

Reckoning

by odogoddess

The war is finally over and Severus Snape is waiting for justice to be done. Ten years later, he still waits...

1 of 2 - The White Room

Chapter 1 of 2

The war is finally over and Severus Snape is waiting for justice to be done. Ten years later, he still waits...

A/N: With thanks to chazpure for initial beta and scatteredlogic for final beta and Britpicking.

This story was written before Book 7, so is not DH-compliant.

* * * *

"Harry?"

"Are you sure, Harry?"

"I saw what I saw."

Snape scowled reflexively in the chair he was chained to and almost wished he had not bothered to protect the messy-haired brat. Since Snape had taken more than one hex for him during the Final Battle and saved Hermione's life, which had distracted Voldemort at a crucial moment, allowing Harry to finally smite him, the boy had been insufferable.

As annoying as he'd been when he thought Snape was a horrid, greasy git of a teacher, then murderer, he was twice as annoying now in his magnanimous attitude; it was like bloody noblesse oblige and it rankled.

Moody limped into the room and jerked his head at Harry, silently conveying that he wished him to leave. Harry hesitated.

"Go on with you, boy. We need to question him. Then we'll ask you to confirm or deny his statement."

Harry finally nodded and left the room.

"Long time no see. Murderer."

Snape said nothing.

"You may have tricked that boy out there, but some of us know what you really are."

Snape looked up at him then. Moody's one human eye glittered menacingly. So it was to be like that, was it?

"Let's dispense with the pleasantries. Why don't you just try and convict me right here and cart me off to Azkaban?"

Moody scowled. "Eager to catch up with the rest of your Death Eater friends?"

"I have no friends."

"No loyalty among thieves and cut-throats."

Snape said nothing.

"I've got something of yours."

Moody held up his wand. Snape gazed on the length of ebony and then looked at the Auror, sneered.

"Bet you want it, don't you?"

Moody moved closer, wand clenched in his meaty hand.

Snape ignored him and looked straight ahead.

"You listen to me, you filthy, no good, murderer I know there's enough question now to convict you. I know that boy thinks he knows what he saw."

"You feel your own savior is imagining things?"

"He's done it before. The boy has a vivid imagination. Who knows what spell or potion you used that made him think you're innocent? We know better! We know you!" Moody's voice had built to a roar.

Snape drew in a slow, even breath and released it, saying nothing.

"I'm here to make sure you don't get away with it this time!"

Before Snape could react, Moody lunged close, grabbing at Snape's shackled arms. Snape instinctively grappled with him, trying to pull the maddened Auror off him.

He could smell the Auror's breath as he hissed and felt his wand pressing hard on top of his hand. He pushed his head back against the wooden chair, striving to keep his face from Moody's bared teeth. His wand was being forced into his grip.

He froze as Moody smiled at him, a grim rictus of expression.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

The door slammed open, even as Snape froze in horror.

Moody slumped in his lap, dead at his own hand. The wand was still stuck in between the chair arm and Snape's palm.

Kingsley Shacklebolt stared in horror.

"What the devil?"

Harry hurried into the room, followed by Hermione, who gasped at the scene.

Snape's wand clattered to the floor and he closed his eyes. There was nothing, he knew, that he could say that would salvage the situation. His innocence would count for naught in the face of the direct evidence.

Harry frowned, confused, and was about to step forward when Shacklebolt stopped him with hand.

"A moment, Harry."

The Auror shut and warded the door.

"I don't want anyone coming and ruining evidence," he stated. Then he drew his own wand. "*Accio wand!*"

Snape's wand flew to Kingsley who cast *aPriori Incantatum*. The four all watched the results, Hermione's hands flying to her mouth in horror. Harry looked troubled.

"Why?" He turned to Snape.

"Say nothing," Shacklebolt advised him before turning to the two. "Harry, Hermione. Please step out."

Harry looked like he wished to argue, but finally allowed Hermione to pull at his elbow and lead him away.

He paused at the door to look at Snape one last time. He swallowed.

"I trusted you."

Then he left Snape with Shacklebolt, who closed the door again, then turned and smiled at Snape. The smile was a bit too wide for Snape's comfort.

"Well, then, traitor. Looks like you might just be getting what you deserve after all."

The last thing Snape remembered was hearing Shacklebolt cast "*Stupefy!*"

* * * *

When he woke, it was dim and cold. There was a single candle burning, the candleholder set atop a copy of the *Daily Prophet* which lay atop the single table in the single room. A simple stool was before it.

He lay on a mattress that was spread out on a marble slab of some kind. Two folded blankets lay to the side. A pillow was under his head.

Was he in Azkaban? He had been there once, but his room had not seemed this clean or smooth or white. Whatever place he was in had no windows, no door, no opening that he could see aside from two very small pipes that extended in near the ceiling at two corners of the room, which he suspected provided the room's only ventilation.

He sat up and immediately felt his bladder protest rather painfully. This made him look around rather more urgently, and he noted, with some relief, a chamber pot, which he used without preamble.

In doing so he noted he wore only a dun-coloured robe of lightweight wool and socks. His boots and pants were gone. This made him scowl a bit, but he was grateful for what he did have.

To his further relief, the chamber pot appeared to have a self-cleaning charm built in, as it emptied as soon as he was done. He set it down near the nominal "bed" and noted a basin on the table, which held water. He drank thirstily, noting the basin also appeared to have been charmed to refill with clean water. He sighed. At least his imprisonment wasn't to be entirely unpleasant. It seemed the room had the basic amenities, although he did wonder how he was to be fed in a room that had no visible entry.

Of course, appearances could be deceiving.

Two hours later, Snape conceded defeat. He had scoured every wall minutely, looking for cracks, listening as he tapped carefully, high and low, using the sturdy stool to stand on, to tap near the stone ceiling.

Nothing. He had only learnt that the cell was approximately 12 feet by 16 feet, and approximately 8 feet in height, entirely enclosed.

Now he sat on the stool at the table and set the large candle aside to look at the paper. To his surprise, a folded parchment was under the candleholder.

He unfolded and looked at it. The note was in the perfectly even penmanship that indicated a Dictaquil had been used to write it.

Snape I'm sure you've figured out now that you are held captive. I would say imprisoned, but truly, Azkaban's facilities are not so nice, are they? You have a bed with a mattress. You have a privy and clean water. You have light, as the candle provided will burn for exactly one year before it expires and leaves an indelible mark on the holder. I want you to know exactly how long you are captive.

The flame can be increased by stroking the candle upwards, and damped down should you desire darkness by tapping it. It will never go entirely out, however. Do you see how magnanimous I am? More than you have ever been. Far better than you ever treated me will I treat you, Snape. You have blankets and a pillow. You will get food, oh, yes, because I am not cruel. I leave such things to you.

No, you will have everything I choose to allow you except for freedom. You do not deserve freedom for your many sins. You do not deserve a quick death, either. No, you, my dear prisoner, deserve to suffer. You deserve what you will receive, and I am the one who will determine what that is to be.

I am the master here. You should know about those. Do you remember your masters, Snape? Lord Voldemort. Albus Dumbledore. Well, now I am your master. And you will kneel before me one day. And I shall enjoy that very, very much.

Snape's nostrils flared, and he nearly wadded up the parchment, but then reminded himself not to dispose of any possible resource. There were few enough in this room.

Suddenly, the sound of displaced air made him turn his head to see an owl phase through a seemingly solid wall and drop a brown paper sack onto the table. It was gone before he could even think to catch it, phasing back through the wall.

This time, Snape got up and went to that wall. It was as solid as before. There was no single clue that it might not be an actual wall.

He sat again, stymied, and stared at the paper sack before opening it.

The smell of warm sandwiches filled the small room. His stomach growled, and he retrieved the food from the sack, finding several roast beef sandwiches, a plate of chips and a rather dilapidated pair of apples.

He carefully smelt the food, but could sense nothing with which it might have been doctored. Not that this meant much, since he well knew there were many potions that could not be detected by smell, but he had no other way of testing.

He decided to take the missive he'd found at face value and accept that his unknown captor wanted him alive.

The food was delicious, and he ate a few sandwiches and an apple, saving the rest for later in case he got hungry. They were steamy hot, and remained so, indicating a standard stasis spell had been cast to keep them fresh.

Whilst he ate, he read the *Daily Prophet*, which, he noted, was dated two days from the time he last remembered. No wonder his bladder had felt nigh to bursting!

The front page was dedicated to Lucius Malfoy's successful attempt to remain out of Azkaban. He was seen weeping, purportedly in distress after having been freed from the Imperius, which he swore Voldemort had used against him.

Well, supposed Snape now, it had worked for him after the last war. Malfoy had, in fact, refused to return to Malfoy manor until it was thoroughly cleaned of dark magic by the MLE. He claimed Voldemort had forced him and his family to house various dark artefacts, and he gave the beleaguered Ministry an undisclosed amount so the MLE and Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office could work around the clock to purge his house of all dark influences, which, Snape conceded was a novel approach.

More interesting was the small article on the front cover about him. Apparently, he was an escaped fugitive. He had, the *Prophet* informed the reader, killed an Auror, one Alastor Moody, and escaped the head of the MLE, one Kingsley Shacklebolt via use of an undiscovered portkey. The Aurors were looking for him. Shacklebolt was said to have given a statement of confidence in his being found. He was, the paper indicated, tried in absentia by the MLE and found guilty. If he was caught and killed, it would be no loss. Otherwise, he was to be sent to Azkaban for life.

Snape's gut twisted, suddenly feeling as if the food had turned to lead in his stomach. He rubbed at his stomach. He had an uneasy digestion at the best of times, and this was most definitely not a good time for it to start troubling him.

