

Fair Exchanges

by Fawkes_07

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This is canon-compliant with books 5 and 6 and provides a behind-the-scenes story that JKR never even guessed...

1: The Art of the Deal

Chapter 1 of 47

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Snape threw down his quill in disgust at the knock on his door. An interruption at this hour? It had better be important; he would never get these essays marked at this rate. He strode angrily to the door and threw it open.

"What is it, Granger?" She didn't flinch, despite the chill in his voice. Apparently it *was* important. He stepped back, grudgingly, allowing her to enter the office.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Professor. I have something to ask of you."

He sniffed reprovingly. "Ask, then, and be quick about it; I have work to do tonight."

She straightened her back and took a deep breath. "I've come to ask if you would teach me Occlumency."

Snape was far too guarded to sputter at unexpected events, but this was almost enough to set him off. He stared at her for a moment, contemplating just how harshly he would phrase his reply.

"Granger," he said menacingly, "I am teaching your *friend* at the Headmaster's request, not because I am eager for extracurricular chores. I have no intention of leading an entire course in Occlumency."

To his surprise, she still didn't flinch. "I understand, sir. I'm the only one that knows about... 'remedial Potions.' Well, except for Ron," she added as a guilty aside, "but he won't come asking you for lessons. I won't tell anyone. It will be just me."

"Allow me to make myself more clear: I don't want to teach 'just you.' If I had a choice, I wouldn't even teach Potter."

"I know, sir. I know it would be an inconvenience. I'm asking this of you as one member of the Order to another."

Testing my loyalty, hmm? Snape glanced hastily around the room, though he knew it was empty. "Keep your voice down!" he hissed.

"Sorry, sir," she whispered, but gave him a pointed look; the door was closed, after all.

That put a new spin on the request. He could simply respond that she wasn't an official member of the Order of the Phoenix, but that would be a petty argument; her status was only a matter of semantics. He scowled, but when he finally replied, he left the patronizing edge out of his voice. "It is not necessary for every member of the Order to be versed in Occlumency. What makes you think you deserve such training?"

She bit her lip. "I don't know if I *deserve* it," she said haltingly, "but..."

He began to lose patience again. "You're looking for another little skill to master and keep on file as evidence of your superiority?"

She glared at him. "That was a low blow. Sir."

Snape leaned back against his desk, folding his arms. She was much easier to intimidate in front of a crowd in the classroom. "Miss Granger," he finally said with a tired sigh, "if there were a real *need*, I might consider doing this. You have yet to convince me. If you cannot do so, then please stop wasting my time."

She averted her eyes, nodding. "All right. You're right. I don't know if I'd ever need to use it. The fact is..." She paused again and met his gaze. "I'm afraid, Professor. I know so much about Harry. If I were captured... I could give away far too much." Her voice became a whisper. "I could never forgive myself if I was too weak to keep things secret."

"Dare I suggest, Granger, that the Dark Lord may consider you too insignificant to interrogate?"

"Well, you ought to know!" she snapped angrily, but her hand immediately flew over her mouth. She looked down at the floor again. "Please pardon my outburst," she said contritely.

He rolled his eyes; she could certainly play the game. "I *do* know, Miss Granger," he said, surprising even himself with the gentleness in his voice. "You needn't distress yourself with fears of torture."

"Not yet!" she said, and her eyes were suddenly brimming with tears. "But as Harry gets stronger, who knows? He's been able to spy on Harry through this link they have for years, but now Harry's breaking it. Who's to say he won't open a new one through someone close to Harry, like me?"

That had never occurred to him, but he raised his brow thoughtfully. However unlikely, it was not impossible. Nonetheless, "unlikely" was still the operant adjective. "An interesting hypothesis. However, I'm unwilling to give up yet another evening of my time just to allay your fears about what *might* happen in the future."

To Snape's surprise, she was not daunted at all by this comment, but seemed to rally herself anew. "I appreciate that your time is valuable, sir. I want to work out an exchange for your lessons."

He scoffed. "You have nothing to offer that I could possibly want."

"Now you're just being obstinate!" she snapped without regret or apology this time. "I'm asking for an hour of your time. I'm sure there's some way I can return it. Here, just off the top, what if I were to help you mark essays? That would easily make up an hour."

Snape furrowed his brows thoughtfully. *She's certainly smart enough to do the first-years... and the second-years... Oh, hell, she could do her own classmates--she's miles ahead of them anyway.* He decided against it, however; such a thing simply wasn't done, and he'd be getting complaints from parents in no time. "I admit that's an intriguing idea, but unfeasible."

"Very well," she said gamely, "I'm sure there are others. Some other unpleasant chore that you'd really rather avoid? I could... clean up the Potions classroom for you or prepare ingredients."

"Believe it or not," he said wryly, "I actually *enjoy* the work associated with my field."

"All right, well, let me think. What about filing papers?" He leveled a bored gaze at her, flicking his wand at a messy stack on his desk, which promptly arranged itself into a tidy pile.

She frowned. "Your laundry?"

"House-elves."

She exhaled noisily. "If you were a Muggle, I'd offer to wash your car." He peered disdainfully down his nose, saying nothing. He was amused despite himself, but refused to smile.

"I don't suppose you have a pet that needs feeding?"

"I dislike animals almost as much as pesky students with outrageous requests."

"You know, you might at least extend the courtesy of trying, here!" she said, exasperated. "I'm offering to help you in return for your knowledge; I would think that's the sort of thing a professor would support!"

Now she was getting too snippy. "You are nearing the limit of my patience, young lady. I prefer to do things myself; I neither need nor want any help from you."

She looked away. Snape hoped she would shed a tear; it would give him an excuse to order her out of the office. She pursed her lips a few times, clearly on the verge of giving up in despair, but damned if she didn't come up with another idea.

"There are other ways to make a fair exchange. If I can't return the time I take from you, maybe I could pay you." She looked glum, though; he doubted she had a Sickie to spare. Besides that, however, the thought of taking money in exchange for lessons somehow made him feel dirty. She was getting to him, damn it.

"Miss Granger, I am adequately paid to teach my assigned coursework at Hogwarts. I have no desire to expand into private tutoring." He weighed every word carefully, knowing that she would parse his sentence for loopholes.

"I could do something nice for you, then. Bring you fresh flowers in the morning, or, or, read to you at bedtime..."

His jaw fell open before he could stop it, and to make matters worse, when he closed it again, his teeth made a loud click. It was too much to hope that this reaction would escape her.

She looked up at him with a wide smile. "My roommates and I take turns reading to each other! Everybody loves being read to at bedtime. I'll come and do that for you every night, whatever you want to hear."

He took a long, deep breath and let it out slowly. One of the few fond memories he carried from his youth were the times his worthless father went out to a Muggle pub and drank all night. His mother would read to him by candlelight for hours until he fell asleep with his head on her lap. It *would* be lovely to drift off to the sound of a book... *until the news spread that a female student was coming to his room every night.* It was foolishness. She could hardly be out in the corridors at midnight anyway... *but if she used the fireplace in her common room, she could be there and back without anyone ever knowing.*

Snape was by nature a decisive man, but this was quite a dilemma. If she had begged, or cried, or appealed to his generosity, he'd have tossed her out and slammed the door on her behind. She'd behaved with respect, except when (he bitterly admitted to himself) he'd deliberately provoked or insulted her. Potter was aggravating him to no end with his blatant disregard for discipline and practice. Granger, on the other hand, had a fine mind: organized, intelligent, thorough. It was always a pleasure to teach a competent student.

If she learned Occlumency, she would surely try to teach Potter, and maybe that farce would finally come to an end.

"It's a deal," he said flatly.

2: Fair and Square

Chapter 2 of 47

The first Occlumency lesson, and the first payback. To quote Wallace of "Wallace and Gromit" fame, "That went as well as could be expected, didn't it?"

Hermione arrived precisely on time for the first lesson as he expected. No one would possibly accept that she needed Remedial Potions, so she had deliberately misbehaved in class, and he had issued a detention. She'd been mortified by the idea, but could not come up with a better plan.

"Good evening, Miss Granger. Lock the door."

"Yes, sir."

He took his seat behind his desk and gave her a hard glare. "Henceforth, I would prefer if you did not earn your detentions by hexing Mr. Malfoy."

She gulped with a guilty look. "Yes, sir."

"Now, to the matter at hand. I assume Potter has told you all about the abuse to which he is subjected by my hand?"

She peered at him curiously. "He's been rather unwilling to say anything at all about his lessons, actually."

"Really?" he said cynically, raising his brow. "I shall soon find out if you are telling me the truth." He paused as he picked up his wand, suspecting that she might change her story, but she said nothing. "Very well. The lesson is straightforward. I will enter your mind with Legilimency. You will attempt to stop me. We will repeat this until you develop the skill. Prepare yourself." He raised his wand.

"Wait!" she said, her eyes wide and fearful. "I have some questions first!"

"I will have your answers within seconds. *Legilimens!*"

Her mind was as far removed from Potter's as he could ever hope to encounter. There was no fog of rage and defiance, no clutter of remembered pain and humiliation. It was orderly and structured, with pure, clean focus. There were fears and angers, of course, but they were properly tucked away in far corners where they would not constantly surface and interfere. Her thoughts flowed smoothly, logically; he could dive into their current and be swept along effortlessly.

She also had no resistance whatsoever to his presence. This was going to take some time.

Snape released her and sat back in his chair, ignoring her stunned expression. "First of all, I can offer no explanation of what you must do. Performing Occlumency is similar to resisting the Imperius curse; you might prepare yourself by practicing that skill in Defense Against the Dark Arts."

She composed herself enough to mutter angrily, "I'll be sure to suggest that to Professor Umbridge."

Even Snape couldn't hold in a wry grin at that comment. He despised Umbridge; she was so incompetent, she could barely find her own arse with both hands. "I'm sure that would be well received. Next question: I have permitted you to keep your wand for symbolic purposes. Most people require it at first; it has become a crutch on which they must lean to perform magic. You must eventually learn to repel me with your mind, but the wand will serve as a step toward that end."

"As for your third question, it will be both painful and frightening, but you have probably recognized that already. Prepare to defend yourself." He raised his wand again.

"WAIT!" she said emphatically. "I have a... request."

He scowled impatiently. "What is it now, Granger?"

She fixed his gaze and said firmly, "I want you to stay out of my dreams."

He smirked. "You do realize you have just assured that your dreams will be the first place I explore?"

She shook her head savagely. "No! Don't take this lightly. I need your promise, Professor, that you'll leave my dreams alone. I can't do this if you won't agree."

He regarded her contemptuously. "Threatening to stop these lessons will hardly motivate me to give you my word, Granger."

She considered for a moment, then said quietly, "I *hope* you'll give your word because you're an honorable man."

She definitely knew how to play the game. The worst part was that she meant every word. He leaned back in his chair, clasping his fingers in his lap and scrutinizing her carefully as he pondered his decision.

"Very well, Miss Granger," he said resignedly. "No dreams. For now. If you cannot parry me, however, I may need to take more drastic measures to motivate your efforts."

She shuddered. "If it comes to that, then I'll accept failure. I'm ready; let's give it a go."

Snape couldn't believe it when he glanced at the clock; it was nearly midnight. "Good grief!" he said sharply. "You are dismissed."

Hermione followed his gaze quizzically and was equally startled. "Oh, my! I'm sorry, Professor, I guess I lost track of time. Well. Thank you, sir. Shall I just stay and read to you?" she asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

He gritted his teeth, unsure of what to say. What kind of man would bring a child into his room to read stories? It was absurd--what had he been thinking when he had made this bargain? Even if she were able to master Occlumency (and that was by no means a certainty), she might not be able to drive it into Potter's thick skull any faster than he could. "That will not be necessary, Miss Granger," he said drily.

She frowned. "What do you mean? We had an agreement! Are you not going to teach me anymore?! We won't go over an hour again, I'll make sure of it--"

"I'll teach you!" he snapped loudly to put an end to her plea. "I just...release you from your repayment."

"Release me?" she said, her uncertainty quickly escalating into affront. "I don't want to be 'released!' You're not going to..."

"To what, Miss Granger?" he said, leaning across the desk to glare at her through narrowed eyes.

"To, that is, what I meant... I don't want you to give me these lessons for nothing. An even trade, that was what we agreed. I don't want to... owe you anything once we're done."

He looked up at the ceiling, trying very hard to keep his face neutral. "An excellent insight, young lady." He fixed her with a stern gaze. "Very well, we can come up with another method of payment--"

"Oh, no, you don't!" she said indignantly. "You were quite clear there was nothing else you wanted from me. I'm not going to accept some token duty that will in reality leave me obligated to you--especially not now, after I've taken up your entire evening. I *said* I would read, I prepared myself, I even brought a book." She pulled it out of her robes and tossed it before him on the desk.

"How *dare* you address me that way--" he began, livid, but she spoke over him in a strong, cold voice.

"In this room, right now, we are two members of the Order. That was how this arrangement was made. Don't demean me by playing the 'professor' card, I won't have it."

Snape leaned back in his chair again and ran a finger over his lips thoughtfully before rapping his knuckles on the desk. "You walk a very narrow line, Hermione Granger," he finally said. "Before you demand that I treat you as a peer, you might consider precisely what that might entail."

She blanched slightly under the weight of that comment. "I gave my word and accepted yours as equals. I'm prepared to face whatever consequence that brings. Are you?"

Mother of Merlin, she could play the game! She used truth and honor like a scalpel. A worthy opponent was a rare delight; most people who entered a battle of wits with Severus Snape found themselves hopelessly outgunned. He nodded deliberately, then pushed her book back across the desk and brought himself to his feet.

"Remain here for ten minutes. I will leave the door to my private chamber ajar. It will be very dark; do not even consider snooping around. You will find a chair by the hearth. When I--" he paused, then put one hand dramatically over his chest and gestured toward her with the other--"when *you* feel you have fulfilled your evening's obligation, there is Floo powder out here on the mantel, for your return to the Gryffindor common room."

"Ten minutes, then," was her even reply.

The bravado lasted until his chamber door clicked shut, then his hand flew to his brow. *Damn it!* He'd told himself not to go through with this, but against all logic, here he was. He *never* allowed students beyond that door! This was his sanctuary, buried deep in the stone foundation of the castle, secure from prying eyes and spells. Few people even knew how to find it! Oh, she was a player, all right, arguing her way into this room...

Snape had never undressed so quickly in his life. He banked the fire very low and drew all the curtains tightly around his bed. He started to set out the lamp, but changed his mind--let her use her wand to illuminate the book. He nearly climbed into bed without cracking the door; that would have been nothing short of a catastrophe. She would not have given up, he was sure of it, but he would not open the door while wearing nothing but his linen nightshirt, no matter how violently she pounded on it.

It seemed like an hour had passed before the door closed with a small click. He listened to her quiet footsteps across the stone floor, the rustle of her robes as she settled into the chair. Her voice, softly, "*Lumos*," then it became firm and even as she began.

"Grandfather said: This is the kind of a man Boon Hogganbeck was. Hung on the wall, it could have been his epitaph, like a Bertillon chart or a police poster; any cop in north Mississippi would have arrested him out of any crowd after merely reading the date..."

3: Old Habits Die Hard

Chapter 3 of 47

As the details of the new relationship get sorted out, raw nerves and second thoughts lead things to take a turn for the worse.

Snape stretched languidly upon awakening. That was the best night's sleep he'd had in a long time, and the brush of the bedclothes against his skin felt particularly sensual. In an instant, however, all of that was forgotten as he sat bolt upright in panic. *I never heard her leave!* He took a deep breath to calm himself, then ground his teeth angrily. What nonsense was this, for him to be in such a state *in his own bloody bedroom!* Momentarily forgetting his vow to keep his nightshirt out of view, he yanked open the curtains of his four-poster.

There was no one there.

The coals had died out long ago; the hearthstones were cold. But on the small marble table beside the chair lay her book, with a rectangle of Muggle paper tucked neatly between pages six and seven. Snape scanned over the text, flipped back a page, then another. He couldn't remember a word after the middle of the second page.

Snape sat down to breakfast in the Great Hall, his eyes deliberately avoiding the Gryffindor table. To his chagrin, there was a corner of parchment poking out from under his plate. His heart leapt into his throat, but he kept his features impassive as he surreptitiously slid it into his palm.

Dear Professor,

We neglected to arrange our next meeting.

I thought to return by the same path as

I departed, arriving at the door at the

same time as before. Please confirm if

this is quite alright.

There was no signature, thank goodness, but he recognized her tidy script immediately. "Idiot girl," he fumed under his breath, "at least she had the sense not to use an owl." That control freak, Umbridge, was screening the mail; she would stick to him like pine tar if she caught wind of any secret meetings, professor or no.

He caught her eye during Potions that afternoon and gave her a single curt nod.

By 11:30, he was reduced to pacing the floor. This was insane. No one would accept the truth if she were discovered coming to his room every night. Frankly, it would almost be worse if they did! If it came to that, he'd prefer to be thrown off the faculty for disgraceful conduct than admit he'd been having midnight liaisons with a young lady for the purpose of *bedtime stories*.

Not to mention he'd left the fireplace open to the Floo Network *all night* (albeit only to the rest of Hogwarts--he had barred it from the main grid, lest outsiders have access to his office). Heavens above, that dreadful Umbridge woman was monitoring the fires too, *particularly* the Gryffindor fire, thanks to Potter and Black! No, this would stop tonight; the lessons would stop if she so insisted. He would not be compromised by such an absurd situation.

She stepped out of the fire in his office and frowned. "Oh! I expected you'd be in your room. Should I come back later?"

"No. Turn around and go, but do not come back. I am ending our agreement."

She rose to her full height. "You most certainly are not! I won't permit it!" He stepped closer to her, raising his hand menacingly, but to his utter disbelief, she shoved his hand aside. "You will not manipulate me into a debt, Severus Snape."

When something occurs that is completely outside one's normal experience, it takes a moment to grasp it as reality. For that reason, and that reason only, Snape remained silent long enough for Hermione to continue.

"Are you worried I'll get caught in the Floo Network? Well, don't be. I've been given a classified spell by... someone in the Order. One of the Aurors, I can't say who. Look at the fire!"

Snape was torn between strangling her and doing as he was told. He finally gave in to the latter; the flames were nearly out, but there was something odd. Within the usual emerald green, there was a flicker of red.

"I'm not supposed to have it, obviously, and I had to make an Unbreakable Vow not to use it for any other purpose," she said heavily. "But no one will catch me coming or leaving here."

Now he had familiar rage to ground him. "And precisely what did you tell this Auror when you asked for such a spell?" Every word was a shard of glass, slicing into her consciousness. She took an instinctive step backward, her eyes widening.

"I said I was getting Occlumency lessons," she said, the confidence finally draining from her voice. "From you."

He eliminated the gap between them and seized her shoulders with a crushing grip, speaking through gritted teeth. "You *walk* here for the lessons."

"I fibbed a little," she squeaked shakily. "I mean, this *is* for the lessons, just not directly." She squirmed as he tightened his grip. "You're hurting me."

"I am aware of that," he said icily. "I thought I made it clear, Miss Granger, that no one was to know anything about this arrangement."

"Please stop."

"Stop? I've barely begun," he breathed and leaned forward, forcing her to her knees. "I attempted to get my point across with *words* alone, Miss Granger, apparently without success. Understand that I can and will employ other means to assure your compliance with our bargain."

She shuddered, but to her credit, she looked him square in the eye. "Noted. I hope you'll forgive my indiscretion."

Snape began to shake with suppressed laughter. That non-apology was so steely, he could use it on Lord Voldemort if the need ever arose again. He gave her upper body a vicious twist as though to tear her in half, then let her go. She doubled over, her arms crossed over her chest; he wondered absently if he had pressed too hard and broken a clavicle. When she straightened up again, however, he could see her shoulders were still even. He folded his arms and sneered down at her, daring her to complain. "Tell me, do you still wish to be bound by our agreement, Miss Granger?"

She looked up at him, narrow eyes filled with fear and contempt. "Yes," she said in a scraped voice, then clenched her teeth tightly.

Just to eliminate any doubt of the pecking order, Snape took her chin in his hand and dragged his thumb roughly over her mouth, pulling her lower lip out into a little pout. He leaned down very slowly with his teeth bared as if to kiss her, or bite her, or both, gripping her jaw when she tried to pull away. He left less than a finger's breadth between them; he ran his tongue over his lips, the better to feel her shallow, rapid breath. "Then see that you keep it," he whispered, pushing her away with disdain. "Ten minutes."

From behind the curtains of his bed, he heard the soft patter as she crossed the room and took the chair. She caught her breath several times during the process, and when she began to read, her voice rattled, though it soon became firm and even.

"F-Father thought that was all of it, that it was finished. He even finished cursing, just on principle, as though there were no urgency anywhere, heeling the chair back to the desk and seeing the scattered money which would have to be counted all over now, and then he started to curse at Boon again, not even about the pistol but simply at Boon for being Boon Hogganbeck, until I told him..."

Snape had expected she would cry as she sat alone in his dark office, but he hadn't heard a sound; only the aftermath of her tears gave her away. A thin halo of wandlight illuminated the curtain. He held up his hand and observed its silhouette; his palm alone was as wide as her entire shoulder. A sudden pang of guilt shot through him.

Snape had left the service of the Dark Lord for many reasons. One was that he had come to understand that inflicting pain was a hollow victory. It had its appeal when he was young and filled with self-righteous rage, but it was far too easy--particularly with victims who were smaller or weaker than himself. The Dark Lord used the Cruciatius curse regularly, with immediate and productive results, but Dumbledore achieved the same level of service and loyalty with a wink of his eye. In that, Snape had recognized the nature of true power.

He looked at his hand again as he listened to the rich, woven text she was reading. Hollow victory, indeed. She was smaller and lighter, knew only a fraction of the spells

he knew; indeed, even if she were prepared to retaliate, she wouldn't dare, lest she be expelled. *Ah, yes, Severus, you're a courageous man, aren't you?* he thought in disgust.

But then again, there was something of value in the exchange. She could have run from his office, even gone straight to the headmaster with the tale of his assault. She chose to stay and uphold her own honor, even though she was hurt, probably frightened. His intimidation brought out her courage; his weakness would make her stronger. And she would hate him for it.

Cursing himself inwardly for such sentimentality, he placed his fingertips delicately against the curtain, as though the flimsy fabric were a real, solid barrier between them.

4: Compound Interest

Chapter 4 of 47

Anyone with a credit card knows its the interest that kills you. What's the interest on a karmic debt? Guilt, it would seem...

Snape locked his office the next night and left a lantern burning on his desk. She didn't bring the lamp in with her when she came to read. He understood. He'd told her the first night that it would be very dark and she was not to look around. He didn't leave her the lantern so that she would have enough light to snoop of course, but he thought it might cast her shadow against the curtain.

The following night, he didn't bank down the fire, but left it burning brightly beside her chair. She caught her breath upon opening the door, then quickly, loudly pulled it shut.

Comprehension shot through him like a poisoned dart. Of course she thought he was testing her, trying to trick her into breaking the letter of her promise. She must think him quite the sadist, deliberately setting her up for failure in order to punish her again. Snape understood that routine; his father had utilized it many times. He sighed deeply and buried his face in his hands.

This had to end now, or it would only spiral further downward. He yanked aside the curtain and pulled his robe on over his nightshirt. She was right behind the door wringing her hands nervously when he pulled it open; they both jumped.

"Miss Granger," he said haltingly, "I regret that... I have behaved rather badly." Each word was like a rib being cracked in his chest.

In his entire life, Snape had only spoken an apology once before, to Albus Dumbledore. His crimes had been far worse that first time, and the pardon he'd been granted had spared his life. This reckoning, however, was more painful, perhaps because Albus had never braced in fear of him as he spoke. Not for the first time, Severus Snape wished he weren't so damn *good* at being vicious.

She looked at him uncertainly. In another lifetime, he might have gently brushed her cheek in a comforting manner, but Snape knew the rules; he had lost any such privilege when he left the bruises, still purple, on her collarbones. He turned his head a moment and began again.

"I don't like or trust people, Miss Granger, for reasons that are irrelevant to this discussion. I make a deliberate choice to isolate myself. But because of this choice, I don't often receive... acts of kindness." He forced himself to soften his voice. "I've never learned to accept them with any grace. In fact, I find kindness rather unsettling."

A light began to dawn in her eyes, but she wasn't understanding his words, only that he didn't intend to inflict pain, at least *notight now*. Snape hated himself at that moment, as he had hated his father for so many years.

"I'll teach you if you still wish it, but you owe me nothing," he said quietly. "I forfeited any debt when I... Please leave, Miss Granger." There was no point in explaining; she couldn't hear him until she felt safe from bodily harm. He stepped back and closed the door as slowly and gently as he could, listened to her skittering footsteps and the whoosh of flames, then sunk into the armchair by the fire.

Her book was still sitting on the table beside the hearth. He recalled the way her voice had lulled him to sleep. Sleep had never come easily for him. As a boy he went to his room in fear every night, not of monsters under the bed (he knew that real monsters didn't live in children's rooms), but that he might wake up without his magic. In his nightmares, he would become a pathetic Muggle like his father, worthless, weak, constantly displaying his physical strength as though it mattered, as though brutality were the equivalent of power.

As Snape grew older, he lay awake at night not in fear but in contemplation, burying the spells he'd invented deep in his mind and planning his escape from his parents' household. It was good preparation for the countless hours he came to spend every night under the Dark Lord's service, sorting each day's events according to whether they would please Lord Voldemort or anger him and hiding the latter appropriately. In this way, Severus Snape had slowly evolved into one of the strongest Occlumens in the world, more than a match for both Albus and Voldemort, two of the best Legilimens.

But it had all come at the price of sleep, of rest; Snape's mind was constantly examining, judging, and sentencing every stimulus that passed through it, compartmentalizing his thoughts under each of the facades he wore. Snape could not afford a single mistake before the Dark Lord, a man who punished accidental failure with savage ferocity; how he would react to premeditated betrayal was beyond even Snape's imagination.

He picked up her book and studied the cover. *The Reivers*, William Faulkner. It was a paperback, such as Muggles read, made of yellowed paper and a cardstock cover. Unbelievable that a book utterly devoid of magic could send him to sleep so easily. Her bookmark had advanced only eighteen pages, and he had no memory of most of the text. He scanned the page from the bottom up, as was his custom: "Boon was a corporation, a holding company in which the three of us--McCaslins, De Spain, and General Compson--had mutually equal but completely undefined shares of responsibility, the one and only corporation rule being that whoever was nearest at the crises would leap immediately into whatever breach Boon had this time created or committed or simply fallen heir to." Snape shook his head with a cynical grin. That could have been written about Potter, though that little prat had many more than three "shareholders" making sure he'd be extracted from every disaster.

He tried reading the book himself for a while, but to no avail; Snape had never fallen asleep while reading a book, not even the driest encyclopedia of the History of Magic. He sighed as he settled under the duvet; she had come to his room only three times, how could he possibly be so accustomed to her voice?

Business for the Order occupied his weekend, and then of course there were classes to prepare, essays to mark; he didn't miss her at all until bedtime, which was really an insignificant portion of the hours of the day, when one thought about it. It meant nothing, he told himself, every time he punched some air into his pillow.

When the knock came at eight o'clock Monday night, a bolt of lightning surged through him for the briefest instant, until he realized it was Potter, arriving for his regular lesson. The little git was feeling quite pleased with himself; he had somehow slipped beyond Umbridge's clutches to conduct an interview with (of all things) an absurd

tabloid called *The Quibbler*, describing the Dark Lord's rebirth the previous spring. Apparently an article would be released sometime in the near future. While Snape grudgingly allowed himself a private appreciation for Potter finally taking some wind out of that vile woman's sails, he knew there would be hell to pay the next time he was summoned to Lord Voldemort's side. And of course, Potter would be conveniently absent when that bill came due.

As usual, the lesson was a disaster. Potter had been too busy fawning over some tart and pining for his lost Quidditch privileges to practice Occlumency. Never mind the fact that Albus had *ASKED* him to study, that he had as much as told Potter it would save his scrawny hide someday; oh, no, far be it from Potter to accept instructions on faith and perform them out of a sense of duty or necessity. Undoubtedly young Tom Riddle had a similar habit of defying orders that did not match his personal priorities. After an hour reviewing tedious memories of childhood torture (which invariably left Snape with an upset stomach and new recollections of his own youth), he heaped on the usual admonitions to practice and booted the little tosser out of his office.

Snape set his cheek against the cool, smooth desk and wished he had the ability to doze off effortlessly. Potter had barely left, however, when another caller arrived.

5: The Great Escape

Chapter 5 of 47

Three little words to strike terror into your very soul:

Snape.
Slash.
Umbridge.

Bit of advice: don't drink anything as you read this chapter. Seriously. This chapter is the Comic Relief section. One gal said it made iced coffee come out of her nose.

You've been warned.

Snape refused to indulge himself in the hope that it might be Granger, and this was just as well; he opened the door to reveal Dolores Umbridge in her utterly repulsive pink cardigan. Sometimes he wished doors had never been invented.

"What is it, Professor?" he said coldly, hoping whatever it was could be taken care of entirely in the corridor.

"Why, good evening, Professor Snape," she purred. "May I come in?"

As if I have a choice? "Of course, madam." He stepped back, far back, and made sure that the latch did not quite catch when he closed the door behind her.

She strolled into his office, beady eyes taking in the alembics and vials on his lab bench and the multitude of preserved plants and creatures on the shelves, undoubtedly snooping for contraband. She could look all she wanted; he kept his exceptional ingredients well out of sight. In the meantime, however, she was spreading the stench of cheap perfume throughout his office. "Is there something you need, madam?"

She stopped before a sealed decanter and produced one of her smiles that stopped well below her cheekbones. "Oh, now aren't these interesting! What are they, Professor Snape?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Pickled watermelon rind. I trust that snacking in one's office has not yet been forbidden by Ministry decree."

She giggled without humor. "Oh, Severus, you do go on, don't you?"

"I am not the only one, Professor Umbridge."

Being fully versed in politics, she recognized the chill in the air. Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Well. I suppose you're wondering why I've come to call." He merely folded his arms; there was no point in making things any easier for her. She wrinkled her nose and continued. "I'm developing a little project, Professor, one which I would prefer to be kept under wraps, so to speak. Lucius Malfoy has spoken very highly of you; he believes you are a man who understands discretion."

He continued to glower silently at her, waiting for her to say something relevant.

She took a step closer, smiling coyly. "I see Lucius was right, you *are* the silent type. Am I to assume I can trust you then, Professor?"

"You may assume whatever you please. I, however, will not commit my confidence until I have some idea of the topic you are so diligently skirting."

She sniffed and returned her attention to the shelves. Mother of Merlin, the woman knew how to drag out a conversation, although a simple "Hello" from her was already tedious enough. There was no point in pushing her, though, she had the entire bloody Ministry behind her and could filibuster all night if she chose. He could suck it up, or play this inane game for hours. He sighed. Anything to get that pink sweater out of his sight.

"Perhaps, *Dolores*, if you would clarify just what it is you require of me." Well, at least it wasn't the most obsequious thing he'd ever said. Lord Voldemort had to be handled with even softer gloves, but Snape still felt like he'd just licked a toilet seat.

It was worth it, however; she turned around and strolled back to him with a fresh smile, one that acknowledged his concession to her terms of engagement. "Poor Severus. You must forgive me for being so vague. I just have to be sure I can count on you, before including you in any... official business."

How she could use so many words without saying a damn thing was beyond him. Such was the nature of politics. "Of course. It goes without saying that Lucius would not have advised you to seek me out if I were not able to assist you appropriately."

She sighed with feigned contentment. "It's such a pleasure to find someone in this school who can hold a civilized conversation."

"A rarity indeed, Dolores. May I offer you some tea?" Sometimes the slow route was the only way to make progress.

Twenty minutes later, she still hadn't made her point, blathering on instead about the disciplinary issues at Hogwarts and her connections in the Ministry. Snape understood this game as well, though he despised playing it. Bile rose in his throat to protest as he refilled her teacup, but he had put in enough time now; he'd earned the right to

apply some pressure. "Dear me, Dolores, look at the time. I have papers yet to mark tonight. Perhaps we could continue this discussion tomorrow."

She sat up straighter. "Goodness gracious, it is getting late! I'm so sorry I've kept you so long, Severus." She dropped a sugar cube into her tea, her spoon tinkling against the china as she stirred. "But I really should discuss my request tonight, you may need to get started on it right away."

Finally! "I am at your disposal."

"I understand that you are not just an academic in regard to Potions, Severus, that you are actually quite skilled in preparing them."

Oh, Lord. That clearly called for modesty. "I suffice, madam."

"Oh, come now, that's not what I hear! Lucius tells me you're a Master."

Lucius was going to get an arse-kicking the next time they opened a bottle of cognac together. "My old friend has suffered more than one embarrassing prank due to my skill at the cauldron. He has undoubtedly confused my greater talent with Mastery."

She twittered, and to his horror, pulled her chair slightly closer to his. Their knees were almost touching. *She couldn't possibly be flirting. It was just an attempt to assert her perceived dominance. Surely.*

"I never realized you were so funny, Severus. Well, regardless of Lucius's opinion, I wondered if you have the skill to make Veritaserum?"

At last she had come to the point, and it had taken less than an hour. He congratulated himself inwardly. Now it was only a matter of steering her to the door as they coasted.

"Of course I am, although you are undoubtedly aware that its use is tightly controlled by the Ministry?"

She leaned forward conspiratorially, and there was no mistaking the gleam in her eye, she wasn't just conspiring about potions. "Severus, dear, I *am* the Ministry. I do have the authority to use it as needed on Ministry matters."

Shit, there it was, she'd set her hand on his knee. He had learned years ago, at the icy hands of the Dark Lord, never to flinch, but he intuitively knew she would soon be sliding her hand along his thigh if he didn't react. Glumly, he placed his hand over her stubby fingers; the clear lesser of two evils.

"How much will you require, Dolores?" He was careful to keep his voice at its usual timbre; there was still a good chance of pulling this off in a "friendly" fashion.

She sat back in her chair with a particularly self-satisfied smirk. "Well, now, I suppose that will depend on how strong it is, won't it? At least enough for several good, solid interrogations, perhaps, oh, five or ten people?"

More than the entire Department of Magical Law Enforcement performed in a month. A true professional need not bother with Veritaserum except in the most recalcitrant cases. "Dolores, my goodness, that's a rather tall order. The components are not easily obtained, and making large amounts is trickier than a few drops." He was speaking completely honestly, pondering whether he even had the necessary ingredients in stock. It would take weeks to mature in quantity, for it could not be stirred after a certain point but it had to equilibrate with the air; the surface-to-volume ratio of a large bolus required time for the nitrogen to permeate the entire fluid. Of course, he might be able to spread it out in a flat puddle, but that would never do, the rate of evaporation would--

Snape looked up during his internal reverie to one of the most horrible sights he had ever seen. Umbridge had taken off the Sweater Sinister to reveal a low-cut blouse and was leaning over her teacup to present him with a clear view that she undoubtedly, but erroneously, considered, well, titillating. He'd walked right into it, too; on this playing field, his comments would be considered a coy invitation to "reward" his extra efforts.

He almost lost his composure and groaned, but that would definitely have made matters worse.

Don't give her a chance to say anything. "But of course, I can do it. It will take at least a month, I'm afraid, Dolores. This is a very sensitive potion, it has to be prepared delicately."

Her eyes gleamed again, and he wished he had used more technical terms. "Oh, I trust you're up to the task, Severus, you're a man of many capable skills." There went the hand on his knee again, higher this time.

In the distant past, Snape had murdered, tortured, and raped under the orders of the Dark Lord, but there was no way in Heaven, Hell, or Earth that he was going to bang Dolores Umbridge. Not just no, but Hell No! There are some things a man simply cannot ask of himself.

But Snape was also a master of subterfuge, and there was no excuse for creating an ugly scene when there was still opportunity for a clean extraction. It was time for a virtuoso performance.

Snape averted his eyes coyly. "Oh, Dolores, bless your heart, I think you may have a wrong impression."

She raised her brows curiously. The hook was in place, now to tug the line.

