

Second Chance

by Memory

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

Part I

Chapter 1 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of JK Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

This is my answer to the end of Deathly Hallows. Many thanks go to my fabulous beta **Karelia**, and to those reading this story. Hope you will like it.

Dedication: To **DUJ**, whose friendship is a honour to me and whose stories are like stars shining in a dark night.

And to **Severus Snape**, whom we both love dearly.

Prelude

"Bye, Al," said Harry as his son hugged him. "Don't forget Hagrid's invited you to tea next Friday. Don't mess with Peeves. Don't duel anyone till you've learned how. And don't let James wind you up."

"What if I'm in Slytherin?"

The whisper was for his father alone, and Harry knew that only the moment of departure could have forced Albus to reveal how great and sincere that fear was.

Harry crouched down so that Albus's face was slightly above his own. Alone of Harry's three children, Albus had inherited Lily's eyes.

"Albus Severus," Harry said quietly so that nobody but Ginny could hear, and she was tactful enough to pretend to be waving to Rose who was now on the train, "you were named for two headmasters of Hogwarts. One of them was a Slytherin, and he was probably the bravest man I ever knew."

(Deathly Hallows, Epilogue)

Part I

Headmistress McGonagall looked up with an apologetic expression.

"Just for a couple of days, Severus," she said softly. "The house-elves need to paint the walls of my office. Don't worry, you'll be safely back at your place as soon as they have finished." Her voice became an insinuating whisper. "And, of course, it could be the right moment to move Albus' portrait far away from yours. You always complain that he talks too much..."

Severus Snape, late Hogwarts headmaster and now portrait in an ornamental frame, looked back at her with disgusted eyes.

"You know I can't oppose your decisions, Minerva. So, feel free to do what you think best, especially regarding Albus's position."

"Thank you very much, Severus." The old woman nodded graciously, an amused smile rising on her lips. "I knew you would be happy to collaborate..."

Opening his eyes in the new location, Snape felt like he had awoken after a long sleep. So many years he had been buried in seclusion! It was good to finally experience a change. He looked around in curiosity. The corridor in which he was now hung wasn't frequently used. He himself remembered crossing it only a few times when he was a student. He was still examining the place when two boys arrived hurriedly and stopped just under his frame, panting heavily. The wizard looked inquiringly at them, feeling his professional sixth sense tingle in alarm... a familiar, exciting sensation, very enjoyable after all that time in the office's boring limbo.

So! What were those two students up to in this deserted place? He inclined his head to watch them better. Although some of their physical traits were different, there was an evident resemblance between the children, and Snape deduced that they were relatives: cousins or, even more probably, brothers. Both were dark-haired, and the older one was visibly patronising the other. But looking at them, Severus also felt something else awaken in his chest, an indefinite sensation made of confused, unpleasant feelings. The wizard narrowed his eyes, trying to focus his perception.

Unaware of being observed, the older boy placed a hand on the other child's shoulder and let words come out in a rush.

"Now, you wait here. I'll go alone and let you know something when everything is finished. Okay...? Okay?" he insisted impatiently at the saddened silence of the other.

"But why can't I come?" the younger one asked pleadingly.

"Look, I have already explained this to you. First years are not allowed to participate in Quidditch selections," the older one replied. Then, with a meaningful expression, he asked, "Do you want them to tease you?" At the reluctant capitulation of the other, he commanded, "Now wait here! Don't move!" And, in a few seconds, he vanished. The little one sighed, looking around in uneasiness. And, at that moment, Snape felt the first, terrible pang.

Those eyes! Those green eyes and that black hair... the portrait shivered in anguish. Could that ever be possible? Could his old nemesis have reincarnated again in that little brat, nineteen years after?

He shook his head with a cynical smile. Of course! Why not? Out of the castle, life was going on, cycle after cycle. People got married and had children all the time, and this was probably just what had happened to the hateful individual he was thinking about. Snape sighed while he watched the boy shift nervously below him, and bitter considerations began to flow in his mind. Luckily, he was a portrait. Thankfully, he would soon return to his place in the Headmistress' office. Hopefully, he wouldn't be forced to see another insufferable pest infesting the corridors... Although the boy didn't look so awful... Such a serious, quiet, little thing... Finally, the wizard admitted his curiosity. This disconcerting matter deserved to be investigated.

"Well?" Snape asked with his best intimidating scowl.

"Sir?" Startled, the boy straightened and blushed violently while Severus smiled sarcastically. This new generation was much easier to scare!

The dark wizard intensified his frown. "What are you doing here?"

The boy blushed even more. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know it was prohibited. I'll leave immediately."

"Now, now, just wait a moment," Snape said, a bit disappointed. The boy looked so vulnerable and tiny! A very pathetic object for his sarcasm, but appearance had proven to be greatly misleading at other times, and the dark wizard curled his lips ironically.

"Please indulge me, young man," he asked with that silky, dangerous tone his former students had learned to fear. "What's your name?"

"Potter, sir," the boy answered with a worried expression, and Snape rejoiced inside. So, he had been right! With a nasty smile, the man in the picture dryly commented, "Oh! How incredible! Finally a Potter who has manners! But could I please ask you to be a little more specific? What's your given name, Mr. Potter? James, I suppose?"

"No, sir," the boy hurried to answer. "But James is my older brother's name..." Then he widened his green eyes in amazement. "How did you know it?"

Ha! So, his guess was right. Not that it was that difficult. He was sure that Harry Potter, predictable as he was, would definitely choose that name for one of his children. His sarcastic smile growing even more hateful, Snape replied with a velvety tone, "How did I know? Because I have had the joy of knowing your grandfather and father."

A little pause, then, as if forced to continue by a superior will, the wizard added haltingly, "And... and your... grandmother too."

Snape swallowed, realising what he had just said. He couldn't believe he had effectively voiced something so personal! But those green eyes had literally mesmerised him, and now his feelings were growing uncontrollably strong. How shocking to think of Lily as a grandmother! So many years had passed, yet she would be forever a girl in his heart... Snape lowered his eyes to hide his emotions, struggling against the aching memories that were suddenly assaulting him.

If only he had been more careful...

If only she had listened to his reasons...

If only the Dark Lord had never existed...

If only...

If.

Pain and regret burnt intolerably in his soul. Closing his eyes, he determinedly bottled up those excruciating sensations while the third generation of Potters looked at him with a wondering frown. Then the boy brightened in understanding.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Then you must be Professor Snape! I should have recognised you."

This time it was Snape's turn to be baffled.

"How do you know my name?" He asked slowly, even if he had already guessed the answer.

"Because Dad told me!" the child replied, exactly as he was supposed to, and again Severus Snape smiled nastily. He could imagine Harry Potter telling his sons the tale of the infamous professor, Death Eater, traitor, murderer and spy! How could a child desire a more fascinating story before going to bed?

Ready for a sarcastic remark, Snape took a deep breath inward, but before he could say a word, the boy candidly added, "Dad said that you are probably the bravest man

he ever knew."

Snape stared agape. This was the last thing he expected to hear! But the final pang came with the boy's proud declaration, "I have been named after you!"

"You... you have what?... Say that again!" The man in the picture was feeling hazy. That couldn't be real. This couldn't be Potter's son.

"I have been named after you," the boy repeated hesitantly. Why was the great wizard looking so upset? "Perhaps you didn't know it?" he dared to ask timidly.

"Perhaps you forget that I am a busy man who can't remember all those irrelevant details, Mr. Potter!" Snape snapped nervously, unbalanced by the strange emotions that were tightening his heart. The boy's eyes suddenly wetted and Snape felt incongruously guilty at that sight. He hastened to change subject... and tone of voice.

"And in what House have you been sorted?" he asked more benignantly, waiting in curiosity. Had perhaps fate reserved him a pleasant surprise, assigning Potter's son to the House his father had cordially detested?

Even more saddened, the boy lowered his head and said slowly, "Well, the Sorting Hat decided Slytherin..."

Snape felt a joyful excitement that was immediately cooled down by the next statement.

"He said," and the boy imitated the bizarre voice of the magical device, "'at least one Potter should be in Slytherin, and you'd deserve it much more than your brother'."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "But?"

The boy gulped and whispered, "I asked him to put me in Gryffindor."

With a sigh, the child raised two trustful eyes in disarming sincerity. "I had to do it. Dad wouldn't be disappointed, I know it, because he said that you also were a Slytherin so there was nothing bad in my being a Slytherin too... But James would have teased me forever..."

"Your brother seems to be a remarkably brilliant young man!" Snape growled acidly.

Uncertain about the real meaning of such a comment, the boy smiled hesitantly. "Well, he is definitely brilliant!" He admitted, defending his brother with the pride of the younger for the older. Then he added in discomfort, "I wish I could be as good as he is!"

"Such a talented boy, James Potter?" Snape inquired, raising his eyebrows and pronouncing the name with a sneer.

"Everybody says that he is a genius in Potions!" The boy sighed.

Oh! This was surely another of Lily's characteristics that had been transmitted to her grandsons, although evidently not to young... young *Severus*? Again, Snape felt a strange pang while he associated his name with the tiny little thing before him.

However, the boy's assertion opened many interesting possibilities: to start with, the problem he had been presented with was easily solvable. After all, Snape was a teacher: there was an immense knowledge uselessly stored in his mind. Secondly, Snape's efforts could result in unexpected satisfactions. How would Harry Potter react knowing that Severus Snape was mentoring his son? Thirdly, Snape was beginning to powerfully savour life again, and it was such an exciting feeling, compared to the boredom of being trapped in an office!

Lost in consideration, the wizard traced his lips with a pale finger. "I think we could make a deal," he said thoughtfully. "You probably know I taught your father when he was in Hogwarts."

The boy brightened again. "Aunt Hermione says that dad was a cheater, because in his last year he had found a book with a lot of suggestions inside and so he was getting better marks than she did..."

The boy had an adorable smile. "But Aunt Hermione has always been too fanatic about school and grades."

Snape had a sudden vision of an impatient little hand going constantly up and down in a crowded classroom, and a shiver ran through his body. So many years had passed, yet the memory of that insufferable know-it-all could still irritate him!

"Your aunt was a remarkably brilliant young lady too!" he commented, acidly again. "Now, what are your problems?"

The boy began a stumbling explanation about the use of proper tools while mixing the correct ingredients and keeping flames under cauldrons at the right temperature. Snape listened eagerly, feeling a strange nostalgia burn inside his chest. Paint, he was only paint on a canvas, but his heart was pulsing more and more vigorously with each one of the boy's words.

"Well, you are not so bad," he found himself saying to the boy in an unexpectedly encouraging tone. "You have understood the basics, which is the most important thing. Now you only need more practise after all, you are just a beginner and some good advice from somebody expert."

The boy looked anxiously up and Severus unexpectedly smiled, an oddly paternal smile. "Would you like me to tutor you?"

"Wow!" the boy whistled softly. "Sorry, sir!" he corrected himself immediately, smiling again charmingly. "I'd be very happy to have you as a tutor! ... But what if James complains?"

James Potter! Even though reduced to a painting, Snape felt challenged, as if his old schoolmate was living again in the boy bearing that hateful name, whose existence Snape didn't even suspect just five minutes before. Was life offering the dark wizard a second chance? A grim pleasure spread its intoxicating fluid into his veins while he imagined a James Potter confronting a Severus again... and ignominiously losing.

Looking straight at the boy, Snape replied, "I have offered my help to you. This doesn't mean that you have to advertise the matter. Please try to be as Slytherin as the Hat wanted you to be."

But then Snape looked at the innocent eyes staring so trustfully at him and shook his head at himself. "It doesn't matter, Potter. Just don't talk about our accord to your brother. I will wait for you tomorrow afternoon, at five o'clock. Please be punctual. And remember, if you shouldn't be able to come, you are kindly asked to let me know because my time..."

He felt the absurdity of the statement he was going to pronounce, yet he went on impassively: the boy should respect his teacher, even if his teacher was only a picture.

"Because my time is limited," he therefore finished, a little bit awkwardly.

"Thank you very much, sir!" The boy was literally radiating happiness. Feeling strangely moved, Snape waved his hand nonchalantly.

Then they heard the sound of footsteps. Unexpectedly, the older boy was back in the corridor.

"All!" the one that Snape now knew to be James Potter called loudly. His voice sounded extremely excited. "All! I did it! I'm the new Keeper of the Gryffindor Team! Just wait till I write Daddy the news!"

A/?

Snape felt betrayed. Didn't the little one say that his name was Severus? But before he could investigate better, *Al* exclaimed happily, "It's James! See you soon, Professor!" and ran through the corridor to reach his brother.

Immediately after, another disconcerting surprise unpleasantly hit the wizard.

"Hi, Uncle Albus!" the boy greeted affectionately, waving his hand to another picture while passing by. Snape widened his eyes. On the wall opposite to him, just some steps farther, Albus Dumbledore was smiling mildly, his eyes as always merrily twinkling behind his half-moon spectacles.

The two wizards stared at each other in silence until the boys had left. Then Snape asked coldly, *Uncle* Albus?"

The old wizard shrugged. "His full name is Albus Severus... And I have always wanted a nephew. Why not him?"

The younger wizard had an outraged expression, and Dumbledore couldn't help an amused chuckle. "Disappointed, Severus? You shouldn't be. After all, he has got your name too. And he too could have been a Slytherin, from what I've heard."

Understanding that Dumbledore had listened to his conversation, Snape felt immensely stupid. Then he felt oddly jealous. And finally he realised that he still didn't know why Harry Potter had chosen Severus as a second name for his son. At that point, he also felt extremely curious.

Part II

Chapter 2 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Dedication: To **DUJ**. And to **Severus**.

Part II

Hours passed at an exasperatingly slow pace. Only another day and Snape would be back in the office. The dark wizard was already regretting the silly promise he had made to the Potter boy. And in front of Dumbledore, furthermore! But today he was going to take it back. Just imagine! Harry Potter's son! As if having taught his insufferable father hadn't been enough!

Albus Severus was incredibly punctual, his little face smiling with the zeal of the initiate.

"Good afternoon, Professor!" he greeted happily, and again Snape was lost in the ineffable pureness of those two emerald green eyes. Then he realised that there was unmistakable joy in the child's voice, and an unknown but delightful sensation filled his heart.

"So, here you are!" he exclaimed gruffly, forgetting all his dark propositions. "I hope you brought your books. Who is your Potions professor now?"

The boy said a name and Snape grimaced in disgust. "What?! How could Minerva hire... Oh well! Let's begin immediately! What did you do today?"

The next hour passed in the thorough explanation of the best way to chop Asphodel roots and in the many uses of the little silver knife when extracting juice from some particular seeds. The boy appeared to be unexpectedly bright and, at the end of the lesson, Snape felt the pride and satisfaction of the teacher for a promising apprentice.

Bursting in excitement, the boy asked him, "May I also come tomorrow, Professor?"

There was a hopeful note in his voice, and Snape struggled vainly to remember his previous anger and irritation. But the feelings he was experiencing in that moment were too soothing... Surely another hour of lesson could be afforded! So, he said nonchalantly, "I'll wait for you. Please be as punctual as today."

Minerva came just after the child had left, a hesitant smile on her lips. He felt a pang in his heart. Today? Was he going to be removed today?! Merlin, it was too soon! He imagined how disappointed Albus Severus would feel at not finding him the following day. The thought was strangely hurtful.

But the Headmistress said apologetically, "It seems that the house-elves will need more time, Severus. I'm terribly sorry, but you will have to wait another week. Hope you are not feeling too uncomfortable here."

Snape cast a quick glance at Dumbledore. The old wizard smiled at the uncharacteristically imploring spark in his younger colleague's eyes and didn't comment. Relieved, Snape said in his usual unfriendly tone, "As I already told you, Minerva, I can't oppose your decisions. Do what you think best. I'm not in a position to criticise."

Minerva gave him a long, pensive look, and Snape shifted under her scrutiny. But finally, she said, "Very well. Then I'll leave you boys here." She smiled affectionately at Dumbledore and went back to her office. Silence filled the corridor again until the old wizard raised his head to look at his younger colleague.

"Why do you do this, Severus?" he asked softly.

Snape sighed and looked at his hands. Why, why, why must Albus always meddle?

"Because it's my pleasure," he replied rudely, refusing to admit the obvious.

"I too care for that boy, Severus," Dumbledore said with great tenderness. "But please be careful! He is not like his father... even less like his grandfather."

"Thank you very much, Albus!" Snape blurted out in resentment. "I think I can judge that by myself!"

Silence fell again in the corridor while darkness spread its wings on the day: lights slowly dimmed and the castle was soon wrapped in a peaceful quiet. Yet there was somebody who paced relentlessly that night, vainly looking for rest.

The second lesson was even more satisfactory. Albus Severus was improving quickly, and Snape was enjoying his role more and more.

Looking at his notepad now full of interesting annotations, the boy thoughtfully said with his new, charming confidence, "Dad said you were very strict with marks and discipline. I don't find you so dreadful."

"Thank you, Potter!" Snape replied with mock gravity. Could this be the right moment to investigate without raising suspicions? He paused a moment, then added casually, "I imagine your father told you a lot of awful stories about me."

"No, sir. He just said that you fought in the wizarding war against Voldemort and that you were very brave." The boy was busy reordering his things, but suddenly stopped and looked up at the portrait in uncertainty.

"May... May I ask you something, Professor?" he ventured, blushing in hesitation.

Snape sighed. "You have spent the last hour torturing me with questions, Potter. Another one won't matter."

"But this... this is a personal question." Albus Severus stammered in confusion. "You said that you knew my grandparents... How... How did you..."

Snape felt suddenly horribly empty. "How did I get to know them? Because they both were students at Hogwarts with me. They were Gryffindors like you while I was a Slytherin, but we were same age and studied the same subjects in the same classrooms." Again he paused, lost in his memories. "Your grandmother... she was beautiful. She was my best friend for a long while."

"Oh! And then what happened?" the boy asked, very interested.

"She... she met your grandfather... and she liked him better," Snape whispered.

"Ah!" The boy seemed to suddenly realise how much the man had saddened, and he asked anxiously, "But you were still friends afterwards, weren't you?"

Snape took a deep breath, feeling something cold. The boy's curiosity was slicing him like a scalpel, and the pain was immense. He shouldn't have encouraged these confidences. Now, what could he say to Albus Severus? The boy was looking at him so trustfully... Wrong choices had brought Snape so much anguish and pain in the past! He couldn't afford to be judged and despised by this boy too.

"Yes," he answered and his eyes became blank. "We were... still... friends."

Understanding that the older wizard was pained, Albus Severus suppressed the questions that were still dancing in his mind. Adults were strange, he thought, but he knew there would be time in the next days. It was only a matter of patience.

In the following days, Snape's thoughts focused more and more on the boy, and he raised his head in hope each time he perceived the sound of footsteps approaching. Yet, there were moments in which the dark wizard still wondered...

Why hadn't Harry Potter told anything to his children? Because, incredible as it would seem, apparently he hadn't.

Nineteen years had been a great gap in time. The dreadful memories of the war had probably weakened in the minds and conversations of the wizarding world outside the castle. Perhaps adults might still dedicate them a thought, but surely children were much more interested in their little daily problems, in dealing with studies and with that abominable Quidditch game.

In this way, Severus felt safe. As long as their lessons were undisclosed, there was a hope that nobody would comment and tell the boy the horrible truth about the role Severus had played in the lives of the Potters. Of course, sooner or later the boy would have to know... But by that point, he would have also known who had destroyed his family and then sacrificed his life to pay for his mistakes.

In any case, by that time, Severus would probably be safely buried again in the Headmistress's office why was this thought so disturbing? away from any other implications...

And why had Potter chosen Severus's name for his second son? Snape soon renounced further investigation of the subject. The child was there, and that was the only thing that mattered.

The trust and the confidence sparkling in the boy's eyes, his infectious laughter and his naïve but sincere admiration were a comforting balm for Severus' wounded spirit. The painful memories that were haunting his heart seemed to slowly fade away while a mysterious, paternal feeling gradually replaced anger and bitterness, changing them into shining, pure emotions.

Refusing to worry about the future, Severus painstakingly devolved the best part of his soul to Lily's grandson, hoping that this could be at least a compensation for his mistakes and a promise for the years to come.

Part III

Chapter 3 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part III

On the fifth day, they added a new subject to their lessons. One of the vials the boy had prepared during Potions and that he had secretly kept for Snape's inspection fell to the ground, breaking in a thousand of pieces and spreading bubbling liquid on the floor. Albus Severus shuddered in horror.

"Well?" Severus asked darkly. "You are a wizard, Potter. Use your magic."

"But... I don't know what to do!" the boy exclaimed.

"Move your wand... like this! And now say *"Reparo!"* Snape instructed him.

Albus Severus did as he was commanded, but the myriad of little splinters and the liquid lay desolately still. It took him several tries to finally manage an acceptable spell. From that afternoon, Severus agreed to teach him some other useful enchantments.

At the end of the week, Albus Severus arrived with a prayer in his eyes. "Sir, may I ask you something before we start?"

Again? Snape feared the boy's questions, but he couldn't avoid them, so he nodded and waited in tension.

Albus Severus looked at the floor, then, mustering all his courage, asked in a rush, "Could James participate?"

Snape snorted. That was a point he simply didn't want to discuss. "I was adamant, Potter, that these lessons were reserved for you."

"But why not him?" the boy asked stubbornly.

Hiding his hands carefully under the frame, the wizard tightened his fists in repressed irritation. "Because you said that he was very talented. So, why should he need my lessons?"

Albus Severus gulped and lowered his head. "James is having a lot of problems in Potions lately... Quidditch training is very demanding and he needs help," he confessed.

Snape stiffened. "Well, not from me," he replied coldly; something cruel had unexpectedly awakened in his soul. Memories of another time and another place where another James was triumphantly grabbing the Snitch with a teasing smile.

"I haven't got time to tutor dunderheads who keep Quidditch in such high consideration," the wizard continued scornfully.

"James is no dunderhead!" the boy exclaimed.

"Manners, young man!" Snape replied immediately, and Albus Severus instinctively backed away under that unexpected glowering gaze. The wizard paused for an interminable moment, then asked with frightening calm, "But wait a minute, Potter. Should I presume that you told your brother about our agreement?"

Silence filled the corridor while the boy, defeated, once more lowered his head.

Snape's voice was icy. "I had specifically asked you not to mention it to him. Please explain yourself, Potter."

Albus Severus raised his head and Snape saw tears in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," the boy whispered. "I just wanted... I thought that... Well, thank you very much, Professor. I suppose my lessons end here."

He wiped off his tears angrily and turned to leave, clutching the notepad against his chest. Snape sighed and shook his head.

"Look, Potter, I am happy to teach you, but not your brother," he said in a definitive tone.

"But why not?!" Albus Severus cried in frustration. The dark wizard closed his eyes to avoid the child's. He had put himself into a trap. He couldn't explain. He couldn't take back his words. Every way he looked at it, the situation would hurt the boy. And the thought was intolerable.

"I can't explain. You must trust me. Now, if you want, we can begin the lesson," he finally declared.

The boy looked very sad. "Very well, then, Professor." He sighed. But he was depressed and the lesson ended earlier than usual. As soon as Albus Severus left, a worried voice called Snape.

"Severus? Please be careful with the boy."

"Mind yourself, Albus!" Snape reacted violently. "You made too many mistakes to give advice to me."

Dumbledore looked infinitely sad. "That's exactly why I warn you..." he murmured.

The incident took place the next day. The boy was trying a counterspell in the corridor they had definitely also included Defence Against Dark Arts in their sessions when an ash blond head peeped in and suddenly disappeared. Albus Severus slammed his notebook closed and exclaimed angrily, "I think it was Malfoy!"

"Malfoy?" Surprised, Snape repeated the name. Nineteen years had passed, yet he could still see the cold eyes of Lucius Malfoy and the arrogant smile of his son Draco. But, of course, it couldn't be them...

Unaware of his professor's memories, Albus Severus explained, darkening in resentment, "Scorpius Malfoy. He is a Slytherin and is always spying on me."

Feeling a bit uneasy but trying to reassure the boy, Snape said curtly, "Well, don't worry. It is not forbidden to speak to portraits."

But the quiet atmosphere had definitely been ruined, and the boy went away, leaving Snape with a strange presentiment churning in his heart.

The following day, Albus Severus arrived evidently upset. He stopped under the portrait and looked up with a mix of desperation and hope.

"Did you lie to me?" He asked in a new, trembling tone of voice.

"I beg your pardon, Potter?" Snape replied impassively, trying to maintain his composure while his heart thudded in anxiety.

The boy clenched his fists. "I've spoken with Scorpius Malfoy. He... he said that you betrayed my grandparents and that you sold them to the Dark Lord. Is that true?"

The dark wizard moved suddenly, as if he wanted to stop the boy, but Albus Severus continued inexorably, "Malfoy says that you hated my grandfather and this is why you don't want to teach James: because he has the same name!"

Again, Snape opened his mouth to answer, but no sound came out while pain diffused visibly upon his features.

Shaken by these unmistakable admissions of guilt, yet still wanting to believe in the man before him, the boy presented his last accusation. "You said my grandmother was your best friend, but Malfoy told me that she was killed because of you..."

His eyes widened in anguish while he repeated, "Is that true?"

Snape hesitated, then lowered his head. His heart was aching atrociously.

Albus Severus considered the man bitterly. His voice dropped in contempt. "Then you are a liar, Professor."

With sudden rage, the boy threw his notepad to the ground, his repressed sobs almost strangling him. "I don't care if you are the bravest man on the earth. You are a liar, and I don't want to talk to you anymore." He turned his back to the portrait and ran away.

Feeling his mouth horribly dry and his heart as hard as a stone, Snape staggered back. But then, unexpectedly, a new voice called imperiously, "Albus Severus! Come here!"

Dumbledore had risen in his frame. His tone and gesture were so authoritative that the boy stiffened in his run as if he had been hit. Then he slowed down his pace and, after a few steps, he finally stopped, looking back in challenge.

"Al!" Dumbledore called again, his voice kind again. "Please, do come to me..."

Snape buried his face in his hands while the boy reluctantly reached Dumbledore's portrait and crossed his arms, staring at the old wizard in a defiant silence.

"Al..." Dumbledore said, and his tone was gentle but firm. "You listened to Scorpius Malfoy. Now you must listen to Professor Snape. Why don't you give him a chance to explain himself?"

Albus Severus's expression was sombre. He turned to stare at Snape and the dark wizard returned his gaze. For the first time, the boy could see an immense vulnerability in the man who had seemed so powerful to him, and suddenly, he was scared.

"You are right..." Snape whispered. "I betrayed your grandparents."

The boy paled and went closer to Dumbledore, as if searching for support.

Snape's voice continued, turning hoarse in sorrow. "But I didn't do it on purpose, and when I discovered my error, I was devastated. Please believe me. I loved your grandmother. I still love her. I have never forgiven myself for my mistake."

"But you hated my grandfather," Albus Severus stated obstinately.

"I disliked James Potter as much as he disliked me. But I would have never harmed him, knowing that that would have harmed your grandmother too," Snape replied, opening his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"If this is true, why didn't you tell me when I asked?" the boy murmured, upset at the man's evident grief.

"Because..." Snape stopped, unable to find the words, his soul screaming silently in pain. How could he say to the boy *because I saw Lily in your eyes, and I didn't want to hurt you through my memories?*

How could he admit: *because you are the only one who trusted me without reservations, and I didn't want you to judge me?*

And, above all, how could he confess: *because I've failed so many times in my previous life, so I'd hoped that fate could give me a second chance?*

Snape raised his head ferociously. He could not express his feelings, but somebody else could do it for him. As absurd as it might seem, he needed Harry Potter's help desperately... although he could only hope that Potter would be willing to help him. But there was no escape...

"Do you trust your father?" Snape suddenly asked. Surprised, the boy nodded slowly. A pleading note in his voice, the wizard urged, "Then ask him. Ask him, Albus Severus. Please!"

As soon as he finished, an older voice unexpectedly interposed.

"And when you have spoken with your dad, come to me, Al," Dumbledore added, his eyes filling with tears. "Because much of what happened was really my fault. And I too need to make amends."

Disconcerted, almost frightened at the reactions raised, the boy looked alternately from one man to the other, then backed away wordlessly and finally turned and ran away.

Silence fell once more in the corridor and Snape closed his eyes, waiting to hear Dumbledore's accusations. But no sound came from the other portrait, and eventually, Snape turned his back to it, hiding his face in his hands.

Part IV

Chapter 4 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of JK Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

Many thanks go to my fabulous beta, **Karelia**, to my fantastic revisor, Notsosaintly, and to those reading this story.

Dedication: To **DUJ**. And to **Severus**.

Part IV

Dumbledore had been staring helplessly at his younger colleague since the early hours of the day. When morning finally arrived and the trembling light of the torches brightened the corridor, the old wizard called softly, "Severus..."

No answer came, so Dumbledore insisted, "Please, Severus, talk to me. Sharing worries will help both of us..."

Slowly, the younger wizard turned, and Dumbledore gave a sharp gasp. Paint had broken in an irregular, deep crack on Snape's chest, and the wizard was moving with evident suffering. While Dumbledore stared speechlessly, Snape raised a hand and passed it softly just over his heart. His fingers touched gently the edges of the gash while he breathed painfully. Then Severus closed his eyes and waited for Dumbledore to speak, but the old wizard was lost in immense desolation. So, after a while, Snape turned his head again and stared blankly at the walls, closing himself in his sorrowful thoughts.

Afternoon had just begun when a cheerful Minerva arrived.

"Good news!" she announced with a beaming smile. "Soon you'll be back where you belong. I hope you'll be happy with the change..." She winked conspiringly at the younger wizard. "Especially you, Severus."

But only silence answered and she looked around in perplexity. What was happening? The day that Severus Snape should spare her one of his polished snappy remarks, the castle would probably crumble!

"Severus!" she called, adjusting her spectacles on the bridge of her nose to have a better vision. That weird disinterest was disconcerting.

"Severus..." she repeated uncertainly. "Is everything right with you?"

The wizard didn't answer, and getting closer, Minerva suddenly noticed the long, horrible break in the picture.

"Severus!" She gasped. "How did this happen?" She fretted in shock. "Has the change of place caused this? Oh, I'm so sorry! Why didn't you tell me immediately?"

She worriedly considered the portrait, then she raised her arm.

"*Reparo*!" she exclaimed, flickering her wand anxiously. But nothing happened, and the old witch stared in even more terrified wonder. Never in her life had she experienced anything like this, and she felt horribly helpless. But then, she noticed the two men's unusually quiet attitude and turned to Dumbledore.

"Why are you both so silent? Albus... Please, answer me, at least you!"

"You can do nothing for him, Minerva... and neither can I," the great wizard replied simply.

"Why? What happened?" she cried, upset at Snape's total apathy.

"Please let Severus be. You can't do anything for him now, Minerva," Albus repeated slowly.

The witch was very agitated. "But I can't leave him this way," she murmured, looking around as if asking for invisible support.

"Minerva... please... leave us alone," Dumbledore pleaded, and the old woman stared at him. Surely it had to be a private matter between the two wizards, more proof of the strict connection that had linked them during life and that was still linking them. A battle of gazes took place, and finally, she inhaled deeply and capitulated.

"I don't understand, Albus, but I will do as you ask."

"Thank you very much, Minerva," the old wizard answered, keeping his gaze anxiously fixed on the younger, silent man.

Turning to leave, Minerva suddenly saw a little notepad on the floor, and unnoticed, she bent to pick it up and put it in her sleeves.

Albus Severus was back the morning after.

"I've spoken with dad," the boy said hesitantly. "He sends his best regards to you both." He looked anxiously at Dumbledore, who smiled encouragingly. The boy swallowed and went on bravely, speaking haltingly in short sentences and this time specifically addressing Snape.

"Dad explained everything to me. He said that, huh, it is mostly his fault because he never told me what really happened. He also said that he is very happy you decided to tutor me, and he hopes that our lessons will continue."

Albus Severus paused and glanced expectantly at the dark wizard.

"I, too, hope that our lessons will continue..." he ventured timidly, lowering his head immediately after. "I am very sorry, sir. I shouldn't have listened to Malfoy."

"And why not, Potter?" Snape interrupted him with infinite sadness. "He told you the truth."

The boy bit his lips. "I know that you won't be able to teach my brother," he went on tenaciously, ignoring the comment. He was evidently determined to voice all his feelings, and to find the courage needed, he kept his head obstinately down. "But I have resolved to give you more time. Perhaps in the future you will decide to offer him a chance. James deserves it, even if you don't like his name."

Dumbledore smiled fondly at these words, and Albus Severus finally raised his head, looking at the picture with a hopeful gaze. It was then he noticed the gash that was cruelly cutting Snape's black robes and gasped, "But you... you have been hurt!"

"It's only a crack, Potter. Paintings become old and arid... exactly like men," Snape said, placing a hand on his chest to hide the gash.

"It looks scary! Are you sure it doesn't hurt?" The boy looked pointedly at the man.

"Not as much as our last conversation," Severus replied with a bizarre smile.

"I'm sorry." The boy gulped again, and Snape said briefly, "Don't. It wasn't your fault."

Albus Severus stood silent, evidently thinking of the best way to express his thoughts. Then he said, "Perhaps I can help." And, without warning, he raised his wand and determinedly exclaimed, "*Reparo!*"

Snape shivered suddenly, and the crack closed immediately, leaving a smooth surface.

"Well done, Al!" exclaimed Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling in joy and tenderness.

Albus Severus looked up with a triumphant expression and asked respectfully, a hint of satisfaction colouring his voice, "Better now?"

Snape looked at himself and then at the boy. There was a nicely mischievous smile on that little face. He crossed his arms, feeling a sudden, healing, beautiful feeling powerfully filling his soul.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Potter." Snape inclined his head in acknowledgement. "I see I didn't waste my lessons."

"Could we begin again, then?" Albus Severus was radiant.

"You mean you still want me to teach you?" the dark wizard asked slowly.

"Yes, please! And then I must convince you that my brother is worthwhile."

"Stubborn, aren't we?" Snape said curtly, but there was a smile hidden behind the words, and the boy smiled too. The wizard frowned. "I suppose I will have to give your brother a chance one of these days."

"Will you?" Albus Severus exclaimed, raising his eyebrows in joy.

"Don't jump too fast to conclusions," Snape replied firmly. "I will have to think about it."

Albus Severus smiled again, the quiet confident smile of those who know that victory is just round the corner. "Thank you very much, Professor. I have to leave now. See you in the afternoon."

The boy went away, and the two wizards stared at each other. Dumbledore was stroking his beard with that knowing smile Severus hated so much. The dark wizard clenched his fists.

"Don't say a word, please, Albus," he snapped.

Dumbledore had a surprised, amused expression.

"It wasn't my intention."

The afternoon lesson had just finished when Minerva made an unexpected appearance in the corridor.

"I had arranged for a restorer from St. Mungo's special section for paintings, Severus. But I see you have unexpectedly recovered," she said, raising her eyebrows with a meaningful smile.

"Mr. Potter!" she then exclaimed and frowned as if she had noticed the boy only at that moment. "I wonder what you are doing here?"

"I was..." Albus Severus hesitated. Smiling again, the old woman handed him a little square object. "I suppose this is yours."

Recognising the precious notepad he thought he had definitely lost, the boy's face lit up in happiness. Then, understanding that he had betrayed himself, he blushed and said honestly, "I was studying Potions, Headmistress. Professor Snape is an excellent teacher."

"I know. But unfortunately your lessons end here. Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape must come back to their place this evening."

"Oh!" Albus Severus was very disappointed. "But why?"

"Past Headmasters' portraits should stay in the Headmaster's office, Potter," Minerva explained, carefully scrutinising him and Snape.

The boy looked very sad. "Oh..." he murmured. "Then I have to say good-bye..."

Minerva smiled kindly. "You can always come to visit them."

The boy brightened. "May I? Thank you very much! See you there then, Professor Snape. Uncle Albus..."

With a last, regretful smile, Albus Severus ran away.

Minerva crossed her arms.

"Today I received a very strange letter from Harry Potter, in which he gently suggested that I visit this corridor at this precise time of the afternoon. Now, Severus... Do you have anything to say?"

"I... I don't want to come back to the office," Snape's eyes looked diffidently at her, but there was an uncharacteristically pleading tone in his voice.

"I see," the witch replied patiently. "And what about you, Albus? Are you part of this same conspiracy?"

"No, Minerva, don't worry." Dumbledore suddenly winked. "I'm too old for adventure, and surely Severus will be happy to stay away from me. Although I will miss him a lot."

The old witch stared at Snape, lost in meditation. Then she said slowly, as if expressing her own doubts, "The only problem is exactly the one I was just explaining to young Mr. Potter... who, I suppose, has got nothing to do with your decision, has he, Severus?"

The dark wizard was sullenly silent. She considered his harsh features and unexpectedly smiled. "Rules are made to be broken, sometimes. Would you like to teach again, Severus?"

"Minerva!" Suddenly Snape was very agitated, but she could hear hope mixing with anxiety in his voice. "How could I... How could Hogwarts admit..."

"Oh well! We have had a half-giant, a centaur, a ghost and a werewolf teaching here, not counting a brainless seer. I don't see any objection to also having a painting, especially when he is such an experienced teacher."

Snape closed his eyes, his face suddenly flushing with emotion, and Minerva smiled again, seeing how strongly he was fighting to dissimulate his immense joy. Then she continued, severely, "But this implies that you will have to accept young James Potter too, and all the other children we decide to present to you."

Snape sighed and lowered his head.

"Does this mean that you agree?" Minerva teased him cheerfully, and the younger wizard narrowed his eyes.

"Your quiet cunning has always surprised me, Minerva. You really should have been sorted into Slytherin," he replied disdainfully.

"Harry, Minerva and Albus Severus. Three Gryffindors against you, Severus! I think you have been out-Slytherined." Dumbledore laughed in quiet satisfaction.

Snape didn't reply. His mind was full of confused, contradictory thoughts and feelings. Yet, there was one thing he was absolutely, comfortingly certain of. Life had unexpectedly reserved him a second chance. And this time, he would make sure that it wouldn't be wasted.

Part V

Chapter 5 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of JK Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

*Heartfelt thanks to my betas and previewers: **DementedLeaf**, for her patience and thoroughness, **Xoxphoenix**, for her enthusiasm and encouragement, and **Morgaine_Dulac** for her friendly support.*

Many thanks to those who have waited for this sequel. I hope I won't disappoint you.

And finally, many thanks to those who will join on the road. I hope you will like it.

Part V

The meeting room was silent. The professors had just listened to an astonishing announcement, and they were now staring at the Headmistress with vaguely perplexed expressions. Minerva smiled ironically, tightening her lips in the determined expression her staff knew so well, and which meant that there was nothing else to say or to do: her decision was final.

Finally, an uneasy, thin man raised a hand, adjusted his glasses, cleared his throat and asked, somewhat incredulously, "So, if I understand well, Headmistress, from now on I am to share my duties with a... a painting?"

"That is exactly what I said. It is not a concept difficult to grasp, I believe. Any other useless questions?" Her tone made it clear that she was ready for an argument.

The man looked around for support, but his eyes met only the amused little grins of his colleagues. Understanding his unspoken question, Minerva curled her lips in a cold expression. The man had been a brilliant though arrogant student, but now he was only a mediocre professor. Hiring him had been an error, she sadly admitted to herself, but nobody else seemed available, and Malfoy's not so hidden manoeuvring of the Board had been the last nudge to an inevitable decision. However, the situation was going to change, and hopefully for the better. She stared back at the man, and all those present held their breaths in anticipation, hoping for the start of a good fight. But the man kept silent; so, after a meaningful glance, the Headmistress went on calmly.

"Very well. Tomorrow we will begin with two experimental classes that will involve only a restricted number of first and second year students. By doing so, we will be able to monitor the lessons and verify the progress."

She paused. "This will also allow us to interrupt the course at an early stage, should it prove ineffective, without causing too many difficulties to the students."

She paused again, then added with deliberate gravity, "It will be up to me and to our current Potions master to make the final decision. However, I trust that there won't be any problem, knowing -- as we both well know -- the high reputation of the... painting."

Her eyes narrowed intentionally as she looked at the man, who shifted uncomfortably.

Satisfied at his reaction, Minerva continued firmly, "If the test instead should prove successful, I think we could extend it to older students and maybe create two different subjects, Potions and Advanced Potions. In that case, I would reverse the ages and allow only sixth and seventh years to frequent the special course."

The Headmistress looked around. Nobody dared to speak, and she sighed inwardly in relief. She dismissed the gathering with a brief nod; at the same time, she raised a hand to stop the man, who was preparing to leave with an offended frown.

"Just one last word, Professor," she asked him, quickly checking that nobody was near enough to listen. The man couldn't hide a hopeful glimpse in his eyes and, finally, she graced him with the statement he desired so much to hear.

"I think you will be glad to know that the...*painting*," and a bitter irony vibrated in her voice, while she pronounced that definition again, "isn't, of course, in need of a salary; this means that you won't be requested to share yours with him. I hope this is the answer you needed to solve your remaining doubts."

The current Potions professor relaxed for a moment then stiffened again in offended pride. But it was too late for a comment. The Headmistress had already turned her back to him, heading for the door. The room was empty now, and the other professors were walking in the corridor, discussing the interesting news while glancing at the lonely man with covert derision.

Minerva went up to her office. Thankfully, the meeting had been easier to manage than supposed. However, she was feeling exhausted. Her duty was becoming more and more demanding every year, yet she couldn't think of resigning. Her life would be empty without the school... What would she do, confined in a decaying family house of which she was the only occupant? Sip tea, eat biscuits and chat with... chat with whom? So many of her friends had left or retired, while others had died, and others simply had not been in touch with her for years.

Feeling tears well up in her eyes, the Headmistress crossed her arms on the table and leaned her head on them, ceding to the immense sadness filling her heart. That arrogant, brainless... idiot! How could he talk of Severus in that condescending way? How could he think to be just skilled enough to teach in the place that had featured Horace Slughorn as Potions master and Severus Snape as his even worthier successor?

Sniffing, Minerva raised her head a little to wipe her eyes. At the meeting, she had felt so old and alone! Practically all her previous colleagues had been succeeded by a younger generation of teachers.

Sprout, Sinistra, Vector, even Sybill... one by one they had left, somewhat overwhelmed after Dumbledore's death and Voldemort's defeat, as if Hogwarts wasn't the same place, as if it wasn't home anymore for them.

Well, she had remained. She, and old, frail, little professor Flitwick with her. Headmistress and Deputy, the ones the ex-students came to greet with a particular light in their eyes, and with a meaningful smile when presenting their children. But Flitwick was getting ever more old and tired. Actually, he had been practically living in St. Mungo's, as he was still laboriously recovering from a severe bout of flu caught from his youngest students. It had been necessary to hire a temporary Charms professor for his lessons... and, at this point, she could only hope that Flitwick's illness was just temporary.

Again, she felt terribly alone and wasted. In her devotion to duty, she had had no offspring of her own: only generations and generations of students, whose names and faces were now whirling in her memory just like in a carousel...

"Minerva!" a low, rich voice called her, interrupting her thoughts. Startled, she raised her head again, massaging her wet eyes behind the spectacles.

"Severus?" she stammered, blushing in confusion. Watching her gravely from a framed picture, a black clad man nodded in reply.

"Minerva..." His tone was softer now, almost a caress. Never had she heard such a touching tenderness in that voice when its owner was alive! Tears forced their way out, and she blinked repeatedly to fight them back. Trying to hide her emotion, the old witch got up from her seat and rushed into an explanation.

"Sorry, I didn't notice you were here," she said, blushing even more and avoiding his gaze. "Really, I am so tired and... and my eyes don't work properly, lately. I suppose I'll have to owl Poppy and ask for a remedy... or perhaps a visit to St. Mungo's, you know, they are always so---"

"Minerva!" This time, the voice sounded affectionately reproaching. "Don't try to deceive me. I see that you are upset. Even though I am a painting now, I can easily detect your emotions. I know you too well."

Snape had crossed his arms and was now looking at her with his characteristic scowl. She felt guilty, like a small girl caught in wrongdoing, and clasped her hands in embarrassment; but, immediately after, she couldn't help a tremulous smile despite the tears prickling in her eyes. To be scolded by Severus Snape! Wasn't the situation absurd? She had taught that man when he was a child, and she had even given him detentions!

Studying her carefully with inquiring eyes, Snape continued in a low voice, "I knew the meeting wouldn't be easy to handle. It wasn't difficult to imagine the reactions you'd raise! However, you can always take back your offer. I can't oppose and I won't complain..." A slight hesitation. "After all, I'm only a painting."

Shocked and pained, the Headmistress protested, "Who told you what happened? Did Albus visit you before me? I had asked him not to meddle, but I didn't think to effectively examine each picture in the room." She sighed wearily. "I suppose he was there incognito, as he always is..."

Then, in a sudden outburst, she exclaimed angrily, "However, if he is honest, he should have told you what I replied to that silly man!"

"No, Minerva, this time you are being unfair to Albus. I don't know if he was at the meeting. However, he didn't come here to speak with me; your words have just revealed me what happened. So, there was effectively opposition?" Strangely, he looked rather amused at her anger.

"Only a foolish comment from a foolish man. But I showed him his place!" she replied fiercely, irritated for having entered Snape's trap, and for being consequently forced to admit that there hadn't been a complete agreement. Snape tilted his head.

"Thank you very much then, for being such a valiant fighter," he replied gravely.

"Oh, come now, Severus! I'm just an old lady..." she declared, confused and pleased at the same time.

Snape's lips curled into a smile. "The most daring and endearing old lady I have ever known," he declared, the solemnity of his words softened by an uncharacteristically affectionate expression.

She raised two reddened, incredulous eyes to stare at him. How young he had looked while pronouncing those words! And, with a painful twinge, she thought that he would forever be that young: nobody would ever see Severus' face wrinkle and his hair turn white. There he was, eternally condemned to live the appearance of a life, while he deserved so much to enjoy the real one a wicked fate had subtracted him!

Impulsively, Minerva raised a hand as if she wanted to reach him. But immediately after, with an apologetic expression, she stopped her gesture, feeling her lips twitch in emotion. A tear escaped her eyelids, ran along the bridge of her nose and finally fell down. Snape was now looking at her in a concerned way, his dark eyes waiting with a mute question. Minerva lowered her head, trying to dominate the trembling of her lips.

"I'm sorry," she said painfully. "I'm so very sorry, Severus. I wish I had known. I wish I hadn't been so ready to judge you. I wish I could do something different than merely offering you my apologies. You have been the true hero, while I just--"

"No, Minerva!" he interrupted her with a bitter smile, "Don't blame yourself for having always been loyal and trustworthy; what comes naturally to you is something I have had to learn the hard way."

He hesitated, as if embarrassed for his own impetuous words. Then, slowly, almost timidly, he replicated her action, stretching out a hand and raising its palm towards her.

Minerva stared at him in confusion, trying to guess what he was expecting her to do. Then, suddenly understanding, she too raised her hand and gently placed her palm against his. The canvas felt rough under her fingers, and she hoped that at least a part of her emotions could reach the man imprisoned in that frame, and soothe him.

They looked at each other for a few seconds, enjoying the touching of their hands and spirits. Finally, Snape accentuated his smile and said briefly, "I'll see you tomorrow, Minerva. Thank you again. Have a good night."

Before she could stop him, he left the picture with a quick movement.

Slowly, she drew back her hand, her gaze still painfully fixed on the sudden void on the wall. How empty her office seemed now, without his presence!

With a graceless movement, she sat heavily on her chair and lost herself in meditation. Yes, she was old and tired, and the past couldn't be changed; but the present could be elaborated in a happier future, and this was going to be her commitment for the days to come.

Especially tomorrow.

Tomorrow, Severus would start his lessons. A healing hope sweetly bloomed in her heart, and gentle tears finally flew unrestrained on her cheeks.

Part VI

Chapter 6 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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All my gratitude to my betas and previewers: **DementedLeaf, Xoxphoenix, Morgaine_Dulac and Duj**.

It's extremely difficult to correct an Italian writing in English! Sorry for the many odd things that could not be changed, and many thanks to my brave and kind readers and reviewers.

Part V

The room was comfortably spacious. Its most noticeable ornament was a life size painting of Severus Snape seated at his desk, positioned on the wall opposite to the door as if waiting to welcome those entering. On either side, other magnificent pictures decorated the room, all carefully chosen to display only landscapes.

Many desks and cauldrons stood in orderly rows. Next to each cauldron there was a short column and, over each column, a small painting was slightly inclined at an angle that allowed a perfect view of the cauldrons' interiors.

Several capacious cupboards, obviously filled with the necessary tools and ingredients, were standing against the walls, and four imposing suits of armour had been positioned at the corners of the room, watching over the place like intimidating guardians. The light of the early morning joyfully filtered through the glass of a large coloured window. Minerva beamed in joy.

"Ready for your first lesson, Severus?" she called.

"This is not my first lesson," he remarked quietly, and Minerva smiled inwardly at his confidence.

"How do you like it?" she asked, indicating the place with a proud gesture. "I think we have followed all your indications."

For probably the hundredth time, Minerva recapitulated the details of the room. "The picture where you are now is your office. Inside it, we have painted your desk, chair, quills, ink and all the necessary to write, grade and do what's connected with teaching."

She stopped. "I hope you have checked the contents of the drawers," she asked anxiously. He nodded in amused gravity; reassured, Minerva went on with the description.

"At the back, you have your cauldron, and a cupboard with ingredients and tools. We have also painted a library with all the usual schoolbooks, plus many other specialised texts. If you should want more of them, just let me know their titles, and we will add them. However, I don't think you will need all this material now."

"This is perfect, thank you." Snape again nodded in appreciation, while his brows automatically furrowed, as if he was unconsciously rehearsing his expression.

Enjoying the approval in his voice, the Headmistress continued. "Then, as you requested, your portrait is connected with these little pictures near the cauldrons, so you can enter and exit any one of them at your will, to check the students' work."

"Excellent," he replied in his dry, concise way, and again, she felt immensely pleased to see him entering his role again, and so smoothly. The Headmistress took a deep breath. Finally, the magical moment had arrived.

"If you are satisfied, we can introduce your new pupils now," Minerva said with an expectant smile. But an unexpected, mature voice at her shoulders made her startle in surprise.

"I too was waiting to be introduced to Professor Snape, though I hope there should be effectively no need of presentation between us. I am really honoured to have him as a colleague, having personally experienced his great talent as a teacher."

A man had entered the room; his lips displayed a cordial smile, but his bespectacled eyes were cold and vigilant. Minerva blushed in unease, suddenly realising that, in her concern, she had lacked in delicacy towards her current Potions professor. But Snape nodded in acknowledgment and replied with cautious politeness.

"Mr. Zabini! Glad to see you again at Hogwarts. I had been told that you were teaching Potions. Well, isn't this an unexpected pleasure? I've always thought your skills and ambitions would lead you to a very different career. But sometimes life has its own plans, I suppose."

A pause followed, while the two men stared at each other with wary curiosity.

Looking at Zabini, clearly unbalanced by that rich accent evoking so many memories, Minerva remembered in a flash the tragic moments he had experienced after the Dark Lord's fall. His family, his mother and he himself have made no mysteries about the side attracting their sympathies. As a result, disgrace had irrupted in their lives, devastating them economically and socially. After Voldemort's fall, vindictiveness had spread its dark wings on the wizarding world: several exponents of the winning party had been ready to take the opportunity and use their newly regained power to level social disadvantages, destroy potential careers and occasionally even retaliate against personal enemies. So, no more influential wizard had opened his door to the son of the beautiful adventuress. Even Blaise's stepfather – the last of a long series – had precipitously cut every connection with his wife, abandoning her and her boy to their unlucky destiny.

Slughorn had been the only one to feel a spark of pity. The old man had retired and become even fatter and lazier in the last years, but he had enjoyed playing the role of the benefactor, as long as he had noticed that his reputation wasn't damaged but reinforced by these generous acts so openly exhibited.

Finally, Blaise had ended up working for him, learning as much as he could of a specialization that he had always detested. The Malfoys too had kept an eye on him, ready as always to help a fellow Slytherin; they'd tried to find him an opportunity, and the chance had presented itself as soon as the last Potion teacher at Hogwarts had left his position. So, this was Blaise's second year in the school and, although he wasn't very loved by his colleagues and students, he had slowly become part of the mechanism.

While these silent considerations took place, Snape was studying his interlocutor as well, and Minerva understood his thoughts. The boy that once had been his student had grown to a full maturity, while Severus was frozen, trapped in a canvas and condemned to be a perpetual spectator. Confronting memories with real life, Minerva felt again an immense sadness. Then, unexpectedly, Snape tilted his head, narrowing his eyes.

Suddenly, Zabini staggered back, a stab of pain altering his face. Surprised, Minerva raised her eyebrows. The man had visibly paled, but there was nothing that could justify such a strong reaction: yet, Zabini looked definitely shocked... What could have happened? An alarming doubt insinuated in the Headmistress' mind: could a portrait still perform Legilimency? Could Severus be able to read souls through his eyes?

While Minerva silently wondered, Blaise took off his spectacles and wiped them clean, evidently trying to recover his composure. Then he raised his head and met Snape's undecipherable eyes. With an angry gesture, the man put his spectacles on his nose again and replied coldly, "Yes, Professor, life is full of surprises, but not all are as pleasant as we would like them to be."

He inclined his head in a defiant nod, like a fencer before a duel, then he addressed Minerva, who was watching the skirmish in uneasiness.

"If you allow me, Headmistress, I would be pleased to introduce the children." For a moment, a strange note vibrated in his voice: wariness and something more obscure, a feeling that Minerva interpreted as regret for having been excluded, and desire to reaffirm the rights of his role in front of his two interlocutors.

Without waiting for an answer, Zabini went to the door, opened it and nodded to somebody invisible outside. Following his command, an ordered queue of boys and girls entered the room, greeting good morning with their clear, tiny voices and looking around in curiosity.

"Professor Snape, here are my best second year students," Zabini announced.

Part VII

Chapter 7 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part VII

Embarrassed, curious or awed, each student bowed respectfully to Snape, while Zabini declared names and Houses.

"Frederick Abbott, Hufflepuff... Jennifer Avery, Slytherin... Margaret Finch-Fletchley, Ravenclaw..."

Snape felt an unexpected emotion; there were so many very well known names amongst the children, and memories started unlocking in his mind. Nineteen years had passed, yet it seemed that past had suddenly revived. Mechanically, the wizard took a quick glance at the painted register on his desk, without seeing it. In the meantime, directed by Minerva, one by one the students reached their place near the cauldrons, lifting their faces expectantly while the presentation continued.

"Arthur Macmillan, Gryffindor... Jasmine Montgomery, Hufflepuff... James Potter, Gryffindor..."

That name! That hateful name still had the power to hurt him like a stab! Frowning, Snape looked at James Potter, and James Potter looked back at him with a mixture of shyness and cheek. Snape deepened his frown, but the boy didn't lower his gaze: instead, his brows and lips seemed to curl down into a scowl. Feeling anger bubble in his chest for such unacceptable behaviour, Snape kept his eyes fixed on the boy until he succeeded in making James turn his head in uneasiness.

"I see," the dark wizard murmured menacingly, with a last threatening glance. Then, back to himself again after that silent exchange of gazes, the painted professor turned to his living colleague.

"Thank you, Professor Zabini. I presume that the students have been informed about the very special characteristics of this course, including... me?"

Zabini nodded rigidly, and Snape seemed to forget the world around him: with a smooth movement, he raised himself and walked in front of his desk to address the children. What had his introductory speech sounded like, so many years ago? He smiled darkly, and sentences began to flow.

"I won't waste words in describing what you should know very well by now. Potions is an outstandingly difficult subject, and only those of you who are particularly gifted may aspire to stay in this class. So, I trust you are not going to disappoint Professor Zabini, who offered you this opportunity, but, even more important, I hope you are not going to disappoint me. You will see that it's not easy to achieve the standards I've set... However, I reward generously those who are willing to try and that meet with my approval. And now, let's begin!"

The children, who had exchanged worried glances during the speech, took an even more horrified expression when Snape announced, "We will test your preparation with the Draught of Relaxation. This potion is included in the first year's program, so everyone here should be able to favourably impress me."

A menacing pause followed. "But beware: only those passing the test will be allowed to remain in this class."

As he expected, the looks of horror gradually transformed, some changing into eagerness, some into panic, some into the instinctive relaxation of those who hoped to fail and consequently be spared the new upcoming battles. In an impressive silence, boys and girls opened their books, checked the requested items and then went to the cupboards to collect tools and ingredients, intersecting their paths in a disordered dance.

Snape immediately noticed that, as always, girls were the most determined. Then he caught a look of uncertainty upon James Potter's face, and his heart had a joyful twist. The test was the last trick he had planned to avoid teaching that insufferable boy without openly disobeying Minerva and, above all, without disappointing Albus Severus. He had carefully kept his plan secret, knowing that, the moment he had announced his decision, Minerva wouldn't contradict a professor in front of his students.

And in fact, though irritated for his ruse, the Headmistress crossed her arms and sighed in exasperation, looking up at Snape with an indignant frown. But he refused to lower his eyes. If this was his class, he had to be the one in command there, and he had to be free to decide.

Blaise Zabini was watching the ordered confusion as well, but there was a mix of expectation and controlled anger on his features. His eyes, lost in contemplation, were

revealing his feelings: he was hoping for a failure... and Snape smiled sardonically. Being a portrait had its advantages: there was only one supreme authority he would bow to, even if reluctantly, and that was Minerva. All the other possible opponents should be prepared to fight, included his so unenthusiastic former student.

Ah! Finally James Potter was reacting! Taking a ladle with an exaggerated gesture, the boy winked at young Arthur Macmillan, who was working next to him, and who smiled back in complicity. Looking at little Arthur, Snape wondered if the child could be Ernie Macmillan's son. Probable, but the lad wasn't similar to his extremely ceremonious parent; Arthur had a mischievous smile that matched James', while his eyes were brightened in excitement. And, underlining even more the difference with his father, who had been a respectful Hufflepuff, the child had been sorted into Gryffindor, one of the annoying surprises that the Sorting Hat sometimes dispensed. So, it seemed that also "this" James Potter had got a toady, and probably a troublesome one: a situation that Snape immediately found detestable.

Well, let's see how this new dangerous pair was going to perform the test...

Pride for his House made Snape finally watch the Slytherins. Feeling his gaze on their back, the children raised their eyes and smiled shyly, hoping in his partiality. The Avery girl was particularly committed in her work. She had already opened the cupboards at least ten times, choosing her ingredients with great care and dividing them in little piles. She was obviously trying to impress him... but she deserved his appreciation, so Snape raised his brows in silent encouragement.

Slowly, the class took form before his eyes. The students appeared to be trained, but their preparation lacked consistency. It seemed that each one had developed individual and original approaches of work, instead of following a method. The result was a creative mess of techniques that the dark wizard contemplated with disdainfully pressed lips. Trying to catch the many different inconsistencies, Snape's attention shifted relentlessly from child to child... but returned constantly to James. The boy seemed to enjoy the curiosity of his new teacher. After that very first moment of well simulated panic -- which had been clearly a fake -- James was now working deftly, chopping his ingredients, adding them to the mixture, bending to check the fire under the cauldron, and finally wiping his forehead with a smile of sincere joy to his friend.

Snape's heart tightened. That was exactly the way Lily used to smile to him, when they were competing in a class... a smile in which friendship, pleasure, mischief and affection were mixed in such a lovely combination! Snape closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The emotion had been too strong. Both the Potter boys had something in their features that reminded him too painfully of their grandmother... But this last tremulous impression was cancelled by the smirk that had unexpectedly substituted the smile. Intolerable in his smugness, that smirk filled Snape with a dark satisfaction, persuading him that, skilled or incompetent, James Potter was an insufferable, presumptuous brat, like his grandfather before him. But this time, Severus Snape was on a different side of the barricade...

Jennifer Avery gave a surprised little cry, when Snape appeared in the frame suspended over her cauldron. However, the girl instantly recovered her composure and smiled -- a true Slytherin smile -- waiting for his judgement.

"Very well done, Miss Avery," Snape answered to her mute question. She blushed in pride, and he left to enter the next frames. The children weren't expecting such closeness. One of the little Hufflepuffs dropped his herbal extracts in panic as soon as his teacher appeared next to him. Snape scolded him briefly, and the boy bent to clean the floor while tears flew from his eyes. Minerva watched Zabini. The man had clenched his fists and was looking at the scene with repressed anger. The Headmistress sighed.

Finally, the test was over. The children nervously held their breaths, while Snape made a last tour of the frames to check the final results. In an expectant silence, the wizard announced his verdict, being very careful in choosing his words.

"I'd say that you all have passed the test, a result that honours the many hours Professor Zabini dedicated to you. In particular, both Miss Avery and Mr. Potter have brewed a perfect mixture."

Snape stopped, savouring the satisfaction that was slowly diffusing upon Potter's features... then he hit mercilessly.

"However, five points go to Slytherin, as Miss Avery was the first one to complete the assignment."

James Potter had a sudden uncontrolled movement, and Snape was ready to notice it.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Potter? We are not on a Quidditch field now, so please watch your manners."

The boy crossed his arms with a dark frown, but kept silent. It was Zabini who immediately replied, venting his exasperation.

"It was my understanding that the test wasn't supposed to be awarded with points, Professor Snape."

"Well, then you misunderstood, Professor Zabini," Snape growled back. The two men looked at each other in challenge, and Minerva intervened, talking to the students.

"Very well, children, the class is over. I'm glad to see that the test has been a success. Now, please leave and reach your next lesson. I'll let you know the schedule of the new course as soon as possible."

The children went away, half relieved, half baffled, Jennifer Avery shining in joy, James Potter shrugging sullenly at the words that Arthur Macmillan was whispering. As soon as they had left, the Headmistress turned to both professors.

"I won't, I repeat, I won't tolerate such behaviour in front of the students anymore. Have I made myself clear?"

The two men exchanged a rapid glance and didn't reply, so Minerva insisted angrily, "Professor Zabini? Professor Snape?"

Slytherin in his strategy, Zabini was the first one to surrender. With an apologising smile, he bowed to the old witch and said, "I'm sorry, Headmistress, but I was speaking on behalf of my students."

"Thank you, Professor Zabini," Minerva replied. "I'm sure that Professor Snape understands and appreciates your concern as I do. However, I'm also sure that Professor Snape knows how to deal with his students, given his long practice."

Called into question in such way, Snape couldn't refuse to utter an ironic, "Thank you for the acknowledgment, Minerva."

"Enough," she replied severely, cutting off any other comment. "The test has been passed. I think we can begin a regular course. Now, may I ask you to leave us, Professor Zabini? I would like to exchange some words with Professor Snape and define better the details."

A storm was ready to burst, and the man couldn't hide a meaningful smile; he bowed again to Minerva, and replied, "As you wish, Headmistress."

"Professor Snape," he then greeted, and Snape nodded coldly. Zabini walked out, shooting a last triumphant glance to the portrait. Then the door closed, and the old witch released her frustration, exclaiming angrily, "I expected better from you, Severus!"

Snape looked down at her with folded arms. "Why did you hire him, Minerva?"

"This is none of your business!" she answered, even angrier. "Instead, why did you reply to him in that way, and in front of the children, furthermore?"

"You don't know him as I do," Snape retorted.

"Of course!" she declared indignantly, "And are you sure that young James Potter didn't play a part in this childish reaction? Really, Severus, why did you have to humiliate him and to assign points to Miss Avery? This was supposed to be a test!"

"I have my reasons, Minerva!" he reacted with unexpected violence. Then, looking suddenly and oddly vulnerable, the wizard lowered his voice, "But I'll understand if you ask me to renounce teaching, now."

The Headmistress watched him with anguished eyes. Snape was staring sullenly at the wall, his fingers tormenting the pages of his new register.

"No, Severus," she finally sighed, shaking her head. "I still want you to teach. But please, control your temper."

She turned her back and went towards the door. But after just a few steps, she stopped in hesitation and turned again to him, only to discover that the portrait was now desolately empty. Minerva bit her lips in dismay, then rubbed the bridge of her nose under the spectacles with a discomforted gesture.

"And this should have been a day of joy..." she murmured bitterly.

A well-known voice called her.

"Minerva? Please don't be too harsh with the boy. He has suffered so much... He needs to learn to live again."

"Albus!" the old witch reacted, realising that Albus Dumbledore was staring at her from the wall. The old wizard was comfortably seated in a beautiful picture that showed Hogwarts' garden in all its splendour.

"Albus..." Minerva repeated, shaking her head in disbelief, yet smiling in evident affection. "As always, you've managed to meddle?"

"Ah, come on, Minerva! I just wanted to see how the boy was doing, and I knew I couldn't count on you for an invitation. However, you chose well the place. I had the hell of a time finding it! Next time, please, be so kind as to inform me, will you?"

Minerva didn't answer, her hands clasping and unclasping in anguish. Then she murmured blankly, "Did I do the wrong thing? Did I make a mistake, allowing Severus to teach again?"

"Minerva!" Albus gently reproached her. "Now don't be too harsh with yourself! You made him the best present you could ever imagine. But you need to learn how to handle him, now. It will take time. Please be patient."

"Thank you, Albus," the old witch murmured, looking suddenly exhausted. Quietly, as if lost in a dream, she began to walk towards the door.

"And, Minerva? Severus is a loyal friend. Do listen to him," Dumbledore added with a concerned expression.

Again, she nodded wearily, without stopping her walk. Then she went out, closing the door after her. Albus stood still for a while, looking at the empty room with meditative eyes. Then he sighed deeply and left the picture.

Part VIII

Chapter 8 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part VIII

The next day, the scene seemed to be a repeat of the day before, except for a detail: the mood in the room had changed, switching from expectation to uneasiness, and the three main actors on the scene displayed a full range of expressions reflecting this transformation.

The Headmistress looked worried, and cast anxious glances to Blaise and Severus.

Zabini seemed to be expecting something. His brows were wrinkled in the disappointed frown so typical of those thinking to have been deceived. However, he behaved in cold politeness, as always.

Snape... Well, Snape was the real mystery. Going up to her office the night before, Minerva had hoped to exchange some words with him and clarify their positions: her heart had been aching the whole day for the miserable end of that so long-awaited first lesson! But Severus wasn't in his frame, and the old witch had deduced that he was deliberately avoiding her presence. That, of course, had troubled her spirit even more.

However, when Zabini announced the arrival of his best first year students, Minerva finally could see a sudden interest lightening Snape's face, immediately dissimulated under his habitual impassive mask.

This time, a not very ordered queue of miniature wizards and witches entered the room, blushing in embarrassment while scrutinizing the place. The children were voiceless in awe, and an impatient Zabini had to remind them to greet good morning to the two important people waiting for them. The tiny faces turned obediently to Minerva then up to look at the big portrait: some students smiled in embarrassment, some widened their eyes in naïve wonder, some displayed evident anxiety.

Again, names and Houses were declared, and so many of them brought back vivid memories from the past.

"Stephen Bootes, Hufflepuff... Martha Corner, Ravenclaw... Scorpius Malfoy, Slytherin... Rupert Warrington, Slytherin... Rose Weasley, Gryffindor..."

Minerva could see Severus' eyes narrow during the listing as if he were waiting for something.

When Zabini had finished his litany, the dark wizard seemed to reflect, then he asked, "What about Mr. Potter? It was my understanding that he too would be included in the course."

"You met him yesterday, don't you remember, Professor?" Zabini asked teasingly. "He incurred your wrath by not complying with your sense of time."

"We mean young Albus Severus," Minerva intervened, joining Snape in his question, in the evident attempt of preventing incensed reactions.

"Oh!" Zabini replied with exaggerated surprise. "I understand. You wanted to have both the sons of our past celebrity in your classes! But unfortunately, the boy doesn't meet with the standards required for this course."

"More reason to admit him here, then," Snape growled incongruously, and Zabini frowned, abandoning his pleasant tone.

"You asked for the best," he replied resentfully. "Here you have them."

The students were shifting uncomfortably during that skirmish, and Minerva furrowed her brows in disappointment. The awful scene of the day before was repeating itself, in spite of her warnings. No, she couldn't allow Severus to act like this, neither Zabini to provoke him continuously.

In the meantime, the dark wizard was declaring with gritted teeth, "I had asked for a..."

Intercepting Minerva's look of warning, Snape interrupted himself, clenched his fists and asked, "Could we please exchange a word in private, Headmistress?"

Keeping her eyes expressionless, Minerva replied, "I'll be happy to speak with you as soon as the lesson is finished, Professor Snape."

Zabini smiled meaningfully.

There was no escape, and Snape frowned in anger. Then he began to speak to the children. Slowly, he seemed to enter his role and forget the tension around him. This time, the children were asked to perform a very simple concoction. After all, they had only had a week or two of practice, and Snape was relieved to see that the group was promising, and their fresh abilities still not spoiled by bad habits.

Scorpius Malfoy soon took the opportunity to talk with him.

"My father sends his best regards, Professor. He said that you were always his favourite teacher. I hope I will be as good as he was."

Typical Malfoys, that suave adulation: but Scorpius was Draco's portrait, and Severus felt a strange sensation looking at him. The boy was respectful and anxious to please, yet there was something uneasy, even resentful, inside him.

"Thank you, Mr. Malfoy," he replied automatically and then lost himself in considerations from which he was wakened by a raised hand, followed by a question. The girl who had spoken was waiting, her nice head of red-brown hair tilted in expectation, her hazelnut eyes looking straight at him. Again, he reacted automatically.

"Speak louder, Miss Granger, I didn't hear your words."

For a moment, the girl looked puzzled, then she replied.

"Sorry, Professor," and an amused smile appeared and disappeared on her lips, "my name is Weasley, Rose Weasley. Granger is my mother's maiden name."

Minerva smiled as well, and Snape felt stupid. How similar to her mother the girl was, despite the Weasley red mark on her hair! Unconsciously, he looked around, as if expecting to find Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley sitting somewhere else in the classroom: his expression changed so much in those unguarded seconds, that the girl and the other two adults exchanged a wondering glance.

"Well, Miss Weasley... I believe you had a question to ask?" Snape finally seemed to react after a long pause.

The girl asked, and hers was a question full of good sense, that revealed her bright intelligence but, alas! also the lacks of her previous teacher. Snape glanced at Zabini and replied briefly, avoiding twisting the knife. An alarming sensation was invading his heart, and he suddenly felt nervous.

Trying to keep his anxiety under control, he connected to the little frames to check the students' work. This time he had deigned to advise the class, so there was only a great expectation, and no panicked reactions at his coming and going.

The children were evidently excited, proud to be there, eager to do their best, and ready to be surprised by more and more enchanted wonders. They were only first year, of course, and the magical world was just beginning to unveil to their fresh minds. Snape felt bizarrely moved for a moment, and again, he thought how things could have been different, if he hadn't been so...

The pang in his heart was violent. He sighed, while a sudden wave of memories washed again upon him.

Hiding his pain under a frown, Snape checked, asked, commented and finally graced the students with a favourable verdict. The class reacted with a joyful explosion. An amused smile danced again on Minerva's lips, happy at the unusual sight of students enjoying a lesson, and coming from such a teacher.

The children were then dismissed and went out whispering in excitement, while the three adults faced themselves again in the empty room. But this time, Minerva surprised both Snape and Zabini by announcing that she had something to do, and that she would be back in a few minutes. In the meantime, the two professors were kindly invited to exchange their opinions.

Snape watched her going out, and his face altered in a sullen expression. This was surely a trick to force him and Zabini to confront each other. Feeling deceived, he looked at his younger colleague and Zabini looked back at him, folding his arms with a disdainful gesture. The two men kept rigorously silent for a while, each one waiting for the other to make the first move.

Snape decided to extend an olive branch.

"Mr. Zabini," he said, with his most reasonable tone, "We both are Slytherins. I was your teacher years ago and Head of the House, and you used to trust me then. Why are you so hostile to me now? What has happened that I don't know?"

Zabini clenched his fists and took a step back to contemplate better the portrait.

"Where do you want me to begin, Professor?" he asked bitterly. "Perhaps from your betrayal? Did you forget that you raised us into hate and contempt, while you were secretly devoted to a completely different mission?"

The man stopped to breathe, letting his words sink into Snape's soul.

Then he continued, his voice full of resentment, "Did you ever think of your students while you performed your double acting so well, or did you consider us just pawns that could be sacrificed for a superior reason? Did you ever wonder what would happen to us or to our families, or were you too involved in your heroic task to pay attention to such insignificant details?"

For a moment, his voice vibrated with pain, and Snape closed his eyes, hiding his anguish. Once more, his mistakes had unexpectedly come out to torture him after so many years. The wounds he had believed closed had been reopened, and by somebody he had hoped to be a friend. How many other men and women could claim to have been hurt because of his faults and of his mission? He had never thought that the consequences of his actions would be able to extend so far in the future... when, oh! when would he find a reprieve from his sins?

Zabini's voice continued implacably.

"Potter said you killed Dumbledore to save Draco. Well, then he was the only one of us you really cared about. But all the others... we have been doomed, afterwards!"

Blaise's lips twisted uncontrollably, then he recovered his control. He spoke in harsh, halting sentences, as if pain were forcing an admission from him.

"I need my employment, Professor. You have honourably died and become a hero. But I'm still living, and I need this job to survive. Do you want to prey upon the only resource I have been left?"

Zabini raised his head, and Snape could see desperation altering his features. But there was also something else, something much more alarming...

Then he heard a soft knock at the door, and Minerva entered the room, a hopeful smile on her face. Zabini closed again his emotions behind a wall, while Snape felt a bitter remorse biting his heart... followed by a cold sensation of fear.

Part IX

Chapter 9 of 38

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Part IX

The classroom was empty and silent. Passing through the glasses of the window, the soft afternoon light created coloured patterns that danced joyfully on the floor and the walls. Severus Snape sat motionless in his frame, lost in contemplation of the happy sight... yet there was no joy in his eyes. His gaze relentlessly roamed past the many objects disseminated under his portrait: the ones that should have been the symbols of his rebirth, and that now a secret anguish was slowly transforming into creepy caricatures.

Closing his eyes in despair, Snape thought at what had happened in the last two days. That morning, Zabini's revelations had left a deep mark on his imagination. The horror of discovering that the consequences of his actions still affected the life of those surrounding him had been immense. And yet, there was nothing that he could do.

Paint. He was only paint. Though magically imbued with unusual stubbornness and ferocious determination, he was only a portrait, condemned for the rest of his days to watch from a wall, eternally contemplating those who were contemplating him, in a weird game of mirrors.

Painful considerations emerged and exploded like bubbles in his mind, dripping along the fibres of his canvas and condensing in stinging questions. How many other accusers would he meet that would remind him of his misdeeds? How many of his students would despise him for having betrayed their parents or relatives? How could he face those gazes and find the words to answer those mute accusations? He remembered little Malfoy's diffident eyes: was the child silently condemning him?

Nineteen years had seemed such a long gap to forget the past! Had his seclusion in the office anaesthetised his conscience and covered his feelings with dust? His determination began to vacillate. Who was Severus Snape? An impostor dressed up as a teacher. What hopes, what dreams, what aspirations had Severus Snape? None... or better, none left. So, why should Severus Snape still be allowed to perform his task?

A kind old voice unexpectedly interrupted these dark reflections.

"A Knut for your thoughts, Severus..."

Awakened from his anguishing daydream, Snape rubbed his eyes, answering in irritation, "How could I possibly believe that you would remain in Minerva's office forever? I should have asked her to lock you there with an *Incarcerous* spell!"

He sighed in resignation then looked around, searching for his unwelcome companion.

"Where are you hiding, Albus? You seem to forget that we are both two-dimensional. I can't see you if you are at my side."

"I am always *on* your side when you look for me, Severus. But today, you only need to raise your eyes... and your spirit."

Severus lifted his head until he meet a smiling Dumbledore, watching from a beautiful panorama, higher on the opposite wall.

"These pictures are so relaxing, don't you think?" the great wizard declared nonchalantly, his piercing eyes never abandoning the younger man. "I must admit that Minerva had a splendid idea when preparing this room."

Severus shrugged. "Why don't you simply admit that you always find a way to meddle?" he asked, closing himself again in his bitter contemplation.

"I will be glad to admit whatever you prefer, if this makes you answer my first question."

"There is nothing to say..." Severus replied sullenly, "except that I'm going to resign this same evening."

"This is an unexpected and saddening decision, my boy. May I ask you why?"

The old wizard wasn't evidently intentioned to let him go, and Snape reacted in anger, "Don't be irritating, Albus. I have just discovered that... that..."

But he could not continue, so Dumbledore sighed in his turn.

"Don't let the words of an embittered little man obscure your courage and your loyalty, Severus."

"You have listened to our conversation!!!" Snape reacted indignantly and, after a little pause, Dumbledore nodded in silence.

Enraged by this quiet admission, the younger wizard raised his voice. "That embittered little man – as you like to call him – once was one of my students. He used to trust me then, while today he accused me of betrayal!"

"Still, you have justifications that he doesn't have," Albus replied meekly. "Don't burden your shoulders with the wrong choices that others have made, Severus."

Snape considered his old mentor with unsympathetic eyes, then he shook his head in stubbornness.

"The past can't be changed. It has been foolish to hope."

"It's never foolish to hope, my son", the old voice whispered, and a vigorous knock at the door seemed to reply to this assertion, making both wizards startle in surprise.

"Come in," Snape invited grudgingly, expecting to see Minerva and bracing himself for a discussion. But this time his intuition was wrong. The door opened, and an unknown man entered the room, walking with an energetic pace and displaying a nice, sincere smile on his round face.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape!" the stranger greeted politely, and for a moment, only silence answered his voice.

"Mr. Longbottom!" Snape finally breathed, suddenly realising whom his visitor was; then he added in astonishment, "Well, this... this is most unexpected!"

"I'm glad you remember me, Professor," Neville Longbottom happily replied. "Headmistress McGonagall told us that you have been fully reinstated in your role today, so I came to congratulate you."

His smile grew wider. "Perhaps you don't know it, but now we are colleagues."

Confused, Snape considered the man, trying to recover this piece of information from the mass accumulated in his brain during those long, somnolent years in Minerva's office.

"Colleagues?" he repeated cautiously.

"I teach Herbology, Professor," Longbottom eagerly explained. "Madam Sprout was so kind as to recommend my name when she decided to resign, some time ago. So, you see, now I have passed on the other side and, I must say, it hasn't been easy. During these few years of teaching, I have been able to reflect about my school days, and, if you allow me, I would like to apologise for my utter stupidity. Really, you had to use all your perseverance."

"Which doesn't mean patience..." and Snape smiled darkly.

"Well, no!" the man confessed with a laugh. "I must admit that you have never been renowned for your patience amongst us students. But I bet you knew it very well and enjoyed the idea."

"Mr. Long... I mean, Professor Longbottom, how is it that you speak to me so easily now?" Snape asked impatiently, trying to understand the real meaning of that visit. Surely Neville Longbottom couldn't be considered an affectionate friend, neither a nostalgic House fellow. "I had the strong conviction that you simply hated even the sound of my voice."