This thought made him suddenly think to wonder about loo rolls. There were none in the room. He considered the *Prophet*, then, and the brown paper sack. The *Prophet* might be his only link to the outside in future. He had no idea if his captor would continue to provide it or not.

He began to tear the paper sack into strips of the appropriate size...

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The first week he had worked industriously, trying to figure out a way to get out of his cell. He even tried to capture the owl that brought his bag of food, with little success. It was somehow spelled so it could phase through that wall, and was entirely insubstantial. His food did not become solid until the owl released his bundle and flew back through that seemingly solid wall.

Snape had spent a few bad days imagining that some nameless, unseen captor was watching him through that wall, like a specimen in a lab jar. It made him wary of washing or using the chamber pot, and he'd adopted the habit of tapping the candle down and lifting his robes only far enough to allow him to straddle it so he could relieve his bowels. He faced the wall as he used the brown paper and stuffed the soiled strips into the chamber pot behind him, which promptly made them vanish.

He also tapped the candle's flame down the first time he'd felt the need to relieve other sources of discomfort.

The first time he had brought the chamber pot to his bed along with a strip of dampened brown paper, he had felt deeply ashamed, but he had always had a strong sexual drive, and captivity did not alter it.

Still, he had lifted his robes the bare minimum, and quickly and mechanically taken care of the stiff ache, aiming his release into the chamber pot and then wiping his hand and softening penis with the paper before dropping it into the pot and watching evidence of his indiscretion disappear.

The morning after his second furtive wank of the week, he had woken stiff and sore to the realization that the room, as well as himself, had been cleaned and refreshed. His robe had been laundered. There was what appeared to be a rather large and old-fashioned wooden washtub in one corner. A rather threadbare towel was draped over it and some flannels, as well as a large cake of harsh soap. Another robe was at the foot of his bed, as well as another pair of socks. They were also dun-coloured and were definitely not new.

As he stood, he could feel the dampness of his hair against his neck and cringed. He reached a hand up to feel it and was perturbed to realize he'd been shaved. Someone had bathed him and shaved him in his sleep! Or more likely, he thought now, considering how stiff he felt, someone had *Stupefy*'d in him his sleep and then done whatever they wanted as he lay insensate. His muscles were paying for the indignity of being kept unnaturally immobile for however long his captor took to do his deeds.

Snape grew red with mixed rage and humiliation. How dare someone touch his person, invade his private space! Yes, it was a cell, but it was still his only refuge.

The fact they had washed him was a further slight to him. He was normally fastidious about his toilet habits, but he had avoided washing because he felt he was being watched. Now it seemed it did not matter. One way or the other his captor would learn all his secrets, would not allow him any dignity. This made him as furious as he'd been when James bloody Potter and Sirius Black had hung him upside down, exposing him to half the school. They had made fun of every aspect of his being, and when he'd returned only a few years after he left Hogwarts, he'd had to put up with the recycled comments from students who remembered him and the so-called Marauders' treatment of him.

He knew well what was said behind his back to this day about his supposed filthy habits. He had heard the students speaking none too cautiously in the hallways, discussing his greasy hair and discoloured hands and nails. The little cretins never bothered to consider that dealing with sometimes noxious potion fumes all day would leave him with no hair at all if he did not bother to coat it with protective oil during the day. Nor did they think of the fact that dealing with potions ingredients all the time might stain his hands and nails.

But was it a student who held him captive? A former student? Maybe more than one?

He considered things and decided it was unlikely. The letter, as well as the elaborate setting of his cell, and Moody's and Shackbolt's odd behaviour seemed to indicate it was likely the work of just one very determined and methodical person.

Snape As you can see, not washing will only necessitate my having to wash you personally as I will not allow you to wallow in filth like you would in Azkaban.

Do not thank me, for it is not kindness that compels me. You see, I know how you love your secrets, how you covet your privacy. It was how you hid secrets from your masters, your private nature. Well, you have no privacy now, my dear Snape. Your every secret will be laid bare before me.

Do I watch? Does it matter? I will answer, though, since I disliked having to handle you and your pathetically unappealing body. No, I do not watch you constantly. I have better things to do with my time. You are but one tiny bit of satisfaction that gives my heart a lift as I go about my day.

Knowing you are trapped, helpless but for what I give, and ultimately doomed should I unexpectedly suffer a demise, is, quite simply, the highlight of my every day. I'd bet, having looked on your pale and scrawny form that this is a first.

Did no one ever tell you a bit of sunlight is good? Did you never aspire to be fitter? There are potions to help your muscles develop, you know. Or at least, I assume you know, being a Potions master. Or perhaps it is that you do not care what anyone thinks because no one has ever looked at you naked. Is that it?

I know you masturbate. You do it so joylessly I can't help but wonder if you've ever even had a lover. Is it that no one has ever touched you and so you do not know what it can be like? Or is it that you know you are so ugly no one would want you? Pathetic. As it is one pleasure I feel no need to curtail, don't bother trying to hide it. The knowledge that you will never know the touch of another gives me great pleasure. So feel free to wank without consequence.

To that end, I left a tub and some soap so that you may wash properly, as well as two flannels and a rag so that you can keep your cell clean. Never let it be said I cannot be magnanimous.

Once he'd calmed, Snape inspected the tub. It was roomy enough for him to get into and sit with his knees up. It was not new, clearly well used, and the wood had a worn and slightly warped look to it. An old-fashioned rubber plug was on the bottom. He unplugged it and poured water from his water basin within. The water drained away, magically. The tub did not leak at all, and when he took his first bath, he discovered there was a warming charm on it. Once water was inside it, the water quickly became pleasantly warm, an unexpected boon for which Snape felt shame to be grateful.

After his first bath, Snape once again considered his predicament. He was beginning to suspect who might be holding him captive. He re-read his two letters and imagined Lucius Malfoy's voice. Yes. It had to be Malfoy. Somehow he had *Imperio*'d Moody and bribed Shackbolt. No doubt the Auror felt he deserved imprisonment and did not care if he served his time in Azkaban or in one of the Malfoy sepulchers.

It would no doubt amuse Lucius to provide Snape with rustic furnishings, plain food, and to withhold amenities like loo rolls, knowing he would be forced to use the brown paper sacking.

In his first letter he also claimed to feel hard done by Snape. He had mentioned his "masters"; a term Lucius had used condescendingly as regarded Albus Dumbledore, when he wasn't calling him "that Muggle-loving fool you work for."

The Malfoys also had their own owlery; it would be easy for Lucius to pick one particular one for his daily task. The Malfoys also had house-elves and kitchens. It would be simplicity itself for him to order sandwiches with stasis charms on them, picnic-style, and get his owl to deliver them, no one the wiser.

The phasing charm on the owl was a clever bit of work, but Lucius had always been very good at Charms. Such as the one on the tub, an afterthought of a gesture which smacked of *noblesse oblige*, the very epitome of Lucius Malfoy.

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By the fourth month, he had fallen into a sort of routine. He had worked out a method of telling the time by feeling the wall by the table. It grew dampish and cool at what he suspected was night. He always had slept between six or seven hours at night, no more, sometimes less if he suffered nightmares. When he did he would sit up and increase the flame on the candle and recite potions ingredients in as close to alphabetical order as he could get. Still, even when he could not sleep well during the war years, he nearly always awoke with the dawn.

The owl with his food package usually came not long after he woke. He didn't know how his captor could tell when he was awake, but he did not, could not, question it. He'd yet to be able to get hold of the bird, and even if he did, he had nothing with which to write a message.

He did not sicken, as expected, from lack of sun, so he knew his food had been spelled to provide what nutrients his body needed. He wondered at this, why Malfoy would even bother, and then decided the kitchen elf assigned to provide his meals was the likely candidate for the unexpected consideration. Elves thought of a lot more than their owners gave them credit for.

He would eat, remove the dried robe draped over the tub and fold it on his bed. Then he would do the stretching exercises a Healer had once recommended to him for muscle stiffness, pace the long end of the room, six steps and turning to repeat it five thousand times. Sometimes he counted in English, sometimes in Greek, sometimes in

German, sometimes in Latin. He soon alternated by counting in English on Mondays, Greek on Tuesdays, German on Wednesdays, Latin on Thursdays, German on Fridays, and Greek on Saturdays. Sundays he only stretched and did the *Prophet* crossword by scratching his answers out with a nail.

After his walk or the crossword, he would fill the tub, remove his robe and bathe. He did not have to shave, as he'd discovered not long after the tub had appeared. It seemed Malfoy had not only shaved him at the time, but also applied a hair-inhibiting spell to his face. He sometimes wished he'd applied it to the hair on his head, as, uncut, it continued to grow.

So he washed his robe every other day and set it to drape over the tub's edge. It took two days for it to dry properly. The two small pipe ends that opened near the ceiling of his cell clearly provided fresh air, but there was no breeze save what Snape himself raised by waving a newspaper. He took to doing this from time to time, not merely to dry his robes faster, but to spread the scent of freshly washed laundry through the room. At least, it was, briefly, something different to smell.

He took care to wank in the tub on those days he felt the need, closing his eyes and shutting everything out of his mind that he could, imagining the one time as a youth when nearly all the school had gone to Hogsmeade just before summer hols. He had no money and no desire to be tormented in town or on the road by the gruesome twosome comprised of Black and Potter, so he didn't go.

Instead, he'd found a shaded clearing under a tree and, noticing no one at all was around, he had given in to his hormones and stroked himself to an orgasm so intense he thought he would rupture himself. This fantasy served him well, and he imagined the blue of the sky, the clouds and the cool grass beneath him. He remembered how it felt to be young and vibrant, his body pulsing with vitality and magic and a need so great it was practically all he could think of, day and night. He remembered how he never had much leisure or privacy for an involved wank, having to settle for quick toss-offs in the loo between classes and occasionally under his bedclothes, lifting his frayed nightshirt and taking himself in hand and biting his lip to stay quiet, not to disturb his dorm mates. He remembered how lovely that day had been, as if it was just for him, and no one else. He had felt at one with the Earth and its own magic, pulsing with life and vitality as much as he was himself.

