lucky it didn't end up a whole lot worse! I told you it was a bad idea," the grizzled Auror was near-bellowing.

"Mad-Eye!"

"Well, it was!" said Moody, turning on Tonks, whose scandalised expression at the man's open denouncement of what had originally been Dumbledore's idea failed to quiet him. "I don't see why I shouldn't voice my opinion about it. Perhaps if I had been listened to in the first place, this debacle would never have occurred."

"I really don't see how this is helpful," sighed Lupin, shrugging slightly and leaning up against the bookcase he was standing in front of.

Moody redirected his ire from Tonks to Lupin. "I'm not interested in being helpful," he pointed out harshly, his charmed glass eye rotating in one lazy revolution. "There's too much laxity, and it's going to bite us all if we're not more careful." He stumped closer to Dumbledore's desk. "We've got to have a lot more precautions in place to stop the wrong people finding us. A safe house with no security is just an invitation for disaster." There was no doubt at just whom he was making the accusation at, and most of the room tensed at the audacity of the Auror. Moody was fractious at the best of times, but this was pushing the limit of even his scanty manners.

Dumbledore didn't bat an eyelid at Moody's words, but the crease line between his eyebrows deepened a touch. "I've never claimed to be omniscient, Alastor, but regardless with whom the fault lies, the fact remains that someone has been paying much closer attention to our activities than we had thought." He tapped the arm of his chair lightly. "With that said, your input is always welcome in such matters."

The back of Moody's glass eye gleamed at Dumbledore, his natural eye fixed on the Headmaster's face. A faint, yet wry smile cragged its way along his mouth and there was a pause, which the man no doubt used to turn over in his mind how much further he could rub Dumbledore's face in it. He decided, judiciously, to let the blame game rest. After all, no-one had gotten hurt unless one counted the gash that Parr managed to procure whilst squeezing out of the bathroom window. But Moody was correct: it could have been a lot worse.

Normally, it was easy to fool Muggles into ignoring things they weren't meant to see, frighteningly easy in fact. Magicfolk were harder to hoodwink, and if it had been only them involved, then perhaps the situation would not be as concerning. Snape pulled a face. This was assuming that the involvement of one Muggle...one that he was familiar with...meant that more were involved. That small revelation had not yet been brought up in the conversation, but it was only a matter of time.

The others were already squabbling over what new precautions should be brought into play for any future safe houses. Shackbolt was having an uncharacteristically terse exchange with Moody about booby traps whilst Tonks was flicking surreptitious glances at Lupin when she thought no-one could see. Snape shook his head slightly and wondered if she knew that Lupin had as much a taste for men as he did women. Knowing her, she'd probably morph into a male to please him. That idea made him snort in amused disdain.

That was the last they would ever see of that safe house. Not that it was any great loss. It was broken down, cold, smelly, and one could never shake the sense that fleas were about to erupt out of the carpet and hurtle onto the nearest owner of a heartbeat like a tiny, ravaging army. Even the thought made Snape itch. Yet, now he thought about it, he'd spent a considerable amount of time there himself, despite its inherent unpleasantness. Uninviting surroundings never fazed him, except perhaps for the risk of being set upon by pestilential insects. Spending time at the safe house had proved preferable to having to dodge Karkaroff and his bleating questions and shrill demands. The wretched man had found out where Snape's private quarters were and had taken to hammering on his door at frequent yet irregular intervals. Folter had held him at bay with wide-eyed stoicism that never tipped into actually lying, but Karkaroff could smell the subterfuge like the scuttling rat he was. The Durmstrang Headmaster decided that abrupt appearances at Snape's door might bear fruit in catching the Potions master, but all he succeeded in doing was giving Snape the shifts. Trying to grade student papers was unpleasant enough without having to drown out Karkaroff's hollering and door-bashing.

Snape had managed to find a room in a disused section of the castle up on the fifth floor to get some peace and quiet in, but it rankled that he was forced to hide from Karkaroff. He'd much prefer to bind the stupid man's lips together with a sticking charm. However, it probably wasn't very diplomatic, and Dumbledore would certainly have problems in seeing the benefit of Snape taking such course of action.

His new hidey-hole was sufficient to allow him to attend to the grading aspect of his teaching role, but he found that being away from the dungeons meant that Moody felt free to grub through his classroom whenever the whim took him. Between concealing himself from Karkaroff and warding Moody away from another smashing escapade, Snape got increasingly foul-tempered and decided he had to get out and off the school premises before he went berserk. The safe house had initially been a reluctant option, but since he had needed to travel to London most weekends, sometimes during weekdays as well, he figured that irritating Lupin between errands would prove entertaining. The werewolf seemed to have decided to put up with Snape's jibes for a majority of the time, which made the whole thing a lot more challenging. When he was on his own, he was a lot easier to rattle. Parr's presence had a diluting effect on Snape's efforts to piss Lupin off, so he was finding himself working more than twice as hard in order to aggravate two people.

Both Parr and Lupin seemed to spend scant time in their tutor and student roles. Lupin was always scratching away at his "research", the nature of which appeared varied. Snape had seen books on astronomy and folklore, messy notes on lycanthropic theory and metallurgy, and carefully printed parchments on genealogy and politics in Lupin's hands, and was at a loss as to what the common theme was. If indeed there was a common theme.

Parr seemed to always have her backside planted firmly on the couch, ostentatiously not doing her studies and telling obscene jokes that had Lupin either guffawing in amusement or gasping in red-faced embarrassment. At first, Snape really couldn't understand why Parr had to be outside of Hogwarts to do that, but he recalled one particular joke she had been telling when he'd walked into the safe house and realised that it was best that such lurid tales be kept out of the auditory range of impressionable children. He'd stood just outside the door to the lounge, out of sight, listening to what was a recitation of probably one of the most disgusting and perverted jokes he'd ever heard involving a mermaid, a centaur and a snake. Lupin had gone into a prudery-induced fit of apoplexy after the explicitly erotic punch-line, sending Parr off into gales of laughter. Any thought that Snape had entertained at making his presence known to the two of them went out of his head as his brain froze into shock at what he'd just heard. What was even more distressing, for Snape at least, was the fact that he couldn't put the joke out of his mind for the rest of that evening back at the school, which subsequently ruined his concentration and therefore the potion he had been working on. That had put him in such a confused pique that he'd abandoned what he was doing and fled to his private quarters to try and work through the mental loop with something a bit more drastic than he would ordinarily have considered. His right forearm had ached for two days afterwards, and it was a whole week before he could look at the Slytherin crest without going scarlet in the face.

He flicked a glance over to where Parr was standing, half in shadow over near Fawkes' perch; the phoenix was absent, abroad doing only Dumbledore knew what. Parr had her eyes narrowed and fixed on Moody, her face set in a stony expression that was noticeably like suspicion.

Moody was ticking Tonks off about being the foolishly trusting Hufflepuff she was, and the girl's hair was starting to go as red as her cheeks. Everyone knew that Tonks took whatever Moody ever said to her to heart, regarding the rough Auror with something akin to hero-worship, so having a dressing-down from him in front of others must have been especially humiliating. Snape snorted. *Serves her right*, he thought uncharitably.

What Snape had found interesting was the way Moody reacted to Parr. It was subtle, but from where he was standing, Snape noticed that Moody kept his charmed eye cast roughly in Parr's direction at all times. In the few moments that the man's mouth hadn't been emitting noise, his expression had almost mirrored the one that Parr held

on her face right now. It was like watching two strange cats eye each warily across a room, not sure what the other's presence meant, but certain that it boded ill in some way.

Obviously exasperated by the arguing that was going on in front of him, Dumbledore stood up slowly from his chair and, unnoticed, made his way slowly over to where Snape was standing, a copy of the *Daily Prophet* in one hand.

"Since I have been accused of forgoing input from others, I think I'll let them snarl themselves up in differing viewpoints for a while," the Headmaster revealed dryly. "Brainstorming sessions can be so... invigorating."

Snape thinned his lips and sniffed.

"Who were they?" Dumbledore asked quietly, pretending to peruse the front cover of the paper, a small frown on his face.

Snape turned his head to look at the man.

"I didn't see any of them clearly," he replied, keeping his voice low enough as to not be heard by the group over by the desk.

"Indeed?" Dumbledore opened the paper and began to scan the pages through his half-moon spectacles. "Their faces were covered?"

There was a pause. "No, not Death Eaters," Snape answered. "We were not in a position to see them when they entered the house." He continued before Dumbledore could get the fact that the three of them had been stuffed in a wardrobe when it happened out of him. "I recognised one of them by his voice."

"Mmm?" Dumbledore squinted at an advertisement for self-cleaning robes as if seriously considering purchasing one.

"An informant of mine," Snape reluctantly admitted.

Dumbledore inhaled noisily through his nose and turned a page to the sports section with a crinkle.

"I'd be most interested to hear how this... informant of yours came to know the location of the safe house," Dumbledore mused, noting the latest Quidditch league scores.

Snape looked at the floor and scowled. "So would I, Headmaster." He glanced up to find that Dumbledore was staring hard at him, his blue eyes boring into Snape's sooty ones with the light of accusation glinting in them.

"I can't help but wonder, Severus, if you truly understood me when I said that it was dangerous to go digging in uncertain ground."

Snape blinked at tone of the man's voice and let his mind go blank.

"I'm certain you will do whatever is necessary to put this... informant off the scent and heading in another direction," Dumbledore mentioned in an even tone, his eyes burning a hole right through to the back of Snape's skull. "Uncovering their affiliations would also be of use."

"He is a Muggle," Snape admitted, finally managing to wrench his gaze away from Dumbledore and back to the floor, carefully avoiding looking anywhere in Parr's direction. He didn't see Dumbledore's brows lower abruptly.

"Interesting," was the Headmaster's eventual summation. "It seems the line between the two worlds has become blurred, although not in the manner in which I had hoped." He closed the newspaper and folded it carefully. "You will, of course, be able to determine the extent of this new alliance, won't you, Severus?" The wizard glanced up at the group in front of his desk, noting that Moody was starting to swear rather loudly at Lupin about being water-spined.

Snape suppressed a sigh. "Yes, Headmaster." He tried not to dwell on the rising sense of annoyance at the way Dumbledore could calmly reroute his daily activities in whatever direction he chose. He settled for glaring at the man's back as he walked back to his desk and wondered if the lack of a personal life was of his own choosing or a deliberate punishment from Dumbledore for Snape's past transgressions. It seemed that some mistakes could never be atoned for.

"pointless nonsense that's being discussed," Moody finished crossly, his straggly hair sticking out like a growling dog's fur.

"Of course, Alastor, you must be anxious to getting back to finding out who has been making it their goal to make Potter dance like a puppet on a string," said Dumbledore soothingly. "How are you progressing with that?"

Moody clutched on to his staff and pressed his lips together tightly for a few brief moments. "I have some... suspicions," he growled, looking slowly and obviously over at Snape. His charmed eye still showed white, doubtlessly fixed on Parr. Snape stared back at Moody blandly.

"Ah," said Dumbledore, nodding. "Then I have no wish to delay your investigations further. We'll pick this up tomorrow, I think." He sat down in his chair with a sigh and began to busy himself with something of pressing urgency.

Moody gave Snape a nasty smile and limped heavily from Dumbledore's office, clearly on his way to another destructive inspection of Snape's own study. He bared his teeth at the Auror's back and vowed to hex his artificial leg into giving way whilst halfway down a staircase.

Shacklebolt, Tonks and Lupin milled about uncertainly, clearly not knowing whether they too had been dismissed. Lupin shrugged at Tonks who gave him a goofy smile in return. Snape rolled his eyes.

"Wait just a moment," Dumbledore said quietly after the door had closed behind Moody. He continued to write with his quill for some moments, the sound of the nib scratching across the parchment floating up to the shrouded ceiling, while everyone stared at different points around the room. Parr had her eyes fixed on the door that Moody had left through, a calculating expression replacing her previous one of suspicion.

"Remus, what have you been able to find out over the past week?" Dumbledore's voice broke the rather uneasy silence, startling Tonks who was millimetres away from fiddling with something breakable on the Headmaster's desk.

Lupin blinked a few times and scratched his head. "No-one seems to want to talk to me," he admitted. "I mean, even less so than usual," he added wryly, his head tilted in a self-deprecating fashion that Tonks seemed to find appealing, judging from the slightly slack-mouthed wonderment her features had rearranged themselves into. "There's a den between Tottenham and Walthamstow that are normally approachable."

Snape suppressed a snort. The notion that any group of werewolves was approachable was ludicrous.

"At least two of the werewolves there know something's going on but refuse to elaborate. They got quite agitated when I pushed them, so I had to leave before I risked what little standing I still have among them."

Dumbledore sighed and scratched at his chin with a knuckle.

"However," Lupin continued, "as I was leaving, I found someone who would talk to me."

Dumbledore's hand came down from his face, and he sat up a little straighter in his chair.

"Or rather, she found me," said Lupin, stuffing his hands in his pockets and shifting slightly from foot to foot.

Snape saw Parr's head turn from the door and over to Lupin, a half-smile turning up the left corner of her mouth. Her face was beginning to get that greenish cast to it. Surely she wasn't going to vomit *again*?

Lupin inched further forward towards the edge of Dumbledore's desk, an unusual pleading tone entering his voice. "Albus, please, she's only ten. I need to get her away from the others, now. Before they... you know." His gaze dropped to the floor for a moment before returning to the Headmaster's face.

Dumbledore gazed at the man for some time with a faint frown. He bounced the palm of his hand gently on the arm of his chair, the cogs of his mind turning in a soundless, intricate choreography.

"Remus..." he began, sounding tired and a little exasperated.

Lupin's hands came out of his pockets to clutch the edge of the desk, the upper half of his body slanted towards Dumbledore in entreaty. "Albus, I *had* to! I couldn't leave her there!" He paused. "I couldn't."

"Remus..." Dumbledore repeated, sitting forward and crossing his hands.

"I'll take responsibility for her. I promise!" Lupin implored, brow furrowed.

"Remus, I'm not disagreeing with you that she should be removed from the den," Dumbledore pointed out. "I have an issue with the manner in which it was done."

Lupin removed his hands from the desk, stuck them back in his pockets and exhaled heavily.

"You say that you have no wish to lose any influence over the werewolves who will speak to you, yet you spirit away one of their number, and one that you full well know they would have wanted to keep hold of," Dumbledore continued rather tersely.

It seemed that a few of them were being treated to reprimands this evening.

"How on earth do you expect to look after her?" the Headmaster asked Lupin. "To be brutally frank, the Order needs you unencumbered by a dependant, and I rather think you have enough on your plate to deal with without having a child, and a lycanthropic one at that, on your hands."

Lupin had nothing to say, but the stubborn set to his face indicated clearly that he was not about to change his mind. The man was not only water-spined, as Moody had put it, but soft-hearted as well. Snape shook his head slightly at Lupin's dichotomy: he could be oddly blasé on some matters and immovably resistant on others. At times it was a mystery what internal set of ethics and morals the werewolf followed. Sometimes it changed from one moment to the next; one of Lupin's more exasperating personality traits.

Snape gradually tuned out of the conversation as Dumbledore continued to list all the negatives of Lupin's ill-considered actions. Although one of the more even-tempered examples, the man had not outgrown Gryffindor impulsiveness since leaving the school. Very few of them ever considered the consequences of their actions, citing their beliefs in justice and fairness that Snape found amusing since it usually required that everyone else to suspend theirs in order to excuse the behaviour.

Parr had the fingers of her right hand up to her closed eyes, her left arm tucked under the right across her chest. Snape watched her for a while, turning questions over in his mind. He had a suspicion about something that had occurred earlier in the evening and wondered if a simple approach would give him the confirmation he needed. Taking another look over at the Headmaster's desk to check that the others in the room were adequately distracted by the lecture that Dumbledore was giving Lupin, Snape walked slowly across the room and over to where Parr was standing, giving every impression that his destination was of little importance...merely another location in which to wait until being dismissed. After a cursory glance at some of the portraits on the wall, some of which were paying quite careful attention to what was being said, he turned slowly on his heel until he stood directly to Parr's left, facing in the same direction. She gave no indication she knew he was there, but it would have been foolish to think that she was unaware. Her hand remained pressed to her face, shoulders rounded forward and moving smoothly with each breath she took.

"...may be something that we can do," Shacklebolt was saying. "After all, we cannot refuse aid to a person simply because it could prove to be inconvenient to us."

"Kingsley, that isn't the point I'm trying to make here," Dumbledore responded, shaking his head slightly, fingertips lightly touching his temple. "I can't stress enough how long it took for the fallout from the last incident to die down. You should know; you were the one that had to remove all the documentation from the Ministry."

Snape was about to open his mouth to say something when his stomach beat him to it, making an impressive growling noise that only vaguely represented the colossal hunger pangs he'd been attempting to ignore for the past hour. It wasn't the way he would have wanted to start the conversation.

"Tell me about it," said Parr to her own chest, her voice low. "I've been desperate for something to eat since mid-afternoon."

"Even after all that vomiting?"

She let her hand drop from her face and fixed him with eyes that were beginning to turn bloodshot. "Especially after all that vomiting," she replied and fossicked about in her pocket for a mint. Crunching it up enthusiastically, she squinted at him, nostrils slightly flared. "Well?"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Well what?"

Parr smacked her lips and turned them up in a half-smile. "You didn't come over here to play your hunger out loud for me, Professor. Therefore, I am guessing you want to ask me something."

He blinked at her, summing up every experience with her he'd had up to this current point, and decided to dispense with the roundabout approach.

"That barking noise back at the safe house. That was a seevy." It was not spoken as a question. He got the impression that if there were any indication of doubt in the statement, she would use it to her advantage. She would lie, agree or disagree, or not answer at all. Would he be able to tell if it was to be a lie? She was looking straight at him, and ordinarily that would be enough, but recalling his prior attempts at Legilimency with her, she'd give him the mental version of a slap. More likely a brass-knuckled punch.

She took a deep breath through her nose and screwed up her mouth before replying.

"Yes."

Simple as that.

"...know that Remus would never do anything without the best intentions, Professor," Tonks was saying. "I would have done the same."

"My dear girl, I would expect no less of you, but I would hate for our efforts to help so many more end in naught because we assisted one," said Dumbledore soothingly in an effort to palliate the rising agitation in Tonks. "So. The deed is done, and now we have to ensure that..."

Parr's red-rimmed gaze never wavered. He didn't know whether to be surprised or not. With the affirmative answer, Snape couldn't see how a lie would advantage her.

"Why do they wish you harm?" he posed with a tilt to his head.

Again that upward curve at the corner of her mouth. "Professor, if a seevy wishes to capture someone, they don't give away their presence intentionally."

"A warning."

Her single nod confirmed his statement.

"Why?"

Her forehead puckered as her brows drew up in a line of momentary uncertainty. "One would conclude it was to alert us to whomever it was intending to catch us unawares." She huffed and opened her eyes fully so that white showed all around the grey irises. Snape could see the thickening blood vessels in the sclerae, like creeping scarlet threads. "Who was he?" she asked softly.

Snape said nothing and feigned ignorance with a shake of his head and a shrug of his shoulders.

Parr's face snapped into flintiness.

"Professor, it is exceedingly rude to repay my honesty with dissemblance," she told him. "In fact, I'd go so far as to say that it is insulting." She bared a great many of her teeth in a cold moulding of a smile. "Though I can appreciate that could be your intention, I know that, at least in this case, it isn't."

That brought an unexpected curve to his own mouth. "How well you must know me," he replied, wrapping the words in sardonicism.

"Know?" She shook her head. "Smell? Yes." Her right hand floated up to her eyes, her words slightly muffled by her hand.

Snape clenched his teeth at being reminded at how much he had underestimated Trint and saw no point in responding. He noticed Parr sway ever so slightly.

"What's wrong?"

She dropped her hand and frowned. "I'm, er, having some trouble focusing." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, colour drained from her face, and she bent over with her hands on her knees.

Snape stepped back quickly, anticipating being hit with another spectacular example of vomiting, but Parr started to wheeze in deep, gulping breaths, a tremor running along her arms.

Unseen, miles away, an eye that had been closed for eleven months slowly opened.

"Remus, what's wrong with her?" Tonks asked shrilly, trying to hold Parr up and off the floor. The hand she had around the woman's arm confirmed what she could not believe her eyes were telling her. Parr had become emaciated right before them, as if her bulk had boiled away leaving only skin and bone.

Lupin was struggling to get Parr to look at him, torn between forcing her head up and kneeling in front of her to look up into her face.

"I don't know! I've never seen her do this before," he replied, panicked. "Chara? Damn it, Chara, what's happening?!" The agonised sound of breath scraping in and out of ruined lungs increased, and the hollow-eyed expression on her face terrified him in a way he hadn't experienced for some years. She was wasting away in his hands like ice seared by heat. A rivulet of blood escaped from her nose, and the skin of her lips cracked and split. "Chara, can you hear me?" He looked to Dumbledore. "I don't know what to do. Albus, I don't know what to do!"

Dumbledore turned to Shackbolt. "You remember where to find Poppy?" Shackbolt nodded. "Then go. And quickly." The man left.

Parr started to choke.

"Circe, don't die on me, Chara, *please*?" Lupin pleaded, renewing his efforts to raise her head.

"Severus, isn't there something you can do?"

Snape looked at Dumbledore, caught slightly off-guard by the question. He'd been stunned by the way Parr seemed to be almost collapsing in on herself, as if some parasite were sucking the life out of her at an alarming rate.

"Headmaster, you know that I never..."

"I think we're a little past worrying about official qualifications, Severus," Dumbledore interrupted him.

Snape grit his teeth and shoved Lupin aside. He gripped Parr's jaw with one hand, but he may as well have tried to move the head of a statue. He turned his head to look at Dumbledore.

"We have to..."

Parr stopped breathing, the rattling cut off as sharply as a knife wound. Her hand shot out and grabbed unerringly for the collar of Snape's coat. She pulled down forcefully, and his right knee slammed into the floor, sending a lightning strike of pain from knee to hip and making the right side of his body erupt in gooseflesh. The face above his was almost unrecognisable to him. Her skin was drawn so tightly across the bones that he could see the blood vessels underneath, her eyes seeming to be abnormally large in their sockets, pupils so dilated that there was barely a ring of grey iris around them. The blood from her nose had pooled in the corner of her mouth, leaching its way into the cracks of her parched lips, leaving them scarlet valleys. The ever-present bandage around her neck was dark with blood, and her breath was as foul as the air from a midden. Her iron grip on his coat prevented him from recoiling.

Parr's eyes stared straight through him. Then she swallowed him whole.

"You said you could find her!"

The four other men in the room flinched at the sudden roar of words.

Greyback kicked his chair, and it shattered into awkward pieces.

"You said you could bring her to me!"

He picked up a heavy chunk of the chair and threw it forcefully against the brick wall. It exploded into splinters and dust.

"Useless son of a two-legged whore!" the werewolf raged, shaking in red-faced fury.

"Someone tipped them off!" Trint explained, desperate to deflect Greyback's ire as quickly as possible before his throat got torn out. "We only just missed them."

Greyback balled his hands into fists and shook them. "I don't care if you missed them by five seconds or five *days*, you stupid bastard! The result is the same!"

Macnair opened his mouth. The werewolf covered the distance between them in two long strides.

"Just say it, Macnair. Just say one... fucking... word... and it'll be your last," he vowed in a low voice, glaring with the ferocious intensity of a rabid animal.

Macnair wisely closed his mouth. Greyback whirled away from him and began to pace back and forth across the room.

"I thought I had made it abundantly clear that finding and trapping Chara Parr was the most important thing you will ever do, Trint. Did I not indeed make that very... very clear?" The sound of bones crunching under the werewolf's boots added a pointed threat to the question.

Trint's hands clenched at his sides. "Yes."

"Then I confess to being somewhat bemused by the ratio of expended effort in relation to importance, Trint," Greyback pointed out, eyes narrowed shrewdly. "I am also aggrieved to find what I consider to be a lack of contriteness on your part for having failed me."

Trint pressed his lips together tightly and dropped his gaze to the bone-littered floor. He knew that there was nothing that he could say that could possibly ameliorate the situation. It remained to be seen if he would escape unscathed. Greyback was notorious for spectacular overreactions to the slightest obstacles. Waiving of fee would be considered compulsory now. However, to mention that at this precarious juncture could quite easily result in a forfeiture of more than earnings.

Put up, shut up, and keep still, Trint told himself, panic gusting in and out through his flared nostrils. He didn't like being in this position. This was the kind of situation he tended to put others in, which was the reason why he knew how best to deal with the role reversal. What mollified him appeared to be mollifying Greyback who, whilst still scrutinising him with the cold light of barely restrained fury in his eyes, didn't appear to be gearing himself up for further retribution. It seemed the storm had passed. For now.

Greyback turned away painfully slowly, his eyes locked on Trint until the last moment, the lighthouse beacon of his focus swinging to the man crouched on the floor.

"I am hoping my little medicine man has a balm of good news to alleviate this rather... unwelcome sting of disappointment."

The man in question cringed, his fingers tightening around a cold, thin wrist.

"I..." he began in a thick, choked voice, and had to pause to clear his throat. "I have given her all the serum." His eyes blinked rapidly in a staccato of anxiety. The pulse beneath his fingers was stronger than before, but still very slow. Much slower than it should have been.

Greyback pursed his lips and folded his hands together behind his back. "And?" he inquired with a politeness that was never a genuine facet of his character.

"She... ah... perhaps we need to wait a little longer," was the reply.

Greyback nodded slightly, as if to himself. "And how much longer is that, Pirino? Minutes? Hours? Days?" He shrugged his heavy shoulders and waited until the man opened his mouth to reply. "I no longer have such time!" he roared in Pirino's pale face.

The man, caught completely off-guard by the werewolf's abrupt change of disposition, fell back against the wall, instinctively raising his right arm to shield his face. "You have *seconds*! That is all I am giving you, Pirino. I don't care if you have to thrash her back into consciousness, but you will do it or you will be administering aid to yourself with the one limb I will allow you to keep attached to your body!" He grabbed hold of the arm the mediwizard was shielding himself with and pulled him roughly to a standing position. Pirino gave an emasculated squeak and flattened himself against the wall. "What's the matter, Pirino? Could it be that the pride of St Mungo's is not as good as he boasts? Could it be that he is just another useless, ball-juggling ignoramus who spends more time self-aggrandising than carrying out his duties diligently? Could it be that you think this challenge beneath you and your lofty abilities and wish instead to waste my time in retaliation?" Greyback shook the man vigorously so that his head bumped repeatedly against the powdery bricks with a hollow sound.

"No!" Pirino managed to cry out. "I am doing the best I can with what I have!"

Greyback stopped shaking him. "What's that? Surely not buck-passing, Pirino? Are you now blaming your tools instead of your lack of ability to work a simple cure?" He let go of the mediwizard's arm and spun to face Todianus. The fat man shrank back and slightly behind Macnair. "Well, *Toadianus*, it appears Pirino is intimating that your materials are insufficient to the simple task of reviving someone."

The accusation brought Todianus out from behind Macnair. "No! My supplies are *ne plus ultra*! I have provided precisely what I was told to provide...nothing less!" His flabby cheeks wobbled in sweaty outrage.

"And yet she remains unconscious!" Greyback fumed, one dirty and scarred finger pointed accusingly at the crumpled heap at Pirino's feet.

"I gave her enough stimulants to wake a dead troll!" Pirino whined, his knees shaking beneath his robes.

Greyback's gaze swung back to him.

"Perhaps it isn't obvious to you that you're not treating a dead troll," Todianus shrilled, his response pulling the werewolf's head back to him. "You do, after all, seem incapable of the simplest task set for you!"

"I am required to adhere to the basic tenets of my profession," Pirino retorted angrily, finally finding his spine. "Whatever turpitude you bring to *your* profession has no place in medicine!"

"I do what I must in order to get the job done," Todianus replied smoothly, brushing his chubby digits across his chest, light flickering along the rings cutting lavishly into his fingers.

"Enough!" Greyback roared, slashing at the air with his arm. He pushed the mediwizard back against the wall. "I have given you ample time to examine her and more time than I should have for you to treat her. You have been unable to determine how she can survive so long without food, unable to determine if she is fertile, and unable to revive her. Since you have proved so inept, your services are no longer required."

Pirino looked about nervously, his chin pressed painfully back into his neck in an effort to remain as far away from the werewolf as possible. "You mean... I can go?" A hopeful light entered his eyes and he glanced towards the doorway.

Greyback's mouth twisted into a smile. "I have one more task for you before you... go." He turned suddenly and grabbed for Trint. He moved too fast for the man to avoid the werewolf's grasp around his neck, and Trint was on his knees before he'd even realised what was happening. Greyback's ragged fingernails dug into the flesh of his neck, and the cowed man made to bring his hands up to try and pry the tightening noose away. Greyback grabbed his left hand and sank his teeth into the outer edge of the palm. With a sharp jerk of his head, he tore Trint's little finger straight from his hand with a wet, wrenching sound. The bone splintered all the way to the wrist and then gave way, and blood splattered like hot rain onto the floor.

For a few seconds, Trint was so shocked that the pain failed to register. Macnair flinched and backed away to avoid having his shoes ruined by the blood spraying from Trint's ruined hand. Todianus went white and pursed his mouth into a tight moue, holding down a rising tide of bile and pressing the fingers of one hand delicately to his lips. Pirino's jaw fell open as Greyback downed the mangled flesh like a wild dog, not even bothering to chew, and scrubbed his hand across his chin. Crimson streaked across his face like war paint.

Trint began to scream. Greyback kicked him in the face, knocking him backwards and cutting off the tortured vocalisation abruptly.

"One finger for every failure, Trint," Greyback vowed hoarsely, flecks of blood accompanying the words leaving his mouth. "Perhaps you just need greater incentive, eh?"

He turned his head to Pirino. "Fix him," he grated. "Don't grow back his finger. Just patch him up. He still has a lot of work ahead of him and very little time to lose."

AN: 'ne plus ultra' is Latin for:

1. *The highest point, as of excellence or achievement; the acme; the pinnacle; the ultimate.*
2. *The most profound degree of a quality or condition.*

Chapter Thirty-One - Pain

Chapter 31 of 59

Sometimes the price of a mistake can be mortally high.

For those who have never experienced it, they inevitably ask: What's it like being under the Cruciatus Curse? It is a ridiculous question; after all, the name is self-explanatory: Cruciatus excruciating.

Most people have experienced pain. It is, after all, a part of life. Some have the misfortune to be dealt severe pain, whether through injury or illness. Others deal with unrelenting acute pain, the kind that is endured through sleepless nights, red-tinged days, agonisingly slow weeks that swell into endless months that cluster into a merciless cloud of a year. Nerves shredded and raw. A pitiful lassitude of will to carry out even the most basic day-to-day functions. Each breath merely extending a pathetic and torturous existence. That is what the Cruciatus Curse is like, only ten times stronger. It is an agony set outside of time. Pervasive, debilitating, destructive. It macerates the very fabric of consciousness into a mince of primal sensory information. Even thoughts of escape cannot form. Nothing exists except for the pain. It surrounds and devours. There is nothing beyond it. When it stops there is the briefest moment of relief...the sensation of normality, that absence of pain, is incredible. Then the body comes out of shock and the feedback from every cell in the body overloads the brain in a wash of searing hurt. Sometimes this second wave is worse than the Cruciatus itself: the reintroduction of a state of being that is not solely enmeshed in pain, the jolt of visceral, muscular and nerve cramping and twisting, woven throughout with the terror that the curse will descend again. A certitude that it will return, and the conviction that withstanding it a second time is unthinkable, wholly implausible. Anticipated agony has a way of magnifying the actuality. This was something that the Dark Lord knew very, very well.

Slumped on his knees as he was, Snape could not tell if what he just experienced was the same or worse than the Cruciatus Curse. Objective, rational thought was always exceedingly difficult to maintain when in pain...that was what made it such an effective tool of control. Overload a person's senses sufficiently, and they will do anything, say anything, think anything that you want them to, as long as you stop the pain.

The magnitude of sensation had been so great that his sight had given out. This was not unusual in instances of excessive pain. What had been unexpected was the internal vision, the exposure to imagery through someone else's eyes. Again, this was not a new experience for Snape. Being a Legilimens, it was a point of view that was not unfamiliar to him, but what he had seen was not through Parr's eyes. It could not have been. She had been an observer, just as he was to her observation...looking through the eyes of someone who looked through the eyes of another. There was not the proximity of a normal incidence of Legilimency. There was always a mental closeness to the act. Some might have said that closeness was too mild a term. "Violation", they would normally label it. Legilimency was like a knife: it cut itself into another's mind no matter how you used it. It was just a matter of degree of laceration. Whether you used a fine needle or a blunt axe-blade, it was always an intrusion, an injury, a forcing into where you didn't belong. It was an insidious, dishonest, brutal tool, invariably a rape of the mind. The victim hardly ever welcomed it. It involved a taking of something that was not being offered. It always sickened him, no matter how many times he used it.

Snape had once asked Parr if she was a Legilimens, a question that she gave every indication of finding insulting. Occlumency and Legilimency often went hand in hand, though not always. A person could be adept at attack and woefully incapable of defence and vice-versa, but usually if a person had skills in one, there was some ability in the other. Parr could block a reasonably solid stab of Legilimency with little effort, even going so far as to clamp down on the incursion with a vice-like mental grip. Experience had taught Snape enough for him to realize that she could have been a hell of a lot rougher with him than she had been at the safe house.

To call what she had done to him in Dumbledore's study Legilimency would be akin to comparing drowning with a sponge bath. It had not been an insertion of one mind into another. It had been one consciousness consuming another, a complete submersion of his awareness into hers. He had not experienced anything like it before.

"Severus?"

His ears heard the word, but his brain couldn't attach a meaning to the sound. It was just random noise to him.

Just as speech had nuances, volumes and subtleties of meaning, so did minds. They had shape, texture, emotion, and sometimes what he thought of as flavour, although that word was insufficient in describing the attribute. It was hard to use the spoken word in such descriptions, and others who were Legilimens were rarely ones who discussed the language of their ability with others. It was seen as a negative trait, something inherently dishonest, like thievery, so more often than not Legilimens remained silent.

With Legilimency, one forced a portion of themselves into the awareness of another, like a hand pushing through a membranous barrier to the space beyond. There was never a subsuming of either mind. True, one was the violator and the other the violated, but the two were connected at only one point. An Occlumens blocked a Legilimens by finding that point and either severing the connection or deflecting the invasion before it had a chance to penetrate. But how does one prevent a drowning when there is no surface to rise to? How does one find the exit to a room with no door? How does one stay separate when held wholly in the consciousness of another? Snape had no answers to these questions.

"Severus?"

The sound was familiar to him now, but in what way, he couldn't tell.

Trint. He'd seen Trint very clearly from an upward angle, so whoever it was whose eyes he'd been looking through had been lying on the floor. Next to him had been Macnair. Snape had known that it had only been a matter of time before that bastard reappeared. Now he knew that the man was involved with Greyback, and from what he'd seen, whatever arrangement had initially been worked out was now sliding out of Macnair's direct control. Greyback's attitude towards him smacked of contempt, which was interesting. Macnair could easily overpower the werewolf with magic, but he'd made no move to use either wand or wandless magic. Why?

Snape had also seen that bloated fop, Todianus, lurking behind Macnair. Perhaps this was the explanation that had seen the apoth divert his higher quality merchandise away from Snape and, undoubtedly, other patrons of a less psychotic persuasion. Perhaps the fat man was too stupid to realize that he would most likely end up in the same place as his brother, Timeus? Perhaps he thought himself smart enough and nimble enough to balance along the knife-edge of an association with Greyback?

It had not been solely a visual experience. Legilimency rarely was. There was always emotion involved, usually at a very intense level: emotion surrounding memory, stemming from thought, arising from the reaction at the mental connection. The emotional input had been a highly disorientating one, with a peculiar echo to it. It may have had something to do with the fact that there had been more than two people involved. Legilimency never involved more than two since it required constant eye contact to maintain the connection. Snape had no idea how Parr had managed to combine three consciousnesses, especially considering that one had not been in immediate proximity. There had been a resonance between her mind and that of the unknown person, a harmonising reverberation that whispered words he couldn't discern from the unbroken ocean of overpowering sensory information. Whoever this unknown person was, Parr knew her, and knew her well. He'd been able to tell that much from under Parr's distress.

Pain...the kind of pain that was old, long-endured, suffered, forborne simply because there was no other alternative. This silhouette of an identity reeked with it, was drowning in it. Snape was both observer and vessel of it, the duality yet another layer of disorientation. She had been heavily drugged, not to sedate but to stimulate her out of unconsciousness. The bitter tang of ephedra in her mouth had been unmistakable along with the burning of her fingertips and toes that revealed that it had been a dangerously high dose...the serum that Pirino had given her was undoubtedly rich in it. Snape knew him only by reputation: an up-and-coming hot-shot mediwizard who worked his way around many of the discipline's long-held strictures in order to affect a cure while never actually breaking any of the rules. Snape had instantly disliked the man from a distance, not because of his flagrant disregard for caution, but for the shameless preening he did when in the medical spotlight. The size of Pirino's ego was disgustingly bloated. Snape hated show ponies, and Pirino had the gymkhana all to himself.

"Severus?"

This time he knew what it meant.

"Yes." He didn't bother to raise his head, preferring to allow his hair to shield his eyes from the light.

"What happened?"

Snape didn't answer immediately, still trying to get the edges of the fractured picture to align. Dumbledore waited. He had the kind of patience that ground rocks into dust when it suited him.

Parr wasn't in the room. Snape *knew* that, though the method by which the knowledge had come was a mystery. He had no idea when she had let him go, but the imprint of her mind on his was still there ever so faintly, like fingerprints pressed into soft clay...merely a reminder of her hold rather than any remaining connection.

"Do all seevy have resistance to magic?"

If Dumbledore was surprised by the question, he gave no indication of it in his reply. Even if he were looking at the man, Snape knew he'd still not be able to tell. Few were as opaque as Dumbledore. It was a mark of his skill at manipulation that few knew when information was being withheld from them.

"No. Only a certain number are. It is a closely guarded secret, even amongst themselves."

Snape shifted his weight off his knees slightly, trying to alleviate the press of stone into the top of his lower legs. He was going to have some spectacular bruising there from when Parr rammed his knees into the ground.

"Greyback knows it, and so does Macnair." He made an ungainly attempt to stand, shrinking back and away from Dumbledore's steadying hand. "Greyback is trying to learn if the resistance can be passed along to non-seevy." He peeled his eyes open slowly, exhaling his fatigue heavily. Both he and Dumbledore were alone, the others having gone who knew where. Lupin was probably with Parr, and wherever Lupin was, Tonks usually was.

"How do you know this?" Dumbledore asked.

Snape rolled his tongue in his mouth, part of him convinced that the *Codonopsis* he could taste was not solely as a result of the sensory information that had been injected into his brain.

"The woman Parr is looking for... Greyback wants to breed from her to see if the immunity can be introduced into the werewolf population." He pushed his long hair out of one eye with the side of his thumb. "He is also using her as a blood bank to give himself protection. She's heavily dosed with a Blood-Replenishing Potion to stop her from becoming anaemic."

For once, Dumbledore let his disgust show on his face. To hear that a woman was being used like a breeding animal and a living pharmacopoeia would have revolted most people. Greyback had little in the way of ethics and mores, which was what made him so dangerous. That he would drink the blood of another like a vampire showed that even the bone-deep, centuries-old animosity between werewolves and vampires couldn't prevent him from getting what he wanted, even if it meant mimicking his enemies. Male werewolves killed quickly and messily. They favoured numbers over constant supply. The joy for them was in killing; sustenance was secondary.

"Severus, don't mention any of this to Chara." Dumbledore turned away and walked slowly back to his desk.

Snape frowned at the Headmaster's back. "Why? She saw what I saw, heard what I did. She already knows." He paused a moment. "Who is this woman she's looking for?"

Dumbledore didn't turn, preferring to remain with his back to Snape. There was a marked hesitation before he answered.

"Her Handler. More than that I cannot say."

Handler? What sort of person needed a handler as if they were a trained animal? Obviously someone like Parr, but whilst she was outspoken and not a little rough around the edges, Snape didn't think that she needed a handler to control her. He straightened his coat. Well, thinking back on that time she'd tried to jam a dead spider into his mouth, perhaps she did.

"She has the Dark Mark on her arm."

That comment brought Dumbledore's head around to face him, this time with a genuine expression of surprise.

"You've seen it?" His blue eyes searched Snape's face keenly, his own features creased in anxiety.

Snape shook his head. "I know it's there."

"How?" Dumbledore asked before Snape had even finished his sentence. His gaze sharpened and hardened at this obviously unwelcome statement.

Snape huffed and glanced to one side, trying to work out how to give a shroud of reality to something as incorporeal as the ghost of his belief.

The way she fussed at her arm, the incident in the classroom when his Dark Mark had caused a sudden, cutting pain that had made both of them flinch, that she had known he was branded... He admitted to Dumbledore that these were not iron-clad explanations, but just as he had experienced the physical sensations from Parr's so-called handler, so he had shared Parr's: the suppurating welts around her neck, the dull ache in her left leg, the burn of acid in her stomach, the acute sense of smell that brought everyone's scent into crystal-clear focus... and the twisting sting on the inside of her forearm. A sting in the shape of the Dark Mark.

Dumbledore stared at Snape during his explanation, and for some time after. Then he gave a small shake of his head.

"No. I don't believe it's true. I've seen her arm. There is nothing there." The apparent certainty of his words was mismatched with the subtle line of concern that his brows had formed. It seemed that the Headmaster was trying to convince himself that it wasn't possible for Parr to be branded as a follower of the Dark Lord. "She has no prior

connection to the Death Eaters. Surely you of all people would know if she had?"

"The Dark Lord never shows all his cards," Snape reminded him quietly, dropping his gaze to the floor and pushing down a wave of tiredness down deep to where it could wait to be attended to later. "Ownership of someone of Parr's abilities would have been agreeable to him." He glanced back up at Dumbledore. "But someone with a mind that strong would be a weapon that could just as easily cripple whoever aimed it."

Dumbledore's concern deepened. "She is a Legilimens?"

"No."

"An Occlumens?"

"No." Snape rubbed one eye with a knuckle, as if to press out the fatigue from it. "She is something better."

Something better. Quite an understatement. If one were to make an honest and accurate comparison between what Snape could do and what Parr could do, the allegory would be she speaking a language fluently and with a poetic complexity while he shouted obscene swear words like an incoherent drunk.

Snape stared blankly at the wall, the spoon in his hand going from bowl to mouth automatically. He didn't even notice the taste of the soup that Folter had given him, but he knew it was insufficient to quiet the gut-twisting hunger drilling a hole through to his spine.

Snape worked hard to excel in the things he had talent in. Having been born with few positive physical attributes, he'd done the best he could with his mind. Whilst he hated using Legilimency, there was a perverse pride in him that he could wield it very well. He even considered himself one of the most adept in it, and it may have been hubris to think himself more skilled than the Dark Lord himself, but a good part of him believed it so. The strength of the weapon was the same, but the Dark Lord used it with all the subtlety of a rusty, serrated knife ripped through the guts. Force won over delicacy, in the Dark Lord's mind at least. The range of its uses was curtailed for the Dark Lord; he destroyed with it, ravaged with it. He probably never even contemplated that someone could withstand and deflect such brute strength, so had never advanced beyond a competent level of Occlumency. Whom would he need to guard against that could be stronger than he? The Dark Lord had taken many things from Snape, but he had never taken his ability to hide beneath layers.

Snape had spent his whole life hiding beneath layers. Sometimes he wondered if there was anything left of him at the core. Perhaps what he had once been had long since rotted away? It was a melancholic thought he entertained himself with when he was feeling maudlin.

The empty spoon surprised him. He'd gotten through the soup in a ridiculously short amount of time. Snape put the bowl down on the small table next to his chair and jiggled his leg in frustration.

He'd gotten careless. Their narrow escape from the now poorly-named safe house had been of the luckiest kind. There were four possibilities: Trint had worked through the triple blind that Snape had set up between himself and the double-crossing information seller; someone had been tracking him without his knowledge and had therefore made the connection between one of his Polyjuice personae and himself; someone had been following one or more of the others who knew of the safe house; or one of the others had let key information slip. Snape didn't like the way that Trint was involved with Greyback and Macnair. It made the likelihood that Trint had tracked him, whether through the string of buffering messengers or from having Snape followed, very strong indeed.

He rested his elbows on the armrests of the chair and slid his fingertips back and forth lightly across each other, stirring the agglomeration of thoughts in his mind in the hope that something of use would rise to the surface. His eyes flicked over to a movement in the shadows: Folter.

She had his coat in her hands, checking it carefully for any kind of soiling. She was exceptionally particular about his clothing, almost to the point of sterilisation. Sometimes he doubted that some articles of his clothing had *ever* seen dirt or grime. She must have deemed his coat's state unacceptable as she began to empty the contents of his pockets onto the side table. He didn't ever carry much. The pieces of string and two glass vials earned barely a glance, the folded white handkerchief paused for a fraction of a second in her hand, but the looped lock of hair was treated to a very close scrutiny. The flickering blue of the charm set around it almost obscured the colour of the hair and made holding it difficult. The surface of Stasis Charms tended to be slippery, so Folter hooked one finger through the loop and then rested it carefully atop the handkerchief.

Snape thinned his lips. He'd forgotten he had put that in his pocket. Folter gave him one of her wide-eyed looks that he held for a few seconds before sliding his own eyes away, one finger tapping the armrest rhythmically and rapidly. Folter turned and headed back into the shadows, his coat still in her hands. He didn't want to speculate on what was going through her mind. He felt as uncomfortable as if he'd been caught in some embarrassing act, though surely she had no idea what he intended to do with the lock of hair. Sometimes he wondered, though.

Snape knew why Greyback was so insolent to Macnair. He must have succeeded in getting immunity to magic by drinking Parr's handler's blood. The werewolf could strut about to his heart's content, and Macnair could do nothing. It was a fine line for Greyback to be stomping along. If he pushed Macnair too hard, the Ministry's Executioner could make life very, very difficult for the werewolves. Life was already a meagre thing for them, so they could ill-afford any further drop in their living conditions. So if Macnair was keeping his mouth shut in the face of Greyback's taunting, it must mean that he wanted something from the werewolf rather badly...most likely the support of the werewolves. When the Dark Lord had been at his peak, the werewolves had been drawn to him as what they thought of as the stronger of two evils. To make themselves indispensable to him meant that they had some form of protection against the persecution they were facing from the wizarding world. So they became insanely violent, making themselves the Dark Lord's barely-trained hounds that dispensed a frenzied and mortal punishment on whomever the Dark Lord deemed unfit to continue breathing. He would also use them to terrify others into complying with his demands, gnashing teeth kept a hair's-breadth from shrieking throats, family members thrown to the werewolves mere hours before the full moon. That had been a favourite form of entertainment for the Death Eaters.

However, it wasn't long before the werewolves realised that the protection they had bought was grossly overpriced. More of them died under the Dark Lord's shielding hand than the Ministry's. They were brutally abused, drugged and tortured into entertaining some of the sicker and more twisted Death Eaters. It didn't matter to the Dark Lord what happened to them. They were tools to him, nothing more. The werewolves tried to back out of the arrangement, only to lose more of their numbers in the attempt. In the end, they were forced to endure the barbed yoke as best they could. One could never make a bargain with the Dark Lord without losing everything. It was only ever a matter of time.

The Dark Lord's defeat had granted the werewolves the escape they had so badly needed. Macnair was clearly after their support again and was having to work hard to get it. Numbers in the werewolf population were difficult to gauge. The infection rate was nearly one hundred percent, assuming the victim survived the attack. Little was known as to how lycanthropy was passed along genetically simply because werewolves rarely survived long enough in order to breed, and for the fact that no-one outside of themselves had any interest in learning about the generational effects on the disease. Most magicfolk were in favour of genocide, though few ever voiced it. It was a nasty, dark aspect of wizarding society that simmered like poison under the skin.

Folter, in that peculiarly intuitive way of hers, had known how hungry he still was and had brought him a plate of food. She padded towards the side table and replaced the empty bowl with the full plate. Then she stood in front of him and waited, the bowl clutched in her long fingers, her large brown eyes fixed on his. She knew that he wanted to ask her something. She almost always knew, no matter how hard he tried to hide it. So much for his prodigious Occlumency skills, he thought to himself with a wry smile. He sighed and wondered if he could ask of her what he needed her to do. It was dangerous, something that he would ordinarily have handled himself, but since Trint had managed to sniff him out, that option wasn't open to him.

Snape liked Folter. She was quick to pick up on a subtle suggestion, didn't jabber constantly like most house-elves, and had what he usually described as a terminal streak of mischief that he appreciated as long as it wasn't being directed at him. She was the perpetrator of some of his pettiest vengeance against the staff and, if truth be told, against the student body as well. He had no idea how she managed to get Flitwick's hands to remain sticky for that long. It must have taken the Charms Professor the larger part of a day to find a way to stop everything he touched from affixing to his hands...retribution for having charmed Snape's feet to the floor of the staffroom. Hooch and Sprout had been in stitches over it, mainly because there had been a pair of very lacy pink knickers dangling from Flitwick's left hand amongst all the other paraphernalia

glued there: feathers, Flitwick's wand, half an apple, two coffee beans and a rabbit's foot. The tiny man had maintained stoically and red-facedly that the knickers did not belong to him, nor did he know whose they were or how they got there. That just made Hooch and Flitwick laugh even harder and McGonagall purse her lips until they went white. Snape just stuck his nose in a book and pretended to ignore the whole commotion. The knickers had obviously been Folter's idea. It was the only way he could explain why Flitwick had been unable to get rid of the items stuck to his with magic...house-elf magic was an entirely different thing to wizarding magic.

"Folter, I need you to do something for me."

She tipped her head slightly to one side and used one hand to tuck her hair behind her large ear. "Sir."

"It's very dangerous," he pointed out, scraping the nail of one index finger across the pad of its opposite in unconscious habit. "I wouldn't ask it of you normally, so you are free to refuse." She probably wouldn't though. Couldn't. His guilt increased. She never said no, so his statement was somewhat useless.

"I need you to go to an address in London and find out if someone I know is still alive."

She made no reply at that, waiting calmly for more information, the light from the fireplace glinting off the surface of her eyes.

"Her house may be watched by people capable of killing whomever they find, but they will be expecting a witch or wizard, not a house-elf. You may be able to slip past their traps." He thought he saw a faint smile on her face, which was very unusual for her.

"Folter is very good at avoiding notice and getting past barriers, Professor."

Snape couldn't stop the corners of his mouth curling up at her statement. "I have noticed that," he mentioned dryly. "Will you do it?"

The almost permanently surprised expression on her face deepened. "Yes," she replied as if the answer had been so blatantly obvious that to give it voice was ridiculous.

Snape laced his fingers together and hitched his shoulders. "Why?"

Folter's lids flashed over her eyes like a bird blinking.

"Because the Professor has asked Folter to do it."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "That's not the only reason, is it?"

Folter squinted and glanced thoughtfully at the ceiling.

"Folter has been told that she has an overdeveloped sense of adventure that will get her into trouble one day." She dropped her eyes to him again, with a dusting of colour on her high cheekbones. "Folter hasn't been caught yet."

Snape smiled at her and gave her the address, hoping that he wasn't wrong about Trint's two-dimensional thinking.

She was back an hour later. He found her in the main room of his private quarters after he left the bathroom, his hair still dripping water down his back. He saw straight away that the news wasn't good. The paleness of Folter's face and the lines of distress around her eyes were such a rare sight on her that she looked like a different house-elf altogether.

They stared at each other for a few moments before Folter shook her head slowly, her fine chestnut hair slipping from behind her ears to fall, strand by strand, to partially cover her face.

Snape's heart sank. "How?"

Folter tucked her hair back behind her ears carefully. "Folter thinks it was done slowly. With a knife." It pained her to say it aloud, almost as much as it pained Snape to hear it...another dead because of him. It seemed that was all he was good for in life.

Folter drew something out from the small pocket she had sewn in her flour sack clothing, walked towards him and held it out. The silver chain twisted around her thin fingers, the triangular opaline amulet swinging and catching the firelight in flickering flashes along its metal border.

He took one hand from the towel around his waist and took the jewellery from her. The metal felt cold, like a trophy stolen from the grave in the dead of a winter night. He closed his fingers around it, the points of the triangle digging into his palm.

It took a great deal of effort for Snape to ask the next question...his throat had closed up and a tightness in his chest made breathing awkward.

"The birds?"

"Folter has put those that still lived in the Owlery."

Kettering must have held out a long time. The death of any of her birds in such a situation would have destroyed her. He couldn't blame her for giving him up.

AN: ephedra is a stimulant chemical, and Codonopsis is a Chinese herbal tonifier that is used to fortify the blood.

Chapter Thirty-Two — Cut, Sever and Bite

Chapter 32 of 59

Life is filled with sharp edges. Knowing which ones will harm and which will give pleasure can only be found through trial and error.

AN: It's been a while since I made any acknowledgements. Thanks to JKR for providing such interesting characters and a fascinating world. My gratitude to those who still read this story your reviews and feedback are invaluable to me. And last but certainly not least, my appreciation to my beta, froggie-becky, who tolerates my infrequent

writing and sudden demands with such good graces.

The pages were useless to him. The werewolf had been smart enough to Charm them so that they would only be legible while his hands were in contact with them. It was an ingenious piece of spellwork, though no less irritating for it. There was very little chance Macnair could undo the charm. It required the wand that had originally cast the spell, as well as a precise and incident-specific counter-charm. Otherwise, it would have been useless as a security measure.

It was clear that Lupin had been engaged in research of some kind, but for whom? There was no indication of it from the books left behind, their subject and sources as varied as they could possibly be. One had even been written in Ancient Greek, though Macnair was uncertain whether or not Lupin could translate it.

Macnair tossed the sheaf of incomprehensible parchments onto the table in front of him and suppressed a sigh. His house was quiet at this hour. Truth be told, his house was always quiet, for that was the way he preferred it to be. The house-elves knew this and had learned it the hard way. Macnair didn't appreciate guests... *intruders*... into his sanctuary, but sometimes it was necessary for the job at hand. They too knew his unwavering demand for quiet, but the man who shared the room with him currently was having trouble remaining inconspicuous.

"Stop fiddling with it," he grated out at Trint. "Your finger's gone. Learn to live with it."

The olive-skinned man scowled at him from across the room. He sat stiffly in the leather armchair, more a captive than a guest, and keenly aware of the difference.

"If you can't get used to losing the first, you'll be in pieces, figuratively and literally, by the time you lose the third."

Trint's expression turned blacker.

"If you feel my skill is so poor that it warrants further dismemberment, why not dismiss me?" the information peddler snapped truculently, clutching his maimed hand with his untouched one, wide shoulders rounded in protectively.

Macnair scratched at his moustache. "I think not." He fixed the man with a stony glare. "And nor should you."

Trint glared back at him, his mouth pinched into a sphincter of hatred. Macnair let the man's attitude roll straight off him. He couldn't give two figs what Trint thought of him...he was a paid servant, nothing more. Macnair had much more pressing things to consider.

Firstly, how did both Lupin and Snape manage to escape? They had been over the plan more times than he could care to remember. Trint had assured him that there was no way to escape from that house they had been in other than by Apparating. All the exits had been covered, and Macnair had seen to it himself that the Nullifier had completely covered the entire building, even going so far as to wrapping the spell under the foundations of the house as well. Trint had followed Snape all the way to the house and had remained, hidden, to ensure that no-one had left until the others had arrived.

And yet, the quarry had escaped. Trint was lucky that Greyback hadn't killed him outright. Macnair was still weighing up in his mind as to how aggrieved he was himself that he had failed to get a hold of Snape. Once Macnair made a decision, he clung to it doggedly until it was carried through. It would consume him, filling his every waking moment until the goal was reached. He disliked having the desired result yanked away from him. It made him irritable and upset his stomach ulcer.

He didn't care about Lupin. The man was a wastrel, and a disease-ridden one at that. His loyalties lay with Dumbledore, so even his lycanthropy was lost to Macnair...he was effectively chaff.

Snape was another matter. Macnair didn't want him sniffing about, discovering what he was up to. He already seemed to know way too much, and Snape never left information unused. He'd unravel it and twist it into a rope to tighten around Macnair's throat. He'd done it before to others, and now the Ministry's Executioner was in line to be served his own brand of justice. The Dark Lord's right-hand man was a serpent in every sense of the word: cold, unreadable, hard to find and swift to strike. The only way to avoid the bite was to kill him first, but that was proving hard to achieve.

What was he doing hanging around with Lupin? Macnair knew that Snape was posing as a turncoat, shielded by Dumbledore like a canker at the heart of the apple, sent there by the Dark Lord himself, but sometimes Macnair wondered what Snape's motivation truly was. If he were anything like the other Death Eaters, he'd cut the throat of anyone he thought was getting in his way and leave no evidence of his involvement. Normally, there were things that Macnair could use against a person: a loved one, some precious possession or way of life, avarice, self-preservation... Snape didn't seem swayed by any of these, except perhaps self-preservation. There was nothing else that Macnair could use as a goad, so it boiled down to killing Snape outright. However, the man was hard to track and even harder to trap. Quite frankly, Macnair was amazed that Trint had managed to do the first.

Whilst Snape was high on Macnair's list of acquisitions, one rated higher: Parr. It had turned into a race between Greyback and himself as to who would get her first. Of course, the werewolf had no idea that Macnair was after her as well, and he was intending to keep it that way. Greyback didn't know that it was Macnair who had sent the killer into St Mungo's. Of course, Greyback had heard about the attempted murder, but he was still in the dark as to who the machinator was. He wouldn't take kindly to Macnair eliminating a very crucial pawn in his long-term plan.

For many months, Macnair had thought that the murder had been successful. The *Daily Prophet* had certainly reported to that effect. It had been a little strange that the murderer had not returned after having carried out his task, but considering the man had been Imperioed to do the deed, perhaps he'd been so mortified at what he'd done that he'd gone to ground. This caused some irritation for Macnair, since he had intended to murder the murderer in order to cover his own involvement in the whole affair. The Imperius Curse must have failed, which was not unheard of when used on a person to commit an act against someone well-known to them. Such long-standing association made it difficult to get the curse to hold for a length of time. It must have given out before the man could return to Macnair.

At least, that's what he had thought at first. When Trint had revealed to him that someone had been looking for a person sounding suspiciously like Chara Parr, he had thought that it was mildly intriguing. He did not recognise the person looking for Parr from the description that Trint gave him, so dismissed it as perhaps someone who had noticed her disappearance and was trying to track her down. He'd shrugged internally and told Trint to keep him informed. After all, Trint wouldn't be able to find her...she was dead.

Yet it seemed that was not the case. Macnair and Brachoveitch had been in Albania, using a Striker and Handler to search out more of their kind, who apparently populated Albania in greater numbers than in England. There had been whispers of the Dark Lord's location in all sorts of countries in the northern hemisphere...a couple even in the southern!...which Macnair had not taken too seriously. However, whilst in Albania, Brachoveitch had said that he'd seen Pettigrew skulking about and had set a watch on the rat of a man using the Carello seevy. What they had reported back was enough to pull Macnair from his home in the middle of the night to see for himself.

It hadn't been long after they had Apparated to Albania that the sudden appearance of Lupin and Parr had surprised them all. Parr had been the first one to break the stasis, costing his Striker a broken leg and Brachoveitch one of his ears. She'd moved so fast that Macnair had only just been able to Apparate himself before she'd set her knife to his throat. It turned out that Brachoveitch had managed to escape as well, but the Striker and Handler were left behind, their fate unknown. Missing in action. Macnair hadn't bothered to go back and find them. The loss was substantial, but Macnair had replacements, and that was sufficient.

The bitch wasn't dead. Worse still, she was hiding behind Dumbledore, burrowed into Hogwarts like a blood-sucking tick. Unless she stepped beyond its walls, Macnair didn't have a chance in hell of getting anywhere near her.

Seevy were hard to find. He himself had only ever had control of three sets of them, one of which he had been forced to kill when they had steadfastly refused to stand on the side of the Dark Lord. Nothing that Macnair had done to them could convince them otherwise, so rather than release them to no doubt put the rest of their kind on guard, he had dispensed with them. It had been a long and messy process, but that had been Macnair's choice. One other set had been the Carellos he had lost in Albania.

Greyback had suddenly fixated on acquiring Parr, and if he had to go through Macnair to do it, he wouldn't hesitate. Macnair had enough on his plate without keeping constant watch on the werewolf, so he'd ensured that he gave no indication that Parr was as of much interest to him as she was to Greyback. If the werewolf discovered

that Macnair was looking for Parr only to kill her, all hell would break loose. He could forget any potential alliance with the werewolves. Greyback would gut him from groin to throat. The risk that resistance to magic could be bred into the werewolves was too great to allow Parr to live. Who knew how many other seevy had such a trait? The Teveringtons, not blessed with such a trait, couldn't tell him, and they were under his thumb as securely as he could ever want...not all seevy were willing to shun the Dark Lord. The issue was whether Macnair could find enough of them to make a real difference to the Death Eaters. It would be like holding a bare blade, but the potential edge they could provide made it worth taking the chance.

Ironically, it had been Greyback that had originally tossed Parr aside, having dismissed her as scrap. Parr was barren and, therefore, useless in Greyback's plan to breed resistance to magic into the werewolf population currently under his control. It wasn't until after Parr had been left behind to her fate in one of the abandoned squats the werewolves lived in that Greyback had discovered that bleeding Parr's Handler and drinking the blood gave him a temporary immunity to magic. That had come as a result of a suggestion from Pirino. Acted upon, it had opened up a whole new world of possibilities for the werewolf, one that gave him the upper hand in dealings with Macnair. Macnair was unsure as to whether or not the immunity that Greyback bled from Parr's Handler also rendered his own magic dead. The werewolf was not a frequent user of magic, preferring instead to rely on the insane brutality and strength that his lycanthropy gave him in order to achieve his aims. He could use his wand when the mood took him, but Macnair knew it was the personal physical contact that Greyback relished. The maniac liked to touch the flesh he was torturing and maiming, enjoy the sensation of tissue tearing apart under his fingernails and teeth. Magic was starting to fail in satisfying the ever-increasing bloodlust in the man who was becoming more rabid beast with each passing full moon. Now he wanted Parr back...two blood banks were better than one, and perhaps she could be used as a bargaining chip to get the Handler to co-operate. But first, Greyback had to get the Handler conscious, which was proving to be a lot harder than either of them had anticipated. Macnair had no idea how she was managing to survive for so long in such squalor and state of ill-health. He had no doubt in his mind that Greyback would have abused her in every way he possibly could without actually killing her, but now, with Parr still eluding him, the Handler was becoming more and more precious to the werewolf, so he'd stepped back from his more disgusting uses of her and was haranguing Pirino to get her out of her coma and into some form of breeding capacity.

"Find Parr before Greyback does," Macnair told Trint stonily. "I don't care how you do it. Use the Teveringtons if you must, but if I learn that Greyback has her before I do, I will personally cut every extremity off you and feed it to the strays while you watch."

Not here. Not again. Not now. Please...

Did he do this to himself, or was this a punishment exacted by a wholly separate entity? He didn't know which answer was worse.

"Severus?"

He refused to look up. The very instant he had arrived here and seen that he wasn't alone, he had known that it could only mean the worst for him. The silhouette of the shadow was unmistakable.

"Severus?"

What did she want? She was dead! He'd already taken from her the most she'd had to give. His hand may not have been the one that had held the knife, but he felt no less guilty than if it had been.

"Severus, why won't you look at me?"

"Because you're not really here."

"What makes you say that?"

"Dead people do not come here."

"Is that so?" There was a tinge of wryness to her response that was achingly familiar to him. It made the simulacrum less a copy and more crushingly real, and his confidence that she was nothing more than an aggregation of experience and memory started to falter.

"Look at me, Severus. You owe me that." A faint sting of rebuke.

Perhaps, at the very least, he did owe her memory that one thing. Pressing the tips of his fingers into the wall behind him, Snape slowly lifted his head to look at the shadow in front of him. At first, he could see no detail beyond her outline. The boarded-up window was directly behind her, the light that filtered through the cracks giving her figure its unique form: all angles and straight lines. She stood in the exact centre of the room where the now-permanent dark circle stained the floor. He couldn't tell if it were just a marking or if the floor itself was starting to rot away. Sometimes it seemed as if it were in both states at once.

As his eyes became used to the low light levels, other features began to appear: the burgundy of her coat with its large buttons, the weave of the braids she always had her hair drawn into, hands clasped in front and failing to cover the ugly rent straight down her torso. The thick fabric of the coat glistened with blood that must surely have stopped flowing not long after that cut had been made. The sight of it made him go cold, and he raised his eyes to her face so that he would not have to see what Trint had done to her.

She looked at him sadly, a line between her brows that he could see even in shadow. Her throat had been slit from ear to ear, cleanly and deeply. The lower half of her throat was almost black with dried blood, but the silver of the chain around her neck was untouched, the lines of it guiding his eyes down to the triangular pendant he knew was still in his hand back where he slept.

"I'm... sorry, Kettering." The words seemed so inadequate, so pale in their ability to truly represent how much her death had punched a hole straight through him and smothered him in acrid guilt.

"Death comes for us all," she replied quietly.

His eyes flicked from the pendant to her face. "Not like this."

She had no answer to that and instead unclasped her hands to hide them behind her back. Her fingers looked strangely short until he realized that the ends of each digit had been cut off at the knuckle closest to the nail.

"Does guilt serve you well, Severus?"

The question caught him off-guard. She must have seen the surprise on his face.

"You carry it around with you like a child with a security blanket."

He frowned. This was not like her. Kettering had never accused him of anything before, much less self-victimisation.

"A personal choice," he admitted, hesitantly.

Kettering's face was split by an unfamiliar twist to her mouth that looked suspiciously like a sneer. "What do you think it buys you? Absolution?" She snorted in derision. "That isn't how it works."

He blinked, mute, unsure of how to react to this unfamiliar attitude radiating from her.

"I should know." Her thin lips formed a smile that he had never seen on her face. Snape didn't know who or what this was, but it wasn't Kettering.

"Why? Because you are dead?" he asked.

Her sudden laughter carried in its depths the screams of countless numbers, the tears of those left behind, the exultation of the victorious and the despair of the vanquished.

"No, because I *am* death."

She took a step forward, and Snape pressed himself more tightly against the wall. Now that she was closer, he could see the subtle differences in her face: the cheeks were too hollow, the jaw not angular enough, eyes so completely dark that they may well have been twin voids in her skull.

"What's the matter, Severus?" she mocked him in a voice higher than Kettering's ever was. "Do you not like the face you've chosen to see me in? Does it not please you to finally meet me? Am I what you expected?" Her voice battered at him, harsh and cruel, like nails raking through flesh.

"I never saw death in her face," he denied, almost angry at the accusation in the words she spat at him.

The lifeless eyes glinted at him as Death tilted her head to look at him like an avian Inferi, face pale above the blackened throat.

"Ah," she sighed, nodding slightly at his response. "Then perhaps this suits you better?" She lunged for his throat with clawed hands as her face twisted and melted, hair falling to reveal a vein-riddled pate as pale as moonlight on water, soulless eyes contracting to slitted pupils floating in red, nose so abbreviated it was almost two holes in the face, tongue cleft and teeth like needles.

Snape had nowhere to move as the Dark Lord's nails pierced his throat like shards of poisoned metal and tore downwards.

Death. It was not terribly surprising. Snape lived with the constant sensation of it looming over him like a Dementor, so there was little reason for it not to be in his dreams, as well. It would have been nice, though... a brief respite if he were allowed at least some time out from under its shadow.

He sat on the edge of his bed, hunched over and shivering as the sweat on his body froze in the frigid air of his private quarters. He welcomed it. As it was, the chances of him being able to return to sleep were now woefully small. He wasn't sure he *wanted* to sleep again, not if he had to face some macabre visual interpretation of guilt. Sometimes, his imagination had a ridiculous flair for the dramatic.

Death was a woman? How droll. He rubbed one eye with the heel of his hand and sighed. And not just a woman but a bitch as well, knowing exactly how to put him through the emotional wringer. Of course, it was all in his mind; that Death would taunt him in such a manner was his own doing, but did it have to be so damned vivid and cruel? Was this to be the start of some new self-punishment technique that would see more of those that had died at his hand trotted out to make accusations at him in Death's soprano-like lilt? Or attack him with hands that were colder than winter stone?

Since a night's rest was now effectively written off, he may as well end the charade and occupy himself in some other fashion. That thought didn't cheer him at all. He really *did* want to sleep. Bone-weariness was starting to get old hat, and lately even *he* was starting to get sick of his crabby attitude and short fuse, so Sycorax knew how the rest of the faculty felt about it!

Perhaps he'd just lie back for a few minutes, just until the lingering disorientation let him go and he could piece himself back together long enough to at least partially function as a human being. Sort of.

The pillow was damp, the sheets were wet, and he was still cold. He sneered in the dark and closed his eyes.

He was hungry. Again. Maybe he should get something to eat?

He found himself standing directly behind her, hands on either side of her on the surface of the table she was standing in front of, the heavy wood grain teasing at the pads on his fingers. Since his height superceded hers by nearly a foot, he could see clearly over her shoulder at what she was doing.

Her attention was centred on a small, half-full earthenware pot that sat primly atop a metal stand, under which a yellow flame licked repeatedly and lazily at its base. In the palm of one hand, she cradled what at first looked like a small and rather withered turnip, but to his practised eye was in fact *Lepidium Myenii*. In her other hand, her silver Potions knife spun slowly between her fingers, as he had seen it done many times in his classroom. It tended to indicate either thought or waiting. In this instance, he couldn't tell which it was due to the position he was standing in: it was abnormally close. Well, abnormally for him. Actually, abnormally for anyone who wasn't either a close relative or a slavering debauchee. He wasn't actually touching her, but it would only take a slight sway forward to change that.

Light flashed along the blade of Parr's knife as it rotated smoothly. She gave no indication that she was aware of him, though how she could miss the way he was breathing down her neck was a mystery. Breathing *in* down her neck was more accurate. Her scent was all too apparent to him with his nose poised such an incredibly small distance from where her ear was almost hidden behind her silvery hair, curling up in the heat that radiated out from the collar of her grey jacket.

He pressed his fingers into the table and sniffed in a small arc, sorting through what he could pick up on. It was all the things he had smelled on her before, though never so strongly. It seemed that this dream was going to be a lot more immersive than those he had previously experienced, and that brought a genuine, if small smile to his face. The other dreams had not been... objective, or even especially realistic, but they had been an interesting mental exercise nonetheless. He shifted his weight from foot to foot and resisted the urge to move even closer to her.

Blatant, undisguised sexual dreams were not unknown to him, nor entirely unwelcome, although at times his subconscious seemed to pair him with the most unlikely and disturbing of partners. He'd learned to embrace it and take from it whatever he could rather than shun the opportunity for this kind of fictional physical intimacy. At times that could be challenging. Sprout had been something of a test of his abilities to put aside preconceptions in favour of the chance to indulge fully in an activity that was rarely offered to him, but he'd shrugged and figured that his subconscious must have assessed that the very generously-padded frame of the Herbology professor held some hidden potential for his libido to exploit. Surprisingly, it had been... not too bad.

At least his subconscious hadn't tried to pair him with a man. That truly would have made him baulk.

Parr closed her fingers over the *Lepidium Myenii* and moved to hold it over the earthenware pot. She hesitated, and the knife stopped turning between the fingers of her other hand.

"I thought I told you that your hair is to be pinned back when in my class, Miss Parr," he reminded her quietly, noticing a small knick in the cartilage of the ear he was breathing into. He was about to run the edge of his bottom lip over it when her voice stopped him.

Parr had made no move at his words. "I am not in your class, Professor," she replied smoothly and rather faintly, as if he merited only a small portion of her attention; a situation he had every intention of changing.

He dipped his head and snaked his tongue out to wrap it around the hip-length tress of her hair and draw the strands into his mouth and between his teeth. Leaning back, he pulled the hair up and over her shoulder until it exposed her ear completely. The strands slipped from his mouth like fine threads of silk to rest on her back, leaving the taste of sweetness on his tongue.

"Thankfully not," he whispered, his fingers imprinting themselves even more forcefully on the table top as the very end of his nose traced along the folds in the shell of her ear.

Parr sighed, although not in the way he had hoped...she sounded tired and not a little exasperated.

"You shouldn't be standing there," she told him, bringing her hand back and away from over the mouth of the earthenware pot.

"Why not?" His lips brushed the lobe of her ear, determined to use this chance of a vivid imaginary fuck to the fullest extent.

"It is not your place," she said rather sternly and put the creamy-coloured tuber down on the table.

That elicited a gentle laugh from him. "But this *is* my place, Miss Parr, and I think you'll find I can do what I want here."

"Whether I want it or not?" she pointed out in a slightly fractious tone, gripping the silver knife in her hand tightly.

She didn't even flinch as he ran the silken tip of his tongue along the bottom of her earlobe before drawing it into his mouth and biting down gently. The flavour of her spread along his tongue, the softness of her skin encouraging him to bite harder into the fruit of her ear.

"Oh, you'll want it, Miss Parr," he assured her in a slightly slurred voice, unwilling to let his mouth release the plump little prize it had.

She snorted at his assurance and pushed the earthenware pot on its stand further away from her. The sound of metal on wood made him raise his eyes to see what she was doing, though he never took his teeth from her ear, tongue still teasing gently at the lobe.

Spread in front of her was a series of knives of varying sizes and shapes, from a heavy steel knife the width of three fingers to a pair of almost needle-thin daggers. Her blade with the orange and silver-wrapped hilt sat somewhere near the centre of the array.

He frowned slightly as he realised that he was going to have to try harder at getting her undivided attention. It appeared that this wasn't going to be one of the easier sexual fantasies granted to him, but that just made the challenge more realistic and, therefore, so much sweeter when he finally got his way.

He finally let her earlobe slip from his mouth with one final liquid swipe of his tongue and trailed his nose down the side of her neck. He realised that, for once, her throat was unbandaged. Even better. However, the jacket's high collar was preventing him from reaching as far down as he wanted. His left hand lifted from the table and back until his middle finger touched the fabric of her jacket, sliding slowly upwards over her ribs, pausing ever so briefly as it traversed over the swell of her breast and then up to the fastener at her left shoulder.

Parr merely began to change the order the knives were placed in on the tabletop in front of her, completely ignoring the way he grazed his teeth along the side of her neck.

His finger dipped behind the front seam of her jacket to determine how to undo the fastener without having to raise his head from where it was nipping at her. It felt like a hook-and-eye, which he easily undid with one hand. He was used to dealing with difficult clothing, so there was barely a pause before he peeled the flap of her jacket down and across her chest. It loosened the collar enough to allow him to tug it away with his teeth, granting him access to the point where her neck met her shoulder. It took all his willpower not to bite her hard. If he did that, it'd be over much, much too soon.

Parr continued to swap the order of the knives in front of her, her expression unknown to him as he buried his face to the task, both hands on the table now pushing him back from her body instead of just balancing him in his current position.

She smelled disgustingly delicious: sweet, citric, ripe. He breathed her in through his mouth and nose, picking up on something he hadn't noticed before. Or perhaps, it had been too faint for him to detect. He inhaled again, brushing his lips and tongue across skin that had never been exposed to him before, that had always been hidden from his eyes, that here was unmarked except for the light bites he was tenderising it with. He could taste it, this... other element, and he gripped the edge of the table in a Herculean effort to restrain himself, a thrill running through him like a static shock. His subconscious had thrown up one of the most subsuming experiences it ever had for him, but he was going to have to work for it.

With a steady smoothness, he sank his teeth briefly into the firm muscle in her shoulder before licking away the imprint he had left and moving ever so slightly closer to her, the buttons of his coat touching her back.

"You're going to make things very hard, Professor," she muttered, spacing the knives out farther from each other.

He swayed his body forward until it pressed against the admirable curve of her behind.

"Too late," he told her, his smirk reflected in the depth of his voice.

She tutted. "I meant for *me*, you prurient egomaniac!"

"I sincerely hope so." He lapped at her with agonising slowness in an effort to break her concentration.

"I had no idea you were into butch, Professor," she mused, turning three knives so that their cutting edges face to the left instead of the right.

He continued to drink in the intriguing taste of her, his assuredness growing that this was going to be a truly spectacular, if illusory experience.

"I'm not. Butch doesn't have a body made for pleasure. You do," he pointed out, pushing himself harder against her to dispel any doubt in her mind as to what he had planned for her. She fumbled the slender dagger she'd had in her hand, and it clattered to the table, causing a pulse of exultation to rise in him that he'd finally unsettled her.

"Oh, I'm going to enjoy this, Miss Parr," he vowed, nuzzling his large nose into her. "Several times, I think."

Parr used one finger to turn one of the knives in a semi-circle until its point was away from her.

"You seem very cocksure that I will allow it, Professor," she mentioned in an amused tone, turning another knife until the point faced away from them both.

He stifled a groan at her choice of descriptor, the images that flitted through his mind too lascivious too early on.

"Why not?" he answered, his voice muffled by the fabric of her jacket. "I've had you before."

That got her attention. She twisted around in the cage his body had set around her, her hip brushing across his groin, nearly making his legs fold with the exquisite sensation the contact gave.

"Oh, really?" Her eyebrows were up as high as he had ever seen, and he'd had to lean back to avoid getting clipped in the face by her shoulder as she turned. She appeared scandalised by his comment, which succeeded only in spurring him on.

He smirked at her, baring his teeth slightly and shifting his right hand so that his thumb brushed along the side of her thigh. He could feel the edge of her underwear through her trousers; the same style he'd seen her in back at the safe house when she'd demolished the bathroom over that stupid spider: soft cotton shorts that moulded relentlessly to her shape. He wondered if they were the same deep red colour as those had been, then realised that right now he was more interested in what was *in* them.

"Does that bother you, Miss Parr?" he asked her, eyes narrowed and head tilted to one side.

"To be leered at by a closet roué?" She barked a laugh at him, but the colour that sat in her cheeks said otherwise.

"Leering wasn't what I was doing to you, Miss Parr," he assured her with the sort of confidence born from someone who believed he was completely in control. He trapped the tip of his tongue between the front teeth for a moment, gazing lazily at her. "And you weren't complaining."

"Ah, I think I see the problem here, Professor," she said with the smile of shark about to bite a seal in half. "That wasn't me. That was some quirky little fantasy version of me, wasn't it?"

He raised an eyebrow of scepticism at her, his thumb still brushing across the seam of her underwear.

Parr huffed at his expression. "Who was on top?"

He blinked at the question that had caught him slightly off-guard. He managed to cover the hesitation quickly.

"Tut, tut, Miss Parr. Your question suggests that you think that I enjoyed you in only one position." He paused for effect. "And only once." He drew the words out of his mouth slowly and languidly.

Now, it was her turn to blink, but the revelation failed to rattle her. She leaned forward slightly, tipping her head to the side so that she could avoid his nose. He thought for a moment she was going to kiss him, which was much more along the lines of what his body was screaming insistently for.

"You'd not find the reality as pliable as the fantasy, Professor," she breathed at him.

Ah, finally she was going to play! It was all he could do not to push her back and up onto the table, pin her down by ramming the knives into the table through her clothing to hold her still and show her that, in his case, it was true what they said about men with prodigious noses.

"Are you flirting with me, Miss Parr?" he asked her, his breathing quickening as he edged nearer, making her tip her head backwards to keep looking at him in the face. "Surely you'd know by now that such a course of action will get you into trouble?" He smiled slowly as her eyes widened. "Or should I say, will get me into you." His long-fingered hands slipped over her behind and pulled her into him. Her body felt even more luscious than it had a right to, and his breath caught in his throat, his eyes closing slowly from the pure, undiluted lust that soaked into every cell in his body.

If he had been able to, he would've grovelled at the feet of his subconscious for giving him this.

His eyes opened again to meet her grey gaze, the pupils dilated and her mouth open slightly in amazement, her hands clutching at the edge of the table she was backed against. He slipped the palm of one hand up the front of her body, around her neck and under the back of her head where his fingers twisted in her hair, pulling her head even further back.

Snape leant down, air hissing through his teeth as he ran the side of his nose up along hers, over the bridge and down the other side. The friction of their skin sliding against each other made a growl rise in his throat.

"I *knew* it!" Parr whispered.

He ran his tongue along her bottom lip and went to suckle the words from her mouth.

That was when Folter woke him.

Chapter Thirty-Three — Attachments

Chapter 33 of 59

The tenuous threads that tie one person to another can be the rope that hangs.

Folter blinked several times in mild surprise at the string of epithets that flew from Snape's mouth. She so rarely heard him swear, even though there were times that even she thought it was warranted.