"That time has passed, Professor," Neville answered quietly, and his eyes sparkled. "We have grown up, and we've got to know what you have done for the magical world. I never thanked you properly for that. Neither have I thanked you for the detentions with Hagrid in your last months as a Headmaster. Now I know that you were trying to protect us."

Snape felt a sudden pang. The sinister faces of Alecto and Amycus Carrow had appeared to his mind, and with them a flood of unpleasant, horrid memories. Real life could be so... so *hurtful*. He had forgotten it.

But Longbottom was already going on, a mischievous grin opening again on his face. "You see, Professor, you don't scare me anymore. I've placed myself in the very path of Voldemort himself, and I hate to break the news, but you don't really compare in the intimidating stakes*."

Snape considered that answer with a scowl. There was something more he needed to know... But before he could ask, the door opened again, and a boy entered, almost running.

"Professor Snape! Oh! Finally I have found the place!" Albus Severus Potter exclaimed in exultation.

Then the child stopped in embarrassment, realising that there were more people than he expected to see in the room. But, suddenly recognising a familiar face, he relaxed and reached Neville under the frame.

"Good afternoon!" he said with his charming tiny voice, smiling cheerfully to both man and portrait.

Snape shot a quick glance at the eldest of his visitors. If Longbottom had been surprised to see a student -- even more, "a Potter" -- greeting with such warmth a teacher as formidable as Snape, he had been able to disguise it without difficulty. But perhaps he had already been informed of this recent friendship. After all, he was an old friend of Harry Potter ... or had it been Albus with his good intentions?

Albus Severus instead, in his great innocence, simply wasn't surprised to find Neville there. *And why should he?* Snape considered. What could there be more natural for a student than his two professors talking like friends? Oh, how the boy would have been shocked if he had known the truth...

Feeling a bit tense, Snape inclined his head in a welcome. His heart had been filled with joy, but reserved as he was about his feelings, he struggled to keep them under control in front of Longbottom.

"Mr. Potter. I'm glad to see you again," he therefore declared with great composure, while Neville showed his long-standing familiarity exclaiming cordially, "Hello, young man! What a nice surprise!"

"Hello, Professor Longbottom," the child replied a bit awkwardly.

"Hey! You can call me Neville in this room. Professor Snape won't mind. We were just remembering the old days."

Snape frowned at that informal behaviour, but he was still too uneasy to react in front of the child; so Neville continued, "Are you enjoying Hogwarts?"

"Oh yes!" the boy answered enthusiastically. "Everything is fantastic here!" And he began to describe a list of wonders that had impressed his imagination. Snape watched the scene, and a bitter sensation of sorrow invaded his heart. Was he really going to renounce to all this and bury himself forever in an office?

He sighed deeply, and Albus Severus immediately interrupted his description. The child turned to the portrait, anxious to justify his delay. "I'm sorry I arrived so late, Professor, but James didn't want to tell me where the classroom was... He is a bit angry with you."

Snape furrowed his brows, and the boy realised in horror to have betrayed his brother's not precisely respectful feelings. So, he tried to correct, "Well, he... he is disappointed for the points, you see."

Neville smiled at the unintentional pun, but Snape growled darkly, "Your brother should learn how to behave, before complaining uselessly."

Trying to help both children, Neville declared gently, "I'm sure that James will improve very fast with such a teacher. And what about you, Al: are you attending the new Potions course?"

"No, unfortunately I have not been selected... at least, not yet," the boy replied in regret, a bit ashamed. But then, brightening again, he announced the very primary reason of his visit and of his joy. "However, Professor McGonagall says that I can still take private lessons from Professor Snape... if he agrees, of course."

Surprised at the evident hope in the child's voice, Neville turned to look at Snape with questioning eyes. Embarrassed, the dark wizard tried to disguise his sudden emotion by asking with a menacing glare, "What did she say, Mr. Potter?"

Albus Severus hurried to report, "Well, she said that there is no need to spread the news, but if I keep the thing reserved, and I manage to ask you in the proper way... Oh!"

The boy was suddenly horrified. "I shouldn't have told this to you! I mean, she said that I shouldn't..."

Realising that every sentence was leading him more and more to disaster, the boy blushed intensely. Moved by his evident desolation, Neville went to the rescue, speaking as if Al's words were intended for him.

"I'm not going to talk, promise. Also because I am very afraid of Professor Snape."

"Really?" Albus Severus was amazed.

"Well, as a student, I was a complete failure at Potions. So Professor Snape gave me detentions and called me a dunderhead. He was very rigid, you see."

A mischievous smile forming on his lips, Neville looked at Snape again, then lowered his tone in a promising whisper, saying to the child, "I'll reveal a secret to you... though I suppose Professor Snape knows it already. But you must promise you won't tell it to anyone."

Forgetting his anguish, the boy nodded in expectation, while the sudden memory of a stuffed vulture on a hat made Snape freeze in horror.

"Mr. Longbottom!" he snapped harshly. But, ignoring the portrait's menacing gaze, Neville continued with a conspiring wink, "He was my Boggart. You know what a Boggart is, don't you?"

"Something scary..." murmured the boy, clearly fascinated at the idea, and considered the relieved but still fuming Snape with new admiration... and absolutely no fear. A meditative pause followed and, encouraged by that confession, Al declared proudly, "I have never been afraid of him."

"Well, then you are much braver than I was," commented Neville with a smile.

"But you ARE brave!" the boy protested. "Dad said that you cut off the head of Voldemort's monster serpent. Why didn't you ever tell me THAT story before?"

Searching a support to his declaration, Albus Severus turned to look at Snape. But the portrait had visibly paled, and his eyes were void, lost in reminiscences. Lowering his head, the boy apologised, "I'm sorry. I didn't think... I know what the snake did to you..."

Snape breathed slowly. Memories, so unexpectedly recalled, had produced a devastating emotion. But the boy's revelations had raised also another reaction, even more shocking than the previous one. Nobody had ever cared to inform the portrait of the many other events that had lead to the Dark Lord's destruction... or had it been Snape himself who had declined to listen, indifferent as he had become about the world and his living inhabitants? There was a blank space in his knowledge that was urging to be filled, so he commanded sharply, "Mr. Longbottom! What does this mean? Explain yourself!"

Neville looked as embarrassed as when he was a student.

"How could you possibly not know?" he murmured. Then he answered, "Yes, I killed the snake. Harry had asked me to do it, before leaving for his last meeting with Voldemort."

Snape's astonishment was complete, and he repeated slowly, "You did it? You! *Neville Longbottom!*"

"With my hands and the sword of Gryffindor..." Neville replied firmly. Then, misunderstanding Snape's reaction, he added with a bitter tone, "I suppose you don't trust me. You never did. Why should have you changed?"

Snape contemplated Neville's still incongruously childish face with new eyes, trying to manage his many confused emotions. He wanted to speak, but his voice refused to exit. At the same time, Neville had crossed his arms, watching Snape with a defiant yet wounded gaze.

Then Albus Severus found the right words, the ones that only a child could say.

"You see? You ARE brave! You've vindicated Professor Snape, even though he scolded you all the time and called you a dunderhead!"

Neville watched the boy and couldn't help a smile. "Well, I didn't think of that, at the time. But you are right, and now I'm happy."

He stroked affectionately the dark hair of the child, then he raised two serene eyes at the portrait.

"I hope you will go on teaching dunderheads for many and many years to come."

Snape felt disarmed, and strangely in peace.

"Thank you, Mr. Longbottom," he gruffly said.

Then his gaze went up and anxiously looked for Dumbledore. There was no sign of him in any of the paintings around, so Snape hoped that Albus hadn't tried to meddle. Sometimes joy was much more difficult to share than pain...

NA:

"You don't scare me anymore. I've placed myself in the very path of Voldemort himself, and I hate to break the news, but you don't really compare in the intimidating stakes."

I've taken this sentence from a story I've enjoyed very much, "The Lady Loves her Will" by Whatapotter. Thanks for writing it, Whatapotter. I hope you won't mind my little theft, but will consider it a tribute to your work.

Part X

Chapter 10 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part X

Neville Longbottom had left, leaving professor and pupil alone. Snape watched the little one smiling so confidently at him and wondered if that boy could ever evoke a Boggart. What could the worst fear of such a tender, trustful heart be? That soothing consideration was soon followed by a renewed wave of joy and gratitude for Minerva, who had offered them both a perfect solution by recommending private lessons in her official capacity.

He hardened his voice in his usual severe tone and asked, "So, Mr. Potter, do you still want to take lessons from me?"

The boy looked offended. "Of course!" he exclaimed. "Now that you are teaching James, I must find a way to beat him. He is boasting all the time about the new course!"

Snape darkened. He was sure that James Potter was a vain and pathetic bully, and Albus Severus' words once more confirmed this opinion; however, the dark wizard investigated. "Didn't you tell me that your brother wasn't happy with me?"

"Well, that was because of the points," Albus Severus explained. "But he is very proud of having been selected, and he has already written to tell Mum and Dad that I wasn't."

Albus Severus curled his lips down in discomfort, then exclaimed passionately, "I did my best, Professor! Really! Yet Professor Zabini said I wasn't good enough. I am so sorry!"

The little face wrinkled in comic desperation, then lightened in hope. "But today Professor McGonagall called me and said that I could try again, with a little help from you..."

Shining in renewed joy, the boy declared with his beautiful smile, "You see, James and I must fight on equal terms. Honourably. Like you did with my grandpa."

Snape inhaled sharply in surprise. "Why do you say so? Who told you this?"

"Nobody, Sir." The boy was surprised. "I know you, so I just imagine it."

The wizard felt lost before such an immense candour. How could he deserve that touching admiration? For the very first time in so many years, he felt tears prickling at the corners of his eyes and smiled sadly at the thought. A crying portrait! Would the paint liquefy and drip with his tears, destroying his renewed life? And yet, what an awesome way to dissolve in the void, comforted by such pure, healing emotions, knowing that this time somebody would sincerely miss him...

The boy hadn't understood those feelings, of course. He was admiring the place, sparkling with energy as every normal healthy child. Curious, he asked to Snape with his charming confidence, "May I see the cauldrons, Professor?"

Snape nodded, still incapable to articulate a word, and the boy made a cautious tour of the room. Then, unable to contain himself, he asked hopefully, "May *touch* them?"

Snape smiled, and Albus Severus reverently placed a hand on the metallic belly of a big cauldron. The boy whistled softly in admiration, then he returned under the frame.

"Surely James is lucky!" he declared, furrowing his brows. "When do we begin, Professor? I need to show him who is the best!"

You will, Albus Severus, Snape thought. With my help, you will.

Then he cleared his throat and announced sharply, "Tomorrow at five, Mr, Potter. And please be punctual, otherwise these lessons will be ended before they start."

"I have never been late before!" the boy protested in his acute tone.

"Manners, young man! I'm not professor Longbottom!" Snape replied frowning. But a smile immediately came to mitigate the harshness of his voice, and the boy smiled back in kind.

The moon was shining high in a velvety black sky when Snape interrupted his reflections and decided that it could be the right time to return to his place in the Headmistress' office. Night was advanced enough to hopefully spare him unwanted visits or conversations while he was in that meditative mood. But, as soon as he reached the frame, he had the unexpected surprise of finding Minerva still sitting at her table.

The day had been evidently too exhausting for her, and she was placidly sleeping, spectacles resting lopsidedly on her nose and arms crossed under her head, just like one of the children she used to teach. He understood that she had been waiting for him until that late hour, and her affection made even more painful the weight he was carrying in his heart.

"Minerva," he called softly. But her sleep was too deep, and he had to repeat his call.

"Minerva!" he insisted with a worried tone, hating to disturb her, but knowing that he was whom she had been waiting for.

Reacting at his voice, she woke up and smiled at him, eyes slightly hazy in sleepiness.

"Severus, are you back?" she greeted him, rubbing her face and rearranging the spectacles on her nose. Then she asked anxiously, "How was the meeting with Zabini? You must excuse me for leaving you alone at the end of the lesson, but I thought that it could be a good occasion for you both..."

She was expecting to be reassured, and Snape hesitated. How could he announce her that the meeting with Zabini had filled him with the desire of abandoning his newly found role? How could he confess that he had been wallowing in sadness for the whole afternoon, and that only Albus Severus' visit had lit up a day that was miserably sinking into despair? How could he admit that his heart was aching in bitterness, and that his mind was still wondering in doubt?

Minerva watched him closely, and a crease formed on her forehead.

"You have something unpleasant to tell me," she declared, suddenly grave.

Snape crossed his arms in his typical defensive pose.

"What would you say if I decided to renounce teaching?" he asked cautiously.

The old witch widened her eyes.

"You what?" she exclaimed. "I thought we had already discussed this option! How can you do this to the children, Severus?"

"Let's say that for instance I cannot be considered a luminous example for some of them..." he replied vaguely.

"What are you saying?" Minerva cried in anger. "I personally explained to the few of them who didn't know you which is the man they will have the honour of being taught by!"

She rose, passionate in her indignation.

"I don't want to hear this nonsense anymore!" she warned him, pointing a finger in a menacing gesture. Then her composure collapsed.

"What has happened, Severus? Why have you changed your mind?"

She considered his brooding features, then her eyes sparkled in understanding.

"It was Zabini, wasn't it?" she bitterly asked. "That man has created troubles since the first day he arrived here. You were right, Severus. I shouldn't have hired him. He is arrogant, uncooperative and always ready to complain."

Minerva lowered her head in defeat.

"I was so happy..." she murmured, as if speaking to herself. "A new opportunity for you. An excellent teacher for the school. And... and my personal occasion to make amends. But it hasn't worked. I should have known."

She sighed deeply and waited in a painful silence.

For the very first time after his awakening in the corridor, Snape considered Minerva with critical eyes, comparing the woman in the room with the woman he used to know so many years before: Dumbledore's right arm, the severe teacher, the reliable colleague, the inflexible educator, the one who always followed the rules even when that meant taking points from her own House. Loyal, sincere, honest...

Yet these outstanding qualities were exactly the reason why Minerva had always been so vulnerable, and time hadn't improved the situation. Before his eyes there was now an old, frail witch, whose hands were wrinkled and stained by age, and whose trembling lips were pressed in a thin line while she struggled to recover her control.

Snape's heart was suddenly filled with an immense regret. What was he doing? It was to Minerva that he owed this new opportunity. How could he disappoint her and, with her, those who believed in him?

Sacrificing his true friends, his noblest aspirations, throwing away the last chance that life had offered him... That meant surrender, and Severus Snape didn't want to. Now, surely Zabini was right in his accusations: his former professor had hurt people in many different ways. But that had been during a war. Another place. Another time. Another life.

Snape met Minerva's anxious gaze and curled his lips in his typical bizarre smile, searching for an answer that could disperse her doubts and anguish.

"Stubborn. That's what all you Gryffindors are. I cannot but subscribe to this judgement and, of course, bow to your decision."

The change in her features was almost astonishing. As soon as she grasped the real meaning of his declaration, an immense, relieved smile widened upon her face. She scolded him affectionately.

"Ah, Severus! Thank Merlin, you were only joking! Did you want to be praised by me, then? Is that your roundabout way to ask for compliments?"

Embarrassed, Snape lowered his eyes while she looked at him with touching joy.

"I'm so glad to have you back on the Board of Professors," she confessed in simplicity. "I am getting old, and old people like to have youth around. Especially when they are such long-lasting good friends."

"You are not old, Minerva," he protested automatically, but she shook her head and a mischievous smile formed on her lips, making her look like the lively slender teenager she had been.

"I AM old, Severus. Not as old as Albus yet, of course, but in October, I will be centenarian," she answered with a little chuckle.

Her cheeks blushed with the lovely rosy shade so typical of aged people, and she said with a sort of timid pride, "A hundred years! Can you imagine? So many things happened, so many things witnessed. Some happy, some sad, some bad, some beautiful..."

She smiled at him again, and a myriad of little sparks lit in her eyes while she added in emotion, "And from now on, you will be a part of my life again. What a wonderful present!"

Tears finally trickled down on her cheeks, and Snape watched them flow, not daring to speak, unable to express the emotions that were chasing in his mind, and feeling a warm wave of affection invading his heart.

Then a startling idea abruptly flashed in his brain, and he widened his eyes at the intensity of that perception.

The fresh light of the early morning illuminated the new Potions classroom. A man entered hurriedly and went straight under the big picture where Snape was waiting impatiently, arms crossed and brows furrowed in his usual frown.

"Professor Snape," the man greeted, panting as if he had run. "Did you ask for me?"

"Mr. Longbottom," Snape acknowledged with a nod. "Yes, I did. Thank you for coming so quickly after such a short notice."

A pause followed, and the portrait examined carefully the man, who was steadying his breath while waiting to know more.

"I have a plan, but I need you to put it to work."

"What do you want me to do?" Neville simply replied, and Snape appreciated the trust implicit in his words.

"It's not difficult, you'll see. Not for the man who has slaughtered 'Voldemort's monster serpent'," the dark wizard declared with a meaningful smile, and many other words immediately followed in a concise but exhaustive explanation.

Neville listened with great attention, then smiled and considered, "It's a challenging task. There is not too much time left."

"This is why I asked for you."

"I suppose I should be honoured by your preference," Neville replied intentionally. Snape crossed again his arms and spoke slowly, as if sealing a solemn promise.

"Only a few hours ago, you claimed that I had never trusted you... and perhaps you were right. Now I have the opportunity to redress the balance. I'm relying on you, Mr. Longbottom. I'm sure you won't disappoint me."

NA:

In one of her interviews, JKR states that Minerva was around 75 and Albus 150 at the beginning of HP: now, if you add the few years needed to conclude the saga plus the 19 years after, you arrive more or less at 100.

However, blame me if I'm wrong. I never was a good mathematician ;)

Part XI

Chapter 11 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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*All my gratitude to my betas and previewers **DementedLeaf**, **Xoxphoenix** and **Morgaine_Dulac**. Heartfeld thanks to **Duj** for her final revision.*

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Part XI

Snape's first real lesson to his second years began while a violent storm exploded in fury, and thunder rumbled in a sky black with clouds. The splendidly-decorated panes of the ancient window vibrated and sent vivid coloured flashes each time a lightning bolt crossed the air. Electricity filled the atmosphere, and thunder made the most impressionable amongst the children jump in fear. The torches diffused a tremulous though bright illumination. In that contrast of dark and light, where the vacillating shadows gave an even more tridimensional effect to the objects, and cauldrons appeared immense compared to the little figures moving amongst them, Severus Snape looked strangely flat while flashes reflected on the uneven surface of his portrait.

The class was evidently uncomfortable. For the very first time, the children were alone with their new professor, and they were considering him suspiciously with surreptitious glances. Those who had gathered information from parents or older relatives had hurried to tell the others about the frightening reputation of Snape as a teacher. Whispers had been exchanged in the corridors about his having been a follower of the Dark Lord. Some of the Slytherins had been torn between loyalty for their House and the disparate feelings of distrust, anger or hate raised by the flux of information. Headmistress McGonagall's previous explanations had therefore been deleted by a torrent of news coming directly from houses and families. Yet, no parent had opposed to the peculiar choice of the Headmistress: no father had protested in indignation, no mother had sent an owl in concern. The children had been left wondering in their sea of doubts, and diffidence was now making their faces darken and their voices hesitate, while the tempest howled outside the windows and inside their hearts.

Snape welcomed the class with a cold smile that changed into a sardonic expression as soon as James Potter appeared under the frame of the door. The child was nervous, and although he displayed a bold appearance, he somehow avoided looking directly at his teacher. With his long-lasting experience, Snape was instantly alert, and the sarcastic twist of his lips accentuated even more.

The portrait was expecting a challenge: even better, he was looking forward to it.

The lesson began with a short lecture, in which the wizard pointed out some of the most evident mistakes he had noticed in their previous meeting. It was difficult to change habits that had settled down after a year of practice, so the children needed to be corrected as soon as possible. Snape shuddered thinking of the older students: how many other wrong behaviours had Zabini helped to encourage with his inexplicable laxity?

Then a quick survey followed and, while he asked noncommittal questions, the new professor searched for interactions amongst the students: he was studying the dynamics of the class, to understand who the leading ones were, who the weaker, who the most eager or prepared, and finally who the potential troublemakers.

Soon he individuated two major groups, one gathering around the Gryffindors, one around the Slytherins. Nothing new in this, Snape thought with a soft sigh, remembering his past. The only remarkable difference was that now the Ravenclaws seemed to team up with the green and silver students, and the centre of their attraction was undoubtedly Jennifer Avery... That was an interesting detail for a further investigation.

Finally, they arrived to practice. With his usual sarcastic scowl, Snape opened his painted book and chose a potion to test his students; but this time he opted for a very difficult one, as he was curious to see how the different characters would react to such a demanding challenge.

At least, that was the justification he was repeating to himself.

But his eyes were continuously returning to James Potter, who was painfully aware of that merciless scrutiny. The boy was getting uneasy and looked around as if searching for support, chewing his lips and scratching his head in the effort of interpreting the text. Next to him, even more anguished, Arthur Macmillan was raking his fingers through his hair, making it stand absurdly up while he desperately tried to make sense of the instructions.

Thunder cracked loudly, and the vivid light of flashes illuminated the place with a sinister effect. The whole class was wriggling and squirming like worms on a hook. The assignment was evidently too hard for them. They might be the best, but the best according to Zabini's recognition, Snape thought and smiled cruelly, observing James rub his nose in perplexity and exchange worried glances with his companions.

On the other side of the room, a meaningful smile matching Snape's on her face, Jennifer Avery was cutting her flobberworms in little precise segments, eyes accurately focused on the ingredients on her desk. Her hands were moving steadily, and her behaviour betrayed an immense confidence and a covert contempt for the pathetic bunch gathered around her.

That would be a different kind of problem to deal with in the future, Snape considered with a frown.

The assignment was soon over. One by one, the children renounced the fight and watched their potions decompose, waiting in panic to know the reactions of their new and so frightening teacher at that failure. James Potter was the only one in the Gryffindor group who refused to give up his task and continued an obstinate struggle against the obscure forces in his cauldron: yet, too nervous to act properly, he too lost control on the brewing process, and the mixture he was stirring soon changed its colour, going from a pale yellow to a stunning bright orange.

Attempting to counterbalance the alarming transformation, James added new ingredients, but the cauldron emitted a bubbling gurgle and squirted out some liquid, splashing the boy with a disgustingly viscid fluid.

"Hell!" James shouted, and stepped back, making a cup of seeds fall on the floor with a resounding crash.

"Manners, Mr. Potter!" Snape exclaimed, a ferocious joy growing in his chest. "As I already told you, we are not on a Quidditch field."

The boy clenched his fists, and his lips twitched in the effort of controlling his anger, while he picked up the seeds.

Too easy, Snape thought vindictively and, as if perceiving his thoughts, the cauldron vomited again a wave of liquid on the unlucky lad as soon as he went closer to check it again. This time, the words that escaped James' lips were as burning as the potion he had tried to brew.

"Mr. Potter! Watch your tongue, and clean up the mess you have made on the floor!" Snape ordered.

"I didn't do it on purpose!" the boy exclaimed indignantly, and Snape instantly exploded. "Respect, Potter! You call me sir or professor!"

The class froze and retreated in alarm; suddenly, that painted professor looked much more alive and terrifying than many of his living colleagues.

Crossing his arms in his favourite pose, Snape lowered his voice to a cold tone. "Isn't that your cauldron, Potter?"

"Yes, but---"

"No excuses!" the wizard spat. "Blame your incompetence, Potter, if you have spoiled your concoction and wasted your test. Don't forget you are in a course that requires brain, not muscles."

"I didn't ask to stay in this course... sir, " the boy replied resentfully at that reiterated allusion to his physical exploits.

"Clean up that mess!" the wizard continued with a tone that made all the other children shiver and stare in anxious expectation.

"I'm going to write to my father about this," James angrily whispered to Arthur Macmillan, a look of disgust on his face while he tried to clean himself. But, alas! Snape's ears were extremely keen after so many years of teaching.

"I had the pleasure of teaching your father before you, Mr. Potter," the wizard replied slowly and dangerously, "He also thought himself above the rules as a child, yet I don't believe he would be happy to hear you were following in his footsteps in that regard. Ask him, by all means."

Snape paused.

"But I regret to inform you that, in this class, the last word is mine," he concluded with a cold smile.

"Then I will speak with Professor McGonagall! I don't want to stay in this course anymore!" James burst out in childish resentment.

Thunder cracked again with a resounding roar as if underlining that declaration, and vivid flashes of red exploded in Snape's mind, coagulating in little pulsing dots.

"Clean up that mess, Potter, if you don't want to be given a detention."

Boy and professor stared at each other, eyes locked in a mute challenge.

"NO!" the boy shouted; then, vibrating in anger, he turned his shoulders to the portrait and began to walk towards the door: yet, his steps became immediately hesitant, as if he was already regretting his too-hurried decision, while his eyes glanced around, asking his companions to say something, to defend him, to give him somehow support. But nobody moved, and Jennifer Avery crossed her arms, a cold smile dancing on her lips.

"What are you doing, Potter?" Snape asked sharply.

"I'm leaving," James replied, his trembling voice heightened by tension.

"I think not. *Auxilium!*"

A startling creak replied to this call. Awakening from its inanimate slumber, one of the suits of armours resting in the corners straightened itself and slowly began to walk, with a frightening, strident noise.

Some of the children gasped in fear, but almost everybody was entranced by the scene, all feeling relieved that their professor had forgotten his lesson and found such a convenient scapegoat.

James paled. It was the very first time that he confronted a magical adversary, and surely he hadn't thought that the man in the portrait could have such allies at his side. He stopped and considered his enemy. Then, with a determined expression, he tried to circumvent it, using the many techniques he had learned and that worked so well on a Quidditch match.

He dodged, feinted and tried to leap past the statue, and Snape smiled in silence, savouring the moment in which the spoiled brat would be forced to return to his place in

shame. Charming those impressive guardians -- so that his painted and therefore powerless self could awaken them to life -- had been a splendid intuition.

But the armour was even more resolute in its task than both Snape and James had imagined. After an unsuccessful try, an iron arm unexpectedly stretched itself out at an impossible length and grabbed the boy by his ankle. Suddenly, James was upside down, his arms almost touching the floor, while the creature turned back towards Snape to present triumphantly its dangling captive.

"Let me go!" the boy screamed, gasping in that uncomfortable position, and the whole class held its breath in fascinated horror.

A solitary flash violently lit the room, and Snape's eyes widened, while memories brought him back in time. Now he was sixteen again, watching the scene from a remote distance, and it was his younger self, lifted by a Levicorpus, that shouted and wriggled and struggled to free himself... but nobody tried to help. It had been James' grandfather to humiliate young Severus in front of their fellow students, and hate suddenly ran into Snape's veins while he relived that most shameful episode in impotent rage. Emotions he hadn't thought possible to experience anymore awakened wildly in his fibres and, for a moment, darkness veiled his mind.

James was wearing trousers under his uniform. At least, he had been spared the public shame of being exposed in his underwear. But, escaping from one of his pockets, a little glowing card fell graciously on the floor where, with a little pop, it transformed into the misty shape of a girl. In the sudden silence, a soft voice declared, "*I love you, James!*"

The class exploded with laughter, and the dangling boy, mortified, burst into tears.

The whole episode had lasted only a few seconds, but Snape felt as if he were back from a long travel into time. Bitterness tightened his heart. No, there was no joy, no satisfaction, no pleasure in the humiliation of that small boy whose eyes were reflecting the same anguish the wizard was carrying in his soul.

"Enough!" Snape found himself shouting. Immediately, the students stopped and backed in fear at the fury diffusing upon his features.

"Let him go!" Snape ordered the armour, and the creature gently released the sobbing James on the floor, where he curled in a ball, not daring to look at his companions.

"Ten points from each House!" the wizard declared sharply, and the children lowered their eyes in a resentful silence. Then Snape turned to James.

"You will clean that mess before you leave, Potter. This is all, and I hope I won't have to complain about you anymore," he declared quietly.

"But he will be late for Transfiguration!" Arthur Macmillan, the only one who hadn't laughed, couldn't help but interject in his anxiety.

"In this case, you will help him, Mr. Macmillan. Punishment is more bearable when it is shared with friends. And then, immediately after, you will have a new occasion to show your friendly support, when you both arrive late to Transfiguration."

Arthur lowered his head, too frightened to reply.

"Class is dismissed," Snape commanded and, in the same resentful silence, the children took their books and left the room. Outside, the storm was calming, but thunder still rumbled in the distance, as if echoing the many contrasting emotions pervading the spirits.

As soon as he was alone with Arthur, James slowly got to his feet. Without saying a word, closing himself behind a wall of coldness, he began to clean the floor, eyes still full of burning tears. Arthur went closer and tried to comfort his friend by clumsily putting a hand on his shoulder. James pulled away, tightening his lips in a line. Discomfited, Arthur took a deep breath, then, remembering their situation, he turned to look up at Snape in apprehension. But the portrait was empty, and the two children stared at each other in relief.

"I hate him!" James murmured, paling under the violence of his raising feelings. "I hate him! I HATE HIM!!! Didn't you see how he enjoyed the scene?"

"Well..." Arthur uncomfortably replied, "I did tell you to leave Margaret's card in our room..."

"I didn't mean that, you idiot! Didn't you hear what he said? He hates me because of my family, because of my name!"

"Still, he seems to like your brother..." Arthur tried again, swallowing in uneasiness. He didn't want to bicker with his friend, but James could become very dangerous.

"Al is stupid! I warned him! Bet Snape will do something mean to him too. He hates all of us!"

James inhaled and concluded sharply, "Somehow I'll find a way to make him suffer for what he did!"

Minerva slowly sipped her herbal infusion. Lately, she had lamented little annoying pains in her body, and Snape, who had become very protective about his old friend, had asked Zabini well, effectively obliged him to prepare every evening a special mix of invigorating herbs to help her. Then he had begun to spend his evenings with her, enjoying a last chat before she went to bed. In the circle of his new colleagues always wary and polite in his presence Minerva was the only companion he really cared for, the only one in the school who had shared with him so many important events in his life.

"So," she asked quietly, "it's James Potter again, Severus? Will this situation never end? After all, he is the third generation! The blood must have watered down over the years... despite the mixing with the Weasley heritage."

She raised her eyebrows in hope, but Snape sighed and remained silent. That morning, he had faced his demons. The scene in the classroom was still churning in his stomach, and he didn't want to share his considerations. Furthermore, he had the unpleasant impression that Minerva could perceive his feelings. Her kindness was even more painful than a reproach.

"And what about his brother?" the Headmistress gently continued. "I thought you liked little Albus Severus..."

Snape felt a stab of anguish in his heart. He didn't want to think about his favourite pupil. How would the small one react to his brother's punishment?

"I regret it, Minerva," he finally resolved to say, "but the boy deserved a correction. However, as I told you, I'm always ready to resign."

"And, as I told you, I cannot accept," Minerva replied with a smile and shook her head. "You haven't tried hard enough, Severus. And I need you in this school. So please, do your best."

Minerva placidly finished her cup, then tilted her head to watch her unusually bashful companion.

"You won't get away so easily this time, Severus. Not with me giving the orders."

NA:

I know that this chapter will "disturb" many of my readers in different ways. I can only ask them to please wait. The story has still a long way to go.

Part XII

Chapter 12 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part XII

That morning, Snape could feel the tension in the air. The lesson to his first year hadn't started yet, but the children were already curled defensively in their seats, studying him with wary eyes and casting furtive glances at the suits of armours, as if expecting an attack at any moment. The news of what had happened had unmistakably been spread around, and Snape could easily imagine the reactions it had raised. They were more than evident in the expressions of his students.

For a long moment, the portrait kept looking at the children under his frame, and the children returned his gaze in uneasiness. Then Snape lowered his head and sighed. He shouldn't have accepted that challenge. He was only a painting. What could a painting ever retain of real life, apart from petty memories trapped in its pigments?

And yet, there was a class in front of him, waiting in respectful silence. Snape opened his book, then closed it again and watched the students with a bizarre smile.

"Let's play with fire today," he declared.

The children widened their eyes in surprise.

Time passed quickly while the students worked eagerly. Each one of them had been asked to test an ingredient by boiling it at different temperatures, and Snape had taught them the various spells to control the flames. Playing with fire was something the children obviously hadn't been allowed to do before, and they were very excited. Soon the assignment created also an enjoyable interaction amongst the students, as they needed to compare results and exchange comments, moving from cauldron to cauldron. Gradually, their confidence came back in powerful waves.

Snape monitored the class in silence, and this unusually quiet approach allowed the children to be even more relaxed. In addition, they were only first year, too young to be scared by his notorious reputation as a teacher, too naive to perceive a difference between him and his colleagues in that magical world of wonders. Acutely missing the presence of his favourite pupil, the portrait observed the little faces so nicely lit up in excitement, and searched for resemblances with their parents. Rose Weasley was very similar to her mother, and Rupert Warrington had his father's same bold manners. While Scorpius Malfoy... ah! that boy, so shy and diffident, concealed a mystery that needed to be solved.

For almost two hours, Snape watched the students work under his frame; they were discussing and enjoying their task in the merry cheerfulness of their blessed age, and the portrait felt an intense bitterness rise through his fibres. How lucky those children were! And what an unfair destiny had been offered to him, on the contrary!

Then he heard Stephen Bootes call his companions in delighted surprise. His experiment had been successful, and the children gathered to see how his chopped roots had effectively changed in colour and dimensions. Beaming in pride, Stephen turned to look at Snape and waited for his approval, while an agitated Rose Weasley hurried towards her cauldron to check her results.

The portrait nodded to his student, smirking inwardly at the joy so ingenuously displayed. But gradually, that joy reached also the teacher's heart, and Snape felt his bitter emotions change into something peaceful. That was his class, those were his students. He relaxed on his chair, and a soothing feeling of acceptance suddenly filled his heart.

Strangely, the most difficult part came at the end. Controlling the magical flames was proving to be tougher than the children had supposed. Some of the charmed fires simply refused to abandon their task, roaring menacingly at every attempt to put them out. The apprentices faced the challenge with great zeal and, without explicit admonitions from the teacher, the noise increased consequently. In such a joyful confusion, only a few students initially noticed the unexpected scene that took place.

One of the suits of armours awakened without warning. Some of the children who were working close to it gasped in panic, while others clung together, instinctively searching for protection.

But the armour didn't do anything fearful; it just took off its plumed helmet and shook it vigorously. To the children's surprise, a little mouse fell on the ground, and from there it squeaked loudly, as if protesting against that rude treatment. The children stared in amazement, while the armour straightened itself and put the helmet again on its headless neck with a sharp clang.

One of the girls at the opposite side of the room, too busy with her fire to notice the incident, chose exactly that moment to turn her head. Her gaze met the armour's and, frightened, she let out a cry.

Snape cleared his throat.

"Afraid, Miss Corner?" he asked, and the girl nodded tremblingly, watching the armour in evident anxiety.

"There is nothing to fear," the portrait explained. "These creatures are intended to help, not to harm."

As if answering these words, the armour began to walk with creaking steps that resounded loudly in the sudden silence. Holding their breaths in tension, the children watched the creature stop before the girl and bend its metallic body in a rigid bow. Then, with its gloved hand, it lifted without effort the heavy cauldron full of gurgling liquid while, with the other hand, it choked the rebellious fire, converting it into sizzling embers.

Immediately after, a sweating, almost desperate Rupert Warrington turned to look pleadingly at the portrait.

"Please, sir?" he asked, indicating the flames hissing menacingly under his cauldron. Snape nodded, and the armour started walking towards the boy.

After that, all the children with problematic fires hurried to ask the creature's help, and the statue made a triumphal tour of the room. As soon as the last fire had been disciplined, the armour crossed its arms and turned its head from side to side, as if enjoying the students' admiration. Then it waved its hand in a greeting and went back to its place, where it stiffened in its usual position. The children acclaimed in enthusiasm, and even the wary Miss Corner opened her face in a timid smile, that grew more and more confident until she joined her companions in a liberating applause.

Alone in the classroom, Snape smiled triumphantly. His plan had worked perfectly. In all that confusion, no student had noticed the subtle movements of his forefinger, quietly directing the armour's actions. The portrait felt a heavy weight dissolve in his stomach. Thankfully, he had proved that the armours were reliable helpers when controlled, and that the incident with James Potter had been... well, only an incident!

Yet the memory of that event was still too hurtful. A subtle disquiet began to corrode his fibres, and an even heavier weight formed again in his heart.

For the very first time since the lessons had begun, he wished that Albus were there. For the very first time since he had awakened as a portrait, Snape left his frame and went to search for him. Incredible how hard to find the irritating old man was, when so desperately needed!

Finally, Snape saw him walking in one of the pictures, lost in amiable conversation with the portrait of an unknown ancient wizard, dressed in a bizarre way.

"Ah, Severus, dear boy! What happened?" Albus greeted him gently.

"Why do you ask?" Snape enquired, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

"Because something MUST have happened if you are looking for me," the old wizard replied with his mild smile.

"Did you witness what happened yesterday with James Potter?" Snape went immediately to the point, crossing his arms with a challenging glare.

"Well, Severus, you asked me not to meddle, and I am doing my best to comply," Albus chuckled, and his unknown companion nodded gravely in approval. "However, yes," the great wizard continued cheerfully, "I was there in the upper left painting; you know, the one with that wonderful sight on---"

"Enough!" Snape almost shouted, cutting him off. "Well? No comments, no remarks, no advice from you?"

"What kind of comments should I make that you yourself hadn't already made?" Albus' eyes twinkled with an amusement that Snape found infuriating.

"I assume you think the boy deserved a correction," the younger wizard continued sharply.

"Did I say that?" Dumbledore replied in polite wonder. "That's an interesting interpretation."

"I should have imagined you would defend the boy! Gryffindor!" Snape burst out bitterly, pronouncing the last word like an insult. "Didn't you always justify his father's actions? And didn't you forgive his grandfather for that trick with a werewolf?"

He took a deep breath, then continued in repressed anger, "May I hope for an explanation or should I presume that it's beyond my limited comprehension?"

Albus' blue eyes became strangely inexpressive.

"Do you remember, Severus, what you told me just a few weeks ago? *I have made too many mistakes to give advice to you.* Now it's time for me to watch and keep silent."

Snape clenched his fists in anger, but no more words came from his old mentor. Albus smiled sadly, then turned and continued his walking, resuming an incomprehensible discussion with his strange companion.

Defeated, the wizard left and retired to the brooding silence of his frame.

"Good afternoon, Professor."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Potter."

The boy stared at the portrait, and Snape folded his arms in his usual defensive pose. He had been dreading that moment, and it had obviously come.

"Is there anything you need from me?" he asked warily, preparing for a battle. But the answer caught him by surprise.

"Can we begin our lessons next week?" Albus Severus quietly inquired.

Relieved, Snape replied, "Of course, Potter. But I don't understand why. Is there a reason to delay?"

"Yes, sir. I need an explanation."

The boy's voice was unusually firm, and Snape again felt very uneasy.

"Then ask, Potter," he replied with a sigh.

As always, Albus Severus was straight in his frankness.

"James told me what happened in the class. He told me that you have insulted and humiliated him in front of his companions. Is that true, Professor?"

Snape frowned. The boy wasn't showing the proper respect. How dared he question his professor? That was just asking for a rebuke or, even better, a detention! Instead, feeling extremely uncomfortable before those trustful emerald-green eyes, Snape tried to react.

"Your brother spoiled his potion! But he is too arrogant and egotistical to admit that he had failed."

"Then it's true," Al stated simply.

Snape exploded.

"The truth is that he behaved improperly in the classroom and challenged my authority!" he stormed. "He needed a correction."

"But not a humiliation."

That quiet statement hit home, and Snape lowered his head. Nobody like that child had the power to bare his soul so completely. It was like exposing himself to a mirror, but the image reflected surely wasn't flattering.

Snape took a deep breath. How painful learning to live again was!

"It wasn't my intention," he finally admitted. The nearest thing to sorry he could say.

The boy crossed his arms.

"Why, Professor?" he asked. There was no anger, no hate, no condemnation in his voice, only a quiet sadness. "Because he hasn't got your name? What has my brother done to you?"

The sounds of other voices suddenly echoed in Snape's mind.

"Leave him alone! What's he done to you?"

"Well, it's more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean..."

From the edge of the lake, in another time, an angry Lily Evans again faced James Potter and talked to him. Snape gasped and blinked, trying to reject the suffocating memories, while an acute pain diffused in his fibres. Had he taken the place of his past tormentor?

Al's green eyes, so similar to his grandmother's, were watching him firmly, and more painful memories awakened, tightening his soul.

"I'm sorry."

"It's too late. I've made excuses for you for years."

"No listen, I didn't mean---"

"I can't pretend anymore. You've chosen your way, I've chosen mine."

Snape buried his face in his hands. He feared the answer that he was gently being pushed to give, and his heart was trying to resist with all his strength.

"It's hard for me to forget, Potter," he confessed in a whisper. "Your grandfather hurt me too deeply."

"James is my brother, not my grandfather," Al remarked gently, and that stunning truth definitely silenced Snape.

A long, long pause followed.

"I will speak to him," the wizard finally declared with a sigh.

"I was hoping for this," the boy replied, and a charming smile lit up his face again. "It won't be difficult, you'll see. Just imagine that you are speaking to me."

Part XIII

Chapter 13 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part XIII

Hogwarts Castle was bubbling with activity. The celebration that was held on that sunny October 4th was probably going to be the greatest of the new century for the school, as it would celebrate Headmistress McGonagall's hundredth birthday and Hogwarts' thousandth anniversary, both concentrated in one immense event.

The fantastic idea had been Professor Longbottom's. During a school meeting, he had gathered his fellow professors and announced that Headmistress McGonagall would soon be centenarian, a very significant age in the life of every wizard or witch. He had therefore proposed a big celebration and suggested including also the anniversary of the school. Now, nobody was certain of Hogwarts' real beginning, but it could be reasonably fixed around the initial years of the first millennium. However, nobody thought of questioning the choice of the date. The idea was fascinating and implied so many exciting possibilities! So, the two lucky days were combined in one great feast that would celebrate the school and its history through the birthday of a witch who had devoted her whole existence to teaching, and whose life had identified with the school itself.

For the special occasion, Hogwarts would open its rooms to families and friends, there would be games and tournaments, a banquet dedicated to the Headmistress, and many special guests: in a word, a fantastic opportunity for all the former students to meet and share the common heritage with the youngest members.

All the past professors who were still living had been invited, and the majority of them had reacted in emotion, declaring their joy at being considered again, thanking for the honour and sending owls with the many pleasant compliments and greetings people normally reserve for occasions like these.

The Board of Governors had been even more enthusiastic, and they had proposed to send an invitation to the other two ancient schools of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, that had shared so much of their recent past with Hogwarts. Two delegations were expected to arrive in the first hours of the morning.

Of course, it hadn't been possible to keep Headmistress McGonagall in the dark for too much time. When the project had finally been explained to her in detail, her reaction

at the proposal had been a mix of surprise, joy, gratitude, and all those beautiful, powerful emotions that honest people are ready to dispense and that are so rewarding for those receiving them.

The board of professors had been extremely pleased, though some had secretly envied Professor Longbottom for his intuition, and wondered if that brilliant idea could hide deceitful ambitions. But those suppositions had disappeared as soon as Professor Longbottom himself had expressed the strongest desire of not being quoted as the originator of the proposal.

So, the joyful day had finally arrived, and the gigantic machinery had begun its course, that was going surprisingly smoothly, considering the short time the organizers had had to prepare everything.

Since the early morning, a flood of people had invaded Hogwarts' rooms and spaces, merrily walking through the gardens. People Apparated here and there with soft pops, broomsticks flew high over the sky – for the occasion, the magical locks had been removed, as a special squad of Aurors was in charge of the security – and the Knight Bus was continuously letting off happy vociferous groups of visitors. This impressive stream of people was moving from place to place in a slow but orderly fashion, according to the program, and soon gathered to provide a cheerful welcome to the foreign delegations.

Head of the Beauxbatons group, Madame Maxime made her usual impressive appearance getting off a carriage splendidly adorned. The crowd held its breath when the enormous globe landed after an audacious manoeuvre in the sky and hurried to respectfully make room for the huge flying palomino horses. Then an immense sigh crossed the air, and many of the most emotional witches amongst the present had to search for tissues, when Madame Maxime encircled in her colossal arms the frail figure of Minerva McGonagall, who disappeared for a moment in her tender embrace.

Headmaster Polikarpov from Durmstrang was a bit more frigid in his attitude, but his perfect bow and hand-kissing, though terribly old-fashioned, still were irresistible for the majority of the (older) women.

Flags and decoration with the flamboyant symbols and colours of the four Houses were displayed everywhere. Happiness and excitement were almost palpable. The top of the day was reached during the banquet that took place in the park, due to the immense quantity of people gathered. The table hosting the three headmasters plus many assorted dignitaries and celebrities had been placed over a platform in the centre of the garden, so that everybody could see them. When Harry Potter proposed a toast to Hogwarts and its Headmistress, the answer was a unanimous roar, and Professor McGonagall, forgetting her reserve for a moment, hugged and kissed him on his cheeks, while a powerful chorus shouted and whistled in approval.

The sun was spreading its glorious rays on one of the most beautiful October days in the last few years. The food was extraordinary, the occasion unique, and everybody was beaming in joy. What else could be desired for such a wonderful feast?

Inside the Potions classroom, Severus Snape sat in his picture, listening distractedly to the happy noises coming from the outside. Life was in full swing out there, but he wasn't allowed to participate. He was only a portrait, and the thought was particularly melancholic that day.

During the morning, an exhausted but enthusiastic Longbottom had appeared in the room to inform him of the success of the idea. Neville's cheeks were burning in excitement, and the man's face resembled its younger self in an astounding way. However, in spite of all his animation, Neville had spoken with surprising calm.

"Everybody is happy out there. It has been very difficult for me to hide the fact that you are the real author of this day of joy. I think that Professor McGonagall should be informed."

"No," Snape had answered quietly.

"Well, then allow me to take out your portrait, so that you can at least enjoy the sight."

"No!" Snape had replied more forcefully.

"But why not?! You deserve to share what you have—"

"Mr. Longbottom!" For a moment, Snape had transformed in his old self, and Neville had stepped back, his face reflecting something very similar to his childish terror. "This discussion is pointless. Now go out before somebody has the unpleasant idea of coming here and looking for you."

But Neville had reacted fiercely. "What if I shouldn't agree?"

"Mr. Longbottom!" Snape had exclaimed again, and this time a spark had lit his eyes. The man in the portrait knew very well that he had no other power than his personal reputation and couldn't oppose to any possible decision of a living being. Understanding those feelings, Neville had lowered his head, whispering an embarrassed, "I'm sorry. I'll come later to visit you again, then."

The hours of the late afternoon seemed to spread a veil of quietness after the excitement of the morning. Snape was still meditating when he heard the increasing sound of feet and voices approaching. He instinctively held his breath, feeling scared, nervous, and yet strangely hopeful. The door opened and a small, hesitant group of adults entered the room, looking around uncertainly in what looked like a parody of a first year class.

With sudden emotion, Snape recognized some of his past colleagues: Slughorn, Trelawney, Vector, Hooch and finally Sprout, arm in arm with Neville Longbottom.

"Severus!" Slughorn actually trumpeted as soon as he saw the portrait. The old wizard had fattened even more; his splendid green and silver robes were stained here and there, his face was reddish and beaming in satisfaction, and some little hiccups escaped his lips while he advanced laboriously in the room. He stopped to look around in flattering amazement, then he involuntarily burped. Reddening even more in confusion, he immediately began to pile words upon words.

"Good boy! I see you are doing a wonderful job here! You were an excellent teacher, Severus, and I have always been proud of you. You and Lily... my little jewel... and Harry... he has grown up to be a great Auror, as I predicted him... and he is such a good man ... he never forgets a friend... saw the children today with him... charming little ones..."

Listening and trying to make sense of the incoherent torrent of words that the clearly drunk old man was babbling, Snape suddenly froze at that last mention. Harry Potter! And there! He hadn't thought of that possible consequence when he had decided to dedicate a day of joy to Minerva. Those were the problems of having somebody else handling the matter. But Slughorn had finally reached the picture, and the other professors gathered around him and looked up in expectation, while he concluded his speech exactly with the words that Snape had feared.

"So, dear boy, we are here to congratulate you."

Snape forced himself to say something and stop that outburst.

"Glad to see you," he declared concisely, then with an incinerating glance to Neville, he added coldly, "I suppose I owe this pleasure to Mr. Longbottom, do I?"

"Such a nice boy," Pomona Sprout enthused, stroking Neville's hair maternally. She too had fattened, and her eyes twinkled with placid happiness and pride, while she addressed a cordial smile to the portrait. "He told me that now you are colleagues."

"It's a pleasure to be here today," Hooch interposed. "And I'm glad also to see that you haven't changed that much," she couldn't help to add with a smile.

"Happy to see you, Severus! Really, really happy," declared Vector in the meantime, and his voice decreased to a murmur, while he considered the portrait with pensive eyes, in which compassion was easily detectable. Strangely, Trelawney didn't say anything, but her lips were suspiciously trembling while she continually adjusted her glasses on her nose.

Snape looked at Neville and sighed softly. Hadn't his former student realised how painful that meeting could be for the man locked into the canvas? For the second time in a few hours, Neville perceived those desolate feelings and lowered his eyes in embarrassment; then, with an impulsive decision, he raised his head and began to speak in a rush.

"Professor Snape has recently joined the Board of Professors again, and we are all very happy and honoured to have him with us. Though I was simply terrified by him when I was a student, I am now very grateful for what he did and I am sure that he will be a great addition to—"

Sprout, who was considering Neville with a slight frown, raised a hand and interrupted the speech. Then she spoke with her usual frankness.

"What the boy is trying to say, Severus, is that we are all grateful. It took us a long while to realise it, but now we've got it clear. You have been a hero and we never understood it, so it is time to finally acknowledge the truth."

"Yes, Severus," Slughorn panted, his eyes suddenly filling with tears. "I hope you will forgive me for having tried to add a spoonful of Let-Me-Go Draught to your chocolate, when you were the Headmaster. Thankfully, Alecko Carrow drank it at your place. You remember how greedy she was."

The hint of a smile appeared on Snape's lips, but the rest of his companions stared at Slughorn with a perplexed face. It was evident that nobody knew about the potion, and they were silently wondering about its possibly lethal effects. Happy to have catalysed the attention of the entire group, the old wizard suddenly winked and added with a devilish grin, "So she spent a whole week visiting all the bathrooms in the castle!"

The unexpected conclusion raised a chorus of laughter, and quickly the atmosphere relaxed. Soon the small group was talking quietly, each one of the visitors telling Snape the various minor activities in which they were now involved and with which they were trying to give meaning to their lives; an account that the dark wizard found much more interesting when he understood that Neville hadn't betrayed his secret, and that nobody was suspecting Snape's real role in the feast.

Finally Slughorn, who seemed to have sobered during the conversation, glanced at the others and proposed, "Now, now, a toast to Hogwarts and to Severus. May he teach generations and generations of children for the glory of this school!"

With a quick wave of his wand, he conjured a bottle of wine and a tray of goblets. The group looked once more at the old wizard in disapproval, evidently judging his proposal tactless. But he smiled knowingly and murmured a mysterious spell with impressive speed. Instantaneously, a goblet painted itself in front of Snape, who raised his eyebrows in surprise. The other wizards and witches reacted with thrilled admiration, and Slughorn beamed and waved his hand, declaring with false modesty, "Oh! Just a bagatelle! I learned how to do it many years ago, enjoying the winter holidays with the portrait of Cirnic the Cleric."

Happily, everybody raised a goblet, and several other toasts followed the first, each one dedicated to a different member of the group. Light-hearted by the powerful drink, eventually Hooch asked with a chuckle, "But where is Albus? I haven't seen him yet today. This could be a good occasion to finally tell him how funny he looked with those purple boots!"

"You can tell me whatever you want and whenever you want, Rolanda," said a mild voice. "I am here, ready to listen." Albus Dumbledore twinkled merrily from a panorama on the other side of the room.

"Albus!" Hooch paled then reddened in embarrassment. "Well, I... I really wasn't... I didn't mean... Merlin! You weren't supposed to listen!"

"And what a blessing that would be to us all," Snape wryly commented. "But, unfortunately, he has kept this terrible habit. He's always meddling."

Albus bowed, accepting the remark with a smile. "I would have been very happy to talk with you today, my dear friends," he then declared lightly. "I was only expecting the right occasion. Unfortunately, I have been busy until now with the party. Many of the guests wanted to speak with me, and I couldn't elude this duty."

His eyes twinkled merrily one more time, then he turned grave. "However, I am here to announce that you are requested by the Headmistress. There is a special gathering of all the living professors in the Great Hall, and you are kindly asked to go there immediately."

The small group exploded with questions and regretful comments, then in a confused mix of greetings and wishes, they hurried to leave. Dumbledore waited patiently until the door closed after the excited visitors, then he looked at Snape.

"Just another little announcement, and this time only for you, Severus. There is somebody wishing to speak with you. However, be prepared. This visit might be... unpleasant."

"Albus!" Snape instantly reacted. "What do you mean by that? Albus! ALBUS!!!"

But the old wizard had left his picture and, immediately after, an unknown hand knocked twice at the door. Affecting a calmness that he didn't absolutely feel, Snape forced himself to reply and waited anxiously for his unknown visitor to show.

The door silently opened, and a magnificently dressed old man advanced in the room. The portrait held his breath while, helping himself with a cane, the visitor slowly crossed the space, walking with a fatigued, limping gait. The stranger was wearing a hood, but he lifted it as soon as he reached the picture, revealing a patrician head of white, long hair. His face was drained and wrinkled, but his cold grey eyes and pale thin lips still displayed that hateful arrogant expression the dark wizard remembered so well.

"At last we meet again, Severus!" the old man sardonically greeted, and Snape felt his throat turn dry.

"Lucius..." he whispered.

Memories fell mercilessly upon him.

part XIV

Chapter 14 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part XIV

"I'm glad to see you remember me, Severus, considering how many years have passed since the last time we met. It was when the Dark Lord commanded me to find you, do you remember? You entered the Shrieking Shack... and never came back. Who would have thought that the Dark Lord would sacrifice such a *loyal* follower? "

A sarcastic drawl underlined these last words. It was an unexpected and cruel opening, and an acute pain chilled Snape's heart at those memories while his mouth refused to speak. Raising his brows in mocking surprise, the man under the picture tilted his head and lifted his cane with a shaky hand, aiming its tip to the portrait.

"Not even a word for the friend you always professed to admire and respect? My, my, I really expected a warmer welcome from you. You were always such a persuasive talker! Where did all your eloquence go?"

Lucius lowered the cane and leaned heavily on it with both hands, considering the portrait with a nasty smile.

"Or perhaps it is guilt that ties your tongue?" he suggested with meaningful slowness, bending forward and dropping his tone as if to share a secret. "I can understand that. It must be hard to find something to say to the man you have deceived!"

Feeling a cold rage rising at these words, Snape found his voice again. "I haven't deceived you, Lucius!"

"No!" Malfoy was ready to reply with exaggerated emphasis. "No, you are right. You haven't deceived *only* me. There are many others who can claim to have received this same honour from you."

Again, he considered Snape with a sneer. "Dumbledore's lapdog. Servant and traitor of both your masters. And yet we believed you. How well you performed your part!"

Lucius straightened himself with an effort and let his gaze wander in contempt: slowly, his arrogant eyes roamed past the many different objects gathered in the room, until they rested once more on the man in the portrait, who returned his gaze in disdainful silence. Lucius nodded nonchalantly.

"I see you have recreated your little kingdom here. Everybody speaks of your lessons. You are the wonder of the school, the controversial hero, the notorious professor offered a second life by magical arts. Now, why don't you ask me how did I spend *my* life after the battle? Aren't you interested to know, my dear, dear friend?"

Both men stared at each other in challenge for a long moment. Then Lucius continued sharply, "Fifteen years in Azkaban, Severus. The Wizengamot needed to set an example, and they chose me. Of course! I was the obvious choice. So, I lost everything in a handful of seconds."

His voice wavered while pronouncing these last words, then steadied again, rising in controlled anger. "My name, my dignity, my honour. The love of my wife, who spent fifteen long years in solitude and pain. The wedding of my son, that was celebrated without the joy such an occasion would require. The birth of my grandson, the announcement of which I received with great delay in the solitude of my cell... And finally, my health, my joy and my hopes! Everything has been burnt, Severus, and all I have left is a heap of ashes."

He drew himself up in a painful act of pride. "I, Lucius Malfoy, pureblood and heir of one of the most famous dynasties in the magical world! Now I am forced to lower my eyes in shame even before the humblest Mudblood! See the pathetic wreck I have become! "

His knuckles became white as he tightened his grip on his cane, shaking it violently. "And you knew it! You worked against us from the very beginning!"

"It seems, however, that I didn't succeed as I should have," Snape replied coldly. "I see you are still a loyal follower of the Dark Lord in your heart, even though an ignominious defeat and fifteen years in a cell have proven the vainness of his ambitions. Perhaps the Ministry should be informed of this touching devotion."

"That is not what I meant!" Lucius retorted, eyes sparkling with fury but also with a hint of fear at that menace so openly offered. "You lied constantly to us, to me!"

"Coming from the man who lied shamelessly to the Ministry and the Board of Governors, this is a strange accusation," Snape continued in the same cold tone.

"DON'T PLAY YOUR TRICKS WITH ME!" Lucius shouted in anger, then suddenly paled, and pressed a hand on his heart, staggering back unsteadily.

"I wanted to protect our world..." he panted and swayed, the cane unexpectedly revealing itself too unstable to help to sustain his weight.

"How?" Snape challenged him. "How? By throwing it definitely into the hands of a demonic monster?"

"I don't permit you---" Malfoy began, then again he faltered in pain, and looked around in the desperate search for a support. Attempting to regain his balance, he leaned against one of the desks, keeping a hand tightened on his chest.

"It aches..." he gasped, "Merlin, how it aches... but I need to tell you what I hold in my heart, before it cracks... I still have nightmares, Severus. I had them for fifteen years. Each day. Each hour. Each minute. Waking up in a cold cell, answering to my keepers, eating that stale bread, sleeping in those filthy sheets. Everything reminded me of my past glorious position before I became a number they enjoyed humiliating."

His eyes filled with tears. "How I have hated you, Severus! And, Merlin, how I hate you now!"

Snape shook his head in a sort of incredulous pity and quietly replied, "You should hate the man to whom, on the contrary, you never ceased to proclaim your reverence. Yet you are alive, Lucius, and you still have a family..."

"They are the only reason I chose to survive," the man replied, dashing a trembling hand on his eyes.

"How is Narcissa?" Snape gently asked, hoping to offer a diversion. Again Malfoy reacted in fury.

"Don't you dare pronounce her name! You, you who have..."

"Sealed an Unbreakable Vow with her to protect your son?" Snape ironically suggested.

The man raised a shaky finger. "You lied to her and to Bellatrix!"

"But my lie saved Draco."

This quiet assertion seemed to unexpectedly strike home. Malfoy backed, still vibrating in pain, and crossed his arms. For a moment, his eyes narrowed with a cunning expression that deformed his aristocratic features.

"Yes..." He breathed slowly. "Draco. Your pretext. The perfect excuse you held to for so long."

He raised his head, watching the portrait in contempt, then attacked cruelly. "You say you saved my son... Yet he didn't come here today to thank you. And do you know why? Because I've told him the truth!"

Smiling vindictively, Lucius continued harshly, "Knowing how close we were, Draco has asked me about your double role. I confirmed to him that, apart from Dumbledore, you have constantly lied, used and sacrificed everybody around you for your own goals. And perhaps you lied also to Dumbledore himself; I wouldn't be surprised. However, Draco now knows that your so boasted protection was nothing but a deliberate ruse. You used him as a pawn, and that's why he didn't come here today."

Saddened, Snape contemplated the triumphant Malfoy. So, he thought bitterly, that was the reason little Scorpius had looked so wary during his lessons.

The man in the portrait closed his eyes, struggling against the burning memories.

"No!" he then replied fiercely, raising his head to reject the accusation.

"No," he repeated. "I could not save those who had freely chosen their destiny, and you were amongst them. But I did my best to protect all the others."

He paused for a long moment, then he continued softly, "Draco followed your path because you were the father he loved and admired. He trusted you, while you left him alone and defenceless through your repeated failures."

A stab would have been less painful. An anguished, shocked expression altered the features of the man under the frame, draining his colour. And finally Malfoy broke. Hiding his face in his hands, he burst into the harsh, gasping sobs of an old man not used to weeping, letting his true feelings flow unreservedly with his tears.

"Narcissa was right. It's useless. I have failed."

Raising two reddened, hopeless eyes, Lucius opened his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I've sacrificed myself for Draco, but I lost him anyway. I thought I was creating a safer future for my family, offering my life to shelter them from a horrible punishment... but now my son blames me for my choices. That's why he didn't come here today."

His lips trembled in the effort of pronouncing the words that admitted his defeat. "He is ashamed. He doesn't want to be involved in the humiliation of our house."

He buried again his face in his hands. "Better dead as you are, Severus, than forced to live in perpetual shame."

A gasping sob shook him violently and he added, "Better dead than seeing my grandson lower his eyes in embarrassment when we walk in the street."

As if summoned by these words, the door opened slowly and Scorpius Malfoy peeked in.

"Grandpa?" he questioned timidly from the other side of the room and, unable to control his voice, Lucius managed a hesitant smile, blinking to hide his tears. But the boy didn't move, evidently uneasy before his grandfather, who struggled to compose himself.

"Come in, Scorpius," Lucius finally called, trying to sound confident and reassure the child with a lie. "Professor Snape was telling me about you. I am glad to hear that you are such a good student."

"Yes, Scorpius," Snape addressed the boy, who had cautiously arrived under the portrait. "I am happy to have seen your grandfather. He was once one of my best friends."

Lucius stared anxiously at Scorpius, and the boy stared back piercingly at the old man, then turned to look at the portrait. Snape lowered his head in a farewell.

"Be well, Lucius. Scorpius, I will see you tomorrow. Please send my best regards to your father. I hope I will see him too, one of these days."

Disoriented, Malfoy fumbled again for words; then, renouncing the fight, he dropped his head and reached for his grandson, placing a hand on his shoulder as if asking for support. The boy looked at the man with concerned eyes. The pressure on his shoulder and the extreme exhaustion of that old, loved face finally drove him to overcome his shyness. Taking a wrinkled hand into his, Scorpius asked in a whisper, "Have you been crying, grandpa?"

"Yes." Lucius breathed slowly then steadied his trembling lips. "Memories can be hurtful for a man as old as me. But Professor Snape is a wise friend. And now I have you to help me."

Instinctively, the boy tightened his grip, and Malfoy stopped and watched him closely, losing himself in the astounding grey of Scorpius' pale eyes, so similar to his. He awkwardly stroked the boy's white-blond hair.

"Now let's go out and have fun together. The party won't last forever, you know?"

Scorpius widened his eyes in incredulous, immense joy, blushing in pleasure. Lucius turned his head to look at Snape. The two men exchanged a long, silent gaze, then Lucius headed towards the door, clasping his grandson's hand with renewed force.

Alone again in the dimming light, Severus Snape sighed deeply. How pitiable the man under his portrait was, who had still the greatest of treasures -- life and family -- and yet was losing them to pointless pride!

The wizard lowered his eyes, while a dark anguish filled his heart. Slowly, insidiously, Lucius' vehement accusations -- the ones Snape had so disdainfully rejected -- raised their heads again and added their stinging pain to the words that Zabini had cast only a few days before. Their sound still seemed to vibrate in the air, and Snape felt an acrid taste in his mouth. Had he been able to dispense only sorrow and misery during his life? Had he really betrayed all those surrounding him for the sole benefit of that ambiguous power that Dumbledore used to call "the greater good"?

For many long, interminable moments, the portrait struggled against the bitter sensations rising inexorably in his soul. Alas! The fight was too powerful for his wounded spirit and, defeated, Snape closed his eyes, while a desperate yet impossible desire forced its way in his heart: for a moment, he saw himself slip out the tight boundaries of his frame and walk in the open air, enjoying the sun on his cheeks and the breeze in his hair, feeling the comfort of a warm hand clasping his...

No, what was still possible for Lucius would never be possible for him again: destiny had confined him to a picture, and there he would pass the rest of his existence, eternally wishing for what life had offered him but never delivered, because of his wrong choices.

For a long, long time, Snape watched the door with unseeing eyes: then, crossing his arms in his usual pose, he lowered his head and waited silently for the new day to come.

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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*All my gratitude to my betas and previewers **DementedLeaf**, **Xoxphoenix** and **Morgaine_Dulac**. Infinite thanks to **Duj** for her final supervision. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers. Let's see if this chapter answers some of the questions I have received...*

Part XV

It was almost evening when the door opened again without warning, this time pushed by two eager children who seemed to be in great haste. Abruptly awakening from his dark reverie, Snape recognized Albus Severus in one of them, and his heart filled with joy. But who was the little red-haired girl racing with him to arrive first under the portrait? There was something familiar in her little features, and the wizard had the alarming feeling that he was soon going to be introduced another member of the Potter family.

"Good evening, Professor!" Albus Severus greeted with a joyful smile, then watched his small companion with a mute order in his eyes.

"Good evening, Professor!" the girl volunteered readily.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter," Snape began to answer, and his words raised a giggle from the girl. He frowned immediately, but she didn't lower her eyes. Instead, she looked at the boy with an amused glance.

"Mr. Potter! Is that what they call you at Hogwarts? Oh, Al, how funny it sounds!"

"Mr. Potter?" Snape asked, a bit irritated at this evident cheerful disrespect. "Would you be so kind as to introduce this young lady to me?"

"Young lady!" The girl was evidently pleased. "How nice! Daddy calls me that only when he catches me in wrongdoing."

Embarrassed, the boy smiled and said, "I'm sorry, Professor. This is Lily, my little sister. I've told her everything, and she wanted to meet you."

Lily! Though not unexpected, the name added another emotion to the many others that had stormed till that moment in Snape's soul. And yet, the girl in front of him carried only a pale trace of her grandmother's heritage in her features. Not the colour of her mischievous hazelnut eyes, not the shade of her reddish hair, reminding him too much of her Weasley blood. And what exactly had Albus Severus meant with "I've told her everything"?

But the portrait had no time to ask or add anything else because a small group of people was just entering the room, pushing the door that had been left half open. This time, the persons arriving were much quieter than the children, yet Snape looked at them with tumult in his heart.

Harry Potter! Harry Potter was coming. No more the scrawny lad he was in his school days, but a respectable grown up man properly dressed, steel spectacles on his nose and ruffled dark hair. Next to him, holding tightly to his arm, Snape recognised Ginny Weasley, as radiant as when she was a student, though slightly overweight. A mature Hermione Granger followed them, a big, suspiciously trembling smile on her face while she walked hand in hand with her little Rose. Now that mother and daughter were together, their resemblance was even more striking.

The man in the painting felt trapped. There was no way to escape. The day he had planned as a grateful gift to Minerva McGonagall was slowly transforming itself into a sort of judgment day in which the many memories of his past seemed to have been mercilessly gathered. He braced himself for the trial. From below, Albus Severus looked at the change occurring upon Snape's features, and turned to watch his parents in disconcertment.

"Good evening, Professor Snape," said the unexpectedly grave voice of the adult Harry Potter, and the portrait felt a powerful emotion rise through the fibres of his canvas; his old nemesis, the reincarnation of the man he had hated so much... and of the girl he had loved even more. There he was, looking at him with Albus Severus' same serene emerald green eyes.

Strangely, after those first polite words, it seemed that Potter hadn't anything else to say. He retreated quietly to near a desk while the two women added their greetings to his: Ginny a bit embarrassed, Hermione much more animated.

She must obviously be pleased by the astounding success of her daughter, Snape thought with a lopsided smile, considering Hermione's cheerful expression. The portrait watched his visitors with his habitual frown. It was so strange to see grown up those he had known children! And it was even stranger to consider that they were all the same age now. But the persons down there had a family and a life; they were not just empty memories fixed on a canvas, like sadly he was.

As always, Hermione was the first to react to the embarrassing silence that had followed that initial exchange of words.

"I'm very glad to know that you are teaching again, Professor!" she exclaimed. "I couldn't wish a better tutor for my daughter. I only hope she'll be up to the task."

"You don't have to worry, Madam Weasley," Snape replied, and he saw the eyebrows of his visitors rise at the sound of that voice coming from the past, yet never forgotten. They all were clearly mesmerized, so he continued with bitter satisfaction, "Your daughter has her mother's same keen intelligence. It's a pleasure to have her in my course. And not only she is brilliant, she is also respectful."

Ginny Potter blushed at that indirect allusion, and her eyes sparkled.

"Which I suppose can't be said of my first son," she declared, a little more acutely than needed.

"Although brilliant, young Mr. James Potter cannot be defined as exactly... respectful." Snape was very circumspect in the use of his terms. Albus Severus was looking at him, and he didn't want to hurt the child.

Perceiving the uneasiness of the man in the picture, Hermione immediately took control of the conversation again, exploring different topics related to the school, the feast and the place, and finally concluding, "It's wonderful to see how the classroom has been organized! Rose described me the way you check potions passing through these little portraits. I found it a very clever method."

This last consideration seemed obviously meant to flatter him, and he felt a bit irritated. But immediately after, her real purpose became clear. "Yet I was wondering: how will you manage to grade assignments, if I may ask?"

"I still haven't decided, Miss Granger," he answered, returning unconsciously to the more familiar name he was used to. "Until a few days ago, this course was only an experiment. However, yours is a good question. As you can imagine, we cannot call an artist each time there is an assignment, nor we can ask the students to paint their answers directly on the frames. I suppose I'll have to speak with Headmistress McGonagall about this matter."

Then his eyes narrowed in understanding. How could have he forgotten to whom he was talking? He nodded meaningfully and asked, "Any suggestion from you? I'm sure

you have carefully studied the question."

Blushing in the same pleased pride of when she was a student, she replied immediately. "Well, yes, I think I have a possible solution."

"Indeed," Snape murmured softly. "How astonishing!"

Hermione looked a bit offended, but the portrait was surprised to see a smile rise and widen into a grin upon Harry Potter's face. The man didn't comment, but he was evidently amused at that reiteration of "know-it-all-ness" of his old friend. However, the conversation suddenly came to an end when the door opened again and let in an irritated Ron Weasley, dragging a reluctant little boy who was trying to escape his hold. The man reddened in embarrassment when he noticed all those gazes focused on his entrance.

"I'm sorry," he stammered in the intimidating silence, "but the boy went... I mean, Hugo was... Oh well! Good evening. I hope I didn't miss anything important."

"Mr. Weasley!" Snape replied with his characteristic sardonic tone. "Always late! What did you choose this time for your trip? Another flying car?"

Though evidently uneasy, Ron found his mischievous grin again. "Well, now I have a driving licence, so I suppose I could dare to drive one with better results. Or perhaps I could try with a plane."

His sister smiled while his wife frowned, and Snape felt suddenly cut off. Out there, there was a world that was totally unknown to him and that probably he would never get to know. Painful as it might be, those people were his connection with the past and his bridge to the future. And a disturbing consideration followed: incredible as it might seem, he would be there also when they would be there no more. The idea was simply scary. How would he feel when all the people he had known had disappeared or transformed into portraits too?

His gaze intercepted Albus Severus' trustful eyes. The boy was smiling to his sister, and Snape sadly thought that soon he too would grow up into an adult and go away. But perhaps his children would come to Hogwarts in the future, and perhaps Snape would be allowed to play again a part in the life of a family that had played such an important role in his existence.

The portrait was so intent in his thoughts that he barely heard Hermione announce her intention to meet with Headmistress McGonagall, to speak about her suggestion. Following her words, a stream of electricity ran through the room and, immediately after, all the people inside there were busy performing the curious ballet called "bidding goodbye". Suddenly, all the unsaid questions and answers seemed to condense and hang still in the air while frenzied activity took place. Ginny gathered her children. Hermione joined Ron in reining in the overexcited Hugo who wanted to see the fireworks organised by his uncle George. Ron was evidently relieved to leave the room, and his wife cast him a reproachful glance while Rose added her personal contribution to the happy chaos.

In the middle of this confusion, Harry Potter advanced slowly and positioned himself under the frame. All the others began to retreat towards the door and, from their reaction, Snape understood that leaving Harry behind had been part of a planned scheme. He sighed inwardly. What could Harry Potter possibly want from him?

He felt exhausted and suddenly irate. How wrong he had been, throwing himself again into the worries of real life right at the moment he had reached a blissful nothingness!

Raising his eyes as if searching for help, he saw Albus Severus and Lily walk to the door, obediently following their mother; yet they were continuously turning their heads to look at him, as if they were trying to tell him something. Then the door closed, and silence filled the room. The portrait and the man were definitely alone, and Snape sighed inwardly again.

"I suppose you have something to say, Potter," he said in a quiet, disarming tone. "Please speak, and then leave me to my blessed solitude."

His visitor nodded gravely, looking at the portrait with sympathetic eyes.

"I understand your feelings," Harry replied. "I would have preferred to come here alone. But you know Hermione. She couldn't resist paying a visit and asking you that question! She hasn't changed a bit in nineteen years!"

Harry smiled, an amused expression diffusing upon his face so different from the wary, defiant look that Snape remembered so well! then he turned serious again.

"It's not easy for me to say what I came to say. You see, we all feel guilty. We saw only the bad in you. But we judged through eyes that had deliberately been impaired. Dumbledore told me the truth only after my death."

The portrait startled in shock. "Your... death?" he whispered.

"I had been forced to consign myself to Voldemort before the last battle, and he cast the Avada Kedavra. Technically, I was dead. But, as a matter of fact, he didn't harm me because the drops of my blood that had regenerated him and that were still in his veins protected me. However, I fell under his curse and, during a loss of consciousness, I spoke with Dumbledore in a sort of vision. There he revealed the truth to me, but I was too upset to understand it in its full meaning."

His eyes become suddenly sparkling.

"I still have to thank you for... for what you gave me in the Shrieking Shack."

Snape paled in pain. Harry seemed to realise how hurtful those memories were, yet he resolutely continued. "Though you had given me the key to understanding the facts, it wasn't simple for me to recognize the truth. It wasn't easy to admit that the man who had scolded, punished, insulted and given me detentions for six long years, the traitor who had run away as a bloody coward after having killed his Headmaster and mentor before my eyes..." here Harry gulped and paused for a moment; then he concluded softly "It wasn't easy to accept that this man had been the loyal guardian of my life... and my real protector."

In the silence following this declaration, the portrait closed his eyes. With a weary movement, Snape massaged the bridge of his nose and lowered his head, closing himself in meditation.

Harry bit his lower lip, trying to find the right words.

"I don't know if we will ever get to overcome our memories," he continued slowly. "But perhaps my children will. Albus Severus told me that you are mentoring him, and I am very glad to see how much he is enjoying your lessons. I know that James, on the contrary, is a much tougher character to deal with. He is furious with you now, just as I was so many years ago. He accuses you of being partial and nasty. I suppose he will have to learn the hard way, exactly as I did."

The man in the portrait was still breathing slowly, eyes lost in remoteness, and Harry straightened himself.

"I am happy I have had the chance to tell you all this. I had delayed this moment for too much," he said, waiting for a reaction. But only silence answered his declaration, so he lowered his head and added sadly, "I will leave you now, as I promised. Good bye, Professor Snape."

He nervously raked his hair with his hand, in the characteristic gesture of his youth. The scar was still well visible on his forehead and Snape looked at it in fascination. Speaking haltingly, as if words were forcing their way out against his will, the portrait finally stated, "Albus Severus has a promising talent. I hope he will soon be allowed to join my course."

Harry raised his face again, a controlled joy diffusing upon his features for that answer that revealed a world behind it.

"I'm sure he will. He is a very kind but determined boy."

Then, after a pause, he offered his last gift, "Now you know why we gave him his name. For better or for worse, Albus Dumbledore has shaped my destiny. But, without you, I would have never fulfilled it."

Disappearing again in a remote distance, Snape nodded in silence.

"Good bye then, Professor Snape," Harry greeted.

"Good bye, Mr. Potter."

With a smooth movement, Harry turned his shoulders and walked towards the door. But as soon as he opened it, he stumbled upon Albus Severus and Lily, who were waiting outside the room with guilty expressions on their faces.

"What are you doing here?" Harry inquired, trying to sound authoritative but immediately spoiling the effect with a smile.

"Just a moment, Dad!" Lily pleaded. "Al must show me a... a thing."

Harry turned to look back over his shoulder; the tremulous light of the torches was dancing in the room, and the portrait was still staring blankly at the void, lost in his mysterious thoughts. He smiled again in complicity.

"A secret, uh? Well, young lady, don't make your mum wait too much for you. You are not supposed to remain in Hogwarts like your brothers. And remember, we must say goodbye to Aunt Minerva before going home."

The children nodded enthusiastically, then they entered the room running in excitement. Smiling, Harry waited and saw them stop under the portrait, exactly as he had expected.

"Good night, Severus!" he silently wished, closing the door.

As soon as they were alone, the children raised their heads with a relieved sigh.

"Hello, Professor!" Lily greeted the man in the portrait with cheerful familiarity. "We are back!"

"Glad to see you again, Miss Potter," Snape forced himself to reply, crossing his arms and recovering his usual frown.

The small girl considered the wizard with embarrassing intensity. Then she turned to her brother, who was evidently uneasy. "He is much better than I thought!"

Al became scarlet and raised two imploring eyes, "You must excuse her, Professor. She is only a girl."

Lily raised her head proudly. "I think he can see that by himself!" she snapped. "However, I might be a girl, but the idea was mine."

She looked up again, and a smile lit her features. "I have a present for you, Professor."

"Well, what a nice thought, Miss Potter," Snape declared impatiently, half amused, half irritated at the impertinence of the little witch, yet somehow unable to scold her.

Al looked even more distressed.

"She... she is just a small girl," he repeated uncomfortably, but Lily silenced him with a disdainful glance, then opened a little rectangular flat package.

"I hope you'll like it," she said, lifting the object so that Snape could see it.

"I'm sure that..." Snape began to reply. But his voice stopped and choked while his eyes opened in immense, awesome shock.

From a little picture, a red haired, lovely young woman was smiling at him, and Snape stepped back with a sharp gasp.

"Lily!" he exclaimed brokenly.

The children looked at each other and smiled.

Part XVI

Chapter 16 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part XVI

Snape staggered back and raised his hands, hiding his face and his feelings.

"Severus," Lily's voice called him softly, but the man in the portrait was drowning in an ocean of emotions that made him unable to speak. So she asked for help.

"Al, dear, will you please hang my picture on the wall?"

Reddening in anxiety, the boy hurried to look for a proper position. He found a little painting showing a view of the lake and removed it carefully; then, with even more attention, he took Lily's portrait in his hands and put it at its place.

"Thank you!" she rewarded him with a sweet smile, and Snape, understanding what was going to happen, backed again until his shoulders met the painted wall behind him. There he waited, breathing slowly and watching the little portrait in painful attraction.

