

What It Is

by selinabl

Severus Snape is sitting sleeplessly in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place when somebody close to his heart returns from a dangerous appointment. One shot. HBP and DH disregarded.

I

Chapter 1 of 1

Severus Snape is sitting sleeplessly in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place when somebody close to his heart returns from a dangerous appointment. One shot. HBP and DH disregarded.

Disclaimer: All the rights belong to JK Rowling. The poem "What It Is" belongs to the wonderful Austrian poet Erich Fried.

Author's note: JadeyPL was the marvellous beta fairy for this one shot. So if you spot any mistakes, they are mine.

He was sitting in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place long after midnight, drinking a cup of hot Earl Grey. The house was quiet and already asleep. But for him, sleep was hard coming these days. The final battle was fast approaching; like a kind of herald for the things to come, the Weasley clock was already showing 'mortal peril' with all nine hands, although all family members were sleeping soundly upstairs.

Severus was stirring his tea, lost in thought. Potter wasn't ready yet; if he only knew more about the Dark Lord's plan. He had to work harder to prepare the boy and protect him and his friends. Work harder to protect Hermione.

Hermione.

Instantly he chided himself for allowing his thoughts to stray that way.

The loud slamming of the front door pulled him out of his pondering. Severus drew his wand out of his coat and spun towards the kitchen door. A bundle of honey brown hair stumbled into the room and rushed straight to the sink, her back turned to him.

"Granger, obviously you know how to make an entrance. But please try to enlighten me; why do you have to mimic a horde of giants so late after midnight?"

Thank Merlin you have returned safely.

His snide remark was lost on her. She didn't respond and busied herself with brewing some tea, still avoiding facing him. Usually, when she met him in the kitchen, Hermione would sit down and burden him with some of her animated chatter, telling him that Potter needed intensified Occlumency training and that Weasley was not as terrible as Severus always complained.

Damn her; I have already grown accustomed to that kind of sentimental nonsense.

The spy he was, Severus regarded her more closely while she was brewing her tea. Her hair was messy, partly pulled out of her hair tie. Her cape was dirty and ripped. Severus rose from his chair while an unsettling feeling grew in the pit of his stomach.

"Miss Granger, look at me!" he ordered while silently moving to stand behind her.

But the mass of brown hair before him just shook in denial. She had been out on Dumbledore's orders. A special appointment, the headmaster had said.

"Miss Granger, would you please look at me?" he tried once again in a more soothing tone.

Once again she shook her head. Her gaze was firmly directed at the wall. Severus put his hands on her shoulders. He could feel the slight tremor that had started running through her body.

"Miss Granger?"

Still no word from her. Though, under his touch, the slight tremor was fast becoming a massive shaking. Hard sobs escaped her. Before he truly realised it, he gripped her shoulders with greater strength and turned her gently but quite certainly into his arms. Her hands clutched his frock coat desperately, as if the fabric was the last anchor to her sanity.

"Shhh, you are home now." His right hand was stroking her curly hair of its own accord. His voice and the soft caress seemed to soothe her, and as the sobs began to die down, he could feel her mouth moving.

"Malfoy."

A single word whispered into the fabric of his coat, but it was as if an iron fist had gripped his heart.

"Malfoy," he repeated, lowering his voice. It sounded dangerous and alien even to him.

He drew her out of his embrace so that he could look at her. She still averted her eyes, studying the floor while her thick curls hid her face.

"Miss Granger?" *Why can you not face me, love?*

A quiet "Hmhm" was his only answer. He took her chin with two fingers and tried carefully to lift her head to him.

"Look at me, please," he said gently. "I need to know what has happened to you."

Her head followed the soft guidance of his fingers. But her glance was still fixed on the floor. He gasped when her face came into view. The right half was heavily bruised, covered with blood and dirt. Her lips were bloody and slightly chapped. She had been hit. Hard. Dark circles wrapped her eyes, and traces of tears on her skin mixed with dust and dirt from the outside.

