

By Flash and Thunder Fire

by julymorning

Six years after the defeat of Voldemort, two new professors arrive at Hogwarts and Severus Snape finds his hands full of problems. Affairs and rivalries abound.

Procession

Chapter 1 of 11

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Author's Note: All characters belong to J.K. Rowling. Titles courtesy of Queen.

Procession

Snape sat silently in his place at the head table. Invariably, he was one of the first to arrive in the Great Hall at mealtimes, perhaps because he was constantly so hungry. The anxiety that used to gnaw at his guts when he was a spy had departed, and he was now making up for years of self-imposed starvation. Eating more had served him well: while he was still relatively thin and pale, not to mention tired and less energetic than in days of yore, nutrition had gone a long way toward improving his skin and hair, and his body had finally filled out. No more for him the hollow chest, narrow shoulders, and bony legs of his youth. This, of course, had led to a shopping trip coerced by Draco Malfoy, who had insisted that Snape's clothes no longer fit across the back and thighs. Snape himself would never have noticed such a thing unless it caused him physical discomfort, but he was nonetheless grateful to Draco, whose sense of fashion was impeccable. Snape's new clothing was all black he had put his foot down but had been tailored to his body like a glove to a hand. To his amusement, the appellation of 'bat' had become 'crow' instead, but it did not bother him.

Flitwick was the first to join him at the table, and he gave a cheery greeting, which Snape returned with a nod. It was to be Flitwick's first start-of-term feast as Headmaster. Uncharitably, Snape wondered how the students would respond to being disciplined by someone half their height, but he pushed this query to the back of his mind. He had not wanted to be Headmaster again the single year he had spent in the post still gave him the odd bad dream so, as far as he was concerned, Flitwick was as good a choice as any. The Board of Governors had certainly been pleased to have him.

Of course, Flitwick's promotion, coinciding with McGonagall's retirement, had created the need for two new teachers. McGonagall had continued to teach Transfiguration as Headmistress; the reduced student body after the war had made this possible. But now enrolment was increasing again, and Flitwick found himself unable to juggle the demands of both teaching and heading the school. He had advertised the Transfiguration and Charms posts last spring, and today the new professors arrived. Snape knew who they were; part of the reason he had come to dinner so early was so that he could watch them as they entered the Hall.

Now, Draco came in a beat ahead of Neville Longbottom. He caught Snape's eye and nodded approvingly at the clothing before taking his chair next to Longbottom a few seats away. Longbottom, in Snape's estimation, had matured a great deal in the four years he had been teaching at Hogwarts. His promotion to head of Gryffindor House last school year had come as no surprise to Snape, who had developed a grudging respect for the pleasant and humorous young man. Neville had developed admirable self-confidence a trait that, if Snape were honest with himself, continued to elude him in many meaningful ways and was even beginning to exhibit the Dumbledore twinkle. No, what was more surprising was Longbottom's friendship with Draco Malfoy.

Although, giving it more thought, Snape decided it was not so surprising after all. Draco, too, had matured, and the continued imprisonment of his parents in Azkaban had allowed the young man some space in which to examine himself. And examine himself he had, constantly, to the point of becoming hugely introspective. A solemn and largely solitary Draco Malfoy was a novel experience for Snape, who had spent the seven years of Draco's school career trying to teach him the value of not drawing

attention to himself. Draco had begun teaching at Hogwarts in the same year as Longbottom, taking over the Potions position that Snape had been more than happy to relinquish, and the students seemed to own a great respect and affection for their pale and quiet Potions master. So did Longbottom, who had forgiven all of Draco's past transgressions in his cheerful and open way, and whose professional relationship with his childhood adversary had developed into a strong friendship.

Then Snape's attention was drawn to the woman now entering the Great Hall: the new Charms professor, Miranda Silva. He had taught her some twenty years ago. Though she must be at least thirty now, he reasoned, her appearance had changed little in the intervening time. She was still tall and willowy with straight black hair and vibrant blue eyes. Perhaps, he thought, she had lost a little of the fullness of youth: her cheekbones and chin were more prominent, and her eyes deeper-set, but her skin was smooth and unlined, and she looked much the same as he remembered her. She had been Miranda Holden then, a Ravenclaw and a half-blood, but after Hogwarts she had married Antonio Silva, a pureblood whose family was heavily involved in the magical government of Spain. Snape knew of Antonio Silva from Death Eater gossip: while the man had never shown any interest in joining Voldemort's cause himself, he was rumoured to be sympathetic to it.

Watching Miranda approach the high table, Snape felt a shiver of wariness. Did she share her husband's prejudices? Would she, God forbid, want to hear about his experiences as a Death Eater? More to the point, why had she come here without her husband? With the grace of a cat, she climbed the dais and came to sit directly beside him; when he turned to greet her, she fixed him with her cold, clever blue eyes, and he was put in mind, suddenly, of a panther, an image he found eminently suitable.

Last to enter the hall was the Transfiguration professor herself, Hermione Granger. Here was a former student Snape recalled all too well, for obvious reasons, though he had not seen her in years. She certainly had not changed by one iota, he thought wryly. Still, she possessed her usual, open, frank expression, her determined stride, her average appearance. A good word for her, that average brown hair, average brown eyes, average figure. Still amazed and enchanted by the ceiling of the Great Hall, which tonight was pocked with stars. When she sat down to Snape's right, between him and Draco, she smiled at both of them in turn, and Snape noticed that she turned on them a gaze that was neither petty nor judgmental. So, he mused she had grown up and acquired a little more self-awareness. Never mind that her eyes on him were none too casual; whatever she was looking for, or seeing, in him, he was confident he would find out sooner or later. Her inability to keep her mouth shut, he was sure, was the same, too.

Shortly after all of the faculty were seated, the students began to enter the Hall, for once neat and dry, thanks to the clear skies outside. Sinistra, the new deputy head, began the sorting, and everyone at the high table applauded each new student as the Sorting Hat bellowed out his or her chosen house. Cheers filled the Great Hall with each sorting, but Snape kept his clapping firmly neutral. He had given over the headship of Slytherin to Draco some time ago, wishing to relieve himself of extra responsibilities, and he was glad of it. For him, at least, house rivalry was a thing of the past, and for the students, there was time enough for that after the feast. Flitwick's words of welcome Snape found less than inspiring, and after that, at long last, food began to appear on the tables.

The instant chatter of the students masked the rumbling of his stomach as he filled his plate, but it was not long before conversation at the high table took his concentration off his dinner. Draco leaned over and asked Hermione and Miranda collectively, 'How are you finding your new quarters?'

'Wonderful,' answered Hermione, taking a sip of pumpkin juice. 'Minerva left all of her syllabi and lesson plans in her office for me to use.'

'Have you decorated your personal rooms yet?' demanded Draco. 'If not, come to Malfoy Manor and pick out anything you want. Apart from vases and flowerpots, that is. Neville snaffled those years ago.'

Hermione laughed. 'That's a very generous offer, Draco. I might take you up on it.' Snape was struck by the sheer good nature in her voice.

Draco leaned past Hermione to look at Miranda, who was eating roast parsnips with a relish that suggested she hadn't tasted them in a long time. 'What quarters have you been given?' he enquired politely.

'Professor Snape's old rooms in the dungeon,' she answered and dabbed delicately at her mouth with a napkin. The gesture was so genteel that Snape, unaccountably, wanted to laugh at her. He smothered that reaction and said instead:

'Call me Severus, please.'

Hermione asked curiously, 'Where are you living now, Prof... Severus? Do you Floo here from home like Draco?'

'No,' he said slowly, reluctant as always to reveal any kind of personal information. 'I have one of the suites on the fourth floor near the Defence classroom.'

Miranda nodded. 'That's right, you're teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts now. We always suspected you wanted that post.'

Her statement seemed open-ended, as if she wanted him to elaborate on his preference, but he didn't oblige her. He had never really cared for teaching Potions; while the subject came naturally to him, clearly not everyone else had the same aptitude. He found that teaching the process of potion-making, which some students understood instinctively and others never managed to grasp at all, was much more frustrating than providing students with information and guidance in honing their self-defence skills. There was also, he had discovered to his surprise, less likelihood of near-fatal accidents in the Defence classroom. He was much happier, as a teacher and as a person, now that he didn't have the constant responsibility of making sure none of his students mixed combustible substances or created toxic fumes in their cauldrons.

He had missed some of the conversation while reflecting on his recent job satisfaction, and when he tuned into it again, Hermione was asking Miranda about draughts and pests. For a moment he was confused, until he realised that they were still discussing the dungeon quarters.

'I'm sure I'll be able to deal with the problem,' Miranda assured her, 'although perhaps, Severus, you could show me the particular spells you used to make the rooms more comfortable while you were living there.'

'Certainly,' he said shortly. 'Do you wish to know them now?'

'Oh, not during the meal. Just come by whenever you have a convenient moment.'

'That reminds me,' Hermione said to him suddenly. 'I wanted to ask you about some of the Muggle-Repelling charms on the castle. *Hogwarts: A History* says that Muggle electronic devices don't work inside or anywhere nearby, but I've grown quite used to listening to music on my stereo. Do you think that if I fitted my chambers with a ward that didn't allow magic to be used in them, my stereo might work there?'

Snape was astonished. 'I can't imagine why you would wish to do such a thing.'

'But would it work? You used to be the Headmaster, so you would know if anybody would.'

He reflected briefly, then responded, 'You couldn't fit your entire living space with such a ward because it would interfere with the plumbing in your toilet. The house-elves wouldn't be able to enter your rooms either. Nor could you take your wand into any space protected by an anti-magic ward. I suppose you could charm your sitting room...'

'What a ridiculous idea,' Miranda interrupted briskly. 'Transfigure yourself an old phonograph and enchant the winding mechanism with a Perpetual Motion charm whenever you want to listen to your music.'

Snape could see the objection forming on Hermione's lips and pre-empted it by saying, 'You may borrow any records from me that you wish. I'm sure you'll be able to find something to your taste.'

'And if not,' Draco added from her other side, 'come to Malfoy Manor and pick out anything you want. Both of my parents love music. They'd be happy to know their collection was getting some use.'

Hermione looked as if she doubted this. Snape privately doubted too that Lucius and Narcissa would appreciate their cherished belongings being lent to all and sundry but

Hermione accepted Draco's offer graciously enough. She turned back toward him, and her gaze lingered for a long moment on Miranda why? before she met Snape's eyes. He looked at her directly and thought how easy it would be, in the intensity of her eye contact, to slip unobtrusively into her mind and find out just what was prompting all of this scrutiny. Just when he had decided to do so, she faced Draco again thank God and he felt a gentle hand on his left arm. Startled and disturbed by the near-regression into his old habits of suspicion and intimidation, he gratefully focussed his attention on Miranda and felt the same, sudden, twinge of wariness from earlier as he met her unblinking, blue stare, along with a perceptible speeding of his heart-rate. Then she casually put another serving of parsnips onto her plate and asked conversationally in her low voice:

'So why do you prefer teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts, Severus?'

Father to Son

Chapter 2 of 11

Term begins. Snape holds the first meeting of the Duelling Club. He learns new things from Hermione and Miranda.

Author's Note: Many thanks to Angel Mischa, my excellent beta.

Father to Son

It was several hours later. The students were all tucked into their dormitories, the corridors had been patrolled, and Snape was now partaking of a nightcap with Draco at Malfoy Manor. They were in Snape's favourite room of the house, the long double parlour. The room was rectangular in shape: two huge, stone fireplaces made up either of the short sides of the rectangle, while the wood panelling of the long sides was interrupted by various doors. The doors on the south wall of the room were tall, mullioned glass and led onto a stone loggia that overlooked the pond and the vegetable garden. Far in the distance, the river gleamed, and in the summer Draco kept these doors open most of the day and into the night to fill the house with the sweet breezes that came off of the water. The north doors opened into the long foyer of the house, whose large windows provided a view of the sloping, velvety front lawns.

Snape sat with Draco by the west fireplace, losing himself in one of the plush armchairs, and added another drop of rum to his coffee. Draco kept his drinks trolley well stocked, but almost always fixed the same thing for himself, a mixture of Jamaican dark rum and ginger beer, the idea of which made Snape's stomach turn. But the rum was of good quality, and Lucius Malfoy's collection of aged whiskies was off limits, so Snape drank it in the blindest way possible, dissolved into a cup of Colombian decaf. The only light in the room came from the fire burning gently in the hearth, and Snape tried to concentrate on Draco's rambling conversation, though he was extremely sleepy.

Draco leaned forward from one of the other armchairs and poked the fire. 'I wonder why Miranda Silva took up the Charms post,' he was saying. 'My father knew her husband, you know, from the Ministry, and always said that the Silva family lived in the absolute lap of luxury out in Spain. He said the whole extended lot of them stayed in this palace somewhere near Granada that used to belong to a caliph, hundreds of years ago. There were something like twenty people living there, husbands and wives and children and grandparents, and about fifty house-elves to look after them all.' He laughed. 'I suppose we shouldn't tell Hermione that.'

Snape nodded in agreement.

Draco went on: 'Father said the whole family were purebloods apart from Miranda, and they all supported the Dark Lord's cause, but they were too canny to publicise it. He told me they sent money instead, but it was all the wrong currency, and the Death Eaters didn't need money anyway. They also used their influence in the government to make life very hard for Muggle-borns in Spain, which made my father see red because all the Muggle-borns just left and some of them came here in the end. Also, Antonio Silva was supposedly indiscreet, although what his indiscretions consisted of, I don't know. I got the impression that it was something to do with women. God only knows what Miranda thought of it all. But Father said Antonio married her because she was beautiful and insanely clever. I think he must have been right, because she is very beautiful indeed, but I don't know if her sort of cleverness is at all appealing. It puts me in mind of a stalking cat.'

Snape chuckled at this, so perfectly did it echo his mental picture of the blue-eyed panther. 'I think I'll give her a wide berth,' he said in a low voice.

'So will I,' Draco agreed. He poured himself another drink and slouched further into his chair, tapping the rim of his glass with one narrow, pale finger. He was quiet for a long moment, but Snape wasn't fooled; nothing could stop Draco's gossiping once it got going.

Finally, Draco spoke again: 'She certainly seemed very interested in you, though, didn't she? She talked to you all through dinner.'

Snape scowled. 'I know.'

'It's enough to make you a little uneasy, isn't it?' Draco gave a small laugh. 'She wasn't the only one, either. Hermione Granger stared at you enough.'

Snape didn't answer. He had noticed both of these things, of course, and the idea of either woman taking a fancy to him made him feel a little sick. Fortunately, it seemed to him highly unlikely that Hermione Granger was anything other than curious; the last time he had seen her up close, he had been dying on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, and the revelations about his work for Dumbledore hadn't come until much later. He had no idea what she thought of him now that she knew what he had been doing for Dumbledore all those years, and why he had been doing it, and he suspected she had no idea what she thought of him either. She had been friendly to him, at least, and he was grateful for her open mind, but he doubted she possessed any romantic designs. If anything, she was far too sensible for that.

He looked up to find Draco watching him speculatively. 'What?' he grunted.

'Nothing. Just wondering what you were thinking.'

'I'll thank you to stay out of my head,' Snape said acerbically.

Draco grinned. 'At any rate,' he continued, not offended, 'I think Hermione will be all right as a teacher, don't you? She seemed pretty self-confident...'

As Draco rhapsodised about Hermione's demeanour and sense of humour, Snape found himself feeling a little disconsolate. He wanted Hermione as a friend, he thought suddenly: she was steady and calm and cheerful, and these traits no longer irritated him now that he was at leisure to appreciate them. She would understand, he was sure, his desire to achieve integrity and contentment. But was he to go about becoming her friend? He was not, by nature, a cheerful or unguarded person himself.

Then Draco echoed his thoughts again: '... those records,' he was saying. 'I don't even know what sort of music she likes.'

Snape privately resolved that this would be his overture to Hermione: music. And, that decision made, he suddenly felt so fatigued that he placed his empty coffee mug on the low table next to his chair and stood, stretching out the knots in his back. 'I should be going, Draco, but thank you as always for the drink.'

'Of course,' Draco said, standing as well and reaching for the pot of Floo powder on the mantelpiece. 'Sleep well.'

Snape nodded. 'See you at breakfast,' he said, and calling out 'Hogwarts,' he stepped into the flames and disappeared.

Draco lounged back into his chair again and nursed the final few ounces of his drink. It wouldn't kill Snape to make a friend, he thought. Perhaps Hermione would enjoy learning a little more about Snape's character. He thought back to the days when he had begun teaching at Hogwarts. He was only a bit older than the students then, and many of them had remembered him from his days as a Slytherin prefect. When he finally voiced his frustrations, it was Snape who had taken him aside and given him some advice. Snape had written his suggestions in a letter, practical and useful suggestions about both teaching and living, and Draco still had this letter, tucked carefully into the pages of his diary. He decided to give a copy of it to Hermione as soon as possible.

Lessons began, and Snape was immersed in teaching once more with very little time even for the usual evening drinks at Malfoy Manor, which for the first few weeks of term were rushed affairs on both his and Draco's parts. Stacks of essays to be marked grew and grew, and more than once Snape was obliged to assist Madam Pomfrey in the hospital wing when his Defence students became a little too enthusiastic about the new material they were learning.

In addition to this, Flitwick reminded Snape almost daily that he wanted the Duelling Club reinstated. As Headmaster, Flitwick was naturally too busy to supervise such a thing himself, but he wheedled and begged until Snape finally agreed to schedule the first meeting for the final week in September. When he complained to Draco about his increased workload, Draco laughed and told him to recruit an assistant. Miranda or Hermione, he said, would do nicely.

Privately, Snape determined that he would let the cold and clever Miranda come nowhere near his Duelling Club, and so he found himself seeking out Hermione in the staff room one evening before dinner and discovered her reading his letter to Draco from all those years ago.

'How,' he enquired politely, leaning over her shoulder, 'did that come into your possession?'

'Oh! Severus,' she said, startled. 'I didn't hear you come in. Sorry. Draco gave this to me a couple of days ago. He said I might like to read it.'

'I see. And what do you think?'

She stood and faced him, her stance confident but not challenging. Mildly, she said, 'Honestly? I thought you failed, abysmally, to practice what you preach, at least while I was your student.'

Snape couldn't help it; he laughed. 'What Draco doesn't know, and clearly neither do you, is that Minerva McGonagall gave me that advice when I first started to work here, and it is the same advice that Albus Dumbledore gave her when she took up the Transfiguration post fifty years ago. For all I know, Dumbledore got it from someone else when he started at Hogwarts. That letter has a long tradition.'

Hermione laughed, too, and folded the letter into her pocket. 'The writing sounds very like Dumbledore, doesn't it?'

Snape was disarmed by her smile and suddenly found it easy to make the request he had come to ask of her. 'Hermione, the headmaster wishes for me to reinstate the Duelling Club. Would you care to assist me?'

'Of course,' she said readily. 'I saw the meeting advertised on the notice board. Is there anything you need me to do beforehand?'

'Not at all,' he answered politely. 'Just your presence will be necessary.' He turned to leave, but paused when he seemed to feel her inquisitive stare on him again. 'Thank you,' he added, without facing her, and walked away.

Several days passed before he saw her in the staff room again, and he was preparing to invite her to inspect his record collection after dinner when Flitwick drew him aside with a look that suggested he wanted to exchange confidences of some sort.

'Yes, Headmaster? What can I do for you?' Snape watched helplessly as Hermione slipped out of the room with a slight wave.

'Severus, have you been to see how Miranda is getting on in your old rooms?' Flitwick asked quietly. 'I hate that we had to put her in the dungeons, but the other suites had already been allocated by the time I learned she wouldn't be Flooing to work.'

'I have not called on her, no. Would you like me to do so?'

'Oh, yes, excellent idea,' Flitwick enthused, still quietly. 'Do make sure she's comfortable down there and try not to let her know she's got the worst quarters in the place. I'd hate for there to be any kind of fuss amongst the staff.'

Snape swallowed his irritation certainly no one had minded when he had lived in the 'worst quarters in the place' and obediently caught up with Miranda as she was leaving the Great Hall after dinner.

'I should like to see how you are coming along down in the dungeons,' he said stiffly. 'Do you have time?'

'Of course,' she responded and led the way into the underbelly of the school. She stopped just past the entrance to the Slytherin common room and gave the password to the portrait hanging there. Snape followed her inside and was immediately impressed with how comfortable she had made his old rooms. Bare and spartan while he lived there he had spent so little time in them, after all they were now warm and cozy. She had covered the damp, stone walls with colourful hangings, and the flagstone floor was now concealed by a plethora of lush carpets woven in complex, geometric patterns. She had chosen warm reds and golds and greens for the valances now hanging over the window-slits high up in the wall, and brocaded armchairs now ringed around the fireplace in the sitting room.

'As you can see,' she said, smiling slightly, 'I'm coming along just fine. May I offer you a drink?'

'Yes, thank you.'

She pointed to one of the chairs by the fire. 'Do take a seat. What will you have?'

'Whisky, please,' he said and sat obediently. After a few moments, she joined him, handing him a glass. He sniffed delicately and appreciatively at the golden liquid and took a sip, relishing the warmth that infused his weary body and the smoky, peaty taste on his tongue.

'How are you finding your lessons thus far?' she asked him, sipping her own drink.

'Very pleasant,' he responded. 'And yours?'

'Oh, generally very good. It can be slightly difficult, of course, because I'm having to train myself out of using Spanish magic, and when I slip up, I confuse the students.' She smiled ruefully.

'Spanish magic?' he asked curiously. 'I wasn't aware there was much difference between magical cultures in that regard.'

'There isn't, no,' she assured him. 'But Spanish as a magical language is quite different from the bastard Latin generally used in the magical world. Spanish is infused heavily with Arabic, as you know, and so spells in that language are used to accomplish different types of tasks.'

'How do you mean?' He was fascinated.

'Spanish spells are used primarily for what is generally called potential magic, while the Latin spells are for actual magic. Do you understand what I mean?'

'I'm not sure,' he admitted.

'Spanish and Arabic,' she explained, 'are languages that rely heavily on the subjunctive mood. So Spanish spells are largely concerned with what is possible what has the potential to exist rather than with what is actual, that is, what already does exist.'

'Surely,' Snape said slowly, 'all of magic is concerned with turning the potential into the actual.'

'This is largely true,' she agreed. 'But Spanish spells are not designed to do that. Rather, they illuminate what is possible without taking any action toward actualising it. It is the difference, to refer back to Latin, between *posse* and *esse*. Potence and essence.'

'I think I'm beginning to understand.'

'In the Middle Ages, Latin was the language of *quidditas*: the *whatness*, if you will, of some object or property. It remains so, in large part, today. Spanish is the language of *qualitas* then: the *howness*. It allows the caster to envision something as it might be, rather than as it is.'

Snape grew even more intrigued as their conversation wore on, and when he left her rooms close to midnight, he was heavily impressed by Miranda's intellect. It didn't bother him at all that the intensity of their conversation was all on his part; even when discussing a topic that obviously interested her, she remained casual and inscrutable. But he was left, at the end of the night, with an impression of ruthless precision, both in her demeanour and her way of speaking, and it was this characteristic that did nothing to ease the slight wariness he continued to feel in her presence. She had given him no cause to relax, either, when, slightly drunk, he had asked why she applied for the post at Hogwarts. Her answer, that she had left her husband, was tossed off as casually as everything else she said and gave him no indication as to how she felt about her husband's family and their infamous prejudices.

The night of the Duelling Club arrived. Snape and Hermione had just finished moving the house tables out of the centre of the Great Hall when the students started filing in, and the air in the large room grew palpable with anticipation. It was the first meeting of the Duelling Club in years in fact, it was the first since Gilderoy Lockhart's humiliation at Snape's hands during Hermione's second year. Snape remembered the incident with fondness and couldn't help wondering whether Hermione, having seen Lockhart's defeat, felt any trepidation herself about facing off with Snape. She looked decidedly unconcerned, however, and he was looking forward with unaccustomed pleasure to the evening.

'Gather round, everybody,' Hermione called, and the students, their faces alight with eagerness, formed a circle around the two of them.

'Welcome to the Duelling Club,' Snape intoned. 'Anyone who is here anticipating violence or gore shall be disappointed to discover that duelling is an art form, not a sport or an opportunity for personal retribution. We shall be teaching you the formal etiquette and precise routine of the traditional wizards' duel. No horseplay will be permitted. Anyone caught breaching the etiquette of the club will find himself or herself barred from participating for the remainder of his or her school career. The spells you will be learning are dangerous. Close attention to the directions of myself and Professor Granger is required.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Snape saw, with his unerring ability to ferret out trouble, whispering taking place amongst some of the older students.

'Corner!' he singled out one of the culprits. 'What did I just say?'

Stephen Corner, a seventh-year Ravenclaw, blushed. 'Sorry, sir. You said we must pay close attention.'

'Why, then, were you not paying close attention?'

'Sorry, sir.' He paused. Looking back at his friends, who offered him smiles of encouragement cheeky, Snape thought he said, 'Sir, we were wondering, did you or Professor Granger ever duel against... against You-Know-Who?'

Hermione turned to Corner in surprise. 'Why should you want to know that?' she asked.

'Well,' said Corner, and now his friends seemed to be pressing him on, 'we were all wondering. What was it like... fighting him?' he asked hesitantly.

Leaving in the back of his mind his ignoble last encounter with Voldemort, Snape shot a weary glance at Hermione. He read the expression of resignation on her face and said, 'Very well, Corner. Perhaps you would like to help me with a demonstration.'

There was a collective gasp from the seventh years. The boy himself looked horrified, Snape saw with satisfaction. 'No? Perhaps, then, Professor Granger will oblige.'

He offered her a hand onto the top of the high table, then leapt up lightly. 'Gather round on both sides, but stand well back,' he warned the students. They moved in groups to surround the long table, staying a cautious five or six feet away from the edge.

With another exchanged glance, Snape and Hermione moved to either end of the table and faced one another. 'Observe closely,' Snape barked. 'The duel begins with the presentation of wands.' He held his wand up for Hermione to see. She returned his action. 'Then,' he continued, 'the participants exchange a gesture of respect, which can range from a simple nod to a full bow.' Snape himself bowed slightly forward, maintaining eye contact with Hermione, and again she mimicked him. 'The participants cast on the count of three. Corner, count off!'

The boy, now grinning, called out, 'Three! Two! One!' A beat later, the duel began.

To Snape's surprise, Hermione started with a non-verbal blocking charm, so his, '*Expelliarmus!*' bounced harmlessly away. '*Protego!*' he said immediately, and her Jelly-Legs Jinx, cast as soon as she was out of danger, blasted his shield but failed to reach him and then they began casting in earnest.

Hermione was extraordinarily competent, Snape discovered, interchanging hexes and mild curses with quick, non-verbal blocks. She was hardly moving, at her end of the table, except for her wand arm, which flew back and forth as she took careful aim at Snape over and over. By contrast, he cast few blocking charms himself; instead he dodged her spells physically while throwing jinxes at her, trying to get under her guard. By unconscious agreement they were demonstrating two different, and equally showman-like defences: it was considered impressive in duelling circles both to be able to cast while moving and to deflect while remaining stationary. The students, whenever Snape was able to spare a glance at them, were enthralled and had moved back another five feet or so, motivated, he suspected, out of a desire to see better rather than any worry for their own safety.

Hermione, across the table, was grinning at him, and he noticed that she was changing her spells to ones that provided the maximum amount of light and noise. Understanding her strategy, he did the same, and the hall was soon filled with light and smoke as their curses ricocheted off of the table and walls. The act of duelling was one of Snape's most enjoyable pastimes, and now he became exhilarated from performing and from the knowledge that, with Hermione, he need have no fear of any actual malice working its way into the contest. He assumed, from her face, that she felt the same; he experienced, for a moment, a sensation of comradeship.