He clutched the sheet in white-knuckled hands and finally focused on the house-elf.

"Half an hour! You couldn't have waited half an hour? Ten minutes? Ten *seconds*?!" He let go of the sheet and pressed his hands to his eyes. "Damn it, Folter, what did you wake me for?" he moaned quietly.

Folter shifted her weight from foot to foot and tucked her hair behind her ears. It had fallen forward when she had jumped back at the angry sound in his voice after she'd woken him. She'd known that he'd been suffering from disturbed sleep for some days and had hoped that allowing him to rest past his usual waking hour would benefit him.

"Folter is sorry," she began in a hushed tone. "She waited as long as possible to wake the Professor, but he needs to get up now or he will be late."

Snape didn't move his hands away from his eyes. "I'm not interested in eating in the Great Hall this morning," he muttered sourly. As if on cue, his stomach made a stupendous gurgling sound that made him sigh in exasperation.

Folter wriggled her bare toes on the stone floor, watching him in mild curiosity.

"Ah, Folter means late for class, not late for breakfast."

Snape removed his hands from his eyes and looked at her wearily. "What are you talking about?"

The house-elf pressed her lips together briefly, surmising that a combination of fatigue and disorientation was making Snape slow on the uptake.

"The Professor's first class starts in fifteen minutes."

They stared at each other in silence for a few moments as Snape's mind lurched back and forth over her statement.

Folter had to jump back again as sheets and pillows went flying in all directions. She looked up to see Snape stumble in the doorway to the bathroom, tripping on a sheet that had wrapped around his ankle. The door slammed shut on the material.

By the time she had returned from the kitchens with his breakfast, Snape was already out of the bathroom and in front of the fireplace, dragging his clothes on awkwardly over skin that was still damp.

"Your sense of timing is highly questionable, Folter," he pointed out acerbically, misbuttoning his shirt. The house-elf shook her head slightly and tried to help him by jumping up onto the mantelpiece and straightening his collar. "Where were you three hours ago when I *needed* you to wake me?"

Folter had no idea how to answer that, so she didn't.

His coat was secured on him with charm-induced alacrity that ordinarily he would have eschewed. The house-elf got slapped in the face by his cold, damp hair as he whirled towards the door out of his private quarters, completely ignoring his breakfast.

The stentorian slam marked his departure.

It was to be a day of very mixed fortune.

The tip of his quill slid back and forth gently under his chin as he sat lost in speculation.

The students had been charged with the task of determining what potions would be appropriate for the situations he'd listed on the blackboard. He was in no mood for any kind of interaction, so he had granted them twenty minutes to search through their books for the relevant information before embarking on the preparation of two of the possible six potions for that day's assignment. Even though it was a double lesson, they'd be pressed for time and therefore by necessity more fully focused on their task instead of fooling about.

Folter's timing had been almost comically poor. Rather than wake him up before the terrifying crescendo of his nightmare, she'd dragged him away from what he'd determined to make an erotic dream of exquisite degree.

Snape often mused on the content of such dreams after they had occurred. If the person he'd enjoyed was in the immediate vicinity, he'd study them carefully, wondering if his nocturnal imaginings had any basis in reality. Sprout had actually shouted at him for staring at her for too long once, but she was notoriously crabby first thing in the morning and was likely to bite the head off of anyone who glanced at her at the breakfast table.

The difference in this instance was that he hadn't got to finish what he'd started and so had no idea how the whole escapade would have turned out. Probably with a punch in the teeth or knife in his guts, if his experiences with Parr were to be a basis for accurate judgement, but surely his subconscious would not have been so cruel. Thinking back to the nightmare he'd had, perhaps it would be.

It was true that he'd had Parr in his dreams before. The first time had left him both bemused and uncertain. The woman was a thorn in his side, exhibited minimal deference and somewhat violent behaviour...not the sort of traits that made a person attractive. Unless, of course, that type of behaviour appealed to you.

The tip of Snape's quill stopped in its path as he fixed his gaze on Parr. She was sitting at the back of the classroom, her head bowed to her textbook. Other than dark circles under her eyes and cheeks that were slightly more hollow than normal, there was little to betray her rather horrific transformation from the night before.

The second time was puzzling, simply because it had occurred so soon after the first. Normally a repeat performance didn't crop up until months later, if at all. Not that he'd denied himself a second go at it. Her proclivity for aggravating him in real life didn't get in the way of such nocturnal pleasure.

The quill-tip resumed its back-and-forth motion.

Perhaps it was a manifestation of a desire for control. Snape knew that sex was often used in such a fashion, but he had never been conscious of the tendency in himself. He enjoyed sex, plain and simple. It was ego-boosting when he got it, and logically if one ensured the partner got a lot out of it, then they'd return the favour; it was a win-win situation. Sex with an unwilling participant disgusted him. Such forcing was the result of selfishness and brutality that had little to do with the sexual act. It was overwhelming control, debasing another to satisfy a perverse desire to subjugate a person using a method that ordinarily gave pleasure. He'd had enough indirect experience with such flagitious behaviour growing up, and he had no intention of following in his father's footsteps.

Snape tilted his head to one side, watching the way Parr tucked her bottom lip under her upper teeth as she scribbled out some notes.

The third time he'd taken her, he hadn't hesitated. There had been very little in the way of control on that occasion which, upon waking, had left him very wide-eyed indeed.

But the last dream had been different to those before it. For a start, there had been verbal preamble...that had been a first. Parr had also resisted his attempts to engage her in amorous activity, which had therefore caused him to be more insistent with her. The dimension of smell to the dream had also been an uncommon layer. The scent of her had been overpowering, assailing him with a hunger so much deeper and more pervasive than he had previously experienced, which made the premature ending to the dream that much more frustrating. He mentally cursed Folter for the fourth time that day.

Snape sighed and ran the feathered tip of the quill across his bottom lip. He'd deliberately refrained from his customary stalking about the classroom in an effort to keep as far away from Parr as possible. He had no idea what it would do to him to be in her immediate vicinity. If, in his current state, he smelled her, it would very likely set him off, and that would be egregious in so many ways.

Student, attitude-ridden, sharp-tongued, disrespectful, physically overpowering, opaque, obstreperous...

The shaft of the quill buckled in his fingers.

Damn it! Listing her faults was just making it worse!

Something had to be done. Snape couldn't allow the situation to get even further out of his control. It was upsetting the precarious balance he was trying to maintain the poorly-patched tatters of his life in, as well as disrupting his concentration.

He gently straightened the bent quill and finished the letter in front of him.

A solid wall of half-giant stopped his exit from the Great Hall after lunch. Snape tipped his head back to look at Hagrid, whose face was located roughly halfway between the knotted mass of his hair and the bristling capaciousness of his beard.

"Ah, Professor, I've bin lookin' fer yeh!" Hagrid announced jovially.

Snape blinked at him. "And you have succeeded in that effort, Hagrid. Congratulations," he replied coolly. "However, if you don't mind..."

"I think I've foun' a Striker fer yeh," Hagrid boomed over him, smiling in accomplishment.

Snape tried to prevent the strangled sound that came out of his mouth but failed. He took a moment to compose himself and cleared his throat.

"If I may speak with you *outside*, Hagrid?" he grated out through clenched teeth before striding off towards the main courtyard.

"Understand this very clearly, Hagrid," he warned as they stood opposite one another under the slate grey sky that drizzled water over them. "No-one is ever to know that I asked you about Strikers."

Hagrid's smile dropped off his face. "Oh."

"In fact, I would appreciate it if you yourself forgot I ever mentioned them."

"Ah."

"It is a matter of extreme sensitivity that certain... foreign ears do not need to be aware of."

"Um."

"I hope that I have made my point very clearly."

"Er..."

Snape sighed, noting Hagrid's rather guilty expression and the way he was fiddling with his pocket flaps, the rain beginning to make the fur of his coat even more redolent than before.

"What have you done, Hagrid?" Snape asked in a flat tone.

"Well," Hagrid began, still fiddling nervously. "I thought tha' I could find yeh a Striker, since yeh were so keen on knowin' more about 'em." He stopped as the thunderous look on Snape's face distilled further.

"Go on."

"I... ah... told someone I know tha' yeh needed a Striker, an' they said they could arrange it."

This was not good. "I don't believe such a request formed part of our previous conversation, Hagrid." Snape was trying his hardest not to unleash a verbal fury on the oversized teacher, at least until he determined the extent of the damage. It seemed that he had underestimated Hagrid's desire to be helpful.

"No, but I thought tha' yeh would get th' answers yeh're after if yeh asked a Striker, Professor," Hagrid pointed out, trying valiantly to stem the bleeding. The twist to Snape's mouth suggested that this was not going well at all. He rummaged about in his enormous pockets and dragged out a piece of parchment that looked like it had been scrunched up, soaked in gravy, flattened, torn, repaired (poorly) and folded neatly. "Here's th' details," Hagrid explained. "She's expectin' yeh on Sa'urday."

Snape took the parchment at the very corner between thumb and forefinger in an attempt to minimise skin contact with this highly dubious-looking item. It looked like it had been used to plug up one end of a diarrhetic sheep.

"Who is expecting me?" he sneered, holding the parchment away from him.

Hagrid blinked a few times. Yes, this was definitely going badly.

"Ah, th' Screen, Professor. Yeh have t' go through her first."

Snape just stared at him, a small rivulet of rain water running along the length of his jaw. Well, perhaps it wasn't a total disaster, he conceded. There were ways around the spikier aspects of what Hagrid had gotten him into without his consent.

"It's OK, I've told her what yeh look like so yeh won't have ter explain who yeh are."

Fuck.

"Wonderful," Snape lied heroically.

He channelled his pent-up frustration toward the students. That afternoon saw all four houses lose a staggering number of points.

Of course, he should have known that to rely on Hagrid was a bad idea, but he hadn't thought that the half-giant would have gone so far as to make indirect contact with a seevy. Had the meeting been arranged by himself, then all manner of precautions could have been put in place to maintain a level of anonymity. Hagrid had effectively negated that firstly by arranging the meeting on the Screen's home ground and at the time of her choosing and secondly by describing Snape to her so that he was unable to attend such a meeting in any other guise except his own.

Snape felt that he was being thrown into waters where the currents were hidden from him. Who did the seevy that the Screen spoke for have an alliance to? It could be to the Ministry, to the Order, to the Death Eaters or even Macnair himself, or to some as yet unknown faction...perhaps one within the seevy community itself. If Snape's experience with the Death Eaters was anything to go by, there could be as many disparate factions amongst seevy as there were individuals. Sometimes being aware of all the possibilities made the situation harder to read.

Leaning over the cauldron on his personal workbench, Snape dropped the final ingredient into the cooling liquid and waited for it to dissolve.

Todianus. That fat shit of an excuse of a man was one of the weakest links to Macnair and Greyback's little scheme. Pirino would be the *easiest* to get information from, but the likelihood that he'd know much was doubtful. It hadn't appeared yet, but Snape knew that it was only a matter of time before an announcement of Pirino's disappearance or death appeared in the *Daily Prophet*. Little the mediwizard might know, but it would be enough to see him removed from the picture that was being clumsily painted by Greyback.

The looped strands that sat on the surface of the thick, mud-like liquid began to melt and spread, relaxing into the embrace of the potion almost tiredly. A curl of steam accompanied the state change like smoke from the immolating fire of a dying phoenix.

One question that needed to be answered was with whom was Todianus allied? Snape would bet with near certainty that Macnair was not relying solely on Greyback, that the Ministry's Executioner would be simply waiting for the right moment to turn whatever standing agreement there was between the two Death Eaters on its head to leave Greyback stuck out in the open in full view of unfriendly eyes. As sure as the sun slept at night, there was a betrayal accreting in Macnair's mind. So, was Todianus in on this potentiality, or was he in the dark as much as Greyback was?

Of great concern was the fact that the apoth knew that Parr had been a seevy when she had accompanied Snape into the shop in Knockturn Alley. How good was his knowledge about seevy? It was time to pay the oily bastard another terse visit in order to find out.

Snape left the now-complete potion to cool and turned his attention to the row of small glass jars on the shelf behind him. He spent some time staring at them as if to choose the cleanest amongst the line of already hyper-sterilised containers, but it was mostly to allow himself a moment to grow as calm as he possibly could. If he were agitated in any way whilst carrying out his next task, he'd get bitten.

He picked one of the palm-sized glass jars off the shelf and turned back to his workbench. Setting the jar down with a sharp click, he drifted through one of the archways to a side room that was illuminated with a faintly bluish light. The air was warmer and moister here, which was a marked contrast to the rest of his territory, but he maintained very stringent measures to keep it that way. He used a Locomotor spell to move the large glass tank over to his workbench, setting it down so carefully that it never made a sound. The shadow inside it shifted slightly, aware of the change in temperature. Snape would have to leave the tank to cool for some minutes to allow its occupant to become more sluggish.

Was Greyback the only werewolf interested in acquiring Parr? Kettering had said that the werewolves were amongst those looking for Parr but she had not specified who precisely. Greyback did not control all the werewolves, but he did hold a lot of them in his clawed hand, and those he didn't knew to be very careful of upsetting this magic-wielding maniac. Resistance to magic would be a highly-prized trait for any werewolf, who needed every defence against magic-folk they could get. Snape had known for several years that some werewolves were attempting to grow their numbers in the same way that non-lycanthropes did: by breeding. They were trying to live their lives in spite of their wretched condition, but how that was to be done caused friction and often vicious in-fighting. That Lupin had stolen away a young female lycanthrope was both surprising and unsurprising; the former because it showed that Lupin actually had a set of balls to risk such a dicey manoeuvre, though Snape questioned the notion that Lupin had actually given his decision longer than a second of thought, and the latter because most would be horrified at how lycanthropic females were treated.

When under the influence of the full moon, lyc-males tended to attack nonlyc-males over females. Seeing other males as a threat was a large part of it. Close to the full moon, werewolves became edgy, short-tempered and easily aroused. It was not unknown for attacks on women to increase in the three days leading up to the full moon, and then again in the three days following it, although to a markedly lesser degree. Their urge to breed was strongest during these waxing and waning periods, and they were more than capable of being forcefully brutal to get what they wanted. Snape had seen examples of it, though the circumstances had been extreme. No wonder Lupin wanted to remove such a young female lycanthrope from the den he'd visited. The moment she proved to be of breeding age, she'd be condemned to a life of unrelenting copulation against her will, assuming that she didn't die in the process.

The second reason for such a male-heavy component to the werewolf population was that females tended to react differently to the condition once infected. There was a noticeable lucidity to them during the full moon that was always absent in the males. They were still dangerous, still powerful, still bloodthirsty, but with a cunning that made them a force to be reckoned with. They did not attack and infect indiscriminately, but instead chose their victims with an apparent care, satisfying some unknown set of criteria. Some victims would be resoundingly killed, others deliberately left alive, and an overwhelming majority of their victims were male. There were reports that they would leave non-lyc females untouched in favour of attacking males. They were a fascinating aspect of lycanthropy, one of many that had drawn Snape to a study of them in the early stages of his now-abandoned career path.

He ran the pad of his middle finger in a circular motion over one of his coat buttons, eyes defocused in reminiscence.

If the way Parr had looked was an accurate representation of her Handler's health, she was very sick indeed. The conditions for observation had not been ideal, but from what he could remember of her external appearance, the Handler was suffering from malnutrition and anaemia...not terribly surprising. She could easily be harbouring injuries that he hadn't noticed. Certainly her neck would be in a bad state based on what Greyback was doing to her, which would make the likelihood of a blood or tissue infection high, taxing what little was left of her immune system.

Snape's finger stopped its motion, and his eyes refocused abruptly.

Parr was supporting her Handler. It all made sense now: her injuries that wouldn't heal even with non-magical treatment, why her health fluctuated rapidly, and why she ate enough for four people. Snape had no idea just how she was managing to do it, but Parr was shouldering her Handler's physical needs in order to prolong her life, most likely until she could be found and rescued, if that was part of whatever arrangement there was between Parr and Dumbledore.

Greyback was short-sighted. Endangering Parr's Handler's health would see his supply of magic-resistant blood correspondingly endangered. The man willingly lived in squalor, delighting in the sickness he bore, but was he as stupid as he was short-sighted? Snape recalled hearing that he'd abused Pirino for not being able to find out how the woman was staying alive, so it was unlikely she was being given any external nutrition. Being unconscious would not allow her to eat or be force-fed. Her resistance to magic would negate most attempts to fortify her using the more common magical methods of introducing nutrients into her body, so she was relying solely on what Parr could give her. Her poor state of health, plus having Greyback drain her who knew how often and to what extent, would mean that she was balancing very precariously on the fine line between survival and death. Considering how much Parr ate and how she hadn't put on weight, most of what she was ingesting was for the benefit of her Handler. Was it not enough for the Handler to be in a better state of health, or was it just being burnt up as soon as it was passed on to her? Snape knew of no other situation where such an arrangement existed. Parasites lived on or inside a host, so there was always a clear connection. In this case, the connection was mental. Parasitism didn't seem to be what was happening between Parr and her Handler; it was more along the lines of symbiosis...each gaining from and giving to the other. Who knew how this manifested itself between Striker and Handler under normal circumstances? Would this be the kind of information he'd be able to get from the Screen? If seevy were as secretive as Dumbledore claimed they were, it was unlikely. Could he get the answers using Legilimency? Not if Screens were as adept at mental blocking the way Strikers were.

Snape huffed in exasperation. There were too many unknowns, too many gaps and too many possibilities to get a clear idea of what connections ran between whom, who stood for and against whom, and who was intending to do what. He closed his eyes and took a moment to clear the whole tangled mess from his mind before returning to the task in front of him. He stretched a circular sheet of sheep skin over the open mouth of the glass jar and secured it with a length of hemp twine so that the surface was kept taut. Then, with careful and slow movements, he removed the lid of the glass tank and lifted its occupant out. She tolerated his touch with her usual flat-eyed dignity, her diamond-shaped head wavering gently, forked tongue flickering out briefly to check the identity of who held her. Her coils tightened around his arm, the mottled patterning of her scales so clear against the black fabric of his attire, gloss against matte. She was getting larger and heavier, he noticed. He'd have to get her a bigger tank or she'd get tetchy and short-tempered. It took only a little encouragement to get her to bite into the vellum-covered glass jar, but he kept a firm grip behind her head in case she changed her mind about being co-operative.

"You should wear that more often. It suits you."

Snape didn't bother to look up.

"Does protocol mean nothing to you, Lupin?" he muttered, watching the slightly milky drops of liquid roll down the inside of the glass jar. "It is customary to ask permission before encroaching on someone's personal space. The only reason you're not being forcefully ejected out and onto your bony backside is because I am otherwise engaged with more important matters, but I can assure you that won't last much longer."

"Then I have chosen my moment wisely," replied Lupin from the doorway. He eyed the large reptile that was wrapped around Snape's forearm curiously. "What do you plan to do with that?" he inquired of the slowly-filling glass jar.

Snape fixed him with a black glare. "Its uses are multifarious and none of your business. Why are you annoying me?"

Lupin scratched his stubbled cheek and sighed. "By necessity of a request," he explained in a rather strained tone of voice and then jammed his hands in the pockets of his tatty trousers.

Snape ran his thumb absently down the back of the snake's head in an almost soothing gesture, not taking his eyes off Lupin.

"If it involves me providing Wolfsbane Potion to your newly-acquired lycanthropic dependent, put it out of your mind right now," he pointed out in a deceptively calm voice. "I am not your personal apothecary."

Lupin blinked at him in surprise. "It had never occurred to me to ask that of you, Severus, and even if it had, I still wouldn't ask."

Snape narrowed his eyes at the man, wondering if there was an insult buried somewhere in his response.

"A Lust Potion, then? Circe knows you need it, dressed like that."

Lupin smiled back at him. "We don't all have your flair for impeccable old-fashioned style."

Snape sneered at him. "If being the height of fashion means looking like a dirt-drenched animal's bed, then I'm overjoyed to be passé."

Lupin snorted at his retort.

Gently disengaging the snake's fangs from the vellum, Snape returned her to her tank, running one finger lightly along her smooth scales to quieten her. She rustled about in the leaf litter restlessly, coils slipping over one another, her tongue flashing out like scarlet lightning. Snape pulled a piece of string from his pocket, Transfigured it back into a mouse and dropped it into the tank, replacing the lid quickly. He noticed Lupin's mouth tighten as the mouse squeaked as it was bitten. The werewolf was ridiculously squeamish about some things.

"Actually," Lupin continued, clearing his throat and strolling further into Snape's private room, "the request does not come from me."

Snape's lip curled in contempt. "Just the messenger boy, then," he sniped. "And why does this exalted personage not come to me with their request directly instead of sending the dog?"

Lupin shook his head slightly, trying to let the snideness slide past him. "For the same reason you so recently cited, Severus: protocol." He took his right hand from his pocket and, with two extended fingers, pointed to a spot on the stone floor beside him. A resounding cough, almost like a bark, came out of Lupin's mouth, igniting a flash of recognition within Snape which could not be examined, for in that moment Parr appeared through the same doorway that Lupin had. Keeping her eyes lowered to the floor, she stopped where Lupin was pointing, the hem of her black coat swaying against her calves. There was a pinched look to her face that Snape couldn't determine was due to anger, pain or uncertainty.

His eyes flicked back to Lupin. "Intriguing. Since Miss Parr has never exhibited a difficulty in making her opinions known to all and sundry, I am at a loss as to why she does so now."

There was an almost imperceptible sigh from Lupin. "These circumstances dictate it," he replied rather flatly.

Snape's gaze returned to Parr. "And what circumstances are those?" He noticed her face turning a rather interesting and intense shade of pink at his words, though the expression on her face did not alter in the slightest.

An altogether stony set to Lupin's face betrayed his annoyance at the question. "Suffice it to say that Chara acknowledges that a... mental propriety was not observed by her recently."

Snape squinted one eye. *Prickly about ritual and formality*, Hagrid had told him. He scanned Parr from head to foot, noting the absence of her usual school attire in favour of her black garb. Was this one of those instances of ritual and formality? Her subdued manner suggested it. Snape hoped she didn't have her knife stashed somewhere on her person. Her often erratic and violent behaviour coupled with the strange and foreign rules that governed seevy could easily see Snape having his ear removed as a gesture of her alleged contrition.

"I see," he lied coolly.

"Since the manner by which she would ordinarily be punished is not an option, an alternative has been arranged."

Snape stopped squinting at Parr and returned his attention to Lupin. The man sounded uncharacteristically terse.

"One would hope not a less severe alternative," Snape mentioned silkily. He noted that Parr bared her teeth briefly at his remark, the colour in her face darkening.

Lupin opened his eyes very wide and bared his own teeth at Snape as if to indicate that his comments were a gross breach of manners. Snape didn't give a shit about what Lupin thought, rather revelling in his apparently rude behaviour.

"As recompense," Lupin continued, enunciating clearly and emphatically, "Chara is to submit herself into your service for seven consecutive days."

"Is it Miss Parr being punished or I?"

"That remains to be seen," Lupin replied through gritted teeth.

Once again that barking cough, and Parr turned to leave. A long strip of white material running down the back of her coat glowed with an almost painful brilliance in the dimness, like the flash of light skittering along the edge of a blade, before she disappeared through the archway and out of sight.

Lupin glared sullenly at Snape. "The situation was awkward enough, Severus. Why did you have to be such an arsehole?"

"I take it that protocol is no longer in effect, Lupin?" Snape shot back snottily.

Lupin made an exasperated sound. "I'm beginning to think this punishment is going to be far worse than tradition decrees," he muttered, returning his hands to his trouser pockets.

"Why is it not *my* right to determine the nature of Miss Parr's punishment?" Snape demanded to know. "I'm surprised you didn't have her writing lines or some other such trivial hardship."

Lupin tutted. "I didn't decide this. The nature of the punishment is Chara's to determine, Severus."

Snape's brows lifted. "How lenient her traditions must be," he concluded, sneering.

"A week at your mercy is, I think, sufficiently torturous," Lupin snapped, hunching his shoulders and flicking his greying, too-long hair out of his eyes.

"At my mercy?" Snape repeated, a spark of interest igniting. "Tell me, Lupin, since you clearly have the rare advantage of certain knowledge over me, to what extent of compliance is Miss Parr bound to?" He ran the tips of his fingers back and forth along the edge of his workbench.

The werewolf pressed his lips together tightly, plainly unwilling to answer Snape's shrewd question.

"The punishment is ineffectual unless I am enlightened of the precise nature of the respective roles, and I shall not consider Miss Parr's debt discharged until I know the exact extent of my rights in order to determine if they have been suitably... exercised."

Lupin remained silent, his arms tensed as if his hands were clenched into fists in his pockets.

Snape glided slowly from behind his workbench, the fingers of one hand still caressing the slightly blunted edge of the work surface, the hem of his teaching robes whispering across the stone floor.

"I should so hate to commit any breaches of protocol, as it were," he opined, half closing his eyes and resting back on the workbench, fingers still toying lightly with the scarred wood to either side of him.

"Chara is bound to obey you for seven consecutive days, Severus. I think I have made that patently clear," Lupin finally and reluctantly responded, his eyes dropping briefly to Snape's constantly moving fingers and frowning.

"Exceptions?"

Lupin's frown deepened.

"Is there anything she will not do?" Snape elaborated, a faint quirk to his mouth as he enjoyed Lupin's discomfort.

The werewolf sighed rather heavily and transferred his gaze to his own shoes as if dragging up some last remaining shred of temperance. When he looked back up at Snape, the expression he wore was a study in intractable determination.

"If I hear that you have mistreated or disgraced Chara in any way, Severus..."

"Answer the question, Lupin. You're not a Slytherin so your attempt to sidestep is pathetically wanting." He slid the pads of his middle fingers excruciatingly slowly back along the table towards his body.

Lupin's nostrils flared with his audible exhalation. "No, but..."

"When is her punishment to commence?"

"Sunrise tomorrow, however..."

"Five seconds, Lupin," Snape interrupted a final time. "If there is still one molecule of you in this room by the time I count to five, I will show you at least three painful uses of the snake venom I have just procured." He turned his back on the werewolf slowly and deliberately. "One... two..."

He knew that, by the count of four, Lupin had gone.

Chapter Thirty-Four — Uncovered

Chapter 34 of 59

Obfuscation can only last for so long.

Snape looked at the small velvet bag that Folter had in her slender hands.

"When?" he asked.

The house-elf gave the question a seemingly unnecessary amount of thought. "About two hours ago, Professor."

That would make it right after he had verbally ejected Lupin from his private workroom. He'd spent just over an hour attending to some marking and then the better part of another hour attempting to eat a six-foot diameter food clearance at the staff table in the Great Hall at dinner. McGonagall had made several comments about intestinal worms that he'd pointedly ignored. They both knew he'd deliberately knocked her drink onto her lap as he haughtily left the table.

Snape blinked at the pouch that Folter was still holding out to him. "No message?"

Folter shook her head. "No, Professor." She placed the pouch in his outstretched hand, the contents making a sound like the dulled chime of a small bell. The house-elf padded away into the shadows to attend to... whatever it was she felt she had to attend to.

Snape stood in front of the closed door of his personal quarters, having been presented with this familiar item as soon as he had entered. The manner by which Folter had proffered it to him suggested an urgency that the lack of an accompanying message made somewhat mystifying.

He hadn't seen it for weeks but recognised it immediately as the pouch that Dumbledore had given him to carry to Lupin. That there was a connection between it and Parr had been obvious, but what it represented was much less so. Perhaps now would be the time to deduce its purpose, and since Lupin had left no instructions denying him anything, Snape saw no reason for that not to be the case.

He sat down in his reading chair and began to unfasten the pouch strings. His hands paused. Dumbledore had said that it was important that he neither looked at nor lost the contents. Could they be charmed or even cursed? He mulled over this possibility for a few moments. Lupin could be nasty if the phase of the moon was right, but it was not in his nature, so to leave no warning of a curse was very out of character unless the curse was something mild, in which case the werewolf might have left it for Snape to discover himself as retribution for getting booted out of the dungeons.

Snape judiciously decided that caution was warranted. He placed the pouch on the floor in front of him, took out his wand and used magic to extract the contents. The jointed metal slid out of the pouch sinuously, light flickering along the links and throwing a refracted glittering along the walls. A shard of its cold brilliance fell across the tiny bamboo cage hanging in the corner of the room, and the birds inside let out a tinkling burst of notes...their first since being moved from the Owlery to their current location, perhaps their first since their former owner had died. One of the birds fluffed its feathers, as if waking from a long sleep. A single oval feather was shifted loose, turning solid as soon as it left the bird's body, dropping to the floor below the cage with a metallic clink.

Snape returned his gaze to the object suspended in front of him, a length of chain still partly contained within the pouch. He raised it higher and the chain slithered free. Turning it in order to get a clear look at it, it took him a few moments to work out what it was. The metal was silver-like, but with a reddish sheen that appeared when the light hit it at a certain angle. The links between the inch-long panels were exquisitely-wrought with an almost Goblin-like skill, the fine filigree pattern on the panels twisting and curving like an orchestrated riot of vines. The clasps joined the two ends of the length of panels with a snick, the trailing chain, its length as long as Snape's arm, so thin and delicate that the slightest pull on it would surely separate it from the whole.

A collar and leash.

"I know you are here."

He tried not to breathe, lest the slightest movement give him away.

The shadow passed not two feet in front of him, the flat profile sharp against the fingers of sun that stole through the cracks in the boarded-up window. The light was full, the pale green of spring powdered through it, warm and soft.

"I will find you," the high voice promised. At first it had sounded faintly amused, as if it had been a childish game that would see him lose in a sufficiently brief time frame. Now it was beginning to sound angry, and its movements around the doorless room becoming more erratic as if to catch him out of his hiding place.

He was standing in full view, pressed flat against the wall opposite the window, but the figure kept moving straight past him as if he were invisible. His eyes tracked it as it paced restlessly back and forth.

"Where are you hiding, Severus?" Back to the deceptively calm tone of voice. The figure stopped, turning its head as if to try and catch the slightest sound that would betray him. "It is rude to bring me here and then hide from me."

He frowned. The figure's smooth head twitched as if it had detected his change of expression. It drifted a few feet to one side and stopped.

He saw it again, that peculiar, rippling distortion behind the figure, almost like the wavering of convection currents. It bowed and bent the view of the room behind it, an amorphous ghost following Death.

A long-fingered hand raised, the spidery digits splayed apart, middle finger questing as if to feel the texture of the still, heavy air. The head turned, bringing the red eyes around to face him, passing over him. Death drifted towards him slowly, hand moving through the air with an almost dance-like grace.

"I know you are here," it repeated in a caressing whisper like a lover's sigh. The hand moved closer to him, less than an arm's length away. Automatically he pressed his back even harder into the wall, knowing he could not move aside, for to do so would mark his location beyond a shadow of a doubt.

The middle finger hooked in the air, and Death stopped still. "Ah." Needle-thin teeth glittered inside the lipless mouth. "I see now." The other hand came up to search through the gossamer threads he could not perceive. Death took a step closer. "I should be outraged at you, Severus. Hell hath no fury." A dry, sharp laugh, as bitter as pith. "Do you want to make me jealous? Is that it?" The hands wove in front of him...elegant, delicate, deadly. Forked tongue flickered. Another step closer. The rippling distortion thickened, swelling behind Death like a promise of violence. The hands stopped moving. A hissing intake of breath. "She cannot hide you forever." Death drew back a reluctant pace, face twisted in frustration. "You cannot court me and then refuse me!" Another pace back as if stung. "I *will* have you!" Death roared at him, slashing at the air with clawed, poisonous hands.

The air congealed.

The room swelled.

The floor dropped away, down to oblivion.

His heart squeezed itself flat as Death shrieked at him. "*You promised me!*"

Death has nasty temper, Snape thought to himself as he shivered in the dark.

The rangy man continued to twitch. Having the Teverington Striker so close to him was no doubt the reason for it. Most would have found the muddy green eyes disturbing from across a room, let alone having them trained on them from a hand-span away.

"Gone where?" Macnair repeated a little more harshly.

The werewolf flinched, desperately trying not to look at the man who loomed over him. "I... ah... we think that... perhaps she was taken away."

Macnair cast a brief glance over to the huddled crowd in the corner of the room, bodies curved inward, shoulder to shoulder, flicking anxious looks up at him, feet shuffling, like animals in a slaughter pen.

He turned his attention back to the sorry excuse in front of him. "Taken by whom?"

The werewolf started to gasp for breath like an asthmatic and began to back away. The Striker's hand shot out and grabbed the man's filthy shirt, holding him in place. A rumble like the juddering start of an avalanche rose from his throat. The werewolf let out a high yelp, eyes so wide it looked like they were about to fall from his skull.

"Lupin! Remus Lupin!" he cried, shying away, eyes squinted close against the blow he was sure would descend on him.

A tic started up below Macnair's left eye. "Lupin was here?"

"Yes!"

"When?"

The werewolf didn't answer, still straining away from the Striker's anchoring grip, his body shaking and his flared nostrils white.

"*When?*" Macnair repeated, his grip on his wand tightening.

The Striker flexed his arm slowly, dragging the werewolf closer to him, worn shoes scraping across the concrete.

"Last... last week!" the werewolf replied, jaw clenched, pulling harder against his captor's grip.

Macnair's moustache twitched like a small rat that had been jabbed with a fork. "Last week? And you waited until now to tell me?"

The werewolf struggled like a sheep tied to a stake, feet scrabbling uselessly for purchase on the floor. "But I had no way of..."

"Drop him," Macnair told the Striker. The man pulled down on the werewolf's shirt, bringing him painfully to his knees before letting go of his clothing.

"*Crucio!*"

The werewolf screamed, his malnourished body twisting painfully and spasmodically. The den members in the corner surged in fright, each pushing another in front of them as if to shield themselves from oncoming punishment.

The Striker tipped his head to one side, watching the man contort in front of him as if it were a curiosity on display at a museum. His heavy, dreadlocked hair swung with the movement, and he scratched the tip of his wide nose calmly.

Macnair ended the curse.

The wretched figure on the floor trembled, blood leaking from his mouth where he had bitten through his tongue. His hands clenched and unclenched erratically, the muscles in his body contracting violently in the aftermath. The other lyc-males panted and rolled their eyes in terror.

"It was made very clear to you that secrecy was of the utmost importance," said Macnair coldly.

The cowed man on the floor coughed and spat a clot of congealing blood out of his mouth. His hand crept towards Macnair's foot.

"Please," he pleaded. "We never told Lupin anything. I *swear* it."

The Striker brought his heavy boot down sharply on the man's wrist, the bones audibly crunching with the impact. The werewolf let out a miserable howl that made Macnair's teeth clench.

"*She* will tell him, idiot!" the wizard hissed, spittle flicking from his mouth.

Someone in the corner moaned. Macnair's head turned toward the cowering group.

"Farring?"

A shadow formed behind him. "Yes?"

"Kill two of them." Macnair looked down at the sobbing figure sprawled on the floor in front of him. "This one's mine."

She had patience. When it suited her, of course, which was rarely. Most would have been shifting their feet and fidgeting by now, but Parr stood, unmoving, statue-like, giving every appearance of not being bothered in the slightest.

Snape continued his marking with brows slightly raised to radiate an air of insouciance, but he was curious to see how much longer she'd wait. It had already been over an hour, and he could very easily make it another. This was a perfect opportunity for a power play, and he was going to wring it dry for everything he could get.

She'd caught him off guard as he'd left his private quarters that morning, standing opposite the door in very much the same way she was standing in his classroom now.

He'd stared at her, expecting some form of explanation and wondering how she'd known where his private quarters were. The silence stretched out until even he was uncomfortable.

"Go away," he'd instructed and walked off.

The reprieve from her presence had only lasted until the end of the final lesson that afternoon. One moment the classroom was empty. The next she had appeared, not one sound made to give her away, but he'd known almost the second she had arrived. It was like a nuzzling itch somewhere in the front of his mind that made him aware he wasn't alone.

They'd stared at each other, both blank-faced until Snape had shaken his head slightly and dismissed her from his attention to refocus on his marking.

An hour passed, excruciating, cold, silent.

He pushed aside the last parchment with a sigh and stood up, fixing a tired expression on his face. Parr watched him flow from his desk down to where she stood. He squinted at her as if she were a particularly difficult problem, which wasn't that far from the truth.

"A mental propriety?"

She blinked at him.

"Your manners are so appalling I'd be surprised if you even knew how to spell the word."

Parr opened her mouth. "M... a... n....."

"Spare me, Miss Parr. I'm beginning to realise that are many things you know but choose not to utilise." He circled her slowly, the hem of his robe dragging across the top of her boots, along the length and around the heel. "Why do you perform to a substandard level in my class?"

"There are some things I do not have an affinity for, Professor," she replied calmly, her gaze fixed forward.

"I am acutely aware of that," he mentioned snidely, circling her again, one hand raised to his chest, the thumb toying with one of his buttons lightly. "However, I am also aware that you are deliberately working below your capacity in my subject, and I want to know why."

Parr's head rotated slightly as he passed behind her a second time, closer than before so that his arm brushed her back. She remained silent.

"For someone with no magical ability, you have a surprising adeptness at and knowledge of a field where you should have none."

"My mother was..."

"A horticulturist and a Healer; yes, I know," Snape interrupted her. "That is not sufficient reason. Nor is tutelage under Marconi Fulgor. He may be highly skilled, but it takes more than six months to gain the ability that you're trying to hide." He ended his circling and stood in front of her again. "It doesn't fool me. If I see you doing it again, I will refuse to teach you at all."

She looked up at him with her grey eyes and a hint of colour high on her cheeks, confirming his suspicions.

"While in my class you will give me everything you have. Anything less I will consider insulting."

"Yes, Professor." The blush in her face increased.

So, she thought she'd managed to hoodwink him, did she? "I also do not appreciate you pushing second-hand hunger on to me." Her eyes widened at that and her mouth opened slightly. "You spout a lot of hot air about mental etiquette, but it appears very one-sided to me. I wonder what else you're doing under the illusion that it's not being detected."

Uncertainty flickered across her face and her breathing quickened. Her irises contracted sharply and then relaxed back open, the pupils wider than before, the misted line across the surface of her left eye flirting with the edge of the aperture.

"Do not use me. You will have to support your Handler alone."

The colour drained from her face. "How do you..."

"Ah, not as sly as you thought you were, Miss Parr," he breathed, the taint of a nasty smile on his face. "One would suspect that you are attempting to disguise how much you know about the wizarding world." Her nostrils flared, her anxiety increasing. He leaned closer to her, peering into her face as if to read the secrets behind her slate eyes, studying her reaction to his proximity. "Hmm," he mused gently. He'd only have to take a step closer to her to put them both in nearly the same position they'd been in his dream. That thought sent a curious thrill through him. It was unlikely she'd dare it, but he wondered what her response would be if she looked into his thoughts and saw the image of his hands splayed over her behind and his tongue running hungrily along her mouth. He was almost tempted to push it into her mind, but the possibility it would end in him being brutally castrated stopped him.

"Lupin is under the impression I will make you perform some degrading task as part of your punishment." His mouth twisted into a sneer. "I confess that the idea has merit." He circled her again, the length of his teaching robes wrapping loosely around her ankles, the fabric slipping sinuously across the leather. "I have a slew of things that I could make you do that would have him chewing his tongue in outrage, but then..." He paused. "... the man always was rather prudish. Personally, I cannot wait to see you on your knees before me, and since Lupin tells me there is nothing you will refuse me, I have every intention of using you in whatever manner I choose." He

stopped behind her and turned so that he could curve his body down over hers, his mouth close to her ear. "And let me tell you, Miss Parr, it's going to be dirty and hard and exhausting, and I will love every minute of it." The urge to tear her clothing away from her neck and sink his teeth into her was so powerful it made his hands clench and shake, the scent of her locking a bittersweet, steel hunger into his groin that was almost fierce in its intensity. One inch closer and his tongue would slide along the arc of her ear. He opened his mouth and breathed her in and out with a sigh, his hair slipping forward across his face. One centimetre nearer and he'd know if she tasted as delicious as she smelled. It was by pure will alone he didn't twist his fingers into her hair or slide them up the front of her body. One millimetre between dream and reality, speculation and actuality, thought and deed. "Go fetch your toothbrush, Striker," he whispered. "This floor is disgusting, and you'll be spending all night cleaning it while I watch you."

Chapter Thirty-Five – Occupational Hazard

Chapter 35 of 59

The job description is not always available to protect you from wandering into danger.

Gaelina pursed her lips and waited for the man to speak. It was too early to tell how this was going to fare, and had she not been assured by Hagrid that this man was indeed looking for a Striker, she would have been at a loss as to why he was here at all. Since entering her home, he'd not spoken one word. Perhaps she was just used to Hagrid's garrulousness, she thought, trying to keep an open mind.

He was an interesting specimen...pale and verging on gaunt, like a vine grown in moonlight. He sat stiffly opposite her, his eyes darting periodically around the room, assessing, judging, so dark that she couldn't tell where the pupils ended and the irises began. There was hardly any colour to him, only tone with his pale skin, black hair and eyes and obsidian clothes with underlying white at collar and cuffs: a very rigid dress sense to match his manner. He'd failed to remove the heavy overcoat that would have protected him against the icy wind outside but would surely grow uncomfortably hot inside the house. The way he held himself suggested he did not wish to be here long.

Gaelina tried not to let her puzzlement show on her face. Hagrid regarded this man as a friend? She gave a small sniff. There were few that Hagrid did not regard as such, but Gaelina wondered if this man saw Hagrid in the same light.

He pulled his gaze from the bookshelf and stared at her impassively. She had to suppress a smile. It was like a stand-off between two animals unfamiliar to each other...one encroaching on another's territory. He was giving every indication that *she* was the encroacher, watching her with an equine dignity that could easily turn aggressive if a threat was detected. Gaelina decided to make the concession. Her past experiences had taught her that to yield a small measure in the beginning meant gain later on.

"Tea?" she offered lightly, lifting the round pot off the table.

He blinked slowly. "No, thank you."

The teapot wavered as her grip on it faltered. *Ah, not so colourless after all! Such a beautiful voice for so austere an appearance.* Ordinarily, this would have been a welcome thing for Gaelina, but the problem was that she had heard this voice before, only out of a different face. She put the teapot back in its place carefully. This was a much trickier situation than she had first realised.

Gaelina had a good ear...she needed to in her line of work. A person gave away all kinds of clues in the way they spoke, and as a Screen it was her responsibility to be as cautious as if she were stepping into a bear's den.

It was possible that the vocal similarity was a coincidence. Possible, but unlikely. His voice was too distinctive.

She folded her hands into her lap and tried to remain calm. She recognised him, in a fashion, but did he remember her? If so, it would explain his very guarded attitude. Since Hagrid had described the man to her, Gaelina knew that his appearance at the pub must have been a disguise...perhaps through Metamorphagy or Polyjuice Potion.

He quirked an eyebrow at her as if having heard her thought, but his glance at her empty cup allayed her fears.

"I'm not an appreciator of tea," she explained with a smile.

"Indeed," he remarked. "I would guess that red wine is your preference."

Yes, he *had* recognised her. Gaelina had no clear idea how to manage this situation. The man was indirectly linked to Trint, which of itself was of little concern, but the fact that Trint had been making concerted efforts into gathering information on seevy changed the flavour of the interaction.

Gaelina had been in the pub to keep a watch on Trint. Whom Trint had been meeting with was not of any consequence to her at the time, and she had been unable to divine anything useful from their conversation.

"Hagrid tells me you are in need of assistance," Gaelina stated, watching the man carefully.

"Perhaps," was the minimalist reply, delivered with a dangerous evenness of tone.

"In order to assess whether or not the assistance I can provide will be adequate to your needs, I will require some information as to the nature of the work," she said in as reasonable a manner as possible.

"Madam, in order for me to assess whether such assistance will be adequate, I will need to know the vector in which this assistance will operate," he counteracted coolly.

Gaelina's mouth curved slightly at the man's parry. "That is not an option, sir. The service I provide requires a very specific level of anonymity that is non-negotiable."

He considered this quietly for some moments, a ghost of a smile on his own mouth.

"I have been disappointed in the past by those who claim to be able to find what I require. What assurance can you give me that your service will be different?"

"No client has been disappointed by the service I provide," she replied. "If you are seeking testimonials, I have none to give you, since privacy is of paramount importance to my clients."

"That leaves very little from which to form an opinion," he noted.

"Just so," she admitted, bowing her head slightly in confirmation. "You will just have to trust me."

His brows drew down, shadowing his eyes. "Trust is very expensive, madam."

"Not as expensive as inexperience," she countered.

He stared hard at her, his gaze drilling through her eyes. "Just so," he agreed faintly.

"What do you seek?" Gaelina asked him, starting to feel slightly unnerved by being under such unwavering scrutiny.

"Information on a deceased person," he replied and failed to elaborate further.

"Since the number of dead people is rather large, I will need to know specifics," Gaelina pointed out dryly. "Date of death, name, gender, age, physical description, last known loca..."

"Deceased approximately three months ago at St Mungo's."

The plump, hen-like woman's brows drifted upwards. "I gather the nature of the death was suspicious in some way?"

"Murder."

Gaelina's eyes lifted to the ceiling, creases of thought on her forehead. "I seem to recall an incident around that time reported in the *Daily Prophet*," she said quietly, and then looked back down again, awaiting more information patiently. The silence stretched out until she was forced to prompt him.

"You have no more information?"

The man's mouth twisted slightly. "Little, which is, after all, why I am here," he pointed out with a touch of impatience. "All I can tell you is that the deceased was male."

"Can you be more specific about the cause of death?"

"Uncertain. However the corpse was shredded beyond recognition."

Gaelina's hands clenched in her lap and he felt the blood drain from her face. "Shredded? Are you certain?" Her heartbeat sped up, causing her to pant ever so slightly.

The man opened his mouth to reply and then abruptly closed it again. His eyes narrowed to slits and his whole demeanour shifted from suspicion to outright hostility.

Gaelina blinked at him in surprise, having no idea what had caused such a rapid change in attitude.

His nostrils flared briefly, and then his eyes searched the room again.

"Who else is here?" he demanded to know, voice harsh.

"There is no-one else in this room but you and me," she replied, leaning back slightly at his tone.

His gaze latched onto her again and he sneered before standing up to loom over her. "Technically true, but I question your assertion that privacy is as high on your list of client services as you claim, madam. Good day." With that, he turned and left the house, slamming the door behind him loudly.

Gaelina stared after him, lips pressed firmly together, clenching and relaxing her hands.

She heard movement behind her, past the doorway that led into the dining room.

"That went well," said Avella wryly in her throaty voice.

"Not my finest effort," Gaelina admitted, propping an elbow on the table to lean her head into her hand. "I didn't think he'd bolt like that."

"He knew I was trying to read him," Arla mentioned from behind her sister with some degree of wonderment.

Avella looked back over her shoulder at her with a curious expression. "You're not normally so clumsy," she responded.

Arla sniffed loudly. "I was extremely careful, thank you very much!" she said tartly, shaking her blonde hair with a toss of her head.

"I've seen him before," said Gaelina with a sigh. "And he I. That's why he was so edgy to begin with."

Avella drifted into the room and sat down in the seat their visitor had just vacated. "So have we."

Gaelina lifted her head to look at her. "Really? Where?"

Arla followed her sister into the room and stood behind her. "He's been into the shop. Looking for information on theriomorphs, he said." She sighed. "He had a really bad hangover," she recalled.

"Someone else poking their nose in where they shouldn't," said Gaelina, rubbing one eye. "He's been employing that Trint, you know."

Avella frowned. "That must be how the Teveringtons found the house," she concluded. "Those mangy bastards couldn't locate their own backsides with an instruction manual!"

"No-one's been at that house since then," Arla confirmed. "Compromised beyond use."

Gaelina exhaled heavily. "She must be at Hogwarts, then."

"Of her own volition?" Avella wondered aloud, resting one hand on the table.

No-one knew the answer to that, so they sat in silence for some time, considering, postulating, wondering. The tick of the clock on the mantle measured out the silence into even, heavy sections.

"He has pretty eyes," said Avella out of the blue.

Gaelina snorted.

"Didn't you notice his nose?" asked Arla in a tone of awe.

Avella huffed in amusement. "I did notice *you* noticing," she remarked with a sly glance back at her sister, who blushed.

"I was thinking of you!" Arla replied a little shrilly.

"He's a bit... uptight for me," Avella muttered, "however pretty his eyes might be."

"Did you know he's a Dual?"

The older sister turned in her chair. "Are you sure? Why didn't you mention it before?"

"I thought he might have been, back at the shop, but I wasn't sure. That's how he knew I was trying to read him."

Gaelina sat back into her own chair. "An unattached Dual, and a freeborn one at that." She mused on this unexpected piece of information, rubbing her hands together slowly and gently. "You heard what he said about the murder?"

Avella shrugged slightly. "If what he said is true... " She looked up and behind at her sister.

"It isn't a lie, but whether it is a fact... ?" Arla returned her Handler's shrug with one of her own.

"If so, can we be certain that she did it?" Avella asked, her blue-green eyes glittering in the lamplight.

"That she did it is not the issue," Gaelina sighed, rearranging her woollen shawl across her shoulders to counteract the chill that had gone through her. "The question is why?"

"We can't be sure right now that it was Luke," Arla pointed out, running a finger along her bent nose absently. "It could be some other man."

"Then why have we not been able to find him?" her sister asked with some asperity, a crack in the façade of her calm betraying her frustration. "Why would he vanish?"

"Someone else could have got to him."

Avella snorted lightly. "And leave no trace for you to track? Unlikely." She slid the pads of her fingertips over her lips lightly, lost in thought.

"Regardless of who it was, why would she kill him?" Gaelina whispered.

The Striker stopped rubbing her nose. "There could only be one reason: that her life was directly threatened. Which meant whoever it was, they were there to kill her."

Avella whistled lightly through her teeth and shook her head slightly. "This is a very strange set of circumstances, but one thing's for sure: we need to get a hold of Chara, before her time runs out."

"I need you."

Parr's eyebrows shot up and she stopped chewing her mouthful. She gazed at him for a few seconds before opening the door further, and turned away from him. The book in her hand was tossed lightly onto her bed to allow both her hands to rummage noisily through the drawer of her side table. Having located the object of her search amongst the pens, combs, bits of paper and boiled sweets, some of which had rained down onto the floor during her fossicking, she slammed the drawer shut with her hip and turned back to him, the dark red fabric of her loose trousers swirling around her legs with the motion.

Snape looked at the toothbrush in her hand and tutted.

"Not that."

Parr examined the toothbrush, still finishing her mouthful. "Good. I don't think I'd be able to clean very much with the three bristles that are left." It landed on the side table with a clatter. She turned back expectantly and could not have failed to notice the way his eyes travelled down her body all the way to her black-clad feet. She cleared her throat faintly.

"Surely, Professor, you didn't think that I wore my uniform all the time?"

"You consider what you wear during school hours to be a uniform, Striker?"

She shrugged ever so slightly, the motion pulling the cotton of her white and red panelled top up enough to expose a sliver of bare midriff. "How is it that my attire is not considered uniform if that worn by students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang is?"

Snape thinned his lips. "Get your 'uniform' on. You can't do what I need you to do wearing *that*." He gestured at her clothing with his jaw.

Parr stared at him keenly. Time flattened and twisted in on itself, wrenching into something smaller than an atom and greater than the night sky. Snape clutched at the doorframe as the disorientation threatened to floor him.

Her face shifted into an expression of undisguised eagerness, her hands opening and closing. She took a step towards him before she could stop herself, her hair swaying forward and shifting back against her body.

"My knife," she whispered, eyes so wide that the light in the room gave them an eerie glow, like clouds shielding the full moon. "I need it." Not a request.

He wondered if he'd be able to stand if he took his hands from the doorframe, his fingertips white with the pressure exerted in order to hold him up.

Parr took another step forward, nostrils flared. "I cannot do what you ask without it." Insistent.

"How do you know what I will ask you to do?" Each word sounded wrong the moment it left his lips; poorly-chosen, inadequately-phrased, grossly childish.

Her blink shuttered the slate irises that had already begun to shift into green. "You have already asked it." Another step closer.

He took the risk and released his grip on the doorframe to step inside the room and turn to face Parr's knife above the doorway. The Sticking Charm broke at his words and the blade found its way straight to Parr's hand. To touch it himself seemed an insult he was not willing to impart. He didn't know why such a consideration had arisen in him, but the impropriety of ignoring it was so tangible that it left a bitter taste in his mouth, a promised commination that would cut him in half before he even realised it. Snape averted his eyes from Parr to stare at the shrouded corridor wall opposite.

"You have five minutes to be at the front gate or I will leave you behind," he vowed and left the room before she could see his hands shake.

How would he hold her back? She was tipping on the edge of control before they'd even left the grounds. Worse still, she was pulling him with her down into that swirl of untrammelled agitation. He blinked, eyes unseeing as his focus turned inward.

That dichotomous gymnastic time had performed was not what had disorientated him. After all, he'd felt it before, though he still didn't know what it signified; a symptom of some condition he couldn't diagnose. No, it had been the way Parr had pulled his awareness toward her before he could even think about resisting. It had been like a physical intoxication that caused the room to spin and petrify at the same time, and his consciousness didn't know which the true state was. Perhaps both. Perhaps neither.

All he knew at the time was that he had to get away from her, get away before he drowned again, get away before he grasped for it willingly.

A gelid gust of wind pulled desiccated leaves across the ground in front of him with a brittle rattle, shifted the hem of his overcoat and mercilessly cut through the clothing underneath. Snape shuddered briefly and debated if going through with this was a good idea.

The greater the distance he'd placed between himself and Parr, the faster the mental confusion had left him. The frigidity of the air outside had returned his objectivity, making what had just occurred in Parr's room increasingly indistinct, a dream that faded upon waking, like water slipping through fingers. Perhaps he'd eaten something bad at dinner?

His mouth compressed into a thin line. He'd barely eaten the entire day, so it was unlikely. In fact, he'd eaten little for most of the week, ever since he'd told Parr to stop palming her hunger off onto him. Dutifully, she had done so. The sudden and intense pangs of starvation no longer bothered him and his usual insipid appetite had returned. He found, with some degree of irritation, that he missed being able to eat as enthusiastically as before. He'd even tried to do so without the assistance of now-vanished hunger, but the food had tasted oily and wholly unappetising, so he'd given up, albeit reluctantly.

The wind died just as it brought evidence of Parr's arrival. Snape closed his eyes tiredly, waiting for that chaotic churn to return and deracinate his mental stability. It never came. It unsettled him to realise that was not as much of a relief as it should have been for him.

"Five seconds late, Striker," he pointed out.

"Five seconds *early*, Leash-holder," she countered, coming to a stop to his left.

He opened his eyes again and looked askance at her. She stared straight ahead and through the bars of the gate to the clouded horizon, her face just beginning to arc outwards in a gentle curve. A flush of light from the near-full moon threw the hills into sharp silhouette, their edges harsh and unforgiving, while it ignited her hair into a cold fire, each strand a line of a knife's cut resting on the black fabric of her coat.

The tips of his fingers touched the velvet pouch in his right coat pocket, feeling the contours of the metal inside it. Did she know he had it with him? He brought his hand out of his left pocket and held the vial out to her. She took it from his fingers but didn't voice the question.

"An anti-emetic. I don't want you spewing on my shoes the way you did with Lupin," he sneered at her nastily.

She downed the greenish contents in one gulp and returned the container to his outstretched hand.

"So certain I wouldn't poison you?" he crooned softly.

"You would gain nothing from it," she explained calmly. "As for another day?" She shrugged. "Who knows?"

He didn't know what to make of her comment. She sounded more sad than accusatory, giving him little reason to snap a smart comment back at her. They stood next to each other in silence as the wind lifted once more.

"It tastes like shit," she noted after a couple of minutes.

Snape raised his eyebrows. "Metaphorically or literally?"

Parr tutted.

Another minute passed as the clouds shifted and drifted restlessly.

Her sigh pulled his gaze to the left once more.

"There is something that we must speak of," she began, raising her hands to chest height, the index and middle fingers of each hand straight and overlapped in parallel. He turned his head to stare more fully at her, but she refused to return his gaze, keeping her eyes firmly trained on the horizon. "In order to do what you require, it is necessary to..." She paused. "... hold your mind," she finished through gritted teeth. Her hands dropped to her sides.

"No."

She flinched as if slapped. "I cannot do it, then."

His brows drew down. "Cannot, or will not?"

"As well expect a carpenter to work without tools," was her fractious response, low, bitter and shamed at his accusation.

"Is that what you think I am, Striker? A tool?"

She twitched in an echo of her flinch. "That is what I am."

And that was certainly how he had used her for the past three days. She had scrubbed, polished, gutted, sorted, distilled, crushed and moved whatever he had demanded her to, from the minute her classes had ended to the moment he'd grown too tired to continue watching her, from the second he left his private quarters in the morning to the time her classes began again, determined to blunt or break her, to dull the edge of her until she were nothing but a flat, formless mass that could do nothing but be discarded for the useless implement it had become. Every evening she thwarted his attempt to do so, honing herself in the hours he slept, steeling the will inside her to withstand his use of her. He detested her defiance with an irrational intensity.

He made her disembowel live rodents. She didn't shy away. He demanded she split dead Bowtruckles until her hands bled from the splinters. She voiced no complaint. He told her to clean already-spotless equipment five times over. She didn't pause. He tried to find a way to make her hesitate. She didn't let him. Even in punishment she overcame him, driving him towards the last, most childish attempt to fracture her.

Her grey eyes had been wide and terrified, her body shaking like earth in the grip of a quake, her face whiter than pearl, but she pulled each palm-sized spider from its underground burrow with implacable determination, her eyes fixed on the trees at the border of the Forbidden Forest as her hands disappeared into the nightmare he made her gasp through.

The tool that couldn't be blunted. When he realised that, the opportunity to wield her became too great.

"I would not hurt you." Her words pulled him back to where they stood and made his temper roil.

"You flatter yourself that you could, Striker!" Snape hissed at her, outraged, his eyes narrowed to slits.

Parr clenched her teeth so that the muscle in her jaw rippled with her effort at restraint, closer to breaking than he'd seen her all week. "You must be stronger," she told him. "Or I will walk all over you." Her head turned and her bi-colour eyes stared straight through him, *into* him. "Can you do it?"

And there was the challenge before him. Could he hold her to a straight course, or would his grip be too weak to stop her from turning on him, cutting him into a thousand pieces as he fought for control? Tougher choices had been placed before him, more deadly than this, and he had survived. It had been a long time since he'd been labelled a coward. He would not let tonight be when that ended.

Snape smiled spitefully at her. "Don't let your hold falter. I know how to turn as fast as you."

*Take it, Striker! I want to see if your grasp is as strong as you think it is. I **dare** you!*

He braced himself for it, for the suffocating, smothering ligature he was certain she'd implode him with, his body taut with the effort that spilled from his mind to flex against hers, fingernails digging into his palms.

His every barrier dissolved, rendered useless as she wrapped her mind around his with a pressure so subtle he nearly missed it, like a sigh across marble. She didn't need to break what she could swallow whole, couldn't cut what she had made as much a part of herself as her own flesh, wouldn't surrender what he had given her in his impulsive desire to show her just how strong he was.

Bound. Intertwined. Locked.

The blade set in the scabbard.

He did not know whose grip was tighter. He didn't care. Was this how it was between Striker and Handler, merged together, closer than lovers, stronger than Death herself?

"Then let us visit the fat man once more," Parr replied, the moonlight refracting into her eyes so they glowed, the fingers of her left hand wrapped around the extended two fingers of her right.

Circe's heart, how would he hold *himself* back?

Chapter Thirty-Six – The Opportune Time

Chapter 36 of 59

Bleeding the fat man.

Timing. Few knew just how crucial an element timing could be. It made the difference between profit and loss, power and servitude, life and death. Todianus pondered on this familiar notion, one pudgy hand pressed lightly to his equally plump cheek, lips pursed in calculated thought. Was now the time to move from the position of loss and servitude to something a little less... precarious? The cold night air skimmed over his bald head and slipped down the back of his neck like a corpse's questing fingers, caressing through the runnels of sweat down his back.

The apoth shivered but didn't move from where he stood, still locked in the fermentation process of his decision-making. The issue wasn't whether or not he could move out from under Macnair's heel; it was how long he would survive if he did.

Isseacus Todianus had the capacity to be a patient man and, he liked to think, a logical one. Both traits were needed in an apoth: the disposition to accept that some things took time to mature, that not everything could be rushed. Equally important was the knowledge of when the optimum time arrived to achieve a particular goal. It was all in the timing.

His be-ringed fingers tickled gently at his cheek as he stared at the closed rear door to his apothecary on Knockturn Alley. He'd invested a lot of time in this business. True, it had been a mostly behind-the-scenes role up until fairly recently, but he'd had just as much of a right to its ownership as his brother had. After all, he was the one who had fronted up the money to start the whole venture. He was the one who had spent countless hours researching the competition, searching out the best suppliers, and negotiating the deals that brought them the highest quality ingredients at the most reasonable pricing levels. Timeus had done nothing for the administration of the business. Certainly nothing useful. Isseacus had been forced to shoulder his elder brother aside in order to get the business performing at the sort of levels he had envisioned for it. If Timeus had been allowed to dictate the operation, they would have been barely earning a profit, not even close to enabling Isseacus to recoup what he had invested. Even worse, their reputation would have been insipid, as bland as watered-down soup. It had been a point of frequent friction between the brothers.

"Wasted opportunity!" Isseacus would shrill, his jowls wobbling in outrage. "I wonder, Timeus, why you even bother to run an apothecary if this is the sort of business you bring in through the door!" He shook the ledger in his brother's pale face, the scantily filled pages fluttering accusingly at him.

"I have no affinity with figures," Timeus would sigh tiredly, shrugging his bony shoulders. "You know full well they hold no interest for me."

"No, and at the rate you're selling the wares, it'll hold no interest for the business either!" the fatter sibling snapped nastily, flinging the ledger down on the counter in disgust. "I don't ask you to be the greatest salesman the wizarding world has ever seen, Timeus. I just ask that you *try*!"

But the argument never seemed to touch Timeus, who would stolidly rebuff his brother's haranguing and continue to plod along, letting the potential riches that business hours could bring remain nothing more than projected figures written in Isseacus' fussy hand.

Isseacus had had no choice but to steal the reins from his brother surreptitiously. He began to deal directly with the suppliers to ensure the quality of the goods did not drop, for when Timeus had borne that responsibility, shrewder heads had realized that the same money could be asked for items of lesser quality. Isseacus soon showed them the error of such thinking. He raised all the prices of the wares in the shop, despite Timeus' protestations that it would force their current clientele to go elsewhere.

"One cannot make a living from selling bargains to prolls," Isseacus would point out acerbically. "Room must be made for those whose purses are more admirably filled."

The last hurdle had been getting his brother out of the shop altogether. Isseacus had watched, lips tight and disapproving as Timeus fumbled and flopped his way through a sale, failing to convince a potential customer that whilst the product they were looking at was a perfectly adequate one, the shop held others of far superior quality for not that much extra in cost. The man had no gift with language, no talent at the gentle art of persuasion, and no feel for the teetering doubt that could easily arise in uncertain quarry. Wasted opportunities.

Then, one day, Timeus had been ill: Fickleboil 'flu, he'd said and asked Isseacus to cover for him.

"It'll be easy," he'd wheezed, mopping his leaking nose with a crumpled hanky and peering at Isseacus through eyes near-closed with the pustulant boils that clamoured for space on his eyelids. "Fridays are always quiet."

Isseacus had exhaled heavily through his nose and bit back an insult that wouldn't have made any difference to the whole situation.

He'd stood in the shop, in nearly the exact same pose he stood in now, his irritation and disappointment increasing with every hour that passed, watching people pass by

the door of the shop. He hadn't realised that things had gotten this bad: to not even have customers enter the shop! Such a dire situation needed drastic measures.

"Take the next week off," he'd instructed his brother in a voice as persuasive as it was cunning. "As you say, things are quiet, and it's best you get plenty of rest." He'd handed Timeus a tonic "to ease the symptoms", but in actual fact had been concocted to prolong and intensify the disease's hold whilst simultaneously rendering his brother feverish and insensible.

The following week had been the hardest that Isseacus had ever worked. He stood out the front of the apothecary and flouted his wares shamelessly yet skilfully, wheedled and cajoled passers-by to come and see that the quality of his products could not be matched by anyone else, flattered and pandered to those he caught in his net until they purchased handsomely as if it had all been their idea in the first place.

The end of the trading week saw the ledger fuller than it had ever been, and whilst the takings had not been substantial, it had been an important and noticeable improvement.

In that time, Isseacus clinched several important repeating orders from customers of not insignificant standing and wealth. Sweeteners and preferential treatment aided a word-of-mouth campaign that swelled the apothecary's customer base to more than triple its former size.

"I need you to do something for me," Isseacus had begun in a gentle voice as he sat by his brother's bed. Timeus squinted up at him, his red-rimmed eyes watering with the pain of his headache. "Some of your customers have expressed a reluctance to deal with me, preferring instead to wait until your return before making their purchases." He spread his hands and wrinkled his forehead in concern. "I tried to convince them that I could assist them just as admirably as you, but they are incredibly stubborn. I don't suppose that you could take on the responsibility of handling their requests? Once you have recovered, of course!" he added in faux haste, patting his brother's thin arm in fraternal reassurance.

The truth of the matter was that not only had those of important social standing begun to frequent the store, but those of a less than savoury nature. It was these that Isseacus was attempting to palm off onto his brother, preferring instead to deal with those who could bolster his own reputation amongst the elite circles of wizarding society. The flotsam and reprobates could be Timeus' cross to bear. If he failed to sell them anything, it would be no great loss, and it would occupy him enough to keep him out of Isseacus' metaphorical hair.

So, that was how Isseacus had entangled himself with Macnair, and Timeus was ensnared by Greyback. Two more opposite in society would be hard to find, but both as dangerous as each other, with the Ministry-appointed Executioner's influence as great as the werewolf's insanity. In all honesty, Isseacus had half hoped that Greyback would incapacitate his brother sufficiently to see him permanently retired from the business, but the final result was, whilst mildly surprising in its severity, no less advantageous. Isseacus did experience a brief pang of sorrow at his brother's rather brutal demise but had put it down to being a light bout of indigestion. Life moved on. Opportunities were there to be had and capitalised upon.

The problem was that Isseacus had inherited not only the apothecary in its entirety, but the business's most erratically behaved customer as well. Greyback was a maniac, and a not particularly wealthy maniac at that. At least Macnair, whilst hiding some distinctly alarming psychotic behaviour under the veneer of social acceptability, had wads of cash to spend.

Isseacus had done his best to mollify Greyback whilst remaining rather removed from the smelly beast, preferring to keep any public knowledge of their business exchange to the barest minimum. He favoured lavishing his attention on Macnair who was inclined to order all sorts of expensive paraphernalia through Isseacus for Merlin knows what purposes. Quite frankly, Isseacus didn't care as long as he got paid.

But the two polar opposites had decided to associate with each other, sandwiching Isseacus rather uncomfortably in the middle. Macnair's wallet was too capacious to even contemplate giving up whilst Greyback left no doubt in the apoth's mind as to what happened to those that upset him. This left Isseacus in a rather tricky position, a position that had begun to get more and more precarious as the weeks had passed.

If it had been simply a case of supply for the demand, there would be little to worry over. However, Isseacus found himself being inexorably drawn into whatever convoluted schemes the two men were brewing. Greyback had himself a captured Sniffer that was two inches from death, and he expected Isseacus to find a way to bring her back from the brink. It was like a child expecting a mouse to continue cavorting after the brat had bashed its bones into dust, pitching a tantrum because the vermin wasn't playing by the rules. Macnair, on the other hand, had been purchasing various narcotics in increasing amounts, narcotics that were usually affected on lycanthropes, difficult to find, highly dangerous, and unfailingly addictive. Werewolf-baiting was a favoured pastime of Death Eaters, but Isseacus was at something of a loss as to precisely what Macnair was doing with the narcotics. Quite frankly, he didn't want to know. He didn't care to know. As long as Macnair paid up, Isseacus asked no questions.

Now it was getting to the point where dealing with both men was starting to get awkward. Both demanded some form of loyalty from him, which Isseacus found somewhat bizarre since he was an apoth, not a lackey. He sold a product and expected to be paid for it; that was where the extent of effort on his part should end. However, it was becoming apparent that what Isseacus thought was of little interest to either Macnair or Greyback.

The werewolf seemed more than happy to summon Isseacus when the mood took him.

"I need more Blood Replenishing Tonic!"

"Where's that powdered hen's tooth you said you could get?"

"Why is her hair falling out? Fix it!"

"I don't care what I said before! I need *double* what you've brought me!"

The manner in which he summoned Isseacus was starting to put permanent dents in the apoth's skull. The bastard had no social mores or restraints whatsoever. Isseacus had lost count of the number of people that Greyback had either killed or mutilated in front of him, and he was getting really tired of having to put up with it.

Macnair was becoming awkward in a wholly different manner.

"The last batch of Frenzy Cull wasn't strong enough. I need something of better quality."

"I must know who is procuring dried bisselweed. Do whatever you have to in order to find out."

"Have you ever used the services of a Striker?"

"I hope that your dealings with Greyback do not take precedence over my custom. That would be unfortunate indeed."

No, this was not the sort of arrangement that Isseacus wanted to find himself sucked into. The dilemma was figuring out who was the one whose ire he was willing to withstand.

Isseacus sighed rather dramatically, his hand dropping from his cheek as he stepped towards the locked door. This evening had been a long one. Macnair had gotten into the habit of dragging the apoth to various unspecified locations by Side-Along Apparition, which Isseacus found faintly insulting. Despite what he thought of as a solid business relationship of mutual understanding, Macnair seemed bent on keeping him in the dark whilst still expecting him to have a sufficient enough understanding of the delicate web of situation around him in order to fulfil the Executioner's needs. Virtually shaking him in Greyback's face was one of the more odious little performances Macnair was running.

Isseacus used his wand to dispel the security charms on the door and stepped gratefully into the warmth of the apothecary. Macnair had not allowed him even the time to grab a cloak before wrenching him off to some disgusting werewolf hovel to dose a pregnant lyc-female against early-term abortion. Isseacus wasn't a mediwizard, but

Macnair seemed to think him less trouble as a substitute, despite the apoth's frequent protestations that his knowledge in that area was limited and certainly not encompassing the working of miracles. He'd wisely kept that last bit to himself.

He slammed the door against the freezing night air and shivered at the temperature change. A nice hot bath would not only warm him, but relax his muscles as well and get rid of that awful stink that werewolf dens always seemed to exude.

He made a little sound of disgust and crossed the dim storeroom to the stairs that led to the upper level. He'd barely taken three steps before a pinpoint of pain between his shoulder blades stopped him. He automatically rolled his shoulders and arched his back in order to move away from the source of the pain, but it followed him and increased, sending thin threads of neural alarm down his spine and agitating his internals into a tight boiling.

The rumble from behind him warned him to keep stock still. The shadows in the stairwell in front of him shifted and solidified into a human form, the majority of it barely defined in the low light thrown from the oil lamp hanging in its bracket on the storeroom wall.

"Your trading hours are somewhat restrictive to my needs, so I let myself in."

Isseacus flared his nostrils to allow more air to enter his lungs. Even opening his mouth seemed like far too much movement to risk. Tonight was shaping up to be even worse than he had originally thought.

"I believe you have something I want," the man stated quietly, looking down his large nose at the apoth. "The manner in how I get it is up to you."

The pain point in Isseacus' back pressed inwards and down towards his heart, making his knees buckle. The copious amounts of fat on his frame failed to cushion him against the awkward impact with the wooden floor, his kneecaps reverberating and flinching, shaking off their agony like an animal shaking water from its fur. He looked up as the man approached to tower over him.

"You stink like werewolf!" came the accusation, a twist of contempt to the mouth that formed the words. "Has no-one ever told you that if you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas?"

The focal point of agony pushed in until it found a sensitised nerve. A trickle of heat ran down his back and slithered along the back of his thigh.

"Whuh... what do you want?" Isseacus gasped out, his fingers knitting themselves together in a mass of plump, white-knuckled entreaty, looking straight into those black eyes with the courage, the *desperation*, of one who knew that it was far more deadly to look away.

The man's eyebrows lifted slightly. "The truth. Whether you offer it freely or it has to be cut out of you is of little concern to me."

From behind him, gloved fingers trailed over Isseacus' hairless head almost lovingly, delicate, gentle. The blade found his throat a second later, the point stretching out into a taut line of steel threat.

Isseacus did his best not to swallow convulsively and decided which of the two options was preferable to him.

Parr's fingers dug into the dirt as her midriff twisted and imploded a third time in an attempt to disgorge whatever she had eaten a week ago.

"For God's sake, don't stand there gawking at me!" she pleaded with vocal chords already blistered with the fumes of her violent nausea. She flung one hand in a general and ambiguous direction away from her. "You're making it worse!" Her stomach wrenched itself into a knot, like a tea-towel being wrung dry.

Snape stared at her for a moment before drifting away from where she was slumped, unsure of which was the more important revelation: that the anti-emetic hadn't worked, or that the sight of someone vomiting was failing to cause him to empty his own innards. Even the sound didn't unsettle him, although he did wonder if Parr was being ostentatious.

He gazed at the hulking mass of the school that squatted in the dark, noting which windows were still lit with a vague and drifting attention. He was finding it difficult to focus and wasn't sure why. It wasn't fatigue; this was more like being mildly inebriated giddy but not unpleasant, the stage just before inhibition dissolved and embarrassing things occurred.

Parr made a sound behind him like a cow being strangled before choking on whatever wretched material she was expelling. The cacophony of sound was so ludicrous that it caused an altogether unfamiliar wave of laughter to rise up inside him. He clenched his teeth to stop it from escaping.

"Evil bastard!" Parr snapped accusingly between gasps. "I always suspected you got a thrill out of other people's misery." She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and got unsteadily to her feet. "You *dare* laugh and I'll wipe your face in it." She swore under her breath. "So much for your bloody anti-emetic!"

"I think it more likely that the lack of efficacy is due to your colossal contrariness than my lack of skill in concoction," Snape pointed out snidely over his shoulder.

Parr snorted and tottered to his side, one dirt-dusted hand pressed to her forehead. They stood in silence for several minutes; she swaying ever so slightly, eyes screwed shut as her internals finished scrambling themselves, he with head tilted slightly to one side, gazing at some unspecified point on the stone wall of the building in front of them.

"Why did you do it?"

He swivelled his eyes to look sideways at her. "You have a problem with the *Imperius*?"

Parr's hand dropped from her head to her side. "Yes," she sighed.

"Why?"

She sucked at her lower lip and frowned. "It is..." She paused. "What you did... is an abomination."

He sneered at her in the moonlight. "Spare me your value judgements, Striker. The use of your knife to get results is no less dubious."

Parr made an exasperated sound like a cross between a hiss and a cough. "The two are not even *close* to being similar! I wonder why I even bother," she added under her breath, sullen and bitter.

"I don't know why you bother either," he sniped back nastily. "That you fail to see the hypocrisy astounds me."

Her body went tight with repressed rage. She dropped his mind as if it burned her, and the floating sensation he had been enjoying fell with it, leaving the predawn air to bite at him unhindered. She took a few unsteady steps away from him and towards the entrance to the building before halting, body as rigid as stone, refusing to face him.

"You'll experience fever. That is normal. Pay no attention to your dreams tonight." Her words were hard and cold; the anger set deep into every sound revealing unplumbed depths that could drown and crush with their pressure.

His question stopped her again.

"Will you tell the Headmaster?"

"No," she replied harshly after some moments.

"Why not?"

"It would serve no purpose to do so. For now." She hunched her shoulders slightly, the panel of black cloth that hung from behind her laid-back cowl to the hem of the overcoat swaying. "As to another time?" She shrugged and slipped away from him, out of the moonlight and into the shadows.

Chapter Thirty-Seven — Hate

Chapter 37 of 59

Sometimes you find out the motivations of another far too late.

"More serious than I had thought, yet not as surprising as I had expected."

Snape said nothing in response. There didn't seem to be anything pertinent to say.

Dumbledore continued to stare into the stone bowl of the Pensieve, but whether he was actually observing something there was hard to tell.

"Does either of them know that the other has the same goal in mind?"

Snape scanned back over what Todianus had told him.

"It's possible. Both seem to be having some measure of success, and maybe working together they would have more, but Greyback still remembers how the Death Eaters treated the werewolves before. It would be his preference to work alone this time."

"As I recall, he didn't treat his own kind much better," Dumbledore mused quietly. "I've never envied lycanthropes," he admitted with a sigh, "but I pity them even more so, now." He turned to face Snape. "What is this? No words of scorn, Severus? Have those numerous arguments between us slipped your memory?"

Snape gazed blankly at him and refused to be drawn into another one of those "arguments".

Dumbledore squinted at him. "Are you feeling all right? You're very pale."

"Sunbathing is not high on my list of pastimes," Snape replied dryly, squashing the urge to roll his eyes.

"You haven't lost your sense of humour, at least," the older man noted. "You may need it." He left the Pensieve and headed back to his desk. "It might be best if you work with Remus on this." The lack of reaction at his words made him look even more keenly at Snape. "You're *definitely* not well if that failed to outrage you," he noted with a slight smile.

Snape gave him his best death look.

"I don't expect the two of you to be firm friends, but could you at least set aside the acrimony for the greater good?"

The effort it took not to reply in the negative caused Snape's mouth to form a tight line across his face and a flush of heat to rise in his cheeks.

Dumbledore sighed. "Regardless, the two of you will need to find some way to cooperate." He sat down in his chair and began to rummage through a drawer in his desk. "If what you have told me is true, then we have very little time to try and convince any lycanthropes that we are a third option available to them. Their usefulness to our cause is incalculable. Plus, I don't see how they can ever hope to be accepted into wizarding society without our help."

Snape shook his head slightly at Dumbledore's words, wishing he had failed to notice the unabashed patronisation. He wondered if the man knew he spoke of lycanthropes as if they were soiled, unrefined animals who needed to be taught how the rest of the world behaved, which was true in many ways, but that was beside the point. There was a palpable sense of elitism in the old wizard that Snape sometimes found rather alarming. He wondered if he was regarded in the same light: as someone who played at being a civilised member of society, who came from dubious, mixed bloodlines and still tried to play with the upper-class as if they were all equals. He frowned. No one knew better than he how such folly was regarded by the pure-bloods, but to hear the stain of it in Dumbledore's voice never failed to sting.

"I am certain that Lupin doesn't need my assistance," he snapped rather nastily.

Dumbledore shrugged as he drew a sheaf of papers out of the drawer. "Perhaps not, but the man is shouldering rather a lot of responsibility right now, so I think he'd appreciate the help." He picked up his quill and started to scratch out something along the margin of the topmost page. "And since you have decided to stick your toe in the water..."

"The information came out whilst I was determining what Macnair had been doing!" Snape barked, rubbing a sheen of sweat off his temple with the pad of his thumb. "I really couldn't care less about the fate of the werewolf population!"

Dumbledore quirked an eyebrow. "Something you have stated on more than one occasion, Severus, but you can't choose to help only those that you *like* in this world. Assistance should be given to lycanthropes as much as any of the other magical creatures. One never knows what may come of it." He drew out a page from closer to the bottom of the sheaf and peered through his half-moon glasses at it. "Besides, you have a very valuable informant, now, and knowing the circumstances of Remus' activities will be useful in you knowing which questions to ask your... contact." He scribbled something at the top of the page and pushed it back into place. "And your own knowledge of lycanthropes is not insubstantial. It is time we had your input."

"I really have nothing to add, Headmaster."

Dumbledore looked up at him, a ghosting of irritation in his eyes. "We are all doing things we don't want to do, Severus."

You have the gall to say that to my face? Snape thought in outrage, his hands beginning to shake.

"I know your experiences with lycanthropes have not been pleasant, but there must be something that draws you to them if you had spent all that time researching them while you were an intern at the hospital." He raised his eyebrows. "Unless there is something that you wish to tell me?"

Snape glared frostily at him. "Medical assistance should be given to lycanthropes as much as any of the other magical creatures," he replied flatly, returning Dumbledore's words. "However much I may dislike them."

"Of course," the man replied after a noticeable pause. "Why is Macnair attempting to recruit seevy?"

Snape blinked at him, a little disorientated. He put it down to the change of subject. "From what I have been told, they have proved useful in tracking down those that Macnair wishes to find."

"Lycanthropes."

"Amongst others." Snape frowned, wondering why it was becoming so hot in the Headmaster's office, especially since there was no fire under the mantel to impart any warmth. "Some that Macnair wishes to control, others that he wishes to kill."

"I hope that he finds them harder to find than we have," Dumbledore mentioned, placing his quill down on the table carefully.