Moving gracefully and fluidly as in a dance, Lily left her picture and entered his frame; in a few rapid steps, she arrived before the wizard and there she stopped, considering him with admiration.

"How handsome you have become, Severus!" she finally said, her voice betraying the tears that were welling in her eyes.

He was breathing with difficulty, trying to manage his conflicting emotions while contemplating the dearest vision with adoring eyes. There she was, exactly as he remembered her, in the untouched beauty of her twenty-one years.

"Lily!" he murmured with a strangled voice. "Lily," he repeated in a sobbing whisper, then his too forceful emotions overpowered him, and he tried to kneel before her.

She immediately grabbed him by his arms and held him tightly, stopping his movement and shielding him from the sight of the children. For a moment, leaned against her body, he felt a shocking stream of warmth run through his fibres. Finally, he savoured a physical contact with another being and exactly with the one that was so dear to his heart. How intensely he had desired it! Joy was simply overwhelming.

Then he raised his head and their eyes met, his pleading, hers compassionate, both shining with tears. Lost in the sight of the girl he had thought he would never see again, dizzy for the emotions clashing in his soul, Snape summoned all his courage and slowly straightened himself, opening his mouth to speak. But the girl stepped back and, with a quick warning glance, she indicated the children behind her, asking him silently to wait.

"Grandma!" little Lily called imperiously. She had evidently planned everything, and didn't want to miss a single detail. "You should kiss Professor Snape now!"

Then, as if having second thought, she declared reassuringly, "You can do it, I won't tell anything to grandpa."

Finally, after another thoughtful pause, she added, "Either will Al. Right, Al?"

But her brother was staring agape, so she elbowed him.

"AL!!!" the small girl exclaimed in exasperation, and their grandmother smiled.

"I had already thought about this by myself, but thank you for the suggestion," Lily declared with a nonchalance that revealed her intense emotion. She went closer to Snape and gently put her hands on his shoulders. Instantly, the wizard stiffened and closed his eyes, while she straightened on the tips of her toes and kissed him lightly on his cheek. Snape shuddered and inhaled sharply; then he opened his eyes with a sort of pain on his features.

She considered him with a bit of surprise.

"Did it hurt?" she inquired in concern.

"N-no." His voice was just a hoarse whisper.

"Well, then why do you look so tense?" she asked him gently.

"I... I am not used to kisses," he replied huskily, trembling in emotion. "Especially from... from you," he added with an effort that made him flush.

In the meantime, the children looked at each other, one in perplexity, the other in delight.

"He doesn't seem to like it," Al whispered to her sister, but she cut him off patronisingly, "Of course he likes it! You are a boy, that's why you don't understand this kind of thing."

She turned again to the portrait.

"Now you should go for a walk," she instructed, but her grandma replied with a hesitant voice, looking at Snape in worry, "I think you should let Professor Snape decide what he prefers to do. Perhaps he would like me to leave, now."

"DON'T!"

Words burst out before he could stop them, and he awkwardly managed to add, "I mean... I would love to go walking with you in one of these beautiful panoramas."

Radiating in joy, little Lily elbowed again her brother and exclaimed in excitement, "Come on, Al! We must leave them alone now!"

She smiled at the couple and hopefully asked, "Grandma, will you kiss Professor Snape for me before I leave?"

Seriously, the woman in the picture replied, "Darling, perhaps Professor Snape has had enough of kisses."

"But if he was so happy when you kissed him before!" the child was ready to answer. Her grandma smiled. "Well, maybe later."

"Goodbye, Professor Snape," little Lily greeted. "I hope you like my surprise."

With an effort, Snape turned his eyes away from the woman before him and nodded to the small one watching him so trustfully from below.

"Thank you, Miss Potter," he said. "And I really mean it."

She brightened and waved her hand, then turned her shoulders proudly and began to walk, grabbing her stunned brother in her way and exclaiming, "Let's go, Al; Dad will be waiting for us! You don't want him to come here, don't you?"

But the woman in the portrait stopped the boy on his march by asking him, "Please, Albus Severus, wait for me down there, near the door. Later I'll need your help again to go home."

The little girl frowned; then, understanding the uselessness of a complaint, she resumed her walking with a last regretful glance. When little Lily had left the room, Al whispered, "Grandma, couldn't you become my sister too?"

Lily widened her eyes and replied, "Al! You already have a sister! Don't you like her?"

"Oh, grandma, but you are so beautiful!" The boy looked at her in admiration, then sighed and obediently went to reach his place at the opposite end of the room, where he sat on a chair. As soon as he was far enough to not hear their words, Snape softly called again, "Lily..."

"Shht!" she silenced him by placing a finger on his lips, then she took him by his hand. "Come with me and don't say a word."

Once more, he felt a liquid wave of emotion running through his body at her touch; little pulsing coloured blots danced before his eyes and, spellbound, he followed her into a picture showing a magnificent sunset glowing from behind a chain of mountains. As soon as they entered the painting, the sun seemed to radiate more intensely while the delicate colours of the fading evening changed in a transition of glorious shades. For a long moment, they stopped and contemplated in awe the majestic beauty of the

scene, reflecting so well the emotions in their spirits. Then they sat on a painted bench, and the dark wizard immediately turned to the girl.

"Lily!" Snape implored with a sort of desperation, "I have been dreaming about this possibility for such a long time in my mind! Please tell me that you... that you don't hate me for what I have done. Tell me that you are here to forgive, not to condemn!"

Protected by the bench, he slid down and knelt in front of her, clasping her hands and holding them tightly, craving to kiss them yet not daring to try. Oh, how could he expose his soul, how could he show the intensity of the feelings that made his painted heart race in emotion!

Answering to the plea in his voice, she bent and leaned her forehead against his, enfolding him in the soothing balm of her tenderness. He felt her breath tickle his cheeks and closed his eyes, wishing that that blissful moment could last forever. But she was already raising her head, caressing his skin with soft fingers while she gently unleashed her hands from his hold. He trembled again under her touch, and her brows furrowed in concern.

"Severus, don't!" she whispered. "I have come here for you. Please sit next to me. Let's speak like the friends we were." A painful pause, then she corrected herself. "Like the friends we are."

Slowly, his heart beating madly at those words, he got on his feet and sat again next to her, a hesitant look on his face.

"I'm sorry," she said, brushing off the hair with the same graceful movement he remembered so well. Instantly, it was as if so many years hadn't passed and, for a moment, he was again the gangly, clumsy boy he had been in his teens.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, watching him in anxiety, "I should have advised you. But, as you probably understood, it was a sudden decision."

Still trying to manage his rushing heartbeats, Snape asked the first of the many questions chasing in his mind. "Lily... how... how did you...?"

She understood his unspoken words and smiled, happy to switch to a safer subject.

"I was painted a year ago, and I must thank Ginny for that. My first grandson had received his letter from Hogwarts and memories came unexpectedly back to haunt Harry. So Ginny told him that it was time to cope with his unresolved anguishes. My son never wanted to have our pictures in his home. He didn't know us except in his dreams. But eventually, he agreed, so I got to know my daughter-in-law and my grandchildren. Now Harry comes to speak to me, but I imagine how difficult it must be for a grown up man... talking to the adolescent woman who happens to be his mother."

There were tears in her eyes that couldn't trickle down. She lowered her head, and Snape felt the desperate impulse to hug her; yet he didn't dare to do anything but force himself to stay quiet, though vibrating in pain. Finally, with a deep breath, Lily raised her face and locked her eyes with his, declaring firmly, "Harry told me everything, Severus."

Snape stiffened immediately in alarm, a cold stab of fear chilling his heart. But Lily placed her little hand on his hand in a gentle, reassuring touch, while she resumed her telling.

"You see, when Dumbledore told James and I that there was a prophecy and that our son might be involved in it, I was terrified. When he told us that you - and exactly you of all those surrounding me - had been the one to report it to Voldemort, I was sickened. But when he told us that you had practically delivered yourself in his hands to inform him of the danger, I felt a new hope surging in my soul. I knew you couldn't be that evil, and I hoped, oh! so desperately hoped to see you again at my side!"

She stopped in emotion, reliving the events.

"Then everything was destroyed by Voldemort, the night in which he reached our house, the place that was supposed to be our shelter! I begged him, trying to protect my baby. But it all was useless, and I thought that you had lied to Albus."

Her face altered at the memory. "Betrayed by the man who once was my best friend! It was such a painful thought to die with!"

Her voice broke in a sob, and Snape felt his heart crash in a thousand pieces, as if the colours with which he had been painted had suddenly shrunk and crumbled in a multitude of wounding, razor-sharp flakes.

"Forgive me! Please forgive me!" he cried in despair, yielding to the pain torturing his fibres. "You don't know how much I have hated myself for what I did to you!"

Shaken by tearless sobs, he buried his face in his hands, feeling his soul lacerate in agony. Then he heard Lily anxiously call him and perceived her arms close and tighten around his body, enfolding him in a loving embrace. He turned to hide his face in her shoulder, shivering for the many emotions devastating his mind. She kept him tightly, murmuring soothing words.

"It's all forgiven, Severus, it's all forgiven. I know our death wasn't your fault."

Those words! Those astonishing words! Incredulous, he dared to raise his head and look at her, so he saw her eyes brighten with tears. Her voice vibrated in renewed affection while she talked quietly.

"Harry told me everything. How you tried to save us, and how you devoted the rest of your life to protecting him. The times in which you punished him and those in which you helped him. And he told me about your Patronus."

She paused, her warm breath stirring softly his hair. "But, above all, he told me that you did everything in memory of me, while the man whom we trusted, and who should have been Harry's true protector, had instead planned to raise him like a sacrificial victim, like a 'pig for slaughter'. This is why I came here today. To tell you that everything is forgiven. And to tell you that I will be forever grateful."

Drowning in a gigantic wave of tenderness, he relaxed in her arms and closed his eyes. Impulsively, she kissed him on his temple. That gesture inexplicably froze him. With a shiver, he disentangled from her embrace, feeling exposed and, what was worse, ridiculous. She was still so young and innocent despite the tragic events she had experienced while he was almost double her age, and with a whole life of atonement behind his shoulders. What chance could there still be between them, what bond, what hope, except for childhood memories and burning regret?

He looked at her and declared bitterly, "I don't deserve your pity."

Worried by his reaction, she confessed, "I'm sorry. I had been tempted to do something similar when we were at school." She gulped. "I mean, before we quarreled. You looked so... so vulnerable."

"I wish you had done it at that time, then. But you were too committed to Potter," he replied harshly, feeling his anger irrationally grow at the thought of those lost possibilities.

"You still can't call him James, can you?" she said, an echo of her old animosity rising in her voice.

"He stole you from me. I will never forgive him for that," he replied sharply. Then his voice softened with heartbreaking tenderness and he whispered slowly, "I have loved you since the very first moment I saw you."

Finally he had said it! It had taken him a whole life and both their deaths to express those feelings, but finally he had told her. And, immediately after, he realised once more the hopelessness of that declaration. Life had offered him a second chance, but he would never be allowed to fulfill it. And yet he should be grateful, though his heart was filled with consuming bitterness and his mind with useless options.

He felt her fingers gently close around his wrist.

"I knew it, Severus. That's why I never dared to encourage you. I couldn't return your feelings."

He turned to stare disbelievingly at her, and she looked back at him, trying to find the words.

"I have given my mind and my heart to the man I had chosen, Severus, and I can't change this. But there will be always a place for you in my soul. This is why I came here."

The man near her was rubbing angrily his eyes. "It doesn't matter! It's too late. It has always been too late for me!"

"Severus..." she placed a hand on his arm, but he pulled away with a tug. Pained, she withdrew on the bench.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. Will you forgive me?" she asked.

"Lily!" he exclaimed, instantly regretting his action. "Lily, how can you ask this from me? I am the one who destroyed your life and your family! Without me, nothing would have happened! You don't know how many times I have wished that the Dark Lord had never existed, that /had never existed. Or, at least, that I had never had the chance to meet you."

He stopped, strangled by his too-intense emotions.

"You..." he murmured, surrendering to his feelings and abandoning himself to the immensity of his love. "You, who have always been the only reason of my existence."

The world stood still for a moment. She sighed, a small, soft, tremulous sound disguising a sob, then closed her eyes, lowering her head to hide the sorrow on her face. A painful silence filled the frame, while the sun seemed to palpitate and fade. Clouds slowly covered the mountains and a grim tone saturated the colours.

Greying in the dimming light, Snape turned his head and contemplated the desolate figure near him with desperate tenderness. Slowly, cautiously, his hand travelled bit by bit on the back of the bench until it reached her shoulder. She stiffened and he stopped in panic, mutely asking for permission. But finally she relaxed and he gently pulled her close to him, resting his black head on her soft hair.

They enjoyed the warmth of their closeness and the beauty of the mountains in a silence filled with unspoken words.

"Let's start this conversation again, may we?" she whispered after a while.

"No," he replied firmly and she immediately straightened, turning to look at him with worried eyes. But he kissed her tenderly on her hair, saying quietly, "No. Let's just stay here. Together."

He drew her back against him again and she leaned her head on his shoulder. Silently, they watched the sunset shine and sparkle before them, in renewed, incessant, awesome glory.

Sitting on an uncomfortable chair near the door and feeling extremely tired after that long, demanding day, Albus Severus yawned for the hundredth time, trying at the same time to guess what was going on between Professor Snape and Grandma Lily. His sister Lily had been so sure that Professor Snape would be happy... and yes, he had looked happy, but in such a strange, painful way!

Forgotten witness of that peculiar encounter, Albus Severus had listened in concern to the raising and lowering of the voices, unable to understand the words but easily perceiving the tones. The emotions he had been able to sense had been so strong, so powerful, so filled with sadness, that his little heart had ached in sympathy, and many times tears had threatened to trickle. He had therefore been forced to rub his eyes forcefully. He didn't want to be caught weeping, especially from those two so very special persons.

But then Professor Snape and Grandma Lily had unexpectedly become silent on the bench, and Albus Severus had found himself holding his breath while looking at the timid climbing of Professor Snape's hand on the backrest. And finally he had relaxed, when the two adults had clung together in that soothing embrace. He was rubbing his eyes again, this time in happy tiredness, when a voice made him startle.

"Al! Al! Are you sleeping?" Albus Dumbledore was calling him softly but anxiously. Al smiled to him in haziness and the old wizard continued in a hardly contained agitation. "You must leave immediately, my dear boy! Somebody's coming this way. Better for you to go, or you will be punished, and they'll be discovered."

"But... but... Grandma asked me to stay!" The boy tried to protest and Dumbledore smiled fondly.

"Don't worry. I'm sure Lily would prefer to know you safely away, with no points taken from Gryffindor. I'll explain her what happened."

Convinced, the boy got on his feet; cautiously, he opened the door and looked around in the corridor. A sound of approaching steps made him wince in panic.

"Go! Go!" Dumbledore incited him and, with a last apologetic glance, Albus Severus silently raced towards the Gryffindors' common room.

As soon as the boy had left, the soft shape of Minerva McGonagall appeared in the corridor. Moving as cautiously as the boy had done, she opened the door and looked around for Dumbledore. The witch and the wizard exchanged a happy glance, then paused for a moment to look at the couple. Finally, always in silence, they left.

A few minutes passed and the door opened again. This time, a silent shadow entered warily and stopped in surprise, watching the scene with a wondering frown. Then the shadow noiselessly slipped out, leaving the room and its unaware occupants to their blissful emotions.

Part XVII

Chapter 17 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

settings elaborated herein.

*All my gratitude to my betas and previewers **DementedLeaf**, **Xoxphoenix** and **Morgaine_Dulac**. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers.*

Part XVII

That morning, Severus Snape woke up curled on a wooden bench. He raised his head and blinked, surprised to see an unfamiliar, yet also strangely familiar, scene before his eyes. The mountains were shining in the distance, a gentle breeze was stroking his hair, and the sunset had changed into dawn. Suddenly, he remembered everything and looked around, anxiously searching for Lily. But she was nowhere to be seen and, for a moment, fear tightened his heart. Then, he noticed the little picture still hanging there. Could that mean that she would come again to visit him?

An immense hope ran through his fibres. Lazily, indulging in that soothing feeling, he got up from the uncomfortable position he had held for the night and yawned, stretching his arms... when his gaze unexpectedly met Minerva's smiling eyes.

The old witch was considering him with great tenderness, and he stiffened in embarrassment, trying to find something to say. But Minerva was quicker.

"Good morning, sleepyhead!" she exclaimed joyfully. "How are you feeling today, Severus? I know you had visits yesterday."

He blushed. How did Minerva know? But, above all, what did she know? However, her smile didn't seem to hide any second intention. It was a nice, friendly smile, and he felt reassured.

"Ah, er, yes, it was effectively an interesting afternoon," he replied, looking at the buttons of his cuffs with exaggerated attention.

Minerva tilted her head.

"I'm glad," she replied. "Hermione Granger... well, I should say Hermione Weasley, but I still can't associate her with that name, even after so many years that she's been married."

She stopped to shake her head in disbelief, then took a deep breath and resumed her talking. "Anyway! Hermione, as I was saying, told me that the two of you have had a nice conversation. At least, she was evidently pleased. And I know that Harry was here too."

Her voice softened. "I'm glad he finally came to speak to you. I had the chance to exchange only a few words with him just before he left."

She glanced at Snape in expectation, but he was still busy with his cuffs.

"How annoyingly uncooperative your buttons are this morning!" she considered lightly, and he blushed again and finally looked at her. But now, it was Minerva's turn to look lost in daydreaming.

"It has been such a wonderful day!" she murmured. "Having them all here again... It was as if time had never passed."

She sighed and, once more, she was again her practical self.

"So, as I was telling you, I have spoken with Hermione. She has found a very brilliant solution to help you with grading the parchments. Being raised in a Muggle family could be an advantage for a clever wizard or witch, these days. I have to admit that sometimes Muggles can be incredibly creative in their solutions, and Hermione always was a"

"An insufferable know-it-all," Snape muttered, raising his eyebrows in exasperation. She frowned at his words; then she unexpectedly burst into a happy laughter. Snape too felt a smile widen upon his face. He tried to scowl, but it was simply impossible. Joy was so infectious that morning!

"So, what did she say?" he insisted, crossing his arms.

Wiping tears of mirth from her eyes, Minerva resumed her talking.

"I'll tell you in a moment. First, you will be kindly asked to leave this picture for a while. This request seems to be a bit repetitive lately, don't you think? But this time you will be allowed to stay in another picture and enjoy the show. A master painter from St. Mungo's is coming today to make a special addition to your tools."

"That is?" he asked, a little concern tingeing his voice. What had that damn girl, no *woman*, suggested?

"Ah, er, the name is... is..." Minerva looked confused for a moment. "The name is fax. F-A-X."

She smiled at his puzzled expression and continued with a didactic tone, "Hermione told me that it was invented at the end of the last century, and that the Wizengamot has agreed to allow its use in special occasions. Hermione also said that it's employed at the Ministry to communicate with other countries: it's faster, simpler and surer."

She stopped her enunciation to look at him.

"A... fax?" Snape repeated slowly, and she nodded in expectation.

"I wonder how it works," he continued, furrowing his brows. But he wasn't really interested. Again, he glanced at the little frame in front of him and then turned his head with a guilty expression, afraid of having betrayed himself.

Minerva smiled fondly.

"Well, Severus, I must leave you now, but the painter will soon be here, and he will tell you what you need to know. And don't worry. Your lessons have been suspended till tomorrow morning."

"That's very kind of you," he replied and lowered his head in a goodbye, happy to have a chance of losing himself once more in his dreams.

She had almost reached the door when she suddenly turned and said, "Oh, I nearly forgot! Thank you for the wonderful surprise."

"Surprise?" He awakened in panic. "What surprise?"

"Ah, come on, Severus! I'm old, not stupid. Who else could have suggested such a nice celebration? Thank you, my dear, dear boy."

Her eyes twinkled with tears. "Have a nice day."

She left before he could answer: but really, there was no need, and he felt again a great peace entering his heart.

The painter arrived in the early afternoon. He was an energetic, good-looking man in his thirties with a mane of ruffled brown hair, a pointed beard and incredibly brilliant

blue eyes. He smiled at the portrait, then introduced himself with charming informality. The name sounded foreign like his accent and, for a moment, Snape was tempted to ask for more details. But he was still too dreamy to begin a conversation and, on the other hand, his visitor seemed impatient to begin his task.

As Minerva had announced, Snape was asked to leave his frame and enter another picture. From there, he watched the painter conjure brushes and a palette of magically changing shades: in a few seconds, evoked by precise taps of the wand, an assortment of creative tools was displayed on one of the little desks. Soon the man was absorbed in his work, so Snape forgot his questions and wandered in the pictures on the walls, looking in happy beatitude at the different scenes around him. He was feeling so elated and so young, so incredibly young!

His heart was dilating with the same cheerful expectation he remembered of his teenage days, the same lively excitement, the same hopeful joy. Once more, he relived his encounter with Lily, savouring every single word that she had said and adding those precious moments to the loving memories treasured in his heart.

The little empty portrait was continuously attracting his gaze. Would Lily come again to see him?

Please do! He prayed in his mind, and the words almost blurted out in their intensity. After all, he didn't ask for too much: to see her, talk with her, hold her hand, perhaps even dare to kiss her lightly on her cheek... A shiver crossed through his body at the very thought, a prelude, an anticipation of new joy to come. It was only a hope, but it was so blissful! Closing his eyes, Snape took a deep breath, losing himself in the enchantment of his dreams: the illusion of happiness, the crumbs of happiness... yet, they meant a whole paradise to him.

"Professor Snape, it's finished!" the painter called, interrupting this meditation, and obediently, Severus entered his frame again. The smell of magical paint was stinging, but it didn't feel too disagreeable to his nostrils.

And then, he saw it on his desk. The machine. The contraption. The fax. A plastic structure coloured in grey, with buttons, lights and other mysterious protuberances. Absent-mindedly, he touched it, trying to figure out how it would work.

"Be careful! It's still fresh!" an alarmed voice warned him, but it was too late.

"Damn!" the painter exclaimed, yet there was no reproach in his voice, just an amused, sympathetic tone. "Now I'll have to retouch you both."

Embarrassed, Snape looked at the marks he had left on the object. His fingertips were grey like the fax's upper cover, and the painter smiled at his confusion.

"No problem, Professor! Please raise your hand and stand still."

Snape held his breath while he felt the delicate strokes of the brush tickle his fingers, and the new paint adhere and become part of his body.

"Thank you, Mister...? I'm sorry, but I didn't understand your name," he confessed, a bit uncomfortable.

"Marcello Bernardi al vostro servizio!" The man promptly replied with a nice smile. Now that they were face to face, Snape noticed the painter's simple but refined elegance and his aristocratic features. The man seemed to understand and enjoy the portrait's curiosity.

"Yes, I'm Italian," he added with a bow. "Many master painters who work at St. Mungo's come from my country. Italy has a long-lasting tradition and a great reputation in the artistic field. So, we are proud to promote our art in other countries."

Snape nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Bernardi," he said, trying to imitate the sounds he had heard.

"My pleasure!" Bernardi answered. "I am honoured to have been of help. I was still studying at the Accademia di Arti Magiche* when Voldemort was destroyed."

His eyes became grave. "I know the role you played in that war."

Embarrassed, Snape tightened his lips and watched his fingers again.

"Is there anything else I can do? Want me to refresh you?" the painter gently asked. He was evidently used to such requests from portraits. "I can give you richer colours, if you like."

For a moment, Snape was tempted. He furtively looked at the mirror in his picture. Why not? Now that Lily was here, why not?

Then, he understood the futility of that change. She had already seen him and found him "handsome". But she had never been his and never would be. He took a deep breath, feeling the first drop of bitterness enter his recent happiness.

"No... no, thank you!" he finally replied, a bit more harshly than he would have liked.

"Ah, come on!" the man insisted, then winked in complicity. "There must be some nice portrait in this castle."

Bernardi was more or less his age, and his words were friendly. Yet, for a moment, Snape felt oddly resentful. He wished that he could be living again and that he and the woman he had for a moment hoped to impress could be magically brought back in time. Emotion made him frown, and the painter, who was watching him attentively, became serious.

"I'm sorry. I have been indiscreet," he apologised, abandoning his amused tone. Then, he advised, "Please wait just another five minutes, Professor, while I cast the enchantment on the real fax. Then, we will test both the machines."

Sidetracked, Snape watched the man open a box and take out a perfect copy of his painted masterpiece.

Again, Bernardi smiled.

"See? It's easy! You insert the parchment here, then click the button. The sheet passes through here, comes out there and, at the same time, a copy will arrive in your machine. Same procedure when you want to send something out. Don't worry, the two machines are interconnected, so there is no possibility of mistaking the recipient, unless one of your little rascals here enchants the copy in the classroom. However, I'll put a triple-shield protection. They'll need to be very, very skilled to break it."

After a few moments, the man finally announced, "Ready! Let's try!"

The painter took a piece of parchment and wrote something on it. Then, he inserted it in the fax and pressed a button. Astonished, Snape saw a parchment slip out from his machine.

"Take it, Professor! It doesn't bite!" Bernardi encouraged him.

Snape took the parchment. The words said "Marcello Bernardi, Maestro Pittore". He watched them in awe. They came from the world, the real world. An immense emotion overwhelmed him, as if a ray of sun had found a passage through a wall of bricks. He took his quill, then paused to consider it with a bizarre, lopsided smile. What a contrast! The bare simplicity of a feather against the technological wonder of a mechanism made of so many little parts.

Finally, he took the parchment and wrote "Severus Snape, Potions Master". Then, he sent the message back with disconcerting easiness.

Author's note:

Just a little explanation: personally, I hate OCs, so I try to use as many canon characters as possible when writing a story. But sometimes it's impossible, which was exactly the case at this point in the story. I needed a painter, but no canon character seemed suitable for this job... in my opinion, of course. So, I decided to invent one and, while I was inventing, I thought, "why not offer a tribute to my country of artists?"

This is how Marcello Bernardi was born, and this is the evidence that he was somehow waiting to come out: I don't like the name "Marcello", but this name popped automatically in my mind as soon as I imagined this character. So, I believe he was waiting to have a chance. Let's hope you will give it to him.

But there is also a more important reason to make the painter an Italian. You will discover it in the next chapter :)

Translation of the Italian words:

"Al vostro servizio" means "at your orders"

"Accademia di Arti Magiche" means "Accademy of Magical Arts".

Part XVIII

Chapter 18 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of JK Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

*All my gratitude to my betas and previewers **DementedLeaf**, **Xoxphoenix** and **Morgaine_Dulac**. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers.*

Part XVIII

"Severus Snape, Potions master."

Marcello Bernardi watched the piece of parchment and grinned, shaking his head in amazement. Then, he put it in his pocket.

"Nobody will believe that in Siena!" he affirmed and winked at Snape. "Well, you opened a new path, Professor. You can be proud of yourself. Now, we just need one of your students to test the machine."

As if answering this request, a boy appeared under the frame of the door. Albus Severus entered quickly, then stopped in awe before that imposing stranger. Bernardi waved a hand.

"Come in, come in, please!" he called cordially; then, he glanced at Snape. "It seems that we have an answer to our prayers," he declared, rubbing his hands in satisfaction.

But Snape didn't share that joyful reaction. On the contrary, he felt strangely irritated. After the encounter with Lily, he had closed himself in a blissful shell that excluded any other intrusion. The arrival of the painter had already been a rather annoying interruption, though indubitably necessary. But little Al's visit a circumstance that he would have welcomed with joy only a day before was definitely filling him with a sort of exasperation.

Bernardi greeted Albus Severus with warm cordiality. "Hello, young man! My name is Marcello Bernardi, and I'm only a poor painter, so I need a student to test this machine. Would you like to help me?"

"Well, thank you, sir," Al replied, frowning at that weird accent. "I'd be glad, but I came here only to speak with Professor Snape."

"Of course! But would you mind helping your professor with this new device? See, you will be the first in your class to use it," the painter offered.

The boy curled down his lips. "This is not my class," he said curtly.

"Oh!" The painter scratched his head, a bit confused at that news. "Well, okay, it doesn't matter. Your help is wanted anyway. It's easy, you'll see. You only need to write something and then send it through the machine. I'll explain it to you."

Few words of instructions followed this preamble, and finally, the reluctant Al inserted his parchment.

"Perfetto!" Bernardi exclaimed as soon as the message reached the portrait.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," Snape more composedly replied.

"Potter?" Bernardi lifted his brows at that name, considering the boy with new interest. "Perhaps a relative of the famous Harry?"

The boy brightened in pride. "Yes, sir," he answered. "I am his son. His second son," he specified humbly.

"Davvero! It's a honour, young man. I come from Italy, and your name is famous there too."

Al didn't look too impressed. He was evidently anxious to speak with Snape, so he just nodded distractedly.

The wizard perceived this nervousness and began to feel worried. Thankfully, Bernardi seemed to realise their need for privacy, and announced that he was going to collect his things. Snape appreciated this tactful retreat, especially when the painter went to the opposite side of the room to take a look at the other paintings. The portrait watched the child, and his impatience rose. What other problems were threatening to spoil his joy?

"Well, Mr. Potter?"

The boy was evidently uneasy.

"I am here to take the picture," he whispered.

Snape felt his painted self freeze.

"T-the picture?" he almost stammered. He hadn't thought of such a catastrophic possibility!

Lowering his head, Al insisted. "I'm sorry, Professor, but I must send it back home. What if Dad should notice that it's missing?"

I'm sure he already has Snape thought bitterly; then, he clenched his fists in rebellion. No, he would not renounce that soothing comfort his second life had so unexpectedly offered him! The painter was busy reordering his tools, and Snape instinctively turned to him.

"Perhaps Mr. Bernardi can help," he ventured. How he hated being so powerless!

The man raised his head. "Yes, Professor?"

"Is there a chance..." Strangely, words failed him. But before he could find his voice again, Al had already begun to explain.

"I need to send that picture home," he said, indicating the little frame. "It's my grandma's, but now she's away. She went to meet Professor Snape in secret, and then she probably decided to go visiting the castle. She had told me she would enjoy a tour. But I need to have her back and send the portrait home before Dad notices that she's missing."

The painter looked at Snape, who had paled and unconsciously tightened his hands while his private matters were so candidly exposed.

"Your grandma, you said?" The man asked softly, and a sudden understanding diffused upon his face. The look that he cast at Snape was now full of compassion, and the wizard returned it bravely, feeling embarrassment and hope clash in his heart.

"No need to say anything else," Bernardi said quietly. "I'll prepare a copy."

With a quick snap of his fingers, he conjured several little pictures, each one featuring a different background; then, he displayed them in front of the boy.

"Here," he said with a smile, "these are paintings I've made for a special occasion like this. Now, as a present for your grandma, choose the one that you think she would prefer."

Al widened his eyes in surprise and admiration.

"You are fantastic!" he exclaimed, and he dedicated himself to the choice.

Bernardi watched Snape and smiled, crossing his arms.

"Privileges of being part of the guild," he said nonchalantly, and the portrait felt a sudden wave of gratitude.

After a few moments spent in thoughtful meditation, Al lifted a beautiful view of a balcony. The window behind it had splendid chiselled gratings in Moresque style, but the most impressive detail was a superb cascade of flowers surrounding the balcony and falling in gracious waves. They looked so vibrant and lively that it seemed possible even to perceive their fragrance.

"Ottima scelta!" the painter exclaimed and immediately translated, "Great choice!"

He took his wand and murmured a spell; then, he touched both pictures, the one on the wall and the one still lovingly held by the boy.

"Here," he said. "Now those two paintings are connected. Your grandma can enter the one she wants. But she must return to this room first. So, let's remove the old picture and hang in its place the one that you chose. This will be a nice surprise, as she doesn't know that there is a new beautiful home waiting for her. And you can send the original to your dad."

"Thank you!" Al was radiant. He turned to look at Snape with such disarming joy that the dark wizard felt an intense shame for his previous selfish attitude. The painter bowed jokingly and went back to his table. The boy and the portrait looked at each other; then, Snape cleared his throat and said, "Is there anything else you would like to ask to me?"

"Yes, sir. Can we begin our lessons?"

"I'm afraid it's impossible, young man," a new, unexpected voice interposed, startling them both.

Another man had entered the room, and the portrait recognised Professor Finlay, Flitwick's temporary substitute, one of the few colleagues who hadn't been Snape's student. The wizard, a tall, bespectacled man with fluent white hair, smiled nervously.

"I'm sorry, Professor Snape, but the Board of Professors has received a complaint. We cannot allow a single child to take private lessons from you. A special class has been selected for your course. All the others have Professor Zabini to teach them, and they must rely on him."

He turned to look paternally at the boy. Albus Severus was staring at the man with two immense eyes. Snape displayed his best scowl.

"A complaint? From whom?" he growled. *Who dared interpose?*

Finlay hesitated. He was evidently uneasy and tried to soften the news. "I'm sorry, the name is confidential. But I'm sure you understand, we cannot allow this... this partiality. It would be unfair for his schoolmates."

"Very well," Snape finally ceded, thinking that he would find a way to solve the situation, and added menacingly, "I reserve the right to speak with the Headmistress."

"It's your right, of course," Finlay acknowledged in relief. "Have a good evening."

But surprises weren't still finished. Another man entered the room while Finlay left it, and the two wizards nodded in greeting, crossing under the doorframe.

"Mr. Zabini!" Snape exclaimed, his voice hardened by a cold anger. He hadn't seen his colleague for a long time, but he was more than sure that his fellow Slytherin had played a significant part in that last mean trick.

"Zabini?" a surprised voice asked. The painter went again under the picture and addressed the newly arrived.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation, but I couldn't avoid hearing your name. Are you Italian? Perhaps of the Zabini family from Emilia?"

Zabini frowned and considered the man.

"To whom have I the honour of speaking?" he asked coldly.

"My name is Marcello Bernardi, and I am an Italian master painter. I came here to work in St. Mungo's." In his excitement, his foreign accent was even more evident.

Zabini relaxed and considered the man with new respect. "Then I'll be happy to reply. My father died when I was a small child. I don't even remember him, and my mother never told me much about my origins. They divorced almost immediately, so I suppose she preferred to forget him. You say that there is an Italian family with my name?"

"Yes, a very powerful family, whose home is in Emilia, in the North East of Italy."

The painter was examining Zabini closely, but the wizard didn't seem annoyed. On the contrary, he too looked very interested in his interlocutor and ended by asking politely, "I would be glad to exchange some words with you then when I am finished. Would you mind waiting for me?"

"Of course not. I'll go speak with the Headmistress and wait for you in the Great Hall."

Smiling, the painter turned to Snape.

"Professor!" he greeted. "It has been a pleasure!"

Then Bernardi winked to Albus Severus.

"All the best to you and to your dad," he wished. "And let me know if *she* liked the surprise."

The painter went out, and Snape breathed in relief. For a moment, he had feared that his secret would be revealed by that so extrovert nature. Then, anger came back in cold waves. Zabini was watching the boy with inexpressive eyes.

"Please, Potter, I need to speak with Professor Snape," he ordered quietly, and Snape nodded. He too didn't want the boy to witness that encounter.

Obediently, holding the precious picture to his chest, Albus Severus left. Zabini waited till the little figure had definitely disappeared and turned to the portrait.

"I have reflected a lot during these days," he began awkwardly.

"I'm glad you are still able to use some of your basic functions," Snape replied coldly.

"I see you are enraged with me," Zabini went on obstinately. "But there is no reason. I'm here to apologise for what I said in our previous meetings. I have decided that I have been unfair in judging you. After all, it wasn't your fault. You were beholden to Dumbledore. And you paid your choice with your death. I'm sure you didn't mean for us to suffer."

A pause followed, in which the man seemed to be fumbling for words.

"I need a friend," he finally declared.

"A friend or an ally?" Snape retorted mercilessly.

"It needs a Slytherin to understand a Slytherin. You are right, Professor," Zabini admitted. "I need an ally, possibly somebody as wise and powerful as you are."

"And do you expect me to believe these sickly declarations after the last announcement I have been given?" the portrait snarled.

"Which last announcement?" the man protested.

"Don't lie to me!" Snape exploded in fury. "Would you pretend you have nothing to do with this complaint about my private lessons?"

"Oh, that!" Zabini exclaimed, looking immensely relieved. Then, his expression changed again into something indecipherable. "I don't like tattle. But as a sign of the honesty of my intentions... the complaint came from James Potter, Professor. I know you won't betray me."

James Potter? A flood of anger invaded Snape's heart, immediately followed by a cold sensation, the premonition of something unpleasant to come. He had neither seen nor spoken to the boy after the incident, as preparation for the anniversaries had absorbed most of his attention and he had gladly plunged into that opportune diversion; so, in spite of the promise that Albus Severus had so gently extorted from him, the wizard had let his good intentions slip to the very bottom of his list, and now they were surging again before him, challenging him like resentful ghosts.

Zabini crossed his arms, awakening Snape from his trance.

"You see, Professor," he said, and his voice sounded surprisingly meek, "I'm tired of fighting. I have spent my whole life fighting against my destiny, and I have always failed. I need a reprieve."

Taken aback by that disarming attitude, Snape frowned and considered the man. Those words had stirred the strong feelings of loyalty the wizard had always felt towards his Slytherins, so often despised or discarded because of their ambiguous legacy. Hadn't he witnessed far too many unpleasant episodes in his own previous existence? And wasn't Zabini's life a blatant example of how that injustice was still persisting? Although, the portrait realised with a shiver, Snape himself had contributed to his students' disgraceful outcome.

As if perceiving the emotions behind the silence, Zabini raised two hopeful eyes. "I will do everything in my power to support you here in Hogwarts, sir," he offered. "As you said, we both are Slytherin, and once you were my Head of House."

The portrait hesitated, still suspended in doubt: there was something obscure in the man under the frame, something hidden carefully and very deeply. But Zabini had always been the most secretive of his students, respectful in a distant, rather cold way, and Snape remembered it well. So, trying to better focus his thoughts, the portrait narrowed his eyes while indefinite memories ran through his fibres, restraining the words on his lips.

Zabini was positively worried now, and the struggle with his pride made him flush violently. "Professor, please, I'm sincere. I've admitted I have made a mistake. Why don't you allow me to make amends?"

But Snape still kept silent. He was frantically weighing the many questions that were unfolding in his mind like an origami. Zabini seemed to have changed. But what were the real reasons behind that change? Was he really as sincere as he sounded? How to deal with a man whom Snape didn't trust completely yet he felt he had failed? What would that so pressing request of help imply?

And while the portrait searched for answers, more considerations followed. The complaint about his lessons had obviously been James' revenge, but also the consequence of Snape's skipped promise. In another time, the wizard would have reacted in fury at that challenge; now, he was feeling troubled. Soon, Albus Severus would discover the truth. What would his reactions be? How would the portrait justify himself? Millions of doubts and worries clashed in his soul. Silence became heavy, and Zabini misunderstood its meaning.

"No hope, no trust, no mercy for me, Professor, not even a word?" he asked bitterly. "Should I deduce that you reject my offer since you refuse even to speak to me?"

He stopped and swallowed, fighting back his emotions.

"Forgive my intrusion," he declared curtly; then, he bowed and turned to leave.

Torn between doubt and compassion, afraid that his last chances might slip through his fingers, finally Snape reacted. "Mr. Zabini! Blaise!"

As soon as he heard his name, the man stopped in his tracks, waiting, yet still poised to flee. His head turned slowly while his brows arched in a mute question.

Snape inhaled slowly. "Wait," he whispered. "Let's discuss this better."

When Zabini left, the portrait and the man had sealed a very Slytherin deal that suited them both. Snape had promised to support Zabini, and in return, the actual Potions master would allow Albus Severus to join Snape's classes. Of course, there was always the unknown of James Potter to solve, but the portrait felt reasonably sure that he would find a way to handle the boy and reconcile both brothers with him. So, the situation could be defined satisfactory, with the exception of a small, insignificant detail: Snape wasn't satisfied.

The wizard paced nervously in his frame. His conscience was beginning to trouble him, and what was worse, he had no arguments to counteract its attack. Soon, he sat behind his desk again and sighed deeply, hiding his face in his hands.

He had traded Albus Severus' happiness with Zabini's safety, pretending to be acting for the sake of them both.

He had delayed an explanation to James Potter, pretending to be too busy to talk with a boy whom he, in effect, cordially disliked.

He had betrayed Albus Severus' faith, pretending to accept a request whose fulfilment he had instead eluded.

In conclusion, he had manipulated and deceived those surrounding him in order to achieve his personal goals, exactly as he had done so many other times in his living days.

While in his previous life, his mission and secrets had obliged him to follow a path of deception. Now, he had no other defence than his own selfish advantage. Remorse soon rose in powerful waves, and with it came the most anguishing of his doubts: how would Lily judge him?

He turned to watch her picture as if asking for help, and his eyes lit in surprise. A flower seemed to have unexpectedly blossomed on the balcony, the most beautiful rose the wizard had ever seen. Holding his breath in awe, Snape admired its fragrant softness and the exquisite perfection of its petals, illuminated by glittering drops of dew.

Evidently, Bernardi had painted it while everybody was too busy to notice him working, and for a long moment, the portrait wondered why. Then, the meaning sparkled clear in his mind: it was a gift to Snape so that the prisoner of the frame could have something precious to offer to his lady.

A soothing emotion dilated Snape's heart at this thought, and the wizard closed his eyes, abandoning himself to that gentle feeling. But, immediately after, shame veiled his mind, and remorse flew even more powerful in his veins.

Notes:

1) About Italian words:

For the (hopefully) few that don't know this name, "Siena" is one of our beautiful "cities of art" in Toscana (Tuscany), full of painted and carved masterpieces, like Pisa and Firenze (Florence). But the city itself is a masterpiece. In my story, Marcello Bernardi comes from Siena.

"**Davvero**" means "really".

2) **Zabini** is effectively an Italian surname. I have always had the sensation that JKR had imagined him Italian. Anyway, this surname is owned by a very small group of persons in the northeast of Italy.

3) Info about magical portraits coming directly from JKR. This is what she stated in her interview at Carnegie Hall, in October 2007, and this is where I took some of my inspirations:

"I created a lot of rules for this world and then later had to navigate my way around them. But this rule was always good, and the rule was that portraits could only move between portraits in the same building. So, if I'm in a picture and you're in a picture and we're both in Carnegie Hall, then we can move into each other's pictures. Otherwise, we can move only to other places where we have a portrait. You can't just move willy nilly through all the the Louvre, the Met you can't do a world tour, as a picture person. You are limited by geography."

Part XIX

Chapter 19 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of JK Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

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Part XIX

The first-years entered and Snape watched them in surprise. It was such an astonishing sight! Never had he seen students so happy to attend his classes! A dark smile curled his lips. The last lesson had evidently been very much appreciated, and now the children were looking forward to another exciting experience. He had allowed them to play with forces and substances that had always been forbidden to them, and Potions had obviously become their favourite subject.

So, the children were sparkling with joy, and their anticipation was reflected in their smiling faces and in their cheerful attitudes. Some students even stopped to pat the legs and the gloved hands of the gigantic suit of armour that had helped tame the rebellious fires. The creature seemed to appreciate their friendly gestures and bowed its head at every greeting.

Snape was waiting anxiously for his new apprentice, but when all the children were sitting with their eyes lifted to the portrait, he was definitely sure that Albus Severus Potter had decided otherwise. Feeling bitterness, disappointment and a strange sort of anger bubble in his fibres, the wizard watched the class. His expression was so different from the one the children had learnt to know in their previous lesson that everybody froze, and the excited chatter stopped immediately.

The wizard took his register and pretended to check the roll, but his keen eyes had already determined that the only missing one was exactly the most wished for of all. He hoped there could be a different explanation from the one he feared.

"What about Mr. Potter? I was expecting him here today."

The Gryffindors were of course the first to reply.

"He was with us till the end of Charms, but when we reached the door I didn't see him anymore," Rose Weasley hurried to report, trying to justify her cousin and House-fellow; and little Angus Flanagan added with his acute stuttering voice, "P-perhaps he got l-lost."

Lost, after so many visits the boy had paid to the classroom?

The children waited anxiously to see Snape's reaction.

"Very well," the portrait replied, darkening at that account. "Miss Weasley, you will find Mr. Potter and ask him to come here."

The girl jumped to her feet but Snape raised a hand and stopped her almost immediately, continuing with a slow, meaningful tone, "When the lesson is ended."

He saw the children exchange a worried look, misunderstanding his intentions. But, in spite of his frustration, the portrait knew only too well what the boy could be harbouring in his heart, and he didn't want the whole class to witness their encounter.

"Now, open your books," he commanded, and for the following two hours the students worked in respectful silence, too busy to have thoughts for anything else. This time, the potion requested was simpler in its steps, yet extremely demanding in accuracy. Soon the children were too engaged in weighing ingredients, counting stirs and writing a report to think about their missing companion.

At the end of the lesson, the apprentices were tired and a bit disappointed, but another wonder made its magical entrance and brightened the little faces in excitement. With a few words, Snape introduced the fax, explaining its characteristics and use as if he had used it for centuries. The children widened their eyes and, for a moment, they forgot about manners, each one wanting to be the first one to try the new toy. Finally, reined in by Snape's best scowl, they formed a queue and proceeded in alphabetical order, thrilled to see a small pile of parchments grow little by little on the painted desk of their teacher.

When the class was dismissed, Snape was totally exhausted. If he had been a human being, he would probably have had a ferocious headache. The two hours had been a long, wearing exercise in patience, and all his fibres were aching with the need to know.

And finally Albus Severus arrived. Silent, uncharacteristically serious, head stubbornly down even in his greeting. The portrait felt uneasy and, as a reaction, his voice became harsh.

"Well, Mr. Potter? Any reason for not coming to the lesson?"

That was the right way to start, Snape thought. Discipline was the basis for a correct relationship. The wizard might be a painting, but he was still an adult and a reputable member of the Board of Professors, and the boy should respect him... Though it was difficult to decide in what exactly the lack of respect consisted. The boy wasn't showing any visible sign of insolence. He was only intolerably sad.

"This is not my class," Albus Severus softly stated, as he had already replied to Marcello Bernardi.

Snape felt his irritation grow. What did that child want? Hadn't he just received a gift on a silver platter? The portrait was prepared for a discussion, but that gloomy meekness was unbalancing him. Perhaps a new element had entered the game? That was exactly what Snape feared. His mind had worked frantically for the entire night to prepare a pile of argumentations, but he was painfully aware that the building he had assembled was only a castle of cards. His nervousness increased, as well as the harshness in his voice.

"What do you mean, this is not your class? Professor Zabini came to tell me that you are ready for a promotion. So, from now on, this is the course you will attend."

The wizard paused and tightened his lips in a thin line, in an effort to stop the question that was threatening to escape, and that would betray his utter dismay *aren't you happy about that?*

The boy was keeping his head obstinately down.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't believe it." The same unemotional tone, that disconcerting grimness. Snape lost his temper.

"Potter! Are you saying that I'm a liar?"

The question almost choked him the instant he formulated it. Memories of his first argument with the boy lit in his mind and guilt awakened, as well as the awareness that he WAS actually lying. Why had his conscience extracted exactly those words from his throat?

Albus Severus lifted his head for a quick moment, then lowered it again, but that movement had been enough for Snape.

"Potter! Look at me!"

Reluctantly, the boy raised his head. There was an evident yellowish bruise on his cheekbone, and Snape widened his eyes.

"What the hell---" he began, forgetting his role for a moment.

Albus Severus explained with alarming calm.

"I went to find James yesterday, but he didn't want to speak to me. Arthur told me that James was angry because he thought that I was cheating. My brother says that there is no merit in being good at school when you are favoured by a teacher."

His lips trembled.

"I wanted to fight honourably, Professor, but James said that I am a faker, and he is stronger than me. Anyway, I am sure that he didn't really want to hit me, because at the end he was almost crying, and he said that it was all my fault."

He stopped and considered Snape for a long moment, then he asked quietly, "You didn't speak with my brother, Professor, did you?"

Snape felt something cold enter his soul, and his tongue froze. He tried to use one of his carefully prepared justifications but his voice simply refused to collaborate; so, he took a deep intake of breath, letting silence admit his fault.

The boy watched the portrait with bitter eyes.

"I trusted you," he said. "I thought we were friends."

Snape stiffened while a confused memory awakened in his brain. Who had already pronounced words like those, in a past lost in remoteness? The voice of another boy suddenly echoed in his mind. *"Weren't we supposed to be friends? Best friends?"*

And then a scene opened to his eyes. A red-haired girl was walking rapidly across the castle courtyard, followed by a boy who was trying to keep her pace while talking in hurried sentences. He could still hear their words: the first serious discussion he had experienced with Lily, the first time he had pleaded for her friendship, the first push towards their separation, the first step to his perdition. He closed his eyes and his heart ached.

As if reading the portrait's mind, the boy clenched his fists in a sudden outburst.

"Did you behave like this with my grandmother too? Did you tell her that you were friends and then let her down? Perhaps my grandfather wasn't completely wrong about you, after all."

Snape became livid. That was too bold and hurt too much! His fists collided violently against the desk and he roared furiously, "Potter! Your apologies, here and now!"

"Sorry, sir," the boy replied immediately, the challenging look in his eyes denying that prompt submission.

"You will serve detention for a week, Sunday included!" Snape continued ferociously.

"Yes, sir," Albus Severus answered without even blinking.

"As for your punishment, you will scrub every cauldron in this room, and you'll make them shine with the sole force of your arms!"

"Yes, sir."

"During your work you won't be allowed to pronounce a word, except good evening and good bye!"

"Yes, sir."

"Detention starts from this night, Potter! And you will be here immediately after dinner."

The tone had risen with every statement, and finally Snape stopped, strangled by his own anger and unable to find additional unpleasant details. He bent to stare directly into the child's eyes.

"Have I made myself clear?" the wizard growled through gritted teeth.

"Yes, sir." The boy took a deep breath. "I should have known."

And with that last sibylline assertion, Albus Severus crossed his arms and waited, his gaze resolutely focused on the floor. Snape too crossed his arms, and for a moment, he looked strangely like another sulky child.

Silence hurt even more now; after his incensed reaction, Snape was beginning to regret the merciless words he had just pronounced. The wizard closed his eyes and breathed slowly. There should be a way of repairing. He had always been able to repair... except with Lily.

"Albus Severus," Snape began quietly, and the boy jerked his head up in surprise at hearing his name. "Though I'm not used to explaining my actions to my students, I'll make an exception for you."

Sentences were accumulating more and more quickly, in a torrent urging to escape.

"I have a plan," he said. "I have always had a plan. But you must give me the time to make it work. I haven't seen your brother during these last few days because there were no lessons scheduled for his class. But tomorrow he will be here. And tomorrow I'll keep my promise. Do you trust me?"

The boy nodded cautiously. His eyes were rapidly filling with tears, and his mouth twisted with the effort of controlling his emotion.

"Do you really think I am a liar?" Snape insisted, and Albus Severus sniffled, gulped and shook his head in denial. The portrait sighed deeply. It was so easy to manipulate honest people! And it was even easier with the little one before him.

Snape laced his fingers and stared blankly at the walls.

"Forget about detention, Potter. I'll excuse you for this time," he said, closing his eyes to hide his sadness *He was the one who needed mercy.*

"Will you punish my brother for this?" Albus Severus managed to ask with trembling lips, his previous boldness completely gone.

"No," Snape sighed again. "Didn't I say I am going to speak with him?"

"I'm sorry, Professor."

The boy was definitely crying now, but his tears were the gentle rain that melts the clouds away, clearing the sky. He wiped his wet eyes with his sleeves, then he raised his head at the portrait.

"Still... still friends?" Albus Severus hesitantly asked, and when the wizard nodded, the boy's face opened in a timid smile, that became more and more confident in spite of the tears trickling down on his cheeks.

Snape felt something crack inside his soul.

Silence was even more impressive at that late hour, and the objects in the Potions classroom were only vague shadows in the dimming light.

"Severus," the soft voice of Minerva McGonagall called, but no answer came. Puzzled, she tilted her head to have a better view of the wall.

"Severus?" she tried again, slightly louder. She was somehow afraid to disturb the supernatural peace of the place, but she needed to talk with Snape. It was several evenings since her habitual companion had paid her a visit, and she was of course a bit worried.

And perhaps jealous, let's face it, Minerva, she murmured to herself. Talking with Snape had become a soothing comfort to her solitude, and her empty evenings didn't look so meaningless when he was with her. But perhaps now Severus had found more interesting ways to spend his time. She couldn't claim the privilege of his friendship only

for herself, she sadly thought. After all, he was still young. What could the company of a centenarian woman offer him? Only memories, and so many of them were painful ones...

"Severus!"

But Snape wasn't in his picture, and for a moment she felt baffled. Had he left his place? Why wasn't he answering her call?

After a few moments of anxious search, finally she discovered him in another painting, the view of a garden under an enchanting starry sky. She stopped and frowned, considering the scene with perplexed eyes. When she had selected the pictures for that room, she had deliberately avoided nocturnal subjects, to make the place even more joyful. Who had dared defy her authority?

Shaking her head in indignation, she turned to watch her friend, and her heart twisted with compassion. Snape was leaning against a small wall of bricks, and his head was resting on his crossed arms while his eyes looked lost in contemplation of the night.

There was something worrisome in his stance, and she called him again, very softly.

"Severus."

The man in the painting sighed, keeping his gaze focused on the velvet depths of the sky; then he spoke with an absent-minded tone, as if awakening from a dream.

"Did you know, Minerva, that pictures can imitate the rhythms of the day and the sequence of the seasons?"

So, it had been Snape who had caused that impressive change. Minerva felt suddenly alarmed, yet she did her best to disguise her reaction.

"Amazing indeed," she replied almost happily. "I'd never noticed it, and I am glad you've informed me. I suppose there are still a lot of things I need to learn, even at my old age. An encouraging thought, don't you think?"

Snape sighed again, and she was certain that something painful was troubling him. Her heart felt heavy. Impulsively, she took one of the chairs in the classroom and sat under the picture. Silence enfolded them both in its peace, and the light of the torches dimmed even more, while she waited patiently.

Finally, after a few minutes that seemed hours to the worried Headmistress, Snape spoke again, his head still resting on his arms, his usually rich voice changed into that flat tone that scared her so much.

"Minerva... how's the sky outside?"

"Nice and twinkling," she tried to reassure him. "A beautiful night, Severus. As beautiful as the one you are enjoying here."

Her comments raised a fierce reaction.

"How can you compare the lights of the stars with the deceiving illusion of these painted dots?" he burst out angrily, forgetting his artificial calm.

She didn't answer. In the days that had followed Snape's rebirth, she had gradually learned to handle him and his unpredictable explosions. She knew that silence was her best helper, so she waited for him to make the next move.

"Minerva."

Finally, he had turned to look at her, as she had hoped. His eyes were black pools of anguish.

"Minerva, how does it feel, being alive? I don't remember it anymore."

She felt hopeless. How could she even think to give an answer to such a crucial question? How could she help her friend and find a way to soothe his desolation? Once more, she chose to keep silent. She knew that he needed time to express his feelings completely, and in fact, after a few moments, Snape spoke again.

"I shouldn't have accepted," he murmured, closing his eyes. "Why did I want to try? Why did you let me hope? I am made of paint." His voice rose uncontrollably. "Can't you see? I-AM-MADE-OF-PAINT!"

She lowered her head, feeling her heart pound with compassion. Then more upsetting words trickled out from him in a rivulet of pain.

"I thought I had a second chance. I thought that things in this life could be changed. But 'I' haven't changed. And I can't change. I am still my old self. There is still darkness in me, painted in the fibres of this canvas. I'm still deceiving people. And I'm still hurting the ones who make the mistake of trusting me."

His tone became harsh.

"So now I understand." Anguish made his voice tremble. "This must be hell, and to hell I must belong for the rest of my days."

In uncharacteristic violence, Snape raised his clenched hands and beat them forcefully against the void before him.

"Don't you see? I am a prisoner!" he cried.

Shocked, Minerva could see his fists collide once, twice, thrice, against something invisible but extremely solid: the magical barrier that divided the real world from the painted one, and that inexorably locked the helpless wizard into an unbreakable cell.

Snape hit the void for one last, useless time. Then he finally seemed to realise the futility of his efforts. His face altered in heartbreaking desperation and, defeated, he dropped his head, leaning it wearily against that disconcerting nothingness.

"There's no hope," he murmured with a sob. "I am damned, and damned forever..."

Minerva felt tears well in her eyes, and her throat closed. Yet, she needed to find the words. Her heart was breaking, but when she spoke, her voice sounded surprisingly firm.

"We all are prisoner, Severus, of different prisons. Men build cages of every shape and dimensions for themselves. Fears, vices, prejudices, imperfections... Just name it."

She took a deep breath, fearing the pain she was going to inflict on herself while trying to help him.

"I too am a prisoner, wouldn't you believe it? A prisoner of this old, useless body. There are so many things that I was able to do, and that now I can't do anymore. Even as a cat, Severus, my joints ache, and my only wish would be to curl near a fireplace... or possibly, in the cosy lap of someone who loves me."

Such bitterness in that admission! Never had she dared confess, even to herself, how much she had missed a companion in her lonely life. Truth cut sharply while emerging from its hard chrysalis. Her voice trembled, but she swallowed her pain and resumed her talking.

"My body is a prison. But also my office can be a prison, this castle can be a prison, the whole world can be a prison! Frames change, Severus, and every place can become a prison for those who don't possess a free spirit."

She could perceive his gasping breaths slowly come back to a regular rhythm. He was listening, so she continued softly.

"Yet, if your soul has wings, there are no chains that can lock you to the ground. Even if you are a prisoner in a cell."

She stopped and added meaningfully, "Even if you are a portrait in a frame."

Silence followed her declaration and she considered him again. Words, only words against his desperation! And yet, what else could she offer him? What else, except her friendship and her affection?

She lowered her head to hide the tears.

"Don't leave again, Severus..." she whispered, ceding to her emotion.

With a deep sigh, the man pressed his palms against the void, his head still resting against the invisible barrier that divided him from the world he was craving to touch. His long, black hair hung like a curtain, veiling his face and his feelings. But when he spoke, she felt a new, tremulous hope mix with his bitter tone.

"How do you think that it could be possible, Minerva? I'm not human anymore."

"On the contrary, Severus," she murmured fiercely, raising her head and wiping her eyes." On the contrary."

She got up, feeling her limbs ache exactly as she had told him, and stretched a wrinkled hand to touch his head. He flinched in surprise and, for a moment, she perceived the softness of his hair gently tickling her fingers. Her lips curled in a fond smile.

"I believe you are much more human than many of us."

Part XX

Chapter 20 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of JK Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

*All my gratitude to my betas **DementedLeaf** and **Xoxphoenix** and to my previewers **Duj** and **Morgaine_Dulac**. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers.*

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Part XX

Albus Severus entered the classroom in a rush and went straight over to the portrait.

"Good... morning...", he gasped, almost strangling himself in the effort of inhaling and speaking at the same time.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter. Better breathe if you want to live," Snape advised him.

"Thank you, sir," the boy replied, panting, then smiled his nice smile. "I've come here immediately after breakfast... I should be going to Herbology now, but this is more important."

He paused to take a deep intake of air, keeping a hand pressed on his chest; then he extracted a little roll of parchment, accurately sealed, from his pocket. Snape raised his brows in polite surprise.

"My sister sends this to you," Albus Severus explained and broke the seal; then he stopped as if he had been hit by a sudden thought and lifted his eyes to the portrait with a hint of panic.

"You will tell her that I didn't read it, won't you?" he asked.

Snape couldn't help but give a twisted smile. Little Lily Potter was definitely the boss in her family. In the meantime, Albus Severus unwrapped and flattened the roll, positioning it in the fax machine. Then he clicked the start button and kept his eyes firmly closed until the ironical voice of his professor called him.

"Relax, Mr. Potter. I have it."

The boy sighed in relief, then threw the original letter in the fire under a cauldron.

"See you later, Professor," he declared. "Sorry, I must go now."

Snape didn't answer. He was watching the letter with wide eyes. The text was written in bright colours with a large, round handwriting. Little rabbits, butterflies and flowers danced merrily around the sentences. He wrinkled his nose in comical disconcertment before beginning to read.

Dear Professor Snape,

I hope you still remember me. The feast was wonderful, and I am very glad I could visit Hogwarts and see my brothers. I am also glad I could meet you. I think you are very nice and kind, so I would like to ask you if you could come to visit us.

Will you? I would be very happy. Please let me know.

Yours sincerely,

Lily Potter

Snape's lips curled in an incredulous smile. Such an impertinent little one! Why was that child so fond of him? When had she decided that he was worth her affection? He read the letter again, feeling an unusual warmth diffuse in his fibres. Then, in a space miraculously left free from her drawings, he saw the addendum.

P.S.: You can tell Al about my invitation, but please don't say anything to James. He doesn't like you. I told him he is stupid.

Snape's face darkened. His fist hit the table with a sharp sound, and the merry drawings reacted with incongruous joy at the vibration. He watched them frolic, and the curl on his lips became bitter. With a sudden decision, he crushed the parchment; then he got up and turned to throw it in the flames of his painted fireplace. But his arm stopped at the last moment.

He hesitated, considering the crumpled ball in his hand; then he sat again, put it on the table and lost himself in meditation. Slowly, as if guided by an independent will, his hands took the message and reopened it. The little drawings had become grey and still. He frowned and smoothed the many wrinkles of the parchment until the little figures turned brilliant and lively again and resumed their dances. He kept contemplating them for some moments more, then buried his face in his hands and sighed deeply.

"Good morning, sir."

The second year students collectively greeted their teacher, then entered the room in respectful silence.

Too respectful, Snape thought with a frown. The right adjective was wary. Or perhaps, in the case of the Gryffindors *resentful*.

He inclined his head to adjust his two-dimensional eyes and have a better vision of the children. Though last time the Gryffindors had triumphantly led the group, this time the golden and red students seemed to have forgot their characteristic boldness and followed their schoolmates quietly. Head down, James Potter walked in, staring at the floor. Near to him, Arthur Macmillan looked nervously around, chewing his lower lip in anxiety.

Snape watched the students take their places. Silence filled the room. It was time to see if his plan would work. Apologise to the little brat? That was out of question. But perhaps the solution he had thought of would provide an acceptable arrangement to both parties. He laced his fingers together and began to speak quietly.

"Potions is a subject which requires a combination of skills: knowledge, rational thinking, patience, curiosity, stubbornness and dexterity... but also intuitiveness and a great dose of creativity. You have been selected amongst your companions because you have demonstrated to possess these talents in greater amount. Now it's time to explore them in depth. I have prepared a very special experiment today, a test that will show you where your abilities lie. Are you intuitive or rational? Creative or methodical? Today you will find out because today we will play with forces."

The class didn't show any enthusiasm. Only the Slytherins seemed interested. The look that Jennifer Avery cast on the Gryffindors – and on James in particular – was very eloquent. You are doomed, her eyes said.

"There are many ways to manipulate a potion or to change it into something different. Every decent potioneer knows the system to increase the effects of a concoction or to speed its preparation. So, today we will prepare samples using different reagents or catalysts. Now, who can tell me what a reagent is?"

Jennifer Avery immediately lifted her hand. *Another Granger!* Snape thought. James was still keeping his head down and showed no interest, though Arthur kept nudging him anxiously. *This will be tough*, the portrait considered.

"Yes, Miss Avery?" Snape finally nodded when it became obvious that nobody else dared reply.

"A reagent is a substance taking part in a chemical reaction, especially one used to detect, measure or prepare another substance."

The look of pride in the girl's eyes once more reminded him unpleasantly of Hermione Granger. But the girl had answered correctly, and he rewarded her as she expected.

"Excellent. Five points to Slytherin."

Arthur clenched his fists and cast James a clearly disappointed glance. Jennifer turned her head with a victorious smile, and her housemates smirked in pride while Snape continued his lecture.

"So, a reagent is, for instance, that simple ingredient that, added at the right time and at the proper conditions in a blend of otherwise inert ingredients, makes them react. But a reagent can also be used to confirm or quantify the presence of another substance. Every expert potioneer knows how to separate the many components of a concoction in order to classify the different elements."

Snape watched the class. Till now, the interest raised was scarce, especially from the one he had hoped to lure.

"Now, who can tell me what a catalyst is?"

Again, Arthur looked hopefully at James, who crossed his arms with a sulky expression. And again, Jennifer's hand jerked up.

"It seems that everybody except Miss Avery has unfairly earned a reputation here," Snape growled, and finally, he could see James react. The boy looked at the girl with a challenging glare.

Good! Snape thought. But after that defying look, James turned indifferent again, to Arthur's great desperation, and the portrait was forced to ask the girl.

"Yes, Miss Avery?"

"A catalyst is a substance that can increase or decrease the rate of a chemical reaction without undergoing any change."

The girl had declaimed the explanation in one go, and again, Snape rewarded her with five points. Arthur was positively angry now and shot reproachful glances at James, who, on the contrary, seemed totally apathetic.

"So," Snape continued, watching the class, "a catalyst increases or slows down a reaction without being consumed by the reaction itself. You wonder what the benefit of slowing down a reaction could be? Just imagine that you had spoiled your concoction and that it could explode in your face unless you find the way to stop or to delay the reaction... Ah, I see that Mr. Potter understands the importance of this information."

James had unconsciously tightened his fists. His eyes gleamed for a moment, and then he returned to his apathy. The portrait sighed inwardly.

"I believe we can begin our experiment," he declared, and the children exchanged worried glances, understanding that the moment of the ordeal had arrived. Snape opened his book.

"In the next hour, we will learn something more about reagents and catalysts by preparing samples. Then we will check the results, and every successful sample will be rewarded with five points."

Half an hour after, the class was busy with brewing. The children had been instructed to prepare several batches of different bases and then invited to choose a reagent in an assortment of possible additions. The only help they had received from their teacher was a list of ingredients to avoid and some suggestions about fire temperatures. For the rest, they had been left free to experiment, and they were now occupied in finding uses and characteristics of the components they had selected, so to create something that could hopefully gain points for their House. It seemed as if they were inside a gigantic kitchen, and the "apprentice cooks" were getting more and more excited, each one trying carefully to conceal their own "recipe" from the others. As he had done with the first years, Snape didn't intervene. He retreated in his frame and waited patiently while the noise increased.

An hour later, the apprentices were contemplating the results of their efforts with exultant or depressed faces. Some students were still fighting with their creations but the majority were waiting for Snape's verdict. Using the little pictures on the columns, the wizard made a tour of the cauldrons and checked, commented, rewarded or scolded. Then he went back to his frame. It was time for the hook he had planned.

"So far, you have simply tested ingredients," he declared and paused intentionally. "Now, to make the lesson even more interesting – and rewarding – I look for volunteers for a very particular experiment. I will grant a bonus of twenty-five points to those who successfully complete this test."

An excited whisper ran through the class but it was immediately silenced when Snape added quietly with a meaningful smile, "Let me warn you that I will also subtract these points in the case of failure."

"So!" His voice became dangerously sweet. "Anyone daring enough to try?"

Arthur Macmillan immediately turned to watch James with a hopeful look, but the boy shook his head in refusal. On the other side of the room, Jennifer Avery hesitated only a second; then she stepped out and went proudly under the portrait. At that sight, Arthur lost the small control he still possessed. Impetuously, he got up and joined the girl, a determined expression on his round face.

"Mr. Macmillan! I'm impressed!" Snape's teasing tone sounded hateful even to his own ears. "Finally, a Gryffindor who has guts. But perhaps it's only desperation... Are you sure you want to try?"

Arthur nodded, though his unhappy expression betrayed his apprehension.

"Excellent!" Snape commented, but before he could add another word, James suddenly got up. In three steps, he reached his friend and pushed him aside.

"If you don't mind, Professor," he said calmly, "I think it's up to me."

Finally! Though pleased for the success of his ruse, Snape shrugged with calculated indifference and saw James darken in response. A bitter feeling invaded his heart. Once more, he was brilliantly playing his nasty role, deceiving those who, on the contrary, he was trying to help. Exactly as it had happened with Harry Potter, who had spent seven years hating his professor... and who had finally come to an understanding when it was too late.

The portrait checked his feelings and replied with a sneer, "Not exactly correct behaviour, Mr. Potter, but I suppose we cannot expect proper manners from you."

He sighed theatrically. "Any objection, Mr. Macmillan?"

Arthur, who had reddened with joy, shook his head to express both his enthusiasm and his approval.

"Then let's begin," Snape commanded.

The students listened attentively while Snape instructed the volunteers. His directions were decidedly short, and after a few moments, the portrait turned to the class.

"As I was saying, so far, we have only tested ingredients. But now with the help of Miss Avery and Mr. Potter, we will see how a potion can be altered into something different. We will use the Draught of Relaxation – the same potion you prepared in your first lesson – and we will modify it through two different actions: we will either slow its force and obtain a liniment for muscular pains or increase its relaxing power and create a remedy for insomnia."

The portrait paused.

"Where is the difficulty, you will ask? Well, using a catalyst to modify a potion requires a particular sensitivity. And as this is an experiment, Miss Avery and Mr. Potter will be left alone to decide timings and temperatures. They will be allowed to count only on their previous experience and on their intuition."

Some of the children gasped and Snape scowled.

"We will offer the quiet energy of the narwhal's horn to Miss Avery's Slytherin determination," he declared with his hateful smile, "and we will reward the Gryffindor boldness with the aggressive power of the dragon's blood."

He turned to James, a twisted smile still dancing on his lips. "Let me warn you to be particularly cautious with this ingredient, Potter. Its reaction can be extremely... rude."

James frowned and Snape added sharply, "The more the danger, the more the honour. Let's be chivalrous, Potter. We wouldn't like a nice girl to lose her nose or her ears, would we?"

His tone clearly conveyed that such concern didn't include James' health. The boy looked curiously at his teacher and didn't reply.

The girl displayed all her competence and precision in chopping and weighing her ingredients. Right in front of her, the boy counteracted with equally precise movements. But while Jennifer was perhaps too careful, James was rapid and definitely instinctive in his choices.

From his frame, Snape watched him select and deftly prepare his concoction. Memories of a similar contest flooded his mind, and he closed his eyes, trying to exclude that beautiful spring morning so far back in time in which Slughorn had challenged him and Lily with that same experiment.

Both potions seemed to progress at the same speed, and little by little, the other children moved closer in order to observe their advancement, every House eager to support its favourite champion.

It was only at the end that the unexpected happened. Jennifer had just raised the fire and her potion was boiling happily. In a few seconds, the colour turned deep purple, and a disgusting smell invaded the room.

"Too bad, Miss Avery," Snape commented dryly, letting disappointment pervade his tone. "It seems that you have been too hasty."

The girl reddened and paled and reddened again, anxiously stirring the liquid with her ladle. James tightened his lips and continued his work without raising his head, indifferent to the excited whispers coming from his companions.

A few moments later, the trial was over. James was the indubitable winner and Jennifer was desperate. For the very first time, she looked like the child she effectively was, vulnerable and ready for tears. A round of applause greeted the champion, who didn't in any way seem to enjoy his victory. Snape crossed his arms.

"Miss Avery, your test has been spoiled by your anxiety. You didn't reflect on the implications. The horn slowed the boiling, but this change was unusual for you, so you

have raised the temperature of your fire, thus invalidating the action of the catalyst. I suppose this means you have a methodical mind that doesn't allow exceptions to rules."

"Mr. Potter." Snape seemed to fight against himself. "Your result is..." again, he seemed to search for an adjective, "...*good*. You have grasped the idea. Your catalyst has speeded up the preparation, yet you have kept the fire at the right temperature. Instinctive, I would say."

A pause followed. "But also definitely clever," he finally concluded. The boy raised his head with a bizarre expression.

"Twenty-five points to Gryffindor," Snape announced, and part of the class exploded with joy.

"And twenty-five points from Slytherin," Snape added, restoring the calm with the tone of his voice. Fifty points of advantage to the House of his old enemies! And he had been the one to award the prize! It was part of his plan but it hurt... Merlin, how it hurt!

The Slytherins lowered their eyes, and Jennifer stood still, tears running down on her cheeks. Then James spoke.

"I don't want these points. This was only a test, and we can win the Cup without them."

Arthur gasped in astonishment. Jennifer wiped a tear, an incredulous look in her eyes... The whole class was shocked. For the first time, Snape felt strangely respectful.

"Though expressed with your characteristic boldness, this is a very generous and unexpected proposal, Mr. Potter. Should I take back my offer? Are you sure?"

No, no! The eyes of the Gryffindors pleaded, but James nodded firmly.

"Well, then let me reward you and Mr. Macmillan with five points each, respectively, for his courage and for your chivalry," Snape replied. He turned to the girl. "Miss Avery?"

Jennifer rubbed her eyes one last time. She sniffled and looked uncertainly at her adversary.

"Thank you, Potter," she whispered. Another round of applause started, and this time, the Slytherins also joined in.

Then order was restored, the children cleaned their tools, and in a little while, the class was ready to leave.

The moment had come. The students had already formed a queue to exit when Snape called, "A word, Mr. Potter."

Arthur froze in panic, and the other children watched both the portrait and James with expressions going from curiosity to fear. But the boy seemed to have expected that request. Calmly, he went back under the painting and waited for his schoolmates to leave.

The boy and the portrait stared at each other. Finally, Snape opened the skirmish with an unexpectedly quiet voice.

"Perhaps now you will explain to me why you have refused your prize."

James hesitated; then he replied bravely, "Do you want the truth, sir?"

"Of course, Potter."

The boy hardened his features. "Because I believe you have cheated," he declared, crossing his arms with a challenging glare.

How similar to his grandmother James looked now! Snape stiffened, disguising his thoughts under his usual cold tone.

"That is a serious accusation, Mr. Potter. What evidence do you offer to support such a theory?"

"A... a memory, sir."

"A memory?" The portrait was baffled.

Suddenly, James seemed to realise the danger implicit in his situation. Yet he couldn't draw back his words, so he replied, "Yes, a memory, a story that my grandmother once told me. Something about an experiment similar to this, that she had to undergo in her class. But the test had been arranged, so to make her win in any case."

Ah! So, Lily, too, had kept a memory of Slughorn's fixed contest! That time, their old professor had challenged both his favourite pupils but he had intended only one to win and that one was Lily. It was their second year, and though Sorted into different Houses, she was still Snape's best friend. So, her reaction at discovering the truth had been indignant. Slughorn had blushed in confusion, trying to explain that it had been only a joke. But young Severus Snape, so passionately defended in front of a whole class – even better, in front of James Potter senior – had felt so incredibly happy!

A sweet emotion tightened his heart again at the thought, and words escaped his lips before he could stop them.

"Your grandmother didn't need any help. She was extraordinarily brilliant."

James darkened. "So, it's true."

Snape recovered his usual severe timbre.

"If you refer to the memory your grandmother told you, yes, it's true. I was her antagonist that day. Professor Slughorn liked your grandmother – who didn't? – and wanted her to win. But we both managed to complete our potions successfully."

"And today? Who was supposed to win, Professor?"

The question sounded insolent, but Snape didn't react at the provocation in those words. He laced his fingers and leant back in his chair, speaking calmly.

"You have seen it with your own eyes, Potter. Both you and Miss Avery prepared the potions by yourselves, and there was no trick in that. In spite of my warnings, there was no difference in those ingredients, only in the method, and you were the one who chose the correct procedure."

Which was the truth, but Snape had obviously omitted to say that he had based his plan on Jennifer's psychology... and thankfully he had guessed right. The portrait paused.

"I suppose you thought I was favouring Miss Avery," he added. After a slight hesitation, the boy shook his head.

"No, I knew it was me," he replied uncomfortably. "But I can't understand why."

Surprised, Snape watched the boy. "This makes your renunciation even more worthwhile. Given the situation, you would have been largely justified to grab every possible advantage."

James shrugged. "It would have been a worthless victory."

The portrait inclined his head in a little bow, a bizarre expression on his features.

"Truly Gryffindor! This sentiment does you credit, Potter. But you can relax. What I offered today was simply a chance. I am glad you were the one who took it."

He crossed his arms. "You had been treated unjustly on a previous occasion, so a rehabilitation, better, a reward, was essential."

The boy stiffened, an incredulous look in his eyes.

"A reward? I don't understand. I thought that you....," he gulped and trailed off under Snape's piercing gaze.

"That's the point, Potter," the wizard replied. "You *thought*."

Silence fell while James considered the portrait with a suspicious expression. Finally, he spoke again.

"Last time... did you charm that suit of armour on purpose?"

"The suits of armour were intended to help, not to harm. I never had the intention of hurting you."

Which again wasn't totally true, as Snape knew well. He had hoped that the boy would put himself in a dead end. He had hoped to feel satisfaction. He had hoped to feel joy. His revenge. A heap of ashes.

But he couldn't admit all his faults. Not in that moment. Not on that day. And not in front of that boy. No matter what Albus Severus might have said, speaking to James wasn't like speaking to his younger brother; therefore, Snape concluded briefly, "Our enemies are not always who we think they are."

Then he added bitterly, as if speaking to himself, "And both your father and I have learned this truth at our own expenses..."

James kept considering the portrait with a curious expression: that odd, unexpected calm from his otherwise frightening teacher was unbalancing to him. But it was also an inviting occasion. So, he hazarded a new question.

"My father... you didn't like him, did you?"

"Absolutely not." Snape curled his lips in a cold smile, remembering his words to Dumbledore. "I found him *mediocre, arrogant, a determined rule-breaker, delighted to find himself famous, attention-seeking and impertinent...*"

Disconcerted at that enunciation, James objected, "But... but Dad told us that you sacrificed your life to protect him."

"And he told you the truth."

"So, why did you help him if you didn't like him?" The questions were growing more and more personal, but James didn't seem to notice in his anxiety to know.

Snape closed his eyes. So many explanations had flooded his mind! *Because I loved your grandmother. Because I was the cause of her death. Because I swore to protect her child. Because I hoped to obtain her forgiveness. Because I needed to redeem myself. Because I had no other reason to live.*

Painful. It was simply painful to recall all his actions and faults again and justify his reasons to that very boy. And yet, that boy and his family were so strictly intertwined with Snape's life! Perhaps he had the right to know... Or perhaps he had not. The wizard resolved to be as brief as possible.

"Because Lily Evans was my best friend and Harry Potter was her son."

As if he had expected that answer, James frowned and replied impulsively, "But you never told my dad anything. How did you expect him to trust you?"

Snape felt irritation bubble and replied coldly, "He wasn't supposed to know. Unfortunately, I hadn't a choice. You forget we were in a war. I had to disguise my actions. And your father never did anything to ease my task, stubborn and reckless as he was."

"If you treated him the way you are treating me, it's no wonder." James' voice trembled with resentment. "Nobody likes to be harassed, even if it is for their own good!"

Snape's lips curled in a cruel smile.

"That's exactly what your revered grandfather used to do to me. And he didn't do it for my own good but only to amuse himself. Yet I survived to eventually help his son."

"I don't believe you! My grandfather wasn't as mean as you say! My dad wouldn't have named me after him! The truth is that you hated him, so you tried to get revenge. And now you hate me because I have the same name."

He stiffened, waiting for the explosion he had deliberately stirred, but the portrait remained surprisingly calm.