He was growing tired, however, and it was not long before he finally shouted the safe-word over the noise: '*Finite incantatem!*' The air in the hall became clear again, and he joined Hermione at the centre of the table while the students applauded.

'Pair up, all of you, and practice disarming and blocking only,' he instructed. 'If at any point you wish to call a halt to the duel, the established safe-word is *Finite incantatem*.

Begin.'

Hermione climbed down from the table and began to work her way amongst the pairs of students, reminding them of the correct etiquette procedure. Snape was about to follow when his eyes were drawn to the back of the room. There, in the shadows, Miranda Silva was standing, watching him, and he was suddenly powerfully excited by her presence. She must have seen him duelling; she must have been impressed by his prowess. He felt a warming in his chest, but then a sense of being watched made him look down, and he saw Hermione's eyes on him, thoughtful and quiet. Jumping from the table, he focussed quickly on the pair of students closest to him and barked out, 'Smith! Bow!' Hermione's attention moved on; when he next had a moment to look toward the other end of the hall, Miranda was no longer there.

After the meeting of the Duelling Club ended, when the Great Hall had been returned to its mealtime configuration, Snape finally had a chance to invite Hermione to his rooms. The promise of records, and books, lured her after him to the fourth floor, and he poured her a drink while she perused his shelves. He took a moment to appreciate the firelight glinting off her curly hair, tumbling over her shoulders, the same golden-brown colour as the whisky he was drinking. He had learned appreciation of such things from Draco, who was always drawing his attention to the texture of someone's skin, or the translucence of the irises in someone's eyes, the tiny details of human beauty that Snape had overlooked for so many years. Draco always reminded him that no one was truly ugly and that all people had some feature or characteristic that could be considered beautiful. He had even, Snape reflected, managed to be convincing about Snape's own attractiveness, going on about his eyes and his body until Snape had become uncomfortable.

'What sort of music do you listen to?' Snape asked Hermione abruptly, drawing his thoughts back to the present moment.

'Oh, you know, whatever.'

'Classical?'

'Some, yes.'

'Anything more modern?'

'Really,' she said, her attention still on the records, 'whatever you'd like to recommend will be fine.'

He joined her in contemplating the records on the bookshelf and handed her drink to her. 'You should take some Schumann,' he advised, plucking a record from the shelf and placing it on the nearby desk. 'And Mozart, of course, and Stravinsky...' Hermione nodded as he continued and the stack of records on the desk grew. 'And then some of these as well,' he said, moving on to the more contemporary choices, the great rock giants of the seventies he had listened to and loved during his teenaged summers at home. When he finally paused to see whether she was paying attention, there was stack of about twenty albums resting on the desk.

'I think that's enough to be getting on with for now,' Hermione laughed.

'Of course,' Snape murmured, slightly embarrassed. 'Come. Sit. Tell me how are the Weasleys and the Boy Who Lived.'

'Do you really want to know?' Hermione asked, surprised. 'I didn't think you would...'

'Yes, I want to know.' He gestured to one of the armchairs by the fire, and she reclined into it, cradling her gin and tonic.

'They're all doing very well,' she said. 'Harry and Ginny got married last year, as you probably know. They're living at Grimmauld Place for the time being and helping Andromeda Tonks look after Teddy. He's really grown - he looks just like his father now. Professor Lupin needn't have been worried about him; he's the most good-natured child I've ever met. Always happy as a clam.'

Snape nodded. He had never met Teddy Lupin.

'Harry and Ron are working for Kingsley now at the Ministry. I think everything there is finally beginning to iron itself out, and Kingsley told me that recruiting Aurors has never been so easy. Percy says he won't work there ever again; instead, he's helping George at the shop. Fred took care of all the finance, so Percy's been doing that and he really seems to love it. George thinks Percy must've undergone a personality switch during the war - apparently he finds their joke products hilarious and spends loads of money giving them as presents to everyone he knows, including Bill and Fleur's daughter, Victoire. She's really too young for most of the stuff they sell, but she loves the card tricks.'

Hermione talked on, her voice soothing, and Snape fell into a kind of trance, staring into the fire. He wasn't truly interested in the doings of Hermione's friends, but he had felt it polite to ask. After a while his thoughts turned to Miranda, observing his duel with Hermione from the back of the Great Hall. Why had she come to watch? More to the point, why had she left so suddenly? He wondered what it would be like to duel with Miranda. A damn sight more dangerous than duelling with Hermione, he'd wager, and picturing it in his mind, he grew both anxious and aroused. The fire was warming him now, and he felt extremely stiff and weary from the evening's exertions. At some point he drifted off to sleep, and Hermione, smiling indulgently, collected the records from the desk by the bookcase and slipped quietly out of the door.

When Snape regained awareness some time later, he was covered in a cold sweat. The fire had burnt down to little sputtering sparks and embers in the fireplace. He stripped off his clothing without ever really waking up and fell into his bed, slipping immediately back into the dream he'd been having. In it, he was making violent love to Miranda Silva, their naked forms grinding together on his hearthrug, and it was both wonderful and fearsome all at once. When he awoke in the morning, he was shivering again and filled with self-loathing.

The term drew on, and the chill of autumn grew deeper. Snape felt it in his joints. He continued to visit Draco at the Manor on weekend evenings, but during the week, Draco's nights were given over to his duties as head of Slytherin or socialising with Hermione and Neville. Snape left the three young people alone on these occasions, having no wish to intrude on them and understanding that, perhaps, his presence would be unwelcome. Instead, he spent his few free evenings with Miranda in the dungeon, learning more about Spanish magic and depleting her stock of fine spirits. She drank almost no alcohol herself, but seemed to enjoy thrilling him with offerings of cask-aged Scotches.

Occasionally, Hermione sought him out for teaching advice; on these nights, they discussed classroom management and discipline. She was having particular difficulty with the older students, some of whom remembered her as Head Girl. Snape tried to help her develop a persona of authority, and she seemed to find this useful.

He didn't realise, however, just how entrenched her discipline problem was until one morning during the week before the first Quidditch match of the school year. He was reading the newspaper in the staff room and enjoying his second cup of coffee when the quiet was broken by Hermione, who swept into the room, obviously flustered, and approached Miranda, who was marking essays at her desk. He had never seen them interact significantly before.

'I've just had Stephen Corner in class,' Hermione stated. 'He tried to tell me that you gave him permission to skip the detention I assigned him tonight.' She said this with a small laugh, as if it were too ridiculous to believe. Snape peeked cautiously at the two women from around the edge of the newspaper.

Miranda didn't look up. 'I told him that, yes,' she responded.

Clearly wrong-footed, Hermione protested, 'Why? He's been disrupting my lessons for days now!'

Miranda shrugged and began to gather up her papers. 'He's the Ravenclaw seeker. He needs to practice this week. Surely he can serve his detention next week.'

'But...' Hermione seemed at a loss for words. 'It's not a punishment if he gets to choose a time that suits him!'

'I really don't understand what the problem is, Hermione,' replied Miranda casually. 'I'll make sure he serves the detention next week. As his head of House I have final say

over any disciplinary action. Don't worry about Stephen Corner,' she added. 'All he needs is a firmer hand. You'll get the hang of it, I'm sure.'

Hermione's mouth dropped open in shock. Miranda paid her absolutely no mind and left the room. Throwing a pained glance at Snape, Hermione trudged out too, leaving him sitting behind his newspaper, acutely embarrassed.

He didn't see Hermione at lunch that day, nor at dinner, and after the meal, he decided to visit her in her rooms to see if there was anything he could do to make her feel better. This impulse was fairly alien to Snape, who had never really possessed an altruistic streak, but he had rudely eavesdropped on the altercation this morning solely in order to satisfy his own curiosity, and he felt some reparation was needed.

Hermione didn't answer his knock, so he gave the password and climbed past the portrait into her sitting room. The hearth was cold and the candles unlit, so he knew immediately that she wasn't in. He wandered over to her desk and took in the careful orderliness of her books and papers, then glanced out the window, puzzled as to where she might be. But then he caught sight of a movement down by the lake and squinted through the glass into the darkening distance. A small figure, draped in a white cloak, was walking around the shore of the lake, head down, hands clasped behind her back. Snape's chest constricted briefly, and he considered going down to her, but changed his mind as he was leaving her quarters. It was clear to him that she needed time alone; he would not impose his apology on her now.

White Queen (As It Began)

Chapter 3 of 11

Snape masters a new spell.

Author's Note: The Spanish verb *ver*, like the Latin *videre*, has many meanings; in this story, it means 'to seem.'

White Queen (As It Began)

Snape did not see Hermione at all for several days, either at meals or in the staff room. He refrained, out of courtesy, from visiting her in her rooms. He believed, based on personal experience, that it was the height of selfishness to intrude upon a person who wanted solitude. Too many times, this had happened to him, and it had always infuriated him, as if the very integrity of his person were being breached. He visited Draco instead, hoping, ashamed at himself, to hear some gossip.

He found Draco curled into one of the chairs before the parlour fire, eating a bowl of vanilla ice cream and listening to the Wizarding Wireless.

'Nicked it from the school,' mumbled Draco through a mouthful of food. 'It was fresher than the stuff here.' He swished his wand and the radio snapped off. 'Want some?'

'No, thank you,' Snape replied.

'You sure? I've got some Grand Marnier you can pour over it.'

'I'd rather have the Grand Marnier by itself.'

Draco shrugged and gestured at the drinks trolley. 'Suit yourself.' He took another huge bite of ice cream.

'So,' Snape began casually as he busied himself with the drinks.

'Wondering about Hermione, are you?' Draco asked shrewdly.

'Yes.'

'You can ask Neville, then, when he gets here. She's been hanging around him a lot, these past few days.'

Snape swirled the orange liqueur in his tumbler thoughtfully.

'If you don't mind my asking,' Draco continued, 'why are you bothered about her? It's not as if you're particularly close.'

'Miranda was rather cruel to her,' Snape replied. He took a seat in one of the armchairs and told Draco about the incident in the staff room.

'Ah, yes,' Draco mused, 'Miranda broke the unwritten rule. Solidarity amongst teachers.'

The fire suddenly flared green, and Neville climbed out, shaking soot from his clothing. 'Hi, Draco. Good evening, Severus,' he greeted them. 'Any chance of a beer?'

'I'll get one from the kitchens,' offered Draco. Shooting a significant glance at Snape, he left the room through the foyer doors.

'Longbottom,' Snape said abruptly, 'Draco says you've spent some time with Hermione recently.'

'Yes, that's true,' said Neville. He sat cross-legged on the hearthrug and waited patiently for Snape to speak again.

Seeing that no information would be volunteered, Snape forced himself to enquire, 'Is she all right? She hasn't been coming to meals.'

'Well, you know how it is,' Neville said sympathetically. 'I think she's a bit overwhelmed. I know I was, when I first started teaching. It's a big adjustment.' He cracked his back loudly. 'I get so stiff bending over the plants,' he said apologetically.

'Did she say anything to you about Miranda?' Snape persisted.

'Nothing special, I suppose.' He leaned forward and looked intently at Snape. 'I can tell you're concerned, but she's all right really. She just needed a few days to regroup. You understand?'

'Of course,' Snape affirmed. Neville, he thought, wasn't going to tell him anything. He couldn't blame him; after all, as Draco had said, it was not as if Hermione were a close friend. Nevertheless, Snape would have liked to see fearless Hermione back again. He wished that, that day in the staff room, Hermione had put Miranda in her place.

Neville sensed Snape's frustration, evidently, and changed the subject cheerfully. 'Are you putting anything on the Quidditch match this weekend?'

'You mean a wager?' Snape asked, startled.

'Naturally.' Neville grinned. 'Draco's bet me ten galleons and a bottle of rum that Slytherin will defeat Gryffindor.'

Draco returned just then and passed Neville a can of lager. 'Neville wants one of the rosebushes out of the garden if Gryffindor win. My mother would kill me, but I think I'm safe. Gryffindor hasn't won since... when was it, again, Neville?'

'Stuff it, Malfoy.'

Snape awoke the next morning with a monumental headache and a feeling of complete disorientation. He stared around the unfamiliar bedroom in confusion until he remembered that he was at Malfoy Manor. The previous night's drinking came back to him in a rush, and he groaned pitifully. It was Saturday, he recalled suddenly and glanced in alarm at the mantel clock, hoping he hadn't missed the Quidditch match. Fortunately, it was still quite early in the morning, so he dragged himself to the bathroom and climbed gingerly into the shower.

The pounding of the water on his head nauseated him. Knowing instinctively that he would vomit if he attempted to shampoo in this state, he snaked his arm around the shower curtain and rummaged in the medicine cabinet until he found a vial of Pepper-Up Potion. He swallowed the liquid eagerly and lay down in the bottom of the bathtub until it started to take effect. Surely he had not drunk that much last night! He remembered the Grand Marnier... and then the decaf and rum... but that was it. Two innocent drinks. God, Snape thought miserably, if this was what aging did to a person's body, he wasn't sure he wanted to go on with life after all.

After the potion and the shower, he felt somewhat better and joined Draco and Neville in the dining room for breakfast. The Manor's house-elves had covered the sideboard with the makings of the traditional English breakfast; the smells were divine, and Snape filled his plate enthusiastically, grateful that his earlier nausea had passed.

'All right, Severus?' Draco asked, looking, Snape thought enviously, rather fresh-faced and perky this morning.

'Mmm,' he grunted, taking a huge bite of sausage and tomato. Neville too, he noticed, was stuffing his face eagerly.

'Lots to do before the match,' Neville explained indistinctly. He swallowed his last bite of food and wiped his mouth. 'Got to pick out my rosebush.'

Draco eyed Neville suspiciously as the young man went through the French doors and out into the garden. Neville could be seen through the glass doors, wandering happily amongst the plants, now and then appearing to talk to them. Snape raised an eyebrow at Draco.

'Hmm,' Draco said vaguely. 'You coming?'

'Indeed.' Snape stuffed two more pieces of toast into the pocket of his robes, earning a sharp rebuke from Draco about the permanence of grease stains, and followed his young friend through the fire.

Most of the school were already seated in the stands when Snape and Draco arrived. They joined the Slytherin students on the benches, Draco asking, 'Sure you don't want to bet?'

'Don't be foolish, Draco.'

At the last moment they saw Neville rushing across the grounds and up the wooden stairs of the Gryffindor stands; then Madam Hooch blew the whistle and the match began. The game was extraordinarily civil, as most contests between Slytherin and Gryffindor had been since the end of the war. Snape noticed only one foul, which Hooch called with her eagle eye, and when Slytherin were victorious at the end, it was only by virtue of having caught the Snitch; both teams had played well. Draco barged out of the stands immediately, Snape assumed to collect his winnings from Neville. Snape himself followed more sedately, descending from the stands amongst a gaggle of cheering, green-clad students. He was feeling mildly bereft: though he had been searching through the sea of Gryffindor faces across the pitch, he had not found Hermioné's among them.

As he walked back up to the school, Snape discerned the sounds of someone trying to catch him up and saw Miranda Silva coming alongside him.

'Severus,' she said, 'will you have a celebratory drink?'

'I wasn't planning to, no.'

'Come on, then,' she said, as if his answer had been affirmative rather than negative, and swept through the great front doors of the castle. Snape hesitated on the threshold, but after a moment he steeled himself and followed Miranda down to the dungeons.

'Just pumpkin juice, please,' he told her, removing his cloak and hanging it just inside the door of the sitting room. When she brought his glass, he remained standing, even though he knew it seemed confrontational. Miranda shrugged off her outer robes and lowered herself onto the hearthrug; for an instant Snape's dream flashed behind his eyes.

'I think,' said Miranda, setting her glass down on the rug, 'that you might be ready to learn some Spanish magic. Are you interested?'

Snape tensed immediately, on his guard for no readily identifiable reason. His back straightened, and his vision sharpened, as it always did when he perceived himself under threat. His pulse began to race.

'Don't be silly, Severus,' Miranda admonished briefly. 'Come on.'

Stiffly, he bent his knees and settled onto the rug, facing her, and put his glass of juice on the hearthstones. She had not lit a fire; sunlight drifted through the window-slits, augmenting the glow from an oil lamp on her desk. Her hair, streaming over her shoulders and arms like a silken curtain, was so black it seemed to reflect the light in blue. She pulled her wand from her pocket and held it lightly on her palms in front of her, as if to reassure Snape that she was no threat to him. Her long fingers were almost as narrow as the wand itself, and for the first time he noticed how angular her body was.

'I'm going to teach you quite a simple spell this first time,' she said and laughed when his eyes narrowed. 'Not an easy spell. But a simple one, in that it demonstrates a very basic piece of the magic of potential. It is the foundation upon which many other Spanish spells are constructed.'

Snape nodded and extracted his own wand. 'Go on.'

'Watch closely,' she instructed; with outstretched arm, she arced her wand around them and said softly *Espero que vea*

At once the room changed, or seemed to: the colours grew deeper and the air warmer; light penetrated every part of the room and illuminated it with a gentle glow; every piece of furniture in the sitting room, which during Snape's tenancy had been dusty and neglected, took on the aspect of cherished objects to him; the glasses sparkled as if they were crystal; Miranda's brandy glowed like topaz. When he lifted his gaze to Miranda's face, he saw that she, too, had changed. Somehow, her eyes were softer, her cheeks more rounded, her expression sweeter. 'Do you see it?' she asked, and her voice was clear and lilting, like but also unlike her usual, low tones.

'What is this?' he whispered, speaking to himself more than to her. He was inspired and profoundly disturbed all at once.

'It's potential,' she explained. 'Every object within the field of vision is made to represent the viewer's ideal concept of that object. What you see before you is your idea of perfection.' Then her wand swept by again, and the room returned to normal. 'It's called an Enhancement Charm,' she finished simply.

Snape shook his head slowly, trying to dislodge the image of a soft, sweet Miranda. 'I don't understand,' he said. 'How does it work when there are multiple viewers? What are its physical parameters?'

Miranda gave a small smile. 'The charm is subjective. Each viewer perceives things differently because each person has unique concepts of perfection. Perhaps you find cotton softer than wool; your clothes will feel like cotton against your skin. Perhaps you prefer candlelight to sunlight; the room will seem to be lit by candles. You get the idea, but even that is too crude an analogy. And the charm's parameters? Whatever you can see, literally, with your eyes.'

'How long do the effects last, if the caster doesn't lift the charm?'

She shrugged. 'Not long. Perhaps five minutes.'

Snape shook his head again, more emphatically this time. Miranda reached out and put her hand under his chin, lifting his head so that she could inspect his face. He wanted to flinch away, but met her gaze defiantly instead. She seemed to be searching for something, her eyebrows drawn together in an expression that looked to him like a mixture of worry and perturbation. 'What do you want?' he demanded finally, irritated.

She started to answer him, but drew back instead and picked up her brandy. 'You can derive a lot of information from the Enhancement Charm,' she said thoughtfully, 'if you know what to look for.'

'I see.' Snape stood awkwardly. 'I take it you're not going to tell me what you found.'

She flashed a small smile at him. 'Who says I was looking for anything?'

His patience exhausted at last, Snape marched to the coat rack and slung his cloak over his shoulders. 'Thank you for the lesson,' he said sarcastically. 'It was most instructive.' He didn't slam the door as he left.

Minutes later, stalking into the entrance hall, he was already pitying any student foolish enough to come within his line of sight while he was in such a toweringly bad mood. He felt like the bat of the dungeons again. Then, mounting the staircase, he spied through a window a small white figure walking by the lake and whirled in the opposite direction. Hermione. *She* could bear the brunt of his mood, he thought: she deserved telling off for not standing up for herself the other day. He savagely jerked open one of the great front doors and took the stairs down to the lawn two at a time. When he neared the shore of the lake, she was some distance from him, walking with her back to him.

And then he had an idea so unexpected that, for a moment, he wasn't sure it had originated from his own brain. Acting on impulse, he pulled out his wand, pointed it at Hermione, and whispered, '*Espero que vea*.' He was almost convinced that he had botched the spell, so intently was he staring at an unaltered Hermione. Then the view beyond her caught his eye, and he inhaled sharply, amazed. The mountains, craggy in the distance, seemed to tower all the way into the vault of the heavens, their breathtaking beauty reflected in the still, clear waters of the lake. Each cloud had for him a distinct and fascinating shape; each breath of wind caressed his body like the hands of a lover.

Hypnotised, he stood motionless until the spell wore off. When he finally blinked, saddened by the loss of the vision, he found that Hermione had approached him and was now watching him curiously.

'Are you all right?' she enquired.

'Yes,' he responded. He could no longer remember why he had followed her out here. 'How are you?' he asked lamely.

'Better,' she acknowledged, linking her arm through his. He stiffened, but chose not to move away from the contact; he had no wish to risk an interrogation about his personal boundaries. As they moved round the shore of the lake, Hermione continued: 'It's been quite a wrench trying to be civil to Miranda Silva since she undermined me with Stephen Corner. I thought it best to avoid her if you can't say something nice, you know, you shouldn't say anything at all.' She smiled up at him.

Now, he remembered; he commented, 'You seem angry with her. Has she done anything else to upset you?'

'That one incident would have been enough,' said Hermione, a slight edge in her voice, 'but thinking on it afterwards, I decided there were other things, too. I didn't know she was head of Ravenclaw; did you?'

'Yes, but I had forgotten.'

'Well,' Hermione continued, 'I thought the older Slytherins would give me the most difficulties, but Draco seems to have shaped them up rather well. Instead, it's the Ravenclaws who are causing me all the problems. Many of them are just as cold as she is! Do you think that's just the sort of person who ends up sorted into Ravenclaw? Or is she somehow coaching them at it?'

'Children are highly impressionable,' Snape admitted. 'If they see her as a role model as I think they must then they will actively choose to emulate her.'

'She truly is very clever, then?'

'Very clever indeed.'

Hermione sighed. 'She looks it, too.'

They walked in silence for a few minutes. The sun was dropping below the peaks of the mountains now. The wind, picking up speed as it passed across the flat of the lake, sliced through their cloaks. Hermione clutched the white wool closer around her chest and pulled up her hood. 'Severus,' she said hesitantly, 'I know Miranda has got nothing personal against me. To tell the truth, that's what made me angry: she's uninterested, not malicious. If she was being rude to me on purpose, then I could do something about it, try to fix the situation. But she was rude, and she undermined my authority as a teacher, for no reason at all! How does one deal with that?'

Hermione did not often ask rhetorical questions, Snape knew, so he answered this one. 'You should talk to her. Invite her to your quarters to look at the phonograph. Be friendly toward her.'

'This is some kind of Slytherin strategy, isn't it?' Hermione grinned.

'Of course. Your politeness will put her off-balance and give you the advantage, and your friendliness will make it impossible for her to continue treating you indifferently.'

'It would also be a more mature way of dealing with the problem than sulking about has been,' Hermione pointed out. 'You meant to say that as well, didn't you?' she teased.

'Yes, it is an admirable plan, whichever way you look at it,' Snape said, finally returning her smile. 'The best plans always are.'

Snape had scheduled a meeting of the Duelling Club for the following Friday night; afterward, giddy with exhaustion, he and Hermione Flooed to Malfoy Manor and found Draco in his Potions laboratory.

'Excellent; you're here,' he said, turning down the fire under a cauldron. 'Drinks. In the conservatory.' And he flapped his hands at them, dismissing them from the lab. Hermione went, but Snape remained behind for a moment.

'Wolfsbane?' he asked.

'Yes,' replied Draco shortly. 'Have to keep the stock up, you know, now that the Ministry's providing it free to every werewolf in the country.'

'Are they paying you for it yet?'

Draco finished wiping down his worktop. 'I saw enough of Greyback,' he said solemnly, 'to want to make this stuff free of charge for the rest of my life.'

He ushered Snape out of the lab and up to the ground floor of the house.

'Why the conservatory?' Snape asked suddenly. 'It's freezing outside.'

Draco's face shuttered briefly. 'Hermione doesn't go in the parlour.'

Snape remembered: that was where Bellatrix Lestrange had tortured Hermione, all those years ago, while Draco, sickened and horrified, had been made to watch. Suddenly, Snape couldn't think how he had ever considered that room his favourite.

'Where's Longbottom?' he asked, changing the subject as they passed through the breakfast room and out to the glass-walled conservatory.

Hermione was there, having already switched on the electric heater and asked the house-elves for the drinks trolley. 'I saw him in greenhouse two after dinner,' she said teasingly, 'potting quite a large plant. I wonder what it could have been.'

Snape looked sharply at Draco, whose pale face had gone slightly pink.

'Fine,' Draco snapped. 'I gave him the damned roses anyway. So what?' His tone dared them to say another word about it. Snape had no intention of saying anything further his curiosity did not extend that far into Draco's life but Hermione pouted prettily and made sure, Snape saw, that Draco's drink was rather long on rum and short on ginger beer.

Shortly after midnight, Hermione brought the topic of conversation round to Miranda Silva. 'I took your advice the other night, Severus, and asked her to come and have a look at my phonograph,' she began.

Severus explained to Draco what he had suggested Hermione do, then asked, 'How did it go?'

'She was really very genial,' replied Hermione. 'We had a nice conversation about Spain. I've been to Granada, you see, on holiday, and she asked to see my photographs. A couple of them actually had her house in them! It's really more of a palace, though, I suppose.'

'Did you ask her why she was so patronising about your teaching?' Draco enquired.

Hermione flushed. 'More like told her not to do it again, than asking,' she said. 'She didn't realise it had bothered me. She apologised...' her voice trailed off.

'And?' Snape prompted.

'And... she said I should grow a thicker skin if I wanted to be a successful teacher. Don't get mad,' Hermione continued, when Snape and Draco both looked indignant. 'She's right about that, at least. She said students can sniff out insecurity as easily as dogs can sniff out rabbits.'

'But...' Draco began.

'Anyway,' said Hermione loudly, interrupting him, 'she was quite kind about it all. She even fixed the phonograph. The sound quality is much better now. She really is amazingly good with charms.'

'Speaking of charms,' Snape said abruptly, 'Miranda showed me a Spanish one last weekend.'

Both Hermione and Draco scooted forward in their seats, causing Snape to grin at their eagerness. 'Show us!' Hermione demanded.

He explained what the Enhancement Charm was meant to do and how the language worked, then asked, 'Ready?'

Draco and Hermione nodded enthusiastically.

Snape took a deep breath and swept his wand in a wide curve around them. *Espero que vea*'

No one spoke for some time, silenced by the beauty of the sight before their eyes. Snape wondered if the other two saw the same vision he did, of a space made ethereal by starlight, every chair, drinking glass, and plant in the room picked out in shades of grey and silver. Draco, bathed in the cold illumination, evinced a powerful, angelic beauty; his eyes, widened in amazement, were radiant.

When Snape looked at Hermione, however, his sudden feeling of consternation hit him like a fist to his abdomen. For, yet again, she remained unchanged under the influence of the spell at least, he noticed nothing different but now he was really looking at her, really *seeing* her without anything else distracting his mind, and he found her beautiful, especially as she was now, with her lips parted and her chest rising and falling in rapid, captivated breaths. The consternation changed to pain in his chest, the pain of a longing so intense that it made him feel physically weak. The sensation was familiar to him; it reminded him of how he had felt in those final few years before Voldemort's defeat, when he had wished so ardently and so hopelessly to be free of his burden of secrets at last. This, he knew, was the same, hopeless burning after something he would probably never have; only now he couldn't quite identify what it was he was longing for. Was it love he wanted, with all of its attendant and infinite trust, respect, and admiration? Or was it Hermione herself?