"Surely Miss Parr could assist you on that," Snape pointed out, squinting as a drop of sweat found its way from his hairline to the corner of one eye, the saltiness stinging sharply. "She is unfailingly helpful," he added sarcastically.

"Her knowledge has borne some fruit, though not as much as I would have liked. The restrictions placed on her are rather severe," Dumbledore revealed, ignoring Snape's rather snotty remark and making the younger man wonder what the origin of those restrictions was.

"Restraint is not something she seems to have any problem with." He shivered as the room temperature seemed to drop alarmingly. "I got the impression she is here in return for her assistance. It wouldn't surprise me that she is short-changing you on that arrangement."

"She has little reason to trust wizarding society, Severus. I keep that in mind whenever asking her for information. In any case, Remus seems to have more sway with her than I do, so I must rely on his delicate touch."

Snape snorted loudly. "That oaf has about as much subtlety as Peeves on a good day! Or a bad one. Take your pick." He folded his arms to try and keep some body warmth to himself. "She walks all over him like the doormat he is."

"This doormat you speak so derisively of continues to put himself in very grave danger for the benefit of our cause, Severus," Dumbledore pointed out sternly. "He has never balked at anything asked of him, though lately he has more than enough reason to!"

Snape attempted to sneer but found it a little awkward as the muscles in his face seemed to have gone rather numb. "His recent actions seem rather counterproductive to fostering any kind of trust amongst other lycanthropes," he retorted, trying not to slur his words. The shaking in his hands began to spread along his crossed arms. "Not much delicate touch evident there."

"I cannot berate Remus for doing what he felt to be right," Dumbledore replied, his brows drawing down over his eyes.

"By stealing a potential brood-dam from right under their noses? A pretty serious transgression, in my opinion. How long before he does something more dangerous?"

"His actions were... impulsive," Dumbledore admitted reluctantly.

"Exactly my point," Snape griped, hunching his shoulders against the coldness seeping under his clothing. "My objection isn't to the end result, it's to the method by which that result was achieved. I cannot work with someone who fails to think through the ramifications of his actions *beforehand*!"

"Not everyone is blessed with such unwavering mental and emotional discipline, Severus," said Dumbledore, leaning forward in his chair. "Sometimes allowances must be made for those who act rashly under the influence of strong emotion."

Snape gritted his teeth together so hard that he could have sworn he heard his jaw creak. *You never fail to throw that back in my face, do you, you bastard!*

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"I find the topic of conversation agitating," Snape ground out with the effort of someone trying their utmost to hide an affliction. The greying around the outside of his vision warned him that if he didn't get out of Dumbledore's office right now, he'd keel over with all the grace of a sack of potatoes being dropped from the top of the Astronomy Tower. "Perhaps we can continue this another time." He turned awkwardly as his balance started to fail him and made for the door. The grey crept inward, and his legs felt like they were moving through syrup.

Just get to the door, he told himself. Don't you dare pass out here!

The sheer threat of humiliation at being found slumped on the floor gave him enough strength to find his own quarters before giving into the fever that tore at him, cramping his muscles and making the sweat run out of every pore until his clothing was as soaked as if he had stood in the rain that fell outside the walls in icy sheets.

There must have been a time in his life when he had felt this way. There must have been. There was no other explanation for the familiarity of it, like an item of clothing so often worn it had softened to an almost butter-like consistency. But try as he might, he could not recall that time. He sifted through his memories and could not find it, yet he was so sure it that it was there. Somewhere. Sometime.

His mind shifted ever so slightly, enough to slide against the embrace around him. Smooth like glass, light as a feather's touch, stronger than a diamond buried deep underground.

It could not have been recently. There had been nothing in his life that would lead him anywhere near this. It was not after he had turned back; there had been little in the way of salvation then. It was not after he had forsaken common sense and followed the lure of vengeance; that had brought nothing but delusion and despair. It had not been when his life had stretched before him like an ocean of potential into which the ships of opportunity had eventually sunk one by one; the sensation of loss had only ever increased. It had not been as a child; there had never been anyone to show him such things were possible.

To feel this content...it was an illusion that others spoke of. He had only ever stood to the side and seen the appearance of it; an actor dressed in its costume to continue the charade that such sensation could even be dreamt of, let alone experienced in reality.

To feel this at ease...it would have required him to disregard all the expectations that his gaolers shackled him with, to sever the strings they tied to him in order to make him perform to their opaque and cruel script as they struck him across the back with the cutting, whip-like goad of guilt.

To feel this complete...surely there were so many parts of him missing, so very many that had withered or been brutalised beyond recognition that he should not even recognise himself without the holes and amputations.

To feel this potent...he had been in positions of incredible strength that still crumbled from the hairline fractures of betrayal and deceit, and even at their peak had never shielded him with such an imperforate aegis.

To feel this licentious...how could he pause on the ascent to carnal ecstasy, one step below that rapturous peak of lubricious finality where for one moment he lost who he was and became nothing more than a convulsion of lust and need and possession, and not go insane from the torture of being kept from its attainment?

The edges of his mind began to dissolve and blur, seeping, bleeding into hers, and that was when he knew that the feeling of familiarity hadn't been his. He couldn't remember having ever felt like this because in truth he hadn't. It had all come from her, wrapped around him as she was so they were like two slumbering animals that relaxed into each other, that breathed as one, that *were* one. He couldn't tell where she ended and he began. He didn't care to know.

You have to let him go.

The voice echoed through him, so recognisable yet so alien, one inch to the left of where it normally emanated from, that subtle deviation enough to threaten him far more than physical violence had even been able to.

She tightened around him, a child unwilling to release a treasured possession, no matter how sternly the parent spoke.

It is unfair to him. You should never have done it.

A ripple of consternation moved through her, but she held fast, held tight, defiant.

Chara.

No.

You must.

No!

It is not a choice you get to make.

Her mind twisted and flexed, and everything that he was yielded to drift in that plangent swell of regret. He would have let her wrench him into a knot that could never be undone, as long as she never let him go.

You have to do it now. Before it's too late.

For the briefest moment her hold was a constriction of such pain, such blistering agony, that it threatened to unravel his consciousness into a frayed mass of nonsensical impulses. Then she did the unthinkable.

She let him go.

This was drowning without the water. Burning without the fire. Freezing without the cold. Suffocation while he still breathed. The fall without the drop. The fall that didn't end.

He reached out reflexively in every direction as her touch trailed away from him, desperate, despairing, as terrified as he had ever been in his life. She was going to leave him here! Condemn him to how he had been before. Alone. Fractured. Dead.

It would destroy him. Not instantly. It would last until the end of his days, leaving just enough of him to be acutely aware of the loss. A burning dread that would strangle him, a blackened threat that it would only worsen, a promise that even as he died inside he would still be conscious of his abandonment to the bitter, flat, cruel greyness that extended around him like an unbroken, desolate gravestone.

She could not do this to him!

Somewhere in that black void, his mind touched hers, the horror spilling from him and into her in a torrent, his anguish clutching at her, his need dragging her back towards him with the monstrous strength of utter hopelessness. Pleading. Begging.

She tried to wrest his grasp from her, pushing him away, fending him off from his frenetic attempt to become a part of her once more. She was too strong for him. No matter how tightly he clung to her, she broke every point of connection ruthlessly, the fingers that held on at the edge of the precipice slipping until there was only one left to keep him suspended above that chasm that would drop him far below hell.

Something inside him shattered, and all he could do was cry out soundlessly in his defeat, to wait for the death that would last for the rest of life.

But the drop never came.

A finely-tuned balance of hesitation that contracted down to a point so small that it could not possibly hold him. A thread of second-chance.

Be quiet. Be still.

It was all he could do not to clamber along that fibre in panic, took all that he had to trust that she would not let him fall. He tried to touch as much of that single point as he possibly could and waited.

You've not defied me since you were eight. Why would you do so now?

You have already pointed out my disgrace. Must you twist the knife as well?

I don't know, Chara. You tell me.

It will not happen again.

It should never have happened in the first place!

Damn it, Caroli, he *asked* me! What was I to do?

Refuse! He doesn't know our ways. You shouldn't have acted as if he did!

He was going to the fat man. I could have found out where you were. I could have come for you!

You risk too much.

That is what I do! That is why I exist! How can you punish me for fulfilling my duty to you?

What will you do when your duty ends, Chara?

Don't say that!

What will you do when you cannot be there for me?

Why are you asking this?

Because it's a question you will have to answer, Striker!

No! Remus will find you. He said he can find you!

I cannot keep holding on. It hurts. So much.

Then I will take it. I've done it before. I can do it again!

It is too much, Chara. It will kill you.

Without you, I am already dead!

No, Chara.

Please? Just a little longer. Please?

The silence went for so long that he wondered if he had missed the reply.

Then you had best hurry.

He woke an hour before dawn with the rain still lashing at the building's stone, the sour stink of fever-sweat surrounding him, soaked into the sheets and curdling in the fibres of the clothes he'd collapsed onto the bed in.

There wasn't one part of him that didn't hurt, that didn't feel as if it had been shredded with filthy, diseased claws.

Snape let his head fall to one side, more of a submission to gravity than any deliberately-guided muscular movement, and found himself looking straight into Folter's eyes.

The house-elf gazed back at him mournfully, her form outlined in a thin halo caused by the light of a single lamp that sat on the floor behind her. She held a small glass bottle in her hands. Empty.

It would not be the first time she would have treated him. Her eye was sharp and her mind quick, and more than once, she had saved him from succumbing to a potentially fatal injury or a deadly poison. He knew she watched him closely, watched whatever he did and learned from it in her usual silence, perhaps thinking that he didn't notice her, that he didn't realise that she looked for any chance to keep him from falling into the pit that surrounded the small island of his miserable isolation.

He sighed. Why did she even *care*? It was an oft-asked question that he had never been able to answer.

Lifting his arm was like trying to raise a petrified tree from its watery grave, the tendons and ligaments creaking and splitting like rotten rope so he could open his hand.

Folter placed the empty bottle carefully into his palm.

Bringing it closer to his face took an age. Or perhaps it took no time at all. The raw misery that leaked into the infinitesimal space between every cell in his body did cruel things to the instance he occupied, twisting it into insensibility.

The label told him what he already knew, and he let his arm fall back to his side and closed his eyes.

"I'll need more," he whispered. "You know where to find it."

She paused before answering, as she always did. No doubt she pushed her hair behind her ears before speaking. She always did that, too.

"Yes, Professor."

He waited long enough to ensure she was gone before he dredged up some remnant of strength, some scrap of energy that allowed him to hurl the glass bottle at the wall opposite his bed. It shattered loudly in the dark, sending shards of pain into his head that tore their way into his sinuses and splintered the nerves in his teeth.

Parr had let him stumble into her trap, holding back the true magnitude of what he'd asked of her so she could use him to get what she wanted. In doing so she had forced into him something he hadn't expected, something that he would have backed away from if he had known what it was. She'd shown him what could have been his and then taken it away, leaving him to suffer and twist on the barbed hook of withdrawal. She'd made him an addict for what could never be his.

And he hated her for it.

Chapter Thirty-Eight—Unwilling Collaboration

Chapter 38 of 59

Some don't play well with others, regardless of the circumstance.

Lupin sat in silence, trying desperately not to fidget, but Snape could see that he was having a very bad time of it. The werewolf kept raising his hand to his mouth to nibble at those disgusting nails of his...an old habit of agitation that went right back to his school days.

Good. Snape didn't want Lupin feeling the least bit comfortable in this situation. His eyes travelled to the livid scar along Lupin's jawline, not quite healed despite the man undoubtedly having used whatever poor-quality wound repair medication he could afford. Lycanthropic injuries were notoriously hard to treat, even if they were self-inflicted. This one looked like it had come from the full moon three days past.

"Have you already finished the Wolfsbane I gave you?"

Lupin blinked, somewhat surprised that the statue sitting opposite him had finally spoken.

They were alone in the library, seated in the Restricted Section and thus even less likely to be disturbed, their table illuminated in a pool of golden light speckled with dust that isolated them from the surrounding shadows. It had been on Snape's insistence that they meet here, and so it'd had to take place in the late evening when the library was closed to students. Madam Pince had been rather vociferous in her displeasure that her domain would be occupied in such a fashion, but Snape had insisted that it was the library or nowhere, leaving Lupin to sweet-talk the vulture-like librarian into letting them encroach on her space. Snape had been mildly disgusted that Lupin had managed to do so.

"I... ah... no, I haven't," Lupin finally replied, fiddling about with the pile of parchments and books sitting on the table in front of him.

"Then why have you injured yourself? The potion is sufficiently strong enough to keep you unconscious during your... affliction."

Lupin pressed his lips together and looked everywhere except at Snape, his eyes rather wide in their heavily shadowed hollows.

"You've been giving it to that lyc-girl, haven't you?"

It wasn't really a question, so Lupin didn't vocally answer, but his hunched shoulders replied in the affirmative.

"I thought I had told you that I will not provide such medication to others."

The werewolf's guilty expression hardened into stubbornness, but he still failed to look Snape in the eye. "If I recall, Severus, you said that you would not supply anyone else with it. Technically, that is still the case."

"Don't split hairs, Lupin. You're giving your medication to someone else, which is not only stupid and dangerous but an insult to me, as well. Did it never occur to you that the strength of what I give you is too great for someone her age?" Lupin risked a quick, uncertain glance at him, making him sneer. "No, I didn't think so. I suggest you go back to taking what I give you and giving her the cheap facsimile you appear to be dosing yourself with." Lupin opened his mouth to make some rather vigorous response, but Snape cut him off. "Make no mistake. I don't give a damn if you take the Wolfsbane Potion I give you or not, but I will have something to say if you medicate someone else with it. I will not be held responsible for the damage such idiocy will cause."

Lupin glared frostily at him. "Don't you get tired of being so ratty all the time, Severus?" It was a question he normally asked with a faint smile on his face, something that he tended to goad Snape with without any real malice or negative intent behind it, a regular joke that poked fun at the dark-haired man's infamous disposition, but this time it seemed a genuine, if rather bitter, inquiry.

"No. I find it's the only way I can tolerate the monumental vacuity of the people around me."

Lupin tutted.

"Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get this over and done with."

"What makes you think / want to be here any more than you?" Lupin snapped, his eyes flashing angrily, sitting up higher in his chair.

Snape said nothing. He merely opened his mouth slightly to let the tip of his tongue lick out at the corner.

Lupin's face went an interesting shade of red, and he fussed angrily at the pages in front of him, pointedly avoiding Snape's gaze. "Dumbledore tells me you have information on what Macnair and... Greyback are doing," he began rather sullenly. "How about we start there?"

Snape made it three times as difficult for Lupin to get the information he wanted, which the werewolf clearly found exasperating after Snape's insistence that this whole collaboration end as soon as possible as well as his deliberate attempt to make Lupin feel awkward.

Both Macnair and Greyback were manoeuvring themselves towards controlling a very large portion of the werewolf population. Greyback was doing it through his usual methods of fear and violence, illustrating to the werewolves that unless they submitted to his authority, they'd find themselves on the receiving end of a brutal display of mania. Macnair was doing it through a more insidious yet no less stark manner: addiction. Whilst the Ministry's Executioner was capable of some spectacular feats of savagery, he obviously felt that it was easier to use drugs rather than fear to enslave lycanthropes to his cause. True, it was a much more expensive method, but whatever Macnair couldn't afford he just took. He was bleeding Todanus for a goodly portion of his required supplies, and no doubt pushing the apoth towards financial ruin, but that wouldn't have made a dent on the membranous layer of empathy in him.

Addiction. The word soured Snape's attitude even further, making Lupin stammer his questions as the features of the man opposite him darkened and hardened. Four days, and he was still not free of it; largely, but not entirely. The first day had been the worst. Determined not to miss a day of teaching, Snape had consumed triple the dose of Addict's End he would normally have prescribed, which consequently made him jittery, sweaty and not a little nauseous...symptoms he'd tried to hide from both students and faculty as much as he could by shunning company unless it was absolutely necessary.

He'd managed to stiff-leg his way through the days, the bones of his limbs aching in a way they hadn't since his pre-adolescence, but the nights had been unrelieved. He slept even more fitfully than normal, adrift in a groundless blackness, all his focus on that tiny point of contact, like a madman with his hands pressed to a mark on a wall, trying to pull the connection inside him to help assuage the agony of withdrawal. He clutched at it even as his hate for her increased.

Whether it was through her own difficulties with illness or the knowledge that he would be far from welcoming at her presence, he didn't know, but Parr made herself a ghost, an apparition that slid past him whenever they came close to each other. She had missed the first Potions class of the week altogether, another excusatory note from Poppy finding its way into his hand.

Was he annoyed by that? Snape shrugged irritably to himself as Lupin's quill scratched noisily along the slightly roughened surface of the parchment. He would have been furious had Parr appeared for her last day of servitude to him. In fact, he had braced himself for that, determined to have her run from his ire as he unleashed accusing words of contempt and disgust at what she had done to him, at what she'd tricked him into. What she'd weakened him with. He clenched his hands into fists so tight he thought the knuckles would split through the skin.

All Parr had wanted was to get the information she needed from the apoth: where her Handler was. He hadn't known how strong the need in her had been until it was too late.

That initial subsuming of his mind into hers had been incredible, the combination fortifying both of them beyond what he had thought possible...the whole far greater than the sum of its parts, but the Apparition to London had still cut her feet out from underneath her. She must have spent nearly twenty minutes shuddering on her knees, tears streamed down her face and the bandaging around her neck growing redder with blood leaking from her wounds from the pressure of her vomiting. At the time, it hadn't occurred to him why it had been so bad for her. He had just been mildly confused as to why the anti-emetic he'd given her hadn't worked. It wasn't until much later that he guessed she'd taken his own nausea from him in most likely the same fashion that she pushed her hunger onto him. After all, he had not felt one spasm of queasiness at the sight of her sicking her guts up in the gutter of a back alley, and normally even the description of it in a text would be enough to set him off.

Parr hadn't lied when she had said to him that he needed to be stronger than her. It had taken more than all of his willpower to stop her from cutting Todanus' flabby throat when they learned he didn't know where Greyback was hiding. It had only been Snape's directive to Todanus to find out that information by whatever means possible that had stayed her hand, otherwise she would have shredded him to pulp in her furious disappointment.

He'd been luckier than he had first realised that the apoth had not known where the Handler was. Snape was positive that Parr would have shaken him off and made for the hidden location, and there would have been nothing he would have done to stop her. He'd risked setting loose a harbinger of terrible consequence. Who knew what

devastation she could have wrought, unchecked, uncontrolled, a berserker who would have pulverised anything that got in her way. As well he might have attempted to fend off a giant with a tree branch for all the efficacy his attempt to rein her in had. She had only followed his mental demands because she had wanted to. She could have cut herself free of him right there and vanished into the night, leaving him to explain to Dumbledore what had happened through his foolishness.

He may still not avoid the Headmaster's ire if the man ever found out what had happened. That was why he had asked Parr if she would tell Dumbledore what had occurred that night. For now, perhaps, she would say nothing, but when would that change? Snape had to make sure that the advantages to staying silent outweighed those that came from speaking out. Yet another tightrope he would have to walk.

"Have you... ah... heard anything about either Macnair or... Greyback deliberately searching out lyc-females?" Lupin asked hesitantly, shifting about in his chair as if he had a burr in his pants.

Snape narrowed his eyes and didn't respond. This was the first confirmation of something that he had suspected but had been unable to gain any solid proof of. Even Todianus seemed vague on the details, claiming that he was only told a fraction of what Macnair and Greyback were up to.

Lupin was predictable, almost painfully so. Snape knew he only had to string out the silence and the man would fill the gap with what he knew. He was already fiddling about with his quill, shoulders rounded in ever so slightly and tipping his head to one side so that his greying fringe of hair kept clear of his eyes. He looked like a dog trying to appear winsome in the hopes its owner would bestow a treat upon him. Snape just gazed back at him patiently, eyes half-closed, waiting for him to crack.

"It's just that... ah... I've heard whispers of a place where a large number of lyc-females are being kept," Lupin revealed, "but I don't know where exactly."

Snape raised his eyebrows a fraction.

"No-one will tell me," the werewolf explained rather dejectedly, hunching his shoulders a little more as if admitting his ineptitude.

"I'm not surprised," Snape noted with a slight sneer. "Logic would suggest that one way to bolster the lyc-population is through breeding, and that, just in case you'd forgotten, requires both males and females."

"Thank you, Severus. I am *aware* of both the mechanics and the requirements of sexual reproduction!"

"What a revolting thought," Snape revealed, increasing the intensity of his sneer. "However, why would either Macnair or Greyback use breeding to increase numbers when infection is faster?"

Lupin rolled the shaft of his quill between his ink-stained fingers. "I don't know," he admitted.

"Patently obvious," was the response, making Lupin flush in irritation. "If increasing numbers is not the reason for hoarding lyc-females, what would be?"

Lupin considered this question for some time, a frown creasing his forehead.

Snape tutted. "Must I walk you through everything, Lupin? You should know better than anyone the effect lyc-females have on lyc-males, especially around the full moon."

Recognition flared in the werewolf's eyes. "Control?"

Snape inclined his head. Lupin sighed and dropped his quill onto the table.

"Your problem is that you're incapable of manipulating others, so you cannot see when someone is manipulating circumstance," Snape told him in a faintly accusing tone.

"Oh, I'm more aware of the use of manipulation than you think, Severus," Lupin retorted gently, looking him straight in the eye. "It's a tool that some people just can't help but use to keep others off-balance."

Snape kicked at the man's momentary stability by smiling at him. Lupin pressed his lips together and dropped his eyes quickly, fumbling for his quill.

"How can you possibly teach Defence Against the Dark Arts when you don't even know the basics?" the Potions master carped at him. "Dangling a breeding partner in front of a lyc-male is the only reliable way to control him, especially at the full moon. Greyback would know what truly motivates a werewolf as well as how to source lyc-females. Therefore it would be my conclusion that Greyback and Macnair are working together in order to assemble this rather dangerous harem. Greyback's undoubtedly stupid enough to attempt it whilst still being aware of the risk, relying on Macnair to provide the drugs he's most likely keeping them subdued with."

"Greyback is insane," Lupin muttered, scratching out a series of hatched lines in the margin of his parchment in agitation. "He wouldn't give two shits about the risk."

"Lupin, have you ever seen a lyc-female? And I mean a fully grown one, not a juvenile like the one you've shackled yourself with."

There was a long pause before he replied. "Not that I'm consciously aware of," Lupin admitted, still scratching away absently at the increasingly darkening margin of parchment with his quill tip. "Though perhaps I have while... ah... you know." He shrugged one shoulder and tugged at the front of his patched cardigan in discomfort.

"Well, I have," Snape told him coldly. "An adult lyc-female could rip a man from groin to throat without the slightest difficulty and with even less provocation." He tipped his head back to squint down his nose at Lupin. "A transformed lyc-female would be even more deadly. Greyback wouldn't stand a chance against one."

"Where did you see one?" Lupin asked, his eyes wide with interest but a crease of disbelief across his forehead.

Snape ran the tip of his tongue along the sharp points of his back teeth and considered how much to let the man opposite him know. "I don't believe it's relevant to the discussion."

"I do," Lupin said rather snippily, folding his arms tightly and defensively. "If it'll help us to track down where Macnair and ... Greyback are holding these lyc-females, then you should tell me!" The stony set to his features deepened the lines of premature aging on his face, making him look more than a decade older than his true years.

"It won't," Snape told him dismissively. "It happened some time ago and some distance from London."

Lupin scowled at his evasiveness. They stared at each other, the impasse accentuated by the spattering of rain drops against the tall windows of the library. The werewolf sighed, rubbed a knuckle under his nose and picked up his quill once more.

"What was she like?"

Snape blinked at him.

"The lyc-female," Lupin elaborated. "What was she like?" He twisted the shaft of the quill between his fingers in rapid little movements, his nostrils flared, looking up though his fringe at Snape.

"Terrifying," Snape told him, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. His dark eyes darted to one side momentarily and the corner of his mouth curved upwards. "And magnificent."

Lupin's eyebrows shot up. He shook his head slightly and cleared his throat. "Oh."

"Why are you researching seevy for the MLE?"

The question caught Lupin as off-guard as if he had been punched while looking in another direction.

"What? How the hell did you know..."

"Lupin, it's my job to find out information that others want to remain hidden. I wouldn't make a very good spy if I was unable to uncover such information, now, would I?" He curled his lip contemptuously as he spoke. "Though in this case it wasn't that much of a stretch to figure out why both you and Miss Parr spend so much time together."

Lupin twiddled his quill until it became a blur between his fingers. "I'm not at liberty to discuss it," he replied sullenly.

"Ah, I see, the flow of information goes only from me to you, does it?" Snape noted in a tetchy voice. "I do recall the Headmaster saying that we had to work together, odious though it seems."

Lupin chewed his bottom lip and dropped his gaze.

"Don't you trust me?" came the silky inquiry, barely audible under the increasingly heavy rainfall outside the windows.

"Trust has nothing to do with it, Severus," Lupin muttered, scratching one finger down his stubbled cheek absently.

"Actually, it does, Lupin." He stood up. "And until you realise that, we cannot work together." He turned to leave.

"No! Wait!"

Snape stopped on the very edge of the light but didn't turn back to face him.

Lupin sighed heavily. "The MLE wants to use seevy for a number of functions, but they're having trouble convincing them to come back into magical society."

"What kind of functions?" He kept his back to the werewolf to make it clear that he could still leave if he considered Lupin's co-operation wanting.

"The sort of functions the MLE can't perform without breaking the law," Lupin replied reluctantly.

"Murder." It was not a question.

"Yes. Though there are other... less final functions."

Snape turned his head slightly to speak over his shoulder. "The MLE has few enough scruples. They've never stopped at murder before. Why would they do so now?"

"Because the people they wish to dispose of are both greater in number and harder to find than ever before. The MLE's activities can no longer go unnoticed by both public and persecuted."

"They've become sloppy, you mean."

"If you choose to look at it that way, Severus."

Snape finally turned back to face him. "Why would you assist them in such activities?"

"I am the MLE's researcher and analyst, nothing more," said Lupin sternly.

"You are a conspirator to the MLE's immoral and unlawful actions, Lupin, whether you like it or not!"

"And will you see me kicked out of that role, too, Severus?" Lupin asked him sadly. "Can I not even earn a living, pitiful though it is, doing what you have done on so many occasions before?"

Snape's hands balled into fists at his sides. "Arrogant bastard! You have no idea what personal morals I've had to forgo in order to do what others have demanded of me!"

"I didn't make the comparison to accuse you," Lupin pointed out. He sat back in his chair wearily. "You think I want to live my life like this? Itinerant, poor, afflicted with a disease that others have neither empathy nor sympathy for? I do this job because it means I can earn enough to feed myself, that I can work towards some kind of solution for those unfortunate enough to suffer from the same affliction as I, and perhaps make enough of a difference to give us the advantage against those that want to see us *all* ground down in the dirt!" His voice had grown increasingly loud as he spoke until he was almost shouting. "Is that so great an atrocity in your eyes?" He stood up angrily. "You're not the only person stuck between a rock and a hard place! I'm hated by magicfolk for my lycanthropy, and I'm reviled by lycanthropes for my magical abilities. I do what I do because I have no *choice*!" He swept a book viciously from the table in a fit of rage. It collided with a nearby shelf and fell to the floor, its pages crumpled awkwardly against the thin carpet. He leant heavily on the table, his head hanging so that his hair hid his face. "I rather foolishly thought you might understand my position, but I guess not." Inhaling deeply, he sat back down and slowly picked up his quill with shaking fingers. "Is there any way that you could find out where Macnair and... Greyback are hiding the lyc-females?" he asked calmly, as if his furious outburst had never occurred.

Snape watched the man's bent form keenly as if half-expecting another display of violent frustration to manifest itself. "Possibly."

"It would be appreciated," was the quiet reply.

"You'd better find Miss Parr's Handler very soon."

Lupin looked up at him, his face so pale it seemed to be tinged with grey. "Why?" He stood once more, this time in anxiety. "What's happened to her?"

"She is dying," Snape replied simply and walked from the light and into the shadows beyond.

Chapter Thirty-Nine—Broken

Chapter 39 of 59

There's little to celebrate this Christmas.

Stupid. The whole idea was stupid. A monumental waste of time. A gargantuan test of his patience. The only thing that ameliorated the situation was that it happened as infrequently as it did, though he would have much preferred it to not happen at all during his time at the school.

As each day passed and Christmas drew closer, Snape's mood soured. It seemed there was no place he could go without hearing some reference to the bloody Yule Ball. Students spent a majority of their time whispering about it, shouting about it, scribbling notes in class about it, crying about it, fighting about it and therefore not paying *any* attention to what they should be doing.

Even other members of the faculty seemed overly preoccupied with the wretched event. McGonagall harped on endlessly about everyone playing their part to ensure the ball went off without a hitch. Protracted arguments broke out between Flitwick and Filch about Christmas decorations. Hooch insisted in showing everyone her dancing skills at every ten-second opportunity that presented itself in the staff room whilst simultaneously plotting to spike the punch with Sprout's unabashed assistance, and Vector kept scrawling incomprehensible equations over any scrap of paper that didn't move and mumbling something about incompatible triples. At one point, Snape found her writing numbers all over the surface of the table in purple ink and banging her foot on the floor in frustration, making everyone's teacups jump about. He'd turned on his heel and walked straight back out of the staff room, vowing not to set foot in it again until the New Year unless McGonagall threatened him with student counselling duty.

Maxime and Karkaroff had their finest sneers and looks of disdain screwed on tight, with the Beauxbatons headmistress loudly denouncing English festivity whenever there was a pause in conversation at mealtimes. Karkaroff was uncharacteristically silent, but Snape had spotted him casting looks of speculation in his direction when the man thought he wasn't paying attention. He half-expected an ambush to erupt from the shadows, yet the Durmstrang leader kept his distance in all but his gaze. Snape had no idea what had caused the change in Karkaroff's behaviour, but if it kept him away, he didn't care to know the reasons why.

Even the normally uplifting incidence of being able to grade Potter at the bottom of the class for botching his poison antidote on the final day of term had failed to palliate the itching sense of dread in him. Hooch had the ill-considered gall to ask him which of the castle's stone gargoyles he was taking to the ball with him, to which he promptly and snidely informed her that she was currently leading the faculty pool for being the first one to be found in a drunken state of dishabille and cracking onto the seventh-year students.

"So, perhaps you should be practising abstinence instead of dancing about like an imbecile with a rabid Niffler jammed in her knickers, Rolanda," he finished, thus ending any further yuletide raillery from being aimed in his direction.

Christmas evening saw him standing in the Slytherin common room in front of his charges informing them that if he detected even a whiff of poor behaviour from any of them, they would forever remember the twenty-fifth of December as the anniversary of their worst day ever.

"And just for the temerarious or chronically obtuse amongst you, that includes intoxication of any kind, fighting, swearing, dancing on tables, petting, hexing, spitting, belching or singing disgusting songs. If you want to act like that, you can join Gryffindor and don't think for one second that this is an empty threat."

It remained to be seen if any of them tested the veracity of his statement.

"You could have made an effort to upgrade your attire, Severus!" McGonagall snapped at him outside the Great Hall, looking him up and down disapprovingly.

"I had no idea it was a fancy dress event, Minerva," he replied coolly, wincing at her red tartan outfit and leaning back from the thistles she had rather violently arranged around the brim of her hat. "Are you going as a Scottish thicket?"

"You could at least take your teaching robes off," she harped, her eyes flinty.

"As far as I am concerned, I am on duty this evening, therefore I am appropriately dressed," he retorted.

McGonagall tutted. "Co-operation isn't a dirty word, Severus."

"Save your breath, Minerva," Sprout advised as she strolled past the two of them looking like a Christmas bauble in her garishly-coloured dress robes. "He needs to work himself into a snit so he can terrify the students on his anti-amative searches in the bushes."

Snape had no idea how long he was forced to remain in the Great Hall, but it seemed like hours. He gritted his teeth and tried not to jiggle his leg in frustration under the dinner table as everyone else checked their common sense in at the door and threw themselves into the revelry with gusto. The meal passed without him even noticing. He certainly didn't eat any of it. Now he had to stand about waiting until he could leave without causing an interfaculty uproar at his rudeness.

He swept his eyes over the throng and shook his head. Did they honestly *enjoy* this nonsense? It was incomprehensible to him how this could be considered a desirable way to pass the time. The gleaming and rather vacant eyes on the girls unsettled him, and the pigeon-like strutting of the boys aggravated him. It was a dolled-up charade that only he seemed aware of as being a shallow attempt at entertainment. Was there no one else here who hated this kind of thing?

He scanned the crowd again and frowned, not knowing whether to be angry or surprised that her name had popped into his head. Parr was the last person he wanted to see right now, and she seemed to have granted his wish. Ordinarily, her presence in the last remaining days of term would have been barely noticeable to most, but Snape had become so sensitised to any glimpse of her that he could not help but pick her out of the shadows at the back of his classroom where she sought to avoid detection as much as she was able to whilst still being in the same room as him. He had been especially nasty to her in the last two Potions lessons, but the dead look in her eyes and the slate-coloured pallor in her face made him wonder if she even noticed the effort he was making to upset her.

He sighed heavily and glared at the back of Moody's head as the man took a swig from his ugly pewter hip flask without even bothering to hide the action from everyone round him. Sinistra, showing her total lack of taste, even asked the crabby lump of a man to dance! Were there copious amounts of alcohol being surreptitiously consumed that he wasn't aware of? It beggared belief.

Snape rolled his eyes and slipped out of the Great Hall.

It took him less than five minutes to find the first pair of transgressors groping each other, and less than fifteen for Karkaroff to track him down.

"Go away, Igor. I'm busy," he told the man curtly, squinting at a suspicious source of movement behind the topiary. He should have realised that just as the chill evening air was proving no dissuasion to hormone-riddled students, it would fail to touch the Durmstrang headmaster. An English winter would barely register to him.

"Severus, it's imperative that I speak with you," Karkaroff hissed at him. "I have to ask you something."

"My dance card's full," Snape replied sourly and used his wand to scorch a hole right through the dragon-shaped hedge. It was partially to uncover two students bonded at the lips but mostly to aggravate Sprout who had spent weeks making the grounds look as impressive as possible for this very night. He'd pay good money to see the look on her face in the morning when she saw the ragged remains of her painstaking work, but he knew that being within a five-mile radius at that point in time would bode ill for him.

"I really don't have time for your repetitive jabbering," he told the Durmstrang headmaster under his breath. "Wainwright, that's ten points from Ravenclaw, and whatever your name is... je parlerai à votre directrice au matinée!" he barked at the two red-faced students. "Get back in the Great Hall and keep your hands to yourselves!"

The two men watched the teenagers scurry off through the icy darkness towards the doors.

"Yes, I can see this is a very pressing duty that you're attending to, Severus," Karkaroff mentioned with a whining peevishness that wisped from his mouth like smoke. "Has

your life become so dull that this activity assumes such monumental importance?"

Snape's head swivelled slowly towards Karkaroff. "Unlike some, I take my duties very seriously, regardless of how inane or trivial they may seem. You would do well to attend to the responsibilities of your *own* role, instead of pointing fingers at me."

Karkaroff twisted his goatee around his index finger nervously. "One must pay mind to the direction the winds are blowing. Had I not, I would never have found out what Macnair and Brachoveitch are up to," he mentioned in a rather self-satisfied tone.

Snape sighed heavily. "Why would the activity of those two be of any interest to me, Igor?" Not bothering to wait for a reply, he strode off to the opposite end of the topiary garden, leaving Karkaroff to jog after him.

"Your comment makes me wonder if you know what they're *redoing*," came the sly statement. "If you did, I doubt you'd be so blasé."

Snape bent down to look under the arch of a hedge bridge. "I can see your feet. Come out or I'll drag you out!"

The hedge rustled and shook as three bodies extracted themselves from their hiding place. Three? Circe knew what they'd been doing. Snape didn't want to know.

"Parkhurst, I thought I made it clear what behaviour was within the realms of acceptable and what wasn't, so that's ten points from Slytherin, and I will ensure all your house mates know how your stupidity has penalised them as a whole. Fortescue and Willis, I am not surprised at finding you embarrassing Gryffindor, so that's ten points a-piece and two evening's detention with Filch."

The girls began to cry morosely which Snape thought had more to do with being caught in front of Karkaroff than anything else.

"Are all the Hogwarts students this inclined to break school rules, Severus?" Karkaroff inquired curiously. "I would never allow such behaviour from *my* students."

Snape spun his wand slowly between his fingers. "I think a more accurate statement would be that your investigative abilities are so wanting that you're unable to catch your students out. Or perhaps they just have a dullness of imagination," he mused, watching the slowly rotating length of wood in his hand. "I hear that happens when one discourages independence of thought."

Karkaroff's mouth tightened. "What you call dullness of imagination I call discipline and obedience."

"You have no subtlety, Igor," Snape sneered at him. "Drawing out the required elements from a stubborn source is an art you have absolutely no skill in. Your attempt at guidance and influence is like a poke in the eye with a sharp stick." The wand stopped abruptly in his fingers, and he aimed its tip right at Karkaroff's left eye. The man swayed back automatically, a nervous twitch making his cheek jump.

Snape smiled nastily at him before slipping his wand back into his pocket. "Too slow. Always too slow," he hissed, his lip curling in practised contempt.

"Not always, Severus," Karkaroff assured him, a bit of his customary bluster returning. "I'm fast enough to catch Brachoveitch out."

"Brachoveitch is a slug," Snape denounced, staring coldly down his nose at Karkaroff. "You are the *last* person to be aware of his activities."

"Then you condone what he's doing?"

Snape exhaled tiredly. "What Brachoveitch is doing is dangerous. He risks much in his idiocy but he is not the only one."

"I know Macnair is behind it, but to risk an association with werewolves?" Karkaroff snorted and twisted the strands of his goatee between his fingers. "He makes himself out to be so much better than the rest of us, and under cover of darkness he lies down with dogs."

"Then he'll get up with fleas," Snape replied, shrugging in disinterest. "And it'll be one less fool in the fold." He widened his eyes briefly at Karkaroff but the man was too dense and self-absorbed to notice.

"But what if they get loose?" Karkaroff whined. "What if he sets them on *us*? Have you not considered that?"

"I consider all options, Igor," Snape pointed out.

"But that building he's hiding them in..."

"Is one of three places he is using, only one of which is the true location," Snape told him in a bored tone, but his gaze was fixed resolutely and unerringly on Karkaroff's eyes.

Uncertainly flowed across the other man's face, and his mind threw up exactly the information that Snape had manipulated him towards, confusion making Karkaroff drop his guard just long enough as he mentally shuffled through the stored images in his memory. He may as well have blurted the location out.

"I'm... worried," came the reluctant admission.

"You should be," was the dry response.

Karkaroff's eyes slid left and right, searching out possible eavesdroppers. It was a perfect example of the man's carelessness that in the absence of direct evidence to the contrary, he considered them alone.

"*He...* is coming back."

Snape shrugged slightly, making Karkaroff scowl.

"Surely you are not so confident in yourself that you think this is of no consequence, Severus," he hissed, eyes wide enough to catch the light of the dying moon in glassy anxiety. "This is not like Macnair and Brachoveitch messing about in dangerous territory. This is the direst of situations!"

"Why?"

Karkaroff blinked a few times at Snape's surly inquiry.

"If you were stupid enough to fold under pressure and spill your guts, that's *your* problem to deal with. If you had thought there'd be no consequences arising from it, you're a greater fool than I had thought."

"I find it rather hypocritical that you accuse me of self-preservation when you have been sheltered under Dumbledore's hand since the Dark Lord fell," Karkaroff spat bitterly.

"How the years have caused your intelligence to atrophy, Igor," Snape replied silkily. "The Dark Lord was the one who sent me back here in the first place. But of course, being the fringe-dweller you always were, how could I expect you to know that?"

"But the Dark Mark," Karkaroff continued unabated. "It burns so much! What does that mean? Is the Dark Lord here? In England? Is he calling us back to him?"

Snape suppressed a frown at Karkaroff's words. "You assume that the Dark Lord speaks to us without discrimination?"

Confusion returned to the man's face with a vengeance.

"I don't see what there is to fuss about, Igor," Snape told him, maintaining an air of calm that he wasn't experiencing in truth.

"Severus, you cannot pretend that this isn't happening!" Karkaroff whispered, taking a step closer to him, pushing his face forward in his anxiety. He held out his left arm. "It's been getting clearer and clearer for months. I am becoming seriously concerned, I can't deny it..."

"Then flee," Snape told him, growing agitated with the man's whining and becoming even more impatient with the conversation. He began to walk away from Karkaroff and towards the rose garden beds. "Flee, and I will make your excuses. I, however, am remaining at Hogwarts."

How the man had ever managed to manoeuvre himself into a strong enough position to receive the Dark Mark was a mystery to Snape. He bowed at the first touch of pressure, scuttled away at the slightest challenge and covered his behind so religiously that Snape wondered if the man knew how to use his hands for anything else.

A flit of white caught Snape's eye, drawing him around the corner of the rose beds and his wand back out of his pocket. He made sure that he severed the rose bushes near their bases to make it that much harder for Sprout to repair them. It also had the effect of singing the clothing of those hiding amongst the thorny plants.

"Ten points from Hufflepuff, Fawcett!" he snapped as the girl scuttled past him, the hem of her dress smouldering. "And ten points from Ravenclaw, Stebbins!" he pointed out to the boy bolting after her. He'd already hauled that one out of a closet with another girl earlier in the evening.

Perhaps if he went back into the castle where there were other people in greater numbers, Karkaroff would leave him alone instead of dogging his steps and bending his ear with pathetic bleating. Of course, there would be the disadvantage of possibly having to *interact* with these other people, but most were sharp enough to take a hint if he was sufficiently nasty in the face of their bland small-talk and platitudes. It was worth the risk.

He turned towards the castle and stopped short.

"And what are you two doing?" he ground out between gritted teeth. Was there no end to the parade of imbeciles placing themselves in front of him?

"We're walking," Weasley replied sulkily from behind his fringe, his words shrouded in a puff of misted breath in the cold winter air. "Not against the law, is it?"

Snape narrowed his eyes at the boy's tone. Weasley wasn't normally brave enough to be openly aggravating. That was usually Potter's area of expertise. He shifted his gaze to the darker-haired boy, assessing what level of insolence he was about to encounter, but Potter just returned his look with a somewhat stony one of his own. Merlin's beard, surely those two weren't going off to grope each other in the shadows, were they? Snape just could *wait* to encounter *that* nightmare! That would just be the perfect culmination to his shit of a day. His momentary shudder had nothing to do with the cold.

"Keep walking, then!" he growled at them and swept past, keenly aware that Karkaroff was still tethered to him.

It took some swift manoeuvring between the clusters of students in the entrance hall to shake the man, but Snape managed to lose Karkaroff finally, leaving him free to prowl the corridors, flushing students out from classrooms and closets. Points dropped from houses in a steady stream.

The slumped form with the empty liquor bottle at the bottom of the stairs to the third floor ratcheted his filthy mood into the medically dangerous zone.

Parkhurst started to make hollow, gulping sounds while they were still some way from the infirmary.

"Don't even *think* about it, boy," Snape told him, tightening his grip on his collar and keeping his eyes fixed determinedly forward. "If you do, I'll triple your punishment and you'll be scrubbing the Owlery out on your hands and knees for the rest of the school year."

Parkhurst, despite his inebriated state, realised that clamping his hands over his mouth would be the wisest course of action, but the thought of bird rejectamenta was having a rather negative effect on his already roiling stomach. The choice between holding down what was making him feel so utterly wretched and condemning himself to constantly smelling owl crap for six months was undoubtedly the toughest he'd ever had to make.

They reached the shadowed silence of the infirmary just as Parkhurst started to gag. Snape flung him on the nearest cot and snatched up a steel kidney bowl to thrust under the boy's mouth. The receptacle was woefully inadequate to the task of holding what was about to erupt out, but Snape couldn't care less if Parkhurst drenched himself in a sea of stinking vomit, just as long as he was nowhere near the boy when it occurred.

He gritted his teeth together tightly as the guttural purging began in earnest behind him. Snape doubted that this would be the only incident of underage alcohol poisoning that Pomfrey would have to deal with tonight. He actually felt something akin to sympathy for her, condemned as she was to dealing with idiot drunken children on a night she would surely want to enjoy without being sprayed in acidic spew. If his own experiences as a student were anything to go by, Pomfrey would give them nothing to lessen the agony of their condition. The gut-wrenching nausea, vicious sweats, muscle cramps and monolithic headaches would be more of a punishment than any amount of outraged lecturing from her could ever impart.

Where on earth was she? The last thing Snape wanted was to hang about any longer listening to Parkhurst turn himself inside out, but the matron was not in her side office, nor anywhere to be seen in the main room.

The house-elf appeared with a crack barely a second after he spoke her name.

"Folter, where is Madam Pomfrey?"

She seemed to consider this question carefully before responding, peering up at him with her large brown eyes. "Folter will ask Kuppy." She dematerialised sharply.

Snape sighed, wishing he could just slink off to his rooms and forget the whole evening. This Christmas had proved to be just as unsatisfying and tedious as all the others had been, devoid of all the sorts of festive enjoyments that others seemed to experience as the norm. Parkhurst's retching continued unabated, making Snape clamp his mouth shut tightly to stem the rising wave of biliousness that was beginning in him. Much as he wanted to, he couldn't leave an incapacitated student alone, even if the illness was self-inflicted.

Folter reappeared. "Kuppy says Madam Pomfrey is not on school premises."

Snape frowned. "Then where is she?"

The house-elf shrugged, tucking her hair behind her ears. "Kuppy does not know."

Snape tutted. "It's important that you find out, Folter. A student requires her care."

Folter nodded once and flicked a glance down towards the end of the room where the tall windows allowed the moonlight to stripe the floor with bands of pale grey. "Folter will find Madam Pomfrey," she told him quietly and, peculiarly, padded out of the infirmary instead of vanishing in her normal manner.

He stared after her for a moment before looking back to where she had briefly set her gaze. While the moonlight threw some parts of the infirmary into colourless clarity, most of it huddled in silent shadows. Heavy, lurking masses watched him suspiciously, an intruder on their sterile territory.

An unfolded screen partially hid one of the cots that sat closest to the windows. For a moment, Snape thought that perhaps Pomfrey was behind it, but Folter would have

told him had that been the case. Surely there was not a student left unattended? That would be so unlike Poppy as to be ludicrous. Strange enough that she was off-grounds when supposedly on-duty, but that? Never.

He drifted slowly down towards the end of the room and, blessedly, farther from the source of his increasing nausea. Unsure of what he would find behind the screen, he peered somewhat hesitantly around it and discovered the reason why Parr had been absent from the Great Hall that evening. On her side, with her face to the windows, she was not in the most wretched state that he had ever seen her in, but she was obviously in considerable physical difficulty.

Looking like she'd been doused with a bucket of water, her silver hair was plastered to her head, and where her sweat had not affixed it to her, it lay lank across the pillow like rivulets of mercury. Breathing rapidly and shallowly, her eyes closed in their heavily-shadowed sockets, she appeared either asleep or unconscious. A folded strip of gauze was draped across her neck, trailing across the cot to dangle its ends over the edge of the mattress, the one hand he could see open and suspended mid-air, the forearm resting on top of the coverlet. The bandage around her palm and wrist was darkened with the slow bloom of blood leaking from wounds he couldn't see.

Poppy had left her like this? Snape shook his head in disbelief. Something was very wrong here. He moved to stand in front of the windows, his shadow falling across Parr's recumbent form with a ripple. She looked even worse from this angle, the hollowness of her cheeks making it look as if something was sucking the life out of her.

She shouldn't be here. A person this ill, this cachectic needed to be in St Mungo's, not left lying in a school sickbed as if she had nothing more than a stomach ache.

"Are you going to give me detention?"

Snape blinked in mild surprise. Not unconscious, then.

One eye opened slightly to fix him with a slight glimmer.

"Detention on Christmas night would be terribly mean," she pointed out hoarsely, her cracked lips barely moving.

"And, after all, I *am* known for my unfailing generosity of character," he replied dryly, one eyebrow raised.

Her mouth twisted in a faint, yet pain-ridden, smile, her other eye opening a fraction.

"Have you run out of judgement-impaired students to terrify, Professor?"

"One can't run out of what there is an inexhaustible supply of, Miss Parr," he countered, tilting his head to the same side her own head was resting at.

A hiss of breath that could have passed for amusement at his statement slipped from her mouth. She took a few shallow breaths, the fingers of her hand curling gently.

"You look nice. Going dancing?"

He squinted at her. "This is what I always wear."

Again, that hissing approximation of a laugh. "I know." Her eyes closed, brows drawing in towards each other, setting a deep crease above the bridge of her nose.

"Where is Madam Pomfrey?"

Her eyes opened again, slightly wider this time. Her forehead wrinkled. "I... don't know. She was here before, but now..." Her breathing hitched with a rattle in her chest. "No, I don't know," she finished with a minute shrug.

"What happened?"

She seemed to struggle to understand his question, and it was some time before she answered that he thought that perhaps she had either not heard him or she'd lapsed into the unconsciousness that he had thought her in when he'd discovered her.

"I got sick," she said simply, the corners of her mouth quirking upwards.

"How?"

She closed her eyes once more and ignored the question, her hand flexing briefly.

"May I see?"

Her breathing paused as the faint glimmer studied him again. Her laughter this time was clearer, though still a pale imitation of what it usually was. She shrugged her uppermost shoulder.

"Sure. Why the hell not? I'm not exactly in a position to deny you."

Snape bent forward and carefully lifted the strip of gauze to uncover the ripped mess of her neck. The sight of the inch-long punctures set in cushions of angry, inflamed flesh froze his spine solid in recognition. Despite the brutal appearance of the wounds, there was no smell of decay or putrid flesh, and because of that, they didn't seem real...almost an illusion. He very tentatively touched the bloated site of one puncture with the tip of his index finger. The bloom of intense heat rolled against his skin before he'd even touched her. The deep red of the inflammation indicated these wounds were not new, that she'd been harbouring them for who knew how long under those ever-present bandages around her neck, the serum leaking from them like tears from eyes long-used to crying, so accustomed to the weeping caused from angry, bitter pain.

A soft puff of air tickled the side of his neck, once, twice.

He leant back and frowned at her.

"Your hair is getting in my mouth," she explained in a rasping voice that fought its way through a faint smile.

He blinked at her, seeing how bloodshot the sclera of her eyes were, how thin and translucent her skin had become, how the blood from the cracks in her lips had dried to thin black lines. The strength had been leached from her, leaving little more than a husk behind as a cruel reminder of what had been taken. He wondered how long it would be before this shell collapsed in on itself, the implosion inevitable to leave nothing more than dust.

He tucked his hair behind his ear to keep it away from her face and leant forward once more, as much to avoid having to look into her eyes that already told him that she knew she was losing the fight as to study the butchered flesh that formed a necklace of vicious agony, a noose to slowly choke her with.

"What are you doing?"

His head snapped to the right to find Lupin standing at the foot of the cot, a ceramic bowl cradled in his arm and a rolled bandage in his free hand.

Snape dropped the gauze back into place and straightened.

"Where's Poppy?"

Lupin's expression turned flinty, but he answered nonetheless. "St Mungo's. What are you doing here?"

Snape scowled at the man's tone. "Precisely what I was going to ask you."

"Poppy asked me to keep an eye on Chara," Lupin told him flatly, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

"You're doing a poor job of it, then," Snape sneered at him. "While you're at it, you can inadequately care for the drunken vomitee in bed two. I know you have extensive experience with *that* particular condition," he noted haughtily and swept past the werewolf and out of the infirmary with his nose in the air.

Chapter Forty—The Edge

Chapter 40 of 59

It is said that life dwells on the razor thin edge between order and chaos. It is also where death waits.

It was like a dark red. A dark red that went acidic and yellow at the edges. A dark red that smothered and suffocated. A dark red that came at the end of all things. A dark red that smelled of death.

She remembered times past. She tracked over her earliest memories that were mixed in with those difficult years where she learned that people hated those different from them, who were suspicious of anything that stepped outside the rigidly-imposed and accepted norms of behaviour and being, and there were few as cruel as children in that respect. She'd hated them as powerfully as they had hated her, no matter what her aunt had told her. She never believed that they would ever find acceptance, so she shifted her attitude to a detestation of fitting in, of subsuming who you were and what you wanted to be just to avoid notice. It got her in so much trouble that even her Handler despaired, and she was more lenient than she should ever have been with her Striker.

She thought wistfully of those times with her family, when they were all there for each other, making the awful instances just a fraction less difficult to manage, knowing they could always start again if the persecution got too great that they would have to move on. Before they were sundered apart.

Oh, they fought. Sometimes bitterly, always wholeheartedly. But they were inextricably bonded to each other, and that made them stronger than any disagreement could ever be. They had enough to deal with without being resentful toward each other.

It had all fallen to pieces. Tears stung her closed eyes, and she pulled her body inwards tightly to close her shame off from any who might see.

"Discipline. Fortitude. Strength. Protection. Justice." Her aunt had drilled those words into her since she could crawl. "Validus quam nex. Never forget that, Striker."

How could she? Those words were engraved on her heart as surely as they were engraved on her knives, engraved into the very core of who she was.

Dear God, is this what it meant to die? To go through a review of your life that held no order, no comprehension, where what you had thought were pivotal points were nothing more than pallid actions that were no more crucial than waking and sleeping? Where you resented the very thing that gave you the guts to go on? Where you whined in misery at the memory of all the times you had failed? Where you nearly welcomed death in your despair of what you had done?

She was a child, tottering towards her aunt who crooned encouragement as her stubby legs marched erratically but determinedly towards those outstretched hands, hands that were scarred and calloused, hands that saved and hands that caught. Hands that taught, that punished, that held her to the right course, merciless but just. How she missed them!

A salty, hot trickle slid down her face.

She was arguing with Remus two months ago for being careless enough to cause trouble, earning her detention for her childish lack of self-control at being baited. She was mortified, her face burning scarlet as he told her how disappointed he was, ashamed that she had disgraced him in such a fashion, but stubbornly determined that she would not suffer standing by whilst another was unfairly treated in her stead. She had never been able to do so.

Her fingers curled into the wounds in her palms, the sting sharp and white-hot as it ran along the nerves in her arms to deep inside her brain.

She was standing outside their house as it burned to the ground, her teenaged body shaking in rage that this had happened a third time. Why couldn't they just let them *be*? Why were they allowed to get away with it? It wasn't *right*!

Her throat tightened in an effort to stop the keening sound coming from her mouth: pathetic, weak, surrendering.

She was twelve, standing in shocked surprise after a boy in her class had spat in her face as his friends had jeered at her. She had done nothing to provoke such treatment, she was sure of it. She punched the boy in the face nonetheless, earning her a stern punishment from both her teachers, but it didn't matter. She knew she had been right to hit him.

Her teeth clenched in indignation and searing agony as the wounds in her neck screamed in high-pitched voices. Or perhaps she was the one screaming. She could no longer tell where pain ended and she began. It had been so very long.

She was eighteen, standing behind her Handler for the first time in pride and achievement, sworn to protect her at all costs, even if it meant her life. She was pleased to do it. It was all she had ever known that she could be, all she had ever been trained to do...the greatest honour that could be granted her.

She bit her tongue until the heat of her blood ran out of the corner of her mouth.

She was standing in the hospital room, her knife clenched tightly in her fist as he stood in front of her, his face forever burned into her memory with that look of utter hopelessness, his words tightening around her throat as he forced her to do something she swore she never would, something that he knew she couldn't deny him. "*Bastard!*" she had shrieked at him, even as she did as he had asked.

She felt the gap her actions had left inside her: icy, vast, acidic. Her body clenched in denial and desperation to hide from the self-indulgence of her loss. She should never have coveted him in the first place!

She was nine, hiding in the stairwell and looking through the wooden slats of the banister, watching her mother and her aunt argue about allaying themselves with those that could protect them, that could welcome them into their society as equals, as those who had something positive to offer instead of being nothing more than objects of revilement and persecution.

She was thirty-two, standing in the laneway behind her Handler moments before the trap closed around them, condemning them both to this most miserable of situations because of her lack of awareness, her carelessness in not seeing it coming, her fault. All hers. All.

She was three, stroking the glossy fur of the neighbour's cat, then crying when her aunt said she could not have it for her own. She cried for days. Inconsolable.

She was twenty, stroking the glossy fur of her Handler's cat. Aristotle. How she loved him, spoiling him rotten as he slept on her lap or next to her at night, his purr so soothing, his claws hooked lightly into her clothing as if to say "Stay awhile? Just a bit longer?"

She was thirty-three, struggling like the captured creature she was as they chained her, blades puncturing her neck like a beast's ragged teeth to control her, to stop her from tearing them all to shreds for what they were doing to her Handler. Her vision was blurred from tears of such vicious fury that the room fractured into a multitude of repeating horrors she could never escape.

She was seven, laughing as they played a game.

She was twenty-eight, heart racing in anxiety as they neared their mark.

She was fourteen, listening to her mother as she showed her how to mix the ingredients just right.

She was eight, wailing as the notch was cut in her ear.

She was twenty-two, falling for him.

She was nine.

She was thirty-three.

She was eighteen.

She was six.

Dear God, is this what it meant to die?

She was standing in front of the doorway, the chill from it seeping into the front of her body like water. A doorway that stood alone, with no wall around it, the fractured stone framing the membranous ripple as the whispered voices behind it shifted it in hypnotising waves, drawing her towards it. A doorway to beyond.

She reached out her hand.

"No!"

She recoiled in confusion, the triple voice coming from all around her, from inside her. From her.

"Validus quam nex," a single voice whispered directly behind her. "This is not where it ends."

She sighed out her exhaustion and sank to her knees in the gritty dirt, sharp pieces of flint digging into her skin.

"You must go on."

A single sob escaped her as she wrapped her arms around her body.

"Your duty is incomplete."

She nodded in the shadows thrown by the doorway, this monolithic crossing-point that loomed over her in susurrant judgement of her weakness.

"Why do you fight?" a second voice asked her from behind her left shoulder.

"Death and I have a very special understanding," she replied through gritted teeth, her body shaking in the frigid air as it stole the warmth from her spirit.

"Which is?"

How she wanted to smack him for asking that, for making her remember the vow she had taken.

"I win, she loses."

There was a pause.

"Death is a woman?"

That made her laugh. "Was there any doubt in your mind?"

The doorway vanished with a flicker of regret.

Words reached her, distant, thin, incomprehensible. They coalesced and sharpened, their edges coming into focus as she lay gasping on her side in dampness, as many voices as there seemed to be words.

"... my utmost, but he refused."

"Why?"

"He said she was too much of a risk to other patients. He had to think of the needs of the many."

"Couldn't they send someone, at least?"

"They couldn't help her when she was there. What could they possibly do now?"

"What about a Muggle hospital? They helped her before."

"For broken bones, yes. But this?"

"Surely it's worth the risk?"

"We cannot let her out from under our protection. It's too risky."

"Albus, please? We have to do *something*."

"We could bring the Muggles here!"

"The Ministry would go ape-shit!"

"They don't need to know, Tonks. We've hidden things from them before. We can do it again."

She stopped.

Time passed.

The pain stayed...her stalwart companion in the darkness. She cursed it in as many words as she could dredge up even as she held onto it doggedly. She must not let it go.

Something touched her shoulder.

"Chara? Can you hear me?"

Her jaw creaked as it moved, its hinges rusted in place. "Yes."

"Can you sit up for me?"

A groan escaped her before she could stop it. "Yes." She tried to move her body. She couldn't find it. She'd lost it somewhere along the way. A single sob slipped out at this latest failure. "No!"

"It's OK, sweetheart, I'll help you."

Hands lifted her. Blood pulsed cruelly through every sore point in her body, gravity's light pull turning into a tearing wrench. Her head lolled forward, allowing something to leak out of her mouth.

"Poppy?"

"Yes, Chara?"

"Morphine. Please."

"I can't. You've had too much already."

"Please?"

"Your kidneys"

"*Please?*"

Voices murmured to each other. She couldn't hear the words hidden under the roar of blood in her ears, drowning her in white-noise.

"Can you wait, sweetheart? I have to go and fetch it."

Liquid slid out of her nose, smoother than oiled silk.

"Yes," she whispered.

Hands left her. She swayed slightly against the blackness, dimly wondering how she managed to stay upright, how she avoided collapsing like a boneless mass of flesh. A pressure under her heart that her breathing moved against. A caress down her left forearm, turning it underside up ever so gently.

The wait stretched on into eternity, and she felt the up-swell rolling towards her with terrifying speed. It dwarfed her. She'd never be able to hold it back...it was too overwhelming. The certainty of it escaping her nearly crushed her lungs flat.

"I'm sorry, Caroli," she whispered through a rictus of despair as she stared into the face of the wave that would surely pulverise her beyond all recognition.

Everything went white.

Perhaps she screamed. Perhaps. She never heard it. She was glad for that at least.

White bled red.

Undoubtedly she fell. Undoubtedly. It went on forever. Terror reached a new level of meaning.

Red bloomed black.

A single point pierced right into her and stopped her fall, more painful than the stab of a knife. She clung to it, this point that was so small, tearing her fingers into it until it widened into a rent that she could push her heart into in a last-ditch attempt to remain whole while the blast-wave shredded her with an infinite number of razor-sharp edges.

Black went clear.

She ended.

AN: 'Validus quam nex' is Latin for 'stronger than death'. I hope. My high school Latin is pretty poor!

Chapter Forty-One—Indenture

Some things just have to be done.

AN: It's been so long, I know. I hope I haven't lost you.

Numb.

At least, that's what she had thought at first. It was not unknown for her whole body to go totally numb during times that the pain became so intense, so voracious that she wished for such all-encompassing sensory deadness. Occasionally, her wish was granted but not often enough.

Her pain receptors had become so accustomed to firing that sometimes she wondered if she had just learned to block the bulk of it out and that they never stopped sending those burning signals of desperation into her brain. It was always a matter of degree. If there was no pain, she was in overload.

She took a deep breath and sighed the air out slowly. Something wasn't quite right...she could feel her ribs creak tiredly as they moved. She inhaled again, thinking that she was mistaken. No, she could feel the tightness in her throat, the stiffness in her spine from being left in one position for too long and slight warmth on her face.

She could feel.

Parr prised her eyelids open carefully and looked blindly into the pale winter light. Her focus was shot to hell. Even squinting failed to sharpen any of the details. She rolled her eyes in their sockets, wincing as the granular sensation of grit scraped across the inside of her lids. A raspy groan slipped from her mouth as she pushed herself upright and wobbled on the uncertain support of her right arm. The tight bandage around her neck made it difficult for her to drop her head forward and out of the cruel blast of sunlight. Drawing her legs up towards her body, she slumped over her knees, one hand pressed to her forehead.

She felt like she'd been sat on by an elephant, which, whilst unusual, was not unwelcome in comparison to how she'd been feeling over the past few days. It was still worse than one of those monumental hangovers that were always Remus' fault.

She smacked her lips and nearly reeled backwards at the smell of her own breath. Dear God, had someone stuffed a dead bird in her mouth while she was passed out?

"Remus," she ground out raggedly. The evil bastard had probably avenged himself by doing to her what she had done to him some months ago. He'd shown an amazing lack of humour at the event, which had just served to heighten Parr's amusement. Some rather colourful language had erupted from the man's mouth along with the sparrow's feathers that could have had something to do with an avowal of revenge. She'd been too busy laughing to notice at the time.

A rustle of starched cloth approached.

"What on Earth are you doing?" The outraged tone could only come from one person.

"Trying to get away from the stench of my own breath, Poppy," Parr replied hoarsely, swinging her legs over the side of the cot and out of the covers. "I don't suppose you have a toothbrush, do you? Mine's... ah... sort of... ruined."

"Paré's pants, your toothbrush is the least of my concerns right now!" Pomfrey told her crossly.

Parr's head wobbled upright and she tried to fix her gaze on the matron-shaped blob in front of her.

"Poppy, my breath comes straight from Satan's arse," she pointed out, her hand cupped over her mouth. "How can you not be vomiting?"

"I have a strong stomach in addition to having been rather desensitised to dreadful smells over the past two days, Chara. I also have an extremely short temper right now, so it would really be better for all if you got back into bed."

Parr's gauze-wrapped hand dropped from her mouth, and she sighed. "Trust me when I say that I would feel a lot better if I could take a shower and scrape the dung out of my mouth. Then I promise I'll get back into bed." She squinted up at Pomfrey's blurry silhouette. "Please?"

"How do you feel?"

"Old, squashed and smelly," Parr replied. "Therefore a lot better than before."

Pomfrey's hand tipped her head up to allow her to fuss at the bandage around Parr's neck.

"You've been out for two days. I was starting to worry."

"You? Worry?" Parr snorted. "I find that hard to believe." The lines across her forehead deepened. "Two days? I guess it must've been worse than I thought."

"How much do you remember?"

Parr blinked a few times as her mind lurched about, trying to find some scraps of recollection. The stark whiteness of the ceiling played havoc with her eyes' already poor focussing abilities, making her feel disorientated and unbalanced. She tried her hardest not to sway lest Pomfrey notice and determine that strapping her back into bed was the best course of action.

"Not much," she admitted after a few moments. "I remember... people talking. I remember... red." She frowned. "Remus. Remus was here." She moved to stand. "Did he..."

Pomfrey stopped her from rising off the cot with a hand on her shoulder. "No, Chara. He's not found her yet. Please, sit still for me."

"Oh God!" Panic shot through Parr's voice. "I dropped it! I *dropped* it, Poppy!" She clutched at the woman's arms, her eyes wide with the razor-sharp shock of what she had forgotten.

"Chara, don't! You'll..."

"She relies on me!" Parr cried, her grip tightening painfully on Pomfrey's forearms. "She relies on me to take it and I *dropped* it!" Her face drained of colour until it was nearly as white as her hair.

"You would know if she is dead!" Pomfrey told her loudly, trying to cut through Parr's abrupt hysteria. "Is she?"

Parr froze, blinking uncertainly up at the mediwitch. She gulped in a breath.

"No." A sob escaped her. "But I *dropped* it, Poppy! I swore I never would. I *swore* to her," she repeated in a harsh whisper, her eyes searching desperately for something in Pomfrey's eyes. Whether it was forgiveness or condemnation, Pomfrey couldn't tell. The woman's wretched situation was not in her ability to cure or even palliate.

"If you dropped it, then where is it?"

Parr's fingernails dug into Pomfrey's skin. "I don't know!" She shook the older woman slightly. "I can't find it!"

"Perhaps because it isn't there, Chara."

The younger woman's forehead wrinkled. "I don't... understand..."

"The drugs you've been given deaden the pain receptors in your body," Pomfrey explained. "It's a dangerous thing to do, but we had no choice. You wouldn't stop screaming." She prised Parr's hands off her arms gently but firmly. "Remus nearly gave himself a stroke when he heard you. I had to ask his permission to give the drugs to you. There wasn't anyone else I could..." She trailed off, plainly unwilling to finish the sentence.

"Then the pain..."

"Is essentially still there, but you can't feel it."

"Does it rebound? To Caroli?" The desperate expression returned, the fine network of lines around her eyes deepening in her pale skin like spider webs in an evening's dying light.

"You would know better than I. Is she in pain?"

Parr's eyes defocused as she looked inward, her pupils dilating to almost twice their size. She sobbed again, this time in relief. "No!" She hung her head to hide her face, but Pomfrey saw the thick drop of water fall onto the woman's bare leg.

"Then there is something to be glad of," the mediwitch told her softly.

Parr gave a snotty sniff and scrubbed her hand over her eyes. "You said you were going to St Mungo's. Is that where you got the drugs from?"

It was the question that Pomfrey had hoped Parr wouldn't ask. She smoothed her apron absently and knotted her fingers together tightly.

"No."

Parr looked up, her eyes reddened and abnormally bright from the tears that sat in them.

"Then where..."

"They wouldn't help," said Pomfrey angrily and turned away abruptly lest Parr see the nasty flush of red in her face. She busied herself with rearranging various objects on the small table beside Parr's cot: a comb, a glass of water, some bandages and a book that its owner had been reading only a few hours before. A safety-pin was pushed around to various spots by Pomfrey's agitated fingers.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Why not?" Parr's tone was flat, and Pomfrey couldn't tell if she was angry, curious or disappointed, facing away from her as she was in order to hide her own emotion.

"They said it was too dangerous for you to be brought there again. Refused!" Pomfrey banged the glass of water sharply on the wood of the side table to vent her frustration. Some of the contents slopped over the rim, eliciting a hiss of annoyance. "I couldn't believe it. I tried everything I could." She pressed her lips together tightly before turning to face Parr. "They wouldn't even *send* anyone!" Her voice shook with rage, the colour high in her cheeks.

Parr blinked slowly. "Hardly surprising, considering what happened last time," she replied carefully and rather woodenly.

"That is no excuse!" Pomfrey almost shrieked. "They are not to make judgements like that! A sick person deserves treatment. That is the way it always has been. Or so I thought!"

"Then where did you get the drugs from?"

Pomfrey's face went stony, and she looked to one side, the blood in her cheeks signalling her discomfort.

"Surely you didn't *steal* them?" Parr asked with a small laugh.

The mediwitch's face snapped into outrage. "Certainly not! I would never..."

"It was a joke, Poppy. I know you would never do that," Parr assured her, wiping the dampness from her own cheeks.

Pomfrey's huff of indignation relayed what she thought of Parr's sense of humour.

With a creak of old bedsprings and even older-feeling bones, Parr stood slowly from the bed, testing her legs carefully. She waved Pomfrey away as the woman surged towards her. A smile of satisfaction seemed appropriate as she managed to stay upright.

"And so," she continued, her arms held out in a mini-flourish at her success. "Who do I have to thank for being my drug dealer, then?"

Regret.

At least, that was what he had felt at first. It was like reopening an old wound, the kind that had never healed cleanly. Brittle and thin, a weak spot that would forever be condemned to the risk of failure. It had been years since he had thought of its cause. Perhaps he should have left it alone.

He had become so accustomed to ignoring the memory that as time went by he started to wonder if it had really happened. Perhaps he had fabricated the whole thing, so divorced from the experience of it that it could have been someone else's story, something that had insinuated itself into his recollections like a cunning parasite.

It hurt more than he thought it would, probably because he'd pushed it aside for so long, refusing to acknowledge just how greatly it had impacted his life. Cut it dead before it destroyed him...that was how he had chosen to react to it. But the anger was still there, still strong even after fifteen years, interwoven tightly with a bitter emptiness.

He'd stared disbelievingly when the Chief Healer had told him he'd been refused advancement in his chosen career. Langerhans must have seen the undisguised shock on his face.

"I know you were expecting to get the apprenticeship position, but the board decided in favour of Tyro Harris for a number of reasons."

Snape failed to evince any reaction to Langerhans' comment, frozen in the chair, his brain locked around the denial like a stone in the gears of a machine. The Chief Healer sighed, realising that this was going to go even worse than he had anticipated.

"It's nothing to do with your abilities or your knowledge, Severus." The first-time use of his given name sounded alien to the both of them, a shallow attempt to inject some form of friendliness and understanding into the exchange. "But there are so many other factors involved in Harris being a more suitable candidate than you."

"It's because I told Healer Pander she was wrong about that poisoned girl in the Borgia Ward, isn't it?"

Langerhans closed his eyes briefly and sighed at Snape's flat tone. "It certainly didn't help," he replied honestly. "However..."

"But I was right."

"However..."

"If I hadn't said something, the patient could have died."

"However," the older man overrode him, giving him a warning look over his pince-nez glasses. "There are a number of other points of concern that several board members brought up during the review of your application."

Snape clamped his mouth shut against the retort that threatened the Chief Healer's already limited patience and jiggled his leg in furious exasperation.

"Of serious note was your frequent tendency to correct Healers in front of patients as well as your lack of empathy with those undergoing treatment here at the hospital."

The younger man ducked his head, trying to hide behind the one lock of hair that always refused to be tied back. He hated having his hair pulled away from his face, but the hospital's rules were very specific and inflexible. The other trainees were always making jokes at his expense that Snape didn't find in the least bit amusing. Harris was the worst, always sweetly reassuring him that he'd grow into his nose one day with the kind of doe-eyed innocence that made him want to slap her. Now he had even more reason to hate her.

"You seem to regard medical cases as nothing more than the illness," Langerhans continued with a stern frown. "It seems inconsequential to you that the illness comes with a person attached, a person who has feelings...worries...about their condition."

Snape sniffed and looked at his feet partially hidden under the hem of his pale green trainee robes.

"Healer Broca has spoken to you on a number of occasions about this very issue, and so have I, but you persist in a complete refusal of dealing with a person's emotional dis-ease."

"I don't feel comfortable coddling people," the dark-haired trainee mentioned sullenly. "It sounds... fake."

Langerhans sighed, shaking his head at the young man's unfailing stubbornness. "I'd hoped that the more you interacted with patients, the more accustomed to considering the intangible side of healing you'd become." He rested his elbow on his desk and rubbed his forehead wearily. "But it seems to be a barrier you do not wish to overcome, and I cannot allow that kind of attitude in any apprentice Healer, no matter how gifted they may be."

"But not all Healers deal with patients," Snape pointed out, squinting shrewdly at the grey-haired man opposite him. "Healer Bethune spends all his time in his office writing research papers and no-one lectures him about not holding a patient's hand."

"Healer Bethune spent decades working on the wards with patients before you were even born, Tyro Snape," Langerhans informed him rather loudly. "He has earned the right to spend his days researching in whatever area he deems important." He paused in an effort to dispel the flash of temper that Snape's comment had dredged up from him. "Just because a Healer spends their time in research, it does not mean they do not consider the eventual impact of their research on a living, breathing person. It is a consideration that *all* Healers must have, whether they work on a full ward or in a dusty and remote office. The person is what we treat, not just the condition. They are inextricably linked."

"Guérir quelquefois, soulager souvent, consoler toujours," Snape muttered with a sour twist to his mouth.

"Exactly," Langerhans replied emphatically, leaning forward in his chair. "I'm glad that you have at least absorbed *something* of what Healer La Vigne has taught you during your time here. They have to become more than just words to you or you will never reach your potential."

Snape glowered darkly at him, mouth pressed in a thin line.

"Your distance and curtness are not the only problems," Langerhans continued after another pause. He fiddled about with some parchments on the desk in front of him, trying to find the best way to phrase his next sentence.

Black eyes glittered at him, unblinking, accusatory. The Chief Healer's muddy blue eyes met them head-on.

"A number of people have expressed... a concern about your affiliations outside of the hospital."

Snape said nothing, but he felt his face darken involuntarily. The silence stretched out between them like a thorny chasm that became greater than the spacious office the conversation was taking place in, threatening to swallow them both into a ragged descent into vicious argument.

"What does my life outside of the hospital have to do with anything?" Snape finally demanded to know, his shoulders tight and rounded forward defensively.

"It has *everything* to do with your position here," Langerhans told him unflinchingly. "A patient has to trust a Healer. Trust is hard to procure from a patient at the best of times and it is frighteningly easy to lose. Your reputation is key to securing and keeping that trust. If there is *any* doubt as to the credence of your duty as a Healer, a patient will not trust you. And if a patient does not trust you, you cannot treat them adequately. And if you cannot treat the patient adequately, then there is no point to you being a Healer."

"Unlike some, Healer Langerhans, I am able to separate my personal life from my professional life," Snape responded with a bitter sneer.

"I cannot consider them separately, Tyro Snape," Langerhans shot back coldly. "Once a Healer, what you do off-duty is as relevant as what you do when on-duty."

"I disagree."

"You are at liberty to do so, but not in my hospital."

Snape stood, pulled loose the thin strap of leather that held his hair back and tossed it on Langerhans' desk.

"It will not be your hospital forever," he noted icily and left the Chief Healer's office, and the hospital, for the last time.

Maybe not forever, but certainly for a long time. Fifteen years on and Langerhans was still in charge, with no retirement in sight. Not that it mattered. The time of his apprenticeship had come and gone; an opportunity that would never present itself again.

Snape sighed and scribbled some notes in the margin of the parchment he was writing on. Whilst the incumbent Chief Healer had not changed in the intervening years, other things had. Now that he was older, Snape realised that Langerhans and the board had been right to refuse him the apprenticeship. The blots against his application were of his own devising...he couldn't deny that. It didn't mean that he liked what had happened, just that maturity had opened him to accepting the reasons *why* it had happened. Those reasons still existed: he was still curt, irascible and unsympathetic, and to many he was still a Death Eater, no matter what the determination of the Wizengamot had been. Who *would* want to be treated by such a person?

The line between his brows deepened. Someone who was desperate. Someone that all others had given up on, whether justified or not. Someone who had been near death.

It was true that Snape was only ever interested in the medical condition. The person attached to it was inconsequential to him, almost an embarrassment in the way they'd

muddy up the diagnosis with tedious whining and pathetic self-absorption. As a trainee at the hospital, he'd lost track of the number of times he'd told a patient to shut up and let him get on with the task at hand, and that was always after an interminable period of time during which he'd suffer their repetitive bleating in silence.

He'd come to the conclusion early on that patients lied. Or, if he were to be honest, perhaps it was more that their ignorance was a serious hindrance. They focussed on some elements of their condition and forgot about others. There was never a factual recounting of the symptoms. There'd be the inevitable side stories about family strife, troubles at work, feeling out of control, stress about money...

"Just fill this in," Snape would tell them, thrusting a questionnaire parchment at them and leaving the room before he snapped. Sometimes he even said "please" if it had been fairly early on in the day, before he got ground down into frustration. Healer Broca would shake her head and lecture him endlessly about his lack of empathy, totally disregarding the almost unflinching accuracy of his final diagnosis.

It still pissed him off.

But that was a long time ago, and there was little point in dwelling on what could have been and resenting what he couldn't change. He'd made his decision and that was that: his chosen career ended before it had even begun.

Or so he had thought.

While at St Mungo's, he'd been mystified at the way the other trainees fumbled and flopped their way through a differential, spending more time arguing with each other than examining the possible causes of the patient's symptoms. They seemed to approach the whole thing backwards, lurching from one suggestion to another without examining the anatomical cause behind the symptoms. If there were five of the six symptoms evident for a particular illness, they'd tout it as a possibility. Four out of six if they were desperate.

He'd just wait until they'd finished cluttering the session up with extraneous material and then declare three of the most likely diagnoses. The other trainees would sigh and roll their eyes at his certain tone, Healer Broca would proceed to pick apart his suggestions as best she could while Healer La Vigne wore her enigmatic smile, having swiftly become accustomed to the accuracy of her trainee's diagnostic abilities and was rather proud of it. None of the other Healers had been so fortunate in their trainees' abilities.

"They are jealous," La Vigne explained in her wry, heavily-accented voice accompanied with a slight shrug when he asked why everyone picked his suggestions as the ones to rip apart. "Pay it no mind. They don't like you because you have no manners."

He'd blinked at that bald comment.

"But then, neither do I," his teacher pointed out with an elegant wave of her hand, closing her heavily-lashed eyes. "Healer Broca still hates me, and it's been forty years since I suffered her as my trainer." She'd fixed him with an appraising look from her deep blue, almost violet eyes and pinched his cheek lightly...one of the few people he'd ever let touch him without flinching or shying away. "They also don't like you because you are right. And a right answer is what matters, non?"

Snape lifted the quill from the parchment in a momentary pause. He'd disappointed Healer La Vigne. He knew that with a certainty as steely as the woman's exacting standards. He'd never explained to her why he'd left, and he wondered now if she'd have known the reasons why. She'd written to him after he'd left, but he'd never read her letter. The likelihood that her disappointment was contained within the elaborate swirls of her handwriting caused him to immolate the letter before he could bring himself to open it. Burned, along with the opportunity to become a Healer, the chance to unpick the knots of mystery that snarled up a person's body; ashes. Fitting.

He put the quill down, maudlin thoughts throwing cold water on his examination of the components of the anodyne of his own devising in order to achieve something more refined, more tailored to the requirement of it. He'd made it himself many years ago in a desperate attempt to quench a rapacious agony borne of a near fatal injury bestowed upon him by a master who took failure very poorly. He'd suffered through many sleepless nights where standard treatment had left him begging for death. The drug was deadly. One drop too much could mortally poison. Dose with it for too long and the heart would stop. Seek it out too often and it became bitterly addictive.

Snape stared, unseeing, between the sharp angles of his written words, the silence of the classroom sitting heavy around him, like weighted cloth that only slightly softened the claustrophobic mass of frigid stone in the dungeons.

