

The Plan

by Memory

What if Snape hadn't really been following any one of his masters but a stronger, mysterious inspiration? A dark tribute to the ambiguous Snape we used to know. HBP compliant.

1. Feelings

Chapter 1 of 8

What if Snape hadn't really been following any one of his masters but a stronger, mysterious inspiration? A dark tribute to the ambiguous Snape we used to know. HBP compliant.

Just two quick words of introduction: I'm Italian, and this will probably help you understand why some expressions may still sound awkward or odd in spite of all the corrections my wonderful betas have made to this story. I hope you will anyway enjoy the ideas, if not the style.

This story is dedicated to all the HP fanfiction readers, in particular to the ones who would dare to write their own novels... but haven't tried yet. Have a good reading and, if you want, let me know your comments.

1. Feelings

“What would a man be without his soul?”

The Plan was burning his mind, consuming his thoughts, ripping his flesh with sharp claws, devouring his bones slowly and insidiously. The Plan had been controlling him for almost half his existence, filling his days with challenges and haunting his nights with doubts. The Plan had claimed his life when he was only eighteen and had joined the Dark Lord. So young and so confident he was in his glorious destiny! But he was soon to be disappointed, because The Plan had other intentions for him, ones more obscure and dangerous than he could possibly imagine.

The Plan had been holding him in a forceful grip, leaving him no choice but to keep roaming its mysterious paths. He had felt its chilled touch the night the Potters were killed, the night the whole wizarding world had been rearranged. He had been aware of its silent paws following him in close pursuit when he had left his evil master to join Dumbledore, seeking oblivion in the quiet darkness of the castle's dungeons.

For eleven years, The Plan had been sleeping in his heart and in his mind... until Harry Potter reached Hogwarts with a gaggle of little witches and wizards. That same night, taking a look at the famous Potter – and his even more famous scar – while the child was eating his first dinner in the Great Hall, he felt a short, sudden, acute pain. He had instantly known there was no hope... The Plan had awoken and was lurking inside him, breathing in his chest, following the rhythm of his heartbeat.

The days, the weeks, the months that followed painfully confirmed his initial feelings. The Plan that had waited mutely for so many years was now roaring at full voice. Its claws were gripping harder and harder, and this was getting stronger each time the Potter boy came near him.

The last two years had been a continuous challenge, an incessant battle to survive, his body and mind divided in two parts. He had allies in each of them, friends nowhere; his fate was to be always alone, eyed in suspicion either by the members of the Order of the Phoenix or by his former fellow Death Eaters, especially the ones who survived Azkaban.

Only two men had decided to trust him completely... or so they declared: the Dark Lord and Albus Dumbledore.

Now, wasn't it funny that he had been able to convince the leaders but not the followers? Were they simply jealous of their masters' confidence in him, or were they merely afraid of the man's power? Because indeed he was growing more and more powerful. Secrets, missions and decisions were constantly entrusted in his hands, his actions fully known only by himself... and his loyalties deeply hidden in his soul.

He had then served his two masters, developing a complicated web of lies and secrets, forgetting his real identity and creating a new one according to circumstances. However, in spite of the contempt, the envy, even the hatred that was surrounding him, he had been secretly pleased. And why shouldn't he be? The two greatest wizards of Britain were relying upon his judgement.

Albus Dumbledore was always asking for his advice and so was the Dark Lord. The balance between Light and Darkness was resting on his shoulders. No woman, no family, no property had been permitted to him, but he had never regretted his choice. Either he had to kneel and kiss the hem of the Dark Lord's cloak or walk in conversation with Dumbledore, with the old man's weak, blue-veined hand trustfully resting on his shoulder.

He was untouchable, because The Plan was watching over him.

Yet he was beginning to feel uncomfortable. The Plan was still flowing in his veins with power he could not contain, but while he never seemed to lose control, inside he felt like he was walking on a sheet of ice that was getting thinner and thinner. There were too many unknowns entering the equation, too many pieces ready to make a move on the chessboard, and more importantly, Harry Potter was amongst them.

Potter, who had held the Philosopher's Stone in his hands, having no desire to possess it. Potter, who had fought and slain the Basilisk when he was only twelve. Potter, who had participated in the Triwizard Tournament against older competitors and won. And Potter, who had faced the born-again Dark Lord and survived his fury, standing by Cedric Diggory's dead body.

But also, Potter, who was always breaking rules and never paying for his indiscretions. Potter, who was the living image of his hateful father and was proud of it. Potter, who was stubborn, exasperating, undisciplined and careless, but no one ever seemed to notice.

Potter, who was the centre of the Dark Lord's thoughts and efforts. Potter, who year after year had gained Albus' respect, admiration and finally affection. The Chosen One, the living menace with his "one and only guardian of The Plan" status. Perhaps the only one he should have really feared...

However, he knew the boy's weak points too well to be truly alarmed. The Plan had been so completely intertwined with his own life that he had always refused to imagine it could ever go on without him.

But The Plan that was always with him, sharing each moment of his days and nights, was a passionate lover that could unexpectedly turn into a wild animal. Sometimes he asked himself what had really happened when Narcissa Malfoy had pleaded with him to take the Unbreakable Vow. Was The Plan trying to bind him even more harshly? Or had The Plan unexpectedly unbound and revealed itself as an uncontrollable, monstrous creature? He didn't like the idea that things were slipping from his hands. Even worse, he couldn't stand the thought that somehow The Plan was going to desert him, denying him the future of power and glory for which he had been working so hard.

Facing his doubts every day had become a rather unbearable burden, yet he had obstinately carried on. For Severus Snape was a man of honour. Severus Snape was a man of pride. Severus Snape was a man of action.

Nevertheless, even if he hated to admit it, Severus Snape was still a human being. Sometimes, when the hours of the night were darker than he could stand, his hand had involuntarily slipped towards the little leather bag where the powerful powder of dream and death was carefully conserved. But immediately, with a deep sigh of frustration, he had blamed himself for his cowardice and forced himself to defy the darkness. And then, as memories and words and sounds were flowing through his mind in an incessant stream, he had closed his eyes in agony, suppressing his thoughts and allowing The Plan to envelop him in its cold embrace.

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2. Memories

Chapter 2 of 8

What if Snape hadn't been really following anyone of his masters but a stronger, mysterious inspiration? A dark tribute to the ambiguous Snape we used to know. HBP compliant.

2. Memories

"Mine is your body..."

Severus Snape was sitting in the dark, quiet place he had chosen to think. Nobody knew of it; nobody could have ever imagined that it had become his place, where he would retire and cut off the world.

The place was silent and filthy, a subtle smell of putrefaction rising from the old furniture. Broken pieces were scattered here and there in disarray. They didn't seem to bother the dark wizard, since the place was as it had always been and as it must remain. Even the bed where he was sitting had collapsed, as if refusing to sustain its own weight anymore.

But this was the place where everything had started, when the spell yelled by Granger, Weasley and the thought was still unbearable Potter's frightened voices had

blasted him unconscious against the wall. This was the place where the fierce power of The Plan had pulsed as one with his impatient heartbeat, feeding his mind with renewed force and caressing his senses with promises of glory.

For so many long nights, The Plan had guided him there and forced him to face again and again the main events of his life and the immense sufferings they'd carried. Innumerable times he had been reminded that one of his greatest terrors had revealed itself in that place, the night he'd escaped the fangs of a werewolf. And innumerable times he had relived another doomed night when a rat that once was a man tricked his former friends and disappeared into the darkness of the forest, thus changing forever the future of the wizarding world.

Now, again, he was there, even if his own world was changed, because this was the place where incredibly he looked for peace from his troubled thoughts by submitting his body and mind to the incorporeal will that dominated his life and abandoning himself to its ferocious power.

Severus Snape spent the whole night staring in the dark, sitting where the shape of his body imprinted itself on a heap of dusty sheets by infinite hours of tormented wakefulness.

The Plan had led him to a point where there were no options. For the first time in his life, he was feeling deeply alone, uncertain and vulnerable. Something terrible had just happened, and he was endlessly reviewing his actions, trying to figure out if he had truly understood what The Plan had been demanding of him.

The Plan had made him kill Dumbledore and rush away from Hogwarts like a bloody coward. The Plan had forced him to spare Harry Potter when the boy was at his complete mercy. The Plan had unpredictably turned the Dark Lord against him, grimly enjoying the confusion and the shame that followed.

Severus closed his eyes and buried his face in his hands, letting the memories flow without control. Painfully, determinedly, he retraced his steps, following the Death Eaters' desperate flight from Hogwarts, the night Dumbledore died...

The night Dumbledore died, there had been no time to stop and think. The Dark Lord had immediately summoned his followers around him to celebrate the incredible victory.

Celebrate! Severus, still struggling against the confused feelings storming in his mind, had felt The Plan's chilled grip slowly fade away, leaving him weak and hesitant as he entered the room where they were gathered. It was a large, ancient, rectangular shaped structure where everything gave an impression of power and magnificence, and where paintings, decorations, coats of arms and tapestries covered the massive stony walls. It was June, but the room was cold and damp in spite of the fire crackling in the enormous fireplace opposite from the door.

The Dark Lord was standing in the middle of the room, his hideous face lit by the flames, a condescending smile playing on his lips. A little circle of dark figures dressed in black, but wearing no masks, was respectfully waiting around him, speaking in low voices.

Amongst them was Wormtail, standing near his master in his characteristically furtive attitude, his watery little eyes flickering with excitement while Voldemort confidentially exchanged words with some of his favourites, allowing them to kiss his hand as a special sign of preference.

The Dark Lord's smile became suddenly cold the moment he saw the small group entering the door. Following their master's gaze, the Death Eaters seemed to move surreally, turning their heads in slow motion as Amycus, Alecto, Draco and Severus walked in, stumbling with exhaustion, eyes feverishly brightened by the frantic run that had followed the success of their mission.

Among the pale ovals of faces looking at him, Snape immediately recognized Narcissa's blonde hair blazing under the light. She attempted to reach her son, but was stopped immediately by a cold glance from her sister, Bellatrix, whose dark figure was radiating a cruel joy.

Severus was leading Draco by his arm. After the wild escape, the boy now seemed to realize what had really happened. His face was ashen, his body and steps faltering. A dim sparkle was dancing in his eyes, a glow that Severus had never seen before. Was it horror for what he had been about to commit? Fear of being punished for not having been able to accomplish it? Or was it relief for having just handed his burden to somebody else?

Snape had also noticed the strange, furtive glances Draco shot at him when he wasn't supposed to be looking. Even if the boy was letting the older wizard guide him, he seemed to wince each time their bodies came into contact, his previous admiration slowly changing into resentment and uneasiness.

Severus arched an eyebrow in a mute question, and the boy lowered his eyes, blushing sickly in embarrassment. Then, as if ashamed by his weakness, he raised his head and pulled his arm away, staring firmly at his tutor with reddened, worn-out eyes, almost defying him. A strange, uncharacteristic pang of guilt made Snape hesitate in his step, but he immediately choked his emotion back as he went to kneel in front of his master, the move promptly imitated by the others.

Again, the sensation of imminent disaster pervaded him. The Dark Lord wasn't greeting them anymore with his reptilian smile, nor was he showing any joy for their triumph. He looked coldly interested only in the boy, who was definitely shaking like a leaf, kneeling at his feet.

"Well then, Draco, my boy," he began, almost caressingly. "You proved your worth. The trap you prepared during all these long, long months of waiting was tripped finally. Dumbledore is dead, isn't he?"

"He is, my Lord," Draco replied, trembling, biting his lips to fight back the tears. His mother flinched involuntarily at his answer, and the Dark Lord raised a warning gaze then turned again to the boy, reverting to his usual, sarcastic tone. "And was it your wand that gave him death, as I requested?"

Draco turned his head and glanced over to his companions, searching for help.

"Just look at me, Draco," Voldemort hissed impatiently. "Did you fulfil my order?"

The boy stared at his master with deep terror on his face. "I... I tried, my Lord," he whispered, not daring to lower his eyes.

"But..." Voldemort urged him.

"I couldn't," Draco admitted feebly, dropping his head in defeat.

"Inept a servant as was your father, I see." The Dark Lord was still dangerously calm. "Why couldn't you slay him, Draco? Wasn't he defenceless and at your mercy? Wasn't he weak and alone?" His red eyes narrowed and his voice became harsh. "Were you still afraid of his power? Or worse, were you trying to spare him in spite of my command?"

Voldemort leaned in until his face and the boy's were at same level. "Did you really want to obey my order? Tell me, Draco," he whispered almost tenderly.

The boy swallowed, fear stealing his answer and paralysing his lips. The other Death Eaters shifted uncomfortably, and then Amycus tried to help. "He was going to, Master... but we were running out of time and..."

"Be quiet!" The master's high-pitched voice burst furiously, and Amycus bowed in terror.

Abandoning any pretence of kindness, the Dark Lord straightened up and exclaimed angrily, "Do you remember that your life was bound to my command? And not only yours but also your mother's and your father's as I warned you so many months ago?! Are you ready to lose not only your life but also the lives of your whole family as a

consequence of your weakness? Answer me, Draco!"

The boy was white with horror, his hands clenching convulsively. He desperately looked at his mother, who suddenly untangled from her sister's grasp to join him in front of their master. But before she could utter a word, the Dark Lord turned to her, even more furious. "Narcissa! How dare you? I know you have induced Severus to take an Unbreakable Vow to protect your useless son from failing. You have betrayed my confidence in you by asking someone else to accomplish the task that was entrusted to Draco!"

Snape held his breath, but remained impassive, while Narcissa paled in panic and sank to her knees, her eyes full of tears. "Forgive us, my Lord!" she implored. "I only wanted to obey your orders... and protect my son. He is a loyal servant, but he is only a boy. Please, don't punish him for my faults. I'm the only one to be blamed, and I... I'm ready to submit to your sentence."

She was so beautiful in her panic, so fierce in her protectiveness, that many of her fellow Death Eaters turned their heads away, embarrassed, yet at the same time attracted by her desperation. Even Severus, always careful to hide his emotions, couldn't avoid a faint spark of desire for the very desirable woman, but the Dark Lord wasn't human anymore. "Oh, you certainly will!" he sneered, considering her broken, sobbing figure with a cruel smile.

Recovering his frightful composure, he folded his arms across his chest and resumed speaking in a low, meditative tone. "Nevertheless, Draco, in his great cowardice, has effectively found a way to allow my faithful Death Eaters to break into Hogwarts. This is a service I cannot underestimate. And, after all, Dumbledore is dead..."

The Dark Lord looked at the boy with a frown; then he made a brief, authoritative gesture towards the group still kneeling at his feet. "Amycus, my friend, will you tell us what happened so that everyone here can know and enjoy?"