A gasp from Draco drew him out of his reverie, and he shifted his gaze to find both of them staring at him, their eyes wide. After a moment, Hermione took out her wand and said in a low, harsh voice, '*Finite incantatem*.'

Draco laughed and said, 'Amazing.'

Hermione put her hands over her eyes and pressed with her fingertips, as if to erase the images she had just seen. 'I don't know that I like that spell, Severus.' She sighed and wearily got to her feet. 'Sometimes, maybe, we shouldn't be able to see what is possible.' Draining her drink and setting the glass on the trolley, she said, 'I'm going to bed. Sleep well.'

When she had gone, Snape turned to Draco and demanded, 'What did you see when you looked at her?'

Draco crunched a piece of ice thoughtfully. 'I don't know if I can really explain it. She looked kind of how she did that time she hit me across the face. Young and strong and fearless. Why? What did you see?'

Snape shook his head, unwilling to admit that the spell had been defective. 'You're right; it's hard to explain.'

'You, on the other hand,' Draco commented, 'should have seen *yourself*.'

The memory of Miranda, scrutinizing his face, flashed into his mind. 'Tell me.'

Draco cocked his head, his expression growing solemn, and met Snape's eyes gravely. 'You looked like you were standing in a pool of sunlight,' he said carefully. 'There were no more shadows surrounding you.'

Some Day One Day

Chapter 4 of 11

Hermione plays music for Snape. He gets the measure of Miranda's duelling skills.

Author's Note: My gratitude goes out to Angel Mischa, without whose input this story would be illegible. The tunes Hermione plays for Snape actually exist and are accurately described herein. Anyone who wishes to make a guess about them is free to do so. *Lassi requiescamus* is a reference to Ovid, *Amores* 1.5.25.

Some Day One Day

Over the next few weeks, Snape was dismayed to discover Miranda attending the Duelling Club regularly. He assumed that, in her newly found friendship with Hermione, she was coming to give the younger woman moral support, though he believed privately that this behaviour was likely to cause Hermione more unease than comfort. It certainly caused him unease, at least initially, to know that she was sitting in the back of the Great Hall watching and, probably, critiquing his abilities. Her presence also pricked his ego, though he was loath to admit it to himself. Miranda seemed just as fascinated by Hermione as by him. He couldn't decide whether it was the implication that she considered someone twenty years his junior impressive, or the fact that her attention was not centred solely on him, that bothered him more. In the end, he decided that he must not enjoy sharing the spotlight; Hermione was rather good at duelling and he admired her proficiency himself. In the night, when he was tired and sore and his mind hovered on the edge of sleep, he could be honest with himself: he coveted Miranda's admiration. She was beautiful and clever, and it gave him a little thrill to think that she might hold a favourable opinion of him.

Eventually, he was prompted to invite Draco to attend the Duelling Club as well to provide some kind of mitigation of Miranda's presence. It made Snape uncomfortable to think of her sitting alone in the back of the room, making him nervous and intimidating the students. He refused to let her duel, at least for the time being he had a vague presentiment of disaster should she be allowed to practise what were surely her unsavoury Spanish duelling techniques but it was getting progressively more difficult to resist the students' demands to see her in action.

Snape was also becoming curious about whether Hermione was enjoying the music he had selected for her. As far as he knew, she had not asked to borrow any of Draco's parents' records. One Saturday evening in November, he took himself to her quarters near the Transfiguration classroom and asked if she would care to play for him anything she had especially liked.

Though the hour was not particularly late, Hermione had undressed for the night and wore a long, fuzzy dressing gown. Her hair, freed from its weekend ponytail, hung messily around her shoulders, and her face was fresh, as if it had just been scrubbed. She looked incredibly warm and cosy as, barefoot, she led Snape into her sitting room.

'I hope I haven't interrupted you,' he said awkwardly, perching on the arm of a chair.

'Not at all,' she replied breezily. 'I was just going to stay in with a book. Can I get you anything to drink?'

'I've brought some,' Snape answered, pulling a bottle of red wine out of his robes. 'Draco told me you have a taste for this particular vintage.'

She leaned down to inspect the label and grinned. 'He's right. Shall I get some goblets, then?'

While she rummaged in a cabinet, Snape set the wine on the coffee table and walked over to inspect her phonograph. She had made it absurdly old-fashioned: the casing was blue enamel, and the fluted horn rose two feet into the air.

'Do you like it?' she asked from behind him.

'Yes, very much. Although it's much more elaborate than anything I'd have come up with.'

She uncorked the wine and poured in into two glasses, then curled up on the corner of the sofa. 'Well, *hm* the Transfiguration professor. It wouldn't do to let standards slip.'

Snape sat next to her on the sofa surely that wasn't too presumptuous? and leaned forward to take his wine.

'No,' she said, putting her hand on his arm. 'You have to let it breathe first.'

Amused, he drew back and waited silently for a few minutes until she decided the wine had aerated enough.

'Now,' she said, picking up her wine, 'a toast.'

'A toast to what?'

'To music.' She clinked her glass against his and took a long sip, rolling the wine over her tongue for a few seconds before swallowing.

He found her mouth absurdly erotic and drank hastily, hoping to cover his discomfiture.

'So,' she said, 'you wanted to know if there were any songs I liked from amongst the albums you lent me.'

He nodded.

'I've got three favourites at the moment,' she informed him. 'Shall I play them for you?'

'Please.'

She got up and selected three albums from a shelf near the window he noticed with approval that she had not stacked them one on top of another, but kept them stored upright instead and put one on the turntable, waving her wand to start the turntable revolving and carefully placing the needle onto the vinyl.

The first song was a melodic, simple mixture of guitars and piano. The words and the timbre of the electric guitar put Snape in mind of summer and sunlight. Peculiarly for that particular band, the tune contained no flute; idly, he wondered if Hermione preferred that.

The second, by a different group this time, was also very melodic, with otherworldly harmonics and distorted guitars; its lyrics gave a haunting account of a traveller returned home to find that, in his absence, decades have passed, while he himself has aged only by one year. This was rather the opposite of his own situation, Snape reflected ruefully: after the war, and after regaining his health, he seemed to have aged tremendously on the inside, if not so much on the outside while everyone else, in their relief and exultation, had shed years.

The third, and final, tune that Hermione played for him was one that Snape had always loved: a dark and powerful piece of blues worked in chiming guitars, thundering drums, and wailing vocals. The grinding, driving rhythm had always lowered his inhibitions; listening to it, he could imagine how he might behave were his passions permitted to reign. This song, he knew, like so many others by the same band, was a song of the *id*, and he had always taken care that listening to it should remain an infrequent pleasure.

An affinity for this song seemed so out of character for Hermione, as Snape had come to know her, that, when she returned to her place on the sofa after situating the needle, he looked at her searchingly, wondering what aspects of her personality she had yet to reveal to him. She shrugged, answering his unspoken question, and said, 'It makes me feel... different. Bolder.'

Hermione's slight movement had shifted the neck of her dressing gown, revealing an expanse of smooth skin that Snape tried in vain to drag his eyes away from. She must see him staring, he thought; surely, she would tell him to stop looking at her this way! But she did nothing of the sort, and some restraint inside him broke, almost imperceptibly. Driven forward by the music, and the dimness of the sitting room, and her air of mellow contentment, he reached out and pushed the fabric of the dressing gown further aside with one graceful hand, leaning in to kiss the exposed swell of her breast.

She arched her back and sighed softly; simultaneously relieved and aroused, he sucked at her skin gently for a moment, then raised his head, knowing instinctively what he would see: her half-closed eyes, pupils dilated, her lips parted from her sigh. She allowed him a moment to appreciate her enjoyment of what he was doing before she touched her lips to his in a long, sensuous kiss that seemed to him to mimic the rhythm of the song on the turntable.

He closed his eyes, luxuriating in the pleasure of her mouth, and allowed her to lead. Pushing him against the back of the sofa, she climbed slowly into his lap and straddled his thighs, never breaking the kiss. Her hands moved from his shoulders to the back of his head; her fingers caressed his scalp in slow circles as her tongue twined around his. Burning with a desire to touch her, he pulled her hips closer against him and slid his hands up to her ribs. His thumbs stroked beneath her breasts through the cloth of the dressing gown, and she sighed again, her breath warm in his mouth.

Snape felt himself sink into thoughtlessness when she moved, pressing her chest to him and grinding her hips in one long, torturous revolution against his. The movements of her mouth were growing more heated and urgent. Unable and unwilling to resist her unspoken demands, he hooked his fingers around either side of her gown and pulled it open slowly, exposing her breasts. He moved his hands further up her ribs and ran the pads of his thumbs in light circles around her nipples before brushing over them gently.

Breathing raggedly, Hermione reached between them and untied the belt of the dressing gown, letting the garment fall completely open across the front of her body. He couldn't help himself he wanted to look at her: breaking the kiss, he let his eyes roam over her face, flushed with desire; her full breasts; her pale belly; her soft thighs that met beneath a scrap of black satin. She arched her back again, and he bent his head to kiss her breasts, loving the feel of the silky skin beneath his lips. When he ran his tongue lightly over one of her breasts, her head fell back, and she groaned quietly. Supporting the curve of her back with his hands, he leaned forward and closed his mouth around her nipple, sucking gently at first, then harder, until he could feel her moans vibrating in her chest. He did the same to her other breast, and then her hands were closing around his jaw, forcing his head up into another kiss, hot, passionate, and demanding.

The insistent fire pulsing throughout his body gradually made Snape aware that if he permitted this activity to progress any further, he would quickly reach a point at which self-restraint would no longer be even remotely possible. Regretfully, he gentled the kiss and closed Hermione's dressing gown over her breasts.

'Severus,' she whispered, 'we don't have to stop.'

'I know,' he said quietly, planting light kisses along her jaw and over her cheeks.

She melted against his body sweetly and asked simply, 'Why?'

He held her, embracing her, and said softly, 'I won't deny that I want you very much. But if we do this, Hermione, it shouldn't be hasty or impulsive.'

She nodded. 'I understand.'

The music had stopped some time ago; the only sound in the room now came from the crackling of the logs in the fire. Snape stretched out on the sofa, drawing Hermione against him, and entwined his legs with hers. 'I would, however, like to keep kissing you,' he said.

'By all means,' she replied, smiling, and offered her mouth to him. Finding a strange pleasure in tormenting himself, in resisting his body's needs, Snape remained there with her until long after midnight, enjoying the simplicity of her slow, delicious kisses and the feel of her languid body, warm in its fluffy dressing gown, relaxing against him.

Snape strode into the Great Hall for the following week's meeting of the Duelling Club already in a foul mood, due to a number of different factors. First, and most frustrating, was the fact that Hermione had not had any free time since their evening spent snogging on her sofa. As a consequence, he had seen very little of her, even during the day. The last conversation they had shared had taken place this morning in the staff room, when she had informed him that she would be leaving the castle directly after the Duelling Club to spend the weekend in London. He had gone to his lessons wondering if she had decided that kissing him had been a mistake.

But he had not been given the leisure to dwell on that speculation because not twenty minutes later he ended up in the infirmary assisting Madam Pomfrey with some very stupid students of his who had hexed each other's noses off. Unbeknownst to Snape, who was demonstrating a spell on the other side of the classroom at the time, they had been attempting a poorly modified version of the Bat-Bogey Hex. Upon hearing the gasps and screams, he had whirled around, stopping short in horrified fascination at the sight of the two noses wriggling half-heartedly on the wooden floor. Some time had passed before he was able to force enough Calming Draught down the perpetrators' throats to convince them to walk to the hospital wing; not even threats of dire punishment proved to be enough to compel them to collect their noses, a task which had been left to their thoroughly fed-up professor.

Finally, having missed most of his morning lessons, he sat down gratefully at lunch, only to be accosted by Miranda, who demanded bluntly to be allowed to duel that night. Hoping that the grinding of his teeth was audible only to himself, he had acquiesced, provided that she sharpened her skills only on Draco Malfoy, the sole member of the club, other than Snape himself, who had enough sense to be prepared for the sort of spells she might throw at him.

Wrenching his concentration back to the matter at hand, Snape let his gaze sweep menacingly over the students assembled warily before him. Some of them had already suffered the lash of his temper today and looked as if they would dearly prefer to be anywhere but at the Duelling Club; even Hermione and Draco seemed subdued. Only Miranda, to Snape's irritation, appeared unaffected by his mood: she bounced on the balls of her feet impatiently, grinning in anticipation.

'This evening,' Snape growled, 'Professor Silva and Professor Malfoy have volunteered to demonstrate their duelling expertise for the club. Although this is a contest of skill, rather than a fight...' here he eyed Miranda meaningfully '...you are advised to stand well back from the high table and be prepared to shield yourselves, should the need arise. I will not tolerate any misbehaviour tonight.'

The students backed away from the high table hastily, some drawing their wands protectively, as Miranda and Draco leapt lightly onto the tabletop and executed the opening formalities of the duel.

Draco was good, Snape thought, but not good enough: the duel was a complete rout. The students were bedazzled by Miranda's showmanship, but what really impressed Snape was the ruthless way in which she bombarded Draco with curses. He was able to fire off only one spell for every ten or twelve of hers, and it was clear to Snape that the effort of shielding himself was draining Draco's energy alarmingly. It would not be long before he faltered, Snape reasoned, and then Draco would be risking serious injury.

Snape nudged Hermione, who approached the high table as closely as she dared and shouted, *Finite incantatem!*

In the resulting silence, Draco's aggrieved panting was audible. 'What was that for?' he demanded, turning a fierce glare on Hermione. 'I had everything under control!'

'I...' she began, turning helplessly toward Snape.

He stepped forward, noticing as he did so that Miranda was perfectly composed and scarcely even winded. 'You were getting tired,' he said shortly to Draco. 'Tired wizards make sloppy duellers.'

Draco snorted, flipping his hair out of his eyes, and Snape, painfully conscious of his own fatigue, narrowed his eyes at Draco's unspoken taunt. 'You have something to say?' he asked silkily.

'Yes. *You* come up here and take my place, and let's see how tired *you* get.' Draco jumped to the floor and gestured for Snape to take his place.

Snape scowled at Draco and clambered onto the table. 'By all means,' he drawled.

Draco huffed again and stomped out of the hall, leaving the students to stare wide-eyed at the two professors standing on the table. Hermione's wand was still out, Snape saw, and that too annoyed him, as it suggested she might intervene if she felt he was flagging.

Then he turned to face Miranda and bowed; noting the eagerness in her face and the anticipatory tension in her limbs, he allowed a smirk to turn up the corners of his lips. At last he had discovered a good reason to permit Miranda to duel: so that she could be the target for his temper.

He quickly revised this opinion once the duel began. He could use her as a target, but only if she paused in her relentless casting for long enough to let him fire off some really terrible hexes. Her turn of speed was truly astonishing; it also irked him that she cast silently, leaving the students with no idea of the kind of magic he was facing.

They might not look so unimpressed, he thought bitterly, if they could hear her. Though she never once breached duelling etiquette non-verbal spells *did* tend to be the norm in professional duels he considered that her strategy counted as fighting dirty, at least for the purposes of a student club, and pursed his lips firmly together, determined not to make another sound.

His sudden silence put her off her stride, and he was finally able to cast, a powerful *Sectumsempra!* that screamed through his brain and streaked down the table. Hermione, recognizing the spell, gasped out loud in horror, and Miranda, registering the danger, narrowly dodged the bolt of light.

Black hair whipping around her face, she fixed him with a look of pure fury and advanced, flinging curse after silent curse at him, all of which he deflected or evaded nimbly, elated by the fact that he had finally gotten under her guard. Chunks of stone broke off the wall behind him and tumbled to the floor; ducking for cover, the students scattered, and Hermione rushed forward again, flicking a Blocking Charm toward the wall and screaming at the older students, 'The safe-word, damn it!'

Two or three of the seventh-year Gryffindors brandished their wands at Snape and Miranda; the air cleared at once, and Snape, chest heaving, dropped his wand deliberately on the table. He turned to face Hermione, about to apologise and a jolt hit him in the back, right between his shoulder blades, a perfectly aimed final curse fired off silently by Miranda in flagrant defiance of all the rules of duelling. Flames seared through his chest. He stumbled, momentarily unable to control his muscles, but managed to catch himself before toppling to the floor. He recognised this spell, recognised the sudden, painful, arousal in his body, the deafening pounding of his heart, the sense of desperate need growing in his mind that was quickly crowding out rational thought, and felt a tide of anger build up inside of him.

Instead of the apology he had been about to make, he shouted hoarsely, 'This meeting is over! Everyone is dismissed!'

With a monumental effort of will, he ignored the curse raging through him until Hermione had ushered all of the students out of the Great Hall; no one, including Hermione herself, seemed to have noticed Miranda's out-of-bounds parting shot, and they all glanced at him in puzzlement as they left the room.

When he judged that the club members had at last passed out of earshot, Snape snatched up his wand and pointed it viciously at the doors of the hall, which slammed shut with a violent bang. He rounded on Miranda, who had climbed down from the table, and stalked toward her, hoping his greater height proved intimidating.

'You stupid woman!' he exploded, his hands beginning to tremble from the effort of resisting the spell. 'There's a reason the *Lassi requiescamus* is a curse! Do you know what you've *done*?'

'Of course I do!' she shouted back; far from being intimidated, her thin face was bright with laughter, some of which she was unable to suppress. Miranda backed toward the wall, never taking her eyes off his face, as he approached and leapt from the table; he finally saw the telltale tremors in her limbs that showed him her resistance was weakening as well. Her breath was coming in short gasps, and the blue of her huge eyes was beginning to glaze over. He knew the same thing was happening to him: the spell had been denied for too long; soon, it would take over.

'Severus...' Miranda whispered desperately.

Abruptly, his mind shut down. Shoving her against the wall, he pulled up her robes and forced her leg around his waist. She clung to his shoulders, kissing him violently, biting his lips and thrusting her tongue into his mouth. He groaned and ground his hips between her legs, sliding his hand along the back of her thigh until it reached her centre; heat enveloped his fingers as he explored her. She moaned into his mouth and tilted her hips, driving his fingers deeper into her.

His body shrieked its need at him; fumbling at his trousers with his other hand, he finally managed to release his erection, which was now excruciatingly hard. Lifting her other leg and pinning her in place with his weight, he pushed aside her knickers and plunged into her as far as he could. She met him thrust for thrust, crying out inarticulately as he took her, roughly, slamming her against the wall over and over.

Her orgasm, when it happened, was so intense that he felt as if his body was being squeezed in half. Her scream of completion filled the Great Hall and set off a cascade of fireworks in his groin; with one last push, he came deep inside her, a powerful release that left his entire body shaking with relief.

Weakly, he lowered her legs to the ground and backed away, leaning for support against the high table. He felt the spell wane and fade away; they had satisfied its demands. He lifted his head, nearly exhausted by the effort it took, and saw that Miranda had sunk to the floor and was rubbing the back of her head. 'I'm going to have a bruise,' she said and laughed softly.

'Why?' he asked her quietly, physically incapable of raising his voice now. 'Why *that* spell, when you know the only way to lift it is for the caster and the victim to reach climax together?'

Wincing, she got to her feet. Taking a brief moment to cast a cleansing spell on both of them, she offered Snape her hand and said, 'Come with me.'

Ignoring her hand, he forced himself fully upright and followed her into the dungeons. She lit the fire in her sitting room and poured him a drink, a generous measure of whisky that warmed him and revived him.

'What on earth possessed you to do that?' he asked again when she had settled herself on the hearthrug with a drink of her own.

Miranda gazed into the fire for a long time without answering, her face pale and thoughtful. He felt as wrung out as a dishrag and marvelled that she could appear so calm

and composed. She sat in a pose of extreme relaxation, leaning back on her arms, her long legs stretched out before her. Her glossy, black hair, hanging down her back, wasn't even disarranged, he noted with a twinge of envy.

Finally, she said simply, 'I wanted you. I was tired of waiting.'

Snape heaved a weary sigh and rubbed his hands across his face. 'You might've tried the conventional way before resorting to a curse to seduce me,' he pointed out.

She shrugged gracefully. 'I didn't think that would work.'

'You were right,' he said bitterly. 'I wasn't interested in you.'

'Wasn't,' she repeated, still not looking at him.

He leaned back and let his head drop against the back of the chair, staring at the stone ceiling. He knew he was not to blame for what had happened in the Great Hall, yet guilt washed through his mind. This was the end of his hopes for Hermione, he thought sadly; she wouldn't want him now, and he couldn't fault her for that. He felt as if he had betrayed her, even though, for all he knew, she had never really wanted him in the first place. Certainly, she had given him no indication since their evening together that she was ready to become involved with him. But he was not so petty that he resented this; he knew she had been genuinely busy. If he were prepared to be so generous with Hermione, he thought, he should really extend the same courtesy to Miranda: she had not known about him and Hermione, and she was not really a stupid woman, as he had called her. Just a selfish, inconsiderate, and reckless one.

He sighed again and raised his head. 'So what do we do now?' he asked resignedly.

Miranda finally turned away from the fire and looked at him, and he was struck by the tender patience in her expression. 'Come here,' she commanded softly and held her hand out to him again.

This time he grasped it and joined her on the rug. She took his drink from him and placed it on the hearthstones next to hers, then stroked his cheek gently with the pads of her fingers. To his surprise, he found that he did not mind her touching him now, that the combination of wariness and admiration he had always felt in her presence was making his blood sing again with arousal. He took her hand away from his cheek and kissed her fingertips, half questioning what he thought he was doing, and saw the answering flare of desire in her eyes. She pulled him closer to her and began to unfasten his robes.

Their lovemaking was calmer this time, but no less intense. She made every effort to please him, perhaps in apology for forcing herself upon him earlier, and he reciprocated enthusiastically, excited by her responsiveness. It was not until much later, as he lay half-asleep in his own bed, alone, that it occurred to him that she had not spoken a single word during their moments of intimacy, either in the Great Hall or in her rooms. She had not called out his name as she had climaxed. It wasn't as if she had made no sound at all, he admitted, remembering her moans of satisfaction; all the same, the lack of words seemed strange to him, a reflection of a kind of detachment he found glaringly out of place considering what they had been doing. But then, he wondered, how could a person be passionate and detached at the same time? Perhaps he simply didn't know enough about passion. Or perhaps, he thought, intensity and passion were not the same thing.

Snape was playing chess with Draco in the parlour of Malfoy Manor on Sunday night. After considering the board carefully, he moved his bishop into position to take Draco's queen.

Draco tapped his fingers against his thigh thoughtfully. Still deciding on his move, he asked conversationally, 'How did your duel with Miranda go?'

'Why didn't you stay to watch?' Snape asked irritably.

Draco moved his queen out of danger. 'I wasn't feeling so well,' he admitted. 'She blasted me with some kind of nausea spell.'

'I see.' Snape focussed on one of his few remaining pawns.

'Well?' Draco said. 'What happened?'

Reluctantly, Snape told him about the *Lassi requiescamus*.

Draco stared at him, aghast. 'Is *that* what you've been doing all weekend?'

'Yes.'

Ignoring the chessboard now, Draco said evenly, 'You hid that well.' He regarded Snape solemnly. 'Does Hermione know?'

'What?' Snape asked, surprised. 'No,' he said, feeling a sick sensation of shame. 'Why do you ask?'

'I won't tell her,' Draco said, and his expression changed to one of pity. 'Just don't lead her on.'

Insulted, Snape snapped, 'I have no intention of leading anyone on. My relationship with Hermione is strictly one of friendship.'

Draco raised his eyebrows. 'If you say so.'

'It's true,' Snape insisted quietly, knowing that this piece of literal truth was very, very close to being a lie.

Draco shrugged, as if to suggest that Snape could delude himself as much as he liked, and looked down at the chessboard again. 'It's your move,' he said.

Loser in the End

Chapter 5 of 11

Snape gets caught.

Loser in the End

Snape sat alone in his office marking papers early one Saturday morning. It was mid-December, and through his window, he could see Hagrid trimming the huge Christmas trees intended for the Great Hall and securing them in their ceramic stands. The sun, low in the sky now that the winter solstice was approaching, cast a dim, cold light over the school grounds, turning the lawns and the pine trees of the forest to silver. A thin coating of frost etched fractured patterns on the glass near the bottom of the window. Snape hated this time of year; despite constant fires, wool robes, and his down duvet, he never seemed able to shake off the throbbing ache of cold in his bones. Even now, situated at his desk directly in front of the fire, his fingers were so stiff that he could scarcely write on his students' papers.

Giving up for the time being, he made himself a pot of coffee and wandered into his personal quarters, collecting his duvet from the bed and arranging it over his legs as he curled up in his favourite armchair. The coffee was deliciously bitter, and the heat from the mug helped to warm his hands a little. Beneath the comforting aroma of his drink, he could smell faint, lingering traces of Miranda on the bedclothes, a mixture of perfume, shampoo, and the subtle scent of Miranda herself. She had been here last night, teaching him variations of the Enhancement Charm and making love to him. When he had awakened close to dawn, she was gone, and he had been glad of it.

Twisting his mouth into something like a smile, he acknowledged to himself that she was a master of the stick and the carrot. From that first time, when she had cursed him in the Great Hall, she had held to the same pattern: provoke him into losing his temper, then soothe him with a *volte-face* into tender compassion. He felt almost like a victim of some strange permutation of Stockholm Syndrome. But he enjoyed their time together; the combination of her brilliance and beauty, her brains and sensuality, satisfied him both intellectually and physically and gave him very little cause for complaint.

Nevertheless, he was aware of something seriously amiss with their arrangement, and that was the vast emotional wasteland that yawned between them. They never talked about their relationship, such as it was; they never exchanged words of affection; Miranda had still never spoken to him during sex, communicating her needs and reactions instead through body language and vocalisations that had nothing to do with words. In a way, Snape was grateful for this emotional barrier; he was never very comfortable with his softer sentiments, even at the best of times. He was tempted to consider that the barrier was one of his own making, but his powers of self-delusion were not great enough to permit him to believe this. Analysing his and Miranda's behaviour rationally, he was forced to conclude that it was she who kept him intentionally at arm's length, and while he was happy to acquiesce to this, he knew it was not a circumstance of his own devising. She seemed to want only the most casual of relationships, and he did not object but, on an academic level, he wondered why she wanted such a rigid boundary between them.

Sounds of laughter and shouting from the grounds below interrupted his reverie; wrapping the duvet around his shoulders, he walked to the window and looked out. The other inhabitants of the castle were waking up and venturing outside now; he could see a straggling line of figures making their way up the path toward Hogsmeade. Some of them peeled off toward Hagrid's hut at the edge of the forest, eager to help him carry in the trees and start decorating. One of these, Snape saw, was Hermione, swathed in her white cloak. He could not make out her face from this distance, but he knew she would be cheery and pink-cheeked from the cold. He had not spent any time alone with her since that night in November when he had gone to her quarters to ask her about music. But she had been at the meetings of the Duelling Club and at Malfoy Manor whenever Draco invited the two of them and Neville to join him for the evening, and never once during any of these occasions had she displayed toward him anything other than open, pleasant friendliness. She betrayed no awkwardness or resentment; it was as if their snogging session had never occurred. Snape, in all his finely tuned perceptiveness, was unable to tell if her pleasant demeanour was genuine or feigned. He hoped it was genuine and hated himself a bit for that hope; he knew that if it was genuine, it must be a result of her ignorance of his affair with Miranda but, ashamed, he could not bring himself to rectify that gap in her knowledge.