What has Lucius done to you? He carefully searched for signs of further injuries. Her wrists were violently scratched; her hands must have been bound to something raw. But fortunately, beside the bruises and cuttings on her face, he could not recognise any further, more serious violations. But she was still in some kind of shock.

"Miss Granger, your face and your hands need medical assistance." He tried to sound composed. "I will take you now to the settee in the living room. Please sit down and wait there while I fetch some of my potion supplies."

Seconds later, Severus ran from the living room down to his small lab in the headquarters and fetched his first-aid potions, his troubled mind longing for answers. When he returned, Hermione hadn't moved an inch. She was still sitting upright on the settee, her gaze unfocused and lost in thought. He knelt down beside her, putting his potions kit down next to him.

"I will now begin to clean the wounds on your face, Miss Granger," he stated in his best classroom voice.

No response. Snape pulled a potion vial and a cloth out of his kit and wet the cloth with the antiseptic fluid from the vial. His fingers carefully brushed some of her loose curls behind her ear. Just as he prepared to clean the first cut above her right eyebrow, she moved her head to face him. Brown eyes met black ones, holding each other's gaze.

Hello, dearest.

Though all too soon she broke their eye contact, looking at the floor once again.

"Professor?" she addressed him for the first time. "Why would Malfoy believe that I would be the perfect bait to lure you into a trap, to finally prove your false loyalty to the Dark Lord?" Her question was nothing more than a whisper.

No, it could not be!

Severus' muscles and movements momentarily went rigid. His tongue felt heavy, like sweet molasses in his mouth. There was no way that Lucius could have come to know about his silly aberration, as Severus called it. He tried to regain his composure and his voice while averting his eyes from her and starting to clean the first of her cuts.

"I have not the faintest idea."

Liar!

"Maybe his misplaced jealousy of the faith the Dark Lord has in me has finally clouded his judgement and led him to this fateful assumption." His answer sounded unconvincing, even to his own ears. "Did he actually tell you that?"

Keep her talking, Snape.

"Yes, while he shoved my face against a brick wall in one of the cellars at his manor," she stated quietly.

He stopped his cleaning and looked at her questioningly, keeping his face bare of any emotion. *You will pay for this, Lucius!*

"I was at the Ministry library to secretly copy a page out of a special book the headmaster needed," she calmly explained.

While anxiously listening to her, Severus picked up the cleaning again. He needed something to keep him going.

"When I had completed my task, I tried to sneak out of the library again. Mr. Weasley had arranged that I could slip in after the librarian had left his office, but he couldn't stay behind and wait until I was finished. So I had to find the way out of the Ministry on my own. Malfoy must have been there after business hours, too; I think he followed me. Because..." She paused and swallowed. "Because somehow, I had the feeling of being watched, and just when I left the building to Apparate back to headquarters, somebody stepped out of the dark and gripped my arm. The next thing I remember is awakening to Malfoy's scornful laughter in one of his shady cellars." She closed her eyes, her head hanging, crestfallen. "I should have been more careful," she sighed.

"This was hardly your fault, Miss Granger," Severus commented sadly as he applied a plaster over one of her cuts.*It's mine.*

One other question bothered him. "But how did you manage to escape?"

She opened her eyes again. "Narcissa."

Severus raised his left eyebrow, urging her to continue.

"She came down to the cellar and freed me after Malfoy drunk himself to sleep over his precious catch. She told me he was completely besotted by the thought that he now had the tool in his hands that could blow your cover."

Once again brown eyes held black ones, asking for answers that black ones weren't prepared to give.*She must not know, not now, not ever.*

"Narcissa fears for Draco, should your position within Tom's inner circle be weakened. She knows that he is under your protection." Hermione touched her swollen lips unconsciously while she spoke. "She has Obliviated Lucius."

"A prudent choice. Now, hold still and be quiet, Miss Granger; I have to clean your chapped lips," he ordered to end the conversation. Severus dabbed her mouth gently with the wet cloth while Hermione regarded him intently. He could feel her questioning eyes on him.