"I won't deny that I disliked your grandfather," Snape replied with immense composure. "And he returned the feeling with great eagerness, making my days at Hogwarts a living hell. However, hateful as he was, your grandfather must have had some good quality – though I can't imagine which – because your grandmother chose him, not me."

He paused, struggling against the many emotions clashing in his heart. Then his composure unexpectedly broke.

"I'm only a portrait, Potter. But before being paint layered on a canvas, I was a man made of flesh and blood. What makes you think that I didn't have feelings? My job? My House? My role as a spy? Or simply the fact that now I am dead?"

Baffled by that sudden outburst, the boy took a step back. Moving randomly on the table, Snape's fingers found a piece of parchment and clenched it firmly while he tried to control his voice and his reactions.

"I detest your name, Potter," he declared harshly, "and I hate the memories it brings. But I don't hate you."

He released the crushed parchment. "Do you need proof? Let's see if I can spare you a confession."

For a moment, James didn't understand; then he widened his eyes.

"You know about—?"

"Your complaint?" Snape completed ironically. "It wasn't difficult. Who else could be interested in stopping my lessons? However, if you had reflected a bit more instead of letting your Gryffindor impetuosity take over, you would have understood that you were hurting your brother rather than me."

The wizard folded his arms. "We have both wounded somebody dear to us, Potter. I made that mistake a long time before you and paid for it dearly. I hope you'll remember my words and learn at least from my mistakes."

He took a deep breath and his hands clenched again.

"Dismissed!" he ordered with a growl.

James hesitated; then he lowered his head. The movement was too quick, so the wizard couldn't understand whether the spark in the boy's eyes was contempt or anger. Or, even worse, pity.

The room was quiet and empty now, and Snape let his mind wander and weigh again the words that had been said. In spite of his good intentions, the conversation hadn't come out as he had hoped. Dealing with living people could be so frustrating... He buried his face in his hands, admitting his failure.

Then he felt two arms unexpectedly enfold him from behind while a soft cascade of hair gently tickled his cheek. Lily! His heart twisted in blissful emotion. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and abandoned himself to the soothing comfort of her embrace.

Part XXI

Chapter 21 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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*All my gratitude to my betas **Pellegrina**, **Xoxphoenix** and **Hexgirl** and to my previewers **Duj** and **Morgaine_Dulac**. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers.*

Part XXI

Wrapped in Lily's arms, his head resting under her chin, Snape closed his eyes and lost himself in the blissful, unfamiliar sensation of being coddled while she talked in soft whispers that tickled his ear delightfully.

"You have never been good at apologising, Severus. That's why I appreciate so much what you did with James... It must have cost you a lot."

"Lily...", he murmured, feeling his heart dilate with emotion. His hand slowly reached for her hand and gently wrapped around it. She bent and kissed him quickly on his cheek. Again, her hair brushed his skin, and he had to force himself to stand still. The desire to return her kiss was overwhelming, but he couldn't risk offending her with unwanted tenderness. He hoped so much that she would allow him a gesture sooner or later, but for the moment, he could only wait and control himself.

"Lily...", he repeated, and in his blissful haze, he thought that her unexpected visit must be a reward. The idea affirmed itself powerfully while he basked in that soothing feeling. Yes, he had sincerely tried to make amends with young James Potter, and fate had rewarded him. It was clear proof that Minerva was right, that his existence was still worth living and that there was still a drop of happiness waiting for him even in that suffocating world of frames. Emotions ran forcefully within his fibres, and colours danced before his eyes while his head nestled cosily against the warm skin of her throat.

"What a wonderful gift you have given me, Severus," she whispered tenderly, holding him in the circle of her arms.

Gift? The word shone in his hazy brain like a flash in the night, and suddenly, Snape remembered. A new stream of joy invaded his heart.

"I have something special for you, dear," he announced with a hoarse voice.

"Something special?" Lily asked with a smile, and for a moment, he expected and hoped for her to kiss him again. But she stood waiting in an amused, interrogative silence, so he got up and turned to face her. How beautiful she was, how perfect, how desirable! A shiver ran through his spine in delightful anticipation of the surprise he was going to offer: such an unworthy gift to her exquisiteness, but still "his" gift.

"Come with me," Snape declared. Hand in hand, he guided her into the new picture that Bernardi had prepared and Albus Severus had chosen.

"Oh, Severus!" Lily breathed when she saw the balcony and the blooming flowers surrounding it. "How beautiful! Is this really for me?"

Her face was both admiring and astonished, and Snape felt an immense happiness.

"This is your new home at Hogwarts," he declared proudly. "And this is for you," he continued, taking Bernardi's glittering rose in his hand and offering it to her with an awkward bow.

Lily watched him and the flower, and her lips trembled. With an emotion that made Snape's heart twist in elation, she took the rose and inclined her head to inhale its scent, closing her eyelids with a sigh. Then she raised her face again to look at him, her eyes luminous with tears.

Snape couldn't control himself anymore and bent to kiss her, searching for her mouth. But Lily stiffened instantly and turned her head, drawing back as if she had been insulted. Frozen, he stopped his gesture and watched her with an apologetic look, cursing himself for his clumsiness.

Then Lily's expression changed again, and she moved closer and kissed him lightly, very lightly, on his lips. Baffled, Snape watched her, and she said with forced cheerfulness, "I shouldn't have... but this will be a nice memory for both of us."

"Memory?" he repeated, frowning in confusion. "What do you mean by that?"

Lily hesitated.

"I'm going home, Severus," she finally replied. "I have visited the castle and spoken with the ones I used to know when I was alive. Now I'm finished. I want to go back to my family and stay with them for the rest of my days."

His eyes widened in pain, and Lily hastened to complete her sentence. "I'm sorry." She averted her gaze in embarrassment. "You know you will be always dear to me."

Snape was speechless.

"But... but why?" he finally articulated.

"Severus!" she sighed, sounding slightly exasperated. "Don't you see? We are memories ourselves! Painted memories on a canvas. What does all this coming and going mean? What else can we do except watch and remember? We have had our chance years ago... Now it's all ended."

"No!" he rebelled violently, his mind clinging ferociously to Minerva's words. "Nothing is ever ended when we still have the chance to change it."

Her eyes veiled. "What could we change by now, Severus?" she asked. "I lost my life before you and I am resigned to my fate."

His pain was becoming unbearable.

"I don't want to watch and remember uselessly!" Snape protested.

"I'm sorry," she replied, watching him with alarmed eyes, "but this is exactly what scares me about you. Albus Severus has told me of your lessons. I'm glad he shows so much affection for you, but frankly, Severus, what's the meaning of all this? What are you trying to prove? We are only paintings!"

He felt the bars of the cage described by Minerva close around him.

"It's useless... it's all useless..." he murmured, fighting against desperation. "Was she deceiving me?"

Misunderstanding his words, Lily asked anxiously, "Did I make a mistake coming here?"

"No. But you are making a terrible one now. I beg of you, Lily, think again about your choice," he implored.

She considered him, and her face saddened.

"No. I can't. That would mean I would have to lie. And I have always been true to my word."

He watched her. Her decision was irrevocable, he knew it far too well.

"So, is this your last word, Mrs. Potter?" Snape asked calmly. Lily stiffened at his use of her married name; her eyes remained indecipherable, though her voice softened with regret.

"Yes, it is... Professor Snape."

He instinctively clenched his fists, but then he released them with some effort, adding with barely controlled emotion, "Then please go away and never come back. It would hurt me too much."

"You will be alone," Lily replied incongruously.

"I have been alone for my whole life, and I'll continue to be so."

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

His eyes narrowed. "At least you are sorry. Last time we quarrelled in real life, you were only contemptuous."

His words were harsh and meant to hurt her, but the pain was breaking his heart: he had lost her for the second time, and no more chances would be offered to him. It was the final crumbling of his hopes, the ending of his dreams, and his mind was silently screaming.

Lily lowered her head in defeat.

"You know you'll always have my gratitude."

Anguish diffused across her features, but Snape stubbornly refused himself the consolation of admitting it.

"It's not what I wanted, but thank you anyway," he answered sharply.

"Let's part as friends, can we?" Lily offered with a desolate voice.

"No. No more friends," Snape whispered. Then he took a strand of her long, beautiful hair in his hand. Slowly, conveying all his desperation and his love in that gesture, he brought it to his lips and kissed it.

"Farewell, my love," he murmured brokenly and let the strand fall free.

Lily watched him with something similar to fear in her eyes. Then, with a sob, she covered her face with her hands and moved a few steps backwards until her back met the limit of the frame. There she finally turned and ran out of his picture.

Snape closed his eyes, feeling a devastating pain lacerate his heart. Moving unsteadily, he sank into his chair, crossed his arms on the table and rested his head upon them, his body shook with harsh, tearless sobs.

In the secrecy of his room, Blaise Zabini placed a little metallic box on a table, then sat and contemplated it with trepidation and hope in his eyes. A splendid barn owl had delivered it that afternoon, but till that moment, the wizard hadn't found the courage to open it. The room was silent and everything around was still; only his heart was thudding in anxiety. That box could change the course of his life, and Blaise both longed and feared the revelations it could contain.

Finally, he raised a hand and gently touched a button. With a soft, noiseless movement, the lid opened and a column of light sprang out from it. The shadowy figure of an old man dressed in rich robes appeared, moving as gracefully and weightlessly as if he were floating in the light. Zabini contemplated him with awed eyes. The man's face was severe, his gaze sharp, his lips thin. Everything suggested the idea of an immense inner power quietly concealed under the frailty of that old body.

The figure raised his head and looked at Zabini with ageless eyes. For a moment, the younger wizard was scared, but then he remembered that the vision was only a holographic image, something that had been imported from Muggle culture. Silence was even thicker now, and the old man began to talk.

"Dilectissime fili, salve atque vale."

Zabini felt a pang in his heart. The figure was speaking Latin, and Blaise was lost in panic. But the language changed immediately into English, fluid and with a slight Italian accent.

"Greetings, my beloved great-grandson. I am Biagio Zabini, your father's grandfather and head of our family."

The voice of the figure mirrored his aspect; it sounded somewhat old and frail, yet power and magnificence flowed richly and easily with every word. The younger wizard relaxed and watched his ancestor with great curiosity. Finally, his past was going to be revealed, and his origins brought to light.

"I'm glad you have my same name," Biagio Zabini continued with a thoughtful smile. "This is proof that, in spite of his faults, your father held the family traditions in due respect."

A deep breath, and the old man once more seemed to stare at his grandson. Zabini returned the gaze, emotion growing in his chest.

"We were very happy to receive your message. Maestro Bernardi, of the Bernardi family from Siena, sent it to me, saying that his third son, Marcello, had met you in England and that you had expressed the wish of getting in touch with your family. The Bernardis have been our friends for generations, and they have created many masterpieces on our behalf; so, I was happy it was one of them who met you. Another one probably wouldn't have given you a chance. And I will explain why."

Suddenly, the great wizard appeared immensely saddened and weary, as if his task had become too arduous to accomplish. He cleared his throat.

"Mine will be a long message, grandson, long and perhaps difficult for you. Please excuse my accent. Though I was taught to speak in more than thirty languages, English wasn't a priority at the time. I will, nonetheless, take great care in my explanations, and of course, all of your questions will be answered at the right time."

He paused as if searching for words.

"I'll begin by telling you something about the family you come from. We are, I can tell you this with great pride, one of the most renowned families in the north of Italy. Our origins lose themselves in the mist of time."

Blaise was completely hooked by the magic of the voice. Marcello Bernardi hadn't told him much about the Zabini family, so he listened avidly. Every word added new strength to his hopes: the discovery of being a descendant of such a noble family was completely unexpected, and the opportunities that such family ties could offer him were surpassing his highest ambitions. In the meantime, the old voice continued calmly.

"I am what is called an 'IntraMundi Magus': an exponent of one of the most elitist and secret diplomacies of the world, the wizarding one. Italians have always been present in diplomatic affairs, and our family has always had a main role. The whole history of our beloved country has been a continual fight to survive during ages of invasions, wars and intrigues. Diplomacy has, therefore, been the only way to stay alive for the numerous Italian lords ruling the various little states into which Italy has been divided for so many centuries."

"The magic world has never been so secret here. Many of those ancient princes or rulers had brothers or sisters who happily discovered themselves to be magically gifted, thus greatly enhancing the power and the opportunities of their families. The sovereigns who weren't so lucky with their relatives did their best to have at least a magical counsellor at their court. Obviously, the magic wasn't publicized, but the populace silently knew."

"The Italian magical world and Muggle world have consequently been strongly linked, exchanging and borrowing talents with great profit on both sides. Muggles so immensely gifted as to be considered wizards, like painters and sculptors and poets, have always benefited from the tacit protection of the wizarding communities. At the same time, the magical population have been regarded as a source of strength and influence and carefully safeguarded by the political authorities since the Roman Empire."

Blaise was still intent in absorbing all this information when his great-grandfather's voice changed again, becoming a bit harsher.

"Now, coming to a more private story. Your father Cosimo was the youngest of my grandchildren. He always was a rebellious spirit and soon decided to leave the family, rejecting his heritage when he was only 25, the age of consent in our world. By doing so, he implicitly agreed to be exiled. Our traditions are very severe for those who refuse their obligations."

The eyes of the old man became suddenly cold, and Blaise felt himself shiver. He held his breath and waited even more anxiously for the revelations that were still to come.

"One of your uncles continued to keep track of your father all the same. So, we got to know that he had reached England and married your mother. A woman of dubious reputation, I'm sorry to say."

The old wizard paused, lowering his head in meditation. Then he seemed to watch Zabini again.

"But that is past and the past can't be changed, unfortunately. The marriage didn't last too long. A couple of years after you were born, your father died in a violent dispute with an unknown wizard. We suppose that the fight had been deliberately provoked... However, the Ministry never found proof of it, and as your father was a foreigner, nobody cared too much about his disgraceful ending."

For a moment, the old man's voice trembled in indignation, showing the depth of his sorrow for his ill-fated grandson. Then his tone lowered again to an alarming calm.

"From that time onwards, your uncle kept an eye on you."

Suddenly, Blaise felt extremely uneasy. Though he knew that the figure couldn't effectively see him, he raised a hand to cover his face as if concealing his thoughts.

"We knew that you were educated at Hogwarts, and that you were sorted into Slytherin under the guide of the late Severus Snape. Your curriculum of studies was excellent. However, we were extremely disappointed to see that you were associated with the infamous Tom Riddle, who named himself Lord Voldemort, and with his band of so-called Death Eaters."

Blaise blushed. The contempt in those words was very hard to stand, and for the thousandth time in his life, he silently cursed the choices that had led him along the path of disgrace. And with even more anger, Blaise cursed the man who had deceived him and his housemates so well: Severus Snape.

"But let's forget those unfortunate events," the older wizard sighed. "You were young, too young, and nobody was there to guide you. Your father decided to leave us, and according to our rules, this has removed you automatically from the line of succession, excluding you from the Italian wizarding fellowship. That's why you were so lucky to meet a Bernardi."

Blaise's cheeks reddened in embarrassment, and the old Zabini sighed again, as if he could see the pain on his great-grandson's face.

"However, times change, and your uncles think that it's unjust to condemn you because of your father's faults. Family is family and our blood runs in your veins. We know that your education was completely different from ours, so your role in the family probably won't be what I would have hoped. But a valid potioneer is always appreciated. Therefore, we are ready to welcome you back."

Widening his eyes in surprise and immense relief, Blaise unconsciously clasped his hands as if in prayer.

"*Ma... c'è sempre un ma che rovina ogni cosa*," his great-grandfather added slowly, and though not understanding his words, Zabini felt a chilling sensation in his heart, the premonition of something terrible still to come.

"There is always a *but* that ruins the story, our proverb says," the old wizard translated quietly and sighed for the third time, crossing his arms.

"I'm sorry, grandson, my news must have pained you, and yet the most important thing is still to come. Now listen carefully, Blaise, because from your answer to this question, your future will depend."

Zabini raised his eyes, hope and fear tightening his heart. But as he continued to listen and the sense of what he was asked to do became clear to him, his expression changed, becoming more and more desperate.

The form of a young woman was running blindly from picture to picture, staring at the ground to avoid the gazes and the questions of the other figures that she encountered in her frantic flight.

Soon, she reached an ancient painting in one of the corridors, and there her frenzied dash found an end when she collided with something soft. A hand grabbed her arm, and she raised her eyes in panic only to meet Albus Dumbledore's sweet smile.

"Lily," he said, holding her gently but firmly. "Where are you going so quickly? Is there something troubling you?"

"Oh, Albus!" she cried, and suddenly, her knees went weak. With a soft gasp, she threw herself into his comforting arms and hugged him tightly. "It's so good to see you!"

Her voice was heavy with suppressed emotion. He returned her forceful hug, frowning worriedly over the top of her red head.

"Please tell me, dear," he asked kindly.

"Oh, Albus," she repeated between broken sobs. "I just said goodbye to Severus... I told him that I am leaving to go home... forever."

The old wizard sighed, and the girl shivered in his arms.

"I have hurt him. Again." Lily sobbed. "But... but it was my only choice."

"Why?" Dumbledore asked, trying to disentangle himself from her hold and look at her. But she hugged him even more firmly, hiding her face in his chest and sniffing softly against his robes. He caressed her hair and waited patiently.

"He scares me," she confessed after a while. The hand on her hair stilled, and she finally raised her eyes to stare at him.

"Scares you?" Dumbledore inquired softly.

"He... he behaves as if he were still alive," she tried to explain. "There is something, a weird sort of energy that seems to flow from him. It's... it's disturbing!"

She breathed and continued in an almost petulant way, "I mean, we are all paintings, Albus, just paintings! What else could we be? What else could we hope for? And yet, he thinks that we can still do something... that we could change our future..."

"Lily," Dumbledore sighed, but she went on feverishly.

"Isn't he horribly mistaken? After all, there are laws we all should obey..."

"Lily!" The old wizard exclaimed severely, and she blushed and hid her face against his chest again.

"Tell me the truth," he ordered. "I'm sure there is more."

"How do you know, Albus?" she murmured faintly. "But you are right. Yes, there is something else. Something even worse."

He waited. The girl hesitated, then began to speak with an almost imperceptible voice.

"I love James, you know that, Albus... and yet... and yet..."

She swallowed hard. Words seemed to come out with great pain and difficulty.

"And yet, when I talk with Severus, when I see what he has done, what he has become... sometimes... sometimes I think that perhaps... perhaps I was in too much of a hurry... perhaps I have made a mistake..."

She definitely broke, and sobs shook her violently while she clung desperately to the old wizard.

"I MUST leave, Albus, don't you see?" she cried. "I cannot betray my husband. And I cannot offer Severus anything, not even my friendship. I came here to help him and give him forgiveness and peace. But I have only ruined everything again and made him suffer even more."

She abruptly stopped, her features altered in pain.

"Who will forgive ME, this time? I have always misunderstood him!"

"You are not the only one," Dumbledore replied, and his eyes filled with tears. "We are all guilty, Lily. All guilty. But the biggest responsibility falls on me."

His head leaned wearily on her shoulder as if it was his turn to searching for comfort while he bitterly admitted, "And nobody will ever forgive me for what I have done."

Author's note:

Dilectissime fili, salve atque vale: *most beloved son, greetings and be well* These are the ancient Latin words to open or close a letter.

IntraMundi Magus: my personal invention, meaning something like "wizard between worlds".

Biagio is the Italian form for Blaise. I chose the name Cosimo for Blaise Zabini's father as a tribute to the wonderful Italian author Italo Calvino and to his marvellous book *Barone Rampante (The Baron in the Trees)*, in which he features two brothers, Cosimo and Biagio Piovasco di Rondò. Cosimo is also an ancient Florentine name, used in the Medici family.

Part XXII

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of JK Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

*All my gratitude to my beta **AmyLouise**. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers.*

Part XXII

In the quietness of her room, in the warmth of her bed, a pensive Minerva McGonagall was preparing to face the dark hours of the night and the gloomy thoughts they usually raised in her heart.

The day had been saddened by depressing news: two of her dearest friends had suffered an extremely painful experience while an old foe would soon have to undergo the most fearsome of the events a human being could face. Destiny, which had pretended to offer all those people a second chance, had instead brutally pulled apart their hopes, leaving them with bare hands and, above all, with empty hearts.

The thought of those sufferings had filled Minerva with a deep sorrow and an overwhelming sense of helplessness. Feeling lonely and vulnerable, the old witch lay awake in her bed for a while, fighting against the many emotions stirred in her heart. But soon the nervousness became unbearable. Her hand swung in indecision, then picked up a book from a small pile on her nightstand. It was a romance, and for a moment, the Headmistress felt a sudden wave of embarrassment redden her cheeks.

Yet she didn't put the volume down. With measured movements, she raised her pillow so that it could comfortably support her and magically enhanced the light of the candles in order to help her weary eyes. Then she opened the book and began to read, only to stop after a few pages and stare blankly at the wall. Disconcerting how she could be so easily hooked by those senseless stories oozing passion and sentiment! Was she beginning to lose her mind? Was she transforming into a pathetic old woman like the Muggle ones she had seen, lonely and desperate, feeding the cats in the alleys?

She massaged her temples to lessen the tension; anxiety was surely the cause of her fluctuating mood and of her bizarre choices. Yet the sensation of uneasiness increased, and she lost herself in meditation, chewing her lower lip like a child. Then she heard a well-known voice calling her.

"Minerva!" Severus Snape appeared in a frame at the side of her bed. "Minerva, are you there?"

Their eyes met, and he immediately blushed and turned his face.

"Sorry," he muttered, half embarrassed, half frustrated, "I didn't think you would be in bed."

Minerva placed the book on the sheets, carefully face down, and adjusted a shawl over her nightshirt. She had expected that visit from the very moment she had found a sobbing Lily waiting in her office and had listened to her broken explanations. Apprehension tightened her heart but she checked it determinedly.

"A man in my bedroom! I'm flattered," she commented lightly, trying to make him smile. But he didn't react, so she continued with her usual nice composure, "You are welcome, Severus. I'm glad you came to visit. You know I am always happy to see you."

She watched him closely, disguising her examination under a friendly tone. "Tell me, please. Did you come for a chat, or do you need something from the Headmistress?"

He was evidently in a sullen mood.

"I'm sorry," he grumbled, "Surely I didn't choose the right moment. You are tired and..."

"I'm not!" she protested, her kind expression changing to one of concern. The old witch braced herself. She knew what was troubling her friend, but this time she was afraid that her affection simply wouldn't be enough to soothe his pain. And how could she think to comfort him when she herself was wandering in a sea of anguish? Minerva hesitated, weighing her words. Then she watched his brooding face and decided to take the dare.

"Please, Severus," she whispered, "forgive Lily."

His reaction was alarming. He paled so much she couldn't believe it and replied with increasing rage, "You... you know what has happened! How do you know? Were you spying on me, or was it Albus?"

"Severus!" she interrupted him, raising her hands in a pacifying gesture. "Please do not get angry. I didn't see Albus. And Lily came to see me of her own accord."

"When?" he asked immediately, and she felt an immense compassion for his evident suffering.

"After she had met you. She was desperate for your reaction and needed to share her burden," Minerva replied and waited for her words to sink into him.

He lowered his head, and she continued firmly, "I know how much she must have hurt you. And I imagine how enraged you must be with her. Yet allow me to tell you: she doesn't deserve your anger."

She paused. "Nor your contempt," she finished in a whisper.

He closed his eyes and slowly shook his head, his face altering in emotion.

"You know that these are not my feelings, Minerva," he murmured. "How could I ever despise Lily? She has always been the only sun in my life."

The confession broke the dam of his restraint, and words seemed to flow in desolate tenderness. "The small good I did, I did it for her. To her I devoted my existence, and for her I would happily sacrifice it again if that could bring her back to me. But this will never happen. Today she has definitely left, and I'll never see her again."

His voice trembled in defeat. "Perhaps I am the one who didn't deserve her."

"Severus!" Minerva instinctively raised a hand as if to reach him. "Please don't blame yourself. It wasn't your fault if she had to go."

He watched her with sudden hope. She sighed, acutely conscious of his tension.

"Should an old maid explain to you what you should have realised by now?" she finally murmured. "You don't need to tell me what you feel for her, Severus. I have understood your feelings since you were a child: your adoration for Lily was so evident! But even at that time, even when you and Lily were still friends...and such close friends...I thought that ..." She saw his eyes and gulped but continued softly, "Well, I knew she wasn't made for you."

She shook her head while memories flashed in her mind. "She never loved you the way you loved her."

His lips curled in a wounded expression. "You are so right, of course, Minerva," Snape replied bitterly. "But there is nothing I can do against my feelings. Whatever she

might say or whatever she might do, I'll never be able to stop loving her. Neither will I be able to delete her from my heart. I simply can't. And I don't understand why."

His eyes desolately questioned the old witch. "Why has she got such power over me? Why am I so defenceless before her?"

"Oh, Severus!" Minerva exclaimed. "Millions of lovers have exulted in joy asking themselves this question. That's the magnificence of love, and blessed is the heart that can host such an immense feeling."

"But it's so hurtful when it is one sided," he whispered, his head lowering wearily on his crossed arms.

Minerva felt a deep wave of compassion at that quiet suffering. The old witch considered the crushed figure in front of her and again shook her head in disbelief; not even in death would Severus Snape find reprieve from his torment! Both his life and Lily's had been brutally interrupted by the same malignant power, and both Severus and Lily had been entitled to a second chance, in the magical world of pictures. Yet those new possibilities hadn't levelled the course of their existences, only accentuated the differences. And though the mere concept of such existence was hardly conceivable for a living being, the balance was totally in favour of the girl.

In spite of being a portrait, Lily had a family waiting for her and a loving husband with whom she could share her virtual life. In addition she had been allowed the blessing of a son and the joy of a handful of grandchildren... while even the consolation of her friendship was now denied to the man whose dedication had saved Lily's son, and who had never ceased to devote to her an unconditional love.

Minerva lingered in meditation, enfolding Snape in the tenderness of her gaze. How close she felt to him! Two desolate souls, prisoners of different universes, companions in solitude but no mates for anybody else in their worlds, therefore, condemned to a sorrowful loneliness.

The old witch frowned. Something obscure began to form in her mind, an odd sort of rebellion that made her eyes narrow in resolution. The love for Lily had been the key for Severus' redemption, but what had been a means of salvation in another life had become a curse in his actual existence. Severus needed to be free.

Her hands clenched in determination. She wanted Severus at her side, and she wanted him free from any other sentimental attachment. There was of course a big dose of self-interest in that decision because she craved the consolation of his presence, and she needed the comfort of his visits... even if he was only a portrait, even if she was only a centenarian maid, even if there would never be a fulfilment to such a peculiar bond.

But why not, her heart vehemently protested? Severus Snape might love Lily Evans desperately, but it was Minerva McGonagall that he searched for when he was in need of help. Why shouldn't destiny compensate Minerva's commitment by at least offering her that final modest solace? Young, impetuous Lily had refused a man she had always misjudged...and whose worthiness she had probably never understood, the witch thought bitterly...but the old and solitary Headmistress wasn't going to waste such an unexpected chance. With her help, Severus would find a more rewarding meaning to his existence, something that could lift his spirit and fortify his will, releasing him from a love that was only trapping him in hopeless misery.

Having everything settled in her mind, though her reason silently screamed against the risks implicit in such a decision, Minerva carefully proceeded to cut his remaining ties.

"Lily knows how you feel, and that's why she is pained as well. Her heart is divided, and now it's filled by regret and confusion," she gently declared; then her tone became firm. "But she is the only one who can interpret and decide about her feelings."

She placed her hand on his canvas, in a gesture that had become the expression of her deep affection. "Everyone has to make their own decisions, Severus. As much as I would like to spare you the pain of her choice, I know it's impossible. It's part of our being human and frail."

He was still curled in his frame, his head resting on his arms. Was he listening? Was he yielding to her argumentations as he had always done lately? Minerva's voice became a soft murmur.

"Love is its own reward, Severus, and the feeling you possess in such a large amount should be spread on those who surround you here and who will be happy to return the same affection to you."

She hesitated a moment, then decided to offer her final nudge. "I told Lily that she had done the right thing and that you will learn to live without her, as you did till now."

His head jerked up ferociously, and she immediately realised that her feelings had betrayed her: those last words had been a huge error.

"It's easy for you, isn't it, Minerva?" Snape hissed. "Dispensing wise words and good advices, playing the part of the affectionate friend and enjoying your being superior..."

His voice had lost its trusting edge and was now cold and rather aggressive. She paled and tears blurred her eyes, but he went on mercilessly. "Who gave you the right to decide in our places? What does a spinster know about love? I wonder if you have ever been kissed!"

She stiffened in pain, watching him with a pleading look.

"I'm sorry, Severus, I....," she stammered, but his eyes were icy.

"It's too late for an apology." He cut her off harshly, and with a quick movement, he left the frame. Terrified, Minerva extended her arm in a useless attempt to stop his leaving. Then the enormity of her mistake hit her, and she let her arm drop in despair while slow, burning drops once more dimmed her sight.

For the rest of the night, Snape paced in his picture like a lion in a cage. Rage, frustration and a myriad different feelings...all extremely vivid...stormed in his heart, torturing the fibres of his being. But when the darkest hours of the night faded away, more rational considerations came to disperse the tempest, as if the light of the sun had enlightened his conscience as well as the shadowy room in which he was hanging.

Once more he relived his conversation with Minerva, and his head lowered in shame. How could he have been so merciless, so inconsiderate, so harsh with a friend who had only tried to help him? Minerva was right, he had to admit it... even if his heart was aching so much for that admission! There was no hope in his love for Lily, and there had never been. Though the Headmistress' words had been awkward, her intentions were certainly good. She wanted the best for him. And he had offended her so cruelly! Had he really pushed away one of the few people who sincerely cared for him?

He sighed in desolation. He ought to find Minerva and ask for her forgiveness. But he didn't dare invade the privacy of her room at that early hour, and breakfast in the Great Hall didn't offer any occasion to a portrait for a private talk. So, for the moment, he could only hope that later she would come and visit him before the beginning of his lessons.

But, of course, she didn't.

The first years were very undisciplined that morning, lively and noisy like all kids of their age. Snape watched Albus Severus enter with the other Gryffindors. The boy was chatting with his cousin Rose, and when he lifted his head to greet his professor, his eyes had a sudden spark of complicity, and a smile brightened his features.

Rose too watched Snape, then turned to consider her cousin with a perplexed look. The wizard felt nervous. Life was going to become difficult for that boy if his schoolmates had begun to think that he was favoured. But perhaps they already knew? Oh, better not investigate! He had too many troubles to manage that morning to add a new one.

But a new one quickly added itself as soon as Scorpius Malfoy attracted Snape's attention with his unusual behaviour. In the previous lessons, Snape had identified him as a quiet, respectful child, though Malfoy's pride had already imprinted him with its mark. But today the boy was curiously absent-minded, and all his movements were strangely awkward. Snape tilted his head to watch him closely.

Suddenly aware of his professor's gaze, Scorpius seemed to force himself to react and focused again on his potion. One of his schoolmates...Frederick Abbot, a Hufflepuff with more enthusiasm than wits...rolled his eyes in scorn at that activity and made a quick comment in a low voice. The distance was too great for Snape to hear it, but he could see Scorpius disdainfully tighten his lips and continue with his work.

Frederick kept stirring his potion with a twisted smile; then, when nobody was looking, he bent again and hurriedly whispered something to Scorpius, who had been forced to pass near him to go and take ingredients from the cupboard. Some of the children around them caught the words as well and raised their heads, looking either perplexed or amused. Once more, Scorpius shot Abbot a warning glance...his pale eyes so similar to Lucius'...then he turned his shoulders with a shrug and went back to his cauldron.

Frederick put his hands on his hips with a challenging look; he waited for Scorpius to turn again and mimicked the action of locking a door and throwing away the key. At that sight, Scorpius went unexpectedly mad. With a sudden movement he took out the ladle with which he was mixing his boiling potion and threw it at his tormentor. Frederick ducked, but some burning drops hit him all the same, and he cried in pain.

"Mr. Malfoy! Mr. Abbot!" Snape instantly called, feeling a wave of panic. How could he divide the boys? The students were already gathering to face the Slytherins, who had surrounded Scorpius protectively.

"Auxilium!" the wizard called or, rather, pleaded. One of the gigantic armours obediently awakened, and at that impressive sight, the children backed in fear. In what seemed a caricature of human behaviour, the giant interposed its massive figure between the boys and crossed its arms with a threatening effect. Frederick immediately took a step backwards, but Scorpius stared at his opponent with a challenging glare. Surprised, Snape saw tears in his eyes.

"Mr. Malfoy, I presume you have an explanation," the wizard questioned darkly.

"Sorry, sir, but I don't have anything to say," the boy replied.

"Perhaps Mr. Abbot can help you?" Snape's voice was definitely intimidating.

The Hufflepuff reddened. Snape could easily see that the boy was torn between embarrassment and fear, but there was also a secret smugness in his eyes while he looked at Malfoy. The Slytherin, on the other hand, seemed to be extremely agitated, as if he wanted to prevent any admission from his adversary. Before Frederick could say a word, Scorpius confessed, "It was my fault, Professor."

Snape was decidedly concerned now: an inner part of his mind was urging him to talk with the boy in private.

"Very well," he growled. "Five points from Slytherin."

Then he turned to the other boy with a sarcastic scowl. "Anything to add, Mr. Abbot? I have noticed that you have had no problems in expressing your thoughts to Mr. Malfoy during your work."

Snape watched the boy pointedly. The children shouldn't think that their teacher was deaf and blind just because he was a portrait. Frederick paled, but lowered his eyes in silence.

"Five points also from Hufflepuff, then," Snape replied coldly. He looked at the two boys and added sharply, "Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Abbot, you will stay after the lesson so that we can decide your punishment. Now, everybody back to work. Don't forget that you have a potion to prepare and that I will check your result in a few minutes."

The suit of armour that had been waiting between the boys bowed its head respectfully and went noisily to its place. The children hurried to their potions. Scorpius reached his cauldron, his face white as chalk and eyes blinking furiously to stop the tears. Neither he nor Abbot completed their task, but Snape didn't say anything. His thoughts were full of bitterness. Portrait. He was only a portrait in a world full of living beings with unpredictable reactions...

Soon the lesson was over, and the children left while the two guilty students waited in silence. Snape crossed his arms.

"Mr. Abbot, I'm sure you still haven't visited the owlery properly. I suggest you make a complete tour this evening, including filling the mangers and scrubbing the floor. Nothing like cleaning a place to know it in detail and be thoroughly impressed. Therefore, please present yourself to..."

For a moment, the name of Argus Filch was on his lips, and then Snape remembered. Filch wasn't there anymore. The new caretaker was a tall, silent, bony man with a stolid expression and very few teeth left in his mouth. The children were deeply scared of him because he was practically mute and his smile looked like a ghostly grimace.

Frederick paled in anguish and then turned to Scorpius, hoping to have at least the satisfaction of a similar punishment for his antagonist. But Snape ordered imperiously, "Dismissed!" and though reluctant, the boy was forced to leave.

As soon as the door closed after Abbot, Scorpius watched Snape with that new, unexpectedly defiant gaze and crossed his arms.

"I'm not going to punish you, Scorpius," Snape said slowly. "I have seen you were provoked, and I understand that there must be something serious if you decided to keep silent. But perhaps you will tell me what really happened, now that we are alone in the secrecy of this room."

"I have nothing to say, sir," the boy replied coldly.

"Are you sure?" Snape asked quietly. "Not even in the name of my friendship with your grandfather?"

Scorpius hesitated. "Nothing you could be interested in," he finally and rudely replied.

Snape felt helpless; then his many years of experience came to his rescue.

"Your father will be informed of your punishment, I must advise you," he declared imperturbably. "You will have to explain the matter directly to him."

The boy's face shrunk in panic. "Please, don't," he pleaded. "I will tell you everything, but please don't let him know about this."

Snape nodded, and Scorpius began uncertainly, "Abbot was... taunting me. He said that my grandfather had been a close friend of his uncle."

The wizard frowned. "So?"

Tears welled in Scorpius' eyes. "His uncle is a warder in Azkaban..."

Minerva McGonagall chose exactly that moment to enter.

"Good morning, Professor Snape," she greeted with detached courtesy; then she turned to the boy.

"Ah, here you are, Mr. Malfoy," she said. "Come with me, child. I have opened a connection in the Floo. Your family is waiting."

Scorpius widened his eyes and ran towards the old witch. Snape was confused. What was happening? Why was Minerva there? Why was Scorpius going home? And then he tried to grab the occasion.

"Headmistress, please!" he called. She was already leaving after the boy but turned to look at him. Her eyes were inexpressive, and he felt extremely uneasy.

"May... May I ask you the honour of a private talk?"

"I will be glad to speak with you, Professor," she replied impassively. Then, unexpected, a quiet smile curled her lips and reached her eyes. "But not today, Severus. Let's see you tomorrow."

She left, and Snape felt a tremulous hope warm his heart.

Albus Severus entered the room. Lily's eyes watched Snape again, and she smiled to him through her grandson.

"Hello, Professor, just thought I'd come to visit."

The words sounded cordial, but the boy looked a bit worried. Snape watched him enquiringly; the child took it as an invitation because he sat and began to talk. As always, Albus Severus went straight to the point, but the similarity in the genders of the people involved in his explanation made it a bit confused.

"My sister wrote me that grandma is back at home. She says that grandma looks very sad and that she has talked a lot with grandpa... and not very pleasantly. She says that grandpa has asked her... I mean my sister...to go out and leave them alone. My sister suspects that you and grandma might have quarrelled. She is a bit angry with grandma because she was hoping that you would come to visit, but now it seems impossible, of course. You know how commanding my sister is... she is a girl."

And with that last assertion, the boy seemed to have justified his sister's behaviour before the world. Yet he still seemed strangely anxious.

"Did you quarrel with grandma?" he finally asked.

Snape sighed. Though he felt an odd sensation at the idea that Lily and James Sr. might have argued about him, the thought didn't give him any joy.

"Your grandma has left, but we didn't quarrel," he declared quietly.

"But you are sad," the boy hazarded.

"Of course."

What else could be said? His eyes met Albus Severus'. How could the child understand the immense power his grandmother had on Snape's soul? The boy considered him in silence, embracing his knees and swinging unsteadily on his seat. He meditated for a while, then raised his head.

"Love is a tough matter, isn't it?" he asked timidly.

Snape should have felt irritated but he knew the little one in front of him too well not to grasp the affection under the words. So he nodded and crossed his arms silently. The boy considered him again.

"You know, I was thinking that if my grandma had married you, now YOU would be my grandfather."

The first thought that came immediately to Snape's mind after that declaration was the flimsiness of such a premise. No James Potter, therefore, no Harry Potter... and consequently no Albus Severus Potter. The second thought was that he should feel annoyed at such an informal approach; instead something forced him to ask, "Would you have liked it?"

"Well, my grandpa is so young!" Albus Severus replied thoughtfully. "He doesn't look like a grandpa. He is so similar to my cousin Teddy, Teddy Lupin. When they meet, they always laugh and joke."

Teddy Lupin... another name that brought indefinite emotions in Snape's heart. Yes, even Remus Lupin, his old enemy and ally, had left a trace of himself in the real world. Snape shook his head, dispersing his thoughts, and watched the boy who, unaware of those gloomy considerations, was happily continuing his reasoning.

"So, you would certainly look more appropriate. Though you don't seem a grandpa either... Perhaps an uncle?" Albus Severus asked hopefully.

Snape had a wry smile, but that didn't stop the boy, who considered him again.

"I think I prefer to have you as a friend," Albus Severus declared gravely. "Of course," the boy hurried to add, "only when I am grown up. My brother always says that... Oh!" he suddenly exclaimed, "I forgot! Thank you for speaking with James, Professor."

Snape wanted to be superior, but curiosity was too strong.

"Did your brother tell you anything?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Well, he said... May I use his words?" Albus Severus timidly offered.

"Certainly, Potter!" Snape replied, and the boy took a deep breath.

"Well, he said, 'The man is mental, but he's better than I thought.'"

Albus Severus smiled proudly. "I think he is beginning to appreciate you," he added confidentially.

For a moment Snape felt a deep indignation, but something in the boy's words suddenly struck him.

The man is mental...

So, James Potter was considering him like a human being, not only like a layer of paint! A strange satisfaction filled Snape's heart, and for the very first time since his rebirth, he burst into quiet laughter.

"So, I'm mental, eh?"

"Are you angry, Professor?" Albus Severus asked, immediately worried.

"No, Potter," Snape replied merrily. "I think that your brother deserves a reward, and I will personally award it to him tomorrow."

The boy lifted his head in curiosity, but though his teacher seemed strangely elated, no other explanation came; therefore, he didn't dare ask for details. So, when he left after a few minutes, Albus Severus was still pondering Snape's words with great perplexity.

Part XXIII

Chapter 23 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part XXIII

Slowly, the second year students took their places in the classroom. Their mood was diffident that morning, as the severe expression displayed by their teacher didn't encourage any manifestations of cheerfulness. James Potter, in particular, looked very circumspect, and Snape curled his lips in an ironic smile...surely Albus Severus had reported his last conversation to his brother, and now the elder Potter wasn't sure of what was waiting for him. Well, he was going to be very surprised.

The lesson opened with the usual lecture: Snape recapitulated the experiments they had performed in the previous session, and then he randomly asked questions to see what his students had grasped. Uncomfortable under his piercing eyes, many of the children sounded hesitant, and Snape's scowl increased, as well as the general nervousness of the class.

Finally, the portrait announced, "As I told you at the beginning of this course, it is my intention to give special assignments to this class. Students who have been allowed to attend my programme must keep a reputation of excellence. Otherwise, there would be no reason, and no need, for their admission."

Snape's brows furrowed while his eyes lingered on the worried little faces raised towards him.

"Participation in my courses implies hard work, commitment, sometimes even small physical risks, enthusiasm and pride," he declared slowly.

He paused; then he added with his hateful smile, "Not forgetting a brain."

The children watched each other in dismay. Some paled, some snorted; the majority lowered their heads in resentment.

Snape laced his fingers, hiding his feelings under his usual ironical expression. The class was reacting as he had expected. With his most severe scowl, he turned to James, who was shifting under his frame in evident uneasiness.

"What's the problem, Potter? Unable to sit properly on a chair? Should I remind you again that we are not on a Quidditch field?"

James looked offended but managed to check his reaction. Snape watched him severely while a deep satisfaction invaded his heart; the boy was beginning to learn. Prompted by those merciless eyes, James glanced at his companions, as if asking for support, and replied, "Sorry, sir, I think that..."

He hesitated, searching for the right words, and concluded bravely, "I mean, it's tough... And we have so many other subjects to study...."

"Disappointing, Potter!" Snape immediately took his most contemptuous tone. "Absolutely unacceptable! Students in this class must be prepared to face a challenge each time they are requested to do so. I thought I'd made it clear in my first lesson. But perhaps, as always, you were too busy to listen at the time."

The boy lowered his head with a sulky expression, and Snape continued with theatrical emphasis, crossing his arms with an irritated gesture. "Your objections are pathetic! I am extremely disappointed to hear this nonsense, and on the very day I was going to teach you how to prepare Roaring Fizzies, Luminessential Tablets, Diaphanoids and Morpho Beans."

He couldn't have hoped for a more rewarding reaction. The children jerked up their heads, emitted a sharp gasp and looked at the portrait in utter incredulity. But Snape didn't seem to notice; he just shrugged and lowered his voice in another disconcerting declaration. "After all, Halloween will be here in less than a week, and such tricks are always useful on such occasions."

He cast a quick glance at the class. The children were still staring agape, eyes popping. The contrast between the tone of their teacher and the meaning of his words had completely dumbfounded them, leaving them speechless. Snape watched the astonished little faces and concluded with calculated indifference, "However, it seems that I was wrong. You prefer theory to practice. Very well then, open your books at page 25."

A complete silence was the only answer to that order until finally James reacted.

"But... but we want to make them, Professor!" he pleaded, and the class joined eagerly, voices begging and intersecting in rising confusion. "Yes, please, we want to try! Please! Please!"

Snape frowned, concealing his inner satisfaction. It had been so easy! Suddenly, an unknown, beautiful feeling pervaded his heart, and he shivered in emotion, savouring that unexpected sensation of joy.

"Be quiet!" he then roared, and the children instantly stiffened in panic, all except Jennifer Avery, who was studying the portrait with calculating eyes, and James Potter, who had crossed his arms and raised his chin in his habitual I-fear-nothing expression. The wizard prepared for the second part of his speech.

"I'm glad you have so unexpectedly recovered your courage," Snape declared coldly. In spite of the tone, it was a promising statement, and the students held their breath in expectation. The portrait shot an ironic glance at Arthur Macmillan, who had joined his hands in prayer.

"I see you are determined," Snape affirmed sarcastically. "Very well. I'll give you a chance."

It took him several moments to restore calm.

"The making of these Halloween candies can produce a number of bizarre and most unwelcome effects if not handled with due precaution," Snape warned, pacing in his

frame, with his arms folded behind his back, while the children listened anxiously.

"To avoid unpleasant surprises," he continued after a long, distressing pause, "I will ask the help of very special assistants."

The wizard stopped and turned to point his finger at the impressive iron giants standing at the corners of the room.

"We will use the suits of armour to perform the most hazardous steps of these concoctions."

The children widened their eyes at that thrilling new prospect; unexpectedly, what was supposed to be a most boring lesson had become an Easter egg full of fantastic surprises. Applause started spontaneously, and many students turned to consider the knights with jubilant smiles.

Enjoying the growing excitement, Snape hardened his tone to underline the importance of his words.

"I want to make it very clear that this is not a game. Four selected students, one from each House, will be appointed to supervise your efforts. These supervisors will therefore have a great responsibility. The mixtures you are going to prepare are normally assigned to much more skilled potioners than second year apprentices, so let's hope you won't spoil my expectations with reckless behaviour."

The children cheered, ready to promise everything. The boys' eyes were shining in enthusiasm, but the girls were also exchanging excited glances. Snape raised a hand to re-establish silence.

"Now, about the nominations. For this specific experiment, I will appoint Miss Avery for Slytherin, Miss Montgomery for Hufflepuff, Mr. Howe for Ravenclaw, and...Mr. Potter for Gryffindor."

The small group of the newly elected supervisors gathered under the frame. Snape's eyes seemed to dig inside James, whose face was unusually serious.

"Mr. Potter," the wizard said quietly, "I hope we can trust you after the way you... excelled yourself last time."

Then Snape turned to Jennifer. "And I hope Miss Avery is not going to disappoint me again."

The girl blushed and lowered her head. Snape also attentively watched the other two children, who returned his gaze with meek smiles. Jasmine Montgomery, a slightly overweight little girl, was evidently pleased for the honour, but at the same time, she looked very tense. On the other hand, Jordan Howe, a tall red-haired bespectacled boy, was sparkling with enthusiasm.

"The first step will be linking a knight with you," Snape explained to the supervisors. "You must select one of them by calling its name to create a magical connection. Now listen carefully."

"Sir Tristram!" the wizard called, and with an impressive creak, one of the iron creatures came to life and raised a gloved hand in greeting.

"Sir Dunstan!" Snape called again, and a second giant bowed in response; it was the knight who had "quarrelled" with James Potter, and Snape cast a quick glance at his student. The boy had evidently recognised his antagonist, and a strange, thoughtful expression suffused his face.

"Sir Beltram! Sir Rowan!" One after the other, the two remaining knights answered their call while the class watched in awe. Then the portrait turned to the supervisors again.

"To avoid preferences, we will proceed in alphabetical order. Potter!" Snape ordered. "You will be the first."

"S-sorry, sir?" the boy asked in surprise. Wasn't Avery the first name on the register?

"Did you leave your brain on your desk, Potter? Every House will be assigned a suit of armour. We have four Houses here, so let's begin with Gryffindor; then, following in alphabetical order as I said before, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Now! Would you please make your choice, or should I decide for you?"

James studied the four imposing knights. From the furrowing of his brows, Snape could easily perceive the thoughts that were whirling in his mind. The boy had been humiliated in that same classroom by one of those iron creatures, and his pride was still hurt. But knowing James' reactions quite well by now, the wizard was sure that there was only one possible choice. And it was in order to grant that choice that he had imposed the alphabetical order and favoured the Gryffindors once more. Now, had he assumed correctly?

"Sir Dunstan for Gryffindor!" James called, and Snape smiled inwardly. Yes, he had guessed right again. Nobody else should command the knight who had dared challenge a Potter! The red and golden colours of Gryffindor wrapped the knight's armour, which blazed fiercely, while a roaring lion appeared on its shield.

"Gryffindooooor!" The loud, metallic voice of the giant exulted. Then it raised its fist and hit its chest with a resounding clash. The Gryffindors burst into applause, eyes shining in joy.

It was Hufflepuff's turn now, so Jasmine Montgomery stepped out and, imitating her classmate, called with a voice wavering in emotion, "Sir Beltram for Hufflepuff!"

"Hu-ffle-puff!" A second giant bowed gallantly and was immediately covered by the black and yellow colours of the House. Another round of applause started while Jasmine smiled proudly.

Sir Rowan was Ravenclaw's choice, and finally, with a challenging look, Jennifer Avery called, "Sir Tristram for Slytherin!"

With an expectant gaze, the four students turned to look at Snape for instructions. With his usual cold smile, the wizard sent four different parchments through the fax. The second years weren't as familiar as the first years with that means of communication, so the supervisors took their rolls with a slightly perplexed air.

But their perplexity increased even more when they read the instructions. It was Jennifer Avery who dared ask for explanation.

"Please, Professor... There are no names on these potions. How can we know what we are preparing?"

She gulped while Snape curled his lips in a cruel smile.

"This is a final little pleasure reserved to me, Miss Avery. As soon as you have completed your work, we will test the results on the supervisors. And then...and only then...will you know what you have produced."

The children glanced at each other, a sudden look of horror on Jasmine's face. But then Jennifer and James went straight to their housemates, and Jordan immediately followed their example. So, with a tremulous sigh, the little girl also moved to her companions.

A few minutes later, a laboratory had been set up, and Snape watched the different methods at work.

James had gathered his companions, and they were now talking animatedly, bent over a desk, studying the instructions with heads lowered in concentration. The gigantic Sir Dunstan had joined them and inclined his helm to listen, and the children were looking at it with friendly easiness.

Jennifer was whispering her instructions and clearly deciding the best moves. Her companions were listening with desperate intensity, and their suit of armour also seemed subjugated by the girl's personality.

The Hufflepuffs were talking in low voices, some of them raking their hair or biting their lips, while shooting cautious glances at the knight towering near them.

The Ravenclaws had been the quickest; they had discussed the steps, divided the parchment into strips and were now assigning tasks. Even their knight seemed to be thoroughly impressed by such meticulous efficiency.

Ending their session, the Gryffindors high-fived each other, then hit Sir Dunstan's fist with their own, as in a propitiatory rite.

The knight began the work it had evidently been entrusted with. With its huge arms, it collected its new mates' cauldrons and disposed them, one near the other, in a circle. The children hurried to light the fire. At the same time, the Ravenclaws and the Slytherins were opening the cupboards, looking for ingredients. Still examining the instructions, the Hufflepuffs raised their heads in panic at that activity, and Snape felt a wave of compassion.

"This is not a race," he consoled the children. "Be careful, and remember: speed may ruin your work."

The Hufflepuffs smiled in relief, though Snape scowled at them immediately after, as if regretting his kindness.

Half an hour later, the room was full of vapour, and disparate smells and fumes were rising, mixing with the excited comments of the children. Every group was trying to guess what they were preparing, and different hypotheses burst out as soon as any of the students could detect a change in the mixtures.

The knights were hard workers. They lifted cauldrons, raised heavy weights and, above all, took all the risky operations in their hands.

The Ravenclaws applauded in joy when Sir Rowan opened a jar of viscid jellyfish and dropped them, one by one, in the boiling liquid.

Sir Tristram helped his Slytherins by inserting his arm directly into the hot mixture and recovering the catalyst.

The Hufflepuffs looked in reverent admiration when Sir Beltram deftly filled a gigantic cauldron with the contents of two other smaller ones that needed to be mixed together.

The fun was immense, and work was going on quickly and smoothly, so Snape leant back on his chair and closed his eyes, enjoying the merry confusion. Slowly, that soothing, blissful, powerful feeling he had previously experienced came back again in overwhelming waves, and the wizard relaxed, letting his thoughts free to wander.

Charming the suits of armour had been tough work, the portrait lazily considered, opening his eyes again to check James Potter and Sir Dunstan, who were working side by side. First, it had required calling Professor Finlay, Flitwick's substitute for Charms, and asking him the favour of his magical cooperation. The older wizard had no particular affection for Snape, so the work of convincing him had taken time and diplomacy, a subtle art that Snape had been obliged to brush up on after so many years of neglect.

Choosing the right enchantments had taken even more time, and Snape had regretted over and over that his painted form had made it impossible for his spells to reach the real world. For a moment, he had felt overwhelmed by a burning frustration and was even tempted to abandon the project. It had taken all his courage to go on, all the ferocious determination in his heart....

Finally, Finlay's curiosity had been greatly excited; the older wizard had begun to ask innumerable questions about the intended use of the knights, and Snape had felt positively irritated at his colleague's evident scepticism. The portrait had been able to reassure Finlay only by promising him to ask the Headmistress' permission for that experiment, a request that Snape had obviously and conveniently "forgotten".

The sound of voices rising in animation awakened the portrait from his trance. Ah! Work was coming to a conclusion, and Snape felt his heartbeats speed up in anticipation, as well as his students'.

Tired, excited, curious; with dirty hands and bright eyes, the children stepped back while the knights proceeded to the last operation: collecting the material created in the big bellies of the cauldrons.

In spite of his warnings, Snape knew perfectly well that there was no difficulty in preparing the magical candies. It was mostly an exercise in gastronomy, and the real risks were in the high temperatures and in the handling of such large quantities of ingredients, all issues that had been perfectly managed by the knights.

So, the portrait allowed himself to smile benevolently at the students, who were triumphantly displaying their results on the large platters appropriately prepared. Then he taught them a special spell, and after a few attempts, the four vividly coloured masses were divided into many little pills.

The children held their breaths in expectation. It was the moment of the final test.

"Let's reverse the order for the tasting," Snape proposed with a diabolical smile, knowing what each group had prepared and savouring the result in advance.

Obedying that unexpected decision, Jennifer became the first one to taste the production, and suddenly, she was a bit worried. However, she couldn't refuse, and a shiver shook her forcefully when she swallowed a tablet. But a few moments later, a beautiful fluorescent glow surrounded her body, and the Slytherins applauded enthusiastically.

"Luminessential Tablets," announced Snape, nodding at their joy. "Excellent job, Miss Avery. Ten points to Slytherin for perfect coordination."

Jennifer relaxed, her habitually cold smile once more on her lips.

The Ravenclaws were on tenterhooks, yet affected a superior nonchalance while Jordan put a pill in his mouth. The boy smiled hesitantly; then he watched his hands and emitted a cry of horror, immediately followed by an exclamation of delight. His fingers had become deformed like the branches of an old tree, and when he blinked, his features changed their shape, making him look like a gargoyle.

"Morpho Beans," declared Snape, and the Ravenclaws looked pleased, though a little bit terrified. But their uncertain expressions turned instantly into relieved grins as soon as Snape commented casually, "The effect lasts only fifteen minutes with that dose, Mr. Howe. Excellent! Ten points to Ravenclaw!"

The Hufflepuffs were extremely nervous. Jasmine gulped her tablet with a look of fear in her eyes. In a few seconds, her skin took on a more transparent shade, and her skull and bones became detectable, though in a confused way, glowing in spectral pallor.

"Diaphanoids," Snape commented and considered the slightly overweight little girl with an ironic expression. "Really impressive, Miss Montgomery. Though not exactly a diet I would suggest."

Hufflepuff too was rewarded with ten points like the other Houses, and Jasmine smiled, reassured and proud, while the other students stared enviously at her skeletal look. It was now Gryffindor's turn, but surprises were obviously ended.

"I presume you have understood by now what you have prepared, Potter," Snape confirmed. "Roaring Fizzies. Let's test them."

The boy was a bit frustrated, but he took his pill and swallowed it eagerly. No visible change occurred, and James looked at his teacher in uncertainty.

"How do you feel, Potter?" Snape asked with a mischievous smile. The boy opened his mouth, but a resounding roar was the only answer he could manage, and many of

the students began to laugh. The situation looked funny rather than scary as it was supposed to be. The Gryffindors immediately replied with exaggerated applause, watching their amused schoolmates with a threatening glare.

"Very good, Potter," Snape declared silkily. "Though I don't find a great difference from the way you usually speak."

The Slytherins snickered, and the wizard concluded, waving his hand in condescension, "Ten points to Gryffindor."

A desperate look in his eyes, James tried to say something, but he could only struggle uselessly with his throat, and Snape smiled again.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Potter. I regret to inform you that the effect lasts for an hour, more or less. You will have to wait before insulting me. But look at the good side: you can say whatever you want now. Nobody will understand you."

Then, preventing any other reaction, Snape raised a hand imperiously.

"We will bottle the candies you have prepared, and every House will receive a ration for Halloween. Now, ladies and gentlemen, time to clean up the mess," he ordered with a sharp tone. Laughter ceased abruptly while the children looked in alarm at the confusion in the room. Heads down and lips tightened, the students began their work.

All in all, with the help of the suits of armour, cleaning the room had been quicker than expected. Soon the children were ready to leave, talking in excited whispers while glancing avidly at the jars of candies.

But his new ability was evidently troubling James, so when his classmates went out, he slipped back in the classroom, going straight under the frame. There he crossed his arms and watched Snape with a defiant glare.

"Yes?" Snape asked with cold courtesy, an inner hilarity rising in his chest.

The boy gesticulated uselessly, then tried to speak again. But only animal sounds came out from his throat, so after a few tries, he stopped in frustration.

"I know what you mean, Potter," Snape replied with a meaningful expression. "I may be mental, but I'm not stupid."

The boy froze at those words and looked at his professor with a wounded expression. Then his head dropped in defeat, his shoulders slumped, and resignedly, he turned to leave.

"You give up too easily, Potter!" Snape stopped him, a smile oddly sounding in his tone. "Who better than you should appreciate a joke?"

Baffled, James raised his head again. With a smooth movement, the portrait waved his wand and exclaimed, "*Finite Incantatem!*"

Then Snape crossed his arms, asking quietly, "Feeling better, now?"

"Well, I..." The boy seemed surprised to hear the sound of his voice again. For a moment, he struggled with himself; then he concluded grudgingly, "Thank you, sir."

"You don't need to thank me," Snape replied, lacing his fingers and looking at the ceiling with exaggerated attention. "And you can tell your mates that this is an easy way to interrupt the effect of the candies."

Then the portrait inclined his head to watch James and declared mischievously, savouring the reaction he was going to raise, "But I am perplexed, Potter. I thought that your actual language barrier could be an excellent excuse to avoid being examined in the next hour. After all, what better justification? Your nasty Potions professor played a trick on you, and you have plenty of witnesses to prove it."

A pause. A stunned look in his eyes, the boy considered the man in the frame, and...amazingly!...the man in the frame curled his lips in an amused smile, concluding suavely, "But perhaps I have misjudged you."

James finally brightened in incredulous understanding. With a cautious move, he grabbed two pills and hesitantly showed them to the portrait. Snape interpreted the unspoken question: two hours, which was exactly the time needed to the end of the morning lessons.

A bizarre elation once more flooded his chest. The man nodded at the boy, and after a moment of indecision, the boy swallowed the tablets. Something inconceivable had just happened, but Snape didn't seem to mind it at all. He only put a long, pale finger on his lips, clearly inviting the boy to keep the secret. Still incredulous, James nodded his agreement. Then, bowing his head in a silent greeting, he turned to leave, just in time to see a frowning Minerva McGonagall open the door.

"Good morning, Potter," she said curtly, eyes pointed at the portrait. Instinctively, the boy answered. A powerful roar echoed in the room, and the old witch froze, putting a hand on her heart.

"My... my goodness!" she exhaled. "What's the matter with you and the other little monsters I have just found walking in the corridors? Severus!" she exclaimed. At that tone, announcing a storm, James prudently disappeared.

"Minerva." The amused expression on Snape's face had changed into one of confusion. That childish look was so uncharacteristic of him that Minerva couldn't help a smile.

"So!" she said, her stern timbre softening in the special warmth she reserved for him. "It seems that your lessons are becoming really popular in this school, Severus. I have just met a group of very excited students going to their classes and telling the world how fantastic Potions can be."

Her eyes softened even more. "I'm very proud of you."

"Minerva..." Snape hesitated while he looked at the old witch. The headmistress looked extremely frail in the merciless light of the day. Her face was wrinkled and tired, her eyes strangely reddened. Instantly, Snape felt worried and remorseful again.

"I am very sorry for last night."

"Let's forget about it, Severus. It was my fault. I have been selfish. I would have liked to..." Suddenly, Minerva seemed to fumble for words without finding them. Her smile became painful to see.

"You must be patient with me," she concluded, lowering her head and looking even more vulnerable. "Sometimes old people lose their discernment, but eventually, life puts them in their place again."

"Minerva," Snape called for the third time, and his tone was now full of concern. "What is happening? Why are you so upset?"

The old witch bit her lips in evident anguish. "Nothing. Really, nothing. As I was telling you, life takes charge of putting things in order again."

She watched him, and a myriad little sparks lit in her eyes.

"Lucius Malfoy is dying." Her voice wavered dangerously. "It seems that his visit at Hogwarts has exacted a dreadful toll from a body that was already worn out. Yesterday, his family requested Scorpius to come home, as Lucius wanted to tell him goodbye. They have taken every possible precaution to physically shield the child. But psychologically, he came back completely devastated. The link between grandfather and grandson was evidently stronger than they supposed."

Tears began to slowly flow down her cheeks. "I had never imagined I would cry for Lucius. After all, he was a follower of the Dark."

Her lips began to tremble uncontrollably. "But... but whatever he was, whatever he has done, he has paid and paid abundantly. And now, his wife, alone again... Narcissa... Scorpius, poor child."

Her words became incoherent, and finally, Minerva ceded to emotion. Gasping sobs shook her body violently while Snape looked at her in helpless, desolate pity.

It was night, and the room was glowing, reflecting the silvery moonlight slanting through the great windows. Lost in melancholy reflections, Severus Snape stared at the walls with unseeing eyes, meditating on the events.

Lucius Malfoy's unpredictable tragedy...just in the moment he had rejoined his family...had stirred innumerable emotions in Snape's heart. But some of them were still beyond his understanding.

Lucius had been a friend. With him, Snape had shared a big part of his previous existence. But what were the real feelings the portrait felt for that peculiar friendship, now that he was living in a parallel universe? Did the word "friend" still have a meaning in a world of canvas and paint?

In a few days, perhaps in a few hours, Lucius would face the most transcending journey a human being could undertake, an experience that Snape had already left behind and of which he had only obscure memories: a black tunnel from which he had awakened as a portrait while an immense desperation had tightened his fibres, making his heart stiffen in denial.

And from there, a life of eternal contemplation had opened to him, his features and body fixed by paint in unalterable stillness.

But wasn't this condition better...oh! so much better...than the state of continual uncertainty that was torturing the living beings? Hadn't he reached a blessed quietude that was shielding him from the miserable, petty anguishes of a corporeal existence?

Again, his thoughts focused on Minerva. She had sobbed so desperately for the man who had been one of her most detested foes. And yet, Snape had had no means to soothe her grief, no arms to hold her tightly, no words to offer and calm the fears that he had perceived tormenting her spirit.

So, she had cried for Malfoy, but perhaps she had cried also for herself, for a life that was flowing so smoothly, yet so vacuously, linked to a chain of repetitive duties that kept her hands busy but her mind empty.

Wasn't Minerva even too similar to Severus? Oh, how right she had been in speaking of prisons! And how much more fearsome was the cage that trapped her, whose bars were going to open only to grant access to that dreadful passage!

So, Snape reflected, why was he desperately longing for such existence? Why?

The answer sprang out immediately from the depth of his soul, coming from the memories of the days in which he was alive. Because life, though filled with pain and anguish and sorrow, was the most wonderful manifestation of gifts and chances, the most splendid opportunity to love and to be loved.

Had he only been able to waste the opportunities he had been offered in his previous life? Was that the reason why he felt so powerfully attracted by the real world? Was he still searching for something that could fill that unbearable prickling void in his soul? Was there still something he must accomplish?

Or was the answer already laid before him, and he hadn't seen it?

For a very quick moment, Snape saw again young James Potter and his comically disconcerted expression when he had been offered...and by his most hated teacher!...the chance of escaping his lessons.

For a very quick moment, that powerful breath of life he had experienced in the morning came back to dilate his heart in an incredibly joyful sensation.

And it was right in that moment that Snape realised it, and the thought made him shiver in wonder and emotion: for the very first time, one of his spells had definitely broken the invisible barriers of his frame, reaching the real world.

Part XXIV

Chapter 24 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part XXIV

When the firsties arrived in the morning, Snape was disappointed, but not surprised, at not finding Scorpius amongst them. According to the Headmistress, the child had returned crushed from the visit to his family, and proud as only a Malfoy could be, he surely didn't want to expose his anguish to the morbid curiosity of the other students.

Once more, the image of a sobbing Minerva came back to Snape's mind. The portrait lowered his head under the intensity of that memory, and his eyes took on a pained expression. There was no difference before death: every human being was left alone to face it, and no rank or privileges could spare or lessen the fear and the pain of that dreadful passage.

Raising his head for a quick moment while preparing his potion, Albus Severus caught the change in Snape's mood and turned to check the room, trying to understand what was saddening his teacher so much. But there was nothing to be seen, and when the child looked back again, Snape's features had recovered their usual composure. The boy frowned in concern and continued to cast worried glances at the painting during the lesson.

The session went on smoothly, and when it ended, Albus Severus busied himself in several minor tasks, thus managing to stay behind. Then, as soon as the room was empty, he abandoned his acting and addressed the portrait with a confidence derived from their past interactions: "Anything wrong, sir?"

But Snape had sunk into a meditative mood, and his spirit was longing for solitude. That friendly intrusion somewhat irritated him and made him reply with a curt, "Nothing, Potter, if you exclude the minor detail of being dead in the world of the living."

Disconcerted, Albus Severus took a step back and lowered his head, not really knowing how to handle that assertion. But no other words came from the portrait, clearly lost in his musings. So, after a few moments spent in hopeful, but useless, waiting, the boy turned his shoulders and slowly crossed the room, still meditating on that puzzling reply. He had almost reached the door when he saw the doorknob rotate, and the heavy wooden panel seemed to open cautiously by itself; a circumspect Scorpius Malfoy peeked in but stopped in panic as soon as his eyes met his classmate's.

"What are you doing here, Malfoy?" Albus Severus inquired suspiciously, noticing that the other boy was hiding something against his chest.

"That's none of your business, Potter," Scorpius replied coldly, and the two boys looked at each other with a challenging glare. Abruptly awakened from his trance, Snape frowned in irritation. Everything in that scene reminded him unpleasantly of the many conflicts between Harry and Draco, and his Slytherin pride ignited.

"If you don't mind, Potter, I am the one who asks the questions here," he snapped. "Now, please, leave us alone."

Albus Severus' face wrinkled in surprise, and the child turned to look at the portrait with a wounded expression. But Scorpius had already rudely pushed him aside, a triumphant smile dancing on his lips. Defeated, the Gryffindor clenched his fists and left the room, closing the door a bit harder than was polite.

Silence fell again, and Scorpius' boldness suddenly seemed to evaporate as soon as he found himself alone with his teacher. Slowly, the boy went over to the frame, and with a hesitant move, he raised the thing he had lovingly held in his arms till that moment. Surprised, Snape saw a small metallic box.

As if realising his teacher's disconcertion, Scorpius placed the box on a desk and whispered, eyes reddening dangerously, "My grandpa sends this to you."

Tears began to flow down his cheeks, but the boy wiped them away ferociously and clicked a button on the side of the box. With a smooth movement, the lid opened, and a silvery radiance lit the room. Suspended in a luminous ray that flowed incessantly towards the ceiling, the image of Lucius Malfoy appeared to the astounded Snape.

The once powerful wizard was lying in a bed and looked extremely ill. His features were drained, and his expression revealed a mortal exhaustion. His head was resting on a pillow, and his body was enwrapped in covers that a feminine hand (*Narcissa?* Snape thought with a shiver) was continually adjusting.

"Severus, my friend...", Lucius' voice was feeble and uneven but was clearly audible in the immense silence of the room. The child stared with desolate eyes while his grandfather opened his hands in a pleading gesture.

"I don't know if you will listen to my words after the many spiteful accusations I cast against you when we met at Hogwarts. But I do hope and pray you will accord me this last chance. I deliver my message into Scorpius' hands. Please, do not send him away unheard."

The effort had been too much for that devastated organism. An excruciating pause followed while the man struggled for breath.

"Life is a harsh teacher, Severus," he finally went on, "and now that I'm facing death, I watch things with different eyes. I want to close my accounts and make amends for the many sufferings I have caused. I am here to ask for your forgiveness."

A choking cough interrupted the speech, and Snape felt fear and pain tighten his heart. But finally, obstinately, Lucius mastered his forces again.

"I have been unjust with you, Severus, because my pride needed a justification for the faults I had committed. But I was a fool in thinking to elude my doom. A sentence had been written for me since the moment I chose the wrong path so many years ago."

Lucius closed his eyes in exhaustion, and the little hand tenderly wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"I'm sorry, my friend. I suppose there is a lesson in all this, though I won't ever be able to put it into practice. But it's my destiny, and it must be fulfilled." The voice was becoming more and more indistinct, yet Snape could easily perceive the immense regret filling it. "Still, it's so saddening to leave my wife again."

"Lucius!" Narcissa's cry of pain reverberated in the column of light, making it vibrate violently.

For a moment, Lucius looked like his younger self, and his hand clasped his wife's with surprising strength. Then he ceded to his exhaustion and leaned back on the pillow, whispering slowly, "You have made the right choice, Severus. Blessed be you forever."

The light vanished abruptly, leaving Snape with a tightened throat. Curled under the frame, Scorpius was sobbing quietly, face in his hands and shoulders shaking lightly.

The portrait contemplated the boy for a very long moment, and when he spoke again, his timbre sounded unexpectedly harsh.

"Mr. Malfoy!"

Startled, the boy raised his head in panic. "Y-yes, sir?" he stammered, trying to steady his voice.

"This is no time for crying!" Snape affirmed; then he began to pace feverishly. "We must do something! I can't... I won't..."

A strange urge was compelling him. Suddenly, he stopped and turned to the child.

"I must see your grandfather," he ordered.

Bewildered, the boy widened his eyes. "But you are a painting! How will you...?"

"I will use your magic," Snape declared simply.

Scorpius watched him, agape. Then his eyes sparkled, and his features hardened in determination.

"What shall I do, Professor?" he asked.

Ten minutes later, Snape was flying, wrapped in a handkerchief tied to the claws of a majestic grey owl. Passing through the fabric, the stinging October wind was cruelly biting the fibres of the canvas in a silence broken only by the powerful movements of the wings.

Everything had happened so quickly! It had taken Scorpius only two tries to learn and cast the spell that had reduced a life-size portrait to a more manageable size. Then, carefully holding the painting in his hands...and Snape had felt a comforting warmth radiating from the boy's fingers...Scorpius had run to the Owlery, chosen a bird and sent it to his family with that precious load. There had not been time for second thoughts, nor for asking permission from Minerva. For the first time after his awakening, Snape had felt free and master of himself, and a violent emotion had filled his heart.

The whistle of the wind was mixing savagely with the roaring of the blood throbbing in his ears while he was swinging loosely in the air. What if Scorpius hadn't secured the package well? That would mean the end for Snape, and most importantly, for his mission. Yet there was no fear in his heart, only a ferocious determination and a growing

anxiety: was he already too late?

Finally, he felt the great bird slow down the rhythm of its wings. The owl was evidently gliding, and soon the change in the temperature advised Snape that he was inside a closed space. A house. *Malfoy Manor*, he thought, and a shiver shook him while again memories flooded uncontrollably into his mind. Then he heard an alarmed feminine voice.

"Look, an owl from the school and so soon! Oh dear, what could have happened?"

"Don't get agitated, please, Astoria," a calm, almost cold, voice answered. Its timbre had changed with adulthood, but Snape immediately recognised Draco, and an overwhelming nostalgia filled his heart again.

The wrapped picture gently hit against a wooden surface; the owl emitted a sharp cry and swayed, as if that wonderful creature of the sky was feeling uncomfortable on the earth. Two impatient hands fumbled with the fabric, and its soft whiteness opened to show the worried faces of Draco Malfoy and of his wife Astoria.

"Professor Snape!" the man reacted in astonishment.

"Professor Snape?" the woman repeated in utter surprise.

"Glad to see you, Astoria, Draco," Snape composedly replied; then he crossed his arms and watched the couple, concealing his curiosity under his usual ironical expression. He hadn't cared to investigate who his favourite Slytherin student had married. So the portrait was surprised and pleased to find that the youngest of the Greengrass sisters...a girl he had always considered much worthier than Pansy Parkinson...had been Draco's final choice.

But his reflections were soon interrupted. Astoria Malfoy, an elegant blonde woman with anguished eyes, was asking anxiously, "How is Scorpius, Professor? Is there any problem with my son?"

"The boy is fine," Draco declared firmly, exchanging a glance with Snape. "Professor Snape is here for a visit," the man continued with a meaningful expression, keeping his eyes on the portrait. "Please leave us alone."

Astoria opened her mouth with a request, then silenced by her husband's determined face, lowered her head with a sigh and left the room. In the meantime, Draco had raised the portrait in his hands, looking at it with cold, yet fascinated, attention.

"You haven't changed, Professor," he sneered. "Death is decidedly the perfect cure against aging."

"Unfortunately, a definitive one," Snape replied briefly, considering how his student, on the contrary, had grown old. Draco's blond hair had receded somewhat, which emphasized the pointed chin and the arrogant expression of his thin lips. The two men examined each other for some moments.

"Am I welcome in your house, Draco?" the portrait finally asked.

The man clenched his fists. "No, you aren't," he snapped angrily, "but I suppose I will be forced to accept you here. Didn't my father call you?"

"Yours is a wrong assumption," Snape replied imperturbably. "I came on my own accord with the help of your son."

The man darkened even more. "So? Are you here to torment us again with vain considerations? My father came back literally devastated from his visit to Hogwarts. I told him he was making a huge mistake, exposing himself and our family to scorn and criticism."

"I have a different opinion on this matter, Draco, but discussing it with you would only be a waste of time, I'm afraid. How is he?"

For the first time, Draco lowered his guard. "He is still lucid, but declining quickly. The mediwizards say that he has only a few days left. Perhaps only a few hours. They cannot tell."

"I want to see him," Snape ordered. Then his voice softened. "Please."

"What else would you want from him?" Draco exclaimed. "Weren't your words enough?"

"I came here to comfort him in this most fearful moment. After all, this is a step I have already undergone, and hopefully, my visit will help soothe his spirit."

Draco placed the picture on a table and crossed his arms. "What is all this concern about? Didn't you betray us all when you were alive? What kind of difference can your visit make now?"

"I'm sure that your father knows better. However, why don't you leave the decision to him?"

Rudely, Draco grabbed the portrait again. "Let's go ask him, then. But I advise you, Professor...don't try any of your dirty tricks, or I'll smash you into a thousand little pieces. And then I'll throw them into my fireplace."

"You know I didn't come here with a mean purpose. However, you are free to do whatever you think best. I am literally in your hands," Snape agreed softly. The man snorted, considered the painting for a long moment; finally, he began to walk.

Suspended in Draco's firm grip, Snape watched the corridors and the rooms opening before his eyes; suddenly, he was back in time, and the ghosts of his mind came to populate those empty spaces as if the pattern of their lives had never been interrupted.

"This is the salon where I used to meet your father when you were a child," the portrait unexpectedly noticed, and an immense nostalgia tightened his heart again. So many terrible events had happened in that house! And yet, it seemed that his mind could recall only the joyful and serene memories at the moment.

"And that is the room where you received your prefect's badge," Snape added quietly. "Lucius was so proud! I can still see the smile on his face."

Draco's fingers tightened convulsively around the picture. The man watched Snape angrily, but his eyes reddened, betraying his inner emotion. He blinked, trying to fight back the tears, and suddenly, he looked again like the child he had been, arrogant and vulnerable at the same time.

"Why are you telling me all these things?" he asked hoarsely. "To show me that you cared about us? About me?"

"You know I cared about you, Draco. But you didn't want to accept my help. How much pain I could have spared you if you had decided to trust me! I even begged you that night at Slughorn's party, don't you remember?" Snape's voice had grown more and more bitter.

Draco stopped abruptly. Surprised, the portrait noticed that the man was shaking slightly.

"No, Potter was the one you cared for, the one you protected, the one you defended," Draco replied accusingly. "And you still care about him; you are unfairly favouring his son. Scorpius told me everything about your private lessons. Have you got the nerve to deny it, Professor? Show me that your talent as a liar hasn't vanished."

His eyes locked with Snape's, and instinctively, the portrait opened his mind, welcoming the familiar force flooding into his brain. Yet this time he wasn't using it to pry into another mind, but to expose his soul in an unconditional offer.

Fragments of memories flowed and intersected so rapidly that both men went breathless with emotion. Shocked, Draco staggered back, and his face paled. There was fear

in his voice when he spoke again.

"How can a painting still perform Legilimency?" he gasped, watching Snape with a sort of terror. "Who are you, really? Are you really dead? Or have you been hiding somewhere in disguise?"

"No, Draco," Snape replied with infinite bitterness. "I'm dead, and I am only a portrait. Now, please, let me see your father."

The door opened silently and revealed a scene of heartbreaking tenderness. Lucius Malfoy was lying in his bed, exactly as in the message he had sent to Snape. Narcissa was sitting near him, holding his hand in hers. Her hair was as white as her husband's, and her face had a grave, drained expression. Yet she looked much more beautiful in that composed attitude than in the days in which she was the inaccessible lady of the manor. The presence of death was filling the air, and the only audible sounds were the slow, gasping breaths of a man struggling to survive.

Draco stopped respectfully under the frame of the door.

"Father," he announced, a bit embarrassed, "there is a... a visitor for you, if you'd like to see him."

Slowly, Narcissa turned to watch her son. "Who would ever think to come here?" she asked, a quiet, yet excruciating, resignation colouring her words. It was more than Snape could bear.

"It's me, Narcissa," he declared with a strangled voice. "Severus. Severus Snape."

An astonished silence followed, to which Lucius was the first to react with an explosion of energy unimaginable in such a shattered body. "Severus! Are you really here?"

Joy vibrated so intensely in that cry that Draco didn't dare say or do anything, except for crossing the room and positioning the little picture on the chest of drawers before the bed. Lucius followed every movement of his son in anxious expectation, until Draco muttered a counterspell, and the portrait went back to his real dimension.