Not to mention that enlightening Hermione might destroy the tentative friendship she was building with Miranda. Snape often noticed the two of them taking long walks together during the afternoon tea break. It had occurred to him once to wonder what they might be discussing together, but this could hardly be a mystery, considering their formidable intellects. They had also apparently reached an understanding about Duelling Club; Miranda had told him one night that she only wanted to go up against Hermione in future; when, astonished, he had asked why, she had laughed and said merely that Hermione, as another woman, would understand the spirit in which she fought. Snape had to admit that there was some truth in this when he saw them duelling: their performance had seemed more like a dance than a duel, and it had delighted the students so much that they had requested repeats of it at every meeting of the club since. Snape came to dread their duels, however. He knew what the students did not: that the gracefulness of their matches was deceptive, that the two women were actually firing lethal spells at one another that put under considerable strain the protective charms he had placed around the Great Hall. Their fierceness and energy awed him; he thought they looked like a pair of avenging goddesses and felt a cold twinge of fear should they ever be on the same side against an enemy.

It was hard to imagine that ferocity now, he thought, watching Hermione struggle under the weight of one of the huge Fraser firs. Nevertheless, he yet felt a fervent determination: he must never become that enemy.

The students deserted Hogwarts in droves for the Christmas holidays, as they had been doing since the end of the war. Gone were the war orphans and the sense of fear that had prompted many parents to keep their children at the school under Dumbledore's protection. Snape was used to it by now, but Miranda marvelled at the silence of the corridors, empty of all but teachers. The festive spirit amongst the staff seemed to infect her, and she wasted a great deal of Snape's time forcing him to help her plan and carry out practical jokes on their colleagues. He was a frequent victim of her good humour himself: one morning he stepped out of the shower to discover his entire wardrobe transfigured into a set of nesting boxes, at the centre of which he found a pair of Christmas-themed pants as his only remaining piece of clothing; on another occasion she had laced his Floo powder with itching powder, and he had stumbled into Draco Malfoy's parlour scratching himself uncontrollably, furious at the young man's helpless peals of laughter.

Two days before Christmas, having gotten one over on almost every member of the faculty, Miranda seemed to lose her interest in pranks and spent the afternoon in his office instead, humming Christmas carols and charming his belongings to blink like fairy lights, distracting him from the reports he was trying to write. When they finally went down to dinner, his brain was exhausted, and he didn't notice until halfway through the meal that Miranda was stroking his thigh provocatively under the table.

'Stop that,' he hissed under his breath, unable to continue eating now that he realised what she was doing.

Raising one eyebrow at him, she complied, but left the table soon afterward. Snape remained behind, discussing the Gryffindor reports with Neville Longbottom over coffee. Eventually, they got up and parted ways in the entrance hall, Neville on his way to Hogsmeade to have a drink at the Three Broomsticks. Snape ascended the main staircase to the fourth floor and made his way along the corridor toward his rooms. He had gone about ten yards beyond the door to the staff room when he was yanked into an alcove. Stumbling, he came face to face with Miranda, who pressed her body against him and kissed him deeply.

'Not here,' he murmured against her mouth, feeling his body start to respond.

'Yes, here,' she whispered, pulling his hands against her. She was wearing nothing beneath her long robes, and his hands glided uninterrupted along her smooth skin. Crushing her against the wall, he unfastened her robes at the neckline and kissed her breasts. Impatient, she pulled the garment the rest of the way open and bared her body to his exploration, panting into his kisses.

He slid one hand between her legs and slipped his fingers into her damp folds, smiling when she gasped and rocked against him. He stroked her soft flesh gently and sensuously, bringing her to the edge before raising his hand to his lips and licking his fingers. She kissed him violently around his hand, sucking his fingers into her mouth. Impossibly turned on, he forgot they were hidden in an alcove and allowed her to push him aggressively to the wall. Dropping to her knees, she unfastened his trousers and took his erection into her mouth. Groaning quietly, he rested his head on the rough stones behind him and watched from beneath lowered lashes as she tasted him, her nude body pale in the dim light, her long black hair blending with the robes that still hung over her shoulders.

He had just lifted her up and positioned her against the wall, about to sheathe himself in her welcoming warmth, when the slam of a door nearby drew them both suddenly back to reality. Grinning at him mischievously, Miranda fastened her robes hurriedly and slithered from his grasp out into the corridor. Snape waited a few moments, taking the time to adjust his clothing, then stepped out of the alcove, only to run bodily into Hermione Granger.

She had obviously just seen Miranda and was wearing a small smile of amusement, which dropped off her face abruptly when she saw who had barrelled into her. 'Snape?' she blurted incredulously, gaping at him in astonishment.

He favoured her with his most forbidding stare, valiantly masking the awful sinking sensation in his gut.

'What is this?' she asked him, wide-eyed. 'What were you doing?'

'That's none of your business,' he snapped, humiliation making his voice harsh.

Hermione blushed, drawing the obvious conclusion, and smirked at him. 'You shouldn't be conducting your business in the hallways then,' she retorted, unimpressed at his attempt to intimidate her.

'I'll note that down,' he drawled, relieved that she didn't appear to be upset. 'If you'll excuse me, please,' he said and dodged around her to stride up the hallway toward his quarters.

'Oh, Severus?' she called out from behind him, pausing at the door to her classroom.

'Yes, what is it?' he replied warily, wondering if he was going to get a bollocking now, and turned to face her.

Hermione pointed in the opposite direction with an impish smile and said, 'She went that way.' Opening the door, she disappeared into the classroom, leaving him standing alone in the corridor feeling both stupid and mystified.

Hermione did not surface for meals the following day, and when Snape enquired of Neville where she was, Neville told him that she had gone to Malfoy Manor. Snape found this piece of intelligence bizarre: if she were going to leave the school, why had she not gone to Grimmauld Place to spend the holiday with Potter and Weasley? He continued to be puzzled by this throughout Christmas Day, which he celebrated with Miranda before joining the staff for Christmas dinner. Draco was not present for the festivities either, so Snape took himself off to Malfoy Manor later that afternoon.

When Snape arrived at the house, Draco was playing carols on the piano in the lounge and nursing a glass of eggnog.

'Severus,' he said, getting up to shake his hand. 'Happy Christmas!'

'Happy Christmas,' Snape replied.

'Come into the parlour,' Draco said. 'There are some presents for you under the tree. Can I get you some eggnog?'

'Yes, please,' answered Snape, adjusting the bag he was carrying with him. 'I've got some presents here too.'

He followed Draco into the parlour, which was beautifully decorated for the holiday, and unpacked his bag. One of the house-elves came in with a pitcher of eggnog and replenished Draco's drink before pouring Snape a glass.

Draco passed Snape his gifts—a book on Native American hallucinogenic potions and a set of silver cuff links inlaid with mother-of-pearl—and gleefully opened his own. Snape had found it difficult to choose gifts for Draco, whose taste in all things was far more sophisticated than his own. In the end, he had found an old volume about historic Wizarding homes of Britain in which there was a beautiful engraving of the older buildings of Malfoy Manor. He had painstakingly reproduced the engraving in coloured inks and framed it, giving both the picture and the book to Draco.

'Thank you so much,' Draco said. 'I never knew you were such a talented artist!' He set the picture on the mantel. 'I'll have the house-elves hang that in my room later.'

'I'm glad you like it.'

They sat in silence for a few moments, sipping their eggnog.

'Do you like it?' Draco asked, pointing to Snape's glass.

'It's delicious,' Snape answered.

'I made it myself,' Draco said proudly. 'The house-elves are teaching me how to cook. I used the cognac Neville gave me for Christmas.'

'What else did you get?' Snape enquired.

'Well, not much from my parents, obviously,' Draco commented, 'but they sent me a nice long letter from Azkaban. Hermione gave me a Venus fly trap. Carnivorous plants are so weird, don't you think?'

Snape jumped on this opening enthusiastically. 'Where is Hermione? I've got something for her, too.'

Draco looked uncomfortable and averted his eyes. 'She's around here somewhere,' he said finally.

'I see,' Snape said coolly. 'She's avoiding me, is she?'

'I really have no idea.'

Something about Draco's tone made Snape feel even more awkward. Hermione had not seemed that upset about discovering him and Miranda; was it possible that her removal to Malfoy Manor had nothing to do with him at all? And then he felt like a complete fool for assuming that his affair would bother her. After all, they had shared only one evening together; how egotistical of him to think that she might have become invested enough in him to be hurt by his dalliance with Miranda. Did he really think so much of himself? Or, worse, was he projecting onto Hermione what his own reaction would be were their positions reversed?

Mortified, Snape got to his feet and reached for his cloak, which he had tossed across a chair. 'Well,' he said self-consciously. 'I should be off.'

Subdued, Draco handed him the pot of Floo powder and watched him go.

For several days, Snape avoided any and all thought of Hermione, steadfastly refusing to consider further any of what had occurred to him on Christmas Day. Miranda ignored his mild despondency; he was obliged to conclude that she was either oblivious to his foul mood or completely uninterested in his mental torment. Again, he found himself feeling very grateful to her; had she questioned him about it, he would have been forced to think, and he would rather pretend to himself that nothing to do with Hermione concerned him in the slightest.

He was unable to continue this pretence on New Year's Day when he arrived at Malfoy Manor to find his present to Hermione still sitting unopened beneath the Christmas tree.

'Damn it, Draco,' he snapped. 'What the hell is the matter with her?'

'Don't be an ass, Severus,' Draco shot back uncharacteristically sharply. 'I told you not to let her find out about Miranda. And yet you decided it would be a good idea to conduct your *relationship*!' he emphasised this word disparagingly 'in the corridor right outside of the staff room.'

'I will not be blamed for this,' Snape hissed. 'This silent treatment is childish in the extreme.'

'You won't be blamed?' Draco asked incredulously. 'Tell me, Severus how is any of this *not* your fault?'

'She didn't even act interested in me!' Snape protested, feeling disingenuous.

'Oh, really,' Draco scoffed. 'I wonder what a woman would have to do to prove her interest. Perhaps Hermione should have practically raped you like Miranda did.'

Taken aback, Snape stood speechlessly and stared at Draco.

'I shouldn't wonder that Hermione wants to avoid you,' Draco stated, speaking more reasonably now. 'You never even gave her the chance to get used to the idea of being attracted to you. It can't be easy for her, you know. She used to hate you,' he pointed out.

'I'm sure she does again,' Snape said bitterly.

Draco shrugged. 'I doubt that. But you're making a big mistake with Miranda. Can't you see that Hermione is worth ten of her?'

'Of course I can!' Snape exploded, provoked into anger. 'Why do you think I didn't go straight to Hermione after that duel? She wouldn't have had anything to do with me, not after I had... *sullied* myself!'

Draco looked at him strangely. 'You're an idiot,' he said flatly.

'Oh, you think so?' Snape snarled.

'Yes, I do. Are you still sixteen years old on the inside? Do you think everyone is as emotionally crippled as you?'

For a moment, Snape was incapacitated by his own fury. Then he turned abruptly and stalked to the nearest fireplace. 'Happy New Year,' he said sarcastically. 'Give my regards to Hermione.'

When Snape's form had disappeared, spinning into the fire, Draco dropped wearily onto the sofa. He sat there for some time, reflecting unhappily, before snatching a bottle of Scotch from the drinks trolley and making his way out of the parlour and into the gardens.

There he found Hermione sitting on one of the wooden benches, wrapped snugly in her white cloak and the knitted mittens and woolly cap he had given her for Christmas. He passed the bottle wordlessly to her, and she took a long drink.

'Snape's gone,' he said eventually. 'You can come back inside now.'

Hermione shrugged. Her face was pink from the cold, and although her eyes were dry, Draco could see from the shadows beneath them that she was unhappy. The longer she remained silent, the more her air of resignation bothered him.

'Hermione,' he said thoughtfully, 'Snape thinks you shouldn't want him now. He thinks he doesn't deserve you.'

'That's stupid,' she said quietly.

'Why did you give him the impression that you only wanted to be his friend?'

She leaned back and pulled off her cap, running her fingers through her hair. 'I didn't want to rush him. I thought he would come to me when he was ready. And then, when I found him with Miranda... I didn't want him to know I was hurt. I didn't want to seem pathetic.'

'He probably would have come to you, if not for Miranda,' Draco observed ruefully.

'She didn't know,' Hermione said reasonably.

'That doesn't matter,' Draco snapped, suddenly angry again.

'Why do you say that?'

'Listen, Hermione,' Draco said, taking a swig from the bottle. 'You know the parable of the rich man and the poor man, don't you? The rich man had many flocks of sheep, and the poor man had only one ewe lamb. But when the rent came due, the rich man took the poor man's only lamb.'

Hermione regarded him askance. 'What on earth?'

'I read it in a book somewhere,' Draco said dismissively. 'But think about it. Miranda's done the same thing to you. She's got a man she's got *husband*, for God's sake. She doesn't need Severus, but she took him anyway.'

Hermione cocked her head pensively. Draco watched her closely and was gratified to see her expression change gradually from resignation to something like determination. When she finally turned to him to take the bottle again, her eyes had become fierce.

Ogre Battle

Chapter 6 of 11

After an altercation between Hermione and Miranda, Snape has a moment of self-discovery.

Ogre Battle

'Tonight, we shall be practising the art of physical evasion,' Snape stated to the students gathered before him for the first meeting of the Duelling Club in the new term. 'Many of you are accomplished at this skill already, but in wizards' duels there is more to evasion than simply dodging out of the path of an oncoming spell. The more finesse with which you can, jump, bend, and twist, the more impressive a dueller you will become.'

Directly in his line of sight, Stephen Corner smirked.

'Despite the acrobatic theatrics some of you may have in mind,' Snape continued silkily, focussing his piercing gaze on the young Ravenclaw, 'this is not a game of Quidditch. The goal of this exercise is not to achieve showiness. It is to achieve grace.'

One of the Gryffindors at the front of the group raised her hand eagerly, and Snape was reminded irresistibly of Hermione at the same age. 'Please, sir,' the girl said, 'could you demonstrate for us what you mean?'

'Certainly,' he assented. Lifting his eyes to the very back of the group, he looked at Miranda enquiringly. She shook her head, almost imperceptibly, and he remembered: she only wanted to duel against Hermione. 'Perhaps,' he amended, 'Professor Silva and Professor Granger will offer you a demonstration.'

It was difficult to miss the enthusiasm with which many of the students greeted this suggestion, but Snape, suddenly disturbed, was unaffected by it. For, while Miranda smiled in agreement, there was something hard and implacable in Hermione's face that, in Snape's opinion, did not bode well for the evening's activities. In truth, he had been surprised to see her attend the meeting at all, so assiduously had she been avoiding him since before Christmas. He knew Hermione well enough, however, to suppose that she was not the sort of individual to allow personal discomfort to interfere with her professional duties.

He waited with some trepidation as each woman climbed onto the high table and bowed in the other's direction, but it seemed that his worries were unfounded. Hermione and Miranda duelled without Shield Charms, and though this necessarily meant that their hexes connected more often than usual, they seemed to have decided independently of one another not to cast any particularly dangerous spells. Snape allowed himself a wry smile: despite their fierceness, clearly neither woman enjoyed the idea of being truly injured.

And then, as if his very thought had triggered it, Hermione lashed out at Miranda. So quickly that Snape almost didn't register what had happened, she fired off two spells in rapid succession: a nasty jinx that Miranda dodged gracefully, leaping up and arching her back out of the path of the bolt of light, and a Disarming Charm, which slammed into Miranda while she was still in mid-air. She sailed off the end of the table, crashing into the wall behind her, and slid to the floor in the very same place where she and Snape had consummated her curse. Her wand, wrenched from her grasp, soared through the air and landed with a clatter on the stone floor some ten feet away.

A collective gasp arose from the onlookers; for a moment, nobody moved. Then, with the suddenness of a tableau unfreezing, several Ravenclaws ran to Miranda; another group of students, Gryffindors, hurtled toward Hermione; and Draco darted from the Great Hall, presumably to fetch Madam Pomfrey from the infirmary. Snape, too, made his way toward Miranda, wading through a sea of Ravenclaws to reach her prone form. When he was close enough to see her, he noted with relief that she was alert and moving her arms and legs gingerly. Nothing appeared to be broken. She looked up at him with the same small smile from *that night* and said, 'I'm going to have a lot of bruises.'

'Can you make it to the hospital wing?' Snape asked.

'In a minute.'

Turning, he addressed the students: 'Return to your common rooms, all of you. This meeting is rescheduled for Sunday night.'

Looking disgruntled, most of the students left the hall. With a promise to inform them about Miranda's recovery, Snape was obliged to drive off the Ravenclaws himself, all of whom shot dirty glares at Hermione as he herded them from the room. Carefully, he assisted Miranda into a standing position, but she refused his offer of support while she walked. Instead, she limped over to Hermione, who was still standing by the high table, looking, in Snape's opinion, somewhat absurdly confused.

Without speaking, Miranda assessed Hermione for some time, her expression clinical and appraising. Hermione stood up to this scrutiny resolutely, allowing Miranda to look her fill, leaving Snape to wonder when the shouting was going to begin.

He should have known better, however; neither of the women was much given to displays of temper. Eventually, Miranda spoke.

'I see,' she said quietly to Hermione.

While Snape would have interpreted this statement as the beginnings of a threat, Hermione did nothing of the sort. Instead, she responded, 'I'm sorry. That was uncalled for.'

In the same quiet voice, this time with another small smile and a rueful tone that Snape found difficult to interpret, Miranda said, 'No, it was called for.' She limped away toward the door. Hermione followed her stiffly, leaving Snape alone in the Great Hall.

As he rearranged the tables and benches into their configuration for breakfast the following morning, he analysed what had just passed between Miranda and Hermione. The realisation hit him abruptly that all the secrets between them were in the open now: Hermione knew that Snape was carrying on with Miranda, and Miranda had obviously divined Hermione's feelings for Snape. And then another insight popped into his head, one that left him so faint with self-disgust that he was unable to force himself to continue standing.

Flicking his wand at the doors of the hall, he closed them securely, unwilling that anyone should witness his weakness, and dropped onto one of the benches and put his head in his hands, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. Breathing deeply, he opened his mind to what he had thought a moment ago and admitted that the cause of his recent distress, and the distress that Hermione, and now Miranda, had suffered, was *himself*. He had pursued a sexual relationship with Miranda despite the fact that she had used him, despite the fact that she was married, despite his interest in and affection for Hermione. He had allowed himself to believe that Hermione was uninterested in him, that she would judge him for succumbing to a curse, that she would not forgive him for an indiscretion that was no fault of his own. And he had used this belief as an excuse to carry on with Miranda, an excuse to hide things from Hermione, an excuse to justify his loss of temper with Draco on New Year's Day. And he had done it all because it was *easier* than the alternative. After a lifetime of standing up to Voldemort and Dumbledore and suffering for the sake of his pride and his loyalty, he had fallen at the first minor hurdle because he did not have the courage to stand up to *himself*.

Sickened, he lurched from the Great Hall and climbed the stairs to his rooms, locking the door behind him and groping his way into the bathroom. After a moment of hanging his head over the toilet and willing himself not to be sick, he switched on the taps and ran a bath. Sinking gratefully into the hot water, he pondered what course of action he should pursue. If it were shameful of him to have spent so much time deceiving himself, he thought, it would only worsen the problem to go about with his tail between his legs now. He could not go to Hermione, cap in hand, and expect forgiveness at this point; nor could he break things off with Miranda for reasons he should have told her at the start of their relationship. He would not compound cowardice with more cowardice, he decided. This was the bed he had made; now he would lie in it. He owed Hermione an explanation, but he would not insult her by asking for the indulgence of her pardon; he owed Miranda an explanation too, and if, after she had heard it, she wanted to continue their arrangement, he would give her his best effort and his respect.

The next morning, Snape went to Hermione's office and asked to speak with her. Solemnly, she invited him in and sat behind her desk, offering him the students' chair facing her. She steepled her fingers together and didn't speak as he took his seat.

Uncomfortable, but nevertheless determined, Snape finally said, 'I owe you an apology.'

'Go on,' she offered, not unkindly.

'I'm sorry I wasn't honest with you about Miranda. I should have told you what was happening several months ago.'

Hermione leaned back and looked thoughtful. For a few moments, she stared at a spot somewhere above his head, then responded, 'Yes, you should have. Why didn't you?'

Forthrightly, he said, 'It was simpler not to say anything.'

'Go on.'

'I've never been particularly at ease with other people's emotions. I couldn't face yours, whatever they might have been. And I'm especially reluctant to face my own.'

'Why are you doing so now?' she asked curiously.

Snape sighed. 'Because I decided it's better to do what is right than what is easy.'

Hermione smiled. 'Dumbledore used to say that.'

'I know.'

Silence fell again. Hermione didn't appear to have anything further to say, so Snape continued: 'I'm prepared to give you an explanation of what has been going on, if you wish it.'

'Yes, I wish it.' She looked at him expectantly.

Slowly, but without hesitation, he told her about the *Lassi requiescamus*, his reaction to Miranda afterward, and his altercation with Draco. Hermione listened patiently, holding his gaze with her own. Out of stubbornness, he refused to look away; that, too, in his estimation, would have been evidence of cowardice. He dearly would have preferred, however, to hide under a rock than to look her in the eye not out of shame, but out of humiliation for having put himself into a position where apologies and explanations were necessary at all.

Hermione seemed to realise this: when he finished, she did not smile again, or offer any suggestion that she enjoyed or approved his humility. Instead, she asked, 'Do you love Miranda?'

'No,' he said.

'Does she love you?'

'I shouldn't think so.'

Hermione considered this intelligence, tapping her wand against the blotter on her desk. 'Since we're in confessional mode,' she commented, 'I should tell you that I think Miranda wants something from you other than casual sex.'

Snape raised his eyebrows involuntarily. 'Oh?' he said, surprised. 'Do you think she does love me?'

'No.'

'Then what does she want from me, Hermione?'

She shrugged, a maddening gesture Snape would have been happy never to see again. 'I couldn't even begin to guess,' she said. 'But she's not after you for you because then I doubt she would have so little concern for what has gone on between you and me.'

'How do you know that doesn't concern her?' Snape enquired curiously.

'She told me so,' Hermione said simply. 'Last night in the infirmary.'

'Did she,' he said slowly, thinking out loud. 'Why would she tell you that?'

'I suppose because it's true. Perhaps she was trying to make me feel better about treating her so unjustly at the Duelling Club.' Hermione flushed, clearly ashamed at her vengeful behaviour the previous night.

'Perhaps,' he allowed. 'I have always understood that she has no emotional investment in our... relationship.'

At this remark, Hermione looked faintly disgusted, but soldiered on: 'I'm right, then. There's something else she wants from you.'

'There could be,' Snape admitted.

'Do you know,' Hermione continued, as if she were having these thoughts for the first time, 'I suspect she wants something from me, too? Her behaviour toward me has not been entirely casual, and that seems... how shall I put it? Out of character, coming from her.'

'Oh?' Snape said again.

'I can't think what it might be, though,' she said. 'After all that's happened, any kind of friendship between us is more or less impossible.'

'Don't you think that's rather petty of you?' Snape asked sharply, unable to help himself.

She shrugged again, and his teeth ground together in annoyance. Standing, he decided to put an end to the interview, considering that he had accomplished what he had come here to do. She walked him to the door.

'Severus,' she stopped him, placing her hand lightly on his arm. 'Thank you for your apology. I'm glad you came to see me. I couldn't bear to lose you as a friend.'

'You're welcome, Hermione,' he answered. Returning to his chambers, he reckoned that their conversation had gone well, perhaps even better than he had expected; nevertheless, he was unsettled: first, by the thought that Miranda was taking some interest in Hermione that struck him as somehow dangerous for Hermione herself and second, by her parting remarks about losing him as a friend. Although he was grateful to be forgiven, he could not help but hear in her choice of words the death-knell of her romantic attraction to him. It did not occur to him that, for a woman like Hermione, friendship and romantic attraction were entirely compatible, and that, indeed, the first was a pre-requisite for the second.

Over the next few days, for reasons he could not identify, Snape's health deteriorated into what felt to him like the flu. His head hurt, his body ached all over, and he ran a fever that, though modest, refused to succumb to the potions he usually took for infections. On Tuesday morning he was forced to admit to the Headmaster that he was unable to teach his classes; Flitwick generously offered to cover his lessons and sent Madam Pomfrey to his chambers to see what she could do to help.

'When did these symptoms present?' she asked him, flicking her wand about his body.

'Saturday night,' he told her. 'That's when the headache began. The fever came Sunday night.'

'And nothing you've taken has helped?'

'No,' he admitted.

'Well,' she said, putting her hands on her hips, 'I can't see that there's anything seriously wrong with you, although the fact that your fever isn't dropping worries me. Get some rest today and drink plenty of fluids. I'll send Draco Malfoy round with a Cooling Draught to see if we can't bring your temperature down a bit. That should help with the headache, too.'

Snape thanked her weakly and fell asleep when she left. In the early evening he was awakened, not by Draco, but by Miranda, who had brought him the potion and a bucket full of ice water. She sat on the edge of the bed, dipped a flannel in the bucket, and bathed his forehead with the cold water.

'Are you feeling any better?' she enquired.

'Maybe a little.'

'Good.' She gave him the potion, and he swallowed it, grimacing at the bitter taste. 'You won't die,' she said, smiling at him. 'It's not poison.'

'What?' He looked suspiciously at the vial in his hand.

Miranda laughed. 'I suppose that kind of humour is out of place in a sickroom. I just wanted you to know I'm not angry with you.'

He stared at her in confusion.

'I know you apologised to Hermione,' she explained, refreshing the flannel in the bucket. 'You don't need to apologise to me.'

'I'm not in the mood for this, Miranda,' Snape confessed, massaging his temples. 'Can't we discuss this when I'm no longer ill?'

She took the vial from him and placed it on the nightstand, then stretched out on the bed next to him. 'Of course, but there's nothing to discuss. Whatever has gone on between you and Hermione is none of my business. I'm quite happy to leave it there, provided that she doesn't attack me again, which I don't think she will.'

'That's very generous of you,' he remarked dryly.

'It's not a question of generosity,' she said, lifting his head and cooling the back of his neck with the flannel. 'I'm just not very interested.'

'So if I went to Hermione now,' he said, turning on his side to face her, 'and made love to her, that wouldn't interest you?'

'Not much,' she admitted.

Snape considered this statement. 'I assume you wouldn't bother trying to lie to me,' he told her. 'If that's the case, and you're truly unconcerned what I do with Hermione, I feel compelled to ask why fidelity is so unimportant to you.'

'What makes you think I wouldn't lie to you?' she asked, evading his question.

He rose up on his elbow and leaned over her threateningly. Deliberately making eye contact, he said, his tone heavy with menace, 'I could open your mind like a book, if I were so inclined. I could peel back the pages of your consciousness and see every thought that has ever passed through your brain. I could be doing it right now, and you would never know.'

'Do it, then,' she challenged, her cold blue eyes meeting his unflinchingly.

'Answer my question first.'

To her credit, she didn't pretend not to remember. 'Fidelity,' she stated, 'relates only to ego and disease prevention. I don't think so poorly of myself that other beautiful, intelligent women threaten my self-esteem. I don't think so poorly of you that I believe you would endanger my health. So why should I insist that you be faithful?'

'And what if I loved her?' he asked in a low voice.

She regarded him curiously for a long moment, as if wondering whether *hedid* love Hermione. Then she blinked and shook her head. 'No, I don't think that would bother me either although I would certainly wonder,' she added, 'why you were sleeping with me.'