Just before the imagined scent of that long gone summery day could be recalled, he would find himself shuddering out his climax into the bathwater.

Then he would rinse his genitals and drain the tub. He would dry and dress. He would tear the brown paper into strips, some of which would be lost to the chamber pot not long after his bath.

Then he would read another page of the *Daily Prophet*, which was sent once a week. He had a small stack of them saved beneath the table. He would pull them out and stare at the images, imagining how each person would sound as they spoke. He even mimed them sometimes, when the need to hear a sound, any sound, was nigh unbearable.

Occasionally a sound would filter in to him, from wherever he was being kept. Once, he thought he heard a child screaming, another time he thought he heard singing, but wasn't sure if it was his imagination.

The only other sounds, like large rumbling ones that seemed to make the floor beneath his feet shake, were all he heard. He imagined that was thunder. The faint smell of moist earth also filtered down at those times, although he was less sure if it was a real perception or something he imagined. The two pipe ends near the ceiling remained dry, although, he suspected this was due to a spell.

No messages had come since the last that came with the tub.

He felt like he was going mad...

He woke stiff and sore one day, but his hair was not damp and he had not been washed. He groaned, sitting up, and noted a new addition to his cell atop the table. A small, black wizarding wireless sat atop one corner of the table, the ridged knobs nearly smooth, shiny with the patina of long years of use.

My dear Snape You've grown rather boring. I presume you know how one of these works?

Of course, he had not read the note until he had spent two entire hours listening to the wireless, tears trickling down his otherwise unmoving face at the sound of each new voice.

By then he no longer cared if his captor was watching or not. The sense of being on the edge of insanity was not one he had ever cared for. It was what he was most afraid of.

That was the moment he decided he was going to kill Lucius Malfoy for this ignominy one day... even if it was the last thing he did.

* * * *

Not long after a new candle had been delivered with his food one day, along with a note congratulating him on his first year of captivity and instructions to light the candle with the dying one's flame, Snape accidentally broke a long splinter from his tub with a toenail as he clambered out of the tub.

Fortunately, the wood had not been driven into his skin, but when he picked it up, a splinter the length of his palm, he froze in revelation.

It had taken some thought, and the burning of one of his strips of brown paper for the soot, but not long after, he began to use the splinter to write a journal of sorts... as well as notes detailing his ordeal and asking for help. He stopped using the brown paper for the toilet and his other needs, and began using sections of the old Prophets he did not care for, instead, saving the brown paper for his notes. The stack of newspapers had been growing beneath the table anyway, he decided.

The owl, of course, refused his notes, but Severus had considered this. He began to time the bird phasing in and out of his cell and threw the notes out the wall as it phased out, hoping for them to land outside the magical wall. He fully expected to get called on his attempts to communicate, although, to his surprise, nothing happened.

He did not get in trouble, but nothing ever came of the notes. Still, he threw a new note out every week.

They all said the same thing: S. Snape held prisoner by L. Malfoy. Hidden, possibly a sepulcher. Please find me.

They all were dated. They all were ignored.

* * * *

His third year, he decided to turn his schedule around and see what happened.

As it turned out, not much. The food was spelled to stay hot and fresh until he ate it, so all that happened was that he missed the owl's delivery and no new notes were sent for a while.

Not that it seemed to matter much, he thought. No one could apparently see them, wherever they were landing. He still strongly suspected he was being kept in one of the Malfoy sepulchers. If so, it was remotely possible that a visitor or relative might run across his notes. Or a house-elf, he thought now, although they would not do anything, even if they found him.

Still, he returned to his normal schedule, which now included tying his hair back with a slight strip of fabric he had carefully torn from the bottom of one of his robes. It was, he gathered, below his shoulder blades. This, more than anything, marked the passage of time to him.

He continued writing and trying to throw his notes out with the morning owl. What else could he do?

* * * *

His wireless, he'd discovered one day near the end of his third year, occasionally picked up a French broadcast. So he spent his fourth year learning French. He even tried to write some, but not knowing the spelling of things hampered his efforts.

He had not received any notes from his captor in over two years. The candles denoting the year's passage came with his food, and no note since the first. The only new development was that the food no longer came quite so regularly. He had finally determined he got a larger than normal portion of food on the weekends, so he had to make sure to ration it. Often the owl would not return until midweek, and then it brought only enough for one meal each day, instead of enough for the whole day like before.

He wondered, as he began to note that he was losing weight, if he was being forgotten. This did nothing to his routine, aside from changing the quantity of his nightmares.

He dreamt often now of his prison opening, and someone, usually Draco or Narcissa, finding him. He was always nearly dead in the dream an ancient, withered man, too old and frail to walk or talk.

The only thing that soothed his mind, although not for long, was remembering that Draco and his mother had escaped the Dark Lord's wrath long before the war ended and were likely still in hiding.

This was finally confirmed his fifth year, when he heard a wireless news report about Lucius Malfoy trying to get his wife and son declared dead so that he could remarry.

The jammy bastard was courting the Parkinson's scion!

* * * *

Despite his regular wank sessions, Severus still experienced the occasional sexy dream. Sometime in his fifth year, they became more than occasional the norm rather than the exception.

He blamed the wireless news report of Lucius's official engagement to Pansy for starting it, but in his dreams, whenever he heard the occasional gossip piece about the couple of interest, he became Lucius, and it was their wedding night.

Severus practically vibrated with sexual tension as he looked on his new wife. He tried to take care of her needs before his own, but his efforts were clumsy, his thin fingers stiff as they had been getting recently as he had no potion for his mildly rheumatic joints. Moreover, he was so hard with need that he ached, and even his shame at looking at one of his own students in this way could not stop him from reaching for her... climbing over her...

Severus woke up ejaculating, swearing as he felt his copious semen soiling his robe.

This soon became a regular occurrence when he heard news of marriages or engagements on the wireless. Now that the immediacy of the war and its aftermath had ebbed, now that the school had reopened and students had been readmitted and were graduating, and those who'd already graduated had finished their training and apprenticeships and were embarked on careers, relationships once again took center stage in Wizarding youths' lives.

In spite of being alone, Severus still blushed whenever his member began to get hard now at the mention of marriages or engagements of people he knew, knowing of the dreams that would come.

Since most of such announcements were about students he had taught, the subsequent dreams also had the effect of making him feel dirty and perverted.

He did not like it, nor could he help it, but he took to sleeping with a bit of paper wrapped around the head of his penis on those particular nights... just in case.

What the isolation, what the monotonous food and surroundings had not been able to accomplish, this new wrinkle nearly did. The sexual tension he found himself filled with made Snape feel he was going quite mad.

He tried to give up listening to the wireless, but the dreams only grew worse, nightmares instead of sex dreams.

On the whole, the sex dreams were better, even if they made him feel slightly barmy... even if he did have to wank every day now, sometimes more than once.

* * * *

It was, though, ironically enough, one of these dreams that helped him near the start of his seventh year.

In it, despite his horror at the prospect, he was being sucked off by the Granger girl. The wireless that afternoon had given one of their useless reports of a possible engagement between the girl and one of the Weasley boys. It wasn't even an official engagement!

The whole tone of the report had aggravated him with their implication that it was about time Miss Granger seemed to finally be choosing to properly settle down instead of apprenticing in yet another discipline. Apparently, the girl had chosen a three-year apprenticeship in Arithmancy, followed by a course in Healing.

What was wrong with study, he'd fumed. The girl was smarter than all the Weasley clan with the possible exception of Percy. Why should she tie herself down so early, when she had a long life ahead of her, which could be quite illustrious if her studies and research were encouraged?

So, to his chagrin, this dream had him arguing, nude, before the girl, telling her she was bound for better things, for someone more worthy than him. Meanwhile, she was stroking and caressing him, distracting him from his speech. When she knelt before him and gently sucked him into her hot mouth, he arched and came and came.

He woke up still ejaculating, drenching his robes with the most powerful orgasm he'd experienced to date. It left him guilt-stricken and ashamed, despite his awareness that a man could not help what he dreamt.

After washing out his robe, he turned the wireless on, hoping for music or talk either soothing or distracting.

Instead, an advert was playing, and he sullenly put up with it as he rinsed the wash water from the tub.

Skip your NEWT's? Feel you don't have what it takes to move ahead and earn more at your job? Are all your old friends more skilled now in Charms and Transfigurations and Arithmancy? Have you been bypassed for promotion because you don't know the more complex spells, the higher incantations, or the complex calculations? Is your best friend the talk of the office because he's an Animagus whilst you're stuck in one place going nowhere fast? Well, Simon Simple's Standard School's Seven Month Certificate can help you!

The *clang* of the water basin as it hit the floor reverberated in the tiny room for many long moments.

Severus sat up the rest of the night, feverishly writing down what he knew about Transfiguration, especially the specific means to become an Animagus.

The one major pro was that it was one of the fields of magical study that needed no wand. This was helpful in his current situation.

The one major drawback was he had no instructor, therefore, there would be no way to determine if he was, in fact, making progress or just whiling away time. Still, what all did he have?

He struggled to remember and write down, both what he'd learnt as a student and what Minerva had once confided to him as a colleague, about the Animagus

transformation. She usually had at least a couple advanced students each year that chose to study the art, with varying degrees of success. With instruction, it took around two years. He recalled now that Lupin had informed the Order late in Potter's third year (and well after the fact would have been useful, of course) that Black and Pettigrew were animagi, and had successfully accomplished the skill on their own, but that it had taken them four years.