He should have left it alone. It wasn't his business. He'd been told that on a number of occasions, either verbally or with a look. It depended on the witness to his interest as to how they would transmit their dissatisfaction about his curiosity, but he'd never been able to leave a mystery alone. It would nag at him until he found ways to unravel the snarled mass of intrigue and occlusion, for to know was better than to be in ignorance. Ignorance left you in the dark. Ignorance left you exposed. Ignorance could get you killed. It had been a brutally harsh lesson for him to learn and he wasn't about to forget what it had taught him. He'd made too many mistakes through ignorance.

If the others had been in the infirmary, he didn't know what he would have done. Turn around and left? Could he have possibly done that? Part of him would have said it was the wisest course of action. His presence, let alone his assistance, would not be welcomed there. It was fortunate, not only for him, that he hadn't had to come up against that decision. Only Pomfrey had been there, slumped forward in a wooden chair, her head resting in her hand so that her fingers covered her eyes, elbow on her knee. A small, empty bottle in her free hand, clutched so tight that her knuckles were pale. Waiting the way Healers did when their patients had nothing left to do but die. Waiting while they furiously turned over in their mind what they could have done to change this outcome. Waiting for the moment when the breath wouldn't come again...the silence that screamed in accusation and despair.

"Poppy?"

Her head lifted. He could see the faint sheen of wetness on her face lit from the lamp on the table next to the cot, a light that threw the wretched figure in the bed into silhouette.

"Severus?"

She stood, hesitant, waiting for him to walk through the doorway.

"What is it?" She took a step towards him, the hand that had supported her head clutching at her white apron.

He held the bottle up in his hand.

Pomfrey paused a moment before making her way towards him, a brief glance at her patient to check that her chest still rose and fell in its erratic rhythm, fearful that should she step too far away, the lack of her immediate presence would take the last support away from whatever it was that held Parr up from that bottomless pit that yawned beneath her.

"What is it?" the mediwitch asked once more into the shadows where he stood.

"A last chance."

She took the bottle from his hand. The liquid inside was as clear as water, giving no hint as to its components. She looked back up at him across the threshold to the infirmary, her eyes rimmed with a redness that he could see even in the dim light, and held out the bottle to him.

"You know best how to use it," she told him. "I shouldn't..."

"No."

Pomfrey's lips thinned as she pressed them together briefly. "Why not?"

"You know the reason why. This is not my place."

She sighed. "I'm old, Severus, but my memory is not failing me. I do recall you being here on a number of prior occasions."

"As a teacher, yes. As a patient..." He shrugged slightly. "From time to time. But no more than that." He saw the lines in her face that spelled out her keen awareness of her failure. He'd seen it before, years ago; that same pattern of dreadful realisation that some things were beyond a person's ability to ameliorate. He had to admit that, for once, he felt sympathy for her.

He told her the dosage, turned and left, having not set one foot in the infirmary during the entire exchange. It was not his place to do so.

In many ways what he had done to Pomfrey was cruel. In giving her a potential hope at such a moment it called into question her own efficacy in her role. Snape knew that in her youth, she had been more than capable as a Healer, "a person of significant potential" he had heard said of her. How and why she had ended up as a mediwitch at a school treating a sorry gallimaufry of typical childhood magical diseases and ludicrous maladies resulting from immature pranks, he had no idea. He'd never asked and no one had ever told him. He found it hard to believe that it would have been a willing decision on her part.

He had also put her in the quagmire of uncertainty as to whether or not she should use what he gave her. He was not entitled to treat people in such a fashion, even though others had required it of him in the past. Treating himself was one thing. He had only himself to be responsible for. Even providing Lupin's lycanthropy medication made him uncomfortable.

Snape rested his elbow on his desk and lowered his forehead into the palm of his hand, his fatigue finally catching up with him. Rest had been patchy of late.

Would Pomfrey take the risk? There really wasn't much choice left for her. Either let her patient die, or try a possible salvation, however dangerous. Which option was in the best interests of her patient?

Parr had been a wreck, her body so wasted and wracked in pain that to let her live in such a way was an obscenity against compassion. It was never clear when the Healer had to let the patient go. There was never a definitive line that you could see being crossed, when the best interests of the patient were overshadowed by the Healer's stubborn refusal to give up, thinking that perhaps there was some way, hoping that some miracle would happen when all else had failed.

Would Pomfrey take the risk? He'd forced that decision on her, abrogating his own responsibility by walking away and leaving the bottle in her hand. Just one more cruelty in his character, to do such a thing. Langerhans had been right.

He'd owned many decisions: ones that had shaped his life into the jagged edges that he stood on precariously as if balanced on the shards of shattered glass in bare feet, ones that occasionally made the darkness a little less consuming only to return him to that hopeless reality of his situation, ones that condemned him to pay and pay and pay until it seemed he had nothing left to give. But he'd refused to own the decision to let Parr live or die, and he had no idea why.

Would Pomfrey take the risk? Snape couldn't say how he knew the answer to that. He had not been to the infirmary since, and he had shunned company entirely since that night, seeping around the castle like black ink in the shadows, ill-at-ease, unseen by anyone except Folter.

Until now.

He sighed and raised his head and looked straight at Parr.

Her cheeks were still hollowed, the shadowing around her eyes making her look even thinner, but she was not even close to the level of emaciation he had last seen her in. She must have eaten half the contents of the school's kitchen stores to recover weight so quickly. She shouldn't even be out of the infirmary, but wilful as she was, Parr would decide what she wanted to do, when and for how long.

She stared at him blankly from the other side of his desk, steeped neck to toes in black that blended at its edges into the shadows of the classroom, pupils swollen in the grey irises like a bloom of soot on granite.

Neither of them spoke. Snape had no idea what he should say, if anything, and Parr was being uncharacteristically mute. He saw her nostrils flare a fraction of a second before she moved and moved so fast that his eyes struggled to catch up.

The point of the knife bit into the wooden surface of the desk faster than the strike of a serpent; the deed done before his body even had a chance to flinch.

Parr's hand tightened on the hilt, her gaze locked on the blade with an almost vicious intensity that never touched the rest of her face, frozen as the line of crimson ran down the edge. And then she was gone, a streak of silver and black, the white panel down the back of her overcoat slashed with rusted orange, her knife still jammed into his desk with her blood leaking into the pierced wood, its hilt bound in the same shades as those running down her back...a late sunset twisted with long white cloud.

He studied the embedded blade for some time, trying to riddle out its meaning, but it was a language he had no knowledge of, a symbol of some unknown declaration on her part, a sign that could as easily be an announcement of war as a proclamation of gratitude. Snape had no idea what it was saying to him.

But he did know someone who might.

AN: "Guérir quelquefois, soulager souvent, consoler toujours" means "Cure occasionally, relieve often, console always". It is a quote attributed to the French surgeon, Ambroise Paré (1510-1590).

Chapter Forty-Two—Reply

Chapter 42 of 59

Some questions require a very carefully-considered response.

"Lupin! Get your stinking, flea-riddled carcass up out of whatever disgusting excuse you call a bed. I need to speak to you."

There was an almost insulting period of time that passed before Lupin's head appeared in the flames.

"And a good afternoon to you, too, Severus," was the werewolf's slightly tetchy response. "Nice to see that Christmas has imparted its usual festive influence on your manners."

"It has been my experience, Lupin, that manners are wasted on certain people, therefore I choose to employ them only where I deem they will be of some use," Snape replied rather snidely, tapping the arm of his chair with one finger impatiently. "Any particular reason why you're festering under sheets at three o'clock in the afternoon like the useless flaneur you are?"

"Some of us are not blessed with regular paid work set to a pre-arranged schedule and our day-to-day needs catered to, Severus," Lupin responded with the kind of brightness that reeked of falsity. "The great unwashed must muddle along as best we can."

Snape sneered down his nose at him. "So, you've been drinking again."

"Look, is there a valid reason why you're demanding my attention with all the social grace of mountain troll?" Lupin snapped back at him. "I *do* have other things to do other than stand here listening to you carp on at me and, believe it or not, they don't involve imbibing alcohol."

"What a topsy-turvy world we live in," Snape mentioned, tilting his head to one side as if bemused by Lupin's statement. "Put your clothes on. I've found where the lyc-females are being held."

Lupin's expression switched rapidly from one of peevish irritation to keen attention. "Really? Are you certain?"

Snape leant forward in the chair facing the fireplace in his private quarters. "No, you terminal idiot, I just decided to contact you because I had a vague notion about where they *could* be! Of course I'm certain! You think I was up all night skulking about London because I enjoy the night life?"

"Then where are they?" Lupin's head was bobbing from side to side amongst the flames, an extension of the fidgeting he was undoubtedly doing hundreds of miles away.

Snape narrowed his eyes at him and sat back slowly in the armchair, carefully considering the question.

"Severus!" Lupin barked at him. "Don't start with that shit now. This is important!"

"I'm well aware of that, Lupin," Snape replied, nonchalantly checking his fingernails. "I want something in return, though."

The werewolf hissed in frustration at him. "It was my understanding that your help was going to be provided without conditions."

He got a snort in response. "Then you're a greater fool than I thought you were. Nothing comes for free."

"Something I am acutely aware of, Severus, thank you very much, so please spare me the platitudes and get to the point," said Lupin, glaring at him. "What do you want?"

Snape let the silence drag on for a few painful seconds before picking the knife up off his lap and holding it up so the werewolf could see it.

"How the fuck did you get a hold of that!" Lupin bellowed, eyes bulging in outrage. His head disappeared from the fire and a heartbeat later the flames turned green. Snape only just had enough time to slide out of the armchair and twist out of the way to narrowly avoid Lupin's clutching hands. Soot and slivers of charcoal belched out onto the hearth as the werewolf flooded in like a charging bull. He clambered over the armchair in pursuit, eyes fixed resolutely on the knife in Snape's hand, held up and out of his immediate reach.

"Give it to me!" Lupin demanded harshly, stretching up to take a swipe at Snape's wrist. The point of Snape's wand in the depression between his collarbones stopped him short. He hissed and tried to dodge to one side, but Snape drove the wand deeper, forcing Lupin back a couple of steps.

"Must I constantly remind you of common etiquette, Lupin? I don't appreciate having you barging in on me uninvited..." His eyes traveled down Lupin's torso. "... much less half-dressed. Thank Merlin you at least have your trousers on."

"Is she dead?" Lupin ground out hoarsely, his chin raised high and to the right, the cords in his neck standing out in the effort to hold still despite the painful jab of the wand in his throat. "Is that how you took it from her?"

"Parr? No." Snape pushed the encroacher on his territory back another pace towards the fireplace. He noticed the way Lupin relaxed slightly at his response.

"Did you steal it from her?" There was a nasty, steely flash of outrage in the man's brown eyes.

"What a disgraceful accusation," Snape pointed out silkily, pushing Lupin back another step. "Unlike some, penury doesn't reduce me to theft."

"Then how did you get it?" said Lupin through clenched teeth, his hands bunched into fists at his sides and his toes gripping the frigid stone beneath his feet. The wand left his throat.

"She gave it to me," Snape replied, his lip curled into a sneer that showed his teeth. The flash of surprise on Lupin's face gave him an unexpected flush of amusement and triumph. He dangled the knife between thumb and middle finger at the man opposite him, waving it from side to side in a childish display of ownership. The outrage was back in Lupin's eyes, framed by a scowl.

"I'd like to see you try that in front of Chara," the bare-torsoed man told him in a low voice. "She'd have your ear off for being so disrespectful."

Snape wrapped the other fingers of his left hand around the hilt of the knife possessively and slowly ran his thumb up and down along the cloth bindings. "Is that so?" He turned his back on Lupin in order to return to his armchair. "And what other interesting little tidbits of information can you provide?" he asked, looking up at the tense silhouette in front of the fireplace, one eyebrow raised in expectation.

"You're an amoral, blackmailing, dirty piece of work, Severus," Lupin told him with a degree of wonder and contrasting disgust in his voice.

Snape gave him a tight smile. "Thank you, Lupin. That means a lot to me coming from an impecunious, half-dressed tatterdemalion who reeks of wet dog hair."

"And you're an arsehole!" Lupin added sullenly.

"Ah, but now you're making me blush." He tipped his head to one side so he could gaze up at the man steadily in a manner he knew full well would unsettle him. Right on cue, Lupin's arms wrapped around his own ribs and he edged closer to the fire, shivering slightly. "But time's wasting, so much as I always revel in your flattery, I would really appreciate you providing the information I want." Lupin's lips pressed together tightly and defiantly. "It'll be the only way you'll get the information *you* desire so much. Therefore, coquettishness isn't very conducive to satisfying your... needs." He let his eyes travel down Lupin's half-naked body blatantly, trailing the middle finger of his left hand back and forth along the flat of the blade resting on his leg.

Lupin closed his eyes and bared his teeth slightly, exhaling heavily. "What do you want to know?"

Snape ran his tongue along the ridges of his molars and squinted. "Why would Parr jam a bloodied blade into my desk without a word of explanation?"

"I don't know."

Snape's face went stony. "Liar! I suppose I shouldn't have expected anything else out of you." He stood up. "Get out of my quarters before I kick you back the way you came, Floo powder or not."

"But what about the lyc-females?" Lupin reminded him, slipping to one side and away from the fireplace, his hands held out slightly as if to ward Snape away lest he did

actually try to kick him into the flames. "You said—"

"Nothing for nothing, Lupin," Snape answered, still advancing on him, Parr's knife clutched tightly in his hand. "I thought I made that clear to you." He pursued the werewolf around his armchair and back towards the fireplace.

"No! Wait!" Lupin lifted his open hands higher. His pursuer stopped in his tracks. "All right, I'll tell you!" He pressed the fleshy pad of his thumb to his forehead and swore quietly. There was a long pause before he spoke again, this time so quietly that Snape could barely hear him. "Blood debt. It means blood debt."

"Louder, Lupin. And look me in the eye so I can be certain you aren't lying again.

Lupin sighed and reluctantly raised his eyes from the floor to Snape's face.

"And specifics, if you would be so kind. I haven't the inclination to coax details out from you."

"Chara is either admitting to or declaring a blood debt to you," Lupin elaborated. He frowned. "Were you there when she left the blade?"

"Yes."

"What colours was she wearing down her back?"

"Orange and white."

Lupin nodded as if he had expected this. "Then the blood debt covers both Striker and Handler. Had there only been white, the debt would have been hers alone."

"Then this is different to that mutual punishment we went through two weeks ago?"

Lupin laughed bitterly. "Markedly so."

"How?"

The man's agitation was apparent in the way he shifted his weight from foot to foot. "I don't feel comfortable with this, Severus. It's a betrayal of Chara's trust."

"Why should I care about that, Lupin? I'll ask you again: how is this different?"

"I don't know the intricacies of it." He widened his eyes at Snape's look of disbelief. "I swear it! Chara doesn't tell me as much as you seem to think she does."

"Then she is judicious in considering your relationship with the MLE as untrustworthy," Snape hissed at him.

Lupin wrapped his arms around his ribs again and started to quiver as his muscles attempted to generate some heat in defiance of the cold his body was steeped in.

"You have no understanding of what the situation is," the shivering man told him truculently. "Now, I believe I have answered your question so—"

"Poorly, Lupin. Poorly. What does the blood debt mean to me?"

"Both Striker and Handler are bound to you in debt unless you wish to refuse them."

Snape studied Lupin for some time, watching his eyes carefully. "For how long?"

A faint shrug. "I don't know." There was no falsity in his words.

"And if I wanted to refuse them?"

Lupin blinked rapidly. "That would be... rather rude, but permissible under seevy etiquette as long as you refused correctly."

"Then you had best instruct me in the appropriate manners, hadn't you?" Snape warned him, advancing on him once more in a sinuous flow.

Lupin edged backwards, his eyes flicking from Snape's face to the knife in his hand and back again. "Chara has asked you a question. You must answer it."

"How?" The flat of the blade was teased with the slightly calloused pad of Snape's finger as he shepherded Lupin back up against the fireplace.

"You must return the knife to her. If you wish to accept the blood debt, you leave the blade bloodied. If you wish to refuse, you clean the blade." Lupin's shoulder blades pressed against the mantle, the fire making the fabric of his trousers almost painfully hot as the stone sucked the warmth of his body from him.

Snape stopped a pace short of physically touching Lupin. "If I learn that your instruction has been false or lacking in any way, I shall make my displeasure keenly felt in that tick-infested hide of yours." The minatory threat was delivered with a dangerous, almost liquid gentleness that made Lupin's nostrils flare. The werewolf opened his mouth to protest, but Snape forestalled him. "Just remember that, Lupin. I'll bite you before you even realise I'm there." He stepped out of the threatening proximity and gave the werewolf the warehouse location of lyc-females.

Lupin turned quickly, grabbed a handful of Floo powder from the earthenware pot next to the fireplace and vanished into the flames the very instant they had flared green, the heavy fog of soot from his swift exit curling around Snape's boots in the eddies of the disturbed air.

It was as if the colour had been sucked out of the world: the sky shrouded in the steely grey clouds that hung overhead, the air peppered with the falling snow that drifted down to smother everything it touched in a suffocating, icy blanket. All was a mélange of empty, wintry shades that sighed of the bleakness of the year's end. The slash of orange stood out starkly in the pallid environs, like a warning in the approaching dusk. Or a beacon.

It had taken him hours to find her. According to Pomfrey, she had not been in the infirmary for some time, seemingly ever since she had driven her knife into his desk. The mediwitch was in turns angry, worried and exhausted. The conversation between them had been decidedly awkward but, at least in Pomfrey's eyes, necessary, though Snape doubted the veracity of that. Just as he had placed her in an unjust situation two days ago, so she had done the same to him, and no amount of verbal wriggling had allowed him to escape the iron grip of her decision. Her threat to go to Dumbledore was the final nail in his coffin.

Snape watched Parr's still, black-encased figure standing in the swale below him, her face turned toward where the sun was setting behind the clouds, but she had made no move at all—a statue that seemed scarcely alive. Waiting.

He sighed and made his way carefully down the slope of the hill, the snow crunching underfoot; a sound she could not possibly fail to hear, but still she made no move as he approached. Her overcoat was dusted with snow and even the ends of her hair seemed frosted by its frozen caress. She must have been standing here for hours.

He stopped behind her, unsure of how to proceed. Lupin's information had been a lot less substantial than he had hoped, but he had sensed no further occlusion from the man once his lie had been called out.

What Parr had done was not only a test of him, but of Lupin also. She could not possibly expect Snape to know the intricacies of seevy etiquette, yet she had spoken to him in its convoluted, mysterious symbols and clearly expected an answer. Not only was she acknowledging debt to what he had done for her and her Handler in pulling them

both back from death, but she was probing Lupin's trustworthiness, seeing if he would volunteer up what she had told him under whatever strange arrangement bound them both to the MLE.

He stared at the white and orange panels down her back that shimmered with melted snow. Did she realise how much he knew now, what she had let him see when she had been at her weakest, at her most desperate time? Would she be angry or ashamed that he had seen her at her most wretched, unable even to hold herself upright, so mired in agony that her muscles had utterly surrendered to gravity as they flinched in knotted sensory chaos? He'd been able to feel their shuddering as he held her around her ribs to stop her falling forward as she waited in a sempiternal purgatory as Pomfrey fetched the morphine that in the end had proven so ineffectual.

He'd harboured a suspicion Parr was a Death Eater. Numerous times she had displayed discomfort in her left arm at the same times that he had, but when he had learned that she was able to palm her hunger off onto him, he'd wondered if perhaps the door swung both ways: that she could take as well as give. Shouldering her Handler's illness was the evidence that made that postulation a truth. Her unmarked forearm confirmed it. For whatever reason, she was able to share the pain the Dark Mark had been giving him. Of course, it was still possible she was a Death Eater. The absence of the Dark Mark didn't conclusively exonerate her. Snape shuddered to think what the Dark Lord could do with a seevy. What he'd done with lycanthropes had been terrifying enough. Perhaps she was hiding from more than he had first realised.

What Dumbledore's interest in her was hard to determine. The Headmaster had intimated that Parr was at Hogwarts under protection, though he had been vague about what, or whom, that protection was against. He wasn't about to take Dumbledore's apparent philanthropy toward seevy at face value. Snape had learned the hard way that old wizard's methods were far slyer than they first appeared to be. Dumbledore was a master at hooking someone into his schemes without them even catching a whiff of his intentions. By the time they realised the extent of their involvement in the man's plans, it was too late.

Did Parr know what she had gotten herself into? She had more than enough to deal with already. The machinations of one of the magical world's most accomplished, powerful and devious wizards was probably of far lesser concern to her than it should have been. Just withstanding the chronic pain that ravaged her into a hollow shell was a feat that stunned him.

As she had sagged in his grip, mucous and tears and bile leaking from her like a battered animal that waited for the blessed, merciful relief of death, he had wondered what kept her from giving up, from succumbing to the blank finality of mortality that he himself had stared at enviously more times than he cared to remember.

That was before she had screamed and the back-blast of her pain into him erased all ordered thought from his head. Everything that she had taken on from her Handler spilled out from her in a tearing torrent he couldn't stop, a Cruciatus of terrifying magnitude that locked his body into a rigour that almost bonded him physically to her.

Pomfrey had found them on her return from her supply cupboard, he with his arms locked around Parr's body, his nose bleeding profusely as she shrieked in agony with every shred of breath she could hold. How Pomfrey had separated them, he had no idea, but by the time he came to, he found himself on his knees, the back of his hand pressed under his bloody nose, every nerve in his body shredded and on fire. Pomfrey was fighting with Parr to try and get the morphine into her, her unfamiliarity with the syringe a serious disadvantage in such a dire situation.

It shamed Snape as much now as it had then that he had scrambled off the floor and fled the infirmary, leaving Pomfrey alone in her struggle, the only intelligible thought in his head telling him to get as far away as possible lest Parr drag him down again, drowning in that sea of constricting suffering. Perhaps it had been his shame that had led him to give Pomfrey the anodyne. Perhaps it had been his early medical training, now lost in the past under the shroud of his mistakes. Perhaps.

Regardless, it had led him here, the snow kissing his face and resting on his hair and clothing in a gentle, whispering determination to turn the darkness white. He sighed in tiredness and dissolution and uncertainty, his breath a pearly mist in the bitterly cold air, but he gave his answer nonetheless.

He walked around Parr to face her. Eyes closed, her face was pale but for the shadows under her eyes and the bluish tinge to her lips and eyelids. She had stood too long out here. Even her eyelashes were touched with snow.

Was he supposed to say something? This was a ritual he had no guidance in. Lupin's rather pathetic information left him on a knife's edge where not doing something could be as disastrous as doing something: a situation he should be used to after all these years, but he had never grown tolerant of it. Just more resentful.

Parr's eyes opened, as colourless as sky above, her face inscrutable, not giving the barest hint as to what he was meant to do. He stared right into the dark centre of those pupils, hoping to find some clue to lead him, but her mind was closed to him, the steel door as impenetrable as a Gringotts vault.

So he held out the bundle in his hand and spoke not a word. Parr's eyes dropped from his face to his offering, the bulky shape of her knife swaddled in white cloth bound with a black cord. Unhurriedly, she raised her arm from her side and took the bundle from him with gloved fingers. Her eyes met his again, and for a moment, he thought she was going to speak, but time stretched out like an arctic plane in front of them, soundless and desolate.

He backed away a few paces and then turned to follow his footprints back up the hill and towards the castle, leaving Parr alone in the approaching evening.

Chapter Forty-Three—Patient

Chapter 43 of 59

Some cures are very bitter.

Snape stood by the cot, tapping his foot impatiently. Diagonally across from him, Pomfrey was stripping another cot of its linen now that its former occupant was gone. There had been a brief burst of gastric 'flu amongst the students after the Yule Ball, and some of those hardest hit had been kept in the infirmary under Pomfrey's hawk-like eye. Snape suspected that some of those cases were more likely hangovers. Teenagers could never forgo an opportunity to get utterly inebriated. He glared at the mediwitch's back as she fussed with the precise angles of the hospital corners the sheets were being pressed into, displacing his irritation to her in the absence of its rightful focus.

He'd come here straight from the grounds, trailing water from the melted snow from his overcoat across the floor and making Pomfrey bristle at his effrontery.

"This is your idea, not mine!" he replied rather petulantly, making her roll her eyes at his snippiness. She cast a drying charm to dispel the puddles and proceeded to ignore him.

Minutes ticked by. Snape folded his arms and ground his teeth, becoming increasingly ratty at being kept waiting and his overcoat dripping a growing pool of water around his boots.

Folter would have told him if Parr was heading back to her quarters instead of here, but he hadn't thought the Striker would take this long to return inside. Perhaps whatever mysterious ritual attached to the return of her knife dictated she stay outside for some indeterminate further period of time. Snape's eyes flicked to the windows at

the end of the room. It was now fully dark, the snow still falling outside in the swirls of a light wind. If Parr caught hypothermia, he'd flay a strip off her. That thought actually brightened his mood and he watched the flurry of snowfall through the frost-edged panes of glass for a while with a faint smile on his face.

When he turned his head back toward the entrance to the infirmary, he found Parr standing less than an arm's length away, her misted eye squinted as she looked up at him. He failed to suppress the jump that her sudden appearance elicited. She quirked her eyebrow faintly.

"Where have you been?" he snapped.

"Outside," she replied mildly.

"Doing what?" He feigned not to notice Pomfrey's icy expression at his nasty tone.

"Picking my nose."

His eyebrows drew down into an ill omen. "Don't be fatuous."

Parr shrugged slightly. "I was telling the truth. It itches inside."

"And I'm sure shoving your germ-ridden finger up your nostril is going to alleviate that," Snape responded sarcastically. "Take your clothes off and stand here." He pointed to a spot in front of him.

This time both Parr's eyebrows climbed some distance up her forehead. "Why? Are we going on a date?"

"What Professor Snape is trying to say," Pomfrey interjected, sweeping over in a rustle of impeccably starched linens, "is that he needs to examine you." She fixed Snape with her finest disapproving glare. "Though he could have put the suggestion to you in a slightly more appropriate way."

Parr's mouth formed a moue. "You're a doctor?" she asked Snape with a taint of suspicion in her voice, head tilted to one side like a curious sparrow.

"Not exactly," he ground out through gritted teeth, a vein in his temple starting to throb.

"The Professor spent some time in training at St Mungo's but never continued to apprenticeship," Pomfrey informed her.

"Ah." Parr nodded her head slowly. "Let me guess. Temperament issues?"

"Certainly not!" he snapped, hating Pomfrey rather keenly for subjecting him to this.

"No, I suppose not," Parr admitted calmly, studying him as if he were a particularly alien object. "Rudeness, sarcasm and irascibility are prized traits in a doctor, after all."

Snape bared his teeth at her.

"I had hoped to speak to you prior," Pomfrey continued as if the blooming acrimony were not occurring right in front of her face, "but I think it best if the Professor has some say in treating your condition. We think that he may be able to significantly increase your recovery. I'll be here at all times, so there's nothing to be concerned over."

Snape narrowed his eyes at Pomfrey. She was giving the impression that this had been a decision reached mutually between him and the mediwitch. The truth was that Pomfrey had browbeaten him into agreeing. He'd tried to twist out of it, but the woman had made up her mind and that was that.

"I cannot help her," she'd told him rather shrilly, two spots of colour high in her faintly-lined cheeks. "I've tried everything I know and it hasn't worked. You must do it." She'd somehow managed to loom over him despite being half a foot shorter.

"I'm not a Healer, Poppy. It isn't ethical."

She'd snorted at that. "I'm not giving you free rein, Severus. You will still be subordinate to me in Chara's treatment."

That certainly hadn't made the idea any more appealing. The notion of being subordinate always put his back up.

"I'm not interested," he'd told her bluntly and had turned to leave the infirmary.

"Your level of interest is beside the point," Pomfrey had replied, dodging around and in front of him once more to prevent his exit. "I will not see a patient of mine suffer through my inadequacies. If that means you have to treat her, then that's what you'll do, even if I have to hold you by the scruff of the neck to do it!"

He'd seen the iron-clad determination in her eyes and concluded that she would do exactly that if she felt it necessary.

"There is nothing I can do you can't, Poppy," he'd persisted, trying to slip out of the tightening grip of her resolve. "Medical matters are your purview because you are better qualified and more adept than I."

"Spare me the ego-stroking, Severus. I won't fall for it," Pomfrey had vowed. "There is no room in medicine for ego. The patient always comes first."

"It is not my place," he'd maintained doggedly and swept around her.

"I'll go to Albus if I have to."

That had stopped him dead. "You wouldn't." He didn't need to turn back to see the implacability in her face. It saturated her words like a water-laden sponge, leaving him in no doubt that she would do anything she felt she had to in order to get him to assent.

"Albus wants her alive, whatever the cost. Don't make me make him force you to do this."

"I never thought that blackmail was in your character, Poppy." His back had been rigid in suppressed anger at her inexorable will to force him to bend. She would drag him back into the embrace of the only profession he'd ever willingly sought to serve in. The pain it would reignite in him at his exclusion from it all those years ago did not matter to her. He still could have refused, but he'd known that eventually he would have been compelled to do as she had asked. Eventually.

The second he could convince Pomfrey that she was capable of handling Parr's rehabilitation herself once more, he'd drop the burden she'd dumped on him as if it were a burning branch. Perhaps if he were sufficiently rude and curt, she'd realise her mistake and chase him out from the infirmary before that, and since Parr's attitude had a hide as thick as an elephant's, he'd need to be especially discourteous.

Snape stared down at the Striker. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way, Miss Parr," he informed her. "Your smart mouth doesn't impress me one bit. I'm here to treat your injuries, not put up with your insolence and lack of co-operation."

"Severus!"

"Poppy, if you want me to do this, then I do it my way," he told the mediwitch curtly. "Miss Parr is difficult enough as a student but as a patient she has the potential to be intolerable." He fixed Parr with a black look. "I suffer you as a student only because I must; I do this under Madam Pomfrey's request only, and if you decide that it will amuse you to frustrate me I will hang you from the top of the Astronomy tower by your underwear, snowstorm or not. Doing what I tell you isn't optional or pursuant to the

dictates of your mood and if I catch a whiff of recalcitrance to follow my instructions I'll hold you down and insert the foulest-tasting potion I can find into you. Have I made myself perfectly clear or do you want to test my rapidly dwindling patience and force a demonstration?"

"My *God*, you're sexy when you're angry," Parr told him, her eyes wide at his tirade. "Is that why you never became a doctor? All those female patients throwing themselves at you because of the way you flirt?"

"Get undressed!" he barked at her, an unfamiliar rush of blood to his face making him even angrier as he stalked off to find the bitterest purgative that Pomfrey had in her stores.

"Stop fidgeting."

"It's cold."

"Deal with it."

Parr ignored him and bounced lightly up and down on the balls of her feet as he scribbled away in his notebook. It made the floorboards bow slightly and shift his feet so that the notebook jogged rhythmically. Snape swivelled his eyes up.

"Stop... doing... that."

"Sorry, doc," she replied, still bouncing up and down. He tried not to notice the way it made her chest move, but considering there was little between her current state of undress and complete nudity, it was a fairly blatant indicator of her gender.

"Don't call me that." He went back to his notes, the ends of his hair almost brushing the pages. The notebook continued to shift in time with Parr's movements. She didn't seem even the slightest bit perturbed to be standing in front of him in her underwear. In fact, he had a suspicion she was deliberately trying to make *him* feel uncomfortable about it. When her feet started to leave the floor and return with a thump, he realised that she knew how empty his earlier threat had been. He'd be flat on his face before he could get within two feet of jamming a purgative into her. He closed his notebook with a snap, shoved it and the half-sized quill into his pocket and unfolded himself from the wooden chair. Looming over her didn't prevent her from bouncing up and down on the spot, so he stared at her until she stopped which, admittedly, took close to a minute and occurred only after Pomfrey had cleared her throat.

He spent some time looking closely at the scars on her body. Most of them had the trademark dots of muggle stitching running along the length of them and showed the results of a very diligent and careful hand.

"Why do you have so many scars?" he asked her bluntly, squinting at the ragged and keloid wound line running down the outer side of her left leg. It started a few inches below the bottom of her cotton shorts and ended midway down her calf.

"Comes with the job," Parr told him.

"Why is this one so bad?" he asked Pomfrey, the tip of his index finger less than an inch from Parr's skin.

"Chara's femur and tibia were shattered during her incarceration. By the time she got to St Mungo's there was a bad infection and they were unable to heal it cleanly. The Healers found out too late that Chara was immune to magic so she had to be taken to a muggle hospital in order to have the bones pinned together. The doctors there didn't do a good job of stitching her back up."

Snape snorted. "Butchers."

"Nah, it's just like a go-faster stripe," said Parr lightly.

Snape bent down further. "What happened to your feet?" Her left foot had a small dressing between the bones of her first two toes, and both feet had pale white scars between each metatarsal.

"I had trouble staying still."

He peered up at Parr. "An elaboration would be appreciated."

"I had knives rammed into my feet in order to pin me to the floor," she provided calmly, as if it were of no moment. She held out her hands, palms toward her and her fingers spread. "They did the same to my hands, but they've not healed so well." The bandages around her hands reinforced her statement.

Snape wished he hadn't asked. His eyes slid away from hers towards Pomfrey. "Is there an infection?"

"None that I can find," the mediwitch replied. "Some of her wounds just fail to heal. I've tried all sorts of treatments." She held out a sheaf of parchments to him. Snape straightened from his crouched stance and took them from her. He could feel Parr's eyes on him as he read through her medical records. It was strange. Why would some of her injuries fail to heal, whilst others had? Most medical treatments employed by both St Mungo's and Pomfrey had no magical components in them, only substances that muggles had no access to. He flicked back and forth through the pages. There was no mention of Parr's symbiotic relationship with her Handler, yet that would surely have some effect on her abilities to heal. Was it possible that neither the hospital nor Pomfrey were aware of this relationship? Could it be deemed that much of a secret that its revelation would be denied a medical practitioner? Snape judiciously decided not to ask the question until he could find out from either Parr or, more likely, Lupin as to whether or not this was the case.

"I need to see the injury around her neck," he said instead, handing the parchments back to Pomfrey.

The puncture wounds were still inflamed, still that angry, puffy redness around them he'd seen three days ago.

"They look infected, but they aren't," said Pomfrey, folding the unwrapped bandages in her hands, a crease of confusion between her brows. "I've checked every day but nothing pathogenic shows up. No virus, bacteria or fungi, yet her immune system is reacting as if there were something there."

"Any allergies?" Snape asked faintly. He hooked his finger around one of Parr's side tresses to move it aside so he could get a better look at the punctures along the left side of her neck. She didn't move but the change in her attitude was like a slap across his face and he realised he'd overstepped some invisible line. He pulled his hand back as if it had been burned. Her face was deathly pale, lips pressed tightly together and nostrils flared wide. She pointedly didn't look at him, but the unmistakable rumble from deep in her chest told him how on edge his touch had made her.

"I'm... sorry," Snape said hesitantly. "I didn't mean..."

"The fault is mine," she interrupted him harshly. "I forget that you don't know." She kept her eyes fixed on the wall opposite and a faint blush of colour suffused the pale milkiness of her cheeks.

Snape looked at Pomfrey silently for help. She shrugged slightly at him and shook her head, her brows wrinkled in uncertainty. It seemed she had no idea what Parr was talking about either.

"Chara..."

"It is..." Parr paused, a ripple of consternation on her forehead. "... considered rude for... someone to touch a Striker's hair unless it is their Handler." Her shoulders rounded forward defensively, though whether that was due to the unintentional insult or the need for her to explain the reasoning surrounding it, Snape couldn't tell. It left him almost afraid to move lest he upset her further and end up with a black eye or worse.

"Chara, if you're upset, we can stop," Pomfrey told her gently.

Parr took a deep breath in through her nose. "No. It is my problem to deal with," she said flatly and raised her hands to scoop her hair up and out of the way, tipping her head to one side so that Snape could see her injuries more clearly without having to touch her.

He tried to make his examination of those deep, almost bite-like marks around Parr's neck as brief as possible, desperately uncomfortable at the waves of agitation that rolled off her, her words clashing with what he had seen prior.

Lupin had touched her hair. He'd witnessed that very clearly. It had been an almost intimate gesture, and one that she had shown no anxiety at. Pomfrey would surely have touched Parr's hair at some point, but the mediwitch had seemed just as surprised as he had felt at Parr's reaction.

He edged back cautiously.

"Poppy, I need to see a swabbed sample from each unhealed wound. Don't apply anything on them that will try to seal them. They need to be left open until I can figure out the best way to treat them."

"I need to get sample dishes from stores," Pomfrey replied, looking from him to Parr worriedly, patently unwilling to leave the two of them alone so soon after Parr's burst of upset.

Snape backed away several paces until he was right up against the cot behind him, opening an even wider distance between them. "I will wait here." He looked keenly at Parr. "That is, if you are all right with that."

Her nostrils flared and she let her hair fall loose from her hands. A small nod signalled her agreeance.

Pomfrey still hesitated. "I don't know..."

"I won't move from this spot," Snape assured her emphatically.

"I'll be as quick as I can, Chara," Pomfrey promised her and hustled off.

The ensuing silence screamed awkwardness. Snape watched Parr carefully, alert for any change in her profile that would signal any potential retributive act for his ignorance of seevy etiquette, but she remained still in distraught stoniness, her eyes trained resolutely on the wall opposite her, the deep red shade of her underwear and the rich pink scar down her leg seemingly the only colour in her.

There had been no mention of it in the records that Pomfrey had handed him, but Snape had a nasty suspicion that the true extent of Parr's abuse remained unreported, at least on parchment. Greyback wouldn't have been able to resist brutalising her, and the wounds on her feet and hands were enough to confirm that. Sycorax only knew what he would have put her through.

The situation was so far from ideal that Snape knew he shouldn't ask the question, but he had to do it while Pomfrey was out of the room.

"Who did it?"

Parr's head turned slowly towards him, her face blank. Silent.

He tried again. "Who put the collar on you?"

Once more, she didn't move, but he knew the boiling rage and shame that lay hidden behind that neutral expression he'd seen too often on her. He could almost taste it, bitter and acrid.

Her eyes glittered at him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

They stared at each other, frozen at a desperately perilous impasse as the seconds ticked by. Of course she wouldn't trust him, but he had to know.

He lifted his hands to his neck, undoing the buttons of both coat and shirt and pulling the material aside so she could see the healed scars around his throat.

A hissing growl rose up in her, her teeth bared to the molars like a dog mere seconds from biting. It took every last shred of self-control in him not to flinch and skitter even further away from her. He saw her left hand come up from her side, the first two fingers straight and pointed to the ceiling, a shadow of a knife held in threat.

"Who did it?" she demanded hoarsely of him, a stain of outrage shaping the lines of her face as she took two steps towards him, her hair bristling. "Who did it?!" She shook her hand, shaped as it was in a seevy symbol he couldn't translate. Snape forced himself to look right in her eyes, directly into that savage grey blaze of near terrifying intensity, and hoped that he hadn't made a fatal error in asking her the same question.

"Don't make me say his name," he told her quietly.

Her guttural growl intensified as she drew in a breath through her teeth, the vibrations of it running down through her body and into the floor, sinking into the wood until he thought he could feel them under his feet.

She shook her hand again. "Why?"

Snape blinked at her and heard the greater meaning behind that solitary word. "Because I disobeyed him."

Parr's face contorted in convulsive reaction and she screwed her eyes shut. "My list grows longer," she whispered and clenched her raised hand into a tight fist.

Pomfrey's approaching footsteps brought her eyes open and returned her to that former statue-like stance, aggressiveness hidden under the blanket of blank neutrality that Snape couldn't help but admire now that he knew the depth and intensity of fury it could obscure. Hurriedly, he refastened his shirt and coat just as Pomfrey entered the infirmary with a cluster of glassware in her hands.

"Who did it?" he whispered to Parr persistently. He had to know.

She closed her eyes slowly and her mouth formed the name silently.

Brachoveitch.

Chapter Forty-Four—Undue Haste

Chapter 44 of 59

It can be startling how rapidly a pleasant morning turns rotten.

"I won't bite you."

Snape looked up from his notebook and noticed the quirked eyebrow. He rolled the quill between his fingers slowly and didn't respond.

She actually smiled at him which made him blink a few times in mild confusion before he went back to his notes.

The pale winter light that filtered in through the frosted infirmary windows threw his shadow across the three metres of distance between the two of them: he hunched over in the wooden chair with his notebook resting on his knee, and she perched cross-legged on the cot. He felt it prudent to maintain his distance even though Pomfrey was nearby. Yesterday's exchange had left him more than a little rattled, and he wasn't about to blunder over some other obscure seevy boundary if he could help it.

Parr had been waiting for him, watching his approach with a deceptive calmness from her position on the cot, this time swathed in her usual grey Striker's uniform. Her knee-high boots sat at the foot of the cot, the polished leather reflecting the morning sunlight, the laces snaking across the floor like tiny black eels. She'd also drawn her hair back into a French plait. It gave her a rather odd appearance with her silver hair pulled in so close to her head as opposed to the usual messy mane she kept it in. She seemed smaller, less threatening. Yesterday's altercation had obviously induced a rare prudence in her to keep her hair away from his hands lest any further misunderstandings occur.

He'd dragged the wooden chair to its current position and sat down without a word to either her or Pomfrey, so the three of them remained in silence while he scribbled away, ignoring the two women. That was until Parr's statement lifted his head. Snape honestly couldn't tell if she was joking or not, so he decided not to reply.

Pomfrey folded and unfolded her hands in front of her waist repeatedly, sighing rather emphatically at his continued reticence. He hitched his shoulders and sniffed, the tip of the quill making the loudest noise in the room. A frustrated wind rattled briefly at the window panes and then died out.

"Do you have a family history of illnesses or conditions I should know of?" he asked eventually, eyes still trained on his notes and the quill sliding across the page in its uninterrupted formation of his spiky handwriting. "Besides the obvious," he added with a twist to his mouth.

"No." There was a pause. "Although my grandmother had a fat arse. Does that count?"

Snape refused to take the bait but Pomfrey tutted. He turned a page and kept writing. "Does your seevism leave you prone to certain illnesses or conditions?"

"Some seevy lines have trouble with osteoporosis and spinal alignment, but Parrs have never had those issues. There once was a history of diabetes but was bred out three generations ago, to my knowledge. Sometimes I get stomach ulcers and hypoglycaemia, but I was told that was idiosyncratic and not a general Parr trait. My aunt claims it came from my father, and though I only have her word on that, I have no reason to doubt it."

Snape's quill paused momentarily. "Seevy are matriarchal?"

"Yes."

He nodded faintly and wrote a few lines. "Do you take any medication other than what Madam Pomfrey gives you?"

"No."

He dotted the end of his sentence and blew on the page to dry the ink as he stood up. "Poppy, Miss Parr is to be on a restricted diet as of now. There is far too much uric acid in her blood which undoubtedly comes from the excessive amount of food she consumes and possible damage to her kidneys from the morphine. Please can you give a list of permissible foods to her and to the house-elves in the kitchens? She appears to have a pre-arrangement with them to allow her to eat to excess."

"Oh, what?" Parr squawked. "Is this because I mentioned my grandmother's fat arse?"

Snape closed his notebook and pocketed it. "Stand up."

Parr uncrossed her legs and slid off the cot, bare feet on the wood of the infirmary floor.

"I need to look in your eyes very closely which will involve touching you," Snape told her, staring at least a foot over her head. "Will that breach any etiquette I am unaware of?" he asked rather tersely.

"Only if you have morning breath," Parr replied, straightening her jacket.

Snape thinned his lips and stayed where he was.

"Are you going to do it from all the way over there?" Parr asked him curiously after a few torturous seconds. "I could come to you if that'll make things easier." Her tone was steeped in reasonableness, but Snape got the distinct impression she was trying to wind him up.

He huffed. "That won't be necessary." He traversed the gap between them smoothly, careful not to betray the hesitation he felt. If Parr got the idea he was afraid of her, she'd use it to her advantage. He placed his index finger under her chin to tip her head back so he could look in her eyes more easily. He squinted at the scarring across the left iris.

"How did you get the cut across your face?" he asked quietly

"Someone thought it amusing to risk my eyesight as a display of superiority over me." She stared fixedly back at him the same way he was at her which he found rather unsettling. Most people tended to look slightly away from the person examining their eyes, but then, Parr wasn't most people. Probably doing it deliberately to make him uneasy. He frowned as a curious sensation crept across his awareness, like a trickle of warm water.

"Stop that," he told her firmly.

"Stop what?" She actually sounded genuinely confused, but Snape wouldn't put it past her to feign innocence. The tickling sensation across his mind stopped rather coincidentally.

"Turn your head to the side," he told her and pushed her chin to the right to encourage her. He peered in her ear for a few seconds until he realised she was making a rude gesture behind her back at him.

"What's that for?"

"Just checking if you can see straight through to the other side, doc."

Snape thought he heard a noise behind him coming from Pomfrey that sounded suspiciously like a smothered laugh.

"Don't call me that."

"Okay, doc."

Snape ground his teeth and turned her head over to the left to check her other ear. He resisted the urge to run the tip of his finger over the notch cut into the outer rim of her ear, but couldn't help the memory of that disturbingly lucid dream he'd had of her from dancing across his mind. The one where he'd nuzzled that same ear and promised he was going to avail himself of the opportunity to feel every inch of her, outside and in. Repeatedly. He sighed slightly at the cruelty that he'd not been able to fulfil that promise. Fucking her would have been spectacular, even if it would only have been a dream; of that he had no doubt.

Parr gasped and he saw her eyes go wide. He snatched his hand away from her chin where his fingers had clasped her jaw and took a step back in surprise. They both looked at each other with the same expression—a blend of disbelief and embarrassment—before fixing their gazes in precisely opposite directions. Merlin's balls, surely she hadn't seen what he was thinking?

"Is everything all right?" Pomfrey asked with a sliver of concern.

"Yes," they both replied hastily and simultaneously. Snape looked askance at Parr and noticed her cheeks were decidedly reddened. He concluded with a sinking feeling that she must have picked up on what he had been thinking. It had been pure carelessness on his part, but he was so used to the privacy of his thoughts, especially when not engaged in direct eye contact, that it hadn't occurred to him to be more circumspect around Parr.

"I can't see properly in this light," he blustered and grabbed hold of Parr's sleeve and dragged her across the floor to the windows. He swung her around so she was facing into the sunlight. "Open your mouth!"

"Whuh?" said Parr just before Snape dug the fingers of one hand into the hollows above her jaw and clamped her nostrils closed with the fingers of his other hand. She squawked and opened her mouth so she could breathe. He yanked down on her jaw hard to get a better look.

"For heaven's sake, Severus, do you have to be so rough?" Pomfrey shrieked at him as he tipped his head to one side to peer at her back teeth. "There's nothing wrong with *asking* Chara to open her mouth instead of wrenching it open!"

Snape grunted. "You have a disgraceful number of amalgams. Don't you ever brush your teeth?" He let go of her jaw.

"Of course I do!" She rubbed where his fingers had pressed harshly into her skin.

"You've got more silver in there than there is in Gringott's coffers."

She smiled widely at him. "All the better to eat you with, my dear."

He stared at her blankly.

Parr sighed. "Classic literature's wasted on you."

He sneered. "I'm well aware of the type of literature *you* peruse, Miss Parr, so forgive me if I fail to be even in the least bit concerned about my reading choices not living up to your impeccable standards." He took his notebook out of his pocket and scribbled something in it. "Not everyone needs animated genitalia to enjoy a story," he muttered under his breath so only she could hear.

"I'm not interested in story when I'm looking at porn!" she guffawed at him.

His head shot up, eyes wide. "Is it perhaps even *remotely* possible that you could lower your voice? You might not care what others think about you, but I would prefer not to have people believe that I find your perverted tendencies of any interest whatsoever!" He darted a glance back in Pomfrey's direction.

Parr closed her mouth and put a prissy expression on her face.

Snape resumed scribbling his notes. "Don't you ever think about anything else other than food or sex?"

"Is that a medical question or are you interested in my perverted tendencies?"

"Jeune, pestiferous *shit*!" he barked at her, snapping his notebook closed and stalking over to the wooden chair. He dragged it noisily across the floor towards the cot, leaving arcing gouged scrapes in the varnished floorboards that made Pomfrey's eyes pop in indignation. He pointed at the mattress. "Sit down and..." He paused and pressed his hand briefly to his forehead. "... give me your foot," he finished weakly and sat down in the chair.

Parr plonked herself down enthusiastically on the cot, making the springs squeak in protest. "Careful, doc," she told him with rather more gaiety than the situation demanded. "I'm exceedingly ticklish!" She propped her foot up onto his knee and wriggled her toes.

Snape glared at her but it didn't make a dent in the rather vacuous smile she had plastered across her face. Her cheeks were still rather red, and he wondered if perhaps she was trying to hide her former embarrassment at his lewd thoughts under this over-exaggeration of excitement.

He sighed heavily and tried not to pause too noticeably before wrapping both hands around her foot and bowing his head forward. The wound under the dressing was not too serious, but the edges of it were quite swollen. He fished his hand into his pocket and drew out a glass vial of rather putrescent yellow liquid. Snape trapped Parr's foot between his knees tightly and poured a few drops from the vial right into the wound. The effect was instantaneous.

"Fucking hell, that stings like a bastard!" Parr shrieked, trying to wrench out of his grasp.

"Really? That's interesting," he responded flatly and kept his knees clamped tightly against her foot.

"You could have given me some warning!" The look on her face was thunderous, eliciting a perverse thrill in him. He decided to push his luck and scraped his fingernails lightly along the sole of her foot. He was exceedingly fortunate not to get her heel driven into his groin as she thrashed to free herself. "What was that for?" she bellowed.

Snape raised his eyebrows haughtily and pocketed the vial of anti-inflammatory. "Just testing your reflexes." He sniffed disdainfully as he replaced the dressing. "Adequate."

Parr glared at him.

"Other foot."

She continued to bore holes through his skull with her grey eyes, all trace of humour gone from her face. He knew she was restraining herself from ramming her fist into his guts, and that just spurred him on.

"You give or I take, Miss Parr. It's your choice," he pointed out softly and relaxed the muscles in his legs.

"Remus was right. You *are* vindictive," she mentioned acidly, clasping her foot protectively now that it was liberated from between his knees.

"Lupin is particularly biased," Snape shot back. "Though I doubt he's told you the reason why."

Parr narrowed her eyes shrewdly and scowled.

He sneered back at her. "I thought not."

It was just as Snape slid his fingers around Parr's right foot that Lupin walked through the door to the infirmary. The timing was near impeccable, as if the man had heard his name spoken and come running. The werewolf stopped dead at the sight of Parr's foot cradled in Snape's hands.

"What the hell are you doing?" he ground out tonelessly, a decidedly disapproving expression tainting his features; at least, the features that weren't already distorted by a resoundingly swollen and black eye.

"Remus, what happened to your face?" Pomfrey cried and launched herself in his direction.

"It's nothing, Poppy," Lupin dismissed, trying to wave aside the approaching mediwitch and failing dismally. He found his head clasped between her hands and pulled downwards so she could get a better look at the bruised tissue. "Just a clumsy accident."

Pomfrey tutted. "Did this accident happen to come in the shape of someone's fist? I can see the knuckle marks, Remus." She pulled him towards where Parr and Snape were. "Let me fix it for you," she demanded, completely ignoring his feeble protestations.

"Did you make another pass at someone, Remus?" Parr asked him brightly as he sat next to her on the cot.

Snape snorted. "Haven't you learned that sailors are out of your league, Lupin?"

"Well, you know I can't resist the challenge, Severus," Lupin replied snippily from around Pomfrey's shoulder. "Why should I let a cantankerous, graceless refusal stop me?"

This time it was Parr that snorted. Snape just rolled his eyes and went back to scrutinising the foot in his hands.

"Something that I should know about?" Lupin asked pointedly, wincing as Pomfrey fussed at his eye with her fingers.

"No," said Snape in a surly tone, squinting at Parr's toenails.

"I'm having a pedicure," said Parr happily. She made a peculiar yelping sound and dragged her foot out of Snape's hands.

"Adequate," Snape concluded, rubbing his palms together. "Stand up."

Lupin had a pinched look on his face that had nothing to do with the struggle against the tears that welled up in his right eye from the fumes of the anti-contusion ointment Pomfrey was smearing on his face.

"Turn around."

Parr smiled brightly at Lupin as Snape probed his thumbs along her lower back. "I like the bruise. It matches your eyes."

Lupin ignored her and glowered at the way Snape was running his hands over her back, dangerously close to her backside.

"Bend over. Slowly," Snape told her with a faint smirk on his face.

"Poppy, could I have a word with Severus and Chara alone, please?" Lupin asked abruptly in a strained voice as Parr's palms pressed flat against the floor.

"Well, I don't—"

"It's rather urgent," Lupin persisted as he saw Snape's hands splay over Parr's hips in what he felt was an altogether inappropriate manner.

"Would you mind telling me what, precisely, is going on?" Lupin requested firmly once Pomfrey had stalked off, muttering under her breath.

"Yes," Snape replied, moving his right hand into the small of Parr's back.

"He's an almost-doctor," Parr whispered at a ridiculously loud volume, peering up at Lupin from her doubled-over position. "I think he's checking out my gluteus maximus."

"Oh, well, that would account for the groping," said Lupin sarcastically, failing to miss the insulting curve to Snape's mouth as he twisted the palm of his hand back and forth over Parr's sacrum slowly and told Lupin in a rather protracted and confusing medical description what he could do with himself.

"I'd like to hear you suggest that to Dumbledore," Lupin retorted just as a small crowd of people spilled into the infirmary.

"Severus," the Headmaster greeted him after a blatantly obvious study of the scene before him. The faces of the people behind him were less ambiguously set, ranging from Tonks' scandalised and rather disgusted look to Shacklebolt's disturbingly canny frown. "Are we interrupting something?"

"Not at all," Snape replied calmly, removing his hands from Parr's back. "Stand up," he told her quietly.

"I had no idea you were involved in Chara's treatment," Dumbledore continued mildly, but the glint in his eye asked the question he didn't voice.

"A recent development, Headmaster, and only at Madam Pomfrey's request," Snape assured him, wiping his hands briefly as if the contact with Parr had been faintly nauseating.

The old wizard nodded slightly, though the glint remained. "I'm hoping this won't take long."

"As long as you need," said Snape and turned to leave, his large nose lifted slightly in hauteur at the disapproving expressions aimed in his direction.

Dumbledore held up his hand to forestall his exit. "No, it's appropriate that you remain."

"Albus," Jones whispered behind him in subtle warning.

"It's all right, Hestia. Severus is involved in this and I trust him to be discreet."

Tonks had the impetuousness and underdeveloped lack of prudence of youth not to mask her disagreement with the Headmaster's statement, earning her an acidic stare from Snape that eventually forced her eyes to the floor.

"What is it?" Parr asked with a crinkle of lines across her forehead, looking from one face to the next.

"I went to the warehouse where... Greyback was holding the lyc-females," Lupin told her, still squinting awkwardly against the ointment fumes.

Parr's face went flatter and colder than a slab of marble. "What?"

"Severus told me where it was," Lupin added hastily in an effort to deflect the repressed fury in the woman opposite him. Parr's head swivelled slowly to impale Snape with the brunt of emotion she kept hidden behind the impervious mask of detachment that had become all too familiar to him, but her eyes spoke volumes. It was like standing still whilst your clothing was on fire, but Snape managed to return her look with a cool dispassion of his own.

"You were so ill," Lupin continued, bringing her head back around. "I couldn't wait. I thought..." His eyes flicked to Snape briefly. "... she might be there."

"That was not what we agreed to," said Parr in a deadly evenness of tone. The Order members behind Dumbledore fidgeted in agitation.

"I know, but—"

"That was not what we agreed to," Parr repeated harshly.

Tonks stepped forward. "Chara, Remus thought he was only—"

"They weren't there," Lupin spoke over her. "Someone knew we'd found them. There was... blood everywhere." The distress on the man's face was almost painful in its intensity. "The place was empty, except for all the blood." He drew his shoulders in and hunched over in mournful anguish. "We were too late!"

"Who else knew the location?" Dumbledore asked Snape.

"No one. Except Karkaroff, and he wasn't even certain."

"How did he find them in the first place?" Shackbolt inquired.

"He's been sniffing about after Macnair," Snape replied rather reluctantly.

"And you never thought to tell us that?" Tonks accused, her hair shifting into a vibrant red of warning. "What else are you neglecting to tell us that might get innocent people killed?"

"Nymphadora," said Dumbledore quietly, preventing any further unwise condemnation in an already potentially explosive situation.

"If there was no one there, who hit you?" Parr asked Lupin in that same flat tone she had hammered her voice into.

Lupin looked up at her, the puffiness of his eye now markedly less than before. "I don't know," he admitted reluctantly. "I turned around, and the next thing I knew, I was on the floor." He paused. "I think it was a woman."

"You think?"

Lupin deliberately ignored Snape's incredulity. "There was more than one of them, but I heard a woman's voice."

"What did she say?" Parr's hands had balled into fists at her side.

Lupin scrubbed a shaky hand through his greying hair. "'Leave him. He's not one of them.'"

There was a protracted silence.

"Show me."

"Chara, it's too—"

"Show me!" she barked and reached for her boots. Lupin scrambled after her as she strode out of the infirmary, still barefoot. The others were sucked up in her slipstream and hurried to catch up. Dumbledore turned to Snape before he left.

"Find out who did it." It wasn't a question, and he didn't wait for a reply.

Chapter Forty-Five—Boundaries Blur

Chapter 45 of 59

Toe-treading, territory-encroaching and back-stabbing. Oh my.

Spun gold around flesh, both gaoler and prisoner.

The scent of promise heated by blood flow, a vow of lust and violence.

One heart pulsing in fear, heard by another that flexed with the coiled energy of an animal poised to strike.

Duty binding her to subservience. The way it should be.

Skin pale, smooth, soft. Unmarked. For now.

No more than this. No thoughts beyond that of possession. Of satiation. Of ruin.

His eyes lifted from her neck, focussing sharply on the plump, delectable prettiness of lower lip, catching the quiver that his hands had put there as they ran along her arms, as they dug into her ripeness with a steely resolve.

He would take her until she was destroyed, until she wept in recognition of what she should have known all along. The way it should be.

Fingers closing around her neck, tightening the trap she had been condemned to walk straight into, pressing deep into the throb of despair.

She opened her mouth to scream.

A voice lifted to shattering heights in desperation, in warning, in terror.

But that voice did not come from her mouth.

Macnair turned his head toward the door a fraction of a second before it disintegrated into long, jagged splinters that rained down on them, bodies turning away in reflexive protection. His wand was in his hand as he spun to face the breach.

"Bitches, leave!"

The three women scrambled past Greyback's hulking form, the shredding sobs of relief like fingernails tearing through skin, their dread driving them from one nightmare past another to freedom.

The werewolf's head turned slowly, taking in the scene before him. Macnair saw the madness in his eyes, the cold exactitude of purpose, and for a brief moment glimpsed his end in them.

"The two of you fornicate together?" The man's disgust twisted the brutal harshness of his face. "And they call *me* an animal!" He stepped further into the room with an inexorable resolve, as if oblivious to the wand pointed directly at his heart. "But then, I shouldn't be surprised to find the both of you engaged in such activity. Fucking others is all you seem capable of." He loomed closer, the stench of his breath raking at Macnair's nose, his cracked and stained teeth bared up to disease-spotted gums. "But I don't much care for being fucked, Macnair. It's very, *very* bad manners." His gaze flicked over to the figure reclined on the chaise longue. "One move, Brachoveitch, and I will ensure you pay dearly. With your own dear son's blood."

The gaunt, one-eared man with the deep set eyes stilled his hand on its move to his own wand, struck into immobility by Greyback's words.

The werewolf laughed nastily. "You're not the only one who knows how to inflict pain, and when properly motivated I can be thoroughly creative." He gritted his teeth together. "Try me. I *dare* you!" Saliva leaked from his mouth and trickled down his whiskered chin, tainted red from the sweetness of savagery. "I always take out an insurance policy when dealing with scum."

Brachoveitch raised both hands slowly, away from his pockets, eyes flat in unwilling obeisance.

Greyback turned his attention back to Macnair. "I made the mistake of thinking you were smart. You certainly waste no opportunity to grind your superiority in my face, yet here I am, wondering how... the fuck... you expected to get away with this!"

Macnair bared his brown teeth at the werewolf, his moustache bristling under his nose and he firmed his hand's grip on the wand. The gap between the two men vanished as Greyback screamed in the Chief Executioner's face.

"Tell me, Macnair! How did you plan to escape me tearing you to shreds and feeding you to the cats?!" The barely restrained madness in the man's eyes flared into throat-cutting insanity. He knocked Macnair's hand aside with terrifying speed and had him slammed up against the wall before the hex could even form. "I should have recognised the stink of treachery on you long before."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Macnair gasped, his windpipe being crushed by Greyback's forearm across his throat. He found himself thrown forcefully across the room to land heavily next to the chaise longue.

"You stupid *bastard*!" Greyback roared, the fingers of his hands splayed in outrage. "Where have you taken them?!"

Macnair stared uncomprehendingly at him. He wasn't fast enough to dodge the jagged piece of wood flung at his head. The impact with his skull made his ears ring.

"The lyc-females! Where have you taken them?!"

The floored man clutched his bleeding head in his hands and groaned, swaying as the room spun around him in a woven streak of colours and brutality.

Greyback switched his focus to Brachoveitch, who merely returned the werewolf's unhinged demand with a cool, silent, emotionless glance. Nothing ever rattled him. He was notoriously devoid of emotion; something of an advantage for a torturer. Of the two of them, he was deadlier. Macnair had the capacity to be dangerous, but he could be swayed by emotion if one knew which buttons to push. Brachoveitch had the heart of a dyed-in-the-wool serial killer. It was near impossible to tell what was going through his mind at any time, and therefore his actions could rarely be predicted.

The werewolf searched hard to find some clue in the man's pale, sharp face, some indication of guilt that would serve to justify Greyback's outrage. He may have well have been looking at stone.

"Don't know... what you're talking about," Macnair slurred, trying in vain to get back on his feet, one hand mopping about on the floor for his wand. It was a pointless effort anyway. Greyback was always careful to have himself primed against the effect of magic by draining his captured seevy as often as he could. It left him temporarily devoid of his own magical ability, but then his overwhelming brute strength filled the gap with a surprising efficacy.

"The women are gone from the warehouse! Must I spell it out to you, you traitorous, greedy milk-sop!"

Macnair stared up at him stupidly, the search for his wand abandoned. Brachoveitch, on the other hand, was on his feet immediately.

"This was never a partnership in your minds, was it?" Greyback noted. "Just an unashamed use of my time and my resources for you to get what you want. Some things never change." He spat on the floor in blunt emphasis. "More fool me for thinking they would."

"They're gone?" Macnair repeated, a constricting clutch of dread in his guts. "Where? How?"

"Why are you asking me, you arrogant turd!" Greyback roared. "How should I fucking know?!"

Macnair flinched as the volume of Greyback's voice split through his throbbing skull. "But I was there only five... six hours ago. They were *there*! I saw them!"

The werewolf clenched his fists and shook them in utter rage and frustration. "Listen to me, you terminal shit of a man! They're... not... there... because you took them! I lost three of my finest men in your little stunt. You painted the fucking walls with them!"

"It wasn't us," Macnair told him, the iron returning to his voice as his head began to clear and the adrenalin returned strength to his muscles. He dragged himself to his knees awkwardly.

"Ah, spare me the bollocks, Macnair. I've had a gutful of it."

"Speaking of bollocks, Greyback, how do we know this isn't some shallow hokum on your part to steal the women yourself and feign ignorance under foul-mouthed accusations?" the gasping man inquired, leaning heavily against the wall for support.

"Fuck me, Macnair. What kind of retard do you think I am? If I'd taken them, you'd be all over me like fleas on a dog! I was going to get them in the end anyway, so why the

hell would I risk that by taking them now? Who else knew they were there? Eh? Tell me that!"

"There's only one way to find out." Macnair wiped the blood trailing down his forehead with the back of his hand.

Greyback bared his teeth and raised his hand, finger pointed directly at Macnair's face. "We will go together. On foot. Either of you as much as flinch in my direction, I will rip you in twain like a wishbone. If you think of hexing me or Disapparating, the heir to the Brachoveitch estate dies and the Ministry's Executioner goes down in a tawdry ball of flames when his sexual deviancy makes headlines in the *Daily Prophet* tomorrow morning." He waited a few heavy seconds to ensure his words had sunk in. "Now, gentleman, zip your cocks back in your pants and let's go for a little stroll, shall we?"

The cluster of women at the bottom of the stairs edged backwards nervously as the three of them descended, trapped against vacating the brothel by the darkly threatening figure standing in front of the doorway to the street.

Macnair stopped dead on the steps.

Greyback laughed harshly. "Your puppies weren't very happy when they found out what had happened. They think that perhaps I can offer them something more suited to their long term goals. Isn't that right, Evanton?"

The Teverington Striker said nothing, but the gravelly rumble from his chest spoke volumes, his green eyes locked firmly on Macnair, who developed a rather energetic tic in his left cheek.

Greyback shoved Macnair roughly. "Get moving."

The torturer and the executioner edged around the Striker carefully and out through the door to where Evanton's Handler waited in the shadows.

"Madam," Greyback acknowledged the tall and statuesque woman who shielded her girls as best she could from the hulking mass leering at them. "Such a pleasure to visit your establishment. A shame about the clientele, though."

She returned his gaze coolly, almost regally, her chin lifting slightly. Her wand remained pointed unerringly at Greyback's chest. The werewolf looked at her raised hand with a condescending twist to his mouth and chuckled. Only after the men had left did she lower her hand again.

"All of you, go home. Wait to hear from me."

The girls fled at her command, desperate to be as far away from the brothel as possible.

The madam stood alone at the bottom of the stairs, her gaze fixed on the wall opposite, a carving of feline beauty lost in thorny thought.

She turned smoothly, the hem of her pale green satin robes whispering at her feet as she ascended the stairs. An almost dismissive wave of her wand locked and warded the door securely. She swept her wand around her head delicately to secure the rest of the building. Her girls would already have left, and any clients that knocked on the door would have to seek their pleasures elsewhere for now.

The Floo powder trailed in an arc from her fingers and into the flames under the mantel in her private room. She leant down and further into the licking heat, the curls of her hair swinging forward and over her shoulder in a tumultuous wave of perfumed softness.

"Lucius. I must speak with you."

The slender figure darted from shadow to shadow, her loose hair swinging around her as she turned her head to check that none followed. She had zigzagged, backtracked and Disapparated in a confusing pattern to ensure that anyone trailing her would be left utterly bewildered. Her father had taught her well. She blessed his name and slipped swiftly across the street, avoiding the dirty orange pools of illumination thrown by the street lamps.

Her feet carried her silently into the building and up the three flights of carpeted stairs to the loft. Tapping lightly on the wooden door to warn its occupants, she waited a few seconds before entering, crooning softly and reassuringly. The birds shuffled on their perches, blinking cautiously at the gentle light from the end of her wand. Her eyes searched out the one she needed. Good, he was there. Perhaps the hunting had been poor tonight.

She hurried to the small writing table and scratched out her message with a shaky hand, cursing at the way the quill jittered in her fingers. The scrap of parchment was rolled tightly, a length of slender ribbon plucked from the drawer.

"Fly fast, my friend" she told the owl, tying the scroll carefully to his outstretched leg. He clicked his beak at her, stretching his wings and beating them gently a few times, the triangle of white feathers on his chest stirring in the air currents. And then he was gone.

"You knew nothing of this?"

Trint shook his head. "First I've heard of it."

Malfoy drew his finger slowly back and forth under his lip, digesting this.

"And you caught the entire conversation?" he asked the woman sitting opposite him.

She raised an elegant eyebrow at him. "They were hardly keeping their voices down," she pointed out.

It was possible that it had been an elaborate ruse by Greyback to grab the lyc-females for himself, feign ignorance, and lay the blame on Macnair and Brachoveitch, but that wasn't the werewolf's style. It seemed that someone else was playing their hand. Another person in the game. The rules had shifted once more.

"Interesting," Malfoy understated, looking away and into the shadows at the edges of the room. He tapped the top knuckle of his index finger lightly against his mouth.

"What will you do?" the madam asked curiously.

Her question brought Malfoy out of his reverie. He inhaled as if to reply, but smiled instead.

"As always, my dear, your information is timely and appreciated. Do you require compensation for the inconvenience of having so many... unsavoury characters intruding on your establishment?"

The madam returned his smile with a tight one of her own. "The offer is appreciated but unnecessary, Lucius. In a fashion, Greyback has done me a favour."

Malfoy arched a graceful eyebrow in query.

"I came close to losing three of my girls this evening. Macnair and Brachoveitch paid highly for them, but that wasn't why I sent them to what would have been a gruesome end." She stood fluidly, arising from the high-backed armchair as if it had been a throne. "To deny those two would have marked us all for death. The needs of the many," she sighed, a mixture of disgust, regret and frustration rippling across her smooth, high forehead. "I do not wish ever to be placed in that position again."

"What will you do?" Malfoy handed her earlier question back to her as he also stood.

She smiled enigmatically at him. "My regards to your delightful wife, as always." An elegant hand reached towards him.

"Stay." Malfoy took the proffered hand into his own. "Narcissa has so few genuine friends left from her school days. She would love to see you."

The curve to the madam's lips took on a melancholic twist. "And I her, but I would not have her reputation affected by mine in any way." She nodded faintly. "It is better this way, however much I wish it was not so." Her hand slipped from his and sought the fine powder of her departure from the drawing room.

Malfoy waiting until the flames had warmed to gold before turning to Trint.

"Well?"

Trint sighed. "They have made their move. And smartly."

"How so?"

The information peddler rubbed his hands together slowly, elbows propped on his knees. He seemed not to notice his missing fingers any more, but perhaps the three fleshy stubs served as a deterrent to such inspection, markers that they were to his continued "failure" in Greyback's eyes. Perhaps it was just the promise of the eventual return of those missing digits that allowed him to withstand their brutal and agonising removal, otherwise Malfoy would have struggled to secure the man's loyalty.

"Macnair and Brachoveitch had planned to steal the women away at dawn tomorrow," he revealed. "I just found out this evening that they'd laid a very careful trail to a den south of the river. Greyback couldn't have failed to have followed it to the scapegoats, leaving those two blameless." He gave a hollow laugh. "I wish I could have seen their faces." His face twisted into a vicious grin of shadenfreude.

"Where will the women be taken?"

Trint swivelled his shrewd brown eyes up to meet Malfoy's cool blue gaze. "Nowhere and everywhere," he replied cryptically. "No-one knows better how to hide these women." He straightened in his chair, the wood creaking in slight protest as his bulk shifted. "What will you do?"

Malfoy turned his head away from the man, his blonde hair swaying gently down his back, and smiled a smile of secrets, of decisions, of silence.

"What did you find?"

Parr lifted her head and looked at Dumbledore, the lines at the edges of her eyes showing strain.

"It looks like they were moved about five hours before it was discovered." She bowed her head to resume watching Snape stitching up the cut across her palm. His face was so close to her hand that she had to lean to one side to get a good look.

"Stop fidgeting," he told her absently, his breath tickling against the exposed skin of her wrist.

"Moved?" Dumbledore repeated, patting distractedly at his long beard. "Then they weren't killed?"

Parr shrugged, earning her a hiss from the man sewing her skin together. "It's possible that some of them may have been killed but I don't think so. At least not there."

"Then why all the blood?"

Parr drew the index finger of her free hand down the length of her nose a few times as if musing on this question. "I... think it was lyc-male blood."

"It could be that someone else, some other group has stolen the lyc-females away from... Greyback," said Lupin from behind Dumbledore, taking his chewed thumbnail away from his mouth briefly. "Whether it's another lyc-group, a different faction amongst the Death Eaters or an organisation we have yet to identify, we can't tell." He kept his eyes trained on Parr's hand resting on Snape's knee.

"Could it be other seevy?" Dumbledore posed.

Parr took an even longer time to answer that. "No. Whoever it was planned the ambush well. They have foresight and I suspect some experience in dealing with lycanthropes in order to mortally disable some and control others in order to remove them from the location, but seevy?" She shook her head. "It doesn't smell right for that."

Snape blinked. She was lying. Or at least, deliberately withholding something. He had no idea how he knew that, but he was certain she was keeping something to herself. He could almost... smell it.

"Then we can't be sure the lyc-females are in any better situation than they were before," Dumbledore concluded.

"They're not with Greyback or Macnair," Snape revealed quietly, using a small knife to cut the suture thread. He stuck the needle in the cuff of his coat-sleeve and squinted at his handiwork.

"How do you know that?" was Lupin's rather suspicious inquiry, drawing him a frowning glance from Dumbledore. He didn't see the way Snape's mouth compressed into a thin line at his tone.

"They're both at each other's throats, each accusing the other of theft." Snape picked up a slender, amber glass bottle from the floor near his feet and shook it. "This incident may be enough to fraction the two of them apart, which could potentially make things even worse."

"It could work in our favour," the Headmaster pointed out. Snape merely shrugged instead of voicing his doubt on that and poured a thin line of the flask's contents along the knife wound on Parr's palm.

"Chara? Was she there?"

Parr's fingers curled reflexively, but whether that was in response to Dumbledore's question or from the way Snape's thumb drew over the sutured cut to spread the brownish-red antiseptic was hard to tell.

"No." The terse, one-word answer betrayed none of the boiling disappointment and anguish that roiled out of Parr. It made his hands tighten momentarily around her injured one in disorientation. Was she deliberately pushing it onto him the way she had once pushed her hunger? Did she even know she was doing it? He shook his head slightly to clear the slight spinning sensation deep in his brain and took the dressings from Pomfrey's outstretched fingers.

"What happened to your hand?" Dumbledore asked finally, making Snape pause, his shoulders tightening as he waited for Parr to answer. Would she tell him she'd cut her hand to stain the knife she'd given him? Something inside him prickled in hostility, something he knew didn't come from Parr. Something that hissed in blood-fuelled possessiveness. He blinked several times at the unexpected reaction.

"Just one of those things, Headmaster," Parr replied smoothly. "It's nothing to be concerned over."

Something rippled over Snape's awareness, a gentle caress that silenced the sibilant irritation like a calming stroke down an agitated animal's back. He covered his confusion hastily by wrapping Parr's hand up tightly in the bandaging, trying his hardest not to jiggle his leg.

"We have a new safe house, Chara." Dumbledore informed her. "This one's a lot more secure than the last one. Professor Moody had been exceedingly thorough."

"I'm... pleased to hear that, Headmaster," said Parr carefully. Snape looked at her sharply wondering if he was the only one to hear the lie behind her words. She studiously avoided meeting his gaze.

"Poppy, when will Chara be well enough to resume her work?" the Headmaster asked, seemingly oblivious to the falsity of Parr's statement. "There is some urgency involved."

"Some of her wounds must be kept open. Therefore it leaves her prone to exacerbating them further with significant physical activity. I would much rather she did not do anything strenuous for a further ten days at least."

The corners of Snape's mouth pulled down as the prickly hostility rose in him again. Dumbledore was right to ask Pomfrey instead of him, but he couldn't shake the sensation of territoriality. He'd forgotten how jealously possessive he became over those he treated, bristling like a cat being edged away from a fresh kill at anyone who tried to elbow him out of the way, no matter how subtly or graciously they tried to do it. It was yet another behavioural tendency that had gotten him in trouble as a trainee, and it seemed the passing years had not lessened the proclivity for it in him.

"Anything that you can do to speed her recovery would be welcomed, Poppy."

Snape had to clench his teeth together to prevent a rather vituperative sentence from slipping out of his mouth. Had it been anyone but Dumbledore, he wouldn't have bit it back. He looked up automatically and straight into Parr's eyes. She shook her head slightly at him, the movement so minimal that she surely meant only him to see it. He wasn't certain, but he thought she smiled. Just a fraction. The hissing cat retracted its claws and purred. Sweet Hecate, what was she doing to him?

Snape grabbed the front of her jacket and dragged her to a standing position away from the cot. "Up," he instructed harshly, desperate to mask his uncertainty. "Follow the end of my finger." Her grey eyes tracked his calloused finger back and forth unerringly, her brows raised in faint surprise.

"Remus, if I may speak with you a moment," said the Headmaster, drawing the werewolf away from the end of the infirmary. "What are the chances of you being able to make contact with the den near Epsom? Hestia says they've been unusually active and I think maybe..." His voice trailed out of hearing range as the two men moved towards the entrance.

"Close your eyes and point where I click my fingers," Snape told Parr. He winced as she grabbed his wrist tightly after the first click. "Point, not mangle!" he snapped, pulling his arm out of her grip. She was fast and unfailingly accurate. He tried to trick her by using magic to set a click behind her, but she snatched his wand out of his hand and threw it along the length of the infirmary without opening her eyes. It landed with a clatter not far from Lupin's boots.

Pomfrey tutted. "Chara, it's rude to do that," she chided and rustled off to fetch it.

"How did you know?"

Parr opened her eyes and wrinkled her nose at him.

"Can you smell magic?"

She smiled tightly. "I can smell *you*."

His eyes flicked over to where Pomfrey plucked his wand up off the floor.

"Why did you lie to the Headmaster?"

Parr gave him a penetrating stare. "I do not trust him..." She paused and frowned. "... either," she added quietly with a mix of astonishment and inquiry.

He saw Pomfrey linger to say something to Lupin, buying him a few extra seconds. "Can you communicate with your sister?" He saw the blank expression start to form. "Don't try and dissemble. I know she's your Handler."

The rumble in Parr's chest warned him he was skirting close to offending her again. "You know all too much, and all too little, Professor," she whispered. "Regardless, you should know better. We do not speak of such things where others can hear."

"I've... *seen* her."

Parr's eyes went wide.

"She looks like you. She's your twin, isn't she?"

"She is Handler before all else," Parr hissed. She looked back quickly to where Pomfrey was talking with Lupin and Dumbledore. The mediwitch started on her return. Parr's head turned back, a wisp of hair falling loose from her plait to slide along her jaw with the movement. "You should know that!"

"Why?"

Parr searched his face, looking up at him in apparent confusion. "Because you are Dual!" She took half a step towards him. "Where did you see her?" The desperation in her words was keener than a blade.

Snape realised that Pomfrey was too close for him to answer, so he showed Parr in the only way he knew. The pad of his outstretched finger touched her forehead lightly and briefly.

"Severus, Remus says he needs to speak to you before he goes," said Pomfrey, holding out his wand to him. "I can take care of Chara's neck for you."

The image formed in his mind, and he pushed it clumsily toward hers before turning away. His hand slipped the wand from Pomfrey's grasp wordlessly and headed over to where Lupin was waiting for him just past the infirmary's doorway.

"What do you want?" he asked the werewolf impatiently, sneering down his nose at Lupin.

"Why have you got your hands all over her?" Lupin demanded to know truculently, peering at him through his faintly bruised eye. "It's highly inappropriate for you to grope her the way you do."

Snape fixed him with a nasty stare. "I think, Lupin, you're confusing a medical examination with one of your disgusting, drunken one night stands. Regardless, what I'm doing is none of your business."

Lupin's face went rather steely. "As a matter of fact, it *is* my business. As Chara's guardian I have a say in her treatment, so I would appreciate it if I am kept informed of anything that you do to her."

"How very lycanthropic to regard a woman as chattel, Lupin," Snape told him silkily.

The werewolf's expression screamed effrontery. "I would never..."

"Unless Miss Parr wishes it, the details of her treatment are to remain unshared with anyone else, and quite frankly I don't care what you think you are. She is of adult age and therefore free to determine her own needs."

"You have no understanding of the arrangement between us, Severus, so stop twisting the situation into a knot."

"I don't think you realise how little you differ from other werewolves," said Snape, lavishing the kind of disdain he reserved especially for Lupin on the hunched, tattered-clothed figure before him. "One minute you act like a spoiled child who's had his favourite toy taken off him and then you carelessly discard that toy when something else glints prettily at you."

"You snide..."

"Are you going to ask for her leash back?"

That forestalled Lupin's tirade as abruptly as if Snape had struck him. He gaped, unsure of what to say in response; of what he *could* say in response.

"Are you going to make her run around like a pet? Is that it, Lupin?" His contempt for the man rose like bile in his throat. "Does it give you a thrill to drive her to do your bidding while you dangle the possibility of rescuing her Handler just far enough in front of her so she'll obey you? Just far enough out of her reach that you'll never actually give her what she wants?"

Lupin flinched back at his words.

"You could have found her Handler months ago. Even you: a sorry excuse of a man who can usually only find his way to the next bottle of cheap liquor. Yet mysteriously the search continues. Why is that, Lupin? Tell me why that is."

The look in the werewolf's eyes was like that of an animal being backed into a corner, uncomprehending as to the reason why it was being herded so.