'And why *should* I sleep with you,' he pressed, imposing himself further into her personal space, 'if you care so little what I might do with other women?'

'Because you enjoy it,' she said simply. 'Why else would you do it?'

'You disingenuous fool,' he said wearily, rolling onto his back.

Miranda pulled back the bedclothes and ran the cold flannel across his chest. 'Why am I a fool, Severus?' she enquired, unoffended.

'People often do things for reasons other than because they enjoy them,' he said.

'Do people often have sex for reasons other than because they enjoy it?'

'Of course,' he snapped.

'What reasons are these, then?'

'Duty, boredom, revenge, intoxication, power... need I go on?'

'To alleviate a headache, perhaps?' she asked, smiling and bending down to kiss his breastbone.

'Well,' he responded, pulling her into a straddling position across his hips, 'we can but hope.'

Sometime during the night, Snape awoke to find Miranda still in bed with him. 'Miranda,' he whispered, shaking her gently. 'You should go.'

She burrowed deeper under the covers in response. 'No,' she murmured.

'You don't want to catch what I've got,' he told her, poking her in the bum with his knee. 'Go on.'

Flipping over, she pinned him by throwing an arm and a leg across his body and said indistinctly, 'Shut up.'

He sighed and slid her leg off his stomach, which was feeling rather sensitive, and positioned it over his thighs. 'Fine, but if you get sick, you have only yourself to blame.' She snuggled in closer, and he allowed himself to relax again, knowing that he couldn't force her to leave without suggesting that he, personally, wished for her to go, and thereby offending her.

Just as he was drifting back to sleep, he heard her mumble something into his shoulder. It was such an odd statement that, when he remembered it in the morning, he

decided he must have dreamt it. For, to his fatigue-fogged ears, it had sounded as if she had said, 'What you've got isn't catching.'

Fairy Feller's Masterstroke

Chapter 7 of 11

Snape holds a duelling tournament.

Author's Note: I wanted this chapter to coincide with the beginning of March Madness a homage to all of you basketball fans out there. International Drinking Rules can be found here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Drinking_Rules

Fairy-Feller's Masterstroke

Over the next several weeks, following his recovery from his brief illness, Snape found himself more and more in the company of Hermione and Draco and less and less in the company of Miranda. His apologies, one of which he had tendered to Draco, who accepted it in his solemn and considerate way, seemed to have reinstated Snape's open invitation to spend evenings at Malfoy Manor. Hermione's Christmas there had created a bond between her and Draco that was immediately noticeable on such evenings; it made Snape feel very comfortable and easy in their presence, and even Neville's periodic attendance at the manor did nothing to mar this camaraderie. It had occurred to Snape to wonder what Potter and Weasley had made of Hermione's turning to a Malfoy for comfort, but his speculation always ended by his picturing the duo's faces as she explained to them why, exactly, that comfort was needed in the first place. Presumably, then, she had not told them anything. Whenever he thought of it, however, the very image of Weasley's outrage gave him a frisson of spiteful delight, and he hoped that, should circumstances ever change, he was a witness to the young men's reactions.

Snape also grew ever more convinced that Miranda's claimed lack of jealousy or possessiveness was genuine; as the days went by and their time spent together dwindled, she made no complaints. She seemed quite content with whatever amount of time he was willing to grant her, and her physical attentions remained as ardent as ever if 'ardent' were an appropriate word to describe her particular detached passion. Their less frequent interaction also gave Snape the leisure to reflect on their relationship, and on Miranda herself, in an analytical manner he had not hitherto employed. Clear in his memory now were the reservations he had entertained about her at the beginning of the school year, none of which had been resolved. All of their many conversations, having been centred largely on academic topics, had not revealed much about her experiences after Hogwarts or her married life. Having confessed to leaving her husband, Miranda had never elaborated on her reasons for it, nor on any legal or familial repercussions she might be suffering as a result. In fact, her personal life was still a complete mystery, as far as he was concerned, apart from those bits that included Snape himself. With the exception of Draco's sketchy gossip all those months ago, Snape also remained in the dark regarding the character of Antonio Silva, about whom Miranda almost never spoke.

With these gaps in his knowledge in mind, Snape took himself to the library on several occasions to try to rectify his ignorance. As the repository of information for the magical youth of Britain, the Hogwarts library seemed suddenly woefully inadequate to him: the most recent volumes of pureblood genealogy were too old to contain any mention of Antonio Silva through the older generations of his family had certainly been a colourful and eccentric lot, as was usually the case among traditional, and therefore heavily inbred, pureblood families and, of course, the library held no information on Miranda whatsoever except her school reports, which Snape already knew quite well, given that he had helped to write them. He could go to the Ministry and use their resources, he supposed, but such a trip was, in his estimation, hardly worth the time and effort required; alternatively, he could ask Hermione for help research was, after all, one of her favourite activities but he did not want to do that either. His desire for information remained unfulfilled, therefore, for the time being; he decided to make a more thorough search during the Easter holidays, when he would have time to go to the Ministry in London and, possibly, to visit the Malfoys in Azkaban and pick their brains.

He raised the issue with Draco one Saturday night in March. They were sitting at the dining room table in Malfoy Manor, finishing Irish coffees after dinner. Snape could hear Hermione and Neville talking in the conservatory; the weather that night was unusually mild, and a fresh breeze coming through the open windows blew their voices back to him.

'You think my parents might know more than what I remember?' Draco was asking in a faintly slurred voice. He had served wine with the meal, and they were all slightly tipsy.

'I think they might. And I'd rather ask them than anyone else. They're my friends.'

Draco sighed and stared into his coffee. 'Why don't you just ask Filius? He's bound to have thought of all this when Miranda applied to work at Hogwarts.'

Snape shuddered at the thought. 'My personal life is none of his business. Besides,' he added, 'I'm not looking for evidence of criminal wrong-doing.'

'You just want to satisfy your curiosity.' Draco nodded. 'Come along to Azkaban with me, then. I'm sure my parents will help you if they can.'

The thought of visiting the remote prison did not entice Snape in the slightest; even the few short days he had spent there twenty-five years ago haunted him. The prospect was not nearly so abhorrent, however, as it would have been had the Dementors still guarded the island, so he steeled himself to face it when the time came.

Footsteps interrupted the silence in the dining room; Neville entered, carrying a pack of cards, and announced, 'We've got a couple of bottles of wine left. Bridge, anyone?'

Snape groaned.

'Bridge is too hard when we've been drinking,' Draco complained. 'Nobody can concentrate properly.'

'Come on, Draco,' Neville bullied, plucking the wine bottles from the sideboard and waving them temptingly. 'Gryffindor versus Slytherin for the honour of our houses.'

'Fine,' Draco acquiesced, 'but on one condition. International Drinking Rules and anyone who makes a stupid bid or loses has to sink their beverage.' He headed toward the door to the conservatory, still nursing his coffee, his steps slightly unsteady.

Snape tried to linger behind, but Neville was having none of it. 'Off your arse, Severus,' he commanded. 'Hermione's waiting.'

The best two out of three rubbers went to Hermione and Neville, as Snape had known they would: Draco was drunk and Snape, regrettably middle-aged, could no longer hold his wine as well as he used to. They had only managed to win the second rubber because Hermione had doubled, in a display of such incredible stupidity that Draco had made her down two glasses of wine on the spot; unfortunately, Draco seemed to have forgotten the rules he had insisted upon, and his cries of 'Drink, Hermione!' had resulted in the same penalty for himself.

When Snape had tallied the final rubber and announced the winner, Hermione and Neville directed identical gloating grins at him and Draco. 'Losers' penalty!' Hermione

exclaimed as Neville dropped a Knut into each of their wineglasses. With a weary sigh, Snape exchanged a look of resignation with Draco and stood.

'God save the Queen,' he intoned and downed the last of his wine. Draco followed suit, then stuck his fingers into the glass to retrieve the coin. This effort seemed to be too much for him; he tumbled sideways into Neville, who laughed and caught his arm.

'Bedtime for you, I think,' he slurred and pulled Draco's limp arm around his shoulders. Together they stumbled back into the dining room, leaving Snape and Hermione alone in the conservatory.

He was tired, but Hermione, with the boundless energy of youth, leapt up from her seat and unlatched the glass door. 'Let's go into the gardens,' she proposed.

Snape followed her outdoors, grateful for the cool night air on his wine-flushed face. It was very late; a quarter moon hung on the horizon, and Orion towered above them, high in the sky. Hermione walked ahead of him, her pale yellow dress twisting around her knees in the light wind. They passed through the flowerbeds and onto the expanse of open lawn by the pond.

'I don't know why I like to go outside when I've been drinking,' said Hermione, kicking off her shoes to walk barefoot through the grass.

'Maybe it's the weather,' Snape suggested. He stood unmoving and watched her approach the edge of the water. The pond, at least, was still cold; with a gasp, she pulled her toes out of the tiny waves.

Then she turned to face him again, and he noticed that her wand was out. He fumbled in his sleeve, but it was too late: with a drunken cry of *Eh garde!* she whipped her wand in his direction. Panicked was she having fun or seriously attacking him? he dove out of the path of the spell, catching himself before he hit the ground. The bolt of light streaked past, nowhere near the place he had been standing: Hermione's aim was off, and she had missed him by a country mile.

He could hear her giggling as he extracted his wand. 'You want a duel?' he snarled at her.

'Yes!'

And then she was firing all sorts of hexes at him. He deflected the ones that looked as if they might come near him, but most of them sailed by, completely off target, even as she drew closer to him. After a few minutes, Hermione paused and looked at her wand quizzically, as if it, rather than her drunkenness, might be responsible for her poor aim. The sight was so comical that Snape doubled over in genuine, helpless laughter. That was his mistake: as soon as he took his eyes off her, she charged him. Dropping her wand, she ran forward and tackled him, barrelling into his hips. Off-balance from his bent position, he fell over, expelling his breath in a great *whoosh* as his back slammed into the ground. Hermione sat on his chest and looked down at him triumphantly as he wheezed.

'I win,' she said gleefully.

'You cheated,' he rasped.

'Cheaters never win,' she intoned sententiously. 'But I won, so I can't have cheated.'

He was getting his breath back now, despite the pressure of her weight on his ribcage. Furtively, he pushed his wand aside on the grass and tensed the muscles in his legs. 'I believe the proverb is *cheaters never prosper*.'

'I still won,' she countered, offering him a maddening shrug.

'You think so?' he said silkily. Suddenly, he flipped over, dislodging her easily and pinned her beneath him in one swift, graceful move. 'Are you winning now?'

'Oh, yes,' she breathed, looking up at him. The moonlight bathed her face, and in its pale glow, Snape could clearly see her dark eyes and smooth, soft skin. She panted through parted red lips he had knocked the breath out of her, too and she looked just as he imagined she would if she were lying beneath him in the throes of passion. He was seized by an almost irresistible desire to kiss her, to bury one hand in her wild curls and slide the other beneath her grass-stained dress, to worship her bare body in this cold, white light. He could feel the heat of her flushed skin beneath his hands where he was holding her in place; he was already on top of her; gazing down at her half-closed eyes, he knew she felt the same way; all he needed to do to set things in motion was lean forward and brush his lips against hers...

Instead, he moved away from her and sat in the grass, resting his arms across his raised knees. 'Oh, God, Hermione,' he whispered.

She sat up and came to kneel behind him, placing her hands on his shoulders. For a long while, she didn't move; then, gently, she began to massage the muscles where his shoulders met his neck. He relaxed against her, letting her soothe him, wishing with a fervency borne of frustration that he could have done what he wanted to do. But it would not have been right: he was not that kind of man, and he didn't want Hermione to be that kind of woman. He would not use Hermione, not in that way, not in the way that he used Miranda and in the way that Miranda used him.

'I'm sorry, Hermione,' he said quietly.

'It's all right,' she said immediately, softly, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and pulling him closer. 'We needn't rush. We have all the time in the world.'

The knowledge that Hermione still wanted him, that she was willing to wait for him, cleansed Snape of all desire for Miranda. All of the admiration he had once felt for her mind and for her body paled in comparison to his appreciation for Hermione, who was sweet where Miranda was harsh, soft where Miranda was hard, warm where Miranda was cold, open where Miranda was secretive... He could have kept such a list going almost indefinitely. When he closed his eyes and thought of Hermione, he saw gleaming, colourful sunbursts; his mental picture of Miranda was the Venus de Milo a blank, white and incomplete image of feminine beauty.

And yet, when he thought of ending his relationship with her, his perpetual uneasiness about her blossomed into a dull, grinding fear, not for himself, but for Hermione. He couldn't explain this reaction; nothing Miranda had ever done suggested that there was any reason for fear hadn't she remained calm and forgiving in the face of Hermione's unprovoked attack? but Snape had not survived as a double-agent for twenty years by ignoring his intuition. His sixth sense told him that, however reasonable she might appear to be, Miranda merited the same caution one might employ in the presence of a very dangerous, and very clever, animal.

So, for some time, Snape did nothing. He continued to see Miranda periodically; he spent most of his free time at Malfoy Manor; he taught his classes and held meetings of the Duelling Club. Nobody questioned this routine. And Snape thought, and planned, and wondered, and analysed, and nursed in his mind the resentment toward Miranda that began to grow there. The feeling was pleasant to him; it had been too long since he had had an object of hate to force his thoughts and intentions to coalesce into bright, sharp crystal-clarity.

Above all, however, Snape watched Miranda. He had been a spy; he was good at watching. He hoped his intense observation would reveal something to him about her own plans and motivations, for he had decided that this was what he wanted to know about most of all. Why was she with him? What did she see in him? What did she want from him? She did not love him, though she did seem to like him at least a little; she took pleasure in their intellectual conversations; she enjoyed sleeping with him. Could it truly be that what she wanted from him was... friendship? Again, while nothing she did or said contradicted it, he felt instinctively that this conclusion was the wrong one. For one thing, she was not interested in comforting him or seeing to his emotional needs. Her lack of sympathy was remarkable: following her brief evening spent playing Florence Nightingale, she had never asked after his health again or shown any concern regarding his well-being. For another, she seemed to require no such interest or concern from him. If she had any problems or worries, she did not turn to Snape for support or reassurance. He was ready to admit that his experiences with friendship were few and, of course, uniquely odd, but his life had not been so devoid of companionship that he didn't know that these things were essential components of the friend-relationship. Perhaps, then, she just wanted a regular sexual arrangement with someone who was reasonably intelligent and attractive. But this answer did not quite strike true either; Miranda, attractive as she was, could have found that sort of arrangement with almost anyone she chose it did not have to be Snape who played the

role of her lover.

At this point in his analysis, Snape always drew a blank; even his sly and suspicious mind could provide no further speculations about Miranda's interest except for ones he dismissed out of hand: he was not wealthy, influential, or well connected. Nor, he thought ruefully, were his genes the sort that might attract a woman hoping to have the 'perfect' child. In fact, Snape had nothing at all to offer a woman except *himself* the very thing about which Miranda seemed supremely indifferent.

Near the middle of April, however, an event occurred that gave Snape the insight he needed into Miranda's character. That Friday was the last meeting of the Duelling Club before the Easter holidays; the students were rowdy and excited, as many of them would not be able to participate again until after O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s were over. Snape had decided to put their mastery of duelling skills to the test in a tournament. To that end, he had organised the sixteen older students into pairs and drawn up a schedule of fifteen single-elimination bouts that would narrow down the group to a single champion, who would be permitted to choose a prize. Snape fully expected the winner to ask for house points; lately, he had spent a lot of time in the Entrance Hall, staring at the hourglasses and trying to work out how many points he could give without upsetting the current balance too much.

Because he wanted to give the students taking part in the tournament a chance to prepare, he had published the brackets outside the Great Hall the previous weekend. This turned out to have been something of a mistake; he had confiscated innumerable copies of the list from students during lessons, children who were too distracted by their attempts to pick the winners to focus on learning. The rest of the staff had also caught wind of the event; being something of a duelling enthusiast himself, Flitwick did not object when Snape discovered Madam Hooch running a book and even 'anonymously' placed fifteen Galleons on Stephen Corner to win. Snape had been unable to hold in his derisive snort when Draco told him he very much doubted that Corner would make it even as far as the semi-finals.

After dinner, Snape and Hermione had set up one of the house tables in the middle of the Great Hall and arranged benches for the spectators on either side of it. They had decided to allow non-members to attend and reserved the first row of benches for the first- and second-years, who were too short to watch from the back rows. Shortly before eight o'clock, students began filing into the hall. The first to arrive were the competitors themselves, who stood at one end of the room in an excited and nervous huddle. Then the younger students came in, escorted by their Heads of House, and finally the upper forms, who carried their copies of the brackets and, noticing the many white faces amongst the competitors at the back of the room, began to make surreptitious changes to their predictions.

When the rest of the staff had arrived and taken their seats, Snape closed the doors to the Great Hall and explained the rules of the tournament to the assembled audience. Each duel would last for precisely five minutes, at the end of which he and Hermione, as the judges, would determine the winner. Points would be awarded for etiquette, showmanship, creativity, and accuracy of casting. The student who won the whole tournament would receive a trophy and a prize of his or her choosing. As he spoke, Hermione made her way around the centre table, casting protective charms to prevent stray spells from damaging the spectators or the Great Hall.

Then, taking his seat next to Hermione in the front row of benches, Snape announced the first duel.

The nervousness of the competitors seemed to wear off as each one in turn climbed onto the table to face his or her opponent. The excitement in the room was palpable; the spectators cheered the inventive spells and flashy manoeuvres, and many of the competing duellists took confidence from this. At the end of the first round, when eight of the sixteen duellists had been eliminated, Snape announced a short break. During those five minutes, which he spent walking around the Great Hall to stretch his legs sitting still for long periods of time was not very comfortable for him these days he noticed money changing hands amongst many of the students and staff. Those gamblers who had supported the losing duellists were being forced to pay up.

The second round took only half as long as the first; Stephen Corner lost, as Snape had predicted, and he grinned at the knowledge that Madam Hooch was now fifteen Galleons richer for Flitwick's folly. The four remaining competitors, three girls and a boy, were all Slytherins; Snape thought that Draco must be proud. Glancing across the room at Miranda, Snape noted that she seemed pleased with the results of the tournament so far, despite the fact that all of her Ravenclaws had been eliminated. He supposed she simply enjoyed the cut and thrust of a good competition.

At last, just before ten o'clock, Snape called a halt to the final duel. He and Hermione argued for a few minutes over their judgments; then Snape climbed atop the table and said, 'The winner of the 2005 Hogwarts Duelling Tournament is... Selene Harper!'

The tall, blonde Slytherin seventh-year joined Snape on the table amid deafening cheers from her housemates. She had performed amazingly well, Snape thought, handing her the trophy: her aim was unerring and her physical evasions were some of the most graceful and economical Snape had seen in someone with so little experience. She was too young to remember the days when Snape had been Head of Slytherin; nevertheless, she beamed at him with obvious pleasure at winning such an honour for her house.

'Miss Harper, as the winner of the tournament, you now have the opportunity to choose a prize. Have you decided yet what it will be?'

She looked over her shoulder at the other Slytherin competitors and nodded, then turned back to Snape and said, 'Yes, we all decided what we would ask for if one of us won.'

'And that is?' he prompted, expecting a demand for a ridiculous number of house points for Slytherin.

To his complete surprise, she responded, 'I would like to see Professor Silva and Professor Granger duel.'

He started to interrupt; surely she could think of something far more rewarding! But then she finished:

'with you and Professor Malfoy.'

Snape's objection was pre-empted by the Headmaster's enthusiastic shout of, 'An excellent idea, Miss Harper! We can all watch.' With a flick of his wand, he directed a second house table into position parallel with the first and smiled encouragingly at Snape.

Gritting his teeth, he watched as Miranda eagerly joined him on the table, followed by Draco and Hermione, neither of whom looked especially pleased by Selene Harper's choice of prize.

'Headmaster,' Snape began, 'surely we haven't the time for this? It is nearly curfew for the younger students.'

'Not at all!' exclaimed Flitwick, who was seated amongst the first-years in the front row. 'This will be a special treat for them a dual duel!'

Groaning inwardly at the terrible pun, Snape sighed in resignation and moved to the end of the first table. Draco stood next to him and said under his breath, 'Stupid idea, letting students choose their own rewards.'

'Clearly,' Snape drawled. Bowing, he presented his wand to the women, keeping his eyes on Flitwick in anticipation of the signal to begin.

Flitwick's arm dropped; Snape brought his wand up immediately and cast two rapid Petrifying Hexes toward the other end of the table. Both spells missed, and he dodged rapidly behind Draco's Shield Charm to avoid the Stinging Hex careening his way. Draco continued to provide the defence while Snape shot spell after spell at the women across from them. From what he could see, Hermione was covering Miranda's offensive attacks, but she was doing a much better job than Draco. In fact, she and Miranda worked together like an extremely efficient and well-oiled machine; both of them moved around a great deal but never seemed to get in each other's way, and the timing with which they lowered and raised their Shield Charms to cast curses at the men and yet still provide cover for themselves was impeccable. Snape knew they couldn't have practised this, and not for the first time he wondered if there was something special about communication between women that men would never really grasp or master.

After ten minutes, Flitwick called a halt to the duel and joined his four teachers on the tables. 'I think we should let the students decide the winner, don't you?' he called out. 'Who chooses Professors Snape and Malfoy? A great roar of applause greeted his question, coming largely from that part of the room occupied by Slytherin House. 'And who thinks Professors Granger and Silva performed the best?'

This time, the screams and cheers and stomps were deafening; Snape stared around the room in amazement as the other three houses shouted themselves hoarse in acclamation for the two women. Returning his gaze to his colleagues, he saw that Hermione was grinning happily, no doubt pleased to lived up to expectations. The look on Miranda's face was harder to interpret; she met his eyes and seemed to direct her expression at him, a subtle smile that contained no small amount of smugness and satisfaction, as well as some other emotion he couldn't immediately identify. He began to clap for them too, shooting a pointed glance at Draco, who dropped his wand on the table in good-natured capitulation. By popular choice, the women had defeated the men; female dominance was clearly on the rise at Hogwarts.

Later that night, after he had consumed a great deal of champagne at Malfoy Manor in celebration of the successful tournament, Miranda came to him in his rooms and seduced him. He observed with great fascination as she divested them both of their robes; for once, he felt as detached as she always seemed to be. His fascination only grew as she used all of her considerable skill to bring him to the edge of orgasm over and over but never allowed him to reach the peak and then, with a startling clarity that he had never believed he was capable of achieving in this drunken, frustrated state, he realised exactly what she was doing and why.

She was trying to defeat him in this, the way she had defeated him in the duel that night, and the look on her face that had so puzzled him was an expression of triumph. Now, as she controlled his body and relished in her ability to do so, he felt like a city being sacked by an invading army. Having killed the men and raped the women his resistance and his good sense she was now enslaving the children: his willpower. She was trying to break him, to make him dependent on her for pleasure and completion. And she thought he would accept it passively. Even as the very idea of being treated in this way made him sick, he smiled a little to himself, a devious and unforgiving look that many of his former students would have recognised.

He let Miranda carry on for a bit while he planned his assault; then, with a growl, he flipped her onto her back and pinned her wrists against his mattress. Slowly, deliberately, he slid inside her, maintaining eye contact and making sure she felt every movement of his body on hers. She gazed up at him, still detached, and his smile grew with the knowledge that she would not preserve that detachment for much longer. He had never minded her emotional barriers before, so he had never tried to breach them; he would do so now and make her a victim of her own strategy because he would not be broken, and in breaking her, he would conquer the fear that had held him captive for the past month.

He made love to her masterfully, touching her, stroking her, bringing her closer and closer to climax, kissing her devotedly and passionately, until at last, finding his own release in the convulsions of her powerful orgasm, he heard surrender in her scream of the first word she had ever said in bed with him:

'Severus!'

Nevermore

Chapter 8 of 11

Snape and Hermione finish what they started.

Nevermore

Miranda had gone from his rooms by the time Snape awoke the next morning. He felt extraordinarily relaxed, sipping his tea and reading his morning post, and revelled in the peaceful solitude. The sun was out, and he could hear birds singing in the forest through his open windows; he was fully prepared to enjoy what promised to be a beautiful weekend.

Wanting to be alone for a little while longer, he called a house-elf to bring breakfast to his sitting room and, after eating, took his time showering and shaving. He had thought it would be difficult to wash the stain of Miranda from his skin, but instead he felt refreshed; he was free of her now, and it delighted him. He dressed carefully in a white shirt and black trousers and did not mind when he looked at himself in the mirror and noticed the greying hair at his temples. For the first time in a long while, he felt neither old nor weary; there was a buoyancy in his chest that morning that nothing could tarnish.

His first order of business that day was to visit Neville in the greenhouses. As he walked across the grounds, he luxuriated in the play of the sunlight over his body and paid no attention to the stares of the students lounging around the lawn, who all gaped in astonishment at the sight of their Defence professor venturing into the spring morning wearing a colour other than black. He found Neville in Greenhouse Two, potting ferns in his shirtsleeves and humming happily to himself.

'Good morning, Severus,' he said, wiping dirt off his cheek with the back of his wrist. 'What brings you down here?'

'I need some flowers, if that is possible.'

Tearing his gaze from the plants in his hand, Neville narrowed his eyes at Snape in a calculating fashion and asked, 'What for?'

'Cheeky,' Snape said breezily. 'They're not for you, if that's what you're wondering. I know you stole that rosebush from Draco what colour was it? Pink?'

Neville blushed at the taunts, unaccustomed to banter from Snape. 'White.'

'I'll have some of those, then, if you please.'

'You can't. That bush isn't blooming yet,' Neville said defensively.

'Liar.'

Neville's shoulders drooped. 'Fine.' He led the way to the other end of the greenhouse and unlocked the back door, which opened onto one of the exterior fenced-in gardens. The row of rose bushes was in full blossom, a swath of rainbow colours that Snape found unexpectedly beautiful.

'This is the one,' said Neville, pointing at one of the bushes and passing Snape a pair of shears. 'Be gentle with it.'

'Why did you want this so badly?' Snape asked curiously as he snipped off a handful of the long-stemmed blooms.

'I'm going to graft a piece of it with the yellow and see if I can make a green flower.'

'What for?'

'Ha!' Neville laughed. 'Not for you, if that's what you're wondering,' he echoed, grinning. 'Now piss off I've got other things to do than flirt with you all morning.'

'Right,' Snape agreed, following him back into the greenhouse. 'See you at dinner?'

'Of course,' said Neville, returning to his ferns. 'You do know Draco is cooking tonight?'

'Trust me, I wouldn't miss that disaster for the world.' Snape was still smiling when he emerged onto the lawns, giving the students another reason to stare at him in bewilderment.

The dinner Draco served them at Malfoy Manor that night was delicious, if uncomplicated. Snape was not normally a fan of pizza, but he knew that Draco's skills in the kitchen were not yet sophisticated enough to attempt proper meals. The house-elves had written down a recipe for Draco to consult. 'Just like making a potion, really,' Draco had commented and the result was an entirely edible margherita, albeit with a slightly spongy crust.

As the night drew to a close, Snape found himself growing anxious. He had wanted to talk to Hermione, but as the four of them drank and gossiped their way towards midnight, no opportunity of having words with her alone had presented itself. When Draco and Neville announced their intention of heading to bed, Hermione followed, and Snape trudged up to his usual room alone. The sight of the roses, standing in a vase on his bedside table, seemed to mock him.