Amycus nodded in surprise, giving Snape a perplexed glance. Feeling uneasy, but anxious to please his master, the clumsy, hard breathing man began to describe the events as they had occurred: how the Dark Mark was cast over the castle, how Draco had faced Dumbledore on the Astronomy Tower and revealed he was deplorably unable to complete his mission so badly that Fenrir had eagerly volunteered to kill the old wizard in his place...

Here Voldemort turned his inhumane eyes on the narrator, who, looking suddenly worried, muttered in confusion, unconsciously imitating Narcissa. "He only wanted to be of help, my Lord..." The Dark Lord curled his lips in a sarcastic, frightful sneer.

Time seemed to stop while Amycus, nervously proceeding with his story, explained how Snape had unexpectedly appeared, having passed undamaged through the battle that was raging in the castle's corridors. Dumbledore had pleaded with him for his life here the circle of the attentive Death Eaters had grown excited, murmuring with admiration and staring at Severus in approval; Bellatrix had even conceded him a brief, appreciative nod but Snape had been quick and merciless. One shot and the foolish old man was dead, his threat forever silenced.

While pretending to be listening, but desperately trying to ignore Amycus' rough voice, Severus closed his eyes and concentrated on his heartbeat, hoping to feel The Plan's protective arms wrapping around him as always. All he perceived was a sensation of loss and despair. From afar, he could still see Dumbledore's blue eyes looking at him so trusting, so firm while the soft sound of the old, kind voice called his name again and again in the same gentle way Severus had gotten used to being addressed during all those years at Hogwarts. Slowly, he clenched his fists and lowered his head, trying to suffocate the feelings that were emerging so painfully strong that they could possibly betray him in front of his Lord. Everything had happened so fast and so easily, but now, nothing seemed to make sense anymore. How could he feel safe when The Plan had already destroyed Dumbledore? And what part had Dumbledore played on that evil game's chessboard? Had he been a king, as Severus had always believed, or just a pawn? An unguarded reaction made him raise his eyes, and he flinched as he unexpectedly met his master's inquisitive gaze. Voldemort bowed ironically at him, and Severus felt his heart sink.

The narration was nearly over, and words began to come out in a rush as if Amycus was impatient to arrive at its conclusion. Listening closely, his senses alert again, Severus relived those frantic moments in his fellow Death Eater's terse description.

After the murder, they were forced to flee. Inside the castle, members of the Order of the Phoenix were fighting back the invaders. Many of the students had awoken from the sounds of the battle, and Aurors from the Ministry of Magic were expected to Apparate at any moment. So they had left as quickly as possible, but during their run, they had been followed by an enraged Harry Potter, who seemed to materialize immediately after the killing of his old protector and had probably even witnessed it, hidden somewhere on the tower. The boy directed his anger towards Snape primarily, but this was obvious. They all knew how the boy and his former professor hated each other. And of course, it had been Snape who had struck down Dumbledore here Amycus grinned in satisfaction, glancing approvingly at Severus and finally feeling much safer.

Snape had hit Potter with a powerful hex, pushing him down on the grass; Alec, too, had tried to cast a curse, but Snape had stopped her attempt because the boy was reserved for the Dark Lord. Anyway, in a few minutes, they had left, leaving Hogwarts in a state of terror and confusion, flames and ruins everywhere and probably other victims amongst its defenders.

Slowly, implacably, insidiously, a vortex of images began to form while the words disappeared in a confused murmur, holding Snape in a powerful grasp and bringing him suddenly back in time. Now he was again on the Hogwarts' grounds, defying Potter and his pathetic courage, hearing Potter's unbearable words coward! The brat had dared to call him a coward! savouring once more the wild joy of seeing Potter at his complete mercy. It would have been so easy to kill him!

The violence of his emotions whirled and exploded deeply into his soul, lacerating it into thousands of sharp-edged pieces. Unconsciously, he clenched his hands and straightened himself to stare at his memories, lost in impotence, trembling with anger, wishing that time could stop... And then again, he sensed his master's predatory eyes on him, mutely inquiring, thoughtfully watching his reactions, but this time, he didn't dare look up. Never had he felt so defenceless against his feelings!

Amycus terminated his chronicle in relief, sure of his master's approval after all, hadn't the Dark Lord smiled his frightening smile twice while looking at Severus? He was panting slightly from the exertion. The kneeling position was becoming more and more difficult to maintain, and his tired body was asking for a change. Draco, on the other hand, had listened tensely, eyes closed, shuddering still, while Narcissa, face buried in her hands, was trying to regain control. Alec looked around in faint pride, enjoying the approving glances of the other Death Eaters, and Snape was now coldly aware of something terrible just waiting to strike.

"All in all, a success then, even if not a complete one," the Dark Lord declared briefly after a moment of silence that seemed to last forever, and the black dressed figures respectfully expressed their appreciation. "So, Narcissa, I'm going to forgive you in the name of this success; after all, you are a mother, and your devotion can be excused..." He went on, adding sarcastically, an unpleasant glitter in his eyes, "I never consider how feelings, as foolish as they are, may interfere. My fault, I suppose."

Narcissa gave a trembling sob and raised her hands in a mute, hopeful prayer, but the Dark Lord, with a vindictive sneer, disabused her immediately. "Be that as it may, Draco has failed, and failures must be punished. Perhaps his punishment will seem lighter to him if his mother carries it out. Who better than a mother to help her child understand?" Voldemort paused, enjoying her suffering. "What do you say, Narcissa? Will you agree?"

Taken by surprise, Narcissa looked completely lost. She was visibly torn between the joy of seeing Voldemort being merciful to the boy and the horror of being called on to perform such a terrible assignment. She gasped, searched for air and implored help from her sister with a desperate glance.

"My sister has always been weak where her son is concerned, Master," Bellatrix said disdainfully. "Could I just suggest ..." but she trailed off under his threatening gaze, lowering her eyes in silence.

"I see," the Dark Lord said angrily. "Even those I believe to be my most loyal followers draw back when it is their own blood under trial. But the boy didn't accomplish his task. The boy didn't obey my orders. Therefore, the boy must be punished. Should I do it myself, then?"

Draco paled horribly, looking even more young and vulnerable. His fear was so evident that his mother exclaimed again. "Please, my Lord, forgive him, and let me pay for his errors!"

Her words made Draco finally react. Standing up with supreme effort, he offered himself with a trembling but determined, "I accept your punishment, Master!"

Narcissa gave a faint exclamation, while an evil joy spread over the Dark Lord's features. He slowly stepped forward and raised his wand. With a sharp cry, Draco dropped to the ground, where he twitched and writhed convulsively. Narcissa stared, eyes wide in horror, mouth open in a silent scream, while Bellatrix kept her firmly by her shoulders to prevent her from interfering.

The torture only lasted a few moments. With a triumphant expression on his face, the Dark Lord lowered his wand, smiled at the shattered lad at his feet and declared forcefully, "Now you are a man, Draco. Now you are definitely mine. You paid for your faults, and there is nothing left between you and me. Rise then, Draco, my loyal follower, and seal your true admission to my service. Have the gratitude of the Dark Lord for your actions."

The Death Eaters murmured excitedly. Shaking, the boy struggled to get to his feet, helped by his mother. Relief, joy and pride clashed in a whirl of emotions as the tears flowed. Visibly staggering but looking exultant, Draco knelt again and bent to kiss the Dark Lord's hand. Then, exhausted, he fainted into his mother's arms.

Voldemort curled his lips in an unpleasant smile and held up a hand to stop Narcissa, who was incoherently babbling words of gratitude and promises of loyalty for her and her son in her overwhelmed joy. The Dark Lord's red glowing eyes were now considering the group still kneeling at his feet.

"And I would like to thank you, too," he added, his voice sounding loud in the room, "my faithful servants, who risked your lives to help Draco in this very difficult task. You, Amycus, a truly valiant friend, and you, Alecto, fierce as your name, and..." His eyes finally rested on Snape, who had been expecting this moment in tension. "Now, now, but I haven't heard from Severus yet!" the Dark Lord remarked in his ironically disappointed tone. "How come the hero of the day, the conqueror of the great Dumbledore, has not spoken a word? To what is such modesty due, Severus?"

"My entire life has been devoted to the fulfilment of your orders, my Lord," Snape answered quietly, his heart beating slowly. "Otherwise, my existence would be meaningless. I claim no honour for this."

"Oh, but your courage must be honoured, and I'll make sure you receive a full reward before a new day comes," the Dark Lord replied coldly.

Feeling the storm raging behind the deceptive calm of their leader, some of the Death Eaters turned their heads with a questioning gaze. Bella shot Snape a derisive glance then looked at her master as though asking him permission. Voldemort smiled back in assent and declared forcefully, "My friends, I invite you all to celebrate this great victory. Dumbledore is dead! Let everybody know it! May fear and desperation be our allies in destroying what remains of the old wizarding world. And now you may leave."

A thunderous acclamation followed, and it was in the middle of this joyful explosion that he looked intentionally at Snape and added imperiously, "But you, Severus, stay!"

One by one, ready for their mission, the Death Eaters greeted their master with a respectful bow and quickly Disappeared in an ordered confusion of faces glowing and dancing in the dark. Immensely relieved when their turn came, Amycus and his sister bent to kiss the hem of the Dark Lord's cloak and slowly straightened their aching limbs from the exhausting position they'd held for such a long time, bowing again to avoid their master's feral eyes.

Bracing for the proof he understood was waiting for him, Severus, too, had begun to get to his feet when a hard voice stopped him.

"I said *stay!*" said the Dark Lord sharply. "That didn't mean *rise*."

Wormtail, tilting his head to have a better view of his old schoolmate, raised his eyebrows significantly and nervously stroked his silvery hand, waiting for a silent nod from his master to leave the room. The few other remaining Death Eaters looked uncomfortably at each other, while Snape, feeling his face burn under their astonished gaze, knelt again obediently and waited.

Sustaining a dizzy Draco, who seemed to be grimly enjoying Snape's humiliation, Narcissa gave Severus an apologetic glance. Their eyes met in a silent goodbye; then she lowered her head in embarrassment and quietly Disappeared with her son, her concerned expression clearly revealing that she knew something awful was going to happen and that she was sorry for him.

The last thing Severus saw was Bella's triumphant smile as she Disappeared with a soft pop, following her sister.

Then he was left alone with the Dark Lord.

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3. Memories

Chapter 3 of 8

What if Snape hadn't really been following any one of his masters but a stronger, mysterious inspiration? A dark tribute to the ambiguous Snape we used to know. HBP compliant.

3. Memories

"Mine is your mind..."

The room was now quiet, dark and suddenly vast and mysterious as a cave.

Severus closed his eyes and controlled his breathing, forcing himself to forget the pain and humiliation flowing into his exhausted body and mind. Then he waited in silence, grateful for the little pause that allowed him to reorganize his thoughts and prepare himself for the ordeal about to come.

A terrible suspicion had been torturing him since his arrival, and he was desperately trying to find an answer. Why was the Dark Lord so visibly angry with him? What could have possibly happened to change his position so unfavourably? His mind had thoroughly explored every option, but each new perspective was revealing more and more frightening possibilities.

The soft sound of footsteps slowly broke into his consciousness, as if coming from far away, and he opened his eyes in alarm, realising that his master was approaching.

"I believe I must exchange some words with my most loyal follower, Severus Snape." The Dark Lord's voice was silky, but his eyes were frightful as he began to walk in slow circles around the man keeling on the hard stones.

"How many propitious things have happened this night!" His words, sounding both ironic and pretentious, echoed against the walls and dispersed into the darkness, following the progression of his pacing.

"And you have played such an important role, haven't you, Severus?" Voldemort brusquely stopped to ask his question, then moved closer to the younger wizard, crossing the distance between them with slow steps until Snape felt his presence behind him and struggled to keep his growing apprehension under control.

Severus looked at himself from the hidden, safe place in the future, and his heart twisted in anguish, reliving the intense sensation of fear that had suddenly invaded his body under his master's merciless scrutiny. There had been no escape, no hope, no rescue for him. Time swirled into eternity when the Dark Lord met his servant's eyes and stared firmly into their black, fathomless depths.

"You are very quiet, my friend." Voldemort resumed his pacing, then stopped again to look at the flames slowly dying in the fireplace. "Where has your persuasive eloquence gone? Or should I ask you: *why* has it so unexpectedly vanished?"

Severus raised his head and opened his mouth to answer, but no sound came out. For the very first time in his life, there were no other possible options to which he could cling. He was completely alone and deeply scared of the creature standing in front of him, whose immense power was quietly, but inexorably encircling him.

"Come now, Severus!" The Dark Lord chuckled malignantly. "I can feel your fear. This night you have been constantly avoiding my gaze. Should I think that you are hiding something? Do you want me to suspect you are disloyal to your Lord?"

"Forgive me, Master." Snape finally succeeded in answering, his husky voice betraying his emotion. "I see you are disappointed, and I just can't imagine why. I've always been a faithful servant and ..."

"Faithful servant?" The Dark Lord interrupted him with a short, contemptuous laugh. "You still dare to proclaim your devotion? Do you really believe I totally trusted you during all these years? Why do you think I put Wormtail at your side? For a spy, Severus, you certainly are very naive..."

Snape felt his heart skip a beat at this freezing declaration, but his face managed to stay expressionless while the Dark Lord went on with growing anger.

"How childish of you to think that your role could guarantee you immunity. It was too easy to play two parts! Loyal to me and loyal to the old fool, each time pretending you were acting for a greater good. Nobody would question your choices, and in case somebody did, your answer was always ready. You didn't want to reveal your hand. Wasn't this your excuse, Severus?"

"And in addition to this questionable behaviour, those who are closer to you have been constantly reporting to me about your many little inconsistencies... a real collection of evidence, in spite of your justifications. Now, are you going to tell me you've never noticed that Bella was keeping a close watch on you?"

"Bellatrix has always detested me, Master," Snape answered hastily, doing his best to sound reasonable and even slightly resentful. He could not understand the reason behind this venomous attack, and his fear was increasing. "She has always been irrationally envious of everyone who could possibly interpose between herself... and your benevolence." He finished almost uncomfortably, letting a hint of bitterness colour his speech.

"Jealous, Severus?" The Dark Lord seemed coldly amused. "No, poor Bella should only blame her dedication. Twelve years in Azkaban have eroded her mind with pain and suffering, and she will never truly be herself again. Devotion is now her only reason to live, and yes, she's surely the most affectionate of my followers. But even if she may act unreasonably for what concerns my person, she is not totally blind. Fidelity has sharpened her senses, and she has always been sure of your betrayal."