"I've *tried*!" he whispered. "I've tried but I can't find her." His hands opened and closed convulsively in front of him, the shadows in the corridor smothering him in his frantic despondency. "I can't *find* her!"

"Such a disappointment," Snape pronounced with a twist to his mouth. "The boy's failure becomes that of the man's. But then, I shouldn't have expected anything else. Should I?" he asked softly, half-closing his black eyes at Lupin, the full force of his derision turned on the cringing figure before him, attacking him verbally when he was at his weakest, at his most vulnerable. Snape waited until the flicker of defiance returned to Lupin's eyes before he turned his back on him and walked away.

Chapter Forty-Six—Bargain

Chapter 46 of 59

In order to cheat Death, a little help is sometimes required.

The snow had turned to sludge: white into a patchy grey that grew steadily darker the more he walked over it. Back and forth.

Perhaps he hadn't done it right. He'd once thought himself skilled, but in comparison to others, he'd realised that had been an impressive piece of self-delusion on his part.

Snape sighed heavily, the air twisting as it chilled into a pale, pearly cloud. Maybe not self-delusion. It had been like entering into a circle of people thinking you were better than they at something... anything... only to find that, in fact, you weren't nearly as adept as you thought you were. It stung like acid and made him resentful.

Back and forth, eroding a dark line into the snow in the swale. Slipping in and out of the shadows. Fingers interlaced and palms apart to stop himself from picking at his thumbnail in agitation.

Perhaps he hadn't done it right.

The cold rarely bothered him, but he'd been waiting out here for close to an hour; at first patiently, then irritably, then disappointedly. The snow was trudged to a wet mush that seeped into the cuffs of his trousers and up his legs with a creeping freeze. He stopped pacing. Realistically, how much longer could he wait before he had to give the idea up? For whatever reason, she was not here. She was not going to be here. He turned his head to look in the direction of the castle, hidden behind the rise, and wondered which he was most angry about: that she hadn't understood what he'd asked, or that she had already refused him.

He felt it, that precarious balance that occurred just before a decision, a decision that could go either way, and ached to hold on just that little longer before committing himself. Just another minute. He began to pace once more.

But would it be just another minute? Would it be five? Or ten? It had already been over sixty because he had been telling himself "just another minute" for the past half an hour. He hissed in irritation at his vacillation and swirled to the rise, accepting bitterly the finality of her absence.

A whisper stopped him, the slide of graupel in the distance. He held himself as still as possible and listened, eyes lifted to the crest of the rise. The distinctive crunch of foot in snow as the silhouette loomed above him. He squinted but could make no sense of its form in the poor light. The sky bloomed pendulous clouds that hid any sky-borne illumination so that even the stark whiteness of snow was dulled into a bluish bruise across the land.

The silhouette held steady, a shoulder of mountain that stood fast in the flowing chaos of the world around it, and then it was a flux of black water that coursed into the swale, flicking up white powder as it circled behind him with the speed and fluidity of a cat.

"Still here, Professor?"

She sounded surprised and not a little amused. He turned slowly to face her.

"Only just."

Parr laughed at that, a low-pitched rumble under her voice that echoed in the clearing. He couldn't see her face, but he fancied he could see every one of her teeth bared at him.

"Why out here?"

Snape blinked a few times, wondering how much he should say so early on. "So none other can hear."

The silhouette swelled as she stood straighter, out of her coiled crouch, looming up to the greatest height he'd ever seen her at. "Which of us is it that has something to lose?" she queried, tone deep and thickened into a threatening alto.

"Both."

A pause, then she dropped to her hands to stalk around him in a wide circle, her arms long enough to support her with her back at an angle above the horizontal. Snape turned on his heel to match her speed, determined not to have her hulking behind him where he couldn't see her.

"Interesting. If that is the case, then why do you risk destabilising the already precarious position we find ourselves in?"

"You have something I want."

There was a bullish huff, breath streaming out in pale grey before her bowed profile. "Is that so?" She completed her circle around him and continued to a second with a loping pace.

"And I have something you want."

Parr laughed at that, tossing her head like an equine unbroken to the rein. "I find that unlikely. My needs are very great, Professor, and I've heard many promises that have yet to prove their worth. What could you possibly offer that others haven't already?"

Snape's jaw clenched with a momentary uncertainty, his confidence off kilter from her predatory circling. "I will find her."

Parr stopped abruptly in her tracks. "Tread carefully, Professor," she warned with a deadly exactitude. "I will not have such things bargained so lightly."

"And I do not offer carelessly, Striker," he replied, watching the crisp delineation of her profile against the icy slope. "But I think, perhaps, my need is as great as yours."

She may as well have been a rock set in the ground for the stillness she had locked herself into. There was an agonising pause before she spoke. "And what need is that?"

"Do you agree?" he pressed, fighting the bone-deep urge to move his hand closer to the wand in his pocket, knowing full well it would be useless against her but so honed to its protection that he may well have forsaken the air he needed to breathe than deny its reassuring power.

Her head dropped down and away from him, the arcing lines of her face hidden from sight, hair trailing across the snow. "This is not my place," she muttered. "I bargain poorly. I am Striker, not Screen."

"Do you have a choice?"

Her bulk shifted. He couldn't tell if she faced toward or away from him, detail lost in the blackness of her form under the clouded night sky.

Time twisted and flexed, a rope that knotted into unimaginable turns and snarls, a membrane that rippled to the edges of existence and beyond to where instance and eternity merged.

"There is always choice, but some choices are so much harder to make than others. I do what I must," she sighed as if to herself. "What is it you want?"

"To live."

Again, that bullish exhalation. "You seem capable of that already, Professor. I cannot imagine that you would need my assistance for that."

"To survive, then."

Parr pondered on that for some moments. "And how could I increase your chances of that?"

Snape stared into the dark mass in front of him, a hole punched into the air to a place of unfathomable depth, a chasm that could easily claim the life he tried so desperately to hang on to even when the crushing despair of inevitable ruin threatened to drown him. "Teach me how to hide."

Her head swung around slowly and for a brief moment a line of green flame flickered across her eyes. Her silence was question enough.

"Thought. Intention. By necessity my mind must be my own if I am to succeed."

"And which of your three masters do you wish to hide from?"

Three? Snape frowned, wondering if he had misheard her. "There are only two," he reluctantly admitted, a bitter twist to his mouth. "And they are more than enough."

The swelling rumble made him edge back and away from her. "Understand this clearly, Professor. If this is to be done, there must be no secrets. No occlusion. No lies. You enter into this with the understanding that if you mislead me in any way, the bargain is null and void and I will take whatever action I deem necessarily to even the score. I must know who has their hands on your throat, and you must accept that I outrank them all. All three of them."

"I... do not know of a third," he maintained doggedly, muscles tensed in a futile readiness should she decide that he was already attempting to hide a truth from her and cut him down right there and then.

"That may be the case," Parr mused with a surprising mildness. "Nevertheless, I must stand above them all for this bargain to proceed."

"That condition may condemn me to the death I must delay."

"Everyone dies, Professor. Immortality is not in my power to bestow." She actually chuckled, making him blink rapidly at her mercurial changes of mood. "Surely such a great Potions master needs no assistance to put a stopper in death?"

The wry comment made him press his lips together tightly in a flush of chagrin and annoyance. "Death and I have a very special understanding."

"Which is?"

"All debts must be paid. Eventually."

"Ah." Parr sighed in realisation. "The third is the strongest, but not as strong as she thinks she is."

"But strong enough," he noted quietly. "Everyone succumbs in the end."

"I do not go where she leads," Parr stated flatly, implacable determination hammered into every word. "No matter how hard she pulls. Yet be aware that if I stand behind you, Dual, I may bring you closer to the end you wish to avoid."

"Avoidance is not the issue, only delay of the inevitable. I am a dead man anyway, whether I discharge my debt or not."

She resumed her circling, the first flakes of snowfall drifting from arctic heights to settle in her tracks. "Then why discharge it at all?"

"If I succeed, my death will be short. If I fail, my death will last a long, long time." Snape turned to follow her on her encirclement. "A poor choice, but a choice nonetheless."

"And how did she trap you into such a choice?"

"I made a mistake, a fatal one, and she showed me what waited for me at the end. I made a bargain, and she agreed."

Parr's steps paused momentarily. "She agreed?" There was a huff of heated exhalation. "Interesting. Perhaps your tongue is more silver than I thought. But then, Death bargains better than I. She is notoriously sly and stubbornly greedy." The shadow paced once more. "You may have lost more than had you not bargained."

"More than my life?"

The snow began to fall thicker, peppering the darkness into a speckled confusion.

"She was going to get that anyway," Parr pointed out, the hidden gleam of her teeth twisted through her words. "But I like a challenge, and nothing gives me greater pleasure than sticking it to Death. *Validus quam nex*," she hissed. "Name your terms."

"I will find your Handler and in return you must teach me how seevy hide their thoughts."

Parr grunted. "Remus said he would find her. Not a very strong bargain on your side of the table, is it?"

Snape blinked the snow out of his eyes that had begun to drift in a light wind. "Lupin is ill-suited to such a task. He may believe he can do it, but unless I am mistaken, it has been several months...time neither you nor your Handler can afford."

Parr's pacing turned stiff in agitation, her silhouette slipping in and out of clear focus as the snow sighed down faster. "He is not the only one who searches."

"But the months have passed nonetheless, Striker. Of them all, Lupin has the greatest chance of finding her. His lycanthropy buys him access where others are forbidden to go, but that is not enough. He cannot go where I can."

"Remus is a good man, but he is... weak," Parr muttered, the admission coming to her mouth with obvious difficulty. "He is my friend and I owe him much. Another hard choice..." her voice trailed off. "What if he finds her before you? What of our bargain then?"

"I will teach you what they will not," Snape offered, winter's touch trailing down his face and smothering his clothing as if to embrace him into the landscape around him, to absorb him into its bleakness as one of its own.

"And what is that?" She sounded amused at his offer.

"Darkness."

"Why would I need to learn that?"

"Because that's what has your Handler. Because if you and your kind mean to seek protection in magical society, you must know that there are just as many among us that will use you just the way they use others. Because I know how the darkness works better than those who fight against it."

Her laugh was empty, like the space between the splintered teeth of a mountain range, harsh and unforgiving. "So you play both sides, Dual? How apt. But perhaps both sides use you as much as you use them." There was a tired sigh. "We are all tools. You. And I. That is how it has always been."

"Then we will use each other," Snape proposed, "and your Handler will live."

"And you?"

"I will live long enough."

Parr became still again, nothing more than a smudge of blackness to him, her thoughts her own as she turned the offer over in her mind. The connection with her earlier was nowhere to be felt here and now. She was blank to him, an impenetrable wall hiding all. Even had he been able to see her eyes, Snape knew that he would not have been able to divine anything from them.

Refusal was just as likely as acceptance, and he had no way of tipping the balance any further into his favour. Every time he tried to sway her, she dug her heels in, suspicious, cautious, cagey. His desperation to have her agreement concerned him. He hadn't realised how much he had needed what she could give him, weakening him into a reliance he could ill afford. He already depended on others far too much for his own liking. Perhaps her hand would just end up being one more on his throat, one more to squeeze the life out of him with unflinching mercilessness.

"I will ask," she stated roughly. She must have sensed his alarm, taking a few steps towards him, still obscured in body and mind from his perception. "We come as a set, Dual. I do nothing without her consent, but understand that the three of us are all who are to know of this, whether bargain is struck or not. You may play both sides, but you will not play us." The threat was a stark as bare branches against the sky.

He nodded, one step closer to the desired end. "Very well."

"Wait."

And then she was gone. To where, Snape could not tell. She could be ten feet from him or ten miles for all he could see through the snowfall. He had no choice but to do as she said. Parr could teach him to be stronger in mind than he had thought ever possible. He would take anything that would give him an edge over those who used him. She would take anything that would save her Handler. *Please, let it be enough.*

He curled his numbed fingers into the palms of his hands and shivered, head tipping forward to shield his face from the falling snow. And waited.

This time, he did not hear her approach, but her presence pressed against his mind like a hand on a door.

"The bargain is ill-balanced. We cannot agree to it."

Snape didn't raise his head, the abrupt heaviness that formed inside him causing every bone in his body to petrify under the weight of cruel refusal.

"I cannot give you any more," he told her, defeat saturating into his will like poison. "So be it." He turned to leave.

"You misunderstand."

Her voice halted his departure.

"The bargain favours us too greatly. We cannot agree to it. We owe more than we repay."

Confusion and triumph warred within him for the upper hand at her words. "It bothers you to be advantaged?"

"It is not right. It is not our way. There must be something more."

He smiled. "It is enough."

The contusion bloomed in front of him, a blade held point down toward him. "In your eyes, maybe. Perhaps I can find a way to tip the scale level once more."

Snape shrugged slightly in response.

"Take it." Parr pushed the slender blade closer to him, her bare, elongated fingers wrapped around the hilt. She pulled back and away from him once it sat in his hand. "She wanted you to have it."

The pale metal was blood-warm in his palm. It must have sat next to her skin to avoid the night's chill. It seemed a peculiarly intimate gesture to him. He should have been ashamed at how much that pleased him, but he couldn't deny that victorious sensation as it slithered down his spine and swelled into a perilously sweet licentiousness that caught him off-guard.

"Then we are agreed?" Snape asked, trying desperately to hide the gasp that had found its way into his breathing, trailing the fingers of his free hand down the length of the blade with a smothering cupidity for what it represented.

"We are."

The confirmation made his blood surge with unfamiliar heat.

Parr cleared her throat quietly. "I... ah... am freezing my arse off here, Dual," she whispered, a taint of what sounded like contrition in her voice. "Is there any chance..."

"Get inside," he replied smoothly, his fingers tightening around the hilt of the familiar blade greedily. "If I find you have caught pneumonia, you'll regret it in more ways than one."

This time her laugh held genuine levity. "If you say so, doc," she replied from behind the curtain of swirling white between them. "Don't play out here too long, now." And with that caution, she left Snape clutching his prize, his body tight with a rapaciousness he had no clue as to how to quench.

Chapter Forty-Seven — Role Reversal

Chapter 47 of 59

Teacher and student switch places for a very challenging subject.

A/N: Yes, it's been a painfully long time, but hopefully the length of this chapter makes up for it.

Lupin could hear the shrieking from the floor below. In the split second that it intruded on his awareness, his body had already decided on the course of action to take before his brain had even lurched in the direction of a conscious thought process. He cleared the last flight three steps at a time, hand fumbling for his wand in the only pocket that didn't have holes, and gaped at the scene laid out before him in the infirmary.

Parr was stuck ten feet up the wall, bellowing at the top of her lungs down at her audience of one. At first, Lupin couldn't see what was keeping her up there. Despite having become so accustomed to her immunity to magic, it wasn't her position that was the source of his disbelief. He'd seen her scale the side of a building with nothing more to assist her than hands and feet, but here, even she'd have trouble keeping herself up against the wall with the way she was thrashing her limbs about like a red-faced child pitching a tantrum. There was no mistaking the utter outrage on her face, twisted as it was into a mask of throat-biting fury, the screamed vitriol so forceful that Lupin could see the spittle rain down in the mid-morning sunlight streaming in through the windows. He doubted that the affront had as much to do with the state of her undress as it did being pinned up like a trophy animal that had been shot dead in a Muggle safari hunt.

Lupin sighed heavily and winced as a particularly colourful invective blasted out of Parr's mouth. If she didn't stop struggling, the material that was holding her up would certainly give way and dump her on the floor, totally naked. It wasn't her well-being he was worried about. If she got loose, her captor would find shreds of himself thrown like confetti around the room before he could blink.

The werewolf pocketed his wand and frowned as a headache bloomed behind his eyeballs. Why couldn't these two resist winding each other up? They fought more often than twelve-year-old schoolboys in the playground.

"Christmas spirit seems to be a bit thin on the ground in here," Lupin noted drily during a pause in the tirade as Parr sucked in a breath.

Snape's head swivelled slowly around to fix him with his finest death-glare from between the strands of his hair. "Probably because you drank it all, you noxious, repellent sot." The instrument responsible for sticking Parr to the wall was held lightly in his right hand, the tip resting on the pad of the middle finger of his left. That, coupled with his unmistakably ratty expression, told Lupin that Snape was attempting to make a point about something to Parr. And knowing Parr, she'd probably done something to justify her current treatment.

"Good morning to you, too, Severus. Get up on the wrong side of your lair?" Lupin had to yell to make himself heard over Parr's shouting, which took the edge off his attempt at nonchalance in the face of Snape's surliness. "Must be why you're displaying such impeccable diplomacy."

The black glare narrowed to a thin line.

"Ah, I know what it is," Lupin continued, refusing to be dissuaded by having two holes bored through his skull. "No students to terrorise. Bet you're hating that."

Snape actually bared his teeth, making Lupin blink and amend how close he got to the man. He left a very clear six-foot gap between them as he turned and looked up at Parr. The two men stood, silent, as insults rained down from above. Lupin was inwardly staggered that Parr knew so many words for a man's genitals, but he tried to keep his face as neutral as possible. She gave no acknowledgement of his presence, maintaining her full and vituperative attention on Snape as if her words could carve him into small pieces and then set the bits on fire. Considering some of the language she was using, it was entirely possible she'd achieve just such an effect.

Lupin stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned a bit towards Snape. "What do you call it?"

Snape squinted at him with one eye, curling his upper lip into a sneer. "What?"

Lupin nodded up at Parr. "What do you call it? 'Teaching Methods Series 5'? 'I Have A Short Fuse And I'm Not Afraid To Use It'? 'Near-Nude Descending A Wall'?"

"If you have a point to make, Lupin, it escapes me."

Lupin shrugged slightly, trying to suppress a flush of embarrassment as Parr vowed where she'd shove her fist when she got free. Truly, the woman had worse language than a drunken sailor when the mood took her. "I just thought perhaps you'd given up on Potions and segued into the art world since you have Chara tacked up on the wall like a canvas."

"I don't consider a foul-mouthed, violent harridan a work of art," Snape pointed out snottily.

"Ah, then it must be some form of medical treatment, then," Lupin concluded under a blanket of four-letter words that threatened to smother them both. "After all, I can't imagine why else she'd be pinned to the wall by her underwear in the school infirmary. Have you passed this treatment with Poppy? I'm sure she'd be thrilled to see it in action." He looked around the room. "Actually, where is she?"

"Not here."

"Lucky you," the werewolf muttered, earning him a vicious glower. Lupin knew that Pomfrey would have a fit if she walked in and discovered this in her infirmary, and a part of him craned hopefully towards the possibility that might actually occur sometime soon. He'd love to see an altercation between Pomfrey and Snape and wasn't entirely sure who'd come out on top. Perhaps now would be the chance to find out. He sighed and looked back up at Parr. "I see you've found the loophole around Chara's immunity to magic."

"It proves to be an interesting method of control," was the terse response.

Lupin tried to ignore the burning sensation on the side of his face as Snape continued to stare with the kind of intensity of a cat about to rip a mouse in twain. "You wouldn't need to control her if you didn't piss her off," he mentioned a little crankily.

"Intriguing that your automatic assumption is that I was the instigator, Lupin." Even under the overwhelming volume of Parr's billingsgate, the warning was still blatantly clear in that sinuous, low voice.

Lupin cleared his throat slightly and fidgeted on the spot. "No, one could never imagine that you were a proactive shit-stirrer, Severus. I can't imagine what led me to make such a mistake." He turned his head to look at the man, steeling himself against the inevitable withering of confidence that exposure to those black eyes would incur. "What perceived infraction is Chara guilty of this time?"

"Miss Parr has a problem with boundaries. How I deal with that issue is none of your business."

Lupin's gaze sharpened on Snape's face. He could've been mistaken but he was almost sure that a flush of colour bloomed in the normally-sallow man's cheeks. He covered his surprise rapidly.

"And how long do you intend to leave her up there?"

"Until I hear the required words from her."

Lupin scrunched his face up. "Well, it's obvious those words aren't 'cock', 'wanker' or 'felch'," he muttered. "And I have no idea what 'crack a fat' means." He drew his wand back out of his pocket. "So for the sake of my delicate innocence, I think it's time she came down." He braced himself for the inevitable outrage and perhaps even a Stinging Hex aimed at his groin, but he got his second surprise when a tight smile appeared on Snape's face.

"Go ahead."

Those two languid words gave Lupin sufficient pause to wonder where the trap was. He vacillated as Parr started listing euphemisms for illegal forms of copulation and Snape's involvement in them. He studied the man's expression carefully as if that would give his intentions away, but the smile just widened as the Potions master drew the tip of his middle finger back and forth slowly along the length of his own wand.

Lupin didn't need to look in Snape's direction to know that his insulting smile did nothing but get larger as the werewolf futilely tried to undo whatever charm Snape had used to bond Chara's underwear to the infirmary wall. Lupin had always considered himself quite adept at charms, but everything he tried failed to have any effect whatsoever.

He turned full-face into Snape's derision at his inefficacy and scowled at him. The heavy-lidded eyes and insulting smile said it all: the man had known all along that Lupin would flounder like an inept first-year and was relishing the actuality with an almost perverse delight, the insufferable bastard!

Snape glided across the gap between them until there was less than half a foot separating them.

"Good luck with that," he murmured silkily, sneering down his nose at Lupin, and then side-stepped around him and out of the infirmary like an eel slipping past a rock.

Parr continued to scream obscenities after him for half a minute before she finally gave an indication that she knew Lupin was in the room.

"Hi, Remus. Any chance you could get me down? I've been up here so long my knickers have turned into cheese-wire."

Lupin glared up at her through his greying fringe. "Thanks for that visual. What the hell did you do to piss him off this time?"

The expression on Parr's face was so overdone it may as well have been a clay mask that had a parody of innocence scrawled on it by a four-year-old. "Nothing."

Lupin threw his hands in the air. "Like I believe that for a minute. I'm not getting you down until you tell me what happened."

Parr snorted in amusement, fists on hips, stuck up above him like a bizarre, dangling mannequin. "You weren't doing that anyway!" He continued to stare at her in disapproval until she huffed and relented. "I couldn't help it."

"You never can," was the curt reply. "What did you do?"

"He was bending over!" she cried, shrugging her shoulders awkwardly.

Lupin held up his hand hastily. "Actually, forget it. I don't want to know!"

In the end, Lupin had to track down Flitwick and flush him out of the staffroom, having exhausted everything he could think of to undo the sticking charm. It flummoxed the Charms professor for a few minutes, but before long, Parr's feet were back on the ground and she was enthusiastically rearranging her underwear so that it wasn't quite so intimately invasive.

"Who put her up there?" Flitwick asked Lupin, a mixture of annoyance and curiosity on his diminutive face.

"Severus," Lupin replied with as much condemnation as he could fit into one word.

Flitwick rolled his eyes. "Ah. Well, he always was a fast learner," he muttered as he left the infirmary to return to his gossip mags.

"You could've just *given* me the note in the infirmary."

Parr looked down at him from her perch, one eyebrow raised.

"Whilst your pick-pocketing skills are potentially impressive, I fail to see the advantage of such a convoluted method of passing on the relevant information to me."

"Really? I don't," she countered calmly, a ghost of a smile on her mouth.

Snape felt that flush of heat return to his face again and glowered up at her.

Parr tossed her head slightly, flicking one of her tresses over her shoulder. "But enough of this banter." She held her hands out to each side, index and middle finger extended, palms to the concrete sky. "The ground rules. I feel it important to get them in the open first in case you have any... misunderstandings as to how this is to run."

Snape's expression darkened and he thought a swear word that, judging from the way Parr's lips thinned momentarily as she dropped her hands, she might have picked up on.

"Rule number one: no talking when I'm talking. It gives me the shits. If you have a question, I will answer it, but talk over me and I'll tear you a new one."

Snape sniffed as derisively as he could. A folded cloth slapped him in the face as Parr threw a handkerchief at him.

"Rule number two: if I find that you have spoken to *anyone* about what I teach you, I will stick my boot where the sun doesn't shine."

That earned her a frosty look.

"Then, I will ensure you never speak again. Rule number three: I decide what you learn, when you learn it, and for how long. Should you have other ideas, you can stuff them up your jacksie." She pointed emphatically down at him.

"How surprising that you choose to abuse your role and use this as an opportunity for petty payback," Snape muttered, hands clenched into fists on his knees.

"I can do that almost any time I want, Professor," she mentioned, guffawing. "Why would I wait until now?" She dug a finger under the bandage hidden behind the high collar of her black overcoat and scratched.

"Don't do that."

She pouted and shrugged. "It itches." She continued to scratch for a few more seconds. Undoubtedly to irritate him. "We begin. Any questions?"

"I want a bigger rock."

Parr's eyebrows climbed up to her hairline. "A bigger rock must be *earned*, not given away, Dual."

Snape tightened his jaw until he heard the bone creak. This was starting as poorly as he had expected it would. Not only had it taken him over an hour to find Parr, but he was relegated to sitting awkwardly on a rounded boulder that kept him barely a foot off the frozen ground while she peered down at him from a veritable mountain of rain-smoothed stone six-feet in front of him. The power-play was as blatant as a punch in the face, and he'd probably end up with one of those bestowed upon him before the lesson was out. He knew how ridiculous he must look, sat so low that his knees were up higher than his waist, the boulder underneath him slowly and inexorably stealing the heat out of him via his rapidly numbing backside, and the Scotch mist dampening his hair and clothing in its aim to make him as similar to a drowned rat as possible.

"Do you allow your students to swear during their lessons, Dual?" Parr frowned down at him, her eyes as unyielding as the stone that supported them both.

"Certainly not," he snapped waspishly.

"Then don't do it in *my* classroom, vocally or otherwise."

He snorted. "This is your classroom?" He indicated the rocky ledge set halfway down the side of the tor where they sat, just east of the Black Lake.

"*Outside* is my classroom, Dual. You would do well to remember that." She shifted about in her cross-legged position and folded her hands in her lap. "Tell me about your mother."

"What?"

"Your mother," she repeated slowly. "You will tell me about her."

"No."

Parr unfolded her legs, slid off her boulder, and headed down the slope of the tor.

"Where are you going?"

She stopped and turned to look at him, her face as hard as her voice. "The lesson is over."

Snape stared after her until she vanished from view in the roiling mist that drifted in from over the surface of the lake.

She answered the door after the third time he knocked.

Time flexed and twisted and flattened as she gazed up at him, the deep red of her clothing throwing a tint up under her jaw and bleeding into the paleness of her hair, still damp after the rain.

He tried to keep his expression neutral and the swear words unformed.

"One hour. Not the same place," she told him and slammed the door in his face.

It took him just over three-quarters of an hour to find her and his mood had soured to dangerous levels. It was bad enough that the original start of the lesson had been less than stellar, and Snape had argued with himself for what remained of the afternoon as to whether or not he should even attempt to show some kind of contrition. Having to force himself to request, albeit silently, a second chance made him even tetchier. In the end, he couldn't deny that the end result was more important than the discomfort that Parr was putting him through. He'd find other ways to even the score. He always did.

"Why the game of hide and seek?" he demanded to know, a little more crossly than he had thought his voice would sound. "I have wasted too much time already trying to track you down. It would be beneficial for both of us if you would just tell me, specifically, where to meet you."

Parr squinted at him, her chin resting on the forearm that sat across her knee. She'd chosen to sit under the spidery fingers of a bare oak not far from the front gates, the

trunk shielding her from view out of the castle windows and its roots slithering in and out of the bare earth around her and down the gentle rise of the land it grew from.

"That you need to ask the question means you haven't thought very hard about it," she told him serenely. "Sit."

"Where?"

She gave him a faint smile and didn't answer, but her eyes seemed especially bright, watching him carefully, if a little wryly.

He glanced around him, weighing up his options, and realised what the correct answer was. He backtracked a few steps and chose a weather-worn spur of wood that left his head noticeably below the level of Parr's when he sat down.

She hid the lower part of her face behind her forearm for a moment, but Snape knew that she was trying to wipe the smirk off before he saw it. Her hands formed the same gesture that had started the lesson the first time.

"Continue."

He thought carefully before speaking; not an uncommon practice for him if the circumstances dictated it necessary. "I do not know what it is you need to know."

"Start somewhere. Anywhere."

Why did she need to know *anything* about his mother? Snape had asked himself that question over and over since she'd left him in the drizzle earlier that afternoon. It was a taboo subject for him, one that he made apparent to others should they even head in the direction of asking anything about his family. He always made sure to make the sting of rebuke harsh enough that no-one ever tried a second time. Yet here he was, turning the charcoal and clinkers that summed up his relationship with his mother over and over in his mind to search for a glimmer of worth to break that taboo himself with something that didn't make it seem like the pitiful wreckage he knew that it had always been.

"My mother was a witch who married a Muggle. By doing so, she made herself a pariah."

"Why?"

"The man was a bigot. He hated anything and everything to do with the wizarding world. Gloriously incongruent of him to marry a woman who came from that world, yet so like him to punish her for his own stupidity."

Parr turned that over in her mind for some time, studying him with an unwavering determination.

"Was she sad?"

Snape blinked at the unexpected question, a question that he found distressingly difficult to answer.

"Yes."

"Was she angry?"

"Sometimes."

A pause.

"Was she broken?"

A cold hand reached into his chest and squeezed mercilessly. It took him several erratic heartbeats before he could reply, but he kept his eyes on hers even though he would have done damn near anything to hide whatever it was that she was looking straight into as if flesh and bone were as insubstantial and transient as breath.

"Yes."

Silence sat between them, a silence he didn't know what to do with, a silence she was seemingly unaffected by. There was a smell in the air, of damp and of cold and of the mountains, which would manifest in an ugly evening storm very soon. Were they going to sit out in it and stare at each other? He had no idea what that would achieve other than the obvious, and he was beginning to realise that what Parr wanted to teach him was something he was starting to wonder if he wanted to learn.

"Did you hate her?"

His hands in their fingerless gloves clenched tightly on his knees in an effort to remain where he was, physically and mentally, refusing to answer. That she would ask such a question betrayed that she knew just where to hit him, where to make that bitter cut so that it would pierce down through the flesh, past the bone and into the soul, the blade of her inquisition pulled back to flay him open and reveal what lay rotten at the core of him, what he'd never had the courage to scour out, what he'd never had the grace to purge, what he'd never let go of in the terror that it would leave him adrift in a groundless black where things made no sense. His way was simpler.

"Did you love her?"

What he felt then almost blinded him.

Snape would freely admit that there were many, many people he disliked. In fact, it would have been far easier to list the ones he *did* like. On the fingers of one hand. Yet despite the idiosyncratic misanthropy that made up a goodly portion of his attitude, there weren't that many that he could say he truly hated. It was a term he used sparingly lest it lose its significance amongst the other words of hostility that he attached to the names of those he knew. But Parr was giving it a damn good shot that she'd end up on that dreaded list very soon. A more rational part of him whispered that it was an over-reaction on his part, but the adrenaline and bile in his body were too strong to allow reason to lower his hackles.

Parr's expression was one he hadn't seen on her face before; no less steely, no more yielding, but something that looked unexpectedly like regret. "I do this for a reason, Dual. I wouldn't ask unless it was absolutely necessary. I *am* a bitch, but not that much of one."

He wanted to disbelieve her statement, to see it for the lie he needed it to be because it would make it easier to categorise her, and so much easier to hate her in the end.

"Do you have any other female relatives?"

"None that ever visited. None I ever met."

She actually looked away from him as a clench of pain twisted her face, eyes closed as if she had witnessed something that upset her greatly. The harsh vindictiveness in him was pleased at that.

"Do not judge her so harshly, Dual. She was alone."

She heard his unspoken response, and turned her eyes back to his, the skin on her cheeks drained of blood.

"You were her son. You could not teach her. And she did the best that she could, as paltry as that may seem in your eyes."

Surprisingly, Parr said it in such a way that it wasn't an accusation. An explanation, nothing more, no matter how hard he tried to find the sarcasm or condemnation. But had the understanding come from common experience, or had she lifted memory from him? Snape didn't know which possibility worried him most.

"This topic is distressing. I would appreciate it if we could stop." He spoke the words, even knowing full well that it would probably end the lesson as abruptly as his recalcitrance had the previous time, but he couldn't continue to sit here, haemorrhaging inside and searching for ways to hate her.

Parr nodded once. "I understand. I shall not speak of it again unless you deem it necessary."

That made him blink a few times, at a loss as to whether her acquiescence was due to an unexpected consideration for his feelings or whether she had found out whatever information it was she'd been after in the first place. The notion that the first option could be true caused the cogs of his mind to jam.

"I don't know who has taught you, but your mind flexes strangely for a seevy," Parr mused, studying him like an oddity.

"Perhaps because I am *not* a seevy."

This time it was Parr's turn to look confused. "You are Dual. Of course you're a seevy, whether you realise it or not." One eyebrow lifted. "Which, plainly, you don't." She breathed out heavily. "And if you're fortunate, nor does anyone else." She stood, dusting earth from the back of her trousers. "Nevertheless, there are too many traits for it to be otherwise. So let us see what you're capable of."

Her fingers delved up one sleeve and drew out a narrow orange strip of material roughly three feet long. Even in the darkening afternoon, Snape could see the colour was the same as that of the strip of orange she wore down the back of her overcoat, the same orange that bound the hilt of her knife. The same coppery colour as her Handler's hair.

"You've managed to hobble yourself in order to keep others out of your mind, but if someone is experienced enough to find a way around it, you're in a lot of trouble." She held the cloth straight between her hands. "This is the best way I can describe it, since it's rather hard to draw a diagram of a thing that has no form. Using a piece of material to represent the topography of the mind is limiting but it will have to do for now." She tied a knot at the centre of the cloth strip. "The knot is the block you have in place to stop people from seeing what you don't want them to see. It's not an uncommon way to block others, and young seevy use it as a way to block until they're taught something more advanced. Knotting should be a temporary block only, and you should never leave the knot in place because it causes a weakness around the snarl that could be exploited, or worse, allow your mind to become torn or fractured." She held the cloth by one end, leaving the other end free to sway back and forth gently. Pinching the material just under her fist, Parr pulled her fingers down so the material slipped through them until she reached the knot. "Most people will be stopped by the knot, but these are people who are runted so their mental agility is poor and linear, rendering them reliant on tracking along the mind from one end."

"What do you mean by runted?" He had a suspicion but wanted to see if she'd admit to it.

Wonder of wonders, she actually hesitated before replying, a simulacrum of awkwardness about her. "It's what we call magicfolk who manifest the recessive seevy mental talent. What you call Occlumency or Legilimency. There is a..." She wrinkled her nose slightly, trying to locate the right word. "... prejudice amongst seevy about it. It's viewed as a rather distasteful disability stemming from a cross-breeding between seevy and magicfolk." She saw the affront form on his face. "The shortcomings of seevy society's tolerance are not what we are here to discuss, Dual," she pointed out in a voice that brooked no argument. "Unless you wish to end this lesson here and now." The flinty eyes and stock-still posture confirmed her readiness to back up her statement.

Snape weighed the options up in his mind, balanced the scale, and remained mute. She took his silence as acquiescence.

"The only way to achieve your end goal is to unpick the knot. Otherwise anything I teach you will be wasted."

He didn't much like the sound of that.

"But first I have to figure out if I can unpick it, because if I can't, we are at an impasse."

"So much for our agreement," Snape pointed out, a twist to his mouth.

"Bloody hell, were you this aggravating as a student?" Parr snapped, flinging the knotted cloth at him. "Forgive me if I don't keel over in shock at the hypocrisy coming out of your trap!"

He snatched the cloth out of the air and gave her a tight smile.

"Shitting *shit* it!" She clenched her fists at her temples briefly and took a deep breath. "Unlike some, I don't profess to be a miracle worker, so instead of underlining my perceived shortcomings as a trainer, I suggest you take a close look at your own stubbornness to co-operate in a valiant attempt to convince me that you might be capable of learning anything without giving me a fucking aneurism!"

"Welcome to the world of teaching, Miss Parr."

That made her laugh. "Touché, you colossal wanker, but I meant what I said. I need to figure out if this can be achieved at all. If not..." She spread her hands. "... then I must annul the agreement in disgrace."

The stricture of fear that comment tangled his insides with was just another reminder of how much he needed her help, and how much he resented her for it.

Parr took a few steps down the gentle rise and crouched so that their eye lines were equal. "What I am about to ask you to do I need you to do without reservation, without restriction and without remorse. Whatever ethics you may have, you must suspend them until I say otherwise. I must know what you're capable of now in order to determine what you can possibly achieve, so you must break into my mind by whatever means you have at your disposal. Regardless of whether or not you feel it is moral. Do you understand?"

Snape squinted at her, trying to predict how she would fend him off, but her face betrayed nothing and the steel door to her mind had been in place before the lesson had even begun. He'd checked, tentatively.

"I understand."

"But...?"

She would have to ask, wouldn't she?

"I have concerns."

"Which are?" Those grey eyes stared into his, and he couldn't shake the feeling that she knew exactly what he was thinking.

How was he to verbalise the reasons for his hesitation? How could he truly convey to her how much it would sicken him to do what she asked, how he could barely do such a thing even when given no other option? Hemmed into living a life he didn't want to be living, every day forced him into making choices he never wanted to even consider. The only difference was the degree of his loathing for the choices he had to make. And now, to have one more person kick him down the path to damnation as if he had no will of his own birthed such malignity in him that a part of him wondered if who he was and who he needed to be were not as different or separated as he thought. It was a realisation that frightened far more than he ever thought possible that the act had become reality.

It wasn't that Parr was asking him to deliberately claw his way into her mind that was the only problem. She was telling him to put his full weight behind the effort, to break

in by whatever means he could, allowing her to see the enormity of his moral degradation and ethical debasement with an attempted rape of the mind. To see what he was capable of. How could he show her that?

"You've done it before," Parr mentioned quietly. The certainty in her tone changed Snape's hesitation to an acidic resentfulness that she would know such a damning piece of the life of which he was ashamed.

"And how would you know that?" he snapped at her, channelling all the venom that poisoned him inexorably into his voice.

"I can see it in your face."

It was enough. He lashed out with no other thought than finding that realisation, that recognition of his disgrace in her mind and scouring it out, blotting it forever from her thoughts, erasing it from the way she looked at him and judged his every action based on it. He would not have her see him as the monster that others had made him, even though his actions would condemn him to being precisely what he was trying to hide.

She had expected it. She held him back, stopping him before he could even get close. No matter how hard he pushed, how much he twisted and turned to get around her defences, he could find no way in. His desperation turned to anger at being denied even the chance to enter her mind and change her perception of him. He fought harder, jaw clenched in effort, as she deflected every piercing thrust, keeping him at bay like a giant with its hand around a house-elf's neck as it kicked and swung futilely at the enormous creature that held it. That laughed at it in its pathetic attempt to free itself and take down something fifty times its size. So not only could Parr now see him for the abhorrent brute he'd become, but she could also mock him for the wretched inadequacy of his abilities, tricking him into revealing how pitiable a figure he was. His anger turned to hatred. And something inside him snapped.

Parr's eyes went wide as the push turned into a pull, as Snape dragged her mind towards his, latching onto her deflection with a tenacity born of overwhelming fury.

"Stop!"

He ignored her, turning her own trick against her by trying to swallow what he couldn't break, his mind swelling in consumptive threat.

"Enough!"

A whip-line of pain struck him across his mind, causing him to physically flinch back and startling him enough to stop before he could discover how far this new technique could take him.

Parr was on her feet, staring down at him with an expression he couldn't interpret. He searched the lines of her for disgust, outrage... anything that would mirror his own revulsion at what he'd tried to do, but her face went blank before he could find it. It took a monumental effort to look her in the eye, but the residual anger at being forced into the act gave him the steel to do it. Was she hiding her loathing of him, of what he'd done? Or rather, what he'd tried to do? Was she laughing at him inside, from behind that blank expression? He didn't know whom he hated more: her or himself.

Parr opened her mouth to say something, but paused, a line appearing between her brows momentarily. She appeared to change her mind about something.

"I can unpick the knot," she told him finally. Woodenly. "But you need to know that if I do, it will leave you completely open. You won't be able to stop anyone getting in until I teach you how. And I think, perhaps, that leaves you far more vulnerable than you can afford to be."

Her eyes dropped to the ground and away from him, the blankness wavering briefly. And there it was the inevitable judgement that meant she couldn't even stand to look at him.

"Think long and hard on it, Dual. It's not a decision I can make for you."

With that she turned her back on him and walked away, the orange and white down her back like scores of accusation in the black of her overcoat.

Snape sat where he was, frozen in disgrace and defeat, yet another poor choice before him. He dimly realised his hand was hurting and looked down to find that he'd grasped the cloth Parr had flung at him so tightly in his fist that the knot had imprinted painfully in his palm.

Rain swept down from the mountains, drenching him in an icy wetness that he resolved to remain in until his body went numb, as if it could wash the stain of corruption off his soul. It didn't work. He couldn't sit here in this place that was a witness to what he could be pushed to, regardless of the fact that he'd failed to achieve that repugnant end.

He stood in pain, his knees screaming in agony at being left in such a torturous position for so long, and paced awkwardly around the limits of the school grounds like a trapped animal seeking escape from a cage. He stumbled occasionally in the failing light, feet slipping in muddy earth sodden with chilled rain as he tried to reach a decision, shivering as his clothes became soaked.

To say yes would leave him open, as easily read as book left open to the eyes of whoever might pass, and the most likely candidate would be the Headmaster. If Dumbledore discovered the extent of the relationship between Snape and Parr, it would only serve to lower him in the old wizard's estimation of him. He was a pawn already; an expendable piece in Dumbledore's convoluted and precarious game. What worth the man perceived in him was truly the only thing that kept Snape out of the gutter of society and from the cruelty of those who wouldn't hesitate to remove him swiftly from the equation. He couldn't imagine that Parr would fare any better if Dumbledore uncovered a threat to his carefully-laid plans. Both he and the Striker were submitting themselves to significant risk in attempting this.

To say no would leave him hobbled, stunted, and still prey to someone stronger or less scrupulous. It was a choice that was no choice at all, for choice would give the impression that one option was more favourable than the other. Here, there was nothing but either immediacy or delay of the inevitable. If the knot was undone and a Death Eater with even a rudimentary skill at Legilimency crossed his path, it could endanger everything he was bound to. If what Dumbledore suspected were true, that it was only a matter of time before the Dark Lord found a way back into the realm of the physical, then if he called Snape to his side before Parr had a chance to teach him how to keep that insane, genocidal maniac from ravaging through his mind, nothing could hide Snape's treachery. She had not said how long it would take to teach him what he needed to know. Perhaps there was no definitive answer. Perhaps, as with all things, it depended on the skill of both student and teacher. If the knot was left tied and the Death Eaters bound even one seevy to their cause, the knot would mean nothing in the end. There were too many maybes, and far too many uncertainties.

How could he possibly make a decision like this? Every way he looked at it, it was a stalemate. He scrubbed at his face in agitation, desperately attempting to find a shred of objectivity and distance from the roiling sensation in his gut and the gasping hatred and anger in his chest.

Night fell.

He kept walking, simply because he didn't know what else to do.

The rain slowed to a faint drizzle.

Like a thin trickle of water down his spine, distress and pain began to muddy his thoughts. He tried to push it down and away in a vain hope that he could prevent it from influencing his eventual choice but it persisted with an iron-fisted doggedness that confused him as it grew stronger. It took Snape some time to realise that it didn't originate from him.

The sound pinpointed her before he could stumble over her, crouched in a desolation of surrounds and spirit, her back to him as she stared sightlessly off into the distance, breath gulping in and out of her body like a hysteric so locked in terror that she could not even vocalise her panic with unarticulated cries.

It was then that he realised that in his overweening selfishness, he had not even given a thought to Parr's distress at what she had made Snape do. Separated by force

from her Handler, there was no foundation for her to rely on to support her through what she did out of necessity. Isolated by the secrecy of their collusion, she could not even seek comfort of whomever she could possibly regard as a friend at the school. The disgust that he thought he'd seen on her face had been at her own actions, not his. She had known all along what it meant to ask of him what she had, but she had done so anyway.

Due to Lupin's continued failure at finding her other half, Parr had been forced to accept an arrangement that must have been as unappealing to her as it had been to Snape, but the need to find her Handler was so strong that she couldn't even contemplate refusing him. To admit that she may not be able to fulfil her end of the bargain was a terrible admittance on her part, one that could lose her the one chance she felt she had left. What would she have done if she had discovered that she couldn't undo the knot in his mind? It seemed that Snape was not the only one who walked on the edge of a knife.

"Why... are you here?" she groaned at him through her gasps, one hand gripped around the blade of the long silver dagger that was the twin of the one she had given him, the one that he'd not let out of his possession since he'd first held it. The veins of black running down the back of her hand were blood flowing from the cut in her palm that the dagger's edge must have bitten into her.

"What will you do if I say no?"

Despair rolled over him, but her face never changed and her eyes never shifted from the horizon, a fish dying slowly as its gasps failed to alleviate the terrible, slow suffocation.

"I don't... know."

She seemed so much smaller to him, on her knees on the drenched earth, her clothes heavy with water and painted with mud, her distress shrinking her into a huddled, lonely figure, hyperventilating in either physical or mental torment, most likely both. He didn't know she could look this broken, even with the darkness hiding the clarity of her hopelessness.

"You could have lied and told me what I wanted to hear," Snape pointed out. "Others have done it before."

"I am not... others," she told him angrily. "That is not... our way."

"Your way could mean death."

"So be it," Parr replied harshly. "Validus... quam nex. She's tried... to catch me... before."

"You can't evade her forever."

"Perhaps. But long enough... will do."

Snape didn't know what to say to that.

"You could have lied," he told her once more, as if he couldn't understand how she could not have. "What will you do if I say no?"

He didn't expect an answer and almost missed the words she whispered. He didn't know if he was meant to hear them or not, but as he bent closer he saw how gaunt her face was, how the bones of her hands stood out sharply as they held the dagger that was slowly bleeding her the way her Handler was bleeding the strength from her in order to survive.

She repeated the words over and over between her gasps as if they were the only thing keeping her upright, a litany of forbearance under a crushing burden that she could not possibly relinquish.

"Don't... make me beg. Please, don't make me... beg."

Snape took the orange cloth from his pocket, untied the knot and held it out to her.

The shame that he felt when Parr clutched at the cloth like the lifeline it represented was not from the way she'd been forced to hope he would give the reply she so desperately needed, holding back from influencing him with lies or omissions of truth and trusting that the strength of both their needs would be enough. It was from the surge of visceral pleasure that came from knowing that she was tied closer to him than ever before. He hated himself for it even as he embraced it.

Chapter Forty-Eight—A Matter Of Time

Chapter 48 of 59

The inevitable can only be delayed.

"I'm getting a little tired of sewing your hand up. Will I be forced to ban all sharp objects from your possession or will you show me that you understand which end of a blade you're supposed to grip?"

Parr seemed to find that statement inordinately funny and laughed like a drain, nearly choking herself as she continued to shovel soup into her mouth with the spoon clutched in her uninjured hand. Snape thinned his lips in disapproval of her reaction and squinted at the double cut he was suturing. The previous gash in Parr's hand had reopened, her blade slicing both stitches and barely-healed flesh.

"It was my understanding that your knives were kept out of your reach whilst on school grounds," he continued under his breath so that Pomfrey couldn't hear. The mediwitch was hovering near the entrance to the infirmary, talking to Sprout, who'd brought her a fistful of greenery. The two women had spent some time in conversation, and Snape wasn't prepared to chance that would continue. He'd already had to deal with Pomfrey's stridentulous spiel on his ineptitude at keeping a close enough eye on a patient and her subsequent loitering over him as he treated Parr. He couldn't blame her, though. If their positions had been reversed, he would have been livid to find Parr in the state that she turned up in.

"My *work* blade is kept out of my reach," Parr told him, responding to the snippy statement made over her sliced hand. "Did you think I only had one?" It was the first time that she had spoken since he had agreed to let her untie the knot in his mind.

It had been a mark of how afflicted she had been that Parr had permitted any assistance in getting her from where Snape had found her back to the castle. Perhaps she had realised that she had been far too weak to manage it on her own. Perhaps she was too delirious to realise that she had allowed him to touch her. Perhaps something

he had done granted him immunity—he had no idea what. Seevy etiquette seemed so convoluted as to defy common sense.

Snape had held his tongue as Pomfrey had levelled all manner of accusations at him, feeling far too melancholic and fatigued to be disaffected enough to defend himself. He'd barely noticed when the mediwitch moved onto criticising him for tracking mud and water into her hallowed space.

"Let her eat whatever she wants until I return," he'd managed to grind out when Pomfrey inhaled through necessity.

"And when will that be, Severus?" Pomfrey had shrilled, drawing Parr away from him. "Before or after she's developed pneumonia?"

"Ten minutes," he pronounced flatly before stalking out, ensuring his clothing dropped as much muddy water as possible on the polished wooden floor with a whispered Draining Charm.

He discovered that Parr could eat an incredible amount of food in the space of ten minutes. Pomfrey also reaffirmed her medical skill by bringing the Striker back to some semblance of quiescence and lucidity in such a short space of time. Parr still had the purple-shadowed, overly bright and widened eyes of someone on the verge of physical exhaustion, but at least her attention was set unwaveringly on the food before her.

"How did you manage to clean her up so quickly?" Snape asked, squinting suspiciously at Parr's creased but clean clothing, dried but knotted hair, and dirtless but grey-tinged skin.

"Mud and water are not immune to magic, Severus," Pomfrey pointed out, "as you so kindly proved to me before." She was struggling to get Parr out of her overcoat, but the Striker refused to drop the sustenance she had clutched in her hands. "She won't let me get to the cut on her palm, and it's bleeding badly."

The strip of orange material was wrapped clumsily around Parr's left hand, darkening to deep red.

"No more meat except for fish," Snape pronounced, snatching the chicken leg out of Parr's right hand. She hissed at him briefly before stuffing a bread roll into her mouth. The planes of cheek and jawbones stood out under the skin of her face, giving her an unusual fragility that seemed at odds with her movements. Snape made a mental note to keep his hands out of the proximity of her mouth whilst she was ravaging anything edible she could grab.

She thrust her injured hand at him, not bothering to look up from the plate of spinach she was pulling towards her along the table that sat across the cot she was seated on. At first it made Snape feel like a lackey rather than a medical practitioner, but when he noticed Pomfrey's irritated expression that she'd been denied something that Parr freely permitted him to attend to, it made him smirk. Rather childish, he had to admit.

"How many knives do you own?" Snape asked Parr, his face twisted into disgust as she shamelessly licked the soup bowl clean.

"That is an egregiously inappropriate question, Dual," she told him through a hastily-crammed mouthful of green beans. "Be grateful I don't strap your hide for asking it."

Pomfrey's return prevented him from retorting waspishly about her disgusting table manners.

"How much ephedra did you give her?" he snapped at the mediwitch crossly. "It's made her extremely ill-tempered."

"It's made *her* ill-tempered?" muttered Pomfrey under her breath. "A quarter-dose. I was reluctant to give her any more because her pulse was already too elevated."

Snape cut the suture thread carefully and pierced the needle into his sleeve. "Treat her for blood loss, metabolic acidosis and thrombocytopenia. Let her eat as much non-animal protein as possible." He drew out a small amber flask from his pocket and handed it to Pomfrey. "Five drops every four hours under the tongue until mid-day tomorrow, then every eight hours."

Parr stopped chewing abruptly. "What's it for?"

"Eat your beans," he told her dismissively and began to bind her stitched hand. She snatched it out of his grasp, causing the rolled bandage to fall to the floor and unravel.

"You will tell me what it's for or I will refuse to take it," she told him frostily, eyes glaring out from their shadowed sockets.

Snape huffed at her stubbornness. "It is a generic treatment for cachexia. You will take it." He turned back to Pomfrey. "When was the last dose of painkiller?"

"Just over five hours ago."

"I'm not taking that anymore."

That brought his head back around with a dangerous deliberation. "You will take what I prescribe for you."

Parr actually blinked a few times under the forcefulness of his words. "It... scatters my thoughts. I cannot focus." There was a slight emphasis on the last word that alerted him to the underlying meaning.

"And how will you deal with the pain unaided, Miss Parr?"

"How I have always dealt with it," she replied with a frown. "I cannot be drugged to the eyeballs at the expense of my work capacity."

"Unless you accede to the dictates of your treatment, you will not *have* a work capacity," Snape pointed out tetchily. "Hypokinesia is my problem to deal with, not yours, and I will handle it as *I* determine best, not you."

"No painkiller!" Parr barked at him and resumed stuffing her face as if the matter had been decided. Her outstretched hand graciously allowed Snape to continue treating her freshest injury. "And don't think you can hide it in my food or drink!" she added, spraying half-masticated bits of food everywhere. "It stinks like dog feet."

It seemed to amuse her to appear as the Dark Lord to him. He could almost smell the thrill it gave her over the metallic tang of his own terror. Her pacing was more of leisure than of searching, walking calmly from side to side in that room that had no door. Waiting patiently. Just passing the time. Her silhouette passing back and forth in front of the boarded-up window. Or rather, *his* silhouette.

It was clear that she still couldn't see him. He wondered what it was that hid him from those merciless, red eyes. Standing as still as possible, he wasn't willing to test the strength of the camouflage, whatever its source.

Death stopped in the centre of the room, poised over the rotten bloom on the floor that covered the hole to oblivion.

"It's only a matter of time. Once she unties the knot, you're mine."

His heart stopped.

Death had a nasty laugh. He could see the needlepoint teeth against the wintry blue light coming through the cracks of the wooden boards covering the window.

"She didn't tell you that, did she?" Her pacing resumed. "I didn't think she would." Reflected light flickered briefly over her bald pate.

How could Death know this? He shook his head slightly, as if to dislodge a troublesome fly from his brow. Of course she would know. She was a figment of his imagination. A construct of his fears and subconscious impulses. She would know what he knew simply because she was a creation of his mind. There was no separation between them.

"More of a separation than you think, Severus," she told him in her high voice, a voice not that dissimilar to the Dark Lord's. They could be siblings, Death and the Dark Lord. "I am not you, although you promised you would be mine. Never forget that. Your Striker does not stand above me. No-one does."

The gossamer robes she wore whispered through the dry air, a susurrant that sang of her final victory.

You do not have me yet.

"It is only a matter of time, Severus. I know her tricks. I should. Only a matter of time."

Snape awoke in gasping desperation, plunged into the stark waters of frigid doubt, cursing the part of him that tortured the whole. Why would he punish himself like this? This Death was not real.

He spent the rest of the night in the infirmary, staring at Parr's unconscious form, repeating this sentence over and over again in his head as if to purge that sadistic fragment of his soul that deemed it justified to have him twist on the hook of emotional torture.

Pomfrey appeared an hour before the steely dawn to coax Parr far enough out of her comatose slumber to medicate her. The mediwitch merely glanced at Snape as if it were of no surprise to her to find him there.

She said nothing and brought him tea. For that, he was grateful. And for the tea.

He dragged himself to the breakfast table late. If he looked half as bad as he felt, it would explain why no-one wanted to sit near him.

Snape didn't know how much of the conversation he missed, but Pirino's name cut through the fog of his fatigue.

The man's body had been found, badly decomposed and dumped in the Thames River. So the *Daily Prophet* claimed. Flitwick and Hooch were in an overdramatic flap about it, revelling in the gruesomeness of it all, dissecting and analysing every printed word.

Snape sighed quietly, staring at his plate. It was only ever a matter of time.

"Why are you reading that?"

Her slightly bloodshot eyes lifted to his over the top of the book.

"Required reading," she replied, mouth full of porridge.

"So it's just *my* subject you choose to do so little study in."

Parr tutted, her expression hidden behind the book. "To study Potions in your presence would be gauche." She set the bowl down and turned a page. "Plus you'd do nothing but snipe at me, and I can't concentrate when you do that." She picked up the bowl again and tipped it so that porridge slid out of it and into her mouth.

Snape sniffed and studied the sutured cuts. The flesh around the wounds was much more inflamed than it should have been.

"It is a child's book."

Parr snorted. "I'm sure Remus will be happy to hear you say that."

"Lupin is an oaf, and an ill-educated one at that," Snape replied prissily, dabbing ointment on the stitched cuts. "He is insufficiently qualified to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"And you are?" The quirked eyebrow spoke louder than her tone.

"My knowledge is vastly greater."

"So's your ego."

Pomfrey's approach stymied the opportunity to make a cutting invective in Parr's direction. The empty porridge bowl was removed and replaced by a dish of shelled, boiled eggs. By the time the mediwitch passed out of hearing range, Snape's crankiness had subsided, which surprised him. He must have been more tired than he realised.

"That book won't tell you what you need to know."

The grey eyes peered at him over the book cover once again.

"I have something better."

Parr's eyebrows lifted, just a fraction.

Snape waited until Parr's hand was re-bandaged before calling the house-elf's name, ever so quietly. For a few moments, he thought she hadn't heard, but the tap of her bare feet against the wood drew his attention to the doorway of the infirmary. This was the second time Folter had appeared a distance away from him, and both times it had been in Parr's presence. It irked him that he didn't know the reason why.

"Folter, I need the green, leather-bound book on the third shelf in my study. The one with the gold lettering down the spine." He flicked a glance in Pomfrey's direction. The mediwitch was unfolding sheets with her wand and remaking the already spotless cots, buried in her task. "Without anyone else noticing, if you please."

Folter tucked her hair behind her ears and bobbed her head. "Yes, Professor." She glanced quickly at Parr before turning to leave the way she had arrived. If Snape hadn't been watching her carefully, he would've missed the look. He squinted suspiciously at Parr.

"She knows that house-elf Apparition hurts me," she told him, all but her eyes still hidden behind the book. Her freshly bandaged hand sought out the dish of boiled eggs. "It's like someone firing a gun in my ear."

"And how would she know that?"

Parr shrugged slightly. "I spend a fair amount of time in the kitchens, and unlike you, I do talk to people without an ulterior motive." She chewed her boiled egg for a moment. "Why not wave your stick and get the book yourself?"

"The shelf is warded. Folter knows how to bypass it."

"That's very trusting of you. How out of character." She said it lightly but it rankled nonetheless.

"I trust those who earn it," he replied tersely and snatched the book out of her hand. Parr's face registered her surprise, her cheeks not quite as hollow as the previous night. She must have eaten a gargantuan amount of food to regain the weight her Handler had sucked away from her.

Snape divested the book of its cover and held the tome up for a second before dropping it, flat-side down, onto the floor. It made an enormous bang that echoed off the infirmary walls and drew an exclamation that was surprisingly coarse out of Pomfrey's mouth. The sound covered the appearance of the leather-bound book on the cot before Parr's crossed legs.

"Sharp timing," she murmured, impressed, her eyes watering slightly.

Snape flipped the discarded book's cover at Parr, his body hiding the action from Pomfrey. "Cover it with that. If anyone finds it, I will ensure your punishment is sufficiently retributive for breaking into my study and stealing it."

"Naturally."

"Left foot."

"Yes, doc."

"Don't call me that."

"Yes, doc."

Parr waited until Pomfrey had finished her cantankerous muttering at being startled before sliding the book jacket over her new literature. Fortunately, both books were of similar thickness, so unless anyone saw what was written on the pages inside, no-one would be any the wiser. Unless a person had a reason to go digging about, looking for something illicit. That thought reminded him of something he had been meaning to ask Parr for some time.

"Why don't you trust Moody?"

"Not here," she whispered, her eyes fixed on the open book in her hand. Another boiled egg disappeared into her mouth. Snape's hands stilled on her foot, causing Parr to flick a glance up at him. A liquid velvet touch trickled down his spine. Cautioning. Calming. Promising.

He cleared his throat hastily and stood up. "Poppy, since Miss Parr is so concerned about muscle atrophy, she is permitted to walk outside for twenty minutes after lunch, weather permitting." He heard the intake of breath in preparation for a dispute, but he strode on past the mediwitch towards the door. "I will accompany her to ensure she does not roll in the mud."

They did not speak until some distance from the castle.

For once, the day was neither drenched in frigid rain nor draped in ashen cloud. The sky was an almost unfamiliar blue, a shade that belonged in spring rather than in the pit of winter. It was still bitterly cold. Pomfrey had made sure, to an almost ridiculous degree, that Parr wore sufficient clothing to block any chill from reaching inside her. It was a wonder she could move at all under all the material she was bundled up in. The Striker had flatly refused to wear a woolly hat.

As soon as they were hidden from the sight of anyone who would happen to glance out of the castle windows, Parr was scrabbling at the thick scarf around her neck.

"Leave it," Snape told her, catching the movement out of the corner of his eye as they walked side by side.

"I'm sweating to death here!" Parr snapped up at him, trying to untangle the material from the impossible knot that Pomfrey had tied into it. "It's like being clamped under a giant's armpit!"

"Why do you never follow instructions given to you by medical practitioners without endless whining? Has it never occurred to you that you are being treated in a manner conducive to addressing your particular ailments?"

"I'm overheating and getting cross! How is that addressing my ailments?"

"You are perfectly capable of inducing those states without anyone else assisting you so it seems redundant to blame that on being dressed appropriately for the weather. If you dislike that, you have a choice: deal with it or stay indoors."

"I can't stay indoors and have Poppy restrict me to bed-rest! I can't afford to be enfeebled." She was getting increasingly agitated at failing to untie the scarf and had settled for trying to slip the snug loop over her head. Snape wondered how much of her irritation was caused by the scarf and how much from withdrawal from the painkiller.

"What precisely are you expecting to take part in that you eschew adequate recovery time?" he inquired, squinting down at her struggling form. "Common sense should tell you that to rush recuperation will merely prolong your debilitation. Since you repeatedly fail to follow medical advice, at least listen to that."

Parr succeeded in freeing her head from the noose of her scarf. "Time is a luxury I don't have. If I'm required to track, I have to be ready, as strong as I can be. That is what I agreed to."

"What—"

"That agreement is not your concern, Dual," Parr pointed out in a ratty voice, stuffing the scarf into her pocket with a shaking hand.

"It *is* my concern if it affects your recovery," Snape replied sharply. "Since you're shouldering your Handler's ill-health, threatening what's left of your constitution is foolish."

"What choice do I have?" Parr growled at him, her frustration evident. "I cannot be drugged at the level you would have me at. 'I...' She paused awkwardly. "... barely hear her anymore as it is. The drugs make it worse. I can't focus enough to even feel her there. If I lose that link between us, I... cannot help her."

"As it is, you may be doing her a level of disservice you do not realise."

That stopped her in her tracks. "What do you mean?"

Forced to stop as well, he turned back to face her, seeing the alarm in her eyes.

"You take her symptoms, but not the pathogens. There is no trace of them in your body, but your Handler is undoubtedly suffering from infection and perhaps even blood toxicity. Symptoms are there for a reason: to assist the body in combating the condition. Take the symptoms away and the infection has little to stop it."

"This is how we have always done it." The stubborn set to her jaw spoke volumes.

"For how long? Hours? Days? Certainly not weeks or months."

There was no reaction on her face, but Snape felt a sweep of coldness run over his skin that had nothing to do with the chill wind that clutched at their clothing.

“Over a short period of time, it makes sense, but in this situation you are burning up her immune system as well as your own.”

“What choice do I *have*?” Parr whispered eventually, a ripple of vexation under the sheen of sweat across her forehead, her hair stirring in the breeze and catching the pale winter sun.

“There may be a better way,” he told her and turned back to follow the path that they were on.

“Which is?” she prompted, trotting eagerly beside him. “I must know!” Her shaking hand nearly touched his arm but she pulled it away before contact. “Tell me!”

“The apoth. I can give him drugs to treat your Handler, sufficient to stabilise her but not strong enough to alert suspicion or... attract unwanted attention.” That was a dark blot that neither of them wanted to spend time lingering over. It was more than likely that Greyback had abused Parr’s Handler in dreadful ways already, but her precarious state of health would surely have prevented its continuance. At least for now.

“But the fat man said he never knows when they will take him to where Greyback is!” Parr pointed out astutely. “What if he’s taken there but doesn’t have the drugs with him?”

“He will keep them with him at all times,” Snape assured her, his gaze fixed resolutely ahead. “I will make sure of it.” He steeled himself for another wash of Parr’s derision and disgust at his use of the Imperius curse. An “abomination”, she had called it. Whilst he never enjoyed using it, it had been a crucial tool on a number of occasions to achieve the result he was after. Its use always left him feeling nauseous, but always there was little choice in the matter for him. To have someone echo his own deep-seated disgust elicited a shame in him at his use of this Unforgivable Curse, a shame that he tried to drown in anger.

But for a wonder, Parr said nothing. Still, he felt her rancour burning his left side as keenly as if she had shouted at him. Of course she would hate how he would force the apoth, but what choice did they have in the time left to them? It was an unspoken question that they both ruminated on as they walked around the grounds.

Every so often, a flush of Parr’s withdrawal touched him, and each time she drew it back from him, like the ebb and flow of the tides. It was a sensation Snape was familiar with, despite the number of years that had passed since he had felt it. He had experienced a terrible guilt opening her to its eventual sting, but had he not given Pomfrey the anodyne, Parr would have folded under the pressure of the pain she was absorbing from her Handler, a pressure that would have stopped her heart. Right now, she must be suffering significantly to allow her normally steely mental control to slip.

He noticed that she was starting to shake and realised they would have to return to the castle before the withdrawal gripped her too tightly. He would have to shepherd her back surreptitiously or there’d be a protracted argument about it.

“Why don’t you trust Moody?” Perhaps he could distract her with a change in conversation.

Parr scrubbed a hand under her nose absently. “He smells...” She appeared to struggle for a word. “...duplicitous.”

“Alastor Moody is a man with an agenda,” Snape noted calmly, altering the direction they were walking in ever so slightly. “He is also insane. They don’t call him Mad-Eye for nothing.”

“It’s more than that,” Parr muttered, seemingly oblivious to the way Snape was manoeuvring her in a wide arc in order to head back to the castle. “He is there, but not.”

Snape frowned at that cryptic summation.

Parr made an irritated sound and waved a hand in front of her face as if to ward off an annoying fly. “Duplicity I can identify, even if I cannot discern the details. This is something more. It’s as if he himself is a lie.” Again, the gasp of exasperation. “I can’t explain it.”

“You distrust him the same way you distrust the Headmaster?”

“No, that one is different. His agendas are so layered that I lose track of where he’s headed.” She stumbled slightly on the uneven grass they were crossing even though her eyes were fixed on the ground in front of her. “That one would do whatever he felt necessary to get what he wanted,” she said quietly, her hair falling forward to partially hide her face. “That I can understand if not condone. I distrust him, but not for the same reasons. And he is not as opaque as he likes to think he is. Watch yourself, Dual. And watch him closer.”

Snape chose not to respond to that, though it unsettled him how closely her assessment of Dumbledore matched his own.

“How much do you keep from him?”

“As much as I can. He would see us yoked to the MLE once more and not give a thought about the reasons why we left in the first place.”

“And yet you allow Lupin to gather information for the organisation you claim you wish to avoid control by.”

A blood-shot eye rolled up at him. “I tell Lupin nothing of importance. I dislike lying to him, even if it is lie by omission, but I will not be responsible for our return to slavery. I do what I must. And besides, as a teacher you should know that it’s possible to say all manner of things and at the same time say nothing at all. Students are not the only ones capable of that.” She sighed heavily. “Why didn’t you just turn around and head straight back to the castle instead of nudging me into a circuitous route? It’s like walking with someone who has one leg shorter than the other!”

“Smell my duplicity, did you?”

A barking laugh was all the answer he got to that question.

The entrance to the castle loomed in front of them, the threshold beyond which they could not talk of such things. They were a few steps from it when Parr spoke again, very quietly.

“Go visit the fat man, Dual. Then we will unpick the knot.”

Chapter Forty-Nine—Canary

Chapter 49 of 59

Crumbs are a poor diet for those who crave meat.

Ordinarily, the prissily-dressed woman's continued hesitation would have him fussing at the folds of his saffron robes in repressed agitation, but Todianus had seen the tell-tale glint in her dark brown eyes that told him she had already decided to purchase the goods. It was merely an appearance of vacillation employed to determine whether or not she had bargained with him as tightly as possible. Customer hesitation would have those of lesser experience reduce the price even further in order to guarantee the sale. Todianus was not so foolish.

"The gall-stones are of considerable quality, madam," he told her mildly in his high voice and clasped his chubby hands together. "I must confess that I've had to turn away several other interested customers as I knew you would be calling in today. Your reputation for a discerning taste in apothecaria tells me that you would not deny yourself the opportunity to secure such quality examples as you see here."

She heard the flattery. Of course she would. Todianus had expected no less. But the woman also heard the intimation that the apoth had been pushed as far as he was willing to go in reducing the price and was prepared to pass on the dragon galls to another interested party. Her keen eyes studied his flabby face for signs of deceit, shrewd beneath her high, arching brows, thin mouth slightly pursed in assessment. Yes, he could very well be lying, but was she prepared to take that chance?

"They are adequate," she decided with a sigh, as if disappointed at being forced to buy them for want of something finer. Her skeletal hand slid into her purse just as the door to the shop opened.

Todianus' gaze flicked up automatically to observe his new customer, his mind otherwise occupied with self-congratulations for achieving the sale with a handsome profit margin. Such thoughts fled rapidly as he recognised the dark silhouette against the winter afternoon's fading light.

The fat apoth tried his hardest to keep his hands from shaking, but it was a futile exercise. The tremor was patently evident as he took the bony woman's Galleons, earning him a sharp look as he fumbled one of the heavy coins and allowed it to clatter onto the counter.

He gave a nervous titter. "My apologies, madam. Allow me to prepare your purchase."

"Swiftly, please," his female customer instructed haughtily, keen to regain some of the upper hand in the exchange by acting snobbishly. "I have business elsewhere and I have been kept here longer than I wished."

Todianus bobbed his bald head in assent, wiping a trickle of sweat off his temple surreptitiously and reaching for a delicate glass case for the die-sized gall-stones. He risked a second glance at his other customer who had drifted from the doorway to give the outward appearance of calmly checking the large jars on the shelf next to the tinted shop window. It was possible that he was scrutinising the merchandise, but the apoth knew the real reason why the man was here.

It was a small miracle that Todianus didn't smash the glass case in his haste to have the woman's purchase prepared and she herself out of his shop. For someone who had professed an urgency to be away, she took an inordinate amount of time to leave. It was all the apoth could do not to shove her out physically. Not that he was keen to be left alone with this man, but he would rather not anyone else know of the situation at hand.

The snick of the door closing made Todianus jump slightly, as if it were the fastening of a dried corpse's hand around his throat. He waited tensely behind his counter, fingers knotted together tightly. The man gave no indication that he knew Todianus was watching him —a deliberate tactic to ensure the apoth's nervousness would do nothing but increase as the seconds ticked by.

Todianus mopped his forehead with a handkerchief as his gaze followed the man across the shop floor to the opposite wall. Several more minutes were spent assessing the wares there in a parody of an innocent customer browsing which covered the reality of a person knowing they were so completely in control of the situation that they could take all the time they needed. And time that they *didn't* need.

Turning slowly on his heel, the man drifted back towards the door and stopped, looking out on the few shadows moving back and forth along Knockturn Alley with his hands clasped behind his back, head tilted a fraction to one side. Todianus shuffled his weight between his feet and hoped that no other customers would attempt to enter with that forbidding figure blocking passage. It would be appalling for business. He was mere seconds away from clearing his throat when the man spoke.

"I will take five ounces of the lacewing flies."

The low voice kicked back from the glass as clearly as if the man had been facing the apoth, startling the fat man into motion. His trembling and sweaty hands nearly allowed the jar to slip from his grasp as he gathered it from the shelf. Sensing Todianus' discomfort, the man turned smoothly to watch him, a sardonic twist to his mouth and a slightly raised eyebrow.

With the dried insects carefully boxed up, the apoth dabbed again at his perspiring face with the rapidly dampening handkerchief. "Will there be anything else today?" he inquired, hoping for a negative answer.

The man's smile tightened. Todianus sighed, drew out his wand and pointed it in the man's direction.

The dark-haired wizard hissed through his uneven teeth and stepped swiftly to one side, his hand moving partway to where his own wand was kept.

Todianus blinked in confusion, lowering his wand and taking a pace back in alarm before realising how his actions must have looked.

"No! I meant... ah... that is... I... need to close the shop."

The hard black eyes continued to bore into his. He knew better than to look away. He'd learnt the hard way.

"The sign," Todianus clarified. "I need to turn it."

There was a long pause before the man lifted his hand, trapped the sign between his fingers and twisted it around to deny entry to any other, all without taking his eyes off the apoth. The whispered *Colloportus* would stop the illiterate or the more persistent.

Todianus put his wand down on the counter and wiped his palms on his robes. This was never going to be a pleasant encounter, but his lack of foresight had now ensured that it was undoubtedly going to be even less agreeable. He edged toward to the curtain drawn across the doorway leading to the rear of the shop and pulled the material back.

The black stare narrowed. "After you, I think."

The truth was that Todianus, whilst dreading these particular confrontations, grudgingly admitted, albeit to himself, that they were not the worst he experienced these days. There was no gore, no physical violence like that he witnessed in his dealings with Greyback. No threat to his livelihood or indeed his *life* that he underwent with Macnair. However, these encounters within his own shop were just as dangerous, just as deadly, the control over him so absolute that to contemplate anything but obeisance and obedience was unthinkable. Not just unthinkable: impossible. The man had a grappling hook buried so deep into his will that even the normally slippery apoth could find no way to avoid its biting pull. He would do whatever the man said, and gladly. That was the way of the Imperius. In some ways, he was glad of it. This way, he had no will, no conscience to struggle against. He just did as he was told.

Yet his flesh still crawled whenever he had to turn his back on the man. The rational part of him knew, *knew* that it was in the wizard's best interests to keep Todianus alive, but how could he know when he'd outlived his usefulness when the man kept him in the dark as much as Greyback and Macnair tried to?

The apoth sighed and pushed open the door to his small office at the rear of the shop where the neatly stacked ledgers and inventories sat aligned with a near mathematical precision. All trace of his brother's administrative chaos was now long gone. He stood by the leather chair and tried not to swallow convulsively. With it being

the only seating in the room, he offered it to his visitor in somewhat fawning subservience.

"My two feet do well enough," was the response. The fact that it allowed the man to tower over Todianus even more than usual was left unspoken.

"There is little to tell," the fat man began, dropping his weight into the chair and blotting the handkerchief against his jowls.

"That may be so." The tone suggested that there was a disbelief in the veracity of Todianus' statement.

"You know I cannot lie," the apoth replied tiredly, looking up at the lanky, black-shrouded figure.

"I know you do not see the greater picture," was the quiet answer. "It remains for me to determine the quality and quantity of your information. You have the location?"

Todianus wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. "Greyback has moved again. I do not know where. Some place I have not been before. He expressed a... concern that someone was leaking information as to where his den was. One or two werewolves had reported..." He searched for an adequate word. "Lurkers in the vicinity." He shook his head slightly. "Greyback has been more jumpy than usual. More violent as well." Images of torn bodies, clenched fists and poorly-repressed rage flickered through his mind. "I am put through an even more elaborate disorientation process than ever before. I don't believe he suspects me, but that could easily change if I am not careful."

"Macnair."

"Judging on the amounts of drugs he's taking from me, I estimate he has between two hundred and fifty and two hundred and seventy five lycanthropes tied to him. He has made no mention as to what fraction of that number constitutes females." Todianus tapped his fingers on the table briefly. "Perhaps none. There has been no mention of the loss of lyc-females that he did once have, but I am certain they remain lost to him." Simulacra of whispered, fervent exchanges between Macnair and Brachoveitch flashed through his head. "Those two argue. A lot. I sense a... disparity of purpose between them."

"Their long-term plan?"

"Still unknown to me."

The man opposite him considered this for some time, making of it who knew what as he stared steadily into the apoth's eyes. One long-fingered hand slipped into his overcoat pocket, making Todianus tense up immediately. The tightening of his body did not go unobserved, if the man's curled lip was any judge. Three small glass vials were placed in front of the apoth.

"Give the sick woman five drops of the blue, two of the green and one of the clear. This is the most important thing you will ever do, so you will keep the vials on you at all times, even as you sleep. If I discover you have missed any opportunity, you will pray that Greyback tears you apart first."

"But if he asks—"

"Tell the fool that one is an antibiotic, one an anti-inflammatory and the third a liver tonic. It is unimportant which is which as long as you are consistent. The medication is not to be left in his possession, and nor are you. Be creative in your reasoning."

"He'll want to know why one isn't a stimulant."

"Then tell him 'one step at a time'. A stimulant will destroy what's left of her liver and then she will be beyond help. She must be dosed every five hours and the dosage will vary according to her progress."

"How will I know—"

"You will observe her very, very carefully. I will determine the variation based on your observation, so be thorough."

The apoth placed the vials into his pocket. A small, velvet pouch was placed in front of him, its contents making a faint tinkling sound. He blinked in confusion. It hadn't sounded like coins for payment of any kind.

"What is it?" The man had asked the question he had intended to voice. Todianus hesitated before reaching for the pouch and loosening the cord. The jointed metal inside was unfamiliar to him in form but not nature, fashioned in a strange collar-like arrangement with a delicate chain hanging loose from one panel. He turned the metal over in his hands, squinting at the fine engraving, turning the panels towards the light coming from the lamp on the table.

"I don't know, but the metal is pewtinella-haem. I've seen it once or twice before, but not like this.

"Then where?"

Todianus fiddled with the catch, marvelling at the workmanship. Goblin-wrought, surely.

"I came across an incomplete set of flasks made of it at an auction many years ago. The auctioneer knew nothing more than the metal and its approximate age. I was quite taken with them. Pewtinella-haem is resistant to oxidation and non-reactive with most contents, so they would have made excellent, if expensive storage flasks for the more temperamental apothecaria." He set the jewellery down on the black velvet rather reluctantly. "Alas, someone had deeper pockets than I that day. The other time I saw a knife of it in the hands of a woman. Briefly. I could have been mistaken, but the colour..." He shrugged. "Too distinct for anything else." He studied the collar once more. "A gift?"

The man's expression didn't change, but he sounded surprised at the query. "Perhaps."

Todianus nodded, his curiosity aroused but wisely unspoken any further.

"Does either of the Teverington seevy wear such a piece?"

It was the apoth's turn to be surprised. "No! At least, not that I've ever seen." He mulled over the question for a moment. "It's possible. They could wear one under their clothing and I'd never know."

"Who is the senior of the two?"

Todianus looked up from the jewellery, still lost in the consideration of how he would know if either Teverington wore anything like it. A crease marked his smooth forehead.

"In age?"

"In rank."

"Oh." An interesting question. "The Handler, although..." He wasn't sure whether the supposition would be worth relaying.

"Yes?" It was the prompt that would inevitably have been asked.

"I suspect that the Sniffer is changing that."

The fathomless eyes glittered at him. "How so?"

It was quicker, easier, to allow the man to look at what Todianus had seen than try to explain it. In words, the exchanges, the looks, the mood of the incidents would seem inconsequential, but in reality, Todianus' gut feeling was that there was a subtle, inexorable shift of power going on between the seevy. Pushing the memories to the front of his mind only strengthened that belief. It was a belief that seemed to trouble the other man.

"What do you know of seevy?"

Now Todianus was definitely confused. He frowned up at the man.

"There is a problem with the question?" The raised eyebrows and soft voice reminded the apoth that this man had a cold temper.

"Ah, no, but what could I possibly tell you that you don't already know?"

The man did not respond.

"Surely your Sniffer could tell you?" Todianus hunched his shoulders inward to make himself appear even more subservient; sensing a prickly irritation arising in the room's other occupant.

"This question is not how much I know. It is how much *you* know."

"Little," the apoth was quick to emphasise. "I have heard that some apoths used to employ Sniffers, but personally I know of none now that do so. A shame."

That, strangely, caused a faint smile on the other man's face. "And why is that?"

"Quality control," Todianus replied without thinking ahead. "A tool for differentiating the poor from the fine. The industry is rife with suppliers looking to short change a buyer."

The smile widened. "Quite so."

The apoth realised that one such buyer was currently standing in front of him, sneering down at him through the lank locks of his raven hair. Todianus clenched his teeth in dreaded anticipation of retribution for reminding the man that he had once been duped with less laudable supplies than the coin had demanded.

"I've tried to secure the services of a Sniffer," the apoth rushed on, keen to get away from his rather spectacular metaphorical insertion of his foot in his mouth as quickly as possible. "I was stonewalled by a Screen and now I cannot even find evidence of any other seevy except for the ones working for Macnair. I was told in no uncertain terms that I have been blacklisted."

"How?"

"A knife point in my back and a voice in my ear. I never saw them, and so much the better." He saw the man's questioning expression. "I've heard it said that to see a Sniffer's face is to see the face of death." Todianus shrugged slightly, noting the way the fabric of his robes clung to his skin awkwardly from the sweat that squeezed from his pores. "An effective legend, and perhaps it was true once, but I've looked on the Teverington Sniffer's face more than once and I survive still. Given the choice, I would prefer not to see it."