"I see how... lovely you look tonight, and I appreciate it, really, it's just..." He put his fingertips over his lips in what he hoped was a shy, endearing manner (he had never attempted such a thing before). It seemed to pass muster; she cocked her head and stared at him, puzzled.

"I'm afraid..." Snape bowed his head and attempted a nervous giggle, then fixed her gaze. "It's just that you look so seductive, but I'm not, ah, that is, I don't exactly..."

"Severus!" Her eyes widened. "Are you trying to tell me you're queer?"

Bloody hell no, I'm not, but thanks for asking. "I, tee hee, I'm afraid so, dear."

She cracked what was probably the first sincerely amused smile he'd ever seen on her toadlike face and sat back in her chair. "*Hem, hem.* Well. I would never have guessed."

"Thank you for saying so. I strive to keep my private matters out of the public perception."

Oh, bloody hell. She obviously fancied herself quite the fag hag; she was nodding kindly and patting his knee. "I'm sure it must be difficult, poor dear," she said sympathetically. "People can be so uptight about such things, particularly when it comes to teachers. You've really done an excellent job, I promise, I never even suspected it until this very moment."

He smiled as graciously as he could. "Well, we've both shared our little secrets now, haven't we, Dolores?"

There was that humorless grin. Checkmate. The end was in sight.

"Quite so, darling. But you simply must tell me one more thing. Does Lucius know?"

It is proof that we live in a divine universe, that such opportunities arise when they are so desperately needed. "Oh, Dolores, trust me. He understands *perfectly!*" Snape winked with a shiver so subtle that it screamed of untold passion, and he saw in her eyes that she immediately filed that away under Malfoy: Leverage Against.

From now on, that blond bastard would think twice about referring his Ministry problems to Snape for disposal.

6: The First Brick Crumbles

Chapter 6 of 47

Snape has a third visitor for the evening and contemplates installing a revolving door in his office. Not!

I liked the contrast this brought out between Umbridge and Hermione, it was kind of a study in annoying vs endearing. Ooh, and I got to write my own full-blown Faulkner-style one-sentence-paragraph, woot woot.

Bloody hell. The stack of essays remained untouched on his desk, and it was nearly 10:30. And no sooner had he sat down when, Mother of Merlin, someone ELSE knocked at the door. He nearly yanked it off its hinges, ready to assist the offending visitor into an immediate and possibly airborne departure.

"Miss Granger."

She was already backing away. "I see this isn't a good time, Professor, I'm sorry I interrupted--"

"No," he insisted, "it is I who apologize. I've had a rather frustrating evening, Miss Granger, but there was no call to be so brusque." *Please don't go.* "Please come in."

She steeled herself and entered. Without even thinking about it, he locked the door.

Her mouth was pressed into a flat line as she knit her brows, obviously uncertain if it was safe to speak. He couldn't guess her specific purpose, but realistically, he expected it to end with a quick exit and a pang in his chest. Better to just get it over with quickly. "Have you come for your book, perhaps?"

She looked up and opened her mouth, but closed it again, shaking her head. "Well, yes and no, I suppose," she said after a moment, "but more to the point... I've been thinking about what you said."

Snape had a clean shot at a snide remark, but he held his tongue. He could still see the edge of his thumbprint beside her sternum, now greenish brown with a yellow border. *By God, you monster, your hands should be chopped off with a dull axe.*

She was ready to continue and did so as though reading from a parchment, which she undoubtedly had written and memorized earlier in the evening. "You've always been very clear that you value your privacy, Professor. It was a mistake for me to invade it the way I did. It upset you and, and... made you act out of anger in a way that you regret." Her voice began to shake; if she were incorrect, she knew his wrath would come raining down on her in spades. "I want to apol--"

"DON'T say it, Miss Granger." Snape had to close his eyes; they stung as though they'd been salted. "You owe me nothing, an apology least of all." She looked up at him in protest--he could imagine her thinking, "Just shut up and let me get this over with already," but he held up his hands. He had to end this properly.

"This has been a rather extraordinary experience, Miss Granger, one which has forced me into some needed, albeit uncomfortable, introspection." He sighed. "You must listen to me now. No matter what, whether acting as a professor or a peer, it was inexcusable to hurt you. I spoke the other night of my regret, but that conveyed nothing of my... shame." Funny, he had thought he'd rather die than admit such a thing, but really, it wasn't all that bad now that it was done. It almost felt as if a crushing band had been removed from around his ribs, letting him breathe freely for the first time.

"I have spent most of my life in a violent world, one which you can barely comprehend. Some of it was thrust upon me, and some the result of misguided choices. I later chose to teach in an attempt to escape from that life. I know full well that I cannot revert to old patterns here. Particularly with you."

She glanced up at him, puzzled, but he would not elaborate on that last comment; he had no idea what ill-used corner of his mind it had leapt from, either.

"For what it's worth, Miss Granger," he said, despite the sudden gravel in his voice, "I swear to you that I will never again raise a hand against you." He dropped to one knee. "On my life, even if the Dark Lord demands it, I will not harm you." Both of them went wide-eyed; this was the strongest oath he could give, and every word had burned from his heart without premeditation.

Somehow, suddenly, his face was buried in her silly, silly hair, and he could feel her shaking and crying and holding his shoulders like a life ring on a stormy sea, and he self-consciously placed his hands just barely against her waist and rocked her with a gentle turning motion, until the regret and fear and distrust were spent, until all that remained were two strangers journeying down vastly different paths that had inexplicably crossed.

"That was Saturday," she began. "Ludus was back at work Monday morning. On the next Friday my grandfather--the other one, Mother's father, your great-grandmother's father--died in Bay St. Louis."

Snape lay on his side, watching her hazy outline on the curtain weave and bob in the firelight. He felt his limbs relaxing, already conditioned to recognize the day's end at the sound of her even tone.

He closed his eyes. What a night it had been. First the prat, then the toad; this was the sort of night that typically ends with broken glass or china and a stiff drink, and yet here he was, nothing broken, maybe even something healed.

She'd accepted his oath so matter-of-factly, as though she couldn't fathom him violating it. He'd renounced the vow that bound him to Voldemort at enormous risk, and she knew it, yet she trusted him implicitly to keep his promise to her. Was she so naive, or was she aware of something he himself barely understood?

"Boon was a mutual benevolent protective benefit association, of which the benefits were all Boon's and the mutuality and the benevolence and the protecting all ours."

He smirked. *If that's not Potter, I'm a bacon sandwich.* He wondered if she had recognized the analogy and picked this book deliberately to amuse him. It didn't seem possible; she would need a fine understanding of his sense of humor *and* his sense of Potter. He'd tried to keep both of these deliberately coarse and oversimplified in the public eye. It was safer for all concerned if the general perception was that Potter was just another hated name on a long list (albeit one near the top).

It was actually less pleasant to see her hazy silhouette against the curtain than the diffused wandlight. With the latter, he could close his eyes and use his imagination if he wanted to visualize her, but the jittery shadows were too vague and foreshortened for a satisfactory image, yet too real to ignore. She was pretty, in a wholesome, effortless way. She didn't paint her face or adorn herself with the absurdly revealing fashions of the day. Her mind was her greatest virtue, and it would serve her and take her where

she wanted to go, long after the beauty of her peers had faded. He wanted to watch her mouth form the words, her eyes saccade over the page, her body shift and settle into the leather armchair. He had never dreamed it possible that any female being would come to his room every night, and even if it was just for "bedtime stories," he wanted to savor every drop of it.

When the burning log flared just right, it would project (for an instant) her profile on the curtain. He watched the spot as if mesmerized, waiting for these illicit-seeming glimpses of a feminine face there in his bed. At one point, there was a brief snapshot of the pout he had literally put on her face the week before. He winced sharply at the memory. Not because of guilt--Snape had a profound understanding of transgressions and atonements--but because he had been too angry at the time to notice the softness of her skin or the taste of her breath. Snape sighed. He had utterly wasted his only opportunity.

7: Distillations

Chapter 7 of 47

A bit of ethanol dissolves some of Snape's exterior and reveals a bit of what's underneath. Hermione has a chance to practice being a good prefect.

Snape felt like a dishrag that had been stuffed in the drain while someone was chopping spoiled meat into the sink. He sank behind his desk. The Prat had just left the office. He was developing some skill at Occlumency, all right--unfortunately, he was directing it at his teacher, not his enemy. *Leave it to Potter to get that confused.* The Prat had even managed a bit of Legilimency, helping himself to a few unpleasant memories of Snape's. *Wanker. He would poke into that bit about the broom.*

What was worse, Snape had seen a dead-on view of the vision the Dark Lord was sending to Potter. He knew exactly where it was. He'd looked down that same corridor as he was being hauled before the Wizengamot, with Albus at his side sporting that twinkly grin of his. His life, death, or worse-than-death would be decided within the hour, and there was Albus, smiling like the cat that ate the chocolate-covered canary with a tuna center, framed by the same claustrophobic corridor that was being thrust into Potter's mind.

The Dark Lord did not trust Snape enough--yet--to confide his reasons for sending The Prat these visions, but he suspected it was something about that damned prophecy hidden in the room beyond that hall. The prophecy Snape himself had stolen, the last service he'd performed for the Master before the scales had tipped. But it was only speculation. There were all kinds of things inside the Department of Mysteries, and Merlin-only-knew what he could be after; it was foolish to guess. The only certainty was that the Dark Lord was manipulating Potter with these images, but Potter was more concerned with exacting a pound of flesh from Snape himself than with closing his mind to the Master's temptations. *Idiot!*

The Prat even had the nerve to ask why he referred to the Dark Lord as... the Dark Lord. Snape shook his head, reaching for the bottle of firewhiskey. *That would be because this cursed Mark would bring him straight to me if I uttered his name, you imbecile, and I think the last thing he ought to see right now is me instructing you in Occlumency.* Snape took the entire shot in one gulp. He reckoned briefly that he could call the Dark Lord "You-Know-Who" like everybody else did, but it was just so utterly uncouth.

As if that weren't enough, then Umbridge lowered the boom on Trelawney. At least Albus showed up, finally, from wherever he'd been, running off and leaving them stuck with That Woman. *Although if I could opt to get away from her, I'd do it too, with relish. And all the condiments.* Rumors, if they were to be believed at all, indicated that Albus had gone to visit a bloody house-elf recently (or was it the creature's funeral?), or some such rubbish like that.

Snape raised his glass in a silent toast: *Coup d'ecole* to Albus for having that centaur at hand to replace Trelawney as the Divination teacher. At least Umbridge wouldn't be further infiltrating Hogwarts with another sycophant from the Ministry. Some poor bastard had expected to cash in tonight, only to find that his winnings were leprechaun gold. Whoever it was, he'd undoubtedly given in to Umbridge's ghastly hand on his thigh. Yeurgh. That called for a double.

Snape smiled bitterly at his ingenious tale to throw "Dolores, dah-ling" off the scent; even with a partial victory, she'd be feeling pretty dominant tonight after sacking The Human Beetle and would surely be on the prowl. Heh. Maybe Firenze was getting a "welcome, new member" visit from her even now. Snape shuddered. He hoped the poor git had horseshoes on--the granite flagstones would be tough on his hooves if he were forced to break into a gallop.

After another shot or three, Snape began to wonder if he shouldn't go pat the horsie and introduce himself. *Hah!* Still, it would be a hospitable gesture to take him a bottle of something... although what sort of thing centaurs liked, he had no idea. Shame to waste one of his exquisite selections on someone that may not appreciate it. *Eh, it was a stupid idea anyway. Let Dolores be the welcome wagon.* Who knew? Perhaps that was exactly the sort of thing centaurs liked.

When he tried to navigate to his desk and nearly broke his best alembic, he knew it was time to shelve the firewhiskey. Marking papers was out of the question--not that he couldn't do it, but, as Snape openly acknowledged, he was a sullen drunk, and all that inane drivel would send him into near-suicidal depths. A nice book, that would be perfect right now, a brief respite from the insanity his life had become: the lies, the half-truths, the incomplete truths... there were so many ways to use the truth to obscure a lie, and vice versa. But as soon as you started weaving that web, you had to sustain it until its purpose was served--and it just kept getting more and more unwieldy every day. Snape was far too stoic to complain, but tonight, damn it all, he was tired. And the Little Prat had seen him trying to ride that goddamn broom.

He was sprawled on the small divan--neither sitting nor lying down, but some unlikely superposition of the two--trying to decide if he could get to the kitchens for a little something and back without being spotted, when he heard a "whoosh" in the fireplace. He jerked straight up in alarm, which proved an ill-advised idea; the room promptly began to scroll upward and leap back to its proper place in a very disorienting manner. Hermione Granger stepped out of the hearth with a cheery smile and began to scroll as well.

Oh, shit, whatever you do, do NOT get the giggles. Not that they struck him very often, but even the crabbiest drunk will sometimes ponder some grand absurdity for too long and end up laughing maniacally about a concept like the existence of free will, which no one else would find comprehensible, much less *funny*. The last time Snape was this plastered, he'd jubilantly written a series of runes in an equation that he was certain explained the origin of the universe. The next day he couldn't even read it, and it had taken forever to remove it from the wall.

"Good evening, Mish Granger. Hee hee hee." If he'd had a knife handy, he'd have stuck it in his thigh.

Oh, no, not The Look. Yer busted, Severus. Her eyes were as big and round as saucers, but at least her smile was kindly, not scheming. "Professor?"

"Yessir?" he rhymed. *Great Goddess, I besmirch thee, pull out my vocal cords right now... hang on, hang on... I messed that up, didn't I? Oh, bugger.*

She peered at him dubiously. "Have you been drinking?"

"Guilty as charged, miss. And does that diminish me in your sight?" There was the sullen drunk; about time he showed up.

She frowned. "Should it? Although it *is* a bit of a surprise--you don't seem the type to... relinquish control."

"Very good, Miss Granger. You do have a brain inside that pretty head."

That took her frown up to a frank scowl. "You know, there is absolutely no call to be insulting. I'm sorry you don't like being seen when you're vulnerable, but--"

"Stop right there, young lady," he snarled, but she wasn't having any of it.

"I will not! If you want to get drunk and sulk in private, fine! Perhaps next time you'll be kind enough to send a message so I'll know to skip our nightly appointment. In the meantime, you can at least refrain from taking whatever it is out on me."

That took a moment to decrypt, but he put in the effort--he had a feeling it was important. Besides, she looked rather cute when she was angry. "Quite right, as always, Miss Granger. You must excuse me for being... exactly what I am. Except more so than usual."

She looked even better when she smiled.

"Very well, Professor. I think there's not much point in reading tonight. Good eve--" She stopped abruptly, staring at him in surprise.

"What?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. You just looked terribly sad for a moment. It must have been the light or something."

It wasn't the light. "Must have. Good evening, dear girl." He let his head fall onto the back of the divan, which, unfortunately, had a wooden frame that he'd completely forgotten. He was reminded with a loud clunk. "Oh. That's gonna hurt," he mumbled.

She rolled her eyes and walked behind the divan, not bothering to ask permission to tip his head forward. "You're right, it will, you'll have quite a goose egg tomorrow. Come now, let's get you to bed, shall we?" She kept her hand on his shoulder as she rounded the divan, then tried to pull him up.

That was an offer he didn't receive every day, and it struck him as hilarious. That she would attempt to help him to his feet, like a little bowtruckle picking up a troll, didn't help either. An indomitable spirit, yet not fueled by hate nor rage... she was so inexplicable, so interesting. Though he would never have considered it when sober, he broke into a crooked smile and with one firm tug, brought her practically into his lap.

She looked quite at a loss as to what to do, but she didn't struggle or pull away. With the boldness of drunken fools everywhere, he put his hands on her waist and drew her even closer. With the sensibility of one who is NOT a drunken fool, she braced her elbows against his chest, subtly defining the limit of that closeness.

I love you. "You are a remarkable woman, Miss Granger."

"You are far too drunk right now, Professor Snape. You're going to regret it in the morning. Come on. Let me help you to your room."

8: What Goes Around

Chapter 8 of 47

Lucius Malfoy drops by Hogwarts to have a little discussion with Professor Snape.

The office door flew open so violently it smashed into the wall. "Severus Snape, you son of a bitch, you've gone too far this time!"

"Lucius," Snape said flatly, without raising his head from the paper he was grading, "I suggest you close the door. This is a long corridor with very efficient acoustics."

Malfoy was so furious he clanged into a small spindly table as he strode across the room, but Snape deliberately finished the last sentence of the essay and scribbled a "D" at the top before seizing his wand and raising to his full height.

"I gather you haven't been by the Ministry until quite recently," Snape said coldly.

"You bastard. How dare you? If it's a war you want, you little shit, you'll have it. I shall rip out your balls and force them down your throat!"

Snape leveled a bored glance. "There's a queue for that, Lucius. You'll have to go to the end." He turned his back, knowing that Lucius never made good on threats; if he intended to harm anyone, it would simply happen, unannounced. Snape searched through the cabinet above his collection of preserved reptiles until he found a fine ancient meade, handing it to Lucius to open as he brought out two crystal snifters.

Lucius was livid, but he took the time to inhale the bouquet of the meade before cracking his knuckles expectantly.

"What have you heard?" Snape asked. No point in confessing to the wrong crime.

The older man hissed through his teeth, "Only that you and I have been fucking like dogs in heat since my seventh year at Hogwarts."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "That's impressive. That's a considerable escalation, and over such a short time. The scandalous ones always do."

Malfoy looked as though he might break the stem of his snifter simply by squeezing it to death. "Why, Severus? WHY?"

"Why did you direct that cunt Umbridge to my office, Lucius?" Malfoy was one of two living men with whom Snape could safely raise his voice. "Did you hear how it happened?"

"If I had heard, would I be asking?"

Snape poured more meade for each of them. "Morgan le Fay, Lucius, she came in asking for Veritaserum, and she wanted to *thank* me for the favor personally. Make that *fuck* me for the favor. Because you'd always spoken so *highly* of me."

Malfoy made a squeamish face, but he was still unsatisfied with the explanation. "Oh, good grief, Severus, do you always have to be such an Epicurean? Haven't you ever heard the phrase, 'At night, all cats are gray'?"

Snape scoffed. "There is no night that dark, Lucius. The woman's a toad, not a cat. Besides," he had to take a long, wasteful draught of the meade before he could say it, "given the selection around here, she would undoubtedly be *back*. Frequently!"

"And had you been cursed such that the word 'No' would not pass your lips that night?"

"You know it's never that simple. I needed to shoot her down for good, but leave her with a graceful exit. She's already sacked Trelawney, has her sights set on Hagrid--and they've never done anything to offend her other than exist! Tell me, Lucius, exactly how would I explain to the Master that I'd lost my position at Hogwarts after all these years because I jilted the wrong woman? He'd probably burst an aneurysm laughing--while simultaneously flaying me alive, of course."

Malfoy stared at him, then turned away reproachfully and concentrated on his meade.

"You try thinking of a good story on the spot, with her hand creeping up your thigh like a cockroach." The memory made him shiver. "I wanted to gnaw off my own leg, for the love of Merlin."

Still refusing to look at him, Malfoy sighed deeply. "Bloody hell, Severus. But why, pray tell, did you feel the need to drag my name into it? You could have just sent me a Howler if you were so bothered by her appointment."

Snape shrugged, but with deference rather than defiance. "For what it's worth, I didn't mention anyone else; she went out of her way to ask about you." He indulged in a vicious smile. "You know I'd never kiss and tell."

Malfoy's glare was like a crossbow bolt. "Don't even joke about it, you tosser."

Snape rolled his eyes. "For pity's sake, Lucius, look at you! It's just a rumor! You know how to handle rumors. 'Consider the source.' Or tell them all exactly what I've told you, if you can bear to spread the truth around for a change. I'm sure she's stalked at least half the Ministry--believe me, they'll understand. They'll all be jealous that I've usurped the best excuse, next time she's in London."

Malfoy snorted with laughter. "Severus, you are such a prick."

He gave Malfoy the same coquettish grin he'd given Umbridge, though with plenty of added sarcasm. "And that's why you love me, isn't it, darling?"

9: The Potions Master

Chapter 9 of 47

Miss Granger's perspectives on recent events are revealed.

"I heard that, Granger. You can't seem to get enough detention this term. Saturday, one o'clock." Snape hadn't even looked up from the cauldron he was tending.

Ron gave her an apologetic wink. "Oops. Sorry," he whispered, he and Harry still smirking at her speculation on Malfoy's true ancestry. Malfoy was glowering, but she didn't care; he was just a great bloody poser, too cowardly to come up with any revenge she couldn't handle.

Saturday. Drat. She'd wanted the lesson on *Sunday* because she'd made some study plans for O.W.L.s Saturday, and there was a DA meeting Monday night. Well, the study group could wait until after the lesson, or it wouldn't kill them to start without her for a change. Surely *someone* else took notes in History of Magic.

Hermione knew it was unseemly, but she couldn't resist peeking up at Professor Snape during class. There was a certain thrill in simply having a secret like this: the clandestine meetings, the pretense of nonchalance and disinterest--and always, always the risk of being caught. Not that they were doing anything wrong, because really, they weren't. Odd, perhaps, but what of it? It was working, it was even fun, and more's the pity that such things were uncommon. But if they were caught--if someone got wind of her late-night trips to the common room, or managed to get a pair of Extendable Ears... The thought sent a quiver through her every time, and it was not at all unpleasant. *I'm going to end up an adrenaline junkie like Harry one of these days.*

But her eyes weren't drifting to Professor Snape because of the secret they shared. She was intrigued by the secrets he *kept*. She saw a side of him that he showed to no one, except perhaps Professor Dumbledore. She knew why the Headmaster trusted him so deeply, even though she didn't have any specific details of their history: She had seen the passion in his eyes when he made his vow to her, itself the very essence of chivalry, maturity, altruism. He had experienced hatred fully in his lifetime, and drew it to its inevitable conclusions, and once he had seen all that hatred had to offer, he chose to abandon it. He had evolved and apotheosized into a higher form of man. Most people did what was right primarily out of fear of the punishment for doing wrong. Professor Snape walked the right path because it was right.

She realized she'd been staring and quickly averted her eyes to her cauldron. It didn't matter if anyone else noticed; she could always say she was merely staring off into space, or if they insisted, that she was picturing the greasy git in Neville's grandmother's dress (with a pitchfork through the center) for giving her another detention. But she mustn't let *him* catch her. He was so damn uptight! He'd been so frightened in the beginning that he'd tried to sabotage their arrangement, even though it meant reverting into habits he'd denounced. She wondered whether he was more afraid of being caught in the lessons or in the bedroom. The latter would certainly raise some awkward questions, but if You-Know-Who caught him teaching her Occlumency, that could mean the end of his life.

He risks his life for Harry's sake. Harry didn't admit to it anymore, but Ron and Neville knew that he frequently woke to nightmares and pain. Ron had become one of the lightest sleepers in the Tower after his father was attacked; any time Harry so much as twitched in his sleep, Ron woke in a cold sweat, filled with dread. You-Know-Who was working Harry over nearly every night--what would happen if he began to take visions and memories *away* from Harry, instead of just implanting them in Harry's dreams? If You-Know-Who saw the professor in Harry's memories, teaching Harry how to keep his enemies out of his mind, the best Professor Snape could hope for would be a quick death.

Honestly, sometimes she just wanted to smack Harry silly, the way he went on about Professor Snape being a traitor. It was hard to teach Occlumency. She'd been at it for two months now, almost as long as Harry, and was no closer to slamming her mind closed to the professor than to setting her rump aglow like a firefly. It was just unfair for

Harry to accuse the professor of deliberately prolonging the process. Unfortunately, Hermione was not free to say, "It's not his fault, even *I'm* having trouble getting it right," in order to prove her point.

She sighed and glanced at him again. She wished she could talk to others about the man she'd come to know. It was almost too painful to see the icy glaze over his eyes at the front of the classroom, to know that no one else even imagined the good man behind it. No one would believe her, though, even if she were free to tell them all; she wouldn't have believed it herself if she hadn't seen it with her own two eyes.

Or felt it. That was the keystone. She'd been terrified the time he'd crushed her shoulders, but it was familiar--expected, almost, certainly not out of character. But he had also put his hands on her tenderly, even (giggle) drunkenly, and that incongruity with his frosty persona was as palpable as his touch itself. She'd never felt anything squicky when he touched her, no suffocating sense of lewd intentions on his part. Even when he'd pulled her onto the divan that night, and her knees had spread around his before she caught her balance, he hadn't attempted any groping or grinding. Given how utterly blitzed he was at the time, it was almost an insult that he hadn't tried *something*. The Toad Squad were quietly spreading a rumor that the professor was homosexual--from a "reliable source," of course. She smirked. *Oh, no, he's not*. Snape had not pushed himself against her, but she'd pressed close enough to know that he was prepared if the opportunity arose.

She had to catch her breath at that memory; it felt as though her insides had dropped out for an instant. She glanced at him again, and to her horror, caught his eye. Not an iota of recognition from him, but he must have seen it. *Good grief, it would be handy to be able to throw on a mask like his once in a while* Still, he couldn't know what she was thinking... until Saturday's lesson. Ugh.

He'd opened her like a curio cabinet, pulling on the threads of her mind and examining them like so many bright knick-knacks on dusty shelves. But he'd conscientiously avoided her dreams, and he'd sidestepped Viktor Krum, and even Ron. And Harry, she presently realized. Just like his hands, his mind touched her gently, respectfully, staying out of matters where conflict or sexuality would rear their awkward heads.

"Have you managed to produce a decent potion despite your distractions, Granger?" snarled Professor Snape, barely glancing into her cauldron.

She knew it was perfect; it looked exactly as the book described. He peered down at it skeptically, then cautiously dipped his index finger in the cauldron and brought a droplet to the tip of his tongue. Her insides fell out again.

I want you. "Any good, Professor?"

10: That Which Does Not Kill Me

Chapter 10 of 47

Having noticed Miss Granger's attentions, Snape chooses to take a drastic measure.

To a casual observer, Snape appeared to study the parchment in his hands with great interest, yet in reality, he barely registered that it was even there. He was too busy trying to stave off a growing sense of panic. He'd caught her eye several times in class the day before, and every glance felt like a blow from a sledgehammer. This could not be happening--it must not happen.

The Dark Lord was an expert at manipulation. He understood levers and pulleys--not the mechanical kind, but the type that move hearts, minds, and wills. Miss Granger had never been of interest to the Master. He had a vague notion of a smart female friend who helped Potter with lessons, but once he learned that the two shared no romantic attraction, he'd dismissed her out of hand. He wanted a lever with real teeth to apply against Potter.

But Lord Voldemort had always searched for someone, something, anything at all that Snape loved too much to sacrifice. It made the Dark Lord uneasy to have a free agent in the midst of his forces, someone with no wife or child or lover that could be used to assure that all orders would be followed.

Snape had never once let slip anything about Lily, and was still haunted occasionally by the notion that had the Master known about her, she might still be alive. He always forced himself at those moments to recall that if the Master *had* known about Lily, she was better off just as she was. It had been relatively easy to keep her concealed within his mind; he kept only a handful of secrets from the Dark Lord back in those days. And because she'd neither known of his attraction nor returned it, the Master never located any hook in her mind.

But Hermione... Heavens above! Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle--any of them could have seen her glancing at him in the classroom. They had only to mention that fact to their fathers, even casually, and Hermione would quickly become one of the Master's top priorities. If she were captured and interrogated, he would split her mind open as easily as seasoned firewood. He would find her memories, and he would *know*. He would have the lever he'd been seeking for nearly twenty years.

Hermione teetered on the brink of the very danger that she'd studied Occlumency to avoid. And for once, it wasn't Potter that had dragged her into it. It was Snape himself.

She didn't know how to protect herself from the Dark Lord.

But he knew.

* * * * *

"*Legilimens*." Snape plunged into her consciousness without his usual delicacy, quickly pilfering through deep memories, searching for specific content. There was Draco hexing her front teeth until they were as long as tusks, and he himself claiming to see no difference. Lupin and Black inside the Shrieking Shack; she had just begun to understand the truth of Pettigrew's crimes and Black's innocence when he appeared and nearly turned both of them over to the dementors. She was under the stadium during a Quidditch game, setting his robe on fire in the belief that he was trying to hex Potter's broom. He dragged up everything he could find in which he'd hurt or angered her, and there was certainly plenty of material to choose from.

Releasing her, Snape sat back in his chair with an unconcerned expression. "Do you enjoy reviewing those memories with me, Miss Granger?"

Her face was unreadable. "Not particularly," she finally mumbled in a shaky voice.

"Perhaps you ought to try to stop me."

"I *am* trying! It's like trying to stop the wind! There's nothing to push against--"

"Excuses!" he spat. "What *are* you, Granger, if not a living mind? Defend yourself for once. Use your will! *Legilimens!*"

Viktor Krum, giving her that first kiss. Snape could feel her indignation at the intrusion, so he deliberately went over the memory several more times. He found one of Viktor's letters, written on coarse parchment in a sharp script that belied the tender message it bore. Good grief, he'd really fallen for her. Who would have guessed a musclehead from Durmstrang could write so elegantly?

"And how did he make you feel, Granger?" He pulled back just far enough so that he could speak and she could hear, then sprang again inside her thoughts, tracing along the thread of memory like a spider devouring its tattered web. Her delight at being noticed at all was flavored with a delicious tartness that this was no ordinary schoolboy. The Champion of Durmstrang *and* a famous Quidditch player, and he'd fancied *her* when he could have chosen any of the prettiest or most popular girls in the school--or anywhere else, for that matter.

She'd been merely flattered at first to have caught the eye of a celebrity, but it quickly evolved beyond that. What Viktor liked most about her were the exact same traits that usually drove boys away. He wasn't put off by her intelligence. He didn't try to compete with her. He didn't complain that she studied all the time. He even understood her jokes! She had lain awake many nights marveling that such a man could even exist, someone who enjoyed her just because she was Hermione Granger.

Snape began to see the overlapping tendrils of a separate memory that shared certain elements with this one. If his theory was correct, then he'd find himself at the other end of it; this would be the very thread that the Dark Lord must never see. And if he was wrong... If he was wrong, he would be very hard pressed to disprove the nagging fear imposed upon him by his parents: that he was a creature so unworthy, so fundamentally flawed, that no woman could ever love him. Either way, he had to know, and either way, he dreaded to find out.

He summoned all the courage he had and leapt into the memory.

Snape reached across the desk and yanked her wand out of her hand, casting it to the floor behind him. "How interesting, Granger," he began coldly, walking slowly and deliberately around the desk. "I finally understand your game." He caught her wrists in his hands and stepped close, too close. Her eyes were wide, her mouth forming a stunned little "o" as she caught her breath.

He pinned her arms against her sides. "You've been throwing your mind open to me deliberately, haven't you? Don't lie to me. I saw it all!" he lashed fiercely as she sputtered in protest. "I was foolish not to see it all along. 'Come into my thoughts, and then I'll come into your bedroom, won't that be a fair trade?' Nothing short of pathetic; you're so desperate for attention that you whore out your own mind to attract it."

He stepped forward, putting his foot between her knees and driving his thigh between hers. "Well, you have my attention now, Granger. You didn't need to play all these games, or waste all these hours. You could simply have asked. You're pretty enough, I'd have you." Pulling her hands into the small of her back, his voice dropped to a contemptuous hiss as he pressed her against his body. "Tell me, Granger, do you hide your dreams because you fuck me every night in your sleep?"

The unprecedented vulgarity broke her shock and disbelief; she began to struggle soundlessly, wasting no energy on words, only escape. "Oh, Granger," he breathed mockingly into her ear, "more charades? I know what you want, little slut. There's no need to put on a token show of virtue. Or have you realized that I like a girl to fight me?"

Snape took both of her wrists into one hand and fumbled around on his desk for his wand. With a flick of it, he conjured a thin cord that wound itself around her forearms. Once she was bound, he leaned back, appraising her with a cruel smile and curling his fingers under either side of her collar.

He ripped her robe open with such force that she was lifted off the ground.

Snape could see it in her eyes; mere defiance was replaced by desperate horror, the indignant rage by a primal instinct for self-preservation. He sneered, pulling her head back by her long, thick hair as he reached into the front of his robes with his other hand. He was ready; he took hold of the waistband of her woolen tights and yanked downward--

--a sensation of falling through darkness--

Snape regarded her through half-lidded eyes from his seat across the desk. "Congratulations, Miss Granger," he said in a low, listless voice. "You have just performed Occlumency."

She leapt up from her chair, panting. She threw her arms before her, staring at them in shock as she found her wrists unbound, her wand still in her right hand. With the left, she suddenly clutched the front of her robe, patting it in disbelief as she realized it was still intact. "You!" she said with revulsion, then blinked and shook her head as she began to comprehend. "You... That was all..."

He set his elbow on the desk and slowly rested his chin in his hand. "All in your mind, Miss Granger," he said, watching the tip of his wand as he let it arc downward to clatter noisily against a stack of parchment.

"You bastard," she hissed.

Snape raised his brows thoughtfully, but kept his gaze on his wand, rolling it between his fingertips. "I don't deny it, young lady," he said softly. "But my hands are clean, and I stayed out of your dreams."

She stood for another moment, flexing her fingers into fists, too vexed to speak. Then she picked up a leaded glass paperweight on his desk and hurled it at him, turning to run from his office. He caught it before it crushed his heart.

11: Reckoning

Chapter 11 of 47

After such an intense confrontation, a debriefing is in order.

Snape was astounded when, at 11:00 that same night, the hearth behind his desk blazed up in red and green and she stepped out of the flames. For a moment, all he could do was stare.

"Don't give me that look," she said tersely. "I've sussed it out, all right? Stop gloating."

He raised his brows with faux umbrage and spread his fingertips over his chest in a questioning gesture. "Oh, shut up," she growled, though he hadn't said a word. "Just get in bed and let's get it over with for the night, shall we?"

Her question had evolved an entirely new context after the events of the evening. He knew she had meant it innocently, but the sight of her eyes flying wide open as her hand covered her mouth in dismay made him want to laugh. He'd begun to wonder of late if he'd lost the ability.

"Excuse me, Miss Granger, but may I speak first, here in my own office?" he said sardonically, though he was unable to keep a crooked smile from his face. She nodded, her hand still clamped over her mouth and her cheeks turning pink, a sight he found so droll that he was forced to avert his eyes to retain a stern composure.

"I..." He had looked up too soon, and a full-blown smile formed before he could cast his eyes back to the floor. *No more nonsense, Severus, you idiot!* "I'm not gloating, Miss Granger. I'm... pleased that you recognize the necessity of that distasteful scene earlier."

It was her turn to avert her eyes. "Yeah," she said somberly. "I think I do, anyway; that I needed to feel truly threatened in order to push you out of my mind."

"Precisely." The relief in his voice startled both of them. Snape cursed himself inwardly once again.

"Professor, may I ask you something?"

Please don't. "Of course."

She bit her lip, her brow furrowed with distress. "If I hadn't stopped you, would you have..." She was struggling for words, but there were none he could think of in the entire language that suited the occasion. He spoke up before she could find some that would do in approximation.

"No." He shook his head vehemently. "No. I wasn't going to--" he had to grit his teeth before he could say it "--rape you, Miss Granger. I planned to end it if I was able to open your robe. It seemed an appropriate stopping point; you would have some physical proof that what you believed had not literally happened.

"And as fate often decrees, that was the precise moment you showed a modicum of defense. So I pressed a bit further." He sighed. "Many people simply can't perform Occlumency, but I suspected you could do it if sufficiently provoked. And what do you know? Right again."

"I'm sorry I called you... that name," she said sincerely. "That was a horrible thing to say."

Now *that* was amusing. "Miss Granger, I have been called far worse in my time, and for much lesser grievances. If any man should assault you again in that fashion, I hope you will repeat it, both louder and sooner."

She nodded in grim agreement, then her brow furrowed again. "I rather shudder to think what you use to provoke Harry."

Wonderful--my favorite subject. "Potter has no shortage of such material."

Snape had muttered it without thinking and thus was quite surprised by the intensity of her reaction. Both hands flew to her mouth this time. "Harry's been raped?" she gasped, and he realized he'd misspoken.