The Dark Lord's reptilian eyes sparkled as he sardonically continued. "However, she too had to admit that it was impossible to prove your loyalties until you served two masters... but as I told her, why worry until you did the job you were expected to do and you did it well? Why stop you without any proof? After all, your mission was to be a liar. And finally, why upset my truly loyal followers by showing them that a traitor and what a powerful traitor! had comfortably made his nest amongst us? Better to keep you as an example of reliability, don't you think?"

Silence fell between the two men with a menacing pause while Voldemort seemed to weigh the young wizard, a disdainful expression curling his lips.

"All things considered, the situation has been entertaining, yes, greatly entertaining." The light, ironic tone frightfully contrasted with the anger clearly showing in the Dark Lord's eyes. "In fact, wasn't it amusing to see how concerned you looked each time you came to report your information? And at the same time, wasn't it enjoyable to notice how strong and trustful your confidence was becoming while you were performing your little ruse so well?"

Voldemort had a cruel smile on his face, watching Snape savour his words and their harsh, acrid taste. "So as you see, you shouldn't really reproach her. It wasn't only her scepticism that gave me a reason to doubt."

The Dark Lord crossed his arms. His sudden silence was even more frightening than his previous anger. "Now we are alone, Severus, and you will definitely tell me the truth. I've let you live because I didn't want to try you in front of the others on the night of our most important victory. Just imagine their shock and disbelief in discovering how well you have managed to deceive them all for such a long time..."

The Dark Lord paused significantly, then smiled sarcastically. "But perhaps you'll be able to favourably surprise me once more. Do it, please, Severus. Otherwise you'll pay for your faults with your own life... and in an extremely painful way." Again the Dark Lord had a twisted smile. "Be convincing, if you can."

Voldemort moved closer and leaned to stare resolutely into the young wizard's tormented eyes, his evil power gradually enveloping him like the coils of a poisonous snake. "You see, Severus, this night you'll be offered the chance to discover my inner thoughts. No more mysteries between you and me, no more secrets. Just think how many of your fellow Death Eaters would willingly trade their souls to have the possibility of catching a glimpse of my mind! And here you are, the only one whom I have deemed worthy. Enjoy this opportunity, Severus! Nobody has ever done it and survived."

The Dark Lord straightened up, and Snape swayed in weakness. Kneeling on the floor was becoming an intolerable torture in itself, and his mind was working furiously to protect his thoughts from the terrible pressure his master was intensifying. And the question was always there, burning implacably: what could have happened to generate such anger, to raise again the suspicions he had believed to be totally erased, the doubts which he had thought no longer remained?

"Tired, my friend?" Voldemort raised an eyebrow, obviously enjoying Snape's weariness. "Then let's put an end to our uncertainty. Let's give an answer to the many questions you left unanswered, and let's begin with a very important one. Why didn't you tell me immediately about the Unbreakable Vow? I had to find out from Bellatrix... not that she was very eager to let me know her sister's plan; too afraid for her and probably for Draco. But even more important, why did you accept to take it? Did you want to comfort poor, lonely Narcissa?"

A mocking expression appeared on the Dark Lord's hideous features. "I'm pleased to see the great affection that has developed between the two of you. Lucius, too, will surely be delighted to know how much you cared for his wife when the gates of Azkaban are opened again... and this will happen soon."

Instinctively, Snape made to protest, but the Dark Lord aimed his wand at him in irritation and hissed dangerously. "Manners, my friend! I have not permitted you to speak!"

For a moment suspended in eternity, before the spell could hit him with its stinging power, Severus saw himself roaring the same words to a dark haired, bespectacled boy, who was looking at him in anger and despire.

"You've had your revenge, Potter!" he thought bitterly, struggling to keep his balance in the haze of pain and confusion that followed the blast. Then he whispered a quiet, "I'm sorry, Master," raising his hand to wipe away the little drops of blood slowly trickling down from his scratched cheek.

The Dark Lord frowned in grim approval and went on impatiently. "Didn't you know that an Unbreakable Vow could not be broken or solved or modified in any way? Didn't you think that you were going to be bound eternally to the boy with a bond that is even stronger than the one I sealed on your arm?"

A frightful pause followed. Then the Dark Lord icily added, "I presume you can give me an explanation."

Searching for a response that would please his tormenter, Snape hesitated then answered in the most sincere tone he could achieve, lowering his head as if regretting his action. "I admit I probably have been highly unwise, my Lord, but I thought that helping the boy could have only resulted in achieving your plans... please forgive my impulsiveness."

Then, hesitating even more because he knew he was venturing on a risky path, but he needed to test his master's reactions he added softly, "I did it only to ensure success, my Lord. Please believe me." Then he waited in hope.

"A noble thought indeed, Severus." Voldemort was staring at him so intensely that Snape, not daring to raise his head yet, felt his skin burn under the gaze. "But finally, the truth has come out. And the truth is that you effectively wanted complete success... but only for yourself. You knew from the beginning that Draco would not be able to perform his mission. What could an inept boy do against a wizard as powerful as Dumbledore? But you could, Severus, and that's what's troubling me. You weren't supposed to interfere, but you did. Again I ask you: why?"

Terrified by the result of his attempt, Snape tried to object, but the Dark Lord raised his wand in anger. "I warned you, Severus. You will not leave this room until you've finally, unquestionably told me the truth. And believe me, you will, but this time, I'm not going to be as merciful as I was for young, foolish Draco. I spared him because he is only a boy and I need fresh forces in my army. But now he has become dangerous, because he has a link with you that cannot be removed, more binding than his own blood ties."

Snape once more moved involuntarily, and Voldemort stopped him, narrowing his eyes. "Why do you think I wasted so much time with Draco, rather than immediately give him the punishment he so greatly deserved? Because the Vow would have asked you to stop me at any cost, even with the sacrifice of your life. This way instead, with a little pressure, the boy voluntarily accepted my sentence, thus releasing you from your obligation. And most importantly, neither he nor his adoring mother understands how forcefully you have been bound by your promise. But as you see, thanks to the Vow, Draco's safety has already become vital to you, even more imperative than my will!

"Should I add something more? You are not a man to risk your life for a useless brat... or a beautiful woman, even one as attractive as Narcissa. Do you want me to tell you what I believe were your true motivations? It wasn't your loyalty or your commitment or your affection for the boy. Oh no, my friend! You accepted that bond because you needed justification to be the one to kill Dumbledore. You had been given the chance to fulfil your heart's desire and were ready to take it!"

The Dark Lord paused in his vehemence and declared musingly, "You wanted the power you would receive from your actions. Don't deny it, Severus, I know you too well. I never thought you were working for Dumbledore, as poor Bella obsessively repeated to me. You are ambitious, and the object of your ambition is power."

Voldemort lowered his voice, becoming angrier. "I'd been adamant with Draco that he should keep you totally unaware of his projects, and I know that the boy was too frightened to speak. How maddening this uncertainty must have been for you! You didn't know what was happening, and you were afraid that somebody else would ruin your plans and steal your glory... perhaps even the boy himself!

"That's why you hurried so fast to get to the tower in time. The Vow was calling you, offering the right opportunity to fulfil your wishes and, at the same time, to present me with extraordinary proof of your loyalty. And that's why you pushed Draco aside and prevented the others from making a move: because the boy was right in his accusation. To kill such a powerful wizard was going to give you even more strength and influence. The others may desire more power... but you... you want THE power. And this cannot be tolerated."

Voldemort paused to take a deep breath then concluded with a deceptively silky tone. "So, my devoted servant, I accuse you of the most grievous and unforgivable sin I could ever accuse one of my followers of making: of being an astute, disloyal, meddling opportunist!"

Slowly, Snape raised his head to look at his master, and the Dark Lord returned his gaze in contempt.

"You deny it, Severus?" he asked disdainfully.

Feeling too weak to react at the unexpected, incredible accusation and unable to sustain any longer the battle against the power that so terribly challenged him, Snape totally voided himself of feelings and emotions. Exhausted, he renounced any resistance and abandoned himself into the arms of his supreme master, the real owner of his soul, the one he had always bowed to: The Plan.

"If you believe this, Master, then kill me now," he replied quietly, offering his empty eyes and mind to the Dark Lord's scrutiny and his broken body to the fate he now believed to be inevitable. "Give me death by your wand, and I'll welcome it."

Voldemort hesitated and, for a moment, looked uncharacteristically uncertain. After a few seconds of silence that seemed to last forever, he lowered his wand. Then, still staring intensely at Snape, he conjured an armchair, and sitting slowly upon it, he rested his chin on one fist, the other hand softly caressing the armrest, and appeared to be lost in thought.

"You really are a riddle, Severus," he finally murmured, and for a long, unreal instant, he looked unexpectedly human and old incredibly old. "How can I try you? How can I definitely determine what is in your mind?"

Comforted by the hesitation of the man sitting in front of him, Snape felt a stream of renewed energy run through his veins, pervading him with a wild joy. So the master wasn't sure of his accusations! Paranoid and obsessed as he was, the Dark Lord was trying to see if there had been deception, and Snape's prompt submission had greatly disconcerted him. Maybe The Plan had not deserted its servant after all? Perhaps a new, promising scheme was just revealing itself. He dared to raise his eyes and look at his master, mutely answering the question.

The Dark Lord seemed strangely pleased. "Ah!" he exclaimed softly. "The old Severus is back again... I can see the cunning in your eyes. You have always been a resourceful man. Are you going to surprise me again as I asked you before?"

Voldemort stared intently at the younger wizard; then he laid his hands on his lap and leaned back, giving voice to his inner thoughts, not caring to hide his own emotions. "Ah, Severus, Severus... You have the best qualities of the four Hogwarts Houses: ambitious as a Slytherin, brave as a Gryffindor, clever as a Ravenclaw, and loyal as... well no, loyal may not be the correct word."

Once more, the old wizard and his young follower looked at each other, as if they were comparing their strengths. There was a curious twinkle in the Dark Lord's eyes when he spoke again.

"That's the third time you've come to me, Severus. The first time, you were a young, bold man, sharp and full of hate. Oh, yes... I could recognize it so easily. After all, we both were raised with hate. Hate is a powerful force. And in spite of what Dumbledore may have told you, hate is much more powerful than love. And you are proof, aren't you, Severus?"

"The second time, the night of my rebirth, you arrived later than the others. I was highly disappointed, do you remember, my friend? I thought that you had definitely left my side to join the old fool... but finally, you came back and your excuses were... if not convincing, let's say at least acceptable. However, I knew that something had changed forever."

The Dark Lord stopped his speech and waited in meditation. His face, already awful, had become even more fearful in its cruel, inhumane expression.

"You wanted the Power; I could feel it." His tone was now low and remote. "That's when I began to doubt your loyalties. You were longing for something that could make you more and more powerful. I could see the yearning in your eyes when you looked at my reborn figure and wondered if I truly was real, if I had really gone beyond my corporeal limits and submitted them to my will. But I warn you, Severus. There is a price to be paid. Mine was immense! I was exiled on the other side of existence and almost reached Death's gates, nearly touching them with my hands. I lost my body, my features, my nature, and changed into something much more than human... but always frustratingly far from perfection. Are you prepared for such a sacrifice?"

Voldemort was still, wandering once more in contemplation, but when he spoke again, his voice sounded somewhat amused. "Half Blood Prince, I remember well. Wasn't this the name you had chosen for yourself so many years ago? I suppose a sovereign can allow a prince in his realm... but not another king."

Again, time seemed to elapse in a different dimension while Voldemort sat still, meditating in his chair, and Snape waited in a hopeful silence, well aware of the struggle inside his master. Finally, the Dark Lord seemed to have made his decision. "So, Severus, you were my follower, my adviser, my friend... Should I call you my ally now? Have you the power to stand by me? Think carefully, Severus... This time, no repentance will be allowed."

Incredulous, Snape understood that the Dark Lord had been testing him for the very last time and that a new, extraordinary chance was being offered to him. Exultant, he unlocked his mind and let the full force of The Plan pervade him.

A torrent of uncontained emotions exploded ferociously inside his body, and he shivered uncontrollably while flashing images showing a future of power and glory, force and magnificence, danced wildly in his mind. Relief, joy, pride, hope, desire... all joined in a whirl so amazingly breathtaking that he moaned softly, trying to regain control. Never had he dreamed that he could have such a glorious destiny! In a mist of blurred sensations, he could see his magical power growing invincible while he towered over an awestruck wizarding world. Master of himself, judge of those who were no longer his equals, ruler of the other frail human beings; everything was possible, because might and supremacy were somewhere out there waiting for him.

His imagination blissfully explored endless possibilities... until, unexpectedly, he met his master's frightful eyes and knew he was completely, absolutely lost.

The Dark Lord was smiling triumphantly; his feral smile and evil pleasure slowly transforming his features. He rose from his chair and made it disappear with a quick wave of his wand. "I have won, Severus," he declared briefly.

Infinitely grateful thanks to my wonderful betas Jynx67, Pennfana and Notsosaintly.

4. Memories

Chapter 4 of 8

What if Snape hadn't really been following any one of his masters but a stronger, mysterious inspiration? A dark tribute to the ambiguous Snape we used to know.

4. Memories

"Mine is your soul!"

In the safe, hidden place of the future, Severus Snape pushed the heels of his hands against his eyes and sighed in anguish. After so many years of careful, calculated acting, at last his inner emotions—the ones he should have learned to control perfectly—had betrayed him, with the help of extreme weariness and the subtle arts of a wicked manipulator.

Trembling in humiliation, he remembered how the Dark Lord—a nasty, merciless expression playing on his face—had slowly approached the broken man knelt before him and, with the tip of his wand, had forced Snape's chin up until he had raised his head and looked at his master.

"So, Severus, I wasn't wrong after all. You were undeniably hiding something from me," Voldemort said with deceiving tenderness. Despair was so unmistakably visible in Snape's eyes that there was no need for an answer.

"My poor little prince!" The Dark Lord was cruelly teasing him now. "You really wanted to be my ally, my peer, perhaps even my heir? Do you think it's still possible, now that I know your secret ambitions? Why should I spare you? After all, you have also been Dumbledore's loyal follower... At least that's what he believed, but you didn't hesitate to slay him tonight. How can I trust you? How can I feel safe?"

Growing suddenly outraged and wrathful, Voldemort ordered, "What other secrets have you hidden for all these years? Where are you hiding them now? Open yourself to me, Severus. Show me your inner mind, or you will not survive."

Then the Dark Lord, as if remembering something, brusquely turned to look at the dying flames. "Nagini!" he called imperiously. From the other side of the room, awakening from her sleep in the comfortable warmth of the fireplace, the pet serpent raised its monstrous head and hissed in answer.