So, with proper instruction then, it took two years to master the skills. On one's own, around four.

One thing he had, though, that Black and Pettigrew hadn't, was copious spare time to devote to it...

* * * *

Three years later...

Hermione knelt by the white tomb. This was her first time visiting it since the war.

She'd finally returned to Hogwarts, this time as a Healer, to replace the retiring Poppy Pomfrey.

She had gotten to the school early and gotten herself settled into her new quarters and acquainted herself with the Infirmary and reacquainted herself with her old professors, now colleagues. She had determined what supplies needed restocking and what potions and ointments and unguents and salves needed replacing. She had made lists, and a trip to Hogsmeade, and given her requests to the school's Potions master, Justin Finch-Fletchley, offering her assistance if needed at busy times, and assuring him the simpler potions she would make herself.

That she had done over the remainder of the week as her colleagues also slowly prepared themselves for the return of students in a few weeks' time.

So it was on a warm evening in midsummer that found her outside on the grounds, standing near Dumbledore's tomb.

She had smiled tearfully at the daisy-covered ground, and then found herself bending over to gently remove a bit of tall grass trying to use the tombstone for support.

She noted her shadow lengthening on the stone and decided she would go in soon, have some dinner in her quarters and perhaps read the latest *Diseases and Diagnoses Quarterly*.

Then another shadow began to grow behind her and she turned, then gasped, straightening and reaching for her wand as Severus Snape slowly formed before her.

He was and was not like the teacher she remembered. This Snape had long black hair, with some silver in it, that nearly reached his buttocks... and she could see those buttocks and everything else since he was Mother naked!

Oddly, he blushed when he saw her and covered his genitals with both hands, even as his eyes drifted to the ground.

"M-miss Granger."

His voice was raspy and had an unused quality. She noted now how thin he looked, how deathly pale.

"Or perhaps it is Weasley now. I need... assistance," he admitted uneasily.

"P-professor Snape? Is it really you?" She held him at wand point, although he would not have noticed since he was having trouble meeting her eyes.

"I'm afraid," he murmured quietly, "that you have me at a disadvantage."

She considered this, her orderly mind setting aside her many questions for now to see to his immediate needs.

She pointed her wand to the stubbornly tall grass, and it transformed into a simple black robe.

"Please, put that on," she urged.

He glanced to the robe, and the look of gratitude in his eyes gave her pause.

What had happened to him? Where had he been?

"Sir... you were declared dead around ten years ago. Where have you been all this time?"

He had turned from her to slip the robe on and turned back now, still a bit flushed, but willing to answer.

"I'm not sure. Lucius Malfoy had me imprisoned." He looked around, eyes falling to the white tomb, and his ghostly pale face grew paler still.

"Bloody..."

"What is it?"

He pointed a shaking finger.

"That bloody bastard... he entombed me with Albus!"

* * * *

To her relief, Snape was amenable to being examined and treated. He knew he had to regain his strength if he was to meet his captor and get answers.

In order to avoid questions or a general outcry from the rest of the staff, she had led him to Hagrid's old hut. It was currently unused, as Rubeus had moved to France a few years back in order to be near his new wife. The new groundskeeper had quarters near the greenhouses, sized for a human rather than a half-giant.

"They said I was dead?"

Hermione nodded. "After you killed Alastor Moody and Apparated out from under Kingsley's nose, badly injured, he looked for you for some time. About three weeks later, Kingsley called off the hunt and declared you missing, presumed dead. He told the Order, what was left of us, that he had actually killed you near Spain. Case closed."

"Shacklebolt..." Severus frowned. "We had no animosity between us. Why would he lie?"

"Yes."

"I didn't kill Moody. I know it looked like I did, but I didn't. He forced the wand into my hand and cast the Killing Curse himself."

"But why would he do that?"

"I don't know!" Snape sounded shrill, and he stopped himself, trembling. "I don't understand. I've been imprisoned all this time. I thought it was Malfoy. But Shacklebolt..."

"I always did wonder why Kingsley insisted on searching for you alone," Hermione said now, remembering back. "Even Harry had remarked on it at the time."

"Potter. Is he all right? I've only heard mention that he's still not married."

Hermione smiled. "Mention?"

Snape coloured. "I had means with which to learn of outside news. Perhaps you should check Albus's tomb, Miss Granger, or is it Mrs. Weasley now? My story will be easily corroborated by the evidence."

"It's Healer or Miss Granger, if you prefer. I'm not married. Harry's fine." She considered the rest of his statement, and then winced at the thought of desecrating the Headmaster's tomb. "Breaking into the Headmaster's tomb would not be my first choice of action."

He nodded. "If you were an Animagus, a small form, I could lead you back in the way I got out."

"I didn't take up that particular discipline, although the idea fascinates me. How did you get out?"

"Once I achieved my Animagus transformation, I practiced these last several months until I could fully utilize my new form and hold it for long lengths of time. It was small and I was able to climb to a ventilation pipe and make my way out. I didn't know where I was. I thought I was in one of the Malfoy sepulchers. I didn't expect to find myself outside Hogwarts."

"Show me your form," she requested, still holding her wand toward him, as she'd been doing since she first saw him.

He nodded, then closed his eyes and...*withered*, shrinking down, his glossy black hair seeming to cover him, then becoming glossy black legs, impossibly small and fragile-seeming appendages.

Severus Snape was a spider. Hermione smiled.

He was not a particularly good Animagus, either, she noted, since he stood atop the robes she had transfigured for him.

Suddenly, he began to grow, changing back, and soon he was crouched before her, human and naked. He noticed this, covering himself again and blushing fiercely.

Hermione merely waved at his robe, and he quickly got off of it and slipped it back on. Her training as a Healer precluded any embarrassment now, although a part of her noted his assets with intense female appreciation.

"Don't be ashamed," she said quietly. "I'm a Healer now. I've seen it all, male, female, goblin, elf and even centaur."

"I, uh, didn't mean to do that. I can't seem to transfigure my clothing, too."

"I believe you, Severus," she said suddenly, sitting back.

He scowled a little as he tied the robe around him tightly, but he lifted a brow to her in inquiry.

"Students untutored in the Animagus transformation take rather longer to learn how to transform their clothing. Sirius once told Harry and I an amusing anecdote about his first adventures as Padfoot during our fourth year. With a bit more practice, you should be able to transform the clothes as part of you and transform them back when you return to human form."

"That is comforting to know," he murmured.

"It took them four years to learn how to take a new form, too, so that fits in. So do your general condition, your paleness and the length of your hair. But... what were you doing the other six years?"

"Seven," he corrected. "I managed the transformation and was able to hold my form long enough to learn how to utilize it fully within three years. The rest of my imprisonment is rather a blur. I was trapped, unable to do anything. I had a bed of sorts, a pad atop the marble within the tomb," he paled slightly at this, then continued.

"He sent me sandwiches, spelled to keep fresh until eaten. At first they came daily, then after a few years, they came less regularly. I had a water basin that refilled, a wash tub for bathing and washing, and a, um, self-cleaning chamber pot."

She nodded, ignoring his new blush. He was so pale, any increase in blood showed up in stark contrast.

"I was provided a weekly *Daily Prophet* and a wireless unit was provided after a few months."

"It's hard to believe."

"It's true. I tell you I can prove it."

"That's not what I meant. I'm trying to figure out why Kingsley would do such a thing."

"Perhaps he was under Imperius?"

"Put under by whom?"

"Lucius Malfoy remains my main suspect. I will find him, and I will get the truth from him."

Hermione looked troubled.

"I can see why you might feel that way, but I disagree."

He glared at her. "You don't know the messages he sent me. They were classic Malfoy. Insinuating and insulting."

She considered this.

"Did he sign them?"

Snape shook his head.

"Did he make mention of things only you and he would know?"

"No, but he didn't have to," Snape insisted.

"Be that as it may... Severus," she paused, and then to his surprise, reached a hand out to lay it on his knee.

He could feel the warmth from her palm seeping through the fabric of the thick robe she'd conjured for him. It made him feel faint, and he could feel a slight pulsing

sensation in his crotch now. He swallowed.

"The papers didn't print what Malfoy did upon hearing of your supposed death. The paper pretty much ignored anything related to his Death Eater days and focused on his supposed enforced obedience and his efforts to aid the Ministry and be a dutiful citizen."

He watched her, feeling his organ filling and feeling himself grow warm and uneasy. This close, he could smell her, the soap and shampoo she used, a faint mix of mint and eucalyptus that he found both bracing and comforting.

"H-how do you know what he said or did, then?"

She smiled, gently squeezing his knee.

"I went with Harry to tell him what Shackbolt had told the Order. Harry thought he might get something he could use against Malfoy; he was terribly upset that Malfoy escaped justice. He didn't manage to get anything of use, but... Severus... Malfoy cared for you a great deal. He was horribly upset at the news. He paid for your funeral and set up a scholarship, all quite privately, in your name for any students who wanted to apprentice in Potions. Justin Finch-Fletchley was the first recipient of the scholarship. He's the school's first Potions master since you left."

She let his knee go then, but he did not notice. His mind was whirling with this news, and his erection had died, unnoticed, as he struggled to absorb it all.

* * * *

cont'd in 2 of 2

2 of 2 - The Final Ties

Chapter 2 of 2

The war is finally over and Severus Snape is waiting for justice to be done. Ten years later, he still waits...

A/N: I normally hate prefaces to chapters; however, in this particular case, I want to be quite clear...I don't want anyone to feel I think little of non-consensual sex, because I don't.