"No, no, nothing like that--that was a mistaken implication. I meant that... your friend harbors a great many bitter memories," he admitted somewhat grudgingly. "I needn't look very hard to find topic after topic that he would prefer to hide from me." He sniffed cynically. "Finding something pleasant would be the real challenge; I virtually drown in rage every time I..." Snape stopped abruptly; it was not his place to disclose the contents of an acolyte's mind, even if it was The Little Prat.

Hermione's eyes widened in sympathy for her friend, but she too appeared to recognize that it was inappropriate to discuss such intimate matters. "I imagine he fights you tooth and nail."

"Indeed, Miss Granger." Sometimes the back of his hand still twinged where Potter had once cast a Stinging Hex.

She frowned thoughtfully. "You know, though, it's rather the opposite of our lessons. I had it too easy for so long, but perhaps he has it too hard. If all he's doing is fighting you instinctively because it's *you*, how can he learn the skill? If he learned to trust you--"

"I don't *wish* to earn his trust," he snapped, "any more than I want yours... or any other students', for that matter. One can learn as much from an enemy as a friend, and often more."

She bowed her head to hide an abashed grin, then looked up at him thoughtfully. "That's your style, isn't it? To teach by provocation. All this hard-nosed stuff, the insults, the belittling--they're mainly for show. To drive the knowledge home."

Snape's blood ran cold. He had relaxed too much, been too open; she was far too bright to miss the forest if given enough trees. He flattened his face into the neutral facade he wore in the presence of students, but it was already too late. She watched him do it, recognized it for the mask it was, knew that there was a soft white underbelly beneath it all. His pulse quickened; Severus Snape was afraid.

She raised her hands in confusion. "Professor... why did you withdraw like that? I'm not your enemy, you know."

His neck suddenly ached deeply. Snape closed his eyes and let his head fall forward. "That may be true, Miss Granger, but neither are you my friend."

"Why do you say such bitter things?"

She was indignant, not hurt; this was getting worse with every passing minute. He ought to strike her, curse her, or repeat the vignette he'd devised earlier, only in the physical realm this time. Terrify her, make her think he was mad, restore her hatred and disdain. Yet he had sworn he would never harm her. The only safe route he could identify was the truth.

Snape raised his head slowly, though his shoulders sagged in defeat. "Because, young lady," he said wearily, "you are not nearly proficient enough at Occlumency to be close to me."

She stared at him for a long time, then nodded slowly. "You have secrets. More than Harry, even." She looked down pensively with a smile so sharp and sweet and insightful it took his breath away.

"You once told me You-Know-Who wouldn't be questioning me any time soon." The corner of his mouth twitched into a fleeting smirk; she never forgot a thing. "If that's true, then I have plenty of time to improve." She cocked her head with an optimistic grin.

She held out her hand.

His own hand moved as if it had a will of its own, independent from the parts of him that had more sense, more reason, more fear. Once it found her slender fingers, however, every nerve in it burned to life and enthusiastically reported in.

She had offered it for a handshake, but in an unprecedented rejection of his near-Calvinist austerity, Severus Snape lowered his head and brought her delicate fingers to his lips, igniting them as well.

12: Abandon

Chapter 12 of 47

All I can say is: It's about freaking time, buddy. Apologies for the rather inopportune cliffhanger, but the chapter was getting too darn long and this was the only semi-decent break point.

The last time Snape had touched a woman, he was still a servant of the Dark Lord. It had not ended well, or begun well, or gone at all well in the middle for that matter. She was a prisoner, and he'd drawn the so-called "lucky" straw. He had primarily served the Master as a Potionist, but as one of Voldemort's favorites, he was always invited to participate in "interrogations" when the opportunity arose.

Snape was nineteen years old, the prisoner no more than twenty-five. He was given no questions to ask, and never even learned her name, but he performed an exemplary torture. By the time he uttered the *Kedavra* curse and dropped her lifeless body to the floor, she welcomed that death as a stroke of mercy. The Dark Lord had been so impressed by the proceedings that he'd used Snape as a teaching example, reliving the technique at least a dozen times with Legilimency. Every time, Snape had reinforced the barriers in his mind behind which he kept his self-loathing, for they were nearing the bursting point.

It took months before he could look at a woman without needing to vomit. To this day, the sight of certain facial expressions would transport him, momentarily but completely back to that night, and though he never gave in to the impulse to scream or clutch his chest, he broke out in chills and had to sit down every time. But he had confessed it all to Dumbledore and gained his own form of absolution through penance and unrelenting introspection. After five years, he could actually speak comfortably with female faculty and students, and in two more years he could even look them in the eye. But that was the extent of it; he lived an ascetic life, rarely leaving the castle except to go to his even more isolated house in Northern England.

Of course, none of that was on his mind at the moment. In fact, very little cognition was going on in Snape's head at all, the entire stock of his cranium being occupied with blissful sensation.

What had been intended as a chaste gentleman's kiss had rapidly become a sensual exploration. He hadn't meant it to happen, hadn't even guessed it would happen, but like the first split in the snow that signals the avalanche, the heat of his breath reflected from her hand started a reaction that brought down the entire hillside.

His eyes fell shut involuntarily; no time to waste on mere vision once real, solid touch had entered the scene. At first he couldn't bear to move. The sensation of soft skin against his lips made him feel as though something had sprung to life inside his chest and was running wild. Her skin smelled faintly of blackberries, or rather the scent of the blackberry plant in midsummer, the fruit not yet ripe, but the heat perfuming the air with a hint of the sweetness to come. He slowly turned his head, then followed her forefinger until the fingertip dangled between his teeth. He couldn't keep from nipping it gently, just for a taste of her.

Of all the weak, impulsive... Let go before you make an even greater fool of yourself! Snape jerked his head back, but did not look at her face. It was impossible now to pass this off as a polite peck-and-release gesture, and it was bad enough just to imagine the revulsion in her eyes.

"Don't stop."

A breathy whisper, spoken quickly, but she'd *said* it, it wasn't his imagination, though it was a dream come true. Her head was tipped back, her eyes closed. *Oh, Goddess, could she still feel that way?* She couldn't want him anymore! No, no, she was toying with him, some kind of vicious revenge for what he had done earlier that day. Wasn't she?

Another half-second and they both would fall out of "now" and back into the realm of "what if" and "what should."

Severus Snape placed his hands on either side of her face and fell into the kiss like a man stepping off a skyscraper.

It was so fast, so sudden, after so very, very long. He forced himself not to move his hands, not to take in all of her body at once, not to lift her hips up onto the desk and have her on the spot. But *her* hands... She was so bold, so proprietary. It was her nature that once she made a decision, she was single-mindedly direct about carrying it out. She gripped his forearms at first as though determined not to let him escape. As he surrendered voraciously to the kiss, she released him and let her hands wander almost absently over his arms, his chest. When Snape finally had to let her go and make some vital adjustments, she followed his hand down, sending a bolt of lightning through his spine. But it was only to guide his fingertips to her waist. He felt the band of those woolen tights through her robes, the same ones he had found in her mind earlier that day--

--*Oh, shit.*

What the bloody hell was he doing?! This was a student, *a student*, not to mention a girl half his age. A one-way ticket to disgrace and scandal and much, much worse if the Master discovered her. She was an adolescent, driven by an onslaught of raging hormones. He knew better than to tamper with the fires kindling within her, he was the only one at fault and the one who must stop, *now!*

He pulled back to arm's length, and she opened her eyes. For the briefest instant they were ablaze, but doused by his sudden withdrawal, they quickly widened with... shock? Pain? Regret? Whatever it was, it made his insides feel like tearing up the lease and finding a more hospitable body to live in.

"Oh, dear," she said, her voice much too deep and sultry to match her concerned frown. She looked up at him expectantly, waiting for an explanation of the sudden chill, or the sudden heat, or Merlin-only-knew, there were certainly plenty of current events that demanded to be explained. But when nothing was forthcoming, she took one step back and looked at him in sharp appraisal, then put her hands on her hips. "Severus Snape, you will NOT get cold feet *now.*"

He revelled in the sound of his name on her tongue, but ignored the rest of her statement. "Hermione. I know I don't need to explain the many reasons this is a mistake," he began, his voice numb and empty.

"I can think of at least six," she said wryly. "However, I refuse to accept them." She relaxed her posture and stepped close to him again. "In fact, I'm sure I can counter each and every one of them. You could save a lot of time and trouble by simply conceding." She smiled flirtatiously. "I'd much rather kiss you than argue right now."

Snape, a well-read man who took pride in his command of language, found himself at a complete loss for words. No matter where he began, his thoughts would invariably end somewhere around "impudent little whelp," or worse.

She cocked her head like a curious kitten, then spoke again. "Well. I don't think I've ever seen you speechless before."

"Miss Granger, may I--" Her hand suddenly clamped over his lips, and her glare alone told him that he had not chosen the best tactic.

"Don't you dare," she said firmly, pulling her hand from his mouth only after his own eyes had widened in chagrin. "No. No denial, no scheming, and no fabricating, Severus. I won't stand for it. If you need time to compose your thoughts, that's fine, but I want the truth when you're ready."

"The truth," he muttered grudgingly. "They say the truth is so fragile, it must be guarded by layers of lies."

"Hush. Think of what you want to say to me."

I love you. He pulled her gently to his chest to breathe her in while he calmed the maelstrom in his heart. This *was* insane, it was absolutely forbidden, it could mean her death, for heaven's sake, and yet Mother of Merlin, he'd seen it himself inside her mind, she *desired him*. Bloody hell, what difference did that make, she was too young to grant consent. No, there was only one thing for it, no matter how he felt, how she felt...

Talking of which, how can these creatures be so bloody soft? She began to nuzzle his chest with her cheek, which had a rather disruptive effect on his concentration. "I can hear your heart," she said quietly.

"I'm sure you can," he mused aloud. "It seems to have asserted itself without consulting the rest of me."

She smirked. "Oh, I think there's a bit of consensus." There was a bold glint in her eye. "Come here, Severus." He started to shake his head, to back away, but good grief, she was so soft and close, pulling gently and irresistibly on his shoulders to bring his mouth down to hers.

13: Sensibility

Chapter 13 of 47

When caroming like a Jamaican bobsled out of control, common sense demands the application of brakes.

By the time he returned to his senses, Snape had sunk to his knees; she was in his lap, her arms and legs encircling him tightly. Both of them were breathless. "Hermione!" he said in genuine alarm. "... I can't... Merlin's ghost, no matter what, we're moving too fast!"

For once, she acquiesced, averting her eyes and nodding. "All right. I can see that." She peeked up at him demurely, untangled herself, and sat crosslegged on the floor before him, holding out her hands. He knew he should refuse to take them, but he couldn't. It would be a denial, and she would call him out for it. Snape sighed.

"Hermione. Will you at least concede that there are laws--that you're too young?" She couldn't possibly argue with that, it was an incontrovertable fact.

She caressed his left hand, and the bit of his wrist that protruded from the cuff of his shirt. In an icy voice, however, she presently asked, "If I were to push this sleeve up, what would I find?"

That killed the mood. He jerked both hands away from her furiously. "You know damn well what you'd find. How dare you?"

She glared at him. "How dare *you* hide from me behind the law?"

It had been a while since the two of them had argued. Snape had forgotten how sharp she was. He folded his arms, scowling, but he couldn't think of any more civilized riposte than "Touche'." To his great surprise, she sighed heavily and dropped her arms into her lap, her head bowed as if in defeat.

"Severus," she finally said softly, without looking up. "I don't want to argue." Her tone became sardonic, almost bitter. "Student and professor; adult and minor; those are taboo to keep the strong from taking unfair advantage of the weak. But compare those to Legilimens and, well, 'Legilimensee...' Talk about an imbalance of power! I'm laid open like a parchment to you, while you're a closed book."

Snape's chest tightened uncomfortably as words like "cad" and "opportunist" began to pop unbidden into his thoughts. He opened his mouth to speak, but she waved her hand before her in a slashing motion for silence.

"Let me finish," she said sharply, meeting his gaze at last. "I walked into that *knowingly*. I asked you to engage me in that way. I seem to recall you even warning me that there might be consequences of being treated as your peer." She paused, her lips flat, caught somewhere between smile and scowl. "So you'll have to excuse my cynicism about our ages, or our student-teacher relationship beyond that door. We've rather stepped so far beyond those, they're a bit of a joke at this point."

As she fell silent again, Snape realized that the stone floor was killing his knees. Historically, he had tolerated that sort of pain for Voldemort, and the irony made him smirk despite the circumstances. He shifted his weight to sit crosslegged like Hermione, thinking this was perhaps just as well; they'd each have to unfold before they could leap at the other, and at this point, any impediment to *that* was a wise idea.

"I concede to your impeccable logic," he said without sarcasm. "I am quite concerned, however, that in all three capacities you've mentioned, I'm the party with the upper hand."

That brought a melancholy smile to her face. "You're not coercing me, Severus. I know what you've seen with Legilimency. You know what you've seen." She edged closer to him. "I think your strength is in your intellect, not your emotions. You know your mind can't be cheated, but your heart can. Right now you look like a little boy. Are you afraid I'm going to break your heart?"

He took one of her hands and pressed it firmly against his lips, just for a moment, to feel how real and solid it was. "Young lady... my heart has been forged of the hardest, coldest steel over many years; whether it can be broken remains to be seen."

"How cavalier," she said, clearly unimpressed.

He gritted his teeth. "You ask why I'm afraid? I have a better question: Why aren't you afraid?" Snape uneasily fingered the button on the cuff of his left sleeve, then resolutely twisted it open. He fixed her with his gaze as he pushed the fabric up along his forearm with shaking hands. Once his shirt and robe had been tucked up past the elbow, he held out his arm. She couldn't possibly miss the Dark Mark displayed before her, but Snape couldn't bear to look at it himself, nor demand that she do so. He simply waited until she gave in to the impulse and glanced downward; the painful recognition in her eyes felt a bit like a whaling harpoon had just landed in his stomach.

"You know what I am, Hermione," he said as unapologetically as he could manage. "There are far more than six reasons for you to step into the Floo and never return. I told you, you aren't strong enough for my intimacy. I have terrible enemies, and even more terrible allies. I live on the edge of a knife, one that could cut you down in a thousand different ways." He cringed internally, suddenly envisioning her in the Dark Lord's grasp. "Anyone could betray you to him--anyone who noticed a single tender glance between us. He has searched, Hermione, searched for years for someone whom I won't sacrifice. If he suspected you, and saw what is in your mind..." His throat tightened and he winced again at the image that pierced his thoughts.

She started to speak, but it was his turn to demand silence. "This Mark, it's not just a disfigurement. It links me to him. Only down here, under the castle, am I safe from prying eyes. The Dark Lord is a powerful Legilimens, but he cannot penetrate the stones and enchantments that surround us. He can reach Potter because they, too, are linked--by that scar--and up in the Tower, the magic is weaker, the stones thinner. If The Little... if your friend had allowed himself to be sorted into Slytherin where he belongs, the stones could have protected him. I could have protected him." *Lucius might have protected him. With Potter beside us, Lucius and I might have already staged the coup to end all this madness.*

Snape's voice had trailed off, but he realized it should have done so about five minutes earlier. "I should modify your memory right now, Hermione. Erase all of this, except perhaps that last lesson. Letting you believe you'd been violated would be the greatest gift I could give you. The Dark Lord wouldn't spare you a second glance if he thought you were 'used goods' that I had already discarded." Without thinking about what he was doing, he began patting down the pockets of his robe for his wand.

She leapt to her feet, her own wand in hand. "You will NOT!" she shouted. "Don't even *consider* it! *Expelliarmus!*" To both their surprise, his wand launched itself from his desk along a parabolic arc into the fireplace, making a loud plinking sound as it hit the andiron. Hermione's eyes flew wide open in alarm. "*Accio!*" she gasped immediately and the wand flew to her, a tiny flame in its center snuffing out in the rush of air.

Snape raised his brows. "Nicely done. You needn't say 'accio' aloud, either, although you're fortunate that the entire fire didn't hurl itself into your hand."

"I've been practicing," she said distractedly, staring fearfully at the wand, apparently realizing the same fact about the fire. But presently she turned back to him, her face resolute and firm. "Severus! You must never say that again. Ever! I'll break it right now unless you swear you'll never tamper with my memory like that." She took the ends of his wand in her hands and he knew she would do it. And sitting this way, she'd have time to snap it before he could get up from the floor and snatch it from her. *Oh, bloody hell.*

"What would you have me do?" Snape snarled. "Doom you to torture and death? Do you think I could stand that, Hermione?"

"There are other ways! Don't weaken me, strengthen me! Teach me Occlumency! You know that I can do it now. I'll double my efforts! I'll learn to glaze my eyes the way you do, to keep my feelings for you hidden! Do you think I could stand to lose you now, when it's just beginning to bloom?"

Having recently declared that his heart was unbreakable, Snape felt almost foolish as he felt it shatter like a crystal glass struck by just the right harmonic.

"Hermione," he eventually managed to croak, "how can you possibly want me like this?"

She furrowed her brow briefly, then gave him an angelic smile. "I believe you're a good man, Severus."

"You're wrong."

14: Snape's Worst Week

Chapter 14 of 47

Corresponding strongly to a certain week in OOTP, at the timing of a chapter with the same title...

Sunday night was torture. She insisted on coming to read, even though he swore up and down that any conventional debt between them was null and void at this point. "But I *like* reading to you!" she'd protested, and he'd melted like a snowflake on a stove. Cursed girl, she could undo all his hard-wrought plans with a sparkling smile--she was almost as bad as Albus.

"Ned lowered one foot gingerly into the water. 'This water got dirt in it,' he said. 'If there's one thing I hates, it's dirt betwixt my nekkid toes.'"

Granted, as torture went, this was a rather lovely sort, but agonizing nonetheless. Not even Faulkner could put Snape to sleep, not while he knew she was sitting just beyond arm's reach. He watched her shadow play on the curtain in the firelight. They had agreed, in a calm, intellectual discussion, that for sanity's sake they must keep their distance, at least until she could exert some control at Occlumency. A fine, intelligent, reasonable decision, which grated unendingly on his nerves whenever he saw her (and quite frequently when she was nowhere near, as well).

On Monday she had her meeting with her "Dumbledore's Army." He'd seen the meetings in her mind and admired her for coming up with the idea, even if they did glorify The Little Prat. Umbridge was not preparing these people for the horrors that awaited in dark places, and as far as Snape was concerned, she belonged in Azkaban for it. It was practically premeditated murder, particularly for the seventh-year students who would be leaving the school in only a few weeks. But then again, the entire Ministry was guilty of the same denial, and Snape knew he dared not speak up. If he became a target of the Ministry's attention, his past would turn any inquiry into a deluge, and many, many important plans would fall apart.

The DA meeting had gone horribly wrong. The "Toad Squad" (now with the officious title of "Inquisitorial Squad") had raided the meeting and Albus had, in his usual spectacular fashion, absorbed all of the blame and disappeared. Snape cursed inwardly for not keeping a closer eye on his House; most of the Toadies (Inquisitoadies?) were Slytherins, and he should have known about their plans. Lucius's boy had been in charge, of all things. Draco had shifted his focus to Umbridge, hoping to flatter his way into Ministry channels. Snape shook his head. *Draco, Draco, Draco... You little idiot, you should resolve to stick with the Dark Lord if you really want to get anywhere. You have to focus your ambition, not spread it around. But perhaps you ultimately have more sense than any of us, lad.* Snape had watched Draco grow up, the son of his best friend, and he couldn't help but like the boy, even if he was a bit of a twerp.

Hermione had been devastated and had not even come to read that night (undoubtedly terrified that she would be dragged into Umbridge's investigation). That alone was cause enough for Snape to despise Umbridge even further. Then on top of it all, Umbridge had promoted herself to Headmaster. This job was beginning to lose all of its attraction. If Albus didn't find some way to restore Hogwarts back into his control by the fall term, Snape reckoned he might have to move on. Perhaps there was an American school in need of a Potions professor, one which might even have room for a transfer student...

On Tuesday, the Weasley twins created a rather spectacular fireworks spell that had, to Snape's private delight, completely undermined Umbridge's authority on her very

first day as the self-declared Headmistress. Those boys drove him crazy, but he had to admit (once they directed their hijinks at someone else) they did work some fine magic. Unfortunately, Snape's years in the Dark Lord's service had left him a bit *sensitive* to explosive sounds and sudden flares of green or red light. Walking around in the corridors was starting to feel like a perpetual ambush, and the last thing he needed right now was more pointless aggravation. To make matters worse, a glowing pink piglet with wings of silver sparks had flapped down his chimney and taken up residence in his private chamber and he hadn't yet managed to dispell the damn thing. He reminded himself yet again to bring a spray bottle back from the Potions laboratory--the Weasleys might make their fireworks Impervious to typical disenchantments, but water generally won over fire.

Wednesday had been the worst. The Little Prat was late for his lesson, as usual, and they'd just been getting started when Draco had burst in with the news that the missing Montague had finally shown up. As Head of House, Snape had to attend to the young man, but he made a terrible, terrible mistake. The magical fireworks in the hallways, and the figurative ones in his heart, must have strained him more than he'd realized for him to be so utterly careless: he had left Potter alone in his office. And Potter, being The Little Prat, had promptly stuck his nose where it didn't belong.

When Snape found Potter bent over the Pensieve, he reflexively moved in to kill him. Not out of anger, but because the memories he'd gathered and placed in that bowl were the crux to all of his most secret plans. Snape had automatically picked up the brass stiletto from its hiding place on the shelf before his cortex reminded his hindbrain that most of this knowledge had been set aside in order to *save* Potter's life. Ramming the long, narrow blade into the base of The Prat's skull would rather defeat the entire purpose.

Only then did rage swell up within him. *How DARE he?* Snape started to rip the little bastard from the Pensieve, but realized he'd better find out which memory Potter was snooping in. *Morgan le Fay. THAT one.* It could have been worse; he wasn't sure what he would do if Potter had poked into the plans. Nonetheless, Snape had suffered more than he could stand on account of the incident in question, and the fact that Potter had now observed it made him consider the stiletto again. He forced himself to toss it away before yanking Potter back into the office.

Snape was a master at controlling anger and fear, but perhaps it was all the strain of late, or perhaps it was just because he *could*--it didn't matter if Potter hated him even more--he allowed his control to lapse. "So." He was speechless, though, having been too busy resolving not to pith the boy like a bullfrog for dissection to compose a comment. "So... been enjoying yourself, Potter?"

At least the little bastard had the sense to be frightened. It was a shame that the Cruciatius Curse was as out of the question as murder. Looking into Potter's eyes and seeing the hint of *pity* building behind them only fueled his fury; Snape felt like ripping Potter's throat out with his teeth.

"Amusing man, your father, wasn't he?" Snape didn't even realize how hard he was gripping Potter's arm until the boy's whole body began to shake. He suddenly recalled Hermione's eyes as he'd crushed her shoulder. He had been in perfect control of himself that night and not damaged her, but this time... Snape didn't need the stiletto, he could kill Potter with his bare hands. He had to let go before he made a terrible mistake. Snape threw the little shit to the floor with all his might.

That memory... The events of that day were the spark that had ultimately burned him alive, though the skull-and-serpent on his arm was the only physical evidence of the damage. That incident had started the chain of events that ended in his pledge of service to the Dark Lord. Oh, he'd been well on his way long before his fifth year at Hogwarts, he couldn't deny that, but until that day there had still been a *chance*--he still had hope that there was a place for him in the world of sunlight, of laughter, of the living. But then he found himself hanging in mid-air, hexed with one of the spells *he'd invented*, by two young men who already had wealth and good looks and all the privileges those brought. They'd never gone hungry, or worn clothing pilfered from a washing-line, or tried to read cast-off books that were rotten with mildew. They had all the world laid before them, but they could find no better way to alleviate their boredom than to make him their *toy*.

And then Lily, whom he'd watched from afar since the first day in Potions, rose to his defense *but smirked at the sight of his ragged underwear.* A girl whose seemingly kind heart had made him reconsider his interest in Lord Voldemort, stood there and regarded the stigma of his poverty and misery with smug amusement--as though he had wanted or chosen or deserved that fate. As though it were anything other than the luck of the draw that Severus had been born a Snape instead of a Potter or a Black.

Some light inside his heart had finally extinguished at that moment, not to be rekindled until Albus Dumbledore had shown him the power of forgiveness (although the poisonous green light the Dark Lord favored had provided a handy substitute for several years). The turning point that had made his life an ongoing hell... and now The Prat had witnessed it firsthand. One retelling, and it would haunt him in jeering whispers for years to come. That thought was more than Snape could stand.

"You will not repeat what you saw to anybody!"

Damn you! Can't you be content that the very sight of you drives a spike through my ribs? Lily was dead and gone before the boy had ever known her, but Snape had loved her. And killed her. *I led him to her without even knowing it, and you have her eyes, and you're the only one that can put a stop to him, my only goddamn hope!* Get out."

You slippery little shit, you push past my defenses just to show that you can, just as I brought that cursed Prophecy to the Master because I could. "Get out!"

If you push hard enough to find my Hermione, the Dark Lord will surely spot her in your mind! I don't want to see you in this office ever again!"

Once more, the image burst intrusively into his consciousness, of Hermione kneeling at the feet of Lord Voldemort, this time a sacrifice to Potter's arrogance. Snape picked up the nearest object in a fury and threw it at The Prat. Shards of glass and dead cockroaches flew everywhere.

Damn you, Potter! You couldn't show me even a modicum of respect, could you? Now I have to break my word to Albus. Snape was panting in his fury, and smashed another jar filled with shrivelled salamander tails before he mastered his anger again. Raising his head high, he forced himself to assume his customary facade of cold indifference.

I will keep my promise to Hermione.

Friday night marked the beginning of the spring holidays, which were generally welcomed by both students and faculty, but not for the Potions Master. During his last class, his left forearm began to tingle, fairly innocuously at first, but quickly escalating into frank pain. Snape sighed. It took only four days for the Dark Lord to learn of Dumbledore's expulsion from Hogwarts. *At least I hope that's the reason for this Summoning.*

Fortunately, Snape was right again. He Apparated to the designated meeting place and sang like a bird, telling Voldemort everything he knew with uncharacteristic willingness. It was the first time in nearly twenty years that he was able to deliver a report consisting solely of the truth (and the whole truth, at that), since this matter was entirely between Dumbledore and the Ministry. In fact, it felt so unnatural to speak candidly that Snape interjected a few cautious (and untraceable) lies regarding his personal efforts to undermine Dumbledore. A few fibs here and there would ensure the proper sort of autonomic responses that Voldemort had learned to expect during interviews with Snape.

He had given up his tale a little too eagerly, though, and Voldemort was always suspicious of changes. By the time the Dark Lord released him from Legilimency, Snape was breathless and shivering from the violation of his mind. But alive, and therefore his secrets remained safe. He dropped to one knee to kiss the hem of the Master's cloak, and returned to Hogwarts as quickly as he could.

He was still trembling when he arrived in his dungeon, despite Disapparating at the far end of Hogsmeade to take a long, calming walk home. It was nearly 3:00 in the morning. He swept through his office in pitch darkness, pulling off his cloak and robes before even reaching his bedchamber. His shirt was clammy with sweat and sticking to his back unpleasantly. When that pink and silver piglet flapped up to greet him, he yanked off the shirt without even unbuttoning it and smothered the damned thing at last.

"Severus?"

15: Silver Linings

Chapter 15 of 47

Professor Snape has a bit of explaining to do.

The fact that Snape did not jump entirely out of his own skin is proof that such a feat is impossible, for if it could be done, he would certainly have accomplished it at that moment.

"Mother of Merlin!" he bellowed.

Hermione's voice immediately took on its normal tone, unlike the low, groggy mumble with which she had uttered his name. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to startle you!" He heard a few light thumps and clatters, then she lit her wand, having obviously just retrieved it from his nightstand. "I came down to read, and when you weren't here, I thought I'd just wait." She pointed the beam of light at her own face, as if to prove it was only her, as if anyone besides the two of them ever entered this room. "I had a nice fire going when I lay down for a minute... My goodness, it must be very late!" Now the beam swung out to find him, wild-eyed, panting, and half undressed.

Snape was blinded by the thin beam of wandlight, but he could *hear* the smile spread across her face. "Not one word, Hermione. Not one." He turned his back coldly and began patting around (with a trace of panic) for that cursed bathrobe.

He heard the rustling of bedclothes *Merciful Goddess, she's IN MY BED!* and pulled on his nightshirt as she stoked the fire ablaze again. She turned back from the hearth with a warm, sleepy smile and endearingly squashed, lopsided hair.

"Don't be angry, Severus, please," she said. "I'm sorry I startled you so. I should have left, but really, I thought you'd show up any minute. I just fell asleep."

As if I can hold a grudge when you look at me like that. "Hermione... it's late, you shouldn't be here. Now that you have a fire, you should go."

She was looking at him as if mesmerized, giving him a disconcerting feeling that something very strange was going on immediately behind him. "I've never seen you wear anything but black before," she said softly.

The nightshirt. It had once been a beautiful garment, made of unbleached linen. Despite his self-denial, Snape had always loved fine things, and had indulged in the purchase of this nightshirt when he received his first pay from Hogwarts--that is, as a professor, not a spy masquerading as a professor. He'd justified the expenditure by reasoning that he would spend a third of his life wearing it and it was made to last, and it had. Unfortunately, fifteen years of constant use had left it a bit threadbare and misshapen, but it was certainly comfortable--and it was most certainly *not* black.

Snape felt a bit sheepish. "Believe me, I looked for a black one," he said. "It was either this or stripes." Men's fashions were unfathomable to him.

"You look incredible," she said, in a tone that brooked no argument.

My love... "No. Don't speak of that. Get back to your tower."

Hermione wrinkled her nose disapprovingly. "Spoken like a king banishing the queen for another year."

She stepped toward him slowly, giving him ample time to realize precisely what she had in mind, and that he ought to put a stop to it immediately... and that his vocal cords appeared to be in active rebellion as she was still coming closer and he could say nothing, *nothing*. She was halfway across the room already. Snape was reminded (out of nowhere) of Xeno's Paradox: that the distance between two points can be cut in half, and halved again and again, and so on infinitely; therefore it was impossible to move the points together as there was always another half-step to take. It was a curious intellectual distraction, and it gave him something guiltless to ponder as she came up and settled against his body, proving decisively that Xeno was all wet.

"Hermione," he whispered, brushing a great many errant curls from the top of her head, to no avail. Like the rest of her, her hair tended to resume whatever course it had decided upon no matter how he might try to intervene. Unlike his stiff, heavy robes, the thin nightshirt did not dull the contours of her face against his chest, nor, he realized with a start, her perceptions of his body. And, cursedly fearless as she was, she took immediate advantage of that fact, her hands tracing unpredictable paths over his back and ribs.

"Hermione!" Snape said sharply, taking half a step back from her. "Don't do this. Not tonight. You have no idea..."

She fixed him with a withering glare. "Oh, come now. What's the matter? It's late, but it's the holidays!"

He closed his eyes, shaking his head in frustration. "I am aware it is the holidays. I am even aware that your roommates have gone home and therefore you won't be missed, no matter how late you return to your room." *Or even if you failed to return... stop it already, you lecherous imbecile.* "Hermione, you have no idea where I was tonight. This is not the time."

He felt sudden tension snap throughout her entire body, which was not unpleasant in the slightest, but fortunately(?) she reared back to look him in the eye. "Well?" she demanded.

Stepped into that one all on my own, didn't I? Snape sighed. "I believe it's customary at such times to give you three guesses." She responded with an even sharper glare, making him sigh again. She made no protest as he extracted himself and sank wearily into the armchair by the fire, resting his forehead in his hand.

"I was Summoned tonight by the Dark Lord. I was with him some nine hours. You will pardon me for being a bit... disheveled."

He could sense her wide, fearful eyes on him, but did not look at her. He wasn't certain how she would react to the stark reality of his subjugation to the Master, but if there were ever a time for her to flee in rage or horror, it would be this moment. Snape waited silently for her reaction. He had no other choice. When she finally cleared her throat, he braced himself for the worst.

"Did he hurt you?"

Snape was too exhausted and drained from the events of the evening to hide his shock, and bolted upright in the chair. "No," he responded automatically to her question, then received another surprise: she launched herself across the room and into the chair in what looked like a single step, yanking him so tightly into her arms that he had a

sudden insight into the last earthly sensations of that firework piglet.

She was crying. He was dumbfounded. "Hermione... dear girl... hush now," he stammered, along with any other endearments he could come up with, stroking her back lightly as his mind reeled. Snape had counted on anger, fear, or disgust; the best reaction he dared hope for was cold anxiety regarding whether the Dark Lord had learned about her. The notion that she would be worried about *him* had never entered his imagination. He had never seen such a thing before. *Well, not true; Albus worries too... but not like this.*

He held and soothed her long after her tears were spent, until she began to melt against him like a pat of butter and her breathing slowed and quieted. *My love.* How many nights had he fallen asleep in this armchair, staring at a good fire until his eyes could no longer stay open? There was nothing (*well, perhaps something... down, boy!*) he'd rather do at this moment than drift off before the fire, curled up cozily with a good Hermione.

But only tonight. Tomorrow he would depart for the holidays to his house on Spinner's End. Snape had spent a lot of time pondering the fact that Hermione's roommates were gone for the spring break. He was absolutely certain now that she had done the same. If he had any hope of sticking to his decision about waiting until she learned Occlumency, a retreat was not only in order, but rigidly in demand.

16: Fever

Chapter 16 of 47

Returning from the holidays heralds the onset of spring, and a sudden cooling of the climate.

A Thursday in May. Blossoms and flowers tentatively poke their bright little noses into the brisk air. The days finally seem the right length again, no longer dark during breakfast or right after dinner. The mating chirps of birds, squirrels, and thestrals echo hopefully off the stones of the castle. Spring is in the air everywhere, except, perhaps, the dungeons.

Underground, they are insulated from both the warmth of the sun and the bitterness of the wind. Like a babe in the womb, their temperature remains constant; it is that of the Earth surrounding them, which protectively absorbs the petty influences of transient surface phenomena. Things remain unchanged deep underground, save for the epochal progress of erosion and sedimentation. And yet sometimes the Earth itself demands a change; with shocking swift violence a volcano or quake will turn flat land into mountains or valleys, exposing that which was long buried to the whirlwind of time on the fleeting human scale.

Thursday morning. Double potions today with the fifth-years. She had not come by his room since he returned from the spring holidays, not to read, not to learn Occlumency. He had expected her to be disappointed. He accepted that she might feel spurned or rejected and react with anger. He knew she might not behave rationally. She might even be spiteful, though that would be more characteristic of a Slytherin than a Gryffindor. He resigned himself to all of these facts as he stepped off the Hogwarts grounds that morning. He pondered them for many hours as he stared, sleepless, at the sleet falling outside his window onto the crumbling rooftops of the old mill town. He steeled himself for the inevitable when the holiday ended and he quietly returned to the castle.

All for nothing. The blow never fell, the anger never raged, the accusations never flew. She was utterly indifferent, ignoring him as though they'd launched back through time to an earlier year, when he was nothing to her but an unkind, unfair professor whom she stopped trying to impress because he made it clear that she would never succeed.

Snape felt as though his insides were being scooped out with the jagged edge of a broken bottle.

Damn her! Why should he care? He was insane to imagine that there was anything real between them. She had the attentions of her fawning redhead admirer, her famous athlete, her bloody Boy Who Lived. She had no need in her life for a man twice her age, an unremarkable man with no wealth, no charm, no looks, no grace. It was pathetic that he would indulge himself in such an asinine fantasy. She wanted to learn Occlumency, and she got what she wanted; she was done now. Done with any adolescent pipe dreams about the alleged glamor of taking an older lover, done with her first grand experiment at using her body instead of her mind to obtain what she wanted. She was done with *him*.

He could almost feel it carving the flesh from between his ribs, burrowing like a bullet in slow motion toward his heart.