"I need your help, my dear," whispered Voldemort caressingly as the enormous animal approached and licked his hand affectionately with its parted tongue. "You already know our friend Severus, don't you?" The Dark Lord smiled, coldly amused. He gently stroked Nagini's head as he spoke deftly in Parseltongue.

Eyes wide in terror, Severus saw the malignant creature bow to her master and obediently move towards him, sinuously crawling on the floor until it reached the young wizard and wrapped herself around his body. Then the giant snake arrogantly raised her head and opened her mouth with a menacing hiss, baring her teeth as if she was deriding the frightened man trapped in its coils.

With a satisfied nod, savouring the moment in anticipation of an even more pleasant one, Voldemort said softly, "You see, Severus, I've never tried this magic on anyone else, because no one was powerful enough to endure it and survive. But the time is right; I'll finally have either the truth or your head. I hope you will enjoy this experience!"

Voldemort raised his wand and closed his eyes, mustering all his power to cast a supreme spell. Helpless, immobilized, terrified, Snape felt the immense power of his master gently but inexorably tightening its hold. A cold wave of light suddenly erupted from the wand, and a deep, uncontrollable spasm shook the defenceless young wizard as "something" seemed to disconnect from inside his chest. Painfully—so painfully!—with unbearable leisure, it began to make its way out through his flesh, following the movements of the wand.

The Dark Lord concentrated even more intensely, a faint, vindictive smile curling his lips, while Snape writhed in torture. Finally, with an ultimate devastating effort, the "thing" escaped, revealing itself as a luminous globe that immediately rose over the two men, dancing and rotating in lazy circles.

In a haze of pain, fear and disgust, Snape anxiously raised his eyes to follow the object extracted from his body, anguished to find that even such simple motion had become so extremely difficult.

The sphere was pulsating slowly, following the rhythm of Snape's heartbeat, he unexpectedly realized. From its brilliant, vivid surface, a multitude of images were

continuously detaching, glowing and disappearing in a flashing carousel. Astonished, he understood that every one of the little pictures passing by was mutely displaying a moment of his life.

Trembling, he first saw a smiling Dumbledore, then his former colleagues, McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout, Trelawney so many faces alternating in such a frenetic confusion! then his students and, going further back in time, his own schoolmates and friends and enemies and relatives, all in a vortex of colours and figures changing so quickly that it was practically impossible to catch them separately.

The Dark Lord impatiently waved his wand. Suddenly, the images scattered around, whirling in disorder until they completely vanished, totally unwrapping the globe so that only a vivid little pearl was left, its radiance almost unbearable.

"I did it!" exclaimed Voldemort in exultance. "I did it and you survived! Finally I'll have the proof I wanted!" Breathing excitedly, the Dark Lord moved closer and gently, very gently, touched the little sphere with the tip of his wand. Instantly, a flow of pure, immense, uncontainable energy coursed through Snape's body, and an intolerable pain made him convulse uncontrollably.

Voldemort looked disappointed and tried again, a tender, almost imperceptible touch. But the result was still terrifying. Though firmly held by the giant snake, Snape writhed even more forcefully and retched, a horrible, dry sound of anguish escaping his lips.

Frustrated, the Dark Lord stepped back and looked angrily at his exhausted prisoner. "Ah, Severus, Severus! Your soul is so well locked that if I try to open it, you will die. This is really exasperating... no way to scrutinize your inner self except by destroying it... and you!"

However, as he controlled his rage, Voldemort found himself smiling bitterly in reluctant admiration. "You are so brave, Severus..." he said thoughtfully in a curiously detached tone while Snape arched himself in agony, trying to fight back against the powerful, malignant force enfolding his body. "I believe that this is the true reason why I'll permit you to live. I cannot stand to waste your many outstanding qualities. Not considering the fact that for the others, you are a hero, my most loyal follower and Dumbledore's conqueror. How can I disillusion them?" he concluded ironically.

Sighing, the Dark Lord flicked his wand at the little sphere, and it flashed vividly in response; then it began to descend, following the movement of the wand until it disappeared with a last, tremulous twinkle inside Snape's chest, making the younger man faintly convulse one last time.

Voldemort paused meditatively then raised his head briskly. "Nagini!" he called again, and the giant snake turned her cold eyes to him, waiting for his command. "Let him go!" he ordered sharply.

Obediently, the beast opened her coils and released the shattered man, who was shaking in a cold sweat. With a gentle tap of her head, the snake even helped the young wizard return to his kneeling position before retreating quietly into the darkness. Swaying in exhaustion, Snape put the palms of his hands on the rough stones of the floor and braced himself, because he was dreadfully aware that the worst was still to come, but his hands were damp and slippery, and he lost his balance, falling hard on the ground where he lay motionless, panting heavily.

The Dark Lord moved closer and contemplated the fallen man with a thoughtful expression. Then he whispered softly, "Should I finish you now, lest you betray me in the future?"

Severus spasmed weakly then resigned to his fate. He felt so terribly weary, vulnerable and alone! The Plan had undeniably deserted him, and his suffering was surely punishment for his errors. Tears, those irrational expressions of weakness he hadn't experienced for so many years now even more burning because of his failure began to form under his eyelids as he hopelessly waited for the end.

The Dark Lord didn't move and stood still in contemplation until he finally murmured, "You have been too valuable, Severus, to let it end this way. Your services, though spoiled, are still useful. I must find a way to bind you unconditionally to my plans."

Suddenly, with another flick of his wand, Voldemort brutally lifted Snape from the ground, sustaining him until he had regained his balance and could stand, even if quivering, in front of his master.

"I've decided to give you another sign of my benevolence, Severus," the Dark Lord declared grimly. "And you can thank Narcissa for indirectly suggesting this idea. I'll imprint you with a most powerful mark, a seal that shall link you indissolubly to me. You will never again be able to separate your will from mine. The mark will keep you under control, and it will stop you if and when needed..."

"But don't worry," he chuckled malignantly, "you will not die for any eventual disobedience. You'll just pay with your suffering... and let me advise you to be very careful, because it won't be pleasant at all. Only one other person in our world has unworthily had the honour of a connection with me, and you know him very well. I am speaking of our beloved Harry Potter, of course. He surely is a dear friend of yours, isn't he, Severus? I've heard you let him go free tonight and advised the others to spare him because he was reserved for me."

The high-pitched voice became sarcastic. "How touching of you to be so concerned about my orders, Severus! What else should I have expected from such a faithful servant as you? I wonder if your dreams of glory also included Potter's murder in the near future. Too bad you locked your soul so well!"

Then turning grave again, the Dark Lord held up a hand. "And now, Severus, be prepared. This is my reward, as I promised."

Blazing intensely with power, Voldemort raised his wand and cast a forceful curse. Fiercely hit by the unexpected violence of the spell, Snape gasped and staggered back as one deep and long slash, immediately followed by another, crossed his forehead. Little drops of blood instantly began to ooze from the wounds, but before he could wipe them away, the Dark Lord reiterated his spell, and with agonizing deliberation, a third red-glowing gash traced its way on his skin.

This time, the young wizard couldn't avoid a sharp cry and closed his eyes in pain, but the Dark Lord cruelly insisted until Snape, ceding him victory, sank to his knees and pressed his hands to his forehead with a choked sob.

"Three cuts, Severus, one for each of the times you came to me!" declared Voldemort harshly, breathing in excitement. "Three for the commitments you've taken: the first one with me, that you have betrayed, the second one, unbreakable, with Draco, and now the third, and most important, with me again! This is the mark which will seal my bond with you... and which will remind you that my patience has already reached its limits!"

The Dark Lord stopped to recover his breath when suddenly he seemed to have a new, pleasant inspiration, and he looked at his servant with a twisted smile.

"To make the spell even stronger, I believe I'll put a guardian to watch over you, and who better than Wormtail? I know very well the mutual respect you share for each other... but at least *he* can be trusted, a quality you've never possessed!" Voldemort added in cold sarcasm.

Silence fell between the two men in an unnatural pause, while the giant snake circled incessantly around them, and Snape breathed painfully, his head lowered in desperate impotence.

The Dark Lord stepped forward with arrogance. "Now, there is still one last condition. Look at me, Severus!" he ordered imperiously. Snape raised a devastated face, but he lowered it again almost immediately, keeping his lips pressed and his eyes obstinately closed.

"Look at me, I said," Voldemort repeated in an unexpectedly gentle tone while he stretched out a hand to reach Snape's chin.

The young wizard tried to resist, but the Dark Lord forced him to raise his head again. Defeated, Snape opened his reddened eyes, blinking fast to fight back the tears and avoid, at least, this final humiliation, but he wasn't quick enough. One little drop rounded itself and trickled down his cheek. The Dark Lord smiled and took it with the tip of his finger.

"You sealed the spell by yourself, Severus, so now you are totally, absolutely mine, and this will last forever. Anything you want to say, Severus? How do you like my reward?"

"I... I thank you, my Lord, for your immense mercy. I... know I didn't... deserve it," Snape muttered in a strangled voice, hating his Master for the terrible humiliation he suffered, but hating himself even more for his response.

"I'm glad to see you haven't forgotten your manners, my friend. There could still be hope for you after all," the Dark Lord declared, cruelly pleased to see that Snape was still strong enough to experience a feeling as forceful as hate. "So, Severus, you received the prize I promised nobody should say the Dark Lord is ungrateful! and you are now free to leave and wait for my future orders. I deeply recommend you think on my words while you enjoy your rest. Have a good night, my friend, and don't forget..." His voice became suddenly harsh. "The Potter boy belongs to me, as you were so eager to inform your fellow Death Eaters this night."

With an evil smile, the Dark Lord bowed ironically at his humiliated servant; then, with a soft pop, he and his pet snake Disapparated, leaving Snape alone in the cold, deserted and now completely darkened room.

Feeling thoroughly crushed, Severus took a deep breath and tried to regain his composure. Hesitantly, he touched the three scars on his forehead, still aching even as they were beginning to disappear, and a wild thought immediately crossed his mind. Slave! He had been marked as a slave, and he wouldn't be free ever again after this cursed night!

Fighting his confused emotions, Snape slowly buried his face into his hands and closed his eyes. Then, pain and weariness, humiliation and despair, anguish and uncertainty, all joined, hitting his exhausted being. After a few moments of vain struggle, the broken young man let himself drop to the floor, his cheek resting against the roughness of the stones, his mind torn apart, his body silently shaken by fierce, unrestrained sobs.

In the safe, hidden place in the future, Severus Snape looked blankly at the darkness with opened, blind eyes, while he clenched his hands in a hopeless effort to push back the same desperate tears.

5. Actions

Chapter 5 of 8

What if Snape hadn't really been following any one of his masters but a stronger, mysterious inspiration? A dark tribute to the ambiguous Snape we used to know. HBP compliant.

5. Actions

"Could there be a hope in hell?"

Hidden in the dark protection of the Shrieking Shack, Severus Snape abruptly awakened from his troubled slumber, the very first one his overexcited mind had conceded to his exhausted body after so many nights. A featherlike touch, the mocking parody of a gentle stroke, had been slowly caressing his temple, and with a shiver, he had suddenly become aware that his master was calling. Almost immediately, the thin scars on his forehead had begun to burn atrociously, and he bit his lips, trying to fight back the flood of desperation following the pain.

How intolerable, how indescribably humiliating it was to remember he was now a slave! The crushed remnants of his once powerful future were now lying at his feet like the scattered, broken furniture around him. Solitude, regret and hopelessness were going to be his new, severe companions in the days to come... until his evil master finally grew tired of his services and made a definitive decision about his destiny. He had no doubt of the reward that was awaiting him at the end.

What a fool had he been to submit to the Dark Lord's seductive insistence so many years ago! How many mistakes had he made for which it was now impossible to make amends? How deeply miserable had his life been and in which terrible way was it going to end?

He sighed deeply. The sparkle of pale, desperate hope was still faintly trembling in his chest. Perhaps The Plan... Again, a sharp pain in his forehead reminded him of his duty. He had to bow in bitter resignation. His mistakes were ferociously claiming his punishment, and it was useless to wish for a reprieve.

Still uncertain about how the mark worked, Snape closed his eyes and unlocked his mind, waiting for his master's will to reveal itself. Slowly, sounds and images began to form in his brain while his essence was in a trance. Gradually, a more defined vision forcefully invaded his misty thoughts.

And suddenly, he knew.

The late afternoon was already colouring the sky in warm orange and red tones, happily announcing sunset, when Harry Potter and Hermione Granger smoothly Apparated before the gates of Hogwarts with a soft pop.

They were on their way back from Bill and Fleur Weasley's merry wedding, where the serene atmosphere of the familial event and the gathering of so many affectionate friends had a deep soothing effect on their souls.

When the party was coming to its end and everybody was too animated to notice, a very serious Harry had whispered to Hermione that he was thinking of leaving and stopping by Hogwarts; wouldn't she like to join him?

Still brightened by the general excitement and by the drinks she had uncharacteristically but eagerly volunteered to taste with Ron, highly encouraged in this by Fred and George, Hermione, tugged by many contrasting emotions, had impulsively accepted.

Now, feeling deeply moved at the sight of the castle gently fading away in the glorious rays of the dying sun, the two teenagers walked slowly across the lawn, each one carefully avoiding the other's gaze... But after a few paces, the silence became unbearable.

"Why did you want to come back this way?" Hermione finally asked while her hand furtively wiped the corner of her eyes, a hint of sadness trembling in her voice.

"I really don't know," replied Harry softly, lowering his head as if he was looking for something on the ground, but essentially trying to save his dignity; he, too, was feeling his emotions growing almost uncontrollably. "Maybe because all the best memories of my life are enclosed in this little area. I can't believe that everything I love could be destroyed in just a handful of seconds..."

Then, unable to talk anymore, he quickly moved away from her, murmuring quietly. "And I can't stand the thought that I could lose more of my friends, anyone else I care for, while we are all trying to stop this absurd, useless war."

Hermione watched him go with sad eyes, concern filling her mind that was growing even more sensitive every day. At least the memories in her life were, for the most part, joyful. Her parents were still there, waiting for her to come home, ready to congratulate her on her outstanding scholastic successes. Even if, she had to admit, they didn't really understand the existence in which she was caught up more and more, so different from their own ordinary lives.

Unbidden, a vivid, recurring thought made her shiver with apprehension. Her parents didn't know that her new world, the place she really belonged to, was in terrible danger. She had always been very careful to conceal every possible negative impression. Neither did they know that their beloved daughter, being a Muggle-born a completely meaningless word to them was going to be a highly attractive target in a future approaching fast and threateningly.