I do feel that in times of war, generals make tough decisions about their soldiers sometimes, and Albus was definitely a general for the side of Light, and the Order were his soldiers. Every woman who enlists to go fight in war is aware of the possibility that she might be subject to non-consensual sexual contact. It is almost inevitable if captured. I do not believe the women of the Order were ignorant of the possibility, not given the Death Eaters' proclivities (any enemy who kills without compunction will have no compunction about committing any lesser offense), nor what was reported by the media.

* * * *

Hermione had sent an elf for food, and after Severus had eaten, hands stiff and uncertain in using the silverware, she had sent the used tray with the elf and bidden it to fetch her some potions.

She had given him a mild pain potion for his rheumatic fingers and wrists, applied unguent to them and to his knees, studiously ignoring the obvious erection he got during her ministrations which reared up beneath his robe. She was a Healer; she knew quite well that the presence of a woman could do that to a man, irrespective of his being touched, and Severus Snape had not known anyone's touch in years.

He had also not known sun or fresh air, and despite his obvious state of generally good health, she made him take a Confinement Replenishment Potion to ensure he did not develop any problems from their lack. He told her, and she privately believed him, that he felt the food he'd been sent had been spelled to provide him basic nutrition. Still, the last few years he had admitted to being fed less than what was normal, so she would watch his intake to be sure he got enough.

This done, she urged him to sleep, but he refused, arguing that he needed to find out who had imprisoned him and why. He was insistent.

A bit more questioning led her to suggest following the morning owl. It always came on the weekend, he had stated, and Hermione was sure it would discover him missing and go back to report to whoever had sent it.

Snape finally agreed, and she cast a light Calming Spell on him, which made him curl up and sleep as she'd suggested, lying on Hagrid's immense bed. Hermione remained at the table, troubled, and finally sent a silent Patronus to Harry.

She told him everything she knew, including her own instincts that told her Snape was in earnest and meant her no harm, in fact, meant no harm to anyone aside from his captor. She told him their plans and conveyed she was safe, and the condition Snape had been in.

She knew he was on assignment at the moment, so did not expect an answering message, but she just needed to let him know what was happening if the events of the morrow took longer than anticipated.

She wondered now who had kept Snape captive for so long. His general condition attested to the truth of his story, but it seemed so fantastic.

She set an alarm to wake her if Snape stirred or anyone approached the cabin, or barring that, an hour before day break, and Transfigured her chair into a lounge, waving her wand to stoke the fire in the fireplace before shutting her eyes.

* * * *

The moans roused her in the middle of the night, and she went to the bedside to find Snape trembling, shifting his hips, and her face grew hot as she realized he was having a sex dream.

She turned to make her way back to the lounge when he suddenly cried out, eyes opening as his hips jerked up and a damp spot spread on his robes.

He trembled and fought for breath, then jumped slightly as he noticed her. She shook her head to stop him from saying anything and, without saying a word, waved her wand to remove all signs of his wet dream. Then she put her wand away and moved silently back to her lounge, settling back and closing her eyes.

It was a long time later before Severus was able to sleep. Hermione's nonjudgmental attitude and brisk, but gentle nurturing reminded him of Poppy Pomfrey, another witch who had seen him at his worst, in humiliating circumstances, and yet treated him kindly.

It gave him much to think about, but when he finally did get back to sleep, his dreams were of a soft summer day, blue skies, white clouds and a breeze that seemed scented with mint and eucalyptus.

* * * *

As they ate their elf-provided eggs and sausage well before sunup, a silvery stag galloped into the room and swirled to Hermione, who smiled, extending her hand.

Prongs bent his head and gently touched her hand with his antlers.

Harry, she sensed, understood. He had trusted her judgment since their earliest days, even in something so questionable as this, but conveyed his concern for her nonetheless. The stag began to fade as she heard him ask her to send a Patronus after they found out anything new. He would come as soon as he was able to assist.

"I see the triumvirate still exists," Snape said dryly.

She frowned at this, and then shook her head. "Not really. Harry and I are good friends, as are Ron and Harry."

He considered this. "I heard a news report a few years ago that indicated you were considering marrying one of the Weasley boys. Was it conjecture?"

She nodded. "Ron had it in mind we would marry as soon as the war was over, then again when I completed my first apprenticeship. I was not so minded."

"I see."

"I wanted to continue my education. He did not see how that could not include him as my husband. It's an old argument."

"One I take it you won?"

"Well, not without acrimony. He was not pleased when I decided to continue my studies after my first apprenticeship."

"Were I him, I'd be pleased at your personal fulfillment."

"Yes, well, to a man like Ronald Weasley, my personal fulfillment should lie in being married to him, having his children and making a cozy household whilst he works. Some Muggles have this attitude, too. It's a holdover from the Victorian age. I refuse to let my mind go soft for any man. I also refuse to not attend to any studies I so choose just because someone else finds them inconvenient."

He nodded at her, privately pleased. He wasn't sure what to make of the sense of personal pride he felt in her. She was young enough to be a daughter...what did such a thing say about him?

He cleared his throat, suddenly uncomfortable.

"What does Potter have to say?"

She smiled, wondering if she should confess.

"Actually, he sends you his best. He hopes to see you later in the day if it's at all possible. For now, he tells us to be careful."

Snape stilled, and then glared at her, before setting down his toast and sighing.

"You told him."

"I trust him. You should, too. He knows what he saw. He also knows that things haven't added up since we both stepped out of that room and left you with Alastor."

He considered this, uneasy.

"Severus," she startled him, squeezing his hand briefly. "Let's finish eating and then we'll go see who's doing this. It's liable to be a long day."

* * * *

In the end, he'd been too nervous to eat any more, and Hermione had finally resized an old pair of enormous boots they had found by the bed for him before heading out to the tomb.

Severus was unaccountably nervous as they waited for the owl's appearance. What if it was too late? He had not had a window; he never knew the exact time. What if the owl didn't come? He was going by what "felt" right, and his decade of confinement, of following a known schedule, told him the owl *would* be coming. He wondered now how long it would take for him to break from the habits of that decade.

He nearly jumped when he felt the warm hand touch his shoulder, gentling him. He looked to the young woman by his side, whose large brown eyes expressed only care and concern, and looked away, feeling the unnerving urge to cry. He swallowed hard, swallowed down the feeling, much as he always did, and drew in a deep breath that was only slightly uneven.

"I've become unaccustomed to weather," he murmured, glad of an excuse for his trembling.

He felt the warming charm even as he saw the speck in the sky approaching. He straightened behind his tree, alerting her. Only a small part of him had not expected the owl. What was unexpected was Hermione's gasp on seeing it phase into the tomb.

"Nice bit of wand work," he agreed. "That was another reason I believed it was Malfoy. He is quite good with Charms."

"No, Severus," she breathed, eyes wide. She turned to him. "I know that owl. It's definitely not Malfoy's. It's Percy's owl, Hermes."

His face grew so pale, his eyes so wide at this, that she was afraid he'd pass out, but after a moment, his lips merely firmed, and before she could ask about his reaction, they both heard the flutter of wings.

Snape swore. He had no wand, and like a fool, he'd forgotten to ask.

Before he could say anything, though, Hermione's wand was out, and she *Stupefy'd* the owl as it lifted to the sky, falling not far in front of them. She then cast *Incarcerous*, trussing the bird up before carefully lifting it and gently placing it in a pocket of her carryall.

She met his startled gaze with her own determined one.

"We need to get to the bottom of this. This way, surprise is on our side. Come on. I know where to find him."

He had little choice but to allow her to take his arm, and for the first time in over a decade, Severus gasped as he felt the icy compression that was Apparation to him.

* * * *

The cottage was on the other side of the marshy lake of the Weasley's property, several acres from the Weasley Burrow. Hermione and Snape had Apparated to a copse of trees, hidden from view of the cottage.

"How do you know he's there?"

Hermione turned to the anxious, yet angry, Snape, and gently put a hand on his arm.

"Percy was demoted after the war due to inconsistencies in his testimony about his actions. The Ministry wasn't sure if they could trust him."

Severus's nostrils flared. "He worked for the Death Eaters."

Hermione nodded. "But he was never marked, so there was no proof."

Snape nodded and then asked, "Did he reconcile with his family?"

She shook her head. "Not really. He blamed his father for his fall within the Ministry. Molly he was less upset with; she sent him food, enough food for the whole family, he told us once. She never forgot to send him leftovers and sandwiches for his lunch."

Severus froze, remembering the sandwiches he'd eaten for years. "Of course. I should have recognized it."

"What?"

"The food. I should have recognized... M-Mrs. Weasley's hand in it," he managed to say past a tight throat.

Hermione nodded. "Molly swore she would never let any of her children go lean, and he needed the help."

She paused then, seeing the expression on his face and touched his shoulder. "What is it, Severus?"

He shook his head, a bit of colour returning to his pale cheeks. "N-nothing. So we were both eating thanks to Mo...Mrs. Weasley."

Hermione nodded. "It would seem so. He couldn't afford it on his own. He was pushed from department to department within the Ministry into more and more menial and meaningless positions, each time taking a cut in pay. He finally lost his job a few years ago. Since he's good with numbers, the twins sent him a few of their friends his way to do their accounts. That kept him from total bankruptcy."

She sighed, and realizing she still had her hand on his arm, she pulled it back and into the pocket of her robe.

"Molly and Arthur couldn't bear to think of him living in one of those shabby bedsits off Knockturn Alley, so they renovated this cottage. It's been here for years. It belonged to one of Arthur's maiden aunts until she passed. They gifted the cottage and a few acres to Percy. Frankly," she admitted now, "I haven't seen or spoken to him since one Christmas about five years ago."

Snape nodded, seemed as if he was shouldering a burden, but he straightened and looked to her.

"Well, it's past time then," he murmured, beginning to move toward the cottage, Hermione fast on his heels.