"She sends her greetings and wants you to know that your secret is safe with her," Hermione added.

Damn you, Lucius!

He tried hard to focus on the task at hand while he applied some of his own chamomile salve on the cuttings.

"This should be sufficient," he stated with played soberness when he finished his work.

"Thank you." She still eyed him mindfully. Now it was he who evaded her gaze. He silently collected his potion supplies and turned to leave.

"Professor?" His movements came to a halt.

Yes, *dearest?* "Anything else, Miss Granger?" he asked without looking at her.

"Does it not interest you why Malfoy assumed that my person is the key to your true loyalty?"

More than anything, now that my misplaced feelings have endangered you.

He slowly faced her.

"As I told you, Lucius Malfoy is a jealous man with an overbearing ego, an overactive imagination and too-short brains," he remarked, keeping his cold demeanour. "Be assured, there is no way that your person or your well-being could endanger my cover as a spy for the Order." A lie that flew far too easily from his lips. "If this is all, Miss Granger, I would like to bid you good night." He bowed slightly and spun around to head for the stairs without waiting for her answer.

"Malfoy really enjoyed himself as he revealed how he discovered a photo of me, taken at the graduation ball," the young witch went on, ignoring his answer to her question. "It was in your notebook; it had accidentally slipped from your desk while you were collecting something for him from your potion store." She rose from the settee while she spoke.

No.

No. It cannot be.

Severus was stopped in his tracks, his hand still resting on the stair-rail, his eyes fixed on the steps. He could see the said photo before his inner eye. Hermione was radiating with happiness, winking and playfully blowing a kiss to the person holding the camera.

You were so irresistible that evening. Did you even know that?

McGonagall had afflicted the whole staff with the package of pictures she had gotten from that Creevey boy, showing them to everybody over and over again. Severus had not been able to resist slipping that one enchanting photo into his pocket and hiding it in his personal notebook.

How? When? His world was spinning.

Sunday.

Lucius had visited him last Sunday, requesting some Dreamless Sleep for Narcissa. He had been away for mere minutes.

You are a fool, Snape. An old fool.

"He said he only knew what it meant as he read the poem on the back of the photo." Severus could hear how she withdrew something from her pocket while she spoke:

"It is nonsense, says Reason

It is misfortune, says Caution

It is nothing but pain, says Fear

It is hopeless, says Insight

It is ridiculous, says Pride

It is frivolous, says Prudence

It is impossible, says Experience

It is what it is, says Love"

These beautiful words from those sweet lips. His hands gripped the banister even more firmly, as he feared he would lose his footing.

She knows. She knew it all along.

Suddenly, a warm and gentle hand touched his shoulder. "Professor, please look at me." Her voice was soft and kind.

Professor. Just one of her former professors, indeed.

He closed his eyes painfully. He couldn't move. He couldn't turn around. He was capable of facing the Dark Lord a thousand times, but he couldn't bear to see the pity in her eyes now that she knew. He had to go if he wanted to save what was left of his pride. He moved upstairs, her small hand falling off his shoulder.

"Severus, please," she implored, her words and the use of his given name begging him to stay. Yet still, he moved on.

"Did Malfoy lie to me? Did he just mock me? I need to know, Severus."

He sighed. "Why?" *Let's go, Snape; don't make a complete fool of yourself.*

"Because I need to know if I can hope for my feelings to be returned," she whispered nervously.

Oh.

An unknown warmth flooded his body. He swallowed hard when he turned around to face her. She was standing at the bottom of the stairs, anxiously kneading her fingers and looking at him questioningly with her large, beautiful eyes. For the first time he recognised the fondness and love for him in those brown orbs.

How blind have I been?

He took the flight of stairs in two steps. His hands cupped her face in wonder.

"Hermione." A new and welcome sound to his tongue. His thumb ran gently over her lips. "Hermione."

A soft smile started to caress her mouth while the truth sank in, and he bent down to kiss her.

And it is what it is, says Love.