Suddenly, she felt guilty and oppressed by her new responsibilities. Now she was fully aware of how Harry had been feeling for all those years: desperately alone, the weight of a terrible task totally resting over his prematurely burdened shoulders.

While she was overwhelmed by those unhappy thoughts, an acute, deep wave of compassion unexpectedly seemed to spring up from her inner self, travelling at a mad speed through her body and entering her mind with irresistible strength.

Fascinated, she shivered again, welcoming the forceful emotion that had the strange, yet delightful power to make her feel weary and strong at the same time, while she definitely realized that, from now on, she would not be allowed to be the same anymore. Like a phoenix, a new Hermione was laboriously emerging from the ashes of her old existence, and similar to the phoenix, her renewed essence was vibrating with the compelling urge to spread harmony and tenderness into the troubled lives of the unfortunate people called to fight in this insane war.

The mysterious feeling settled strongly into her chest, pervading her with a confused yet immense happiness. Slowly, the new and the old Hermione combined as she tried to recover her calm and determination. Closing her eyes with a satisfied sigh, she leaned back against the comforting presence of a magnificent tree, enjoying the contact with the silent, vigorous friend. Then with a smile luminous with tears, she raised her head and looked around, searching for Harry.

And suddenly, she saw.

Severus Snape was passively following his master's indications, his mind still incapable of finding a reason to hope. The order received through the vision was to reach one of the caves disseminated in the side of the hills just below Hogwarts castle. But strangely enough, the vision hadn't been very helpful in determining where the selected spot was exactly, thus making it impossible for him to Apparate there. Furious, he had consequently realized that, to find the cave, he would have to walk and properly examine the site.

He knew perfectly well and so did the Dark Lord that he could have been easily discovered, taking the risk of walking through the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid was still living in his cottage and restlessly roaming his little kingdom with Fang, as the half giant used to do to bring some peace to his great body. So to be obliged to go there without magic was simply more proof of his impotence and of his master's wicked malignancy.

Moreover, the unspoken orders implied another distressing experience for him. Passing near the gates, crossing the same path he had so precipitately left behind him that night, contemplating the ruins of all that could have been and hadn't... Powerless in his rage, Snape understood that the Dark Lord's intentions also included a cruel determination to remind him of his faults and weaknesses, to reinforce even more the bond the young wizard had sealed with his own blood and tears.

For a long while, Snape sat still and meditated in silence, vainly trying to resist the orders, hating his master and all those who willingly or unwillingly had managed to change his life, turning its course into this living hell. But above all, he struggled against himself, against his desperate yet hopeless need to see Dumbledore and talk with him again. Oh! Why couldn't he? Just one more time! mirroring his soul in those trustful, serene blue eyes.

Dumbledore had been the only one who had looked at him without the unbearable emotions all the others were unable to conceal: pity, contempt, distrust, hate, even revulsion. Dumbledore had been the only one who had constantly and sincerely behaved as his protector, his friend, sometimes even his... father?

And now, the great wizard was no more, his miserable traitor abandoned, his life and powers submitted to the unpredictable will of a murdering monster. Isolated as he was, Snape totally ignored what had happened in the castle after his departure, what had been said about him and his betrayal, what was being decided in the wizarding world.

He, whose role had always been to know everything, was now completely unaware of even the most insignificant movement around him... and this was the worst torture his restless mind could tolerate. He was used to being alone. After all, he had been alone for his whole life. However, that had been a voluntary choice. To be forced to accept someone else's decisions, to depend on them, to lose control of his actions! These were unbearable sufferings, and the Dark Lord knew it very well.

Minutes passed by agonizingly slow. Then, unable to find a reason to delay any longer, Snape took his black cloak, wishing for a moment that he could hide himself under it as Potter usually did, and prepared to leave. With a resigned sigh, he commanded himself to Apparate to a place he knew very well, having used it for the same purpose during the many years of his secret activities: the dark, protective shadows of a little copse of trees near the Hogwarts gates.

Hermione stifled a cry as she saw the shape of a black clad man moving carefully through the shadows of the trees. Incredibly, the man looked like... Severus Snape?!

Petrified, she was already shaking in fear when she suddenly realized with relief that they had not been seen. Harry, sitting in meditation under a large plant, was completely hidden by its foliage. Meanwhile, she was still leaning against the tree, practically pasted to its massive trunk, carefully controlling her breath.

The dark man so frightfully resembling Snape gave a cautious look around; then like a giant, mysterious cat, he silently began to move through the trees and quickly disappeared, enwrapped in the shadows.

As soon as he was no longer in sight, Hermione exhaled, releasing the breath she had held for fear of being discovered, and swiftly ran to her lost in thought companion.

"Harry!" she whispered anxiously. "We need to leave immediately! I think I saw Snape Apparating in the woods... and he may not be alone! Please, let's go and inform the Order!"

"Snape? SNAPE?!" Brusquely awakened from his trance, Harry opened his eyes in wild surprise. A ferocious expression of joy passed over his face, immediately followed by one of hatred. "We can't let him go, Hermione! He could disappear again! We have to follow him and find out what he's doing here..."

"Harry!" Hermione nearly sobbed in frustration and disbelief. "We can't alone! It's too dangerous! What if he is expecting other Death Eaters... Harry!" she pleaded, grabbing his arm and trying to stop him as he tried to move.

The boy spun angrily towards her. "You can leave if you're afraid! But I won't let him get away again!" he exclaimed harshly, pulling his arm away with a jerk.

Then, looking at her hurt, offended expression, he softened a bit and said excitedly, "Please, Hermione, try to understand. This is our only chance. I won't do anything dangerous, I promise, but I have to know what's going on! Don't you see? This could help the Order and maybe save lives! Oh, come on, let's go after him now!"

Torn between fear and reason, Hermione sighed deeply, knowing too well that, at this point, nothing could stop her friend from his quest. Shaking her head in disbelief, she allowed Harry to lead her away. Watching around carefully, trying not to make even the slightest noise, the two youngsters began to follow the track among the trees.

Severus Snape was feeling highly uncomfortable. When he had Apparated in front of the gates, hidden in the darkness of the foliage, he had thought he'd felt a presence... But after an attentive scan, he had concluded that nobody was there to possibly endanger him. Still, he was troubled by that first disturbing impression. Maybe it was a trap of the Dark Lord himself? It wouldn't surprise him. Extremely careful as he had always been, Snape proceeded deliberately slowly, continuously checking his path and his surroundings, consequently providing Harry and Hermione an easy trail to follow.

After a seemingly long time, prey and predators finally stopped in front of the dark opening of a cave. The youngsters observed Snape while he looked around in concentration, a strangely hesitant expression playing on his face. Finally making a decision, he stepped forward and entered resolutely, soon disappearing into the darkness.

At this point, a sort of madness seemed to possess Harry. Before Hermione could even say a word, he was already running toward the cave, rushing to reach his worst enemy, the living symbol of all he wanted to destroy.

"Harry!" she moaned, vainly hoping to stop him. Desperate, feeling her legs suddenly weak, Hermione hurried after him, wondering what was going to happen and what she could do to help, to "avoid the unavoidable". The obscurity swallowed her, and she had to blink two or three times before getting used to the pitch black and recovering full sight. And then, looking at the scene, she shivered in panic.

The cave was more vast than it had looked from outside, and many mysterious passages departed from its central room. Snape, still unaware of the danger, was standing in the middle, looking uncertain, as if he was waiting for something.

"Snape!" shouted Harry savagely, materializing from the darkness and pointing his wand at him.

Whirling around in surprise, his former professor immediately reacted to the threat in the boy's voice, lifting his hand with a graceful movement. Two flashes of light erupted almost at the same time and travelled through the cave in an explosion of sparkles. A deep, forceful sound reverberated long and harmoniously as the lights hit the rocky walls, scattering dust and debris all around.

The man and the boy stared at each other with mute fury for a moment. They raised their wands again in cold determination.

"*Stupefy!*" yelled Harry, but Snape deflected the attack easily, his lips curled in a sarcastic smile.

"You need to do better than this if you want to have a chance with me, Potter," he said smoothly, his eyes glittering with grim satisfaction.

"*Impedimenta!*" The boy tried again, and the older wizard deviated his spell and cast another one that forced Harry to jump back.

"You lack subtlety, Potter," said Snape in his usual mocking tone, stepping forward and opening his arms as if inviting his adversary to attack. "You always make the same mistakes."

"While you never make any, do you?" Harry retorted, his anger increasing with each spell missing its target. He hated to admit it, but Snape didn't seem to be worried at all. The dark wizard wasn't even trying to strike him down, but barely defending himself. Everything in his attitude suggested great confidence and a damn arrogance.

"At least I try to learn from mine!" replied Snape coldly through gritted teeth, deflecting the boy's spell once more. His movements were elegant and fluid, whereas Harry was wasting his energies trying to find a strategy. Nevertheless, there was something peculiar in the older wizard's attacks, as if something was restraining him from going further.

Still recovering from the shock of this unpleasant surprise, Snape was thinking frantically. How could Harry Potter be there? Was this really a trap? Was it only a terrible coincidence? The boy was no target for him, as he had been cruelly warned. And yet, destiny was offering Snape his revenge on a silver platter... certainly a pathetic object for the immenseness of his hate. Nevertheless it was always satisfying to cast his burning anger on a living being. And Potter had already touched a nerve, with his arrogant manners and his foolishly high self-esteem. There ought to be a way to make him suffer without breaking the Dark Lord's orders!

Surprisingly enough, it was Hermione who intervened. While the two men had been focusing on the battle, she had waited hesitantly, safely hidden in the darkness of the cave. She, too, had noticed that Snape wasn't effectively attacking Harry his moves were more defensive ones, and his counter spells not as aggressive as they could have been and she was beginning to wonder.

Her eyes narrowed in concern as she tried to decide what she should do. Finally, she made up her mind "*Expelliarmus!*" she cried with one incredibly fast movement of her hand

Taken totally by surprise, Snape tried to keep his balance, but the power of the spell blasted him to the ground, and Hermione grabbed his wand with a quick "*Accio.*"

Baffled by her action, Harry shot an incredulous glance at Hermione, who looked back at him with that strange, determined expression she had when she decided to do something she didn't want to do but had to be done. The girl joined Harry in a few measured paces, and both teenagers stared unpleasantly at each other.

Panting in frustration, Snape clenched his fists and straightened himself to face his adversaries. Unarmed! Helpless! Defeated! His mind was roaring with fury. A trap, this could only be a trap, and he had been so easily caught in it!

For a long moment, silence filled the cave, the fast, shallow breath of the two men the only audible sound. Finally, a harsh voice broke the emptiness.

"Well then, Potter. It seems that you and Miss Granger have me outnumbered, haven't you? I should have expected it, anyway. You truly are like your father..." Snape said disdainfully, folding his arms across his chest and trying to control his breathing. "*He was never alone when he wanted to attack me.*"

"Shut up!" roared Harry angrily. He turned to face Hermione with a furious expression. "Give him back his wand!"

"Harry..." the girl began hesitantly.

"GIVE HIM BACK HIS WAND!!!" Harry shouted again, pointing his wand at her. "I don't want your help; I don't need your help in this matter! This is between him and me, has always been between the two of us from the beginning, and I want to settle it myself!"

The boy stopped to breathe, almost choking in fury, his arm shaking with the effort of controlling his rage.

"No," Hermione said coldly, her eyes burning fiercely. "I'm tired of seeing everything solved by violence and with violence. That's why your parents lost their lives, Harry. That's why so many other innocent people have been killed or will be... And that's why you cannot kill him before letting him explain the real reasons for betraying us... and for killing the only one who sincerely trusted him."

"Explain?!!!" Anger was driving Harry to madness. He couldn't believe that Hermione had interposed herself to protect Snape. "There is nothing to explain! He's a bloody murderer, and he deserves to be killed! Don't you remember? I was there! I saw everything with my own eyes! YOU WERE CRYING UNCONTROLLABLY AT DUMBLEDORE'S FUNERAL! How can you possibly ask me to spare Snape's miserable life now?"

"I can," Hermione simply replied, "and you will have to hex me to stop me."

6. Actions

Chapter 6 of 8

What if Snape hadn't really been following any one of his masters but a stronger, mysterious inspiration? A dark tribute to the ambiguous Snape we used to know.

6. Actions

"Darkness is just before dawn"

An unnatural pause fell between them, and their figures froze, eyes locked in a silent battle, each one fighting to hold ground. Finally, Harry, biting his lips, stepped back under Hermione's stare. Slowly, he began to lower his wand, a controlled anger still glowing in his emerald green eyes.

Snape was standing impassively, arms folded, his eyes flickering from Hermione to Harry. So, it wasn't a trap! The conflict between the two children was clear proof that their appearance was just an annoying coincidence. But he had been unlucky, highly unlucky, mainly because he didn't know what was going to happen now that he was not only unarmed but also totally unaware of the reasons for his summoning to this place. He could not let his former students get involved, even if one of them was the insufferable Potter, whom he was longing to humiliate. He was experiencing the disturbing sensation that, thanks to the Dark Lord's plans, his life and Potter's were now indissolubly linked and that to endanger Potter would probably result in an acceleration of his own end. He could at least take advantage of the girl's unexpectedly good disposition towards him... and of Potter's foolish self-confidence, too. He was more than certain that the boy, irrationally proud as he was, would never hit an unarmed adversary.

"How touching!" he said silkily, a hint of cold amusement in his voice. "I suppose I should thank you for your passionate defence, Miss Granger, but alas, I believe it's too late. I suggest you give me back my wand and let me continue where I was requested to go before your most unpleasant arrival... not that I need your permission, anyway," he added softly.

"You bloody bastard!" Harry shouted in a burst of anger, and before Hermione could stop him, he cast a Stinging Hex. Again, Snape avoided it with ease and shook his head in disbelief. He knew it was risky, but he simply couldn't avoid taunting the irritating brat.

"You are so predictable, Potter. I still wonder how you managed to stay alive all these years, so utterly incapable as you are. But I imagine luck helped you a lot."

The boy paled at the insult, his expression changing to one of pure hatred. Hermione looked alarmed, but Harry didn't react, just crossed his arms, saying quietly, "Give him back his wand. I'm not going to repeat myself again."

It was Hermione's turn to pale, now. She didn't know what to do. Sensing her confusion, Snape began to advance slowly towards them, like a dark, avenging angel.

Harry immediately pointed his wand at him, but he didn't even seem to notice. With that faint, twisted smile they had learned to hate during all those years, he kept his gaze fixed on Hermione, who was looking helpless and uncertain. He stopped before getting too near and raised his right hand, a mute, yet arrogant order in his eyes.