"Severus," Lucius murmured, tears trickling slowly on his emaciated cheeks, "I am so happy to see you."

Speechless, Narcissa was staring at Snape in reverent wonder.

"How... how did you manage to come here?" she finally asked.

"It was Scorpius," Snape replied, looking at the couple and feeling his tongue stick to his palate in emotion. "He performed the reducing spell and instructed the owl. That boy will become a wizard as valiant as his grandfather before him."

Lucius shook his head. "I hope he will grow to be very different from me," he said bitterly.

"Lucius!" His wife scolded him tenderly, and instinctively, the man curled against her. All his movements were extremely cautious, as if they were causing him a great deal of pain. Narcissa smiled, a pale smile meant to be comforting. "You know how much Scorpius admires you."

"He should not," Lucius replied determinedly and raised his head to Snape, the rhythm of his breaths increasing gradually in the effort of speaking and of keeping that tiring position. "You will explain the truth to him, Severus, because his father doesn't know it. I have done my best to hide it from him, and now it's too late to change his beliefs."

His gaze searched for Draco, who had retired to a corner, arms folded and brows furrowed in resentful silence. Saddened, Lucius shook his head with that strange, rigid movement; then he sighed.

"And the truth is that I have always been wrong," he murmured.

Then, exhausted by the effort and by that painful admission of guilt, Lucius closed his eyes and rested his head in the lap of his wife. She put a hand on his forehead and gently smoothed his hair, smiling her tremulous smile.

The portrait contemplated that touching scene, and his throat closed in regret: Never had he experienced the bliss of being loved so totally and unconditionally! The girl he had worshipped had never returned his feelings, and her death...that he himself had caused...had locked the doors of his heart in perpetual denial; no other woman had been allowed to open them after her leaving! No hand had held his hand when he was feeling scared and lonely, no smile had comforted him after the tension of a demanding day, no arms had enfolded him during a night filled with nightmares, no lips had brushed against his in a promise of joys to come. His existence had been a continual renunciation, a sacrificial offering whose ashes had been dispersed by the wind of death.

But the man and the woman before him had shared their life in total accord and built a towering castle of their mutual love. Despite the mistakes they might have committed, despite the flaws they had abundantly demonstrated, each one of them had lived for the other, and they both had adored their only child. And now that perfect bond was to be broken.

"I'm so glad you came." Lucius interrupted Snape's meditations with a voice wavering in emotion. "This means that you have forgiven me. It will be easier to say goodbye."

"Lucius!" Narcissa paled, and her hand stilled on her husband's hair. "Don't speak like that! I won't let you go, not now that we are together again."

"I'm sorry I can't obey your wish, beloved," the man replied with growing difficulty. "But at least you will stay here and see our grandson become a man. And sometimes you will add your memories to Severus' and tell Scorpius about his grandpa."

Again, the man laboriously turned to look at Snape, his lips unsuccessfully trying to curl in a smile. "Soon it will be my turn to visit you in your rooms. Please keep me a good place, will you, Severus?"

Pained, the portrait could not answer, and worried at that silence, Lucius insisted tremblingly, "Will you?"

Snape closed his eyes. A scalpel cutting his flesh would have been less hurtful. Grief, anguish, affection, regret: a multitude of feelings invaded his soul until his heart rebelled violently against that unbearable pain.

"No!" he finally burst out savagely. Lucius flinched, Narcissa widened her eyes in shock, and Draco jerked up his head with a threatening glare.

"No," Snape repeated, panting in the effort of checking his emotions. "I agree with Narcissa. I just can't watch you go. There must be a potion that can cure you, and I will find it."

Lucius blinked, clearly disoriented, and watched his wife as if asking permission to believe that amazing announcement. She hesitated, and Snape understood that she was uncertain whether to disappoint her husband at once or offer him a hope in which she did not trust.

"You were an excellent potioneer, Severus," Narcissa finally said with the patient tone of those used to dealing with children.

"But now you are...", she could not use the terrible word 'dead' before her husband, so she paused, sighed and continued softly, "how would you manage to prepare a potion? And even if you did it, how could you send it out into the real world?"

The reassuring figure and smile of Marcello Bernardi appeared to Snape's mind. "I don't know how to do it," he replied, and an immense joy was reflected in his voice, "but

I know somebody who can give me an answer."

Narcissa stifled an exclamation, and her eyes sparkled in the anticipation of hope. Her arms enfolded her husband with possessive tenderness, like a lioness defending its cub.

"If you... if you are able to help Lucius, I will...", she stopped and gave a desperate little sob. What could she promise to a man who had already gone beyond human needs and temptations?

"Narcissa!" Lucius whispered and tried to free himself, but he was too weary to struggle effectively against the loving strength of her hold.

"You don't need to promise anything to me, Narcissa," Snape replied gently. "Just trust me... as you did in our previous life."

Draco lowered his head, and a blush appeared on his white face.

Reduced again to a more manageable size, Snape came back in Draco's hands, ready to be shipped. The portrait was torturing himself for not having thought of a solution before, for having lost time, for having possibly condemned his friend without a try. And in his anxiety to make amends, he was subjecting his carrier to a deluge of questions.

"Who has visited him till now?" he asked with an urgent tone. Time was passing so quickly! Every minute could change the course of an existence.

But Draco was still reluctant, still too upset, so Snape repeated his question in a calmer way. And finally a reply came.

"A French mediwizard, a promising Healer who is considered one of the most talented emerging specialists," the man declared; then he added bitterly, "And who has no connection with the English wizarding society."

Snape tightened his lips. The honour and reputation of his family had always been Draco's obsessions. How could he be still so narrow minded as to allow a prejudice to prevent his father from receiving the cures of a renowned institution like St. Mungo's?

"So, what did he say?" the portrait asked sharply, careless about concealing his irritation. Draco was reacting in the same uncooperative way he used to when he was a child, and Snape continued angrily, "Do you understand that every little piece of information can make a difference for your father?"

Draco stopped and watched the portrait pointedly. But when he spoke, his voice was hesitant, almost pleading.

"Do you really think you can help him? Do you really believe in your promise, or did you make it just to comfort him in his last hours?"

"I always keep my promises, Draco! And you should know it by now. This is a little bit harder, but I can manage it."

In spite of his confident tone, Snape felt a horrid sensation of panic. Yes, this time perhaps he had hazarded too much. But again, a cold determination pervaded him, and once more, he urged Draco to give the answers that were essential to his task.

"So, what did the Healer say?"

Draco sighed. "He said that father has contracted Stonicrucium, or Prisoner's Fever, a terrible infection that used to infest Azkaban in the ancient times. The germ has evidently survived in some of the oldest cells. As a 'privileged' treatment, my father had been confined in one of them, and the beast was probably lurking there."

Draco sighed again. "It took it a long time to claim its victim, the mediwizard said. Almost certainly, the germ grew more and more aggressive during the years spent in my father's body, and finally, it attacked. Descriptions in the ancient books say that the illness, on the contrary, spread rapidly. The course is very painful, as the body calcifies itself. Death comes slowly and agonizingly. In the past, when its characteristics were still unknown, it was feared so much that the keepers of Azkaban used to lock the prison, abandoning the prisoners to their fate."

Snape curled his lips in disgust, and the man continued his report wearily.

"It seems, however, that the last contagion had happened in 1525, when famous mediwizard Horatius Hobnook finally found a cure. But no trace has remained of that ancient remedy, and now there is obviously no time to search for it. Perhaps, if my father had been stronger... but his imprisonment has marked him too heavily, and therefore, we have no hope."

Draco clenched his fists and finally let out his pain.

"So, at the end, in spite of all that boasted clemency, they exacted his life! Fifteen years of absolute horror weren't enough!"

The man was shaking in indignation, yet he checked his feelings again, and his voice dropped to a disdainful tone.

"But I imagine that this means nothing to you. He was a follower of the Dark, so he deserved this end."

Snape had a bitter smile. "You forget that I, too, had been a follower of the Dark, and my end came along with my redemption. Does he know about his illness?"

Draco lowered his head in surrender.

"We haven't told him the truth. That would mean his final humiliation, and... and we haven't got the heart."

"So you have exposed your mother, your son, your whole family to this ghastly disease?" Snape was shocked.

"It is not as you may think, Professor. Stonicrucium has interesting characteristics. It is safe, even beneficial, for younger or stronger constitutions while it's extremely virulent for older people or for weakened ones, like the prisoners of Azkaban were. In spite of her thin appearance, my mother is a strong, healthy woman; besides, it would be impossible to separate her from my father."

"Does she know the truth?" Snape whispered. Draco nodded sadly, and they both went silent, each one lost in his thoughts.

The man kept walking till they reached the salon where the grey owl was patiently waiting. There he stopped and wiped his forehead with a nervous gesture. Something seemed to be still tormenting him, and finally Draco capitulated.

"Now you understand my need for secrecy. What will happen to my family if the contagion should diffuse? What will happen to us, if someone should realise where the infection stemmed from? My father had met so many of his old acquaintances when he returned to Hogwarts recently."

Feeling a cold terror invade his fibres, Snape stared at the man, an incredulous, helpless expression in his eyes.

"Do you realise what may happen?" he breathed.

Draco lowered his head and didn't answer.

Part XXV

Chapter 25 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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*All my gratitude to my beta **AmyLouise**. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers.*

Part XXV

The white softness wrapping Snape gently opened again, but this time he found himself in the Headmistress' office. Minerva McGonagall was staring at him, brows furrowed and an undecipherable expression on her face. Was that anger or worry? Instinctively, he crossed his arms over his chest in the rigid pose he used to strike when he felt challenged.

Silently, Minerva disentangled his miniaturized frame from the fabric and carefully put it on her desk. Her lips had tightened in a thin line, an alarming sign of her repressed tension.

The woman and the portrait locked their gazes, each one waiting for the other to speak. The silence became heavy.

"So, here you are," Minerva finally said. Incredulous, Snape felt astonishment and even awe in her tone rather than the scolding he was expecting. "Scorpius told me you had left, but I couldn't believe it. Did you really go and visit Lucius?"

"I did," he replied and braced himself for a discussion. But Minerva was still looking at him with eyes that were rapidly filling with tears.

"Oh, Severus," she sobbed, and disoriented again, he felt guilty for what he felt was released anxiety.

"I'm sorry," he murmured uncomfortably, "I should have advised you."

The Headmistress shook her head. "Don't you understand?" she asked, and a tremulous smile opened on her face. "You are beginning to break the walls of your prison."

He stiffened, trying to suppress the violent emotion he felt at those words. Their eyes met again, and he smiled wearily in return.

"All portraits can travel," he replied.

"But I have never seen one of them choose an owl to do it," she remarked. "Oh, Severus," she repeated, lifting her glasses to wipe her eyes. "I am so happy."

I am not, he thought while a mass of confused thoughts gathered in his mind again. Innumerable bitter reflections had arisen during his trip back to Hogwarts as he had begun to envisage the difficulties of the task he had so imprudently sworn to fulfil. How many obstacles were still in front of him!

The last words he had shared with Draco once more echoed in his brain: Draco, and the terrible responsibility he had so resentfully thrown on Snape's shoulders.

"Do you realise what may happen?" the portrait had asked severely, but Draco's eyes had become chillingly cold.

"Don't put the blame on me! The Ministry condemned my father to Azkaban. It's not my father's fault if he got infected there. He didn't ask to be locked in that cell. What they sowed, they reaped."

That insolent reply reminded Snape unpleasantly of another scene lost in the mist of time: a boy who was obstinately resisting the questions he was being asked while watching his teacher and Head of House with a defiant expression. Had twenty years actually passed since that night after Slughorn's party? Watching Draco, it seemed like only yesterday: same arrogance, same contempt, same foolish confidence.

The portrait reacted with irritation at the memory.

"Yet, Draco, you should understand what an infection may..."

"I don't care about the others! They never cared about us! Why should I worry about them?"

"They might accuse you of acting on purpose," Snape replied, impatient in the face of such obtuseness..

"They won't. I have taken my precautions."

"What do you mean by that?" the portrait asked, alarmed.

"The French mediwizard." A spark lit in Draco's eyes. "He was the only stranger to the family to know, and he has been thoroughly Obliviated. Nobody else has entered this house. And my elf has been properly instructed. No witnesses, no knowledge, no accusation."

"You have planned everything, I see, except my arrival," Snape commented disdainfully.

Draco curled his lips in a cruel smile. "You are not going to speak, Professor," he declared slowly, "because I'm not going to let you go back unless you swear you won't betray us."

"You can't ask this of me, Draco."

"Why not?" the man replied. Then, with sudden violence, his fist hit the table where the portrait had been placed, making the frame swing unsteadily.

"WHY NOT?" Draco repeated with rage. "You let so many people ruin themselves in order to protect just one precious life! I'm not asking you for the impossible. After all, you are a portrait. Human beings are not in your care."

A deep breath; then, in a calmer, dangerous voice, he said, "I'm going to smash you into pieces, Professor, if you don't swear here and now."

"Would you like me to also take an Unbreakable Vow?" Snape asked ironically.

"Just let my father die in peace! You asked if I realised what may happen. Well, did YOU realise? What about my mother, my wife, my son? Should our lives be definitely destroyed for a mistake we didn't commit?"

Draco clenched his hands in increasing fury.

"Just let my father die in peace," he repeated forcefully. "Then we will leave the country, and you'll be free to reveal the truth."

The portrait sighed. "You forgot, I promised to save him. I swore it to your mother, and I'll do everything in my power to keep my word."

"You really believe you can do something? You, a mere picture?" The contempt in Draco's voice and eyes was hard to stand. But immediately after, the man quickly took advantage of Snape's declaration.

"Well, then I challenge you! Find a remedy, and you will save my father and those he might have possibly infected. Otherwise, there is no solution. Whether you accuse us or not, they will all be condemned!"

"Severus? Are you listening? Is anything wrong with you?"

Abruptly brought back from his unpleasant memories, Snape studied Minerva's face...so wrinkled, so tired...and she returned his look with the fond smile she reserved for him.

"How is Lucius?" she asked. Swiftly, Snape averted his eyes. Great Merlin, not now! How could he answer that question without betraying Lucius, without alarming her, and above all, without lying? He needed time to weigh the situation, but time was running out so quickly in the world of humans!

He returned her question. "Did you see him during the Hogwarts celebration?"

"Oh, I saw him for just a few moments at the beginning of the feast. He looked very uncomfortable, but being a Malfoy, he hid it under his usual arrogant air," Minerva replied, almost merrily. Then her brows curled in a pensive expression, and her voice became slow and grave. "I remember I noticed how pale he looked. And old. Even older than I am, I thought."

Only a few moments. Snape repeated those words in his mind and relaxed. A very short exposure, so perhaps the danger of an infection had been avoided. But then, Minerva spoke again.

"I got to see him better later. I spent more than an hour with the members of the past Board of Governors, and Lucius was the most insistent of them all. He practically monopolised the whole discussion! At the end, the meeting had turned into a private conversation because, one by one, all the others left. Not very happy to be associated with him, I would say."

She paused, compassion clearly showing on her features.

"Lucius Malfoy," she mused, her eyes becoming sad again. "A man whose name meant power, and adulation, and riches."

With a sudden shiver, Snape reacted to the chilling horror with which he had listened to her story.

"Minerva," he interrupted her abruptly, an intolerable agitation running in his fibres, "I need to speak with Mr. Bernardi as soon as possible!"

"Ber... nardi?" She repeated that uncommon name uncertainly, evidently baffled by the switch in the conversation.

"The Italian painter you called to install my fax."

"Oh! Oh, yes, now I remember him. A fine young man."

Still surprised, she considered him with a worried look. "Is there anything you need from him? Has the trip perhaps damaged you?"

"I have a question for him," Snape replied curtly. "A very important question."

Old, sad, tired eyes watched him, suddenly alerted.

"I suppose you are not going to tell me, then." Her voice had become cold and practical, the suspicious voice he remembered so well from his final year as a Headmaster. Minerva looked pointedly at him, but he didn't lower his eyes.

"I will call him," she finally conceded.

The night passed in agonizing slowness. Back to his room and to his usual size, Snape paced in his frame while thousands of possibilities and objections surged, twirled and were discarded in a frantic examination. Now and then, he paused to look at the small number of books and parchments gathered on his bookshelves and sighed in exasperation.

He ought to find more materials, but how could he consult the much richer collection contained in the Hogwarts library? He yearned to perform an accurate search, but how could he ever hope to open and read the volumes that, at the moment, were his only source of information? He needed to speak with Marcello Bernardi as soon as possible; however, he couldn't ask the Italian artist to paint the entire Restricted Section for him.

Furthermore, even if Bernardi could help him in those practical tasks, there were still too many unknown factors to deal with, too many gaps to be filled. He had spent nineteen years in the somnolent quiet of an office: What had the other potioners discovered in the meantime? Teaching children and using old textbooks wasn't exactly the best way to keep oneself updated. He needed to ask other professionals, to create a staff of possible consultants, but without revealing to them the truth, and therefore probably hindering their efforts.

And all that work had to be done as soon as possible! Every moment could be the last one for Lucius' exhausted body. Snape finally sank in his chair and buried his face in his hands. How suffocating the bars of his cage were that night! And how demanding the choice that Draco had put on his shoulders!

"Destroy me, Draco, if you wish. But your action won't prevent the truth coming out, sooner or later. And then, how will you justify yourself? Are you going to make your son pay for misguided pride?"

"Your word or your existence, Professor!" the man had replied with cold determination.

A wand was lifted, and Snape smiled bitterly.

"I have already traded my soul for yours, Draco, in another existence. And you were happy to leave that decision to me, that night on the Astronomy tower."

The man froze. Then, with a sudden move, he threw the wand to the ground, exclaiming angrily with a strangled voice, "Will that memory always haunt my days?"

A tormented look in his eyes, Draco grabbed the frame. With jerky movements, as if he were fighting against himself, he took the handkerchief in which Snape had arrived and began to wrap it around the picture, declaring in broken sentences that matched his frantic gestures, "Go back. You are free. Go back to Hogwarts. Go back, before I regret my choice."

The fabric inexorably enveloped Snape in its muffling whiteness, yet he was still able to hear Draco add, "Our destinies are in your hands, Professor."

The words continued to linger in Snape's mind while the vision blurred and vanished away, leaving a biting pain in his heart. There was no hope of escaping that agony. Being a picture meant no dependence on physical needs like thirst or hunger, but for that same reason, it also excluded the soothing relief that sleep could offer to his troubled soul.

With an effort, the wizard raised his head again. Slowly, his hands tightened in determination.

Horatius Hobnook, a mediwizard living in the sixteenth century, had found a remedy for a horrible disease in spite of the empiric period he lived in.

Five centuries later, Severus Snape was willing to accept the challenge again and to be triumphant.

With a bit of hope.

With a bit of luck.

Part XXVI

Chapter 26 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part XXVI

"Mr. Longbottom." Snape nodded, acknowledging the entrance of the Herbology Professor. "Thank you for coming."

It was very early, but too impatient to wait, and with the help of his best scowl, the portrait had succeeded in convincing one of the elves to call Neville Longbottom in his private rooms. The man was still rubbing his eyes, but the expression on his round face was genuinely cordial.

"Professor Snape," Neville greeted, stifling a yawn. "I am glad to be of assistance, if possible. How can I help you this time?"

Snape hesitated, weighing his words.

"I need to collect a considerable amount of information from you, but this will require time, and unfortunately, my time is very limited."

He paused, and his face took on his usual cynical expression. It wasn't "his" time that was limited, but Lucius'.

"You seem to be a very busy man as well, hence I thought about booking your services in advance."

"You are lucky then, sir," the man said with a smile. "Today the students will go to Hogsmeade, so no lessons are scheduled, at least for me. Therefore, I have a whole morning to answer your questions."

That announcement took Snape by surprise, and suddenly, he remembered: yes, the trip to the town, so long awaited by the children, had been planned for that morning, but the date had evidently slipped from his mind. The news changed his plans considerably, and luckily, for the better. The portrait looked down at Longbottom with a benevolent frown.

"In this case, I will be happy to have a talk with you as soon as you have had your breakfast," he replied.

"I'm not hungry, Professor," Neville offered. "And, as I said, I am happy to be of help."

Snape felt uncomfortable. Though he was exempted from those irrelevant human needs, the memories of his previous life were strong enough to let him understand that only curiosity could prevent the man under his frame to forgo enjoying the rich food waiting for him. Yet the situation was a highly suitable one, so he folded his arms and disguised uneasiness under his usual disdainful tone.

"I was wondering, Mr. Longbottom, if there is any new beneficial plant or botanical extract that has been discovered in the last few years of whose qualities I am obviously unaware. Given that you are teaching this subject, I suppose that it won't be difficult for you to recall those names. I hope your job has sharpened your abysmal memory."

Neville looked surprised, and his right brow lifted. Sarcasm aside, the question didn't justify such a pressing call at that early hour of the morning, and Snape was only too conscious of the thoughts whirling in his interlocutor's mind, but he had no choice. Time was of the essence, and he couldn't waste it by playing at riddles.

In the meantime, the man had recovered his composure and gently replied, "Although my memory has improved, you should give me time to think about it properly, Professor. I suppose you don't really expect me to recite you a list of names by heart. Perhaps you should tell me exactly what you are looking for."

His tone revealed his perplexity...even worse, his doubts. Coming from Longbottom, that weird perceptiveness irritated Snape, and once more, he cursed the helplessness that forced him to depend on somebody else.

"I am following a special research," he began vaguely. "But, much to my chagrin, I have realised that the books I have been supplied are just school texts, and consequently, incomplete. Therefore, I thought that it would be simpler for me to consult directly with an expert and then ask the Headmistress for specific additions to my library."

Neville nodded his assent and said quietly, "May I know the subject of your research, sir? It would greatly help me to restrict the choice of the elements to include."

Snape felt cornered. Suddenly, he realised the extent of his task, and a wave of discouragement invaded his fibres.

"I need to know if there are plants that can fight degeneration of body tissues," he finally muttered reluctantly.

This time Neville didn't look surprised, but rather, on his guard. "That's what they are doing at the moment in St. Mungo's, Professor."

Fear chilled Snape's heart. "In... St. Mungo's?" he repeated hesitantly.

Neville's eyes didn't leave the picture.

"I went visiting my parents two days ago and found the hospital in great ferment. It seems that lately they have admitted several patients whose body functions are slowly degenerating. The most astounding symptom that they present is a sort of "calcification" of tissues, something that mediwizards have never experienced before. So, at the moment, practically the whole staff is researching a cause... and a cure."

The man tilted his head, looking piercingly at the portrait.

"A surprising coincidence, don't you think?"

Snape went suddenly breathless. The infection had begun its horrible march. His worst fears had become true; now he was forced to make the decision he had hoped he would never be requested to make.

Under the frame, Neville was studying the picture, arms crossed and a strange light in his eyes.

"Why don't you tell me the truth?" he suggested quietly.

Longbottom left a few minutes after, and once more, a haunting silence filled the room. Snape closed his eyes, feeling despair invade his heart. Worriedly, he examined what had been said while his hands opened and closed unconsciously, following the rhythms of his heartbeats.

He hadn't replied to Neville. At the last moment, his feelings had stopped him, and the debate with his conscience was still going on, lacerating his soul. The heartbreaking image of Narcissa holding Lucius' head so tenderly in her lap had frozen the words on his lips and weakened his intentions to reveal the truth.

So, exactly as he had done with Minerva, he had twisted his sentences and built a castle to enclose his secret, trying at the same time to extract as much information as possible from his interlocutor. Finally, in the effort to find a solution, he had postponed his decision, asking Neville to come back later. Longbottom had been clearly disappointed. His trustful smile had changed into a frown, and only his innate respect...and probably the hope of receiving a reply...had prevented the man from a harsh discussion.

But now panic was strangling Snape. How could he deny his knowledge to the mediwizards? How could he delay their research when, by simply uttering a name, he could offer them the answer? How could he condemn those infected people and prevent medical staff...much better trained and equipped than he was...from putting all their resources to work?

And yet, something was rebelling inside him. There should be a way to spread the news without involving Lucius...

But Snape no longer had the time to analyse his thoughts. A soft noise of approaching steps announced the arrival of his second visitor.

Marcello Bernardi walked in and went to greet Snape with a charming smile.

"Professor!" he exclaimed joyfully and continued with his most flourished eloquence, "in my country, we say that friends must meet again. So, it's a pleasure for me to be back at Hogwarts, and I can only hope you might consider me a friend. The Headmistress said that you have a very important question and that you have asked specifically for me. I'm honoured by your preference."

"The honour is mine," Snape replied briefly, studying the man with a scowl. His shy nature always felt uneasy at those emotional statements so openly displayed. "And I actually have an important question."

He paused, searching for words. But the horror of his situation had somehow slowed down his reactions. During his visit to Lucius, he had forgotten that he was a picture because the feelings that had been flowing so forcefully in his veins had annihilated every other consideration. But now anguish was enveloping him in a suffocating web, and frustration was rising to intolerable levels. So, he went straight to the point.

"Would it be possible to transfer a painted object from a picture to the real world?"

He had tried to control his voice and to pose the question in a calm, almost detached tone. Bernardi widened his eyes.

"I see. You are beginning to enjoy the possibilities offered by your fax machine," he joked, yet his expression became extremely cautious.

"Why do you ask?" he enquired, and though he had tried to be as detached as the portrait, his voice sounded unexpectedly stern, in surprising contrast to the light-hearted tone he had used till that moment.

"I am the one who posed the question first, and I would like to be answered," Snape replied, still simulating a calm he didn't absolutely feel. "I suppose I am entitled to receive an explanation, considering that this is your work, and that I am a painting. So: would it be possible to send out... let's say a quill, a book... or perhaps a potion?"

Bernardi breathed slowly. The eyes of the two men met in a long, circumspect gaze that broke into a wary smile.

"A potion, you said, Professor?" Bernardi finally replied, and he sighed, crossing his arms.

"It won't be nice to explain," he warned uncomfortably. But the portrait gave a disdainful nod, so the painter continued resignedly. "The real world and the painted world are separated. Definitely divided. The life a portrait is living is only a simulation."

He paused, and his eyes seemed to apologise for the brutality of his words. "I'm sorry. I know it's cruel. But the boundaries between the two kingdoms have been clearly established, and there is no way to circumvent them...with few exceptions. Your fax is one of them, for instance, and it required great magical skills to manage its connection. This is why your humble servant was called."

He bowed jokingly, but there was no happiness on his face.

"As you have seen, painters can link a real object to a painted one that is its perfect copy. But we are not allowed to do the reverse. This is why I wouldn't be in the position to take out your... potion," and a strange smile curled his lips at the reiteration of that word. "It would exist only in your frame because it has been created there."

He raised a hand to prevent objections. "In other words, I can paint objects that are copies of those existing in this world and then link them to their originals, but I can't do the opposite. If your library contains the same books that your students have in this classroom, it's because those books exist in this world. I can, of course, create and paint fantasy creatures or objects, but that is all the more reason why they will exist only in your world. The rules are very strict."

"Rules can be broken," Snape whispered with desperate intensity.

Bernardi looked at him in utter amazement.

"Merlin's beard!" he murmured. "Would you be one of the few..."

He stopped abruptly, and a mischievous grin opened on his face.

"Yes," he admitted calmly, "rules can be broken. Only sometimes, and in very rare, exceptional circumstances. But not by me. What you would like to do requires a Maestro Sommo, a Supreme Master Painter, a position that very few of us achieve, and that I can hope to reach only in... let's see, no less than 40 years. If you are willing to wait..."

The portrait took a deep breath. The man was clearly sympathetic, so Snape prepared himself to struggle and grab every possible advantage.

"Then perhaps you can't," he conceded, "but what about another..."

"I know what you mean," Bernardi interrupted him. "But in England there is none. You can only find somebody in Italy."

His tone became wary and low, as if confiding a secret. "Very few know about this, but my grandfather is one of them."

He paused, embarrassed for what could be interpreted as boasting, then continued eagerly. "Yet my grandfather wouldn't agree to help you... unless you'd give him extremely forceful reasons. The magic required for such powerful spells can destroy a wizard."

Snape lowered his head in frustration. Too late. He was too late. He had no time. He had no potion. He had no hope. Had he been too hasty in making promises? Was he going to disappoint Narcissa and Lucius and Scorpius as he had done with so many other people in his previous life? He buried his face in his hands in an unguarded movement, feeling too miserable to worry about his visitor.

Bernardi was touched by that silent desperation.

"Professor, please," he coughed discreetly. "Why don't you ask my fellow and brother, Professor Zabini, to prepare a potion according to your instructions? I know he is a competent enough potioneer..."

The painter seemed to hesitate, then he added in a rush, as if he were afraid to say too much, "And now he has the support of our Corporation."

"Fellow and brother?" Snape raised his head with a blank expression in his eyes.

"I can't reveal anything more," the man replied firmly, but a meaningful smile shaped his lips again, and he watched Snape with a hopeful look, as if trying to suggest something to him.

Silence fell once more while Bernardi waited for a reaction, chewing his lower lip in expectation. But the portrait was lost in remoteness, and it took him several moments to realise that the painter was still looking up in anxious expectation.

"Thank you, Mr. Bernardi," Snape finally said and lowered his head again. No more words or gestures came after that declaration, so feeling depressed, the man wrapped himself in his cloak.

"I wish you all the luck you deserve," he greeted, his voice softening in compassion. Then, with a last regretful glance, the painter bowed and left.

Alone again, Snape closed his eyes and faced his soul and his increasing remorse.

Arrogant. He had been arrogant, and in his arrogance, he had forgotten that he was only a man. Even worse, he had forgotten that he was only a picture, not entitled to take his place in the world of real beings. How stupidly confident he had been in believing he could break the bonds that kept him locked in his tight frame! How terribly imprudent in raising hopes that he would never be able to fulfil!

Narcissa's eyes mutely accused him, and he lowered his head in defeat. Proud. He had been too proud, and now his pride and his vain ambitions had been turned into ashes. He should have accepted his limits. He shouldn't have tried to change his destiny. Time was passing by, and every minute could be the end of a human life. He could not avoid his responsibilities any longer. He would call Longbottom immediately. Even more miserably, he would call Minerva and tell her the truth. And then, one of those two people...living beings, not insignificant helpless paintings!...would have to advise St. Mungo's on his behalf, and definitely condemn Draco and his family to shame...

Desolation sat powerfully in his stomach, and a bitter, acrid taste filled his mouth. Picture... He was only a picture...

And then, he widened his eyes. Of course! He was a picture! And a stunning, blazing idea hit him with the force of a Bludger. Suddenly, he saw how his being a painting could become an unexpected chance that might allow him to find opportunities usually denied to living beings. He shivered in excitement, savouring the flux of energy rippling down his fibres. A picture. Why hadn't he taken this option into consideration? It was so disconcertingly simple!

"Albus," Snape called. "Albus! ALBUS!!!"

Quickly, he began to move from painting to painting, in frantic search of the late Headmaster. But the exasperating old man was, of course, nowhere to be found, as was usual when he was most needed, so Snape doubled his efforts. The intensity of his calls made many of the ancient portraits turn their heads in scandalised indignation.

"Yes, Severus," a mild old voice finally replied. "Are you really looking for me? Should I assume that we have finally come to an armistice?"

Snape pushed out his bottom lip in his characteristic disgusted pout; then, crossing his arms, he entered the frame in which Dumbledore was waiting.

"I have no time for jokes now, Albus. Have you ever heard of a mediwizard called Horatius Hobnook?"

"Should I have?" Albus smiled his irritating smile. "Perhaps you took me for Miss Granger, but I don't have her elephantine memory. However, the name seems vaguely

familiar."

"Try to remember, then!" Snape urged him vehemently. "I need to know if there is a picture of him. Or of his house. Or of his lab. Whatever may concern him. You must have spoken with so many portraits over the years! Is there a way to learn something...and quickly?"

"The simplest way, my boy. I will ask the Population." Dumbledore smiled and his eyes twinkled merrily.

"Who?" Snape asked baffled.

"The portraits themselves. This is how we call ourselves in Hogwarts. Would that suit you?"

"Yes, it would be most appreciated," Snape murmured. Suddenly, he felt exhausted.

"As your friend was saying, I'm honoured." Dumbledore was watching him closely. "I suppose you are looking for information to help Lucius."

Snape froze and turned to look accusingly at his old mentor.

"I thought I had warned you not to meddle!" he growled through gritted teeth.

Now Dumbledore's eyes weren't benevolent anymore. "What kind of illness does he have, exactly?"

"Don't ask," Snape replied rudely.

"Are you sure I shouldn't insist, Severus?"

"Don't. Ask."

Albus shook his head and considered Snape for a very long moment. Then he turned slowly and eventually left with a deep sigh.

With another sigh, Snape closed his eyes and lowered his head. It was time to call Longbottom and ask for his help and understanding. But now a new hope, faint yet incredible, was warming his heart. A battle was going to be fought, and he intended to be on the very front line right until the last moment.

A/N: Of course, what Marcello Bernardi says to Snape about rules in the pictures' world and the word "Population" referred to Hogwarts' portraits are my personal inventions.

Part XXVII

Chapter 27 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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*All my gratitude to my beta **AmyLouise**. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers.*

Part XXVII

Neville Longbottom stood once more under the frame, arms folded over his chest and eyes narrowed in concentration. In that rigid posture, lips tightened in a concerned expression, he had listened in silence to what Snape was reluctantly exposing. The portrait watched the figure standing so straight before him and thought that, indeed, a bizarre reversal of roles had just happened. The timid, clumsy child he had scolded so many times in his previous life had grown into a stout man whose keen gaze was making Snape feel very uncomfortable.

"You should have spoken immediately. I thought you trusted me," Longbottom finally said, shaking his head. "Your intention to find a remedy does you credit, but unfortunately..."

"... I'm only a portrait," Snape bitterly continued, completing the sentence. A bit embarrassed, Neville nodded and lowered his eyes for a moment. Then, he looked at Snape again, and his expression hardened. He cleared his voice.

"What you told us about this infection is really frightening, Professor. Are you sure that no documents about the cure are available?"

Snape nodded with a deep sigh. He hadn't said a word about Lucius Malfoy, but Lucius aside, he hadn't omitted any other information. So he was surprised to see that Longbottom hadn't already thought of a connection between the illness and the people who had been incarcerated in Azkaban. But perhaps Longbottom was only keeping his considerations to himself...

And then a new idea suddenly hit Snape: it was possible that somebody else amongst the patients in St. Mungo's had been a prisoner. In that case, Lucius' responsibility would be greatly reduced... But on the other hand, the chances of a vaster diffusion would be definitely increased. The portrait felt a chilling fear run in his fibres while dozens of frightful possibilities crossed his mind.

In the meantime, Longbottom had unpredictably declared, "Now that everything is clear, I would like to thank you, Professor."

Snape made a surprised gesture. To be thanked was the last thing he had expected, but Neville was sincere in his assertion and explained why immediately after.

"Living in St. Mungo's, my parents could easily get this infection...my mother in particular, as her health has always been poor. I'll go to the hospital right away, and I'll talk with the medical staff."

He paused and watched Snape intently. "As you asked, I won't reveal the source of my information, but I will take all the responsibility...and therefore the acknowledgment...for this discovery."

Doubt tinged his voice. "Still sure that this is what you really want? No credit, no merit?"

Again, Snape nodded in silence, feeling horribly guilty. He had thought he could find a cure by himself...he, a mere picture!...and now his arrogance would be punished. Soon all hell would break loose: Malfoy Manor would be investigated, the truth would be discovered, and Lucius would spend the last moments of his life with a new, even more atrocious suffering added to his physical pains. The portrait clenched his fists in helplessness. Was he perpetually condemned to betray those who had trusted him?

In the meantime, unaware of those grim thoughts, Neville had inclined his head to watch the small figure that had waited patiently at his side, and that hadn't uttered a word till that moment. His voice softened in affection and concern.

"I'm sure that Professor McGonagall would gladly join me in this announcement; nevertheless, I would not recommend she visit St. Mungo's now, right in the middle of this dreadful epidemic."

Minerva McGonagall silently shook her head. She was sitting on a chair, and Neville was standing close to her, towering protectively over her curled figure. The old woman was looking even more fragile in that position, and her face was a chalky shade. Too high above her to notice her expression, Neville concluded his speech, expressing his opinion more like a nephew than an employee.

"So, Professor McGonagall will stay here. I'm sure we all agree on this." Again, his gaze enfolded the old witch in an affectionate glance. Then his eyes narrowed. "However, Professor Snape, there is still one thing I would like to understand. You have given us very precious information, and of course, we are very grateful... Yet, there is still one piece missing to the puzzle. And to me, that lonely piece is extremely important."

Snape stiffened, waiting for the worst. Which happened immediately.

"How did you get to know?" Neville simply asked, and his round face took on an incongruously severe expression.

A thick, silent pause followed.

"I can't answer this question," Snape finally replied with an effort. "I am bound to a promise, and..."

"It doesn't matter, Severus!" Minerva cut him off, a spark in her eyes. "There is no need to break any of your oaths; your words have only confirmed what I already suspected."

The portrait paled, and Neville turned to watch the headmistress in surprise.

"Old people are very perceptive," the witch explained with an ironic smile. Then, keeping her gaze on the shocked man in the portrait, she ordered, "Please leave us alone, Neville. I will talk to you in a few minutes; wait for me before leaving for the hospital."

Alarmed at the implications that the use of his given name seemed to suggest, Neville hesitated, studying the different expressions of his two companions. Then, in a few measured steps, he left the room. Slowly, Minerva got to her feet.

"So, this is why you were so reluctant to speak yesterday?" She asked quietly. "Did you want to protect Lucius? It couldn't be otherwise, after your surprising trip and the even more surprising words we exchanged on your return."

Defeated, Snape lowered his head. Now the folly of his actions was shining in all its glory before his eyes. In the end, he had behaved as inconsiderately as he had accused Draco of doing, as they both had acted in the name of laudable, but misguided, feelings. How could Minerva still believe him? Why wasn't she hexing him out of her sight?

As if perceiving these questions, Minerva watched the crushed man for a long moment. Her voice became a whisper.

"Were you ready to sacrifice all those infected people in the name of your friendship? I imagine a human life must seem irrelevant to a painting whose colours have been created to last for centuries."

Instantly, Snape jerked up his head and tried to speak, a desperate expression on his face, but she silenced him with a gesture.

"No, you don't need to excuse yourself. I know you were worried, at least about me. You asked if I had met Lucius at the feast, and I saw panic in your eyes. Still, you didn't say a word."

She paused and let her words sink into him like a stab. "Your silence could condemn an entire world, Muggles included. Did you realise what you were doing, Severus?"

His heart twisted in pain.

"No!" He finally cried, and as always, the tumult of his feelings made him inarticulate. "I wasn't going to... I wanted to help! I'm trying to help! This is why I asked for Bernardi... because I wanted to..."

He trailed off under her compassionate gaze.

"I'm sure you had your reasons, Severus," she murmured. "I can only pray that your plans may be successful, whatever they are." She took a deep breath. "And now, I think it's my turn to thank you for your information."

An unnatural silence followed those words while Snape watched the old woman in confusion. Slowly, she raised a hand, as she used to do when she wanted to touch his frame. But this time, strangely, she kept it lifted.

"You see," she whispered with a bizarre, tremulous smile, "I had begun to wonder what was happening to me... and finally, I've received an answer."

With mute, immense horror, Snape saw that three of her fingers had become white and rigid. Straightening herself with touching dignity, Minerva stared back at him.

"I think that I will have to make that trip to St. Mungo's, after all," she declared lightly. A tear trickled down on her cheek. She wiped it away with a quick gesture and spoke, her voice firm again, though heavy with emotion.

"I'll miss you, Severus. But I'll wait in hope. Whatever happens, I know we will meet again."

It was late afternoon, and the weather was cold. Looking out of the window, Snape noticed that snowflakes had started to fall in light, erratic carousels. Winter was arriving earlier that year, he considered absentmindedly... And then, unexpectedly, a startling noise awakened him from his concentration. The children had come back from their trip to Hogsmeade, and Snape could hear their happy laughter and voices while they swarmed in the corridors.

Suddenly, his sadness and desolation felt even more unbearable. That anguishing wait was corroding his fibres. What was happening at the hospital? He prayed that his information would help them find a remedy soon. Five centuries had passed from the last infection, so the mediwizards MUST have improved their spells in the meantime! How stupid he had been, thinking he could do everything by himself...

His mind relived the sufferings of those last hours. First, it had been Lucius. Now Minerva. His friends, the living memories of his past, his ties with the real world... Were they going to join him in that surrogate existence of paint and canvas? And then, who would be left?

As if answering his question, a knock sounded at the door, and Scorpius came in hesitantly.

"Good evening, sir," he greeted.

"Good evening, Mr. Malfoy," Snape replied briefly. Seeing that child deepened his anguish, so he averted his eyes.

Scorpius, too, seemed embarrassed. He was clearly hoping for news. Or reassurance. Or solace. But Snape was too worried himself to offer words of comfort, so they both stared at each other in silence.

"Did you see my grandfather?" the boy finally asked. His cheeks were red and his eyes shiny, yet the child didn't seem to have enjoyed the trip to Hogsmeade much.

"Thank you for your help, Mr. Malfoy," Snape answered kindly, but with a tone that didn't allow replies. "Your grandfather and I are very grateful. Without your assistance, our encounter would have never been possible."

Scorpius swallowed and tried again. "But now you... you will..."

Snape smiled bitterly, understanding the unspoken question.

"I'm doing my best, Mr. Malfoy," he replied, and thought that, yes, he had indeed done his best.

Scorpius lowered his head at those silencing words.

"Thank you very much, sir," he whispered, and slowly, he went out.

Once more, Snape was alone with his remorse, but his sorrowful solitude didn't last long because, only a few seconds later, the door opened again.

"Hello, Professor."

Albus Severus sat at the desk that was his workbench during Potions classes. He placed a bunch of little coloured boxes before him...obviously sweets from Honeydukes...and looked up at his mentor.

"Were you speaking with Scorpius Malfoy?" he inquired, tilting his head to watch better.

"Yes," Snape replied laconically. A bit of curiosity from the boy was understandable; it was the second time that Albus Severus and Scorpius had crossed paths in that room. But the portrait wasn't in the mood for a chat, so after that monosyllable, he frowned and went immediately silent.

The boy didn't seem to notice.

"Do you... do you like him?" The question sounded suspiciously nonchalant.

Snape shrugged impatiently. "I have known his family for a very long time. His grandfather was a friend of mine, and I taught Scorpius' father along with yours."

Albus Severus fiddled with the cartons on his desk.

"Dad told me that the Malfoys were followers of the dark side," he whispered. "They had the Dark Mark on their arms and were proud of it. Scorpius' father even tried to kill uncle Albus..."

Again, Snape smiled his bitter smile. "As you said, *hetried*. Actually, *I* did it."

The boy blushed in confusion. In his haste, he evidently hadn't considered how the story had ended. "Sorry, sir. I... I didn't want... I mean... I... well, I'm sorry."

A long pause of embarrassed silence followed. Then, when Albus Severus judged that enough time had passed, he mustered his courage again and tried timidly, "May I ask you a question?"

Snape sighed. "Has a refusal ever stopped you?" he replied.

The boy smiled nervously and seemed to ponder whether that answer could be considered as an authorization. The response must have been positive because he stubbornly went on. "The two old Malfoys were Death Eaters, yet his wife saved my Dad from the Dark Lord during the last battle."

"Did she?" In spite of his indifferent tone, Snape thought that far too many events had been lost to him. He would have liked to know more. Wasn't it odd that he should be forced to ask a child who wasn't even born when such relevant acts had happened? However, now was not the time for an investigation or a discussion; that conversation needed to be interrupted as soon as possible. But in the meantime, absolutely not discouraged by that apathy, the boy continued impatiently.

"And Scorpius's father pretended he had not recognized my Dad when he was taken prisoner with Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione in Malfoy Manor. That probably helped them to gain time and escape."

"Did he?" This time Snape knew what had happened, though he had forgotten it. *Draco.Draco*. A confused mix of Good and Bad, with a slight prevalence of Good... at least, till now.

"My Dad told me this!" Albus Severus almost shouted, confused at that disconcerting lack of reaction.

"I see." Snape sighed again. "So, your question?"

"How was all that possible? I mean, if they were Death Eaters, why did they act like that?" The boy waited, eyes wide, and Snape felt himself sink again into memories. But when he spoke, it was not about Malfoys.

"Because no one is completely bad. Because sometimes there is a light that shows us the precipice over which we are about to fall. Because mercy is granted to every man and woman willing to accept it."

"Accept?" The boy narrowed his eyes in the effort of understanding. "I thought that mercy was granted only to those who had repented."

"Sometimes it takes more courage to surrender than to keep fighting."

Albus Severus mulled over these mysterious words for some minutes. Then he raised his eyes again.

"I saw Scorpius with his grandpa at the feast. He looked... I mean, his grandpa looked very tired, as if he were sick. And he had such an arrogant air when speaking with other people! But when he talked to Scorpius, he looked different. He looked... kind. I liked it. Scorpius is lucky. It must be wonderful to have a real grandpa."

Soon he won't have a grandpa anymore, Snape thought. The boy swung unsteadily on his chair, wrapping his arms around his knees as he used to do when he was meditating. The room became darker, and the wind began to howl outside the window. Albus Severus raised his head again and spoke softly.

"We have been at Hogsmeade, today, sir. It was the first time I went there, and I liked it a lot."

His eyes became thoughtful.

"I wish you could go out of your picture, Professor."

It was almost night when Neville came back from the hospital. The man entered the room and curtly greeted Snape with two words. "It's done."

"Minerva?" Snape asked anxiously.

Neville shook his head. "They kept her there," he whispered.

Snape didn't dare ask for more, and the man left immediately after. The portrait felt an acute pain. The truth had been divulged, but would truth really make a difference to the Healers in St. Mungo's? Now they knew what the illness was and how it developed, but a remedy had still to be found, and Snape didn't even want to think what could happen if they failed in their task!

He was still looking blankly at the walls when he heard a well-known old voice.

"I think we have an answer, Severus. May I introduce Cornelia Merryweather to you?"

Smiling his usual irritating, benevolent smile, Albus Dumbledore entered the picture. An unknown girl was walking at his side, and for a moment, Snape felt a pang in his heart. With that long, beautiful red hair, the girl looked extraordinarily similar to Lily. But she was dressed in antiquated clothes, and her astonishing pale eyes were shining with an intensity that Lily's eyes had never possessed. He felt overwhelmed.

"Severus Snape?" she said. Her voice was calm and remote, as if coming from another universe. "I see you are confused. Perhaps Albus should have called me by my maiden name. I'm Cornelia Hobnook, the only daughter of Horatius Hobnook."

Taken by surprise, Snape watched her for a moment, and then he instinctively bowed. It came naturally to him to offer such a sign of respect, though the girl looked very young. Cornelia didn't stop his gesture but looked at him with her peculiar eyes. There was something familiar in that gaze, Snape thought, feeling positively awed. There was something... something crazy...

As if she had perceived his thoughts, the girl gave a nice little laugh and said quietly, "Yes, Luna Lovegood is one of my great-great-grand-nieces. Every portrait in the Ravenclaw tower said that her eyes have an astounding resemblance to mine. Do you think that too?"

Disconcerted, Snape dared watch her in the deep of her pale irises.

"How could you know...?" he began, then he immediately apologised. "Forgive me, Madam Merryweather".

She nodded. "You can call me Cornelia, Severus Snape. And no, I'm not a Seer."

He looked even more confused. She watched him, and for the first time, a mischievous smile crossed her face.

"I can easily read your mind, Severus Snape," Cornelia explained and warned him at the same time. Then she turned grave again. "But I won't do it any more. What I have seen, I've liked."

"Th-thank you, Cornelia," the astounded wizard stammered, feeling a strange emotion enfold his heart. The girl looked so young, yet she radiated an ancient, undefined power. He stared at her in silence.

"Perhaps it's better if I leave you now," Dumbledore intervened. Strangely, he didn't look at ease. He was considering Snape and Cornelia with a sort of envy. His eyes seemed to plead for her attention, but she replied without looking at him, "Thank you for leading me here, Albus."

The old man's lips tightened, and he seemed to struggle with himself. "The pleasure is mine," he finally muttered uncharacteristically and lowered his head before leaving.

"He is not happy," Cornelia murmured as soon as Dumbledore had gone too far away to hear. "But there is nothing I can do to relieve him."

At the wondering look of his companion, the girl explained, "Albus, too, is one of my great-great-grandnephews. I have many great-great-grandchildren in the wizarding world. My descendants belong to many of the most important wizarding families."

It should have been a happy statement, yet Snape noticed that there was no joy in her eyes when she said those words.

They automatically began to walk, entering one of the views of Hogwarts hanging on the walls. It displayed a wonderful view of the hills and the lake while showing the castle far away in the background. It felt strange to be admiring the castle from outside while they were still inside it, Snape thought. Finally, they stopped by the lake. The water was moving incessantly, and murmuring little waves came to lap against the shore.

Absentmindedly, Cornelia contemplated the sight then spoke quietly. "Albus told me that you want to know if there is something left of my father. A picture of him, or of his house. I'm sorry to tell you that there is none. I'm the only picture available in his family, so if you were looking for something specific, you will have to ask me."

She turned to watch him with her enigmatic smile. "But I don't know if I will answer you. Now speak, and try to be convincing."

Challenged by her teasing tone, Snape considered the girl. He hadn't had a chance to say a word till that moment; he had been too impressed to do anything other than watch and listen. And suddenly, he felt a bit uneasy. He had never been good at flirting with girls, and this one seemed a very particular young woman.

"I need your help, Cornelia," he began hesitantly. The reverence she inspired made it difficult for him to say her name. Yet she looked happy each time he pronounced it, so he went on.

"Your father was a great mediwizard and potioneer. I know that he had found a remedy for a terrible disease called Stonicrucium."

Instantly, her eyes narrowed, and her smile vanished.

"Far too many have asked me about that secret. But I'm not disposed to reveal it. My father was condemned by the Wizengamot because of that potion. His colleagues were jealous of his success and accused him of having used Dark Magic. They wanted to lock him in Azkaban with the same criminals he had helped save. My father! The best man in the world!"

Snape chilled. His only hope, so near yet so inaccessible.

"I'm asking for that potion for my friends, Cornelia. They too will be condemned, and by a sentence that no judge can remit. I'm sure your father would understand. He created that potion to help."

"Yes! But nevertheless, he was condemned, and though at the last minute his sentence was commuted to exile, I never had the chance to embrace him again. He retired to France, and a few weeks after his forced departure, I got a terrible fever that nobody could cure... and I awakened as a picture. If my father had been there, he would have saved me! Instead, they denied him even a portrait! That's how much they hated him!"

Snape lowered his head. It was no use fighting against such desperation or arguing against such rage. The girl was vibrating with a pain that even five hundred years hadn't be able to lessen.

He whispered, "Then why would you want to condemn other innocent people to a similar tragic end?"

She watched him in challenge. "My father had appointed me guardian of his formulae. For years after my death, a procession of falsely contrite witches and wizards came to visit my portrait and asked for those potions, saying that they needed them to heal humankind."

She paused and her face took a savage expression. "Liars!"

Her voice seemed to whip the air. "My father had discovered secrets that were potentially too dangerous to be shared, and his medical studies were only a part of this immense knowledge. In the wrong hands, his antidotes could be transformed into lethal weapons, capable of inducing epidemics. In the same way, several of his potions could alter body functions enough to control and expand human life beyond its limits. All those impostors coming to visit me wanted something they prized much more than preserving human health: power, glory, or money. What is your real goal? What could a picture desire? Which use would that potion be to you?"

"I only want to help my friends!"

Her eyes sparkled. "Well, then why should I care? They are your friends, not mine."

She considered him for a long moment, and suddenly, her expression became cunning. "However, it's not impossible that we can make a deal: what would you be willing to offer to help them?"

He felt a shiver of repulsion at that unexpected change, but replied quietly, "Whatever you may deem necessary: there is nothing I wouldn't do for their sake."

"Are you sure? You seem to enjoy their friendship too much for a picture. What if I should ask you to retire to one of the towers and dedicate the rest of your existence to me? I have been lonely for so many centuries! Your company might really represent an agreeable change. Plus, the fibres of my canvas are slowly deteriorating. Your portrait could be a very comfortable new home for me... but that would mean a definitive segregation for you. What do you say: Would you accept to leave your friends and never see them again in exchange for their renewed existence?"

"Your conditions are harsh, Cornelia," he mused in a low voice. But she disdainfully answered, "You said you were ready to accept whatever I asked. Yet, you are not obliged..."

In spite of his forced calm, Snape felt an immense rage, an infinite desperation, an intolerable rebellion. No! Not now! Not now that his semblance of life was beginning to present him with the unexpected joy of having friends again, real friends, who had accepted and loved him exactly for what he was. As in a dream, he saw faces and smiles and voices dance in his mind, until unexpectedly Harry Potter entered his thoughts.

How many challenges had the boy faced, and yet he had had the adamant blessing and comfort of his friends supporting him. Why instead had Snape never been able to find friends, real friends?

Alone in his life, alone in his afterlife, and now, the unpleasant prospect of innumerable, meaningless days. Suddenly, he feared the horror of being buried once more in an unknown place...with the sole company of that bitter, desolate lady. Alone again. Sacrificed again...

Cornelia watched him ironically and crossed her arms with a knowing smile. He shivered again, inhaled sharply and finally resigned himself. He had no choice. The mediowizards would never find a remedy soon enough to save Lucius. And perhaps not even Minerva. His head dropped in submission.

"I'll do what you ask if this means their salvation."

She watched him and spoke again, her voice incredulous and sarcastic at the same time.

"You do really love your friends very much... And yet, what have they done for you? I know those you are begging for. Minerva McGonagall, a spinster whose lonely existence has been spent mainly within these walls and whose supreme aspiration has always and only been teaching. Who would ever miss her?"

"And what about Lucius Malfoy? He betrayed his birth and his blood by nurturing foolish and wicked ambitions. But I'm not surprised. I have always regarded his family with aversion. His great-great-uncle was one of those who condemned my father. The nephew proved to be a ruthless fraud whose faults even a hundred years of penance couldn't expiate."

She went near him, slowly, almost seductively. He closed his eyes to exclude her from his sight, but he couldn't cut off her low, passionate voice.

"What did those people do for you? In what way do they deserve your sacrifice?"

"They are my friends," he murmured obstinately, a dull pain corroding his heart.

"I admire your courage, Severus Snape, and I appreciate your words. But you still need to convince me. Why should a picture be involved in what humans do?"

He took a deep breath. "Have you ever loved, Cornelia?"

That direct question produced an unexpected result. The girl gasped, paled, and a rivulet of broken words came out haltingly while she tried to recover her composure, looking human and vulnerable again.

"My husband. He was the only love in my life. But two years after my death, he married again." Her voice finally steadied and dropped in bitterness. "This is how human beings behave. They forget... and forget so easily. But as pictures, we have overcome that pitiable state. Why should we worry about them anymore?"

Snape instinctively clenched his fists and declared awkwardly, "I, too, have loved, and loved totally."

"You don't need to tell me." She could sound compassionate and disdainful at the same time, in a disconcerting mix. "Two times I watched you cry over her. The first time you were mourning her friendship. The second time you were mourning her death."

Snape stiffened in pain. Her cold words had hurt him exactly as if those two episodes had only just happened. He turned his head and bit his lip to keep his emotion under control, so he didn't see the strange expression that was diffusing across her face.

"The girl I loved lost her life because of my fault. To make amends, I swore to protect the lives of all those I could. But now... now I understand that every human being should be granted a second chance."

"Why?" She urged him with a sort of desperation.

A multitude of reasons exploded in his heart along with the desire of confuting that merciless girl and her hateful assertions. And finally truth came out shining, as he remembered the words that he and Dumbledore had exchanged so many years before.

"How many men and women have you watched die, Severus?"

"Lately, only those whom I could not save."

That memory was lacerating. But the feelings it raised were infinitely peaceful.

"Because whoever saves a life, saves himself."

Her eyes widened in astonishment, and a trembling smile appeared on her face. She watched him with the joy of a sentinel who recognises a friend in the dark of the night.

"You are the one, Severus Snape. You are the one I have waited for all these years. "

A test. It had been a test, and he had realised it only now, at its end. Once more, she was looking compellingly beautiful and remote. Forgetting his previous doubts, he felt his soul instinctively submit in renewed trust.

She inclined her head. "I'll tell you the secret. However, there is still a condition." Her eyes twinkled mischievously again. "But not as awful as you seemed to consider my company."

He made an apologetic gesture, but she silenced him with a smile.

"I have been longing for this moment for many years. I felt I was inadequate to watch over my father's legacy, and I craved to find a new guardian, someone worthier than I am. I'll entrust the secrets to your hands... but you must promise me to be very cautious. Those formulae could be a huge temptation for too many."

Her voice urged him. "Swear that you will use them wisely and well."

He took her hands and lost himself in her pale eyes. Her indefinable power once more made his heart twinge in emotion.

"You have my word," he murmured. In that moment, he felt that she could easily have also his life. He would abandon himself in her hands without regrets, his previous fears totally forgotten.

She leant her forehead against his and whispered softly and hurriedly, as if she feared what she was offering.

"My father had a diary in which he used to write his potions. When he left for France, his detractors went to inspect his house, sure they would locate the formulae they had so contemptuously condemned. But they didn't find anything because my father, aware of their intentions, had buried his diary in the basement. I was his only child, and he used to share his secrets with me. That's why I know. Later, the house was destroyed, and a new one was built over its ruins. So the document is still there, in a metal box under the ground, protected by a powerful spell that I alone can break. And I break it now for you."

She paused, looking serene again. Her eyes challenged him tenderly.

"I suppose it won't be difficult for a man like you to find a way to extract the diary from where it lies."

He kept silent, enjoying the delightful sensation of her closeness.

"Go now," she finally said, and for the first time, he saw tears glittering in her eyes. "You have a task to do, and it must be done quickly."

He should have released her hands; instead, he clasped them even more tightly.

"Cornelia," he began, not exactly knowing what he was going to say, spellbound by the many confused emotions whirling in his mind. "I wish... I would like..."

She smiled in tenderness. "No, Severus. Like me, you have given your heart once and forever. We can't change that. What's gone is no longer ours to give."

Her lips trembled dangerously. "I had sworn to make the wizarding world pay for their cruelty, as a revenge for what they did to my father... and... and for what my husband did to me. You changed my mind, and for this I thank you."

Her voice became grave. "But now I fear for you, Severus. Mine was a heavy secret to keep... I hope you'll never regret what I gave you today."

Message:

Oh no, not another OC?! Yes, but Cornelia won't appear anymore in this story, so don't worry about her.

Part XXVIII

Chapter 28 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of JK Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

*All my gratitude to my beta **AmyLouise**. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers.*

Part XXVIII

The rest of the night seemed interminable to Snape, and he paced incessantly in his frame, regretting that human beings needed such long breaks to restore their bodies and minds.

It was still dark when Snape left his picture and began wandering from painting to painting, roaming the castle in the anxious search for an elf. The one he finally found squeaked in panic when he was requested to awaken one of his beloved masters so early, but after a threatening glance from the portrait, the little creature eventually agreed to go and call Professor Longbottom, and Snape resumed his impatient wait.

Neville was the only one who knew the truth, and the portrait wondered if that truth had been revealed also to the other staff members. The man had come back very late from the hospital the night before, so the announcement had surely been postponed. However, Neville should have informed Professor Finlay, the wizard Minerva had hired to substitute for Flitwick as a teacher and a deputy. Snape sighed. He didn't like that old pompous fellow, so full of himself.

Finally, Longbottom arrived, face wrinkled by insufficient rest and by visible nervousness.

"Professor Snape?" he greeted and inquired at the same time, a bit more harshly than usual. The man was in a sullen mood, and Snape felt suddenly uncomfortable. Even worse, he felt discouraged.

Looking at Neville, the portrait realised with dismay that he had hoped not only for his help, but also for his respect, and above all, for his friendship. The boy he had once considered an abysmal failure had become a man whose firm integrity Snape envied greatly. Now he began to understand what kind of tie had linked Potter to his companions. The feeling was incredibly enticing, and his heart ached in despair because, of course, that was a hopeless longing. He was Severus Snape: spy, murderer, and Death Eater; hateful teacher, and deceitful Slytherin. No posthumous glory would ever cancel those stains... He swallowed his bitterness and donned his best impassive face.

"I think I have good news, Mr. Longbottom," he said. "But I still need the help of somebody living if we want to have a chance to save those people inside the hospital..."

As well as those outside, his mind silently completed.

Neville considered him, eyes reddened by tiredness.

"I wonder what might have changed in these few hours," he replied suspiciously.

"Being a picture can have its good sides," Snape explained. "This night, I happened to meet the portrait of a young lady who was the only daughter of Horatius Hobnook."

Neville widened his eyes. "You have... You met..." he stammered, unable to complete his statement.

"I suppose this incoherent babble was meant to be a question," Snape declared disdainfully. "Yes, Mr. Longbottom, I have met Cornelia Hobnook, and she has entrusted her father's formulae to me. But to bring them to the real world, I need the help of a human being. More specifically, your help."

For a long moment, Neville stared at Snape, and his eyes reflected the many feelings warring in his soul: surprise, incredulity, wonder, embarrassment...

Snape crossed his arms. A picture; he was only a picture, yet he had been able to find a solution, not only in spite of his condition, but because of it. However, that morning his triumph had a different taste from what he had expected.

"I am at your disposal," Neville finally said, and Snape acknowledged these words with a curt nod.

"Thank you, Mr. Longbottom." At least he would be granted Longbottom's help, if not his respect. "We will need to act quickly. The antidote to Stonicrucium isn't in our hands yet...there is still a lot to do, and we are, deplorably, running out of time."

The portrait paused. "But I'll explain everything later. Now I want you to call Mr. Zabini."

"Zabini?" Neville was confused and wary. "Why?"

"Because he will brew the remedy for me," Snape replied calmly.

"Why? Aren't you going to share the formula with the staff in St. Mungo's?" Neville's eyes went icy again.

"Of course I am," Snape replied, irritated by that evident mistrust. "But I need to have a batch brewed here...", he fumbled for a justification, didn't find a convincing one, and concluded awkwardly, "for my specific study."

"Or perhaps to help Lucius Malfoy?"

The portrait stiffened. "How do you know?" he asked hoarsely. Had Minerva eventually let out his secret?

Neville seemed to guess that unspoken doubt and shrugged. "It wasn't difficult. The whole board of professors had been informed that Lucius was ill when Scorpius was requested home. And we all know far too well the names of those who have been locked in Azkaban. I believe that the staff in St. Mungo's has already prepared a list of potential patients to check. This morning, a special communication will be spread through radio and in the Daily Prophet."

Longbottom watched the portrait. "I suppose that Malfoy is the reason you were so reluctant to speak yesterday."

Involuntarily, the man had used the same words as Minerva, and Snape lowered his head. How could Longbottom feel mercy? Surely, his integrity was inspiring him with horror for the former Death Eater, so conveniently punished by destiny.

"He is still my friend," he murmured. "I didn't want him to die in shame and desperation, adding more pain to what he has already suffered."

Silence filled the room. Then Longbottom took a deep breath.

"You know, Professor, I never understood you when I was a student. I thought you were cruel and nasty, with no consideration for anyone except your housemates. I thought you were mean to me because you enjoyed humiliating a Gryffindor. And I thought that there was nothing and nobody you cared about."

Neville paused and bit his lip. "Now I know I was wrong."

Snape raised a hand. "It's easier to forgive an enemy than a friend," he commented bitterly. "I have asked for your help, Mr. Longbottom, not for your apologies."

Neville replied firmly, "Now you have them both."

The man and the portrait locked their gazes. Then Neville broke the silence. "I'm going to call Zabini, as you asked before. Is there anything else I can do?"

"Thank you, Mr. Longbottom," Snape replied gruffly, feeling an odd warmth in his heart. "Yes, there is something else: I need to see a painter, and specifically, a man called Bernardi from the special section in St. Mungo's."

"The Italian artist? We met him yesterday at the hospital. He was surprised to see Professor McGonagall there, but at the same time, he seemed to expect it. Did you share

part of the secret with him?"

"No, but he holds the keys that can open the door between our worlds."

Neville gave a thoughtful nod. "I will send a message immediately."

The man who entered the room some minutes later was displaying a frown that could easily compete with Snape's best scowls. He was evidently irritated to have been called early and impatient to get an explanation. But the portrait didn't give him time to protest.

"Take a seat, Mr. Zabini. I'm going to tell you a story."

Zabini hesitated; then, yielding to the authority in Snape's voice, he took a chair and sat, his expression gradually changing from hostility to curiosity. Wordlessly, Longbottom took another chair, and the two men raised their heads expectantly at the picture, bizarrely looking like their younger selves again.

Zabini needed to be properly informed. So, while they sat in perfect silence, Snape recapitulated the events once more, describing in a few words the horrible illness that had invaded the wizarding world, and the role that an almost forgotten mediwizard had played in its defeat, centuries before.

Though still perplexed by that unexpected revelation, Zabini got excited at the name.

"Horatius Hobnook, sir? Professor Slughorn said that he was an exceptionally gifted potioneer. How did you get to..."

The portrait stopped those comments with an impatient wave of his hand and continued his account, eyeing Zabini closely and trying to understand if the man knew about the Malfoys. After all, Blaise had been one of their protégés... But he seemed sincerely unaware, and when Snape revealed that Minerva had been infected, Zabini blinked in surprise but didn't show anything else than polite regret. Reassured, Snape concluded by shortly describing his encounter with Cornelia. The men listened in silence; Neville clearly fascinated, Blaise with a spark in his dark eyes.

Finally, the portrait turned specifically to Zabini. "As you see, the situation is extremely serious, and we have very little time left to save those unfortunate people. Professor Longbottom has already granted his help. What about you?"

"Count me in, of course! I'll be honoured to be your assistant," Zabini immediately offered, casting an oblique glance at Longbottom as if underlining a privileged relationship.

"So, gentlemen, it's all set." Snape's statement seemed to sign a deal. "We only need Mr. Bernardi now."

"Marcello?" Zabini enquired, and Snape couldn't but notice how perfect his pronunciation sounded. There was a link, and a strong one, between the two men. What could that imply?

The portrait weighed his words.

"Mr. Bernardi has a very delicate task to fulfil. As you have probably understood, we will need his help to paint a copy of Hobnook's diary in my frame, as the original one is impracticable. Though now I'm legally its owner, I can't walk outside of this picture to claim it. Furthermore, the document is protected by a powerful spell. If somebody else should ever try to snatch it, both the thief and the document would be mercilessly destroyed. Finally, the diary has been entrusted to me under a clause of secrecy. What better protection than enclosing it in my portrait?"

"But... what a waste, too!" Zabini exclaimed. "I'm sorry, sir, but those potions represent an invaluable treasure. Why keep them hidden in a picture? Personally, I would be happy if..."

"Mr. Zabini!" Snape let his irritation transpire. "I have given my word to Cornelia Hobnook. But I will certainly check the content of that book and make the best use of it, you can be sure."

Zabini insisted, "Still, Professor, I think..."

"I don't remember asking your opinion on this matter," Snape replied with a definitive tone.

Frustrated, Zabini tightened his lips, and Snape watched Neville intentionally.

"Time to see if the painter has arrived, Mr. Longbottom."

Immediately, Neville got up and left the room. As soon as they were alone, Snape turned to Zabini. There was a question he needed to clarify.

"How is it that you have become so close to Mr. Bernardi and to his corporation?" he inquired.

Zabini took on a hesitant air that made him look strangely vulnerable.

"Because my father was Italian. I discovered it through Marcello. His family and mine have been friends for centuries, and he offered his help to contact my relatives."

He crossed his arms, watching Snape defiantly. "I see you still don't trust me. You called Longbottom first. I suppose you need me only to brew the potion." He shrugged, affecting indifference, then lowered his head and began tracing invisible drawings on a desk.

Snape felt baffled. The news had been totally unexpected. And then he felt uneasy. Yes, Blaise was right. He still didn't trust him, in spite of their mutual promise of assistance. There was something that he couldn't define about his former student. Nevertheless, how could he blame Zabini for trying to build a new existence? And probably, one for which he was much better suited. A new family, a new world, a new friend, an ancient lineage... How lucky his colleague was! Life was offering him a second chance, and on a silver platter.

In spite of himself, his voice softened. "So, are you planning to leave us?"

"Well, it would be nice to have a family again."

How very Slytherin, answering without answering... Snape considered the man, who had begun to pace nervously under his frame.

"Perhaps you should have told me," he stated quietly. "Trust is a thing that must be shared, you see."

Zabini blushed. "Yes, perhaps I should have," he murmured, and silence fell again.

A few minutes later, Longbottom was back, followed by a man wrapped in a fine woollen cloak.

"Mr. Bernardi is here."

The painter greeted Snape with a beaming smile.

"I was sure!" he thundered in his extrovert way. "I knew you would make it."

Then he saw Zabini. "*Biagio!*" he exclaimed happily and went to shake hands. Then Bernardi turned grave again. "I saw Headmistress McGonagall yesterday, so I know about the epidemic. A very sad occurrence indeed. I want to express all my most sincere..."

"Mr. Bernardi..." Snape interrupted those civilities that could only delay his plan, "...perhaps you remember our conversation about bringing objects outside of pictures."

The painter instantly lost his confident smile and replied warily, "I do, but I told you that it was a very difficult sp..."

Snape cut him off again. "This time, I need you to bring a real object inside my picture."

In spite of his confidence, Bernardi was looking more and more worried. "Well, that should be easier, but..."

"Just listen." Snape's voice was definite. "The object in question is an ancient book that contains a remedy for this awful epidemic. There is a powerful spell protecting it, and I know the counter-spell. But the book has been buried under a house, so I need you to paint and link a copy in my frame without extracting the original from its shelter."

"*Accidenti*, Professor!" The man widened his eyes with an eloquent grimace. "That's difficult! I mean, I've never done something like that before; the magic could destroy me, as the spell is..."

"You mean you can't help us?" Snape inquired coldly.

"Of course I can!" The painter, incongruously, looked offended. Then, his confidence dropped.

"I... I only hope it will work, Merlin help me..."

A few minutes later, Marcello Bernardi had taken off his cloak, listened to Snape's instructions, prepared his tools, and extracted his wand. Then, he asked the two other men to keep silent.

"The spell is extremely difficult, and I need all my concentration," he warned, and with a nervous smile, he turned to Snape.

"Professor, you must do what I ask you exactly at the moment I ask you. Otherwise, the magic won't work... and I probably won't be able to tell this story to my grandchildren. Are you sure you have the password?"

Snape nodded. Cornelia had given him full details before leaving, and her memory lingered in his heart.

"Then let's begin the game," the painter declared. In spite of his joking tone, he was sweating with anxiety.

The room went silent as Bernardi concentrated, closing his eyes and humming softly an ancient melody. Soon his wand began to vibrate rhythmically, and under the fascinated gazes of those present, a diaphanous, confused image gradually formed, lazily floating in mid-air. It was an old book, covered in leather, glowing faintly with a silvery light. At that sight, Longbottom couldn't help a gasp, and Zabini shot him a warning glance.

With measured, graceful movements of his fingers, Bernardi summoned brushes and colours. The magical tools reached Snape's frame, and directed by the expert gestures of the painter, quickly painted a copy of the radiant image.

"Don't touch it!" Bernardi stopped Snape's instinctive act. "Its guardian must come!"

Then, the painter took a deep breath, and his wand began to trace complicated figures in the air, more and more rapidly, until a fiery raven erupted from its tip. A tense look on his face, Bernardi watched Snape as if asking for a confirmation.

Ravenclaw as Cornelia had been, the portrait thought and inclined his head in assent. Immediately after, a stream of light seemed to surround the painter, and the words he was pronouncing became an almost unintelligible sequence of musical sounds. Guided by their rhythm, the raven grabbed the book in its claws and emitted a piercing cry. The bird seemed to be waiting for something, and Snape could see that the painter was making a big effort to keep the magical creature under control.

Then, a monstrous emerald snake emerged from the floor, releasing its coils and growing almost big enough to touch the ceiling. The beast opened its mouth and hissed menacingly, baring its cruel fangs in an intimidating gesture. Bernardi paled in fear but held his ground, while Neville and Blaise, helpless spectators, stiffened in alarm.

Salazar's Basilisk, Snape thought, strangely detached. Or perhaps the pure essence of the Slytherin symbol. The two animals faced each other, the raven menacing its adversary with ferocious assaults of its beak; the snake inclining its horrid head as if waiting to strike. Vibrating in the effort of controlling the different powers whirling so frantically around him, Bernardi tightened both his hands around the wand and cried out, "The word, Professor! Now!"

A clap of thunder answered this invocation, and a storm seemed to rise. The raven cried wildly while an impetuous wind shook the room, and the cupboards swayed, threatening to fall and disperse their contents onto the floor. An admonitory look on his face, Zabini tugged down Longbottom, who had instinctively tried to get up.

Snape's lips moved, and the counter-spell was uttered, inaudible in that growing chaos. But the enchantment had been broken, and many different events happened in quick succession.

The snake lowered his head and snapped up the book with a swift movement. A blinding flash was followed by a sudden darkness, and violent thunder rumbled again while a powerful vibration shook the castle. Some of the paintings fell; the cupboards expelled their contents; the suits of armour swung unsteadily; and the men were forced to lean against the walls to keep their balance.

But when the light came back, the creatures had disappeared, and a very pale Snape was holding the book in his hands, a faint yet disdainful smile curling his lips.

Kneeling on the floor, wand clasped firmly in his fingers, Bernardi raised his head and cast an ecstatic glance at his companions, exclaiming brokenly, "Ah! We did it! *Fantastico!*"

Then, smiling, he bent forwards and gracefully fainted.

The diary was now on Snape's desk, and the men under the frame joyfully patted the painter on the back, talking and laughing in excitement. Marcello Bernardi, still very pale but extremely proud of his enterprise, was insisting that the whole matter, including his fainting, had been a joke...when the door opened, and an incensed Professor Finlay entered the room, fists clenched in fury.

"What the hell is going on here?" he shouted. "Longbottom! Zabini! Explain!" he then commanded harshly, totally ignoring Snape. "What were you doing in this room? What kind of enchantment has been cast? The castle is in chaos, the students are frightened, and many valuable items have been ruined. I want an explanation!"

A spark ignited in Snape's chest.

"Perhaps you should ask me," he replied composedly. "These gentlemen have acted at my request."

Finlay jerked up his head, an expression of intense dislike spreading upon his face.

"You!" he spat. "You have been a nuisance since the unfortunate day Minerva decided to give you a job! I knew you couldn't be trusted!"

Bernardi stepped forward. "Ah, come on, Professor," he offered, opening his arms in a pacifying gesture. "It was all my fault. I hadn't considered..."

"And now, who are you?" the old wizard turned sharply at the painter, pointing his wand in menace. "Who let you in? And without asking my permission?"

Zabini tried to speak, but Bernardi imperiously raised a hand to stop him and replied, "Now, now, Professor, there is no need to be alarmed. My name is Marcello Bernardi, and I am a master painter. I can explain ev..."

"I don't want to hear another word!" Finlay exploded, reddening in rage. "Zabini, Longbottom, I'm going to denounce this illegal activity to the Ministry right now. I'll make sure that you receive the punishment you deserve for such criminal behaviour! And about you, Mr. what's-your-name painter..."

The flame that was burning slowly into Snape's fibres suddenly turned into a blast of energy.

"Enough!" he thundered, and a vivid ray of light erupted from his frame. Finlay's wand flew away, and the old wizard staggered in shock, leaning against a desk to keep his balance. Zabini gasped, Longbottom widened his eyes, and Bernardi stepped back, staring at Snape in awe.

"*Santo cielo!*" he whispered with a stunned look that could have been comic in another occasion.

Slowly, Finlay straightened himself. Contempt, hate, revulsion, and other wild feelings seemed to be mixed on his face.

"Of course," he panted, controlling his voice in spite of the violent emotion that was making him tremble, "you've never changed. A follower of the Dark before, a dark artefact now."

The three men under the portrait looked at Finlay in confusion, and he raised his chin in a challenging expression.

"I know who you are," the old man said passionately. "You filthy Death Eater! You burnt my house with your band of black criminals and almost killed my father. You arrogant bastard, did you think I could be as easily overpowered as I was when we met the first time?"

Bernardi paled, Zabini frowned, and Longbottom said, "These are serious accusations. Can you prove them?"

"Can I?! Of course I can!" Finlay seemed to choke in rage and exultance. "I was there when your precious friend arrived with his mates. Twelve men against two old people! My father was Crucio'ed, and our house was destroyed. We lost everything in a few seconds. My mother has never been the same since that night!"

Zabini exchanged a glance with Longbottom. "But how can you say that Professor Snape was there?" he asked coldly. The Slytherin was evidently unimpressed by the accusations, and his sceptical expression made Finlay completely lose his composure.

"Because I was there, too!" he exclaimed savagely. "I heard his voice! Do you think I could forget it? They were all masked, the cowards, but I heard Snape speak to my father when he begged for mercy... that obviously wasn't given." The wizard was trembling in repressed fury. "I've never forgotten it. I have been waiting for years to find the man who caused our ruin, and I found him here. I told Minerva weeks ago, but of course, she didn't want to hear a word against her favourite. And she even allowed him to teach again! A Death Eater, disguised as a war hero!"

"Professor Snape IS a war hero," Neville objected calmly. "I'm sure that his action was an inevitable necessity induced by..."

"No!" the word resounded like a shot and came from the portrait. Startled, everybody turned to look at it.

"No," Snape repeated, eyes blank and lost in a terrible vision. "That happened before Voldemort's first fall."

Two men stiffened while the third crossed his arms with an undecipherable expression.

The fourth man, Finlay, curled his lips in a horrible grimace. "You see? He doesn't deny it. Probably he is even proud!" He clenched his fists. "Finally, I'll make you pay for what you did! Nobody will protect you any longer when the Aurors have been informed of the kind of powers you still have, and that you have concealed till now."

With a sudden movement, the old wizard backed away and closed the door after him. The men could hear him casting a locking spell, then silence fell again.

Snape had closed his eyes and lowered his head. An immense pain was diffusing across his features, so intense that Bernardi raked his hair in embarrassment and said softly, "I'm sure that there is an explanation."

No, Snape thought desperately. There was no explanation, only a horrible truth.

It had been his first mission as a Death Eater, because he had joined only two days before: "just in time", a scornful Bellatrix had remarked with her peculiar sneer. The objective was clear. Finding Muggles and terrorising them, preferably those who had connections with the wizarding world and could therefore fully understand what was happening. Far as it was from built-up areas, the little farm in the fields was a perfect target, as were the old Muggle couple who ran it. The fact that their only son was a wizard made everything even more enjoyable for Bellatrix. So, they took and immobilized the boy while she toyed with the old man. Snape had felt the horror, the shame, the disgust coming up as soon as he had realised what was happening. And when the old man had begged for mercy, tears running down his cheeks, Snape had seen the wicked look in Bella's eyes and understood that the worst was still to come.