To his credit, Percy froze only momentarily when he opened the door to their knock. His closed expression did not change one iota, although he did not bother to deny his actions.

"I wondered why Hermes hadn't returned," was all he said.

Hermione kept her wand out.

"Percy. We need to speak."

The tall, thin young man looked to her, then to Snape. The young man, Severus noted, was the same height as him. Percy managed to look bored.

"Fine."

They stepped in, edging past him and Hermione ignored the room to ask, "Why, Percy? Why have you done this?"

Percy's lip twisted into an impressive scowl, glaring now at Snape. "He was going to get away scot-free with his crimes. I couldn't allow that to happen."

Hermione frowned and gestured with her wand, keeping him in her sights.

"Who appointed you High Inquisitor? We have laws."

"You have bribery and corruption," Percy snarled. "Look at Lucius Malfoy. Are you going to tell me you believe his tale of woe and redemption?"

She hesitated, conceding the point, and Snape finally spoke.

"So you wanted me punished? Why? I never truly worked for Him. You, of all people, should know this. So why?"

Percy stood taller then, a haughty look on his face. "My Lord's last thoughts to me were to make sure you were punished for your treachery... and I'm still proud to do his work."

Hermione gasped, paling. Snape merely pursed his lips, a look of disquiet on his face.

"Fitting, don't you think? To jail you in the tomb of your former master? Since you so loved him that you betrayed your true master in his name, I thought it apropos you should rot with the Muggle-loving fool."

"Percy," Hermione breathed, disbelieving.

He ignored her.

"He loved you," Percy told him now, speaking only to Snape. "And you betrayed him."

"He was a blight on our world," Snape said repressively.

"He was our Lord!" Percy snapped, dark eyes flashing. "After Dumbledore's death, you could do no wrong, you were his golden boy. But I had my suspicions and I started gathering evidence. My suspicions amused him, but I hoped one day I would gather enough information so he would give me my marking assignment."

Hermione frowned. "Marking assignment?"

Snape answered her. "When Voldemort felt an initiate was ready to join the Death Eaters, he would assign them a task that, if successfully completed, would garner his favour and only then would he brand them with the Dark Mark."

"Yes, to join the faithful, my true brothers. But you got in my way. Always making me look foolish, mocking my efforts before the others." Percy paused, and then snapped out, "You made my life there as bad as life at home!"

Snape said nothing and Percy went on. "You didn't even know how disgusted you made me feel when you pretended to care, trying to talk to me, telling me how much my family must miss me and how, perhaps, I should go back to them."

Severus swallowed. "It wasn't pretense, Percy."

"Shut it! I knew what you were up to. I knew! You changed tactics, didn't you? Just like a snake, twisting this way and that. You told me I should go back and get in their good graces. Since you couldn't get rid of me, you were trying to groom me as a supposed spy for the Dark Lord."

"I didn't want you tainted by association, boy! Look what's happened to you since his death!"

Percy shrugged this off. "I didn't trust you, Severus Snape. I never trusted you."

He said nothing, and Hermione swallowed, hoping the situation wouldn't devolve any further. Percy had no wand she could see, but she wondered now if he even needed one. Despite his thin frame and drawn appearance, they could feel the dark power radiating from him.

"Nor did my old friend, Scabbers."

Severus frowned and Hermione quickly murmured, "Percy's rat for years, who was actually Peter Pettigrew."

"Yes. You and the Dark Lord called him Wormtail. Not very nice. But Scabbers... Peter... was my friend and loyal to the Dark Lord."

"He was only ever loyal to himself," Snape rasped. Percy ignored him.

"I trusted him and he never lied to me. He gave me information...where you lived, what you did. I learned enough that I felt certain to gain the Dark Lord's favour."

"So why didn't you then?" Hermione suddenly demanded, hoping to change the atmosphere in the room between the two men. "Why didn't you just join Voldemo..."

"Don't say his name!" Percy screamed, nearly in her face.

"...rt and be done with it?"

Snape moved between them, pushing Hermione behind him and, to her shock, placing long fingers on her wand as he did. Silvery mist shot from it and flew under the door.

Through the window, Hermione was shocked to see the fading shape of a wispy mongoose running past.

Percy snarled, pushed beyond endurance, and he grappled now with Snape, knocking Hermione aside and causing her wand to fly from her hand and skitter across the floor.

They were of a height, and both thin, but Severus had been imprisoned for a decade in a cold tomb and Percy was young and healthy. Despite a valiant struggle, all too soon Snape was pressed to the floor, Weasley's forearm to his throat, a dagger to his heaving chest. Hermione, Snape noted with a quick glance, was gone. He hoped she had fled the cottage or Apparated out in the commotion.

"You ruined everything," Percy breathed.

He glared at Snape as they both struggled to catch breath. The dagger poked Snape with each breath, and he fought, unsuccessfully, to keep from inflating his lungs quite so much. He thought he heard a soft sound from behind them, but Percy did not seem to notice. Indeed, he was scowling now, a triumphant expression on his face.

"You deserved to rot in a cell! And now you deserve to die."

Snape swallowed tightly against that wiry forearm. "So you would kill your father then?"

Percy frowned, then scowled. "I could care less what he thinks or how he feels. My stupid Muggle-loving father never gave me much attention or anything else I needed."

"That's not true."

Both men stiffened, then looked to the entryway to the kitchen where Hermione and Molly stood behind Arthur Weasley. The man stood, wand at his side, not held out, as he took in the tableau before him.

Molly whispered, sotto voce, to Hermione, "We got Severus's Patronus. That was rather startling, but..."

"The hell it's not true," Percy sneered now, interrupting her.

"Oh, Percy..." Molly spoke tearfully. "Oh, it is. Your... father... he protected you as much as he could. He kept you from darkening your soul any further, kept you from doing horrible things in the name of evil."

Percy looked askance at her and then gestured with his chin to Arthur. "When did he ever do that?"

Arthur sighed sadly. "You're right. I never did. But Severus Snape did... and he's your father."

* * * *

Snape burned with shame as Molly and Arthur spoke to Percy. He would not, *could* not, meet the intensely curious gaze of Hermione now as his most secret shame was revealed.

"He *raped* you?!"

Severus finally spoke. He trembled beneath his son.

"It was one of my marking assignments. I was a half-blood, so the Dark Lord wanted to be sure I was not sympathetic to the side of light, that I could truly be a Death Eater. I was to go to Dumbledore and join the order... that was my first assignment, in order to spy for him. I did this. But it wasn't enough, and he felt he couldn't be sure of my loyalties, so... he ordered me to... rape one of my newfound colleagues."

A sob sounded from the corner, but Snape refused to look to see if it was Molly or Hermione.

"I was to wear my Death Eater garb and do this thing and return so the Dark Lord could view my thoughts. He wanted to see if I felt hatred and contempt or lust and satisfaction like a true Death Eater, or whether I felt guilt and compassion. I had to do this in order to gain entrance."

Percy's voice dripped with contempt. "Obviously, you didn't have any difficulty with your assignment."

Snape winced.

"I told Albus. He was troubled, but... he called select women of the Order to his office."

Molly suddenly spoke. "Dumbledore explained what was at stake, Percy. We all knew. We all drew straws. Minerva, Alice Longbottom, Emmeline Vance, and Lily Potter."

"And you."

She nodded at Percy. "Yes. And me. Whichever of us was drawn... we would tell our man."

"I was fully aware of and accepted the decision," Arthur told them now, with surprising aplomb.

"This is preposterous!" Percy was aghast.

"It was war," Arthur corrected. "And people were being murdered, children were tortured and maimed. *That* was worse than preposterous. And, the ladies present will pardon my language, but if allowing my own self to be bugged in the middle of Diagon Alley would have helped to stop that madman, then I'd have done it."

"Arthur," Molly soothed, gently touching her husband's shoulder. "Anyway, I was chosen."

Percy and Hermione stood, stock-still and shocked at these revelations. Hermione was remembering what Percy had said of Snape, of how he had treated him when he was amidst the Death Eaters. Severus must have been horrified at Percy's presence.

The look of shock on Severus's face outside the cabin earlier came to mind now, as well. *The food...* Hermione remembered something Ron had off-handedly said to Harry and her one time at Grimmauld Place. That Snape never ate with the rest of the Order. *Having to be in Molly's presence, to accept her kindness, must have been agony to him. And she never indicated anything but respect toward Severus.* She recalled now how Molly always corrected both Ron and Harry by insisting they use Snape's full title when they spoke of him.

"So he raped you." Percy's statement, said in a tone of disgust, got Hermione's distracted attention. She gasped as the dagger in his hand edged a bit further and Severus jerked as the point poked his chest.

"Yes. And no. It wasn't exactly pleasant," Molly conceded. "But it was necessary, and I agreed to it. So it wasn't coerced. Since it was near the holidays, it was decided I would be... taken, whilst doing Christmas shopping. Arthur took Charlie and Bill with him to work that day, to show them his office, and I went to Diagon Alley alone."

Percy swallowed, glanced down at Snape in disgust. "How could you?"

Snape swallowed.

"Albus... Albus helped me. I didn't want to, but he said everything was in place. He gave me a Mood Modification Potion, a lust philtre... then he Obliviated me. I woke and he was asking me to go, some fake errand to Diagon, to a specific shoppe, and that I should report to the Dark Lord to see if I could get more information. My thoughts were muddled. I didn't even notice I was wearing my Death Eater robes until later. By the time I got there, when I saw your mother... the philtre was at full effect."

His face twitched and his voice dropped to a whisper. He wasn't sure he could take enough breath in to speak louder anyway, thanks to the pressure Percy was placing on his chest and neck.