"Where did this warning take place?"

This was clearly of interest to the man: his whole mien had changed from an easy, almost lazy superiority to an intense and focussed alertness.

"As I was leaving the shop."

Jarring visual grabs of the incident swept across his mind, confused and jumbled by the adrenaline-infused terror he had felt at the time. They faded as the man's eyes flicked briefly to one side.

"Find a way to reach Greyback. Tell him you have something that will help keep his captured seevy female alive. Find out where he's hiding and don't let him keep you there. Contact me by Floo the second you return. Remember, if she dies, you'll be next, and it won't be by my hand."

With that, the man picked up the jewellery and its pouch, turned and left the small office, leaving Todianus to scramble clumsily up from his chair and after him. Coins were already on the counter and the boxed lacewing flies securely in the man's hand before the apoth reached the shop floor.

"Ah, there is no charge for today's purchase, Professor!" the fat man called after him breathlessly.

The silhouette paused on the threshold. "I do not steal, Mr Todianus. I pay for everything I take. Kindly remember that in future."

And then he was gone.

Pewtinella-haem. It would explain the colour. A tricky alloy to master, and none were so accomplished as Goblins in that regard. Another line of connection in the web, but one that would lead to a dead-end. Goblins were exceedingly close-mouthed and incredibly canny, and they regarded inquiries into their business very poorly.

Snape sighed as he watched the two silver birds jump from perch to perch in their bamboo cage, serenading each other in an intricate lace of sweet descant and honeyed harmony, wings catching the firelight in pretty little flashes as they flitted back and forth.

At first their singing had bothered him. He was unused to such constant noise in his quarters, however delicate and accomplished a sound it may have been. They would only sing if he were in the room, so he had taken to moving away until they couldn't see him and would therefore fall silent. Then he had been puzzled as to why they would only sing when he was in sight and tested himself with trying to sneak up on the birds to see how close he could get to them before they erupted into what seemed to be a faintly accusing barrage of notes aimed down at him, their tiny bright blue eyes flickering as they scolded him. Folter had caught him at it a couple of times, her large eyes even wider than usual, but typically she said nothing.

It wasn't long before Snape found himself spending more time around the birds, finding their trilling voices oddly soothing. He'd even dragged his small study table nearer to where the cage hung so that the birds could watch him more closely. It seemed to amuse them that they could fluff their feathers and drop those that escaped onto his parchments as he worked. He kept them all. Pewtinella was an expensive, rare metal, and it would have been foolish of him to discard it. Mostly he kept them because the delicate silvern feathers were so elegant.

He wondered how long it would take to collect enough feathers to make a collar like Parr's. It was a piece of incredible worth, both in its constituent metal and the labour and skill that had gone into making it. To blend blood with metal in such a way would not have come cheaply, let alone the fine carving worked into the metal.

The collar laid nestled back in its velvet pouch on the study table in front of him. It bothered him in more ways than one.

Parr had not asked for it back. Since Lupin had left it for him, there had been no mention of it, from the werewolf or from the seevy. Was he meant to return it? Was there a specific etiquette surrounding it? He rolled his eyes. Undoubtedly, if his experience with seevy custom was anything to go by, but he was hamstrung by a lack of information. Questioning the apoth had been fruitless, as he had suspected it would be, but it had been worth a shot.

What did it say to the Parr Striker that he had retained possession of something that belonged to her, something that symbolised who and what she was: a collared creature leashed by a chain so thin that its ability to restrain her would have been laughable? Perhaps that was the whole point of it. The collar unworn and the leash deliberately inadequate to illustrate that the arrangement between Handler and Striker was far more complex and mysterious than Snape had first realised. He had assumed that it was the Handler who maintained seniority in the pairing, but at times it seemed as if the Striker acted as if *she* were the higher ranked of the two. However, having never been in direct contact with her Handler, it was all mere supposition on his part with little to back it up in terms of hard evidence. How much of her behaviour was wilfulness and how much was that from a Striker's right was impossible to judge.

Both Parrs had been in Greyback's possession. He was unsure of the circumstances in which it had occurred, but Snape couldn't imagine that the Striker would have been able to retain possession of not only the collar, but her knives as well. Regardless of whether they had been taken in the field or ambushed at home, their possessions would have been plundered, fought over, coveted and probably sold. The collar and leash could be a replacement—its appearance was pristine enough to be a relatively new acquisition—but her knives appeared to bear markings of a heavier and longer use than recent facsimiles would display. The long silver knife given into his possession as a mark of the Parr seevys' debt to him sat next to the velvet pouch, well-kept, untarnished, sharper than a razor, but lined and dented as silver was inclined to turn with constant handling and the passage of time.

If what he suspected were true—that they were originals—who had kept them from being pillaged? Of even more interest was how they had been returned to the Striker. It was possible that Snape was not the only double agent in hostile territory.

The fat apoth had said something that at first had seemed innocuous, but the more Snape thought on it, the more concerning it was. Todianus had said that he'd received his warning from a Striker on leaving his shop. On Knockturn Alley. A place where non-magicals could not go.

Whilst it was true that the entrance to Diagon Alley, and hence potential access to Knockturn Alley and the other magical laneways of London, lay at the back of the Leaky Cauldron through the wall of its austere courtyard, it was not the only means of access. It was put in place to allow non-magicals and Muggle-born witches and wizards to gain easy access to Diagon Alley, but Knockturn Alley was expressly forbidden to non-magicals via a number of complex and inflexible charms. It had not occurred to him at the time months ago that, theoretically, a seevy like Parr should not be able to walk down Knockturn Alley, but Snape had been so agitated that his visit to the apothecary was being jeopardised by Lupin's thoughtless tardiness that he had given no thought to how Parr had been able to circumvent those guarding charms. It could be explained away by her inherent immunity to magic, but Snape wondered if that were the only reason. The immunity to magic alone was concerning, especially if other seevy had the trait. They could move in and out of Knockturn Alley with ease and without detection. If they could do that, then they were certainly able to walk along Diagon Alley unhindered. The potential contact between the two societies was greater than he had imagined, and it was shaping up to being weighted heavily in the favour of seevy.

Snape shifted in his chair and considered another possibility: that seevyism and magical ability were not mutually exclusive. Certainly Parr manifested no magical ability, but that did not mean *all* seevy were Muggles. Half-breed magicals were not well-regarded. For many it was more distasteful an idea than Muggle-borns. The magical world could be disgustingly elitist.

The question that Snape wanted the answer to was how tightly was seevy society already woven into the magical world. If the MLE was employing Lupin to research seevy, it would suggest that the government was unaware of such close proximity of those they were trying to cajole back into the fold. Whilst it was true that the MLE often kept things from its apparent political masters, that they would be scratching for information would suggest that the government had even less knowledge on seevy to hand. Knowledge that they once would have had. Knowledge that was now lost to them. Or deliberately removed. For whoever controlled information held the real power.

That was when he realised he had stared right in the eyes of two seevy and had not even realised it.

Chapter Fifty — Unravelled

Chapter 50 of 59

Don't anger the person who pulls your strings.

"They're gone."

There was a noticeable pause before Dumbledore responded to Lupin's reply.

"Willingly?"

The werewolf scratched at the crease beside his nose and shifted in the chair. The aged wood creaked in protest. "It's hard for me to say. The den showed definite signs of chaotic departure, but whether that was through haste in vacating or as a result of unexpected intrusion is up for debate. Blood was spilt, and as recently as within the last twenty-four hours, but that could be nothing more than from fractious exchanges between lyc-males forced to share space. It's not uncommon for fights to break out amongst den members."

The Headmaster nodded at that, a pensive cast to his features. The study had the hushed air of a room late in the evening. The silky slither of phoenix feathers whispered gently above a light drizzle that pattered against the window panes, the bird busying himself with his night-time preening. A fire under the mantle hissed and spat occasionally and threw a flickering light that warmed and polished all the metal in the room to a rich glittering. It also reflected in the Headmaster's half-moon glasses, hiding his eyes intermittently.

"The MLE is..." Lupin hesitated, searching for a milder explanation than that which first came to mind. "... not overly interested in the cause, or even the result. Kingsley feels that they will regard it as nothing more than the usual itinerancy that lycanthropes manifest. Case closed, apparently. In some ways, this could work in our favour. I can get into the den again and have a closer look without worrying about an Auror popping up out of nowhere." He stretched his legs out in from of him, crossing one ankle over the other and slouched down a little into his seat. "If I could have Chara, she might be able to find what I can't."

"Severus?"

Snape exhaled heavily and peered at Lupin from out of the corner of his eye. He'd noticed the way the werewolf had changed his posture before proposing that particular course of action. It could be read two ways: Lupin was trying to disguise how important it was for him to use Parr's abilities in determining the cause of the den's vacation by adopting a nonchalant air, or he was subtly shifting to a more subservient, less threatening pose in the hopes that it would allow Snape to feel superior and hence less likely to be intractable. Perhaps it was a combination of both. More likely Lupin was unaware of doing it. It was a lycanthropic type of behaviour.

"I understand her health is poor, but the task would not be physically taxing," Dumbledore pointed out.

"And if an Auror, or worse, were to 'pop up' as you so put it, Lupin, how would you extricate Miss Parr from the situation?" Snape inquired rather frostily. "As it is, her idiosyncratic nausea from Apparating would be a significant detriment to her recovery."

Lupin squinted shrewdly at Snape from behind the strands of his grey fringe. "Would that be the only cause of concern, Severus?" Judging from that prickly question, Lupin's posture shift *had* been unconscious. "I am more than capable of extricating myself and others from awkward situations."

Snape sneered at him. "My experience is that you are unable to do so unassisted, Lupin."

"Unless there is significant medical concern, I would like Chara to accompany Remus to the den," Dumbledore interjected before the two men sitting opposite him could settle too firmly into bickering. "As soon as possible, if you have no objections, Severus."

Snape huffed pointedly and stared over Dumbledore's head.

"Remus, you mentioned a few days ago that you felt that this den may have been under the influence of Macnair. Is it possible that he has shifted them to where his other drug-dependent lycanthropes are?"

Lupin shrugged slightly. "It would make sense. If the werewolves are getting twitchy, he'd want them somewhere he could control their behaviour as rigidly as possible. I don't think he'd be wise to mix the groups together. There are enough fights within a den without mixing up members from other dens amongst each other. However, if they're addicted enough, he could keep them incoherent enough to overcome any inter-den animosity."

"Severus?"

Snape considered the notion carefully. "His supply of narcotics is not drying up, yet. Macnair would prefer direct control of those he's tied to him. He would corral them together in the one spot ordinarily, but I wonder if his recent loss of the lyc-females would cause him to hesitate repeating that tendency."

"There was superficial evidence of drug use at the den," Lupin interjected. "But whether it was drugs from Macnair or generic street drugs I didn't have time to determine. General drug use amongst lycanthropes is not unusual." The man dropped his eyes to the carpet and hunched his shoulders a touch.

"Perhaps Severus should go with you, then."

"What?" The two men sitting across from the Headmaster spoke the word at precisely the same moment.

"Ah, Albus, I'm not sure that's really a good idea," Lupin elaborated, sitting up with some alacrity.

"Indeed not," Snape agreed. "The situation would be precarious enough should anyone come across Lupin and Miss Parr there. My presence is not only unnecessary but potentially hazardous."

"I do recall that Remus is not the only one capable of extricating themselves out of difficult situations, Severus," the Headmaster pointed out mildly, pulling gently at his earlobe as if lost in thought. "I would like confirmation as to whether the members of this den were drug-dependent on Macnair or not, and since you would be able to ascertain that, I would appreciate your assistance in this matter." His gaze sharpened on Snape's face. "Additionally, you will be there to determine whether or not your patient is being taxed beyond her current capabilities."

"Headmaster, I cannot stress greatly enough how dangerous such an idea is," Snape pressed, back ramrod straight and brow furrowed.

"Your concern is noted," Dumbledore responded gently, if rather distantly. "As soon as Chara is ready, I would like the three of you to make a thorough search of the abandoned den. Has there been any progress in discovering who removed the lyc-females from under Macnair's nose?"

Snape ground his teeth in silent frustration at being overridden by the old wizard. How typical of the man to accept only what advice concurred with his own opinions and objectives.

"I suspect that there may be one or two lycs in Clapham that know," Lupin began, seemingly oblivious to the intense waves of cold frustration emanating from the man beside him. "No-one's talking, but it's a gut feeling I have. I'll keep digging, though"

Dumbledore looked expectantly at Snape who glowered for a few moments before replying.

"That I have been unable to unearth any clue on the matter tells me one thing: someone knows and that same person or persons remain silent for good reason," he responded with obvious reluctance. "It is not unusual to get a whisper from the perpetrator in evidence of self-congratulation and posturing amongst the greater criminal community. If anything, several parties are often keen to claim false responsibility if they feel it increases their standing in some way. The silence is deafening."

Dumbledore laced his fingers together and leant forward over his desk slightly. "What does it tell you?"

"Either the perpetrator is very skilled, or very dangerous. Possibly both. That others have not put up their hands says they either don't know what's happened, which in my opinion is unlikely, or they're not brave or stupid enough to claim the deed."

"Is it a fear that Macnair will take the acceptance of responsibility as legitimate?"

Again, Snape considered the Headmaster's question carefully.

"Perhaps."

Dumbledore saw the doubt on Snape's face.

"But..."

"I have been informed of a... significant reluctance to even discuss the matter. I would interpret this as the influence of an adversary more deadly than Macnair."

That raised the Headmaster's eyebrows a fraction. "A more direct interaction may yield additional information," he mentioned, souring Snape's disposition even further at being instructed in his own area of expertise. "It certainly strengthens my opinion that you should accompany Remus and Chara to the den."

So much for not digging in uncertain ground Snape thought to himself bitterly. Dumbledore treated him like an automaton he expected to be obedient and willing, with no initiative unless he determined it necessary. It didn't bother Lupin, but then the werewolf was singularly devoid of extensive independent thought.

"Have you progressed in convincing any lycanthropes to assisting our cause, Remus?" the Headmaster continued.

Lupin sighed. "I think perhaps some are not dismissive of the idea, but many of their decisions are as the result of fear. Fear of being kicked out of their hiding places by their den-mates, fear of being persecuted even further while under the protection of magical society, fear of being tricked. There are so many considerations that it makes them very hard to convince. That they have no central governance is another hurdle. The mind of an individual lycanthrope is changeable by necessity. Their situation is precarious enough as it is. We'd be asking them to take a lot on faith, and to be honest, that's a lot to ask of a pariah."

"Then we will have to be especially convincing," Dumbledore resolved.

"Lupin, I would speak with you."

The werewolf paused on the stairway, turning to look back up at Snape, a taint of surprise on his features.

"Right now?"

"If you can stand to be away from the bottle for five minutes, yes, now." He swept past Lupin swiftly with his nose in the air.

"Carping on about my alcoholism is becoming rather old hat, Severus. Perhaps you should move onto my financial privation."

"That is a condition I was once familiar with, hence I do not find it hilarious," Snape reminded him, reaching the bottom of the winding stone staircase that led from the Headmaster's study. Lupin's hasty footsteps echoed behind him.

"How encouraging that my own drug use causes mirth in a medical practitioner," the werewolf muttered in a wry tone.

Snape gave him a particularly crass epithet in reply.

"Charming," Lupin concluded. "Was that what you wanted to talk to me about?"

Snape held up his hand and forestalled him, peering around the corner in the corridor. The faint, hollow sound of children's voices bounced down the stone passageway. He turned on his heel and headed in the opposite direction. "This way, I think."

"Moving away from potential mischief-makers, Severus? A bit unlike you," Lupin pointed out lightly.

"One would have thought that you would realise the egregiousness of being discovered on school property, Lupin, but once more I find myself having to pare back the level of intelligence I think you manifest."

The werewolf was forced to trot slightly in order to keep pace with him.

"What precisely is your end goal?"

"For what?"

Snape tutted. "You know full well the type of treatment a lycanthrope faces from members of magical society, yet you work towards their subjugation into that same society. I would like to know why."

"Subjugation is an unfair accusation, don't you think?" Lupin murmured. "Lycanthropes have as much right to protection and equality as magicfolk."

Snape snorted his disbelief at Lupin's apparent naivety. "You know there's not the slightest chance of that becoming a reality. Your efforts, scant though they are, are being wasted. Surely your time spent in History of Magic was not given over entirely to scrawling Black's name with hearts around it in your notebook?" He turned a corner abruptly, forcing Lupin to backtrack.

"It is the lesser of many evils, Severus," the werewolf explained, choosing to ignore Snape's verbal stab at his sexuality, forehead furrowed in concern at the true topic of conversation.

"Then you need to analyse the data more critically," Snape told him curtly. "I wonder if you have mired yourself in this in the mistaken belief that since you remain in magical society, however precariously, that it is the best option for *all* lycanthropes."

"And despite being devoid of the condition yourself, you feel that is not the case." Lupin spoke it as a statement rather than a question.

"Be very careful which pit you choose to drop them into." Snape flowed down a wide flight of stairs like black water. "Be more careful of where your actions consign seevy."

"What I do for seevy society is none of your business, Severus."

Snape turned rapidly part way down the stairs and fixed Lupin with a penetrating stare. "Is that so?"

The werewolf blinked rapidly at the sudden confrontation, halting his own progress down the stone staircase lest he collide with Snape.

"I dislike being told to jump when and where at the behest of others. I appreciate even less being led about by the nose and being told to be satisfied with being kept in the dark, so it would be wise to cease telling me what is and what isn't my business." Not giving Lupin a chance to reply, he whirled back around and continued to the lower floor. "If you intend to avail yourself of my experience at that abandoned filth-hole, I require information. That is what I wish to speak to you about."

The air temperature dropped even further than its already frigid winter chill as they descended into the dungeons. That wasn't the only thing that caused Lupin to shiver. Snape was prickly to deal with at the best of times, and now he was giving every indication that he was in a serious snit. If Dumbledore's directive to have him accompany Lupin and Parr to the abandoned den was to have any useful result, some rather careful compromise of Lupin's part would most likely be in order. Snape never did anything for free. The manner and substance of payment, however, was often deliberately ambiguous.

The door to the Potions lab was held open imperiously. It took rather a great deal of personal control to refrain from scuttling past Snape like a reprimanded student. Lupin stuck his hands in his pockets and strolled past the man and into the classroom, a mild expression on his face that attempted to counteract the harsh, acid disapproval twisting the lines of the dark-haired wizard's countenance. He failed dismally in avoiding the jump caused by the resounding bang of the heavy wooden door as it was slammed shut.

"What members of Miss Parr's family remain alive?"

Lupin turned and stared at Snape, who stood with his body pressed back against the door as if to physically prevent Lupin from escaping. It said much that Snape would bring him here, to his territory, before demanding something of him.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Snape sneered at him. "I need to know who else might 'pop up' whilst we're grubbing about amongst the fleas," he enunciated with a dangerous softness. "If I am to do someone else's dirty work, I intend to be fully informed before submitting to it."

"No, it just wouldn't be right for you to do something purely for the greater good, would it?" Lupin shot back, irritated.

"Don't go there," Snape warned, his eyes burning two black holes right through Lupin's skull. "You will answer my questions or I will make the collaboration so unpleasant that you will willingly curse the Headmaster's name for proposing it. I need to know who has an interest in tracking down Miss Parr, for whatever reason, so that I can prepare adequately for any unwelcome intrusions. You speak often of your rather defunct role as a guardian of a person more than capable of defending themselves and making their own decisions, yet you withhold information that would allow me to avoid harm to be inflicted upon that same person."

"An interesting way to look at it," Lupin replied harshly, all trace of his usual good-nature absent. "And perhaps not a little disingenuous."

"Do you doubt the Headmaster's trust in me, Lupin?"

A deliberately thorny question.

"I trust Albus Dumbledore," the werewolf replied after a deliberate pause.

"In that case I will ask again: what members of Miss Parr's family remain alive?"

Lupin hissed quietly and rubbed his eyes briefly. "Other than a sister, no members of her immediate family remain alive."

Interesting that Lupin chose not to verbalise the connection between Parr's Handler and her sister...keeping whatever information he could away from Snape's grasping question.

"How did they die?"

The werewolf stayed silent, plainly unwilling to answer.

"Lupin, if there is a party out there that seeks to eradicate the Parr family, I need to know," Snape pointed out, peering down his nose at him.

"It is... supposed that certain members under... Greyback's control were responsible for murdering Chara's mother and aunt." The werewolf's gaze slid away from Snape, skittering over various objects in the room for no other reason than to avoid that keen-edged look being directed at him.

"That is all of her immediate family? Mother and aunt?"

Lupin sighed heavily. "Yes. There is no father to speak of, and no other aunts or uncles, and no grandparents. A small family unit." He said the last with a faint tinge of sadness.

"How much does Poppy know about the symbiotic relationship between Miss Parr and her Handler?"

Lupin's eyes darted back to Snape's face. "Some, but not all, and I fail to see why you need to know that."

"There is a potential for inadequate treatment of Miss Parr's condition if you withhold such information; therefore, once again, jeopardising the health of your supposed ward. Why are details being hidden from a medical practitioner?"

"At Chara's request, believe it or not. I do not presume to speak for her in such matters."

Snape's lip curled. "Really? I find that unlikely based on my observations. What do you expect to achieve with your lycanthropic dependent?"

A peculiar expression passed across Lupin's face that Snape had trouble interpreting.

"That is definitely not your concern," the werewolf replied, with some degree of nervousness that Snape ~~was~~ able to discern.

"You stole a lyc-female from a den in what I can only describe as a stupid, yet typical, act on your part. Knowing full-well a female-lyc's value to the male members of her kind, you not only place her life in danger, but yours as well and by extension that of Miss Parr's. I do not wish to deal with the descent of a troop of half-crazed male-lycs on our location screaming for your blood. I may just give it to them."

"I just want to keep her safe. Is that too much to ask?" The man sounded tired, defeated, at a loss as to what was the right course of action to follow, his shoulders dropping in what could only be fatigue. "You know what it'd be like for a lyc-female, and a young one at that. Was it so wrong of me to take her from that kind of torturous life?"

"Your intention is not what I question, Lupin. You make too many enemies in your blundering, no matter how noble the objective behind it. What does Miss Parr receive in exchange for her services?"

"That is not *my* business, Severus! If you want to know that, you have to ask her, and all I can say is 'good luck!'" He'd managed to push Lupin rather rapidly into an ill humour which would have uncertain results: the man would either clam up or become so agitated he'd let information slip.

"It is my opinion that Miss Parr hides not only from those who threatened her life initially, but from those of her own kind."

From the way Lupin's expression changed from hostile to guarded, Snape's supposition was close to the truth.

"I cannot imagine that seevy would be very forgiving to any that threatened their autonomy."

Once again, the werewolf did not respond, mouth compressed tightly and a wary glint in his eyes.

"A potential battle on many fronts," Snape concluded. "Aurors, Death-eaters, lycanthropes and seevy. And you wonder why I am reluctant to stick my head in the fire." His hand tightened on the heavy metal door handle, the now unhindered exit telling Lupin very pointedly his presence was no longer required.

Now.

That was all it said. He stared at the small scrap of paper in his hand. For the fourth time he turned the paper over, despite the fact that previous inspections had revealed no other words, no other symbols.

Folter waited patiently beside his bed, her hands clasped together. Always patient.

Who had sent the note was not in question. He'd seen her handwriting too often not to recognise it, but why would she choose this hour? He guessed it not long past midnight, the evening's light rain having strengthened into a relentless downpour that steadily turned the school grounds into a marsh, wearing the stone down in a dissolution that would take centuries.

Snape had not been sleeping; merely going through the sham of night-time rest. There was too much on his mind and at first, he'd thought that was what had prevented slumber. However, with the delivery of this somewhat cryptic, monosyllabic note, he wondered if perhaps it had been expectancy; a premonition of sorts.

Before his bare foot had even touched the stone floor, Folter was already gathering his clothing. He stared at her choices.

"Folter was told that older clothing would be more appropriate," the house-elf explained, looking up at him through her small eyelashes.

"Then you are blessed with more information than I," Snape mentioned dryly. "Is there, perhaps, anything else you would care to enlighten me with?"

The house-elf sensed the annoyance hidden under his tone. "Folter does not presume to know," she replied, bowing her head.

However, walking from the protection of the castle into the rain that sluiced down from the black sky, Snape wondered if that were true. Making his way carefully along slippery, muddied pathways to the bare oak tree near the school gates, he realised that it had never occurred to him to ask the house-elf what she knew of seevy. An error on his part that he would need to rectify eventually.

The throaty rumble of thunder rolled down from the high hills, making the sodden air vibrate. He nearly ended up face first on the sodden earth several times, mentally

cursing the inability to use a *Lumos* to light his way. He could not risk anyone seeing him.

There had been no indication that Parr would be at the oak tree. After all, in the two meetings they'd had out of doors, both locations had differed. Perhaps she had found a third. It would have been wise. In such a situation, she couldn't be too careful.

And yet, his feet had set him in this direction before he'd given it much thought. Even the lack of her figure at the tree did not dissuade him from the notion that this was indeed where he should be. He stood amongst the glistening roots, ignoring the rain that pattered against his face, slid along his jaw and down his neck, circumventing the rather meagre protection of the oiled cloth of his hooded cloak.

She was amused about something. That he knew meant she was nearby, and that she meant him to know.

"Are you a bird?" he asked aloud, his voiced raised just enough for it to be heard over the wet drumming on the rain on the ground.

"I'm a person who doesn't like getting their feet wet if they can avoid it," came the answer from above.

"Then your decision to do this right now seems rather contradictory," he noted, squinting up at her amongst the branches. The rain obscured his vision just enough that he failed to anticipate her rather rapid descent. The dirty cascade of water kicked up from her impact with the ground splashed all the way up his front.

"Ideal conditions are not always to be found, Dual. In fact, I have rarely found it so."

The darkness prevented him from seeing her face; her form nothing more than silhouette in front of him.

"Remus tells me you've been nosey." She spoke the words lightly, but there was a thrum of disapproval in the tone she used.

"What Lupin would call nosiness, I consider to be prudence."

That elicited a bark of laughter. "Got to the know the ins and outs of a cat's bum, don't you!"

"A colourful metaphor," he denounced, sneering faintly.

"Then I'll be plain, shall I? I would like to know why you're using Lupin as a source of information." Her voice was now utterly devoid of geniality, the sharpness setting him on edge.

"As opposed to?"

"Me."

That made him blink.

"It obviously never occurred to you to go to the source instead of browbeating others. Or perhaps you just enjoy putting Lupin in an awkward situation?"

"On the contrary, Miss Parr, the option of asking you was not unknown to me."

"So you just wanted to be sneaky about it."

The roll of thunder sounded again. Snape thought he heard an echoing rumble from the shadow in front of him. He should have known better. Lupin's mouth flapped more than a gossiping old witch.

"I concluded that the likelihood of getting the truth from you was small, to say nothing of the physical abuse I'd likely suffer for even daring to ask."

Parr tutted. "Sometimes your ignorance is amusing. Right now it is exasperating and, quite frankly, insulting. If you have questions about me, then you ask *me*. Whether I choose to answer them is another matter, but I will not have you jeopardising my position by careless questions asked of others!"

"And what position is that, Miss Parr?"

He felt, rather than saw, her bristle at that.

"A precarious one, Dual. One wrong step will see me dead. Or worse: will reveal the deceit of my death to others."

"Why do you hide from your own kind? Of any, they would be the most sympathetic to your plight."

The gasp that came from her virtually screamed her exasperation and disbelief. "Now your ignorance is astounding!"

"Then educate me and stop leaving me in the dark!"

Two paces and she was threateningly close, the lines of her face just perceivable enough to confirm the outrage she manifested.

"Are you blackmailing me, Dual? If I don't tell you, you'll give me away? Is that it?!"

"Nothing so reprehensible."

"Is that so?"

The sky flickered with blue-white veins of light, throwing Parr's face into a freeze-frame of rage. It was more frightening than if he had been able to see her face clearly for more than that fraction of a second. Whereas he could push Lupin fairly safely into bad temper, Snape realised that to do the same with Parr was... impolitic. Foolish.

"And why would I doubt your intentions, Dual? Could it be because you have been in such a position before where one relied on your silence to retain their livelihood and acceptance of others and you chose to spit on that rather than keep your mouth shut?"

"And how was I to determine Lupin's intentions, Striker? As a student, he put the rest of the school at risk with his presence. Dangerous enough as an adolescent lycanthrope, but as an adult? Who knows what kind of damage he could have inflicted on innocent lives! All it would take was one mistake, one slip, and I considered that a risk that should not have been taken and I stand by that decision."

"This situation is no different."

Thunder boomed, the ground shaking in response.

"I disagree. Lupin offered me nothing in return for my silence."

"Mercenary!" Parr spat. "Is there nothing you'll do without selfish intention?"

"You are not the only one who does what they must to survive. You once said you were a tool, nothing more. That is what I am also. All I can hope is to stay alive long

enough to do what I must. An aim we share, so I find your accusation hypocritical and your moral high ground the sham for what it is!"

A bone-shaking snarl erupted from her mouth but Snape was far too angry to be cowed by it.

"All very well to claim that silence will shield you," Snape continued, "but you endanger others by involving them in a situation they do not fully understand. Your obfuscation is far more self-serving than the selfishness you accuse me of!"

Parr was furious, so much so that he thought for a moment she would strike him. She wheeled away from him, a throat-tearing growl the final warning. Her outline paced back and forth, an animal pushed so close to violence that it was nearly insensible.

"Arrogant bastard! You know *nothing* of what I've had to do, of what I've been put through because I do not come first. I have put the noose around my own neck crawling to magical society for help! You ask why I don't go to my own kind?! Just *think* about that!" she roared in his face, her voice thickened in hatred. "They would fight each other for the right to cut my throat! I threaten everything our society fought for in our escape from slavery. They would tear me limb from limb for daring to return us to that for just one life!" Her clenched fists lifted to her head. "It would be easier for *all* if I were dead, but I must do what I have sworn to do. What more could you possibly demand of me than that?"

"Trust."

There was no humour in her laughter at the response to her rhetorical question.

"Trust is what got me here, Dual, so you'll excuse me if I shy away from it."

"Why would I sell you out?"

She threw up her hands. "Who knows? You're an opaque son of a bitch! "

"You could know."

"By taking the knowledge from you?" The outrage was back. "I don't do that!"

"You've been pushed to actions I'm sure you would have sworn you never would. Why balk at Legilimency?"

"I don't *do* that!" Parr shrieked at him.

"Do you murder?"

That shocked her as resoundingly as if Snape had hit her.

"What happened to your Screen?"

She didn't move, but the fury, the shame, boiled off her and bit into his flesh.

"That is not to be spoken of, Dual." She sounded small, curled in on herself. Terrified.

"Did you kill him?"

"No!"

"Liar!"

"Do not speak of it!" Her anger returned, brutal, desperate. She shied on the spot, but whether it was to restrain herself from slugging him or backing away in humiliation, he couldn't tell.

"Now you see why I resort to asking others," he told her.

The cry that ripped from her was mournful, terrifying in its bared remorse and paralysing in its wrath.

"He asked me! What was I to do?! He *asked* me! Begged me to do it. He stood in front of me and *begged!* *What was I to do?* Tell me! Since you're the fucking judge of ethics here, you tell me what I was supposed to do!"

They stared at each other in the driving rain, the echo of her voice ringing in his ears that told him of her guilt, her disgust and the madness that her actions pushed her to. A self-loathing that would burn her for the rest of her life.

"And you stand there and ask me to trust you," Parr hissed through clenched teeth, her breath steaming out of mouth and nose. "How could you possibly trust *me* now that you know I killed one of those closest to me? What of our agreement now, Dual? See what your insatiable curiosity has gotten you!"

"There is a difference," Snape countered. "I have begged you to keep me alive."

That response genuinely surprised her, disabling the intensity of her ire just long enough for reason to return. She stood in that half-crouch, gasping air in and out in exhausted gulps, her mind tracking back and forth over his words.

A flash and rumble in the distance, ominous, filling the relentless march of seconds that ticked by.

"That you have," she admitted at last, voice harsh and raw. "And you will regret it, I am sure. Take the knife out."

"What?"

A hissing growl warned him. "Take the knife out!" Her finger pointed to the ground in front of her.

Snape reached his hand awkwardly around and under his clothing, grasping for the silver handle, the metal almost painfully hot in his chilled hand. He pulled it from the sheath running down his spine and dropped it into the mud where it lay, spattered in dirt and rain, his body's warmth eaten away from it almost immediately.

With a clang, Parr's knives followed, one by one. Snape stared at the pile, realising with a growing dread that she could have pureed him with the blades on her. Did she always carry so many? His aggravation of her had been worse than foolish; it had been insane.

"Any metal on you must be gone," she snapped as her work blade sunk forcefully into the earth, point down.

He gaped at her. "Why?"

"It's time to unpick the knot, Dual."

"Now?!" Snape couldn't keep the panic from his voice.

"You think I called you here just to bellow at you?" she retorted acidly. "Oh, you'll wish you'd not pissed me off, Dual!"

A heartbeat before he unravelled, he felt her grip on his mind and realised it was too late to back away.

Down became up, left slid right, inside bled out. He fell.

It was worse than Apparating, far worse than Floo or Portkey. The mean, brutal cousin of Cruciatus and the terrifying matriarch of pure, undiluted terror. For a moment, he stared right in Death's pitiless eyes and beseeched her help, before he knew that even she could not stop this drowning.

The descent into oblivion went on forever as his body twisted in the mud, the pain so overwhelming it locked the howl so deep inside that it tore his consciousness to shreds, into a bloody, anarchic decimation. Curled fingers tore at the ground in a futile attempt to gain purchase, in desperation of ending this eternal drop into hell.

A lancet of immovable steel impaled him, its insertion into his being a ruthless, savage invasion, his mind slithering down it and slicing itself to ribbons as it clutched onto this one final chance to exist.

"Don't die on me, Dual," a voice whispered to him, *into* him. "That would make me very cross indeed."

Chapter Fifty-One—Reset

Chapter 51 of 59

Unlearning what you've learned can be a painful business.

She had warned him. He couldn't claim ignorance. Perhaps stupidity. Foolishness. Maybe even arrogance. Regardless, she *had* warned him, and still he'd gone ahead and done it.

So now, instead of those burnished, red eyes sweeping back and forth in an attempt to find him, they were locked unerringly on him, unwavering, piercing, accusing.

There was little point in backing away from them, from hiding. Where would he go in this room with no doors?

Death stood blocking the light from the boarded-up window, a crisp halo outlining her form. A form he did not recognise. She had appeared in several guises, in shapes and faces that frightened him, that punished him, that reminded him. He had no idea whose face she wore this time.

"Could it not be possible that I'd wear my own?"

She often knew what he was thinking. Maybe she'd *always* known. Death was a mysterious creature, a subtle manipulator and brutal goad.

"I do what I must, Severus. My role does not allow me much in the way of personal indulgences." The red eyes shuttered briefly. "It is of personal indulgences I wish to speak. I find myself forced to remind you that we had an agreement. An agreement you seem to have set to one side. Why?"

Specks of dust caught in the halo around her turned and spun in eddies, motes of fire and condemnation.

"I still hold true to what was bargained."

Death threw back her head and laughed, the sound reverberating off the walls and the insides of his skull.

"Is that so? Tell me, Severus...do you recall the words you spoke, what you offered in return for your life?"

The coldness of her anger rolled over him, a frigid wave that tightened his throat.

"Yes."

"I bent rules for you. Did you know that? Do you know what I risked in doing that? How quickly you forget! Perhaps you think to outsmart me, yes?"

She wasn't just angry; she was furious. It was controlled, coiled, constrained, but there, like a viper waiting to strike.

"I get them all in the end. How could you possibly think it otherwise?" Her eyes narrowed to slits. "I bent rules for you. I realise now I shouldn't have."

It was astonishing how such a sweet voice could carry so much venom, so much threat. It was all the more terrifying for the contrast.

Something inside him turned bitter, resentful, hateful. Circe, how he was *sick* of answering to other people! Was there nothing that he was permitted for himself? Nothing that he could claim in the name of selfishness the way others did again and again as if it were their right? Nothing that wasn't thrown to him like a scrap from the table? Covetous people with their clutching hands around his throat, using him, forcing him, making a mockery of his dignity and his regret in order to achieve their aims. It was a detestable hypocrisy that made his hands clench and his hackles rise.

"I've done nothing that contravenes our agreement! If anything it has strengthened my ability to do what I'm bound to. This sounds more like petty jealousy than a judicious reminder on your part!" he spat.

The red eyes snapped wide open and the shadow before him swelled in outrage.

"You *dare* to accuse me of jealousy?!"

The soprano rasped into a barbaric shriek.

"You spend too much time in the company of a conceited bitch who mocks me like the egotistical fool that she is! Stop playing with your Striker. This is not a game that you can step out of when you choose! I've waited long enough for you to remember your duty to me."

Death reared up like a thunderhead, the silver lining around her solidifying to a painful brightness, but he refused to be cowed by this bully, this machinator that threw a tantrum when she didn't get her own way.

"And what will you do if I refuse?" he shot back. "Who will be your dog to run around doing your dirty work?"

He stared right back into those eyes that held an eternity of pain and torment, his fear curdling into defiance.

"If I'd known the bargain permitted you to shred my will and kick me like a cur whenever you felt like it, I'd never have begged for it!"

A rippling behind Death caught his eye, flexing the air and refracting the light from the window like sunlight on water. Was this the omen of the obliterating fury he was pushing her toward in his rancour, the premature consumption of everything that he was because he could no longer stand the self-righteous attitude that was constantly shoved down his throat?

"You insolent wretch!" Death howled at him, a harpy's voice that made ears weep blood and spines shatter into brittle shards. "I broke rules for you! I *own* you!"

She lunged forward, a rabid beast that would snatch him up in her jaws and shake him until he was nothing but a bloody, ragged mess; the destruction that would go on and on and on.

Time slowed to a trickle.

Death bared her teeth.

The shadow behind the shadow drew its blade.

He saw the light skitter along the metal, pooling in the engraved words, as leaden as a glacier, as breakneck as lightning, before the two figures in front of him dissolved into a shredding, snarling mêlée of brute strength and indomitable will.

He backed away, desperate to avoid being sucked into this tornado of opposing forces, and ran straight into his own shadow...a shadow of pale skin, slate-grey eyes and hair that stole the colour from the setting sun. In the fraction of a second that he had, he realised that of all the people who had stared right into his soul, this one was the one that terrified him the most: the searchlight that left him no refuge, a honed ray that both split and melted, the anvil against which titanic pressure smashed substance into conformation.

Validus quam nex.

She smiled at him sadly, as if he had lost.

It hurt. So much.

Snape had experienced bad headaches. More than a couple. Occasionally, he'd suffered through migraines, but they had been blessedly few.

This felt like his skull had been smashed open with a hammer and the pieces crushed into a screaming, formless mush. A membranous layer of agony sat between the bones and his skin, burning, splintering, blistering.

It seemed as if he had no body; none that he could feel. All there was of him was the wrenching, grinding fire that melted his nerves.

Could nothing stop it? He would have done anything to stop it. Even breathing was a torture he didn't think he could withstand.

He opened his eyes to darkness, to an utter disorientation where it felt he was falling upwards, sliding backwards, twisting endlessly without moving. His fingers clawed at the softness beneath him in the hope it would stop him slipping down the incline to hell, but the world was falling with him.

Snape groaned in submission to this pulverisation of who he was. The sound fractured him into so many pieces that he could never have possibly counted them.

He raised his head...it took aeons, moving this bloated, rotten, canker that let his brain weep through the lesions.

The silhouette in front of him was witness to this merciless putrefaction. Death had followed him here, to the inescapable reality of his descent into physical decay, a cruel spectator that fed off the brume of his agony. Not surprising, considering how much he had angered her. She'd want to see him twist and writhe and beg for a mercy she did not hold inside her.

But where were the crimson eyes of exultation, of vicious satisfaction? He squinted to try and sharpen his focus. Why would Death sit with her back to him, silent, still? It made no sense. Did she turn from him in disgust, in cold dismissal, his importance now so ruined that to acknowledge him would lend a legitimacy to his life that he had no right to?

He thought of begging her, as he once had, to finish him off. What pride could he possibly have left now, lying here, slowly dissolving into insensibility?

He opened his mouth to capitulate when the gentle shimmer of silver told him that it was not Death that sat at his feet, but the one who had fought the mistress of Gehenna for his life.

It was a thrum of voices, a sound that sat below consciousness, a vibration that his ears could perceive but not understand.

He crouched with his hands pressed to that cruelly small point of connection, forehead resting against the invisible wall to allow him to breathe in whatever he could from the nexus under his fingers.

They were arguing. He didn't need to hear the words to know it. The thorny environment he had grown up in taught him fast that to be unaware of emotional undercurrents saw you treated to the brunt of another's frustration and anger. Yes, he had learned that *very* quickly.

His thoughts were baldly selfish. He would have been the first to admit it. Was it something that he had done? Something that he had *not* done? Did it threaten him in some way? Did it jeopardise his plan? Had he made a mistake?

He drew in a sucking breath, trying to taste the acrimony in the hope he could determine what constituents blended together to form it, to see if he could separate the disappointment, the fury, the indignation and the hurt as the vapour whispered up his nose, telling him that he should not be listening, that this was not his place, that he pushed his luck like a single-minded child. The disapproval did nothing to dissuade him; if anything, it made his hunger even stronger. He nearly whined aloud, gasping, and ran his tongue over that tiny contact point like a starving animal, as if he could lick the connection into him where he could never lose it. A part of him cringed in shame at such wanton behaviour at the same time it convulsed in lascivious pleasure at the stunned surprise that spread across and into the softness of his mouth.

He had no idea that desperation could be steeped in such delectation as this. It was even more delicious for the brevity of it.

Once, early in his traineeship, Snape had made the inevitable error that all aspiring medics had since the dawn of the healing arts: he'd rubbed his eyes after handling Fireflux. The resulting blisters and pain had taken nearly a full week to die down. He'd suspected that it could, in fact, have been far more abbreviated. Healer La Vigne had

been almost casual in her acceptance of his carelessness, as if she had expected it. Tyro Harris had snickered about it until she had done the same thing a month later. Snape had hung on to the schadenfreude *that* had caused for as long as he possibly could.

He later learned that few ever avoided such an experience with Fireflux. It caused no permanent damage, and the Healers at St Mungo's used it as an effective example of how lax attention could cause serious problems.

What he'd felt during those days of agony...of the unremitting pain of inflamed flesh, the sting that tears did nothing to alleviate and the weeping sores that Murtlap barely affected...was not too dissimilar to what he was currently experiencing. It felt like someone had set his eyeballs on fire and then rammed them back into his skull.

He groaned and immediately regretted it as his head started to pound.

Having his eyes open or closed seemed to make little difference to the pain or to discovering where he was. The surrounds were blurred by the salty tears leaking out of his eyes, and he still felt like a troll had shaken him until his teeth had fallen out.

Skidmarks of Sycorax, he felt sick! In his current state, if he threw up on himself there was little he could do to clean himself up. He'd just have to lie there, steaming in his own vomit and feeling utterly wretched. *It couldn't possibly get any worse*, he thought to himself as his head rolled to one side. He was wrong: it could.

She was sitting close enough that he could make out some detail, despite his blurry vision. Her legs were drawn up to her chest, left arm resting across her knees atop which her chin was propped. Her right hand was partially hidden under the hair that fell over her ear, watching him as she sat scrunched up in the chair next to his bed.

"I don't feel very well," he said rather stupidly, increasing his mortification even further.

"I'm not surprised, considering how much mud you ate," Parr replied, failing to keep the twist of amusement from her voice. She probably didn't even try to subsume it. "Are you going to spew again?"

Snape groaned. "Don't say 'spew'." His stomach knotted itself and threatened to turn inside out.

"I've had to change my clothes three times already. Maybe I should just wear a sou'wester until the geyser subsides."

He screwed his eyes shut as the heat radiating from his eye sockets slipped down to his cheeks.

"I've already ... vomited?"

That question just made his stomach roil even more powerfully.

Parr snorted. "You're as theatrical in illness as you are in good health. I've never seen such a performance. I did consider stripping you naked and dumping you in the shower just to save on laundry, but Folter didn't think it was such a good idea. And since she's the one who's been cleaning up after you, I guess she has the right to decide. God knows how quickly she had to clean up the yellow sick road you trailed through the castle before Filch found it!"

"Don't say 'sick'!" Snape grated out through clenched teeth. "I don't remember coming back inside."

"I should think not," said the Parr-shaped blur in the chair. "You were very conveniently unconscious at the time. Unfortunately, it didn't stop you from hurling down my back. I'll never get the smell out of my hair!"

Snape made gurgling noises like a drain backing up.

"For a scrawny guy, you're incredibly heavy."

He stared like a drunken fish at her.

"You carried me?"

"You weren't showing much sign of walking in by yourself, Dual," Parr pointed out a little huffily.

"Someone could have seen!" he snapped, trying to hide in tetchiness the indignity he felt at having been toted like a sack of potatoes.

"Oh, please! I'm not a Strikelet. No-one saw anything!"

"Well, I don't share your certitude, Miss Parr," he responded snottily, trying his hardest not to wince at his own raised voice.

"Shut up and go to sleep," she told him.

He did.

The pendant hung from the silver chain wrapped around her fingers, gently turning in the air, the light that reflected off it flickering a touch from the beat of her heart as it shuddered down the chain's fine links.

He couldn't read the expression on her face as she stared at the jewellery he could have sworn had been around his neck.

Snape made to protest at having it removed from him without his permission but found he couldn't move anything more than his eyes. Fear at this immobility bloomed and leaked into the testiness and blush of embarrassment that welled up in him that he had been found wearing this self-imposed shackle of guilt. Not that she would know what it meant. Would she?

Her grey eyes flicked up to meet his.

He blacked out.

It seemed appropriate that he herald his return to consciousness with a long, drawn-out groan.

Parr remained focussed on the book in her hands, but he thought she turned the page unnecessarily loudly. Trust her to be able to make a scathing remark without even speaking!

Snape clutched at his chest clumsily and felt the sharp pointed metal of the pendant dig into his palm. Perhaps it had been a dream. He hoped it had been a dream. The thought that she would have seen this rather secret concession to personal adornment filled him with a rather puzzling abashment. Martyr-like, he was sure she would denounce it as. At least, she would if she knew what the pendant really meant to him.

He sighed in exasperation at the tangle of his emotions. At least his headache had receded somewhat, and the sting in his eyes only a dull burn now.

"Do you really sleep in that horrible rag?" Parr asked, not looking up from the page she was studying.

"Your judgement of my sleepwear is a matter of supreme indifference to me, Miss Parr," he tried to say as acidly as possible. "This is not a fashion parade."

She snorted in that dismissive manner she always did. "I just thought that for someone who eschewed underpants, a nightshirt seemed oddly prudish."

"Am I to retain no dignity whatsoever?!" Snape hissed, clutching the sheets to his chest tightly.

Parr rolled her eyes and turned a page.

"Shut up and go to sleep."

"What time is it?"

Parr lifted her head from the strip of cloth she was sewing.

"Just before lunch."

Snape managed to turn away just in time before vomiting noisily onto the floor. Luckily, there was so little in his stomach that it didn't make that much of a mess beyond a few drops of bile.

"Let me guess: don't mention food?"

Snape made a sound like a dying cat and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I hate you."

"No doubt," she replied calmly.

Snape rolled onto his back and stared angrily at the ceiling above his bed for a few minutes, seething at yet another blow to his comportment.

"Why are you here?"

Parr tutted at his crankiness. "Doctors *do* make shit patients," she muttered and didn't answer his question.

Snape squinted sideways at her. "I'm not a doctor. What are you doing?"

"I'm fixing my binder." She was carefully stitching a seam at the end of the orange strip of cloth. He watched her cut the thread with her work knife that had been resting in her lap and test the reinserted weight. It passed her scrutiny, if her nod was anything to go by.

"What do you use it for?" He'd thought it had been just some piece of meaningless cloth she'd used in one of their lessons. Lessons. That made him scowl. There had been little she'd taught him except for how much she delighted in making him subservient to her, reliant on her.

Parr jabbed the needle she'd been using in the arm of the chair she sat in, cross-legged and swathed in her usual grey Striker clothes. "It's like a bolas." She held out her arm and the orange cloth snapped around her wrist tightly as she whipped it, the weight at the end of the material giving it a sharp and secure grip.

She was gathering the long cloth in some strange series of folds when Snape asked the question he wasn't sure he wanted the answer to.

"Was it meant to hurt this much?"

Her hands paused. It was clearly a question she didn't want to answer either. Her lips pressed together tightly before she replied.

"I don't know."

His silence made her look up.

"I'm just a Striker. Untwisting is not my... area of expertise." Her eyes darted to one side, as if she were embarrassed. That surprised him. "I couldn't take the pain from you. You had to ride it out alone."

"Is that what Strikers do?"

Parr huffed and frowned, still not meeting his gaze. She was plainly uncomfortable, which gave him a surge of satisfaction that was altogether immature and incredibly gratifying.

"We do not speak of it."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Is that what you say when you don't want to talk about something?"

That brought her head back around. "Git!"

That made him smile which just seemed to irritate her even further.

"Shut the hell up and go to sleep!" she barked at him, her cheeks flushed pink.

He didn't even get the chance to smirk at her before he passed out.

He wished she wouldn't keep doing that.

Lying here was playing havoc with his sense of time. It felt like mere seconds sat between the periods of wakefulness. It also felt like years. The contradiction was aggravating and highly unsettling. It made him want to get up and stagger over to the window, pull the drapes back and determine, at the very least, what hour of the day it was.

But the thought of movement just made him feel incredibly exhausted, so he just lay on his side and continued to stare at her.

Scrunched up in the chair once again, her head was turned away from him, tilted slightly as it rested in her hand. She looked gaunter than he remembered seeing her last. He surmised that the apoth hadn't managed to medicate the Handler yet.

Parr looked tired. Strung out. Stubborn. She had managed to avoid answering his question as to why she was here. Maybe she felt guilty about the state he was in. Perhaps she was making sure that he didn't forget who controlled his life right at this very moment. Or that he didn't die on her...an acerbic gargoyle on the death-watch. He had to suppress a snort at that. It was an unfair comparison, even for him.

Snape didn't understand her reticence to discussing the way Strikers took pain and illness from their Handlers. It was clearly a taboo subject, but just for her or for seevy in

general? Could it be possible that the restriction was coming from the Handler?

His experience with Parr's twin was limited, with too many holes that could easily be filled with suppositions. However, if she were a person who could keep control of a Striker like Parr, she must have a will like iron. The Striker wasn't a person that followed others simply because they told her to. If anything, she was far more likely to tell those same people where to stuff it. She and only she would decide what she would and wouldn't do. The two exceptions that sprang to mind were the Handler and the Screen. The relationship with the latter was still unclarified. It must have been close for her to kill him in such a complete and brutal fashion. There must have been enormous trust placed in the man whose role Snape guessed was to stand between seevy and non-seevy; a barrier of sorts. Just the person to use as an assassin. It would have been devastating for Parr to have had such a confidante turn on her, and then to make such a request of her.

Her bond with her Handler was very strong and wasn't one that she openly strained against, but Snape knew there were instances where Parr did things that the Handler clearly disapproved of. The Striker could easily explain them as actions that in the long run would benefit the Handler, but he was starting to wonder if she was using that as an excuse. She couldn't claim that she would have been unaware of what her Handler's reactions would be.

"She's angry with you."

She made no movement that would have betrayed that she hadn't known he was awake, but he thought the colour in her cheeks darkened slightly. Another taboo topic? He decided to push his luck and see how far her obligation to him went.

"Why?"

Outward appearance gave the impression she was ignoring him, but he got the feeling she was thinking carefully whether or not to answer. It could have been the way her eye narrowed slightly or the line bracketing the corner of her mouth deepened, but such changes couldn't possibly be that eloquent.

"A difference of opinion."

An answer that said little.

"Did she not know what you were going to do?"

Parr's eye narrowed further.

"Why didn't you tell her?"

Considering.

"She would have said 'no'."

"And yet you did it anyway."

"It is my right. She knows this."

A confusing response. Who in this partnership was in charge? Just when he thought the Handler led the way, Parr would indicate that she was the one who dictated the direction.

Parr tutted and shook her head slightly.

Was he that transparent?

"I told you you'd be open after I untied the knot. You may as well be screaming in my ear. And thanks for the gargoyle comparison."

She didn't look or sound amused at that, but Snape knew she was. Perhaps he wasn't the only one left open.

"What day is it?"

"Sunday. Just."

He blinked. A day since she'd untied the knot. It felt like an age.

"I can't lie here any more."

Parr's eyebrows climbed, but she still kept her face in profile. Studiously avoiding looking directly at him. Interesting.

"And why is that?"

There was an edge to her voice that spoke of what she thought of his statement.

"I have obligations, and they do not wait for convalescence."

Parr found that very funny and she stifled the evidence poorly. It took Snape a moment to recognise the hypocrisy in his statement, which made him cranky.

"If this whole undertaking is meant to be kept occluded, I don't see how my being restricted to my bed while I recover is going to go unnoticed. The fact that you're here, which is totally inappropriate, does nothing to aid that secrecy!"

"The Headmaster is not on the grounds and hasn't been since late Friday evening, so stop wetting the underpants you don't wear, Dual. And much as it would amuse me, you are not tied down and incapable of independent movement, so if you choose to get out of bed, who am I to stop you?"

That put him on his guard. If Parr wasn't going to prevent him from getting up, then there must be some other agent that she was certain would keep him there. He could almost smell the expectancy of his attempt misting off her. She *wanted* him to try it, which told him he shouldn't.

Snape didn't feel enfeebled. Tired, certainly, with the ghost of a headache still scraping at the insides of his skull and an acidic sting to his eyes. What little movement he'd made didn't seem affected, but then, he'd not stood up, and if what he remembered of his sense of direction being turned on its head was anything to go by, his proprioception was in some degree of malfunction. Falling flat on his face in front of Parr, again, would be yet another humiliation, but considering how he'd already disgraced himself, Snape wasn't sure whether it would make the situation any worse than it already was.

"It seems you currently have your own *Imperius*, Miss Parr. Who knows what you'll make me do or not do?" he pointed out softly, anticipating a reactionary outburst from her at the accusation. He wanted, *needed* to unbalance her from her position of control over him. Subservience was not a collar he was willing to wear, and aggravating her gave him a thrill he hadn't felt in some time...the almost sensual flush to push, to mercilessly seduce someone to his way of thinking through opposition, to manipulate an adversary into justified compliance. It made him shiver and quicken his breathing.

Parr's head turned slowly, her eyes enlarged from the shadowing hollows that her gauntness threw across her face, the grey no longer that of cold stone but of auguring cloud, the impenetrable wall of her mind no longer steel but of smoked glass.

His muscles tightened in a wave in response to the look she gave him, its meaning sliding down his spine and slipping deeper into him...so far from what he had expected that it was almost alien.

"Shut up and go to sleep," she told him even as the first silken fluctuation swallowed him.

He was consumed in a semi-conscious delirium; a luxuriant fever that trammelled his need into a devastating dimension...a non-corporeal ecstasy that was both a gift and a theft, to be denied a physical form that would allow him to experience the pleasure through flesh and senses. To not have a mediation, a moderation from tactile input was an overwhelm that made him cower and exult, the dichotomy driving him slowly insane in the sweetest and most cruel way.

To not have hands to brace, to cradle, to stroke with.

To not have fingers to clasp, to torment, to delve with.

To have no tongue to taste, to pleasure, to tantalise with.

To have no voice to coax, to adulate, to dominate with.

No arms to bind, to support, to manoeuvre with.

No mouth to seize, to envelop, to suckle with.

No hips to plunge.

No spine to sway.

No thew.

No breath.

A potent ophidian that wrapped itself around him and slithered into him in a way that was both a frightening violation and an exhilarant ingress.

This had gone on forever, expanding into infinity.

It had barely begun...a promise of a delight yet to be fully revealed.

Who he was, what he was, flexed and twisted, impaled and embedded, yielded and embraced.

Consumption.

Gratification.

Satiation.

It was all he could conceive of. All he allowed himself. All he wanted.

He couldn't tell if he was the giver or the receiver. He didn't care to know.

The undulation that embraced him, that permeated him, impelled him to the edge.

Sensation drew into him and bled out of him. No beginning. No end.

The overload heaved him into full consciousness, the grip on himself so urgent, so tight, it bordered on painful. Shame skittered across the surface of the swell, a terror that came from the certainty that he couldn't prevent what was going to happen. Didn't want to.

He paused, the hesitation nothing but sublimation of the inevitable, and realised the chair was empty.

His physical presence returned to him in a blinding rush, nectarous, full, enslaved. Body convulsing, gasping, dissolving. A surge that drained him utterly as he arched in fulfilment. Again. And again. And again.

As he lay there, panting and shuddering in the darkness, he wondered if he had really been alone.

Chapter Fifty-Two—A Light In The Dark

Chapter 52 of 59

Exploration without and within.

Although he'd only been out of his quarters for an hour, Snape felt like he hadn't slept for three days. The level of concentration it was taking just to stay consistently upright or move in the direction he wanted to was proving to be incredibly draining. Given the luxury of choice, he would have stayed out of sight until his balance and muscular control were back to normal, but as always, there wasn't time for such indulgence.

At some point during his incapacity, it had snowed. The muddy marsh that the grounds had been hammered into by the rain was now hidden under a muffling blanket of white that hurt his eyes. It forced him to squint, further exacerbating his ability to balance convincingly on two feet. The savagely cold air was a blessing, though—it kept the fatigue at arm's length.

After looking in the mirror earlier, Snape realised how damaged his eyes were. There was hardly any white of the sclera to be found, the irises surrounded by red from burst blood vessels. That, coupled with the swelling and bruising around his eyes, gave him an altogether hideous appearance. It caught him off-guard when he saw it, and he frantically searched his memory for the incident that would explain the injury. Unless Parr had punched him in both eyes while he was unconscious, he had to chalk it up to an effect of the untying of the knot in his mind.

Fortunately, heavy doses of Anti-Swelling Solution and careful usage of *Exsanguis* removed the worst of it, but Snape was still left with rather red-tinged eyes—the sort that betrayed a night of heavy drinking which wouldn't have been out of place on Lupin.

His stomach had finally settled. He was extremely glad of that and even managed to keep down some simple food that Folter had brought. The smell of the Owlery threatened that stability. Ordinarily, the heavy uric odour, whilst unpleasant, wasn't that sickening once one got used to it. All his senses had been turned up to full and ignored any attempt to modify or control their input into his brain. Snape had been forced to breathe through his mouth whilst trying to retrieve a tightly rolled strip of parchment off an owl's leg, but that meant that now he could taste the bird dust and droppings instead of just smelling them. Fortunately, the white-bibbed messenger didn't fuss too much at being relieved of its burden. Kettering's birds were generally very well-behaved, and there had been little trouble in handling them since their owner had died. It had taken a couple of near-misses before Snape realised that as long as he wore Kettering's pendant, he wouldn't lose his finger to a brutally sharp beak. The birds didn't even need to see the pendant to know it was around his neck, but they made it clear they wouldn't obey him unless he wore it.

It was as he was making his way slowly down the icy stone steps from the Owlery that he saw Dumbledore heading in his direction. It was possible the Headmaster was on his way to send or receive a message of his own, but it would still require some interaction that Snape just wasn't in the mood for right now. He tried to keep the expression on his face as neutral as possible as the Headmaster lingered at the bottom of the flight of stairs, the gold thread in his deep purple overcoat glinting in the brittle winter sun.

Dumbledore frowned slightly at Snape's cautious decent but felt no need to question it, perhaps attributing it to the iciness of the stone.

"I missed you at breakfast, Severus. I trust everything is alright?"

Snape squinted at him, trying not to wince.

"Yes," he responded laconically, wishing the man would go away.

"I'm afraid I have some rather worrying news that I require your assistance with," Dumbledore continued after a pause at Snape's somewhat terse reply.

Snape remained silent, looking at the Headmaster steadily through narrowed eyes and keeping his mind as blank as possible.

Dumbledore shook his head slightly and held out a hand to indicate they should move away from the Owlery. So, he'd come to find Snape specifically.

"I've received word of more Ministry disappearances," the older man explained as they crunched through the snow back to the castle. "All of them are concerning, naturally, but one in particular troubles me."

A rather nasty headache began to bloom behind Snape's eyes, making him wish he'd stayed in bed.

"An Unspeakable vanished a few days ago with no clue as to why." The Headmaster drew his overcoat a little tighter around himself as a brief gust of wind pulled at the fabric of their clothing and whipped up tiny swirls of snow around their feet. "I believe Minister Bones is extremely concerned over it but has made no public announcement or even made the disappearance widely known within the MLE itself."

Snape sniffed, irritated at the way the cold air made his nose run. The Head of the MLE would undoubtedly be worried about one of her precious Unspeakables going AWOL. She would also want to keep word of that disappearance as tightly under her control as possible. As it was, the MLE's relationship with the Department of Mysteries was one of the worst kept secrets in magical government, so for Bones to speak out about the disappearance of an Unspeakable would not only bolster the link, it would bring into question the MLE's abilities to keep track of their most covert employees.

The Ministry as a whole was having a rough time keeping news of disappearances out of the papers. People were twitchy enough as it was without cracks appearing in their confidence in the wizarding world's governing body. In uncertain, potentially dangerous times, people needed to feel assured by those that led and protected them. Who knew what was really going on behind the façade the Ministry was holding up?

"I need you to find out what's happened to this man."

Snape stopped walking rather abruptly and had to suppress a burst of dizziness as it felt like brain kept moving forward independently of his body. He cleared his throat to buy himself a few seconds. Dumbledore stopped also, a faint expression of expectance on his face.

"Forgive me, Headmaster, but surely an Auror would be more appropriate for that task," Snape pointed out. "I can't imagine the MLE welcoming my investigations, however subtle I make them." A thought occurred to him. "Unless... you have some suspicion as to this man's allegiance."

Dumbledore exhaled heavily, his breath pluming out in a white cloud in front of him. "I've heard... doubts expressed by others as to Ted Beresford's political tendencies," he admitted. "I wonder if his disappearance is by his own choice."

"To what end?"

Dumbledore shrugged slightly.

Snape stared at his boots; his hair fell forward to shield his face from the Headmaster.

"I've not heard of a Beresford showing Death Eater involvement or sympathies; but then, it's unlikely I would, especially if he is an Unspeakable. The Dark Lord would prize such an individual highly and hold him very close."

"Hence my concern," said Dumbledore and continued ahead, forcing Snape to follow him. "What news from your contacts? Has there been any word on who might be involved in drawing Harry into the Tri-wizard Tournament?"

"Not even a rumour. If anything, various parties are eying each other, wondering who managed it. Surely Moody has not failed to sniff out the perpetrator?" He couldn't keep the sneer of contempt either off his face or out of his voice.

"The process of investigation continues," Dumbledore murmured. Was it his imagination or was there a strain of disquiet about the Headmaster?

Moody was an Auror with singular determination. That the cause of Potter's allegedly unwilling involvement in the Tournament remained undiscovered even with Moody's near-rabid searching would unsettle Dumbledore. They had debated as to whether or not there was more than one person involved in the plot, whether that person or persons remained at Hogwarts or had fled once Potter's name had been flung successfully from the Goblet of Fire, what the whole plot achieved other than putting Potter's life in serious jeopardy that something more directly threatening didn't. Too many holes, too little information. The lack of progress in determining the perpetrators was unusual. Aurors, those with and without Order affiliations, had been in and out of the castle, each time drawing a blank. According to Dumbledore, Parr had been unable to provide any enlightenment. However, that didn't mean that she didn't know. Snape was sure that what she kept to herself was far greater than what she revealed. Any motivations behind a possible silence would be hard to determine.

"I need you to go to the abandoned den today, Severus. Tonight," said Dumbledore, interrupting Snape's thoughts. "Kingsley tells me that the local council has listed the building for redevelopment, so there could soon be far more human traffic in and out of the place than we had anticipated."

"Could that not be the reason why the den was vacated?"

Dumbledore tipped his head from side to side, as if considering the question, but Snape knew that the man had asked it of himself already.

"There was no development slated for the property until last Friday—well after the lycanthropes left. So, unless they had warning from someone working in the local council, I don't believe that could be the reason. Still, it can't be completely discounted. Remus and Chara will be at the den at midnight, but I will be at the safe house two hours after that to hear of what you find."

A carefully folded piece of parchment was held out to him between Dumbledore's fingers. Snape looked at the address and returned the paper to the Headmaster, who reduced it to ash with an *Incendio*.

"The only access is through the back door. How is Chara's recovery progressing?"

A rather peculiar pressure exerted itself against Snape's mind. He stared at Dumbledore sharply, suspecting the man of surreptitious Legilimency. Odd. He had never been able to detect the Headmaster's use of it but there had been several times when he had suspected it, despite the absence of proof. There was a particular way the man tightened the muscles under his eyes, a subtle manner of angling his head that he only manifested at certain times. Was it possible that with the rather brutal treatment Snape's mind had gone through over the preceding two days, he was now far more sensitised to picking up on the use of Legilimency, even by one so reputedly adept as Dumbledore? If so, would such sensitivity last, or was it like bruised flesh that screamed at the barest touch, that in time would heal? He tried to hold onto the stony blankness, keeping a semblance of privacy behind it, but the anger at the possible incursion threatened to fracture the barrier.

"Her condition is variable," he eventually replied, voice impassive, stuffing the prickliness he felt deep down inside himself. His headache began to spread down the bones of his neck and along his shoulders.

"And how is she today?"

The wind returned, cutting through their clothes and chilling their skin. Snape refused to acknowledge the coldness while the Headmaster rubbed his own hands together to keep blood flowing through his fingers.

"I have not seen her."

Dumbledore instigated their return to the castle once more, his overcoat flapping back behind him.

"Well, she and Remus left for London a few hours ago, so her health must be sufficient, otherwise Poppy wouldn't have let her out of the infirmary. Speaking of which, perhaps you should go there and get something for your headache. Your eyes are very bloodshot."

"Your concern for my health is appreciated, Headmaster," Snape answered through gritted teeth as he turned into the icy wind, disguising his annoyance with empty words in order to end the conversation as rapidly as possible.

There were several reasons he didn't want to be involved in the matter of the abandoned den. For one, Lupin would be there, and Snape's temper was already well down the path to cantankerous without that flea-bitten itinerant winding him up. Secondly, he didn't want anything to do with lycanthropes. Especially male ones. It was a prejudice he'd never let go of, didn't want to let go of—they didn't deserve tolerance. Dirty, violent, uncontrolled and uncontrollable animals. Their total isolation from the rest of society was the only solution until their affliction could be cured once and for all—the disease obliterated entirely, stamped out of existence.

He stood in the inky shadow of the doorway opposite the warehouse, his hands opening and closing into fists at his sides, trying to ignore the damp, fetid reek of the garbage heaped up against door behind him. Undoubtedly, the smell inside the abandoned den would be worse. The outside was already a significant dissuasion to the curious. Windows set high in the brick were all shattered, the embedded wire frame that had once nestled in the glass bent and pulled and wrenched aside into gaping, empty sockets that the darkness stared out of. The odd fragments of torn fabric and plastic that were hooked on sharp metal and pointed glass flapped gently in the breeze that sighed down the street; tattered flesh clinging to a skull. Graffiti, much of it illegible, warred with bill posters for space on the brick, but the latter seemed aged. Even defacers had eventually shunned this place. Perhaps they had seen something that frightened them. Perhaps they had sensed the danger within. Perhaps worse had befallen them.

The greatest cause of his hesitation was the certainty of Parr's presence. There were so many unsettling emotions that had arisen from the enforced interaction between the Striker and himself that he didn't clearly know where he stood. He was angry at the pain he'd gone through. Bitter at the way she'd seen him incapacitated. Resentful that her hand in this game was stronger than his. Hurt that she still withheld things he wanted to know. That made him blink. He would not consciously have used that word to describe how he felt about being treated like an outsider, as someone who was not worthy to be privy to the knowledge she had.

It had always been a source of intense dissatisfaction to him, to be kept apart, to be excluded from knowledge. It was a form of elitism that grated, one more way to make him a pariah. At times it felt as if it was done with a malicious deliberateness, as if to say 'See how inadequate you are? You will know only through our acceptance. And you shall never have that!' It drove him to seek out knowledge that others eschewed or couldn't comprehend or shied away from in misplaced fear. The things that people did in ignorance frequently disgusted him, as if they were proud that they were unenlightened to the objective reality, as if they were content to move through their lives with a level of stupidity that bordered on childish in its insouciance. Snape took any attempt at withholding information as a personal affront, regardless of how trivial that information turned out to be. It was the denial itself that was the greatest insult. Even he realised the immaturity of his reaction—like a child refused something it had decided it wanted—but it was a trait that was so much a part of him and he dreaded letting go of it lest it leave him at the mercy of what others decided he should and shouldn't know. And from the effortless way the vast majority of the public could be hoodwinked and swayed by propaganda, he found himself fighting tooth and claw to remain above them and their almost ovine acquiescence.

Hurt. Anger, he could understand—an emotion he was far more familiar with, far more comfortable with. Hurt was... worrying. He had expected something and been refused. What that was, he wasn't sure. He wasn't certain he wanted to know. Anger was the appropriate response, the usual response. Hurt suggested something far more complex, and Snape didn't like that idea at all.

He shuddered slightly under the unwavering gaze of the warehouse, trying to suppress a prickle of discomfort that threatened to creep up his spine. He didn't like the way it squatted there, poorly lit by the street lights, its roof patched with melting snow like blotches of mould. He exhaled heavily out of his nose to try and dislodge the smell of... who knew what that was rotting under his feet. It was difficult not to fidget. Standing still allowed the ache running through his bones to push its way to the front of his awareness. Movement seemed to alleviate it, but now wasn't the time for that.

She'd told him he was seevy. Dual, she called him. He still had no idea what that meant. For all he knew, it could be an insult, a derogatory term that she was permitted to use on him because of his ignorance of its meaning. She could be lying to his face in claiming he was seevy. It could be a ruse to get him to do what she wanted, a subtle deception that he missed in his insatiable curiosity. After all, it was clear that Lupin knew more than he did about seevy, and he wasn't even one of them. Or was he? It might explain the apparent closeness between Parr and the werewolf, a closeness that did not form a part of any other of Parr's relationships with those around her. Seevyism had obviously found its way into magical society, albeit in what Parr termed the stunted forms of Occlumency and Legilimency. Who knew what other traits had arisen from the cross-breeding?

However, Snape's judgement was that if Lupin had any seevy traits, they were exceedingly weak. The man had no mental adeptness that even approximated a poor grasp of Occlumency or Legilimency. Any heightened senses could be easily attributed to his lycanthropy, and even they only came out close to the full moon. No. It was unlikely that Lupin was seevy. His access to the knowledge came from his employment by the MLE to look into this reclusive society. Parr had even admitted that she told Lupin as little as she possibly could. Once again, evidence that she was capable of manipulating those around her to suit her needs.

Although Lupin had never said it, Snape suspected that the shabby lycanthrope had found Parr during her incarceration by Greyback. Why she had been found and her Handler had not was a mystery. Parr would have been in an appalling physical state. Lupin had said that she'd been beaten black and blue and her left leg shattered. Perhaps she looked to Lupin as a saviour of sorts, someone who'd pulled her out of Greyback's clawed grip. She'd said she owed him, and Parr was exacting in matters of debt.

He stuck his hands in the deep pockets of his overcoat to protect his fingers from frostbite and drew his shoulders in towards his ears. It was very close to midnight, if not

already past the hour, and knowing Lupin's rather fluid sense of time, Snape could easily be stuck waiting here for another half an hour.

Somewhere in the distance, a lorry rumbled along a main road, rippling the cavernous silence momentarily. It echoed the grinding pain in his head that he had been unable to shift for the entire day.

It was becoming clearer to Snape that seevy still retained ties with the magical world, ties that the Ministry was clearly unaware of. They had found ways to be a part of magical society, hiding right in plain sight. If what Snape suspected was true, that two seevy owned the very bookshop he'd been into to source material on their own kind, then they could as easily be in far more influential positions. Perhaps even within the Ministry itself. Such placement would require exquisite care in order to avoid detection. It most likely involved collusion with those already accepted in magical society. Snape had been unable to determine whether a seevy could also wield magic. Some genetic traits mixed poorly with others, and seevism could be one of those. Regardless, it was a strong possibility that there were witches and wizards sympathetic to seevy, for whatever reasons, that actively worked to allow this infiltration into magical society. Witches and wizards that would be severely, possibly mortally punished by either side for revealing the reality. Parr had already made it clear that her life was forfeit amongst her own kind for seeking asylum. Was that forfeiture due to anger at the threat to seevy independence or as an assurance that the true relationship between magical and seevy societies would never become public knowledge?

Snape had enough duplicity, secrecy and covertness going on in his life. Did he really want to embroil himself in more? He was starting to realise how prophetic Dumbledore's warning to him not to go digging in uncertain ground had been. Was it possible for him to step back from it? If he took Parr's claim that he was seevy as the truth, then she may not allow him to retain any autonomy. The agreement they had made truly was a double-edged sword. Both could get what they wanted, but at what cost? It seemed the best option open to him was to meet the conditions of that agreement as soon as possible and extricate himself from any connection with seevy. He had more pressing responsibilities to attend to.

That thought flared a strange warmth in him that the night air had been leaching away gradually over the past twenty minutes, the determination to be rid of Parr in every way steeling his resolve. Yes, better to wash his hands of any connection with her as soon as possible. He didn't like the effect she had on him. It was far too easy for her to unsettle him, to confuse him. The emotional mess she'd left him in was intolerable. He laid the blame for that descent into overwhelming carnal sensation he had experienced earlier that day squarely at her feet. It was a blatantly disingenuous way for her to bind him to her, akin to forcing a highly addictive drug down his throat against his will. Did she honestly believe him weak enough to bend to its effects, like a mindless animal that answered the call of rut without hesitation?

The familiar, acrid taste of anger and resentment was back in his mouth. Snape welcomed it even as it aggravated the raw pounding of his headache and the wiry soreness that scratched at every bone in his body. Each thud of his heartbeat made the pain intensify as if the pulsing push of blood was enough to aggravate his nerves, but he used it to strengthen his ill-temper into a harsh coldness. How he hated her for playing him like a fool!

Snape squinted slightly as the vision in his right eye began to distort, almost warping like poorly-blown glass. He closed the affected eye, but the sensation of this visual disturbance pressed into his head as if a fingertip pushed gently into his brain. Whilst it was neither painful nor unpleasant, it was unsettling. He was about to free one of his hands from its pocket to rub at his eye when two figures drifted out from the shadows between the sickly pools of light gasped out by the street lamps. Snape frowned, briefly alarmed at the towering silhouette looming behind Lupin. He'd forgotten how tall Parr could get.

They walked past on the pavement opposite the disused shop where he lurked, certain, but unhurried. The entrance to the warehouse was down a small laneway that branched off from the street, a narrow access for delivery vehicles that would have once carried their cargo from this place.

Parr's gloved hand reached out and touched Lupin's back less than a handful of steps from the laneway. The tattily dressed man paused, his head swivelling slightly toward the wall of the warehouse. Listening. His shoulders slumped, in exasperation if Snape's guess was correct.

The werewolf turned and crossed the street, heading unerringly in Snape's direction.

"How long were you going to skulk there, making us wait for you?"

Lupin peered into the darkened doorway through the strands of his greying hair, a heavy line set between his brows.

"I do not skulk, Lupin. I just do not find it necessary to announce my presence. Would you prefer I stand in the middle of the road setting off thunderclaps so that you could find me? A little unwise, considering the circumstances."

Snape stuck his nose in the air and slid out of his hiding spot and past Lupin before the man could form a retort.

Parr waited, motionless, near the laneway, still facing down the street. A black statue on guard. Snape pointedly didn't look at her as he walked past, but he did notice that the warping of his vision ceased the moment he crossed her path. He should've known she'd have some involvement in messing up his senses. It seemed to be all she was capable of, lately.

He stopped at the small postern set in the huge double doors of the loading dock, refusing to be the first into the dilapidated building. If anyone was going to get their head snapped off, it was going to be Lupin, but the werewolf swept his hand out to offer Snape right of way.

"You first, Severus. I need to be the last in so I can cast the Skin."

Snape's head turned slowly in order to fix the man with a stony glare.

"Are you suggesting I am incapable of casting a simple spell, Lupin?"

The werewolf pulled a face of unconvincing sufferance at him, his outline bracketed by Parr's featureless shadow, swathed as she was in her Striker black.

"Or perhaps you are inferring that its use did not occur to me?"

Lupin tutted softly and pushed the pitted and splintered door inwards, puncturing another miserable hole into the building. Parr slipped in after him, dropping to all fours briefly in order to fit herself under the lintel.

Snape stared after them, vanished into the darkness, the waft of dereliction and foreboding sighing out to cover him. It wasn't trepidation that made him hesitate, just a plain unwillingness to submerge himself in the carcass that had sheltered so many wretched people. That had imprisoned them, hidden them as they struggled to survive, unwanted by two worlds that despised and feared them in equal measure.

A gentle, cold light flushed, casting jagged jet shadows like rotten teeth. Snape clenched his jaw and bent slightly to step into that open mouth, the fabric of his overcoat snagging on the frayed wood of the doorframe. A chill of revulsion ran through him as he closed the door behind him and cast the ward that not only warned them if another entered the building, but also hemmed them inside, like a grave's embrace—invisible yet confining. It was a simple spell, needing little magic but requiring a deftness to pare the layer as thin as possible in order to avoid detection from any outside its shield. It also had a limited lifespan. They would need to move fast.

The smell was dreadful. Far worse than he thought it would be. He nearly lost what little dinner he had in his stomach. The rancid oil of unwashed skin and acrid tang of sweaty bodies failed to drown out the sharp pungency of urine. The intensity of it was overpowering. A part of him, admittedly small, was grateful that there was no stench of rotten flesh, but there was a peculiar sourness that he couldn't attribute a physical cause. It smelled like desperation. Despair. A deadness not of flesh but of spirit.

The loading dock was strewn with rubbish and broken furniture. Most of the refuse lay in the lower portion of the bay, but even the concrete steps against the left wall and leading up to the mezzanine were almost obscured by the crumpled newspaper, ruined clothing and disintegrating cardboard that littered them. The guard rail around the mechanical goods lift was bent harshly into a crooked vee. Here and there, clumps of wadded material marked a sleeping place. A rusted and soot-cloaked metal oil drum sat underneath a hole in the roof—a crude fireplace, long cold. The walls were cragged with parallel gouges, smeared with splashes of dark that were interspersed with crude statements and slogans painted by the former occupants in frustration and self-loathing.

A thin line of luminescence ran around the perimeter of the enclosure at head height, not so bright that it hurt the eyes, but with enough strength to show the interior as clearly as they needed. It was an ingenious spell, a variation on *Lumos* that provided far greater coverage than a light from the tip of a wand. Snape found himself wondering if the spell was a creation of Lupin's or something that he had picked up from another. Much as Snape liked to think Lupin was an idiot, he wasn't *that* dim, and had occasionally shown brief moments of brilliance while a student. It had never been a sustained effort, which was just one more blot against his name, as far as Snape was concerned.

Parr stood near the centre of the room, her cowl drawn back and her right arm raised out to the side, index and middle fingers pointed straight up. Whatever the sign meant, it was clear that Lupin knew. He stood some paces behind Parr, waiting. Waiting as if they didn't have limited time. Waiting as if standing there, not doing anything, didn't bother him in the slightest.

Flecks of white began to fall through the hole in the roof, drifting down silently, catching the bluish light to sparkle and glint as they fell down into ruin.

They waited.

Parr's head turned slowly as if she were looking up to and around the roof, strands of her hair slipping free from the lowered cowl and down across her shoulders, her face hidden, her expression an unknown.

Time passed.

Snape pushed down the rising nausea and irritation into a small, hard mass in his stomach. Lupin twiddled his fingers of his wandless hand and stared at a discarded shoe to his left, chewing at the inside of his cheek.

Parr's hand dropped slowly to her side.

Lupin moved from sleeping spot to sleeping spot, pushing objects aside with his foot. Snape saw him bend down to pick up a used match that had been split carefully down the wood to the head, the tattered remains of a cannabis joint wedged between the two halves.