He passed into the bathroom and washed his face in cold water, trying to still the hopeful beating of his heart, but there was nothing to be done for it. He stared at himself in the mirror, glaring at his own narrow face and black eyes. He was not a coward; he would not allow this night, this perfect, warm, friendship-filled night, to go to waste. Determinedly, he swept back into the bedroom, snatched up the roses, and walked quietly down the hallway and up the stairs to the next floor. For a moment, he stood silently outside the door of the bedroom Hermione usually slept in, listening for sounds. Hearing nothing, he knocked lightly.

When Hermione opened the door, Snape looked at her speechlessly for a long time. She had never appeared more beautiful to him: her wild hair, free of constraint, tumbled over her shoulders in reckless curls; her body, covered by a lacy camisole and a pair of night shorts, was young and tender and glowed warmly in the firelight. Her dark eyes, gazing at him with sweet welcome, left him breathless. Suddenly, he realised why the Enhancement Charm had never changed her: in his eyes, she was already perfect.

'Hermione,' he said softly, presenting the roses. 'I didn't mean to wake you. I'm sorry.'

'You didn't wake me,' she whispered. She took the roses and lifted them up, inhaling the subtle scent, never taking her eyes from his face.

Instinctively, he reached for her hand, loving the feel of her thin, callused fingers. He kissed them gently and said, 'I hope you sleep well. Good night.'

He would have left; instead, her fingers tightened around his, and she pulled him into the room, closing the door behind him. She laid the roses reverently on the night table; when she came back to where he was standing, she snaked her arms around his neck and rose onto her toes to kiss him. Her lips were hot and soft, and her hands burned where they twined through the hair on the back of his head. This was what he had wanted for such a long time now; sighing with satisfaction, he pulled her body tighter against his and kissed her back, demanding entrance to her mouth, teasing her tongue with his own.

She pulled him toward the bed, climbing backwards onto it without breaking the kiss and unfastening the buttons of his white shirt. He groaned when her hands finally made contact with his skin, sliding over the muscles of his chest and shoulders as she stripped the garment from his body. Her lips drifted over his jaw and down his neck, leaving a burning trail wherever they touched until she reached the place where his collarbones met and flicked her tongue across the sensitive hollow.

His blood boiling now, he slipped his hands under her camisole and pulled it upward, past her breasts and over her head, and pushed her gently onto her back on the bed. Kneeling over her, he kissed her cheeks and her eyelids while his fingers played along the bones of her ribcage and caressed the sides of her breasts. Hermione turned her head and found his lips again, driving her tongue between them with passionate force, splaying her hands across his back and forcing him downward to lie next to her.

Snape met her insistent kisses and teased her warm skin with his hands, cupping her breasts and circling his fingers round her nipples before pinching them lightly and smiling when her gasp of pleasure escaped into his mouth. Bending his head, he closed his lips over one nipple and then the other, sucking and laving with his tongue until he felt her writhing beneath him. When he rose up to kiss her again, he saw a note of panic in her eyes.

'Don't stop, not this time,' she whispered.

He smiled, remembering their encounter on her sofa, and breathed into her ear, 'I have no intention of stopping.'

The sound of his voice and the feel of his hot breath made her shiver; eagerly, she pushed her hands beneath the waistband of his trousers and locked her knee over his hips, pulling his lower body closer to her and straining against him. He hooked his fingers into her shorts and slid them down her legs, revealing white satin knickers; with an impatient snarl, he slid those down too and stared with undisguised longing at her naked form.

'You are so beautiful,' he said, caressing her thigh and the curve of her bottom, dragging her knee further around his waist.

'Touch me,' she begged, and he moved his hand between her legs, trailing his fingers slowly through her moist heat, wanting to prolong this moment of anticipation. He explored her folds gently, mimicking the movement of his lips as he kissed her softly until at last he deepened the kiss and, at the same time, slid one finger inside her softness. She gasped and arched against him, moaning quietly as his finger glided in and out and his thumb stroked her sensitive clitoris in slow circles.

Her hands fluttered around his belt buckle; breathing heavily, he felt her unfasten his trousers and release his cock. Her fingers closed around the hard, smooth flesh, and he moaned into her mouth, pushing another finger inside of her and rocking against the soft skin of her hips. Dimly, through the amazing sensation of her hand stroking up and down his length, he became aware that she was starting to tighten around his fingers. Slowing the movements of his hand, he shifted position until he was kneeling between her legs and bent down to kiss her hips, running his lips down and nibbling on the inside of her thigh. Gently, he pushed her legs further apart and closed his eyes in bliss, inhaling the scent of her arousal.

'Severus,' she moaned, opening herself to him. He loved this part of a woman's body, the tender, pink skin reminding him of the roses he had brought her. Her outer lips were like petals surrounding the source of her pleasure and the font of her sweet nectar. He kissed her there, reverently at first, then more greedily, caressing her centre with his tongue, all the time continuing to move his fingers inside of her. He licked in broad strokes up and down her folds, finally focussing the attention of his mouth on her clitoris, which he teased and sucked until she quaked around him, crying out his name desperately.

He leaned back, giving her a moment to recover, and stripped off his remaining clothes. Lying down beside her, he twined his fingers in her hair and pulled her toward him for another kiss, revelling in her breathless panting. She moved her lips languidly against him, half-smiling in the post-orgasmic glow. Her hand returned to his cock, sliding up and down slowly, then more insistently as she pressed her hips against him and twisted her tongue around his urgently. She was ready now; he moved on top of her and settled his pelvis between her thighs, pushing gently at her entrance until she wrapped her legs around his waist and lifted her hips to meet him. Then he sank into her, his cock sliding inch by inch until he was fully sheathed in her hot core.

She tightened her muscles around him, and he groaned, raising up and thrusting into her again. He luxuriated for a moment in the feel of her entire body surrounding him, welcoming him; then he buried his face in her neck and began to drive into her with abandon, growing harder and harder as she matched his movements with passionate enthusiasm. He managed to hold onto his control until she tightened around him again, trembling violently as she climaxed; he joined her ecstatically, moaning 'Oh, God, Hermione,' and gave himself over to the power of his release.

Afterward, they slept, the only sounds in the room their slow, rhythmic breathing and the soft crackling of the fire.

Snape awoke when the first glimmer of dawn was lighting up the purple sky. He was curled around Hermione's naked body, his arms and legs entangled with hers. His gaze drifted down, along her pale back and soft bottom; involuntarily, his hand followed, running over her smooth skin to cup the back of her knee. She moaned and wriggled against him, pressing her arse against his erection. Fastening his lips on the curve of her neck, tasting the salty flavour of her flesh, he lifted her leg and slid into

her warmth, rocking forward to fill her as deeply as he could. Hermione cried out softly and dragged his hand between her legs to tease her clitoris as he plunged in and out of her body. Her little moans and gasps grew louder and spurred him to thrust harder and faster. His explosion of bliss was accompanied by Hermione's throaty cry of pleasure and left him limp with contentment.

They lay awake together as the sun came up, kissing softly and gazing into one another's eyes until a beep from the bedside table alerted them that it was almost time for breakfast. It was the first morning of the Easter holidays.

Reluctantly, Snape returned to his room and showered. Dressing hastily in black again he hurried downstairs to the dining room and found Draco and Neville already there, waiting to Floo back to Hogwarts for the morning meal. Snape tried to look nonchalant, but it seemed as if the young men neither knew nor cared where he had spent the night. They chatted briefly about the weather; if the day continued fine, Draco suggested, they should set up a game of croquet that afternoon. Neville agreed enthusiastically, leaving Snape, a scion of the working-class North, to laugh at the two aristocratic purebloods and their ideas about how sunny days should be passed. When Hermione finally entered the dining room, looking remarkably fresh and well rested, they all stepped through the fireplace into Draco's office at Hogwarts and hurried down the main stairwell toward the Great Hall.

The students had all departed on the train the previous afternoon; the high table alone was set for the meal. Snape made his way onto the dais behind Hermione and Draco. Only after he had taken his seat and unfolded his napkin in his lap did he look up and notice that there was an extra person at breakfast that morning. Across the table from him, sitting next to Miranda and looking very tanned and cheerful, was a slender, dark-haired man who could only be Miranda's husband, Antonio Silva.

March of the Black Queen

Chapter 9 of 11

Snape attends a dinner party.

Author's Note: My sincerest gratitude is owed to Angel Mischa, a wonderful beta with truly amazing turnaround time, and to the administrators of TPP (especially amsev), who have made it possible for me to bring this story to life.

March of the Black Queen

Snape stared in undisguised consternation at Antonio Silva throughout breakfast, the contentment of his night spent with Hermione at Malfoy Manor shattered in the face of this unexpected guest. He was not alone in his surprise; Draco, Hermione, and Neville all gaped in stupefaction at the man, startled by this new development. Snape wondered if they shared his confusion, too, for Antonio Silva was not at all how Snape had imagined him. Snape was not so insular that he expected all foreigners to look exotic and primitive, but this thin, clean-shaven man in his Muggle suit his Muggle suit! hardly fit Snape's mental profile of a Spanish pureblood wizard. And the man looked so young! Scarcely older than Miranda, if that. Nor was he at all sinister; grooves that appeared in his narrow cheeks when he smiled suggested that he performed that action often, and his dark eyes were warm with good-natured humour. Snape's curiosity about Miranda grew exponentially as he ate his eggs and sausage. Why on earth had she left this man? What did she see in *Snape* that she preferred him to this handsome, well-bred Spaniard?

Snape's countenance darkened as he found himself, once again, considering her motives and coming up blank. He applied himself to his food with ruthless efficiency, ignoring Draco's questioning glances and Hermione's attempts to engage him in conversation. At the end of the meal, Draco dragged Hermione and Neville from the table with a pointed glare at Snape and a brief request for him to meet them at the manor when he finished his coffee. Snape ignored this, too, and remained in his seat, sipping the lukewarm brew and not bothering to conceal his thundercloud expression. When Miranda stood and moved toward the door, leaving her husband deep in conversation with Flitwick and Professor Vector, Snape rocketed out of his chair and headed Miranda off in the Entrance Hall.

'What is *he* doing here?' Snape hissed at her. 'Why did you hide this from me?'

'I didn't hide anything from you,' Miranda responded casually. 'I had no idea he was going to visit.'

'Why *is* he here?' Snape demanded again.

'To see me, I suppose.'

'You told me you left him,' Snape accused. 'Was that a lie?'

'Why, Severus,' she teased, flicking her black hair behind her shoulders and looking up at him with innocent eyes. 'I thought you said I wouldn't be able to lie to you.'

His body went rigid with anger; clenching his jaw, he ground out, *Was it a lie?*

'Of course not,' she said flippantly. 'Now do run along, Severus. I'd hate to think you were jealous.'

Furious at being spoken to like a child, he stepped close to her, invading her personal space, his lips twisted in a vindictive smile. 'Jealous?' he repeated silkily with just a hint of a snarl. 'That would imply that I gave a damn about you.' With a whirl of black robes, he stalked up the staircase and along the fourth-floor corridor to his office, where he swept behind the desk and sat staring at a stack of essays, waiting for his breathing to return to normal.

It dawned on him, as he sat there, that he truly, genuinely, did not like Miranda Silva.

Late that morning, as he was marking third-year essays on boggarts, an owl swooped in through the window of Snape's office and dropped a small parchment card in front of him. Assuming it was from Draco Snape had not gone to Malfoy Manor, and he had left his fire unlit to prevent unwelcome interruption he slit the envelope open with his small, silver dagger and skimmed it negligently, his mind still on the essays. What he saw made him drop his pen in horror, ink dripping out and obliterating the assignment he had been marking. The card was not from Draco, but from Antonio Silva, inviting Snape to join him and Miranda in the dungeons that evening for a private supper.

His suspicions ratcheted into hyper-drive. Had Silva found out about the affair? Was he going to call Snape out? Did you invite someone to dinner if you intended to call him out, or was it just 'wands at dawn, be there'? He had no idea how these things were done in Spain perhaps this was some gesture of politesse. He would have to ask Draco to be his second, but if Snape should lose how accomplished a wizard was Silva, anyway? then Draco would surely be killed. Perhaps he ought to scribble a quick note to Arthur Weasley, or to Potter...

He dropped his head into his hands. Maybe this wasn't an invitation to a duel. Maybe oh, God, no they wanted him to participate in some sick *ménage à trois*. His stomach turned at the thought; he imagined the hideous awkwardness of the request and wondered if he would be able to keep his food down long enough to stammer out an emphatic refusal. He truly did not know Miranda well at all, he realised, unable to judge whether or not she would actually make such a request.

And then the worst possibility of all dropped like a rock into his brain: perhaps Silva wanted to discuss Snape's career as a Death Eater. Snape could imagine no torture worse than having to recount horror stories to an avid audience over the port and cheese. Surely Miranda would have explained Snape's true role in Voldemort's camp! And yet, as he considered this, it occurred to him that perhaps Miranda herself wasn't as familiar with his past as he had assumed. Potter had defeated Voldemort nearly seven years ago, while Miranda was still living in Spain, and Snape's part in the war had never been made especially public. He had lingered on the edge of death for so long that many people had forgotten him, and when Kingsley Shacklebolt had finally pardoned him, the news hadn't even made the front page of the *Daily Prophet*. The circumstances of Dumbledore's death had never been publicised in great detail, either so perhaps Miranda knew even less than Silva himself, who at least had a network of connections, if Draco's gossip were accurate, to keep him informed.

Taut with anxiety, Snape made his way to lunch with every intention of expressing his regrets to Miranda and her husband: he had marking to do, reports to write, a conference with Neville had been lined up to discuss the summer exam schedule...

Draco was already seated at the high table, and as Snape approached, he waved a parchment card in the air. 'Are you going to this dinner as well?'

Relief washed over Snape. Dropping into his chair heavily, he asked, 'How many people did they invite?'

'Just me and Hermione, I think. Neville wasn't asked he said he'd eat glass rather than sit through a formal dinner with Miranda.'

'I can't say I don't sympathise,' Snape responded dryly. 'I'm meant to be meeting him at the Three Broomsticks this afternoon to write up the exam timetable.'

'Drink lots,' Draco advised, turning to his plate as food materialised there.

After lunch, which the Silvas, to Snape's eternal gratitude, did not attend, he and Neville walked to Hogsmeade. The April sunshine was warm, and Neville speculated that the fine weather might continue into the week. They sat at a wooden table outside of the pub and drank cold lager as they consulted schedules and lists to arrange the dates and times for the upcoming exams.

'What do you think of Antonio Silva?' Snape asked finally, unable to focus any longer on work that was, even on this lovely Sunday afternoon, impossibly tedious.

'He seems like a nice enough chap,' Neville answered cautiously. 'I haven't talked to him at all.'

Awkwardness spilled into the atmosphere around them. Snape was unaccustomed to sharing confidences with Neville, who could be inconveniently perceptive. The young man's head was turned to observe passers-by strolling down the high street, but Snape didn't need to make eye contact to know what thoughts were scrolling through Neville's brain.

'I'm not jealous, you know,' Snape offered in a low voice. 'Miranda and I '

'I know,' Neville interrupted. A light sheen of sweat glowed on his earnest face and plastered wisps of dark hair to his forehead. 'I saw the roses in Hermione's room this morning.'

'Would you go to this dinner, if you were me?' Snape asked suddenly.

'Yes,' Neville confirmed instantly. 'It would be rude not to.'

Snape nodded and ran a finger over his lips thoughtfully.

Neville met his eyes now and said carefully, 'You and Hermione and Draco you all seem so wary and uncomfortable.' He paused, as if gathering his thoughts. 'I'm not sure how to ask this, but... what is the big deal with the Silvas? I admit to disliking Miranda. She's unkind. With you three, though, it's deeper than simple dislike. What do you know that I don't?'

Snape laughed sourly and arranged their papers into a neat stack on the table. 'That's just it, Longbottom we don't know anything at all.'

Neville grinned wryly, an expression he did not often wear. 'I can see why that would make you, of all people, nervous.' He picked up his pint and took a long swallow.

'Why don't you tell me what you *do* know,' he suggested.

Over the next hour, Snape unburdened himself to Neville: he told the whole story of his affair with Miranda, interspersed with all of the questions and suspicions he had harboured since meeting her and the new ones that had arisen with the arrival of her husband. Neville listened without interruption, calmly sipping his lager.

'I think,' he said, when Snape had sat back at the conclusion of his tale, 'that you would feel better if you knew *why* Miranda left her husband in the first place. I imagine that would answer a lot of your questions for you.'

'If only I could ask her,' Snape said, almost wistfully.

Neville looked at him evenly. 'Why can't you?'

When Snape arrived outside the door to Miranda's dungeon rooms that night, he paused before knocking and reviewed exactly how he wanted to behave throughout this dinner. Polite, calm, distant he would reveal nothing of his relationship with Miranda, nor anything of his deep and troubling suspicions about her and her husband. He would take his cue from Draco, whose social affability had been bred into him, and from Hermione, who had also been taught gentility by her middle-class parents. Snape's lips twisted briefly; in all his years of spying on Voldemort, he had learned nothing of social etiquette except how to grovel a skill which was no longer of any use to him.

Gathering his mental fortitude, he knocked firmly on the wooden door and was admitted jovially by Antonio Silva. 'Ah, yes, do come in,' he said in a smooth voice, waving Snape through the door and into the sitting room. 'Please, may I get you a drink?'

'Yes, thank you,' Snape responded courteously. Hermione and Draco were already there, seated together on Miranda's long sofa before the fireplace. His eyes locked onto Hermione immediately; she was dressed in long, red robes that set off her colouring to perfection. She looked like a fire-goddess in contrast with Miranda, who occupied the armchair near the window, her ice-blue dress matching her piercing eyes. Beside the two vibrant women, Draco's pale fairness was otherworldly, given earthly life only by the flush in his cheeks from the red wine he was sipping.

A glass was thrust into Snape's hands, pulling him out of his reverie. 'It is African wine,' Antonio elaborated, tasting his own drink with a friendly grin. 'Allow me to introduce myself formally,' he said and presented Snape with his right hand. 'I am Antonio Silva. And you,' he continued when Snape shook politely, 'are of course Severus Snape. I need no introduction to you your talented potion-making is well known.'

Snape narrowed his eyes but said only, 'You are too kind.' He watched Silva cross the room to perch on the arm of Miranda's chair. He really was not at all what Snape had expected: his smile was genial, and the faint hint of an accent to his English only served to increase his charm. In his slightly rumpled Muggle suit with his tie askew, he was the sort of familiar foreigner any uptight Englishman could feel comfortable around.

'Please, all of you, tell me what it is like to teach at Hogwarts,' Silva said, addressing his guests. 'I have always wondered.'

Hermione leapt bravely into the conversation, leaving Snape and Draco to insert a few brief comments as she spoke. Silva asked questions throughout, seeming genuinely interested in the operation of the school and the abilities of its students. The subject carried them to the dinner table, which had been situated in Miranda's office.

'What is it that you do, Señor Silva?' asked Draco politely after the house-elves had distributed the first course, a dainty piece of cold salmon on a bed of baby spinach leaves. 'My father told me once that you work for the Ministry in Spain.'

'Ah, yes,' said Silva, spearing a piece of fish on his fork and eating it with every evidence of delight. 'That is true, although it is nothing very glamorous. I am merely a junior minister. A lowly bureaucrat, if you will.'

'Is the Ministry in Spain much like our Ministry here?' asked Hermione curiously.

'Not at all. The Spanish Ministry is very corrupt,' answered Silva, grinning when his guests looked surprised at his candour. 'Do not pretend to be astonished. We have had no such changes as you have had here in England in the past ten years. We are still struggling to distance ourselves from the more unpleasant aspects of our history.'

'What do you mean?' asked Snape.

'The legacy of Franco continues even now,' Silva explained, finishing his spinach. 'When he was dictator of Spain, he persecuted the magical community as surely as he did the dissenters in the universities and in business. He widened the rift between the magical and non-magical world. The Decree of Secrecy I am not sure what you call it in English has never been closely adhered to in Spain, and the divide between wizards and non-wizards has always been deep. While Franco was in power, there were many wizards in Spain who sympathised with and supported Grindelwald, and later Voldemort, in their attempts to bring the magical community to supremacy. Many still wish those attempts had been successful, including some of those who are in power now. It is a precarious stalemate, what we have with the non-magical government, and it leads to much shady practice in our Ministry.'

Snape grew fascinated as Silva went on; he scarcely noticed when the main course was placed in front of him. He could see that Hermione was interested, too, in Silva's discourse, although Draco and Miranda looked slightly bored.

'But enough depressing conversation,' Silva said finally, smiling again at them. 'I do not wish for you to think that Spain is hopeless. We have a very vibrant magical community most of the time.' He turned to Miranda, who was eating her roast and parsnips enthusiastically. 'Have you shown your friends any Spanish magic?'

'Yes,' she said shortly.

Rolling his eyes apologetically toward Snape, Silva asked, 'What did you think? I know that some of our spells are quite different from what you use here in Britain.'

'I've only learned one spell,' Snape admitted, 'but it was fascinating the Enhancement Charm.'

'Yes, a very useful spell indeed,' Silva agreed.

'Useful?' Snape enquired. 'I'm not sure I '

'I've read that it's commonly used as a diagnostic spell,' Hermione interrupted him. 'How exactly does that work?'

Snape stared at her, surprised that she would talk over him so rudely, but even more astonished that she knew anything about Spanish magic. He should have known, he realised quickly, that she would research it, but why hadn't she shared what she had discovered?

'I'm not sure entirely how it is done,' Silva admitted, clearing his plate of his final few vegetables. 'As I understand it, however, when the spell is cast upon a person who is ill, it provides the contrast of how that person would appear if he or she was healthy, and this contrast enables the Healer to identify more easily what the illness is and what treatment is required. I am surprised Miranda has not explained this to you; she '

'¿Porqué no te callas, Antonio?' Miranda cut in swiftly. *'A nadie importa esa.'*

'Excuse us for one moment,' Silva requested politely of Hermione and Snape, then turned to his wife and said *'¿Cuál es el problema? Ellos quieren'*

'Basta,' Miranda stopped him emphatically. *'No necesitan comprender ahora. Van a descubrir pronto de todos modos'*

'Lo siento,' Antonio replied softly. *'¿Quién es?'*

'Si deseas,' said Miranda resignedly. She turned back to Snape and asked with a friendly smile, 'Perhaps you would like to show Antonio what you have learned.'

Completely confused now, but unwilling to show it, Snape nodded his compliance and cast the spell. He was almost too distracted to notice its effect on the room. After a minute or so, he ended the charm and said to Miranda, 'How was that?'

'Perfect,' she said quietly, watching not him, but Hermione, whose eyes were focussed thoughtfully on her empty plate.

'It is time for dessert, I believe,' Silva announced pleasantly, clapping his hands to summon the house-elves. They brought out chocolate mousse and coffee, and Silva directed the conversation onto other topics, asking how the England Quidditch team was faring that year.

Draco finally perked up and joined the discussion, enabling Snape to sit back and consider what had just happened. Miranda had stopped her husband from elaborating further on the diagnostic properties of the Enhancement Charm, but Snape could not fully understand why. Did she wish to conceal an illness of her own? He considered the difference between Miranda normally and Miranda under the effect of the charm: she always looked softer and more feminine, viewed by means of the charm, but that did not suggest to him that she was suffering from a health problem of any kind. She had been watching Hermione very carefully perhaps she believed Hermione was unwell? Snape knew better, however; had there been anything wrong with her, he would have seen some difference in her when he cast the charm, yet he never did. His Spanish was too rudimentary for him to figure out what the whispered conversation had been about; perhaps he was thinking along the wrong lines entirely. Maybe Miranda just didn't want illness discussed at the dinner table.

After the house-elves had cleared the dishes away, Silva offered them all more wine, but Draco announced his intention of retiring. 'It's been a long weekend,' he said apologetically. When he had gone, the talk returned to the intricacies of the Spanish magical government, but Hermione was uncharacteristically quiet as she nursed her glass of wine. Snape watched her with some concern until, half an hour or so after Draco had departed, she stood up and set aside her wineglass.

'I should get some rest as well,' she said to Miranda and her husband. 'Thank you so much for the lovely dinner. Could I persuade you both to have tea with me tomorrow afternoon, around four o'clock?'

'Certainly,' said Silva. 'We would be delighted.' Miranda nodded her assent.

'I look forward to it, then,' said Hermione. 'Good night to you both. Good night, Severus,' she added.

Silva walked her to the door and said, 'Please, allow me to walk you back to your quarters.' He shrugged at her with a sheepish grin and said, 'This huge, empty building can be very intimidating, as I discovered last night.'

'All right,' Hermione acquiesced. He opened the door for her, and they passed into the hallway.

When the sound of their footsteps had retreated, Miranda sighed wearily and refilled Snape's wineglass. 'So, Severus what do you think of Antonio?'

'He seems very pleasant,' Snape replied honestly. 'I enjoyed his conversation a great deal.'

Miranda nodded and curled deeper into her armchair, gazing into the fire, as was her habit.

'If you don't mind my asking,' Snape began tentatively, 'why did you leave him?'

Miranda smiled tiredly. 'You want to know because he doesn't seem like the sort of man a woman would walk out on.'

'Well, yes, in a way.'

She straightened up a little and took a long swallow of wine. 'We're not well suited. Our marriage was rather hasty, and neither of us realised how different our lifestyles and temperaments were.' The look she turned on Snape as she said this was frank and open; it was an expression he had never before seen on her face.

'I see,' he said, his voice non-committal.

She shifted in her chair again, a move that betrayed her sudden discomfort. 'That answer isn't complete enough for you, is it?' she asked shrewdly.

'I was hoping for a better explanation than "irreconcilable differences,"' he admitted.

'You deserve a better explanation,' she agreed. 'But that one is the truth, however vague it may seem.' She tucked her hair behind her ears and looked up at him with a small smile. Unlike most of her smiles, this one was not mocking or challenging; instead, it had an air of apology about it.

Snape drank the rest of his wine in silence, wondering why Miranda couldn't be this gentle and genuine all of the time. She appeared to be content with his silence, and they sat companionably as they waited for her husband to return.

After perhaps half an hour, when Snape began to grow unpleasantly curious about what could be taking the man so long, the patter of running footsteps approached Miranda's open door, and Draco barged in, out of breath, blond hair tousled.

'Come to the hospital wing,' he rasped. Without waiting for an answer, he darted from the room again. Snape stood abruptly and exchanged a puzzled glance with Miranda. Filled with consternation, he followed her into the corridor and hurried behind her up the staircases to the infirmary.

The sounds of shouting reached them well before they entered the long, brightly lit room. The sight that met Snape's eyes when they crossed the threshold made him stop suddenly and stare past Miranda in shock. Antonio Silva sat on one of the hospital beds, holding a white cloth to his lip, which was torn and bleeding, and rubbing the side of his face gingerly. Snape could see the red imprint of a hand there, just below a gash on his temple that was also bleeding freely. Hermione was on the bed across from him, but she was not sitting calmly. Instead, she struggled against Madam Pomfrey's restraining arm, trying to snatch her wand, which the Healer held in her other hand, just out of Hermione's reach.

'You bastard!' she was shouting, pulling away from Madam Pomfrey futilely.

'Hermione! Hermione, stop it!' Pomfrey threw a helpless, entreating look at Draco, who helped her hold Hermione in place so that the Healer could inspect the finger-mark bruises on her upper arms and the purple swelling that blossomed across her left cheekbone.

'What is happening here?' Snape demanded loudly, cutting across Hermione's invective. He stalked forward, a fierce glare twisting his features.

'He tried to molest me!' Hermione cried, pointing an accusing finger at Silva, who smirked beneath his white handkerchief.

'Is this true?' Snape hissed at him.

'Of course not,' Silva responded dismissively. 'She wanted it.'