Hermione glanced at Harry, unconsciously seeking his advice, but his terrible hate and cold determination were so palpable, she immediately knew there was no hope. Sighing, she lowered her head. Slowly, a bizarre expression grew on her face, and she raised it to look interrogatively into Snape's black eyes.

"That night... when you... when you went..." she began tentatively, locking her gaze on his, the hand still holding his wand trembling a little.

"The night I killed Dumbledore, you mean." He cut her off impatiently. She flinched at his harsh statement, and he went on, arching an eyebrow. "So, Miss Granger?"

"You didn't kill Professor Flitwick, nor me, nor Luna Lovegood... Why?" she whispered, and Harry looked at them with sudden interest.

"You were never a relevant target," Snape spat coldly. "I was in a hurry. I suppose I decided to leave that pleasure to someone else."

They were looking at each other so intensely that Harry felt totally excluded.

"I don't believe you, Professor," Hermione said softly.

Snape looked surprised, then angry. His mind was a raging storm of emotion. How could a girl hurt him so deeply with such a simple statement? Why were his feelings vibrating so achingly inside him? How could he have become so vulnerable?

The man and the girl stared at each other for a moment that seemed to last an eternity when, impulsively, Harry broke the enchantment. With a swift movement of his wrist, he snatched the wand from Hermione and tossed it to Snape.

Snape grabbed it immediately and faced Harry again, a nasty smile on his face. But this time, the boy had been quicker and, letting his hate guide him, had already raised his wand in a silent spell. Even if he was expecting it, Snape was still unbalanced by his previous action and, above all, by his confused emotions. With overwhelming power, the curse knocked him down, leaving him breathless on the stony floor of the cave.

"Harry! Harry! Please, wait!" Hermione was indignant, but Harry, grimly enjoying his long awaited revenge, wouldn't listen. He coldly aimed his wand at the dark figure curled at his feet and cast another spell without hesitation.

Trembling in pain, Snape wearily tried to raise his wand and protect himself, but he was violently blasted into the air. He hit against the rocks and slid once more to the ground, where he laid breathing painfully.

"Harry! He's defenceless! How could you?" Hermione cried, almost in tears, trying to grab his arm to stop him. He looked implacable, and the girl was horrified to see how his expression had become incredibly cruel; it was like her friend had changed into a violent, ferocious beast. She could feel his arm and body, rigid as if they were made of steel, while his lips were distorted in a dark grin.

Again, she clutched his arm to stop him, but Harry coldly pushed her away, and for the third time, pointed his wand at his fallen enemy. "Enough!" yelled Hermione, shaking him in desperation, beginning to sob desperately.

After a few moments of hesitation, Harry seemed to awaken abruptly, turning his head and blinking in alarm. "I... I..." he began, looking helplessly at Hermione, then his eyes opened wide. "It wasn't me!" he realized in shock. "There was something inside my mind, and it was forcing me to strike him down!"

"Oh, Harry!" she sobbed, still holding his arm. "Don't you see? You're being used again by... by..." For the first time in her life, she was too scared to say the Dark Lord's name, as if by pronouncing it, he could unexpectedly appear in the cave.

Harry looked at her in consternation and exclaimed angrily, "I'll never be free, then. He is still controlling me. How can I ever break his control?" He clenched his fists in frustration when Hermione's cry of fear made him startle in alarm.

"You've fooled me once, Potter!" hissed Snape, swaying, but again on his feet, a frightful expression of hate distorting his face. "But you won't have another chance!" Regardless of the dangers and risks, looking only for revenge, he pointed a trembling wand at the teenagers, his eyes shining with fury.

Without thinking, Harry immediately shielded Hermione with his body as Snape prepared to strike... when incredibly, with a broken, painful exclamation, the dark wizard staggered and lowered his wand. He dropped it to the ground and raised his hands to his temples.

While Harry and Hermione watched him in fascinated horror, three long, deep, ugly cuts suddenly appeared on Snape's forehead, and little, red, glowing drops trickled down his face, following the curve of his cheek.

"No! Not... now!" he articulated, clearly suffering unbearably. Then his forces seemed to abandon him, and he slumped on his knees as his body shivered uncontrollably.

"What's happening, Harry? What... who did this?" Hermione whispered agitatedly, raising a hand to her mouth, wishing to step forward and help their former professor, yet too afraid to do so.

"I really don't understand," Harry answered in the same low, worried tone. "He seems to be hurt. Could Voldemort be near?"

While they frantically scanned the cave, looking for the possible menace, Snape lay on the ground, struggling against the evil power of the scars with which he had been marked. The pain was atrocious hadn't the Dark Lord warned him about the impossibility of defying his orders? and the shudders running through his body made him writhe incessantly while he desperately tried to react. But the dark magic was too great to be successfully opposed, especially by his quickly vanishing energies.

This was the second time he was forced to surrender by a power infinitely stronger than him. The Plan, that incorporeal will he had always believed to be his guide, had again denied its help, and even more painful, this time the one undeservingly exulting in victory would be Harry Potter. Harry Potter!

He closed his eyes in defeat, reliving the same terrible sensations he had experienced in his last encounter with the Dark Lord. Bitter thoughts crossed his mind as he waited for his persecutor to cast the final strike, wishing for a quick, merciful end and hoping to be spared the words of triumph the damned brat was surely going to pronounce, gloating over his beaten enemy...

Then, unpredictably, like the soothing murmur of waves from a distant sea, he felt a deep flood of compassion wash over him and embrace him tenderly, helping him to fight back the pain. Confused, strangely reassured, even if still suffering terribly, he opened his eyes and met Hermione's gaze.

The girl looked frightened but genuinely regretful, a troubled, questioning expression on her face. Slowly, as if entranced, she moved closer, offering help she didn't really know how to manage. A sharp exclamation of warning escaped Harry's lips, and he stepped forward to grab her wrist. With a sad, reproaching glance, Hermione pulled herself gently away and knelt beside Snape, tentatively holding out a hand.

Painfully, he turned his face and let out a soft moan, ashamed to be seen so vulnerable and weak. At the same time, he perceived his emotions growing devastatingly strong and impossible to hold back as tears began to surge again behind his eyelids. Desperate, he understood that the evil seal on his forehead was going to claim his humiliation, as it had already done in front of the Dark Lord.

"*Not before Harry Potter!*" he thought wearily. Mustering all his remaining forces, he tried once more to regain his composure, but he soon gave up, too exhausted to fight.

In the meantime, a strange transformation happened to Hermione as she helplessly witnessed the vain struggle of the man lying at her feet. While Harry watched agape, a light, pearly shine gradually surrounded her body, and all her movements became slow, incredibly measured. An immense compassion, the radiation of a power too great for such a young creature to possess, diffused over her features. She stared at Snape with overwhelming tenderness. Suddenly, a stream of energy spread out from her being, filling him with such a forceful sensation of love that he could resist no more. A tear slipped down his cheek, and Harry gasped at the unbelievable sight of Snape... crying?

Hermione smiled exultantly, shining even more gloriously. She leaned forward to gently wipe the little drop away with her fingers. Wincing, but submitting to her touch, Snape felt an acute, yet surprisingly comforting pain, and a mad thought crossed his almost distraught imagination.

"A-Albus?" he stammered uncertainly, his eyes unfocused with tears. The ancient wisdom concealed in Hermione's new consciousness seemed to react joyously to his question. Hermione smiled again, a knowing, compassionate, forgiving smile. Then her unexpectedly older voice exclaimed softly and remotely, as if coming from another dimension, "Be thou of good hope, Severus! *Non prevalebunt!*" In a barely audible whisper, she added gravely, "HE shall not prevail!"

Snape gave a broken sob and let his head drop back, exhausted, but strangely relieved, while Hermione looked even more caring and sad. Her fingers gently, delicately, took his shaking hand, and little drops of blood stained her skin...

Immediately, the glowing aura disappeared, and with a startled cry and eyes widened in shock, the "real" Hermione brusquely rose and stepped back, looking at her hand. The stains were burning her flesh, almost corroding it, while a faint smoke seemed to evaporate from the blots. The pain was terrible. Frightened, too upset to do something effective, she turned to Harry for help, silently raising her injured fingers. Unable to bear the ache anymore, she quietly began to cry.

"*Evanesco!*" Harry exclaimed instantly, repeating the spell two more times to cancel all the evil marks. Then, misinterpreting what he had just witnessed but absolutely not heard - he angrily pointed his wand at Snape, his eyes shining with renovated fury and disbelief. "I knew it! He's become a dark magic weapon! See what he did to you! And you still believe he doesn't deserve to be killed?"

"No, no, Harry!" she cried agitatedly, trying to make him understand of what she was now very certain. "Look, he's suffering! This is not his fault. I think that he's under some dark spell!"

"Even better!" Harry replied irately and raised his wand to strike... when his eyes met Snape's and he hesitated, filled by a horrified pity, a strangling compassion that made him step back with a shiver. He felt as if a powerful hand was holding his arm and gently, but firmly, obliging him to lower the wand.

The boy and girl looked uncertainly at each other as Snape slowly seemed to recover his strength, the scars and blood gradually fading away. Silence enveloped them all in a trance, and then a raucous sound came from above, making them cringe in apprehension. A magnificent bird was flying in circles above them and emitting a sharp, unpleasant cry, its brightly coloured feathers vividly shining in the darkness of the cave.

"Fawkes!" the teenagers exclaimed with incredulous joy.

"Fawkes!?" Snape repeated wearily, a puzzled expression passing over his face.

The beautiful animal landed on Snape's chest with a last, powerful flutter of its wings, and the dark wizard winced in painful surprise. Stretching his superb, finely shaped head towards the adolescents, Fawkes emitted once more that ugly, strident sound so very contrasting with its fiery beauty.

"The phoenix has lost its voice!" Harry exclaimed in horror.

"No!" said Hermione sternly, and Harry stared at her, surprised by her harsh tone.

"No," she repeated softly, sadly. "The phoenix has lost its heart."

With a piercing glance at the girl, Fawkes turned its head, and again its grating call crossed the air, as if it was trying to speak to them. Then, becoming uncharacteristically aggressive, the beautiful bird hissed warningly at them and opened its wings, holding them protectively over the fallen man painfully breathing under its talons.

"I believe it's asking us to leave," Hermione said calmly, a weird expression appearing on her face.

"What do you mean, *leave*?" Harry's immediate reply was full of anger and disbelief. "And what about him? Surely you don't really think that I will let Snape to go free and..." He was going to add "*safe*" when he suddenly understood that a stronger power had probably risen to claim their enemy, a force with which they were not allowed to interfere. No, Snape wasn't safe anymore, and strangely, that little pang of pity he had felt for Draco after that cursed night on the Astronomy Tower seemed to unwillingly reproduce itself even more intensely, to his great irritation.

"He has his own fate waiting for him, Harry. We are not meant to be his judges; at least, not now," Hermione stated quietly, but incisively, and Harry, still fuming, was ferociously pleased to see Snape involuntarily flinch at her words.

The phoenix repeated its raucous sound again, nodding with its head, as if acknowledging Hermione, and suddenly left, disappearing in a flash of light. The teenagers watched it go with a melancholic sensation of loneliness. Harry's mind was filled with confusing feelings. He couldn't believe, he didn't want to believe, what he had just seen, but Fawkes was a sign he could not pretend to ignore. Its presence had inexorably brought up sad memories and aching sensations. Harry blinked frantically and stared intently at the ground, while Hermione, arms crossed, patiently waited for his decision.

"I think... I think you're right," he finally admitted, raising his head with a sigh of resignation.

"Then let's go now," she whispered, squeezing his hand for a moment and gently smiling to mitigate his disappointment.

Harry looked frustratingly around; then, reluctant to leave, he turned angrily to Snape. "But you, you should thank Hermione and Fawkes! You wouldn't be alive if it were up to me, you filthy traitor! I hope the Dark Lord is going to make you suffer even more after today!"

Vibrating in repressed fury, Harry raised his wand, defying Snape to answer his declaration, but the older wizard stared impassively at him, his lips pressed in a thin, disdainful line, his emotions controlled again by cold determination.

Frustrated, Harry Disapparated with a last, menacing glance, while Hermione waited just another second to add softly, with her new, incredibly tender smile, "We'll be waiting for you, Professor."

He stiffened at her words, and once more, he felt a strange emotion trembling in his chest, but he choked the feeling quickly and unmercifully. As soon as he was sure that they were gone, he slowly straightened up and looked around. In a low, calm, dangerous voice, he asked, "Where are you hiding, Wormtail?"

As always, infinite thanks go to my wonderful betas Jynx67, Pennfana and Notsosaintly.

7. Actions

Chapter 7 of 8

What if Snape hadn't really been following any one of his masters but a stronger, mysterious inspiration? A dark tribute to the ambiguous Snape we used to know.

7. Actions

"There is not always just one answer to a question"

His watery eyes flashing with excitement, Peter "Wormtail" Pettigrew emerged from behind a rock, holding his wand triumphantly. "Ah, I never ever would have thought to see this!" He chuckled, looking irritatingly amused. "Just imagine Severus Snape, the *great* Severus Snape, knocked down by a boy, almost a child. Amazing! Even if it must be said that the name of the boy is Harry Potter. I wonder what James would..." His voice trailed off and he suddenly looked embarrassed.

"You wonder?" Snape replied silkily, an alarming light glowing in his eyes. "I'm glad you are still able to think! I would find it difficult if I persistently shrunk my brain to the size of a rat's, as you do!"

"Hey, that's not nice. At least you should thank me for..." The little man began to protest with his acute, querulous voice.

"How long have you been hiding here?" Snape cut him off harshly. The idea of Wormtail witnessing his torture was extremely disagreeable, but the possibility that he had heard Hermione's words was even worse, probably lethal. He cursed inwardly while he tried to find a way to make the other wizard unsuspectingly and voluntarily tell him the truth.

In the meantime, his potential traitor seemed to meditate carefully on an answer. "Quite a long time," he finally admitted grudgingly. "Long before you entered the cave. I was... I was in disguise, as always. I couldn't risk being detected."

"I see," Snape replied coldly. "So, did you enjoy the spectacle?"

As he had imagined, Wormtail was ready to take the opportunity and say something nasty to his old, detested schoolmate.

"Quite a show, don't you think?" Peter smirked, and again he chuckled. "Harry has a lot to learn, but he is quick, and I'm sure that, in a year or two, he could really become a threat. Today, regrettably, he was only lucky."

He winked conspiratorially at Snape, as if they were both enjoying a joke; then he added with undeniable satisfaction, "I must say that I'd really begun to worry when I saw all that blood on your face! I was afraid that I would be forced to reveal myself, you know, and I didn't want to."