There was never any doubt in Snape's mind that they'd find evidence of drug use here. It just remained to be seen to what extent that usage went. He walked slowly away from Lupin and around the shattered remains of an office desk that lay overturned, one leg torn clean off and its drawers nowhere to be found; fuel for the fire, most likely. He made sure that he could see Parr out of the corner of his eye. She hadn't moved from her spot, but her face was turned up to the hole in the roof, watching the snowflakes as they descended, the outline of her bowed profile revealed finally.

Glass crunched under Snape's boot. He looked down to see what was left of an empty bottle, the torn label giving him enough information to know it once contained alcohol. Further along, almost hidden by damp, flattened cardboard, lay a discarded syringe, its needle bent to one side, and dark, dried blood spotting the inside of the barrel. He couldn't bring himself to touch it, but he needed this object to determine precisely what it was its former owner, or owners, had been addicted to. A slender, oak-wood box was brought out from the inside pocket of his coat and a *Mobilis* employed to pick the damaged syringe up off the filthy floor. Even the protection of the wood wasn't enough to stop his skin from crawling at the disease-ridden implement.

Snape was just binding the box shut when Parr moved. She swept around the oil drum and made for the corridor opposite the top of the concrete stairs. She cleared the flight in one leap, falling to all-fours just before the first step. There was a muffled clatter as a loose tube of railing was knocked aside.

Lupin continued his search in the bay, unconcerned at Parr's exit. He appeared to be muttering to himself as he scanned the floor, pushing aside torn cloth with the tip of his wand. Snape watched him for a moment before following Parr up the stairs. He did so with considerably less grace as he futilely attempted to avoid treading on the worst of the detritus. The ring of light around the wall snaked down the dank corridor, in and out of side rooms that were all as wretched as each other, caverns of temporary shelter sunk in squalor, their entrances devoid of doors but partially blocked by furniture and boxes.

He found her in the room farthest from where they had entered the building. It was little more than a storeroom. Boxes lay scattered, ransacked of their contents and crushed into sorry forms. Rusty nails littered the floor, cast about like seeds from which a powdery brown bloomed. A broken window high in the wall and facing out into the street allowed occasional flecks of snow to bluster in, carried by a strengthening wind. Opposite, Parr crouched, the unnaturally lengthened fingers of her now un-gloved hand running along the bottom of the plaster wall. At first, Snape couldn't tell what she was looking at, but as he stepped closer, he saw the roughly carved symbol that her fingertip traced along: a circle poised on the end of an inverted cruciform, a concave arcing line splitting the volume unevenly. A crescent balanced on the point of a knife.

"What is it?" he asked before he could stop himself.

The knife was in her hand in the blink of an eye, its hilt rammed into the wall to shatter the plaster into broken pieces and dust, the symbol obliterated.

Parr unfolded from her crouch smoothly to face him, the index finger of her left hand held in front of her mouth, warning him to silence. Then she was gone from the room.

Snape stared at the dent in the wall until the sound of breaking wood pulled him away from it.

Objects were being thrown from one of the side rooms and into the corridor in a steady stream. Lupin's voice calling Parr's name from the loading bay echoed off the walls. Her black-shrouded figure streaked out from the room whose contents had been evacuated and vanished into another. More objects were flung out. A bottle smashed with a harsh tinkle, the fragments reflecting the light from the strip of *Lumos* set along the walls. Parr flowed into another room just as Lupin reached the top of the stairs. He disappeared into the space after her. Voices drifted out, indistinct.

As Snape walked past the rooms Parr had been emptying, he saw that she had cleared aside any occluding objects to reveal more evidence of drug use. Loose cigarette papers and filters, a warped metal spoon, a small zip-lock plastic bag with a few flecks of dried plant matter left in it, long strips of material most likely used as tourniquets, razor blades dented and stained. Some he gathered, others he left laying where they were.

Lupin turned towards Snape as he entered the last room, the muttered exchange between the werewolf and the Striker cut short.

"What did you find?"

Snape flicked a glance at Parr who was standing just behind Lupin. She returned his look calmly, the blue light turning her eyes a rich malachite and her hair a cold steel.

"Various objects typical of drug use."

Lupin frowned.

"Are you able to determine the nature of the substances they were using?"

"This place is ill-suited to analysis of the evidence, Lupin," he replied coolly, chancing another look at Parr. She narrowed one of her eyes at him and the pain in him vanished like a drop of ink in water.

"Chara believes they left by choice."

Snape blinked at him, momentarily disorientated by the disappearance of the ache in his head and his bones that he'd been nursing all day.

"And what has led Miss Parr to that conclusion?" He stared at her sourly.

"There are no signs of either forced entry or rapid departure," Lupin replied with a slight shrug.

"This place is a sty," Snape retorted, noting the appearance of a rather pinched look on Parr's face. "How could she possibly tell that with any certainty?" Was her change in expression due to his blunt question or from the pain she'd sucked off him? It could just as easily be both.

Lupin's mouth compressed into a thin line that betrayed his rapidly dwindling patience at Snape's ratty attitude.

"From her extensive experience gained over a number of years, I should imagine, Severus. If you have cause to doubt it, please enlighten us."

"Just because they left without violence does not mean it was done willingly. A choice between death and eviction is still a choice, no matter how unpalatable the options are."

Lupin sighed gently. "Something that Chara has pointed out to me." He stepped over a pile of ripped magazines. "As it is, we still cannot tell who or what caused them to leave."

Snape opened his mouth and immediately experienced what he could only describe as a sharp flick to the brain that caused words to die on his tongue. He glanced at Parr who opened her eyes very wide and shook her head incrementally. Whatever she'd found in the far room, she didn't want Lupin to know about. Curious. Snape closed his mouth.

Lupin, his eyes trained on the floor in order to avoid tripping over the mess, noticed nothing.

"We should leave. This place gives me the creeps." The last words were spoken quietly under his breath as he edged around the wrecked metal supports of a chair. Parr loped smoothly after him and past Snape, the hem of her overcoat flaring out to brush against the side of his leg.

Later.

It was a word not spoken but felt. A concept unarticulated but relayed. A promise woven of feeling and scent. That he could understand it worried him even as it mollified him. Bait that he couldn't refuse.

Chapter Fifty-Three—The Necessity of Complicity

Chapter 53 of 59

Collaborators cannot always whisper in dark places.

It was a stark contrast to the last safe house. Well-kept and solidly constructed. Tastefully, if a little austere, decorated. Located in an upper-middle class neighbourhood. There were no fleas, threadbare carpets, leaking taps or clanking pipes. No dilapidated furniture, peeling paint or pictures of ducks. Or dogs. It smelled of tea and faded perfume that was spicy and warm. Snape quite liked it; as much as he *could* like a house, which wasn't a great deal. At least it didn't make him itch like the last one had.

He wondered how Dumbledore had secured it. There was no indication that it was owned by a witch or wizard. There were too many Muggle inventions and gadgets for it to be so, and apart from the rather thorny wards and charms around the outside of the building, it didn't have the typical indicators of a dwelling tailored to suit a magic-wielding inhabitant. Perhaps the Headmaster had bought it. Whilst Snape didn't know for certain what the man's financial status was, he guessed it was more than sufficient. There were many things he could say about Dumbledore, but privation and miserliness were not among them.

A grandfather clock in the hallway outside the study ticked softly, muted light from a lamp set in an alcove in the wall opposite catching the brass time-face. A plate-size bob swung back and forth smoothly, almost hypnotically if one looked at it for too long. The clock had already chimed out a quarter-hour since he'd sat down opposite Parr. And still she hadn't acknowledged him.

She knew he was there. It was hardly avoidable, but she had decided that whatever she was doing took precedence. The surface of the table was covered in the usual disorganisation of books, pencils and bits of parchment. That alone irritated him. How could anyone work in such a mess?

He watched the nib of the quill as it scratched across the parchment in loops and angles, as it paused from time to time as Parr thought out a phrase in her head, as it occasionally dipped into the small glass bottle of ink near the Striker's hand. He thought he could almost hear it, this mental shuffling and recombination of words, like a murmur from another room. Indistinct. Indecipherable.

It was a strange sight. Parr sat hunched over in her chair, the twin side-locks of hair draping forward, eyes downcast and resolutely ignoring him as she concentrated on keeping the quill held securely between her elongated fingers. But for the absence of her overcoat, now draped across the back of a reading chair in one corner of the modest-sized room, she was still dressed in her Striker black. No cuffs in the sleeves, the material needed at its fullest length to cover her stretched limbs. A peculiar, almost pattern-like stitching down the front flap of her jacket that one could only see if the light were just right. Black on black. Her unnatural height made the table look smaller than it really was, as if she were an adult playing at being a child student. In many ways, this was the truth.

The splayed fingers of her left hand kept the parchment still as she wrote, a puffy redness evident around the cuticles of the nails. The slightly grubby bandages around her hands darkened in places where old wounds had opened...another source of irritation that made Snape scowl. The physical shifting was preventing the Striker's injuries from healing properly, thus extending her convalescence far past the point it should have ended. Circumstances had dictated that she be pressed into service too early. Snape had voiced this opinion many times, both to her and to whomever he felt should know it, with little success. He'd given up harping on about it; it just made him sound like a snotty old matron that no one listened to and just rolled their eyes at.

Parr sniffed lightly and sighed. It made him wonder if she knew what he was thinking.

You said "later". This is later.

The Striker continued to write, her face expressionless. No indication she'd heard his thought. He'd tried to push it forward, as if it were a solid thing that could be brought to her attention if he moved it in her direction, but there had been no pause, no flicker of hesitation in her that betrayed a successful attempt.

Snape opened his mouth.

"Silence, if you please, Dual," Parr murmured, beginning another line of her writing, leaning just a fraction closer to the parchment so the tip of her bowed nose hovered less than a foot above the page.

She'd keep him sitting there all night through to dawn if it suited her, and most likely it would. Make a statement to delay his questions and then studiously avoid the opportunity to answer them. Snape was getting rather tired of this technique. It wasn't even a graceful one, and she made no attempt at hiding the obfuscation with any delicate sidestepping.

What he tried next he had never done before, wasn't sure precisely how it should be done, or if it should be done at all, but he'd had enough of waiting. He pushed his mind forward until there was that telltale tingle of repulsion, two like forces coming too close to one another. By rights he should not have been able to find it...it had always necessitated that the subject be looking directly at him. Instead of breaching that barrier with Legilimency, he let his mind slip down, like a fingertip brushing along bare skin. The effect was instantaneous.

Parr flinched to such a degree that her left hand lurched to the right while the right went left. The parchment tore as the quill's nib ripped through it, and the ink bottle tipped on its side and disgorged its contents in a splatter.

"Fuck!"

She dropped the quill and fumbled clumsily with the ink bottle, making it spew more of its black liquid across the parchment and table.

"Damn it all to pus-filled *hell*!"

Tiny droplets of ink sprayed everywhere as she juggled the bottle upright and clamped her hands over it securely. A rivulet of black leaked from between her fingers as she swivelled her head up to fix him with a very green and very angry glare.

"You've spilt a bit of ink," Snape understated, keeping his face as neutral as possible.

"Why can't you people use pens?" Parr roared at him.

"Palsy is rarely a problem for us. Perhaps I can find you a crayon if handling a bird feather is too much for you."

"You can shove your crayon right up your gargantuan nostril," she snapped at him. "It took me ages to write this!" She jabbed a finger at the ruined parchment. "I'm going to blame you for this."

"Teachers have all heard those excuses before, Miss Parr. I doubt you'll find a sympathetic ear."

"I think Remus will be fairly forgiving when I explain the circumstances to him."

Snape hissed out a sigh between his teeth and pulled the parchment towards him. In his student days, he'd been forced to come up with a charm for just such a situation. Ink had all sorts of ways of tarnishing his written work, and none of them originated with him. Lupin's bigoted, moronic friends had been the worst transgressors. Black would just upend an inkbottle right over Snape's work without any pretence at slyness, knowing full well that everyone around him would either back him up or deny they saw anything occur at all.

The ugly blot of ink halted its blighting spread across the parchment and began to regress back into a glistening blotch that lifted off the page, leaving the words it had obscured behind it as it formed an undulating sphere of darkness that followed the tip of his wand. The ink slithered back into the bottle in a sinuous ribbon.

Parr grunted. "Show-off."

He gave her a tight smile and slid his wand back into his pocket. She reached out to take the parchment back off him but he moved it out of her ink-stained grasp, his eyes scanning the words.

"The assignment is not for your subject, Dual, therefore it is none of your business," Parr pointed out frostily, stretching farther across the table to take it from him.

"I think you'll find it is very much my business, Miss Parr," Snape replied evenly, leaning back and out of her reach once more. "Your theories on second-grade curses are... fascinating and, unsurprisingly, erratically spelled."

Her hand narrowly missed snatching the parchment from him as the fabric of her jacket was pulled by an unseen force, dragging her back into her chair.

"Ah, so you can be an arse without the aid of your stick, can you?"

He felt rather than saw the dangerous glint in her eye, keeping his attention fixed on the parchment in his hand.

"Your snide, denigrating tone is wasted on me, Miss Parr," he mentioned, secretly pleased at her irritation. He graded her work with a snort and dropped the parchment on the table. "Pedestrian. Lupin will love it."

Parr narrowed her eyes at him. "Worried I'd let advanced reference sources slip in there?"

"A prudent concern."

"Your reputation as a hoarder of information remains secure."

"As a matter of fact, it's not your access to material that I have graciously loaned you that is the issue. Once again, I am moved to the conclusion that your knowledge of us is far greater than ours of you."

Parr studied him for a moment, her eyes still slitted, mouth pursed.

"Us. You. There is no 'us' and 'you', Dual."

"You have made it clear on several occasions that there is. At times you don't even try to keep the disdain from your voice, yet here you are, sheltering behind our protection, gleaning knowledge from us to what purpose I can only guess since some of it you surely already have. A spy, if you like. And not a very good one."

She found that statement amusing, throwing her head back and laughing aloud, the lowered timbre of her voice making it richer and heartier than it usually was.

"You are a curious one, Dual. You hide when I already know you're there, and draw attention to yourself when you should be silent. Don't you find the dichotomy exhausting?"

"I find your prevarication and avoidance exhausting."

"Perhaps I should tell you to suck it up," Parr replied, a half smile on her face. One long finger tapped on the surface of the table a few times. "But then, that would just make you waspish and even more troublesome. I meant that there is no 'you' and 'us' for *you*, Dual."

"Is that just more evidence of your scorn, Miss Parr, to label me with a term I have no understanding of?"

That question seemed to genuinely surprise her, which in turn surprised him. Her eyes flicked from one side to the other as she thought on his question.

"I forget," she muttered, as if to herself. "A Dual is one who once had the capacity to become either Striker or Handler but, for whatever reason, was never led into one role

over the other."

"Once?"

"Past a certain age, the Dual will forever retain the Dualism, being neither Handler nor Striker, but with some aptitude for both. It is a rare trait, sometimes one that is prevalent along certain genetic lines. A useful trait, too." She paused and gave him a toothy smile. "Be careful. Dualism alone would see you regarded very highly by seevy females. It's strong enough to outweigh even your impeccable discourtesy. If a Striker gets it into her head that you would breed well with her Handler, you'll have little choice in the matter. Maybe it is best that you hide in the shadows."

"Husbandry is another of your roles?" Snape asked with a curl to his mouth.

"It is a function I perform, yes," Parr admitted with a slight shrug.

"And your Handler has no say in the matter? You reduce her to a breeding animal?"

"Now who's the disdainful one?" said Parr, one eyebrow arched. "Of course she has a say, but I have final approval." She shook her head slightly. "You have no understanding of our ways, or of our precarious position. I must think beyond immediate fancy and selfish desire to something far more long-term. It is our way. It has always been our way."

"And you tell me this right here under Lupin's nose? Perhaps this is some trifling piece of information he already has, a scrap that you think you can throw me just to satisfy me long enough for you to slip away."

"Remus has other concerns right now," she mentioned dismissively. "It's hardly right under his nose, even if he is upstairs." Her gaze sharpened on his face. "Don't tell me you're jealous?"

"Of that flea-ridden clod? Hardly," he replied, sneering at her.

"Not of him. Of what I tell him."

"I don't dance to the tune of jealousy, Miss Parr, and since you have already told me that you inform him only of what you deem unessential, it seems ridiculous to be covetous of that."

A discontented rumble issued from her. "You're never satisfied, are you? I answer your question and you bitch about its importance to you." She reached for her quill and made to resume her studies.

"Why are you at the school?"

She tutted. "You know the reason why, Dual."

"I know a reason. A reason that fails to answer all my questions."

Parr threw down her quill once more in exasperation. "I don't exist to answer your damned questions!" she snapped at him, her eyes flashing. "Our agreement is that I teach you some semblance of mental technique that doesn't have you club-footing around like a novice!"

"And very little of *that* you've done, Miss Parr," Snape pointed out. "All I've received so far is a few vague notions and a mental correction that has left me flawed, perhaps more so than I was before."

Parr's brows lowered sharply at the accusation levelled at her.

"Or was that your original intention: to cripple me?" He delivered that with a velveteen smoothness that belied his deep-seated anger at the potential truth of it.

The outrage was on her face as if it had been slapped there. She was up and out of her chair, towering over him, fists clenched and shoulders tight.

"Do you have any..." She cut off her words abruptly, a moderating breath in and out to temper her reaction to something less stentorian. "Do you have any idea how difficult it was to untie that knot?" she hissed at him. "I should never have attempted it if another option was open to me, but there wasn't. I did the best that I could!"

"Then your best was insufficient to the task," he shot back nastily. "I have all manner of sensory glitches now, and who knows what to come later!"

She blinked at him, the colour of her anger still high in her cheeks and the shadows of fatigue ringing her eyes. "What sensory glitches?"

"Visual distortion, proprioception imbalances, no mental defences..."

"I told you you'd be open to others once the knot was untied," she spat back at him. "I will teach you how to block them but now is hardly the time for that. Remember the third rule, Dual. The proprioception imbalances are to be expected. They will fade. I don't know what visual problems you're talking about."

"The vision in my left eye is affected. It... warps," he told her, struggling to give words to the sensation and effect he had experienced.

The expression on Parr's face changed. "Warps?" The fingers of her right hand moved to her mouth, tapping her bottom lip gently, a speculative look in her eyes. "Like this?"

His vision rippled into waves of distortion, making him wince and turn his head aside. The distortion remained, but this time at the far left of his vision. Right where Parr was standing. It made his eyes water, even when he closed them, as if the rippling affected not only what his eyes perceived but of what his brain did also.

"Don't do that," he told her automatically. The rippling stopped. He waited until the water leaking from his eyes drained away. When he turned back to look at her, he almost missed the look of triumph on her face as she covered it with something more neutral.

"Not a glitch, Dual," she told him, resuming her seat, her fingers still ghosting around her mouth.

"Then what is it?" he pressed when she failed to elaborate.

Her hand left her mouth; her inky fingertips traced over her reference books lightly, absently, her eyes avoiding his.

"It is... a way Striker and Handler can locate each other when in close proximity. A beacon, of sorts. Interesting."

"For whom?"

Snape's surly question pulled her eyes back to his. "Interesting for me. Good news for you." She sat back in her chair, a posture of contemplation, her fingers going back to her mouth. "Perhaps the untying went better than I had thought." She rolled her eyes. "Though that might not be saying much."

A stricture of fear struck him at her words. She noticed his change in mood.

"I made a mistake."

The stricture became a strangulation and he couldn't keep his eyes from going wide at the admission.

Parr's hand opened out towards him in a mollifying gesture. "I didn't check that you had removed all metal off you before I untied the knot. A combination of haste and inexperience on my part," she admitted reluctantly yet honestly.

"It makes a difference?"

"Metal has been known to..." She paused, considering the words to use. "...ruck the process. I realised too late how dangerous such a thing was." She stared him straight in the eye. "I almost killed you because of it."

Parr was doing nothing to allay the anxiety in him. Snape wondered if the answers she had for him were really the ones he wanted to hear.

"It was the metal around your neck. It was like trying to hold a fish. You damn near took me with you. You've got a very strong grip. But, in for a penny..." She trailed off with a half-smile. "I had to do something to hold you still and it seems it has... unexpected benefits."

"For you or me?"

"Gah! Stop seeing intrigue where there's none," she told him crossly, tossing her head, the silver strands of her hair catching the light in the room.

"How do you think I've survived so long?" Snape asked her with a frown. "Is an inability to block you from my awareness the only 'benefit' of your ham-fisted actions?"

A shrug. "Perhaps. I have yet to determine to extent of the effects. An answer I know you're not happy with, Dual, but it is a genuine one and all that I have to offer at this time, inadequate to satisfying your demands though it may be."

Truth. He knew that both by how he always knew when the alignment of minds was right, and by some indefinable sensation of congruence. Congruence in her tone, her words, her posture, her scent. The last element caught him off-guard. And she saw that.

"We'll see where it takes you, Dual, though our opportunities are scant." Parr leaned forward, one arm resting on the table. "There is much you need to learn, and fast." There was an unmistakeable urgency to her tone. "My time is limited, as is yours. We must steal more as best we can." There was an unexpected keenness in her face at that statement, as if she welcomed the covertness it implied. It was a keenness that resonated within himself.

"How?"

Again, her fingers tapped on the table as she considered the options.

"I am restricted here for the next few days." The Striker sighed, her tiredness and disappointment finally showing through. Or, perhaps, he was becoming more attuned to its presence. "There are always more of the dead to find." The corners of her mouth turned down in a genuine sadness. "Not what I had thought I'd be asked to do, but there it is...the turncoat that tracks the final resting place of the murdered." She turned her head aside in disgust. "No more than I deserve, some might say."

"Perhaps you can find someone still alive."

Parr head turned back slowly. "Are you requesting my services, Dual?" There was puzzlement, and interest, in her voice.

Snape blinked, turning the question over in his mind.

"It is possible to do so?"

She tipped her head from side to side, consulting her experience in order to answer his question. A fingertip tapped at the table.

"The possibility is there, but the traditional arrangement is not," she sighed, as if it pained her. A snort. "But since tradition is not something I have adhered to assiduously of late, I must consider other options." Again, she looked him straight in the eye in that disturbing way she had that was both an honesty and a challenge. The light caught the faint misting of the blade-slice scar across the left side of her face, turning a milky green where the scar went from skin to iris. "I am not Screen, though. It is still inappropriate of me to act as such."

Snape held her gaze, one that was both an assurance and an unfamiliar intimacy to him.

"There are no others who could act as such?"

It was a question that only one unversed in her society's traditions could ask, but it was also one that offered a genuine alternative, one that she considered carefully. And reluctantly rejected.

"There is one, but I would not jeopardise her position by asking it of her, even though I know she would not refuse it." Parr sat straighter in her chair. "No. If you insist on a service request, I must bargain the terms, and damn the inappropriateness of it."

"I need to find someone, fast."

Parr's eyes glittered at him. "And what makes you believe I can find him faster than you can? Dead people are all I have been able to find of late. I may not be able to track him quickly enough."

Snape squinted back at her. "Are you refusing the request?"

She shook her head. "Just alerting you to the limitations. I would not have you enter an agreement under false pretences."

That comment opened an opportunity for all manner of sniping on his part, but he left it alone.

"I'm willing to take the risk."

A nod. "Very well. Who are you looking for?" Business-like. To the point.

"It is too early for me to give sufficient information. There are still facts and details I need to gather."

Parr remained silent, turning his response over in her mind. She sighed. "Give me what you have."

"An Unspeakable went missing some days ago. I have been asked to find out why he disappeared, and to where. You know of them?"

"Yes." Parr did not elaborate, so whether the source of her information was Lupin, through her studies at Hogwarts, or some other origin, was unclear.

"What payment are you asking for such a service?"

"I cannot determine that until I know the specific parameters," she replied with yet another shrug. "So let us proceed as if I have agreed. That way your hand is stronger."

"How so?"

"You get to determine the remuneration. But I warn you of this, Dual: do not underpay me simply because you can. I already allow you to hold much of what is mine in trust." Flinty in both expression and voice. "It's an imbalance I withstand through necessity."

The statement puzzled Snape until he realised what of hers he kept in his possession.

"They can be returned to you if the imbalance is an issue," he replied, his hand moving towards the pocket of his coat that held one of those objects.

Parr's face went as white as snow at his words, her teeth bared in a terrifying presage of violence, freezing every muscle in his body into an adrenaline-drenched knot.

"Return that to me, Dual, and you disgrace everything that I am with such an insult," she hissed at him, body shaking in repressed rage. "A Striker's collar is *never* returned once it has been given to the Handler. To do so is to denounce them as less than a beast! Unfit, unworthy, unable to perform the only function they can in life."

"I didn't know..."

"Your ignorance saves you this time." Her moral affront fractured, and she slumped forward, her hands supporting her head as her elbows rested on the table. "Bad enough it gets passed around as if I am nothing more than an object to be owned by whomever holds it," she muttered, voice muffled by hands that failed to keep the despair from it. "I cannot teach you what it truly means. To do so would take years, so I must bear your ignorance and trust you do not deliberately dishonour me." She removed her hands from her face, a face that seemed to have aged ten years with cheeks grown hollow, skin stretched thinner and bones grown sharper...eaten away slowly from the inside. Her shoulders rounded inwards as she turned her head aside, her hair shifting aside briefly to reveal the fresh notch cut in her ear. A second nick in the cartilage from precise and deliberate action, the flesh around it flushed and swollen, not yet healed.

He had not seen it earlier. She'd kept it deliberately hidden from him as if it was a mark of shame, but she would have known he'd see it eventually. So why had she hidden it before, and why did she reveal it now?

A sound reached them: a door opening from the rear of the house. Snape turned automatically towards it.

"Too soon our time runs out, Dual, but there is something you must do. For your own sake."

The urgency in her voice brought his head back around to stare at her in query.

"Move to the left."

The strangeness of the request threw him. He shifted his body in the chair in response, which earned him an exasperated exclamation from Parr.

"No! Move to the left *here!*" Two long fingers of one hand pointed to her forehead.

"I don't..."

"Find me!" Her eyes flicked to one side to look behind him and down the corridor to where voices sounded in calm conversation. "Quickly!"

Snape squinted at her and reached out with his awareness. And found nothing. No barrier. No steel door. Nothing. The emptiness was eerily unsettling. Parr could have been a statue for all he could find of her mind.

"How...?"

"Dodge what you cannot block," she told him, eyes darting back and forth from his face to gauge what seconds she had left before Dumbledore drew too close for her to speak with impunity any further.

Snape heard the characteristic wheezing of Doge as the man responded to some query put to him by the Headmaster just as footsteps sounded down the stairs from the upper levels to the house: Lupin.

"What does the sign mean?"

It was a question Snape was certain she knew he'd ask, and until the very moment he asked it, it was plain from her expression she hadn't known if she would answer it. One last look over his shoulder decided it for her.

"Lycanthropy does not discriminate."

The quill was back in her fingers, head bowed to her work, dismissing him from her attention as she stilled herself into the sham of her study as the final seconds of their collusion ran out.

Chapter Fifty-Four—Under Duress

Chapter 54 of 59

Realisations that cut and concern.

Lycanthropy does not discriminate.

He knew that to be true. In his time at St Mungo's, Snape had never learned of any person who manifested immunity to the disease. It was voracious, highly infectious, and insidiously successful. No literature held either cure or prevention against it other than prudence. A few medi-witches and wizards had lost years of their professional lives trying to combat it...a scourge that extended far back in time, perhaps even before the formation of magical society.

He devoted a portion of his awareness to the conversation taking place in front of him and left the rest free for speculation. Lupin was giving a fairly dry yet accurate report on what they had found at the abandoned den to the other occupants of the room, offering up no information that Snape was not already aware of, so he felt secure in focussing on other matters for the time being. It was, however, interesting to note the rather distant expressions of most of the listeners, as if the information was of mild interest but nothing impactful. Dumbledore's aged expression was analytical, as if he were absorbing the words to be mulled upon, categorised and filed away for later advantageous usage. Doge and Shackbolt seemed politely attentive, no more than that. Tonks was the most absorbed, probably because she wondered if Lupin would eventually end up being a member of such a sorry band of diseased outcasts. Parr sat in her chair, her head bowed in such a way to throw shadows down and over her

face, giving her a faintly skull-like appearance. Her eyes were closed, but Snape seriously doubted that she was not paying attention to what was being said. If anything, she probably had the strongest idea of what was going on in the room, if the faint flaring of her nostrils was any indication.

Lycanthropy does not discriminate.

Parr's statement, whilst somewhat ambiguous, was enough for Snape to make the necessary connection. People discriminated on the basis of one factor: difference. What that difference was varied, but there were common elements: race, beliefs, appearance, choices, and gender. The symbol scratched into the wall in the derelict building was a simple blend of two others: the Greek script for Phosphorus, appropriated to represent the female gender, and a crescent moon, a lunar phase that in past civilisations had also stood for the feminine. However, when the current situation was taken into account, it also carried with it the flavour of something greater. Female lycanthropes.

The realisation made Snape's heartbeat quicken. Another party playing their hand in a very convoluted game. His eyes flicked back and forth between Lupin and Parr. Of course, it was possible that female lycanthropes had been influencing certain current events for some time. Parr's obliteration of the symbol and withholding the knowledge of its presence from Lupin suggested a deeper, wider involvement than a one-off action. But what was their role in this game? Had they caused the evacuation of the den or merely investigated the premises after the squatters had left?

The symbol itself suggested organisation; an identifier of a specific group...a group who had deliberately left a marker of their presence. For whose benefit was this marker?

Macnair and Greyback's plan to use lyc-females to control the males would have been very unpopular to the former. There was something of a deep-seated, ancient enmity in the way lyc-females and lyc-males interacted...the usual sexual attraction was overwhelmingly one-sided. The disease didn't require sexual transmission to spread, so what possible advantage could there be in alienating the infected genders from each other? Snape had some experience with the animosity that existed between the two genders, although the circumstances would have been highly fractious even to those not afflicted with the disease. There were few widely agreed-upon answers, and some medical practitioners were so staunch in their theories that any concerted effort into objective research fell by the wayside in favour of argument. As with all infections, it was believed that the disease sought to spread itself as widely as possible. Breeding between already infected individuals did little to aid such a spread, especially considering the long gestation period in human females; far quicker for the pathogen to push the infected genders to seek out those without the disease. Indeed, lyc-males showed an almost mindless streak of rutting tendency as they neared transformation, but the females? So few had ever been observed, and what little research had been done suggested that whilst the push to breed was just as strong, if not stronger, than that in lyc-males, the females had a much better grip on their libido. They were no less capable of violence, but sexual need seemed to play little part in it.

On the surface, it seemed that lyc-males significantly outnumbered lyc-females. Estimates had been as high as ten-to-one, and none lower than four-to-one. It was a statistic that sat poorly with the evidence of the reckless, brutal violence inherent in male lycanthropes that fought and killed as many of their own number as they did healthy victims, their rationality eroded and restraint increasingly weak as the moon waxed. It made little sense that they existed in greater numbers than lyc-females, which led to the conclusion that the reverse might be true. Observed behaviour reinforced a theory that lyc-females had gone even deeper underground than the males. Far slyer. Far more cautious. Invisible. And smart enough to steal their own from right under Macnair and Brachoveitch's noses.

Was it truly a coincidence that right after the desertion of the den that the disused warehouse was slated for redevelopment? In Snape's experience, coincidence was merely situation where the facts were not fully revealed to the outsider. Dumbledore had appeared to dismiss the idea that the desertion and the redevelopment were connected... unless there was someone in the local council's planning department who was affiliated in some way with the group of infected squatters. Snape made a mental note to do a little digging in the council's offices. Theoretically, he'd have no problems in accessing information pertaining to the location, but would all the relevant data be there, and would he be able to determine who it was that had a foot in both worlds?

Snape wondered if Parr had found the same sign at the warehouse where the prospective harem of lyc-females had been held. It was clear to him that she had withheld information from Dumbledore after reporting back from the site, but at the time, Snape hadn't known what it was she was refusing to reveal. What would the reasons behind such a refusal be? Undoubtedly reasons that he was currently not privy to, and it was highly unlikely that would change. After all, Parr would categorise him with those that she felt no need to be fully open with. There was her claim that he was seevy, but Snape wasn't sure how much he could push that angle and get anywhere.

What Snape couldn't quite figure out was why she had let him see the lyc-female symbol in the first place. She could have destroyed it before he'd even entered the room she had found it in. There was no question in his mind that she had waited just long enough for him to spot it, but why? And if the lyc-females had been responsible for clearing out the den, what was the purpose?

The value of seevy to wizarding world was incalculable, which was reason enough for Dumbledore to find ways to entice them back. They were strong, smart and steadfast with the potential to be terrifying adversaries. However, Snape got the impression that they were a people with very, very long memories. If their previous treatment had been as distasteful as Parr had claimed, it was no wonder that their recruitment was proving to be a slow and arduous task. Lupin's peculiar research was surely tied in with it all. Who knew what he was managing to collate on seevy that the MLE had not previously been aware of. Parr could be feeding him all sorts of misinformation, and the werewolf wouldn't be any the wiser.

Parr was plainly using the shelter of magical society to avoid Greyback's clutches, and in return for that protection, she hired herself out as a Tracker under Dumbledore's wishes. Parr's maudlin attitude at finding nothing but dead bodies was mildly surprising to Snape. It was not that she manifested squeamishness at it. Distress was closer in categorising her reaction, but he felt it was more like disappointment or disgrace. She had told him very emphatically that she did not kill, the murder of her Screen aside, and seemed deeply insulted that she could be accused of such. But he'd seen the violence in her, felt the utter certitude that she would destroy anything that stood between her and her Handler. There was a raw, desperate hurt in her that she had killed, even if it had been at the behest of the victim...to kill or be killed. Who could honestly say they would stay their hand when faced with such a decision? Considering the strong probability that the Screen would have been dispensed with after murdering Parr, the choice really had come down to whether or not it would be two people dying that night. That was the first rule of assassination: kill the assassin. Snape wondered if Parr had learned who it was that had turned her most trusted confidante against her. Perhaps she had accepted Dumbledore's offer as a way to get close to the perpetrator and exact revenge, but it was clear her most pressing priority was to locate and rescue her Handler. She would surely not risk anything that would see the Handler killed in retribution, but once her sister was back safely at her side, all hell would break loose, and woe betide whomever got in the way.

Snape wondered if Dumbledore knew that seevy were already woven into magical society and likely with the collaboration of those already entrenched in that society. There was no way that seevy would have been able to achieve such an infiltration unaided. That they would balk at overtures from the MLE yet collude with other witches and wizards meant that there was an underlying benefit to both parties, one that an alliance with the MLE would fail to provide. That wasn't saying much. The MLE was a government department after all, operating with its own hidden agendas and scant concern to the morality of some of its decisions.

Snape's cursory examination of the drug materials collected from the abandoned den had yielded no surprises. He informed the group of as much, keeping his words to the facts as much as possible rather than straying into areas of speculation. Dumbledore had pressed him on it, attempting to gain an insight into Snape's interpretation. The narcotics were street-grade, cut together with some extender chemicals that were fairly inimical to the user, but not particularly unusual. There was little to definitively suggest that the lyc-males were under the stupeficient control of Macnair, unless the Executioner was choosing to use Muggle narcotics instead of those that could be found in magical society. Substances that lycanthropes were normally dosed with by Death Eaters didn't appear to have been used by the den's recent occupants, so the most likely explanation was that they had not come under Macnair's close scrutiny. The other Order members shuffled about momentarily after Snape's conclusion, plainly uncomfortable, though their reasons for such would be varied.

Standard Ministry procedure was to assign the MLE to keep a reasonably close watch on all known lycanthropes. Little actual assistance would ever be extended to them...the observation was merely to protect wizarding world citizens. If they ever became a threat, they would ordinarily be dealt with swiftly and permanently. There was little concern for Muggles or the lycanthropes themselves. Undoubtedly some lycanthropes would slip through the MLE's net, and as long as they weren't directly bothering any witches or wizards, they'd be allowed to survive in whatever pitiful way they could manage. After all, one didn't need to be able to wield magic in order to be infected, and Muggle lycanthropes were even lower on the ladder of social importance than wizarding ones. Trash. Desperately unwanted trash.

The meeting, such as it was, broke up. Doge wheezed off down the corridor and out of the house, to be followed not long after by Shackbolt and Tonks who were discussing the likelihood of being able to convince the Auror department to ramp up their lycanthrope observations. Lupin and Dumbledore put their heads together briefly, speaking at a level that escaped Snape's hearing. Parr remained, unmoving, in her chair. Waiting.

Dodge what you cannot block.

Her words came back to him. Interesting. There had been nothing in his prior experience that had indicated it was even possible to shift a mind spatially in the manner that she had suggested, yet the evidence had been straight in front of him. When he'd tried to find her awareness at her behest, there had been nothing for him to find. What other mental gymnastics were possible? Even more importantly, which ones would she teach him?

He stared hard at her, trying to push his awareness forwards. It was far easier to do so now than before, as if ridding the knot in his mind had released a tether, allowing him to range farther and farther from the mental territory he'd been previously restricted to. Snape half expected to find nothing, but the steel wall was resolutely up. There was little need for Parr to dodge...her block was so impenetrable that it could withstand the incursion. It hulked in front of his perception: a promise of stoic impassivity. He'd found a gap before, though. Twice. A gap that he'd not been able to get through. The deflection had been effortless on her part, though he might have succeeded had he been quick enough. She hadn't expected him to be capable of finding such a crack in her defences and consequently had been lax. Would the gap still be there? Unlikely. And even if it were, did he really want to be poking around in there?

He squinted as he thought he saw Parr's mouth curve upwards at the corners. Or perhaps he was becoming so paranoid at his potential transparency of thought that he was imagining she could hear his rumination. Regardless, prudence was wise.

She was up and out of her chair in one swift motion, her overcoat flaring out as she donned it. She towered behind Lupin, her eyes still trained on the floor as she nodded once at Dumbledore's words. And then they were gone. Out to track. Another dead body for Parr to find? Perhaps tonight would bring better luck. If so, Snape hoped such luck would hold out long enough for him to benefit from its graces.

He absorbed the details that Dumbledore gave him in silence: Beresford's address, his routine, some of his common associates, his appearance, and his proclivities. Information that was strangely explicit for an Unspeakable, someone whose livelihood was conducted behind the strictest security and thickest obfuscation. Dumbledore had ears in many places. It seemed he had an ear against the very heart of the MLE. Snape wondered if this ear had been willing or even conscious of a parasitic listener.

There was something that concerned him far more than evidence of the range of Dumbledore's information network: why did the man give him the required information now? Why had he not imparted it back at Hogwarts when he had made the initial request for Snape to locate this allegedly missing Unspeakable? Why give the task to him in two pieces? Was it in order to deliberately lead or to see who followed?

In the death-like stillness before dawn, he found himself back at Hogwarts in his own private quarters, seated in almost exactly the same posture he'd been in a few hours before, but this time the focus of his apparent attention was on Folter.

The house-elf gave no indication that she was aware of his study, preoccupied as she was in feeding the Pewtinellas that she had taken to setting free from their bamboo cage. The tiny silver birds had proven to be model animal companions, making little mess and imparting a charm with their sauciness of behaviour that Snape found oddly appealing.

Right now, one of the birds sat on Folter's shoulder, half-hidden behind the strands of her hair, its head peeking out to watch him closely, black-bead eyes glinting. One always watched him whilst the other fed. He could never tell which was the male and which the female, though Folter had tried to show him on a number of occasions. She seemed to determine the difference as easily as if one had an extra head. The feeding bird sat in her hand, its head a glittering flash as it pecked at the seeds. The little crackle of de-husking was the only sound in the room.

Snape's incursion into the council building had gone without a hitch, the information he needed quite easily found: four names, three of which were female. Nevertheless, he gave all four names to one of his contacts to check out with the warning to be especially careful. If one of those names led to the lyc-female group, an unwary snooper could easily find themselves mortally punished. He had briefly considered handling the matter himself, but taking into account his past experiences, he felt it prudent to avoid as much potential awkwardness as possible. The whole situation awakened memories he would rather have kept buried. He had enough on his plate as it was.

"Folter."

He saw her mouth compress into an even thinner line at her name. She had been expecting this, and from that minute shift in expression, she hadn't been looking forward to it.

The Pewtinellas gave a small burst of tinkling notes and flew up to their bamboo cage, leaving the house-elf to face his questioning alone. Folter rolled her fingers around the seed, removing it to who knew where...house-elf magic was very much an enigma. She clutched her flour sack clothing with both hands, head bowed to the floor, refusing to look at him.

"I am under the impression that you are privy to information that I am not."

There was a long pause before her non-committal reply.

"Sir?"

Snape tapped the ends of his fingers together, his elbows propped on the armrests of his chair. Folter wasn't garrulous by nature. She kept his secrets well; at least, as far as he could tell, but there was a withholding going on that he had to discover the reason behind.

"I place great trust in you, Folter. It would be egregious if that trust were misplaced."

That brought her head up, eyes wide and her mouth slightly open at the veiled accusation.

"Folter says nothing! She does not tell any others, even if they ask."

He frowned at the strange response. Her tone suggested that she was scandalised at his words, which alone was highly unusual for a house-elf when it was directed at the person they served. But then, Folter was an unusual house-elf.

"You're hiding something from me, Folter."

He delivered the statement as carefully as he could, curling it away from reproach. He still trusted her, but he needed to know.

Folter's brown eyes dropped from his, and she shuffled slightly on the spot.

"Folter keeps secrets," she replied quietly, her hands tightening on her clothing.

"Mine? Or someone else's?"

Her face hardened at that. And she didn't answer.

"You know Chara Parr?"

The house-elf went very still.

"Folter has seen Chara Parr."

A calculated response that, whilst not a lie, failed to answer adequately.

"Do you know what she is?"

"Chara Parr is a student at Hogwarts."

"That is not what I meant, Folter, and you know it."

He allowed a sliver of irritation to taint his words. The house-elf's expression shifted back to consternation.

"Folter keeps secrets," she whispered, almost inaudible.

"Why?"

She sighed. "Folter has been asked to."

"By whom?"

"Folter cannot say."

"For what purpose?"

"Folter cannot say."

"You know of seevy."

It wasn't a question. The diminutive figure's shoulders slumped.

"You must tell me what you know of them."

"Folter cannot say."

"This is becoming tiresome, Folter," he snapped, making her flinch. "Your stubbornness makes me doubt your intentions. Must I go over your head and speak to Kapshot?"

"No!" The light in her eyes was desperate. Her small body was rounded-in on itself in her anxiety.

"Then you must tell me."

Her hands were clenched so tightly that Snape could almost see the bones through her skin. Everything about her screamed distress.

"The Professor must know Folter cannot say!"

The words were ripped from her, a desperate entreaty to him not to pursue the subject. Snape narrowed his eyes to slits.

"Look at me, Folter."

She dragged her gaze back up with an agonising slowness, her disproportionately large eyes seeming to take up her entire face.

"You know that I am seevy?"

She did not answer him.

"I shall take your silence as an affirmation."

Folter pressed her lips together briefly. Yet she did not correct him.

"You are being kept silent under an agreement I do not know the particulars of?"

The house-elf tipped her head ever so slightly to the left.

"Is this agreement between you and Chara Parr?"

Folter squinted hard at that as if trying to wriggle out of a very tight gap.

"Folter cannot say."

"Does it involve Chara Parr?"

Silence.

Snape tapped his fingers together gently.

"Is there any way the restrictions of the agreement can be circumvented?"

Silence. Surprisingly.

"Should they be circumvented?"

Folter spent a long time considering that question.

"Folter cannot say."

The tenor of her voice suggested doubt.

"Would Folter say if my life was in danger because of what she cannot speak of?"

It was the first time ever he had seen anger on the house-elf's face. Not just a hint of anger, but full-blown outrage, transforming her features into something altogether foreign. Snape had to admit to himself later that in that moment, he actually felt fearful of her.

"Folter would permit no harm to come to the Professor! *L'rihlla i Hr'rihlla!* No harm!"

The deferential, almost cowering posture was gone, her hands still clenched but no longer twisted in the fabric of her poor clothing. The mettle he had learned over the years that ran deep inside her was bared like the teeth of a dragon, one that had slept so long that it had been thought dead. He wondered how many more secrets were being kept, what house-elves were truly capable of under the right circumstances.

He stood and swept past her, prickly and ill-at-ease at this revealed side of one of those closest to him. He hoped, desperately, that she would not betray him the way so many others had.

Her voice stopped him before he slammed closed the door to his bedroom.

"The Professor knows that Folter would allow no harm."

There was no rise in tone at the end to suggest it was a question, but he knew it was. He kept his back to her.

"Yes."

"The Professor still trusts Folter."

He allowed some seconds to pass in order to reach a decision. He permitted more to pass to wonder why. He forced the passage of even more out of childish spite and then wished he hadn't.

"Yes."

"Folter serves the Professor."

Snape didn't know why those words made him feel the way they did: sad, adrift, bitter.

"Agreements do not last forever," Folter stated.

"So I have learned. Time and again."

She must have heard the disappointment in his voice.

"Folter's loyalty does."

That made him feel better. If only a little bit.

Chapter Fifty Five—Propitious

Chapter 55 of 59

Watch for opportunity, for it may come but once.

"I've not seen anything like it before. It's called an ivy."

Snape looked dubiously at the plastic bag of clear liquid on the table.

"It's an intravenous drip," he corrected the apoth. "Muggles use it to introduce liquids into a patient—a somewhat barbaric but usually efficacious treatment. For how long has she been dosed with this?" He picked the plump bag up and squinted at the print on the plastic.

The fat man shrugged, plucking at his heavy, purple robes to try and unstick them from his sweaty skin. He was still unnerved from his last visit to the werewolf den. The stink had been dreadful, and the atmosphere even worse. Greyback had been in a towering rage, one that even his followers had shied back from. The day before the full moon was a terrifying one in a den, and in one with an alpha male as insane and violent as Greyback, it was a promise of an impending horror that would have even the doughtiest quaking. Comparatively, this exchange seemed like blessed relief.

"I can't be certain, but not long, I believe. Although I'd not seen her for a week, I guess a couple of days at most judging from the way Greyback spoke and from her physical condition. There is some improvement, but not as much as Greyback is hoping. There was the bald threat that whoever fails to prove their skill at reviving her is dealt a... desperately painful end."

The apoth's cheeks went even paler at the thought of potential failure on his part.

"If you do what I tell you, that painful end will not be yours," Snape told him confidently. "What I have given you is markedly superior to this." He dropped the bag back on to the table. "Have you dosed her?"

Todianus mopped his forehead with an already damp handkerchief. "Yes, but I was concerned it would react badly with this... intravenous... thing." He waved a chubby digit at the bag. "I didn't know what was in it, which, I suppose, was fortunate. I told Greyback there might be a bad reaction from mixing medications, that I'd need to take a sample of what the Muggle had given the woman to check it was harmless. He wasn't very happy about that."

"Why?"

The apoth sighed. "I think because his supply of this liquid isn't as free as he would like. Allowing me to take even one bag away seemed to be a huge risk. He told me that if I didn't bring it back, unspoiled, he'd peel the flab off me with his own hands." He leaned forward slightly to squint at the bag. "Is it really harmless? If she dies, Greyback might blame me. The flesh around the needle in her hand was quite inflamed."

"Let me see."

Todianus waited while the images flicked through his mind, shuffled like cards, random ones selected and studied. He was used to the invasive rummaging but still disliked the ease with which Snape could do this to him. At least it didn't hurt. Scant comfort, but enough. What the dark-haired man made of his memories was hard to tell, but there was a crease across his forehead.

"Who is this Muggle that Greyback has bringing him this liquid?"

The handkerchief was dabbed at perspiring jowls and then disappeared into the apoth's pocket.

"He's some kind of trainee or assistant at a Muggle clinic or hospital. His name's... ah..." Todianus paused, racking his brain for a few seconds. "... Satash... no, *Sarteschi*. He's a strange one."

"How so?"

The apoth fidgeted in his chair under that black glare.

"He doesn't seem worried by Greyback. At all. Even if he were a Squib, his lack of fear is highly unusual, and Greyback is being particularly violent lately. Muggles don't normally deal well with wizarding world contact, which means he's either familiar with it or..." The apoth's high voice trailed off uncertainly. "There's a funny look about him, about the way he talks and carries himself. He looks... drugged."

"Let me see."

The red-rimmed eyes, greyish complexion and slow speech replayed in the apoth's mind.

"It's possible he's a male-lyc, but that still doesn't explain the lack of fear," Todianus mused.

"What else do you know of this Sarteschi? Which clinic does he work at?"

Todianus shook his head. "I've told you all I know. Perhaps if I knew the suburb Greyback is currently in, I could look into clinics and hospitals nearby for this man, but there's still too little indication of where the den is. There is a train station nearby, though. I heard it while I was there."

"How long until you return to the den?"

The apoth glanced at the clock on the wall of his small office and made the calculation.

"Just over four hours. I've been told to wait in Trafalgar Square this time for my chaperone."

Snape spent a few moments mulling over the information.

"Tell Greyback that you need to analyse the Handler's blood to determine if she is diabetic."

The apoth frowned. "Why would—"

"If she is diabetic, the IV she's being given could cause complications. Convince him to allow you to remove the IV until you can confirm there will be no contraindication. If he's stubborn, tell him the conditions in which the Handler is being kept are not sterile and an infection could result from a pathogen entering the bloodstream via the injection site. There's only so much he'll risk. There's no potential allergic reaction in mixing what I've given you with this IV. However, IV solutions vary. If the Muggle gives the Handler a different solution, there could be problems. Have you seen any other bag or bottle piggybacking on the peripheral line?"

"Ah, I don't know what a—"

"Have you seen any other container draining into the catheter in the Handler's vein?" Snape clarified harshly.

Todianus shook his head. "No."

"Until the IV is removed, I cannot determine if a change in the Handler's health is due to what you give her or from what the Muggle gives her. Keep the dosage the same until I tell you otherwise."

The apoth pressed the fingers of one hand to his smooth forehead. "How am I meant to get this blood sample from the Handler? Cutting her would seem to be hypocritical if I'm fussing about sterile conditions and pathogens," he noted a little snippily.

Snape ground his teeth. "There are ways to get blood from her that don't involve incision."

A flush of frustration bloomed in Todianus' face. "You're requiring me to be a mediwizard and I'm not! I've got no training in that area whatsoever, and if I make a mistake and kill the Handler, Greyback will be extracting *my* blood with more than a few incisions!"

A risky idea occurred to Snape. He glanced at the apoth's bald pate.

"You have no hair at all?"

Todianus stared at him, flummoxed by the abrupt change in topic. "Not on my head, no."

Snape suppressed queasiness at the thought of this man's hair sourced from locations other than his head.

"A piece of fingernail will do instead, and you have no more than an hour to tell me everything about all your previous encounters with Greyback and Macnair."

It was an extremely dicey course of action, but one that had to be considered.

Reaching the safe-house and by-passing the security charms, Snape hoped that Parr was actually inside. She had told him she was based here for a few days, but that didn't necessarily mean all the time. She could be out with Lupin, although the sun was only just about to set. They seemed to do their searching during the darkened hours.

It seemed logical to search her out in the small study room where Snape had found her before but logic served little purpose when it came to Parr—she was not there. However, three other people were. He stared at the young girl sitting between Lupin and Tonks on the couch, their laughter abruptly halted by Snape's appearance in the doorway. The girl reached out automatically for one of Tonks' hands, her whole demeanour shifting to one of nervousness at the presence of one who was a stranger to her. Her blue eyes locked onto Snape as if she were reluctant to look away from a potential threat.

Lupin swore under his breath and got up from the couch quickly.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed at Snape, trying to draw him away from the room and back down the hallway. Snape ignored him and continued to study the young girl cowering next to Tonks. The skinny limbs, pale skin and scars like scratches across her face gave it away.

"You keep her here?" he asked Lupin, incredulous.

The lyc-girl flinched at his tone, clutching onto Tonks' hands as if her life depended on it. Tonks scowled at Snape.

"Don't start that now, Severus," Lupin snapped, stepping back to place himself between Snape and the lyc-girl as if to provide a barrier.

A prickle ran down Snape's spine that he shrugged off irritably, leaning to one side to look past Lupin. The lyc-girl blinked rapidly a few times and turned towards Tonks to whisper to her, a crease between her thin brows. Snape didn't hear what she asked.

"No, he's not," Tonks whispered back to the girl. "He's an arsehole but not one of them." She said it deliberately loud enough for Snape to hear. The lyc-girl's frown deepened slightly as she watched him carefully.

"A word, please," Lupin demanded, grabbing hold of Snape's coat and dragging him away from the room. Snape snatched his arm back.

"Don't touch me, Lupin. I'm not one of your furtive nocturnal consorts."

"Don't scare her, then!" Lupin shot back angrily. "She only just barely trusts me."

"Your decision, your problem," Snape summed up curtly. "Where is Miss Parr?"

Lupin's expression turned even flintier.

"Why?"

"None of your business," Snape pointed out with a sneer. "But for the sake of alacrity, there is an urgent medical matter that I must discuss with her."

"What's wrong?"

"That is definitely none of your business, as I believe we have discussed on a number of occasions," Snape mentioned smoothly. "Tell me where she is or I shall employ my talents as an arsehole to make everyone's life instantly unpleasant. And don't go for the obvious retort, please."

"Upstairs, and fuck off! How's that for a retort?"

"My, my, aren't we tetchy this evening? Does the imminent full moon always make you so foul-mouthed? I hope you don't talk like that around your dependant."

Snape watched with an amused fascination as Lupin talked himself down from a spectacular burst of lunar-induced pugnacity. A slightly shaking finger was pointed directly in his face.

"Don't push your luck. I'll not have you upsetting that girl after all she's been through, so you stay the hell away from her."

Snape curled the line of his mouth into an eloquent symbol of derision. "With pleasure." He stuck his nose in the air and swept up the stairs, leaving the frustrated werewolf struggling to manage his temper.

Parr looked down on him with her own brand of suppressed merriment as she answered her door.

"Knocking? That's evidence of manners I didn't think you had, Dual."

There was a peculiar wildness in her eyes that Snape found unsettling, like a deep ocean torn into a maelstrom. It was a stark contrast to the steely control of the rest of her features.

"Prudence rather than manners, Striker. Purely an attempt to avoid a knife in my throat."

Parr snorted gustily at him as if he had made a joke and stepped back from the doorway to allow him to enter. Her eyebrow rose at his hesitation.

"Now, what would you have to worry about in here?" she chided him softly, bright green eyes as keen as a stalking cat's.

"The list is too long to go into right now, Miss Parr," he countered with a confidence he didn't feel and edged past her. The close of the door behind him sounded ominously like that of a prison cell.

His gaze flicked around the room, noting the unusual, almost compulsive tidiness of the objects inside it. Books on a study table in a series of mathematically precise stacks. Bed linens straightened, with folds but no creases. A pair of knee-high black boots standing to attention below a black overcoat hanging from a peg in the wall, the laces draped with a symmetry that was almost ludicrous in its accuracy. On the floor next to the bed lay a sequence of oddly familiar knives that gave him pause not only for the inherent threat held in them, but from the recognition that he had seen them set in such an order once before.

"You have been practising."

It was a statement, not a question. He blinked in mild confusion at Parr as she loped slowly past him and back to her line of knives. She sank down, cross-legged, a whetstone in her hand with which she resumed the sharpening of her work-blade. Snape's eyes focused on the black cord woven around the hilt, cutting between the usual orange and silver bindings.

"Practising?" he repeated.

This time, both her eyebrows drifted up. The scrape of stone across steel set Snape's teeth on edge.

"Your mental dodging. You've been practising."

He squinted at her, observing the elongated limbs and bowed planes of her face. Good.

"I was given the impression it was of some importance to do so," he replied.

Parr gave a tight smile and kept her eyes on her knife. "Indeed. It was not an accusation, Dual. I believe that praise is as beneficial as criticism in teaching, though I'm sure you have contradictory examples just waiting to flow off your tongue. Just to give me the shits, of course."

He ignored her baiting.

"The apoth has medicated your Handler."

Parr's hands did not pause at his words.

"Yes."

Again, a statement.

"You knew?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Parr turned the work-blade over to sharpen the underside.

"I felt better."

"You mentioned that diabetes ran in your family. Could your Handler have the condition?"

She studied the blade in her hands for a moment before resuming the sharpening.

"No."

Snape huffed. "You seem very sure."

"Clear for seven decades, but we test nonetheless. She is not diabetic."

The twin side-locks of her hair framed long-fingered hands, the palms swaddled in bandages; hands that moved carefully and meticulously under her gaze. There was a studied determination in how she held herself, how she moved, even how she breathed: a person with a level of focus that eliminated all unnecessary sensory input to allow her to attend to the task she had set herself.

"There is an immediate chance to find your Handler."

Parr's hands stilled abruptly. She remained frozen for some time during which Snape thought he felt a slew of emotions running through her: hope, desperation, curiosity, relief. Caution. Hesitancy. Concern.

"How so?" she asked evenly in her deepened voice, still in that fixed pose.

"The apoth has to return every five hours to medicate your Handler. I will go in his stead during one visit."

Again, seconds of silence passed.

"Polyjuice Potion."

"Yes," he confirmed.

Her hands placed knife and whetstone down gently, but her head remained lowered.

"When?"

"In another six hours."

Once more, silence. She flexed her toes apart in their socks as she considered his words.

"You said the apoth must medicate her every five hours. Why is there a delay?"

"The potion won't be ready in time for the next medication."

"I thought Polyjuice was effective from the moment the biological sample was added to it," said Parr quickly. Tersely. Suspiciously.

"If the potion is completed, yes. But I don't always have a ready supply, Striker. I've had to use it more heavily of late. It is fortunate that there is only a six-hour delay for this current formulation, but it will be the last window of opportunity before the full moon. I daren't go anywhere near a den during that time, even if I could."

There was a burst of vexation from her that echoed with that inside him. A few breaths and she quashed it with an iron-fisted determination. Did Parr know how easily he could sense the emotional undercurrents in her? Snape was beginning to realise that his ability to read another's mood had improved markedly, but not nearly to the extent that he could divine Parr's. It both alarmed him and lured him closer. That he could circumvent her disguise of her emotions, whether with or without her consent, was innervating, enflaming, inciting an intense wave of possession that shocked him with its velvet clinch.

"How will you do it?"

"Apparition."

"You would not be followed?"

"I have my ways. And they will be looking for the apoth, not me."

She nodded once at that. Short and sharp.

"Where will you take her?"

"The school. Anywhere else is too risky."

Another nod.

Agitation. Impatience. A feeling of uselessness. Parr hated that she could not be there to free her Handler herself, but she accepted the situation as the best chance they had. She still hated it nonetheless.

"There must be something I can... do."

"Help me find another."

Parr's head lifted slowly, her green eyes turned up to him, eerily reflective in the room's light. For a brief moment, Snape was anxious she would sense in him the clutching, near-sensuous ownership of her that he felt, the wave of it rising steadily in a crooning promise to drown him. Then he realised that even if he managed to hide it from her mind, she would surely smell it on him, if she hadn't done so already: the addict come back for more.

"The Unspeakable?"

"Yes. We must go now."

Parr's forehead rippled in suppressed exasperation.

"It cannot wait?"

"No. The apoth has told me something that demands we do this now."

Parr remained still and quiet, staring steadily at him. There was a... flavour to her thoughts that asked the question. Wordless, but the meaning was there. For a moment, he thought he could smell it. It was like heavy cloth that had been brought into the sun after a long winter, the weight of stone lightened by the touch of the sun, the dust of stillness dissolving into a breath of bitter orange.

"An overheard conversation between Macnair and a previous informant of mine." Even the thought of Trint made Snape so coldly furious that he had to clench his hands to

stop them from shaking. "It seems they have the Unspeakable, though for what purpose, the fat man could not say. They are having difficulty extracting the information they need from him. Macnair is growing impatient and has decided that someone else try their hand, someone gifted in such matters. I fear the Unspeakable will be dead before the evening is over."

Parr blinked a couple of times. She appeared so calm. Too calm. It had to be a lie—the turbulence of her emotions that washed over him intermittently made a mockery of her composure. He had to stop himself from trying to smell it out. How could he possibly know what a lie would smell like? The shift in his perception was greater than he had realised, sliding towards a layered awareness that whispered to him, a susurrant of expanding consciousness of what had previously been a hidden world to him. It sank him into sensation, making it thorny for him to concentrate, to remain above visceral impulse.

"There is a problem," Parr murmured. She leaned back until she was resting against the side of the bed, looking up at him with an avid, almost feral gaze, on the edge of causing a rather desperate problem arising on his part. "I cannot leave the house clothed."

Snape had to exert a phenomenal amount of mental discipline on his thought processes at those words.

"What?" he asked with difficulty through gritted teeth.

"Remus has Charmed my clothes so that he knows if I leave the house." The edges of her mouth curved gently. "He suspects a prudishness I do not possess if the motivation is strong enough. However, winter is not my favourite season to go parading about unclothed, and my health is not the best it could be."

Somewhat ingenious of Lupin to do such a thing, if a little naïve in his reliance on it.

"What really keeps you here, then?"

Parr sighed softly, her features taking on a tired cast.

"My word. And that is strong enough." She saw the expression on Snape's face at that statement. "In my line of work, my word is all I have to maintain credibility." She shrugged gently, the high collar of her jacket briefly hiding the bandage around her neck. "That is not all, though. If Remus discovered I had left the house alone, the agreement that protects and hides me is broken. No sanctuary. I must tread very carefully. If I can leave the house undetected and return before my absence is noted, the agreement remains in effect." There was a glint in her eye that looked suspiciously like mischief. "After all, I would not be alone."

Snape couldn't prevent a smile at the realisation that she had ensured there was a way to escape yet still hold true to her word. Sly. He liked that.

"Lupin has Charmed all of your clothing?"

Parr huffed, the corners of her eyes crinkling. "Why would he Charm all of it? Who would possibly aid me in my transgression by bringing a change of clothing from the school?"

The faux innocence in her voice made the impending venture even more sweetly compelling. They both knew what had to be done.

Snape went to the sole window in the room. Open, it would be wide enough, and it looked down on the small courtyard at the back of the building.

"There is less time than perhaps you hope to be available, Dual. I am to be locked away safely at the school during Lupin's incapacity, so I must be here when Kingsley arrives to fetch me at eleven. This leaves us less than six hours to find your Unspeakable. It may not be enough, and then I will be unable to assist you until I return to this house."

"Then this will need to be the fastest track you have ever done, Striker," Snape pointed out, still squinting out into the night, determining who in the surrounding houses had a view of what could come in, or out, of this window. "Until now, I have reached nothing but dead ends in trying to find this man." He turned back and headed towards the door. "Wait ten minutes, then tell Lupin you are unwell and need to rest, undisturbed, until you have to leave." His hand paused on the door handle. "Lupin is an idiot. He should have Charmed your knives, not your clothing."

"He did."

This was ill news. Snape looked over his shoulder at Parr.

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"Because he hasn't Charmed all of them," Parr replied with a toothy grin that was both untamed and frightening. "He doesn't know how many I have." She splayed her fingers and pushed forward four blades from the array in front of her: two narrow-bladed daggers of identical design, a *sgian dubh* with a black handle and silver pommel, and a diamond cross-sectioned stiletto. "I still have enough teeth."

Secretive. Delusive. Wily. Ravenclaw should not have been the house that claimed her.

"Time passes swiftly, Dual. Make sure he sees you go."

Silk slithered down his spine in a narcotic promise of the fusion between them that he had been desperate for since the first time it had happened. Snape didn't care how sick it would make him afterwards, how he would curse her name for ache of the separation she would leave him floundering in, how the anguish of fleeting synchronicity would do nothing but increase his starvation. Had he known how, he would have shredded at that infinitesimal point of connection left between them to open it into a torrent to engulf him.

Eyes. Voice. The touch that could not be seen. Knives were not her only weapons.

It was all he could do not to fall down the stairs in his haste to leave.

Chapter Fifty-Six—Track

Chapter 56 of 59

Everyone leaves a trace of some kind.

A/N: My apologies that this has been so long in arriving. Real life has done little but punch me in the face over the past few months.

"You move fast when there is need."

Her voice floated gently down to him from the darkened window...a curled tendril of approval, but it was a feather that rested on the surface of murky water.

"I had help," was his murmured response.

"Indeed?" She was less approving of that. "Was that altogether prudent?"

"I have no reason to think otherwise."

He hoped Parr would hear the truth of that for there was little else he could impart to convince her.

Snape didn't know which disturbed him more: that Folter kept secrets from him, or that he had been so affected by that revelation. In all honesty, she didn't owe him the kind of loyalty that he had expected, that he had assumed she gave him. He couldn't deny, at least to himself, that he expected a great deal of people and consequently was always disappointed. They all failed to live up to his expectations, set so high that they couldn't possibly hope to reach them. But, stubborn as he was, he refused to lower the bar that he demanded people jump over to prove their worth. There was a dichotomy in him that clutched tightly onto this unreasonable, unrelenting ambition and simultaneously reviled its unattainability. There was scorn for those that couldn't suffice and contempt for himself for engineering such a spectacular and inevitable failure.

The trouble was that in order to stop stewing on the issue, Snape needed to apportion blame. And right now, he was having trouble doing so. Ordinarily in such situations, he would assign fault to the other person...that was quickest, easiest, if not a little unfair. Yet every time he tried to shift the responsibility onto Folter, he felt worse than ever. The condign condemnation he sought so desperately could not possibly come from reason, only from hurt. He'd learned that judgements based on emotion were poor ones, sometimes fatal, but embittered by betrayal as he was, he couldn't help but search for a way to make it her fault, and hers alone, that he felt so disappointed at her mysterious silence.

Folter did not try to curry favour with him. That was not her way, and had she done so, it would have been an admission of wrongdoing on her part. That would have destroyed any hope for forgiveness from him. She had continued in her duties with her usual steadiness and surety, but Snape saw the lines of strain around her eyes that betrayed her anxiety. She knew that she had hurt him, despite the stoic attempt on his part to present an impassible front. She knew him too well for that to work.

So they'd moved through their routine in a bruised silence, each trying to find their own way around the shackles of their principles, and neither willing to release themselves from what they had made the very foundation of who they were.

He hadn't realised how much he had trusted her. Otherwise, it wouldn't have hurt this much. It was that which made Snape decide that if anything was to blame, it was circumstance. There was little point in making Folter suffer for it. It was wrong, and he knew exacerbating her feelings of guilt would fail to make him feel any better. If anything, the keen awareness of his petulance embarrassed him. Today of all days. Another year still saw him dreadfully stunted in his emotional maturity. To cavil in the same manner he had as a teenager was an appalling crutch that he had to let go of. If anyone deserved that relegation of jejunity, it was Folter.

As if to compound her importance in his life, she had not failed him this evening. He'd known that time was critical, that the minutes it would take for him to get from the school gates into the castle, to Parr's room and then to figure out what the Striker would need to replace what Lupin had magically tagged, were more than they could afford.

So Snape had called her name, the word torn from his mouth by the icy wind that lashed against him, that rattled the gate in its fixtures and brought the stony exhalations of the ageless mountains to wrench the warmth from him. The crack of her Apparition was smothered to a snick.

"Folter, I need your help."

The sky was so choked with inky cloud that he could barely see her in the dark.

"Folter serves the Professor."

"And keeps secrets."

She stiffened at that. Even in the dark, he could see it. Her hair streamed from her head, caught in the furious gusts, but the house-elf's small body was stone, miserable yet resolute.

"I need you to keep another."

It was in that moment he realised that he trusted her still. And because of that trust, he had returned within the quarter hour, a tightly bound bundle in his hands that he lofted up to Parr's window.

With luck, the other occupants would still be in the front portion of the house. The small laneway that ran in a cobbled strip between two blocks of buildings provided discreet entrance and exit from the safe house via the courtyard. There were charms set to prevent unwelcome visitors, but they were a secondary prevention. The neighbourhood was one of reasonable affluence and reserved behaviour: people kept to themselves and bowed to the English tendency of politeness and social expectation. All to the good. Provided Lupin had not laid unknown and more subtle methods of keeping tabs on the Striker, they could leave quietly and unseen. But Snape knew that Lupin was neither as open nor naïve as he often seemed. Occasional flashes of shrewdness from him were not unknown. There were a myriad of ways to keep a metaphorical eye on Parr, even taking her immunity to magic into consideration. To divine which, if any, of those ways still remained hidden would take more time than was available. Plus, if Snape went digging about, he could inadvertently alert the werewolf that someone was trying to get around the safeguards. They would just have to risk it. It would be one of the lesser risks taken this evening.

Parr's silhouette slipped from the open window and through the drop from first storey to courtyard with a lithe and deft certainty of motion. She made a disturbing lack of noise in doing so, but the vibrations from her jump that ran through the ground were echoed ominously in a rippling of awareness, a discordance that marked her presence as surely as her stealth sought to disguise it. It was a contradiction that perplexed Snape. Worse, it made him uneasy. She was the ghost in full view, the assassin whose scream betrayed her intent. How could she possibly hope to avoid detection when everything of her that couldn't be seen was a beacon to those attuned to its frequency?

It had not been like this before. When they had gone to see the apoth for the second time barely a month ago, Parr's control had been near absolute. The only moment that her grip had faltered was when the fat man had admitted his ignorance of where Parr's Handler was being kept. It had taken every scrap of Snape's ability in Legilimency to order her not to lash out at the apoth. Despite her overwhelming rage, she had stayed her hand. Short of *Imperius*, nothing could have stopped her had she decided to punish, and Snape dreaded to think what she would have done had he tried to place that particular curse on her. He was certain that the only reason she had listened to him that night was because she still retained some degree of restraint, not from any capacity of control on his part...the rational part of her had been stronger. Tonight, that restraint was thinner than a layer of oil on water. The steel barrier Parr hid behind was still there, but spider lines of instability were appearing across the face of it, thread thin, but a fractioning of the façade nonetheless, a fortress that was beginning to rupture from a quake that it had no hope of withstanding.

Ambient light from the other houses lit her enough to show the paleness of her face briefly. Her eyes were turned down to a slender, flat object clutched in the lengthened fingers of her gloved hand. Snape could not see clearly what it was, the light being insufficient to allow a clear identification. A line between the Striker's brows belied a hesitation that was flavoured with disquiet as the walls of her mind juddered for a heartbeat.

"Time passes. We must leave here," she whispered and flowed towards the back gate.

They slid from darkness to gloom, past insipid circles of light from streetlamps and the searching arms of car headlights. The evening was still young, but the cold kept most people indoors, not inclined to linger in the bitter air that promised sleet when warmth, food and sanctuary could be found within their houses. A small park halfway along a road three blocks away, little more than a square of patchy lawn, bare-knuckled plane trees and scratchy hawthorn, formed a brief refuge for them.

Parr's eyes glittered down at him, colourless in the darkness, the hawthorn screening them from detection by any passersby. The fixed stare he had seen from her back inside the safe house was trained unerringly on him once more. In such a state, there would be nothing he could hide from her, and with a weakening mental resolve, her reactions would be unpredictable: a not uncommon situation for him to be in. Both their minds were vulnerable...his by the removal of a defence mechanism that had protected as well as crippled him, and hers by a fatigue born of illness, physical stress and an almost incomprehensible emotional strain.

From what little Snape understood of the bond between Handler and Striker, it was probable that both leaned on each other, working with a mental unison that they became so reliant upon that any destabilisation of that synchronisation could throw the balance off with dreadful consequences. Parr had told him once that he needed to be stronger than her, or she would walk all over him. He now understood how true her words were and realised that he may not be up to the task.

"This is not mine."

She held a wooden box out to him: the object she had held back in the courtyard that had concerned her.

Snape looked at it, not recognising the object proffered to him. He had not seen it amongst the items he had brought her, but it could easily have been hidden at the centre of the bundle. Or perhaps it had been at the safe house all along.

Parr pushed the box closer to him, urgent. She was giving him no option but to take it.

He turned the box over in his hands, the smooth, polished wood unadorned with any clue as to what it contained. It was heavier than he had expected, perhaps an omen of what it held.

"It doesn't belong to me," he responded, running his thumbnail along the groove that demarcated the two halves of the closed box.

Parr huffed a sharp breath from her nose that the falling temperature painted with a fleeting opalescence, studying him from under her lowered brows.

"It does now. And fitting that it becomes yours tonight." There was a pause as her nostrils flared. "For more than one reason, unless my nose fails me."

She nodded once to his questioning look before he opened the box.

The metal was polished to a flawless shine with a central channel that flowed down the centre of the sinuous blade. Under the hilt, two slender, razor-sharp points promised a deadly bite on either side of the dagger's hand length sting.

Snape saw the surprise on Parr's face. How poor must her control be to be so obvious? She covered it quickly, but her reflective eyes searched his. She drew back slightly, speculative. A small shake of her head and her questions were dismissed. For now.

"Keep it close, Dual. You may need it. I have a bad feeling about tonight."

"I don't..."

"We cannot discuss this now. She wanted you to have it and I trust her judgement. I suggest you do the same."

It was more threat than advice, but Snape wisely took it as both. The steel wall thinned and split a little further, shivering into fragments before healing once more into a scarred membrane. In that momentary dissolution, there was a sound, so faint that he almost missed it. A whisper of many voices. Indistinct. Distant. Elusive. He thought he saw Parr shudder and her eyes defocus for a split second, the arched lines of her distorted face taking on an alien, threatening cast, a superimposition of a sinister stranger. Then it was gone. Her eyes sharpened on his face.

"This Unspeakable has enemies?"

"He is an Unspeakable. Of course he has enemies."

"Powerful ones, if he has been unable to hold them off," the Striker noted in a flat, rasping tone. "Why must you find him?"

Her question made him frown. "Surely Lupin would have taught you how crucial Unspeakables are? They're trusted with the most sensitive material the MLE has, and therefore their lives must be a lie to all others in order to protect them and the information they have. For someone to capture an Unspeakable shows incredible skill, or perhaps a plant in the department itself. The other possibility is that the Unspeakable has turned in his allegiance. Either is of great concern to..."

"I know this, Dual," she interrupted harshly. "Why must *you* find him?" Her eyes were hawk-like in their intensity, the resemblance of a bird of prey enhanced by the bowed planes of her face, pushing her nose into an almost curved beak. A wisp of her silver hair had escaped from under her cowl to lie against her cheek, sharp and cold.

"Because I have been told to."

She considered his answer, mouth pursed in contemplation. "Your response suggests there was no choice in the matter." A calculating, almost suspicious expression tainted her face. "I do not understand this strange arrangement between you and the Headmaster. It concerns me; I do not know what I am walking into."

"What makes you believe that it is the Headmaster that has asked me to do this?"

The look she gave him would have withered stone. "Still open, Dual, no matter how slippery your mind is becoming. Time passes. We will have words on this matter later. Until then I must trust you. Where do we start?"

"At his home."

"Is it close?"

"No. We'll have to Apparate."

Parr hissed her disapproval. "Damn it. Vomiting messes up my tracking, and there are more than enough challenges tonight." Her eyes closed as she took in a deep breath. The fissures in the steel wall diminished to faint lines as she gathered herself, the barrier opaque and impenetrable once more. "Very well." She reached out to take his arm.

"Wait."

Her hand pulled back, eyes widened in mute question.

"Don't you have to..." Snape tipped his head to one side and shrugged slightly.

Parr's expression didn't change, her hand still raised. She gave no indication that she understood what he was talking about.

Snape glanced to one side, uncomfortable at having to clarify his meaning.

"You said it was necessary. Last time. You said you couldn't do your job without it."

Parr exhaled sharply and heavily out of her nose, the body-warmed air pearly in the chilly night air, a bull about to charge. He stood his ground. Defiantly. Foolishly. But defiantly nonetheless.

"As well expect a carpenter to work without tools,' you said. You would provide a service while hobbled?"

Her eyebrows rose; in surprise or outrage, he couldn't tell. She had hidden herself from him once more, the expert dodging the novice, and the redolence of damp, mouldering earth and leaves drowned out any possible scent he would be able to detect. He no longer had insight to her emotional state now that she had screwed down her resolve. He could only go on what he saw before him. Snape ignored the glint in her eye, the glint that could cut him five different ways.

"You have to be at your best for this to work. Failure cannot be an option tonight. For either of us."

Her voice went as sharp and cold as frostbite. "You presume to tell me my job?"

"No. You presumed to tell me, Striker."

That made her bristle. She was in no mood for his counterargument, and her agitation threatened the repaired bulwark that she hid her thoughts behind. "I tell you what I believe you need to know."

That made his mouth twist. "Just like everyone else."

The smile that split across her face held no humour, no goodwill. It was a hair's breadth from the premonitory grimace of a hound about to bite.

"What is this about, Dual?"

"Did you lie to me before when you said it was necessary?"

Her eyes narrowed to slits.

"Did you lie to make me an addict so that you could get what you want, so that I would beg like an animal for a scrap from your table?"

The rumble could have been from the nearby train line, but Snape knew it was his final warning. Parr took one step closer to him, a black thundercloud ready to strike him down with unstoppable force.

"I don't have time for your morbid angst, Dual, but I will ask you this: what do you believe my primary purpose is?"

"I don't believe that has any relevance to..."

"What...do you believe... my primary purpose is?" she repeated with deadly emphasis.

Snape stared up into her face, unsure of the motive behind her question.

"If memory serves, you find things." The abrupt lowering of her brows forced him to make an addendum. "Your words."

Parr didn't appreciate that much, if the grating sound from her chest was anything to go by.

"My primary purpose is ensuring the safety of my Handler. Everything else is secondary." Her elongated, gloved finger came up to point in his face. "Everything. Now, listen to this carefully. I do not need to do what you want in order to find this man. I've tracked without it before. I am not crippled without it, and I give no less in my services by not holding your mind in mine."

"Then why did you insist upon it the first time?"

"Because I must know what you're thinking. Because I must know what you intend. Because I must know at *every* moment where you are!"

Another step forward and she would be nose to nose with him. At least, she would if she didn't top Snape by a foot. He refused to back away.

"Then why not do it this time?"

"Because in this moment you are my Handler and damn the inappropriateness of it!" she spat at him, furious. "Your safety is my first and most important responsibility, and to do what you ask... what you *demand*... is a danger to you that you do not understand!"

"You cannot claim necessity in one instance and irrelevance in another." The anger at her refusal had Snape between its teeth, biting into him with a cruelty that drove his stubbornness. A part of him deep inside cringed in shame at his behaviour, at the desperation that shredded his reason and self-control, at the hunger she had deliberately placed in him for her own ends.

"I cannot give you what you want!" Parr's body shook in her abrupt fury at him.

"What I wanted was irrelevant to you before, Striker. What a fluid set of standards you have that you can change them when it suits you!" Snape hissed accusingly at her.

He may as well have struck her across the face if the bare shock in her expression was to be trusted. It was in that moment that Snape realised that not only was he shamelessly admitting the desperate need he had, but he was cruelly forcing her to explain why she was refusing to satisfy that need. He saw it in her face as the guise of anger and frustration crumbled.

"I cannot do it!"

"Why?"

"Because you frighten me!"

Definitely not the response he had expected. Snape frightened many people. He knew that. Often times, he engineered it so. He'd tried to do so with Parr and failed. Spectacularly. She delighted in pointing out how little he impressed her, how little he could cow her. It seemed to amuse her that she could metaphorically flick him on the ear and brush off the ramifications of that. He could scarcely believe what she had just admitted to.

Parr's hands clenched into fists and hid her eyes from him, the resolve and control she had dredged up from within herself now a tattered ruin, the torn flesh of an animal that had failed miserably in its defiance of an overwhelming force it had stood against because there had been no other option. Just as he had been driven to admit a terrible weakness within him, so he made her do the same.

"You don't know how to let go," she told him quietly. "And it cannot be that way."

Snape wanted to ask why, but to do so would lay bare that he didn't think it was a problem. Rationally, it was a huge problem. He couldn't afford to be what he was becoming. There was too much at stake. Irrationally, he didn't care. He wanted it. He wanted it so badly that even in the face of all the reasons why he shouldn't, he still did.

And she knew it.

"Still open, Dual," she said sadly, her hands dropping from her face. "And I let you walk right into it. And for that I cannot atone. But I will not ruin you further. One day there will be someone for you, and I will not ruin you further. Of all the reasons, that should be enough."

Parr lifted her head and finally met his gaze, exhausted in body and spirit but stubborn in her adherence to a certainty of purpose from which nothing could dissuade her.

"There is a greater reason. I sense tonight will be dangerous. Perhaps more so than you or I realise."

He didn't need to ask. She already knew what he was thinking.

"I have a nose for such things," she explained with a faint and finally genuine smile. It was short-lived. "Whilst you are my Handler, I stand between you and Death. *Validus quam nex...* that is what I have sworn to. It is who I am. You don't know how to let go. If I go down, you will go down, too. And it cannot be that way."

Snape had to admire her implacable determination even as he hated it. A part of him was even grateful that she did not bow to his addiction. A small part, admittedly. She had caused it in the first place, after all.