He didn't need her. He'd got along just fine before he ever met her, thank you very much. It had been a lie from the beginning, and he ought to laugh at himself for buying into it so completely. *Idiot!* Had a "lady" from your own House plied you with those transparent lines, you would have laughed her out of your office, but you were fool enough to trust her just because she was bright and looked you in the eye when she spoke. She obviously knew how to fake sincerity better than anyone in the dungeons. How she must be laughing at you, and rightfully so; she emerged the victor on all fronts. You ought to go shake her hand and congratulate her. Show your respect for an excellent player. She'll go far in the circles you inhabit--accept defeat graciously and she may pull you along with her, and you can bide your time for an icy revenge.

The problem, of course, was that he would die of grief before that time could pass.

He stopped going to the Great Hall. The smell of food was nauseating enough, to say nothing of the sight of it. A few well-meaning but irritating house-elves began to leave bread and scones on his nightstand. Apparently they noticed his prolonged absence from the staff table and took it upon themselves to make sure he stayed fed. He tossed the first few into the fireplace, but the food's disappearance only encouraged them to continue their deliveries. Once he started simply leaving the offerings where they were placed, the cursed creatures began trying other foods, undoubtedly hoping to find something to appeal to him. When they left a bowl of blackberries, he went to the kitchens and had a few choice words with the entire group.

Sleep was impossible. Snape sat up later and later every night forcing himself to read something, anything that would banish her from his thoughts for a few hours. It didn't work very well, but at least it strained his eyes to the point where it felt more comfortable to close them and envision her than to leave them open. Getting them to stay closed was half the battle, after all.

He wanted to protect her from the Dark Lord; now she was certainly safe. That was at least a bit comforting, wasn't it? Think of it as a noble self-sacrifice. Your heart for her life. If you really cared about her, you selfish bastard, you'd be glad to know she had abandoned such a dangerous path. It was unconscionable that you entertained the notion of dragging her down with you in the first place! This is your line to walk, not hers. She belongs in the sunshine and fresh air, among the blossoms, among the living. She came to her senses and now it's your turn. Let her go.

Students were coming into the classroom. You know she's there; don't look at her. It's less than two hours. You can do anything for two hours. You could hold your hand over a candle for two hours if you had to. Avoiding her gaze is much easier than that. Downright simple. Concentrate. You really ought to eat something, the ketogenesis is making you weak. *Except I daren't leave the classroom while that numbskull Longbottom has even a single combustible substance within arms' length* Fine, then. Face the

blackboard. Mark some essays. Torture Potter with an impromptu grilling. If you insist on prolonging your pathetic life another day, then by Jove, make it worthwhile. And look, now it's only another hour to go.

The internal monologue raged on and on, and the sensation of being delicately sliced open would strike him every time her voice rose above the din of the classroom, but he made it through another Thursday, another Double Potions. Each one felt worse than the one before, each one left him more drained, more pale, but he could do this. There were only a few more weeks left in the term, and some of those would be taken up with O.W.L.s; all he had to do was endure a few more classes and he could announce his resignation. Umbridge was a perfect excuse--everyone would believe he had left because he despised her. And the Dark Lord surely would not be offended. With Dumbledore gone, Snape was not much use as a spy at Hogwarts.

He could make it until then. He had made it through today, and nearly everyone had left the room, he had but a few more seconds to endure and he would be free of her until Double Potions on Monday...

"Professor, may I have a word?"

17: Truth

Chapter 17 of 47

When things go wrong, it's so easy to make conjectures to explain what happened. But those may have nothing to do with reality. Two headstrong people with a bit of paranoia are about to get a reality check.

Compose yourself! Take your time turning around. Better to pretend she's beneath your notice anyway. Snape had many years' practice erasing the evidence of his internal processes from the surface. By the time he set his quill carefully in its cup and faced her, his eyes were chiseled granite, his face expressionless. "What is it, Miss Granger?"

He avoided her eyes, concentrating on the flask she was holding. "It didn't come out quite the way the book said, Professor." He forced himself to ignore the strain in her voice and concentrate on the content alone.

"I do have eyes, Miss Granger," he said curtly. The potion was too yellow; it should be clear, with perhaps the palest hint of green. For a few seconds, his curiosity as a scientist actually trumped the overwhelming misery that had governed his life for weeks now. Snape had seen many failed attempts at this (and every) potion, but never before had this particular result crossed his desk. He was mystified.

"Give it," he snapped brusquely, holding his hand flat. He wanted no nonsense of "accidentally" brushing against her fingertips. It should have cooled by now but it was quite warm. Snape removed the ground glass stopper and fanned his hand above the neck of the flask, holding it well away from himself; there was no telling what was in there, and he didn't want a face full of unknown vapors. A whiff would do until he was sure it was safe. It smelled right, mostly, but no, there was an off note there, too. He knew by heart the maxim that an unknown potion should be considered dangerous until proven otherwise, so he carefully replaced the stopper and set the flask gently on his desk.

"You must have heated it too long," he began, but he knew that was not the case. It would be dark green and tarry if overcooked. A perfect example sat on his desk already, labeled "N. Longbottom."

"I stopped heating it before I added the saffron," she said. "It just never cooled. I even fanned it with my book."

"Perhaps the saffron was contaminated." That might explain the persistent yellow color as well as the warmth.

"It was the same as everyone else's," she said, almost pleadingly.

"I don't know what you did wrong, Miss Granger," he growled at last. "I have never seen this product before. I admit to a bit of curiosity as to what you've concocted here. If I can identify it or replicate it, I will inform you." *Now leave, damn you, I've done everything I must as your professor, and I can't keep staring at this bottle forever.*

She turned away and he nearly sighed audibly in relief. He could see it coming, though; she was dragging her feet, and her back was bent with tension. She had something to say. He began to count silently.

By eight she stopped but did not whirl around, only turned her head to the side. "You know, you might have extended the courtesy to tell me that you moved on, instead of just disappearing," she said over her shoulder, then headed purposefully toward the exit.

"I... What?" *Let her go, fool.* "Wait. Hermione, stop." This, too, was a mystery, far more intriguing than the contents of that flask. She halted, but did not turn around, nor did she offer any more insight into her thoughts. *Not here in the classroom, are you mad? Anyone might walk in!* "Please." His voice became a desperate whisper. "Tell me."

"You tell me!" she snapped, facing him again. "You're the one that walked away without so much as a farewell." Her eyes burned into him with accusation, yet she must have seen how utterly baffled he was, for they softened slightly and she continued. "That morning. I woke up in your room. You were gone. There wasn't even a note. You were just *gone*. Right after *he'd* summoned you the night before."

She replayed the memory behind unfocused eyes. "At first I thought maybe you'd gone to get breakfast. I sat around and made up a study plan for over the holidays, just to pass the time. Then I made one up for Harry. By the time I finished one for Ron, too, I *knew* something was wrong. I thought maybe he took you again, maybe you would come back hurt or dying and you'd be all alone down here, no one would even know. And if I left, I knew I couldn't return again until late that night."

She stifled a sob, but her voice became more and more panicked. "I didn't know what to do! What if someone saw me walk out of your office? But I didn't know when the common room would be clear so I could use the Floo. I knew Harry and Ron would start wondering where I was. I had to go, I had to stay, I couldn't do either...I was scared to death!

"I finally got out by peeking into other Floos until I found an empty room--Professor Sinistra's office. I got back to the Tower and told everyone I'd been studying all morning, they believed that. I tried to make up excuses to send people down here, just to check in on you. I told Harry he should go talk to you about Occlumency lessons. When you weren't at supper, I tried to raise Professor McGonagall's concern by asking where you might have gone. She told me it was nothing out of the ordinary for you to leave on business. I couldn't exactly tell her you'd been with You-Know-Who the night before!"

Hermione stamped back across the room, looking for all the world like she would deck him, but she settled for clenching and unclenching her fists from across his desk.

"You have no idea what that did to me! The entire break... Every day you were gone I was more certain you were hurt, or worse, and *I could do nothing!* I almost left for Headquarters, but I can only use that Floo spell for Occlumency lessons. Besides, if I couldn't convince Professor McGonagall to worry about you, there was little chance of getting Sirius to take up the sword. And it was Professor Lupin's time of the month, he was pretty much out of the question.

"And then you show up for class Monday without a word of explanation." Having spent the terrible memories, she set her jaw and glared at him with cold fury. "And no more *detentions*, all of a sudden. And when I didn't come to read, you didn't even comment."

Hermione paused, folding her arms; now she had the eyes of granite. "I reckon it's another woman, probably someone you were seeing long before I came along," she said woodenly. "That's fine. I assumed you were single but I never asked, and you never made any promises or pretenses." Her voice sharpened suddenly. "But even if it was all just a diversion, I didn't deserve to be cast off like a toy that no longer amused you. You should have told me the truth instead of letting me rip my heart out with fear for you all that time."

He heard it all, but it seemed she must be speaking to someone else. As she wrinkled her nose in a final contemptuous snarl, Snape knew that this time, he must not let her go. "Hermione," he whispered, still catching his breath.

She had already begun to turn away, but thank the merciful Fates, she stopped and unfolded her arms. A long, silent stare, in which he made at least a dozen feinted gestures with his hands, abandoning each one along with the inane words spinning through his mind. She was looking more and more impatient.

"I've really mucked it up this time," he finally blurted. It wasn't elegant, but it was the most honest statement he could come up with. She rolled her eyes and sighed loudly, but she didn't walk away.

"Hermione. I'm stunned. It never occurred to me that you would worry."

"Well I DID!" she spat, slamming her fists on the surface of the desk so hard that everything on it jumped. "What did you think would happen, then? That I wouldn't notice your absence? How could you be so stupid?"

I deserved that. "I wasn't thinking. I'm a creature of habit, Hermione; I leave unannounced all the time. No one's ever... missed me before." He raised his hands imploringly. "Most people prefer my absence, really."

"I'm not most people," she growled venomously.

"No. You are not. Hermione." His voice began to catch in his throat; she was not like anyone else on the planet. "Please forgive me once again."

She sighed even more deeply, but her arms remained crossed, her face cold. "Forgive. For what? For scaring me nearly to insanity? Or for running off with someone else?"

He laughed out loud; it couldn't be helped, the very notion was so absurd. "There's no one else. This is *me* we're speaking of, Hermione. I went to my house, *alone*."

He stopped short; she furrowed her brow at this bit of information. "You have a house?"

"They have yet to chain me to the castle. I have a home near Manchester, where I just spent a miserable holiday watching the rain fall onto an empty street and telling myself it was the proper thing to do, because if I'd stayed..."

"If you'd stayed, what?"

"Hermione. If I had stayed here, I don't think... I know I couldn't keep to... oh, hell. I knew I couldn't keep my hands off you, dammit!" He laughed again, and to his amazed delight, so did she. He opened his arms and she lunged into them, clamping her own arms around his rib cage. She was giggling and crying at the same time.

"Damn you, Severus, you thoughtless tosser, don't you *ever* do that again!"

He would have given her the moon, but he could not give that promise. "Hermione. I am thoughtless, and a fool for frightening you. Never will I deliberately do that again. But you know there will be times when I must leave in secrecy. I cannot promise never to do it at all."

She finally relaxed her grip, letting her body settle against his. "Oh, very well," she said with frustrated resignation. "As long as you won't skip off on some Quixotic 'noble cause' like *that* again without warning me. What an idiot you are! 'No one's ever missed me.' For heaven's sake, Severus, wake up and smell the blooming coffee!"

"Awake and sniffing," he mumbled distractedly, breathing in the scent of blackberries and thanking every deity he'd ever heard of for sending him a woman who believed in second chances.

18: Confrontations

Chapter 18 of 47

A certain subject of recent controversy is brought to Our Hero's attention. A study of how different provocateurs create different reactions to the same topic.

Remus Lupin showed up at Snape's door that same evening. He never suspected the elated mood hiding behind Snape's dour, disinterested expression, but even their ensuing argument could do nothing to tarnish it.

"Severus, damn it, you had no *right* to stop the Occlumency lessons!"

Snape folded his arms. "I most certainly have. You, on the other hand, have no right to barge into my office and issue orders. You have at best a superficial understanding of the issue, Lupin, not nearly enough to draw any conclusions."

"If I could reach Dumbledore--" began Lupin, but Snape spoke over him coldly.

"Albus would support my decision. Unlike you, he is acquainted with the relevant facts."

Lupin slammed his fist on the top of Snape's granite lab bench, which *must* have hurt, yet he showed not a grain of it. "I am *acquainted with the fact* that Harry came across

an unpleasant memory that all of us would rather forget!" He swallowed hard and continued in a milder tone. "Severus, *please*. Be angry. Be hateful if you must. But don't be shortsighted! You know he has some reason for sending Harry these dreams. Please don't let your own personal pain--"

Snape cut him off with a snarl. "Do not speak as though you understand my reasons, or anything within my heart, for that matter. I've told you, Lupin, the lessons will not continue. That decision will not change." Some small part of him wished he could tell Remus everything, but it was a foolish whim. Honesty had worked wonders with Hermione, but too much of it was a bad thing.

Lupin stared at him, the eyes of a predator sizing up an enemy, sharp and cold. Snape had always marveled at the intense, primal power just below Lupin's surface. Fenrir Greyback let the wolf run free within him and thus had all the subtlety of a turd in a punchbowl, but Lupin had turned self-control into an art form. Lupin carried himself with grace and humility, never revealing his potential to be the most dangerous man alive (excepting, of course, the Dark Lord himself). Snape did not fear the wolf in Lupin but was a little intimidated by the man--not because he was so deadly, but because he was saving that deadliness for a special occasion.

Lupin never blinked, but eventually he shook his head in disgust. "Merlin's beard. I should have let Sirius come up here after all."

Rolling his eyes, Snape replied scornfully, "Don't make me laugh. Neither fisticuffs nor hexes would change my mind."

"Probably not, but at this point I wouldn't mind seeing him try."

"Shame the moon is waning now, or you could threaten me yourself."

Lupin clenched his teeth. "That was a low blow even for you, Snape."

"You have disregarded my *gentler* attempts to explain the situation. If you don't like the heat, Lupin, then by all means get out of the kitchen." Snape pointed to the door, stretching his arm to its full length to emphasize his point.

"And what if I refuse?" he asked.

"Suit yourself," Snape said disinterestedly and settled behind his desk, picking up a stack of essays as though intending to mark them. He knew Lupin was bluffing; the man could hardly afford to stand there in his office for hours on end. However, he *could* conceivably drag this out long enough to catch Hermione in the Floo... "I should worry that Black might soil the carpets if you're away too long," he said with silken viciousness.

"Bastard!" Lupin hissed.

With a smirk that the werewolf could not possibly comprehend, Snape replied, "I don't deny it, Lupin. Now get out of my office before that hag Umbridge finds you and makes a bloody Ministry decree about leashing one's guests."

Snape remained at his desk attempting to concentrate on essays, until the fire flared green and red. Her eyes lit up as she spotted him, which delighted him beyond measure. "What are you doing up?" she asked with cheery reproach, flicking the ashes from her robe. "I thought we might finish *Reivers* tonight, and I brought a new book too. Unless you have one you'd prefer me to read."

He shook his head as he crossed the room to take her in his arms. "Hermione. Anything you choose will be perfect." He was so glad to see her in his office again, he didn't care if she read aloud the Prat's last Potions essay. In fact, if all she did was stand here so he could press his cheek against the top of her head, it would be a perfect night. *Well, almost.*

Regrettably, she reared back from him and rolled her eyes. "Silly. Perhaps I should borrow one of Lavender's romance novels. *Wandless In Love* would make you eat those words fairly quick, I should think!" She wrinkled her nose in a mocking sneer.

Although a few choice innuendos came to Snape's mind, they would have to wait another year. "Hermione, I quite doubt you could make it through five pages of a book titled *Wandless In Love* before your throat would strangle itself to silence the agony."

"Well, you have me there, I suppose," she said, laughing, but her playful mien suddenly turned somber, a vertical furrow appearing between her eyebrows. "That reminds me of something." She paused, obviously searching for the proper phrasing.

Wanting only to see that smile reappear, he took one of her hands to guide her to the divan. Settling beside her, he raised her hand to his lips without thinking, but gave it only the lightest peck. "Out with it, then," he said gruffly, though the words were meant with tenderness.

"Don't rush me! I know you don't like to discuss this." *Let me guess, my love: you want to talk about the Little Prat.* "It's just that I'm worried about Harry." *Right again, huzzah.* The little furrow was quickly evolving into a full-fledged frown. "Severus, I'm still not sure he was ready to stop the Occlumency lessons. He won't admit it, but he's having bad nightmares--poor Ron is getting woken up every night."

Snape let the breath out of his lungs slowly, stalling for time as he attempted to cool his anger. "You're quite right, Hermione. I *don't* like to discuss this."

Ugh. He knew better; how many times had he seen that nitwit Weasley try to stave her off with a weak attempt at humor, only to fuel her ire even further? The frown had now become The Look. Having just won back her favor mere hours earlier, Snape was in no mood to start a new row.

"Well, you will anyway," she said heatedly. "I'm sure he convinced you that he'd learned enough, but I think he might have exaggerated. He... didn't exactly relish giving up his evenings for the lessons," she observed tactfully. "Or, maybe three weeks ago Harry *could* block You-Know-Who, but since then he's increased his efforts. It doesn't matter; the point is that Harry still needs you!"

Snape sighed. Of all the topics they could discuss, all the things they could be *doing*, why in the name of Merlin, Mordred or Morgana did she have to bring up The Prat? For lack of a better plan, he sighed again in complete frustration; there didn't seem to be any way out of it except forward. Very well. Any conversation with her was better than another evening alone.

"What did th--Mr. Potter tell you about our last lesson?"

She gawked at him in confusion. "Tell me? Nothing. He never says anything about what you two do."

Interesting. "Hmph. He did not explain why we... discontinued the lessons?"

She shook her head. "Only that he got the basics enough to practice on his own."

Very interesting. He told Lupin and Black, but not his peers? Either I scared the little git enough to shut him up, or he has a fragment of a conscience after all. Snape nearly made a razzberry sound out loud in response to his internal musings. He was glad he didn't; it would have given Hermione an accurate but unnecessary impression of Potter's true "mastery" of Occlumency.

Things were certainly becoming awkward. Harry had lied to Hermione, and now it seemed that Snape would have to perpetuate that lie. How tritely ironic: a Gryffindor started a lie that went on to ensnare a Slytherin. *Drat that prat!* Snape had no desire to lie, even once, to Hermione; once the first lie succeeded, it was all too easy to resort to the second, the third... until lies became a habit and honesty became inconvenient. He looked into her eyes, and recalled the mind behind them, clear and genuine. *No.*

No lies. Not with her. It was bad enough that he was forced to withhold certain truths, and this would be one of them, but he would not deliberately undermine her trust. Potter wasn't worth it.

"Very well, Hermione. I will explain this once. Potter indicated to me, in a way that need not be described, that these lessons were no longer... appropriate. He has shown some aptitude for Occlumency (*HAI!*), though I concede that he could probably benefit from further instruction. But Hermione, I have no intention of persuading (or even attempting to persuade) him to return to our lessons. Such efforts would be for naught; if he resists being taught, then I cannot teach him. You understand the process, Hermione--both parties must participate actively."

She nodded, still frowning. "I do understand that, Severus. But Harry can be so stubborn sometimes, maybe if you could--"

"If Potter truly wants to continue," Snape interrupted, "he knows how to find this office. He knows why the lessons have ceased, and what he must do to resume them. If he comes to me with a sincere..." *apology* "interest, I suppose I will not turn him away. But I will do no more. I must leave it to him at this point, Hermione."

She sat back, still frowning, but there was resignation in her eyes. "Very well. You're right, it has to be his decision. I have to keep working on him, I guess."

An irresistible force meets an immovable object. "Indeed, my dear. But don't hold your breath."

19: Tension

Chapter 19 of 47

The upcoming O.W.L.s have worked Hermione into a tizzy, and Snape finds himself charting unknown and treacherous waters. Part 1 of a cruel cliffhanger.

Although Snape would have preferred to gnaw off his own arm, he finally insisted that Hermione forego their nightly reading ritual. With less than two weeks before O.W.L.s, she was obviously succumbing to stress. He knew she would go through her exams like a raisin through a guinea pig, but *she* didn't, or was at least unwilling to admit it. An extra hour of sleep each night should improve her mood, but he suspected she would waste it studying.

He capitulated to the Occlumency lessons, though he insisted they last no more than an hour. Even that seemed overkill; she was constantly distracted and her efforts to punt him from her mind were constantly interrupted by urges to look up some esoteric factoid. "Hermione," he finally said, four days before the first scheduled exam, "I will make you a potion for anxiety. Your panic is starting to rub off onto me, and I've served my time at O.W.L.s, thank you very much."

"I don't need anything," she snapped, then slouched in her chair. "You're the one that disrupted my daily routine just before these bloody exams, so don't you complain."

"Disrupted your... Hermione! Dare I remind you that the last time you came to my room, you dropped your novel no less than eighteen times to consult one of my Potions books?" It had been one of the most jarring evenings he'd ever spent with her. Every time he began to drift off to sleep, she had leapt from the chair to yank some text off its shelf and rifle through it. Merlin-only-knew what marginalia he might have written in them, though his habit of writing in books had greatly diminished once he'd finished school (he found so few useful statements in the average text that whenever one appeared, he would simply rip the page out and keep it in a separate folder). Regardless, she helped herself to the older books as well as the recent editions, and there was much he preferred to keep buried quietly on the shelves.

"Exactly my point!" she squalled. "I was already under all that strain and you put a stop to the one thing I looked forward to every night!"

"Flatterer," he mocked, though he knew she meant every word, and he could feel the color rising in his cheeks. *What magic you possess, my love, to turn me into a blushing adolescent.*

She wrinkled up her entire face in annoyance. "Oh, go hex yourself. How many times have I told you I *like* coming to read to you? I can't sleep anyway, I've got too much 'busy-brain' and stare at the ceiling half the night. The least you could do is let me have some release... relief."

Her hand flew to her mouth in her incomparably droll fashion, and Snape broke into a crooked smile. "Ah, but I have released you, my dear," he said with dry innocence, "from your duty of sacrificing your sleep. Or were you referring to something else?"

"Tease!" she spat, and leapt to her feet to stand before the fire, staring into the flames and appearing most genuinely cross.

Snape blinked at her several times, as though clearing his vision might make sense of what he saw. "Hermione," he said uncertainly. *Don't turn away from me.* "... I have never imagined that I might need to apologize for being too flirtatious, but perhaps I must."

The glare he received could have melted a Galleon, but at least it was brief; even in anger, she could appreciate the irony of his statement. Rolling her eyes, she capitulated to an irritated grin. "Oh, Severus," she said softly, turning back to the fire. "I would never have guessed I'd be angry with you for that." She abruptly brought both hands to her temples and growled huffily. "These stupid O.W.L.s! They're really getting to me, Severus. When I'm not frantic about getting all my facts straight, I'm... oh, *bother!*" She pressed her lips tightly closed and focused even harder on the flames, as if keeping the fire alive by the force of her will.

Oh, bugger! he agreed internally. Even in his limited experience, he could see that this was heading toward some sort of Girl Issue, and his odds of emerging unscathed were rapidly dwindling. Still, he reminded himself, this was but one young lady, and he'd faced much worse in his time, even right here in this very room. Why should her presence turn him into such a bumbling rube?

"Come, dear girl. Let me help you." He rounded his desk and came up behind her, cautiously resting his hands on her shoulders. Her muscles were taut as piano wires, tenting the skin between her neck and arms. He gently kneaded the trapezius, rolling the stiff flesh between fingers and thumb. For an instant she seemed to consider pulling away angrily, but she dropped her arms with a rather grudging sniff. He was off to a good start.

Indeed, within minutes she began to wriggle and stretch under his hands. "More to the left...no, other hand. Erm." He could feel the knot, and manipulated it with both hands until it softened.

When her breathing began to slow and deepen, Snape knew he should stop. This had all started when she'd called him a tease, after all; it was one thing to comfort her, another to arouse. *She's too young and too vulnerable. Don't deceive yourself.* He repeated it like a mantra until he could bear to remove his hands.

"Better?" he asked confidently.

She burst into tears.

20: Disclosure

Chapter 20 of 47

Hermione finally reveals what's really bothering her.

Of all the bloodysoddingcursed...how does she even DO that? Hermione had gone from pristine calm to hysterical sobbing within the blink of an eye. For a moment he wondered if he had lost consciousness briefly, or perhaps a Time-Turner had robbed him of experiencing whatever had caused this disaster. *I should be so lucky*, he thought grimly. *That assumes that there IS an explanation for her mood* With a sinking feeling in his stomach, he gently turned her toward him and pressed her head to his shoulder.

That seemed to be the proper tack; she was still crying, but at least she was holding onto him. Apparently he wasn't to blame for this. *Yet, anyway...* Without any idea what was bothering her, there was little he could say, so Snape took the conservative approach, stroking her hair and glancing uneasily at the dark wet patch spreading on his robe. *What I wouldn't give for a handkerchief*, he thought glumly when she began to snifle.

When the tears finally subsided, he weighed his options. Asking her what was the matter would probably renew the hydraulics, but ignoring it was simply not feasible. That would be akin to ignoring an anvil hanging over his head by a fraying rope. Snape took a slow, deep breath, enjoying the brief quiet and the scent of her hair--the calm before the storm. "There is something weighing heavily on your mind, dear girl, is there not?"

Hermione made a high-pitched squeak, but to his amazement, did not resume crying. "Severus... I think I have a confession to make."

Gulp. "A confession. A secret?" She nodded. Familiar territory again, at last. "You are afraid to speak of it, whatever it is, but you also can't bear to conceal it. Correct?"

"Yes."

Snape's shoulders dropped as his own tension melted away. "If anyone understands secrets, my dear, it is I," he said softly, stroking her hair again. "I suppose the anxiety of your O.W.L.s has brought it into the spotlight. The things you wish most to ignore tend to present themselves at the least convenient time."

"Exactly," she whispered. He watched a tear silently escape, rolling down her cheek to join the others staining his robe.

"You might consider holding on another week. You may regret giving it away once the pressure has eased."

She stiffened slightly, but settled against him once more. "No," she finally said. "It's stupid, but it concerns you too, and it's, well, got me staring at the ceiling all night."

He nodded grimly. "Very well, then, out with it. Unburden yourself."

Hermione opened her mouth several times, but apparently couldn't find the words. "I wish it were that easy, Severus," she finally mumbled.

"Hmm. Will the knowledge lead to my death?" She responded by slapping his chest. "Disfigurement?" he continued. "Blood, mine or otherwise? Pain, illness, insanity? No? Will lightning sear my eardrums when I hear it?" She glared up at him fiercely, though she was smiling despite herself. "I think I can weather it, Hermione," he said gently. "Or if you are unable to speak, you can show me in your mind."

She bit her lip. "It's in my dreams, Severus."

"I suspected as much, as I've been nearly everywhere else." Snape looked into her eyes, noting little flecks of gold within the brown. "Do you want me to open them?"

She curled her head down, and once again, her body stiffened, but this time it felt as though she was steeling herself, calling up her reserves of strength. She finally snapped to, pulling away from him and looking him squarely in the eye. "Yes. Yes, just do it. You're probably going to think I'm the silliest creature alive, but I can't keep this inside anymore." She pointed impatiently toward his wand on the desk.

He retrieved it, and beckoned to her to join him on the divan. "Are you certain of this, Hermione?" he asked grimly, holding his wand at the ready. She suddenly appeared most reluctant.

"I'm sure."

Snape bit his lower lip, frowning. "If there's any doubt... I know you feel strongly about--"

"Mother of Merlin, shut up and *do* it already, Severus!"

He set his jaw with a tiny reproving glare and laid open her subconscious as though rending a muslin curtain with a razor.

The worst part about using Legilimency was that he didn't just look unobtrusively at her memories, he had to *live* them with her. In a Pensieve, the memories were presented like a play on a stage, with no regard to the personal reactions of the original observer. One could look dispassionately at any aspect of the memory, even things on the periphery that were not part of conscious recollection. Indeed, that was what made Pensieves so useful: they made it possible to recover the unnoticed goings-on, unclouded by judgement and emotion.

In Legilimency, however, the memories were still part of her being, filled with the subjective feelings and interpretations that made them uniquely Hermione's. Plus, they were as bright and clear as though they were happening right on the spot. It took some getting used to early on in his Legilimency training, and he'd adapted to the process, but dreams... ugh. Snape didn't enjoy reliving dreams, not even pleasant ones. The colors were wrong, the sensations were wrong, and when viewed with an alert and rational mind, the events were downright screwy. It was almost as though dreams kept people's inherent insanity in check, limiting it to the night when it could do no harm.

He could sense the nightmares, but when he tried to penetrate them, they seemed to slide away, frictionless, ungraspable. "You're Occluding me, Hermione. You have to surrender this secret, if that's still your choice." *Oh, for the love of Merlin! Stupid subconscious, it WOULD have to go and expertly throw up barriers that I've struggled with for months.* Snape heard her thought and laughed inwardly in hearty agreement. Occlumency was a natural process; *controlling* it was the tricky part.

She was in a sterile room like a Muggle hospital, all cold white ceramic tile and chrome. She knelt over a man, any man, it didn't matter; the dream was always the same, though the faces changed. Sometimes strangers, sometimes Severus, sometimes Harry, Ron, Neville, Viktor; she'd been with half the males at Hogwarts in her nightmare, even ones she couldn't name, even Professor Binns once.

She never knew how they ended up in this room; she'd be having a perfectly acceptable dream, only to find herself here, straddling some man with a wicked erection, wanting desperately to have him. She would bring her hand down to guide him, but there was no place for him to go. Her lower body was suddenly as generic and sexless as a Barbie doll. She had nothing, no anatomy, no sensations, no hair, no desire. The man would reach up and grab her hips, pulling her down, but her skin was hard and cold as granite. He would look up at her in utter contempt and accusation, as though she had led him here deliberately to fool him and leave him unsatisfied. She would try to explain that no, no, she hadn't, she wanted to do it too, honestly. The words wouldn't come; her chest and throat had already seized into stone as well. She was impenetrable, armored, unreachable, and it only disgusted him further.

It always ended as he leapt to his feet, knocking her backwards. She *knew* as soon as she hit that tile floor, she would shatter into a million tiny pieces. She was too stiff even to put out her elbows; all she could do was fall and wait for the impact.

Hermione found that she was sitting on the divan across from Severus. So now he *knew*; there was no turning back the tide. Afraid to look him in the eye, she pulled her knees up inside her robes and hugged them tight against her chest, to wait for his reaction.

21: The Interpretation of Dreams

Chapter 21 of 47

Snape figures things out and devises a solution.

"Well. That was... interesting."

Hermione looked as though she might be ill, but frankly Snape didn't feel too chipper himself. He didn't like performing Legilimency on females precisely because of the unfamiliar sensations in sexual situations. It had been awkward, months ago, feeling Viktor Krum's tongue in his mouth, but peering down lustily at Harry Potter was far worse. Furthermore, reaching down to find Potter equipped in downright equine proportions was enough to unsettle anyone. But this was not the time to be squeamish.

Snape sat up straighter and put his hands firmly on her shoulders. "Tell me, Hermione," he said in a deliberately matter-of-fact tone, "what imbecile convinced you that brilliant women are unattractive?"

She didn't look up, but she frowned thoughtfully at the question. "What?"

"You heard me. Though I expect you can't answer. That myth is all too prevalent; one might as well ask who taught you the meaning of words."

"Severus, no games, please. I'm pulled too thin as it is." Her voice was gravelly.

Snape Noxed all the lights except the fire and settled beside her on the divan, putting one arm around her protectively and the other on the crook of her arm. "Listen to me a moment. No games," he said assuringly. "I don't know how you have interpreted that dream, nor will I presume to guess. But I will tell you how I perceive it. "Will that do?"

She glanced at him nervously and gave a single, taut nod.

"There is a lie which I have never understood, yet it is as pervasive as the air we breathe. I recall the best summary of it from my days in Arithmancy: that brains multiplied by beauty is a constant. Do you understand? A crude claim that one counterbalances the other--that beautiful girls are by necessity stupid, and that brilliant ones are..." There was no delicate way to phrase it, but feeling both the chill and tension in Hermione increase, he knew she had caught on.

"Hear me out, Hermione. As I said, this is a lie, but like all successful lies, it couches itself behind your daily observations. You look at the women on the faculty here, all unwed, childless. The lie chides you, 'Of course they are, they spent themselves on knowledge and books and no man will have them.' You look amongst your peers. The ones who spend their evenings reading *Wandless in Love* are never short of male companions to escort them to Madame Puddifoot's, or to the lesser-used corridors and quiet crannies. On the other hand, if it hadn't been for Krum, you probably would have been left dancing with the *Standard Book of Spells, Grade Four* at the Yule Ball." She pulled her knees in tighter, and Snape couldn't blame her; it stung him just to say it.

"I shudder to think of what the Muggle world tells you when you go home for the summer. I've heard of it. Whole periodicals advising what to wear if you're too fat, too thin, too tall, too short, too buxom, too flat--never just right. Tips to 'improve yourself' that center on flattery and physical performance--but never on intelligent conversation. I understand it's even worse than Wizard society."

His voice dropped, but he ploughed on resolutely. "Even now, look where you are. In the arms of the most despised man in the castle, arguably the entire country." She glared up at him immediately, but he shook his head. "No! Don't speak. Listen. Whatever you may think of me, Hermione Granger, yours is not a common belief. If anyone learned that you were my... companion, it would only further the lie. 'Ah yes, that Granger girl, far too clever for her own good. She couldn't land a decent man, had to scrape the dregs from the barrel, didn't she?'"

She looked as though she might slap him. "Stop it, Severus," she said in a dangerous tone, but he rested his fingertips on her lips and shook his head again.

"Lies, Hermione. Lies that masquerade as fact, invading reality in ways both overt and subtle, until even those who should know better succumb to their nagging. That dream is just another sycophant, claiming that the lie explains your loneliness when in fact, the lie is the cause of it. That any suitors find you as cold and stony as you were when the Basilisk struck you." He smirked. "A vicious irony, that a *giant serpent* once rendered you thus; I'm sure your subconscious had a heyday with that."

Her eyes were wide and welling up again. Snape set his hand against her face in time to catch the first tear. *I love you, Hermione Granger, and yet even I feed the lie by withholding that truth from you.* He lowered his head to kiss her, but thought the better of it and nuzzled the track of that teardrop instead. He was taken aback to find that she let him stop there, and that he rather expected (and wanted) her to offer her mouth to him.

"Severus. There's more to it than that." Another tear followed the first, spreading salty heat against his lip. "I believe you, that is, I mean, I'm sure that's part of it, I guess. But... there's more." He tried to lean back, to give her room to speak, but for the first time her arms flew around him. "No!" she blurted with a shudder. "Just let me say it here."

Snape raised an eyebrow and waited silently for a few moments. What could possibly be left unsaid? "Hermione, perhaps you--"

"Be still, damn it! This is hard enough as it is! Severus, I... oh, bloody hell. I understand what you said, and yes, it's very hard to feel wanted when all people see when they look at me is a brain. But it's not just that. I..."

Bloody hell, indeed. It may be difficult for her to say it, but the suspense was grating on his nerves. He tipped her head up by the chin and raised his wand again; this was going to end now, while her "big secret" was in the forefront of her thoughts where he could find it. "*Legilimens.*"

Seconds later, he withdrew from her mind, fighting not to smile.

She stared at him in outrage for an instant, then exploded. "That was a dirty trick, damn you!" The affront, however, was immediately overpowered by shame; she turned bright red and sank back into the divan, turning away from him. *Oh, no you don't!* He caught her shoulders using only his palms and eased her back around, ignoring her averted gaze.

"Hermione. Have I now seen the total of your secret?" She gave him a single curt nod. "Look at me." A single shake. "By Hecate, woman, look at me!" Good grief, a shake AND a pout. It was too much. Snape laughed, loud and long, pulling her against his chest so she couldn't strike him or run away or pull some other silly reaction.

"You think it's funny?" she finally squealed. "That I'm..."

"Impotent?" he suggested rather cruelly, but it was all just *soabsurd!* "Or wait, let me see, I believe the proper vernacular is 'frigid,' perhaps? 'An incomplete woman,' according to *Wandless in Love*, I'm sure. Oh, Hermione," he said with a reproachful laugh. "Do you know how ridiculous you are acting?"