Peter stopped and seemed to consider carefully what he had just said. "Pretty painful thing, huh? I thought you were going to die from shaking." Wormtail had a cruel little smile; then he asked, interested, "But what did you do to the girl? I saw her kneeling besides you, and then she was again on her feet, in tears. You injured her hand, didn't you?" The little man frowned, trying to focus his memories before smiling again, provokingly. "That wasn't very polite on your part, Snape, you should have been nicer to her. Such a lovely girl! And seemed so willing to help you..."

Wormtail waited for a reaction, a galling smile still playing on his lips. Snape didn't even seem to notice, nor did he care to answer. His highly organized mind was working busily, weighing probabilities. Perhaps not only Harry Potter had been lucky this day! It should have been difficult to watch the scene properly from the point of view of the rat Wormtail had transformed into, so there might be a hope that what had really happened wasn't so easily discovered.

Feeling a bit relieved, Snape focused on preventing his companion from more accurately elaborating his memories, while possibly trying to make them even more confused. In the meantime, unaware he was the subject of such attentive considerations, and surprised for not receiving the sharp reply he had expected, Wormtail nervously licked his lips and began to complain, sounding contemporarily resentful and agitated.

"It took you long enough to get here! Perhaps if you had arrived earlier, you could have avoided them. Now we are awfully late. We must leave immediately! The master is not going to be pleased, absolutely not, believe me. He easily loses his temper these days. So I warn you, be prepared."

The little wizard seemed genuinely scared, but his final words strikingly reminded Snape of his last, terrible encounter with the Dark Lord, and he felt a deep rage rising inside. Gritting his teeth, he turned to Wormtail, a sneer on his face. "Perhaps you should help me release the tension, then? A bit of exercise would do." He raised his wand intentionally.

"What... what do you mean, Snape?" Wormtail yelped in fear. "Don't you dare touch me or the master, the master will..." He hesitated, knowing too well the Dark Lord grimly enjoyed humiliating his "first and most loyal servant", as Wormtail never ceased to proclaim himself.

The little wizard swallowed thickly, bitterly aware of his master's contempt; this was a shame he felt acutely and totally undeserved, because he, and himself only, had been the cause of the Dark Lord's rebirth! It had been his sacrifice that had allowed his master to take a newly created human form and regain his immense power. His silvery hand was there to prove it! But nobody seemed to acknowledge his merit, and this desolate sensation of injustice gave him the force to scold his otherwise frightening companion.

"You should be grateful, you know, Snape? I'm not as stupid as you think! I've perfectly understood that you weren't able to fight the boy because there was something controlling you. Surely a sort of spell the master cast, wasn't it? He told me to watch over you carefully, but he was laughing as he said that."

Wormtail looked expectantly at the other wizard, waiting for a word of thanks or an explanation that obviously didn't come. Therefore, curling his lips in a pout like a disappointed child, he went on in his reproach. "So... so you should be grateful that I was there! Without my help, Harry could have probably killed you!"

The little man was passionate in his resentment, but almost immediately, he deflated himself and admitted with a discomforted sigh, "But no, no... he would have probably spared you anyway."

"How do you know?" Snape inquired sharply, arching an eyebrow. He didn't really mean to pose that question, but somehow, he felt strangely compelled to ask. A hint of the supernatural power that had so strongly manifested itself in the cave was still there, vibrating in painful, disturbing empathy with the miserable creature standing in front of him. This unusual sensation was disconcerting Snape, making him feel vulnerable.

"I know him better than you do!" A sparkle of cunning, weirdly mixed with pride, twinkled in Wormtail's eyes. "After all, I stayed in Gryffindor Tower for three long years, listening to their private talks, even sleeping in their beds! I know all the nasty names they've called you, and believe me, you would never imagine how delightfully creative their imagination has been! Unfortunately, I wasn't able to suggest some other nice ideas to them, eh, Snivellus?"

"You are walking on a dangerous path," Snape warned him icily.

"Oh, now it's easy for you to be sarcastic, isn't it? But you weren't so bold before when you were shaking on the ground and..." With a quick glance at his companion, Wormtail immediately changed topic. "Well, didn't I help you with the phoenix? Quite a masterpiece, wasn't it? I've improved in Transfiguration a lot since school! Pity I couldn't give it a voice, but it was too risky. It's practically impossible to simulate its song!" Wormtail looked at Snape, pathetically expecting a word of approval.

"Ah, yes, the phoenix!" Snape exclaimed contemptuously. "A masterwork indeed! You didn't fool me, and I'm sure you absolutely didn't fool the girl. She is too brilliant for these stupid little tricks of yours. Why didn't you stop the boy, instead?"

"The Master has forbidden us to hurt him, as you should very well know," Wormtail replied, looking irritated. "And then... and then, there are other personal reasons why I can't... I mean, I couldn't, unless I was really obliged to. And your personal defeat isn't compelling enough."

"You mean you are still loyal to the friend you killed, so much that you feel the need to protect his son?" Snape asked ironically.

"What the hell are you saying, Snape?" exclaimed Peter agitatedly.

"Potter was your friend!" the other wizard declared harshly.

"No, James wasn't really my friend, nor was Sirius!" Wormtail replied in a cry of anguish. "All they wanted was to have an audience, somebody who admired them in awe and admitted he was inferior, applauding their stunning ability. An affectionate sycophant, that's what I was to them."

Lowering his voice with a sigh, Wormtail seemed to be lost in his memories, prisoner of the cave's strange atmosphere. "Not like Remus. Remus... he was different. Because he, too, knew what it meant to be lonely... and despised. But he was too intelligent for me, and too loyal to the others. Otherwise, he could have joined us, being a werewolf."

"So, this is the reason why you offered Potter to the Dark Lord? A revenge for all the times you supported him while playing Quidditch?" Snape enquired with a twisted smile.

Wormtail blushed unpleasantly and shook his head, rubbing his silvery hand in torment. "No, no, that's not true. I thought that someday James and the Dark Lord were going to confront each other. It couldn't be avoided. So, I just helped to make it happen."

Unexpectedly, he cried in desperation. "Don't you understand? In any case, they were doomed! Sooner or later, even without me, they would have had to meet the Dark Lord again. It had already happened thrice, and they had always survived! Why not this time? James was so brave... and Lily was so clever!"

He met Snape's cold, unfriendly eyes and turned his head, his voice beginning to break. "And after all, what about *you*? Their death is mostly your fault! You heard the prophecy and you told the master about it. He went mad and devoted himself to their pursuit. At that time, I didn't know anything, I was lonely and helpless against his power. Really, what could I have done?"

Wormtail shivered in agony as he lowered his head and his voice. "You gave them to the master, Snape. It was you, not me. If you hadn't rushed to tell him what you had heard, he would have never known. James and Lily would still be alive. You did it, Snape! And Sirius, too! He knew I was too frightened. I could never resist such temptation. He shouldn't have asked me to become James' Secret Keeper! Why does everybody think I'm the only one to blame?"

He was nearly crying. "They were doomed, even without me!" he frantically repeated.

"You are just a miserable, pitiful coward!" murmured Snape in disgust while Wormtail, trembling feverishly, buried his face in his hands. "I wonder how the master tolerates your filthy hands on him!"

"What are you saying? WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?" The little wizard seemed to explode again. "YOU are a coward more than I am! It's been easy for you, hasn't it? With Dumbledore's protection, you escaped Azkaban and even found a job! An ex-Death Eater turning into a highly regarded professor, teaching children, the best wizarding families' offspring! Unbelievable, don't you think? And then as soon as you had the chance, you became a spy again. But loyal to whom? You have always been ready to switch sides, changing your robes according to place and circumstance! So you have been constantly betraying everybody around you, and finally you even killed Dumbledore, who had incredibly trusted you till his end. And now you dare to ask how the Dark Lord has been able to tolerate *me*?"

Snape paled and automatically tightened his hand on his wand, but Wormtail continued implacably. "Face it, Snape! It could have been you in my place! Why, if the Hat had sorted you in Gryffindor and me in Slytherin, it could have been you courting James and Sirius for their friendship! And then what would you have done? Would you have sacrificed yourself and your hopes to save them from the Dark Lord? No, I know you too well. You didn't have friends and you never had any because your ambitions have always been much more important to you! Be honest, Snape, at least with me!"

Tears were shining in the little wizard's eyes, and he wasn't making any effort to hide them. The strange, mysterious force still glowing in the cave vibrated one more time then brusquely vanished, dissolving under a wave of ferociously distorted passions and leaving the man and his emotions completely exposed. Unbidden, Snape was offered a quick glimpse of Peter Pettigrew's personal hell. Hate, fear, hypocrisy, weakness, betrayal, desperation; a wicked combination that mirrored Snape's private feelings in recent days, a highly unpleasant experience that forced him to face again his own recurring anguish.

The two men stood silent for the space of few heartbeats. Then Snape dispersed all those disturbing emotions with determination and stared firmly at Peter, his hand still tightened on his wand.

"Well," he said quietly, "we have already wasted precious time, so let's finish this disgusting exhibition and go where we are awaited. Or have you messages that you can simply tell me here?"

Raising his head in anger, eyes reddened by tears, Wormtail looked at him with impotent hate and replied coldly, "No, the master is waiting for you. He is surely going to punish you for being late. Of course, I will be too, but for you, it will be worse. And hopefully, nobody will be there to help you this time."

Snape stared at him impassively; then he asked softly, "Where are we going?"

A malignant expression on his face, Peter said venomously, "The master doesn't want you to know. You'll have to Side-Apparate with me... like a Squib, Snape!"

"Then let me take your arm, Wormtail," Snape answered calmly, deliberately accentuating his name. "I'll ask the master's permission to clean myself after our arrival."

Peter opened his eyes and mouth as if he had been hit, clenching his fists while he tried to find a retort. Then, ceding to his anger, he suddenly lifted his wand with a terrible expression of hatred. Snape expected it, and was ready to react. With a sharp, "*Expelliarmus*," Peter's wand flew away, and the little wizard fell on the ground, screaming in fear.

"For Merlin's sake, Severus!" Peter pleaded with a glint of terror in his eyes. He stretched his silvery hand out to protect himself while Snape slowly advanced towards him, a cruel, vindictive smile on his lips. "Please don't! Please! Please!"

Snape stopped and lowered his wand with a sneer, waiting for the frightened man to get on his feet. Lost and humiliated, blinded by tears flowing freely down his cheeks, Wormtail felt the ground with his hands to find his wand, then raised himself painfully and finally stood up, head lowered in defeat, not even daring to look at the other wizard.

"Now, are you ready to go, or is there something else you would like to add?" Snape asked coldly, a menacing sparkle in his eyes.

The little man shook his head miserably, sniffing and wiping his tears. Slowly, hesitantly, he approached his companion and silently waited for his decision. With a violent effort, Snape checked his emotions and recovered his mental control, preparing to meet his master. But as soon as he put his hand on Peter's trembling arm, a terrible pang unexpectedly and ferociously hit him in the forehead. He paled, staggering in shock, while the ache made him reinforce his grip even more on Wormtail. Consequently, the wild pain running through his body also reached the horrified little wizard, who was desperately, but unsuccessfully trying to pull his arm away.

Both men, linked in suffering, writhed and struggled to fight back the atrocious sensation. Then their minds lost consciousness, and their bodies were carried away in a whirl of colours and sound too vivid to be tolerated by the human brain.

As always, infinite thanks go to my wonderful betas Jynx67, Pennfana and Notsosaintly.

8. Actions

Chapter 8 of 8

What if Snape hadn't really been following any one of his masters but a stronger, mysterious inspiration? A dark tribute to the ambiguous Snape we used to know.

8. Actions

"Should I really believe you?"

Feeling dizzy and confused, Snape opened his eyes in the shadows and blinked to recover his sight. The surface where he was lying was hard and uncomfortable, so he worked laboriously to get up on his elbows, causing a ripple of pain to course down his spine. His forehead was still burning, but the ache was waning, and he was relieved to find that there was no sign of blood. Wormtail's motionless body was resting near him. The little man seemed to be sleeping peacefully in oblivion.

At first, the place where they had landed appeared to be totally unfamiliar to him; there was nothing he could distinguish in the stillness of the large, square room, whose stony floor felt rough and irregular under his hands. He slowly began to turn his head when, with a flicker of alarm, he perceived a powerful presence, a tremendous stream of energy fiercely pulsing around him.

He froze and waited for his eyes to get used to the scarce light gradually, and finally the scene became unmistakably clear. A huge table was in the centre of the room, and next to it sat an old, black-clothed man, his fingers softly fidgeting in impatience on the plain wooden surface. His greyish brows, wrinkled in a frown over his fiery, shining red eyes, were menacingly revealing a rising anger ready to burst into violence.

Suddenly alert, Snape hastened to kneel and bow in front of his master, feeling subjugated by the immense power radiating from the Dark Lord's awesome person.

However, an icy glare was the only answer he received when he dared to raise his eyes, so with a quick movement, he lowered his head again and waited in silent submission.

Unfortunately, Wormtail chose that exact moment to awaken, his mind still under the terrifying effect of the Dark curse cast upon Snape that had also transmitted to his body. Bewildered by what had happened, frightened and disoriented, he instinctively transformed himself into a rat and tried to escape, scrambling on the uneven ground.

Immediately, with a sarcastic smile, the Dark Lord aimed his wand and exclaimed harshly, "Accio!"

A flash of light, and the spell stopped the little animal in its flight, flinging it violently backwards through the air until it was caught by Voldemort's outstretched hand. The rat wriggled and squeaked pitifully while the Dark Lord kept him dangling by his tail and looked at him with cold, disgusted eyes. Then he dropped the creature to the ground. The twisting Wormtail landed brutally on his stomach and haltingly transformed himself into the sick little man, desperately trying to control his nausea and avoid vomiting.

"So, Wormtail." The Dark Lord's smile was becoming nasty. "It seems you've forgotten your manners, if you ever had any. You kept me waiting for a long time, and you know that this is not polite. I presume that..."

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Master!" implored Wormtail, practically crying, "but Snape arrived very late and I had to wait for him! Please forgive me!"

"It is also very rude to interrupt!" Now the Dark Lord was letting his anger explode in its full intensity. "It's time you learned your lesson *Crucio!*"

The spell froze the upcoming plea on Wormtail's lips, and he twisted horribly, curled in a ball of pain. Thankfully, after only a few excruciating seconds, Voldemort calmly lowered his wand, releasing his miserable victim from the terrible torture. The trembling little man, shaken by sobs, painfully rose on his hands and knees and crawled near his master. He kissed the hem of Voldemort's cloak, thanking him for his mercy in a broken voice; then, still crawling, he moved back, head lowered to hide his tears.