"Enough!" he had shouted, pushing the man to the ground and thus saving him from a hex. Bellatrix had yelled in rage, but Snape had replied forcefully with a commanding gesture, "Enough with these games."

"Incendio!" he had cried, and the barn had lit up with a spectacular explosion.

The fascination that a fire can induce is irresistible. The old man had cried while the Death Eaters cast curses and hexes, laughing and shouting in wild frenzy, careless of Bella's hysterical orders. But the more they had enjoyed their destruction, the more Snape had felt sure that the old couple would be forgotten. So it had been, and after some interminable minutes of chaos and devastation, the masked men had left. But something had been altered forever.

And now the past had grabbed him again in its merciless grip.

Snape raised his head and watched the men below his picture. Zabini was sitting, arms crossed and lips tightened. Longbottom seemed lost in meditation while Bernardi paced nervously in the room, stopping now and then to lift a chair or to put a picture straight. Nobody had uttered a word, and nobody was looking at the portrait, so Snape lowered his head again.

The room was definitely silent, a silence that was much more eloquent than a speech.

The door opened, and Finlay entered with a triumphant smile.

"The Aurors are here, Snape. I leave your destiny in their hands now, as I don't think you'll be able to fool them as you did your assistants."

As if summoned by those words, a well-known figure appeared in the frame of the door.

"Harry!" Neville exclaimed, and Zabini's face darkened, retreating near the portrait in a defensive pose.

"Glad to see you, Neville," Harry Potter replied without smiling, and Snape felt the old detestation awaken in his heart. Why was he always to be confronted with a Potter in the worst moments of his life?

The new arrival glanced around and spoke quietly.

"Nice to see you, Blaise. Didn't have a chance to meet you at the feast."

Stiffening in alarm at the use of his given name, Zabini cautiously nodded in reply, and Harry turned to the painter.

"Mister Bernardi... It's a pleasure to find you here, but shouldn't you be working in St. Mungo's? It seems that you have confused it and Hogwarts lately."

Visibly uncomfortable, the painter murmured something unintelligible, stroking the bridge of his nose to hide his embarrassment.

Finlay, who was looking at the scene in suspicion, hastened to intervene, whispering agitatedly, "Even though you know these men, Head Auror Potter, please remember what I told you."

"My memory is excellent, Deputy Finlay," Harry replied; reassured, the old wizard retreated, shooting a meaningful glance at the little group gathered under the portrait.

Harry crossed his arms.

"A very strange tale has been reported to me," he began with a peculiar tone and raised his eyes to the only one in the room he had deliberately avoided looking at till that moment.

The man and the portrait locked their gazes, and Snape prepared to fight. As always in his life, he was alone, he considered bitterly. Everyone in the room looked hostile or indifferent. Finlay was watching in expectation. Zabini, Bernardi and Longbottom were waiting in silence. Everything was still, though electricity seemed to saturate the air.

Slowly, with measured steps, Harry walked under the frame.

"So, Professor, it seems that, this time, it's my turn to give you a detention."

A/N:

Translation of Italian exclamations:

Accidenti! - The dictionary says "Dash!" or "Dash it!"

Santo cielo! literally, "Good heaven!"

Part XXIX

Chapter 29 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of JK Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

*All my gratitude to my beta **AmyLouise**. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers.*

Part XXIX

Trying to conceal his alarm at the insolent words with which he had been addressed, Snape curled his lips in a defiant expression. With an arrogant shrug, Harry seemed to reject the challenge, then turned away and faced Finlay.

"The situation is extremely serious," he declared. "I need time to investigate." The man crossed his arms and spoke again with quiet authority. "I think it's best if you leave, Deputy Finlay. This is Auror work."

The old wizard frowned. "In my capacity as delegate, I want to be present," he protested.

Harry shot him a cold glance. "May I remind you that your presence is required elsewhere? The school has been damaged, and the children are frightened. Go see to your students; they need your guidance and support now."

Reminded so firmly of his duty, Finlay looked at the devastated furnishings of the room as if hoping it could offer him a pretext to stay. But Harry was quicker. "Thank you. I'll give you an escort to assist you in the inspection."

He raised a hand. "Graham! Robarts!" he called imperiously, and two tall men dressed in Auror uniforms seemed to materialise in front of him.

"Yes, sir?" they asked respectfully.

"Please escort Deputy Finlay in a thorough check of the castle."

Silenced, the old wizard hesitated, then, with a helpless look, he went away, followed closely by the two towering men. Harry waited, arms crossed and with a grave expression, until the door closed after them. Then he raised his wand, murmured a locking spell and turned to scrutinise the little group under the portrait. Zabini was wary, Bernardi nervous, Longbottom silent. Trapped in his frame, Snape hardened his features, preparing for a battle. And finally, the Head Auror broke the silence.

"Now we can talk," Harry commented soberly, and a smile opened on his face, taking everybody by surprise except Longbottom, who smiled back.

"Thank Merlin, you received my message!" Neville winked at his old friend.

"Not a minute too soon! I was leaving for another mission. From what I've seen, I assume you have been successful."

"Mr. Longbottom!" Snape exploded. "What did you do?"

"I sent a message to Harry while I was looking for Zabini, sir," Neville calmly replied. "I had the uncomfortable sensation that something unpleasant could happen, so I took a little precaution. But please, rest assured ... " He watched the portrait meaningfully, "... I didn't tell him everything."

Snape frowned. "You didn't?"

"I thought it was up to you."

Snape hesitated. For the third time in two days, he was facing the necessity of explaining his actions; even worse, the reasons behind his actions, but Longbottom again came to the rescue.

"The Aurors were alerted immediately after my communication to St. Mungo's, so Harry knows about the epidemic. You only need to tell him how you met Cornelia Hobnook and found a remedy."

The Head Auror smiled. "I'm sure that this is going to be a very interesting tale."

"More than you can imagine, Harry," Neville replied merrily.

Watching the two men talk so cordially and perceiving the wave of comradeship running between them, Snape felt a bitter sense of exclusion. But that was his destiny. Paint, he reminded himself, he was only paint and memories. So why was his heart aching so much? Why?

Again, Neville seemed to perceive that secret anguish and raised his eyes to the portrait.

"Professor, I think its time to reward your dedication," he suggested quietly, indicating the ancient volume resting on Snape's desk.

"Yes, I suppose the explanation can wait a bit longer," Harry agreed. At those words, Bernardi definitely relaxed while Zabini crossed his arms and took on his usual inscrutable expression. Slowly, Snape turned his head to observe the manuscript, the precious diary for which he had fought so desperately. He hadn't dared open it yet, and now he touched it in awe. The situation felt utterly unreal: was he really handling the picture of a book that had been written five centuries earlier? And yet, that book made of paint felt heavy in his hands, just as the weight pressing on Snape's heart was heavy. Though he had found a solution that would probably diminish Draco's guilt in the eyes of the wizarding world, Snape had hoped to be the one...through Zabini...to brew the potion for Lucius, exactly as he had promised to Narcissa. But surely Potter wouldn't allow Blaise to manipulate the formula.

Saddened by those thoughts, the portrait flipped the pages, looking blankly at the many amazing titles that popped out here and there. The handwriting was thin and graceful, typical of the period, and flourished capitals decorated the beginning of every paragraph. Finally, in the reverential silence that had fallen in the room, he saw the name he was looking for, and his heart twisted in emotion. Snape read, in the elegant calligraphy of Horatius Hobnook: 'Azkaban's Disease' or 'Prisoners' Fever', also known as Stonicrucium.

Lost in a trance, Snape deciphered the writing. The first lines were notes describing the horrid situation of the prisoners and the pitiless behaviour of their keepers, chosen amongst the most brutal exemplars of the wizarding low class. In a crescendo of disgust, the portrait finally reached the formula. Without even glancing at the words explaining the precious secret, Snape cast a spell on the page and instantly duplicated it. Carefully, he took the newly formed parchment that was floating in mid-air and inserted it in the fax, then pressed the button. The twin machine in the room reacted with a low buzz and the men brightened in excitement...all except Zabini who, after an initial movement, stopped and sat again, fists clenched in frustration.

Amazed, Harry watched the formula slip out from the machine.

"That's fantastic!" he exclaimed, taking the parchment with something similar to reverence. Then he handed it immediately to Longbottom. "Neville, would you bring it to St. Mungo's?"

"I'll be honoured," the Herbology professor replied. "But this time, I'll clearly indicate to whom the merit belongs."

"Don't!" Snape exclaimed, and the four men under the frame raised their eyes to look at him, with four different shades of perplexity on their faces. The portrait lowered his head. He couldn't order, only pray.

"I... I have my reasons for remaining incognito," he finally declared and exchanged a meaningful look with Longbottom.

Neville seemed saddened by this request, but accepted it without objecting. "As you wish," he said softly. "You know you can trust me." He turned to Harry. "I think it would be better if Mr. Bernardi could come with me."

Harry nodded and said gravely, "Mr. Bernardi, your help has been invaluable. I hope we can count on your discretion now."

"My lips are sealed," the painter replied, and Harry smiled at the unusual concision that revealed the deep emotion of the usually verbose Italian.

"Go, Neville, and take care," he then invited Longbottom, who swiftly rolled the parchment and put it in his sleeve.

"Thank you, Professor." Neville inclined his head in a greeting, promptly followed by Bernardi. "I'll make sure the formula is put to good use."

Snape nodded sombrely, and his fingers tightened around the leather cover of the diary. His allies...~~his friends~~?...were leaving, and soon he would be alone to face Potter's interrogation. How to deal with a man who had the power...and perhaps the intention...of hurting or even destroying him? How to fulfill the promise that he had made to Narcissa and Lucius without betraying them? Mouth filled with the bitter taste of defeat, Snape watched Harry unlock the door and Neville and Bernardi disappear along the corridor with the precious document.

The Head Auror raised his wand. "Now we are really alone," he said quietly.

Zabini instantly jerked up his head in alarm, and Harry watched him with his mischievous smile. "Time for a second copy."

Snape opened his mouth but emitted no sound. How could it... Was that a trap? What did damned Potter mean?

"Come on, Professor, let's not waste precious time!" Harry urged. "Send out a new copy so that Zabini can brew the formula. I hope you didn't expect me to do it, did you? Potions never was my forte, as you always remarked."

Zabini jumped on his feet. "What kind of game are you playing, Potter?" he asked. "Hoping to finally put an end to my career? Or simply trying ~~to~~*name* Professor Snape?" he concluded sarcastically.

Harry tilted his head with an innocent expression. "I thought you wanted to try the formula personally," he said with a shrug. "Professor Snape deserves this satisfaction. And then, the bureaucracy in St. Mungo's will take hours before a potioneer is allowed to work on it. Trust me, I am an expert in official procedures."

"Potter!" Snape began, but he didn't know how to continue.

Harry sighed. "Old grudges die hard, I see. Very well, let's speak openly, then. You have a friend in need, Professor, haven't you? A dear friend that you would like to help."

"What the hell are you saying, Potter?" Zabini replied contemptuously. But Snape took a deep breath.

"You know," he said, and that was a statement, not a question.

"Precisely!" Harry replied with an impatient nod. "You won't believe it, but I've become very good at guessing. I thought of Lucius Malfoy as soon as I heard of the Azkaban fever. And guess what? He is the only one amongst the ex-prisoners who hasn't replied to the mediowizards' call... though giving an answer would have been at least polite on his part."

He crossed his arms. "So, will you deny that you are protecting a lawbreaker?"

At that assertion, Snape stared helplessly at the two men under his frame; his plan had crumbled like a castle of cards, and Lucius was definitely lost. The wizard clenched his fists and waited to hear Potter pronounce gloating words of condemnation.

Controlled as always, Zabini was considering the portrait with questioning eyes, and Snape lowered his head under that gaze, expecting a vehement accusation from his former student for having been so disloyally involved in that plot.

But, though evidently wrong-footed, the Slytherin was ready to dissimulate his alarm, and perhaps his anger, recovering his usual impassive expression in a blink.

Quick, but not quick enough for Harry, who shook his head and smiled at Snape. "No need to worry, Professor. I am indebted to you, and I'm willing to pay."

He turned to Zabini. "You, on the contrary, are not obliged to help... but your expertise would be extremely useful."

With a challenging look, Blaise replied, "I've granted my help to Professor Snape, and I'll keep my promise whatever it costs... and whoever is involved."

Snape couldn't but appreciate the loyalty of his assistant, in spite of the risk that the help he had so liberally promised implied. However, though Zabini's voice was firm, his eyes were cold, and Snape felt uncomfortable. That wasn't the way he had planned it. The whole matter had been spoiled by the joint interferences of Finlay before and of Potter after. Despite Zabini's controlled stance, Snape knew him too well not to understand that the man was disguising his resentment for what he was surely interpreting as deception.

And perhaps he was right.

Trust is a thing that must be shared The words of criticism that the portrait had addressed to Zabini were still hanging in the air, now revealing a sad truth: Severus Snape hadn't learned his lesson yet. He was still behaving as his old life of lies and suspicions had taught him, using people and words as tools for his projects.

Unaware of these thoughts, Harry raised his chin in a clear invitation to hurry. Suppressing a sigh, Snape inserted the formula in the fax once more and pressed the button.

Zabini took the parchment and glanced at the disordered mess of tools and ingredients that the magical storm had scattered throughout the floor. Then, still without expression, he said, "I'll check what's needed, and I'll begin immediately."

"Thank you," Snape murmured.

Zabini lit the fire under a cauldron, then he began to collect and examine the different items, declining Harry's help with a curt nod. Harry didn't insist. Instead, the Head Auror went to sit under the portrait and wrapped his arms around his right leg in a curious imitation of what his son used to do when talking to Snape. Then he raised his head to the picture and considered slowly, "I'd never dared imagine we would speak again."

Still fighting against his bitter thoughts, Snape tightened his lips. "There are many things you'd never have dared imagine, Potter. You have always been affected by a deplorable lack of imagination, except for what concerned your foolhardy exploits."

"You still can't forgive me, Professor?" Harry asked quietly. "Yet you devoted your life to saving mine. How could you be so merciless and, at the same time, so committed?"

"Because it wasn't you....," Snape replied and trailed off. Why renew what was useless to say again?

"I know," Harry sighed. "It was my mother. And my father. Always my mother and my father. Did you ever ~~seem~~*seem*, Professor?"

Snape averted his eyes and pondered that question in his heart. Everything seemed so absurdly remote now. Had he really dedicated the second part of his life to hating a man and venerating a woman through the living embodiment of their son? And had he really offered himself to destruction because of a hopeless love? How many sufferings his choices had produced, like circles in the water... And now his life was enclosed in a piece of canvas and a few ounces of paint. He felt empty.

Harry was still watching him, waiting in silence. Incredible how the once reckless boy had changed! There was no animosity in that gaze and, overwhelmed by memories, Snape lowered his head, experiencing that horrid sensation of helplessness again. Everything was so strange, so difficult, so out of control. So many things he didn't know how to handle.... The portrait sighed deeply, mutely questioning the man before him and, once more, Harry returned his gaze, speaking softly.

"I saw you die almost twenty years ago, looking at my eyes. Was it me that you were seeing, Professor, or again, was it my mother? I always thought that it was better to bury those memories forever, because obviously I wasn't going to receive an answer. But lately I have realised that I knew more about you than I ever dared hope. Your memories had become my memories. And I have decided that I am really deeply grateful for what you gave me."

Snape didn't reply, but Harry, lost in his reflections, didn't seem to notice.

"You see, it hasn't been easy for me to overcome what happened," the man continued quietly. "And now that I see my children in the place that used to be my place, I regret what could have been and was not. Albus Severus says that you are the best teacher he could ever dream of having. He tells me strange, unexpected things: you are patient, you are generous, you are kind."

The man paused, and when he spoke again, his voice revealed disconcertment and a hint of amusement.

"But James has been the biggest surprise. He wrote me that you helped him skip a whole morning of lessons. This, I admit, was hard to believe... yet it was true."

Harry watched Snape as if he saw his old antagonist for the first time.

"Sincerely, Professor, I think you have turned into a much better teacher now."

He hesitated, then his expression opened in a bizarrely timid smile.

"Odd as it may sound, I believe you have become much more human."

Snape felt an acute pang. Weren't those the words that Minerva had addressed to him in that night of desperation? What had she said?

"I believe you are much more human than many of us"

Something cold and heavy slowly detached from his heart, and a painful but incredibly sweet sensation filled his soul.

Silence fell again as they watched Zabini work. The Slytherin was dosing each ingredient with great care, consulting the parchment at every step. For the first time, Snape lowered his eyes to the book in front of him. It was such a simple potion, though very ingenious, he considered in dismay. He could have found it by himself, if only he had had the time for a proper study.

Surprisingly, once more Harry seemed to guess his thoughts.

"It seems that we are in perpetual debt to you, Professor," he said slowly. "In a way, you have saved the future of the wizarding world...again."

"Yes, your future.... Mine is linked to this frame, whatever happens," Snape replied bitterly.

"Well, yours is a strategic position, don't you think?" Harry considered.

Snape rested his forehead on his fists and sighed. "What is all this about, Potter? What are you trying to prove?"

"Nothing, Professor. Just that you live in one frame, and I live in another... or in many different frames, if you prefer. But there is no difference in what we do. I work with what you used to call 'foolish wand waving'; you teach the subtle art of potions to young apprentices. And perhaps your work is more important than mine."

"Potter! How do you dare compare the life of the living with the pale imitation I lead in this frame?!" the portrait reacted furiously. Yet, in spite of his fury, Snape's voice was trembling.

"I'm not comparing, only suggesting a different view" Harry replied quietly. "Imagine the world like a big frame. Think of life as a sequence of pictures. Like the portraits in Hogwarts, we slip from picture to picture while we all live in the bigger canvas of the world."

His voice went grave. "But I tell you, very few of those living in this world can do the things that you are doing from your frame."

The portrait closed his eyes, trembling with emotion, wishing to lose himself in those soothing words. Was the man before him finally giving him an answer? Was that THE answer?

"I never imagined you had such a poetic imagination," Snape finally murmured, breathing painfully.

Harry smiled. "There are a lot of things you never imagined about me, Professor. But then, I was the one supposedly lacking imagination. Perhaps its time to give me a chance."

Silence fell again. Then things began to happen at disconcerting speed.

A voice shouted out of the door. "Let me in! Let me in, I say! I must speak to Professor Snape right now!"

The door opened abruptly and Draco Malfoy entered boldly, followed by a young man...clearly an apprentice Auror...who was uselessly trying to stop him. But there was no need: as soon as he saw the other two men in the room, Draco stopped short, a hopeless look on his face.

"Let him in, Perkins," Harry ordered lazily. "He's a friend."

Draco swallowed in indecision, but the need that was driving him was evidently too pressing to be silenced by the unexpected presence of his old antagonist. He managed a weary smile.

"I didn't know you were here, Potter," he said with an uncharacteristically meek tone. "You must excuse me, but I urgently need to speak to Professor Snape...."

"Don't worry, Draco," Harry replied. "Professor Snape has found a remedy and, as you see, Zabini is concocting it right now."

Draco widened his eyes and, for a moment, forgot his prudence. "I can't believe it! Did you really..."

He stopped in panic, while surprise and joy were immediately cancelled by fear and suspicion.

"What do you mean?" Draco asked sharply and glanced at the portrait in accusation.

Snape didn't say a word, just looked at Harry in resigned expectation. Surely Potter wouldn't miss the occasion!

But Harry didn't answer the question; he only watched Draco calmly. "If you don't mind waiting, you can take the potion back with you as soon as it is ready."

"You mean you don't... I am not...." Incredulous, Draco trailed off before he said too much. Then, giving up the fight, he murmured a strangled "Thank you" and sat in a corner, crumpling his robes in agitation and shooting quick, questioning glances at Zabini.

But his fellow Slytherin obviously couldn't explain, so Zabini shook his head, tightened his lips, and went on determinedly with his preparation. Several moments of silence passed again before the same young Auror came in with a disconcerted air.

"Sorry, sir, there is something strange going on. Looks like an intruder. I mean, I have detected an intruder, but I can't see it."

"An intruder?!" Reacting with the ease of long practice, Harry reached the door and raised his wand, moving it in slow circles while he tested the space before him.

"Don't shoot, Dad! It's me!" a joyful, giggling voice said, and the happy face of Lily Potter appeared in mid-air. The Auror gasped in surprise while Harry exclaimed severely, "Lily! What are you doing here? And coming in disguise! You are in big trouble, young lady!"

Smiling unperturbedly, the girl replied to her dad with that deceptively judicious tone children use when they want to convince their parents: "I went to visit you in the office, and your men told me that you had gone to Hogwarts. So I asked if I could go too, but they didn't let me. It was getting late, and there was no time to advise Mum, so I just took your cloak and went by myself through the Floo."

"Simple and easy, I see," her father said dryly. "Now, didn't I forbid you to use the Floo, let alone take my cloak?" In his effort to be severe, Harry sounded strangely similar to Snape when scolding a student.

"But Da-ad!" the child replied, curling her lips in an offended pout. "I'm perfectly capable of using the Floo! And I didn't mean anything bad. I just wanted to see Uncle Severus again."

"*U-Uncle Severus?*" In spite of his previous friendly declarations, Harry evidently wasn't ready for a new member...and such a member!...in his family.

"Well," Lily candidly replied, "we already have an Uncle Albus, why not an Uncle Severus? After all, you named Al after him!"

"This is a totally different matter," Harry retorted; yet, though trying to sound stern, he couldn't help a smile. And, finally, he said the words she was expecting to hear, "What to do with you now? Can't send you back unaccompanied."

Bowing to circumstances, Harry turned to the dumbstruck Auror and shrugged. "It's OK, Perkins. I suppose at this point your presence is useless. Go and help your colleagues in checking the school."

Then, with a meaningful expression, he lowered his tone and whispered, "And please, do your best to keep Professor Finlay far from this room as long as possible."

He escorted Lily back into the room, and the girl raised her eyes to the picture.

"Hello, Professor!" she greeted with a joyful smile.

The portrait lowered his head to watch the odd couple.

"Recklessness is evidently a family trait, Potter," Snape commented dryly. "But I find it to be rather incongruous that you blame your children for what you constantly did in six years of school."

Then he nodded to the girl. "Though I wish you had chosen a better moment, I'm glad to see you, Miss Potter."

Lily blushed in pleasure, but she had no time for a proper reply because the door opened again, and a treble voice called, "Dad? Are you here?"

James Potter entered impetuously; then, like Draco before him, he stopped abruptly as soon as he noticed that his father was not alone.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, reddening in embarrassment. "Good morning, Professor Zabini. Good morning, Professor Snape." And, after an uncertain glance at Draco, "Good morning... sir."

His duties done, he rushed to reach his father and sister under the portrait.

"What is Lily doing here?" he asked in irritation, venting his nervousness from that awkward entrance. Then he looked cautiously at Zabini and lowered his tone. "Dad, Professor Finlay says that Professor Snape has committed a crime, and that you are here to burn his portrait."

Lily gasped in horror at those words and looked at her father with an accusing glare. James cast a quick glance at Snape, who was pretending not to listen, then lowered his voice even more.

"I hope... I mean, this is not true, is it? You aren't going to do anything like that, are you?"

Harry smiled. "No, son," he replied. "Professor Snape is going to teach here for many more years, or at least, as long as he wants to."

"Ah!" The boy breathed in relief. "Good! I knew it couldn't be true. I must tell the others, because they were all worried."

Snape stiffened at that surprising affirmation but didn't utter a word. Relaxing at the news, James stretched himself in a very informal way.

Right at that moment, Zabini exclaimed, "The potion is ready!"

Draco got up immediately, then turned in hesitation to watch Harry.

"Take it, Draco, it's all yours," Harry declared gently while the two children looked in curiosity at the tense blond man.

Zabini filled a little flask with the boiling liquid and corked it. Then he looked at Snape. "If you allow me, I'll go with Draco to help him."

"Please do," Snape said with immense dignity, "and let us know as soon as possible."

Seeing that Harry Potter seemed to acknowledge Snape's authority, Draco recovered his pride.

"Are you really going to let me free, Potter?" he challenged his old foe, arrogance and doubt mixing in his voice.

"Follow the corridors that lead to the left wing," Harry replied serenely. "That way, you'll be sure to avoid my men."

With an astonished expression, Draco looked at Harry, Snape and Zabini alternatively.

Zabini had already put his cloak on. With a sad smile, he turned to look at Snape.

"You can trust me, Professor," he said.

Then, followed by a still unbalanced Draco, he reached the door. In a few moments, the two men had left.

"Well, I suppose we will have to wait for news," Harry declared and smiled to his children.

Part XXX

Chapter 30 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part XXX

Time went by with enervating slowness. Two times Finlay tried to enter the Potions room, and two times he was gently but firmly dissuaded by the Aurors surrounding him like a guard of honour.

The third time, he exchanged some heated words with Harry, but finally he seemed to give up and, muttering something like "I want a complete report as soon as possible", followed by a weary "you know where you can find me", he left for his office.

The first one to come back was Neville.

"It's working, Professor! Harry! It's working!" he exclaimed as soon as he entered.

"Great!" Harry replied with a big smile. "Tell us everything!"

Exuberant as always, Lily ran to welcome the happily tired man, immediately imitated by a more composed James. Neville swayed under the affectionate assault of the two siblings; then he disentangled himself from Lily's embrace, ruffled James' hair, and reached Harry under the portrait, closely followed by the children.

The prisoner of the frame tilted his head, hardly suppressing his agitation.

"Mr. Longbottom?" Snape greeted and asked at the same time, and Neville perceived the anxiety concealed in that question. Everybody was staring at him, and the man began to talk with quiet joy, savouring his impending revelations.

"Till yesterday, there were sixteen cases in the hospital, but more have arrived today after the owls and the announcement on the radio."

Neville smiled exultantly at Snape. "The less seriously ill patients experienced a significant improvement right after the first dose. Once the Medi wizards had overcome an initial understandable perplexity, they carefully studied the formula and prepared personalised treatments."

He glanced again at Snape and suddenly looked a bit embarrassed.

"Of course, the people at St. Mungo's were very interested in such a fortunate discovery, and I did my best to elude their questions. But Professor Slughorn was there, too. He was actively cooperating with the hospital's potioners to find a cure and..."

Neville paused and bit his lower lip. "Well, you know, I think he understood something. When he told me to send you his best regards, he had a very peculiar smile."

He hesitated; then his eyes sparkled in warm admiration. "You have been... amazing! Once again, you have saved us all! Please let me convey the gratitude of all those you have helped to rescue from such a horrible death."

Always uncomfortable at those emotional declarations, Snape took shelter in his usual scowl and finally replied, "You are very kind, Mr. Longbottom, but personally I didn't do anything. If you must thank somebody, please address Mr. Bernardi. He surely deserves to be thanked."

His eyes softened. "As well as you do."

Neville reacted immediately. "Nobody could do what you have done, Professor. We were only your instruments."

The children had listened to this exchange with great interest and, in the following silence, everybody could hear Lily whisper proudly to her brother, "See? I was right about him while you were always wrong!"

James reddened and elbowed the girl, who stuck out her tongue. Neville winked at the children, then looked at the portrait with an unexpectedly mischievous smile.

"Well, I think that now it's time for a surprise, Professor."

He raised a hand and the door opened again, revealing the soft shape of a beaming Minerva McGonagall.

"Severus!" she called, opening her arms while she advanced as if she wanted to hug him.

Snape felt a sweet, immense emotion pervade his fibres and, for a moment, his vision blurred. Then his eyes focused again, and he noticed that another visitor had followed Minerva, but his pace was much more hesitant and slow. Incredulous, Snape recognised Filius Flitwick and automatically remembered that the old Deputy and professor had been hospitalised in St. Mungo's because of a severe flu, the reason why Finlay had been called to substitute for him in those last months. The man had evidently recovered, though still looking very drained.

The new visitor reached the headmistress and raised his head at the portrait.

"I'm glad to see you, Severus," Flitwick said with a warm smile. "I wasn't exposed to the epidemic, but I want to join Minerva in thanking you. I'm so happy to have finally recovered and to be back at home right in time for this occasion. Thank you for saving us all again."

The children were stunned.

"Dad!" James tugged his father's sleeve and asked softly, "but what happened?"

Then, unexpectedly, the door opened for the last time and Narcissa Malfoy...pale, exhausted, trembling but radiating an immense joy...entered the room.

"Lucius can speak," she said with a wavering voice. "Lucius can speak again!"

Everybody reacted in different ways at that announcement. Snape, Harry, Neville and Minerva brightened. The children looked startled. Flitwick exchanged a perplexed glance with Minerva, then his brows raised in sudden understanding.

But Narcissa didn't notice any of these reactions. She had eyes only for Snape, who was returning her gaze with desperate intensity, as if they were alone. She went under the picture and spoke to him, and to him only.

"His lips were paralysed since yesterday, and we feared it would be impossible to make him swallow the potion. We had to supply it drop by drop, and every drop could have choked him..." She stifled a sob. "But we succeeded, and after a while, his lips began to move again. It's... it's a miracle, and you made it!"

Impulsively, Narcissa knelt on the ground.

"Thank you, Severus, thank you," she said, and overwhelmed by feelings, she buried her face in her hands, sobbing softly. Minerva immediately bent to help her, but she couldn't lift the crying woman, so she knelt on the floor as well and embraced her tightly. Narcissa reclined her head on the Headmistress' shoulder and let her tears flow.

Snape closed his eyes and breathed slowly. The emotions he was experiencing were many and powerful, but there was one special thought that was shining in his mind over the others. He forced himself to speak.

"I think we are forgetting the true author of this happy ending," he said quietly. "The one to whom we are all indebted and myself more than the others."

Everybody looked at him in curiosity. Wiping their cheeks and eyes, the two women also laboriously got up and stared at the portrait. Snape let his gaze wander.

"Mr. Potter," he then said, and both Harry and James raised their eyes with a surprised look.

Snape frowned. "I mean young Mr. Potter... James Potter," he specified while a lopsided smile twisted his lips; he had pronounced that hateful name without a tremble.

"Mr. Potter," he repeated and bent his head to cast a meaningful look at the boy. "Would you be able to find a student without being detected by anyone of the staff...especially Professor Finlay?"

James smiled; then, very informally, he exclaimed, "No problem, Professor. I'll use this."

And he grabbed the Invisibility Cloak.

"Very well," Snape approved, and his voice took on a metallic, commanding timbre. "Please go and fetch Mr. Scorpius Malfoy."

Puzzled but proud of his mission, the boy hurried to the door, an expressive little smile dancing on his lips. A few, but incredibly long, minutes passed before a reluctant Scorpius entered the room, practically dragged by a triumphant James. The Slytherin looked wary but his eyes lit up as soon as he saw his grandmother.

"Scorpius!" Narcissa called and went to envelope him in a tight embrace, tears flowing again uncontrollably. Embarrassed, the boy disentangled himself, and Narcissa turned him to look at Snape.

"Your grandpa is safe now, Scorpius. He will recover soon. We must thank Professor Snape for this miracle."

"Mr. Malfoy," Snape said solemnly, "your grandmother has forgotten the most important thing. Your grandfather is safe because of you. You brought me the message, you performed the Reducing Spell, you helped me leave these walls and reach the real world."

He paused as too many memories and emotions enfolded his heart and halted his tongue.

"Thank you," he concluded simply.

From that moment, a merry chaos reigned in the room.

Albus Severus was worried. Strange things were going on in the school. In the early morning, the castle had vibrated loudly, shaken by a powerful earthquake, and many of the students had reacted in panic. Then rumours had been spread of something terrible that had happened in the Potions classroom. Time had passed, and more and more alarming news had arrived about the involvement of Professor Snape in a dangerous, obscure experiment connected with Dark Arts. Had he wanted to kill them all?

Al was extremely worried. What was happening? Were those rumours true? And how was Professor Snape?

The children got very excited when they were told that Harry Potter and his special squad were amongst them. Professor Finlay declared that the Aurors had been called to restore order and punish the offender. Like his housemates, Albus Severus was asked to stay in the Gryffindor Tower by his father's men, many of whom he had known since he was a toddler. Though smiling at him, the Aurors had been very firm in their instructions, and Al's anguish increased even more.

James, of course, had immediately fled. Clever boy, his brother, while Al was too respectful to question the orders. Time kept going, a considerable amount of time for his impatient child's mind, but nothing new happened. Eventually, there were no more Aurors around, only his chatting housemates, happily enjoying that unexpected break from their studies. At that point, anxiety having reached an intolerable level, Al mustered his courage.

Slipping out of the common room was easy. After all, the Fat Lady was there to prevent unauthorised entrances, not illicit exits. The boy followed the corridors that led to the Potions room with the ease of long practice. Soon he reached it, but he kept prudently concealed. Better investigate before throwing himself into danger.

Yet it seemed that there was no need to worry. From his hiding place, the boy could see that there were people gathered under the portrait, and everybody looked euphoric...

Then, surprised, he noticed that not only was his father there but also his brother and his sister! Almost his whole family had been collected in that room, but nobody had thought to call him. He felt a sudden pang of jealousy and tried to fight it back, unsuccessfully. Then he saw James scurry away. Perhaps his brother had finally decided to go searching for him? Puzzled and hurt, Al decided to remain concealed. It would be fun to surprise James at his return...

But, eventually, he was the one who got surprised again when James came back dragging a reluctant Scorpius Malfoy.

Then, Al heard Snape's vibrating words of gratitude. Suddenly, he felt empty and useless. Nobody missed him. Nobody needed him there. Head down, he retreated to the Gryffindor Tower.

Nobody noticed the little shadow sadly going away. Everybody was simply overflowing with feelings and willing to share them.

Minerva was speaking to Narcissa while Neville was talking with Flitwick, informing the little man of the many events that had happened during his absence. After a few timid attempts, Scorpius had found the courage to approach Lily, and now the girl was leading the conversation with her witty remarks and her nice laughter. The boy was clearly subjugated by such a sparkling personality.

Unnoticed in that merry confusion, James backed up a few steps. After a quick glance around, he deftly took the Invisibility Cloak, rolled it into a tiny ball, and put it into his pocket. Then he smiled angelically to the world, pretending to be extremely interested in what Neville was saying.

He had been quick, but not quick enough for his father. Silent in a corner, Harry had noticed what his son was doing, and instinctively, he had raised his eyes at Snape. Unsurprisingly, the portrait had noticed it too, and his brows had furrowed. The two men crossed their gazes, and Harry smiled with a hint of nostalgia; then he addressed Snape with a slightly cryptic message.

"Perhaps a week, Professor?"

The portrait didn't pretend to have not understood.

"Two days," Snape replied firmly. "Two days is enough, Potter, or he is not your son."

Unexpectedly linked by that peculiar deal, Snape and Harry looked again at each other. The man seemed childishly happy, and Snape frowned. Then the portrait shook his head in resignation, and his frown turned into the tiniest of smiles. But still a smile.

"It has been a hard trial for me, Severus, but for you it must have been even worse," Minerva said. It was evening, and she was enjoying a chat before going to bed, just like she used to do before the recent terrible events.

"I had forgotten that real life could be so challenging," Snape admitted quietly, almost humbly. "I was scared. I had dared too much. After all, I am only a picture."

"Only a picture?" Minerva repeated slowly, a hint of incredulity in her tone. "Severus, how many people do you know who would be able to do what you have done, in spite of their being flesh and blood?"

"That's what Potter said, too," Snape confessed. It was so wonderful to have Minerva there again. He was dying to talk about his feelings, now that everything had ended, and ended so well. With her, he didn't feel embarrassed.

"I was glad to find Harry here," the old woman nodded. "Nobody knows how to handle a slippery situation like him."

"Yes." Snape's smile faded. "This reminds me, Minerva... What about Finlay?"

"Oh," she replied vaguely. "Everything is fine, now. Harry talked with him. And then, with Filius being back, Finlay's job as a deputy is over. Tomorrow, we will have a big party, and he will leave immediately after."

In spite of her words, the Headmistress looked saddened, and Snape sighed.

"This isn't exactly the truth, is it, Minerva?"

"Ah, Severus, you are too good at guessing..." She lowered her head. "No. Unfortunately, Finlay thinks he has been deceived. He is still convinced that you acted with a mean purpose. And, above all, he insists that you are a dark artefact. You must understand..."

"I understand perfectly," Snape replied sharply. "There won't be peace in my life until people like him..."

The portrait didn't end his sentence, but looked piercingly at the worried Headmistress. "I want to talk to him. And explain."

"Severus!" Minerva sounded surprised. "You don't need to justify yourself. You saved him and his parents. He knows it."

"And you, how do *you* know?" he counteracted bitterly, feeling betrayed again.

"Albus told me the story, immediately after hiring Finlay."

"Albus?" Snape automatically asked though he wasn't really surprised. Of course. Ever-meddling Albus.

"Odd as it may seem to you, Albus has spoken in your defence to Finlay, and not only once but several times. Yet the man is stubborn and desperately clings to his rage," Minerva replied sadly.

The portrait frowned. "All the more reason then; I want to speak to him as soon as possible."

"As you like, Severus. But don't expect too much from this encounter," the old woman concluded with a sigh.

In the usual evening chaos of the Gryffindors' common room, a depressed Al was listening to the triumphant report of his brother James. Next to him, Arthur MacMillan was ogling the invisibility cloak, eyes glittering with desire.

"You'll let me try it, will you, James?" he asked hopefully, touching the fabric with reverent fingers.

"I don't know," James said, clearly enjoying his moment of glory. "You see, it works better with the Potter family. It's an heirloom."

He turned to his brother with a smug smile, as if asking for support. "Isn't it, Al?"

"Oh, shut up!" Al uncharacteristically reacted. Then, lips tightened and brows furrowed, he rose from his armchair and stormed to his dormitory, leaving Arthur and James agape.

Snape was alone. It was night, and so many things had happened! He was still savouring the different moments and the emotions they had caused in his chest when the door opened slowly and Zabini entered. Snape looked at him. The man had behaved well, and the portrait was happy to finally have the occasion to explain what had effectively happened that morning.

"Professor Snape," Zabini greeted politely. He seemed tired and tense, and there were black shadows under his eyes. "Tonight, it's my turn to patrol this wing of the castle, so I thought to stop by for a visit. I imagine you would like to know the latest news."

"Mr. Zabini," Snape replied. "I'm glad you came. It has been a long day. How's Lucius?"

Zabini took off his glasses to rub his eyes. "Mr. Malfoy is slowly but continually recovering. When I left him, he had taken four doses of the potion, and the effects were amazing."

The man smiled his peculiar smile and readjusted the glasses on his nose. "Now that St. Mungo's has been informed, Madam Malfoy plans to call a Healer tomorrow to check Mr. Malfoy and define a treatment. Till now, we have... well, we have improvised."

"What did Draco say?" Snape urgently asked.

"Oh, he is angry, of course. He will be forced to explain everything to his father. Even worse, he will be forced to explain to the Healer why he kept the situation concealed. It's a hard decision for his pride to make. But perhaps, now that the Medi wizards have been offered a solution, the Aurors will turn a blind eye to this improper behaviour. At least Potter seemed to be unusually benevolent this morning."

Silence fell, then Snape looked at the man under the frame.

"Mr. Zabini," he said quietly, feeling very uncomfortable. "Regarding Potter... I was hoping to see you. I wanted to thank you for your support today. I... I have appreciated it."

Curiously, the uncomfortable feeling wasn't lessened by that declaration as he had hoped; on the contrary, it seemed to increase. Words were coming out surprisingly

hesitantly, and Snape thought that he wasn't good at thanking people. He needed to improve.

Zabini smiled briefly and seemed to weigh his answer.

"I'm glad you changed your opinion about me. I, too, came here to talk with you... but about a very private matter."

He turned a suspicious eye on the other pictures. "I hope we are alone," he said meaningfully. "I would prefer to have no witnesses."

"I think we can reasonably assume that we're alone at this time of the night," Snape replied, feeling anxious and somewhat irritated. "And I am used to keeping secrets. In fact, there are some about you that I have never revealed to anybody else."

"About me?" Zabini looked wary but also strangely arrogant.

"Yes, Mr. Zabini. I saw right through you before my first lesson in this room, don't you remember?" Snape replied with a weary tone. In spite of his good intentions, the conversation wasn't going as he had hoped, and his anxiety was growing.

"So, my sensation was right that day. You tried to pry," the man concluded darkening.

"No," Snape replied quietly. "But your soul disclosed itself to me like an open book."

As if you wanted me to know, he was tempted to add; yet, strangely again, those words died on his lips before being voiced.

"Well, then you don't need explanations," Zabini said coldly. "I'll be short, Professor. I need one of the formulae contained in the Hobnook diary."

Albus Severus turned under the sheets. He couldn't sleep. The scene in the Potions Room was still tormenting him. Neither Professor Snape nor his father had thought to invite him to what seemed a celebration. Instead, Professor Snape had asked for Scorpius and thanked him and, though many of those present had tears in their eyes, everybody had looked so happy!

How was that? What had happened?

Headmistress McGonagall hadn't explained anything at dinner. She had just reassured the students that the morning earthquake had been the result of a very important experiment, and then she had re-introduced Deputy Flitwick: the older students had whooped and acclaimed, but the first year had remained indifferent at the news, though dutifully applauding. That tired old man was a stranger to them, although the majority knew his name.

In all that joy, Professor Finlay and Albus Severus had been the only ones who had looked very serious, if not definitely sad. The atmosphere was strange. Something was going to happen, something mysterious; and he, Albus Severus Potter, was going to be definitely cut out. Not even Professor Snape had wanted him around.

That was annoying.

And frustrating.

And very painful...

Suddenly, the boy decided that he couldn't wait a minute more. He rose and carefully...very carefully...he slipped out of his room.

The anxiety dormant in Snape's soul suddenly awakened into cold fear, and the portrait understood that he had always known what Zabini would ask. How terribly right Cornelia had been! Those formulae were a huge temptation for too many and a crushing responsibility for their guardian. And yet, Snape still hoped that his former student, now an adult and a colleague, would reconsider his actions and understand the foolishness of his request. So, he shaped his face in disdainful incredulity.

"You need *what*?"

"Please let me explain," Zabini crossed his arms, abandoning every pretence of cordiality. "I want to go to Italy. I want to meet my relatives and possibly be accepted by them. But my grandfather said that I must come back bringing something special with me, or I won't be admitted. My father was born into a very ancient and important family, but he left his parents before my birth and, by doing so, he denied his origins; therefore, he and his heirs were excluded from the family line. I must redress my father's faults, according to their tradition."

The man was panting slightly, and his hands kept clenching and unclenching in the effort of finding the words. "Well, as you know, I don't have any particular skill. Though Potions is the only knowledge I can manage, I have no special ability to create something valuable... But you have a whole book of formulae. I'm sure that there is one I can borrow."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Zabini, but you can't," Snape said firmly. "I'm very surprised by your request. You know very well that..."

"No, Professor!" Zabini burst out in cold fury. "I know that you are dead, and I am alive. And I know that I have been offered the chance of building myself a reputation again, but I will never reach this goal unless you give me just one of these formulae."

The man clenched his fists. "You have contributed to ruining my life, and now you deny me a solution? I don't think so, Professor."

There was a pause, and Zabini seemed to realise how the tension had risen uncontrollably; he inhaled deeply to regain control and forced his tone to switch from angry to rational.

"I'm not asking for fabulous secrets. Just one formula. Something that somebody else could discover, sooner or later. Or do you think that innovation was Hobnook's exclusively?"

Snape averted his eyes as if he were pondering that question. But in his heart, he was desperately wishing for somebody to interrupt their conversation, though he knew it was a vain hope. Zabini had pointed out that it was his turn to be on duty, therefore it was highly improbable that somebody else could be roaming the corridors at that hour. The portrait sighed silently. Too bad! That would have been a quick way to put an end to this disagreeable situation.

Zabini was speaking passionately now, piling reason on reason in the effort of being convincing.

"I ask you: what's the value in keeping those formulae concealed? Did you take a glance at them? I bet you didn't, and this makes the difference between you and me. You don't consider them the way a living being would do!"

His voice became insinuating. "How many of those potions could be used to heal humankind? After all, Cornelia didn't say that they should be kept secret, only that you are their guardian, the only one allowed to disclose them if necessary. And in fact, you have just returned to the world a potion that, if it had depended on her, would still hang in oblivion."

His voice became somewhat imploring. "Don't you think that something has already changed?"

"Mr. Zabini!" Snape interrupted him sharply. Time to stop that embarrassing plea. "You are wasting your time. I need a stronger reason. The recipes included in this book can develop into something extremely dangerous in the wrong hands."

"Ah! But you hadn't such scruples when you had to protect Lucius."

That was a wounding truth. The portrait felt his latent sense of guilt awaken and lowered his head.

"Perhaps I could help you create something that would be yours," he offered.

"Thank you, but I can't waste my time any longer. Furthermore, why toy with experiments when we have a complete range of options to choose from? In that diary, there is a potion that can extend life, one that induces metals' transmutation, one that can produce unlimited energy...."

Snape paled. "How do you know?"

"I have read the acts of the process against Hobnook. They were in Slughorn's archives. I consulted them for years while I worked for him. I hoped to find something that could help me and my mother. We were in desperate need of money at the time, but nobody was willing to lend us a Knut. So, I tried to find an escape. But, of course, I failed."

"This is why you stole rare ingredients in Horace's cupboards and sold them?" Snape couldn't refrain from asking in spite of the odd compassion pervading his heart. The glimpses he had been able to catch about Zabini's life had been tormenting him since the day they had met again. Many times he had thought to speak to his former student, but he hadn't been able to find a way. The subject was too painful and embarrassing, and at last, the portrait had given up.

Zabini raised his chin. "You saw it in my mind, I presume. Well, I will repay what I've taken as soon as I am back in my family."

Snape shook his head. "What you ask me is still too much power for just one man."

"But I will offer it to my family, I'm not going to keep it for me!"

"That would be unjust anyway."

"Unjust? Unjust?!" Zabini was growing furious. "Do you think that life is fair? Do you think that those who are born rich inherited their wealth because of merit? Do you think that all those who did something great acted fairly? And what about you, Professor? Did you always act correctly?"

Snape stiffened at that accusation. "I can't deny that I made wrong choices. But I paid for them my whole life. I don't want to put such a burden on anybody else's shoulders."

"I'm willing to take the risk, Professor. And you can't refuse your help. You owe me too much."

In another time, in his previous life, never had Zabini dared use such a tone with him. Feeling compassion turn into irritation, Snape crossed his arms. "No. I can't accept."

The man tilted his head and crossed his arms as well.

"Perhaps we can make a deal," he said slowly. "Would you believe me if I said that there is a spell that can bring back a spirit? I can offer you a new existence. Wouldn't you like to get out of that frame, Professor? Think before rejecting my offer."

Stunned, Snape looked at Zabini, and the man looked back at him with a meaningful smile.

"Ah, I see that now you are interested."

The second years' dormitory was dark and silent at that hour of the night. Al's heart was beating madly, but James was snoring quietly. Reassured, the boy checked the space around him. James' robes were negligently hung on a chair near his bed. Cautiously, Albus Severus put a hand in the pockets and found a wrinkled ball of fabric stuffed inside. *Trust James to keep his toys always at hand* he thought with a knowing smile as he stared at the precious object.

Could he borrow it for that night? Would he be caught if he dared? And what would his father say if...

Suddenly, a wave of exasperation seemed to fill him, pushing him forward. Well, he too was a Potter, and that night, the heirloom was to be his and his only! With a quick move, Al opened the cloak and determinedly wrapped himself into it, instantly disappearing from the world of visible beings.

Snape closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, lost in a whirl of emotions. Had he really been offered life...*real* life...again? Was Zabini sincere? The amazing thing was that, incredibly, he was. The portrait could still recognise when a man was telling the truth, and the chance he had been presented with was something unbelievable and unexpected. He lost himself in that astounding possibility.

Was the promise Snape had made to Cornelia worth a renunciation of such an opportunity? Would Cornelia blame him if he acceded to such offer? After all, wasn't disclosing a single formula an act of due justice to a man he had contributed to ruin?

For many minutes, Snape stood still, eyes closed, vibrating under the assault of the innumerable emotions that were tearing his soul and his mind. Then he saw the answer, and his head lowered.

"I can't," he whispered, bowing to his oath and feeling his heart lacerate under the pain of that decision.

Zabini curled his lips in contempt. "I knew you would refuse. As always, you only offer words that you can twist and bend at your wish. Very well! You don't leave me any other choice."

He took out his wand and lifted it.

"I'm impressed, Mr. Zabini," Snape said ironically. "Would you like to duel with me?"

"*Confino!*" Zabini replied with a cold smile.

The spell washed over the portrait, and Snape widened his eyes under its force; then, realising that something terrible had happened, he tentatively tried the frame around him and ended by hitting it frantically with his hands.

"Don't try too hard," Zabini sneered. "You are locked, Professor, with a very useful spell that my friend Marcello taught me. Of course, he didn't know *why* I asked him. So naïve, that man...."

Snape felt his anger grow. "I see. You deceived him, just like you did me now. So, what dirty trick have you planned next?"

Zabini looked incongruously offended. "Don't forget that you are forcing me. I knew that, foolishly loyal as you are, you would not talk. But I think I have a way to untie your tongue."

He raised his wand again. Understanding that something even more terrible was going to happen, Snape cried "No!"

"*Appello*", Zabini ordered, and Lily suddenly appeared in the little frame that Bernardi had painted for her. The girl looked confused and dizzy, as if she had been awakened abruptly.

"Severus?" she blinked and asked uncertainly, "What did...?"

"Lily! Run away! It's a trap!" Snape exclaimed, trying to warn her, but with another swift movement of his wand, Zabini also blocked her frame.

The portrait clenched his fists and faced the man.

"Let her go!" he roared.

Smiling, Zabini shook his head at that frustration. "No way, Professor. I saw you two cooing together in this room the night of Hogwarts' anniversary. It wasn't difficult to understand what was happening. Everybody knows the sad story of your unlucky love. You should have taken precautions but, of course, you didn't care."

He paused meaningfully. "Ah, love, love, what wouldn't we do for you?" he declaimed lightly, but his eyes had a cold glitter.

"Severus! What's happening?" Lily asked, looking at Zabini with a frown. "Why can't I leave this frame?"

"Because you are locked in, Madam Potter," Zabini said triumphantly. "But don't worry. I need a little help from Professor Snape, and he loves you too much to refuse. If he chooses to cooperate, then I will do you no harm."

"And how do you think to convince us?" Snape replied firmly, though feeling a cold fear pervade his fibres. "You seem to forget that we are pictures."

"Yes, you are pictures," Zabini agreed. His smile was growing more and more exultant. "But there are many ways to harm a portrait. My dear friend Marcello explained them to me. He was worried about your security, isn't it funny?"

"Well, as you said, we are pictures! Destroy us, and we will be painted again," Lily declared vehemently, entering the skirmish and openly defying him.

"Ah, that's exactly the problem." Zabini inclined his head in a bow, as if acknowledging her courage. "Did you know that, in the case of your being destroyed, your new picture would keep only memories of your earlier life? I mean, of course, the life you spent as a human being? All that happened in the middle, all your previous memories as a portrait, would be cancelled. Erased. Vanished."

Snape felt panic tighten his heart. No more memories meant that all that he had experienced, endured, and enjoyed in the last weeks would be removed from his mind. No more memories meant no more Albus Severus and no more Lily. But also no more Minerva, no more Neville, no more Lucius....

And finally, odd as it seemed, no more memories meant also no more Harry Potter and the soothing comfort of his words. Everything would be deleted as if it had never existed. The prospect was terrifying, and Snape paled, revealing his deep emotion.

Who would he be, once he had been recreated? What kind of life would be waiting for him in a new painted form?

"I see you begin to understand," Zabini said coldly.

Part XXXI

Chapter 31 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part XXXI

For the second time in that longest of days, Albus Severus slipped out of the Gryffindor common room. Immersed in a haunting silence, the corridor opened its yawning mouth before him; hesitant, the boy looked nervously around, trying to detect possible threats. It wasn't as easy as he had thought, now that it was night and dark. He took a deep breath. Slowly, cautiously, he moved a step.

"It doesn't matter. I can't accept," Snape replied, trying to sound confident in spite of his growing panic. Perhaps Zabini would be deterred by such an unconcerned attitude. But the man waved his hand nonchalantly.

"I know, I know. Still stupidly clinging to loyalty. Well, in this case, I suppose you won't mind if I destroy her portrait first."

Lily shivered and instinctively backed away. Zabini glanced at her; then he turned to speak to Snape in his imperturbable tone.

"You see, Professor, Marcello told me that for a portrait, the worst way to... depart is to be burnt. It hurts, you know? Physically hurts. That's why he was so worried about you. The vapour, the heat, the flames, the children... So many possibilities of an accident, he complained. And you see, it seems that he was right. This night, if you insist on being so stubborn, an accident will, regrettably, happen."

He shot the horrified Snape a meaningful glance; then he turned to Lily. "Well, my dear lady, ready to go?"

"Severus..." she rasped, eyes fixed on the fireplace. "Severus, please help me. I... I am scared. I have always been afraid of fire. This is horrible."

"Yes! But consider that you won't have any memory of that afterwards," Zabini commented lightly. "Absolutely no memories. Now come with me."

He took the little frame in his hands and considered her with a sad smile. "Such a lovely girl... What a pity! But relax; I'm sure that Potter will have a new portrait made after this unfortunate event."

Reacting in desperation, Snape exclaimed, "Even if we wanted to help you, how do you think you could keep the thing secret? You won't let us free, once you have got the formula. We can't trust you. One way or another, we are doomed."

Zabini straightened himself. "In spite of what you may think, I keep my word when I give it. This is why I'm so reluctant to make promises.

The man had instinctively placed Lily's portrait on a desk while speaking, and Snape kept talking, hoping to distract him until... until when? Until morning came? Ah, what a hopeless presumption! Yet, he could only try, and he put his whole heart into the attempt.

"And how would I justify myself, should somebody discover what happened?"

"You are a portrait. Leave these troubles to us living beings. But nobody will ever discover anything. You are too clever for that. I'm sure you will figure out a solution."

There was a long and meditative pause. Zabini was waiting, and Snape was hoping oh! so desperately hoping! that something would happen. His soul silently cried to the infinity: whoever may be listening, please, answer my call.

The stairs had been a frightening obstacle to overcome, but the long corridors, lost in darkness, were even more terrifying.

A creak, and Al froze, heart beating furiously in his chest. He closed his eyes and considered going back to his room, to his bed.

The boy breathed deeply. He was invisible, he reminded himself. Not even Peeves would see him. And then he had a wand. Thankfully, he had taken it. Furthermore, Professor Snape had taught him many useful defensive spells...

Another frightening creak, just at his left, and Al felt his hair stand up in fear.

Then his eyes narrowed in determination. No. He had the cloak. He had his wand. This was his chance. He would go on and speak with Professor Snape that same night.

"Well?" Zabini asked with a menacing glare.

"I need more time," Snape almost begged. His tongue had suddenly dried, and words were difficult to pronounce.

"I'm sorry to inform you that you have run out of it," Zabini advised him coldly.

Lily raised her head. "Don't worry about me, Severus," she whispered, and her eyes blinked. "I have already lost my life, and the one I lead now is only a simulation. I will still love you in another existence."

Snape stiffened. Probably she hadn't realised what she had said, as she was focusing on the horrible trial that was ahead of her. But she had unconsciously voiced her feelings, and he trembled, filled by something immense.

"I think you have had enough time to decide," Zabini declared, visibly irritated at her reply. "I assume you both prefer ending in ashes."

The man took Lily's portrait in his hands again; the girl gave a soft cry and closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Madam," Zabini commented. "Nothing personal. Put the blame on your stubborn friend here."

He turned to the fireplace. "*Incendio!*" he commanded, and the flames roared immediately.

Snape stared at the fire in horror. He couldn't sacrifice Lily for the second time. No! Not again!

But he had no power. He was only a picture, and trapped in his painted frame, his heart rebelled and cried against the misery of his fate and the renewed injustice of his existence. Frustration, anger, despair... Zabini seemed to guess all those unexpressed feelings and shook his head with a commiserating smile.

"Sometimes I think that you never belonged to Slytherin," he said. Then he watched Lily's portrait. "I'm sorry, Madam. Your time is over."

He lifted her picture, and Lily stiffened with a sharp gasp. Yet she stood still, and Snape couldn't but admire her courage. His strength crumbled.

"No! Wait! I have... I have a proposal," he offered, panting in cold sweat. How, how to gain time? How to reach another picture? How to save Lily without breaking his promise to Cornelia?

"You are a bit too cheeky, Professor." Zabini was clearly savouring his impending victory. "You are not in a position to trade. However, I'll indulge you. What is your proposal?"

He placed Lily's picture on a desk so that Snape could see her and crossed his arms with a slightly mocking smile. The girl raised her head to the portrait and, though evidently frightened, smiled at him, a touching, tremulous smile. Snape felt his heart melt in tenderness. Mutely, he returned her gaze, trying to express all his love.

Then he watched Zabini. How their roles had reversed! Now it was Snape's turn to beg, and he spoke, hoping to be convincing.

"There is something I can do. I will help you select a potion from the forbidden books in the Restricted Section. Some of them have been kept secret for centuries and..."

Zabini shook his head, and his smile became a sneer. "No. Every skilled potioneer could ask for an authorisation to consult those volumes. I need something unique. Sorry, Professor, but my request isn't negotiable."

A mortal pause followed. Lily was breathing slowly, following that crucial exchange, afraid to interrupt that battle of wills. And, stubbornly, Snape tried again.

"Mr Zabini, these are powerful formulae. You won't deceive anyone. As you said, you aren't particularly skilled. Who will believe you?"

But the portrait regretted immediately his question, as Zabini burst out in rage. "There is no escape according to you! My early existence has been spent in failure, my current existence isn't worth a try. What should I do, then? Enlighten me, Professor! Should I throw away my last chance in order to spare your conscience? You weren't so damn scrupulous when you were alive!"

Then his eyes widened in understanding. "You are trying to distract me," he said, and his features hardened. "This is not a game, I warn you. Open that book and obey my orders. Otherwise, she is lost."

The room was so very near now. It had been a long trip, and Al congratulated himself, preparing to take off his cover and imagining the scene. Professor Snape would be very surprised to see him there at that hour. But what if, on the contrary, he had got angry? Al swallowed. He hadn't thought of such possibility, and his determination wavered.

Then his mind automatically registered a noise. There was something strange going on in the room. Voices...angry voices...were speaking on the other side of the wall. The boy chewed his lip, torn between indecision and curiosity.

Better keep the cloak on, he finally decided, and put his hand on the doorknob.

The door opened with a startling creak, and Zabini reacted at surprising speed, whirling on his heels to face the unknown danger. But the dark rectangle under the doorframe was empty, and only the shadows cast by the tremulous light of the torches met his gaze, intertwining their shapes in a bizarre dance on the corridor's wall.

Stifling a curse, Zabini lifted his wand and muttered a sharp command. Obediently, the door closed again. Reassured, the man turned to look at Snape. For a moment, quite incongruously, he seemed to expect the portrait to share his relief.

"So, Professor, what have you decided?" The last interruption had definitely settled his determination, and once more, Lily shivered in her frame.

Snape hesitated, his expression showing the pain he was enduring. His eyes roamed the room, darting from object to object as if asking for help, and finally rested on Lily.

He had never thought that his love could turn against him also in this new existence. But this was a terrible consideration. He was still dangerous to the ones he loved. Lily was at risk because of him. She had asked him to help her, but he had failed her again. He wasn't worthy of her love. He wasn't worth the second chance life had presented him.

"Lily..." he whispered and lowered his head, searching for her gaze. Their eyes locked in a last exchange, and he tried to convey all his horror and his desperation for the choice he was obliged to make. She seemed to perceive his unspoken message and nodded, as if encouraging him. He felt his heart annihilate in pain.

Yet, there was still something he could offer her. He looked at Zabini.

"Destroy me first," he asked hoarsely. "Destroy me first, because I'm not going to give you a formula in any case."

A long silence followed that statement. Zabini's face darkened in disappointment. For a moment, he seemed to struggle with himself.

"As you wish," he declared at last. "Good-bye, Professor!"

He lifted his wand with a deliberately slow movement. Snape clenched his fists, waiting to feel his fibres burn under a mortal curse. Lily bit her lips, restraining a cry of fear. The world stood still for an interminable moment. Then Zabini's control unexpectedly collapsed.

"I can't do this..." he breathed, widening his eyes in a sort of painful horror and lowering the wand that was still vibrating convulsively in his hand. His face altered, and for a moment, he looked vulnerable and scared.

Then he burst out in desperation. "What should I do to convince you? Those formulae were my last hope!"

Tears of frustration wetted his eyes. Surprised and ashamed, Zabini took away his glasses, rubbing his face ferociously. He was evidently shocked by the intensity of his reaction: the man, always so cold and reserved, was shaking under the force of those many contrasting emotions.

"Why don't you want to help me, damn you...why?" he accused.

Then, helpless and angry, he violently dropped his wand on the same desk where Lily's portrait was waiting in anxiety. Unable to see what was happening behind her, the girl stiffened at the loud thud. But Zabini, confused and distraught, collapsed onto a chair. Burying his face in his hands, he tried to recover his control. The man had obviously bluffed till that moment, and the portrait felt relieved and furious at the same time.

"Mr Zabini," Snape began and stopped, not really knowing how to handle the situation. The man shook his head, refusing to listen. Then his pride awakened again.

"I may be unable to destroy you," he panted, rising from the chair in evident turmoil, "but I can't let you reveal this story."

"Mr Zabini!" Snape exclaimed again. The two men stared at each other in challenge. Then something totally unexpected happened.

"Hey!" a piping voice interposed, coming from nowhere. "What's going on here?"

"Al!" Lily cried, recognising her grandson.

Reacting in panic, Zabini stretched to grab his wand and face the invisible intruder, but in doing so, he involuntarily hit Lily's portrait. The picture fell on the floor, and with a sharp crash, its frame divided into many irregular pieces. Snape felt a renewed energy run in his fibres: the locking spell had been broken, and he lifted his wand in exultation.

Al chose exactly that moment to unveil himself and attack. Two flashes of light filled the room, coming from both the portrait and the boy. The double magic was incredibly powerful and caught Zabini unprepared. The man was blasted mercilessly to the ground while his wand rolled on the floor.

Escaping from her broken frame, Lily entered Snape's picture and flung herself into his arms.

Now the room was quiet again. Snape hugged Lily tightly and murmured soothing words while she sobbed softly. Her closeness was simply intoxicating, and he lost himself in that delightful emotion.

Under the portrait, eyes widened in shock, Albus Severus was watching the motionless form lying at his feet.

"Is he dead? Did I kill him?" he asked, fear trembling in his voice. He hadn't realised what had really happened. Still entranced in the awesome sensation of holding Lily in the circle of his arms, Snape reassured him.

"No, Mr Potter. Soon he'll be well again."

Al seemed relieved. Then he glanced at the couple in the picture and immediately averted his eyes. Reddening in embarrassment, he bent to pick up Zabini's wand and glasses and put them carefully on a chair.

"How lucky! They are not broken," he commented lightly and turned his shoulders to Snape, pretending to be extremely interested in his shoes.

But the two adults were too absorbed to notice this tactful retreat.

"Lily," Snape whispered, kissing her on her hair. She relaxed in his arms, and he felt an overwhelming happiness immediately followed by an immense desolation. Their time was running out so quickly! Soon Zabini would recover, and Snape didn't want her to witness that encounter. He caressed her hair, trying to find the words to express his feelings and the strength to accept their impending separation. But she anticipated him.

"I am sorry," she murmured with a trembling voice. "I have been cruel to you."

"No, you have been sincere," he replied softly. His heart was beating madly, savouring every instant of her closeness. But she wasn't for him, and he knew that she would never be. Even though they had met again, their lives would never and could never join as he had hoped when they were both living. He had changed. She had remained unaltered. And unaltered she would remain, as long as her new painted form would allow her.

A memory. A living memory. And nothing more.

Something detached from his soul. The pain was unbearable, and he gritted his teeth to resist. Unaware of his thoughts, she smiled at him before resting her head on his chest. "I'm glad we are friends again," she whispered. Her cheek was warm against his heartbeats, and he trembled in desire.

No. She was forbidden.

"Lily, I must ask you to go home and forget what has happened this night," he asked, disentangling himself from her embrace with an immense effort. "Please. I need to talk to Zabini and to Al."

"But why can't I stay?" She looked at him in utter surprise. Then her eyes met his adoring eyes, and she perceived the uselessness of her words. Neither of them belonged to the other. And though he loved her with such incredible, unceasing devotion, the immensity of his love was itself condemning them to separation. She sighed softly.

"I understand. Farewell, then, Severus," she said quietly.

She went away, and he watched her go, feeling a part of his soul leave forever with her.

Snape inhaled deeply, trying to recover his composure. In a way, he was oddly grateful to Zabini for having allowed a reconciliation with Lily. In another way, he was extremely angry for such a filthy betrayal coming from one of his ex-students and House fellows. His pride asked for compensation.

"Albus Severus," the portrait ordered. "You must help me now. Professor Zabini needs to recover, so that I can talk to him before somebody else comes."

Al nodded. His eyes had continued to anxiously scrutinize the lifeless body at his feet while the two adults were talking and bidding each other goodbye. But, though he had tried to spare them his curiosity, he had seen his grandmother going away without a smile and had noticed Professor Snape's sad, exhausted face. His heart had twisted in sympathy; young as he was, he had nevertheless understood the oddity of that painful link. But now he was feeling nervous and worried for a different reason. What had Professor Zabini been doing before? What would Professor Zabini do as soon as he awakened? Would he harm Professor Snape? Would he punish the insolent boy who had blasted him?

Snape's voice put him out of his misery. The portrait seemed to understand his worries perfectly. And, suddenly, Al remembered... many years before, Professor Snape too had been hit by a spell performed by three students, and the boy knew their names very well. But that had been the beginning of something horrible. Was that perhaps the case? Al felt guilty and spoke in a tiny voice.

"I am very sorry, Professor. I didn't mean to..."

"Mr Potter!" Snape cut him off. "You have done your best. Don't worry, nobody will punish you. Now lift your wand and say *Enervate!*"

The boy repeated the spell. Then, fascinated and frightened, he watched Zabini shiver, blink, and moan, and finally try to get up. Gingerly, Albus Severus helped him to sit on the floor. Zabini massaged his head, sighing softly, and the boy understood that it wasn't the spell that hurt the man, but mostly his wounded pride.

Zabini looked around as if searching for something, and Al returned his glasses to him. Impatiently, Zabini grabbed them and put them on his nose. Then he glared at the boy, who was also hesitantly offering him the wand.

"Keep it, Potter. Your father is going to confiscate it, anyway," he said bitterly. Then he got up, dusted his robes, and straightened to face the portrait.

"I suppose you called the Aurors," he said with forced calm and lifted his glasses again to massage the bridge of his nose. Snape didn't reply, but tilted his head and cast the man a piercing look.

"I hope you feel better now," he said deliberately. Zabini took a deep breath.

"Yes, better indeed," he said sulkily. "Come on, Professor, don't toy with me. Where is Headmistress McGonagall? I think it's better if I resign before being arrested. You know, saving the good name of the school..."

He trailed off. "This is really my last failure," he whispered.

"I haven't called anybody, Mr Zabini," Snape replied sharply, irritated at that emotional display. "You didn't actually do anything irreparable; you just broke a frame... damage that you can easily repair, I suppose."

With a sigh, Zabini took his wand from Al. "*Reparo*," he ordered, and the pieces of the frame instantly joined. He turned to watch Snape.

"I'll unlock you now," Zabini offered.

"Thank you, but the locking spell vanished as soon as you broke the frame," Snape said and added meaningfully, "And you should have noticed it before."

Zabini gulped and replied nervously, "So, what's the sentence you reserve for me? Expulsion? Arrest? Or are you going to personally handle my punishment and hex me now? I suppose you..."

"Mr Zabini!" Snape cut him off warningly, and Zabini shifted under that gaze.

"Sorry," he muttered and lowered his head.

Snape crossed his arms. "Now, let's speak seriously. Mr Potter, please sit. I need a witness, and you are the only one available at the moment."

The boy backed a few steps, then took a seat and curled on it, eyes widened in anxiety and curiosity. Evidently uneasy, Zabini crossed his arms as well and glanced nervously at the boy.

"Do you think that his presence is really necessary?" he asked the portrait and immediately flinched under Snape's sharp glance.

The portrait bent to look at him. "Mr Zabini, I assumed you were a reasonable man. Even more, I assumed you were an intelligent man. I remember you as a gifted student with a quick brain. How could you possibly end up with such an idiotic plan?"

Zabini shrugged like a sulky child.

"What does it matter now? Let's call the Aurors and put an end to this story!"

"I'm not going to do anything like that, Mr Zabini... if I can avoid it."

The man widened his eyes. "You... you are not..." he stammered with an incredulous expression.

"I said *if I can*. Please pay attention. I believe in second chances, though it seems to me that you have wasted all those you have been given till now. You said that you would like to join your family."

Zabini licked his lips, looking definitely confused. "It's true. But without those formulae..." His voice became hopeful. "Have you perhaps changed your mind?"

"Mr Zabini! Do I look demented? Let's examine what *your* mind hasn't found yet. I'm sure there is a solution that you still haven't considered. What exactly did your grandfather ask?"

"But how could you..."

"Mr Zabini! Do answer my question."

The man shrugged. "It's not difficult. I have listened to his words so many times that I have learned them by heart." His lips curled in a bitter smile. "I'm going to have them printed on my grave."

He straightened and began to recite. "What was stolen must be returned. What was broken must be mended. What was stained must be cleaned. Life for life, knowledge for knowledge, trust for trust. Treasures are hidden in unexpected places, but there is a treasure that you alone can find. Let it be the proof that my trust hasn't been misplaced. From your choice, I will know if you are worthy to carry our name."

Snape frowned. "A riddle, I would say. What made you think that a potion could be the answer?"

"Because he spoke of treasures. I don't have any treasure except my knowledge." He shrugged again. "Though I wouldn't define it as a treasure."

"Perhaps your grandfather was speaking of your father. Do you have any of his belongings?"

"No. I had thought of such a possibility as well, but my father left Italy with just his wand and his robes. I have nothing of his, not even a picture. I have also asked my mother."

He swallowed in uneasiness. "Though she is not... she is not completely herself lately," he concluded.

Snape inclined his head at those words, watching Zabini pointedly. Unexpectedly, another piece joined the visual puzzle that was whirling chaotically in his mind: An old, shattered, grey-haired woman was lying in a bed, eyes half-open and head swaying in a drunken stupor, a bottle of champagne on her nightstand... In spite of their current financial troubles, Zabini's mother seemed to have not renounced the expensive habits of her past golden days.

The portrait took a deep breath; Zabini stiffened, and his face hardened. Yet, the man didn't avert his eyes, but kept staring at Snape and continued to speak with a challenging look.

"My mother told me that she had married my father because she loved him. But he was poor and couldn't raise me properly. This is why she chose to separate. Then my father was murdered, so she decided to marry again. I had several stepfathers. My mother always chose wealthy but very aged husbands. She didn't want to be involved sentimentally anymore."

He paused and crossed his arms again. "Well, she was wise. We never lacked anything this way." He raised his chin in a bold attitude. "I had a wonderful life before coming to Hogwarts."

Snape snorted. The gloomy vision of a small child waiting in a ballroom while his mother laughed and danced had suddenly entered his mind, followed by an even gloomier sequence of images: the same child, now older, sitting lonely and sad in his room; a boy dining in a great hall full of lights, sharing his meal with only a house-elf as a companion; an embittered teenager greeting an old man who smiled sarcastically in return; a beautiful woman crying and yelling while the Aurors searched her house; and finally, the same woman, her face now a pathetic reminder of her previous beauty, hitting her fists against a door and sobbing under the indifferent gazes of those passing by.

"I see," Snape said coldly and glanced at Albus Severus. The child was sitting quietly on his chair, hands clasped in his lap, probably too far to hear what the two men were saying. The portrait breathed slowly. Those images had a disagreeable effect on him.

"Why didn't you ask me to help you in this search?" he finally asked Zabini.

"Because you have been blatantly favouring Gryffindors since the first day you returned. How could I trust you?"

Snape sighed. His previous anger and compassion had slowly turned into an intense bitterness. The man under his frame was even more pitiable than Lucius Malfoy. Life and sorrows hadn't taught him anything except mistrust, anger, and slyness. And perhaps Snape, too, had played a part in creating such a miserable result.

The portrait spoke quietly. "I have learned to see people instead of their Houses in my new existence."

"But you never said this to me," Zabini retorted. "You only seemed ready to criticise, each time I spoke."

Snape hardened his voice too. "And you lied to me from the beginning."

The two men glared at each other. Then Snape sighed again. "But this discussion is useless now. Think, Mr Zabini. What does your grandfather know about you?"

Wrong-footed at that unexpected change in conversation, the man replied pensively, "I don't believe he personally knows anything. But he said that one of my uncles kept an eye on me during these years."

"Ah! Then perhaps your uncle noticed something. Do you have any special skill in something that doesn't regard your studies?"

Zabini looked at him agape.

"I have received a formal education... I can dance; I can speak two foreign languages besides English, though unfortunately not Italian; I can select a wine... But I don't think that these can be considered treasures!"

"Yet you must have something special! Your grandfather said there is a treasure that you alone can find."

"Well, perhaps he was only trying to delude me..."

"Nonsense, Mr Zabini. Why would he waste his time in sending you such a complicated message?"

"Perhaps he just wanted to tease me." Zabini was beginning to get angry, and his voice rose. "Perhaps he hates me because of my father."

"Perhaps he wanted you to find something you didn't know you have yet!" Snape replied sharply, and Zabini reacted in fury.

"Well, then, perhaps he asked for something impossible!"

"Perhaps he just meant *you*," the gentle voice of Albus Severus interposed calmly. The two adversaries turned to stare at him with a stunned expression. Zabini let his anger explode.

"Mr Potter, this is none of your business!" he burst out in exasperation and looked at Snape.

"I hope you will Oblivate him, Professor," he asked, clenching his fists. "These are personal, private matters! We cannot trust a mere boy to keep a secret!"

But Snape knew better. He had experienced the astounding resources of his little friend too many times. So he silenced Zabini with a severe look and asked, "Please explain, Mr Potter. What did you mean with these words?"

The boy looked embarrassed. "Well, I was only thinking of a story...."

His eyes seemed to ask for permission, and Snape nodded while Zabini snorted in irritation.

"It's... it's just a novel, you know. An old king had three sons and wanted to choose his heir from among them, so he asked them to bring him treasures to prove their worth; the one who would bring him the most precious gift would become king after him."

In spite of their nervousness, the men were listening, and Albus Severus felt encouraged by their attention. "So the first son came back bringing gold and jewels, the second son found rare books and fabrics, and finally the youngest son brought back nothing but himself."

Zabini rolled his eyes. "So?" he urged in impatience.

"The king asked his youngest son why he had come back with empty hands, and the boy said that he had only his love to offer, the most precious gift he was able to find. His brothers laughed at him, but the king was happy and said that *that* was the most important treasure indeed. So the third son became king after him..."

Al trailed off and watched the two adults in concern. Zabini was smiling with a scornful expression.

"Thank you for your suggestion, Mr Potter," he said sarcastically. "But unfortunately we don't live in fairy tales!"

Snape spoke sternly. "I don't think that Mr Potter's intuition is wrong."

"Don't tell me that you really believe this nonsense!" Zabini was shocked. "Why should my grandfather put me to such a test, if the answer is so easy?"

"It isn't so easy," Snape replied. "Neither of us had even thought of such a solution. I think that your grandfather has been very clever. He probably doesn't want to be disappointed again. Don't forget that he said that your answer would show him who you really are."

Silence fell while Zabini mulled over those words, and Snape smiled bitterly. It was such an astounding solution, but too peculiar for a man who had been raised in indifference and distrust. How could he perceive such simple, loving truths?

And, in fact, Zabini seemed deeply surprised.

"So, you do really believe this rubbish?" he asked incredulously.

"I believe that you are missing your chance again, Mr Zabini. And I'm afraid you won't be granted another."

"I will think about this," Zabini said, looking suddenly exhausted. He hesitated. "May I leave now? Am I free?"

"Yes, but I expect you to make a decision by tomorrow. Either you go to Italy, or you resign and find a new job. In any case, you must leave Hogwarts."

"Your conditions are harsh, but I can't oppose them. I'll talk to you in a few hours then," the man agreed in a resigned tone.

He turned and went to the door; then he stopped and reluctantly came back.

"Thank you for saving my reputation, Professor," he said gruffly. "I only hope that Potter here won't..."

He didn't conclude, because Snape had furrowed his brows in one of his best scowls.

"Good night," Zabini said and left immediately.

"Do you think that Professor Zabini will go to Italy?" Al asked the portrait as soon as they were alone. Then, exhausted by the late hour and the many emotions, he yawned a gigantic yawn.

"Sorry, sir," he apologised, rubbing his eyes.

"You should go to bed now," Snape replied gently. "Better if I guide you back, so you won't fall asleep in a corridor."

Al smiled gratefully. The boy and the portrait walked silently side by side, Snape passing fluidly from picture to picture and Al struggling to stay awake. Finally, they reached the Fat Lady, who was snoring quietly in her frame. There, Snape stopped and inclined his head in a greeting.

"Good night, Mr Potter," he said. "And thank you again."

"Good night, Professor," Al said, swaying in haziness. "It has been... interesting."

Snape smiled and lifted his wand, murmuring something.

"Mr Potter?" he asked then. "Why, exactly, did you come to see me this night?"

"Oh!" The boy struggled to remember. Strangely, all his memories seemed to have vanished. Al blinked repeatedly and finally found an answer. He smiled warmly. "Because I thought you might like a visit."

It was dawn. The night had left, and the first rosy rays were colouring the walls. A soft knock broke the silence of the Potions room, and Snape raised his head.

"Come in!" he said and smiled bitterly at that odd situation. Who had ever cared to ask for permission to a portrait?

Then he felt worried again. Who could it be at that early hour? Perhaps Zabini, already coming with an answer?

No, it was... it looked like...

"Professor Finlay!" the portrait exclaimed in surprise.

"Professor Snape," was the polite reply.

The older man went to stand under the frame and clasped his hands. He looked uneasy, and his words came out with uncharacteristic awkwardness.

"I talked with Headmistress McGonagall this night. And with Albus Dumbledore. He was my Headmaster almost sixty years ago. I have always respected him. More...admired him."

Snape didn't comment, and after a quick glance, Finlay continued tensely.

"Well, as I said, I had a chat with both of them. Then I thought. I spent the whole night thinking. It took me a long time to decide, but finally I am here. I would like to speak with you, too, now."

Snape felt a flicker of hope.

"I'm very glad for your decision, Professor Finlay," he said.

"Gerald," the man quietly interrupted him, and an uncertain smile opened on his face. "The name is Gerald, Severus."

Part XXXII

Chapter 32 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of J.K. Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

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Part XXXII

It was Christmas morning, and it was snowing quietly. The sounds of the world were muffled in that immense whiteness, and the castle and its surroundings looked like an illustration in a book.