"Do you know you're a complete fucking bastard?" she snapped, looking up at him at last. *Ouch!* Snape shrugged, still laughing. She was right--but so was he. He clearly had to put off enjoying the irony until a later time, however.

"Listen to me, dear girl," he said solemnly. "I should not laugh, and you must forgive me yet again for being caught off guard. I ought to know better by now; you always manage to surprise me." She scowled furiously; better get to the point. "I'm astonished, Hermione, that you of all people would be so bothered by the simple fact that you've never had an--"

"DON'T SAY IT!"

By Jove, the girl could outscreech a banshee when she put her mind to it. This really was no laughing matter; however irrational her fear, it was nonetheless overwhelming her. *Grand. A case for tact, Severus. Ah, well. I suppose I have to start somewhere.*

"All right, all right. Come here." He pulled her close once again and resumed stroking her hair until she stopped shaking. "I think, my dear, he said softly, "we need to take a rational approach to this."

"I'd really rather not talk about it anymore, Severus."

He bit back his laughter again. "I believe that. However, since I have never been able to use that excuse successfully with *you*, I'm afraid it's doomed to fail now with me. Besides, the worst is over, my dear; you have shown me your 'great shortcoming,' so to speak, and to your amazement, I do not despise you for it. *Ergo*, it can only get better from here, wouldn't you agree?"

"You are such a tosser."

"Indeed. It seems you could do with a bit of tossing yourself." She slammed her hands into his sides with surprising force, but he didn't mind. *Better to take it out on me than yourself, beloved.*

"I don't know many facts in this area," he began dryly, "but I am absolutely certain that this is not unusual. I'm sure the 'Wandless Ladies in Love' have given you the impression that you should come at the very sight of, say, a bratwurst, am I correct?" She refused to smile, but he could see it wearing at the corners of her mouth. "And I imagine young Mr. Krum made at least some effort toward that end, without success?" No smile this time, but the answer was clear. "So you believe yourself to be sexless and barren, nothing but unfeeling stone between your legs." The tears returned in force.

"Hermione." He shook his head, then leaned to whisper in her ear. "I believe I know better, dear girl. I recall a rather desperate breathlessness here in this very room not too long ago. I daresay that, had circumstances been only a little different, your worries would have been put to rest that night."

She caught her breath, but glared at him. "Damn you! Viktor said the same thing, you know, but he couldn't... make it happen."

"I'm sure he couldn't!" Snape said, in a rare moment of complete sincerity. "He was what, seventeen? Eighteen? And your match in overachieving, nonetheless. I shudder to imagine the determination with which he tried, Hermione. Let me guess: he did not accept failure very graciously."

She bit her lip. "He felt guilty."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Of course he did. The Quidditch star and champion of Durmstrang, and he couldn't send his girlfriend into the throes of ecstasy. How unmanly. And you, I assume, felt guilty as well? That you lacked the proper femininity to reward his efforts?"

"Why do you always have to be so vicious?"

"Because that is what I am, Hermione. But I will tell you what I am *not*: I am not fool enough to believe that I can unlock the delicious secrets of your body for the first time. That, my dear, is up to you. Dare I ask if you've ever tried?"

Her defiance disappeared as if *Evanesco*'ed. She gulped. "Um. I've... read some books..."

"Must I spell it out, then? Have you touched yourself? Jilled off? Stirred the soup?" He knew he was aggravating her, but it was actually rather fun to watch her squirm. She "read some books." *I'll bet you have, beloved, but this is one lesson you must learn empirically.*

She pulled her head down as though she had a shell in which to retract it. "Not exactly. You know, I live in a room with four other people! I can't just... you know... not in front of everybody! What if someone woke up?"

Oh, to be a fly on the wall in that circumstance... "And when you go home for the summer?"

Her head ducked even further. "With Mum and Dad right in the next room? Good heavens! If the bed creaked, they'd probably think I was having a seizure and come charging in. They're still not entirely sure of this whole sorcery business."

"I see. You would rather live with the constant fear that you are somehow defective, than take a chance at being caught proving otherwise."

"It's not that simple!" she spat. "I mean, what if I try it and..."

"And nothing happens?" He nodded sagely. "I see. If you never try, you will never fail, and thus you can still dare to hope."

Hermione stared up at him, wide-eyed once again. "How did you know that?" she asked heavily.

He smiled grimly. "I have learned a bit about despair in my lifetime."

At last she lapsed against him in a way that felt like *his* Hermione; gentle but strong, trusting, solid. He buried his face into her hair again to breathe in the scents of summer, and slowly twisted his body to rock her. After too short a moment, he pulled his head back to look at her.

"Hermione, I want you to go in my chamber and close the door. Take all the time you require. I will leave so that you might relax. But I want your apprehension to end tonight. Do you understand?"

She looked as though he'd instructed her to eat something wriggly from one of his ingredient jars. "Oh, no. Not here. I can't--"

"You can, and you will. Get going," he said firmly, withdrawing his arms and pointing toward his bedroom.

"But--"

"No buts! Go!" He took her shoulders in his palms once again and turned her toward the hallway. He gave her a gentle shove in the proper direction, but damned if she didn't have the gall to turn back and face him. Snape clamped a hand over her mouth before she could protest.

"Hermione Granger, if you do not proceed on your own, I shall take you in there and see to it that you do as you are told." *And Merlin help me if you call my bluff.* Much to his amusement, she got that look of great chagrin, the one in which she normally hid her mouth behind her *own* hand, but his was still in the way. She was so bloody charming when she did that.

He leaned down to her ear one last time. "Go to my room, Hermione. Touch your body the way I long to touch you. I've been in your mind, dear girl; I know it will happen. I want it to happen here, tonight."

It took all of his will to step away again, but he managed it. He turned on his heel without looking at her and headed straight for the corridor. There was no way he could sit in his office and ponder what was going on behind that bedroom door.

22: Words of Warning

Chapter 22 of 47

Snape gets wind of the winds of change, and winds up sending Hermione a secret message.

Three days to go. Not even when he was taking his own O.W.L.s did Snape wish so vehemently for them to be over.

Hermione had all but disappeared since *that night*. Despite the rain, he had walked all the way to the Shrieking Shack, and even stopped at the lake to skip a few stones. When he returned to the dungeon, she was gone. He expected it; he wondered at first if she'd even done as she was told. *If she skipped out to go and study, by the Three Fates I swear to bring her over right in the middle of the Potions O.W.L.* He knew just the thing to sprinkle into her cauldron before the Practical (and Merlin help any male who attempted to cheat and strayed too close to the vapors).

One step into his room, however, and he knew she'd stayed. The bed was not made the way he always did it, and there was a note on his pillow. It said only, "You were right." There was no signature, but a rather maudlin heart was drawn below the text. It made him smile every time he looked at it. He rolled up the note and affixed to the back of the drawer in his nightstand, but he took it out every night and slept with it under his pillow.

She had blustered into his office after the Potions exam the next morning, just long enough to deposit a smug peck on his cheek and then ask him two rather challenging questions and then bemoan the fact that she could no longer recall which answers she'd finally submitted for either of them. Then she was off to overdo some other subject, quite possibly Arithmancy or Astronomy; she dashed out and slammed the door before completing the word. Snape merely watched the parchments flurry in her wake and held onto the edge of his desk as though it (or he) might otherwise be knocked off course as well.

Umbridge managed to dispense with both Hagrid and McGonagall the following night, making him renew his vow to resign at the end of the term if Albus didn't do *something*. He could smell politics in the air and it was enough to turn his stomach. Even though it was nearly one AM before Snape could sneak out of the castle, he went into Hogsmeade and let a room at the Hog's Head, just so he could Floo Lucius and see if anything could be done to put a stop to that woman. Unfortunately, Lucius wasn't home, and Narcissa couldn't elaborate--but her bloodshot eyes told him enough.

Snape sat in the tavern afterward nursing a single butterbeer and thinking. For the first time, he began to doubt his decision about the Prat's Occlumency training. Narcissa was no frail flower, to weep over a trivial or even dangerous assignment. Lucius was involved in something perilous and *Snape was not!* The Master had kept it from him, which generally meant distrust or falling out of favor; both conditions had a poor prognosis among the Death Eaters.

Snape *knew* it was about the visions the Prat was having. *I never should have let that miserable git off the hook.* He knew it was necessary at the time, but Morgan le Fay, he'd cut off his only access to the Dark Lord's intentions. Voldemort was calling Potter to the Department of Mysteries, and Lucius had access to the interior of the Ministry. Whatever they were up to, it must be near fruition, and Snape hadn't the foggiest idea what to expect.

When Aberforth began to hover over his table making disgusting biological noises and nodding pointedly at the clock, Snape threw some coins on the table and went back up to his room. He'd paid for the whole night, after all, might as well make use of it. By the light of a single candle, he wrote a brief but careful note:

Dangerous events are being set into motion, yet I must be deliberately cryptic. I suspect that your redheaded friend will be unpleasantly awakened very soon, but the exact source of his distress will be different--perhaps more compelling than the usual fare. Be skeptical if this is the case. Be rational. Only by strength of reason can you find your way beyond the lies. I know that you can refute even the most pervasive lies, dear girl.

Snape nearly doodled a heart at the bottom of the note, but caught himself in time. *Merlin's beard! Although if I were to put a heart on the letter, no one on Earth would ever*

suspect that it came from me... He finally decided that even Hermione would be dumbstruck by such a thing. Besides, the clues he'd given were sufficient; why gild the lily?

Snape slunk back down the filthy staircase and into the street, where he made his way to the post office. It was dark, but unlocked; years earlier, the Owlmaster became fed up with being dragged out of bed for late-night "emergency" letters and simply left the owl counter open. There were certain "perqs" to living in a small town.

Snape found a Rufous Scops owl, a tiny fellow with elegant speckles on its chest, shivering in the owlery. He knew the poor blighter was from the tropics. He rubbed its belly with one finger, inviting it to hop aboard, and when it finally acquiesced, he lifted up the sleeve of his robe to let it crawl in and warm itself against his forearm. *Just as long as you don't crap in there, little fellow*, he thought, hoping that the owl had a sense of propriety.

He paused just beyond the gates of Hogwarts and made the owl take his letter in its beak. "I want this delivered straight to Hermione Granger, in her room. Not at the breakfast table, not in the common room. Take it to her window in Gryffindor tower right now. No one else is to see you or the message. If her roommates are in, you are to wait until they are asleep, then wake her. I know you have been ordered to surrender all Hogwarts mail for inspection prior to delivery. But you will not surrender this."

The owl poked its head out of his sleeve and peeked up at him with a distressed expression. "I understand your conflict, little one. I will see to it that you have a warm *and* humid place to roost from now on if you do this for me. Do we have a bargain?"

It cocked its head for the briefest moment in consideration, then bobbed enthusiastically. "Go, then, and return to me as soon as it is delivered. Do not wait for a reply." After ducking back into its warm haven one last time, the owl flitted off soundlessly.

Gryffindor Tower was lit up like a Christmas tree despite the hour. Snape reckoned they were all discussing Umbridge's disgusting spectacle on the lawn. He wondered idly where Hagrid would go, now that he'd officially earned the ire of the Ministry. Order Headquarters seemed like a logical place to flee, although his mutt might die of fright between Black and Lupin. Not to mention that damned portrait...Snape passed the time until the owl's return imagining what Mrs. Black would say about a half-giant booming about the house.

When the rufous owl finally reappeared, *sans* letter, he let the creature snuggle back into his sleeve and stole down to the dungeon. He set the owl on his mantelpiece, then grimaced; it looked like a horrid, kitschy knickknack. But he'd given his word to keep it warm and he was too tired to brew the necessary potion that night.

As soon as Snape began to snore, the little owl glided over to the bed and wriggled inside the sleeve of his nightshirt.

23: Objects In Motion

Chapter 23 of 47

Snape is summoned to Umbridge's office and discovers Potter and his cronies being held captive by the Inquisitorial Squad. Umbridge asks for Veritaserum, but there is no more to give. Potter tries to slip him a coded message of some sort. Later, Snape learns that Potter and Granger have led Professor Umbridge out into the Forbidden Forest.

If these events sound familiar, it is because this chapter is a "companion guide" to Chapters 32 and 33 of OOTP.

There are much worse things to wake up with than an owl nestled in one's armpit. Snape, however, was in no mood to count his blessings.

"Do not mistake me for a nature lover!" he squawked angrily at the disheveled featherball, after extracting it from his nightshirt with a most uncharacteristic series of acrobatics. It narrowed its eyes in disdain and flapped up to the curtain rod of his four-poster. "And don't even think about relieving yourself on my pillow, or I'll have you roasted with chestnut stuffing!" *Bloody hell, ten years ago I'd have wrung its neck as soon as it delivered the letter... that blasted Albus must be right about 'love being the most powerful magic,' after all.* What a way to start the morning.

Classes were a waste of time; the students were all aflutter over recent events, but he was able to brew a cauldron of Tahiti Sunshine for the owl. Invented to advertise vacation covens in Indonesia, a few drops would keep the owl's roosting box hot and muggy for weeks at a time. The little squirt need only stop by when it needed a refill.

He was sitting in his office staring aimlessly at some essays when Draco Malfoy burst in without knocking.

"Professor Sn--"

"Draco! I know you've learned the proper etiquette for entering a room. Try again." The young man backed out with barely-concealed exasperation and knocked. "Come."

"Professor Snape, the Headmistress needs you upstairs right away!"

So it begins. "Does she now." It wasn't a question. "I hope no one's been lighting off fireworks again." Snape refused to rush, hoping that Draco would blather a bit in his excitement. True to form, he did, but not about Lucius. It seemed the Toadies had finally ensnared some prey for the Toadmistress.

"... and she had me disarm Potter, I have his wand right here, and we rounded up the rest of his friends like lambs to the slaughter! He wouldn't tell her who he was Flooding, so she sent me to get you. I think she's going to want Veritaserum. I've so been waiting to see Potter take it, do you think I could give it to him, sir?"

Snape's mind was already in overdrive. "Hmm? I think not, Draco, our Headmistress seems to have made a tactical error. I entrusted her with the last of my supply already. If she wants more, then she must have squandered what I gave her, the fool." He watched Draco carefully; damned if the brat didn't crack a sinister grin and tuck that comment away for later. *You are your father's son, child.*

He expected to find Hermione and Weasley, but there were even more of the Prat's companions, all held in various positions of compromise by members of his House. *Utterly lacking in subtlety. I must inform their parents that they are using physical force instead of magic to hold their captives.* Mr. and Mrs. Bulstrode, in particular, would receive a scathing owl from him very soon. "You wanted to see me, Headmistress?" he asked dryly, deliberately avoiding Hermione's eyes lest he hex the entire room in outrage.

Draco was right--she wanted more Veritaserum. "You took my last bottle to interrogate Potter. Surely you did not use it all?" He wished he could permit himself to laugh; aggravating this woman was one of life's simple pleasures. When he told her it would take a month to prepare another bottle, she seemed to actually swell up as though an explosion was imminent.

If only I could take out my wand, damn it! Finally the Prat was looking him willingly in the eye; if he'd been half as cooperative during the bloody Occlumency lessons, he might have actually learned something. *Too late you recognize your friends from your enemies, little idiot. But if I make any show of Legilimency, the Toad will drag this out into a full interrogation. Damn you!* Who could he have been Flooing? Albus? Hagrid? Black? The answer was right there behind Lily's green eyes and yet it might as well be buried under ten feet of concrete.

Umbridge wasn't taking no for an answer, either. "I expected better, Lucius Malfoy always speaks most highly of you!" Snape nearly snorted in derision--if she was threatening to "out" him here and now, she'd be in for a surprise when Draco caught on that the "mystery man" in the rumors he'd been spreading was his own father. That would almost be worth seeing. Apparently Umbridge realized as much, and simply dismissed him.

"He's got Padfoot! At the place where it's hidden!"

Holy shit. Snape almost wished he'd simply whipped out his wand. *Black's not registered, she can't possibly connect him to 'Padfoot.' But how do you know this, Potter? Did someone tell you just now, in the Floo, or did the Dark Lord put that into your mind?"* And Crabbe, loosen your hold a little. *Mother of Merlin, must I do everything in this goddamn castle?* Some days it felt like the whole war persisted only because he personally kept things running smoothly for both sides.

He'd barely closed Umbridge's door when he broke into a run, dashing down the marble stairs to the castle doors. He forced himself to slow down as he approached the Hogwarts gates, just in case that hag was looking out of her window. Once outside, though, he Apparated straight to his room at the Hog's Head; thankfully, Aberforth hadn't already let it to someone else. Snape's tin of Floo Powder was still in the pocket of his robe.

"Number twelve, Grimmauld Place." It took a long time for anyone to answer his Floo, and for a stomach-churning moment, Snape wondered if Black could really be in the hands of the Dark Lord. That vindictive bastard could stir up some real trouble. He was about to step through the Floo and search the house when Black entered the basement kitchen.

"What do you want, Snape?"

Your head on a stake would be lovely. "There's something amiss. Have you left Headquarters today?"

Black frowned. "Of course not. What're you talking about?"

"Think, Black. Is anyone else there? Anyone that can confirm you haven't been Imperiused or drugged, even for a short time?"

That got his attention. Black knelt down directly before the fire, and for once, the disdain in his voice was gone. He spoke like the soldier he was reputed to be, something Snape had never believed because he'd certainly never seen it himself. "Yes, my house-elf. KREACHER!" he bellowed off to the side, and Snape heard the pop as the elf Apparated to the hearth. "Quickly, the truth: have I left this house today?"

"Master has been home all day, tending that filthy beast in his mother's bedroom."

Black turned back to the flames. "You heard. What's going on?"

"I don't know," replied Snape truthfully. "Potter somehow got the impression that you were detained by... 'You Know Who.' " He would rather eat sawdust than utter that phrase, but sometimes it couldn't be helped. "The new headmistress caught him in her fireplace. He may have been trying to track you down, or someone may have been claiming that you'd been abducted. Potter hinted that you had been taken to the Department of Mysteries. Unfortunately I could not pry him from her clutches to find out what all this is about."

"I haven't heard from Harry for weeks, he didn't Floo here. Bloody hell. Someone tried to trick him into chasing after me..."

"Potter won't escape Umbridge any time soon, she was thrilled to have him at her mercy at last. I will see what I can learn."

"Keep me posted. I'll call people in to investigate."

"Summon Albus if you can. There are other factions also at work."

Black stood up, nodding grimly. "Roger that." Snape withdrew from the fireplace. That was the most civilized conversation he'd ever had with Sirius Black.

He had to take his time returning to the castle; if anyone *had* spotted him leaving, it would look suspicious if he reappeared too soon. He stopped in to visit the owl just to give himself something to do. The little fellow orbited his head several times, clearly delighted with the new climate in his roost. *I have apparently made a new friend. Huzzah.*

Snape had no excuse to visit Umbridge and thus was not quite sure how he would check on Potter, but he found Malfoy loitering importantly on the marble stairs as he walked into the castle. Malfoy was watching the oak front doors intently, and looked quite disappointed to see him.

"Expecting someone, Draco?"

"Yes, sir," said the boy sullenly. He looked carefully around for bystanders, then leaned in confidentially. "The headmistress got some information after all. The Mudblood cracked--couldn't bear the sight of poor ickle Potter getting a taste of the Cruciatus." Snape's blood went to a full boil and back down as Draco spoke; if Hermione had "cracked" under the Cruciatus herself, the Toadmistress would not live to see another sunrise. Or moonrise, for that matter.

Snape forced a smirk. "How touching. Where are they?"

"Granger said there was some sort of weapon hidden out in the Forbidden Forest. She and Potter are taking her out there now, to show it to her. I'm not quite sure I believe it, myself, it sounded a bit too convenient, but Professor Umbridge refused to take me--or anyone else--along to watch her back."

Snape nodded empathetically; he knew of late how it felt to be left out of the loop. "So you took it upon yourself to watch for her safe return?"

"Yeah. We're supposed to be keeping an eye on the others, but I--"

"Left them in the competent hands of Thug One and Thug Two?" Draco's eyebrows rocketed as he realized his mistake. "Go back, and stay up there. I will await the professor's return." The young man dashed up the stairs without a word.

Lovely. Who knows how long they'll keep her on this wild goose chase? Snape leaned against the marble balustrade, pondering. He'd wondered last night if Hagrid hadn't simply hidden in the woods--and the great oaf didn't seem to be at Headquarters. Maybe Potter was going to drop Umbridge straight into the giant's lap, fittingly enough. The Toad may or may not come out of such a meeting alive, but Hagrid would not allow Potter to leave the grounds to hunt for Black. The Little Prat was probably safe. There was nothing to be done but wait until someone returned.

An hour later, Snape reckoned he'd check the Toadmistress's office, not because she was likely to know a secret way into the castle, but because standing around anxiously in the Entrance Hall was giving him a migraine. In the corridor, he saw that her door was ajar, and began sputtering four-letter words before throwing it open. Granted, it was essentially a good thing the Prat's brats escaped, but the overconfident blundering of his House students filled him with indignation. He shoed them out without reversing the hexes that had overcome them, forcing them to retreat to the dungeons bearing the marks of their failure.

At least he had the use of the only unmonitored Floo in the castle. Snape took a generous helping of powder from Umbridge's own box on the mantel and went through to Headquarters. Black had managed to summon Lupin, Moody, Tonks, and Shacklebolt, but not Albus.

"Things appear to be worse," Snape said without preamble as he stepped out of the fireplace into the kitchen. "Potter managed to lure Umbridge out into the Forest with the promise of some sort of hidden weapon, and they have not returned. The remainder of his friends escaped their captors and have apparently joined him."

"The forest?" "But it's nighttime!" All of them began speaking to him at once. He held up his hands for silence.

"I plan to return and search for them immediately. But I believe we must assume the worst: that Potter has managed to lose Umbridge in the Forest and is even now attempting to find Black in the Department of Mysteries."

"How in hell would they get to London?" asked Black angrily.

"You may have noticed that Potter is rather resourceful when it comes to getting his way," growled Snape in reply. "If he believes you are in the Ministry, he will undoubtedly devise some way to get there."

Black glared at him and spoke very quietly. "If he *believes* I'm in the Ministry, it's because YOU left him vulnerable to Voldemort's coercions." Black stomped toward him, but the werewolf took hold of his shoulders. *Bring it on, you worthless bastard.*

"Sirius! Easy! For all we know, someone used the Floo to tell Harry about this abduction business." *Listen to the alpha mutt, Black. There's a reason he's in charge.* Black reared back as though acquiescing, but Snape braced for a sucker punch just in case. Lupin eyed both of them, then continued. "I agree, if Harry thinks you're in trouble, he'll find a way to get down here."

"Then we need to move out," said Moody firmly. "Lad's being lured to Level Nine, the trap'll be there. Aurors an' I can Floo everyone straight to the Atrium; I still have clearance."

Moody glanced at Shacklebolt, who stepped up to the hearth immediately and disappeared, only to poke his head back in a moment later. "All clear. Come on," said Shacklebolt. Tonks took Lupin's hand immediately and followed.

"Wait," said Snape. "What about Albus?"

"He's on his way here," said Sirius curtly, reaching for Moody's elbow.

"Then you must stay here and brief him!"

Black gave him a cold glare. "I'm not sitting here when Harry could be walking into an ambush."

"Don't be a fool," hissed Snape. "The Dark Lord himself may have set this trap. I believe he is using some of his top people; at least one has been called away. You'll need Albus to get out of there alive."

Moody was an intimidating man, but he didn't have Lupin's touch when it came to making Black see reason. Black shrugged off Moody's grip and shoved Snape against the wall, twisting his robes with his fists. "Or maybe you need us to wait a moment, to make sure Harry *doesn't* get out alive. Is that it, you traitorous bastard?"

"Black!" roared Moody. "Save it for the Ministry!"

Black slowly released his grip as Snape stared at him in utter contempt. "I'll save it all right, Snape. If Harry so much as stubs his toe..."

Snape shook his shoulders to straighten his robe. "Oh, *do* save it, and the blathering about it as well. And get out of the way so I may go search the Forest, just in case the brat *hasn't* managed to flout every safeguard we've put in place for him and leave the grounds." Black was seething, so Snape turned to Moody. "Persuade this cretin that Albus really ought to be advised where you are, not to mention that promenading his worthless hide in the Ministry won't serve anyone, will you?"

Moody's human eye rolled almost as far back as the "mad" one. "You just tend to the Forest, Snape, and we'll see to Albus."

My pleasure. Snape gave Moody a curt nod, stepped into the Floo and returned to Umbridge's office without giving Black another glance.

24: All The Pretty Horses

Chapter 24 of 47

Snape returns to the Forbidden Forest as promised, and has a pleasantly unexpected encounter.

Snape despised the Forest on the sunniest days. Prowling around it at night, he silently cursed Potter and his entire ancestry every time he tripped over a root or turned his ankle in some unexpected pit. It was too dark to even hope of collecting any useful Potions ingredients, and it appeared that he wouldn't even find Potter.

Hearing something in the distance, Snape paused below a scraggly elm to catch his breath. Voices, female. The pitch was right for the Prat's friends, but they sounded far too jocular. Whoever they were, they were laughing raucously. When he heard the prancing of hooves, he knew the Fates had finally cut him some slack.

Four female centaurs capered in the clearing ahead--probably all of the mares in the herd. They were much more pleasant than the stallions; they had all the sensibility and wit of their species and were far more lovely to gaze upon than the idiot males (who seemingly existed only to guard them obsessively, in hopes of being favored at the annual estrus). Centaurs were scarce and thus were constantly pampered, and they ruled the stallions with an iron hoof. They also adored certain scented pomades for their long, thick hair. Snape had definitely wandered into some good luck.

"My eyes I do not trust in the dark, but my ears revel in the laughter of lovely maidens. Have I perchance stumbled into the greatest temptations in the Forest?"

"Why, Severus Snape! What a lovely surprise! What brings you to our midst? Have you something new and delicious for us?" The centaura cantered across the clearing to him, causing all manner of ripples and bounces about her person.

"Sadly, all I can offer at the moment is myself, Klytemnestra, though you may partake of as much as you wish," he replied with an exaggerated bow.

She flashed her perfect teeth in a wicked smile. "How cruel you are, making such a tempting offer, yet you are without a stepladder, darling Severus. Did you perhaps leave it in some dark corner of the woods, where I must follow you and be left to your tender mercy?"

"Lure you away, and affront these other most worthy beauties? Klyta, my dear, I fear it must be all of you, or none."

She laughed gaily. The mares lacked nothing, except for males who were not so poisoned with their own testosterone that they could carry on a decent conversation. A shame, really, for they were flirtatious and funny, all of which was wasted on the stallions. Klyta offered her hand as she knelt on her forelegs. "Very well Severus, if I must share you, then you will at least mount me first, lover." Snape took her hand and glided onto her equine back, pressing up firmly against her upper body but careful to place his hands only on the sides of her waist. The centaurs were the ultimate reason the Forest was forbidden, for though they spoke lasciviously and seductively, they did not suffer any but their own species to touch them. Few male students would survive beyond their third or fourth year if allowed to encounter these deadly vixens.

The centaura bucked irregularly as she trotted across the clearing, forcing him to grip her tightly with his arms and legs. "Klyta, you mischievous imp, perhaps I should bring a crop with me next time, that I may compel you to behave," he breathed into her ear, noting that she was wearing the lavender-scented gel he'd made.

She laughed again in a musical little whinny, then called to her comrades. "Look here, I have another guest, much more pleasant than the first."

Oh, shit. If Potter's been stampeded to death, that will really cause some problems. "Another? I must share you with another man? Unbearable! Someone give me a bow!" he bellowed in a fair imitation of Magorian, the current alpha male. The centaurs cackled and the dappled one, Nausicaa, came up alongside and hoisted him over onto her back. He shrugged at Klyta with mock helplessness, then hung on carefully for dear life as the bucking and prancing began anew.

When Nausicaa finished with him, he begged to be permitted a respite to "recover his strength," and she let him slide from her back. He would eventually have to play with the other two, but he had a decent segue at the moment. "And I would see my rival, who has surely courted the others already unless he is blind, deaf, and foolish."

"Alas, Severus," said the silvery mare, Leucothea, "our other toy is not nearly as much fun. I'm afraid the stallions have already played her out." She sneered and pawed the ground, pointing with one of her human arms at a lumpy heap at the edge of the clearing. For a brief moment he caught his breath in terror that it was Hermione, but he knew that was absurd; the centaurs had a strict code of conduct and did not harm the young. *I can't have her, and neither can they,* he reminded himself with relief.

He peered more closely. It was Umbridge. *Ugh.* Her eyes were open and she was breathing, but really, there was little else that could be said. Snape recalled the night Firenze had moved into the castle, and how he had speculated on the ways Umbridge might welcome him. It certainly seemed that centaurs did like that sort of thing after all. *Ugh. A shame they didn't just finish her off, but really, this might just make her more manageable than anything Lucius could have dreamed up.* *Ugh.* My regrets that you have been burdened with this for even a moment. Yet, how can any appreciate your beauty without some ugliness to compare with it, on occasion?"

The mares giggled again, and the black one, Nephele, grimaced in disgust. "Do you know this creature, Severus?"

"I'm afraid so. May I ask how you acquired her?"

"She came into the woods with some foals from the school," Nephele replied disdainfully. "Got a bit cheeky with the males. I believe she called them 'half breeds,' a mistake I imagine she will not repeat."

Klyta grinned dangerously. "I'm quite sure every one of them demonstrated that there is nothing 'half' about their breeding."

"Well, perhaps some of them are closer to half," smirked Nausicaa with a knowing glance at her girlfriends.

Snape grinned. If there were any stallions within earshot, they would kill him for being privy to that comment. "Ironically, it was my search for the missing foals that led me to the delights of your company. I hope the stallions were not so crass as to teach this woman her lesson in front of the young ones?"

Nephele snorted. "Oh, it wouldn't surprise me, the show-offs. But one foal was a lass and they probably feared she would throw herself wantonly upon their irresistible bodies if she caught sight of them." Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "No, your young have left the forest. Several thestrals are missing; I suspect they have all gone exploring."

"You are undoubtedly correct, as usual, fair Nephele," said Snape. "I beg you, allow me to rid you of this filthy woman; her presence is an affront to this earthly paradise."

Nephele grinned slyly and tossed her hair. She had always been his favorite, and not just because her coat and mane were black. "But Severus," she complained with a pout, "that would mean parting company already, and I have not yet had my way with you." She knelt on her forelegs and held out a hand. "I shall escort you to the edge of the forest."

"Far be it from me to refuse." Snape climbed onto her back and, to his surprise, she took his hands and pulled them around her, placing them on her belly. *Well, well!* He quickly cast a *Mobilicorpus* spell upon Umbridge to haul her along behind them, though he let her lag behind a little way.

"Severus," began Nephele, taking his hands again and raising them to her ribs, "I find it disconcerting that the stallions have bred with this creature."

"Do you now, Nephele? Surely you can't be jealous."

The centaura laughed. "No, not of her--by the heavens, I've coupled with every one of them as well, though never all in one night." She continued to raise his hands inexorably toward her soft breasts. "I don't think it's quite fair that the stallions have permitted themselves to mate with a human while we mares remained chaste."

Snape grinned and softened his voice innocently. "Poor Nephele, I don't think Madam Umbridge can satisfy you."

She arched her back, resting her head on his shoulder and bringing his hands to their exquisite destination at last. "Aye, and poor Severus. It seems it is up to you to restore equity in the forest."

Snape was no fool. Centaura were legendary teasers, though it was most unusual for them to yield this much physical contact. He left his hands where she had placed them, but kept them absolutely still. "But my dear, it would hardly be equitable to relieve you of your chastity and not the others."

Her eyes gleamed as she put her hands behind his head and hungrily pulled his mouth onto hers. Within seconds, three other pairs of hands set to work at the buttons of his robe.

25: Answering the Master

The morning after the night before. Snape has some more explaining to do.

P.S. If you're eating or drinking as you read this, beware of Teh Funneh about 2/3 of the way down.

Snape staggered out of the Forest just before dawn, without a thought for the events that had led him within it. The Hogwarts grounds were quiet, but the lights were on in Dumbledore's office. Though Snape knew Dumbledore was an early riser, it still seemed odd. It nagged at him as he crossed the dewy lawn, but he didn't realize why until he was halfway up the stone steps to the castle.

Dumbledore was *in his office*! Mother of Merlin, the Department of Mysteries, Lucius, Potter... Something spectacular must have happened. Of course, he'd been occupied with his own spectacular event. But Dumbledore must have done something extreme to be reinstated overnight, the whole Ministry stood behind...

Oh, shit. The Toad.

He'd completely forgotten her. That was truly unlike him, to let slip an important detail like that. She must still be suspended with the Mobilicorpus spell. Perhaps little toads and other amphibia of the forest floor were looking up at her right now and wondering if it was a divine visitation. "Why does the deity smell like horses?" they would ask one another.

It would seem that these centaurs are more magical than they let on. Snape shook his head, trying to think clearly, but then he couldn't recall what he was trying to think about. He gave up and sauntered down to the kitchens, then turned in for what was left of the night.

A few hours later, however, the giddiness was gone and he awoke to searing pain on his left forearm.

There was no time to find out what had gone on the night before. The burning was too intense; the Dark Lord had clearly been Summoning him for hours already. *Nearly sixteen years with no action, and the night I finally get some, a political maelstrom takes place. Heh. I suppose Hell must have frozen over once and for all.*

He had a moment of *deja-vu* as he stepped beyond the Hogwarts gates and Apparated in response to the Summoning. To his chagrin, he found he'd been brought to his own house at Spinner's End. *Things must have gone very badly if the Master is forced to hide here.* This was not going to be a pleasant meeting.

It was rather ignominious to have to knock at the door of his own house, but Snape knew better than to barge in upon the Dark Lord. Peter Pettigrew opened the door. *Joy. Perhaps the whole gang is here, raiding the pantry.* The Master was nowhere in sight, so Snape shoved Wormtail out of the way and closed his own damn front door. "Is he ready for me?" he snarled.

Wormtail was too distressed to snarl back, but he did sniff the air and furrow his brow. "Did you come here on horseback?" Snape answered only with a glower, and Wormtail pointed his metallic hand toward the kitchen with a quiet whimper. Snape raised to his full height and strode across the house with determination. Might as well get it over with at once.

"Your servant, my lord," he said, dropping to one knee before the uninvited guest slouched at his table.

"Get up," said Lord Voldemort. Snape took the remaining chair--when the Dark Lord dispensed with formalities, he meant all of them.

"What have you heard regarding last night, Snape?" *Uh oh, the surname.* Things were definitely not in his favor.

"Nothing, my lord. I gather something has happened, however I was rather... focused all night."

Voldemort scrutinized him coldly. "Something has happened, indeed. And what led you to this brilliant deduction?"

"Dumbledore has returned to Hogwarts, though I have not yet learned why."

The stare grew even colder. "You are a spy, Snape."

No self-doubt or I'm a dead man. "I am indeed. And when I suspect that something relevant is going on, I keep my eyes and ears wide open. Sadly, no one saw fit to inform me that there was a major event planned yesterday evening. Thus I spent the last few hours soundly asleep, as is my custom, rather than scouring the castle for information." *So put that in your pipe and smoke it.*

"I had my reasons for leaving you out of this particular campaign."

"Undoubtedly, my lord."

"I generally expect my spies to pick up information on their own, without having to alert them."

"Quite reasonable, my lord."

Voldemort's voice was dropping in both volume and temperature, another ill omen. "Explain yourself, Snape. What had you so *focused* that you did not notice a disaster at the Ministry of Magic, one which decimated my innermost circle of Death Eaters and restored both Dumbledore's and Potter's credibility?"

Oh, bugger. It really hit the fan, then. Snape cleared his throat. "My lord, I do not wish to provoke your ire, but my answer will be difficult for you to believe."

"What were you doing?"

Snape raised a single eyebrow. "I was being laid, my lord."

Silence.

Lord Voldemort raised his wand and plunged into his mind.