'You liar!' Hermione screamed at him, grabbing for her wand again. Draco snatched it out of Madam Pomfrey's fist and backed away.

'I heard bumps and shouting from my office,' he said to Snape. 'When I went into Hermione's room, he had her pushed up against the wall, so I Stupefied them both and carried them here. I think that's how most of the injuries happened,' he explained.

'Not the ones on my arms!' Hermione snapped indignantly.

'Nor on my lip,' interjected Silva indistinctly. 'The bitch bit me.'

'You're calling me a bitch?' Hermione laughed without an ounce of humour. 'I guess you're used to women allowing you to grope them without invitation, then?' She grew still for a moment; when Madam Pomfrey eased her hold, Hermione whipped around and grasped the Healer's wand. Before anyone could stop her, she pointed it at Silva and cried, '*Impedimenta!*'

The force of the spell shot him backward off the bed; he landed with a thump and rolled into a crouch, aiming his wand at Hermione, but before he could cast, Snape was there, grasping his wrist in a punishing grip that forced him to drop the wand on the floor. 'Do not point your wand at her again,' he snarled menacingly.

'Let go of me,' Silva demanded.

'No.'

Miranda finally unfroze from her position inside the doorway and came up behind her husband. 'Antonio, leave it,' she commanded sternly. 'Fighting with Severus will do you no good at all.'

Silva wrenched out of Snape's hold and faced his wife angrily. 'Do not say this to me!' he shouted at her. 'You wish to protect your lover from me, is that it?' He turned back to Snape and continued, 'Yes, I know you are her lover.' His voice dripped with contempt. 'Much good may it do you.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Snape countered icily.

'Oh, yes, you do,' snapped Silva, waving his hand expansively around the room. 'Look at them they all know! Nobody contradicts me. She cannot help you, Snape she is my wife, it is her duty to take my part.'

Snape snorted derisively. 'I doubt that, considering she left you eight months ago.'

'Left me?' Silva drawled incredulously. 'She hasn't left me.'

Scowling, Snape whirled around to face the other occupants of the room, who were watching the altercation with undisguised curiosity. 'Draco!' he snapped. 'Take Hermione to my office.'

Madam Pomfrey scuttled to the other end of the infirmary as Draco obediently helped Hermione off the hospital bed and steered her toward the door. She met Silva's eyes as she passed him, her expression still full of fury. 'If you dare touch me again,' she threatened, 'I'll kill you.'

'Hermione,' Draco admonished, dragging her away. Silva raised one eyebrow in polite disbelief as Draco closed the door behind their retreating forms.

'You think Miranda has left me for you, Snape?' he persisted, bending down to pick up his wand.

'Antonio,' Miranda broke in, 'please. This is undignified.'

'I don't give a damn about your travesty of a marriage,' Snape answered him sharply. 'If I hear that you have bothered Hermione again/will kill you, make no mistake.'

Silva looked at him curiously, arrested halfway toward a standing position. 'You don't care about my marriage?'

'Not in the slightest.' Snape paused and tilted his head to one side. 'You don't seem to care much either, if I might point out. How do you suppose Miranda feels after witnessing your clumsy attempt at rape?'

'Rape?' Silva gasped incredulously. 'I tried to kiss her. She bit me. Then Sir-Knight-in-Shining-Armour burst in and blasted us apart. That is why I am covered in these bruises.'

'Why did you try to kiss her?' Miranda interjected. Snape cast a wary eye on her; she looked neither surprised nor upset by the evening's developments.

Silva scowled at her. 'You should leave, Miranda. This is a discussion for men.'

Taken aback, Snape asked in disbelief, 'Have you lost your senses? She has every right.'

'No,' said Miranda. 'I'll go.' Sweeping her long hair behind her, she walked casually out of the infirmary. Just outside the door she found Draco and Hermione, who stood as close to the wooden panels as possible, obviously eavesdropping.

'What are you smiling about?' Hermione demanded, affronted at Miranda's suddenly smug expression. 'This is all your fault!'

Miranda's grin disappeared. She paused for a moment before saying, quite calmly, 'Shut up, Hermione.'

Draco stepped forward to challenge her, but Miranda was already striding away from them, down the corridor. He suspected that the smile had not disappeared for long. Turning his ear back to the door, he discovered that the shouting from within the infirmary had stopped; all he could hear now were low murmurs of conversation. Reluctantly, he pulled Hermione away from the door and pushed her toward the stairs. 'Come on, let's get you to Severus's office.'

With a final, uncomfortable glance backward, she accepted his guiding arm and allowed him to lead her to Snape's rooms.

Back inside the infirmary, Silva had returned to his seat on the hospital bed and sheathed his wand inside his sleeve. 'You are involved with Hermione as well?' he asked Snape carefully.

'That's none of your business.'

'Do you not find it difficult to maintain two mistresses at once?' Silva went on, as if Snape had never spoken. 'I would not attempt it, myself.'

Snape sneered at him. 'I understand now why Miranda left you.' His brain added: you stupid, foreign berk.

'What is this leaving?' Silva repeated, looking confused. 'She has never said any such thing to me. Although,' here he gave a soft laugh, 'it would not surprise me if she wanted to. She has never liked me much.'

'Keep your confidences,' Snape said cuttingly. 'I don't want to hear them. I bid you good night.' He stalked into the corridor and felt his robes billow around him. He was reminded of his habit, years ago, of prowling the corridors of the school in exactly this manner; the memory fuelled his anger pleasantly. Had there been any students around, they would have felt the kind of wrath from him that would not have surprised Hermione or Draco in the least.

He went, not to his own quarters, but back to the dungeons, where he accosted Miranda in her sitting room. 'You make sure,' he ordered, 'that your husband stays here all night. I don't want to find that he has forced himself on Hermione again.'

Miranda stared up at him from her armchair. 'I'm afraid I can't help you with that,' she said quietly. 'He's staying in the guest room while he's here.'

Snape nodded. 'Good night, then,' he said stiffly and began to make his way back upstairs. He would just have to ward Hermione's chambers, he decided.

When he had collected Hermione from his office and escorted her back to her quarters Draco, drooping with exhaustion, Flooed to Malfoy Manor from her sitting room. Snape sat wearily on her bed and watched while she changed into her nightclothes. Still trembling with anger, she slid under the duvet next to him and curled into a ball.

'Do you want to talk?' Snape asked awkwardly, having had very little experience consoling women in this situation.

'No,' said Hermione. 'I just want to sleep.' She snuggled up against him. 'Will you stay?'

'Of course,' he assured her. He dimmed the lights with a wave of his wand and wrapped his arms around her. He was still dressed, but he considered his own comfort a small matter compared to hers. It was some time before her breathing deepened into the rhythmic pattern that signalled slumber, but she didn't speak again, and Snape was content to lie there and hold her. He had warded her door from the inside; confident that his spells would keep out any unwanted intruders, he allowed himself to drift off as well, lulled into sleep by the warmth of Hermione's body and the sweet smell of her hair.

The sky was beginning to lighten when he awoke several hours later. Carefully, so as not to wake Hermione, he eased his body, stiff and uncomfortable, from the bed. He scrawled a quick note for her, in case she woke while he was gone, and left for his own rooms to shower and change clothes.

The hot water cascading over his back soothed his tight muscles; with a groan, Snape settled into a sitting position on the floor of the bath and leaned his head against the condensation-covered tile. He felt terrible, the combination of hangover and unrelieved stress turning his body into a mass of aches and pains. He would have to go to Flitwick this morning; the Headmaster needed to be informed about the assault on Hermione. He hoped Hermione would let Flitwick decide what to do, since he doubted she would be clear-headed about the whole episode. Snape couldn't resist the smile that graced his lips at the memory of Hermione, fiery in her red robes, screaming at Antonio Silva. He would have expected tears, but her wrathful reaction served to remind him that she was no longer the young girl who had once wept at his humiliating remarks about her teeth. Her threats had surprised him as well; he knew that *he* was capable of killing a vision of green light streaking across the Astronomy Tower flashed painfully through his mind but he would not have thought Hermione the vengeful type. Another memory swam behind his eyes, one of Miranda sailing through the air in the Great Hall, her body striking the wall with an almighty thump. He revised his appraisal of Hermione with a soft laugh maybe she was the type to shoot first and ask questions later.

Snape dragged himself painfully from the shower when his fingers and toes started to turn pruny and dressed without paying much attention to the clothes he selected. Thanks to Draco, his wardrobe was so organised that everything matched everything else; nevertheless, he felt a twinge of guilt at taking so little trouble with his appearance when Draco had tried so hard to teach him the value of looking good to feel good.

After towel-drying his black hair, he returned to Hermione's quarters and found her awake and dressed, standing by her bedroom window and drinking a cup of tea. Another mug, wreathed in swirls of steam, sat on her desk, and she offered it to him wordlessly. There was a strange tension in the room; Snape wanted her to talk to show him, by

means of her incessant conversation, that she was all right but she continued to gaze through the window without speaking until the sun had risen fully above the treetops of the Forbidden Forest.

Finally, he could stand the silence no longer. Resting his empty teacup on the mantelpiece, he approached her and placed a tentative hand on her shoulder.

'Hermione,' he began but at that precise moment, a violent pounding rattled her door in its frame. Tensing with unidentifiable apprehension, he followed her through to the sitting room. She opened the door to reveal Neville Longbottom, not yet dirty from working in the greenhouses but nevertheless dishevelled. His boyish face was set firmly in a serious expression and his eyes were fierce.

'Flitwick wants to see you both,' he said evenly. 'Could you come with me, please?'

Throwing a resigned look at Snape, Hermione waved him into the corridor and warded her door firmly behind them. Neville led them down the stairs to the third floor but passed by the entrance to the Headmaster's office without so much as a glance. Snape scarcely had time to wonder where they were headed before Neville stopped in front of the door that opened into one of the school's guest rooms and then his assumption, that Flitwick wanted to speak to them about the events of the previous night, shattered.

The first thing Snape registered, when Neville pushed back the door in what felt like slow-motion, was Miranda, huddled in a chair by the fireplace, her face concealed by the long, straight hair of her bowed head, her body wracked by silent, heaving sobs. Then Flitwick, standing next to her, one hand on her shoulder, his eyes grave; then the unexpected figure of Kingsley Shacklebolt, kneeling in the centre of the ornate rug that covered the floor between the fireplace and the bed, a weary hand rubbing his shaven head.

Sprawled on that rug, arms and legs out as if he had fallen backward, but looking impossibly peaceful, was Antonio Silva, a silver knife embedded deeply between his lower ribs.

Hermione's gasp reached Snape's ears belatedly; everyone's gaze fixed on her, but nobody moved to comfort her. Feeling almost indignant, Snape turned to put his arm around her, to pull her to his side, but even as his muscles snapped into action, his eyes snagged on the body and transmitted one final piece of crucial information to his brain: the silver knife, glinting in the sunlight that streamed through the open window of the bedroom, was his own.

Time sped up again; light-headed from the impulsive, hectic rush of blood through his veins, Snape faced Hermione and did not recognise the blank, flat expression on her face. The freezing chill of suspicion sliced through his chest; Hermione moved suddenly, her wand materialising in her hand out of nowhere. She pointed it at him, her eyes now flashing, and said, her voice harsh with accusation, 'That's your knife, Snape.'

Neville, still standing next to her inside the doorway, placed a restraining hand on her arm. 'Hermione, stay calm,' he commanded quietly.

Through the haze of a growing sensation of betrayal, Snape became aware that Kingsley had straightened; his deep voice echoed in the silent chamber.

'You'll both need to return to the Ministry with me straight away,' he addressed Snape and Hermione.

The colour drained from Hermione's face. 'Why?' she asked, lowering her wand.

'To give evidence,' he answered her, holding out a pouch of Floo powder.

'Are we suspects?' she whispered as she dipped her hand into the pouch.

'I can't discuss that right now,' said Kingsley. He offered the small sack to Snape, who took out a handful of powder, unable to believe what was happening.

A rustle from the direction of the fireplace drew his attention; Miranda had risen shakily from her chair and was staring in confusion at Kingsley. 'Why Hermione?' she asked, a note of panic in her tone.

'I'm sorry, Professor, but I truly can't discuss it,' Kingsley said quietly. He motioned toward the fireplace, and Hermione approached it, moving like a sleepwalker, and tossed her Floo powder into the flames. When she had gone, Kingsley directed Snape to follow; his last sight before the flames swirled him away was of Miranda's face, white and stricken.

Funny How Love Is

Chapter 10 of 11

Snape and Hermione become 'persons of interest.'

Funny How Love Is

Testing, testing... It looks like it's working say something.

What is this?

We record all the interviews now with a Dicto-Quill. Apparently, the Muggles do it with tape. Harry said

Just get on with it, please, Arthur.

Yes, of course... Arthur Weasley, Deputy Minister, interviewing Severus Snape in the matter of the suspicious death of Antonio Silva, foreign national. Please state your name for the record.

You just stated it.

Please, Severus, this is awkward enough.

Fine. Severus Snape.

Thank you. Could you please describe, in brief, your movements from eleven o'clock last night?

I was attending a dinner in Miranda Silva's chambers at Hogwarts. Shortly after the time specified, she and I were alerted to an incident in the infirmary. We proceeded there and remained for perhaps half an hour. After returning to the dungeons to speak briefly with Miranda, I collected Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy from my office...

Please go on.

Is this necessary? I didn't kill the man.

Your movements will establish that, Severus. Have you heard of something called an 'alibi'?

Of course I have.

Well then

It's personal.

[pause of eleven seconds]

As much respect as I have for your personal life, Severus, I must point out that in a possible murder investigation, nothing is private.

Very well. I collected Hermione and Draco from my office. We went to Hermione's chambers. Draco Flooed to Malfoy Manor. I remained with Hermione until half past six this morning when I left for my rooms to shower and change clothes. After dressing, I returned directly to Hermione. I was still with her when Neville Longbottom summoned us to the scene, if you will.

Thank you. I, er, need to ask you some specific questions now.

Yes, yes, get on with it.

Did you, at any point, see or interact with Antonio Silva alone last night?

I did not.

Were you alone that is to say, out of the presence of witnesses at any point after eleven o'clock last night?

When I was walking through the halls, yes. And this morning in my chambers, from half past six until seven.

What about during the night?

What are you suggesting, Arthur?

Er... Could you have left Hermione's rooms without her noticing?

I daresay I could have, but I didn't until half past six, as I have already stated.

Could Hermione have left without your noticing, then?

I suppose so, but I find it unlikely. I sleep lightly.

[pause of six seconds shuffling of papers]

Let's discuss the knife. Did you recognise it?

Of course. It's my knife.

You admit that.

Yes. Why shouldn't I? I didn't stab the man with it.

Who else had access to the knife?

Anyone who has access to my office. I use... used it to open my post.

Who has access to your office, Severus?

Flitwick, as Headmaster. Filch, as caretaker. Poppy Pomfrey. Draco Malfoy. Neville Longbottom. Hermione Granger. Miranda Silva.

Anyone else?

Possibly. I'm not sure.

That's quite a long list of people, Severus. I imagined, for some reason, that you would keep your personal space more secure.

I have nothing of value and nothing to hide.

When was the last time you were aware of the location of your... letter-opener?

Yesterday morning when I opened my post.

And then?

I returned it to the top left-hand drawer of my desk.

Would you say that, after that point in time, anyone who had access to your office could have taken the knife without your knowledge?

I suppose so.

Were there any occasions yesterday during which you were obviously absent from your office?

From lunchtime onward.

The only time you returned to the office was to collect Draco and Hermione last night?

Yes.

So they were in your office without you. For how long?

I don't know. Half an hour, maybe.

Do you know of anyone else who might have gone into your office yesterday?

No.

[pause of four seconds shuffling of papers]

A claim has been made that you threatened Antonio Silva's life last night. Is this true?

Yes.

What prompted your threat?

Arthur...

Please, Severus. I don't like this any more than you do.

Silva had... assaulted Hermione. I warned him of the consequences should he do so again.

A claim has also been made that Hermione threatened Antonio Silva's life last night. Were you a witness to this?

Yes.

What prompted her threat?

The same thing that prompted mine.

Can you think of anyone else who might have wished Antonio Silva harm?

I really don't know. He and I were not close.

[pause of eight seconds shuffling of papers]

Allow me to summarise what you have said, please. You left your knife the possible murder weapon in an unsecured location from approximately noon yesterday. Anyone who had access to your office also had access to this knife, although the only people you know for certain entered your office yesterday were Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger. You yourself claim not to have returned to the room except to collect your guests late last night. You were alone last night and this morning on a number of brief occasions, including one half-hour stretch between half past six and seven o'clock today. Although your knife is involved in the crime, you claim to be innocent of wrongdoing, despite having threatened the deceased's life in the presence of witnesses. Is this correct?

Yes... Arthur, why do you keep saying 'possible' murder?

It is, of course, possible that the knife was not the cause of death. We will be testing for poison, as well as inspecting wands for the casting of lethal spells.

I see. And, since you have it in custody, am I to assume you have inspected my wand?

Not yet.

I see.

[pause of five seconds]

So what happens now?

[pause of four seconds]

Unfortunately, nothing in your statement exempts you from suspicion. Er... I'm going to have to take you to Azkaban, pending further developments.

I am a suspect, then. Are you going to charge me with anything?

Not at this time, no. As you know, the law provides for a detention period of up to seven days before charges must be laid.

You're going to keep me in Azkaban for seven days!

Hopefully not. We are continuing to investigate, and the moment we find anything to support your innocence, we'll release you... Don't look at me like that, Severus. You know I would do anything to keep you out of that place. But it's your knife in that man's chest, and nothing you've said proves that you didn't put it there.

[pause of twelve seconds]

Very well... Interview terminated at fourteen minutes past nine.

So, was it you what done it, then, Hermione?

This is no time for joking, Ronald. What the hell is that?

It's a Dicto-Quill. Oh, oops, forgot to say Ronald Weasley, Auror, interviewing Hermione Granger in the matter of the suspicious death of Antonio Silva, foreign national. Er, please state your name for the record.

I will do no such thing. This is absurd.

Come on, Hermione, please

No. I want legal counsel.

What? What for?

I refuse to answer any questions without a witness to this... interrogation.

But, Hermione, look, it's all being recorded

With a quill? Please. I could tamper with that with my eyes shut. I'm not going to be railroaded by the Ministry. I demand a solicitor be present.

A solicitor? We don't even do that stuff, Hermione. If you don't answer the questions now, I'll have to get a writ to use Veritaserum.

Are you insane? You can't do that.

This isn't the Muggle legal system, Hermione. We do things differently.

No surprise there.

Please don't be bitter. Look, just do this voluntarily. I'll see to it myself that nothing happens to the transcript.

[pause of six seconds]

Why are you questioning me? Surely there's some kind of rule about conflicts of interest.

Er...

Oh, right, You do things differently. Fine. Ask your questions.

Good. Okay. State your name, please.

Hermione Jean Granger.

First, could you please describe your movements from eleven o'clock last night?

I was at a dinner party hosted by the Silvas in Miranda's chambers. After the meal, Antonio Silva escorted me to my rooms. When we got there, I offered him a cup of tea. He said he didn't want tea and tried to kiss me. I attempted to push him away, but he restrained my hands and tried again, so I bit his lip. He was angry and smacked me across the face. You see the bruise. Then he shoved me against the wall and started groping me.

He what! That bastard

Please, Ronald. Then Draco came in and Stunned us. I came to in the infirmary and attacked Silva. Severus and Miranda had shown up by then, and Severus ordered me and Draco to leave. We eavesdropped for a little while, but Miranda caught us. So we went to Severus's office and waited until he came to get us. Draco Flooed home from my fireplace, and I went to bed. I got up this morning just before seven and made some tea. Severus came in and had a cup with me. Then Neville showed up and we found out what had happened.

Okay. Yes. Good.

May I leave now?

Er, no. A claim has been made that you threatened to kill this Silva.

That's right, I did. If he ever touched me again.

Right. And did you recognise the weapon? The dagger, I mean?

Yes, it was Severus's letter-opener.

Where does he usually keep it?

In his desk drawer.

Where is his desk?

In his office. Obviously.

And you were in his office last night with Malfoy? For how long?

About half an hour. See this is exactly what I was talking about! I didn't stab him!

Fine, you don't need to get so belligerent. But you were in the room where Snape keeps the knife. And you were alone all night, until about seven o'clock this morning.

Well...

What?

Not exactly alone.

Who was with you?

Well... Severus. Until about half past six. I heard him get up and leave.

You spent the night with Snape!

Yes, Ron. Get over it.

Okay, yeah.

[pause for eight seconds rustling]

Could he have left, in the night, without your hearing?

Probably.

How long was he gone from your room this morning?

About half an hour, I should think.

When you were... eavesdropping outside the infirmary, could you hear any of what was being said inside?

Sadly, no.

Can you think of anyone who might have had a reason to harm Silva?

Of course. Severus.

Because this Silva molested you?

Well, maybe. But also because Severus was carrying on an affair with his wife.

Really?

Yes. Since before Christmas. I don't know the details.

Why did Snape spend the night in your room, then?

It's complicated.

Okay... Why would this affair have given Snape a reason to kill Silva?

Maybe he was jealous. Maybe he wanted Miranda for himself. I don't know.

Hermione... I have to say, that doesn't sound very Snape-y.

He's not been himself.

What makes you say that?

Nothing in particular.

You're being evasive.

Well, I can't see how this is relevant to your investigation anyway.

Fair enough.

[pause of four seconds shuffling of paper]

After the incident in the infirmary, did you see or interact with Antonio Silva alone?

No.

Were you alone at any point after eleven o'clock last night?

Only this morning while Severus was gone.

And that was for half an hour.

About that, yes.

What did you do in that half-hour?

I carried on sleeping for most of it. Then I got up, put on some clothes, and made tea.

Apart from the time you spent there with Draco Malfoy last night, did you at any point yesterday enter Snape's office?

No.

Can anyone corroborate that?

No.

Let me sum up, then. You were involved in a private altercation with the deceased shortly after eleven o'clock last night. After leaving the hospital wing, you then spent about half an hour with Draco Malfoy in Severus Snape's office where you had access to the weapon used on Antonio Silva. When Snape collected you, you went to your chambers and remained there with him until half past six this morning, at which point you were alone for half an hour. You claim to be innocent of any wrongdoing, despite your threat of harm to the deceased. Is this correct?

Yes.

[pause of four seconds]

You must be aware, Hermione, that you have no alibi.

Why should I be aware of that? You haven't even told me what time the man was killed.

We think it was sometime early this morning. We'll know for sure once the body has been inspected more thoroughly.

What am I supposed to do until then?

[pause of five seconds]

What is it, Ronald?

I have to take you to Azkaban, Hermione. Until more evidence comes to light.

How long are you going to keep me there?

Not long, I hope. Legally, we can hold you for seven days. I promise to do everything I can to make sure your time there is as short as possible. Hermione... I'm sorry.

[pause of four seconds sound of weeping; rustling]

Oh, hell... Interview terminated at twenty minutes past ten.

Snape sat disconsolately on the narrow bed of his cell in Azkaban. It was hardly the Easter visit to the prison that he had envisioned. And yet, he had to admit that the place wasn't nearly as awful as he remembered. With the Dementors gone, the prison retained only the faintly hopeless feel of all such institutions, rather than its former crushing, soul-destroying bleakness. The air was lighter, the damp less oppressive. Through the small, barred window high on the back wall of the cell, a spring breeze wafted in, and weak sunlight drew patterns on the clean stone floor. The cheerful whistling of the Auror on duty in this corridor echoed incongruously. Snape supposed the guard had every reason to be cheerful; the inmates in this cellblock were hardly violent or dangerous.

The sound of voices approaching made him sit up a little straighter; his cell was the third from the end of the corridor and the door through which, a little over an hour ago, he had been escorted as a new inmate. Presumably someone else was being brought in. The voices separated from the echoes, and the clacking of footsteps became clearer, more distinct: he could discern now what was being said.

'Just relax now.' Familiar voice, male. Snape couldn't place it. Sound of the door opening into the cell next to his own. 'I'll have you out of here as quickly as possible.'

'Promise?' Hermione. Snape's chest constricted.

'Yes, I promise.' Recognition clicked in Snape's brain: Ronald Weasley. The door clicked shut; one pair of footsteps retreated back the way it had come.

Quiet filled the corridor again. Snape lay back on the bed and put his hands behind his head. If he hadn't felt so alert, so perfectly awake and aware, he would have believed this to be a dream, and not a particularly good one. The image of Antonio Silva, dead on the hearthrug, arms outstretched, swam to the forefront of his mind and, with it, all the questions he had struggled not to ask himself as the morning had passed. Who had stabbed the man? Why had Snape's own dagger been used? Why had Hermione accused him? And the new question brought to his attention by Arthur Weasley: was the dagger really what had been used to kill Silva? Snape's understanding of the matter was only slightly greater than Arthur's, for of course he knew that he had not been responsible for Silva's death.

He fell asleep for a while, surprised and pleased to learn that he could unwind enough to do so. He awoke in the late afternoon feeling rested but stiff and began to pace back and forth across the small cell, trying to loosen his cramped muscles. As night fell and the prison grew darker, his equanimity dripped away bit by bit. They were going to make him spend the night here, he realised; in the dark, it was easy to imagine the black-cloaked horror of the Dementors, the misery and the nightmares that other people had experienced in this very same cell, the muted screams and murmurs that had once filled the giant building. His stomach seemed to coil in on itself. If he didn't put a halt to his morbid fantasies, he would be sick.

Perhaps he would be sick anyway. Clutching his abdomen, Snape lurched to the basin in the corner of the cell and heaved over it futilely. Nothing came out; the only sustenance he had consumed all day was a cup of tea more than twelve hours ago. He wondered if the meal regimen here was still as stringent as it had been twenty-five years ago. He heaved again and wiped the back of his hand across his sweat-beaded brow.

'Snape!' a voice shouted suddenly. 'Are you here?'

Startled, he jerked back and slammed his shin against the bed frame. Groaning, he dropped onto the mattress. 'Hermione?' he called.

'You absolute bastard!' she screamed from the next cell. 'How could you do this?'

He paused, rubbing his leg, and felt his muscles go rigid with defensiveness. 'Do what?'

'You killed him! That was your knife sticking out of his ribs. I recognised it!'

Slowly, Snape drew himself into a standing position and stalked to the bars fronting his cell. 'You think I killed him?' he said, iron in his tone.

'Do you deny that was your dagger in his chest?' came the incredulous response.

'*Do you take me for an imbecile?*' he roared suddenly, unable to control the violence of his anger. 'I wouldn't stab a man with my own knife!'

'You'd use someone else's, then?' she replied venomously, obviously having approached the front of her cell, too. 'I notice you used your own wand to kill Dumbledore. Was no one else's available?'

Snape froze. 'How dare you,' he hissed. 'I was with *you* all night, comforting you. Do you think I slipped from your bed to kill the man, then came back to soil your innocence with my blood-stained hands?'

'And why wouldn't you?' Hermione snapped, her anger echoing in the stone corridor. 'You've been quite happy to put your hands in all sorts of places, all year.'

'What about you, then?' Snape snarled. 'Don't pretend you're as pure as the driven snow, *Miss Granger*. You had as much opportunity as I, not to mention a far more immediate motive.'

'I, unlike you, don't kill people!' she shouted.

'And you, unlike me, have all the subtlety of a fucking freight train,' Snape shouted back, driven by his frustration into uncharacteristic profanity. 'If I had killed him, I wouldn't have gotten caught.'

'That's your defence?' Her tone dripped with feigned incredulity. 'You loathsome, amoral...'