"Time marches on, Dual, and I know you have questions." A gentle sigh. "They will have to wait. Let's go find your Unspeakable."

She drifted to his side, the fingers of her gloved hand wrapping around his arm. It was a mark of his craving that this touch alone made him feel simultaneously dreadful and vivified. It was fortunate there was the barrier of fabric between them because Snape had no idea what he would do if she touched him without it there.

The house was as he remembered it: well-cared for, tidy, unremarkable, and undisturbed except for the almost artistically overturned table and chair by the lounge room window. Whilst Snape was far from being a slob himself, even he allowed a greater amount of disorganisation to his private surrounds than Beresford did. The furniture was fastidious in its exactitude: everything in its place. In its *precise* place. Something in the arrangement reeked of falsity, as if the Unspeakable was so adept at disguising who and what he was that even his private life was a sham. For all Snape knew, there were other, hidden rooms about the house, deliberately obscured in order to protect the knowledge and intentions of their inhabitant. Whilst the temptation to search them out was strong, Snape knew that it would only waste time he already had too little of and probably earn him a nasty, potentially mortal, slap across the face. Still, it was a possibility that the Unspeakable had gone to ground, for whatever reason. It was also a possibility, however small, that he had gone to ground right under their noses. That remained for Parr to determine.

The Striker held herself motionless in the centre of the room as if waiting. Snape had no clear idea what she was doing. Her mood clicked into an almost meditative serenity as soon as the waves of nausea from the Apparating had left her. As she bent to empty her guts into the gutter with whatever dignity she could muster, the slithering, hollow whispering returned to his awareness, as if he could hear it through the thinning steel wall between them. Voices that spoke of many things, things that he couldn't understand, faint yet emphatic, so layered that the sounds merged and blended into a soup of susurrant parlance.

When Parr finally moved, Snape could see her disquiet in the way she held her head, in the angles of her fingers as she moved them, splayed, through the still air. She drifted through the house, from hallway to kitchen, through to study and up to the bedroom. Once, inexplicably, she passed back and forth in front of a painting hanging near a cupboard next to the staircase to the upper level of the house. She spent some moments staring at the painting, shaking her head ever so slightly between pauses of decreasing length.

The overturned table and chair she barely looked at. It may as well have been a pattern on the carpet for all it stood out to her. Parr's dismissal of this obvious evidence of misdeed echoed Snape's own suspicion of the validity of it. It was too convenient, too posed, too considered in its placement. What the Striker found so alluring about the painting, Snape didn't know. Perhaps it wasn't the painting at all. Perhaps she was stripping back the facade that was all around them, discarding the disguise as one would peel an onion.

Snape had once asked Parr directly if she could smell magic. She had carefully avoided answering that question, but he was beginning to suspect that she could, in fact, detect magic in some fashion: by scent or some other awareness. It would be a priceless ability. No wonder the MLE had held seevy so tightly to their chests, and little surprise that they would want such superlative trackers to return to them again.

If Parr did manifest such a skill, Dumbledore would surely know of it by now, either through deduction on his part or from Lupin. The werewolf and the Striker would have operated together too often for questions not to arise on the extent of Parr's abilities. That alone raised another question: why would the Headmaster tell Snape to locate the Unspeakable and not Parr? Snape had already made it clear to Dumbledore that he neither knew of Beresford nor had heard his name mentioned in any other instance. That the apoth had been the one to reveal the urgent necessity of finding Beresford was something that Snape thought wise to keep to himself, yet the nagging suspicion that Dumbledore was testing him was starting to scratch away at his thoughts. He'd already been caught once before in involving himself in a matter that Dumbledore deemed none of his business. But why wave the flag in front of him? The Headmaster had a far greater capacity to be covert and secretive than he was currently being. Was this, in reality, a subtle nudge in the direction that the old wizard wanted him to go? All questions that made him nervous.

Snape sniffed as he stared at the painting that Parr had dithered in front of. It was an uninteresting representation of countryside, almost kitsch in its stereotypical placement of rustic houses nestled amongst hills, the spire of the church slicing sharply into the powder blue sky. He squinted at it, trying to find some hidden glyph in it that would explain Parr's attention on it. Perhaps it disguised a room behind it. He reached his hand out to touch the slightly battered wooden frame, its varnish oddly worn along one side.

A sharp growl behind him stayed his hand.

"Don't touch it."

Snape turned his head to find Parr standing in the doorway to the dining room. Her brows were a heavy line over her eyes, lips pressed tightly together in disapproval.

"Why?"

"This place is riddled with traps. Some are relatively harmless but others will kill you. The worst one is on that painting, so unless you want to cop the fist of Death in your teeth, I suggest you leave it alone, Dual."

He pulled his hand away from the painting. "The Unspeakable?"

"He is not here. And has not been so for at least a week."

An unsurprising result, though no less disappointing, and potentially a dead end.

"You have no means to track him?"

Parr's green eyes glinted at him in the light thrown by the lamp in the corner of the dining room – an allocation of space that seemed absurd. Who would this Unspeakable invite to dinner? Who could they possibly allow into their life, even just to share a meal in their home?

"Which man do you refer to?" She loped from the doorway and back into the lounge room. Snape followed in her wake.

Another man? There was no evidence that Beresford shared his house with anyone else, nor any mention from Dumbledore that the man was in any kind of relationship, with family or with a lover.

"What do you know of this other man?"

Parr snorted. "That was to be my question to you." She huffed, her back facing him, finally studying the overturned table and chair by the window. "Something strange is going on here, and I don't like it, Dual. If this is an attempt to test me, I am insulted."

"And if it isn't?"

She considered that for a few moments. "Then someone is testing us both."

"That may be the case."

His comment turned her around, the fabric of her coat swirling around her legs in a black vortex, her eyes wide in outrage. "And you say nothing of this until now?"

The steel wall split to allow her anger to leak out. Snape could almost taste it: bitter like bile and metallic like blood.

"It was nothing but a suspicion before-" He shook his head slightly to try and dislodge the whispering from his ears as if it were water seeping into his skull.

"Yet something more than suspicion now." Parr's face had taken on that hard cast he'd seen a few times that presaged a nasty burst of temper. "What else are you not telling me?"

Her anger started to bleed into him. "Let's not pretend I'm the only one withholding information, Striker. If it's of little consequence to you that the Unspeakable dies, best tell me now so that I can continue the task alone."

That didn't just put the match to the fuse; it razed it to a stump in blast of fire.

"Arrogant shit!" Parr hissed, advancing on him. "You never tire of calling my abilities into question! You may be better at this than Remus, but at least I don't have to cop abuse every five seconds from him." Her form swelled in front of him, black and terrible. "The only one you'll have to blame for the Unspeakable's death is yourself."

"Then you can find him?"

"Of course I can find him!" she roared in his face, teeth bared in such a way that he could see that they had grown into sharp, arcing lines. "But the difference between finding him alive and finding him dead may depend on who's willing to stop playing the mystery game!" The Striker's hands lifted high to form the sign he'd seen once before: the index and middle fingers of both hands overlapping each other in parallel. "But believe me when I say that if I hear even the ghost of a lie, I will leave you behind and damn the consequences. The Unspeakable will not die because you're too craven to trust me. Not if I have any say in it."

She didn't even wait for him to answer, whirling away to return to the centre of the room, one finger pointed emphatically her feet. "Tell me why a man Apparated into this house, a man whose scent is nowhere else in this house, a man who until three nights ago had never been here before yet knew how to step around every measure put in place to keep him away from what the Unspeakable wanted to keep most hidden. He didn't even have to search for it. From here..." Her finger lifted from the floor to the painting in the hallway. "... straight to there."

"You're certain he Apparated in?"

She heard the confusion in Snape's voice. It had the unexpected benefit of derailing her anger. The cracks in the steel wall sealed again, the ebb of whispering voices fading, the tide of sensory input into his awareness pulling away from him. In its absence, he realised how much it had been affecting him. The Striker was becoming dangerously unbalanced, and whatever she was unable to hold onto was leaking into him. Or perhaps she was deliberately siphoning it from herself and into him. She'd done it before.

"It leaves a... smell that I recognise." Parr splayed the fingers of both hands wide and swept them in a circle around her, demarking an area barely enough to encase her. "This is the only place it could've been done. The rest of the house is blocked against it." A shrewd expression crept across her distorted face. "You didn't know this?"

"I was told of the block, but not of the exception."

Snape wondered if Dumbledore knew of it, and if he had, what difference it really would have made.

"What I can't understand is why this anonymous man didn't Apparate out. He left by the front door." The Striker watched Snape very closely, her eyes closed to mere slits, nostrils flared. Assessing his reaction. Cagey. Suspicious. Still unwilling to believe he was also in the dark. He needed her trust for this to work, or the Unspeakable really would be dead from his inadequacy to the task.

"There are several possibilities for that."

"Which are?"

"He was unaware of the limited area of exception to the Apparating block."

A small shake of her head. "Extremely unlikely since he Apparated in at the only spot he could have."

"His magic was blocked by another party after he entered."

Parr considered this option. "A person-specific Nullifier?"

Snape nodded. "Whilst not the only option, certainly the most likely."

The Striker ran a finger over her lower lip, gaze flicking from side to side. "Maybe, but he didn't leave under duress or under stress. He was calm. Deliberate."

"He could have carried something from the space hidden behind the painting that couldn't be Apparated."

"There are such objects?" A mixture of curiosity and faint disbelief tainted Parr's voice, but her earlier anger remained under tight control. For now.

"I've heard it's possible, though I have never encountered such objects personally. The theory for it is sound. The object doesn't even have to be magical or dangerous, merely something acted upon, like an innocuous object turned into a Portkey. It would force the owner, or the thief of it, to be in personal contact with it at all times. Such a Charm would rarely be the only one acting upon the object. Combined with a spell that renders the object immovable, it would prevent theft." Snape shrugged one shoulder slightly. "Whoever this other person is, they must have known how to overcome all manner of security measures."

"A collaborator?" Parr crouched down, the gloved fingers of her hand brushing against the fibres of the carpet, lost in thought.

"Out of character for an Unspeakable, unless you mean a person who extracted information from the man against his will. To be an Unspeakable is to be alone."

"Foolish," the Striker muttered, her fingers still sliding back and forth across the carpet at her feet. "A person cannot be alone and be protected."

Snape frowned at her comment. "Perhaps he felt that his own protection was sufficient."

She barked a humourless laugh at that. "It is a sorry state of affairs when a man has no other eyes to watch his back." She stood smoothly. "What could drive a person to shun company, to deny even a basic friendship? No family to be visited by. No acquaintances that could enter his home. A wizard who doesn't even have a... House-elf under his roof." Parr turned sharply away and brushed past him, stony-faced. "Come."

They headed swiftly away from the house. Snape had little choice but to follow.

There was no hesitation in Parr's footsteps. Whatever it was that she followed past houses and parked cars, through quiet streets and empty public spaces, must have been as bright as fire to her. Once or twice a stranger came into sight, lost in their own concerns and hurrying to escape the scraping chill in the air and the mist that had begun to descend to dampen hair and clothing with a leaden freeze. Parr would bend forward to disguise her notable height, but the other party barely noticed the presence of anyone else.

As each minute passed, Snape was increasingly convinced the Striker would come to a sudden stop, declaring the trail of their quarry lost in Apparition. But the halt, when it came, was not for the reason he had thought it would be.

Parr stood at the end of a street, her head turning from side to side. The road that ran perpendicular was silent and shrouded. To the left it curved away around the wall of a school and off into the night. To the right it marked the boundary to a construction site ringed with a chicken-wire fence. Ragged shreds of plastic fluttered gently like gruesomely welcoming fingers from the spiralled barbed wire, inviting trespassers to shred their flesh on the cold flecks of piercing metal.

The Striker murmured something he couldn't hear, her head swinging from side to side, locked in indecision. Snape drifted closer to her. Something was clearly distressing Parr. He needed neither the scent of her body nor the flavour of her thoughts to know that. He was close enough this time to catch her words.

"A bad feeling, Dual."

The hole in the fence was hidden around the far side of the construction site and barely wide enough for the Striker to fit through. The ground was muddy and difficult to traverse from rain and the incomprehensibly random potholes and ditches dug by the builders. The mist settled in shallow depressions, swirling as they cut through it. The squat, concrete edifice of half-finished tenements loomed in the dark, a shell of featureless, flat planes that would soon shelter its inhabitants in a joyless, uninspiring claustrophobia that they could barely afford.

A sense of dread was starting to leach into Snape. What kind of person could enter the house of an Unspeakable, bypassing all manner of magical protection to secure something of such interest to them, that would then travel to such a place? What here could possibly be of use to them unless...

"Dear God, no!"

The words were barely out of Parr's mouth before she broke into a run, a dark shape that fled away too swiftly for him to follow, swallowed into the night. Stumbling and lurching clumsily across the uneven ground, Snape tried to follow, cursing her under his breath.

The mist marked Parr's trail as it flowed in to fill the gap made by her like a glacial surf of ghostly water. It thinned to nothing as he reached the incomplete building, the gritty smell of damp concrete and powdery cement stronger here. The main entrance to the building yawned wide, the door absent from its setting. Snape hesitated before it, unwilling to go in after her. He wasn't even certain that was where she had gone.

The clicking growl, like the stuttering, guttural utterance of a crow, off to his right pulled him around to face the neatly stacked planks of wood partially covered by a canvas tarpaulin, the tip of his wand marking the source of it like the needle of a compass. He hadn't even realised he'd drawn it from his pocket. It took a moment for his eyes to pick out Parr's silhouette in the gloom.

The Striker kept her eyes fixed on a window up high in the side of the building as he crouched in the shadows beside her, forestalling his curt reprimand for bolting from him.

"Up there." One long finger guided his eyes up. "Do you see him?"

The window was blank; nothing more than a square hole punctured in the concrete.

Snape shook his head. "No."

"They're here. Both of them." Her hand dropped and disappeared into the wide sleeve of her coat. The shining flat of the slender dagger lay crisply against the darkness of her clothing. "And an old friend."

The nasty thread through her voice made a mockery of the word.

"Who?"

Parr's hand tightened on the hilt of the weapon. "A man whose throat I vowed to cut."

Snape stared at her, at the sharp lines of her face and the enlarged, shadowed eyes. "I thought you didn't kill."

The searchlight of her eyes turned on him. "My past actions have already condemned me, Dual. What more could I lose by murdering a murderer?"

Was this where she would prove too strong for him? That likelihood had been hanging above them ever since leaving the safe house. Both of them had known it but they had chosen the danger nonetheless.

"That is not what you're here for," Snape pointed out, feeling the garrotte of her anger wrapping around his insides and cutting deep. "Personal grievances must wait."

Snape couldn't fathom how she could be so angry and so sad at the same time. One emotion fuelled the other until it was nothing but a feedback loop that swelled the bitterness in her.

"Wait for what? An Unspeakable who is already in Death's hand?"

"You know this already?" he asked in dread. Too late.

"I can smell what's left of him."

Far too late.

"For him, yes," she replied to his thought. "And if luck doesn't spit in our face again, perhaps for the other two as well." Her head turned back to the building. "If we are to go in, understand it may be the last thing we ever do."

"If we have failed already, why go in at all?"

Parr did not answer him straight away, but the reason came to him in an echo of her thoughts, scarlet with fear and rotten with dismay.

The Unspeakable was still alive.

Chapter Fifty-Seven—Slipknot

Chapter 57 of 59

The countdown for some lasts longer than for others.

A/N: I would like to put a warning for torture here. If you're squeamish, it may not be wise for you to read, but I wasn't going to tiptoe around the event.

Snape didn't want to know what Parr could have seen that would have distressed her to such a degree and so openly. Her calling in life would have placed her in situations of some terrible corruptions of humanity, but as he stood in silence, watching her carefully as she stood in the doorway to where the Unspeakable was, her back to the room and her hand pressed tightly to her mouth, he wondered what could have exceeded the Striker's expectations of what she would find. It placed enough doubt in his mind that for a brief moment he wondered if he should leave before seeing what had been done.

Her warning before they had entered the building had set him on edge. Common sense told Snape that to go in after a man who was effectively dead would achieve little. If anything, three people would be in danger instead of just one. However, the thought of abandoning the Unspeakable to an agonising death that was any longer than it had already been sat as poorly with him as it did with Parr. Even if he balked, the Striker would have continued without him, and he wasn't prepared to surrender her safety tonight. Besides, they might be able to flush the perpetrators out.

"You must be silent," she whispered to him. "No noise, no tread, no voice."

"I have done this before," he retorted, offended at the implied doubt of his abilities.

"In the dark on unfamiliar territory?" A delicate snort. "Yes, perhaps you have, at that. Very well." She firmed her grip on her knife and made for the building.

All that Snape recalled of their course from ground floor to fifth was the smell of damp and blood that grew stronger as they ascended. With one hand on the wall of the stairwell and his eyes on Parr's back to guide him, there was little to see. Perhaps he had made a sound loud enough to hear: a scrape of boot on stone or the catch of fabric on concrete, but he was almost certain that he had been as quiet as Parr. Perhaps he'd tripped something: a charm set to alert. Such things were hard to detect until too late. Perhaps it had been nothing more than coincidence.

The harsh, whip-like crack of Apparition ahead of them set a ringing in Snape's ears. The surge of frustration could have been his alone, but he suspected just as much, if not more, came from Parr. She bolted the last few steps and into the room from where the savour of a life ending bloomed.

Snape couldn't separate Parr's abrupt shift from fury to horror from his own leaden sensation of dread. She had turned away from the hanging shadow inside the room, one hand clamped so tightly to her face that her fingers dug deeply into her cheeks. Eyes screwed closed, she fought against the bone-deep survival instinct to flee with a doggedness that was either admirable or absurd.

Perhaps Parr had not been exposed to the level of depravity and viciousness of the amoral that he had. After all, those that he was unwillingly associated with took pride in reaching ever-decreasing levels of compassion and mercy. Some of what Snape had seen defied belief...things that seared straight down to the soul, imprinting themselves on memory and dreams in a horror that continued even after the deed had long ended. What could one more act of brutality do to his already shredded naïveté of what a person was capable of?

He edged his way carefully around Parr and into the stench of an adumbrated nightmare.

His eyes tried to focus on the silhouette and criss-cross of lines before him, but it took several seconds to piece together just exactly what was in front of him.

The smell was worse in here. Much worse. The pungent rot of flesh was a gagging blanket, an unmistakable augury of mortal putrefaction. Even during his time at St Mungo's, Snape had never encountered anything like it, and the hospital had been the repository of some utterly devastating cases of torture and slaughter amongst innocent and guilty alike.

This was a body hung for a slow and agonising death, its heart kept beating only to prolong the pain, the brain forced into an alertness just sharp enough to comprehend the punishment that was still to come, and dull enough to prevent the struggle against it.

There was a garbled gratitude in Snape's mind that the light in the room was so poor. What he could see was more... much more than enough.

The precision with which the Unspeakable had been dissected was exemplary, and even more horrifying for its clinical approach. It had been done by an experienced hand, by someone who knew very clearly the internal structure of the human body, who knew just how far its components could be displaced without killing the whole.

Delicate threads radiated out from the naked body like the gossamer strands of a spider, tied around blood vessels, viscera and nerves, holding them out of their rightful place. This man had been bled of his insides through punctures in his flesh, tissues that were never meant to be touched by air tweezered out and pinned in a gruesome fan before the victim, blistered and serous, the slime of necrosis coating every membrane. The Unspeakable had been forced to see what had been done to him: a torture that he couldn't retreat from either physically or mentally.

Snape's fingers travelled along a length of thread to a small metal nail buried in the left wall, just near the glassless window. Such anchors were dotted all around the Unspeakable, some in the floor and walls, and many in the ceiling. The body itself was suspended by thicker cords leading up from the shoulders. Treading carefully around the network of threads and suspension of flesh, Snape could see the metal hooks that pierced through the skin, arms and legs held out and away from the body. Meat hung by a butcher. A stringed puppet suspended, motionless in a silent nightmare.

It was as he was circling back around that he saw the glint of glass nearly hidden behind the lattice of bared veins and arteries knitted around it like a cage. He would need light to see it more clearly.

Snape tried to keep the glow from his wand as small as possible, but it could not fail to illuminate far more than he ever wished to see. The glance had been automatic, lasting a fraction of a second, yet it burned itself into memory to last a lifetime.

An incision ran from sternum to pubis, the two wings of flesh held out and riddled with angry, inflamed holes through which the blood vessels looped like strands of sodden wool. Muscle and fascia sliced and pinned. Boiling coils of intestine suspended in a cruel crochet of suffering.

Hissing through his teeth, Snape raised the end of his wand in a futile effort to return the torment to the shadows.

The Unspeakable's head hung forward, the hook through the skin at the back of his neck nearly torn through. His face was puffy and streaked with bile and mucus but unmarked, the torturer's knife leaving that deliberately untouched. Despite the setting, the man's face was unremarkable, the sort that would pass in a crowd unnoticed: plain, symmetrical, ordinary. Nothing that would draw the attention of the casual observer. Whoever had tormented him here in this cold, empty, concrete grave of a building, they wanted the victim to witness every abuse inflicted upon them. It would explain the meticulous explosion that fanned out in an arc around the front of the body. It also indicated a cold logic at work. One might consider taking the next step and removing the victim's eyelids. That way, he could not even have found refuge by closing his eyes. But doing so would have drawn blood and oedema which would have poured into his eyes and blocked his vision, so the torturer had let the victim keep his lids.

Had the man's eyes been open, he would have been looking directly at the vial that sat inside the knitted cage of his own veins. Snape peered closer in order to determine its purpose, trying to breathe shallowly in order to keep the smell out of his nose. It was a simple glass container, neither engraving nor label on it, the pale rose of the liquid inside clear and oddly jarring in its starkly brutal surroundings. What role in this macabre vivisection could it have had?

"He's alive. How could he possibly be alive?"

Parr's voice was ragged with disbelief, muffled by the hand still held to her face, her head turned away as she refused to look again upon the foetid dissolution. The sibilance of siren-like euphony pressed hard against her mental barrier, thinning the wall until it blistered into oddly echoing pockets.

"It won't be for much longer," Snape replied, his mouth twisting from the surge of revulsion in his guts. He stepped back from the body yet not far enough away from the gagging stench.

"Is there nothing we can do?"

He turned his head to one side, Parr's shadow looming in the far corner of his eye.

"What would you do, Striker? He's beyond help. Let him go."

Snape backed away another step and let the glow fade from the end of his wand. Hopelessness and anguish articulated into a raw, questioning thought. He didn't know whether it came from her or himself, but he had to answer it for the both of them.

"Perhaps it would be a mercy, but I do not know if I can do it."

Euthanasia was hard to accept, but in the face of such inevitable death, to withhold it seemed just one more cruelty to force upon a person who had already been through more than a living being could possibly bear.

"Then, I will do it."

Parr condemned herself to the action by accepting it as the final humane deed the Unspeakable would ever experience. She turned to face the wretched remains, her knife clutched tightly in her hand, her features resolute and gaunt: merciful death cloaked in black, the eerie voices that called from her mind the lure into destruction.

The gun-shot bang of Apparition sounded somewhere below them.

Parr's face contorted as she swore and swirled for the door. Snape made to follow her.

"No! You will wait here, Dual." The whites of her eyes gleamed at him, the line of her brows telling him she would brook no argument against her order. "Do whatever it is you need to do to seal this room, but you will remain here!"

And then she was gone, leaving Snape with his own string of epithets to voice.

The only way to completely negate magic from operating in the room would require a Nullifier, and he couldn't cast that alone. He would have to fall back on ways of disabling the most likely offensive tactics, calling up a mishmash of defensive charms and trigger hexes to lie in a wide circle around him. It couldn't stop an intruder from Apparating into the room, but they would face a nasty backlash if they did. Anyone entering through the doorway would find themselves bound and hanging upside-down before they could blink. As a last resort, he could always Apparate out. This was the one time Snape was grateful for Parr's immunity to magic. He could lay the nastiest traps without fear of them touching her when she returned. If she returned.

The fear that thought elicited surprised him, but considering how much of his own survival currently relied on the Striker, he should have expected such a reaction.

Seconds passed in leaden silence with only the whisper of his own breathing to accompany him.

Time stretched into a soundless minute.

Surely there would be something by now, some indication of confrontation between the Striker and the intruder, but the velvet quiet denied that there could possibly be anyone outside of the room.

"Please."

Snape dismissed the voice at first, thinking that his ears were playing a trick on him, a misinterpretation of the rush of blood running through him. Or perhaps a brief crystallisation of the chorus that leaked from the Striker's thoughts.

"Please."

He turned to the source of the voice that still hung in a shredded pattern in the centre of the room.

Beresford's head remained tilted forward, but the ends of his fingers twitched erratically, the muscles and tendons working in spasmodic pulses to pull against the threads that anchored the flesh flayed aside.

"I've told you everything I know. Just let me be. Let me die."

That the man alive at all was incredible. That he could still draw breath and form words, wavering but coherent, was incomprehensible. Snape trod carefully back towards the man, his hesitation as much from fear as repulsion. What strength of will or perversity of fate could have kept this man from dying long ago?

The Unspeakable's head lifted in response to Snape's approach, and he flinched back at the weak circle of light that returned to the end of the upheld wand.

The man's eyes sharpened on Snape's face. "You?" He blinked several times in confusion, his voice struggling through his erratic and hitched breathing. "Unexpected, but perhaps unsurprising, now that I think on it. Where there's one, there's always another lurking nearby. I just didn't think there'd be a third."

The tired, broken tone of his voice strengthened Snape's pity for the man's predicament, the sound ragged and raw as if he had screamed until the vocal cords had blistered and split.

"A third what?"

Beresford's head wobbled, a tinge of disorientation passing over his features momentarily, like a person just woken from a very heavy sleep. "Death Eater. Cleared by the Wizengamot, perhaps. But once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater, they say." He paused. "But they're not always right. Are they?"

Something odd was occurring here. This man was too lucid, too calm for someone nearing his end, for someone whose innards had been dragged out of him, for someone who was rotting from the inside out, the heat of his body draining away into the chill winter night. The manner in which he spoke, the apparent clarity of his thoughts, clashed markedly with his physical condition.

The Unspeakable nodded slightly, but whether it was in response to Snape's realisation was hard to determine.

"Albus said you could be trusted, but I wasn't sure." He gave a light snort at that admittance. "Maybe I'm still not sure, but I trust Albus. On this matter, at least. You're lucky

that I did. Some wanted you... removed permanently, regardless of the Wizengamot's findings. I've had to mislead some of my closest colleagues to keep you alive. If they knew, they'd condemn me as a traitor. In many ways I am, but I am not the one they should be looking for."

"Another Unspeakable?"

"Yes, but I don't know who. I only had a suspicion before, but now I'm almost certain, else I wouldn't be here. You must tell Albus."

It might explain how Beresford had been caught: his whereabouts and his routine known by a colleague, and the information delivered to the right ear at the right time. He was an Unspeakable. That alone would make him a tough mark. Chosen carefully and trained thoroughly, of all the MLE's operators, the Unspeakables would be the most adept in keeping their knowledge hidden, the hardest to catch, the deadliest to handle. It was said that their will was iron, that they couldn't be persuaded or broken. Snape had even heard the theory that Unspeakables were all Occlumens, but that could easily have been a rumour carefully planted by the MLE to bolster the reputations of their most secret and opaque operators. That could account for the appalling treatment of this man. In an attempt to break him mentally, the perpetrator had chosen to break him physically first.

"Who did this to you?"

"Mariusz Brachoweitch."

"Why?"

"He wanted to know where the seevy are," Beresford replied, as if it had been the most obvious thing in the world. "All of them."

The Unspeakable flinched oddly, as if struck by a goad across his back.

"Did you tell him where they are?"

"No."

Again, that odd flinch, and Beresford's face twisted.

"The pain?"

The Unspeakable shook his head slightly and looked mildly surprised at the question. "No. There's no pain, but it will come soon. I couldn't last this long under torture if I felt pain. He kept me dosed against it. Said that unless I answered his questions, he'd let me feel what he was doing. Let it happen once, 'to give me a taste', he said. Excruciating doesn't come close to describing it. He had me wanting to beg for death even then, and that was at the start. No, he needed to be sure I wouldn't lie to him through desperation. Pain only works so far in getting the truth."

The man's head dipped. Snape dropped his own gaze to where Beresford was looking: the glass container buried like a transparent heart in the net of veins in front of his chest.

"A painkiller?"

"A poison. So I was told. Kiss of Leinth, he called it. Said he'd let me have it if I told him what he wanted to know."

Snape looked at the vial. The colour was right, but it could be just pigment in water. He wouldn't put it past Brachoweitch.

"A lie, perhaps? To keep you co-operative?"

Beresford gave a humourless chuckle and then choked out a cough a couple of times, the movement making his body sway in its vicious cradle. "I saw him use it on a pigeon. It works. Much crueller that way, to know I'm inches from a quick death yet unable to reach it." His fingers curled and pulled against the threads woven into them.

"Why would he believe that you know where the seevy are?"

Beresford stared at him with eyes that were beginning to cloud over with a pearly white, his expression inscrutable.

"Many people go missing. Far more than the public would ever suspect. Most of the time, we discover the reasons why people disappear, even if we do not make that information known, but some elude even the best of us. The MLE wants seevy back, and they will do whatever it takes to achieve that goal. They think that seevy will help them find these people, but they don't realise that seevy are the reason they disappear in the first place."

"Murder?" The notion contradicted everything that Parr had ever told him about her kind, and the shake of Beresford's head also dispelled the idea.

"No. We don't believe so." He hissed in a breath. "What we have learned suggests that the seevy choose these people carefully. Whatever the common element is, we do not know, but it's important enough for seevy to walk right into our world and risk discovery of their infiltration." There was a pause as the man squeezed one eye closed, the muscles of his face drawing up. "They must have help. It would be impossible for them to be amongst us without it. And we must... know the reason why."

Beresford attempted to focus on Snape's face, but he was plainly having trouble doing so, his head wavering back and forth as if to locate him, the milkiness that was beginning to steal across his eyes occluding his sight. The pain's approach, or perhaps it was the man's body giving up, that his mental focus was finally dissolving as his tissues suppurated and wept poison into his bloodstream.

There was a question that Snape had to ask, one that he needed to get an answer to before this man slipped into death.

"The Parr seevy: the one Fenrir Greyback has. You know where she is?"

"Yes. I've known all along."

"Where?"

"I always know where Greyback is. Always. I always have to know."

"Where is she?"

Beresford was confused by the question, or he had failed to hear it. He seemed to be surrendering at last to his dire predicament. Dark trails began to rain from him as his veins split and perforated, dropping splatters of thick blood on to the concrete floor.

Where the hell was the Striker? Snape needed her here. Now! Before this man died and took his secrets with him. If everything Snape had experienced was indicative of her abilities, she could pull from his mind where her Handler was, regardless of the impropriety of it or the ingrained adherence to the seevy tradition and boundaries that she claimed to honour. He cursed his inability to draw her back without calling out, concerned that such an action would alert the intruder below to her presence. Perhaps he could try Legilimency on the Unspeakable, but the futility of the attempt was apparent almost immediately. The dissolution of Beresford's mind as he slipped towards the precipice of death made it impossible. Images and sounds fractured and leaked into a nonsensical slurry.

The man began to ramble, his eyes defocused and sweeping back and forth, unable to pinpoint anything around him.

"I have to tell Greyback when they're too close, remember? That's what I have to do... very important. Mustn't find him."

"Who mustn't find him?" Snape stepped as close as he could to the Unspeakable, his mouth close to the man's ear to whisper in his urgency, seeking to be heard by the dying man alone.

A hiss escaped from the Beresford's mouth, and his body shifted, swaying in the air as his muscles began to tighten into a rigour.

"The Aurors. They mustn't find him... or they'll ruin everything. Took years. Took us years. They mustn't ruin it. Years. I always tell him... when they're too close."

The Unspeakable was deliberately working against the Aurors? Why?

"What would happen if they found Greyback?"

Beresford twisted, his arms pulling at their threads until they cut through dying tissue like wire. Snape would have to get his answers quickly.

"What would happen if they found Greyback?" he insisted.

"We'd lose them all... we worked so hard. We thought they were different... thought they'd want to be allied with us, but we found they were already here. Years. For years they'd been amongst us and we didn't know why. We had to know why. Too dangerous... not to know why." His breath was becoming ragged. Deep down in his chest, a rattling whistle. At the corner of his mouth, a dark foam. "They have allies... amongst our own people... cannot be trusted. Been watching... for years. You cannot know... too well hidden... we have to know why. They will ruin everything... take what's ours."

Snape had no choice. He couldn't wait for Parr to finish running about in the dark trying to find whomever it was that had Apparated. He would have to call for her.

"Striker!"

The Unspeakable's head snapped up at the word. Beresford wrenched his right arm from its tethers, the opened flesh and macerated blood vessels unable to prevent him from making this last effort. Ruined fingers clutched at the front of Snape's clothing, drawing him closer into that foul cloud of approaching death.

"The Parr seevy... the one Albus has? Do not trust her! She's looking for something... at the school. Bargained for our protection. That is why we keep her Handler from her. We must know what she is looking for! She is more dangerous than you know." The man's claw hand shook Snape roughly. "Do not trust her!" His fevered and clouded gaze flicked past Snape's head.

"And why would that be, Unspeakable?" came a voice from the doorway.

Snape turned to find Parr's towering figure advancing on them, teeth bared and knife held high. The skin of defensive magic that he had laid to entrap warped in its frustrated attempt to prevent her approach, the membrane turned permeable with a bluish silver shimmer as she slipped effortlessly through it. The stony fury on the Striker's face turned to shock. "No!"

The crack of glass pulled Snape's head back to the Unspeakable: dead, the shattered glass vial piercing his mouth and tongue, torn desperately from its vascular prison and crushed between his teeth. Kiss of Leinthe was merciful and quick, taking life in barely a heartbeat. The hand that had clutched at Snape's coat barely a second before now slipped from Beresford's mouth to swing heavily by his hip.

The roar from Parr was deafening. "He knew! He was the one who knew!" She lunged at the corpse, her weaponless hand outstretched to the dead man's mouth to tear the remnants of the vial away.

Reflex caused Snape to grab her wrist and deflect her hand away from the glass shards buried in lifeless flesh.

"No! You touch that with even the smallest cut on your fingers and you will join him in death, Striker! He's beyond us now."

Parr pulled her wrist harshly out of his grip, and for a brief moment, Snape saw in her eyes the will to swat him aside and damn the consequences. With her clenched fist raised high, she could crack his skull with one blow in a hammer-strike of fury. As her arm came down, Snape felt the frost-bitten grip of oblivion immobilise him and resigned himself to joining Beresford in whatever lay past the last breath he would ever take.

But Parr's arm swept past his skull, pulling her around and away from him to shriek in her defeat, a blast of agonised resonance that shook the walls and split deep down into his head, a dragon's scream of sound and mind that vented the cruel violence she had come so close to unleashing on him. Even his hands to his ears failed to lessen the sonic blast of an animal lost to the slaughter of failure. Nothing he had ever heard had come close to this.

Then silence, more profound than any quiet gone before, in utter contrast with what the Striker had released. Even the voices in her mind had been stilled.

Parr's crouched form slumped, and a keening sound cut through the shock that Snape's ears had gone into, the high-pitched feedback blending with the Striker's wail in an eerie harmonic.

Before he knew it, the back of her coat was gripped in his hand and the squeezing vortex of Apparition swallowed them both.

Snape hadn't known what destination he had set, the galvanising aftermath of shock drawing him along like an insensate hostage to the survival instinct. It was only as Parr fell to her knees, the clench of uncontrollable nausea crushing her in its grip, that he realised he could have killed them both. His desire to see them both gone from that wretched site of torture was strong enough to overcome the chance of Splinching, but it could have landed them anywhere. Or worse: nowhere, condemning them to a purgatory from which they would never be saved. To Apparate without clear destination was dangerous in the extreme, but all Snape had thought of was escape.

Parr's shriek would have been heard for miles around, and who knew what damnation would have descended upon them to be found right next to a flayed and brutalised corpse? There would be no pause to determine the veracity of a guilty pronouncement. Both of them would have been swiftly and unjustly condemned as the perpetrators of a dreadful crime, perhaps even struck down where they stood.

The disorientation from the Apparition and the gut-churning aftermath of their discovery threw Snape into an acidic confusion. All he could see was a dappled pattern of light and dark around him, blurry and indistinct. Then the lenses of his eyes snapped back into control.

He had brought them back to Hogwarts, a few feet from the gates that marked the boundary to the one place that could shelter them both more securely than any fortress.

"Get up, Striker. Save your vomiting for later."

His hand still knotted in the fabric of her coat, Snape hauled Parr off her knees and spun her to face him as she wiped the worst of the bile away with her sleeve.

"Who was it that Apparated in?"

Parr raised her eyes to meet his, her brow furrowed in confusion, the disorientation of Apparition and the idiosyncratic sickness it brought in her making her slow to comprehend his words.

"At the building, did you find who Apparated in?" he repeated urgently. If either of them had been seen, who knew what unholy mess would result from it? An Auror witness would see them both into Azkaban, and even Dumbledore's word would fail to exonerate them. If what Beresford had said was true, it had only been his word that had stayed the retributive hand of his colleagues in the MLE. Now that he was dead, his word would mean nothing.

"No-one," Parr croaked. "Whoever it was Apparated *out*, not in. They were there all along." She pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead, trying to dispel the lurching dizziness locked in her skull. A wave of faint sound drifted across the link between the two of them, like vibration along a wire. "It was the man who had been in the Unspeakable's house."

"Not Brachoveitch?"

Parr shook her head, her hair falling forwards in tangled strands. "No. That bastard was the one who Apparated out just before we caught him. This other man was waiting three floors down."

"And you have no idea why he was there?"

The Striker sighed heavily. "No, and I have no way of telling whether he and Brachoveitch were allied. Both had been in that room, but at the same time?" Parr shrugged, clearly at a loss. She buried her face in her hands, its bowed and distorted planes shielded. "Another dead body. My luck has been cursed beyond all hope. If I cannot even fulfil the most basic duty entrusted to me, what use am I any longer?" Her long fingers slipped down her face, allowing her to see where they stood.

"You brought us here?" Disbelief and fear widened her eyes and tensed her body. "You have to take me back to the safe house! If Remus finds me gone, my sanctuary is at risk. He must never know that I left!" Her hand clutched the front of his coat, the wild look back in her eyes. "You must take me back. *Now!*"

"You said you were sidestepping the rules, not breaking them," Snape hissed back at her.

"You want me to drop you right in the middle of the shit-fight that'll blow up if I'm found out?!" she retorted acidly. Her hand slashed through the air in denial as the subconscious chorale began to swell. "This is not a discussion, Dual. Save your acrimony until later! My time is running out here and you must be as far away from me as possible."

Snape brought them two streets away from the safe house. Parr's desperation to get back before her absence was discovered was great enough to stall her nausea. Her knees buckled briefly as her body reflexively caved into the effects of Apparating, but the harsh epithet ground out from between clenched teeth was the last he heard from the Striker before she bolted into the shadows with nary a glance behind her, the silken strip of indistinct voices in his head trailing away into silence.

Parr was able to maintain a good sense of time, despite the dire situations she could often find herself in. It was mercilessly trained into her at an early age by her aunt, and no matter how hard she'd tried to wriggle out of such temporal discipline, the relentless indoctrination continued until her Trainer had been satisfied that the Striker could determine the time accurately to within a ten minute margin.

As with a great deal of her training, Parr hadn't realised how valuable such ability was until she was actually Tracking. Her job involved far more waiting than it ever did action. Sometimes, days could pass in surveillance and concealment, but Parr could never allow herself to be ignorant of the hour.

Sanctuary within Hogwarts didn't allow the more modern timepieces to work, but she kept an old fob watch amongst her possessions. It was more for the comforting sound of the turning mechanisms and the lustre of its metal that she favoured it, her internal clock proving to be more reliable in the past than the watch. However, bearing the burden of her Handler's failing health and the bone-splintering sickness that Apparition threw her into, Parr had begun to doubt that her temporal sense could remain unaffected. The watch sat deep in one of the coat pockets in order to allay her fears.

Yet now she knew with unswerving certainty that she had shaved too close to the deadline, could feel it in sinew and blood as if her entire body was a timepiece of its own. If Remus found her room empty, even his lenient nature could not excuse her actions, but she had deemed it worth the risk. A cry slipped from her, a blend of anger and grief at her failure as she turned into the back alley behind the safe house. She'd suspected that there was someone within the MLE who knew where her Handler was. She'd lost count of the number of times she and Remus had gotten close to discovering where Caroli lay, dying inch by inch, only to miss their mark by mere hours. The coincidences were too great to ignore. Someone must have been tipping Greyback off, someone who knew Parr's movements. It had led her to become far more secretive with Remus, reluctant to voice her suspicions and her theories lest he unwittingly pass them on to the informer. Remus knew she was holding back. Parr had seen the tightening around his eyes when she failed to include him in her thoughts. She didn't like doing that to him. He'd stood on her side more times than that of the MLE, his own situation giving him a measure of sympathy and support toward her predicament, and whilst she never lied to him, the Striker bent the truth until it knotted itself into a riddle that Remus could never even see to know it needed to be unpicked. She may as well have slapped him in the face for all the gratitude she showed him.

She paused on shaking legs to sneak a look through the cracked back gate. Her room remained in darkness, the window still open to admit the night air that chilled her trembling fingers. No true sound except for the whisper of distant traffic and the desiccated rustle of fallen, withered leaves that merged with the calling voices in her mind. Parr slipped through the gate and scuttled up the back wall of the house towards the open window, inwardly cursing at the sound her boots made against the brickwork. Her Trainer would have punished her harshly for that... had she still been alive. The familiar grief at her aunt's death rose in her throat to try and strangle her, but Parr crushed it back down. Deal with one disaster at a time...anything more would threaten to drown her. Her thoughts raced forward, calculating the best ways to hide her infraction, her mental state so scrambled that she failed to notice the figure waiting for her in the dark until he flicked the lights on, blinding her momentarily and freezing her in place, one foot on the carpet and both hands clutched on the wooden lintel above her head.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?"

Chapter Fifty-Eight—Diversion

Chapter 58 of 59

In bocca al lupo...

The night did not turn colder, but preceding events had caused the sweat to rise on his skin and soak into his clothing, a dampness that drew the heat away from him to be lost into the air in a gentle, curling evaporation. It set a chill deep into his flesh that his muscles sought to temper by tremors.

It could not be the sickness that afflicted him before...there had been no mental contact between them other than what normally occurred. Normally. Snape's mouth twisted. As if anything that occurred tonight had been normal!

He turned from the street where Parr had fled from him, as intent on leaving place as well as circumstance, passing through insipid pools of street light and stretches of shadow. Little this night had been anything but disastrous, and it wasn't over. There was still the dangerous task of masquerading as the fat apoth ahead of him. It had been a less than ideal run up to such a delicate task, but circumstance dictated that Snape had little choice in the matter. When in such situations, there was little advantage in stewing on his inability to control events. All he could do was deal with what crumbs were left. It had been a difficult lesson to learn, but one that had proven to him that the chance to obtain something more substantial than crumbs was possible...one could always use them to lure bigger prey.

A flicker at the edge of his vision halted his swift progress down the quiet street. It had been low to the ground, soundless, and heading in the same direction as he was. A cat, perhaps. Snape resumed his path toward the small park that he and Parr had stopped in briefly before Apparating to the dead Unspeakable's home. It would provide enough shelter for him to Apparate back to Hogwarts for the Polyjuice Potion. The apoth would undoubtedly be already waiting for him at his shop in Knockturn Alley.

The second flicker confirmed that something other than a cat was following him. There had been enough distinction to the shadow this time: bi-pedal and not much larger than a small child, but no child could move so soundlessly. Instinct screamed at him to Apparate, but to do so midway down a street with houses that showed too many lights was too much of a risk. He would have to wait until he reached the cloaking screen of the park.

Snape lengthened his stride incrementally so as not to alarm his follower but to also hasten his approach to the park and eventual safety. A crawling sensation between his shoulder blades was a nasty development of his suspicion; whomever it was that was trailing him was far more likely to be foe than friend.

He turned a corner. Odd, though. If the shadow had stayed behind him, he might not have ever known he was being followed. So, the individual was either careless or cunning. Was it possible that he was being herded in a particular direction? Hard to tell, since the eventual destination would be the same in either case.

The park slipped out from the dark ahead. A car drove by, heading in the opposite direction on some unknown errand. Snape waited just long enough for it to pass him by before he crossed the street, heading for the cover of the scrubby hawthorn bushes in the park.

The figure standing by the pitted wooden bench stopped him dead.

The lighting was poor here. Although the plane trees had shed their leaves some weeks ago, their bare branches, coupled with the scrubby hedges, were able to block out enough of the feeble street lighting, leaving the centre of the small park mottled in various strengths of darkness.

Although the height of a small child, it was definitely no child. The proportions and volumes were all wrong. The manner in which the figure was standing was too poised, too confident. The problem was that such a manner was also incongruous with whom, or what, the figure seemed to be. Heavy shadowing around the eyes failed to occlude the size of the eyeballs, and the head was tilted enough to one side to show the length of the nose. The diminutive figure remained just long enough to be certain that Snape had seen them before it turned, the dark hair gathered into a single plait flaring out from its back as it slipped back into the deeper shadows.

Snape didn't know what was more disturbing: that this figure had been the one following him and had managed to travel ahead to meet him at his destination or that this figure was not the only one of its kind that concerned itself with his whereabouts. Regardless, the involvement of such an individual alarmed him. They never occupied themselves in the affairs of anyone beyond their immediate masters, and they were never seen unless they wanted to be. Even rarer was one who was no longer indentured in servitude, but the clothing he had seen could not possibly have been worn by one who did not determine the course of their own life.

The incongruity of the facts gave him pause enough to allow him to see the object resting on the seat of the bench, right next to where the figure had been standing: an envelope. Meant for him? There was only one way to find out, but he wasn't prepared to go over and fetch it. Far too much of what was occurring here was suspicious. A Summoning Charm set the envelope in his hand a fraction of a second before he Apparated to safer ground.

Standing inside the heavy iron gates to the school grounds, Snape read the letter once more. There was no indication that the information it contained was for him, but the cipher in which the message was written left him in little doubt that he was the intended recipient. It was a cipher that he was familiar with, one that he could translate with little effort, having become acquainted with it over the years. It was an idiosyncratic language that marked a particular contact: a reliable one that had saved his neck a number of times. It had been Snape's responsibility to learn the cipher, for the contact refused to communicate in any other form. "User specific" they had described it in the first and only communiqué that ever been written in English. Snape had taken that to mean that only the two of them that could translate the cipher, but as his eyes travelled over the well-known symbols transcribed in a foreign hand, he realised that his assumption had been incorrect. Determining whether it had been incorrect from the very start or the cipher had recently been broken by a third party could involve little more than guesswork at this time. Of more pressing concern was the content of the message.

Come fast or she dies.

The words demanded a response from him that ordinarily he would have eschewed, much as it would pain him to abandon someone to their death. To walk into a situation where the identity and purpose of the third party was unknown to him would be foolish in the extreme, and he had already taken far too many risks this evening in doing just that. Yet the symbol inked at the bottom of the page gave him reason enough to override his hesitation.

A slender crescent contained in a circle, poised atop a cruciform mark.

The lyc-females had caught his spy, and they expected him to come and fetch the transgressor. They gave no indication that his own safety was assured. They left no clue as to where he was supposed to go. Snape had no idea as to the identity of the captured contact...he had never met the person, did not know their name or even their gender. It had been irrelevant to him, information that now could prove critical.

The five words and the symbol were all he had to go on. Perhaps it was a deliberate attempt to frustrate him. A mortal punishment exacted upon the captured spy that Snape could not possibly hope to prevent. Had the five words been all that had been carefully marked onto the page, he would have had to accept that maddening fact, but the symbol told him two things: that the lyc-females expected him to be familiar with its meaning, and that they were deliberately identifying themselves in order to tell him where he needed to go. The connection was shaky, but it was all he had.

Snape was already overdue to meet the apoth, and unless he ignored the letter in his hand and returned to the original plan set for this evening, he would fail to meet Greyback's lackey, who would take him to where Parr's Handler was being held. The welfare of two people hung in a precarious balance that his decision would destabilise. One of them would surely die: a faceless person he had sent into a danger that until now he had not fully appreciated, their life forfeit unless he paid whatever mysterious ransom had been set. The other still had the chance of remaining alive, however slim that chance was. She would not die solely if he failed to go to her. That alone would have determined his choice, but in weighing up to whom he had the greater debt, Snape could not ignore his conscience. He would deal with the ramifications later.

The sight of a slender figure at the mouth of the lane-way called into question the wisdom of trying to sneak into the building. Snape had thought that his visit to the abandoned werewolf den last night would have been his first and last, but considering the contents of the message left for him, this seemed the only possible destination. Given that he had only seen the female lyc cruciform sign twice, he had to draw a line between the two, which is what had brought him here. The derelict edifice was not the sort to encourage people to linger outside it unless they had felonious intent, and the manner in which the silhouetted figure held itself suggested calmness, an ease with being where she was. Waiting for him?

Snape dithered in the shadows, somewhat confident that his guess had been correct, but equally cautious at making an assumption. Coincidence didn't always work in one's favour, and now might be one of those times.

A burst of drunken shouting a few streets over made him flinch. Too edgy, too tired and too rushed—far from the ideal mental state to be in to deal with such precarious matters. Every nerve felt scraped raw. The tinkling of broken glass and another cloud of inebriated swearing drifted through the night air before the revellers moved on.

The waiting woman remained a silent statue, little more than a silhouette.

Was she the only one? Surely not, and he could wait no longer, asking himself questions he had no definite answers to; the tenseness in his body betrayed the deep anxiety he was attempting to suffocate.

Snape's feet had carried him several steps towards the woman before he became conscious of it. A clutch of alarm cramped at his insides. He was walking once again into a situation that was opaque to him, one that could hide all manner of pitfalls and traps, but he had a debt to pay, and little time left to do it in.

The woman turned her head slowly toward him, evincing no surprise or anxiety at his approach. Her plain features resolved themselves as he neared her, her clothes a perfect match to her manner. Simple, perhaps a touch vague. Deliberately chosen, or designed, to be overlooked.

A prickle of static ran up his spine at her gaze, and for a fleeting moment, Snape seriously considered turning on his heel and heading back the way he had come. It was rare that he ignored a gut feeling, but tonight had thrown him into a boiling pot of nerves and adrenaline. Given the choice, he would have bolted back to wherever he felt safe, until he regained some form of dispassionate composure. The smell of damp concrete almost smothered the gentle breath of spice from the woman's perfume: subtle and soothing. It did nothing to calm him.

Perhaps the woman sensed his mood, poised as it was on a knife's edge of indecision. Perhaps the slight thinning of her even lips was unrelated.

"It's rude to keep a lady waiting, *kushëri*."

An unremarkable voice. Every element of this woman was aligned in order to avoid notice, to slip through observation and wriggle out of memory.

"Especially a lady with her hand on someone else's throat," Snape replied.

A twitch at the corner of her mouth marked the barbed comment as having hit home.

"I've never claimed to be a lady," she corrected him mildly. "I merely wait to bring you to where one will be handed back into your care."

Careful words, delivered with an almost mathematically even cadence. Was there nothing of this woman that deviated from a grey average? Snape's eyes travelled over the lines of her face: symmetrical, soft like a blurred charcoal line, a median of shape and measure.

"And who are you?"

She exhaled gently. And evenly, of course. Snape got the distinct impression that she weighed the words of his question very, very carefully.

"A bargaining chip."

His slightly raised eyebrows told of his mild surprise at her answer.

"We're not unreasonable people. This is a delicate matter, and a dangerous one for you. People under stress react unexpectedly. I will... stand as surety to your safety. At least, for now."

"A hostage."

Now it was her turn to be surprised, but the reaction moulded her expression so briefly that Snape wondered if he had seen it at all. Her face was schooled back into neutrality, if indeed it had ever shifted from it in the first place.

"As good a name as any," she replied faintly, as if to herself. "Yes, you shall call me Hostage," she decided, her voice firmer.

Why did he think she was amused by that? There was no crease or wrinkle of flesh to betray such an emotion, no glint to the eye or subtle tightening of the facial muscles that would hint at it, but he was sure... no, *certain* that his label for her met with a humoured approval.

"Come."

She turned into the dark lane-way behind her, clearly expecting him to follow without hesitation. It took her the passage of a few steps to realise that he lingered behind. She was nothing but shadow here, her outline almost blending into the blackness that the cobbled ground slipped into.

There was a faint sigh. "I realise trust is something unreasonable to ask of you, but your safety is guaranteed by my presence. It has been agreed." Hostage paused. "Unless you wish us harm." There was the taste of a question in those words. That Snape did not respond caused her to elaborate. "We wish only to hand back someone who was looking where she shouldn't, with the understanding that it is not to happen again. There is too little time, for all involved, for your hesitation. Come now or not at all. The choice is yours."

Of course, she was right. Forward or back...that was before him in this very instant. He could vacillate no longer. Snape approached Hostage cautiously until the features of her face became clear against the night-shrouded lane-way. He felt the darkness close about him like a blanket, and reflexively his hand found the wand in his pocket.

"You won't be needing that," Hostage pointed out, her own hand resting on the splinter-wood doorway, one eyebrow lifted a hair's breadth.

"You expect me to surrender what means of advantage I have against you? Rather unfair, don't you think?"

His slightly bitter accusation drew a laugh, full throated and rich. It echoed down the lane-way, bouncing back and forth against the slightly damp brick walls, resonating through his body as if it sounded from both outside and inside him. It was a notable deviation from every other trait she manifested: an undulating vein of gold through a panorama of washed out grey.

"Keep it, if it pleases you, but it will find no use here."

Snape's eyes narrowed. An intriguing choice of words, ones that suggested that any attempt at magic on his part would be unnecessary. Or even ineffective. Would there be the tell-tale drop in temperature that betrayed a Nullifier, or the give-away falling sensation in the gut to mark the border to an area blocked against the use of magic. Who could possibly achieve such a neutralisation? A Nullifier needed several individuals of not insignificant skill at wielding magic, whilst a charm to restrict the operation of magic could not fail to escape the notice of the MLE for very long. Such areas were closely monitored once established, and any unauthorised restrictions were a beacon to Aurors. Protected areas were either those that the MLE itself had determined necessary, or areas where something illegal was occurring.

Whoever was here already undoubtedly outnumbered him. It was possible that their skill also exceeded his. He couldn't risk an attempt to determine if his magic was useless, or if it was neutralised. His summoners might interpret the attempt poorly, regardless of whether it was successful or not. If all else failed, he still had the serpentine blade given to him earlier that evening by Parr, though Snape doubted he could even draw it from its hiding place in time to either defend himself or to threaten Hostage.

"A word of warning." The measured cadence had returned to Hostage's voice, lowered as it was into a gentle murmur. "It is something that I strongly urge you to consider before we go any further. Whatever you have been told, we are not violent by nature, but we must submit to the contamination of our condition, no matter how much we would struggle against it. The time is too close, but we had little choice. This exchange can go swiftly. In fact..." Snape heard her take a step closer to him, and he swayed back away from her judiciously, the grip on his wand tightening sharply. "... I advise you to let it go as smoothly as you are able. Beta is, ordinarily, a placid person, but her condition agitates her disproportionately, and she is easily angered at this time, even over trivial matters."

"Not the best representative of your group to have been chosen, then," Snape pointed out acerbically. His blunt statement did not seem to ruffle Hostage.

"As Beta, it is her right to stand for us," the slender woman explained patiently. "She is not foolhardy, and her counsel is well-regarded amongst us." Hostage let the words settle their admonition into him, crystallising the need for prudence and a gentler manner than Snape was accustomed to manifesting. "Now, let this thing be done."

With that, she entered the abandoned den.

The smell was not nearly as pervasive as before, but Snape could still detect the rotten despair that had sunk into the concrete and steel, like an echo of a nightmare dimly

recalled in the heartening light of day. There was no illumination here...the luminescent band that Lupin had placed along the walls long gone.

He could see nothing of the wreckage-strewn cargo bay that lay inside. Not even the scant light from the sky showed through the gaping hole that he recalled had been punched out of the roof. The breach had either been patched or by deliberate intention all light had been sucked from inside this place. The darkness was too absolute to be natural. But if such a thing had been done by magic, it suggested that Snape was not left defenceless.

Then, why Hostage?

Maybe not defenceless, but certainly at a disadvantage. And there was always his captured spy to consider. No, they had thought this out too carefully.

A shaft of bluish light flickered on, falling from the jagged hole in the roof, too strong to be naturally occurring and hurting Snape's eyes briefly. By rights, this light should have thrown enough of the surrounds into visibility, but it stopped as dead as if a solid barrier encircled it. Whatever lay beyond it had been determined not to be for his eyes.

"The door will remain open," Hostage assured him.

"Unguarded?" Snape's voice sounded too unsettled for his liking. Nerves were understandable, but he had no desire to broadcast his unease.

"None may enter, but you are free to leave at any point." She turned and led the way towards the light.

The darkness seemed squeeze in towards him, pressing him forward. Out of the corner of his eye, Snape thought he saw figures hidden in the blackness, but when he turned his head, that opaque and unnatural absence of light made a lie of such impressions. The ghostly figures skittered back into his peripheral vision: watching, measuring, waiting.

Hostage stopped just off centre in the column of light. Snape found it troublesome to look straight ahead as he waited next to her. With nothing to affix his eyes on except that fathomless black, his focus slid and slipped in a valiant attempt to lock on to something, anything. In order to dispel the dizziness, he dropped his gaze to the floor, the pitted, stained concrete providing something for his eyes to latch on to. It also had the added benefit of bringing those elusive figures back into his awareness. With a slight shifting of his eyes, he could count at least eight figures in front of him, fanned out into a crouched semi-circle. He had no idea how many stood behind him. Eight was already far too many.

"Why do you spy on us?"

The question came abruptly, harshly. Authoritatively. It was a voice used to commanding, accustomed to receiving answers without delay. Snape had heard such a tone before, but rarely so honed in its ability to elicit compliance. Some people were able to wield it in fits and starts, saving it for certain occasions that required an additional means of control. Often its usage was accidental and consequently sporadic, but some had managed to call it into service with some degree of aptitude. Dumbledore was one such practitioner, but he favoured a more subtle manipulation than a commanding tone could achieve. That did not mean he was unfamiliar with its advantages, only that his employment of it was not as frequent as it could have been. The Dark Lord had been that way at the start, carefully choosing when and where to use such tone, like a goad that snapped across a recalcitrant animal's flank. Then, he also had favoured manipulation rather than outright tyrannical oppression of opposition. It hadn't taken long for him to brandish it more and more readily once he realised it got him precisely what he wanted in a fraction of the time that manipulation did. The dominance was addictive, luring the baser nature in him to the surface until addiction became indistinguishable from outright arrogance. Who knew how his shadowed castigator used such a tool?

"I have been instructed to discover the cause of certain circumstances. Doing so has led me to question your potential involvement." Not a lie. And certainly not an apology on Snape's part.

"Your suspicions are of no interest to us." Beta's voice contained an odd harmonic: a metallic grind of steel nearly disguised under the huskiness. Such timbre was unusual in a female, but Snape suspected it an indicator of her approaching transformation; one that grew closer with each second that ticked by. "Your surveillance of us stops now."

"Why?"

"Because next time we will mete out a suitable punishment instead of staying our hand. Do not press us on this. We have retaliated more harshly for lesser errors."

Snape's eyes flicked back up to the darkness. A slithering whisper had lifted briefly at Beta's statement, but died like a faint breath of wind before he could make out any words. Hostage remained, silent and still, at his side, her own eyes set to some point several feet above where Beta seemed to be.

"Why have you stayed your hand this time?"

"That is irrelevant. Suffice that you know we will not stay it a second time."

Anxiety. Agitation. Perhaps a taste of uncertainty? It came not only from Beta's words, but from those hiding in the clotted darkness with her. There had been no sound to betray it, but a contraction of sinew, a sensitisation of nerve and tensing of muscle was palpable to Snape. Considering they moved nearer to transformation, such skittishness and emotional discord was to be expected. In fact, it would only intensify. He would have to be away from here, and soon, lest he find himself trapped, possibly with no manner of defence or escape. Magic could still not be an option. Snape had no means to test it without the situation blowing up in his face. Hostage would be useless to him. If anything, she was becoming more and more of a threat, a lyc-female less than a metre away from his throat, assuming Beta didn't get to him first.

Snape wasn't willing to trust in the rumour of their more disciplined nature in comparison to their male counterparts. Stuck right in the middle of them, Snape was beginning to have real trouble overriding common sense and the urge to back away and out of the abandoned warehouse as swiftly as possible. And yet... yet... He had considered himself lucky to have even *seen* a lyc-female all those years ago. Miraculous that he had come out of the situation unscathed, unbitten. Alive. It wasn't until much later that he had realised how much danger he had been in. At the time, he had been utterly focussed on his body's unexpected reaction to the bloodied, defiant, and captivating figure in front of him, as well as the cliff-edge precariousness they both found themselves in. It had been terror and hunger and bare-faced audacity on his part. Snape was no thrill-seeker. It just wasn't in his nature, but whomever it was that stood in his skin that particular night had been a stranger to him then. It was an increasing dread in him that he suspected that stranger was making an ill-timed return visit.

"If my investigations are proving an inconvenience to you..."

"Do not patronise me! We have tolerated your curiosity until now, but no longer. By necessity we remain apart from society as best we can. Outsiders are not permitted. It is a matter of survival. Our business is our own."

"A law unto yourselves."

Beta snorted derisively. "So like magicfolk to be deaf to the hypocrisy of your own words, but I will not be drawn into pointless argument. Nor will I waste time cautioning you further. Stick your head in a hornet's nest, for all I care! But make sure you do the dirty work yourself instead of sending an innocent. You've bought many concessions from us, but be sure when I tell you we will deal with any further spying without leniency."

"Murder does seem to come easily to you. One more throat would be of little consequence."

There was a tense silence.

"Needs must. Survival."

"A subjective opinion."

"We do not kill pointlessly! Our lot is difficult enough as it is. Deaths cause questions. Deaths bring prying eyes, but we will not permit any subjugation, imprisonment or violence to be imparted on us. But what would you care of this? Magicfolk have never looked kindly on us, and non-lycs could never understand. We have no one to protect us but ourselves, and we have been doing that for longer than you can imagine. Your snobbish dismissal is an insult and your ignorance pitiful!"

Hostage cleared her throat gently as if to speak, but she maintained her calm silence next to Snape, unaffected by the seething anger that hulked in the darkness in front of them.

"Take your spy and leave. She was good, but not good enough."

A limp form emerged from the black depths, limbs dangling and spine slack. The only thing holding the unconscious figure up was a long-fingered hand clutched around the elderly woman's upper arm as if her weight was that of a child's. The most that Snape saw of Beta was a bare forearm up to her elbow before she released the spy, causing Snape to reflexively reach out for the wilted body before it crumpled to the cold concrete. The woman was slight, with short grey hair and a lined face. Dark circles under her eyes.

"What have you done to her?"

"A blow to the back of the head. Nothing serious."

"Can you be sure?"

"We are not lyc-males, squatting in disused buildings, stealing what belongs to others and drugging ourselves! We live as others do, as best we can. We work. We earn. Our careers cross many fields. Medicine is one of them. She suffered no permanent physical damage, but it was necessary to Oblivate her."

Snape opened his mouth to respond, but Beta interrupted him quickly. "It was with her consent. We explained the situation to her. She wisely chose to forget. I suggest you do the same."

The whispering from the darkness swelled gently. Long-limbed figures stalked back and forth in Snape's peripheral vision. Watching. Measuring.

"You would Oblivate only one of us?" It was a question Snape was compelled to ask, the still unconscious spy clutched awkwardly in his arms. The lyc-females had already made concessions for him, and had admitted as much. Why would they grant him another?

Beta hissed through her teeth. Her only response. The shadows tensed in a sinuous rhythm. Even Hostage held herself very still. Wary. They didn't like that question at all, and they were at liberty not to answer it. He tried another.

"The lyc-females you took from the warehouse in Battersea... from Macnair: they are safe?"

The silence stretched out, with not even a sound of disapproval from Beta winding out from the shadows. The stillness curdled further. An almost cider-like scent of apprehension.

For the second time, a static charge skittered down Snape's spine, making him shudder involuntarily. Too coincidental, and he realised that he'd felt it before...the lyc-girl at the safe house. Snape's unannounced arrival had unsettled her. He'd thought the sensation unrelated at the time, but it had struck him three times in one evening. And always in the presence of a lyc-female. What it meant, he did not know.

We take care of our own.

A whisper so faint Snape almost missed it, and so subtle he couldn't tell where it came from. It slid through his awareness, its path betrayed by the ripples it left in his mind as it slithered through thought and sensation. His arms tightened around the spy's limp body, warm and soft.

No! Not here. Not now, he thought desperately. There was no way it would happen again. The timing was wrong. Common sense screamed that at him, shrill in its madness to convince him, but the stranger inside refused to listen.

"There is a girl," Snape blurted out, struggling against an increasingly laboured breathing. "She is a lyc. If you do take care of your own, then she belongs with you."

The charge in the room changed from a pull to a push in the sucking pulse of a heartbeat. Beta barely stopped herself in time before she breached the barrier of unnatural darkness that separated them. The scrape of her feet on the concrete gave away her proximity.

"Where is she?" The vocal goad was back, striking deep across the flank of his resistance. The shadows roiled in agitation, surging forwards, threatening to break through the protective skin of light. They reached for him. Snape could feel it. Merlin, he could *smell* it! Hostage was the only one untouched by his words, silent and solid and sure. He nearly made a grab for her as if the contact would steady him, would ground his mind and emotions and allow the galvanism to pass from inside him and through her: the lightning rod that dissipated the voltage that would burn his resistance to ashen ruins.

"I cannot tell you," he gasped, steeling the muscles in his legs to prevent his knees from buckling under him. "I ask a trade."

The unseen hands that reached for him curled to tear at his flesh. Teeth bared to shred muscle to a ragged mess.

"What a piece of work you are, to come here and make demands of us!" Beta growled, furious.

"Not demand! Ask," Snape emphasised quickly. "You could find the lyc-girl now without my help." He couldn't loosen the grip his arms had around the limp body of the spy, and the effort not to crush her flesh set a tremor alive in him, a shivering of desperate strain. "Please!"

"Ask quickly," Beta hissed.

"There is a woman being held by Fenrir Greyback. I must find her."

"Why should we care?" Beta cut him off harshly. "Is she lyc?"

"No, but-"

"Then it isn't our business. And that between us is now ended. Go!" Conclusion hard and swift. Brutal.

"Would you allow one of your own to suffer under Greyback's hand?" Snape retorted, his words foolishly defiant.

"Never!"

"Then do not leave this woman to die!" Snape lifted the unconscious form in his arms. "You've made exceptions before. Why not this time?"

"I have made my decision!" Beta roared, incensed, the blast of her anger unhindered by the darkness that cloaked her. "Leave!"

"You would abandon an innocent?!" His incredulity drove him into bitter accusation.

"Leave!"

Hostage spun on her heel to face him, the control on her face poorly masking the alarm that twisted beneath. "We go. *Now!*" She almost physically dragged Snape by the arm, making it even harder for him not to trip over the slack, dragging legs of the grey-haired spy gathered awkwardly in his arms. At every step, Snape expected to feel the lancing pain of claws and teeth tearing into his back, but whatever restraint that prevented it held until he stumbled his way out of the warehouse.

"Go!" Hostage's hands pushed him out of the lane-way. Snape turned back to plead once more but she stopped him before he could even form the words, the lines of her face distressed but resolute. "I will do what I can, but I promise nothing." Her hands turned him back towards the main road and pushed him firmly. "*Go!*"

Snape's final regret was that he didn't get to thank Alpha before he fled, his burden the unwilling victim of his lack of foresight and caution, twisting over and over in the cold, crushing wrench of Apparition.

Sprung

Chapter 59 of 59

Who gets caught and who slips free?

All intention split and fell into ruin. Afterwards, Snape had no idea if even half of what he recalled did actually happen. His mind had been extraordinarily unfocused, not unlike being trapped in a dream where the surrounds shifted and bled into each other, transforming into colours and concepts and ephemera that he could not even attach a label to.

His desperation to be away from the abandoned den gave him enough concentration to successfully Apparate to where he needed to go: a two-storey brick building just east of Diagon Alley. It was a venue he had used in the past when the need arose...merely a waiting place. He had claimed one of the rooms as his, though he had no idea who actually owned the building; nor did he care. It had been uninhabited for as long as he could remember, which suited him just fine. Snape suspected itinerants used the place from time to time. Vacant buildings rarely escaped the eyes of squatters, and he was content to allow this building to be treated as a stopping point for those who had no home, but only briefly. He had set a subtle charm deep into its brickwork and wooden frames that encouraged others to move on after a day or so. It had been a spell of his own creation, a variant on other, more well-known ones. Charms had never been his strength, but occasionally he was able to bend one into an elegant simplicity that served him. This one had been untested until he used it on the building and it had taken remarkably well. Each time he paused there, usually only for a few hours at most and sometimes not for months on end, he couldn't shake the impression that the charm he'd set had an unexpected side-effect. Not only did it seem to discourage lingerers, it felt as if the building actually welcomed him. To go into the room he'd barred against all others was the closest he'd ever felt to the adage of "coming home". He had no clear idea why this would be so. The room itself was unremarkable in every sense of the word. It held no furniture except for a high-backed armchair upholstered in a threadbare, faded cloth, and a three-legged wooden stool that he would sometimes prop his feet up on. The carpet was frail and worn, scarcely thicker than a piece of cardboard, its pattern and colour long trodden into oblivion.

A dusty fireplace held three logs, the wood so old that Snape wondered if they had actually petrified. He'd never felt the need to light them. Cold was a condition he was used to, even if he didn't particularly like it. It had the benefit of keeping him alert while he was waiting. To risk a lit fire and warmth could potentially lull him into staying longer than he should, so he left the logs to collect increasingly thick layers of dust. No, this was not a place to stay, however much the room seemed to whisper at him that he should.

It was the first place that Snape thought of to leave the spy. Here she would be safe until she regained consciousness. The door to the room was responsive only to him on entrance. She would be able to leave freely but not return into that room. Not that she would. What the grey-haired woman would make of this place he had no desire to discover; he hoped to be long gone before then.

Snape fancied that he felt the walls of the corridor that led to the room flex in a near peristaltic wave, sucking him towards that small, square space that he had sheltered him many times before, but likely it was mirage born of his scrambled mental state and nothing more.

He dropped the spy's rag-doll form rather clumsily into the chair. She didn't even stir. He would have to trust Beta's word that, beyond the Obliviation, no lasting damage had been dealt to the woman. Snape ran his fingers up tck of the spy's skull and found a lump that yielded slightly to pressure: from the blow to knock her out. Amateurish. There were better ways to render someone unconscious rather than by brute force.

The reason for the blow seeped its way through the hissing static in his head: there was no way now to avoid having the spy know that something had happened to her. True, she'd be unable to determine what precisely, but Snape wanted to ensure that she asked herself as few questions as possible lest her curiosity lead her back into danger. The lump on the back of her head provided a decent enough excuse: mugging.

His fingers slid away from her head and delved into her pockets. Snape winced at the soreness that had sprung up in his shaking hands...most likely from the effort of hauling the spy's limp body. A key. Two crumpled receipts. A slender wallet that contained a single twenty pound note. He removed it and cast the wallet carelessly on the floor. A quick frisk found no evidence of jewellery on her body. Slim pickings for a mugger, but it didn't matter.

He left the room without looking back, squashing down a surge of regret that this spy was now lost to him as a resource. Beta was right: ~~she~~was good, but Snape wasn't desperate enough to use her abilities to ignore the threat the female lycs had imparted should they find the spy snooping around again.

A light drizzle had begun while he'd been in the building, and the biting air promised that drizzle would shortly turn into sleet. The weather barely registered to him as he made his way to Knockturn Alley through shadow, behind wall and under stricture. An indefinite abstraction of voices that slipped and slid into meaningless white noise surged and faded in his ears, as if carried by the wind. He rolled his shoulders to shake the creeping sensation of dread that skittered down his spine.

"Merlin's dick, where *were* you?!" the fat apoth hissed at him as Snape slid past the man's corpulent form and into the back of the shop. "You said you would be here an hour ago!"

"Unavoidable," Snape managed to grind out through his clenched teeth, jaw tight against the pain that had spread from his hands up along his arms and into his shoulders. He grabbed hold of the doorjamb with a difficulty he hoped he'd managed to hide, obscuring the vice-like grip behind his back. His legs had become unsteady and the condition showed no signs of improving, so he was forced to use what strength was left in his arms to hold him upright. He noticed the fat man had a hand pressed his cheekbone. "What happened?"

"What *happened?*!" The apoth's voice rose to a shrillness now that the back door was closed. "I nearly *got killed*, that's what fucking happened!" He snatched his hand away from his face to reveal a nasty cut. The clean slice gaped apart now that the apoth was no longer holding the edges of the wound together, and an ooze of blood flowed out, almost black in the low light.

"Give me details, not interpretations!" Snape snapped at him, fingers digging into the wood to hold himself up and steady, hands hidden behind his back to hide just how close he was to sinking to the wooden floor.

"Go ahead and take them, then!" Todianus spat back, groping for a handkerchief in the pocket of his robes and glaring out of an ashen face.

"Just *tell* me, idiot! I can't perform Legilimency on you when you're that agitated!" Snape hoped the lie would pass undetected. The truth was he couldn't focus his mind sufficiently in order to pick through the apoth's thoughts, and the telltale greying at the edges of his vision presaged the distinct likelihood that Snape would pass out if he pushed himself any further than merely standing stock still.

"When you didn't show, I went to the meeting place instead." The apoth misinterpreted the grimace on Snape's face as disapproval. "You think I'd just sit here and let them come and find me for not showing up? The cut would be across my *throat*, not my cheek!"

Snape winced at the apoth's strident voice, the sound splintering its way deep into his head in a discordant harmony to the bone splitting pain that was creeping down from his shoulders into his spine.

Todianus mopped the blood off his face and waddled past and into the shopfront area of the apothecary, gasping for breath in his barely controlled panic.

"Greyback wasn't at the hiding place, and thank Circe for small mercies!" His pudgy, be-ringed fingers rattled through the glass jars on the shelves behind the counter. "That bastard can smell deception five miles away!"

"Who was there?"

Todianus pulled a dark glass bottle with a fluted neck out from behind a flask of Murtlap essence and yanked the cork stopper out with his teeth.

"That dread-locked Sniffer and his leash-holder," the apoth replied, his words somewhat muffled by the occluding cork. "The stinking vagrant that met me in Trafalgar Square abandoned me the very second he was able to." One unsteady hand shook the glutinous contents of the flask out on to the already blood-soaked and crumpled handkerchief. "Can't say I blame him in the least!" Todianus hissed at the sting imparted by the medicated cloth clamped to his cut flesh, the cork falling from his teeth to bounce across the floorboards.

Snape clamped his lips together in a tight, white line. If Greyback's tame seevy had been there, who knew what deceit they could have picked up from the fat man. The apoth was not in the least adept at any kind of mental trickery, and he certainly wasn't gifted at tamping down any emotional surges. In an already panicked state, he could've inadvertently given all manner of information away. Snape had to know the possible extent of the damage.

"What happened?"

Todianus rolled his eyes up at him, the whites catching the paltry light flickering from the lowered lamps on the shop-front's interior walls. A splatter of darkness down the right side of the apoth's robes rolled in and out of shadow.

"I was checking on the woman, once that bastard Sniffer let me past to actually *touch* her!" The flask was slammed down on the counter-top in a harsh punctuation. "She was..." The apoth's voice trailed off, and he wiped the edge of his mouth roughly with the back of his free hand.

"She was *what*?" Snape had to screw his eyes shut as the room started to melt and slide into an incomprehensible sludge. The razor-thin cracks of agony that had begun to erupt along his spine swelled into a ragged, tearing misery that sank in poisoned waves through his muscles. Splinters of wood, peeled up from his grip on the door-frame, wedged themselves cruelly under his fingernails, but the sensation failed to register over the red-swamped clangor that was ratcheting through him. He was having difficulty in picking the apoth's words out from the chorus of slithering voices in his head.

"She was dead," the man wheezed under his breath, studiously avoiding looking at Snape as he said it. The hand on the flask tightened convulsively.

The words failed to register immediately, sliding in and out from between the half-formed whispers and echoing calls that curled in his ears. Snape squinted at the apoth, the feeble light making his eyes burn as if an acid fume were peeling away the corneas, his vision blurring with moisture that did nothing to soothe the sting. He began to back away from the doorway to the shop-floor, seeking the darker refuge of the back hallway as the three words slammed into place, three sharp stabs into comprehension that froze him part-way between light and shadow.

"No, that isn't-"

"*She was dead!*" the fat man shrieked before he could press his shaking hand to his mouth, stopping the panic from spewing out in a shrill, acidic torrent. His pudgy fingers were white at the ends from muffling his terror, the stones in the gaudy rings he wore winking with a malicious gleam that punctured straight into Snape's head. This was far worse than he had thought possible. If Parr's Handler was dead, then everything he had planned, everything he had wanted was forever closed to him. He felt a suffocating stricture in his chest, as if two giant hands had clamped themselves on his heart and squeezed. An acrid, smarting vapour rolled off of the apoth's shaking form and up into Snape's skull.

"How?" It was the only word he could bring to his lips that made any sense.

The apoth shook his bald head rapidly from side-to-side, eyes screwed tightly shut, hand still clamped to his mouth, a trickle of sweat sliding along his jowls. His nostrils flared wide to allow him to heave air in and out of his lungs.

"*How?!*" Snape demanded to know through teeth clenched together so tightly it made his jaw creak from the strain.

"I don't know," the apoth cried, snatching his hand away from his mouth, eyes snapped open and wide in their gleaming fright. "I went to look... to see what had happened... but it wasn't her!"

The metallic tang of blood blossomed in Snape's nose. "What are you talking about?"

Two quick steps brought the apoth closer, causing the taller man to shy back farther into shadow as if Todianus had raised a hand to strike him. The blood splattered, sweat-soaked robes swung and clung around the man's bulky form.

"It wasn't the same woman! I'd never seen this one before, but she was dead. When I realised..." The man's mouth gaped open and shut a few times, the spittle on his lips making the flesh glisten. The hand that held the ruined handkerchief to his cut flesh dropped away, the edges of the wound now gummed together. "I panicked! I tried to run, but Sniffer grabbed hold of my arm and nearly tore it out of my shoulder like a chicken wing! He was right in my face! I didn't know he could *see* like that!" A clenched fist was held towards Snape, not in threat, but in adrenalin-locked disbelief. "The Sniffer is a Legilimens! How is that *possible*?"

If Todianus realised this, then it meant the Striker had raided into the man's mind, and if he was anywhere near as adept as Parr, then the apoth would not have been able to hold anything back from discovery. Unless-

"He knew about the Imperius! I felt him touch it... he know*severything*!"

The gravestone chill that pulled his stomach towards the floor between his feet did nothing to alleviate the blistering welter of Snape's nerves as they screamed and frayed. A thick heat slid out his nose and down to the corner of his mouth. Time began to slow, as if mired in syrup that weighed it down to a leaden crawl.

"I thought he was going to kill me," the apoth croaked, his hand now unclenched and clawed around his fleshy throat. "Slammed me against the wall... 'rabbit', he called me. 'We've caught a sly little rabbit in our trap' he said, and struck me across the face." His eyes defocused, looking straight through Snape as he recounted what had happened. "I saw the knife in his hand... he was going to butcher me but I couldn't move! I saw..." A crease of confusion and uncertainty sliced down between his brows. "... something behind him... something monstrous." His eyes shifted from side to side rapidly, seeing within, remembering. "The Sniffer must have heard it.... he turned..." The apoth's eyes snapped back into focus. "The second his hand was off my throat, I Disapparated! I don't know what happened... what it was. Teeth, and claws. And the eyes... I-" He stopped. "Why are you bleeding?"

Snape risked raising his hand to his face and felt his body start to tip off balance, his legs now gripped in shuddering torment. The dark streak across the back of his hand made him realise the blood he'd smelled was his own. He raised his eyes back up to the apoth's bewildered face, and it was right at that moment he caught the flicker of movement. If the apoth hadn't been blocking out most of the light, Snape might have missed it, but the shadows on the other side of the shop window's glass betrayed their intent as a sliver of warning flickered across his awareness a heartbeat before the entire front wall exploded into a brutalised, shearing destruction.