Laughter.

Snape rolled his eyes. He had never heard the Master laugh quite like that, not even in the early years; it sounded unforced and genuinely mirthful. And it kept going for quite a long time. The Dark Lord finally caught his breath, pressing one hand to his brow and shaking his head. "A cataclysmic night, then. Clearly I was doomed to fail, to offset your incalculable success."

He laughed again, but Snape wrinkled up his nose in irritation. "You know, it's not entirely unheard-of," he said crossly.

"But *more than one*! Good heavens, Severus, how many? Nephele, Nausicaa, Hermione, Klytemnestra... wasn't there another name?"

"Leucothea," he choked.

"Yes, yes. I barely registered the others. The black-haired beauty caught my attention--*most* extraordinary. Unbelievable, Severus. Simply smashing, if it weren't for the fact that it took place during my hour of direst need." Voldemort smashed his fist onto the tabletop, but he settled back into his chair with a pensive look.

"Still, it gives one food for thought, doesn't it?" he finally said. "A glorious, mystical world we live in, Severus. It is easy to forget in the face of setbacks, but truly, all things are possible."

Lord Voldemort smirked once again. "When Dumbledore arrived last night, I was certain you had betrayed me. I intended to slaughter you, here in your own kitchen, in a particularly abhorrent fashion. And against all probability, you have brought good cheer on an otherwise dreary morning. Ah, Severus," he continued in a tone that could almost pass for fondness, "I still don't trust you. But I'm glad I can let you live."

26: Survivor Guilt

Chapter 26 of 47

Continuing with the Day That Would Not End, Snape finally has a chance to chat with Dumbledore and catch up on all he's been missing.

Exhausted and drained, Snape climbed the stone steps of Hogwarts for what felt like the millionth time in the past twenty-four hours. The Dark Lord had released him after a remarkably short time, without torture or reprimand; indeed, he even "granted" Snape a "favor." Wormtail was assigned as his personal servant for the summer, ostensibly to act as a liason between Snape the Master and keep each one apprised of the latest goings-on. In reality, Voldemort was probably sick to death of Pettigrew's whiny presence but was reluctant to kill him. The smarmy little weasel was showcasing that beautiful silver hand, a fine piece of magic on the Master's part.

Snape wanted only to let gravity pull him down into the dungeons, but he knew he must speak to Dumbledore. *The seventh floor. Huzzah.* He peeked into the Great Hall on the wild chance that the headmaster might be feeling peckish in the mid-afternoon. No such luck.

The headmaster had left his door open, which was most unusual, but he was undoubtedly having plenty of visitors today. For once, Snape did not climb up the moving staircase, but let it carry him to the top at its own leisurely pace.

"Professor Snape." Dumbledore looked as tired and worn as Snape felt, yet his voice was warm and welcoming.

"It is good to have you back, Headmaster." He heard the lower door swing shut behind him.

"Please sit down. I presume you spent most of the night with Tom?"

Snape flopped into the proffered chair. "He finished with me fairly quickly, as I had little to tell him. I have yet to learn what has happened, actually, other than the fact that my best friend is now in Azkaban. And that Potter seems to have bested the Dark Lord in a particularly demoralizing fashion this time."

Dumbledore made Snape give a full report first, starting from Umbridge's hostile takeover of Hogwarts in April. He was not pleased with the cessation of Occlumency lessons, but after hearing that the Prat helped himself to the contents of the Pensieve, the old wizard sighed and slumped wearily in his chair.

"I owe you an apology, Severus. I assumed you stopped the lessons out of lingering hatred and spite. It never occurred to me that Harry had provoked you--violated your privacy."

Snape shrugged indifferently. He knew all along that Potter would snoop; that was why he asked for the Pensieve in the first place. As he continued his report, Dumbledore listened intently, though there were times he seemed about to doze over his steepled fingers. Snape ended with his discovery of Dolores Umbridge in the Forbidden Forest.

"I started to bring her in, but I became distracted." He scratched idly at his left forearm and permitted Dumbledore to draw his own conclusions.

"That would explain the state in which I found her this morning. She must have deeply offended the centaurs; the forest quite rang with their cries of outrage while I searched for her."

Enough of that topic. "Dumbledore--what happened last night?"

"So much, Severus, so much. I hardly know where to begin. You were correct that Tom was goading Harry into a trap, using Sirius Black as the bait. The senior Malfoy and a number of others were waiting for him in the Hall of Prophecy. Harry and his cronies put up an impressive fight before the Order arrived. By the time I got there, Tom himself had stepped in. He nearly got me this time, Severus. Poor Fawkes took a dreadful blow on my behalf." Dumbledore gently pulled a bald, grumpy-looking chick from his breast pocket; the phoenix had indeed seen better days.

"We were not without casualties, Severus. Sirius Black is dead."

For a moment, Snape felt nothing at all, perhaps because his reactions were so many and varied that at first, they cancelled one another out. Surprise, disbelief, an eerie disconcertion at Black's last words, but strangest of all, a *lack* of any smug satisfaction that the bastard would finally stop tormenting him. *Black was my own age... younger, in some ways, robbed of so many years in Azkaban.* "By whose hand, Albus?"

Dumbledore squinted, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Bellatrix Lestrange."

"They were blood relatives." *Bella sinks deeper into the Dark Arts at every turn.* Snape bowed his head out of respect for Albus, but only for a moment. "You must pardon my lack of grief on the occasion."

"I grant you that pardon, Severus, however, I will not be as lenient if you torment young Harry as he mourns his godfather."

Snape felt the weight of the Headmaster's gaze, and averted his eyes in acquiescence. "I may be cold, but I am not a monster, Albus," he said quietly.

Dumbledore closed his eyes again, nodding. "You must forgive me, as well. It has been a terrible night, Severus, and it is easy to think the worst at such times."

"The Dark Lord made the same observation."

After a brief silence, Dumbledore smiled in his warm, crinkly way and stood up. Snape understood that the debriefing was over, and took the Headmaster's arm and let himself be escorted to the door. "I know you are weary, Severus, but there is one more thing I would ask of you before you rest. Would you stop by the hospital wing and make sure Madam Pomfrey's stocks are adequate? There were some Dark injuries last night, and she may need potions."

"Of course, Headmaster. Weasley, I presume?" he said as he stepped onto the moving staircase.

"Indeed. He found his way into the brain tank. But his injuries were minor compared with Miss Granger's."

Nothing showed on Snape's face, he was certain of it, but he was thankful that Dumbledore no longer stood beside him as every inch of his skin turned to ice.

He walked calmly to the staircase, and descended evenly to the third floor. *Black was the only death*, he repeated with every step. He drew open the double doors to the infirmary without missing a beat. He found Poppy Pomfrey in her little office at the front of the infirmary and inquired about the injuries sustained and whether she had adequate remedies. When Pomfrey couldn't explain exactly how Hermione had been hurt, he berated her with neither more nor less than his usual arrogance, and demanded that she procure a witness to the actual cursing. He grilled Neville Longbottom mercilessly until he ascertained that the culprit was Antonin Dolohov.

Snape knew the spell; Dolohov had developed it from Snape's own *Sectumsempra*. He reviewed Pomfrey's treatment regimen, corrected it, added seven additional potions (along with twice as many harsh comments about Pomfrey's competence as a Healer), and checked her supply closet. Not once did he look into the infirmary itself.

It was not until he closed and locked the door to his private chamber that Snape fell to his knees, his mouth stretched wide in a silent scream.

He bathed in a numb daze, and even managed to lapse into a fitful sleep for a few hours. When he woke, he forced himself to sit at his desk and grade essays. The Dark Lord had decided to give him another chance, but returning to the fold meant that he would be watched even more carefully. More than ever before, he must appear unperturbed by current events.

A cacophany outside his door resolved at last into the clopping of hooves. It was only Firenze, the Divination professor, though the echoing stones made him sound like a cattle drive. The centaur opened his door without knocking, though he hardly needed to tap on the wood to announce his presence.

"You must come with me now, out to the grounds," Firenze said. Snape sniffed reprovingly, but there was no point in arguing, any more than one could reason with a dog desperately whining to go outside. In both cases, one either complied swiftly or suffered a predictable consequence.

Snape was glad he did not argue for its own sake, for what awaited him was a rare honor. Two centaur children stood at the base of the stone steps--yearlings, he guessed. He knew that every eye in the herd was upon them, and every arrow in the forest was nocked and drawn--though their aim was probably split evenly between himself and Firenze.

The girl could only be Leuciothea's child, her coat was pure white, but the boy might belong to any of them. He looked quite sullen, while the girl held her head up proudly and hopped on her forelegs in excitement. She glanced several times at the boy, who stared at the ground with his arms folded until she flicked him hard with her tail. She bounced away from his attempt to punch her on the arm with such familiar ease that Snape wondered if they were brother and sister. The boy glared at her once, then stepped forward and spoke in a bored, perfunctory tone.

"Severus Snape, the centaurs hereby issue... fair warning that..." The boy paused, frowning, until the other hissed, "Your life!" "Your life will be forfeit," the boy continued, "should you step--" "Set!" "--SET foot in the forest." He frowned again as if trying to remember the rest, but finally threw up his arms in disgust and backed away.

The little girl rolled her eyes in pure disdain, then stepped forward and made a charming curtsy. "Severus Snape," she began (lisping her "esses" such that it sounded more like "theveruth thnape"), "the centaurs of the Hogsmeade Forest bid you their fondest regards and guarantee your safety in their realm." Now it was the boy's turn to roll his eyes in disgust, until he spied a loose stone on the bottom step and began jiggling it with one hoof. She ignored the boy and beckoned to Snape, who descended the steps compulsively at the wriggle of her finger. He conspicuously placed his hands behind his back, lest one of those archers find an excuse to let fly.

"Mummy said you might make something for my hair that smells like strawberries, if I asked nicely!" she whispered.

"I am your willing servant, young miss," he said. The foal clapped her hands and reared on her hind legs at the same time, clearly overjoyed, then dashed down the stone steps, smacking the boy's rump smartly as she passed him. Both of them raced back to the forest, galloping neck and neck until they disappeared among the trees.

Firenze folded his arms over his chest and eyed him suspiciously, but Snape said nothing. "You have been granted a powerful protection, Snape, but accidents are known to happen," the centaur observed. "I would not push my luck if I were you."

Shrugging, he replied, "Not right away, but I doubt even the collective memory of those stallions can retain a grudge for long." He gave Firenze's equine shoulder a condescending slap as he went inside, just because he *could*. Whoever was spying on the castle right now had seen him honored by the centaura, thus giving the Dark Lord further proof that Snape's claims were true.

Snape shook his head as he descended the staircase to the laboratory, glad to have a task that would occupy his mind for a few hours. *You and your mother saved my life, child. You will be swimming in the scent of strawberries by tomorrow morning.*

27: Feast or Famine

Chapter 27 of 47

Snape's long and miserable day is far from over, as he is forced to entertain yet another visitor.

Oh, for the love of Merlin! Who could that be? Snape glanced at the clock, affirming what he already knew: the nightly curfew was only minutes away, and no one should be knocking on his door right now. Not that the caller was interrupting anything important--Snape had been pacing around his office, finding small and irksome chores to complete for most of the evening, while various cauldrons brewed on his workbench. Anything to take his mind off the fact that *she* was upstairs recovering from a spell he'd essentially invented, cast upon her while he was off betraying her trust.

"Come," he growled wearily. Any distraction was welcome.

"Draco," Snape said as the young man stepped into his office. He looked terrible. Such was the privilege of the young, to display their misery on the surface. "Close the door." Snape held back a sigh and reached into the cabinet above his desk for the bottle of Firewhisky.

"Uncle Severus," Malfoy began, then broke down in great racking sobs.

Oh, hell. Far too late at this point to just go off on a bender and forget his troubles. He stewed in his own juices for too long before coming to me. Snape abandoned the bottle and rounded his desk, putting a comforting arm around Malfoy's shoulders. He'd been neglecting his House lately, in favor of spending time with Hermione; now he'd have to pay the piper.

"All right, lad, all right," he murmured, not sure of what he should say. It would be a mistake to blithely claim that all would be well, for that was certainly *not* the most likely outcome. The fact was, Lucius was lucky to be in Azkaban. Had he returned to face the Dark Lord after the disaster at the Ministry, he would undoubtedly be reduced to many tiny, wet pieces by now.

Snape was certain that Lucius had deliberately fumbled away the Prophecy. The man was far too slick to fail so dismally. Judging by the few snippets he'd heard about the actual events, the whole affair had been one long comedy of errors, more typical of a Muggle television farce than the elegant precision of the senior Malfoy. Lucius had specific ambitions, and they generally involved serving the Master *just enough* to be first in line to take over when he inevitably fell. Said fall might be delayed considerably if the Dark Lord had a chance to study the full Prophecy, so of course Malfoy wanted to keep it out of the Master's hands. And he'd put on a fair show--his intentions weren't transparent, by any means. But the Dark Lord *knew* Lucius Malfoy's capabilities. He would figure it out eventually, and then even the walls of Azkaban might not be thick enough to keep Lucius alive.

Whether Draco understood that much, or was pondering only the fact that his father was a prisoner, Snape didn't know. The only certainty was that Draco was practically incoherent. It was good that he came here to break down; showing this much weakness within the Slytherin dungeons would cost him dearly in status, and back at Malfoy Manor, Narcissa was undoubtedly a hair's breadth from falling apart herself.

"All right, now. Pull yourself together, young man." Snape had never quite figured out the Malfoys. He understood their ruthlessness and calculation, recognized and accepted the cold-blooded killer within Lucius (which had yet to emerge from his son), but the way the three of them utterly doted on one another had always mystified him.

But even more inexplicable was the fact that somehow Snape had, to a lesser extent, become part of this--dare he say it?--family. It was more than just mutual indebtedness, though he and Lucius had saved each others' necks so many times that it was impossible to tally up exactly who owed whom. Nor was it simply a matter of sharing similar aspirations, for there were plenty of others who longed to unseat the Dark Lord. And it was certainly not an issue of trust, for neither Snape nor Lucius was careless or generous with that particular commodity. Yet somehow all of these factors and more had woven their way through both men's lives, forging a bond that withstood both desperate circumstances and the plodding banality of time.

Snape had despised young children before Draco came along, and was not eager to change that opinion afterward. But he'd succumbed when Draco, a ridiculous little towhead, proudly pulled himself up against the end table with his gap-toothed grin, only to lean over and make an enormous raspberry sound with his mouth right on Snape's Dark Mark. Snape rarely associated the rug rumpler of memory with the young man attending Hogwarts School, yet the moment Draco had said "Uncle Severus," the connection was re-established in full.

Draco's sobs were beginning to slow down. Snape found himself instinctively rocking the boy against his chest, as he had done several times with Hermione. It was strange that such a simple thing could be so useful; he never would have guessed that kindness took so little effort. "Very good, Draco. Very good." *Merlin's beard, the child's almost as tall as I am. Where did all the time go?* He'd heard many parents say such things before, but Snape generally felt that the little twerps couldn't mature fast enough. After all, he had more than his fill of their children all year, while they were perpetually surprised by the near-strangers that returned to them every summer.

Snape rested the side of his chin on Draco's forehead, as he had done long ago when the little imp would climb into the crook of his arm and snuggle down for a nap. His arm usually fell asleep (and grew far too warm and sweaty as well), but Snape had always quietly endured it. There had been one bleak afternoon soon after the Dark Lord's fall when he had shed a tear onto that innocent blond head, in miserable disbelief that another human being could possibly trust him enough to use him as a piece of furniture. *By the three Fates, I'd forgotten all about that, and yet that sustained me through some of my darkest moments.* In the sudden rush of remembered pain, he pulled Draco tightly against his chest.

Draco responded by desperately grasping the front of Snape's robes, drawing him down into a burning kiss, as fierce as it was unexpected.

Oddly enough, Snape's first thought was an entirely rational assertion that he'd been right all along: that this whole "kindness" business really was much trickier than it seemed.

28: The Toad's Revenge

Chapter 28 of 47

The tete-a-tete with Malfoy continues. Includes an homage to the comedy of George Carlin. P.S. Don't panic! This is one of my most evil cliffies, but all will settle out, I promise.

Mother of Merlin! If ever there was a time for finesse... Unfortunately, Snape's usual skills at manipulation and gamesmanship were being trumped by the absolute imperative to get this other man's tongue out of his mouth. He took Draco by the shoulders and pulled him back, as the boy's grip on his robe precluded Snape from withdrawing his head.

"You will not do this," said Snape as soon as his mouth was empty again. It did little good, however; when he saw the raw passion in the young man's eyes, his jaw dropped in shock. Draco, having his father's native cunning paired with the lightning reflexes of a Seeker, took advantage of the instant of stunned immobility to reclaim his territory.

"Draco!" This time Snape held onto those shoulders and silently thanked the Goddess that his arms were still considerably longer than the boy's. "Are you out of..." *Careful, Severus! Gently!* "Draco..." *Gah, too gentle.* Snape shook his head a few times, utterly nonplussed. "Why me?" he finally croaked, which summarized the events of the last twenty-four hours better than anything else.

"What's wrong? I felt the way you held me just now. Severus...I *know* you fancy men, it's all right--"

"Stop," Snape said firmly. "This is not all right by any stretch of the imagination, Draco." *Shit!* This was an absolute first, a scenario Snape had never imagined in dream, daydream, or nightmare. *Clearly I've been slacking of late,* he thought ruefully.

A bit of self-deprecation was all it took to bring Snape's focus back up to current events. There was no telling what was behind this ploy, but judging by the intensity of his kiss, Draco was most likely sincere. *Very well. We'll play this "straight up," as it were.* "I don't know what you have heard, young man, but I am no pedophile! This stops now, do you hear me?"

Knowing that Draco would reason his way around this argument as deftly as Hermione had, Snape continued before the young man had a chance to rally his thoughts. He softened his voice considerably. "Draco. You've had a terrible shock, and I am glad to offer you comfort. But within limits, child."

Draco's eyes welled up again. *Thank the Goddess.* A few tears would give him a chance to think this through. Snape pulled the young man into his chest again, this time with a tight grip that would thwart any sudden moves.

Shit, piss, cunt, fuck, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits! It was still incredibly hard to wrap his mind around the concept--he'd never had an inkling that Draco was attracted to men, much less to himself. That he had only now revealed it to a trustworthy friend showed that Draco at least had the proper sense of discretion. However, revealing it under duress was still too impulsive; Draco was compromising himself at the precise moment he needed to act impervious.

Rocking the young man from side to side again, Snape shook his head angrily. He had expected Umbridge to attack both he and Lucius, but it was truly vindictive of her to draw Draco into her schemes. It was bad enough that the boy had been spreading rumors that ultimately slandered his own father (which was, Snape had to admit, an impressive work of mindfuckery on the Toad's part). But that vile woman didn't deserve to wield this much power over Draco, to beguile him into dropping his defenses. *And now she's forced me to manipulate Draco as well. Curse that harpy--I hope the stallions knocked her up!*

Snape's mind finally kicked into full capacity, assessing the situation and calculating the best options. He quickly dismissed any lingering notion that this was some sort of bizarre test; the localized pressure of Draco's erection against his thigh convinced him that the young man was not testing him somehow. Which was rather a shame, because Snape knew precisely how to handle being tested. Telling an enamored Draco that they must remain "just friends" was going to take some *serious* improvisation.

Draco had taken a substantial leap of faith by offering himself this way. *If I tell him I'm not queer, he'll be devastatingly humiliated.* Snape knew he'd be blamed, even though it was Umbridge that misled the boy, and all the passion in that kiss would transform into rage. Even with Lucius safely behind bars, Draco had many, many means to avenge himself for being spurned.

Young, dumb, and full of come... You might even be foolish enough to reveal your own secret in the process of punishing me! would drive both Lucius and Narcissa over the edge to learn that Draco wasn't a "breeder." They would have to accept it someday, but they had enough to chew on at the moment. For their sake, if not for Draco's and his own, Snape reckoned he had to be more creative than simply telling the truth.

So, which lie to exploit? Not his youth, by Goddess; I need a more permanent excuse. Snape quickly tallied some options. *Am I already taken, then?* He wrinkled his nose in a reproachful grimace. *That might get Draco out of my office, but as soon as he starts snooping around to find the name of his rival, it points back to Lucius. That won't do.* But that gave Snape a brief inspiration: *I can blame Lucius--that he'd destroy me if I touched his son.* That sounded feasible for a moment, but he knew better. Draco would just beg his mother to intervene for the sake of "their happiness." Narcissa would probably do it, too; the woman would give her right arm for that boy. No, it wouldn't do to drag Lucius into this scenario, although it was ultimately his fault. *"He speaks so highly of you, Severus." Meddlesome blond bastard.*

What else? Snape pondered the notion of "I changed your diapers, child, I just can't think of you That Way." He sighed defeatedly out loud; Draco would enthusiastically accept such a "challenge" to prove he was no longer a babe-in-arms. The "professor/student" gambit seemed a bit more promising, although it hadn't deterred Hermione for a moment. And she lived on the other side of the castle--Draco could bloody well carve a secret passage between their bedrooms with a sodding table spoon and no one would be the wiser.

By Jove, the most efficient way out of this might just be to go ahead and have the affair.

Snape looked down at Draco's face, pressed tight against his chest. His mind, though racing, was drawing nothing but blanks; this was far more difficult than giving The Toad the brush-off.

I did NOT just think that.

He brought up a tentative fingertip and traced the young man's lips, noting the resulting quiver.

Yes, I did.

Snape relaxed his grip on Draco, giving the young man room to reposition himself. He watched the blond head tip back, the gray eyes fall shut, the soft lips part slightly in anticipation. Snape rested his hand against the pale and perfect skin of Draco's face.

"You're very beautiful."

"Oh, Severus."

29: The Great Escape, Part II

Chapter 29 of 47

When the chips are truly down, Snape demonstrates his merit as a true master of deception.

Mother of Merlin, the boy can kiss! Snape's heart was pounding despite himself. Draco positively *tasted* of wealth and dangerous power, things which Snape had once desperately coveted. Having them both offered so willingly and suddenly, albeit symbolically, was downright intoxicating. "Draco," he whispered, the name slurring as his lips dragged against the young man's.

And I thought Hermione was bold... This kiss, this touch, they were so much more intense, filled with raw sexuality rather than romance. Snape's breath became quicker, ragged, matching Draco's. To his horror and delight, Draco slid his hand off his shoulder in a rapid downward spiral around his ribs and found him, Draco's palm holding him in place as his fingers trailed along the length. The realization that Draco meant to have him *right then and there* struck Snape like a bolt of lightning.

Fuck's sake, I need an excuse, and RIGHT NOW!

And at that moment, when the adrenaline truly surged through his system, he had it.

"Draco, I can't," he sputtered, wrenching himself from the inquisitive fingers. "It's too... I'm sorry. I just can't."

Draco was a quick study, and the cold steel gears of his mind were already beginning to turn. Suspicion began to replace the desire in the boy's gray eyes. "What's the matter now?"

"Draco. It's not you. You must understand... Morgan le Fay! How can I explain?" Snape paused and turned away, resting his hands against the mantel and hanging his head as though deep in despair.

It worked. Draco came up behind him and laid a faltering hand on his shoulder. "What is it, Severus? I'm lost here."

Without turning around, Snape spoke again, his voiced wavering with uncertainty as he set up the play. "Draco. I, too, have suffered a great shock on this day. I haven't spoken of it, for it involves my own personal secrets." He paused again. "You must forgive my vacillations; I did not mean to toy with you, Draco."

It was almost painful to hear the concern in the younger man's voice when Draco finally spoke again. "Please tell me. What's happened?"

Now for the spike. "Draco, you've trusted me tonight. Can I trust you?"

The hand on Snape's shoulder strengthened and he found himself being gently pulled back around. It was so rare to see Draco's face devoid of guile; for a moment, Snape could see that endearing little sprog once again. "Of course you can. You can tell me. You're like family; you're *more than* family!" Draco seemed dangerously on the verge of using "the L word."

"Draco, you are the only one to know this, and I don't want to put this burden on you. But I don't know how else to explain." One last pause, with a painful grimace. "My lover was killed last night... at the Ministry."

Game, set, and match.

"Mother of Merlin!" Draco's whole face went slack, and his eyes began to well up once again.

"Don't cry! Please! I can't bear it. Just... just understand, Draco, that right now... I can't dishonor his memory."

Draco pulled his shoulders down, clasping Snape tightly against his chest. "Of course not. I'm so sorry! If I'd known, I would never--"

Whoops, guilt! "I know, dear boy; you didn't know. You've done nothing wrong. You deserved to know why I couldn't..." Snape closed his eyes tightly and pinched the top of his nose.

"I'm so sorry, Uncle Severus." Snape found himself being rocked gently, just as he had done earlier to Draco. Tendrils of guilt were beginning to nag their way into his awareness; Snape resolved to send the Toad a saddle for Christmas every year for the rest of her life.

"But there's something I don't understand," Draco said almost apologetically as he released Snape's shoulders. "I heard that there were no Death Eaters killed the other night--they were all arrested, I thought."

"That is my understanding, Draco."

The younger man furrowed his brow. "But if it wasn't a Death Eater, then who was it?"

The point of no return. "You know of him, but you have never met him, Draco. His name was Sirius Black."

30: A Time To Act

Chapter 30 of 47

The rather unexpected and overwhelming events of late force Severus into some deep introspection.



(Cool new banner by Phoenix5225)

After an extensive explanation that rang uncomfortably close to truth, Snape managed to gently eject the younger Malfoy from his office. He immediately flopped onto the divan and rested his head in his hands. *A monastic life for sixteen years, and suddenly I'm knee deep in willing flesh.* The truly mindboggling part was, of course, that though he hadn't particularly desired *any* of the latest offerings, he couldn't so much as *speak* to the one woman he wanted.

He sighed out loud, miserable. Snape knew how the rest of the term would go. He would bring fresh potions up to the hospital wing daily. He would go through the motions of teaching his remaining classes in a perfectly convincing manner. He would send reassuring owls to Narcissa in her time of shock and despair. He would deliver gifts to the centaura. He would antagonize The Little Prat as much as circumstances allowed, but he would not mention Sirius Black. He would develop a new and awkward intimacy with Draco in which he would mention Black constantly. He would speak at length with Albus, and with the Dark Lord, and do his best to optimize the results of this most recent *coup*. In short, he would do all that was required of a professor, a Potions Master, a Death Eater, a spy, a double agent, a paramour, a friend. But never once would he pass beyond the doors of the hospital wing, nor even inquire about Hermione's condition.

I am so many things for so many people, but I cannot not be myself for her.

Upon her release from the hospital wing, Hermione immediately went outside for some fresh air. She'd been cooped up far too long, they all said, and she agreed wholeheartedly. The sunlight was balm upon her skin, and the warm summer breezes were kisses from the Earth. She'd spent a lot of time with Harry during her convalescence, and considerably more with Ron, and though she loved them both dearly, it was a relief just to get away from them. Harry was being kind but withdrawn, and turned aside all of her attempts to talk about Sirius. And Ron was being, well, Ron, which he was certainly very good at, but too much of a good thing can become tiresome.

Hermione walked all the way around the lake, just to prove to herself that she was completely healed. Madam Pomfrey had been quite certain, but Madam Pomfrey wasn't the one who'd had her insides split open by Anton Dolohov. At first, her every step was hesitant and cautious, as she waited anxiously for some telltale twinge to reveal that something was still broken. But the further she went, the more confident she felt, and it was almost a relief when she finally stumbled over a dead branch and none of her insides fell apart. At that point, Hermione laughed to herself and knew she'd had enough sunshine. It was time to head down to the dungeons.

He answered her knock by shouting, "Come!" from behind his desk, which forced her to pause a moment to recover from an acute case of the giggles. As she lifted the latch, her heart actually fluttered. It felt like months since she'd last seen him--the brief encounters during O.W.L.s and in Umbridge's office certainly didn't count.

He was framed by stacks of rolled parchment, quill in hand, as always. She closed the door and threw the bolt, then dashed across the room. The silly suspicious git didn't even get up from his chair; he looked paralyzed with indecision, as though he wasn't sure if she was running to embrace him or to club him over the head. She would have soared into his lap, but he apparently got a clue at the last second and leapt to his feet.

She felt his mouth form her name against the side of her head, but he made no sound. "Severus," she whispered back, smiling. He was holding her so delicately, as though she were made of glass, undoubtedly afraid of injuring her again. *Silly*. She squeezed his rib cage as hard as she could, just to show him she was not frail nor weak, but his hands remained cautiously hovering on her robes.

"You can hold me, you know. I'm not broken," she said, nuzzling between his chin and the collar of his shirt. A drop of water splashed onto the side of her face, which made her glance upward with dread; Merlin only knew what might be leaking through the ceiling of the dungeon.

"Oh, my God," she said, observing the glistening track of the teardrop on his face.

She put her hands inside his robe and pulled him as close as she could. *Poor sweet Severus. How you must hurt, to let it show on the outside*. He gave no other sign of crying--not a sound, not even an irregular breath, but he couldn't hold the tears back. "Severus. We're all right. Everything's all right. I missed you, too. But all's well again." As he had done for her in the past, she began turning her body to rock him, uncertain exactly what was so painful for him.

"I can't do that again, Hermione," he finally said, his voice weak and gravelly.

"Do what?"

"I now understand your distress when I disappeared for the spring holiday," he began, clearing his throat. "This whole time... even though I knew you were here, and most likely safe... All I wanted to do was go to you, to look at you, hold you..."

"You can hold me now, Severus, I'm fine. I'm all healed, really! It's all right." He encircled her with his long arms, seeming to set aside some of his caution, but still holding back his strength. Again, she rocked him comfortingly, her fingertips subtly exploring the muscles of his shoulder blades. *Mother of Merlin, he has a wicked body hidden under all these clothes*.

As she expected, he composed himself fairly quickly and finally straightened up, taking her by the hand. "Come sit with me," he said, leading her to the divan. A rabble of butterflies launched in her stomach in anticipation, and she chided herself internally. *Don't get your hopes up, you know how uptight he is. Tears or no, he probably only wants to talk*. Ever since That Night, Hermione had been dying to get him alone and thank him properly for... well, for everything.

Sure enough, he scooted back against the armrest as he sat down, putting one knee up onto the seat. *Oh, well*. She did the same, facing him across the divan, but she held onto his hand very gently so he would not withdraw it. He moistened his lips as he looked down at their hands together. *Oh, Severus, you talk too damn much. Can't we just snog, even a little?*

"Hermione, there is something I must do."

His tone was serious and intense. *Ugh, so much for snogging*. She settled back against her own armrest in resignation. "I'm listening, Severus." He raised his hand in a request for silence, and she bit back her impatience. At last he set his jaw and looked up at her.

"I've had enough of this, Hermione. All of it. Lies, subterfuge, espionage, counterespionage; I've had enough."

This is bad. "Severus..."

"Don't speak. Listen. I'm quite serious, Hermione. In the past week, I've played more roles than the entire Royal Academy of Drama. You were hurt by a man I despise, yet I must cooperate with him as though we were true brothers-in-arms. Another man whom I despised was killed, and I find myself wrought with grief that I cannot express. There was a time I never expected to reach my twentieth year, but now thirty-six seems far too young to die. And just days ago, the Dark Lord confessed his intent to murder me. I only escaped through extreme actions and incredibly great luck." Severus turned his head a moment, wincing. Hermione's eyes widened at his display of regret. *He must have done something truly terrible*.

Severus continued. "A friend whose purposes are not so different from my own is now in Azkaban, where he will suffer wretchedly. I have comforted his family such as I am able, to give him hope that they are still protected. But the only one I wanted to comfort was you, Hermione. The only thing I wanted to do. And it was forbidden."

Without warning, he leapt from the divan and paced to the other side of the room. "I will not live this way any longer. I mean to end it all, Hermione." He turned to face her again, his eyes flashing. "Today."

31: Stress Management

Chapter 31 of 47

Hermione gives Severus a swift kick in the seat of the pants, launching him back into reality after a rather surreal period.

"I mean to end it all, Hermione. Today."

Snape expected some measure of support for his resolution. An encouraging smile, or at least a show of interest in the topic. Hermione's jaw dropped and her eyes widened, but she said nothing, didn't even ask him to continue. He nearly sniffed in frustration, but he caught himself; it was reasonable that she would require a moment to adjust to the surprise.

He started to pace. "I can explain myself to Albus tonight. He won't be happy, but he's a resourceful wizard, he'll find a way to make do. The Dark Lord will not notice my absence for some time--with luck, an extended time. I can inform him that I need to secure his interests at Malfoy Manor; that's just the sort of thing a spy should do under the circumstances. I've given it considerable thought and I believe that the South Pacific is the best choice. Given that generality, is there any particular place you favor?"

"What?" She gaped as though he were speaking in a foreign language.

"Hermione Granger, I know you are recovering from a terrible injury, but you are capable of sharper reasoning than this! Pay attention, dear girl!"

"Pay attention... Severus, you're raving like a lunatic!" She jumped up from the divan and stomped angrily to face him. "One minute you're about to kill yourself, then you're asking me to choose a spot in the South Seas... for what, exactly? Severus! What's going on?"

Closing his eyes, Snape took a deep breath and forced himself to let it out slowly. "I see. I was ambiguous. That was my fault." His voice was taut, and he knew this would only aggravate her further. Another deep breath, then. His shoulders dropped and the tension in his throat softened. "I did not mean to imply the Ultimate End, my dear. I could have that easily enough by staying put; I'm sure there are many who would help me along! No. I mean to end *this* life, Hermione, this impossible service to two masters. I want a new life--away from all of this."

Now the cogs were turning in her mind, and he sat back against the edge of his desk, watching her expectantly. *It was quite a rush of ideas; rather rude of me to expect her to suss it all out in one go, I suppose.* A few minutes' delay would not matter, and now that he was certain that she understood, it would be time well spent. Or so he thought, until her hands slowly came up to rest on her hips.

"You want to leave all of this... everything... and you expect me to just join you?"

Snape's breath caught in his throat for the first time since he'd been a child.

"That was the idea..." His voice was barely audible. For a last, peaceful moment, she simply stared at him, the calm before the storm. His chest began to ache in a familiar way that he had long forgotten; he recognized it from his childhood as the sensation that used to precede a beating. He was startled to realize that this was fear.

"Severus... now *you* must listen." Hermione's voice was throaty with anger, but it shook with her attempt to rein in her temper. "I've just spent, what, four days in the hospital. I was *hurt*. Seriously hurt, worse than anything ever before in my life. I knew I might die. I don't think I need to explain that this gave me pause to think. Now, do you know what I decided?"

He shrugged feebly when she paused, but he realized that she wasn't waiting for an answer, she was producing one herself. Her eyes came back into focus. "Quite a few things, actually. One is that if I'm going to die tomorrow, I don't want to waste today fretting about a stupid Ordinary Wizarding Level examination! You think thirty-six is too young to die? Imagine how I feel!"

She stamped her foot, then averted her eyes and took a few calming breaths. "Severus. I want to live. Really *live*. I never realized how precious it is just to breathe the air, walk in the sun, smell a flower or eat blueberries. I'm so glad to be alive right now, I feel as though I could simply explode! And you ask me to go on the run with you? To give up everything I have and become a bloody refugee from You-Know-Who's wrath? It's absolutely insane! I don't want to spend the rest of my days hiding on some Polynesian island! Oh, sure, at first it will all be tropical fish and coconuts, and drinks with little paper umbrellas, but for how long?" She shook her head and began to pace just as he had earlier.

"Running, hiding, looking over my shoulder constantly, never staying anywhere long enough to be recognized--who wants that? I certainly don't! Not to mention that I still have two more years of school! You want me to go gadding off on my own without finishing my studies? What if something were to happen to you? What would become of me? I'm not ready to live as an independent witch--and I'm never going back to being a Muggle! All of my friends, my parents... I'm not going to just vanish and never see them again! And let's not even mention the fact that they all need us--you especially--and that we'd be abandoning them like a pair of utter cowards!"

She came to a halt directly in front of him and took hold of his wrists. "No. Absolutely not. No. If that's what you need to do, Severus Snape, you're on your own."