"I barely remember what happened. It was like a dark dream. I... I went back to Him, like Albus suggested. He... he liked what he saw. I was marked and accepted. It wasn't until well after that Albus showed me what he'd done in a Pensieve, but by then, it no longer mattered. I was a Death Eater, just like he needed."

Molly's voice startled them both.

"The only problem was... I was very fertile and due to the circumstances, no protections could be used. You were born the next summer."

"Percy." Everyone jumped at the sound of Arthur's calm, if slightly emotion-roughened voice. "Please release Severus."

Percy hesitated and Molly continued speaking.

"We never questioned it, son. And Arthur accepted you as one of his own. Never once did he treat you differently, although you weren't like the other boys."

"No indeed," Arthur agreed now, almost amiably. "You were definitely rather odd...quirky, skinny, bookish, strangely conservative, but I accepted you as my son ... until you started spouting nonsense your fifth year, and even then, I never stopped loving you, Percy. I never have. You are my son, regardless of blood."

"But you knew!" This directed at Snape who winced and nodded as much as he was able under the pressure from that wiry arm.

"I knew."

"We told him, son," Molly said now, taking a step forward. "He was the reason your astigmatism wasn't overlooked early on."

"It runs in the family," Snape hissed now, finding it exceedingly difficult to breathe. "Most of my uncles had it."

"Didn't you ever think to wonder why you're the only Weasley that needed spectacles?" Arthur asked him.

"This can't be true." Percy looked desperate.

Hermione finally moved, casting a verbal Paternus charm, which shot shimmering violet energy from Percy down to Snape. The results were irrefutable.

Abruptly, Percy pushed back from Snape, who gasped loudly, grasping at his chest as his son stood free, pulling his wand out of a pocket, looking stunned and confused.

Arthur and Molly tried to approach him, but he pulled back and glared at Snape, who still glowed faintly violet.

He looked at his mother, and then scowling, he lifted his wand. Hermione hesitated, not wanting to Stupefy him unless she absolutely had to. Arthur also waited, wand still at his side, hand clenched tight around it.

Percy looked one more time at Snape, who appeared to be catching his breath. He sneered, face full of a seething hatred.

"*Avada Kedavra*," he said in a clipped, almost indifferent tone of voice, as if he was saying nothing more important than telling someone the time.

Molly screamed and Arthur and Hermione both raised their wands, but it was too late.

Percy lay on the floor, dead by his own hand.

Arthur held Molly, who was sobbing into his shoulder, as Hermione rushed to Snape, who was holding his hand to his chest, looking ashen.

Suddenly she realized that, in pushing off of him, Percy had stabbed Snape with his dagger.

"Severus!" She reached him and ripped open his robe to assess the thin, seemingly superficial wound that dripped blood to the left of his chest.

"I can't say I blame him," he wheezed, before losing consciousness.

* * * *

When he came back to himself, it was dark, and he was in a large, but familiar bed.

He was in a plain, white nightgown, and Hermione was sipping tea and reading at Hagrid's table. He cleared his throat, a touch embarrassed.

She went to his side immediately.

"How do you feel?"

He grimaced. "I need the loo."

She helped him sit up. "You'll be a bit stiff and sore for awhile. The knife nicked a lung, but missed your heart."

He grunted. "Some would say I don't have one."

He shook her hands off as he got to his feet and made his way to the back of the hut where a rough wooden door concealed a privy so large he had to clamber onto a small stool in order to use it.

When he returned to the main room, Hermione had a plate of food and a cup of tea waiting for him. He climbed back into bed, already exhausted, but nodding his thanks, and began to eat; it had been a long time since his last meal and much had happened in the intervening time.

"You're wrong, you know," she said, after he had tucked in and had a few mouthfuls of stew. "There are some who think you have a rather large heart, indeed."

He glanced at her, then kept eating, saying nothing. The silence, though, eventually got to him.

"Why are we here?"

She smiled.

"I thought you'd prefer it to Hogwarts infirmary... and your many ex-colleagues who have been wanting to drop by to visit. You've been greatly missed, Severus."

Snape paled.

"Well considered."

"The cabin's not in use, and frankly," she admitted now, "when I Apparated with you, I completely forgot one can't simply Apparate to Hogwarts. I was trying for the infirmary and ended up not far from Hagrid's hut. So I brought you here and got the elves to get what I needed for your surgery. Not my finest hour, I admit, but... I was worried about you at the time."

He swallowed, and then felt the bandage on his chest.

"You'll have another scar to add to your collection," she noted. "But you'll be just fine in a day or two."

He blushed slightly at the thought of her seeing his scars, but said nothing.

"I think the fresh air and sunshine will do you good here whilst you recover. So consider it what the Healer ordered."

"Thank you, Miss Granger."

"No need. And call me Hermione. You're not my teacher, and I'm afraid I simply don't see you as anything but a trusted colleague anymore."

He snorted.

"If anything, after the revelations of the last two days, you should trust me less, if at all."

"Harry went into Albus's tomb."

He stilled.

"What he found, combined with my own retelling of events, led to Kingsley agreeing to a Pensieve search of his memories of the time just after you were first arrested."

He nodded, suddenly afraid to speak or even breathe.

"Percy *Imperio'd* both him and Moody before they even entered that room. Percy had been at Voldemort's side during the Final Battle, but cloaked, and he was a worker at the Ministry, so no one questioned his presence when he showed up there."

Snape's eyes closed at the thought of Percy, his son, holding him in such contempt. He drew in a shivery breath and forced it out. Tears stung his eyes, but he refused to give in to them.

"Yes, well," he finally managed to say. "Another ignominious chapter closed in the life of Severus Snape."

Hermione looked troubled.

"You succeeded in your goal."

He looked at her.

She tried to smile, but finally just said quietly, "You kept your son from being marked. You kept him from Voldemort as much as it was possible to do. He was never branded a Death Eater."

The tears abruptly returned, but he clenched his jaw, refusing to blink. His voice was thick and tight.

"No. He just hated me. And he didn't even know I was his father."

Hermione shook her head and finally got up and, without preamble, slipped her arms around him.

Perhaps, he thought, it was his enforced confinement. Or perhaps it was his physical weakness after surgery.

Whatever the reason, he could not gainsay her, and when her hands gently stroked his hair and back, he let the tears finally fall.

It was much later when there was a knock at the door.

Severus had been dozing and Hermione reading by his bedside.

Molly and Arthur stood in the doorway. Severus felt a touch of shame at their presence, more so because he was in a nightgown and in bed.

"Don't be troubled, Severus. We just wanted to see how you were doing."

He cleared his throat.

"My Healer assures me I'll be fine in a day or two." He looked to Hermione who had busied herself with making tea.

Molly beamed. "I'm so glad! We... well, we were worried about you."

Arthur nodded. Snape swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat.

"Mrs... Molly. I... I'm sorry for your loss," he managed to say.

She let Arthur's hand go, tears in her eyes, to go to Severus and gently cradle his head to her bosom.

"I know, dear. I know. And I'm so, so, sorry for yours."

Arthur turned from the tableau to go help Hermione in the kitchen, allowing them some privacy.

"I... I never said before," Severus whispered thickly, burning with shame anew. "I could never say before... how very sorry I was... what I did..."

"You did what you had to. As did we all. No more need be said."

"Sins of the father," he muttered. "It all came out in the end."

She smiled at him, then, warm hands soothing away the lines of strain on his face, a kindness that nearly undid him.

"No, Severus. If there were any sins, they were Percy's and Percy's alone. You didn't recruit him to You Know Who. You did everything you could to turn him from the path he was on. You didn't even know it was him keeping you prisoner, and once you found out, you didn't seek revenge, just answers. You've nothing to be ashamed of."

Severus swallowed. "He... Percy was a fine boy. I just wish things had been different."

"So do we. But I think You Know Who is to blame for it all. After all, who knows what might have become of our boy if he hadn't shared room and secrets with that rat of His. He found it, you know. We never got him a rat; we could ill afford it at the time since the twins were either growing out of their togs or breaking things that needed replacement. He found Wormtail in the garden, or so he claimed. We'll never know. But that rat spent twelve years with our family. I'm quite positive it was Wormtail who poisoned Percy, probably whilst he slept, feeding him on lies of You Know Who. You had nothing to do with it."

"It is said," Snape said carefully, "that blood will tell."

"In this case, all it told was that his mother and father loved him. Both as best they could."

He accepted her renewed embrace; feeling oddly light, empty, yet not used up, like a cup needing refilling.

"How about some tea then?"

Hermione's bright voice made them both separate, and Molly beamed at her.

"Thank you, dear! I'm sure a bracing cup of tea would do us all good."

* * * *

This visit aside, it made the next one far, far easier, and Snape didn't even have the strength to scowl when Harry Potter visited them.

The Boy Who Lived no longer looked like James Potter, Severus noted.

He was, in fact, far older than his father had ever become. His hair was cropped close to the skull, his sturdy, compact body toughened by hard work, and his face was now all planes and angles, those green eyes still shining bright beneath the long-faded scar. He had two others now that drew attention from the old hated mark, signs of hexing he had taken in the course of his work as an Auror. He also had a slightly crooked nose now, something that made Snape nearly smile.

"You look well, Snape."

"One could say the same back."

"Yes, well, I wasn't a dead man." He smiled to take any sting out of his words, and he included Hermione in it. "Thanks to Veritaserum testimony by Arthur and Molly at the Ministry, along with Hermione's corroboration of your tale and the full presentation of evidence, you've been cleared of all wrongdoing."

"Evidence?"

Harry nodded. "Dumbledore's tomb... I went in with Ron, who recorded our findings. The furnishings were all old items the Weasleys had thrown away or set aside. And there were hundreds of small notes in the anteroom! All the same. *S. Snape held prisoner by L. Malfoy. Hidden, possibly a sepulcher. Please find me.* They were all dated, going back about eight years. There were also newspapers inside dating back ten years to the date you disappeared."