With a frightfully slow movement, the Dark Lord now turned his head to look at Snape and said in his quiet, menacing tone, "It seems that you have developed a highly irritating inclination to disobey my orders. I wonder if you have thought about my words these past few days, Severus."

"I have, my Lord," murmured Snape respectfully, and once more he felt the familiar sensation of awe pervade his soul, forcing his body and mind to submit to the formidable power towering over him. Again, he bowed reverently then raised his eyes, offering himself to his master's scrutiny with unexpected humility.

"I find your attitude much more appropriate this time," the Dark Lord replied, a curious mixture of anger and satisfaction colouring his voice. "It may then be possible that you are still useful to me." Curling his lips in an expression of command, Voldemort ordered sharply, "Do come here!"

Snape made an initial movement as if to rise, but he stopped almost immediately and glanced at his master questioningly. The Dark Lord frowned then gave a short, satisfied laugh and exclaimed, amused, "Ah, I'm glad to see you have learned your lesson since last time! I was sure you wouldn't have forgotten it so soon. Yes, Severus, you are allowed to rise and pay your respect."

Snape felt a wave of relief washing over him. His submission had resulted in the desired reaction. Slowly, he got up and went near his master, kneeling once more at his feet and bending to kiss the edge of his robes. The Dark Lord looked extremely pleased. He nodded in grim approval; then, leaning forward, he stretched his hand and gently touched Snape's forehead with the tip of his fingers. The young wizard couldn't avoid stiffening at the contact and closed his eyes, expecting to feel the terrible suffering he had experienced so many times already explode once again in his body. But strangely, only a little, tolerable pang crossed his head in a quick flash.

Keeping his fingers in delicate contact with Snape's skin, the Dark Lord stared at him with an inquiring look. "I have perceived your struggle these past few days, Severus," he said quietly. "A very hard battle indeed... not many men would have survived it. But at last, I've triumphed as I had expected, and here you are again."

Voldemort paused for a moment; then he slowly added, "Yes, I perceived your anger... your anger and above all your hate, stronger than any other feeling."

Snape shivered inwardly, expecting a curse to blast him, but the Dark Lord went on, a cold glitter in his eyes. "I could feel them, but I didn't care. Anger is a force that I can easily control, while hate can make a man grow terrible in power. And you still want the Power, don't you, Severus? Your longing is so palpable! That's why you are here. That's why you have submitted again and come back. Now, has your useless anger taught you something more about your limits? Nobody can think to grow stronger in my service if he doesn't learn to overcome those miserable human emotions, and you have had to do it through harsh sufferings. It's difficult, but it is the only way. So, is your hate for me still haunting your soul?"

This unexpectedly direct question unsettled Snape, and he trembled under his master's touch. Voldemort had a knowing, sarcastic smile. "Don't underestimate me, Severus," he said softly. "A long time has passed since I was only a man, but I still remember what it means to be humiliated."

Snape hesitated under that unmerciful gaze, feeling helpless. The immaterial connection with his master was surely going to reveal his inner thoughts, even if he had tried to bury them deeply in his soul. Or perhaps he had a chance?

The Dark Lord frowned at his indecision and asked in irritation, "Your answer, Severus. I'm waiting!"

Impatiently, Voldemort pressed his spidery fingers against Snape's forehead, forcing him to tilt his head and present his face to his master. Instantly, as if obeying the Dark Lord's command, a whirl of emotions gradually began to form in the younger wizard's mind. Snape could perceive the cold void he felt inside being slowly filled by a mixture of contrasting sensations, each one struggling hard to emerge and rule the others.

Dumbledore had nourished Snape's craving for something that could have been generically called "consideration", "esteem", "appraisal", or even "affection". But Dumbledore had been the only one who had constantly supplied him with those feelings. His other colleagues in the school had been ready to give him "respect", yet no real friendship had ever been made with any one of them in particular. So a part of his soul was now unbalanced, deprived of the forceful source of emotions it had received for so many years and from such a powerful personality.

On the other hand, he could acutely feel the longing for power and knowledge that had been so captivating to his conscience in his early adult years. Those had been the prizes shining in front of him; those had been the primary reasons to join the Dark Lord's service... besides his desire for revenge, obviously, and that astounding, powerful, wonderful sensation of being considered and entrusted with special duties, of being inside, yet remaining outside... standing alone over the others... being different...

Being different... That final sensation affirmed itself forcefully in his mind, and he felt the strong affinity he had with his master. Not only the mixed, dark origins but mostly the thirst for something that could separate him from the other men, giving him the possibility of growing greater and triumphing over the limited human options.

This forceful awareness slowly saturated his soul, surprising him with its delightful intensity. So it was without fear that he finally could answer. "No, my Lord. And it is not going to haunt me anymore, now that I've come back to you."

"So, should I believe that you have now become the loyal servant you have never been in the past years?" Voldemort sounded sceptical, but also oddly amused.

Snape closed his eyes, and with a deep breath, he took refuge again in that extraordinary, blissful sensation. "Yes, Master," he stated simply and again linked his gaze to his master, knowing that his emotions had already reached the Dark Lord through the fingers still touching his skin.

"NO!" A sharp cry broke the silence that had suddenly fallen. Wormtail raised himself painfully on his knees from the ground where he had been lying until now, a hand on the floor to sustain himself, his face a mess of tears and dirt.

"No, Master!" he repeated forcefully, vibrating with hate. "He is a liar! Don't believe him! In the cave, today, he saw Harry Potter and that girl friend of his. They fought and Snape was defeated... but the boy spared his life, and the girl even tried to help him. Ask him why, please, Master!"

Wormtail was so excited and anxious to accuse his companion that he didn't notice he had been so daring as to actually "command" the Dark Lord to do something.

Voldemort, looking cruelly interested, understood and accepted this unusual manifestation of courage as a proof of authenticity.

"A very surprising charge indeed, Severus!" he silkily said to Snape, while Wormtail, realizing what he had just done, cringed in fear, afraid to be punished for his insolence. "Yes, your friend is right, I haven't been told the reasons for your delay. It seems now that they were more than important. So, you have met and fought Harry Potter... despite my orders?"

The last words sounded hard and menacing, and Snape understood that the Dark Lord was toying with him like a cat with a mouse, savouring each one of the changing emotions that crossed the young wizard's mind.

"I met Potter unintentionally," Snape declared firmly, while he struggled to keep his apprehension under control. To be humiliated for a second time in a day, and in front of Peter again, was rapidly becoming a frightening possibility. "I suppose he was already on the Hogwarts grounds before I arrived there and clearly, he followed me during my inspection of the forest."

"And then you fought him, even though you had been ordered not to do so! Obviously, you have been defeated. I imagine you have finally understood my warnings..." The Dark Lord smiled intentionally, then hardened his voice. "But he has spared you! Why? Why didn't he take advantage of the situation? Was he really foolish enough to release one of his worst enemies while he had you helpless in his grasp?!"

"I believe he understood I was defenceless because of a spell, my Lord. He is an arrogant brat, and surely, he didn't feel it was a rewarding victory against a worthless antagonist." Snape swallowed while memories filled his heart with anger.

"I see." The Dark Lord smiled ironically at Snape's frustration. "And what about the girl? Sometimes women can be harsher than a man. Bella is proof of that, isn't she, Severus?"

"The girl tried to help me because she felt sympathy," Snape stated quietly, and a deep emotion passed quickly in his heart, remembering her words, but not so quickly that the Dark Lord couldn't detect it.

"Do you feel something for this girl, Severus? Or is she feeling something for you?" Voldemort looked suddenly furious. "What really happened in the cave? Let me read your mind!"

Snape resignedly turned his eyes to his master, voiding his mind of emotions and letting memories flow. There was no hope. Again, he had to submit to that immense, inexorable power. Now the Dark Lord's eyes were sombre, and the pressure of his fingers was more intense, even painful, while images materialized and disappeared in Severus' mind, showing the interior of the cave, Harry's unexpected appearance, the fight, Snape's fall and torture, Hermione's worried expression and her sudden pain and tears.

Wormtail was anxiously waiting, an avid expression on his face. His eyes were shifting from Snape to the Dark Lord, shining in cruel joy as he noticed his master's growing anger.

The Dark Lord drew his fingers away and stared intently at Snape. The younger wizard felt the enormous pressure of his master's terrible power trying to break his mental defences while the thin scars on his forehead began to redden and burn. But this time, something strange happened, and after the first initial suffering, the pain seemed to progressively decrease.

The enquiry was immediately over, and the Dark Lord closed his reptilian eyes in what seemed a difficult decision. Then he opened them again and declared flatly, "You are lying to me again, Severus! The bond I have sealed on your forehead has been broken. I could perceive it from the very first moment my fingers touched your skin. You had been warned and yet you have had the courage to defy my power." A terrible pause followed these words, uttered in quiet rage.

"How could you be so daring as to try to deceive me once more?" the Dark Lord roared suddenly, his fury exploding in violence while he aimed his wand and cast a ferocious spell. Surprised, incredulous at the incredible revelation, Snape didn't even attempt to react. Blasted to the ground, he rose with difficulty and tried to kneel again.

"How dare you to stand in front of me?" Again, the Dark Lord reiterated his spell, and again the young wizard was forcefully tossed against the hard stones.

"I'm a loyal servant... my Lord. Please... believe me..." Snape panted painfully, unable to rise.

"No, you have never been, and you will never be!" the Dark Lord replied vehemently. "Wormtail!" he exclaimed, "Tell me what YOU saw!"

Wormtail smiled vindictively and stepped forward, declaring with a voice heightened by hate. "There was somebody else in the cave, Master, another presence that was expecting us and revealed itself as soon as Harry struck Snape. It happened just after the fight. Now I remember well. Snape was already on the ground, shaking in pain. The girl became suddenly luminous; then she advanced, knelt by his side and touched his hand. But by doing that, her own hand was badly burnt, and the glow disappeared."

With a hint of hesitation, knowing that his Master could easily read his eyes and discover any possible lie, he added desolately, "Perhaps she transmitted her power to him? I'm afraid I don't know, Master. I could only see Harry healing her. Unfortunately, I didn't notice or hear anything else, as I was standing behind them and I didn't want to be discovered. I'm... I'm very sorry, Master." He swallowed and bowed in fear, suddenly perceiving his master's disappointment and genuinely regretting not having more important charges against his old schoolmate.

"I see," declared the Dark Lord, livid again. "You were there to watch him, Wormtail! But once more, you have proven to be a foolish, useless servant!"

Another shot of fire abruptly exploded from Voldemort's wand, and the frightened Wormtail writhed convulsively with a scream. Forgetting the unfortunate little man, the Dark Lord immediately turned to look at Snape, his gaze a dreadful promise of more sufferings to come. Awesome in his fury, he stretched his wand and touched the younger wizard's forehead. Severus instantly closed his eyes in terror while a violent shiver crossed his body. Still, the pain was less intense than he had expected, because "something" seemed to shield his mind. Perceiving this change, the Dark Lord intensified his energy while his rage gradually transformed itself into a cold, calculating examination.

Vibrating in pain, yet resisting the powerful trial he was undergoing, Snape felt incredibly surprised. A new force was gradually growing in his body, protecting him, as if answering the Dark Lord's solicitations. The more Voldemort insisted, the more the protection became harder and more difficult to break. Astonished, the great wizard stopped to look at Snape, and Snape looked back at him in total amazement. At their feet, Wormtail was still sobbing quietly, and Voldemort impatiently silenced him with another flick of his wand, leaving him frozen.

"I see," the Dark Lord finally declared in a whisper. "I see," he repeated in a tone strangely similar to respect as he stared intently at the younger man. It was clear that Snape hadn't been aware of the breaking of the bond which should have linked him forever to his master. But it was also clear that his soul had deplorably been locked again, thus becoming once more impenetrable, even to Voldemort's immense power.

The Dark Lord considered Snape with frightening indecision. A test was undeniably needed to determine how much the new power had changed his servant and, above all, to decide his fate. With a sharp command, Voldemort released his magic, increasing its force more and more until Snape curled on the floor, shaking uncontrollably in pain. Darkly pleased to see that the young wizard could still be physically hurt by his magical power, Voldemort smiled cruelly.

"Your sincerity, at least in this matter, seems to be proven," he declared harshly, "and this is the only reason why I will allow you to live, for now."

Then he paused thoughtfully. "It seems that a new presence is interfering with my plans, Severus. I presume you imagine whom this force is concealing, as you have had the dubious honour to be chosen by it. And I wonder why... although I believe I already have an answer. Still, there is something I would like to try. Perhaps we can find a way to use this interesting gift we have been offered." Brusquely, he added, "The new power that rescinded my mark... did it speak to you?" His eyes rested suspiciously on the panting, shattered man at his feet.

"N-no, Master..." gasped Severus, his hands opening and clenching convulsively to ease the pain... and to tell a convincing lie.

"And the girl..." Here Voldemort paused again, a warning expression on his face. "Was she aware of what happened?"

"I think she was, my Lord, but I don't believe that Potter understood, unless she told him later," Snape answered feebly, still struggling against the terrible pain coursing through his body.

"Well, the boy doesn't matter at the moment." The Dark Lord seemed to lose himself in a reverie; then he suddenly awakened and declared forcefully, "I have a new mission for you, Severus. Go back to your old friends. Let's see what happens. Either they will believe the girl and therefore you will probably be accepted again. Or my deductions are wrong and you will then be painfully killed." He gave a dark chuckle. "But I cannot be wrong, not if I know Albus Dumbledore! He is trying to interfere, even after his death, but I'm the only one who has ever come back from that solitary land, and I will prevail!"

Head lowered in respect, a strange, unknown hope rising in his chest at the perspective of this new, extremely dangerous task, Severus unexpectedly heard Hermione's words echoing in his mind. *"We will be waiting for you, Professor."*

Carefully, he raised a hand to wipe the blood trickling from the corner of his mouth and, at the same time, to hide the twisted, irreverent smile that was slowly forming on his lips. Once more, The Plan had revealed itself in the darkest of the hours. Silently, it had taken its child in its arms, and again, it was safely carrying him through the sufferings and the doubts of that long, terrible travel.

Burying hopes and fears deeply in his soul, Severus listened to the Dark Lord's orders with great attention. Then he rose to his feet, bowed deferentially to his Master and eagerly Disapparated, ready for his new mission.

THE END

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Many thanks also to those who chose to "travel" in Severus' anguished soul with me... I hope you liked the story. I would be glad to receive a comment from you, if you have the time. Tanti cari saluti! as we say in Italy. See you soon!