He had to compose himself a moment before he could speak, and even then his voice was tremulous.

"But Hermione... I can't go on like this any longer. The charades, the duplicity. Something has to change, *something*; I, too, don't want to waste the time I have left on this earth any longer."

She gazed up at him warmly, with a wistful little smile crinkling the corners of her eyes. "Then let's change something, Severus. But for the better, not the worse!" The smile broadened a bit, and her hands slipped into his. "There's no need to toss out the baby along with the bathwater; we just need to figure out what's bothering you the most and change it!"

Snape rolled his eyes. "That would be my compulsory service to *this*," he snapped, gripping his left forearm.

Hermione regarded him with empathy. "Fine, I'll rephrase it: we need to figure out what things you *can* change and eliminate some of *those*." She raised her brows gamely and made a wry, lopsided grin. "It's just a matter of setting your priorities, Severus; there's bound to be something you can yield, to make the rest more bearable."

"This from the young lady who, but two short weeks ago, was paralyzed with self-doubt about her adequacy."

She shook her head, her smile tightening. "Bad tack, Severus. This is a 'you' thing, not a 'me' thing. And need I remind you that when I faltered, you insisted on pointing out the error of my thinking? Finally, at least I never wanted to trade in my Hogwarts robes for a grass skirt!" Her glare could have wilted the entire contents of Pomona Sprout's greenhouses.

He folded his arms stubbornly. "Fine, then. I'm open to suggestions from the floor."

That earned him a scowl. "Why must you always be so difficult? It's not as though you've confided in me. How should I know what's bothering you, much less what can or can't be changed?"

"I? Haven't confided in you?" Snape straightened to his full height, brimming with indignation, but just as quickly, his mind went blank and his umbrage evaporated. He couldn't think of a single counterexample to her claim. *Surely there must have been something...by the Goddess, how can I feel so bloody vulnerable in her presence if I HAVEN'T said anything? Impossible!*

She was studying him thoughtfully, nodding to herself. "Funny. I suppose for you, just a smile is an act of confidence. It's certainly much more than you grant most people." She stepped forward and gingerly slipped her arms inside his robe again. "It's all right, Severus; I think I'm far better off *not* knowing all the secrets you keep."

Snape's eyes bulged out for an instant. "You know, dear girl, I think we both are."

Squeezing his ribs, Hermione harrumphed in a cynical chuckle. "So, *dear sir*, I think that leaves this matter up to you. Do you suppose you can find some little thread or two in your web of intrigue that you can cut? Something that won't involve an escape to the South Seas, that is."

Resting his chin on the top of her head, Snape smirked. "Are you sure? Perhaps you could get used to a life of coconuts and paper parasols, hmm?"

She tipped her head back to glare at him. "Severus, I think ten minutes in the tropics would leave you mortally sunburned, not to mention that no self-respecting umbrella drink would park itself in your uptight hand."

Oof, she's got me there. "Hermione Granger, you are an insolent little imp."

"Oh, as if! I'm quite sure your idea of a vacation in the South Seas involves harvesting some sort of nasty stinging jellyfish or magical coral or something."

"Insufferable wench!" He couldn't keep the smile from his lips, and squeezed her tightly.

Hermione laughed as well. "Indeed! I happen to think that's what you like about me, Severus! Now, will you please stop this bickering and kiss me as though there won't be any tomorrow?"

When she phrased it that way, it was damn impossible to come up with a counterargument.

32: Atropos

Chapter 32 of 47

Smooching, angst, and extreme tenderness, in that order.

This was so much more than a mere kiss.

The centaura had kissed him. They had also lavished attentions on him that he had never experienced before. It was a unique thrill to be the central focus of four pairs of hands, four mouths, four tongues, all vying for his attention. All beautiful, all murderously powerful, and all driven by unrelenting outrage that *their* stallions had dared to couple with anyone but them. He would be dead if he had refused them--if not by their hand, then by that of the Master--but his acquiescence had little to do with the mortal threat.

For one thing, he had underestimated their magic. Though it always disinhibited him, making him banter and flirt in a most uncharacteristic manner, he'd always maintained his limits in the past. That had made him overconfident, and when their seductions went beyond their usual amusing pastime, he had been swept away by the true force of their power.

He knew that they were simply using him as the instrument to punish the impudent stallions who, with their arrogance and possessiveness, were certainly devastated by the whole affair. These were magical creatures, sentient but not human, and their psyches were governed by extremes of tragedy and comedy. Even the Muggles understood this, and created mythology to represent them as such. He was partaking fully of Centaur culture and he knew it, and it *was* an honor to be brought into the clan in this way.

Furthermore, he *understood* being used by the centaura. There was a certain relief in knowing that there would be no expectations of him after the acts were completed. The few partners he'd had in his youth had been similar arrangements. Nearly all were older women whose agendas required the services of a Dark Potionmaster, and they were only too happy to pay in whatever currency he requested. At the time, the idea of exchanging poisons for sex had suited him perfectly, as he wanted no truck with weak abstractions like love and desire. Such things were obviously not meant for him, and he'd long ago decided they were not worth having. Only much later did he come to understand that his body should be as sacrosanct as his mind, and as such, was not intended to be given away for mere beads and trinkets.

But none of these factors had mattered, for ultimately he was *awilling* participant with the centaura. Bitterly alone for his entire life, it was irresistible to revel under their ministrations. The four "Marauders" had stripped him of his self-regard in his youth, and there was something marvelously symmetric about these four Sirens proclaiming him as a perfect man for their desires. They did not love him, but they truly *wanted* him, and for such a lonely man, being wanted that way was intoxicating.

Draco, too, had wanted him, in a way that felt almost as foreign as the centaura's desires. Draco's passion was infused with love, or at least some intense facsimile of it, and was therefore more unfamiliar--and frightening. It was a bit disconcerting to realize that Draco's inherent maleness was one of the least distressing factors in their recent tryst. What concerned him the most was that Draco had unwittingly bestowed upon him the power to break the young man's heart. Severus Snape had a very short list of people whom he would rather NOT hurt, and the majority of those names ended with "Malfoy."

He had meant it when he said that Draco was beautiful. He had Narcissa's pale and delicate skin, and fine, aristocratic features that were completely unlike the coarse visage that met Snape in the mirror every morning. But it was more than that. Draco had inherited Narcissa's heart as well, though he tried so hard to emulate that of his father. He went through the motions of thoughtless cruelty and dispassion, but there was something about him, some seed lurking below the surface that threatened to bloom at any time. Draco might grow into a facade that resembled Lucius, but he would never *be* Lucius. He lacked that fundamental ruthlessness, or, put another way, he possessed too much of a conscience. Draco wouldn't last a year if he were forced to fill his father's shoes among the Death Eaters, which was all the more reason that Voldemort had to be slain, and soon.

Once Snape had made his initial decision to yield to Draco's misbegotten fantasy, it had been easy to kiss him. A bit of long-forgotten curiosity had been dredged back up from the depths of his subconscious, and bloody hell, the lad really could *kiss*. If Draco had paced himself, things might have ended differently, but the overt sexual gesture was too much. Draco had not yet discovered that his heart and body were too precious to hand over at the first sign of kindness, and that was a lesson Snape could only teach by example.

A lesson Snape was rapidly forgetting in Hermione's embrace.

It was so much more than a simple kiss. He had fallen in love with this silly, silly girl months ago. He was hopelessly in love with her now, foolishly, selfishly in love with her, even though she was far better than he deserved and would surely come to her senses sooner or later. She would wake up one morning and set her eyes upon someone young and handsome, and her dour old Potions professor would be yesterday's news. He knew it. He also knew he might not survive long enough to see the interest fade from her eyes, and that alone was worth it. He might yet go to his grave with the knowledge that at least one lover's tear would be shed over it (*well, besides*

Draco's...) Even if her departure preceded his death and he was forced to endure the loss, it would be worth it. He had never felt more alive than he did in her arms, and that was a treasure worth any price.

Everywhere she touched him, his skin felt ablaze. Every soft little cry or moan that escaped her throat sent a rush of heat through his body. He was only half-conscious of leading her toward the divan; he would have carried her, but he was lightheaded from breathing so hard and was not sure he could make it without stumbling. When she pulled away with a fiendish smile and tugged his hand toward the bedroom, he stopped short and closed his eyes, fairly certain that it would be a mistake to follow her even though the reason was momentarily unclear.

"Come on, Severus," she breathed, still smiling as she backed towards the bedroom door.

Lord Voldemort, sitting at his kitchen table, speaking her name. "Hermione, I *can't*...not yet." She began to scoff, but the intrusion of THAT particular memory had brought back his resolve. "Not because you're too young, or because you're my student! Hermione, I absolutely *can not do this* until you've mastered Occlumency. I *can't*. Please!" *Merlin's blood, I can't turn you down, either... Damn it to seven hells, please, Hermione, please don't push me any further.*

"Oh, Severus!" An echo of Draco's sigh, yet infused with exasperation, not surrender. "Give over, already! If I'm forced into Legilimency, he'll see all this anyway. What difference does it make at this point if we... you know?" She glanced down demurely, smirking at her own sudden, absurd shyness.

Praise the Goddess for safe topics. "I'll tell you the difference, Miss Granger; in fact, I shall make it our last Occlumency lesson for the term." His voice almost resumed its normal timbre and his breathing slowed. "You're correct that all of this is a terrible risk, and I am a weak and foolish man for subjecting you to it. Had I not vowed, in an equally weak and foolish moment, never to Obliviate you, you would be in the corridor already with a slight headache and a strange tingling in your stomach."

She glowered at him, but he did not give her time to interrupt. "My only justification, inadequate though it is, lies in the fact that you *are* an Occlumens, Hermione. I believe that right now, were you pressed by a typical Legilimens, you could keep your secrets. I doubt that anyone short of Albus or the Dark Lord could extract your memories of... this." To Snape's horror, he felt his cheeks begin to flush. *Damn that girl!* Fortunately, she was gazing unfocused at the floor, a proud little smile on her face as she absorbed his compliment.

"And naturally, they're the only ones I'm likely to encounter any time soon," she finally uttered softly. "But that proves my point even more so, *Professor Snape*. Again I ask: If you think I can't help but give our sordid tale away, then why not at least make it a story worth telling?" She grinned at him, bold and coy at the same time. *How does she DO that?*

He took two steps toward her before realizing what he was doing, whereupon he halted abruptly and let out a heavy sigh. "If you can behave yourself for five more minutes, you wicked girl, I will explain it!" She wrinkled up her nose, but at least the fire in her gaze fell back to a low simmer. "Right now, Hermione, most of your memory is visual. A cursory Legilimetic glance, even by the very strong, could still yield nothing of interest—at least, not *professional* interest. Behind the screens in your mind, it could be passed off as mere fantasy. A daydream, such as you formerly indulged in during my class." Her eyes widened in alarm, and he couldn't keep himself from smirking. "What happened... in my chambers..." he began, grinding his teeth at the look of recognition in her eyes, "that is a tactile memory, and a powerful one at that. Such things are very difficult to conceal, my dear. Which is why I left you alone at the time. I wanted no association in your mind between that event and myself."

"Severus...*that event* is completely associated with you--"

"Silence!" he barked, then more softly, "Be still, Hermione, please. Don't reinforce that idea. Again, right now, it can pass as a fantasy, part of your imagination rather than your memory. That is what you must say if, by the blood of Merlin, you are interrogated. That you have fancied me for some perverse, inexplicable reason, that it was never expressed, nor returned. Naught but a schoolgirl's fantasy, played out in your mind in such detail that it very nearly seems real."

Hermione glanced away and covered her mouth with her hand. "Good heavens, Severus, they'll think I'm a world-class party girl, sitting there in Potions and 'making up' such stories."

"As it should be, Miss Granger," he deadpanned, earning a fierce scowl.

"So, you believe I can pass your kisses off as daydreams? I admire your confidence, Severus," she grumbled flatly. "So if, over the summer, I am captured and subjected to intense Legilimency by You-Know-Who, you'll feel safe and secure because he'll never suspect it's anything but wishful thinking?"

Snape glared at her angrily. "I will not feel secure in any sense of the word if you taken by the Dark Lord."

"But you're certain he won't find out about us?"

A sudden painful hitch in his chest stole his breath away for a moment. "No," he finally confessed. "I can't be certain. I can only hope that what you have learned will be enough."

She looked at him dispassionately, nodding. "Then we've already passed a point of no return, by your own admission. Isn't that what you just said?"

Walked right into that one. "No! Well, perhaps yes, but damn it all, Hermione, you've twisted my words against me." He straightened up and paused, his voice squeaky in his stunned sincerity. "I don't think anyone's ever done that before!" *Good grief, not even Albus can pin me down in one of my own arguments.*

The novelty was only worth a brief distraction, and he quickly set his jaw again. "Yes, it's true that perhaps we've already gone too far to pass the memories off as insignificant. It is also true that we may *not* have passed that point, that it still lies just on the other side my chamber door. Listen to me, Hermione." He slowed his speech, giving each word plenty of time to set in. "If the worst were to happen, I *could not live* with the knowledge that my actions led to... to..."

Voldemort, at his kitchen table, speaking her name. Snape's knees started to buckle before he could banish the image from his mind.

"All right, Severus." She stared through half-lidded eyes at the floor between them, leaning back against a stone shelf laden with glass jars. "All right. I'm tired of this, but all right." She raised her eyes again, their warmth all but blotted out by a veneer of frustration. "You're asking a lot, you know," she finished sternly.

"I know," he replied. She raised her brows cynically as he continued. "But I have one more lesson, one which might ameliorate the situation, if you'll hear it."

Hermione exhaled loudly through her nose and folded her arms, but she also cracked an indulgent smile at him, shaking her head in disbelief at her acquiescence. Snape stepped before her and delicately placed his hands above her elbows.

"Auditory memory, Hermione, is the least reliable of all in Legilimency. So many words one hears in a lifetime, so many voices... it's nearly impossible to sort real from imaginary. That's why Legilimency isn't used in the Wizengamot. Aside from crimes of blood, most legal matters exist in the realm of words, and verbal testimony extracted through Legilimency is far too subjective. Because of this, I will speak freely to you for a moment."

He took a deep breath and lowered his voice, even though they were in no danger of being overheard. "Your brush with your own mortality inspired you, *licensed* you, to live more passionately. Well, if you have not surmised it already, dear girl, my impulse to disappear in the South Seas was fueled by the same desire. I, too, would like nothing more than to renounce all of this absurdity and reclaim my life *and* the power to spend it only as I choose. Do you understand, Hermione?"

She made no sound at all, staring at him in wide wonder, but gave her head a quick, tiny nod.

"Yes, of course you do," he said quietly, brushing the side of her face lightly with his fingertips. "Just as you know that such a course is impossible. I am mired here, Hermione; I have no choice but to continue this journey to its end. And thus I must be cautious in the extreme, if I'm to have any... anything left when this war is over. You do understand that, don't you?" He searched her eyes, hoping that his own expression was not too pathetically pleading.

She finally averted her gaze, resting her hands on his forearms. "I do, Severus, I do." She glanced up at him sheepishly several times, then grinned wryly. "You won't blame me for trying, will you?"

Snape let his eyes fall shut as he soaked in the delicious notion that right now, this woman *wanted* him, wanted *him*. "Blame you? Silly girl. I haven't come over here to blame you."

Her eyes glinted with genuine curiosity. "Really? Then what are you up to, Severus Snape?" she asked coquettishly, squeezing his forearms. Her eyes darted up and down, between his eyes and his lips, clearly anticipating a kiss in the immediate future.

Snape was only too happy to oblige, parting her lips with his tongue in a desperately brief concession, then raised his head but a hand's breadth and looked her steadily in the eye.

I love you. "I love you, Hermione Granger."

33: Season's End

Chapter 33 of 47

School's out, and Albus wants to have a little talk.

Snape sat on the cliffs behind the castle, overlooking the lake and marking the last of the previous term's essays. With the students absent and Peter Pettigrew awaiting him at Spinner's End, Snape marked and tallied the scores from his Potions classes at a very slow pace, basking in the balmy summer breezes. Contrary to popular belief, he liked a bit of fresh air now and then.

Terminal case of sunburn, indeed! Snape had been sunburned once: it had developed on his nose during a particularly long Quidditch practice. The pain was accompanied by constant comments about "burns on 50 percent of his body," and he'd resolved that this would never happen again. Since a hat was impossible during Quidditch play and tanning was ludicrously out of the question, he'd labored all that week to brew an appropriate potion before the next practice. It worked, although every single game and practice for the rest of the term had been cloudy, a fact which he considered proof of the existence not only of the Goddess, but of her vicious sense of humor.

The giant squid had taken a shine to him, or to be more precise, to the bits of roasted ham and beef that Snape tossed into the lake, and would cruise to the cliffside like a gelatinous torpedo at the first sight of Snape's black robes. Snape didn't mind; the tentacular gestures from the absurdly phallic creature struck him as rather droll, and he began taking all of his meals on the cliff. Any excuse to further delay the inevitable trip home to Wormtail for the summer.

Four days after the Hogwarts Express had rid the grounds of noisy students (with the unpleasant side effect of emptying his office of Hermione), Snape felt a familiar sensation as he tossed a kipper to the squid. A Rufous Scops owl was revolving about his head, finally alighting on his wrist and conscientiously offering a small scroll tied to its leg. Snape scowled at the little fellow for the sake of appearances, but he internally admitted that the beastie had grown on him. *Like a fungus*. He unrolled the parchment; the handwriting was Dumbledore's, who had been absent since the end of the term.

Dear Severus,

We have matters to
discuss. At your next
convenience, then.
Albus

Snape scratched the owl's belly absently, which resulted in an obscenely cute warble. He raised his arm to look the creature in the eye. "You are a menace." The owl responded by rotating its head 180 degrees and puffing air noisily through its bill.

The climb to Dumbledore's office was mitigated by the fact that the headmaster had opened a bottle of his finest Scotch by the time Snape arrived. "Severus! Please sit!" The headmaster bustled cheerfully about the office; it was no wonder he picked the cutest owl in Hogsmeade as his courier. Snape sighed and accepted the crystal glass without comment. "Have you finished your grades?"

"Sadly, yes. The squid nearly swiped all of the seventh-year final exams into the lake, which would have slowed things down considerably. Pity it doesn't have longer arms."

Dumbledore grinned. "I commend your attempts to feed it, but I don't think it can grow any larger," he chirped as he poured the Scotch. "Tell me, what do you plan to do next?"

"I have little choice! I must take my leave at home, where I will spend my time pumping Peter Pettigrew for secrets while attempting to keep my own. Perhaps I shall resume my work on curatives for gastric ulcers; I will surely need one before the fall term begins."

Dumbledore smiled wistfully. "I don't envy you the company of that one, but do try to be patient with him. I think Peter has suffered a great deal."

It wasn't even worth rolling his eyes at that comment. Snape simply downed half the Scotch. Dumbledore briefly averted his eyes with a sad but indulgent air, then continued.

"I've been busy, Severus, these past few months. I developed a number of grim suspicions, and I have recently had a chance to test them. I believe we have to reckon some new considerations into our attack on Tom Riddle."

Snape instinctively scanned the room for eavesdroppers, his stomach clenching at the dozens of wide-eyed portraits on the walls. They were obliged to serve Dumbledore, but he still didn't trust them. "We should discuss this somewhere else," he hissed.

"Now, Severus," Dumbledore chided mildly, "you could stand to be a bit more trusting."

So I'm told. "And you could be more cautious. But if you insist, then spit it out already. The best sunshine comes in half an hour; I'd prefer to be on the cliffside by then."

Dumbledore laughed merrily, delighted by the notion of Snape sunning himself. But he winced with a pained gasp, and as he leaned over his desk, Snape glimpsed for the first time that his right hand was blackened and withered. A chill ran from Snape's head to his toes, and he stared blankly at the ruined hand, unwilling to accept that his vision was accurate.

"Albus... what happened?"

Dumbledore pulled down his sleeve again and shook his head. "That was not the topic I meant to discuss. Tom did not deliver that injury himself, and that is all you need to know. I trust you, my friend, but you are not infallible."

Snape licked the front of his teeth, an attempt to stave off panic. If Voldemort had not done that to Dumbledore, then they had a new and terrible enemy to contend with.

"That is not the reason I called you here, Severus," Dumbledore continued, though the cheerful mien had dropped and he suddenly looked very old. "I've given it plenty of thought, and I think the time is right." He paused, giving Snape a piercing look. "I would like you to take over the Defense Against the Dark Arts classes this fall."

Fucking Merlin's balls.

"What?" Snape finally croaked, hoping against hope that his ears had played a trick on him.

"You heard correctly. You will teach Defense Against the Dark Arts this fall." He nodded at Snape meaningfully.

"But... but..." Snape couldn't extract the argument from his whirling mind.

"Come, now, Severus. You knew it would have to happen eventually. This is very difficult for me to ask, and you're not making it any easier on a tired old man." Dumbledore's eyes were weary, almost pleading, and dewy with unshed tears.

Snape's, on the other hand, were wide with shock and what might be called terror in a lesser man. He knew the implications of this request. Dumbledore meant for him to leave Hogwarts at the end of the term, to return in full to the Dark Lord's service. *That, or die.* Death seemed like the preferable option to the complete re-immersion into Voldemort's culture, where his every move, every *thought*, would be under direct scrutiny.

Snape glanced back down at the headmaster's blackened hand, realizing that he would never know what sort of injury this was, never be allowed to study it nor develop a potion to cure it. Dumbledore did not mind if the Dark Lord perceived him as feeble or injured; in fact, he rather counted on it, hoping to ease the Dark Lord into a false sense of security. But he would not want Voldemort to know just what it took to inflict such an injury upon him. The Master would unleash his full, focused power into Snape's mind on this topic. Even the best Occlumens couldn't hope to hold out forever against such an onslaught--and in one year, Voldemort would have all the time he wanted to pursue the matter.

"Can you tell me... why now?" Snape's voice was low and unsteady.

Dumbledore averted his eyes, and Snape knew the answer. *You found a chink in the Master's armor, a real weakness, and you dare not let me overhear it.* An electrical tingle raced outward from his chest through his limbs. This was *it*, the proverbial IT, the still point in a turning world. Albus had been exploring the reasons for Voldemort's apparent immortality since the incident with Quirrel. He'd finally found IT, the one true weakness that would put an end to the Dark Lord. Snape's hands shook, and he gripped the arms of his chair. *By Hecate, he's done it. It's going to end at last. Really end.*

He forced himself to slow his breathing, calm his body's reactions. Never before with Albus had it been so utterly necessary to keep his thoughts and physiology under tight control, for the Dark Lord would naturally be quite curious about this conversation. "I'm grateful, Headmaster. You are aware that I have been interested in that post for some time."

Albus's eyes glazed ever so slightly. "I'm loathe to lose you as my Potions Master, Severus," he began, his voice cheery once again. "But this past year has been an utter wash, I'm afraid, in their Defense education. If I could, I'd hold all of the seventh-years back, in fact. They've missed out on the most important material, thanks to Madam Umbridge." Dumbledore had not just spouted that line as fodder for the Master to review under Legilimency; it was the truth and they both knew it. "And as difficult as it will be to find a Potions Professor to fill your shoes, it will be nothing compared to finding a Defense Professor that can fill the gaps Dolores left behind." The headmaster smiled grimly. "I would like to see all of the students caught back up to the appropriate level by the end of this next year, Severus."

Snape sat back in the chair and donned his favorite disinterested sneer. "If they are not, Headmaster, it will not be for lack of effort on *my* part."

Albus stood up and rounded the desk, shaking Snape's hand after helping him to his feet. "Do your best, Professor Snape, and they won't be able to keep from learning. Although I have had complaints about the fairness of your marks." The voice was stern, but Snape concentrated his gaze on Dumbledore's mouth. Albus was such a bloody Gryffindork, Snape knew the old man's eyes were twinkling like fireflies. "Before you leave Hogwarts for the holidays, I want a clear explanation of your scoring policies, with representative writing samples from each of your classes for each mark. I'd like to present every irate parent with a nice, objective explanation that their child deserved precisely the score he or she deserved."

"Of course, Headmaster," Snape snarled. *Note to self: brew more Sunban Potion.*

34: Spinner's End

Chapter 34 of 47

The companion guide to the chapter of HBP bearing the same name.

It seemed that all of Britain was doomed to suffer from the Dark Lord's humiliation at the Ministry. The dementors were spread far and wide, creating unseasonably cold weather, and major attacks on Muggles were becoming commonplace. All in all, Snape found it an absurd waste of resources, but he did not care to criticize the Master--

not even regarding Peter Pettigrew's current assignment. Instead, he made his opinions known only to Pettigrew himself.

"Wormtail, I do *not* want to find another of your socks *anywhere* but your feet from this day forward." "Precisely how long do you intend to let that pot 'soak' before you wash it?" "Merlin's balls, man, how did I end up with the moniker of 'Snivellus' back at Hogwarts? Given your proficiency at whining, surely you have spent a lifetime perfecting the technique!"

Pettigrew was useless as an assistant in any context, mainly because his private service to the Dark Lord had left him a walking anxiety attack, too strung out to concentrate on anything more complex than picking his nose without injuring it on that sharp metal hand. It was no wonder the Master pawned him off for the summer.

Perhaps the worst aspect of this unwelcome company was that there was no possible hope of seeing Hermione until the term at Hogwarts resumed. With that Floo spell, she might have been able to visit him now and then, but there was no getting rid of Wormtail. The sneaky little git was there to observe him, after all, and he was damnably quiet when in his Animagus form. Snape had only caught him snooping after the fact, while Pettigrew was desperately trying to reattach that silver hand to the stump of his arm. It was not made to accommodate his rodent form, which was most fortunate--Snape would never have otherwise suspected that his walls now had ears, eyes, and a pointy, whiskery snout. Unless he could convince Wormtail to sleep in a cage, it was just too risky even to contact Hermione, and he doubted Pettigrew would find that acceptable--not even with a little wheel and some lovely chew toys.

Thus Snape was relegated to a summer of insomnia, with more waking hours than he wanted, all filled with Pettigrew's constant complaints and nervous tics. Within three days, he decided he would have preferred to share his home with Dolores Umbridge. At least she would only leave *doilies* sitting on the coffee table, or so one would think.

He was awake at midnight in mid-July when a delicate chime signalled that one of his wards had been crossed. "Wormtail!" he shouted, not knowing if Pettigrew was asleep in his own room, or peeking at him even now with beady eyes from behind the lathe and plaster. "We have visitors. Make yourself presentable for a change!" He heard a distant thump, but there was also a telltale skittering under the floorboards. Snape hoped that whatever made the thump had sealed the nasty git withing the walls for a while. *Let him eat insulation for a few days; perhaps that will regulate his bowels once and for all.*

Had it been an enemy approaching, the ward would have signalled with a klaxon, so Snape merely buttoned his collar and went downstairs to wait. There were no disgusting items from Wormtail's wardrobe anywhere in the sitting room, a welcome change. He lit the single candle in the overhead lamp with a flick of his wand and spent a few moments irritably replacing books that Wormtail had browsed back into their proper positions on the shelves.

At last, the knock. "Narcissa!" It was too dark to identify her companion. "What a pleasant surprise!" *More pleasant if you were alone--oh, Mother of Merlin, may it not be Draco!*

It was not. "Bellatrix," he replied to her cold salutation, automatically forcing himself not to shudder. The woman was nearly as insane as Pettigrew, but twice as unpredictable. He had once admired Bella, back in his distant youth, but not all people have the proper constitution for the Dark Arts, and she was living proof of it.

Narcissa asked, "We are alone, aren't we?"

He nearly pointed out that Bellatrix was there, but caught himself. They were sisters, after all; that was a bond that even Bella's frayed mind must still acknowledge. Wormtail, however, was surely slinking about somewhere; Snape took a chance and opened the door before the attic steps. *Gotcha, you sneaky little rodent.* "As you have clearly realized, Wormtail, we have guests."

He ordered Ratso to fetch the good wine in deference to Narcissa, though he loathed to spare a drop of it on Bellatrix. When he offered Bella a glass, she had the nerve to look down her nose at it! *My wine not good enough for you, Miss Black? We shall see.* He raised his glass. "The Dark Lord." *Turn that down, I dare you!* For some reason, such manipulation always felt more satisfying in his sitting room than his office at Hogwarts.

Narcissa was clearly dying to speak, and he soundly wished she had invited him to Malfoy Manor instead of coming here. It wouldn't do to openly admit that Pettigrew was spying on him, at least not in front of Bellatrix. Fortunately, a recent pair of dirty underwear left on the kitchen floor had provoked Snape into certain preparations. He pointed his wand at the attic entry, hidden again by its bookcase, and wordlessly set off the tiny Wildfire Whiz-Bang he'd sewn into the crotch of Wormtail's 'tighty-whiteys.' It had galled him to pay cash money to the Weasleys and their Wizard Wheezes, but that yelp and subsequent retreat up the stairs were worth every Knut. There was truly no substitute for reliable merchandise.

"My apologies," said Snape. "He has lately taken to listening at doors. I don't know what he means by it... You were saying, Narcissa?"

As usual, Bellatrix dominated the conversation. Snape had been down this road many times; it was useless to attempt a civilized discussion until Bella either had her say or was intimidated into silence. In happier times, Narcissa would have engaged her in a most entertaining shouting match, but she was obviously far too distraught. It was a testament to his love for the Malfoys that Snape diverted Bella's attention fully onto himself, giving Narcissa a chance to compose her thoughts.

Here go the accusations. This is beyond tiresome. "Do you really think that the Dark Lord has not asked me each and every one of those questions?" *Or have you truly come unhinged in the past few years?* Snape went through the standard litany, so well-rehearsed by now that he could spew it forth without concentrating, except that she kept interrupting. When she started boasting of the Master's complete confidence in her, he decided to bait her a little. "Does he *still*, after the fiasco at the Ministry?"

"That was not my fault!"

So says the woman who refuses to accept MY excuses. Bella tried to suggest that Lucius had fumbled the mission and, true to form, Narcissa went *off*. Sadly, it was much too late to let a catfight develop. If he was to hear Narcissa's story, it had to be soon, lest Ratso put out the fire in his pants and return for more snooping. "There is no point apportioning blame. What's done is done."

"But not by you!" *Hellfire and damnation, now it's the "You Never Pull Your Own Weight" bit.* Snape sighed inwardly. This was just making Bellatrix agitated. It was best to stick with the stock answers; when dealing with a lunatic, the familiar and comfortable usually produce the optimal result.

He made his way through the litany of "How I Spent That Night At The Ministry" (the Generic Version, not the Truth. Voldemort had insisted that he keep mum about carousing with the centaura. A bloody shame in many ways, but a political necessity. The other Death Eaters did not share the Dark Lord's sense of humor and would be rankled, to say the least, if they knew Snape had been busy nailing four odalisques while they were being shamed by Potter and crew). Unfortunately, Snape inadvertently mentioned the Order, and that put a new gleam in Bella's misaligned eyes. "You still claim you cannot reveal the whereabouts of their headquarters, don't you?" she squalled.

That the Most Noble House of Black And Other Dark Gloominess now housed the movement against Voldemort was one of Snape's favorite ironies in the whole war. He switched effortlessly to the "I Am Not The Secret Keeper" routine. He even took the high road by congratulating her assassination of Sirius Black, hoping that would lull her into a quiet complacency.

No such luck. Apparently the evening wouldn't be complete without discussing The Little Prat. "You could have killed him at any point in the last five years," Bellatrix grumbled. "You have not done it. Why?"

He smirked. If Bella knew how keenly he longed to wring The Little Prat's neck, she'd undoubtedly begin lobbying for Potter's preservation. Snape launched into that standard litany as well, wrapping it up smoothly and soothingly. "... He has never stopped trusting Severus Snape, and therein lies my great value to the Dark Lord." *Cue music, fade to black. In the name of Merlin, you insane skank, can we finally get down to business?*

He peered closely at Bellatrix. She seemed subdued at last. Closing his eyes, Snape listened for any indication of Wormtail's whereabouts, wishing he'd purchased some of

those blasted Extendable Ears from the Weasley catalog. *This is punishment for your pride, Severus.* There was some distant rumbling up in the attic, and Snape suddenly recalled that those fireworks multiplied when magic was used in attempt to squelch them. He grinned; that would surely keep Ratso utterly disoriented for the rest of the evening. *As long as the attic doesn't catch fire, we shall be free and clear.*

"Now... you came to ask me for help, Narcissa?"

The poor dear. Snape hated to see Narcissa cry, and it was clear that she'd done quite a bit of it lately. She always wilted when Lucius was absent, and the other Death Eater wives were probably ostracizing her. Having a mate in Azkaban was surely no picnic. *If it weren't for Wormtail, I could go to the Manor and keep you company... although I suppose I'd have to set a bear trap beside my bed to keep Draco out of it.* Perhaps Pettigrew's presence wasn't entirely a nuisance after all.

To Snape's chagrin, Narcissa started by informing him that the Master forbade her to speak of this matter. There was only one "correct" response to such news, particularly in front of Bellatrix, and he dutifully gave it. "The Dark Lord's word is law," Snape chided her gently.

Bella suddenly looked more smug than Albus at his worst, however, and even if he were not a spy, he could not let it go at that. "It so happens that I know of the plan." Telling this lie set his teeth on edge; Narcissa deserved better from him, not to mention that it was unsportsmanlike to bluff someone who trusted you so implicitly. For that reason, he was actually glad when Bellatrix butted in; at least he could justify wheedling the facts out of her.

"Draco should be proud," she blathered with her usual tact. "He seems glad of a chance to prove himself..."

So Draco's head is on the chopping block, then? Narcissa confirmed it out loud: "This is vengeance for Lucius's mistake, I know it!"

In the vernacular, my poor dear, 'No Duh.' He avoided Narcissa's eyes, unable to offer any comfort in his gaze--at least not until he knew what in seven hells she was talking about.

"If Draco succeeds, he will be honored above all others," Snape prompted, hoping that optimism would be contagious.

"But he won't succeed! How can he, when the Dark Lord himself--"

Naturally, the Drama Queen chose to gasp theatrically, interrupting Narcissa before she could spill the beans. *Damn it, Bellatrix, you are roughly as helpful as a fart in a windstorm.* Now he'd have to start a brand new attempt to extract information about this Big Plan, and one could only tug on that line so many times before arousing suspicion. He let Narcissa ramble for a moment, waiting for a promising segue to come up. She finally asked him to intervene with the Master on Draco's behalf. *Not perfect, but I can work with that.*

"The Dark Lord will not be persuaded, and I am not stupid enough to attempt it." He mumbled a bit of claptrap regarding Lucius's failure at the Ministry, both to fluster her and to placate Bellatrix. In a few minutes they should both be too distracted to notice a peaceful return to the subject of Draco's assignment.

Whoops. Narcissa got a bit too flustered. Instead of sensing the need to calmly and quickly develop a plan, she began begging him to do Draco's task on his behalf. *Pay attention, Severus, you insensitive idiot! The woman's on the edge already, a toothpick was all she needed, not a Bludger!* He bit the inside of his cheek in frustration. It was time for some serious manipulation.

Calm her down. "He intends me to do it in the end, I think. But he is determined that Draco should try first." He rambled on autopilot, spouting some sentiment about holding back his aid, so as not to compromise his position as a spy, but the unstated message was clear: You see? Old Uncle Severus will take care of everything in the final hour--provided we discuss the preparations *now*.

He had thought it was clear, anyway. Unfortunately, Snape knew he'd blown it again when he saw Narcissa's eyes narrow. *Shit, what did I just say?* He carefully replayed his own words in his mind: "in the unlikely event that Draco succeeds..." That's when she turned sour and replied, "It doesn't matter to him if Draco is killed?"

Ah, a suicide mission? It took all of Snape's discipline not to curse out loud. Death generally served as the ultimate punishment in the Master's mind. He must be furious beyond reason with Lucius, to force him to outlive his only son. Snape suddenly felt a bit sick to his stomach and had to backpedal for a moment to regain his composure.