Snape cleared his throat.

"With my limited knowledge, Lucius Malfoy was the most likely suspect."

Harry nodded at this, and Snape added, "I would be most grateful if the content of the notes was not divulged to either Lucius or the press."

"They've already been disposed of. There was no point to questioning Malfoy, since, for one thing, we know who took you, and for another, he's not even in the country at the moment. He's enjoying his honeymoon with Mrs. Malfoy Number Three."

Snape lifted a brow at this, and Harry and Hermione both smiled.

"He married Lavender Brown two days ago."

Snape considered this, and then fought a groan.

"Sounds like a marriage made in proverbial heaven."

"Anyway, we didn't contact him, nor do we have plans to. Although," Harry confided now, "I know he'd love to hear from you. He was all broken up about your supposed death before."

Snape nodded, then Harry lifted both brows, sticking his hand in his pockets.

"Nearly forgot! The Weasleys asked me to give you this."

He held out a key on a key ring.

"Arthur said to tell you he found letters in the cottage, dating way back. It's pretty clear that Percy never stopped communicating with Pettigrew, even now that he's in Azkaban. Sent him things...care packages and the like. Anyway," Harry wrinkled his nose a bit, "he said to tell you that you weren't at all to blame."

Snape stared at the key.

"What is that?"

"A Portkey. It activates when you twist it like putting the key in a lock. It takes you straight to the cottage." Harry hesitated and then said quietly, "Molly and Arthur both agreed... since the Ministry sold your house and effects when it was thought you were a dead fugitive from justice, and since your so...since Percy lived there, that the cottage is yours. No arguments. Arthur said that. He also said, that if you don't take it, he'll let slip your little secret to the Quibbler."

Snape closed his eyes, suppressing a shudder.

"You know, then."

He jumped at the feeling of Harry's warm, firm hand squeezing his forearm. He looked from it to those green eyes, warm with unexpected understanding and compassion.

"One thing you'll need to understand, if you're going to be friends with Hermione, is that we don't keep secrets from each other. And that we keep each other's secrets from everyone else." He leveled a look at his erstwhile teacher and colleague in the Order and nodded. "Your secret is safe with me."

Severus finally nodded, then Harry quirked a smile at him.

"By the way, that wasn't quite how Arthur put it. He said, and I quote: if he refuses, tell him I'll tell his secret to the Quibbler, as well as tell them he wears a pink bathrobe and bunny slippers when he's alone."

"I do not!"

"Yes, well, you know that and I know that and Hermione and Arthur and Molly know that, but who else would believe it?" Harry asked him pointedly.

* * * *

Two days later, Hermione went with a fully recovered Snape to the cottage. She Apparated them both to the same spot as before, Severus feeling chary of using the Portkey to appear directly inside.

It scarcely looked the same, if only by virtue of having been painted an interesting shade of jade green.

Arthur met them by the door, which he was finishing painting a creamy white, a pleasant contrast to the rest of the house.

"Well, hello there! I'm sorry for having cleaned the place out, but the Aurors traipsed through it like a pack of Hippogriffs, and I couldn't abide keeping anything they'd pawed through. They scuffed everything so much; I felt I had to paint it. Anyway... it's yours now," he clapped a friendly hand to Severus's arm. "As is our eternal friendship. Welcome home, Severus."

Snape nodded, uneasy, but meeting the older man's gaze. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it. But you will come to dinner from time to time, I hope? I know you've kept yourself to yourself in the past, but... well, things are different now, are they not?"

Snape nodded again, fighting the embarrassing urge to break down, and held out his hand to Arthur instead. Arthur ignored his hand and pulled him in to a brief, but tight embrace, slapping at his back in a comradely fashion. Then he turned and hugged Hermione briefly in combined greeting and farewell.

"Well, I'll be off then."

They found themselves alone, and Hermione decided to break the uncertain silence.

"Let's go in, shall we?"

Severus nodded, uncertain what to expect, but the interior was utterly different. The prior furnishings were gone. There was sturdy wooden furniture with a faded black and green tartan predominating the cushions and seat covers. A familiar brown hook rug lay before the fire, which was currently banked.

Two walls were dedicated entirely to bookcases, and to his shock, most of the shelves were full.

"There are more bookcases in the study," Hermione noted. "As well as one in the bedroom, but those are empty."

"These... these are my books!"

"Yes. When you left Hogwarts rather precipitously, Minerva didn't have the heart to simply sell or throw out your belongings. Everything in your rooms that did not belong to Hogwarts is here."

His eyes filled again, but this time Hermione did not let him turn away. She slid an arm around him, and he leaned into her, burying his face briefly, into her warm hair.

The scent of mint and eucalyptus filled his senses, and he felt himself grow hard. He gently pulled back.

"I'm... a bit overwhelmed," he admitted.

"Not surprising. You're going to have to get used to the fact that you are free, and that you are wanted. Not as a fugitive, but as yourself."

He looked pained.

"I'm not very good company, I'm afraid."

She smiled.

"None of us is when we're in pain or distracted or busy. Tell me... were you *ever*not any of those things whilst you were in the Order?"

He shook his head.

"Teaching?"

He shook his head again.

"These last few days?"

He sighed and his lips quirked.

"It would seem I've had a bad couple of ... decades."

"Indeed."

* * *

They found a dinner, enough for at least four, warm atop the kitchen counter, and Hermione set the table whilst Severus sought and found wine in the small cellar.

He was no longer used to it, after years of drinking nothing but water, and he found the two glasses he had with dinner went to his head.

He found himself watching Hermione as she ate and chatted. She was really, he thought now, quite a beautiful woman.

She looked up at him, and he quickly looked down to his plate. What was wrong with him? She was half his age!

But he could not help it, and by the time they finished their pudding, a deliciously dark treacle tart, he was hard as a stone and deeply uncomfortable.

"Sickle for your thoughts."

He startled, then sighed.

"It's been so long. I... I still feel like I'll wake up and find myself... there. Again. Alone."

She suddenly reached across and squeezed his hand, hard.

"You're not asleep. You're not alone. You're here. With me."

He looked at her now, and all his feelings burned in his gaze. How he wanted her. His trousers were becoming a torment.

"Well..."

She got up then, and he watched as she moved toward him. To his shock, she bent over his chair and gently kissed him.

He tried to push her back, but she didn't let him, kissing him again, and before long he stood, chair crashing to the floor as he took her in his arms...

Some time later, atop the surprisingly large and comfortable bed in the equally comfortable bedroom, Severus shifted uneasily above Hermione, his loose, long, and silky hair sensuously slipping along their skin, the only thing covering their bodies.

He could not have said if his unease was due to what was about to happen or the fact he wasn't entirely certain his body would finish before he could even begin. He had only just managed to get them both undressed without catastrophe, but now, his body was throbbing, longing for release.

"I-is this what you really want?"

Hermione stroked his face, nodding. He tried again.

"I haven't been with anyone longer than I can remember, Hermione. I... I'm not sure I can recall, much less manage, the niceties."

She smiled at him, reaching down to stroke him and place him near her entrance.

"I'm ready," was all she said.

He lost his head; it was the only explanation he could think of. One moment he was kissing her, then he could feel her warmth surrounding him and he was inside her, and it was... intense, if brief, not to mention quite shattering to each of them.

His head was still spinning when she shifted out from under him and refreshed them both with her wand.

"I'm s-sorry. It's... been a long time," he stammered, body still twitching a bit from his powerful orgasm.

She shook her head at him, shushed him with a finger, then she climbed over him, straddling him to kiss him.

Slowly... ever so deliciously and agonizingly slowly... Hermione Granger made love to Severus Snape. Her feelings showed in every action, every caress, every whisper of his name from those lips that seemingly kissed every inch of him as if it was precious to her.

He could scarcely believe it, the fact she was so calmly accepting of him, of his body, of his feelings. This thought made him nearly lose control again, and he held her tightly to him, able to finally indulge his fantasies and kiss and caress her. She accepted everything he gave and offered her own back.

It was, he realized now, the answer. What he had been searching for all along, at Hogwarts, then among the Death Eaters, and he had finally found it.

Acceptance.

* * *

The next day...

Peter Pettigrew thanked his jailer obsequiously as he got his package. He'd been getting a bit worried, as Percy hadn't written him of any delays and his usual package

was a bit late. Still, sometimes the Ministry got particularly officious, and the Warden had to crack down on someone and that usually meant the prisoners, like him. Sometimes their mail was put on hold and all packages were inspected.

He forgot the entire issue as he opened up the package and smiled when he saw the candy inside. He began to eat it with pleasure.

No one noticed the minuscule notice in the Daily Prophet the next day, buried as it was between an advert for Sleekeazy's Luscious Locks of Loveliness and a perfunctory notice of Dissolution for a couple of minor Ministry officials.

It read:

Prisoner and former Death Eater Peter Pettigrew was discovered dead of a heart attack in his cell this morning. The prison's Healer stated Pettigrew's general state of health had always been poor and that no signs of foul play were evident.

~ Finite Incantatum ~

post-A/N: With huge thanks to the [Harry Potter Lexicon](#), and in particular to the entry therein on [Percy Ignatius Weasley](#). :)

Also, thanks to [CNN](#) for their nice summary of astigmatism.

Lastly, yes, Snape's Patronus is an intentional tribute to [Rikki-Tikki-Tavi](#). :) I'd often considered Rowling's comments about how revealing Snape's Patronus (before Book 7) would give too much away. Whilst I liked the idea of his Patronus being a phoenix or a lily or even a griffin or a lion (horrors!) ;), I also rather liked the idea of his having a fierce and wily snake hunter as his ethereal protector.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this fic. :)