Severus Snape, former Headmaster of Hogwarts and current Potions teacher, was trying to catch glimpses of that wonderful show through the few window panes of his room that were not coloured. He sighed, crossing his arms. A stinging nostalgia was invading his heart.

A light knock at the door awakened him from that wistful reverie. Neville Longbottom entered, face brightened by a friendly smile.

"Hello, Professor Snape!" he said, raising a smoking mug in a greeting.

"Good morning, Neville," Snape replied without thinking, and Longbottom's smile widened at that unconscious slip. Realising what he had just said, the portrait tilted his head and disguised his confusion under a question.

"What are you drinking?"

"Hot chocolate!" Neville said enthusiastically and immediately proposed, "would you like to have one too?"

Without waiting for an answer, he lifted his wand and quickly muttered a spell. A fragrant duplicate of his mug magically appeared on Snape's desk.

"Looks... good," Snape said cautiously, unable to hide the greedy twinkle in his eyes. Hot chocolate was a pleasure he had discovered after coming to Hogwarts, as his family rarely indulged in such prodigality.

"It tastes good too," Neville replied. "Try it."

Snape lifted the mug and sipped the hot liquid. Delight filled his fibres, and he silently thanked Horace Slughorn for teaching the Exchange Spell to the staff, thus allowing the portrait to share some of the joys of the living.

"So, how is the morning going? Got any presents?" he then gruffly asked, concealing satisfaction under grumpiness. Neville smiled.

"Oh, many. But personally, I think I've received the best one from my wife. Hanna is expecting." His radiant smile suddenly turned into a blush. "The potion you taught me worked very well for her problem." He lowered his mug and his head in embarrassment. "I had given up hopes, you know. So many years of marriage and no children."

Even more embarrassed, though strangely pleased, Snape shook his head and awkwardly said, "Congratulations."

"Thank you," Neville hastened to reply, looking at his shoes. Silence fell, and after a moment, the man went near the window.

"It's snowing," he announced merrily, opening the glass panes. "Want to see the view?"

Snape nodded; he had secretly hoped to be offered that chance, but proud as he was, he didn't want to ask directly and thus admit his limitation. With the ease of long practise, he entered a smaller frame. Gently, Neville took it in his hands and placed it on the windowsill. Then the man crossed his arms and leaned against the cold marble so that his head was level with Snape's.

"Great sight, huh?" he commented. Again Snape nodded in silence, unable to express the many emotions that were flowing in his heart. He was enjoying a view, one of the sights he had loved most in his school years, and with a friend at his side. Wouldn't everybody call that moment "life"?

After some minutes spent in contemplation, the portrait spoke again. "Any news of Mr Zabini?"

Neville turned to the frame. "Minerva got a letter yesterday, with his wishes for Christmas. It seems that his trip to Italy has been successful. His skills as a potioneer are very much appreciated there."

A pause followed; then Neville added with a wink, "Zabini sent a fine selection of Italian sweets and wines, via special delivery. Ten great owls were necessary to bring the package here."

A curious spark lit in his eyes. "He even shipped a personal gift for Professor Slughorn, from the delicatessen of the city he lives in now. There was a sealed envelope in the package, with the request to deposit it as soon as possible at Gringotts... Peculiar, don't you think?"

The man seemed to expect a reaction from Snape, but the portrait kept an inexpressive face, so Neville shrugged and concluded, "Well, it must be a private matter. Professor Slughorn helped Zabini a lot before he was hired here, so I imagine that he is grateful for that."

Snape smiled a bittersweet smile. He knew what was in that envelope and why Zabini had sent it to Hogwarts instead of depositing it directly in the bank. It was a message also to Snape. He had kept his promise after all and was returning what he had illicitly taken during his apprenticeship. The thought was comforting, though the portrait imagined that, more than gratitude, it was a matter of pride for his fellow Slytherin.

"So," he heard his voice say, "What's the program today?"

Neville brightened again. "Oh, Professor Finlay is having a great time organising the celebration. The sad thing is that this year there are no students in the castle, only a few teachers. I'll be leaving immediately after lunch, so he had better speed things up, if he wants an audience."

Snape nodded distractedly, his mind filled by new soothing memories. Gerald Finlay was now definitely a member of the staff. After their morning talk so many weeks before, Finlay had been approached by Filius Flitwick. The former Deputy wanted to remain at Hogwarts, but he felt too tired and old to continue teaching. Minerva had joined Filius in asking Finlay to stay as Charms professor. They didn't need to beg him too much to make him accept.

The portrait smiled absent-mindedly, but Neville seemed to have followed Snape's train of thought because he was looking at the man in the frame with a mischievous expression.

"A nice ending for our adventure," he commented, lifting his mug as if making a toast. Snape didn't reply, but took his cup in his hands and watched it as if he were reading the future in the brown liquid.

"Any other remarkable news?" he asked, affecting indifference.

"Minerva says that there will be presents for everyone today and also for you," Neville replied and winked again.

Surprised and curious, Snape found himself glancing at the door in expectation. For the very first time, he was enjoying Christmas.

Neville had left, and Snape was back in his frame, once more in a meditative mood, when another knock made him startle again. Immediately, he straightened his head, preparing to meet his new visitors. He wouldn't admit it, but he was extremely pleased to receive visits that day, and he felt excited, like a child.

Impatiently, he watched the door open and saw Minerva enter with her measured pace. But his brows lifted in surprise when he saw the other people coming along with her. Firstly, he recognised Flitwick; then, immediately after, Harry Potter, and for a moment, his heartbeat grew faster at that unexpected arrival. Finally, he noticed that there was also Marcello Bernardi, leading an unknown and very old wizard dressed with refined elegance. The group went under the frame, and everybody smiled quietly, each one waiting for the other to break the silence.

"Merry Christmas, Severus," Minerva finally greeted him, and her voice vibrated with such emotion that Snape felt his eyes prickle.

"Today is a very special day," she continued, "And we would like to celebrate it with you. You have done wonders for the wizarding world, so we have tried to find a nice way to say thank you."

Snape's tongue was suddenly pasted against his palate. Minerva turned to Marcello Bernardi, who was clasping and unclasping his hands nervously.

"Well, the one who had the best idea, I must acknowledge, has been Mr Bernardi. Of course, he knows things that we couldn't even suspect about pictures, so we are very grateful for his decision to share this knowledge with us. As you see, he brought here a very special guest. But I think it's time to let him speak and explain."

Bernardi was evidently tense.

"Merry Christmas, Professor Snape," he began, "first of all, please let me introduce my grandfather, Tomaso Bernardi. He is the chief of my family, and..."

The man fumbled in search of words then concluded miserably, "Do you remember what I told you about him?"

Suddenly, Snape felt incredibly agitated, anxious, and hopeful at the same time. He tried to say something, but his voice didn't come out. Tomaso Bernardi looked at the portrait and smiled, raising a hand to stop his grandson. His blue eyes twinkling under the white brows, and the glasses on his nose made him look bizarrely similar to Dumbledore, though physically he resembled Slughorn more: short, round, and bald under the marvellous hat adorned with continuously changing colours.

"Professor Snape," he said with a strong Italian accent, "I'm honoured to meet you. Please forgive my English. I used to speak it when I was young because I spent some years in England, working at St Mungo's, like my grandson here. But alas, it was more than a hundred and twenty years ago, as my friend Albus will certainly remember, and now I miss the practice."

The old man had a pleasant, educated voice, and as he spoke, he turned to glance at a picture to his left. Surprised, Snape saw Dumbledore bow politely in response. He hadn't noticed that Albus had joined them in the room. A new, undefined emotion began to whirl in his mind and his heart: what was going to happen?

The elder Bernardi seemed to perceive his anxiety. "Don't worry, Professor. Instead, let me tell you a story. My grandson Marcello, whom you have honoured with your friendship, came to see me in Italy a week ago. He is a good boy, the most affectionate amongst my grandchildren, and I love him very much. So, as every year, I asked him what present he would like for Christmas. Now, just imagine my surprise when he said that he didn't want anything for himself, but he wanted a present for somebody else. I asked him to explain, and he told me that he had met a great man who was now living in a frame."

The man paused. In spite of the simple, almost grandfatherly, way he was telling his tale, the silence was complete. Everybody was hooked, and Bernardi continued.

"Marcello didn't need to tell me the whole story. Even in Italy, the name of Severus Snape is very well known and respected."

The old wizard inclined his head at these words, and automatically, everybody imitated his gesture.

"Now, you are probably wondering why this babbling old man has come all this way to meet you on a Christmas morning. Well, the answer is to bring you that special gift my grandson would like to offer you. A gift that you would probably call *life*."

Severus felt his head spin, his thoughts grow confused, and an intense emotion twist his heart, almost painfully. Everybody around him was reacting to that announcement with different expressions. Flitwick, Harry, and Minerva had evidently been informed before, so they didn't look surprised, but awed and grateful, while Marcello Bernardi seemed extremely agitated, as if he had been caught in wrongdoing.

"Please understand me well," his grandfather continued. "What I can offer you isn't, of course, *real* life. This is a very ancient magic that was developed in my country a long time ago. For centuries, Italy has been divided into many little states that were always warring one with the other. Courageous or cunning men continuously conceived obscure plots and ploys to help the various rulers, or to conspire against them. But as a logical consequence of living in ages where wars raged, and there was no medical assistance, some of these precious men sometimes died, and yet, they were desperately needed by their armies or by their lords..."

The old wizard's voice lowered to a whisper.

"So, centuries and centuries ago, the ancient Master Painters developed a method: When an important man died...whether he was a captain, an architect, a philosopher or a political counsellor...a picture was painted, capturing his soul. Then a very particular spell was performed that allowed the soul to leave the painting and be reincarnated for a limited time in a body."

Bernardi glanced at those around him. Everybody was holding his breath and the wizard continued solemnly.

"This is very obscure magic, something very, very close to the Dark Arts. When you hear stories about those ancient philosophers or scientists who were said to have discovered the secret of eternal life... well, that's not exactly the truth. They were simply kept in an artificial existence for as long as it was needed."

Bernardi shot a meaningful look at his companions. "Of course, this is a secret."

At the immediate nod of those present, he turned to look at Snape, who was listening, pale and silent, in his frame.

"So, this is the experiment we will try today, if you agree, Professor Snape." Bernardi's face was smiling again, but his eyes were grave. "Needless to say, this kind of magic can be extremely hazardous for those who perform it. My grandson knows the spell, and he wanted to be the one pronouncing the words, but I have forbidden him. I am the one in charge of the secret, and I am the one who will perform it. Marcello will have his chance at the right time."

His gaze rested on his grandson and became softer. "But I agreed to have his assistance."

Minerva watched Snape with an imploring look. "I hope we haven't made a mistake, Severus," she murmured, as if they were alone in the room. "I imagine how upsetting this revelation must be to you."

The old witch took a deep breath. Snape was still wordless. Emotion was silencing his voice while his mind tried to rationalise what he had just heard. Hesitantly, Minerva continued her speech.

"Please, take your time, Severus. The decision must be all yours. However, there are still things that Master Bernardi needs to explain before you decide, and he said that you are the only one allowed to hear those words. So..."

Like the younger Bernardi, she suddenly seemed to be at loss. "Perhaps you will... maybe we should..."

Harry Potter intervened with the new authoritative voice that still sounded so surprising to Snape.

"Merry Christmas, Professor. I see from your expression that you are wondering why I am here today, so I'll explain it immediately. Mr Bernardi has obviously asked the Aurors for official permission to perform this magic, and I have agreed to supervise the ceremony. As you can imagine, the whole ritual is going to be secret."

The man paused, then concluded softly, "I have examined the procedure diligently, and I'm sure that it will work. I can't but hope that you will agree to hear what Maestro Bernardi has to say."

Flitwick nodded eagerly, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder to steady himself. The old wizard's eyes were filled with tears, and Snape felt his emotions turn into an overwhelming sensation. He lowered his head and whispered, "I am ready to listen."

Minerva and Filius left the room, while Harry and Marcello retired to a corner, leaving the elder Bernardi free to speak. Even Albus Dumbledore discreetly moved to a painting at the opposite side of the room. Alone under the frame, the old Italian painter looked intensely moved.

"What an incredible experience!" he murmured. "Marcello had told me, but I couldn't believe it. I have spent my whole life amongst pictures; I thought I knew everything, and I had seen everything, but I was wrong. I have never perceived such a power coming from a portrait. Marcello says that you are even able to perform magic."

Snape nodded, and then he pointed his wand at a chair in the room and made it levitate. Bernardi watched it, then shook his head in a sort of sad admiration.

"This makes my task even more painful," he whispered, and he crossed his arms.

"Professor Snape, there are a few things you should know before we can proceed. Please be advised that I won't go on with the rite unless you want me to and only after you have heard the implications."

The old man suddenly looked concerned. "This is a very delicate subject: please accept my apologies in advance if my words should hurt you. I came here to help. Yet sometimes, the remedy can be more painful than the affliction it's meant to heal."

Tense, Snape could only nod his consent. Bernardi glanced at the men at his back and lowered his voice.

"Your soul has been trapped, Professor, but not by a spell, as happened in ancient times. Your spirit is still locked in that frame because your departure from earth has been premature and abrupt. Your soul can't leave this world because there is something that doesn't allow it to leave. You have been very dedicated to your mission. Do you feel perhaps that there is something you haven't completed yet? Or perhaps you simply feel defrauded? There are many possible questions, but you are the only one that can give them an answer. Hopefully, the gift I'm going to offer you will allow you to understand what troubles your spirit and enable you to make a decision."

The old wizard straightened himself.

"Now, the magic I'm going to perform was used for very cruel purposes in the ancient times. You see, a soul needs a body to reincarnate itself. And when I say a body, I mean a real one, infused by the power and the energy that no spell, and no charm, can recreate."

The old man shook his head while an ironic smile curled his lips. "If Lord Voldemort had studied Visual Arts rather than Dark Arts, he would have known better than to try his pathetic attempt."

He paused, and then his eyes got lost again in the memories he was recalling.

"So, when an important man died and his talents were still needed in this world, my ancient predecessors followed this procedure. First, they painted a portrait to lock in the soul. Then they chose a prisoner, preferably somebody condemned to death, and linked the energy of his body to the soul trapped in the portrait."

The wizard took a deep breath.

"The spell turned the prisoner into a live painting, but by doing so, it also allowed the soul to leave its frame and regenerate a copy of its original body. Of course, the magic would consume this replicated body in a relatively short time, and eventually, the soul would be forced to come back to its portrait while the prisoner...deprived of his vital strength...would be condemned to end his days as a painting as well."

The painter hesitated, then admitted sadly, "Though I'm sorry to say that most of the time, those paintings were burned to avoid complications."

Remembering what had happened with Zabini, Snape felt an immense horror at those words, and Bernardi sighed deeply. "Those were cruel times," he murmured, lowering his head in uneasiness. Then he spoke again, and his voice vibrated with renewed energy.

"But now, let's stop talking of such atrocities, and let's think only of your gift. There is an important clause that I must explain to you before we start... hopefully, that will be the key to your liberation."

His eyes never abandoned Snape's. "Please listen carefully. The moment you are back in your body again, you will be given three options. You could decide to stay in your regenerated body, just like those ancient portraits did. This is a possibility that you can make happen by simply eating or drinking something. Introducing real food into your body will anchor the soul, thus preventing any possible hope of reversing the spell and, therefore, locking the donor in a picture. This, however, will grant you only a limited amount of time. Perhaps a few years?"

Once more, Bernardi paused, as if he wanted to give the portrait the time to weigh his offer. Snape kept silent, and the painter continued slowly.

"The second option is using your body to abandon this world for a second and definitive time. If you should decide to let your soul go and remain here only as a portrait, you will be granted a sweet leaving. You will enter a deep slumber, and as soon as your soul has departed, its energy will automatically reconnect to the donor, recreating his body."

Bernardi took a reassuring air. "Of course, you won't remember anything of this process afterwards. Your life as a painting will be serene and peaceful, as long as your fibres last and your frame stays undamaged."

Snape was hardly breathing. Was that old man really discussing such unbelievable possibilities with him? Surely the portrait was having a dream, or even worse, a hallucination.

And yet hope and desire were holding Snape's heart in a firm grip. Oh, to feel once more the crisp winter breeze on his face and the softness of the snow under his feet! How would it feel to wander in the castle on real legs? And how would it feel to embrace his friends with real arms?

A desperate longing choked his mind. *Only a few moments*, his spirit implored, *perhaps only a minute, but please let me touch the world one more time with my own hands*.

Apparently unaware of the storm taking place in Snape's soul, Bernardi calmly continued his explanation.

"The third choice is coming back exactly as you are, with your pains and your joys and your memories, and keep living in your frame for the rest of your existence, as you did till now. If you choose this third option, then we will perform the spell again at your return to allow a safe transfer, and everything will be just as it was before."

At that point, the old master painter watched Snape meaningfully.

"Please listen carefully: the choice between these three options is absolutely up to you. This is why I asked to talk to you alone. I want you to be free to decide, as this is part of the gift."

Silence filled the room, and then Snape took a deep breath.

"Do I have to make a decision now?" he asked, and a bitter smile curled his lips. His heart was beating madly. No, that couldn't be real! And yet Bernardi continued imperturbably, as if the incredible scenarios he had just described were an everyday matter.

"I don't need an immediate answer, Professor Snape. But unfortunately, I can offer you only a day before the spell becomes permanent...just a few hours to savour real life again and conclude what you have left unfinished. You will need to decide what to do within that arc of time. The spell requires the performer to be put in a trance; therefore, we will know your choice only at the end."

Snape couldn't resist anymore.

"Thank you, Mr Bernardi," he said with a strangled voice. His heart was craving to accept, but his mind was forbidding him to hope. "I don't know how to express my gratitude for such generosity. But I don't think that what you told me can ever take place."

His voice wavered, and he had to pause to control it properly. Then his feelings broke out passionately. "I can't accept. Who would ever think to endanger his life for mine?"

"Ah, Professor Snape!" The old man smiled. "What miserable gift would this be, if we hadn't planned everything in advance? Marcello wanted to be the donor, but I think I'll be honoured to offer myself instead. I'm sure that becoming a picture for one day will be an exciting experience for a painter."

The portrait paled, as if an abyss had opened before his eyes. The option was becoming more and more real with every minute, and Snape struggled to keep his mind lucid.

"And what if I should cede to temptation and remain in my body?"

"I'm sure you will discard this option because my life will be in your hands," Bernardi said quietly. "But even if you should decide to stay here, it won't make a big difference. I am a very old man, and I'll be happy to conclude my life by extending yours."

"I can't permit anyone living to undergo such a terrible risk!" Snape objected tremblingly. "I know Dark Magic enough to understand what would happen if I don't get back in the given time."

The old man shrugged nonchalantly. "Leave these worries to me, Professor. I have handled much worse situations in my life. I'm prepared."

Ceding to that quiet power and confidence, Snape lost himself in the tumult of emotions that had invaded his soul, yet he tried once more to fight them, and said, "Master Bernardi, I... How can you trust me with your life? What if I were unable to choose an option?"

"Now, now, my boy, there is no need to be so upset. I'm sure you will make the right decision when the time comes."

Bernardi looked at Snape with a warm smile. "Your heart will help you understand."

Then, without waiting for an answer, he turned to look at the men who were anxiously waiting in a corner.

"Mr Potter! Marcello!" he called. "Please come here!"

The two men were immediately at his side, and the old wizard declared serenely, "Professor Snape has agreed, so we can proceed with the spell. Nevertheless, I've decided to make a minor variation, Mr Potter, just a quick exchange. Marcello will perform the Magic, while I will be the donor."

"*Cosa? Non se ne parla nemmeno!*" Marcello Bernardi immediately cried. "Don't even think of such an option, Grandpa! We agreed in advance that I was to be the donor!"

The young man had grabbed his grandfather's wrists in his hands, as if he wanted physically to prevent him from a move. "I have been adamant from the beginning! I'm younger and stronger, so this is my..."

"Instead, you will obey your grandfather," the old man exploded, trying to free himself from that grip. "I have my reasons for changing the plan!"

"I beg your pardon."

Unexpectedly, the calm voice of Harry Potter interposed in the discussion, and though he had spoken quietly, the two men ceased their fight immediately at that commanding tone.

"I believe that you are both necessary to perform the spell. Furthermore, I owe a big debt to Professor Snape. He lost his life to save mine. I think that a day against a whole existence is the least I can offer him."

The two men now were looking at him with the same helpless expression. Instantly, Snape understood that, in spite of the assurances he had been given, they were afraid for Potter, and his heart filled again with many confused emotions. But before he could say a word, Harry advanced and raised his head to the portrait.

"I am alive because of your sacrifice, Professor. I have always hoped to have a chance to reward you properly, and today the chance has arrived." He crossed his arms in a definitive gesture. "It won't be worse than facing Voldemort," he said emphatically and concluded softly, "Furthermore, I will finally be allowed to embrace my parents."

And so saying, he pointed his finger to a painting at his left. Everybody in the room turned to look at it, and there was a unanimous gasp. Lily and James Potter were there, smiling and waving at their son, while Albus Dumbledore kept his hands protectively on their shoulders. Harry had evidently planned everything in advance, and Snape stared at James Potter in shocked surprise.

Silence had fallen in the room; evidently baffled, the two Bernardis exchanged a worried glance. Looking embarrassed and incongruously young, James Potter nervously ruffled his hair and said, "You don't need to risk your life, son. We are happy to see you every day, even if you are on the other side of the mirror, don't you know?"

Then he looked at Snape and awkwardly said, "Hello, Severus. It seems that I was wrong about you, after all. Harry told me that you did a great job. Perhaps you just took your role too seriously... I mean at school. However, I suppose I should thank you."

Lily put a hand on her husband's arm to stop him and smiled her kind, heartbreaking smile. "I trust Harry, and I trust you, Severus. I know you'll keep protecting him. I'm looking forward to embracing my son for the very first time after my death."

Tears were shining in her eyes, tears that couldn't be shed. With his authoritative gesture, Dumbledore raised a hand and declared, "I have trusted Severus since he came back to me. He is the most honourable and brave of men. I humbly pray that Harry's wish is granted."

"Albus!" the old Bernardi protested vehemently, but Harry interrupted him firmly.

"Professor Snape?" he asked.

The man and the portrait locked their eyes.

"Professor Snape?" Harry repeated softly.

"I can't accept, Potter," Snape replied, paling as if he had seen a ghost. "I have spent my life trying to protect yours. I can't put it in danger for an experiment!"

Harry crossed his arms. "Facing danger is part of my job, Professor, and I trust Mr Bernardi to know his magic enough to ensure my safety."

Snape looked even more agitated.

"Don't you understand, Potter?" he asked, clenching his hands. "Are you still as arrogant as you were twenty years ago? Danger... danger is implicit in me."

Harry shook his head slowly. "You have protected me even when I didn't deserve it, and you've just admitted that you still feel bound to that oath."

His emerald green eyes dug into Snape's. "I have grown up, Professor. I know that I can trust you. I didn't give my son your name for nothing."

The portrait lowered his head. The boy he had disliked so much...the spitting image of his detestable father...had effectively turned into a man. A man who was the same age as Snape. A man who would grow older than Snape. The child whom Snape had protected had become Snape's protector. The circle had closed. The ends had met, and everything made sense.

The portrait buried his face in his hands.

"Thank you, Potter," he whispered.

Part XXXIII - Coming Back: Morning

Chapter 33 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part XXXIII - Coming Back: Morning

The room was quiet. Minerva and Filius were waiting outside, and the silence was broken only by the words murmured by the elder Bernardi, calmly imparting the last instructions to his grandson.

The old wizard finally turned his head to look at Snape and Harry, mutely asking again for their consent before beginning the rite. As soon as they both agreed...the man with a determined expression, the portrait much more hesitantly...the two painters began to hum softly an ancient melody. Together, they moved their wands in slow circle with a hypnotic effect, and soon Harry relaxed and stood still, closing his eyes while taking deep breaths.

Snape, too, was standing still in his picture, and his heart was beating slowly, his mind full of many contrasting thoughts. His gaze never left the man waiting under his frame until Harry opened his eyes and looked back at him with a reassuring smile.

Leaving the singing to Marcello, the elder Bernardi sat on the armchair that had been brought into the room for him and opened his arms, a hand towards Snape, a hand towards Harry, ideally linking them on a line. A silvery light began to radiate from his fingertips, gradually enveloping the Auror and the portrait. The old wizard smiled one last time as if bidding good-bye; then he closed his eyes with a sigh, concentrating on his task.

Gradually, the light seemed to gather in a forceful flow, and a vague, radiating figure began to take form just in front of Harry. Little by little, the figure defined its shape and became more and more similar to the dark man who was anxiously watching from his frame. For a moment...a very quick moment...Snape looked at his duplicated self from the wall. Then with a wrenching sensation similar to Apparition, he found himself right on the floor of the room before his former student.

Now both Harry's and Snape's bodies radiated with a diaphanous light. The two men stared at each other in silence. Slowly, an oddly timid expression on his face, Harry stretched out a hand as if he wanted to clasp Snape's. But the light that surrounded him suddenly vibrated at that movement and seemed to break up in a myriad of shining particles. Then with a blinding flash, Harry disappeared.

Bent protectively over his grandfather's rigid body, Marcello Bernardi turned to look at Snape, left alone and disoriented under the frame. With a reassuring smile, the painter advised him quietly, "The connection is working, Professor; please don't move yet."

Snape nodded, then closed his eyes and waited. He was experiencing the most astonishing phenomena. The weight of his flesh was growing heavy on his bones while gravity...a sensation he had practically forgotten...anchored him to the ground. His fingers twisted spasmodically, but he kept his eyes obstinately closed, not even daring to look.

Several minutes passed like that...eternal, anguishing moments suspended in uncertainty. Then Bernardi spoke again, and an immense relief trembled in his voice while he alternately watched his grandfather and Snape.

"It's done."

Snape opened his eyes. Vertigo invaded him as soon as his gaze roamed the room, so he immediately closed his eyes again, trying to get used to that incredible situation. Anxiously, Marcello Bernardi ran his hands over his grandfather's body, checking his vital signs. But the old man was serenely slipping into a peaceful trance, and his chest moved regularly, following the rhythm of his breaths. Reassured, Marcello straightened himself and smiled to Snape.

"Welcome again into this world, Professor."

The two men looked at each other, then instinctively raised their gaze to the picture where the Potters should have gathered. A heartbreaking scene appeared to their eyes. Harry had enfolded Lily tightly in his arms, and James was standing near them, lips trembling in the effort of fighting back tears. Lily's soft, tearless sobs were barely audible, nestled as she was against Harry's chest while both father and son looked moved beyond any description.

Snape stared in silence, a wave of emotions running in his heart. It was such an incredible sight! He was witnessing something that should have been impossible, and yet, it was happening before his eyes. His gaze lingered on Harry, looking so surprisingly older than his parents, and finally rested on his protective expression.

How the boy had grown up... and how Snape's heart throbbed now, caught between so many powerful feelings.

Bernardi smiled and raised a hand to wave at the painted family, not wanting to interrupt that touching reunion with useless words. But Snape wasn't ready to move himself yet, so he stood still, savouring the many emotions invading his heart and feeling bizarrely guilty.

Suddenly, a knock broke the silence, and a soft voice asked worriedly, "Mister Bernardi, the door unlocked itself. Is everybody fine in there?"

Bernardi watched Snape again, and his lips curled in a friendly expression of encouragement. Then he answered quietly, "It's done, Headmistress, and we are all safe."

"Oh!" the voice outside vibrated in an acute cry, then steadied itself again. "Then may... may we come in?"

At the quiet permission given in return, the door opened slowly. Hesitantly, Minerva and Filius peeked in, and they both immediately gasped in shock.

"Severus!" Minerva cried and hurried to enter the room, almost running to reach the man standing under the empty frame. Then she abruptly stopped as if something had struck her and asked Bernardi with a concerned face, "May we touch him?"

Marcello nodded. "He is one of us now, Headmistress," he replied serenely.

Minerva turned to look at Snape with incredulous, ecstatic eyes, her many intense emotions clearly reflecting on her wrinkled face.

"Severus...", she murmured. Then joy overcame her.

Still motionless and mute, as if afraid to use his rediscovered faculties, Snape felt her arms close around him and the softness of her thin body press against his now so disconcertingly solid one. How small she seemed, how frail! Instinctively, he wrapped his arms around her and rested his head on her greyish hair, whispering softly, "Minerva."

At her name, she tightened her embrace even more, and he felt the warmth of her cheek on his chest, and while shaking with sobs, she buried her face in his robes.

Looking embarrassed and extremely moved, Bernardi bit his lower lip and scratched his nose uncomfortably. Then he busied himself in making his grandfather as comfortable as possible, conjuring and draping a soft blanket on the old man, who was sleeping in a peaceful trance, clearly undisturbed by all those powerful emotions whirling around him.

Behind Minerva, hands clasped in a nervous grip and eyes twinkling with tears, Flitwick was patiently waiting for his turn. Finally Minerva disentangled herself from Snape's embrace, and the tiny wizard went to shake hands. He looked prodigiously excited, and his stuttering words of joy seemed to address Snape, Harry, and the painters...all together in a happy confusion.

"Mister Bernardi." Minerva suddenly realised she hadn't thanked the makers of that astounding wonder properly, and wiping a last fugitive tear, she stretched out a hand. "I

am so very grateful to you and to your grandfather. Thank you very much, with all my heart."

The painter took her hand and kissed it respectfully.

"We are honoured to have been of help, Headmistress."

Then the old witch went to check the picture to which Harry had been transferred. Tears flowed again from her eyes when she saw the Potters smile joyously at her from the wall.

"Oh, Harry! How selfish I have been! I should have taken your place," she sobbed. "I am an old, useless woman. Why did you risk your life when mine was available?"

"I thought you were used to my reckless behaviour by now, Professor," Harry replied with a grin, and tightening his mother in his arms, he added seriously, "however, here is the answer to your question."

"Hello, Minerva!" Lily said, but couldn't help a shy glance at Snape before adding with forced gaiety, "Hello, everybody! I would like to thank you all for this incredible, unexpected present."

Her voice broke, and her son was ready to hug and kiss her on her cheek while James smiled his embarrassed grin.

Snape, too, raised his head at the family.

"Thank you, Potter," he said, trying to put all his gratitude into that simple sentence, but he paused immediately, as his words had been cut off by a new, horrible feeling of uneasiness. There was something... strange. He didn't feel comfortable in his body. Something must have gone wrong with the spell, he thought, and he felt agitated.

Then he looked again at the kind faces looking at him and considered that he was probably lacking practice.

Nineteen years a prisoner in a canvas... His mind went dizzy while memories and sounds and sensations abruptly filled his senses.

He closed his eyes and breathed slowly.

Back. He was back again.

And this time, amongst real friends.

Bernardi went to greet Snape with touching joy. The Italian was evidently excited, but he managed to keep his emotion under control while he exchanged some words and shook hands vigorously. Then ready for a long wait, he patiently sat near his grandfather, both isolated in a corner of the room and leaving both the small groups...the one in the room and the one in the picture...to their privacy.

"Well," Flitwick said, rubbing his hands in expectation and smiling at Snape like an uncle taking his favourite nephew to the funfair, "what would you like to do first?"

"I think he will speak with me," a new voice unexpectedly replied.

Startled, Snape, Minerva, and Flitwick turned at those words and widened their eyes in surprise.

Ginny Weasley Potter was standing under the doorframe, arms crossed and a determined expression on her face.

Snape and Ginny stared at each other.

After a few words of greeting, Minerva and Filius had left them alone, and Ginny had immediately gone to the frame where her husband was waiting, looking at her with the half-guilty, half-mischievous smile of his teenage days.

Their gazes crossed in a mute exchange, and for a moment, she looked like she was ceding to a powerful emotion. Her lips trembled uncontrollably as if searching for words, but after a few seconds, Ginny steadied them again with a strong act of will. Then wordlessly, she turned her shoulders to the picture and reached Snape in the middle of the room, right before the fireplace. There, she faced him, raising her chin in a defiant gesture, her radiant red hair blazing against the dancing light of the flames.

Feeling uneasy and vulnerable in his new body, Snape defensively folded his arms in his usual pose and waited in silence. That well-known attitude seemed to disconcert Ginny, and the woman paused to stare at him with a puzzled expression.

"It's odd," she finally said. "It's... incredible. You haven't changed. It's like..."

She shook her head, unable to find the words, and then she tried again. "It's like being back in time."

"It's strange for me, too," Snape agreed quietly. "And for exactly the opposite reason. It's strange because you *have* changed."

She nodded absently and silence fell again. Snape looked at her. His senses were growing more and more perceptive with every second, so he could easily detect rage and desolation in the woman before him. He thought he knew the reason, and he sighed.

"You said you wanted to speak with me. I can imagine why. Your husband has chosen to..."

"No," she interrupted him with the characteristic boldness he remembered so well, "I'm not going to say what you surely expect me to say. I'm not blaming Harry for his decision..."

Again, she hesitated, as if she were fighting against an unknown emotion.

"Nor you," she finally added. Her voice became hard.

"I came here because I need to understand. And I want you to understand as well. I never had the chance to speak with you when you... when you were still here."

She grimaced at her own awkward choice of words, yet continued stubbornly. "Perhaps you never thought about this, Professor, but it hasn't been easy to be Harry Potter. Nor to be his wife."

Snape lowered his head in a nod and wordlessly offered her a chair. She hesitated as if his offer could hide a trap, then took the seat she was presented. He sat near her, and they both contemplated the flames in the fireplace with unseeing eyes, carefully avoiding each other's gaze.

"I have been very envied, you know?" she continued after a while, still not looking at him. "The lucky girl who was going to marry the Chosen One. But my husband has never been totally mine. A part of his life is still strongly linked to his memories...the ones that are his own and the ones that you gave him. I needed to exorcise those visions. So, I had no other choice than to come here and speak to you."

She paused and gulped.

"Though, what I want to say is not easy," she admitted slowly.

She finally turned to look at Snape, and the wizard noticed with surprise that her eyes were red rimmed as if she were going to cry. But her features instantly hardened in a resolute expression.

"I've hated you from the very first moment," she declared simply.

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. These were his first instants of life, and they were already bringing pain and rejection. Once more, his past had come back to torture him, cruel reminder of the many things he had left behind unsettled. And he had been conceded only one day... twenty-four hours, or perhaps even less, to repair the untied threads of his existence!

Suddenly, he felt inadequate to carry on that task and averted his gaze, trying to conceal the anguish that invaded his heart.

She took a deep breath, checking her emotion. He could perceive the many feelings bubbling inside her, demanding to be released, and instinctively, he clenched his fists, ready for her next emotional blow. But she was looking at the flames again, lost in a personal reverie.

"I had never been able to filter my memories from the impurities of time. Harry's scar has always been visible, but he carries so many other invisible scars inside him. He has chosen to close his memories in a corner of his mind, but they won't leave him alone. Never."

Snape was listening in silence, and Ginny seemed surprised by his quiet attitude, so she continued even more fervently.

"Our life has been shaped by Harry's memories. None of my children was named after my family. When my first son was born, Harry said that he wanted to call him James Sirius, and I was ready to comply. I had expected it. The joined names of his father and of the man who could have taken his father's place had he lived long enough."

Her eyes turned unexpectedly to search his while her voice became strangely imploring.

"But just imagine my shock when he announced that he would like to call our second baby Albus..*Severus*. Albus, I could understand. But your name! Such detestable memories coming back to life again, each time I would call my son. And yet I agreed."

A dark chuckle. "But, as soon as possible, I shortened his name to Al."

Her head lowered and words began to flow faster, like a torrent breaking a dam.

"Then we had a girl, and Harry honoured his mother, too. It seemed the right thing to do, and anyhow, I liked the name. So, the ghosts of the past seemed to have definitely been banished until last year, when James was owled from Hogwarts. After that message, memories subtly came back to haunt Harry again, and you had such a big part in them..."

Her fingers mechanically tormented the fabric on her lap.

"At the end, I suggested to him that he have his parents' portraits painted as therapy. Strangely, for all these years, it seemed that he'd cared more for the memories you gave him than for actually seeing his mother."

She turned to look accusingly at him.

"You have always been an uninvited, but constant, presence in our lives. And today is the supreme evidence. He chose to leave me alone this Christmas and to become a picture to free you. He chose to endanger his life to repay his debt, a debt that...according to me...had already and abundantly been paid."

Her eyes were as merciless as her voice. "So, I collected my memories again, and I thought that you weren't worth such a risk, such sacrifice."

She paused, then unexpectedly capitulated with a sob. "But I love Harry, and if he has decided to do this for you, it means that you deserve it."

She raised her head, suddenly realizing how long she had spoken in that supernatural silence, and to whom she had told all those cruel considerations. Sniffling softly, she considered him.

"And now you are here. It's... unbelievable."

"I share your feeling," he said bitterly, struggling against the coldness that had invaded his heart.

Coming back had been a mistake. He should never have accepted. How would he ever been able to repair the devastation that he had left behind? Why had he trusted Bernardi and his deceptively kind words?

Ginny tilted her head. Her brows furrowed while she looked at him and tried to express feelings that were still too indefinite to be articulated.

"And... and you see, there is still something else that I need to understand," she said with a low voice. "In these last weeks, I have been wondering what my children saw in you. Albus would trust you with his life; Lily loves you as if you were an uncle... even James now says that you are *cool* and *terrific*."

In spite of her desolation, her lips twitched into a smile, remembering those enthusiastic words of appreciation. Then her brows furrowed again.

"Have I been wrong all this time?" she murmured, almost imperceptibly, to herself.

He was watching the flames blankly, apparently indifferent.

"Professor," she asked impulsively, "please, let me touch your hand."

"To see if I am real?" he replied with a frown. Nevertheless, he complied. With a hesitant move, her fingers intertwined with his, and her eyes opened in surprise.

"Your hand is cold!" she exclaimed, and for the first time, he could see the concern on her features. "You must be freezing. Why didn't you say anything? The heat of the fire isn't enough. You should eat something to warm yourself."

She turned her head as if expecting a house-elf to pop into the room with a tray of food. And with a terrible pang, Snape finally understood what was making him feel so uncomfortable.

There was no blood in his veins, nor tears in his eyes; his body was only an empty shell for his soul while his spirit ached and cried in the desperate longing for a new existence... and the fulfilment of that wish was such a simple, ordinary action!

What if he had conveniently forgotten Bernardi's warning?

Did Ginny know what terrible temptation she had so casually put before him?

He glanced at her eyes, so evidently worried, and his doubts vanished while his mind bowed once more to his fate in a supreme offer.

"I cannot be warmed. I am dead," he explained quietly, and his face altered with the pain of that admission.

His words chilled her. Suddenly, she seemed to realise, and her eyes filled with the shock and the horror of that realisation. But instead of releasing his hand as he would expect of her, she tightened it even more while she uselessly tried to speak.

"I'm... I'm sorry," she finally whispered, and tears forced their way down onto her cheeks.

Motionless and silent, he savoured the bittersweet feelings that those purifying drops were bringing to his heart.

Part XXXIV - Coming Back: Day

Chapter 34 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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*All my gratitude to my beta **AmyLouise**. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers.*

Part XXXIV - Coming Back: Day

A whisper broke the lingering silence.

"Ginny..."

Snape and Ginny raised their heads simultaneously. Harry was looking at them from the picture that had been Snape's home, his body surprisingly enlarged by the much bigger size of the frame.

In spite of the perfect resemblance, he looked like he had been flattened. Third dimension was only a visual illusion, Snape thought, and involuntarily, his eyes focused on his hands, enjoying the wondrous roundness of his fingers.

And in doing so, he noticed Ginny was trembling. Her hand, still clasping his, slowly released its grip. The woman rose and moved closer to her husband's portrait.

"Harry...", she murmured, and Snape realised how frightened she was despite her previous bold attitude. A weird compassion and a pungent envy tightened his heart, seeing how strong was the link that connected his two former students.

Harry's eyes were serious, almost prayerful.

"Ginny, please... do you remember what I asked you?"

She bit her lip, and for a moment, she seemed to struggle with herself. But finally, she nodded, took a deep breath and turned to look at Snape.

"Harry has a...", she began. Then, after a quick glance to the portrait, she stopped abruptly and corrected herself.

"*We* have a special present for you, Professor," she said in a low, dull voice, as if repeating mechanically something that she had learned by heart. Her eyes twinkled again in an undefined emotion. "Please wait for me. I'll be back as soon as possible."

Confused, Snape nodded. He would have liked to object, but the tension he could detect in both Harry and Ginny was making him uneasy, so he resolved to keep silent.

With a last glance, Ginny left, and Snape and Harry looked at each other from their exchanged positions. With a smile, Harry indicated Marcello Bernardi who, evidently exhausted by the powerful magic performed, had placidly slipped into a nap and was snoring quietly, head on his grandfather's shoulder.

"How do you feel, Professor?" Harry finally asked.

Snape surrendered to his sensations. "It's strange," he murmured, and Harry tilted his head.

"I agree," he said slowly, almost weighing his words. "It's strange for me, too, but it's exciting at the same time. I think I will try a tour of the pictures in the castle." He smiled. "I remember that I would have liked to visit some of them as a student."

Snape didn't return the smile.

"Where is your mother?" he asked, and Harry opened his arms and shrugged with an indulgent expression.

"She went looking for other friends with my father. I have personally brought Sirius' and Remus' portraits here to celebrate this occasion. And I have arranged Mad Eye's delivery from the Aurors' Gallery. It's going to be a nice meeting."

Again, Snape was left in a bitter mood. For Harry, it seemed that it was a game, another adventure to add to his already long list. And he had even found a way to meet his friends...people whom Snape also had known and had met in his previous life but who probably wouldn't be happy to see him again.

People whom he had never thought to meet as a portrait. People who were dead and who had accepted being so. But he... he was different. And that difference was making him suffer so much! Wouldn't it have been better to disappear into oblivion? Why instead had he been called back so powerfully?

He took a deep breath. He, too, had friends now. Friends who were willing to put their lives at risk for him. And one was in front of him. Perhaps coming back would reserve some nice surprises for him as it had for Harry?

Minerva quietly entered the room.

"Severus," she said, and her eyes moistened at the repetition of a name that recalled so many memories and that now was addressed again to a living man. Emotion took over once more, and the normally reserved old witch again enfolded her younger colleague in an embrace.

"I... I still can't believe it," she stammered, and Snape felt very embarrassed.

She understood his uneasiness and let him go immediately.

"I'm sorry," she said, raising her head with a touchingly contrite expression.

"There is no need to apologise, Minerva," he replied softly, and suddenly, he felt compelled to hug her back, mutely asking for comfort and consolation, a support to his current unbalanced feelings. Again, the realisation of the miracle he was experiencing hit him powerfully. He was holding a living being in his arms, a body that was warm and breathing and vibrating with emotion. He closed his eyes to enjoy that sensation and lock it in his mind.

"You don't need to apologise," he repeated slowly, savouring his words. No...no more apologies, no more accusations, no more harsh words. It was so sweet to be accepted, to be needed, to be embraced. His spirit was begging to be loved.

"Severus," the old witch finally said, wiping her eyes and looking at him like a mother would do with her son, "I have a question for you. Would you like to meet anybody else? Your fellow professors are all about to leave now. They don't know what has happened behind these doors. Finlay had prepared a show of magical fireworks and has performed it superbly. But I have asked everybody to spend the feast with their families this year. For the first time, we won't have our traditional Christmas lunch because today is your day, Severus, and today, Hogwarts is yours. This is the only present I can offer to you. A miserable one, I know, and I wish I could have... I wish I had..."

She recovered her balance just in time. "But then I thought that perhaps I have been too hurried in making this decision. So, is there anyone you would like to meet?"

"No," Snape said, and his voice trembled in despair. He was feeling more and more uncomfortable. Precious minutes were slipping inexorably through his fingers, and suddenly, he felt an obscure anguish. But this sensation didn't last for long because the door opened again, pushed by a decidedly disconcerted Longbottom.

"Filius told me that... ah!" Neville's face altered in almost comical surprise, and he stopped in his tracks, as if he had been hit by a thunderbolt. Then he raised a wavering finger and breathed, "I... you..."

Minerva stood back, smiling, while the two men faced each other. What a disconcerting sight! They both were the same age, but Neville looked younger, his eyes widened in childlike astonishment and reverential awe.

Snape inclined his head in a greeting, touched and amused by the amazement so evidently displayed.

"Mr. Longbottom," he said quietly. "Neville," he corrected himself almost immediately, and his characteristic lopsided smile tugged up the corner of his lips.

Neville smiled too. "Severus," he replied, and his smile opened more and more in uncontrollable elation until he took a step forward to clasp Snape's arm in a comradely gesture.

"This is really a merry, merry Christmas," he said slowly, watching Snape with deep affection; then he exploded in a mess of chaotic statements.

"So, it was true. I thought that Filius was joking, as always. Can't believe it. Why did nobody tell me? Oh, well, I understand why. Still, I suppose....," he took a deep breath and concluded happily, "it's a great honour and an immense joy for us to have you back for an entire day. Is there anything with which I can help you? I am completely at your disposal!"

"Unfortunately, my time is limited," Snape replied to that impetuous torrent of words. In spite of Neville's good intentions, the magical atmosphere had been broken, and something dark was aching again in his heart at being reminded of time elapsing. Snape averted his eyes to hide his feelings.

"I think I'll have a walk in the castle," he said. "There are places I wasn't able to visit anymore as a picture, and I would like..."

Words failed him. How to explain that horrid sensation of emptiness that was annihilating his thoughts?

"I'll come with you," Minerva offered immediately.

"No!" he replied harshly, and then his tone softened. "Forgive me, Minerva, but I need to be alone. Let's say that this is... is a pilgrimage."

Minerva looked saddened, Neville desolate. Snape saw them exchange a glance and then nod quietly. That covert compassion was so exasperating!

"Where are you thinking of going?" Minerva finally asked with false nonchalance.

Snape smiled sadly and thought, *Don't worry about me. I can't be hurt more than I have been* But he didn't express his feelings. Instead, he replied as casually as possible, "I'd like to visit the dungeons."

"I'll go and check if the others have left," Neville hastened to offer, and after a last meaningful glance at the Headmistress, he went out.

Alone again, Minerva hesitantly put her hand on Snape's hand and squeezed it gently.

"It's your day, Severus, and we are here for you. I only hope you can find answers to your questions and that you can finally be... happy."

This time, she couldn't stop the tears.

He left and began his solitary walk. How depressing the empty castle looked and sounded on that feast day! Rooms and corridors, normally echoing with the happy noises of hundreds of voices and feet, now looked and sounded hauntingly deserted. He shivered and hastened to reach the stairs. Down, down, down he went, following the spiral of stone steps that led to the dungeons.

The dungeons: his realm and his lair, the place to which he had never dared come back as a picture. Filled by so many memories of his previous life. Every stone, every corner, every object recalled an image, a sound, a merry or a sad episode.

And then he was there.

In front of the room in which he used to keep his archive.

His lab.

His shelter.

Slowly, he turned the doorknob, and the heavy panel dutifully opened itself, showing him the dark interior. He stopped, his breath growing shaky. Bottles and ampoules were still neatly lined on the shelves, their liquid essences glowing in many different colours. Hundreds of extraordinary specimens floated lazily in oily or alcoholic

solutions. New ones had joined the old ones. Other hands had written their names on the small parchments positioned under every sample. Yet those who had replaced him in taking care of his realm seemed to have followed his footsteps in its organization.

Trembling with emotion, he contemplated the relics of his past...the evidence that a man of flesh and blood had lived, studied, worked, written, suffered, and cried there. Oh, how many tears he had shed in that room! With a lump in his throat, Snape turned to go out and found himself in front of a plaque that had been positioned over the door, so as to be constantly visible to those working inside.

In this room, Severus Snape, Potions master and Headmaster, spy and saviour of the wizarding world, spent a great part of his adult life as a teacher and finally offered himself to destruction to fulfil his commitment. Remember him, those who follow. May his name be a shining example to future generations.

His lips twitched with emotion. His existence, his death, and his doom had been sealed in those few sentences. He closed the door and wandered aimlessly in the corridors until he found the entrance to the Slytherin common room.

Lost in his thoughts, he entered, and no magical guardian resisted his venturing there, but the enchanted locks meekly opened one by one to welcome him. He stood, overcome by innumerable sensations and emotions. For a moment, he was again in the past.

There, for instance, scared and anxious, he had waited to learn where his dormitory was on the night he had arrived as a first year. Into that lonely corner he used to retire when he was meditating. The brick at the left of the door still had two little doodles imprinted on it, made on an evening when he was particularly happy. In a haze, he crossed the rooms. He let his fingers touch the stones, the marbles, the wooden chairs, and the iron chains suspended on the walls. The original furniture hadn't changed so much during the years, and that gloomy atmosphere in which silver and green elements scintillated here and there had an intoxicating effect on his soul.

Suddenly, he felt the oddness of his situation. Dead man walking. Why had he decided to go there? What was left in that world for him?

Slowly, he walked with unseeing eyes until his attention was attracted by another plaque positioned over a door.

Severus Snape, Slytherin, Potions master and Headmaster of Hogwarts, guardian of Harry Potter and of the wizarding world. May he always be honoured by those who are loyal.

And below, two numbers enclosed in brackets to seal that statement: 1960 1998.

Snape felt dizzy. There it was again, the evidence that his life had begun and concluded its arc in a handful of years. There it was, what was left of him. A shining brassy plaque with shining empty words engraved on it.

He was dead. He was dead, and there were no places in the world that could welcome him back. Overwhelmed by feelings, he turned and hurried out of the room.

He climbed the stairs, looking for light, for fresh air that could regenerate his eyes and his spirit. Alone. He was alone. The House of Slytherin had conveniently celebrated him with a plaque and confined him to the realm of ghosts. His real body lay buried somewhere. His old mates lost, dispersed, prisoners, or dead as well. No, there was nothing he could do, nothing he could change, and nobody was waiting for him except the shadows of his past.

In a blind haze, he crossed the halls and the corridors he had just passed a few minutes before when his heart was dilating in expectation. Everything was haunting him now, reminding him how vain his quest had been. Silence was everywhere. Even the other portraits seemed to have deserted their pictures, and for a quick moment, Snape wondered if that was another courtesy...or trick, he corrected himself ferociously...of the Bernardis. Whatever it was, he felt utterly abandoned.

Then he heard a whisper and froze in alarm.

Slowly, he turned his head and saw Albus Dumbledore looking at him from the wall. The old wizard looked strangely uncomfortable, and Snape felt a grim satisfaction. At least he wasn't alone in his misery.

"Severus," Dumbledore called hesitantly.

"Albus," Snape replied coldly and crossed his arms in his usual defensive pose. Now what else was his old mentor going to say? What deep philosophical interpretation was he going to offer?

"May I walk with you?" Dumbledore surprisingly asked instead.

"Why would you do such a thing?" Snape retorted rudely.

Albus looked even more hesitant. "You haven't noticed, but I've been following you since you left your room," he said, and Snape's lips curled in anger.

Dumbledore hurried to add, "It has been a pilgrimage for me too. A pilgrimage and a tribute, Severus. So many memories have arisen today... It has been an amazing exercise in nostalgia."

He sighed and glanced at Severus in uneasiness. "Watching you walk through these corridors, I've wished that we could go back in time and change the past. I've wished that we both could be alive and friends again...."

"Friends? We were never friends, Albus," Snape interrupted him bitterly. "I was never anything but a slave to you... You were always too blinded by your reason to reason with your heart."

Albus lowered his head. "I'm sorry. But you know that desperate times call for desperate measures."

"Desperate measures indeed!" Snape reacted sarcastically. "Yet I distinctly remember you declaring so many times that love is the most powerful force in the universe! Voldemort used to mock you for such a naïve statement. Well, where did *your* love go? Whom did you really love in your life?"

Dumbledore stiffened.

"You chose your own fatal path, Severus, the day you took the Dark Mark", he said in an attempt at deflection. "But please, calm down now and remember: Who did you go to when you realised your mistake?"

"To the man I thought had the power to help Lily!" Snape replied. "But that man promised to save her and then let her die. And then that same man chained me to my remorse, precluding me from ever seeking a different future and condemning me to a life of perpetual regret."

Dumbledore backed away at those accusations, but Snape continued his speech. A flow of angry, obscure emotions were invading his heart, and the younger wizard felt overwhelmed by their intensity.

"I lived almost all my life with contempt and suspicion. When you died, I was marked as a murderer. I spent my last months in Hogwarts in a living hell. I had neither friend nor confidant. I was alone. And if luck hadn't helped me, I would have died alone and forgotten in the Shack!"

He stopped to breathe, strangled by his indignation. Then, with an effort, he continued in a low steady voice.

"I'm not going to deny my faults. But you used me like a tool, regardless of my feelings. You never cared about me, Albus. You never tried to lessen my punishment. You knew that my name would be consigned to eternal shame, but the thought never bothered you."

Snape inhaled deeply and opened his hands in a last angry accusation.

"If Potter had not seen my memories, would you ever have told him about me?"

Silenced, Dumbledore didn't reply, so Snape shook his head again in disenchantment and concluded bitterly, "You know, I've learned to appreciate Harry. At least he never pretended to be better than he was."

He turned his shoulders from the portrait and began to walk.

"No! Please, don't go!" Albus called, an unusual emotion in his voice. "I have been watching you all these weeks, day after day... the astounding things that you've been able to do... The way you saved Lucius, in spite of your being a picture... You have left me speechless, I admit it."

He took a reverential tone. "And today you are even back amongst the living. I am deeply impressed, Severus. I never imagined you could conceal such power inside you. I wish I had understood it before..."

The older wizard extended his hands as if in prayer. "I... I confess that I have been wrong in my previous life. I have made a mistake...yes, many mistakes, and I can't bear it any longer. So, if you would accept my apologies, I..."

"No", Snape said slowly. He had stopped, and his look of expectation had gradually turned into a disillusioned expression. "Don't you see, Albus? It's always about *you*. The day you feel sorry about *me*, then you will be allowed to continue this conversation. Till that moment, there's nothing you can say or you can do."

"Severus, please, at least let me come with you," Albus begged, trying to follow the younger man by passing fluidly from picture to picture.

"No!" Snape replied, accelerating his pace. "Let me be alone, as I always was."

"But why do you want to wander in solitude, now that you are back?" Dumbledore had stopped and was watching, with desolate eyes, the man who was getting farther and farther away.

"I'm not back, Albus. I'm inside a nightmare."

He left the saddened portrait behind him and began to climb the stairs. Step after step, his body felt heavier, and his spirit struggled to keep his legs moving. That conversation had disheartened him even more.

Why, why, why? Why was he clinging so tenaciously to a cold shell to which he didn't belong anymore? Other stories had been intertwined in the castle, and his thread could no longer fit in that canvas. He had been buried, and a plaque now conveniently remembered it. Perhaps Minerva and Filius were the only ones who really missed him: old, tired and sad, they were probably fearing their impending end and, therefore, preparing themselves by making amends....

He opened the door of the Potions room. There was nobody inside. Minerva had evidently found the two Bernardis a more convenient place to rest. Or perhaps they were having lunch with their hosts somewhere. Celebrating. All things that were denied to him, in spite of his being there in flesh and blood.

He sat and put his elbows on the table, leaning his forehead in abandon on his fists.

His freedom was slowly turning into a sort of cage, even more horrible than the one he had just left. He touched the wooden surface of the table and suddenly noticed that his hands had a warmer shade of colour now. In spite of his anguish, life was slowly permeating his reluctant body.

Ah, Zabini had been so right! Was Snape going to prey upon the living beings? Who needed him there? And for what task?

Now he understood why Tomaso Bernardi had been so sure of his offer, and why he had looked at Snape with that compassionate gaze. Who would have liked living in such a condition? The captains and philosophers and architects whom Bernardi had described in his presentation had been called back almost immediately. Somebody had been waiting desperately for them. They had a mission to accomplish, while he...

Who was missing him? Who needed him?

Who?

Who?

A knock at the door startled him, and he raised his head in alarm. Ginny Weasley Potter peeked in and announced quietly, "I've come back, Professor."

She opened the door completely, and Snape's astonished gaze met the equally astonished gaze of the three younger Potters. The children were evidently dumbstruck. Taken by surprise as well, Snape didn't know how to react. Uncertain, he got up and saw James and Albus Severus take a step back as if frightened at the sight of him. Wounded, he stopped and waited.

As always, it was Lily who broke that tense silence.

"Uncle Severus!" she exclaimed and ran to reach him, opening her arms as if to hug him. But, at the last moment, she seemed to hesitate and slowly raised her head, considering his figure.

"Wow, how tall you are...", she whispered reverently. Then she recovered her spirit.

"I have a present for you!" she announced proudly, and at that declaration, her mother looked amazed, and her brothers cautiously advanced, tilting their heads in curiosity.

With a joyful smile, Lily took out a little rectangular box from her pocket. It was wrapped in silver paper and decorated with a green ribbon. Disconcerted, Snape raised his brows, not knowing what to say.

She smiled at him. "See? I have chosen the colours of your House. I like them; they are much more beautiful than Gryffindor's red and gold."

It was impossible to resist such candid trust, and wordlessly, Snape extended his hand. As soon as the little box touched his skin, it enlarged in his palm. Lily raised her head again at him.

"See?" she repeated. "I asked the clerk to reduce its size so I could take it in my pocket without damaging it."

"Lily!" her mother said, evidently baffled. "When did you go to the shop? And why didn't you tell me anything?"

The girl looked offended. "Because it was a surprise," she replied immediately, then hurried to add, "and I bought it with the money I saved, Mum."

She turned to Snape again. "Open it, Uncle Severus", she practically ordered.

Still silent, Snape fumbled with the ribbon and the paper while Lily waited, rocking impatiently on the heels of her feet. Abandoning their reserve, both her brothers came nearer to watch.

Snape opened the box. Inside, he found a marvellous quill, coloured in nice shades of green. He looked utterly disconcerted, and Lily smiled proudly.

"You can use it for grading so you will remember me."

Suddenly, she seemed to notice the alarming lack of reactions, and her face altered into something similar to anxiety.

"Don't you like it, Uncle Severus?"

Snape looked at the quill and the little one so trustingly staring at him. Something painfully sweet was invading his heart, and he replied with a wavering smile, "It's beautiful. Thank you, Miss Potter."

Lily furrowed her brows.

"You can call me Lily," she said and tugged his sleeve, as if wanting to tell him something. Instinctively, he bent to get closer to her.

"Merry Christmas, Uncle Severus," Lily said simply, and encircling his neck with her short arms, she kissed him on his cheek.

The boys were still wary. They were watching him in a sort of weird fascination, but they didn't dare talk. Snape noticed that, incredibly, even James seemed to be subdued, in spite of his notorious boldness. For a moment, he felt desperate. How to explain and reassure the children when he himself was still wallowing in anguish? Albus Severus was studying him with circumspect eyes, and the wizard felt out of place.

"Don't worry," he said in an incongruously apologetic tone. "I am... I am an experiment. I have just one day to live in this form, then I'll be back in my picture again."

Ginny intervened, addressing the children in a tone that brooked no arguments. "Today your father wants you to stay at Hogwarts and celebrate Christmas here with Professor Snape... and Aunt Minerva."

"Oh!" James sounded disappointed, but obviously, he didn't try to dispute with his mother. "So, we are not going to play Quidditch with our cousins at the Burrow?"

He frowned; then a new thought seemed to hit him, and he declared, "Hey, but we could use the pitch here!"

He got excited. "Yes, could we, Mum? I could teach Al the Sloth Roll Grip. Would you like to try, Al? Perhaps Aunt Minerva will allow you to fly since there's nobody here to watch."

"I want to fly, too, James!" Lily interrupted him, jumping up and down in anticipation.

"No way, little pest, you are too small!"

"I'm not!" She stuck out her tongue. "I can catch the Snitch better than you! Uncle George always says that I am the most damn... Oops, sorry, Mum!"

"Your Uncle George is a bit careless with words. You mustn't listen to him", Ginny said, tightening her lips into a line.

"But we may ask Auntie, may we, Mum?" Lily insisted, and as her mother didn't answer, she turned to look at Snape. "May we, Uncle Severus?" she begged with that characteristic pleading voice which no adult can resist. And Snape was all too willing to cede.

"You know," he said slowly, "Today is Christmas, a day for gifts. But I haven't got any presents at the moment. So, I have come to a decision. I will grant each one of you a wish."

The children suddenly looked up at him in excitement.

How easy... how predictable... but after all, why not? Snape considered silently, looking at the little faces turned up so expectantly. Why not, before disappearing into the void again? At least there would be someone who would keep a nice memory of him.

Someone he could make happy.

Part XXXV - Coming Back: Noon

Chapter 35 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

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Part XXXV - Coming Back: Noon

"So." Snape frowned and crossed his arms. "Let's begin. Miss Potter..."

"Lily!" she interrupted him, and he smiled, bowing in acknowledgement.

"Lily," he agreed, and his heart savoured that name and the feeling behind it. "You are a lady, so I'll ask you first. What would you like to do?"

Her eyes twinkled in pleasure. It was evident that that was an unexpectedly juicy question, and she began her listing.

"I wish we could go to Hogsmeade and have tea together at Madam Puddifoot's, and then go to Honeydukes and buy some sweets, and then go to Zonko's and see their tricks...Uncle George says that they have something nice, though old fashioned...and then go to the Three Broomsticks and have a Butterbeer (Mum never allows me to drink one) and then... and then *perhaps* we may come back," she declaimed in one go and raised her head with a hopeful look.

Snape felt a pang in his heart. The first wish, and he already couldn't grant it!

"These are many wishes gathered in one," he began uncertainly. Lily looked alarmed, and he continued in a dull voice, "I'd like to go there too, but I'm afraid we must stay here."

He made a painful attempt to smile. "You see, other people could get scared at seeing me."

His face had altered, and the girl put her warm hand on his arm.

"Don't be sad, Uncle Severus. We can stay here and play Quidditch together, and you will be the referee, won't you?"

Snape looked surprised at that proposal and turned his head in a mute question to the other children. Al was agape, and for a moment, James seemed wrong footed too; then a meaningful smile opened on his face while he considered his siblings with an eloquent expression.

"Yes!" he exclaimed. "Cool! Let's go immediately while the sun is still high... if Professor Snape agrees, of course," he added dutifully with his cheeky grin.

Ginny glared at the boy, but Snape pretended not to notice and watched Al, who blushed in confusion.

"So, two wishes are chosen. Now, what about you, Albus Severus?" he asked. "What would you like to do?"

"I haven't decided yet..." Finally, the boy seemed to have found his smile again. He looked fondly at his older friend. "But I can play with James and Lily to fulfil their wish, and in the meantime, I can choose mine."

"Then we must hurry. Go and ask Minerva for permission," Snape said with his peculiar smile. "But remember to tell her that I will supervise the game. I'm sure that, with this clause, she will give her approval."

The children's faces shone with joy. "Thank you!" they chimed and ran away, pushing each other in a joyful fight to be first.

Ginny watched Snape. "I'm sure they will have a great time," she said in a tone that implicitly carried disapproval.

Right in that same moment, Albus Severus reappeared under the doorframe, as if he had had second thoughts.

"Mum, but what about Dad?"

"Oh, Dad will spend the feast with his parents and friends," she said feverishly in an apparently cheerful way. "They have so much to tell each other! You must understand it's a rare opportunity, being a portrait for one day."

Al looked at the two adults. Snape had darkened, and Ginny seemed on the verge of tears; yet she managed a forced smile.

"Now go and ask Aunt Minerva," she invited her son. The boy didn't move. His eyes kept questioning in silence.

"Mum, will you come with us?" he asked softly.

"I must go and visit Grandpa and Grandma Weasley," she said and averted her face to hide her expression. "But don't worry; I will be back soon. Now, go with your siblings and keep an eye on Lily, will you?"

Al didn't look very convinced, but obediently, he left. As soon as the boy went out, Snape turned to Ginny. "I hadn't asked for such sacrifice, Madam Potter," he said quietly.

Her face flamed. "I'm sorry. Please forget what I said," she replied, lowering her head. Then she raised two anguished eyes.

"But I... you must understand me. I am scared, deeply scared," she admitted.

"Me too," Snape replied slowly. "Me too."

The sun was shining gloriously on the Quidditch pitch, and Snape blinked, no longer used to such powerful light. But what an emotion! Walking in the snow, hearing the rustling sound of his feet, feeling the crisp air entering his lungs while every fibre of his body enjoyed the wonder of the day and the beauty of the whiteness surrounding him! He felt excited, and a hot wave of pleasure rippled across his spine. Everything was joyful. Everything seemed to smile.

The children were excited, too. James was indicating the different places to his sister with a patronizing tone.

"See? Down there is where we practise. The lockers are on the right; I'll show you mine. I have my uniform inside it...perhaps I could wear it, if you want to see how our team is dressed."

He glanced at Snape and immediately switched subject. "See how big the pitch is? During the real games, it's full of people. Wow, so scary!"

He watched his sister with a smirk. "Would you be able to play in front of such a crowd?"

"If you can do it, I can do it too!" she replied bravely, but she was clearly impressed, and when she looked at the giant hoops on the tall poles at the sides of the pitch, she swallowed in apprehension.

James reached the gym and went straight to the broom storeroom.

"Oh no, it's locked!" he exclaimed in frustration.

"That won't be a problem," Snape replied and lifted a long, pale finger. The door immediately opened, and the children burst out in three different exclamations of exultation. Even the normally composed Al got excited at the sight of the wonderful brooms glittering in the half-obscurity.

"Aunt Minerva said that permission to use the brooms is her gift for us," Lily diligently informed Snape, to whose elbow she was clinging possessively. "She said that, though she would have liked to give us a surprise, she didn't know what to choose."

She shook her head at the inevitable silliness of the adults, then watched Snape with deep affection. "So, she said she wants to thank you for the suggestion."

"But these brooms are a bit too big for you, Lily!" Al exclaimed in disappointment.

"Again, no problem," Snape replied, and with a quick flicker of his hand, he reduced a broom to a more manageable size. Lily brightened, and the boys looked at him in admiration. It had been an easy charm, but he felt oddly pleased.

The brooms were ready and Snape felt a strange impatience in his blood.

"Let me see what you can do, Potter!" he teased James as if they were preparing for a real game.

"I'll show you some nice tricks," the boy answered proudly, emboldened by that invitation.

"Will you?" Snape said with his characteristic silky tone. "Then I think I'll have to show you some *of* my little tricks."

"Oh, er, ah... of course, Professor," James muttered and shot a worried glance at the tall, dark figure towering near him. Snape looked so comfortably at ease... But he couldn't mull over that sensation any longer because his professor spoke again.

"I have had a new idea, Potter," Snape said with a devilish grin. "Let's play teams."

"Oh!" Lily brightened in joy. "You will team with me, will you, Uncle Severus?"

James looked suddenly worried. "But that's not fair, Professor!"

"Really, Potter? Do you mean that two young men, one of whom is a member of the official Gryffindor Quidditch team, are afraid to challenge their old professor and a small girl? I'm surprised."

The boy raised two innocent eyes and considered the man with an expressive look. "I wasn't worried *for* me, Professor," he replied and smiled meaningfully.

Snape scowled at that disrespectful insinuation and asked the other children, "Everybody ready?"

Lily and Albus Severus nodded hesitantly, but once more, James took everybody by surprise by lifting off with a cry of sheer bliss.

"See you there if you dare!" he cried, rising higher and higher into the sky.

"Wait for me, James!" Albus Severus anxiously called and followed his brother with a manoeuvre that didn't lack elegance, in spite of his inexperience.

"And what about you, Lily? Are you ready?" Snape watched the girl, and she returned his gaze with an uncertain smile. The wizard felt a warm sensation of protectiveness.

"Don't worry," he said, "I'll be with you up there."

Her smile steadied at that reassuring declaration, and she lifted gracefully into the air. Her talent wasn't only a boast because, after a few seconds, she seemed to control her broom with great ease and waved at the black figure staring at her from the ground.

My turn, Snape thought, and an unknown emotion powerfully filled his veins. A new strength was invading him, and he welcomed it while he rose in slow circles towards the pure blueness of the sky.

"Everybody catches, and everybody defends!" Eyes twinkling in excitement, James explained in this way his simplified scheme for a game with such a small number of players.

"Your hoops, our hoops!" he shouted, pointing at two different directions while whirling swiftly.

"Now, let's go!" he ordered, and the Quaffle magically answered that command, floating obediently in the air. James rushed to take it with a wild cry. His joy was infectious, and soon Al joined him in a turbulent chase under the clouds.

For a moment, Snape felt wrong footed; then, that new surprising flux of energy drove him up forcefully, and he and Lily whirled and crossed and danced in the sky, hunting the devils-on-brooms that were zigzagging restlessly over and under and around them.

Comfortably seated on a sofa, Minerva was addressing a very peculiar audience.

Harry Potter and his parents, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black and Mad-Eye Moody, plus other assorted portraits, were looking at her with attentive faces from their frames on the walls.

"So," Minerva said, concluding her speech, "I think that he has come a long way since his first awakening in a corridor four months ago."

She smiled at Harry. "And we must thank Albus Severus for this unbelievable change. That boy is a dear."

"He's a smart child." Harry nodded almost nonchalantly, but his eyes were sparkling with pride. James put a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"And you have been a great dad," he said with a wavering voice. "I wish we could have done for you what you have done for your children."

"You both have always been close to me," Harry replied simply. Lily hugged her son, and Minerva blinked to hide her emotion.

"So, at the moment good old Snivelly is arbitrating a Quidditch game?" The question, formulated with a mix of surprise and disbelief, had been asked by a snorting Sirius Black, who continued ironically, "But he never was able to fly decently, let alone know the rules!"

"You are too harsh with him, Sirius," Lupin said softly.

"And you have always been too kind," Sirius irritatingly declared.

"Well," Harry interposed with a pacifying tone, "I do remember him supervising a game between Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs in my first year."

"Oh, then he probably had his reasons," Sirius replied with a sneer.

"Yes, he never liked flying," Moody said with his wolfish grin, "though he seemed to be perfectly at ease when he hit George Weasley's ear."

"Oh, Harry!" Lily said in a desolate tone. "What is he going to do with the children?"

In spite of her words, everybody understood that she was concerned about the lost friend of her youth rather than her grandchildren. Sirius snickered, Lupin looked embarrassed, Moody shrugged, and James sighed.

But Harry scratched his scar and smiled. "I'm sure he has got tricks to perform."

Minerva got on her feet and went to a window. She peered through the coloured glass and turned to the portraits.

"There is only one way to settle the question," she declared. "We will see what's happening from here. The Quidditch pitch is just in front of this window."

"And surely you hadn't noticed it before gathering all of us here?" the portrait of Phineas Nigellus commented with an indulgent smile.

"Well, why not?" Sirius exclaimed rudely. "It could be a good chance for a laugh. Merlin knows, there aren't many opportunities for a portrait to have fun."

Minerva tightened her lips, then indicated a small frame on the wall behind her. Obediently, the portraits entered their new temporary home, exchanging comments and jokes. As soon as everybody was in, Minerva opened the window, took the picture in her hands and gently placed it on the windowsill.

"Hey, it's cold!" Moody protested gruffly.

"Ah, come on, mate; once in a while, enjoy the occasion," James teased.

"Hey, it's a bit crowded here," Lupin complained, trying to disentangle himself from the mass of people avidly looking at the panorama.

"Young man, I too want to see," Dilys Derwent immediately replied, shooting him an incinerating look.

Then everybody went silent. Over the pitch and under the clouds, Snape and the children were flying on their brooms, crossing paths and laughing in excitement. The piping voices of the boys were clearly audible in the fresh air, and their exclamations of joy left the audience they didn't know they had, speechless.

One, two, three, four, five times Snape saved his hoops from the joint attack of the brothers while Lily expressed her exultation by flying higher and higher. It was time for a counteroffensive.

"You have had your chance," the wizard warned James and Al. "I believe it's our turn now. Beware!"

Following James in a difficult rotation, he plunged himself into a breathless dive and grabbed the Quaffle at the last moment. Then, instinctively, with a quick movement, he threw the ball into the hoop. It had been so disconcertingly easy!

"You did it, Uncle Severus!" Lily exclaimed and lifted her arms up in triumph. But, alas, she had underestimated the force of the wind... a stronger, unpredictable gust, and her broom violently reared up. Taken by surprise, the girl lost her grip, and with a cry of horror, she fell into the void.

"Lily!" James and Albus Severus yelled in panic while, frantically pushing their brooms to the maximum speed, they tried to reach their sister.

But Snape was quicker. In one fluid move, he abandoned his broom and dashed after her. The boys gasped in shock at that sight, yet the wizard seemed to be surprisingly at ease...he extended his arms, and his cape opened like a black wing while he gracefully tore through the air at impossible speed. Gliding smoothly, he passed under Lily, whirled to face her and took her in his arms, gradually reducing his speed to slow down her fall. She embraced him tightly, hiding her face against his chest.

"Scared?" he whispered into her hair. She nodded in silence and shivered, too shocked to speak.

"Don't be," he murmured, rocking her in mid-air. "I promised I would watch over you."

In the meantime, the boys had reached them and were flying in circles, looking at Snape with incredulous, awed faces.

"You... you can fly?" James asked with widened eyes. Then, enthusiastic, he began to shout, eagerly joined by Albus Severus, "You can fly! You can fly! YOU CAN FLY!"

An immense emotion enveloped Snape. Still holding Lily in his arms, he flung himself into a flight under the clouds, and the boys flew at his sides, whooping and laughing in excitement. Soon Snape lost himself in those intoxicating sensations, whirling in elation and enjoying all the elements of that wild ride. He could hear Lily giggle in delight against his chest while he played with the wind as if they were old friends.

And finally, he felt the need to be alone again, to savour his emotions. With a flick of his finger...he didn't even need a wand now...he summoned Lily's broom, wandering aimlessly under them. Gently, he placed the girl on it. Then, at his command, the whole group resumed its mad dance in the sky, diving and jumping and gliding and filling the ether with joyful exclamations.

Pressed against the frame, the portraits had followed the incident with gasps or cries of horror and were now collectively releasing their breaths in relief. Minerva smiled, though the shock of the scene she had just witnessed had paralysed her tongue for several minutes.

"Well, Sirius, what do you say now?" she asked.

"I'm... I'm flabbergasted," Sirius exploded. "But how can he do such things? Is that Dark Magic? It must be! After all, he was a powerful wizard. I've never seen anyone fly without a broom. What do you say, Harry?"

"It can't be Dark Magic," Harry replied simply, still recovering from the terrifying experience of seeing his adored little daughter fall through the void. A sudden thought had flashed in his mind.

The Spell has combined our powers, giving him my skills.

And a new thought had immediately followed, filled by something heartbreakingly similar to compassion.

I'm not going to reveal it.

In the meantime, sceptical and irritated, Sirius was questioning Moody with a teasing tone. "Not Dark Magic, huh? What do YOU think, Mad-Eye?"

"I trust Harry," Moody replied briefly. But that last terse assertion didn't stop Sirius, who called out loudly, evidently hoping for support, "And what about you, Albus? Do you agree? Or is there anything you would like to add?"

Only silence answered that question, and perplexed, Sirius glanced around, soon imitated by those surrounding him. Then he asked in surprise, "But where is he?"

The power that had invaded Snape was growing more and more forceful. Soon he lost himself in those overwhelming emotions, abandoning his spirit to their incredible vibrations. Leaving the children in awe, he rose higher and higher into the blue while flashes of light seemed to explode from his body. Farther and farther up he went,

ascending in an awesome silence with only the sound of the wind in his ears. Then, from that astonishing height, he watched the lake, the white fields, the castle, and the mountains shine in the distance: Everything looked so immensely peaceful and remote, so small and insignificant compared to his new condition!

What if he had chosen to follow that powerful stream running in his body? What if he had opted for a renewed existence, in which he could finally release all the potential he had never been allowed to express in his previous life? And finally, the ultimate question that, till that moment, he had desperately tried to elude: *what if he had borrowed part of Harry's life?*

His former student was young and healthy and powerful. Perhaps the Spell would allow them to exchange their bodies again in the future, before magic had inexorably consumed Snape's energy....

He clenched his fists in sudden resolution.

Why not? He needed compensation!

Why not? He deserved compensation!

He blazed fiercely and felt how great the power in his veins had become. Entranced, he toyed with the many possibilities that this new power was disclosing to his mind.

For a moment, he felt invincible.

For a moment, he felt immense.

Then he lowered his head to the children looking up at him with anxious faces.

No.

No.

He opened his arms in a gesture of submission. Once more, in the moment of his major glory, he bowed to his destiny and slowly began his descent.

The sun had lowered, announcing afternoon, but there was still a warm light on the fields when the children finally landed, eyes shining, cheeks reddened and voices roughened by so much shouting.

Snape landed gracefully near them, and the group went to put the brooms back in their lockers.

"Wow! What a day! What a game!" James exclaimed, exuberant as always. Then he turned to look at Snape with unusual friendliness.

"Can't believe you can fly without a broom, sir. Positively fly! Wait till I tell the others....," he announced with a dreamy voice. Then he asked, in a hopeful tone, "will you teach us how to do it, Professor? Maybe in the next years, when we are older?"

Snape smiled. "Definitely not. You don't need to learn how to fly when you can use a broom like you do, Potter."

The boy brightened at that unexpected compliment, then dared reply, "My name is James, Professor."

"I know, James," Snape replied. "And you are not going to tell anything to anybody about today."

"Why not?" the boy protested.

"Because nobody is going to believe you," Snape replied, and James darkened at that truth.

Lily rushed back after having carefully positioned her broom in its locker. She stared at Snape with starry eyes.

"Thank you, Uncle Severus! It has been... wonderful!" She embraced him tightly, pressing her nose against him with absolute confidence. He caressed her hair and felt an acute pain in his chest. His hands were warm and rosy now, and he could perceive the increasing cold of the fading day. Slowly, his body was stabilising, going towards a complete humanization.

He closed his eyes and breathed slowly, savouring the many sensations enveloping him and reaching him through his restored senses. Each minute, each second, was connecting him more and more with the world, and at the same time, it was shortening the time remaining to his new existence. He lost himself in those unbalancing sensations. Then, suddenly, he realised that the children were looking at him with perplexed faces.

He reacted immediately.

"Albus Severus, it's your turn now. Have you thought about your wish?"

At those words, James seemed a bit disappointed. *Of course*, the wizard considered, perceiving the thoughts behind that change of mood: James' wish had already been fulfilled while his brother's was still to be formulated. And who knew what other wonders Professor Snape would be able to perform, now that he had revealed such unexpected powers? The boy was evidently regretting those possible, but irremediably lost chances, and Snape smiled sadly. His time was running out so quickly!

He turned to Albus Severus, who was waiting patiently in the snow.

The boy smiled in embarrassment.

"I must tell you the truth," he said hesitantly. "My wish has already been granted."

Snape frowned, clearly baffled. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I had already expressed a wish," Albus Severus replied. "Don't you remember? It was the day of my first visit to Hogsmeade, and I went to see you on my return."