She continued to abuse him, but the fight had gone out of him now. Wearily, he retreated to the bed and lay down again, this time on his stomach, his arms hanging off either side of the mattress. After several minutes of getting no response, Hermione quieted. The silence pressed in on him; the darkness in the cell was absolute.

Against all expectation, Snape fell asleep again. He dreamed of Dumbledore, not as he had been during the last few years of his life, but after Voldemort's first fall, when optimism had still been possible and the coming of Harry Potter to Hogwarts had been many years away.

Arthur Weasley, interviewing Severus Snape in the matter of the murder of Antonio Silva, foreign national. Please state your name.

Severus Snape.

I won't ask you if you slept well last night, but I hope you didn't endure anything too unpleasant.

Not if what I've heard about Muggle prisons is anything to go by.

Well, quite. The Minister has requested that you be interviewed under the influence of Veritaserum. Are you prepared to grant this?

Who prepared the potion?

Draco Malfoy.

I will grant the Minister's request, then.

Thank you, Severus. This will help us, and you, a great deal. Drink up.

[pause of six seconds]

Please state your name.

Severus Snape.

Please state your occupation.

Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Were you acquainted with the foreign national, Antonio Silva?

Yes.

Are you aware that his recent death was caused unlawfully by outside agency?

So I am told.

Did you yourself bring about his death?

No.

Did you stab him with a knife, and so bring about his death?

No.

Did you cause him any physical harm that could have led to his death?

No.

Do you know who brought about his death?

No. Arthur, I must say, this is all very tedious.

How fortunate for us both, then, that I have what I need now. I'll put this before Kingsley as soon as possible. Should have you out by tomorrow at the latest.

I'm breathless with anticipation.

Sarcasm becomes you, Severus. Interview terminated at nineteen minutes to eleven.

Snape was jolted out of his stupor later that afternoon by the sound of Hermione's voice along the corridor.

'They questioned me under Veritaserum this morning,' she stated. 'Just so you know.'

He didn't answer.

'I didn't kill him,' Hermione said. 'It made me wonder, though, if you could say the same thing under similar circumstances.'

His eyes rolled silently, almost of their own volition.

'You know what, though? I'm not sure I care anymore. What difference should it make to me if you killed your lover's husband?' she went on pensively. 'It's nothing anyone who knows you would be surprised about. I must have seen hundreds, if not thousands, of first-hand examples of your vindictiveness over the years. I defended you, you know. All those times that Ron and Harry insulted you and abused you, I took your part. I thought you were noble. Obviously, I was wrong your behaviour since I started working at Hogwarts has been everything but noble.' She paused for breath.

'I didn't think it was possible for my expectations of prison life to sink any lower, but the proof is incontrovertible: there truly is nothing so bad that it can't get worse,' a silvery deep voice, carrying the barest hint of amusement, interjected.

Snape bolted upright in surprise and pushed his hair from his face. 'Lucius?'

'I'm afraid my skills as host have deteriorated of late. I should have welcomed you yesterday. How are you, Severus?'

Snape approached the bars and tried to peer down the corridor. He could just see a flash of pale hair in the gloom. 'What a stupid thing to ask,' he responded fondly. 'I'm in jail.'

'I couldn't help but overhear your predicament,' Lucius said smoothly. In the cell next to Snape's, Hermione gave a small squeak. 'I understand someone has been stabbed?'

'Antonio Silva,' Snape confirmed. 'You knew his family.'

'Ah, yes.' There was a long pause. 'It was your knife?'

'My letter-opener. The one you gave me.'

Lucius laughed softly. 'And is that Miss Granger I hear as well?'

'Yes,' Hermione snapped through her teeth. Snape could picture her self-righteous expression and the thought made him smile.

'The famous Hermione Granger, friend of Harry Potter, sent down for murder. Quite the change in status for you,' Lucius commented. 'How does it feel?'

Snape leaned as close to the bars as he could and saw Hermione doing the same. 'I haven't been sent down,' she said. 'I'm just temporarily detained.'

Lucius laughed again. 'Is that so.'

Silence fell in the corridor. Snape remained where he was for a little while; eventually, it became obvious that Lucius had said all he was prepared to say.

It wasn't until the sun had gone down, and the cells were wreathed in darkness, that Lucius's deep timbre resonated along the corridor again. 'How is the good Señora Silva?' he asked.

'Miranda?' Snape answered, surprised.

'Yes, of course,' Lucius answered. 'You used to teach her, didn't you, Severus?'

'She's the Charms professor now. She...' Snape trailed off, unsure what to say.

'She's been sleeping with Snape,' Hermione supplied suddenly.

'Gossip?' Lucius's voice perked up noticeably. 'Do tell.'

Snape fumed silently while Hermione recounted, with unattractive glee, his affair with Miranda, up to and including the duel he and Draco had lost in front of the entire school. He was amazed that she would speak so frankly to someone she despised and distrusted, her friendship with Draco notwithstanding, but was hardly shocked to note that she left out her own role in the affair.

Lucius, however, had not lost all of his perceptiveness in captivity. 'Jealous, Miss Granger?' he taunted when she finished speaking. 'Severus mentioned slipping from your bed... has he been leading you a merry dance?'

'Bastard.' The epithet was almost under her breath; Snape wasn't sure if she was referring to him or to Lucius.

'Such unladylike language,' Lucius murmured suggestively. 'So they questioned you with Veritaserum. What about you, Severus?'

'Yes. This morning.'

A weak gasp issued from Hermione's cell. Snape ignored it.

'Who killed him, then?' Lucius mused, but in such a way as to make Snape suspect it was a rhetorical question. 'Tell me, Severus,' he added abruptly, 'how much did you know about Miranda Silva's marriage?'

Two hundred miles away, in the cosy comfort of her dungeon sitting room, Miranda Silva was sitting stiffly on the hearthrug before the fire. Across from her rigid form, equally uncomfortable in a brocade armchair, looking with interest around the dim room, was a young man thin, an inch or two shorter than six feet tall, with vivid green eyes behind round-rimmed glasses, the barest hint of white scar shining through the unkempt black hair that fell across his forehead.

'Professor Silva,' he said in a soft, deep voice. 'The Aurors questioned Hermione and Snape this morning with Veritaserum. Neither of them appears to be responsible for your husband's death.'

For a few moments, Miranda didn't react. She was a lovely woman, Harry reflected; her long, straight hair fell in a black curtain to the carpet behind her. Her face was perfectly sculpted and almost ageless; stark, midnight blue robes made her blue eyes stand out radiantly above her pale cheeks. Her expression, however, was cold and still when she finally responded:

'I knew it wasn't Hermione. I tried to tell the Minister.'

Harry met her gaze and risked a little Legilimency. His skills had improved; he was able to do this even while speaking of other things. She didn't seem to notice his silence or his intensity, and she wasn't trying to block him, but her calm shut him out as surely as any active attempt would have done.

'Do you think Snape killed your husband?' he asked gently.

Emotion leapt into her mind: confusion. 'I don't know. Aren't there ways to get around Veritaserum?'

'Yes, and he would know them, if anyone would,' Harry confessed.

'Didn't he kill Albus Dumbledore?' she pressed on.

Harry leaned back in his chair and rested his hands on his knees. Her confusion was growing stronger now; he couldn't pinpoint anything definite, but it was clear that there was some great conflict in her mind. 'He did kill Dumbledore, yes.'

'Doesn't that precedent suggest anything?' she asked insistently.

He knew what she was getting at; the reasons for her internal conflict grew clearer as he looked at her steadily. 'Believe me,' Harry said, 'no one understands ambivalence about Snape better than I do.' He smiled at her.

'What do you mean?' She knew, but she wanted to hear his explanation anyway. In fact, there was an obvious need in her to hear it, as if she wanted confirmation from Harry of everything she had ever suspected about Snape. He was afraid his words would disappoint her.

'Snape gave Voldemort the information that led to my parents' deaths and almost led to mine,' he said bluntly. This was a part of the story he had tried to keep quiet, not wanting to expose Snape's shame, or his own pain, to the wizarding world. 'He claimed to love my mother, but he was happy to see her husband and child destroyed. He persuaded Voldemort to spare her, even knowing that if she lived, it would be because she had lost the people she loved the most in the world.'

Miranda grew still again. Harry watched her carefully as he continued. 'My mother died anyway, as you know, trying to protect me. Snape never forgave Voldemort; he worked all those years for Dumbledore because of what had happened to my mother. He tried to protect me and help me for the same reason. But he did it grudgingly and unwillingly. He never tried to like me. I didn't know any of this until what I thought were the last moments of his life, when he gave me his memories. I found out that he had only killed Dumbledore because Dumbledore forced him to. I also found out how Dumbledore had betrayed him, and me, for years, making Snape protect me so that I would live long enough to die.'

'How you must hate him,' Miranda murmured softly, settling against the stones of the hearth.

'I don't hate Snape,' Harry corrected. 'He suffered for years and knows that he brought all of his pain on himself. He's had to live with that knowledge; he wasn't granted the release of death. And while I'll never be able to forgive him, who am I to say that he hasn't suffered enough?'

These words, spoken so sympathetically, seemed to have an effect on Miranda. Looking into her eyes again, Harry didn't need Legilimency to see that her conflict was

beginning to resolve itself. Suddenly, the whole of her emotions coalesced in front of him, almost as if she were projecting them. He stood up slowly and moved toward the door.

'Hermione and Snape will probably be released tomorrow, as we have no reason to hold them any longer,' he said matter-of-factly. Miranda followed him to the door and opened it courteously for him.

'Thank you for coming to let me know,' she told him.

He met her eyes again and said deliberately, 'We'll need to speak to you again, unfortunately.' Slowly, carefully, he added, 'I'll come on Thursday. Will that be all right?'

Miranda smiled; for one instant, her expression became soft and warm. 'More than all right. Thank you again, Harry Potter.'

Nodding, he passed into the hallway and heard her door close quietly behind him.

Seven Seas of Rhye

Chapter 11 of 11

The end of the journey.

Author's Note: All of my gratitude is owed to Angel Mischa, the administrators of this excellent website, and to everyone who has read, reviewed, and enjoyed this story. Thank you all very much for making my first fic such a great experience! If you liked this story, keep your eyes peeled for my next SS/HG, entitled *Soul Man*.

Seven Seas of Rhye

Hot water cascaded down Snape's face in a soothing stream. He stood perfectly still, allowing his muscles to relax, and tried to remember whether he had ever had a shower that felt so good. Two and a half days' worth of grime had sloughed from his skin when he'd washed himself with the flannel. He was grateful to be clean, but he was hungry, too: starving, actually, as he had not eaten a proper meal in nearly three days. Twisting the taps closed, he dried himself and, wrapping the towel around his waist, padded into his bedroom to summon a house-elf to bring food.

He sat in the armchair next to the fire and let its heat burn the last water-droplets from his body. Ronald Weasley's appearance in Azkaban this morning had not been unexpected, he thought, resting his head against the back of the chair. Not unexpected, but not unwelcome, either. Snape, along with Hermione, had been overjoyed to be released from the prison, and he had found himself unable to spare much thought, until this moment, for anything but getting back to Hogwarts. Now, comfortably ensconced in his personal chambers once again, he began to plan the many tasks he needed to accomplish today.

First, and most importantly, he needed to consult with Flitwick. Snape's reputation, and that of Hogwarts, had to be protected. He wasn't entirely certain how the death of Antonio Silva would affect the attitudes of the parents and the Board of Directors, but Flitwick would almost definitely want a strategy for damage control. Snape was well aware that the black marks he already had against his name would work in his disfavour. He doubted that he would be sacked, but enrolment might suffer if parents maintained sufficient doubt about his moral rectitude. He knew, too, that a cloud of suspicion would continue to hang over him, and over Hermione as well, until the true culprit was found.

Second, he wanted to speak with Hermione. The damage caused by this business to his relationship with her was nearly incalculable; he could not reasonably see a way to salvage even what was left of their friendship. While he understood that his behaviour toward her throughout the school year had been neither honourable nor honest, he was deeply hurt by the accusations and condemnations she had flung at him while in prison. He was willing to allow her certain latitude: the prospect of an extended stay in Azkaban was enough to make anyone, even the most reasonable of people, a bit deranged. What he found hardest to excuse were her remarks about Dumbledore; they had ruthlessly opened an emotional wound that had never properly healed. He would never have thought her capable of such cruelty had she not gracefully forgiven people whose treatment of her had been even worse than his own? Snape felt as if *he* were the one who had been stabbed.

And finally, of course, there were things to be discussed with Miranda. Lucius's tale of her elopement with Antonio Silva had been a gripping one such romance, of meeting on holiday in the Mediterranean and falling instantly in love, was something Snape had believed to be a thing of the past, if it had ever really existed at all. As good a storyteller as Lucius was, however, he had been unable to conceal his ignorance of the intervening years, apart from the great disappointment the Silva family had expressed, both publicly and privately, about the seeming inability of Antonio and his beautiful English wife to have any children. This minor revelation had had an entirely unprecedented effect on Snape: his entire body had seemed to melt into a puddle of panic for he suddenly realised that in none of his encounters with Miranda had he ever used any kind of prophylactic, Muggle or magical. He had simply assumed, as one tended to, that she had the matter under control. Strange, how the mention of possible infertility had created, in his mind, the corresponding possibility that she was pregnant. Now, he would have to go to her to make sure that she was not, and how could such a conversation be anything but painful and awkward? Imagine saying to a woman, 'I hope to God you're not pregnant with my child!'

When the house-elf appeared with a platter of sandwiches and fruit, Snape put his thoughts aside and tucked in, determined not to let his manifold anxieties disturb his digestion. The meal was so satisfying, and so filling to his shrunken stomach, that he was tempted to take a nap afterward; he had missed the comfort of his bed. With a regretful sigh, however, he shrugged out of his towel, dressed, and meandered into his office to catch up on his post. The newspapers he set aside to read later; there was some professional correspondence as well, which he made a note to answer that afternoon. And there was a blank envelope, which he picked up and stared at for some time before absently reaching for his letter-opener, only to remember that it was no longer in his desk drawer. Suppressing a shiver, he slit the envelope with his fingernail and, with a dawning sense of horror, read the letter therein:

Dear Severus,

Flitwick has just informed me that, due to parent concern, he's going to have to suspend you and Hermione from teaching until your names have officially been cleared of Antonio's murder. I think it'll be easier for him to replace me than the both of you, so consider this my confession: I killed Antonio myself. I stole your dagger in the night, went to his room early that morning, stabbed him, and caught a few hours of sleep before raising the alarm.

Don't feel any horror on behalf of my soul Antonio deserved to die. People say that murder for the sake of vengeance is unsatisfying, that it doesn't make the anger and the bitterness go away. I don't think this is true. As yet, I feel only relief that he is dead. My only regret, if one can call it that, is that nobody will really consider my actions justified. But let them judge, if they wish it won't change my feelings on the matter.

Perhaps you wish to know why I killed him. I could go into details of the suffering and the indignities he forced me to endure, but I think that would be self-indulgent. The ancient prejudice about blood purity was at the heart of it all: when we married rather hurriedly, in retrospect he didn't know that I was a half-blood. And when, through his

contacts in Britain, he discovered the truth, my life became a living hell. He and his family treated me as badly as any of their servants worse than some, even, to tell the truth. I wasn't allowed out of the family home; I was made to sleep on the floor like a dog. My punishment for 'trapping' Antonio into marriage for divorce is unheard of in Wizarding Spain was to be prevented from ever bearing him a 'mixed' child. Did you know that in repeated, concentrated doses, our standard contraceptive potion causes sterility? Meanwhile, Antonio got bastards on all the other women he ever seduced, or bought, or raped, and took these children away from their mothers to be raised in obscurity somewhere.

Can you understand, Severus, what it is for a woman to be deprived of her children, born or unborn? To have the only good thing that could come from a union with such a man as Antonio taken away? And so naturally I plotted to avenge myself and all the other women to suffer at his hands, among whom I now count Hermione. And you, Severus, were the centre of my plot. I had heard things about you in Spain, of course; I managed to get news of the outside world, after a fashion. You, the betrayer of Dumbledore **and** Voldemort, who switched sides so conveniently and who survived, so conveniently, where others had died. You, the Death Eater, the fighter for blood purity! You had suffered no consequences; it would only be just to make sure that you were the one to pay for Antonio's murder. You were the perfect culprit; all I had to do was give you a motive.

I admit to having made some mistakes: I didn't count on Hermione on the fact that I would like her so much or that she would like you as much as she seems to. I hate the idea that I might have caused her any pain. I still find the tenderness she holds for you a little difficult to accept; she should have written you off as a bad gamble long ago. But the hearts of women are hard to fathom, and she seems quite attached to you, so allow me to give you a little piece of advice: don't waste any more time. You haven't got it to waste.

Because the other thing I didn't count on was what the Enhancement Charm would reveal about you. Its use as a diagnostic tool is well-documented, and anyone familiar with its properties would have to be a blind fool not to see what it shows about you every time it is cast in your presence: you're dying. The fatigue, the aches, the pains, the breathlessness surely you've noticed them? I suspect the venom of that snake worked its way too far into your body before the antidote was administered. Once the damage to the organs is done, it's done. I hear you were left for dead for hours before anybody thought to get you to St Mungo's those hours probably could have made all the difference. I estimate that you have a year, perhaps less, ahead of you. I tell you this because I know that you, of all people, would want to know.

I'm going on the run now, obviously. I won't burden you with the knowledge of where I'm headed; you'll have to shop me to the Ministry to exonerate yourself, but at least you won't be able to lead them to me. I wish you all the best for the remainder of your life. One final thing: be sure to thank Harry Potter when next you see him. If he hadn't convinced me that you'd already paid for your past, I'd have cheerfully let you hang.

Miranda

Snape stood frozen, the letter dangling from his fingers. His mind was a perfect blank. For once, he felt no identifiable impulse to act. The emptiness of his office almost frightened him; all of his possessions, which had once seemed so familiar and comforting to him, suddenly seemed wrong and out of place. The idea of continuing to stand here alone was growing unbearable. His eye snagged on the final sentence of Miranda's letter, and with the sluggishness of someone moving through water, he turned to light a fire behind him and tossed in some Floo powder:

'Grimmauld Place!'

The basement kitchen, with its long, rough-hewn wooden table and copper pots and pans hanging from the ceiling, was warm and cosy when Snape stepped through. He thought briefly that he might be alone and nearly panicked before catching sight of the figure dozing in the wooden chair next to the fireplace. It was Ginny Weasley now Ginny Potter sitting there, and Snape did a double-take before realising that she was not fat, just very heavily pregnant. He hadn't known, and he felt guilty for disturbing her nap. Then he saw the saucepan bubbling on the range and felt even worse for interrupting her lunch.

As he stood indecisively, wondering whether to go back through the flames before she noticed his arrival, she stirred and pulled herself upright. 'Professor Snape?' she asked, blinking groggily.

'I'm terribly sorry. I was just...' He trailed off, at a loss for words.

'Please, sit down,' she said, hoisting herself out of the chair. 'You look as if you've seen a ghost. Can I get you a cup of tea?'

'No! No, thank you,' he stammered, blocking her path. 'Don't get up. I'll get it myself.'

Ginny sank gratefully back into her seat and cracked her back while Snape boiled water in the kettle and poured himself a cup of instant coffee. 'I assume you're here to see Harry,' Ginny said from across the room. 'He should be home for lunch soon.'

'Thank you,' Snape said, coming back toward the fire and settling himself at the end of the nearest bench. Looking meaningfully at her stomach, he asked, 'Er...when are you due?'

'Any day now, thank God,' she said and laughed. 'It's a boy. We're going to call him James.'

'Congratulations,' Snape offered weakly. It unnerved him to see this scene of domestic tranquillity after the letter he had just read. He patted his pocket absently.

'They let you out of Azkaban, then,' Ginny commented, flicking her long red braid behind her back.

'This morning.'

She cocked her head and looked at him searchingly. 'I hope everything is all right,' she said, and Snape heard the note of questioning in her tone.

'Well, sort of,' he answered.

He was saved from explanation by the flaring of the fire. Harry Potter stepped through and shook the coal dust from his hair. His eyes went straight to his wife, and he leaned over to kiss her forehead. When he straightened, he noticed Snape sitting on the bench, cradling his mug of coffee, and his brow furrowed.

'Professor,' he said, offering his hand. 'What can I do for you?'

Ginny levered herself from the chair and moved toward the door, saying, 'Lunch should be ready in about ten minutes.'

When she had disappeared into the hallway, Snape reached into his pocket and wordlessly handed Miranda's letter to Harry. After a moment, Harry exclaimed, 'But this is good news! A written confession.'

'Read the rest,' Snape said tonelessly, staring at the chair Ginny had vacated.

When Harry looked up again a few minutes later, his face was white. 'Snape, is this true? What is this Enhancement Charm?'

Snape explained the charm and how it was meant to work while Harry listened in obvious consternation. 'But that doesn't mean she's right,' he protested when Snape had finished. 'She might have made a mistake.'

'I don't think she did,' Snape responded wearily. 'I haven't felt well for a long time now. I get sick at odd times for no reason. I'm worn out after the smallest exertions.'

'You don't think she could have... you know... poisoned you?' Harry asked delicately.

Snape laughed dryly. 'Why should she? She needed me alive.'

Harry blinked and rubbed his eyes uncomfortably. He sat on the bench next to Snape and spread the letter out on the table. 'If this is true...' he began, then stopped and swallowed. Meeting Snape's eyes, he said again, 'If this is true, then it's my fault. I left you there on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. I thought you were already dead.' His guilt was etched across his face.

Snape shrugged listlessly. 'Always thinking of yourself, Potter,' he said, but without any real venom.

'Does Hermione know about this?' Harry pressed, ignoring the taunt.

Something sparked in Snape's memory. 'If you mean, does she know about this letter, no. But she's always had a great dislike of that charm. Maybe she understood, or guessed, what it was showing. She knew about its diagnostic use.'

'You should go and ask her, then,' Harry suggested, brightening a little. 'She'll be able to tell you whether there's anything to worry about.'

'Hermione Granger, the know-it-all.' Snape's lips twisted in a mirthless grin. 'I'll leave this with you, then,' he said, pointing at the letter and pulling himself to his feet.

'Don't you want it?' asked Harry, puzzled.

'Good God, no,' Snape shuddered. 'Give it to the Aurors.' He picked up a fistful of Floo powder and turned to the fire. 'Please convey my apologies to your wife for interrupting your lunch.'

Harry put a tentative hand out as if to stop his leaving. 'Snape... you won't try to deal with this alone, will you?'

Snape gave Harry a look that almost approached his trademark smirk. 'Why do you think I came to see you, Potter?' He threw the powder into the fireplace and stepped into the flames.

At least an hour passed before Snape felt able to go Hermione's rooms, during which he paced back and forth across his sitting room, letting his rage and resentment and bitterness build until the impending explosion finally drove him down the corridor to pound on her door. When she didn't answer immediately, he snarled the password and burst inside only to find her sitting calmly at her desk by the window, chin cradled in hand, staring through the glass almost blindly. She turned her head to look at him, eyes dark in her pale, haggard face, one eyebrow raised slightly in enquiry.

His rage flagged as if he'd been popped like a balloon at the sight of her melancholy expression. Just as once before, out by the lake, he'd been unable to vituperate her, he now had the distinct impression that shouting at her would have the same effect as kicking a puppy. Clearing his throat, he said hesitantly, 'I've just had a letter from Miranda.'

'Oh?'

Cringing inwardly at the tone of disinterest, he continued, 'She's gone. She did it. I gave it to Potter.'

Hermione nodded slowly, digesting this information. She pursed her lips ruefully and gazed up at him apologetically. 'You must hate me.'

Heaving a deep sigh, Snape sat heavily on her sofa and rubbed his temples. 'Of course I don't hate you.'

'I'm sorry, for what that's worth,' she said.

'Thank you.' Snape wondered how to take the conversation in the direction he intended and decided the direct approach was best. 'There was one other thing in that letter,' he added, twisting to watch her over the back of the sofa. 'Regarding the Enhancement Charm.'

Hermione shifted apprehensively in her chair. 'What did she say?' she asked cautiously.

Snape gave her a look of deliberate appraisal. 'What do you think she said, Hermione?'

She sagged; he felt a brief flash of triumph combined with relief that she was not going to deceive him. 'You know what it was, don't you,' he said flatly.

'Yes,' she admitted. She stood abruptly and joined him on the sofa. 'I didn't know if I was right. I thought I might be interpreting the spell incorrectly. The book I found wasn't especially clear. Otherwise I would have told you!' Her voice was imploring. 'I hoped I was wrong.'

Snape closed his eyes. This was the confirmation he had not wanted. How was it, he wondered, that he had managed to survive through twenty years of stress, anxiety, bitterness, and fear, only to discover that now, having conquered most of his demons and leading a lifestyle of reasonable contentment, he was going to die? Perhaps, he reflected, some human beings were not created to experience joy. The thought was purely academic and caused him no particular dismay; if some people were created to be happy, then others must be created to struggle. He had been fighting one thing or another for so long that the prospect of beginning a new battle was nothing too alarming.

Hermione seemed to sense what he was thinking. She placed a gentle hand comfortingly on his forearm.

She seemed to want him to speak, so he dredged up some suitable words: 'I may be dying, but I'm not dead yet. I have time to figure something out.'

'I'll help you,' she offered instantly. 'I'm sure there are lots of things we can do to find out what's wrong with you and fix it.'

Snape nodded. 'That would be good.'

He wanted to live, that much was clear to him. He might have faced death without fear before, and even resigned himself to it, but then it had all been in the name of a worthy cause. He didn't see any need to undertake such a philosophical view now. Determination grew inside him. Death was obdurate, but had he not accomplished even greater things before? Had he not earned the trust of the two most powerful wizards ever to live? Had he not protected the Boy Who Lived and prepared him for his impossible destiny? Had he not cheated death once before? There was nothing, however Herculean, that he could not do.

'I would do anything,' he said simply, 'to keep living.'

'No!' Hermione exclaimed sharply. 'Not anything.'

The look on her face was stricken and worried, as if she feared some incipient madness in him. It was almost funny; perversely, he felt a great tide of happiness rising inside his chest that erupted into genuine, healthy laughter.

Hermione watched him indignantly until he composed himself and responded, 'You're right. Not anything.'

'Good.' Relieved, she sat back and rubbed her index finger across her lower lip thoughtfully. After a moment she asked, 'You know more about this than I do. Where should we start?'

Impulsively, he cast his eye over her enormous, blue-enamelled gramophone and said pensively, 'Since you ask, Hermione, I'd like to start some months ago, on the night I asked you to play your favourite songs. I realise now that I never played you mine, which turns out to have been a good thing, since I think it's changed.'

He levered himself from the sofa and selected a record from the shelf. 'There are many things still unsaid between us,' he went on, frowning briefly at the thought, 'mostly about how foolish I've been for the past eight months. I'm glad you're going to help find me the time to say them. And I'm pretty bloody determined to make sure I have longer than a year to do it.'

Snape placed the thin disc of vinyl on the turntable. Meeting Hermione's eyes, taking in her youthful beauty and resolute posture, he was startled to find her smiling impishly.

'What is it?' he asked.

'I was just thinking,' she explained, starting to laugh, 'that as bad as she was, well, otherwise we never would have known. I never thought I'd find myself saying this, but thank God for Miranda!'

He paused doubtfully.

Hermione laughed again and waved her fingers at him impatiently. 'Just put on the music, Severus. We've got a lot of work to do.'

Storm the master-marathon, I'll fly through

By flash and thunder fire I'll survive

Then I'll defy the laws of nature and come out alive