He looked uneasy as both his siblings were staring at him with vivid curiosity.

"Uh, er, well, I told you about Scorpius' Grandpa....," he said, more and more uncomfortable.

And suddenly, Snape remembered: He was alone and anguished in his frame, waiting to know about the epidemic going on. He had kept Lucius' terrible secret hidden in his heart just to discover that Minerva had contracted the same awful disease. He had felt so desperately miserable and guilty. And then... "Do you remember it now?" Al said in relief, understanding from Snape's expression that his older friend had finally focussed on the right memory.

The boy smiled. "That day I had wished that you could go out of your frame."

His smile grew even more radiant. "And you did it today."

Astounded, Snape felt totally disarmed before such innocence. The boy hadn't wished anything for himself, but he had been happy to help his siblings and a friend who, till that morning, was only paint on a canvas. Something humid prickled in his eyes... There were tears trying to force their way out, but they hadn't got enough power yet. Something that was still missing from his complete humanity....

"Ah, come on, Al!" Unaware of those feelings, James urged his brother, clearly frustrated about that useless waste of such an extraordinary opportunity. "There must be something else, now that Professor Snape is here!"

"Yes," Snape added in a much quieter tone, "Tell me what you would like for yourself," he concluded, and his voice trembled slightly while he tried to check his emotion.

"Hurry up, Al!" Lily insisted. "You must have your gift." And she tugged her brother's arm with an expectant look.

Confused, Albus Severus meditated. Then he watched Snape and asked slowly, "I wish we could go for a walk."

"A... a walk?" Snape was definitely baffled, and he raised his eyes at the sky as if asking for help. The weather wasn't inviting. Darkness was just round the corner, and the air was getting colder. Furthermore, where could they go, apart from the castle's gardens? Every other place was forbidden to him....

Forbidden...

Forbidden!

The Forbidden Forest, Snape thought. Not exactly the most beautiful place to choose for a walk, but they could stay in the safe areas just near the borders. Yes, it could work. And, perhaps, that could be the right place to say goodbye to the world for the second, definitive time.

Because, in those last minutes, Severus Snape had finally come to a decision.

Part XXXVI - Coming Back: Afternoon

Chapter 36 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of J.K. Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

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Part XXXVI - Coming Back: Afternoon

Minerva walked quietly along the corridors until she reached her office. Gently, she opened the door and glanced inside as if she were looking for somebody; surprised, the portraits on the walls returned her gaze and seemed to mutely ask the reason for such cautious behaviour. Smiling, she shook her head and backed out, closing the door in silence.

Again, she strode through the corridors that were so unusually empty, following a sudden inspiration that had lit in her mind. Soon the door of the Potions Room was before her. She entered and leaned her back against the wooden panel, looking up at the walls.

Ah, this time she'd guessed right!

She narrowed her eyes in determination and advanced into the room.

"Albus," she called softly.

Sitting in one of the higher pictures...the same one in which Snape and Cornelia Hobnook had walked together several weeks before...Albus Dumbledore was contemplating the lake with unseeing eyes.

"Albus," Minerva called again, letting affection enter her tone.

He sighed and turned his back to avoid her gaze.

"Yes, Minerva?" he replied sullenly.

"Why didn't you come and join me and the others?" she asked with her most reasonable voice. "We had a splendid time watching Severus and the children fly over the Quidditch pitch. The children were so excited! You should have seen them! Lily and Al are going to be excellent players, just like their brother, but Severus was the real surprise."

A deep silence followed her enthusiastic speech. It was her turn to sigh now.

"Albus," she asked patiently, "Is there anything you would like to tell me?"

"Would anything change if I did?" he replied in an oddly childish tone.

Minerva considered him. "Perhaps you could try," she offered. Then, at his persistent silence, she announced, "As you like, Albus. I'll leave you alone, then."

The old wizard inhaled.

"Severus doesn't want to speak to me," he said, still not looking at her. He may as well have been speaking to the lake. "He doesn't even want to listen to me."

"Oh!" Minerva smiled sadly. "But I thought you were used to such irritating behaviour."

"This time is different," he replied and finally turned to face her. His eyes were suspiciously reddened.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because... because..." Abruptly, his frustration burst out. "Ah, nonsense! I don't have to justify myself! He is stubborn and selfish!"

"Selfish?" she replied with an incredulous tone. "He spent his whole life in atonement, just to be repaid by hate and contempt."

"Well, I don't see it that way!" Dumbledore exploded. "He made a mistake! I offered him a chance! He should be grateful!"

"I see," she said quietly and crossed her arms. "So, if this is what you think, why are you complaining?"

"I would like him to see reason."

"This is not a matter of reason, Albus. This is a matter of heart." Her eyes dug into his eyes, and she shook her head with a sigh. "Perhaps you should give your heart a chance."

His lips thinned stubbornly.

She waited in hopeful silence.

Then, seeing that Dumbledore wasn't going to give her a reply, she sighed and wordlessly left the room. Lost in their thoughts, neither of them noticed the mysterious figure who was considering the scene with pensive eyes, hidden in a corner.

Albus Severus was waiting, his breath coming out in a cloud of regular white puffs. Snape turned to the other two children. It was time for a goodbye.

"I'll see you later," he began; then he saw their disappointed faces and knew that, if everything went according to his plan, he would never see James and Lily again in "this" world. He braced himself and concealed his pain under his most authoritative manner.

"Mr. Potter, please take the young lady to the castle and inform your parents that your brother will be back before dark."

"Yes, sir," James replied respectfully, and a regretful spark twinkled in his eyes.

Hearing this exchange, Lily's disillusioned expression changed into an upset one, and Snape had to force himself to remain impassive.

"Let's go!" He invited Al with a curt nod, beginning to walk. The boy was surprised at Snape's change of mood, but understanding that something was paining the man, he silently obeyed and joined him as he marched. Behind them, the calm lasted only for a few seconds.

"I want to go with them too!" Lily's acute protest exploded across the rapidly growing distance.

"Stay here!" James ordered. The urgency in the boy's tone made Snape understand that James must have physically stopped his sister's attempt to go after them. Stubbornly, the older wizard kept walking, though his heart was begging him to go back. Uncertain, Albus Severus paused, and then after an apologetic glance at his sister, he too resumed his march.

"This is Al's gift," they heard James say in his most rational tone. "You mustn't spoil it."

"My wish wasn't totally mine!" Lily said accusingly, on the verge of tears. "It was your wish, and I agreed only to help you!" She was crying now. "Aw, James, I don't want to go back to the castle!"

"Hush, Lily, Mum is waiting." The boy was evidently using all his big brother authority to soothe her. "You need to warm yourself after the flight. In the castle, there will be cake and sweets. And perhaps other surprises. Don't you want to..."

His voice gradually faded in the distance while Snape and Al walked farther and farther into the snow. The wizard raised his head at the sun...to reach the Forest, they had to do a long trip, but there was less than an hour before sunset, and the air was rapidly going from crisp to cold as a light breeze began to blow. Grey clouds were gathering on the horizon; still far away, Snape considered, but steadily approaching. The day would probably end with a snowfall or a storm.

Instinctively, he accelerated his pace, noting with a fleeting sense of approval that Al did the same. Snape glanced at the boy walking so composedly near him and felt uneasy. What to do? There were no potions or lessons to comment upon, nor books to discuss. What to talk about? What would a friend... no, what would an "uncle" say to a dearest nephew whom he was thinking of leaving forever?

"Aren't you tired, Al?" he finally asked, and the boy shook his head with a shy smile. Reassured, the wizard smiled back and allowed his thoughts to wander freely while his senses savoured the scene around him, wordlessly bidding goodbye.

Side by side, sharing the enchantment of that supernatural quietness, they crossed the hoary gardens and continued their walk till they reached the back courtyard. And there, Snape abruptly stopped.

The Whomping Willow was standing in front of them, its powerful branches swinging in the air as if it were playing catch with the birds flying in circles around its immense foliage.

The wizard inhaled sharply, his body nearly vibrating with emotion. Albus Severus raised his head to watch his older friend.

"Bad memories?" he asked in a whisper, and Snape nodded, unable to translate his feelings into words.

"I know," the boy went on, still whispering. But this time, his tone was growing anxious. "Dad told me. It was my grandfather, wasn't it?"

His eyes seemed to be urging Snape to speak, but the wizard didn't attempt an answer. Why torment the boy? Let Grandpa James explain his reasons to the child. Snape didn't want to spoil his last moments on the earth by remembering tales of hate and horror. Yet the boy surprised him again.

"Dad says that we should always voice our fears; that way we let them out, and they leave us free."

Snape smiled bitterly. Not a remedy he would suggest for himself at the moment. Many dark thoughts had invaded his soul, and he was struggling to keep them under control while they were threatening to overflow his spirit.

He shook his head and tried to take a step, but his legs refused to obey: a vague but increasing sensation of anguish was chaining him there. Alarmed, he renounced the fight and braced himself in anticipation, his breath coming out in imperceptible, accelerated puffs.

And while he shivered in sudden cold, a veil of mist covered his mind. He heard the boy ask something in a worried tone, but Snape was no longer with him: his spirit was focused on facing the memories that were emerging from the past. Before his very eyes, the scene seemed to blur and change in a disconcerting way. He blinked, a prisoner of his vision, and watched helplessly, lost in that new, frightening dimension.

The Whomping Willow had ceased its weird game: The big tree had suddenly stiffened in something similar to surprise, and now it seemed to stare back and somehow challenge the man waiting in the snow.

Immediately after, the snow under the tree began to quake powerfully, and with a sharp sound, the ground exploded in a confused mass of powder and debris. Two monstrous hands appeared from below: then, with horrifying slowness, a beast emerged from the tunnel. Its yellowish eyes gleamed with a vicious spark while a low growl vibrated in its half-closed mouth.

Gradually, the monster straightened itself in a grotesque parody of a man, and finally, it raised its eyes at the sky, howling its challenge at the world. Baring its fangs in a hideous grimace, it turned its head, and its eyes focussed on Snape with a malicious expression. Its body bent, and its claws glittered while it seemed to assess its adversary. Then, with an abrupt start, the beast snorted and began to run, its savage howl filling the air.

"Professor Snape! Professor Snape! Are you feeling well? Please speak to me!"

Called so forcefully back from that horrible vision, Snape shuddered violently and closed his eyes, then opened them again just in time to see the monster stop in its run, writhe in impotence and disappear in a puff of smoke. The wizard blinked, trying to recover his senses, and took in the world around him.

The sun had lowered in the sky, its pale globe glowing mildly over the approaching clouds. The birds were still flying and emitting their joyous calls while the Whomping Willow had resumed its bizarre dance. Smallest in that white immensity, Albus Severus was staring at him with a worried frown.

"Do you feel all right?" the boy asked softly.

Breathing in trembling gasps, Snape raised a hand to his temple and nodded. The vision had been so real! Wordlessly, he turned his head to check the scene again as if wanting to convince himself. Everything was quiet. Everything was peaceful. His breath steadied, and his eyes searched for Albus Severus. The boy returned his gaze with a comforting smile.

"Don't worry," Al said gently, and an incongruously protective expression appeared on his face. "I am with you."

They climbed the hill behind the Whomping Willow and began their descent towards the Forbidden Forest. Soon they reached a field from where Hagrid's hut, now abandoned and empty, could be seen. And there, Snape stopped again, strangled by an intense emotion. Suddenly, he realised that they were following the same path he had covered twenty years before, with Draco at his side. It had been a warm summer night, and the stars had glittered like jewels in the sky, indifferent to the crime that had been committed under their cold light.

He closed his hands into fists and tried to uncover fragments of the past, concealed under that white mantle. How many painful memories had been waiting for him outside of the castle?

Once more, his mind became lost in remembrances, and memories were quick to answer his call. Fang barking loudly, a helpless prisoner in the hut. Hagrid towering in the distance, his giant figure blurred by the night. A mad sprint, the anguish, the crumbling of a world... a frantic attempt to fulfil a plan that was developing moment by moment, and every moment could turn into a catastrophe. No hope, only horror, infinite horror and desperation. Would such an immense sacrifice be worthless?

His eyes again met Harry Potter's.

Harry Potter, who had followed him and could not understand. Harry Potter, who was shouting his contempt and his pain, the same pain that Snape was also feeling.

Murderer! Traitor! Coward!

Warm little fingers were pressing his wrist, and he realised that he was trembling violently. He closed his eyelids to avoid Al's green eyes, the same eyes he had just seen in his mind.

"Memories...", he murmured and gritted his teeth with the effort of squeezing out the tears, the soothing tears that still refused to wet his eyes. "Memories are too painful for me."

"But they happened so many years ago," Al said uncertainly.

"They are still alive in my mind."

"I'm sorry. What did you see?" the boy asked softly, gently forcing the wizard to face his anguish. Again, it was night on the earth, and voiceless ghosts rose from the ground, invisible to anyone but Snape.

"Your father... your father challenged me in this field," he panted, facing the spectral figures in his mind. "He called me coward."

The boy tilted his head. "But now he knows that you are no coward," he offered timidly. "Now he thinks that you are the bravest man he ever met. That's why he gave me your name."

In the castle, Ginny had welcomed back her children. Lily was still disappointed at having been left behind, so she ran into her mother's arms, looking for consolation and blaming her brother for his insistence on dragging her away. James shrugged under Ginny's frown while she embraced her little one tightly, trying to soothe her.

Soon Lily smiled again as Minerva McGonagall had shrewdly begun to praise her and her brothers on their flying skills. And with an avuncular smile, Filius Flitwick eagerly joined Minerva in offering Lily an audience. Forgetting her dismay, and evidently proud of her exploits, the girl brightened at their compliments, ready to talk about her adventure.

And then Ginny noticed and abruptly cut her off.

"Where's Al?" she asked.

Hand hovering over a platter of delicious sweets, James replied nonchalantly, "Oh, he went for a walk."

His mother was horrified. "In this cold weather? At this hour?"

"What's the problem?" James shrugged again, catching in mid-air a chocolate frog that had tried to save itself by jumping off the table. "He is with Professor Snape!"

He chomped on a morsel, then watched his mother and blushed with uneasiness at her irate look. "He promised that Al would be back before dark," he mouthed almost unintelligibly.

Ginny tightened her lips, and Minerva intervened with her calm authority.

"Don't be worried, dear. I'm sure Severus will keep his word, as he always did."

The younger woman sighed and went to look through the window.

"I can't even threaten to kill him," she helplessly murmured at the clouding sky.

The sun was fading quickly, much more rapidly than Snape had expected. But he still wasn't ready to interrupt their walk, nor to separate himself from his little companion. The boy had been the bridge between himself and real life, the shield against his demons, the beginning of a new existence. An extraordinary connection had linked their spirits, giving Snape a reason to hope, to struggle, to "exist". Breaking that connection would prove to be the most painful experience the wizard had ever undergone in his life: being accepted, being trusted, and yet being forced to refuse it forever, after having so desperately needed it. He sighed. Perhaps he should say something to the boy. Prepare him. Explain.

Silently, they climbed another hill. Far in the distance, Hogsmeade was glowing in the sunset, its tiny houses and streets shining with lights. For a moment, he had the vivid impression of hearing the voices, the songs, and the toasts, all the merry noises of a feast day. He stood still and contemplated it. At his side, Albus Severus let out an exclamation of joy.

"How beautiful! Look at all the lights!"

The sunset had painted the darkening sky with streaks of orange and red. Never had he seen such a wondrous nightfall in winter. It was as if nature, too, had tried to offer him a gift, a farewell present, that made his heart tighten in regret. It was late, and he had promised that the boy would be back before dark. But he couldn't go back. Not now. There was still something he needed to do.

He savoured those last precious emotions. Life was appearing in all its splendour just when he had decided to leave it, showing him the last fireworks before closing the curtains forever. He dilated his senses to absorb as much as possible. In just one short day, he had enjoyed more emotions than he had ever experienced in his whole life.

Albus Severus was standing patiently near him. That boy had been his guardian, Snape thought. Through his innocent eyes, the older wizard had learned how to live again, how to love and to be loved.

Now Snape knew what Lucius felt when he looked at Scorpius. His mind filled with an intense emotion and a soothing conviction: No force would ever break a link like that. Not even death.

This truth reached his heart and opened its doors to peace. Yes, everything made sense now. The circle had definitely closed. It was time to leave.

He turned his back away from Hogsmeade. "Let's go," he said quietly and extended his hand to the boy. After a moment of hesitation, Al clasped it with a smile, and they entered the Forest, beginning their last walk.

Darkness was slowly invading the world, so Snape raised his wand. Myriads of dancing vivid sparkles suddenly burst out of its tip, tracing a luminous path amongst the trees and creating a magical atmosphere. The boy was fascinated and watched his friend with fond admiration. Then he seemed to remember something.

"Mum says that the Forest is an awful place. She says that you sent her and her schoolmates into the Forest to punish them when you were the Headmaster," the boy whispered softly, afraid to break that awesome silence. "But Neville says that you did it to protect them instead. Mum is not happy when they share their memories."

Of his last year, Snape thought, and a flow of images once more filled his mind with surprising vividness. The Carrows... the long and lonely walks along the corridors... the malevolent spark in the eyes of his colleagues... Minerva watching him in silent contempt and immense regret... But he had had no choice! He could not speak, chained as he was to Dumbledore's plan. And nobody ever suspected anything... nobody ever asked if, inside that dark brooding man, there were a heart, feelings, or emotions.

They had eyes, yet they could not see, he thought bitterly. But the boy who was walking so trustfully near him had redressed that situation. He had fought for their friendship. Snape felt a warm wave of consolation. Those were his last precious moments, and he wanted to leave his existence filled only by those sweet feelings.

The night had fallen, but warmed and guided by the dancing lights, both the man and the boy had forgotten time and weather. Animals peeked out hesitantly from the trees. Rabbits, deer, a somnolent badger, hares, and even a marten slowly gathered to welcome the visitors.

And finally, Albus Severus widened his eyes. A magnificent unicorn, glowing in pale splendour, advanced slowly towards them. Its mane was swinging fluidly on its powerful yet graceful body, and its eyes were mild and trustful.

Excitedly, Al tugged Snape's hand.

"May I touch it?" he whispered, an intense desire vibrating in his voice.

"Of course you may," Snape replied with the same soft tone, and they moved closer to the magnificent creature. The unicorn didn't draw back, but let Al stroke its glowing hair; the boy gulped in emotion when the animal bent its head to lick his hands, and then he giggled at being tickled and turned to look at Snape with starry eyes.

"Isn't it beautiful?" he said. In that moment, he looked like the happiest child in the world, and Snape smiled, a truly joyful smile, elated by Al's happiness.

The luminous creature raised its head and seemed to invite them to follow the glowing path of sparkles. Laughing, enchanted, Al and Snape plunged more and more deeply into the forest.

In the castle, Ginny was distractedly listening to Lily's story and casting furtive glances towards the window every few seconds. Time was passing at an intolerably slow pace. The night was approaching rapidly, and the sky was heavy with clouds, threatening snow at any moment. Her anxiety and her resentment had been constantly growing in that last half an hour.

James' passionate defence of Professor Snape had been the last straw. What could a picture remember about children and their needs? Why should a portrait care about weather and darkness? After all, Snape was dead. Nothing could hurt him, while Al...

Ginny chilled. If something happened to Snape, would that affect Harry too? Her eyes met Minerva's questioning ones. With a forced smile, the younger woman turned her head to hide her concern while a resolution took shape in her mind. In a few moments, Neville would be back, and then she would ask him for his help. But no matter what anybody would say or do, with or without their consent, Ginny would go out and search for Al.

And for dear, good, damned, old Uncle Severus.

The unicorn had left the luminous path to disappear amongst the trees, and Al was walking in silence, smiling and mulling over his thoughts. But that meditation obviously couldn't last for long.

"What about Centaurs?" the boy asked after a while, ready to be surprised again. "Where do they live?"

Snape raised his brows with an amused smile. It was too cold and too early for those fabulous beings, he explained and mentally thanked the weather. That way he would be spared the justification of his renewed existence to those fierce creatures. He glanced at his small companion, so evidently at ease in that land of wonders. Perhaps that was a good moment to bid goodbye. Then, once more, the boy preceded him.

"When spring comes, would you come here again with me?"

Snape took a deep breath. "I won't be here, Al. My time on earth ends today."

"Of course," the boy replied with that irritating patience children seem to display before adult obtuseness. "You must go back to your frame, but that doesn't change anything. I can bring you here in a smaller picture."

He brightened at the idea. "Today we had such a great time together! Thank you very much...", he hesitated, then added uncertainly, "uh, may I call you Uncle Severus?"

Snape felt his heart break into a thousand pieces. He smiled a wavering smile, and the boy hurried to say, "Only for today, of course. I'll call you Professor when we are in the classroom."

Overwhelmed, Snape murmured, "You can call me whatever you prefer, Al. I'm not going to be your teacher anymore."

"What do you mean?" the boy was instantly alarmed.

"I... I won't be coming back." *How to explain?* It was much worse than he had thought.

Snape cursed his clumsiness. "I'll become a portrait," he miserably ended.

"I know." The boy was relieved again. "Like you were before."

The wizard could drop the subject. It would be a wise choice. No worries, no pain. But that would be a betrayal.

"I have chosen to return as a simple portrait," he therefore explained, without explaining.

"What do you mean?" the boy said and frowned at that distinction.

Snape lowered his eyes. It was wrong. It would hurt the child. Nevertheless, he persisted in his intent. "My spirit will leave this earth. So, I won't be able to teach anymore."

The boy frowned, and his expression altered alarmingly. Snape stopped and put his hands on Al's shoulders. His eyes became firm and pleading at the same time.

"You must understand, Al," he prayed. "I am dead, and there is no peace in my actual existence. Everything calls me back, but I can't stay."

"No!" the boy exclaimed. "We're friends! You promised we would be friends!"

"I'm sorry," Snape said sadly. "But I will always be there as a portrait, and you can always come to talk to me and tell me what you are doing."

"Who will be inside that portrait? You or somebody else? If you are gone, who will be in your frame? A ghost?"

"No. No. It will always be me."

"So, what's changed? Why can't you teach anymore? Are you angry with us?"

"No, Al. No. But this isn't my place any longer, don't you understand? I am dead!"

The boy paled. "You are not dead as long as you can speak with me!"

"Al, you are a child, you can't understand...."

"No! I understand very well. You don't care about me. You have tricked me since the beginning. Why did you offer to tutor me if you didn't think you could go on? Why did you say we were friends? Friends stick together; they don't give up at the first sign of a problem!"

"Though understandable, this line of reasoning is selfish, Al."

"No! You are the selfish one! I... I..."

The boy backed away while tears trickled down his cheeks. The sound of thunder could be heard rumbling powerfully in the distance, and the enchanted lights vanished, as if somebody had violently blown them out. The wind whistled, and suddenly everything was dark and cold while snowflakes whirled all around them.

"Al!" Snape ordered, suddenly aware of the risks implicit in their situation. "We must go back! Come here!"

But the boy thinned his lips into a stubborn line and slowly shook his head. Then, abruptly, he turned his back on the wizard and disappeared into the middle of the trees.

"Al!" Snape shouted in frustration. "Al! Come back immediately! It's dangerous! AL!"

Only wind answered that desperate call. So, furious and worried, Snape rushed to follow the boy inside the forest.

Part XXXVII - Coming Back: Evening

Chapter 37 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of J.K. Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

*All my gratitude to my beta **AmyLouise**. Many thanks to all my kind readers and reviewers.*

Part XXXVII - - Coming Back: Evening

This chapter was written as a loving tribute to John Nettleship, the chemistry teacher whom JKR immortalised as Severus Snape. John died on March 12, 2011, after a long struggle against cancer.

He had initially been worried by JKR's decision to duplicate him as the infamous Potions master, but then he discovered that Snape has as many fans in real life as he has detractors in the books. So, John finally grew fond of his literary twin and enjoyed the reading of the saga and the friendship of some fanfiction authors and fan artists.

He was a good man, and he will be missed.

Darkness had invaded the country, covering the fields under its shadowy cape. Concealing an obscure menace in their feather-like appearance, snowflakes had begun to fall in random carousels, as if cautiously tasting the world in which they were to descend.

Vainly trying to detect her son and his grim companion in that impenetrable blackness, Ginny was getting more and more anxious, but as she couldn't do anything but wait and worry, she tried to keep her tension under control by repeating to herself that there were no dangers around Hogwarts.

Times had changed: no more werewolves or irked centaurs ready to throw arrows at the passersby... though giant spiders were probably still surviving somewhere in the depths of the Forbidden Forest. But, she assured herself, Snape must know about them. He was a valiant wizard, and he had been a Death Eater! Indubitably, he knew how to defend himself and his student... And surely Al was enjoying being out with his questionable friend. Why let her anxiety spoil his happiness? There was no need to worry. Surely, they would return at any moment. And then, when they were safely back in the castle...

Her lips curled in a dark smile while she mentally rehearsed the welcome speech she had especially prepared for "Uncle Severus".

Lost in those considerations, Ginny hadn't forgotten the place in which she was or the people around her. So, when she finally moved on from the window, she was ready to return Minerva and Filius' questioning gazes without a blink, showing her older friends that everything was under control.

Neville chose that moment to enter the room.

"I'm back!" he said, greeting them with his friendly smile. "Hanna sends her best regards to everybody."

Forgetting her anxiety for a moment, Ginny too smiled warmly. "I'm so happy for you," she said. "Tell me how is she?"

"Struggling with nausea and hoping to have a chat with you soon, Ginny. Suggestions from an experienced mother are always appreciated." Neville was evidently sparkling with joy; he winked at James and Lily. "And what about you? How was the day?"

The children had gathered to welcome him. With her sweet confidence, Lily tugged his robes to attract his attention, raising a radiant face in anticipation. Smiling fondly, Neville bent to kiss her, then lifted her in his arms. She placed her cheek against his cheek and began to talk excitedly.

"It was great! I played real Quidditch on *real* brooms with James and Al, and Uncle Severus teamed with me! You can't imagine what happened!"

Thoroughly fed up with listening to his sister's big adventure also because she had actually flown while that exciting experience had been denied to him James impolitely interrupted her with a much more interesting subject.

"Did you know that Professor Snape can fly? You should have seen him! His cape opened like"

"A giant bat..." Neville murmured, and his eyes became blank. James looked at him with a frown, misunderstanding his reaction.

"I'm talking seriously!" he protested. "Lily had fallen from her broom, and he reached her BY FLYING!"

Still lost in his memories, Neville nodded vaguely in acknowledgement. Irritated by what he considered a disconcerting indifference, the boy went on impatiently, "He can fly better than a bird! You should have seen him! He went so high in the sky, I thought he would never come down."

"Yes!" Lily intervened, glaring at her brother for having spoiled her surprise. "And I flew with him! It was... great!" she said with a dreamy voice.

Then she proudly added a brazen lie, "But I wasn't afraid because he promised he would watch over me!"

At this point, her mother was ready to join the conversation.

"Didn't he also promise that Al would be back before dark?" she asked harshly, and James backed off at that well-known signal of approaching temper.

Neville frowned and seemed to suddenly realise that one of the children was missing. Flitwick looked embarrassed, so Neville turned his head towards the Headmistress, and Minerva licked her lower lip nervously.

"I'm sure they will be here soon," she offered uncertainly. Concern was also beginning to show on her face, and Ginny felt her own anxiety increase at that sight.

The older woman smiled a hesitant smile. "There must be a reason for this delay, a logical one. Perhaps they have found..."

A violent rumble of thunder exploded, and the whole castle vibrated under that powerful sound. Ginny jumped up on her feet.

"Enough!" she exclaimed. "I want my boy back!"

As if mocking her, the wind howled and knocked against the window, making the coloured glass tremble and tingle. Snowflakes began to whirl more and more vehemently, whipping the walls, while another thunderclap rumbled even more loudly. Lily widened her eyes, then hid her face against Neville. The storm had reached the castle, and for a moment, everybody stood still in that explosion of fury.

"Now what do you have to say, Minerva?" Ginny asked sharply, unable to contain her tension any longer. "Any other excuse? No sensible person would keep a child out in such weather!"

No answer came, though she had deliberately provoked the Headmistress in the hope of being contradicted, so, finally, Ginny ceded.

"Perhaps... perhaps something has happened," she whispered, confessing her anxiety and raising a desperate face to the others.

"We must find them immediately!" Neville exclaimed, unconsciously tightening Lily in his arms. Frightened, the girl began to cry while James gasped and alternately watched the adults in the room. Minerva raised a hand.

"I think we must ask Mr. Bernardi," she declared with a shaky voice, and both Neville and Ginny saw an immense fear in her eyes.

"Al! Al! Al!"

Lost in the middle of a tempest, wind and snowflakes impairing his sight, a chilling cold biting his body, Snape was reaching levels of panic he had never thought possible to experience. Where was the boy hiding? How long could the young boy survive in such a freezing temperature? Minutes were elapsing at an unbearably slow pace while, heart beating madly, he struggled against the elements, pushing his way frantically through the trees.

But he soon had to pause in desperation. No. That wouldn't work. The Forest was too large to be searched by just one man. He breathed deeply, trying to calm himself and plan a strategy. Should he try to use magic?

"*Accio Al!*" he shouted, pointing his wand, but nothing happened.

"*Accio Albus Severus!*" he tried again furiously. And still nothing happened.

Maddening. The situation was maddening. Frustrated, he watched his wand helplessly, trembling with the effort of controlling his anxiety. And doing so, he noticed that his hands had greyed. Following his previous decision, life had begun to retreat from his limbs. Suddenly, he understood. Renouncing life, he had progressively expelled magic from his body. He needed to recover his earlier strength again. But how to do it without reversing his decision? And was there still time to do it?

He paused and tried to gather all the sensations, all the emotions, all the astonishing feelings he had experienced in that incredible day.

Calling back what he had just rejected.

Letting blood once more replenish his veins.

Embracing life again.

It was dangerous. It was extremely dangerous. Reversing the process could destroy his body forever. But there was no time to ask for help: Al had just a few moments left. There were no other options, or the boy would never survive.

Desperately, Snape focused his thoughts on the child.

A thunderbolt exploded, and he lost himself in an immense wave of power.

Marcello Bernardi was listening with widened eyes and a terrified face.

"Oh, *santo cielo!*" he exclaimed. "That wasn't supposed to happen!"

He seemed to regret his impulsive words as soon as he glanced at Ginny; awkwardly, he tried to offer her comfort by taking her hand and guiding her towards an armchair where a motionless figure covered by a blanket was sleeping quietly. "Don't worry, Madam, I'm sure that my grandfather ..."

The powerful sound of thunder rumbled, and Tomaso Bernardi opened his eyes with a start.

"Marcello!" he called feebly with a voice in which panic could be perceived. *E' successo qualcosa! L'ho perduto!* Something happened! Professor Snape has disconnected. I have lost him."

Both men looked at each other in terror.

Al was sitting under a bush, and the snow had begun to gently envelop him in a soft, deadly cover.

"Al!" Snape called, kneeling at his side to check him. The boy was shivering, and the wizard immediately cast a warming spell. A flurry of warm air enfolded the place. Tracing an arc with his wand, Snape created an invisible shield in order to retain the heat and protect them from the storm.

Al glared at him defiantly. "Go 'way," he blurted. "I don't need your help! I'll go home by myself."

"Don't be silly," Snape said, concealing his immense relief under a stern tone and straightening up in all his imposing height. "It's too cold; you are going to freeze."

Al scrambled to his feet as well. He was shaking, but his face held a stubbornly resentful expression while he challenged the man.

"So what? This is no-none of your b-business. You c-can't give m-me orders any more!"

"Mr. Potter! Watch your tongue! I'm still your teacher," Snape replied in his most professorial tone, and at that statement, Al suddenly smiled.

"You're s-still my t-teacher?" he stammered, teeth chattering uncontrollably in reaction to the warmth invading his body. "Then you t-told me a lie before, d-didn't you? It wasn't true. O-otherwise, why w-would you..."

The rest of the sentence got lost in an indistinct murmur while Al, yielding to his exhaustion, swayed and leaned against Snape.

"Let's go back," Snape said firmly, taking Al's arm. Then he stopped. They couldn't walk back in that weather. Nor could he Side-Along-Apparate the boy into the castle or into its gardens. The protective charms would never let them in. He frowned and looked up at the raging sky.

"How can we reach them?" Ginny asked. Her eyes were dry, her voice determined. Behind her, unable to do anything else but watch a condition frighteningly unusual to him Harry was waiting in silence while his parents had tactfully retired into a frame hanging over the much younger possessors of their names, sitting quietly in a corner of the room.

Tomaso Bernardi shook his head.

"My dear lady," he said, still breathing painfully after that unexpected, shocking awakening. "I'm deeply sorry. There is no way for me to reconnect with Professor Snape in the short time the situation would require. In this moment, Professor Snape is as human as you and me. I have no more power over him. I'm afraid I can't be of help. We must find a different solution."

Marcello Bernardi ran a hand through his hair in utter desolation.

"*Non può essere... che cosa è andato storto?*" he murmured, and though not understanding his words, Ginny immediately perceived his discomfort. She bit her lip in the effort of preventing tears.

Minerva put a hand on her shoulder. The younger woman cast her an accusing glance then spoke again, hardening her tone. "Then I'm going out to search for them!"

Out in the dark, Snape silently interrogated himself. Until that moment, his magic had worked well. Life was flowing powerfully in his veins, and its intoxicating force had filled his heart with renewed confidence. Summoning his memories again, he pointed his wand and called, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Al gasped and widened his eyes. The fluid shape of a silver doe had suddenly burst out from the tip of Snape's wand. Glowing softly, the graceful creature raised her head to the wizard, as if welcoming him back. Then the animal slowly went near to Al.

The child and the doe looked at each other; unable to resist that fascinating image, Al cautiously stretched out a hand. Immediately the doe drew back, still looking at the boy with her mild eyes. Then, with a sudden start, she broke into a run and disappeared amongst the trees, leaving behind her a silvery trail.

Neville was the first to react. "I'm coming with you," he told Ginny; at his side, Marcello Bernardi instantly nodded. "Count me in, Madam," he said, hardening his jaw.

Flitwick and Minerva exchanged a helpless glance. Ginny took her wand. At her shoulders, Harry lowered his head and sighed. Then little Lily let out a shriek of fear and everybody froze.

Something graceful and silver had just jumped through the coloured glass of the window, landing lightly on the floor. The doe raised her head and her long-lashed eyes searched for the woman of whom she was the loving symbol. In her frame, Lily gasped and raised a hand to cover her mouth, her eyes rapidly filling with tears. Minerva advanced, her face revealing an incredulous awe, and the doe lowered her head as if bowing to her authority.

Then the rich, deep voice of Severus Snape resounded in the room.

"Unlock the protective charms, Minerva. We are coming."

With an elegant leap, the creature of light vanished through the wall. The astonished silence that followed was immediately broken by excited, confused exclamations until Tomaso Bernardi silenced everybody by saying quietly, "I'd suggest doing what he asked. Right now."

Under their protective shelter, Snape and Al were silently staring at the storm when the doe came back, and this time she went to rub her head against Al's hand before disappearing. The child smiled, and Snape nodded gravely.

"They know," he said. He paused to contemplate the sky and breathed slowly, comparing his internal turmoil to the violent storm that reflected so well his perturbed spirit. His last moments, definitely his last moments...

Even the stinging cold would be a welcome sensation on his skin now, he bitterly considered. The moon shone for a moment through the clouds, as if bidding him goodbye for the last time, and its light created an ethereal effect on the land covered in white.

The wizard lowered his head and closed his eyes.

"Every cloud has a silver lining," he murmured in a wish and a farewell, feeling his heart ache intensely.

He turned to Al, trying to hide his sorrow. "Time to go, Mr. Potter."

The boy watched him, and the smile that was still lingering on his lips after the meeting with the doe slowly faded into a grave expression.

"And then, when we are back, you will leave us?" he whispered.

Torn between desire and despair, Snape felt acutely helpless. Oh, how much he would have liked to accept the prayer so palpably evident in that question!

But how... how could he bear to be trapped once more into a frame after the glorious day in which he had, against all odds, experienced life again, savoured it in its rough perfection, breathed it into his lungs and veins?

And in which other way could he survive on the earth without condemning Harry to a horrible destiny or himself to perpetual confinement?

Emotions clouded his mind, rising inside him like leaves whirling in the wind, and a silent anger made him clench his fists forcefully.

"I suppose there is nothing I could say that can make you change your plan, is there, Professor?" the boy said, watching him with a surprisingly mature expression.

Snape sighed and averted his eyes, trying to hide the anguish that had invaded his heart. This time, there wouldn't be wounds on his body, but the pain inflicted to his spirit would be even more atrocious than Nagini's bite.

Al shuddered, and not because of the weather.

"I will miss you a lot," he sniffled, becoming once more a child and a desolate one; a tear fell in the snow and sparkled gently like a precious gem before being swallowed by the white softness.

The boy raised his reddened eyes. "Will you remember me in... in the place where you are going?" he asked, looking for comfort in his sorrow for something he couldn't understand or accept.

Snape felt as if his spirit was being lacerated, and his heart rebelled violently against that impending separation. But his mind warned him again: there was nothing he could do! Life as a human being had been forbidden to him twenty years before. The day that had just passed had been only an extraordinary gift, for which he was now feeling both gratitude and resentment.

What use had it been to be offered the joy of living if it had to be taken from him right at the moment he had begun to savour it? Wouldn't it have been better if he had kept living, lonely and untouched, in his frame? He silently cursed the Bernardis and their deceptive offer, then watched Al and tried to steady his voice.

"Of course I will remember you!" he said, and though the words sounded decidedly childish and inadequate to him, Al seemed to be greatly relieved.

"Let's go home, then," the boy whispered, bowing to Snape's decision and clasping the hand he was offered.

With a soft pop, Snape and Albus Severus Apparated into the Potions Room in the middle of an eagerly waiting group. The boy was swaying under the nauseating effect of the Side-Along-Apparition, and at that sight, his mother immediately cried out, "Al!"

He ran to embrace her, and she hugged him forcefully. "Are you okay? Is everything all right?" she inquired anxiously, scrutinising his reddened eyes and cupping his face in that worriedly affectionate way displayed by mothers on such occasions.

More composedly, Minerva reached Snape, who was looking at the scene with a sad expression. She put a hand on his arm.

"What happened, Severus?" she said, her expression betraying her inner anxiety. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm sorry, Madam Potter," Snape said, avoiding Minerva's gaze and looking at Ginny. "I could not keep my word."

Immediately, Al intervened.

"It was my fault, Mum," he said with a contrite expression. "I ran away and got lost in the storm. Professor Snape had to search for me."

Everybody turned their heads to look at the wizard.

"You don't need to make excuses for me, Mr. Potter," Snape replied quietly to the questioning faces. "The fault was mine."

"But why did you do such a thing?" Ginny asked, watching her child with eyes in which relief was turning into doubt.

"Professor Snape said that he wanted to stop teaching and leave us forever. I got angry with him, so I ran away," the boy said as if that could explain everything.

"Again, that's not exactly the truth," Snape interposed. But Minerva stared at him with deep anguish and shook her head.

"Leave us?" she murmured. "What does this mean, Severus?"

Tears twinkled in her eyes while she glanced alternately at Snape and the painters; both the Bernardis had discreetly retired into a corner so that the main actors of the drama could feel free to voice their feelings. Minerva met Tomaso's warning gaze and trembled.

"Do you mean that you... that you..." Strangled by her strength of feeling, she couldn't end her question and watched Snape in silence.

"I can stay here only as a painting," he explained softly. "But I can't accept it any longer. Not after a day like today."

Even as he spoke, he felt the inadequacy of his own words. How could he explain the terrible storm that was raging in his soul?

Lips trembling uncontrollably, Minerva raised a hand to cover her mouth. Snape smiled sadly in acknowledgement, and then he continued slowly, as if he was also trying to explain to himself the choice he had made about that unsolvable dilemma.

"I can't stay here as a living being because that would mean having to sacrifice the man who has so generously exchanged his place with me."

The wizard nodded to Harry, who was listening in silence.

"So, my only remaining options are to leave forever or to stay here in my previous form: a living painting. But, as I said before, this second choice has become intolerable after today."

Again, his heart ached violently in painful protest, and he stiffened, trying to control himself. Upset by those words, but mostly by the expression on his face, little Lily ran to embrace him. "No, Uncle Severus! Don't go! I don't want you to leave!"

And, pressing her face against his robes, she began to cry.

Snape felt something painful, yet immensely sweet, enter his heart. He struggled to resist, but that sentiment was so acutely heartbreaking that he yielded. Forgetting his role, his age, his dignity, he knelt and hugged Lily tightly. Then, overwhelmed by his sensations, he hid his face in her hair and felt the tears finally wet his cheeks.

Nobody tried to move. An intense emotion seemed to have frozen all those present. Extremely touched, Tomaso Bernardi wiped his eyes several times before asking cautiously with a roughened voice, "Should I assume that you have opted for the absolute solution?"

Perceiving the danger disguised in that apparently innocent question, the children reacted all together.

"No!" Albus Severus burst out; then, with a desolate glance at Snape, he turned his head to hide his sorrow.

"No!" his sister cried, hugging Snape even more tightly.

"No!" James added, reddening with the effort of finding a valuable deal to convince the wizard. "Please, Professor, don't go. I swear I'll behave!"

Neville smiled, though there was something twinkling suspiciously in his eyes. "I can't help but join the children in their plea," he said. "Please, Severus, reconsider your choice, if you can. I would be honoured to be your colleague in the years to come. And may they be many and joyful!"

Then his round, boyish face took a saddened, almost solemn expression. "But this is a decision that you alone can make. For my part, I can only hope and wish for you to be happy."

His voice softened. "You deserve it."

From his frame, Harry declared quietly, "I agree with Neville, Professor: you shouldn't leave us. There is still so much that you can do. Living in a frame may have limited your body, but it hasn't chained your spirit, and your past actions have proven it."

Snape raised his head. He wiped a tear, and his reddened eyes looked at the round shining drop on his finger with a sad, incredulous expression. Human... definitely human, right in the moment he was leaving his existence.

Minerva bit her lips and clasped her hands spasmodically. The old woman was evidently struggling to keep her pain under control.

"See how much we love you, Severus," she said with a wavering voice. "Having you here was the most incredible joy we'd ever sought, and I'd hoped..."

She gulped, and her knuckles whitened with the effort of fighting back the tears. Straightening her head in an act of will, she added firmly, "But what I'd hoped doesn't count now. The choice is yours, and we will support you in your decision."

Then her eyes met his, and emotion took over again. "Yet... yet it's so painful to see you leave, now that we have finally learned to know you. I... I would like to..."

But she couldn't go on, as uncontrollable sobs cut her speech.

Snape closed his eyes and breathed slowly.

"I never felt like this," he murmured haltingly, lost in those overwhelming sensations. He paused, searching for words, but he was only able to whisper, "Never."

Then, too upset to continue, he buried his face in Lily's hair again. The child returned his embrace. "Don't cry, Uncle Severus, or I will cry too," she said with a trembling voice, and following her statement, a round drop fell down as if reinforcing it.

Ginny considered her children for a long moment, then took a step forward and went to kneel near Snape. Her expression reflected the emotions clashing in her heart: pain, sympathy, sorrow... and something unexpectedly close to regret.

"I have been terribly unjust with you, Professor," she said. "I was wrong and I want to apologise. I hope you will forgive me."

She hesitated, then continued softly, "All these years I was jealous because I didn't understand why it was you, out of everyone we lost, that Harry wanted back. It never made sense to me until today."

She paused and smiled uncertainly, embarrassed by her own emotion.

"And now I'm going to lose you, just as I've come to know you," she murmured, placing her hand on Snape's arm in a gentle touch and thus renewing this time much more consciously the kind gesture she had offered him after their first conversation.

"I'm sorry," she whispered ruefully.

Neville nodded, and Flitwick croaked, mustering his voice with an evident effort, "We'll miss you."

Snape raised his eyes. His gaze embraced all those surrounding him, pausing on every one, as if he were seeing them for the first time, and finally rested on the children, "his" children.

Albus Severus, the boy he looked upon as a son.

James, who had revealed an unexpectedly kind heart in spite of his bold appearance.

And the precious little girl who was hugging him with such adorable confidence.

He paused to absorb all the splendid feelings he was offered while his mind savoured the many impossibly sweet emotions reaching his heart. And, above all, that incredible, unimaginable, wondrous impression of being enfolded by a gigantic wave of tenderness.

Overwhelmed by those previously unknown sensations and feeling the magnificent glory of tears wet his cheeks again, he looked up and around, as if for guidance. How could anyone of those surrounding him possibly understand his inner turmoil, his devastating confusion, his contradictory thoughts? And yet, his heart dilated in an impossible hope, in the hope of a hope.

With sudden awe, Snape perceived the gentle, incorporeal touch of the powerful spell that had brought him back. His soul trembled, and his eyes lifted unerringly to one portrait on the wall. To Harry. Was perhaps the magical bond that had previously linked their bodies now connecting their spirits? His heart thudded silently in a renewed plea, and incredibly, Harry reacted to that call by smiling and nodding quietly.

Snape breathed slowly, not daring to move for fear of breaking that extraordinary moment. Could Harry Potter feel what Snape was feeling, connected as they were by that singular link?

The wizard stared at the man who had been so generous as to risk his life by becoming a picture and hoped with all his strength that Harry could give him comfort, help, a solution: the answer that his mind was desperately trying to find.

He had no reason to doubt. Since their very first meeting during the Hogwarts celebration and how far back in time that event now seemed, though it had only taken place a couple of months before! Harry had been a continual, total, astounding source of surprise for the wizard who had taught him Potions and misery, Occlumency and distrust.

So, disoriented but hopeful oh, so desperately hopeful! Snape waited in anxiety, silent before a man he had always considered to be stubborn, arrogant, and even foolish in his decisions and who, on the contrary, had proved to possess a reassuringly wise heart.

As if perceiving those thoughts, Harry leaned forward and smiled at his former Professor with the same indulgent smile he reserved for his children.

"Don't be afraid," he said, in that new surprisingly mature voice. "Don't you remember what I told you that day? Think of life as a sequence of pictures that incessantly connect every kind of being in every part of the world... Think of the many astonishing things you have been able to do, even as a painting. Imagine the many other wonders you could be able to accomplish in the future, and you'll see it: there is no difference between you and me. There are no topics you can't possibly explore, nor places you can't visit, nor friends you can't meet, nor feelings you can't share. Your heart is just trying to show you the way. Don't be afraid to listen to it."

Snape watched Harry in amazement. Those words had hit him with incredible force, but the quiet power concealed in the man who was once one of his students had struck him even more. So, feeling young and humble in that unpredicted reversal of roles, the wizard obeyed; closing his eyes, he let his mind connect with his inner self.

Down, down, down he went into his soul, following the path that Harry had so gently traced for him. Deep, deep, deep he plunged into his spirit, reliving all the many thoughts and actions of that extraordinary day, weighing them in his heart and comparing them to the ones he had previously experienced in his past and his subsequently renewed life.

The silence was immense, as nobody dared to disturb the wizard in his meditation, not even the children. Finally, Snape raised his head, once more scrutinising the people in the room, and a sudden revelation struck him.

For the very first time, he wasn't ordered, threatened, or forced to do anything.

For the very first time, he was being accepted, wanted, and cherished exactly for what he was.

The ones gathered there cared for him, in spite of his being a picture. They were offering him love the unconditional love he had always craved without ever attaining it.

Did he really need to be flesh and bones to enjoy those feelings?

Was it really necessary to have a body to love and to be loved?

Was that the simple secret that his heart had desperately tried to make him see for the whole day while his reason had raged and fought and bled in desperation?

He straightened, holding Lily in his arms like a shield. The girl nestled her head against his; then, taking advantage of his closeness, she kissed him on his cheek.

"Please, Uncle Severus... will you stay?" she asked with a small, hopeful voice.

He watched her anxiously waiting eyes and bowed to his heart and to the promises of happiness it contained.

"I'll stay," he said.

The room exploded with joy.

**Translation: for those who were wondering about Marcello's sentence, the one that Ginny couldn't understand, he (literally) said, "It can't be... What did go wrong?"*

Part XXXVIII - Coming Back: Night

Chapter 38 of 38

Severus meets Albus Severus. The past comes back in a very peculiar form. COMPLETE.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of J.K. Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

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Part XXXVII - - Coming Back: Night

Tomaso Bernardi was radiant.

"Ah, Professor, you scared me!" the old painter said, with his strong Italian accent becoming even more accentuated with joy, and eagerly added, "now we must reconnect you with Mr. Potter so that you can both safely switch places..."

He paused, as if a new and disagreeable consideration had suddenly hit him. "I will have to decide the best procedure, though," he muttered with a grimace. "Unfortunately, it's going to be a bit more complicated than what we previously did."

At that point, Marcello Bernardi, who had looked lost in deep thought till that moment, addressed his grandfather with a torrent of words in Italian. The old painter raised his eyebrows in a somewhat surprised expression, but his grandson promptly dragged him into a corner. An animated, incomprehensible discussion took place *sotto voce* whilst Snape waited amongst his friends, little Lily still clinging to him as if she were afraid that he could abruptly disappear.

And finally, Tomaso was back again. He rubbed his hands and smiled at the children, who returned his smile with the same warmth. It was impossible to resist his grandfatherly manner. But even more, it was impossible not to feel compelled by his quiet power, in spite of his funny pronunciation.

So, when he asked the children if they would please agree to leave the room...only for a while, of course, while he helped Professor Snape get back to his picture...James, Al and Lily didn't see any objections; even better, they were relieved at his words and eager to comply.

On the other hand, the adults exchanged a worried glance, perceiving a danger beneath that invitation. Concealing her anxiety under a calm façade, Minerva cast a glance at Filius Flitwick, who nodded in understanding. With an ease derived from years of practice, the old man gathered the children and proposed to them a promenade to the Great Hall in order to see the Christmas decorations. With a trusting smile, little Lily hugged Snape one last time, then clasped Filius' hand and waved goodbye. Obediently, the boys followed the old wizard and their sister out of the room. Those left inside could hear Flitwick's tiny, fragile voice fade in the distance while he told his young listeners about the many wonders that could be found in the castle.

A tense silence fell immediately afterwards; abandoning his cheerful air, Bernardi crossed his arms and began to speak.

"Professor Snape," the old painter said gravely, "though you broke your connection in order to save your student...and we all are very grateful for that...you have put us in a problematic situation."

Snape stiffened, and Bernardi raised a hand to prevent his attempt at replying.

"No, please don't talk," he ordered, looking pointedly at him from behind his glasses. "Just let me explain because what I need to say isn't easy."

He sighed. "You see, when a portrait chooses to be free...and I have personally witnessed this event only once before in my life...the link with the performer of the spell is completely interrupted. There is still a way to re-establish a connection, but this is only feasible for a limited length of time; then the new status becomes permanent. Therefore, we must find a new donor as soon as possible because the magic bond can be reactivated only by channelling the energy through a third component."

Again, Bernardi raised a hand, this time to stop Minerva, Ginny, and Neville, who had stepped forward with the clear intention of offering themselves.

"Let me please complete my explanation," he said quietly, "because here comes the difficult part. The reconnecting spell is... capricious. There is no way to control its effects. This means that we will need an exceptionally powerful donor... or an exceptionally generous one because there is a high probability of getting irremediably destroyed in this attempt, with no hope of coming back."

Again, Snape raised his head with an impulsive gesture, but stopped by Bernardi's stern look, he lowered his eyes powerlessly. Ginny glanced at Harry and paled, then turned to look anxiously at the painter.

Bernardi smiled sadly. "Given the premise, this time I'll be forced to make an adjustment and reverse the procedure."

He paused and looked at each one of those gathered around him before concluding firmly, "Though not exactly canonical, using a portrait is the only possible solution."

"Well, I don't see the problem, Mr. Bernardi," Harry reacted without a blink. "As you said, it's only a matter of reversing the ritual. What I did as a man, I can do as a portrait." He smiled with a hint of his childish mischief. "After all, I have survived Voldemort's Avada Kedavra. This can't be worse."

"No!" His mother exclaimed, paling in anguish, immediately joined by his father, who resolutely added, "It's too dangerous, Harry. I will take your place."

"No, you have already given your life to save me," Harry stubbornly replied, shaking his head in refusal.

Marcello intervened. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, but you cannot be chosen because you are precisely the one we are trying to connect again."

He glanced at his grandfather, then jerked up his head with a bold expression. "If a portrait is not available, I'll be honoured to offer myself." His smile counteracted Harry's frown. "I certainly can't claim to be as skilled as you are, but I have had many interesting experiences lately."

"I'm sorry, but I cannot accept it!" Harry vehemently protested. "I will never agree to sacrifice anybody in this room to save my life...man or picture. You know very well that I'm the only portrait here who has enough power to risk such a threat!"

"No!" A new voice interrupted him. "There is another one."

Startled, all those gathered in the room turned their heads or raised their eyes to look at that unexpected candidate. High on the wall opposite to Harry, arms folded and eyes grave, Dumbledore's portrait was watching them.

"Albus!" Bernardi exclaimed in surprise.

"Albus," Minerva repeated softly, and an intense emotion appeared on her face.

"Professor, I won't permit it!" Harry declared.

"I am sorry, Harry, but this time the last word is mine." Dumbledore's voice trembled, then steadied again. "My turn has finally come. And perhaps this will be the chance to show myself that I haven't lived in vain."

"You don't need to show anything! You gave your life for Draco!" Harry protested.

"That was strategy, not mercy, Harry, as you should know very well by now," Dumbledore replied quietly. "Strategy and a planned opportunity for me to depart painlessly from this world by the merciful hand of the man I had forced to be my murderer... and whose friendship I had never honoured as it truly deserved."

His eyes were silently begging Snape, who looked absolutely speechless.

Tomaso Bernardi inclined his head in assent.

"*Sia fatto come desideri*," he murmured, and then he translated in a louder tone, "as you wish, Albus. Thank you for your offer. And may luck assist us all."

Visibly agitated, both Harry and Snape tried to speak, but raising his hands in a gesture that was an order and a prayer at the same time, Dumbledore silenced them again.

"You both have still so much to do and to give," he said. "I'm only paint and fibres."

Then, opening his hands in a plea, "Don't deny me this chance," he whispered.

At that statement, Harry lowered his head in surrender while Snape frowned and locked his gaze with his old mentor in a long, silent exchange. Then the younger wizard seemed to finally cede.

With everything settled, it was the painters' turn to bid goodbye. Tomaso Bernardi was brief and touching in his words, but Marcello let his impetuous speech run freely. "As I told you, Professor, friends must meet again, and I'll make sure that we will meet again and again in the future! Of course, I can only hope to be considered a friend by you, but I dare say that our..."

"Thank you, Mr. Bernardi," Snape interrupted, checking his emotion with one of his ironic remarks. "If your friendship is as inexhaustible as your chatter, I shall never be left wanting."

Confused, Marcello smiled, then opened his arms in a disarming gesture. "I have always been a chatterer," he admitted with his best grin, "but my words are sincere."

"We know it, Mr. Bernardi," Minerva intervened with a pale smile. "And we are all immensely thankful to your good heart."

Touched and embarrassed, Marcello bowed.

Then Minerva went under Dumbledore's portrait and placed a hand on its canvas, as she used to do with Snape. "Thank you, Albus," she said, and a myriad of sparkles lit in her eyes.

"No, Minerva," he whispered in a sort of desperate tenderness. "You are the one who must be thanked. I never realised how precious you were to me..." His voice cracked. "And now it's too late."

She blinked a tear away and lowered her tone so that nobody else could hear. "I wish that there were a safer way," she murmured, her face altering in pain. "I told Severus that I didn't want to lose him. But... but I don't want to lose you, either!"

Unaware of the powerful feelings rising up in that conversation, Ginny reached the Headmistress under the portrait. She looked evidently moved and her voice wavered when, unable to find other words, she said, "Thank you, Professor".

From his frame, Harry composedly added his thanks to hers. But Dumbledore had eyes only for Snape, who had crossed his arms and seemed to be meditating.

"I'll wait for you, Albus," Snape finally said and paused for what seemed again a long, long moment. The message he wanted to send was too personal to be shared with others, so he took his characteristic sarcastic air. "Don't forget that we must resume our conversation as soon as we are back in our frames."

Then he watched his old mentor with a meaningful expression. Remembering the words that had concluded their last, harsh conversation, Dumbledore's face seemed to suddenly alter in a mix of emotions. Struggling to recover his composure, the wizard returned Snape a trembling smile.

"Thank you, Severus," he murmured and lowered his head.

Perceiving that there was a different meaning from the one that their brief exchange seemed to suggest, Minerva glanced at the old Headmaster: a quiet joy invaded her heart when she saw a tear trickle down on his white beard.

Once more, Snape was standing alone in the middle of the room while the painters prepared for their difficult task. The air vibrated with tension, and the wizard inhaled slowly to control his breath, acutely aware of the risks he and his two framed companions were going to face.

Repeating what he had done in the morning, the older Bernardi began to sing rhythmically, and once more, the spell's powerful enchantment recreated itself. A ray of light made by the gathering of innumerable sparks suddenly exploded from the tip of Tomaso's wand. The luminous stream whirled in the air, as if testing its power, and then with unpredictable violence, it reached and hit Dumbledore in his frame. The old wizard stiffened and closed his eyes, swaying under the intensity of that tremendous explosion of energy. Reflecting against the canvas as it would do with a mirror, the light split itself into two other rays. Harry in the frame and Snape on the floor were again connected by a forceful flux, and their bodies began to glow faintly.

Yet this time something different seemed to happen. The light vibrated unsteadily in a sequence of flashes, as if rebelling from the hand and the power of the man who was guiding it. Marcello immediately joined his grandfather, and after his stabilising intervention, the light steadied and seemed to shine more and more vividly. Slowly, Harry's body recreated in front of Snape. Smiling a radiant smile, the man extended his hand. Snape clasped it, and Harry tightened his grip, his expression growing even more radiant.

"I didn't know you were such a great Quidditch player, Severus," he said, concealing under a joke his emotion for that incredible moment.

Snape looked surprised at the use of his given name. A bizarre smile opened on his face, manifestation of a soul not used to expressing his most private feelings.

"And you are an even greater Auror, Harry," he replied softly, returning the shake. Then, with a blinding flash, he disappeared.

The flux of light disconnected with a last twinkling spark, and a low harmonious sound made the room vibrate softly. In his frame, Dumbledore opened his eyes, staggering and breathing painfully. A surprised expression appeared on his face when he discovered himself to be still safe and sound.

Tomaso Bernardi lowered his wand and swayed in exhaustion, but Marcello was ready to steady him. A supernatural silence filled the room while everybody seemed to slowly return to reality.

Cautiously opening the eyes he had kept closed, Snape found himself in his portrait. Harry waved at him from the middle of the room and smiled, raking his hair in the typical unconscious gesture of his youth.

It took Snape a few moments to get accustomed again to the flatness of that two-dimensional world. But this time, he was considering the space around him with new eyes, eyes that had learned to see beyond their limits and travel to unrestricted horizons.

And while he was savouring that thought, the door opened and let in a merry group of people...his friends, his colleagues, his "family". A sweet joy filled his heart. Whatever might happen, he was home.

The day had been incredibly demanding, in all senses. Little Lily had been the first to surrender and fall asleep while James and Al were trying to resist, sitting on a sofa with their heads swaying more and more heavily.

The adults had gathered under the portraits, having something to drink and exchanging quiet comments. Nobody was effectively ready to go; everybody seemed to search every possible pretext to hang about in the room as long as possible. From the wall, Dumbledore and Snape were participating, and questions and answers crossed the air. In that joyful confusion, Ginny took the opportunity to draw Marcello Bernardi apart and whisper something to him. The man listened and nodded eagerly.

"My pleasure, Madam," he said with his boyishly mischievous smile.

"I think it would be better for you to go home," Minerva finally said to Ginny, looking fondly at the children who were sleeping in a bunch on the sofa. "They are exhausted."

"It has been a long day," Ginny agreed, "but there is still one little thing missing to make it complete."

She turned to Snape. "Professor," she said, "I'm glad that you decided to stay. It's an invaluable gift you've offered us. Now I think it's our turn to give you a present. I hope you will accept it."

Timidly, she raised a frame; from the satisfied smile on Marcello's face, Snape immediately understood that it was another piece from his beautiful collection of treasures, just like the one he had offered to Lily months before. Inside it, the wizard could see a magnificently painted interior of a room. It was almost a copy of his actual study, but with many nice details that made it cosy and comfortable in its sobriety. There were a desk, shelves, and plenty of books, but also a rocking chair, and a fireplace in which the flames were burning merrily, giving the scene a warm touch.

"If you want, Professor," Ginny continued, "this will be your new room in our home. We would be happy if you will use it to come and visit us."

Snape looked impassive, but his eyes betrayed his joy. Then, composedly, his old reserved self returning more and more powerfully after all those emotions, he replied quietly, "I'll be honoured."

The storm had ceased, and once more, the moon peeked out, round and soft in the velvety sky. Neville was the first to excuse himself and bid goodnight while Ginny busied herself in waking her children and preparing them for the trip. Given the late hour, they would use the Floo to go back, and she was afraid that Lily could be too sleepy to land in the right house.

The painters went to shake hands with Minerva. Taking the opportunity, Harry joined the small group and cordially said to Tomaso, "A word before you go, Mr. Bernardi."

"Always at your command," the old man replied warmly, but his warmth faded almost immediately as soon as Harry asked with a knowing smile, "Very good acting, Maestro. But now, please, would you mind explaining why you lied to us?"

Bernardi's face altered with barely suppressed indignation as he straightened his short stature. "What... what do you mean?"

"Now, now, Mr. Bernardi!" Harry replied, raising his hands in a placating gesture. "Please don't get upset. Did you forget that I have carefully studied the rite? Furthermore, my job and...I'd dare say...my past experiences, have taught me how to detect a lie."

Tomaso Bernardi frowned. "I hope this is not an official investigation, Mr. Potter," he inquired.

"No, no, no," Harry replied, and his smile grew bigger. "Don't worry, Maestro, you didn't commit a crime, and I'm not going to bring you before a court. I was only curious: you introduced an unnecessary variation to the rite this time, by requesting the help of a portrait. I was only wondering why."

"Well," Marcello intervened and looked worriedly at Minerva, who had thinned her lips in her characteristic stern expression, "the idea was mine. You see, I happened to hear the Headmistress speaking with Professor Dumbledore in the potion room."

He hesitated and cast again an apologetic glance at Minerva. "Please excuse me. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I couldn't leave the room without interrupting your conversation, and I didn't want to... so I heard that Professor Dumbledore was saddened and regretful about something of which Professor Snape had accused him. Something that had happened in their previous life."

He gulped and went on even more uneasily. "Then, when we gathered here to meet Professor Snape, Professor Dumbledore was here as well, hidden in a picture. So... so I thought that, perhaps, with a little nudge, I could help them reaching an understanding. I asked my grandpa to lend me a hand and he agreed. I'm sorry if I dared meddle..."

He straightened and concluded fiercely, "But if something wrong has been committed, I am the only one to blame."

Minerva looked at the young man waiting in contrite silence, and her eyes twinkled.

"Thank you, Mr. Bernardi!" she said with a voice vibrating with joy. "You found a great way to reconcile them." And she turned to glance at the wall behind her. Snape had entered Dumbledore's frame and they were talking quietly.

"Oh, well, I didn't do that much!" Marcello was clearly immensely relieved. "The real performer has been my grandpa. You know, a bit of light and sound, plus some... how would you call them? Some 'special effects'."

And Marcello smiled at the old painter, who opened his arms, accepting the praise with an amused air.

"Professor Dumbledore was never in danger, my friends," Tomaso concluded, and then he said to Minerva, "however, there are a couple of suggestions I would like to offer about the way in which pictures should be handled in this castle. You know, useful advice to keep their canvases in good condition for a longer time."

Interested, Minerva went away with Tomaso. As soon as they were alone, Harry watched Marcello intentionally.

"So, you didn't do that much?" he asked with a meaningful intonation.

Bernardi blushed again. "You really have keen eyes. And an even keener brain," he commented in admiration. "Very well, I admit it: I joined my grandfather at the end of the rite and reinforced the connection as strongly as possible. To anticipate your question, I'll confess that I did it on purpose, in order to allow Professor Snape to... to meet you while he was still in his human form."

He became serious. "I thought it was due. You both deserved it."

Harry looked at the man with grateful eyes, and then he patted Bernardi on his back.

"You really are a good fellow, Marcello," he said.

And this time, incredibly, the Italian found no words to reply.

Two months later

The stars were beginning to twinkle in the sky when a happily tired Harry Potter arrived home. Wearing a coloured apron that made her look like her mother, Ginny came to kiss him.

"Cooking?" Harry returned her kiss and inhaled deeply. "Mmmm... Let me guess: Molly's secret recipe?" he asked with a hungry look.

"You guessed right," Ginny smiled.

"So, what do I win?" Harry took her in his arms, then suddenly stopped.

"Where is Lily?" he inquired, glancing around.

"Oh, playing chess with Severus," Ginny answered and kissed him again, a long, longing kiss.

A few minutes later, Harry commented with a grin, "That man is a perfect babysitter."

"He is a great help," Ginny agreed with a mischievous smile. "Today, I could prepare everything without troubles and interruptions. By the way, Ron and Hermione are coming to dinner with Hugo."

"Ah, good!"

"How was the day?" She asked going back to the kitchen. "And how did the Auror training course go? ~~He~~ didn't tell me a word."

"That's precisely what I want to discuss with him," Harry murmured with a frown. He knocked at the door of his daughter's room.

"Not ready yet, Mum. Still playing," Lily replied from inside.

Silently, Harry opened the door, crossed his arms and stared at the scene with amused eyes. In his frame, Snape was waiting for Lily to move...judging by the quantity of pieces piled near his side of the chessboard, Lily was evidently losing, but she kept stubbornly trying anyway. Concentrating, and totally unaware of her father's presence, the girl frowned in indecision, hand shifting uncertainly from a castle, to a bishop, to a pawn.

"Mr. Potter!" Snape greeted Harry, and Lily startled.

"Dad!" she exclaimed and ran to hug her father.

The portrait waited for Lily to kiss Harry, then continued with his usual irony, "A bit late, I would say. You really must have enjoyed your day at work."

"That's exactly what I was going to discuss with you," Harry said with an ominous voice.

"Indeed?" Snape commented lightly, cornering Lily's castle by levitating and placing his queen in front of it. The girl gasped in surprise and looked at him with accusing eyes.

"Now listen, Severus," Harry continued calmly. "I admit that your course is a success, and my men are enthusiastic. But you must spare young Perkins your witty remarks. He is still a novice..."

"So?" Snape replied nonchalantly while Lily moved her bishop in a vain attempt to counteract his queen. "He needs to be trained. And what better occasion? He is too young to be spoiled by your bad example."

Harry swallowed. No, he wouldn't bite the hook.

"He can't... *appreciate* your methods. You see, he was never one of your students," he said, trying to be as reasonable as possible.

"Then he must make up for lost time." And Snape smiled devilishly.

"But you shouldn't treat him that way!" Harry finally exploded.

"Come now, Potter!" Snape watched him with blazing eyes. "He wants to be an Auror. He must endure. What did I tell you years ago about *bols who walk with their heart on their sleeves*?"

"Yes, thank you, I got the point," Harry replied with gritted teeth. Snape watched him and smiled.

"See? In spite of your limited capacities, you still remember my lessons. And next time, don't make useless comments before your men."

"You don't really mean..."

"I am simply warning you, Potter. And you will call me sir or professor when I'm teaching!"

The two men glared at each other with the same stubborn expressions of their Hogwarts days. Then...

"Earthquake! Earthquake!" Lily cried, sneakily pushing the chessboard with her knee. The pieces fell everywhere, and Snape curled again his lips in a cold smile.

"It seems that your house is built on a seismic zone, Potter," he said disdainfully, but an amused spark had lit in his eyes. "Young lady, I believe I told you to stop cheating."

"I'm not cheating," she said cheekily. "It was an earthquake! Now we will have to start a new game!"

"You think so?" Snape replied, and with a flick of his wand, the pieces came back in the places they previously were. Lily looked at the chessboard with a comically surprised face. Then she raised two desolated eyes.

"Aw, Uncle Severus, you are mean!" she complained. "You never let me win!"

"That's because I want you to be the best player in the school," he said with the tender smile he reserved for her. "After my lessons, I'm sure you will win every contest."

The girl blushed with pleasure. Snape turned to her father, who had watched that exchange agape.

"Well, Harry, I suppose I'll have to leave now. I have a conference at St. Mungo's in... let's say, two hours."

Harry snorted, raising his brows in mocking disbelief, but Snape impassively replied, "Unlike others, I like to be punctual."

"As if I didn't know," Harry muttered. Ginny peeked in.

"Two hours, you said? Then you have time to share dinner with us," she placidly remarked, evidently used to those skirmishes. "Ron and Hermione should be arriving right now, and they are going to the conference, too."

"Yes, I know. Madam Weasley is due to speak just before me, and this will certainly grant me extra time."

"No problems, then." Ginny smiled knowingly. "And, incidentally, Mum's recipe."

Snape's eyes lit up. "I suppose I could afford a little break," he murmured. Then he suddenly looked worried.

"But Mr. Bernardi said that I shouldn't overindulge in the Food Exchange Spell....," he added in the evident hope of being contradicted.

"I'll ask him to check you," Ginny said patiently.

"It's not me, it's the canvas," Snape reacted, trying to sound convincing.

"Then I'll ask him to paint you a new picture," Ginny concluded firmly and went away, announcing, "dinner in five minutes, provided that the guests are as punctual as you are. Go and wash your hands, Lily. Your cousin will spend the evening with you."

With a cry of joy, the child ran after her mother, leaving Snape and Harry in mute contemplation of each other.

"So, rowdy, clumsy Weasley is coming to dinner, uh?" Snape commented after a while. Harry nodded, a mischievous smile already dancing on his lips. But Snape was too cunning to take the bait.

"I wonder how your wife can always succeed in making me forget the unpleasant parts of her invitations....," he murmured. "But, of course, she must have a long experience in handling such situations, having married you."

And after that last statement, Snape, satisfied, left his frame to triumphantly enter the one hung over the table in the living room.

It was very late when Snape returned to his original portrait in Hogwarts. Though a picture can't feel tiredness, he was, nevertheless, experiencing something oddly similar to a contented weariness. However, he still had a visit to pay. Somebody was waiting for him.

He entered a portrait hanging near a bed and paused. From that frame, many months before, he had told Minerva about his lost love, and she had revealed to him feelings that now he could fully understand and return. Oh, not feelings of love, of course, but the quiet stream of a caring friendship. And here again was the woman who had comforted him in so many desperate moments of his current odd, disconcerting, and awesome existence.

"Minerva?" he called softly.

The old witch was sleeping. She had been reading a book, probably in an attempt to fight the increasing sleepiness. The book was still open on the blanket, but the hand that should have grabbed it was lying inert. The late hour had finally induced her to lean her head against the pillow and disappear in oblivion.

Snape contemplated his old friend with a fond smile, then tried again.

"Minerva?"

This time, she blinked, and her head swayed while she slowly returned to consciousness. She blinked again and smiled drowsily, finally recovering enough voice to welcome him.

"Oh, you are back, Severus!"

He immediately apologised. "I'm sorry for the late hour, but you insisted on saying that you wanted to see me..."

"Of course I wanted to see you! I'll have plenty of time to sleep later." She smiled fully now. "How was the conference?"

He tightened his lips in his usual sardonic expression. "Not as exciting as it could be," he replied.

"Really? And why so?" she asked, waiting expectantly. He smiled, amused to see how her eyes had lit up in interest. That little trick always worked.

He cleared his throat. "Madam Weasley's speech was the only worthwhile lecture. Regrettably, I think that very few of those present understood the thorough research underpinning her argumentation. That was frustrating."

Minerva smiled again. Trust Severus to defend his former students like a mother dragon.

"I know," she said calmly. "She practically lived here for more than two weeks in order to consult the books you suggested to her in the Forbidden Section."

He suddenly darkened at those words. "I used to read those books when I was younger. I thought that the knowledge they offered was useful to both my jobs, the teacher and the... spy."

He lowered his head. "I was wrong. They only allowed me to sink even more in my desperation..."

"Oh, Severus!" Minerva immediately became concerned, and he continued bitterly, "While she was able to do what I wasn't: extract all the good and the helpful material that was still there, buried under centuries of dust and dirt."

"Even the most venomous poisons can be used to prepare medicines when you know how to do it," Minerva said slowly.

"Yes," Snape replied with a sigh. "Though I should know it very well, this is what I have been taught again this evening."

Minerva watched him fondly and changed topic.

"Now, I suppose you want to know about the gift," she said with a mischievous intonation in her voice.

"Of course I do," he replied, and this time his eyes were those lighting up in interest.

She smiled, enjoying her moment. "I have personally selected the most beautiful sets of Gobstones the shop had in stock." Her smile deepened. "And I bought a red and gold one."

"Oh, I don't mind the colour," Snape said firmly. "After all, Al is a Gryffindor. I'm sure you chose him a nice set."

He hesitated. "It will be the first time I have given a birthday present to a boy his age. Well, I did it for Draco, but it was more than thirty years ago and only a matter of respect to his father. This time, it's... it's..."

"Different," the old witch concluded. "And Al will be very happy and grateful to his Uncle Severus." She smiled again.

"You know, Minerva," Snape said slowly, "the one who should be grateful is me. The gift that Albus Severus offered me is infinitely more valuable."

The Headmistress raised her brows, clearly waiting for an explanation, and Snape continued, trying to express his feelings.

"When he ran away in the Forest, I had already renounced my life. His flight forced me to come back and reconsider what I was leaving. In a way, it was he who saved me, not the contrary."

Minerva leaned back, her eyes twinkling.

"That's a wonderful thing you've said," she commented.

"But I should thank all of you," he said, still unravelling his thoughts. "Who would have thought that Longbottom would become such a fine man? And who would suspect such wisdom in Potter? Wasn't he an incredible surprise?" He sighed and lowered his head. "Not for you, I imagine, Minerva..."

The Headmistress smiled quietly, as if encouraging him to go on, so Snape continued.

"And his wife... I always considered the Weasleys a bunch of insufferably annoying troublemakers. Yet Ginny... Ginny is..."

"Different," again Minerva completed placidly.

"Well, ah, yes, thank you," Snape said, a bit embarrassed. "Her brother is still insufferable, though," he grumbled, as if regretting his previous explosion of kindness. "I wonder how the Granger girl could like him. I wouldn't have given him a chance when they were students."

"Freckles," the old woman said impassively, and Snape looked at her in surprise, and then they both grinned openly.

"They were his only chance, I'll concede that," he said, checking a laugh. How wonderful it was to chat with a friend and see that she shared his own vision... though she would always deny it, of course!

A new thought hit him, and he resumed his talking a bit hesitantly.

"Now, about Al's gift: I am in debt to you, Minerva. How can I..."

"Severus!" Minerva interrupted him sternly. "Since the day Zabini left, you have been teaching potions to students of every year and every House. And you are not paid for this. Furthermore, you are a brilliant orator and a renowned potioneer, whose works bring prestige to the school. Now, who is in debt?"

"If you put it in that way..., " he meekly murmured, but she saw that he was pleased at her praise, so she continued firmly.

"And let's also say that your lessons are really appreciated, which is much more important."

She watched him gravely. "You know, yesterday I received a delegation of Slytherins who wanted you as Head of the House."

He was instantly alarmed. "I hope you didn't accept."

"Then I took the wrong decision."

"Minerva! But you...How could you..."

"Relax, Severus, relax." Her eyes had an amused twinkle. "I told them that I needed to think about this. But, honestly, don't you believe that the role would fit you perfectly?"

Still baffled, he didn't answer, and she smiled again, seeing that, despite his previous panic, he was beginning to consider the idea with more and more interest. A quiet silence followed while they both savoured that perfect moment. Minerva's eyelids were slowly closing. Stifling a yawn, the witch curled against the wall and leaned her head against his picture.

"You know, Severus?" she said with a voice in which sleepiness was becoming more and more perceptible. "I'm so happy to have you here. I... I hope that you... you will... always..."

Her voice faded and a quiet snoring was heard at its place. With great tenderness, Snape contemplated the grey head of hair resting so trustfully against his canvas.

"Sleep well, Minerva," he murmured. "Tomorrow is another great day. And we will share it together."

In the mid-obscurity of the corridor, with impatient fingers, Al opened a little package wrapped in silver and green paper.

"Wow!" he whispered, looking reverently at the set of Gobstones, glowing faintly under the light of the torches. "It's fantastic! Look how they shine!"

For a long moment, he lost himself in adoring contemplation. "How beautiful," he repeated in a dreamy tone. Then he raised his head at the portrait.

"Thank you, Uncle Severus!" he said with starry eyes. "How did you know I always wanted a set?"

"Oh," Snape replied non-committally, crossing his arms. "Adults have their ways." And he smiled vaguely, careful not to mention that his favourite "niece" was a very exhaustive source of information about her brothers. But Al had already forgotten his question and was now vibrating with excitement.

"I need to practise as much as possible," he said.

"I didn't know you were such an inveterate player," Snape joked, enjoying the determined expression that had shaped the boy's features.

"I want to take part in the House Gobstones Tournament," Al explained timidly. "The trials are very hard to pass because there are a lot of applicants."

"I see," Snape said, and though he had always cordially disliked that pastime, he didn't hesitate.

"Perhaps you would like some private lessons?" he asked, coughing discreetly.

Al widened his eyes. "Private lessons in... Gobstones?" he asked incredulously.

"You see, my mother was a champion at Gobstones. She was captain of the Slytherin team here at Hogwarts. So....," he smiled his bizarre smile, "so perhaps I could teach you some useful tricks."

The boy smiled an immense smile and tightened the set against his chest.

"When can we begin?" he asked. Snape straightened himself.

"I'll wait for you this evening at six o'clock, Mr. Potter. Please be punctual," he replied with his stern timbre.

"Oh, I will," Al replied enthusiastically, and Snape smiled inwardly at his joy, but continued impassively.

"As with every strategic game, Gobstones requires quick thinking and careful preparation. Though the game may seem an easy one compared to the difficulty of chess, it still has a logical..."

At this point, Snape stopped his lecture to watch his student. The boy hadn't listened to a word, lost as he was in his happiness. The portrait crossed his arms.

"I'll see you this evening, Al," he said with a fond smile. "Now go to your lessons."

The boy smiled back. With a fluid move, Snape left the frame while Al resumed his walking with a dreamy expression on his face.

Once more, the corridor was empty and silent. Shaking his head in disbelief, James left the corner from where, unnoticed, he had watched the whole scene. The boy raked his hair in an unconscious imitation of his father's usual gesture.

"Mental!" he muttered with an amused expression. "That man is mental!"

Then an immense grin opened up on his face. "But thank Merlin for that!"

--- --- --- THE END --- --- ---

To all my readers: it has been a long journey, longer than I expected, but I have enjoyed traveling with you.

Thank you very much for the time you dedicated to my story.

Best regards from Italy and best wishes of a Happy New Year!