"The Dark Lord is very angry. He failed to hear the prophecy. You know as well as I do, Narcissa, that he does not forgive easily." She started sobbing in earnest, but there was nothing for it; when the Dark Lord went on a vendetta, there could be no time wasted on niceties. *The assignment is something I could survive, but Draco could not.* That wasn't particularly informative, but it was a good sign. In surrendering secrets, the first detail was always hardest; once it slipped out, the rest were sure to follow.

Snape scooped Narcissa up carefully and steered her to the sofa. *Do NOT hug her, nor rock her side-to-side.* This would be all business from now on. *A little more wine will help loosen your tongue.* He had to open her hand to make her take the glass, and then demand that she drink it. When she'd swallowed a sip of wine, Snape pressed on with his next tactic.

"It might be possible... for me to help Draco." She perked up immediately, her eyes bright with desperate hope. *Come now. Help me to help him, my dear. Tell me more.*

"Would you look after him, see he comes to no harm?"

"I can try." ... *but I need more information. Come on, Narcissa, must I spell it out for you?* She could connive and scheme with the best of them; she *must* be chomping at the bit to formulate the plan for Draco's redemption. Snape looked deep into her eyes, willing her to calm herself, trust him, and confide in him, in that order and as soon as possible.

Instead, she fell to her knees with the sort of histrionics he normally associated with Bellatrix, and began to kiss his hand in hysterical gratitude.

Oh, bugger! This was downright embarrassing. Her head was practically in his lap, and even though Narcissa was obviously too distraught to realize what she was doing, Bella was beginning to smirk. He fumed silently, thankful that she didn't have a camera; it was hard to imagine how this could get much worse.

"If you are there to protect him... Severus, will you swear it? Will you make the Unbreakable Vow?"

I was wrong; it's worse. "The Unbreakable Vow?" he repeated, feeling about as transparent as one of Trelawney's crystal balls. Bellatrix leapt onto *that* display of weakness like a fly onto manure. "Oh, he'll try, I'm sure... The usual empty words, the usual slithering out of action..."

Up yours, Bellatrix. "Certainly, Narcissa." Snape was annoyed, but not too concerned. He'd done many unspeakable things to suit the Dark Lord; he could surely do one more on behalf of the Malfoys. He was also certain that, no matter what Draco's task, there would inevitably be a way to exploit it and twist it to his own advantage. Besides, a Vow would bring a quick end to all the mystery; Narcissa would have to state precisely what she needed, so that he could Vow to do it for her. A tidy solution, indeed.

He knelt and took Narcissa's hand, inwardly gloating at Bella; he'd never seen her speechless before, and it was delightful to behold. Snape gazed at Narcissa fondly.

"Will you, Severus, watch over my son, Draco, as he attempts to fulfill the Dark Lord's wishes?"

Good, clear establishment of the involved parties. "I will."

"And will you, to the best of your ability, protect him from harm?"

Damn it, Ciss, you're getting off topic. I already protect him from harm. Focus, woman, on fulfilling his assignment! "I will."

"And, should it prove necessary... if it seems Draco will fail..."

Merlin, Mordred, and Morgana, fail at WHAT, already? He nearly crushed her hand in frustration.

"...will you carry out the deed that the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to perform?"

Fuck!

For a moment, all he could do was stare. Only a Malfoy would come up with such phrasing--binding him completely while maintaining her own "plausible deniability" of the entire matter. This was sketchy, Vowing to do Merlin-only-knew what.

Well, how bad could it be? "I will."

As Bellatrix cast the final Bond to whip around their wrists, Snape took a deep breath. He felt the Bond settling into his blood and permeating him. The magic would lie dormant until the Vow was fulfilled, but if he threatened to break his word, the spell would literally take control of him. It would force him, even against his will, to carry out the Vow.

Yet he still had another option, though he was loathe to undertake it. Snape knew full well that there was one other Vow that could supersede an Unbreakable: a Vow to the Death. He would pay a terrible price if he had to make a conflicting Vow, but he could still be released from this unknown task. The longer he waited, the worse it would be--the time for bluffs and gamesmanship was over. He needed to use Legilimency, *tonight*.

Wormtail had belted down the last drop of Calming Draught in the house eight days ago. *I can send Bellatrix to fetch some for her sister, an onerous chore at 1:00 AM.* In the time it would take her to rifle through Narcissa's medicine cabinet, or better yet, force some unlucky apothecarian to open his shop, Snape could easily scan Narcissa's mind *and* Obliviate the act from her memory. It was distasteful to violate a friend in such a way, but his choices were rapidly dwindling.

The whirling Bond was nearly invisible at his wrist. Snape tilted his head back, ready to send Bellatrix on her way as soon as the spell was complete. He had just enough time to register that she was making a series of complex motions with her wand before his heart sank.

"Edificens," she said.

"BELLATRIX!" they both shouted. Narcissa's voice was deep with outrageous indignation, but Snape's was a horrified squeak. He glanced back at Narcissa, whose wide eyes undoubtedly mirrored his own. A small part of him was relieved that they both had good reason to be shocked, as all of his self-discipline had failed him at this latest twist.

Bella had Edified the Vow, taking it to the one step beyond Unbreakable; it was now a Vow to the Death. Or it would be in short order, when the final ritual was complete. The magic of the Bond flared white-hot within both of them, taking hold of them completely. Snape caught only one more willful glimpse of Narcissa baring her teeth at her sister before the spell took her, forcing her to soften her features and reach out to him. Her eyes flashed one last apology before glazing over, and he did his best to produce a sympathetic shrug before succumbing himself to the magic. He never would have guessed Bella would stoop *this* low, and undoubtedly neither had Narcissa.

He was barely aware of their clothing Vanishing, or of Narcissa's body colliding with his as if he'd Accio'd her. He was rock hard in seconds, without even a hint of passion in his heart. She knocked him onto his back, scrambled up awkwardly to straddle him as she pulled him into position, and slammed her hips down onto his with no further preliminaries.

He could almost feel the slick heat of her body, but barely so; the spell was siphoning away all of the vital energy between them. Narcissa looked positively bored, although he knew she was livid behind those blank eyes. He could not turn his head to see Bellatrix, so he spent the time locked in an internal debate over the merits of her running away immediately *versus* sticking around until they recovered their self-control. The thought of her watching was most unappealing, but at least they wouldn't have to chase her down to exact retribution. Either way, her ass was grass, and he and Narcissa were the lawn mower.

A few more violent, mechanical thrusts of her hips and the fiasco was over. The magic released them as soon as the Vow was consummated, abruptly leaving them staring at one another as though the whole event was a lewd dream from which they'd suddenly awakened. Narcissa gave him a remorseful glance (which was thankfully devoid of loathing), and disimpaled herself, shooting toward her sister's last known location with her fingers curled into talons. She howled something that was probably meant to be "Bell," but could easily have been some other "B" word, it was impossible to tell.

The front door was half-open, letting in the unearthly chill and fog of dementor droppings. Bellatrix, demonstrating that she still possessed some remaining sense, was nowhere to be seen. Narcissa tripped over her own robe as it attempted to coalesce about her rapidly moving body, and charged through the door before he could say, "Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am."

Snape slowly sat up, shaking his head as if clearing it of cobwebs. In truth he was quite alert, but his reflexes *expected* him to be dazed, and reacted accordingly. He toyed with the notion of roaring after Bellatrix, but there wasn't much point. Narcissa would be mauling her in short order, and Merlin-only-knew she had a lot of tension to work off. Letting her eviscerate Bella was the least he could do.

He jumped a bit when the attic door crashed open and Wormtail raged into the parlor, a mass of angry red welts dressed in soaking wet tatters. "Snape, you bastard, you've gone too far this time! How dare you plant explosives in my..." Wormtail's voice trailed off as he registered that Snape wasn't even giving him the usual glower. "What's the matter with you?" he finally peeped, his voice a strained falsetto.

Snape took a deep breath and slumped his shoulders before replying, "Pettigrew, tonight I am well and truly fucked."

35: A Breath of Fresh Air

Chapter 35 of 47

Snape and Albus have a chat on the cliffs of Hogwarts before the next term begins.

"Why are you all dressed up?"

"None of your business."

"You're going somewhere, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Out."

Snape forced down the last bite of toast as quickly as he could, desperate to end this inane conversation. It had been two weeks since the Night With Narcissa, and though he had hoped Albus would summon him to Hogwarts (thus giving him an excuse to leave), no such request had come. Snape had run out of patience. His assignments frequently entailed unforeseen dangers, but this Vow business was beyond the rank-and-file; he *needed* to discuss it. Not to mention that being cooped up with Pettigrew had him on the verge of rodenticide.

Licking blackberry jam from his fingertips, Snape gave Wormtail a final glower and headed toward the front door, but as soon as he was beyond Pettigrew's vision, he Apparated. Poor old Ratso disliked loud noises since the incident with the firecracker in his underpants. Snape's only regret was that, having already Apparated, he couldn't enjoy the expression on Wormtail's face at the cracking sound.

Snape's mood calmed as he entered the Hogwarts gates, pleased that the grounds were still peacefully free of students. Determined to enjoy his day out, he strolled to the castle at a leisurely pace, even taking a brief detour to the cliffward side to wave at the Giant Squid.

It rocketed from the center of the lake when it recognized him, leaving a roiling wake behind its streamlined limbs, but when it realized there were no sandwiches forthcoming, it poked its funnel from the water and shot a geyser of cold water at Snape's boots. "Ungrateful cur," he snarled, but without rancor; he and the beast had an honest relationship with well-defined mutual expectations. Had the tables been turned, Snape would resent an unfulfilled trip across the lake, too.

"Severus!" Dumbledore grinned impishly as he approached. "When I saw the squid barreling toward the cliff, I knew that either food was involved, or the poor fellow had lost the will to live. And sure enough, here you are."

Another gush of water splashed over Snape's boots. "Do you perchance have something I can feed him?"

Dumbledore took in the scene, nodding sagely. "He does seem to be trying to tell you something. I don't think a biscuit would be very good for him, though." He pulled out his wand and began Transfiguring a boulder into a picnic table and chairs as Snape stepped away from the balustrade. "I thought we might chat out here--your favorite time of day, I believe?"

"Pah!" Snape snorted. "You don't want me tracking squid spittle into your office."

"That also, my friend." Dumbledore gave him another crinkly grin as they settled onto the chairs.

"There is a problem, Albus," Snape began, too weary from pent-up anxiety to waste another moment. He described in precise detail the events of Narcissa's visit. Dumbledore frowned and nodded, but did not interrupt until the part about the Unbreakable Vow.

"Dear me, Severus! That was a bit rash, even for you! Well, we must get to the bottom of this right away--if you need to counter that Vow, then the sooner, the better--"

"No. I was a bit impulsive in my choice of Bonders. Bellatrix... Edified the Vow."

Dumbledore's brows launched. "Oh!" was all he said at first, then the headmaster *blushed*. "Well, then. So. I suppose you'll be doing it, whatever it is. *Ahem*." Snape had never seen the venerable wizard so flustered; it almost made the whole incident worthwhile.

"Indeed. But this is tricky business, Albus, for I'm already supposed to know what it is. *Ergo*, it will be awkward to investigate this further."

"My spy needs a spy, I see. Well, I shall endeavor to discover it with you." He paused, pursing his lips and drumming his fingers on the tabletop. "Does Lucius know?" he finally inquired.

Snape shrugged. "I don't plan to make a special trip out to Azkaban to tell him. But if I do, I will remind him to take this up with his dear sister-in-law."

Dumbledore nodded with a grim smile and clapped him on the back. "I'm sure he will eventually appreciate that you have, *ahem*, gone so far to protect his son."

Snape nodded in agreement, but something about the gesture unsettled him. He realized seconds later what it was: Dumbledore's other hand was rather conspicuously concealed in his heavy robes on this warm summer day. Snape glared pointedly at the headmaster's cuff, then fixed the old man with a concerned gaze. Dumbledore acceded to a pained grimace, then looked away, casually twisting in his seat in a way that pulled back his sleeve. Snape peered at the injured hand while Dumbledore chattered blithely about some administrative matter. They knew their roles very well, and dutifully created this memory for Snape's next submission to Voldemort.

When Snape felt he'd gathered enough "intell," he raised his eyes mournfully to his friend. The injury had grown since he'd last seen it four weeks ago; it had covered half his palm then, but now it extended to his wrist. His fingers were shriveled and curled, and Snape's stomach lurched as he realized that the tips appeared fragile and dry enough to break off. He did some mental Arithmancy. Assuming the curse spread at the typical exponential rate, Dumbledore would be blackened to the elbow before the students arrived.

"Albus..." he began, but Dumbledore raised his good hand in a halting gesture and shrugged.

"Come now, Severus, we both know that casualties are a necessary part of war," said the headmaster. "It is of no consequence; my wand hand is as strong as ever."

"Spare me the heroics, Albus; it will spread to your wand hand by Yuletide, assuming it doesn't turn your head to charcoal first. You must let me do *something*." But even before he could finish the sentence, Dumbledore closed his eyes and shook his head. *Damn you, you old fool, what good is it to keep your secret if it kills you?*

Snape opened his mouth to protest again, but snapped it shut as a thought struck him. "Headmaster," he said, signalling with his tone that he meant to create another harmless scenario to share with the Dark Lord later, "may I interrupt this conversation briefly? If you insist on sitting in the sun, then I require something from my chambers."

"Certainly, Professor Snape," said Dumbledore, a tiny but sincere furrow of curiosity upon his brow.

Snape made the trip to the dungeons quickly, avoiding the classroom; he didn't want to know who had replaced him as the Potions teacher until it was absolutely necessary. He found the Erlenmeyer flask of Sunban Potion, half full, just as he had left it when he'd run out of excuses to avoid returning home. He poured a jigger of it and downed it in one gulp; it tasted like coconuts. He then picked up the flask and took it up to the cliff, along with a teacup.

"Something for the sun," he muttered as he set the flask upon the Transfigured boulder, and offered Dumbledore the teacup. "One can't be too careful, you know. Amazing

when you give it a bit of thought, that something so far away can burn one's skin. Seems quite strange, though we accept it so readily. How little we truly understand the nature of heat and energy. I believe the Muggles may have surpassed us in that realm."

Dumbledore studied him carefully, then took the flask and began filling his teacup. Snape twitched briefly when it was about two-thirds full. The headmaster righted the flask and replaced its glass stopper.

"Cheers, then, Professor," he said, and took an initial, tentative sip. Beaming in approval at the pleasant taste, he promptly downed the whole cup. Snape, however, returned to the balustrade before he finished, carefully observing the giant squid, who was chasing one of his own tentacles in a watery ring at the foot of the cliff. Between the wind and the splashing of the creature, he did not hear anything going on behind him, though he did register a tiny flash of blue light, as though a miniscule bolt of lightning had struck the rocks behind him. He waited a bit longer, then returned to the table.

Dumbledore had hidden his hand in his sleeve again, but there was no mistaking the gleam of gratitude in the old wizard's eyes *Never let it be said that I learned nothing of value from the Muggle side of the family.*

36: His Master's Voice

Chapter 36 of 47

Snape has to do the Duty Visit before returning to school--and it's not to Grandma's house...

Snape knew better. He *knew* he would be summoned before his return to Hogwarts, knew that the Dark Lord would not leave him in peace for an entire summer. Yet as August droned by in its hot, humid glory, he allowed himself to hope, and that was his mistake. Severus Snape understood perfectly that hope is the gateway to disappointment.

The call finally came as he was literally packing his bags for the trip. For a moment he berated himself for taking too long to make his escape and wished he'd just his wand to complete the task in an instant. Then he shook his head at his own folly. It wasn't as though he could avoid the summons by staying a step ahead of the post-owl, for Merlin's sake.

Having no desire to return home in order to finish packing (and thereby endure even more of Wormtail's presence), he gathered the rest of his belongings with an angry flick of his wand and transported them straight to the dungeons. He'd already warded his bedroom, placing the spells inside the walls, floor, and ceiling, lest Pettigrew sneak inside in his rodent form. Snape sighed in the hopes that the Master would remove the filthy little pest now that the school year had resumed. The idea of Pettigrew freeloading in *his* house, unsupervised for weeks at a time, snooping and stealing and leaving his sodding dirty clothes everywhere... it was enough to turn his stomach.

One look at the little rat-prat lounging with his feet up on the coffee table, and Snape seriously considered burning the place down on his way out. "The Master calls," he snarled, noting without satisfaction that Wormtail put down his feet with a guilty look. *Little bastard will have them up again the minute I'm gone.* He very nearly told Ratso that he didn't plan to return, but thought the better of it. "If I have time, I shall be back for tea before I depart for Hogwarts." *As if I have any desire to share even one more meal with you... but at least you'll think twice about making yourself comfortable for a few more hours.*

That thought gave him pause. He turned sharply into the kitchen and transported all the contents of the liquor cabinet up into his room. *At least he won't be throwing any wild parties,* he mused, returning to the parlor. As Pettigrew tripped over his own feet while standing up to see him off, Snape acknowledged that wasn't likely to be an issue anyway.

Voldemort's latest enclave was too far away for Apparation--a former gulag in the north of Siberia, of all places--so Snape prepared a Portkey and whisked himself to the tilting wooden beams of the entry gate. Concertina wire still hung along the fence in some places, or lay in great vicious tangles in others, but the stuff was lace doilies compared to the wards just behind the fence. Nasty clouds of biting insects were proving this point, creating a crackling display all along the perimeter as they flew into the spells and incinerated. *I wish I could get some of THOSE around my room, damn it all.*

Snape gave the password and sped inside, eager to get away from the bloodsucking aerial assault of the blackflies. He spotted Bellatrix Lestrange watching him from a window. She ducked out of sight immediately, but not before Snape observed that many clumps of her hair were missing. He smirked. Narcissa did good work.

Snape barely raised his sleeve to reveal his Mark to the sneering giant guarding the door to the main building. Said Mark led him directly to the main chamber, where he dropped to one knee in the open, arched doorway. "Your servant, my lord."

Voldemort looked up from the parchment he was studying. "Severus. Come in." He set the paper on a rough wooden bench and stood with his hands crossed.

The formal ritual this time. At least it's better than hostilities. Snape crossed the room, knelt again, and bowed his head until Voldemort offered a hand for Snape to kiss. It took him a moment to realize what was missing; the signet ring of Salazar Slytherin was no longer upon his scaly finger. Snape gulped. *That can NOT be insignificant.*

"Rise, Severus," said Voldemort magnanimously, and Snape's knees crackled like the blackflies on the wards as he returned to his feet. "You are returning to Hogwarts soon, are you not?"

"Today, my lord. The students shall be arriving shortly."

That was a risky move. "I will not keep you for very long, then." Snape exhaled sharply in relief; Voldemort could just as easily replied with the Cruciatus, to punish his insolence. One simply did not attempt to rush the Dark Lord.

"I only wish to check in before you sink once more into Dumbledore's realm," Voldemort continued. "What of the new faculty this term?"

"I have learned that Horace Slughorn is resuming his post as the Potions professor."

Voldemort raised what was once an eyebrow, now a hairless ridge. "I'll be damned! I've been looking for that slippery bastard for years now. Potions, you say? Have you been demoted to Charms, then, Severus?" His tone was light, but it fooled neither of them.

"I shall be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, my lord," he reported uneasily. *If ever he's likely to lash out in pure jealousy, it will be right now.*

Voldemort looked as though he'd just bitten into an apple and found half a worm, but by the time Snape counted silently to twenty, the scathing look had disappeared. "I

see," he said, and Snape was quite sure he did. Voldemort pursed his lips thoughtfully and stared at him for some time, until trickles of sweat began to run down the back of Snape's neck. He finally spoke with a voice of tense control, but Snape got the distinct (and relieving) impression that the Master's anger lay with Albus, not himself.

"I suppose it was inevitable. I've no doubt it has become nigh impossible to find anyone foolish enough to teach the course; that was the point in cursing it in the first place. And you are the only obvious choice from within the faculty, with the possible exception of Binns--he could conceivably teach the students to bore their enemies into stupor."

Snape laughed out loud. One of the few things he still loved about the Dark Lord was the man's sense of humor.

Voldemort himself indulged in a throaty sound that may have been a chortle before continuing. "I wonder, though, Severus... He has always managed to find someone in the past. Why now?" The Dark Lord scrutinized him carefully, like a butcher inspecting a slab of beef. "Does he perhaps believe that you can break the curse? Or does he wish to be rid of you?"

After a few seconds of heavy silence, Snape decided the question was not rhetorical. "He did give a hint of his reasons, my lord: that he was most displeased by the progress of the previous teacher. She was dismally inept, even more so than the usual amateurs he recruits for the position."

"She was appointed by the Ministry, correct?"

"Yes, my lord."

Voldemort rolled his eyes. "I suppose I can understand Dumbledore's despair, then. How was this one removed from the position?" he asked conversationally.

Snape was unable to resist smirking. "She annoyed the centaur herd."

Voldemort smirked as well. "Really?" he asked with a knowing look.

"Quite, my lord. And though her encounter with that species was reminiscent of mine, I daresay it was not nearly as pleasant."

"One never knows, Severus," the Master replied. One corner of his mouth twisted in a grin, but his features quickly hardened. "Enough of that. We must conclude our business and get you on your way."

Voldemort paced to the opposite wall and back one time. "I have been robbed, Severus, and what's more, I'm fairly certain that my property cannot be restored. I am left with but half of my captains. I have reclaimed the Dementors from Azkaban, but my hand was forced prematurely on that score. The walls are still sound, and it will be some time before I can recover my sorcerers from the prison. The giants are being persuaded--slowly, but as scheduled--which is draining even more manpower from my ranks. On the whole, Severus, this has not been a good year.

"I have decided to take a more aggressive stance. You are not to be part of it. Dumbledore is a formidable Legilimens, and I must assume he has some relevant reason for parting with you, the most likely of which is that he no longer trusts you completely. Thus the less you know of my plans of attack, the better. I have no doubt that when my *coup* occurs, you will recognize it and act accordingly.

"In the meantime, you will concentrate harder than ever on the enemy, bring me anything you can, even the most insignificant or far-fetched defenses or plans you hear of. Dumbledore will undoubtedly try to exclude you, so your task will be even harder. Do it, Severus, and do not fail me." Voldemort's eyes glowed red briefly. "I've had quite enough failure of late."

"Yes, my lord."

"Tell me, Severus: What do you make of young Draco Malfoy?"

Snape permitted the confusion to show on his face; it *was* supposed to be a non-sequitor, after all. He cleared his throat, uncertain of the Master's true inquiry and whether Bella had blabbed about the Vow. "He's... bright. Not as subtle as his father--shows his anger, retaliates openly and incautiously, that sort of thing. Young, in other words... with a few years' experience, I expect he shall become quite a leader."

"I would have him progress faster than that," said Voldemort. "I have given him a task this year, Severus." *No shit.* "You will not participate, and again, the less you know, the better." *I knew you would say that, dammit.* "Nonetheless, I want you to keep an eye on him. He will find himself quite challenged. He has been instructed to carry this out on his own, but he may become desperate and seek help. As long as he leaves no trail, that is acceptable." *Leave no witnesses. Wonderful.* "However, if he gets careless or sloppy, then you must intervene. Encourage him, Severus. Excuse any strange behaviors to the extent you can--without compromising your cover, naturally. If he requests your help with a potion, or perhaps a forbidden book, by all means offer such things freely, without asking questions."

"It shall be so, my lord."

Voldemort studied him carefully, and Snape braced himself internally for what he knew would come next. The Master raised his wand and wordlessly opened him with Legilimency. The conversation on the cliffside and the sight of Dumbledore's ruined hand replayed in his mind for what seemed like hours. In reality, it was only minutes, but time takes on a new dimension in such circumstances--just as it does when a red-hot iron is placed against one's skin.

"Very good, Severus," said Voldemort. "Don't worry. You will not need to endure the old man much longer."

37: The Return of the Students

Chapter 37 of 47

Year 6 at Hogwarts begins.

Snape wasted no time reconfiguring his new Portkey to take him straight to Hogwarts. He had no desire to explore this new locale; history had proven time and time again that it was a dreadful mistake for an invading militia to attempt a crossing of the Russian steppes. If there was to be a confrontation between the Order and the Dark Army, it would not take place here. Besides, lingering might put him face-to-face with Bellatrix Black. *Bleah. I'd rather kiss the Toadmistress.*

That thought cheered him as he landed in his chambers. He was back at Hogwarts *without* that disgusting twat peering over his shoulder. True, Horace Slughorn was a

scumsucking opportunist, but far more tolerable, and certainly not in a position of authority. Albus was here, Draco would soon arrive, and most importantly, he would see Hermione *tonight*.

Snape flopped onto his four-poster bed in a downright juvenile fashion, grinning from ear to ear.

Perhaps it was such a relief to be free of Ratsos constant prying, or perhaps his encounter with the Master had exhausted him more than he realized, but Snape drifted off quickly to sleep. He had a very distressing dream in which he was ordered to keep Hermione as a prisoner at Spinner's End. He was forced to maintain appearances of his loyalty to Voldemort, and thus had no choice but to starve and torture her as she looked upon him with horror. When Wormtail took a fancy to her, Snape had no excuse to stop him and had to *permit* the repulsive bastard to copulate with *his* Hermione, right under his own roof! When Snape awoke hours later, he was drenched in sweat and in an outrageously foul mood. The fact that it hadn't really happened did nothing to quell his murderous intentions toward Peter Pettigrew.

He had no choice but to change all of his clothes; there was even a damp outline of his body on the blanket. The house-elves had come during his nap and unpacked his trunk, which was usually a pleasant little "perq," but such was his mood after the nightmare that it felt more like an unwelcome intrusion. To make things worse, it dawned on Snape as he buttoned his fresh shirt that this would be his last Welcoming Feast at Hogwarts. Not that he had ever particularly looked forward to the students arriving, but he irrationally resented the fact that this silly annual ritual would be taken from him. *My last Sorting, my last absurd opening speech from Albus...* Snape's fingers paused on the current button at the first real wave of comprehension that his tenure at Hogwarts was ending.

It lasted for but a moment, and berating himself for foolish sentimentality, he looked up at the clock. Snape uttered aloud a string of four-letter words and redoubled his efforts at buttoning. He was *late*. He had missed the staff welcome (*my last staff welcome*); the Hogwarts Express was probably pulling into the station, if not already there! That confounded nap had sucked away the entire afternoon; what in the name of Merlin, Mordred or Morgana had he been thinking, snoozing like a pussycat upon his return?

Snape made it to the top of his collar and realized that the last button had no corresponding hole. Having exhausted his supply of foul language a moment earlier, he was forced to improvise some new phrases as he undid his work back to the renegade buttonhole and started over. *Fuckses, precious, I WILL go to Gladrags and purchase ONE shirt of the "pullover" variety.*

Snape wrangled his way through the buttons on the shirt, the vest, and the formal smock, then donned his cape and straightened everything before the mirror. *At least I shaved this morning, thank the stars.* He'd been forcing himself not to think about Hermione all summer, lest he go absolutely spare, but damn it, he HAD wanted to look nice for her at tonight's reunion. *As if you could ever look "nice," you ridiculous old fool.* He scowled at his reflection. Perhaps "less awful" was possible. Snape gave his collar one final tug and dashed out of his chambers.

Damn! The corridor was already humming with the voices of students in the Entrance Hall. He bolted up most of the stairway, then stopped to compose himself. Bursting out of the staircase in a fluster was unthinkable. He ascended the rest of the steps in his usual silent glide, not sparing the students so much as a glance as he strode icily into the Great Hall through the wide path that they made around him.

There were only a few students taking their seats at the long House tables, and Snape sighed quietly in relief; he was only a tad late. He could walk to the High Table with dignity and still have plenty of time to scout surreptitiously for Hermione. Settling into his chair beside Dumbledore, he soon spotted Draco, who was actually rather hard to miss, since he was practically bounding over to the Slytherin table. Snape's brows flew up despite himself; he'd rather expected Draco to be considerably more somber this year, given that his father was in prison and he'd been given some task dire enough to drive his mum to despair. Snape watched him curiously as the other Slytherins drew in to hear his latest secret, snorting and laughing and clapping Draco on the back when he finished the story. When Draco looked up and caught his eye, the boy's eyes flashed in a predatory fashion and he licked the tips of his front teeth.

And now I've been caught staring. Huzzah. Fortunately, the appropriate response in this case to any and all observers was simple, stony indifference, at which Snape was an expert.

After giving Draco the Chilling Stare, Snape turned his attention deliberately elsewhere, finding to his great surprise that Albus had turned his back and was peering intently at... a Patronus? Yes, that was no ghost that he knew, and it dissipated quietly into the air as Albus nodded. "What in seven hells was that all about?" he wondered as he caught the Headmaster's eye, and in his usual fashion, Albus not only understood the unspoken question, he replied volumes with a simple quirk of his eyebrow. Snape clenched the armrests on his chair, but nodded and rose from the High Table.

Dumbledore's errand boy... He permitted himself to feel the resentment; it was petty and infantile, but it would make good fodder for the Master later. Here it was, his last Welcoming Feast at Hogwarts, and Albus had *dismissed* him. It wasn't too serious--the width of his eyes had indicated that something was merely amiss--yet it required the attention of someone other than that obsessive Squib, Filch. Dumbledore's head had been tipped toward the main gates, nonetheless. He was going to have to leave the entire bloody *castle* to investigate this mystery.

Snape glanced around the Great Hall before slipping into the antechamber behind the staff table. The tables were nearly full, and only a few stragglers were finding their seats. He spotted Hermione at last; she was peering up and down the Gryffindor table with concern. Potter was not at the table, and a final scan of the Hall proved that he was nowhere to be found. *So the Little Prat has been delayed, and now I have to go fetch him* Snape entered the antechamber and closed the door quietly behind him, and promptly punched the nearest overstuffed chair.

It took a few minutes to find a lantern. Though the castle had plenty of them in a closet off the Great Hall, this was the one night when they were used on the carriages and boats. There was only one remaining in the closet, and its door had been twisted such that one of the hinges was completely broken off. Snape had just enough time to slip down the stairs to the dungeons before the herd of first-years rumbled in behind Hagrid. He didn't want the firsties to see him prowling about with a wall-torch like some sort of janitor. Snape stomped down to his office and took out a proper lantern, the one he used when he gathered ingredients in the Forbidden Forest. By the time he returned to the main floor, they were filing into the Great Hall in a tidy, anxious column. *There it is, then. I shall miss the Sorting for sure.* There was little point in disrupting their ranks, so Snape simply remained in the shadows of the stairway until the last of them had scurried through the double doors.

He lit the lantern at the foot of the stone stairs and ambled down the path to the front gates. At first he could only see Nymphadora Tonks, which was odd; he knew her Patronus and it looked nothing like the indistinct spectre behind Dumbledore's chair. He then realized what this new shape was--or at least what it was supposed to be. *By the blood of Merlin, woman, how can you stand to be such a sap? Do you honestly think he'll be impressed? Grow a spine if you wish to impress him!* Snape had always liked her Patronus; a duck-billed platypus was certainly not something one saw every day, and the absurd little creature suited her in an aesthetic way--whereas the wolf was utterly contrived. *Yet another irritating observation on a thoroughly annoying evening.*

And then Potter slipped out from under his Invisibility cloak.

"Well, well, well. Nice of you to turn up, Potter." He gave the padlock a single tap and glowered at The Prat as the chains slithered apart. It was a tiny bit disconcerting to find the boy covered in blood, particularly since it seemed to be his own, but Potter had walked from Hogsmeade Station, so he couldn't be hurt too badly. *Not badly enough to warrant dragging me away from my final Sorting, I'd wager.* Snape dismissed Tonks with an insult to her lame Patronus and locked the gates, hoping that they could make it back to the castle in time for the last of the alphabet. Naturally, the Little Prat dawdled, calling out a sappy farewell to Tonks. *Mother of Merlin, should I Summon a violin?*

"Fifty points from Gryffindor for lateness, I think. And let me see, another twenty for your Muggle attire." Snape knew he was being petty, but damn it, he FELT petty. After enduring a summer of Ratsos and wanting nothing but to settle into his normal routine at Hogwarts, this stupid errand was the last straw. *Filch could have met these two idiots at the gate,* he fumed internally, deliberately ignoring the voice of reason that attempted to squeak, "But Albus didn't know exactly what to expect!"

"I suppose you wanted to make an entrance, did you?" Snape mused aloud. *Of course he did. Even Hermione knows he's an adrenaline junkie. Just like his father, the Golden Boy in the spotlight. Bloody hell, Slughorn must have him in his sights; I'm sure they spent the whole train ride drinking expensive Scotch and eating candied pineapple. But even that wasn't enough lauding for you, was it, Potter?*

When they reached the castle, the Sorting was over; the sounds of light conversation and silverware on plates were bubbling from the Great Hall. Snape glanced at Potter in the full light of the Entrance Hall and noted with satisfaction that the boy looked like shite warmed over. The Prat twitched his fingers and Snape growled, "No cloak. You can walk in so that everyone sees you, which is what you wanted, I'm sure."

He let The Prat go in through the double doors, then put away his lantern before slinking back to the High Table through the antechamber. One peek at Draco assured Snape that Potter had been bettered in an embarrassing fight, not heroically injured during some fearsome assault on the way from the station. *Good. Bloody hell, if I have to snog Draco later, at least I'll have a reason for it.*

To Snape's satisfaction, the entire Hall went abuzz at the announcement that he would be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts instead of Potions; Potter was so offended that he blurted out a most indiscrete, "No!" The Slytherins, bless their twistedly loyal little hearts, burst into applause, though it was impossible to tell if they were expressing their approval of his promotion, or of the fact that he would undoubtedly be departing at the end of the year. Most of their fathers were Death Eaters; the entire group surely knew the position was cursed. He acknowledged their accolades with a wry wave, thinking to himself that he would get the little bastards later.

When Dumbledore finished his speeches and the students rose noisily from their tables, Snape noticed Hermione dash off to her prefect's duties. He knew she had to shepherd the new students up to Gryffindor Tower and then patrol the corridors. She would undoubtedly stop by her room between those two tasks, and find upon her pillow a single rose which none of her roommates could see. He'd written instructions for the house-elves days ago, and had no doubt they'd set things up according to his specifications when they unpacked his bags earlier that day. Snape headed down to the dungeons for a brief appearance in the Slytherin common room, then hastily returned to his chambers for what he hoped would be a short wait.

A/N: Thanks to [Averygoodun's "Traitor"](#) for setting the tone of Severus's dream and getting his evening off to such a crappy start... ;) And to those of you whom I promised the next post would involve Hermione, my deepest apologies. But the next one REALLY will. REALLY!

38: Hermione Granger and the Half-Blood Prince

Chapter 38 of 47

A new school year gets off to a great start.

He opened the door cautiously--by now it was a conditioned reflex to expect another caller when he hoped to see Hermione--but for once, a welcome sight met his eyes. Lest any wayward Slytherins malingering outside their common room catch sight of him smiling, he stepped back behind the door as he pulled it open. She practically chased him around the heavy oak door, and he shoved it closed as quickly as he could without sending a resounding slam down the corridor. He'd already Charmed it to lock immediately upon closure.

He barely had time to spread his arms before she launched into them at top speed, not quite knocking the wind out of him, but sending him crashing into the doorjamb with a dull thud. Neither said a word, wasting no energy on such an intellectual process when there was warmth to absorb and delicate scents to breathe in.

To Snape's incredulous delight, though she spent that first moment gripping him intensely, she laughed softly the entire time. It was such a warm sound, without self-consciousness and certainly devoid of derision, an expression of simple joy. He could *feel* her laughter as well, the delicate vibrations registering throughout his hands, pressed tight around her ribs.

She finally leaned back--only with her shoulders, and only enough to look him in the eye--and gave him one perfect smile. "Did you miss me?"

"I'm quite sure I greet all my students in this manner, Miss Granger." Her nose wrinkled into such a snarl that she resembled Tonks in the process of Metamorphing. "You, however, seem exceptionally pleased to be back. My poor dear, were your holidays so dreary that you couldn't wait to return to the dungeons?"

"Hmm... I can't seem to recall any longing for cold, hard stone. But you're right, this particular dungeon does seem to have a certain appeal. Why do you suppose that is, Severus?"

He paused to scoop up a handful of curls and bury his face in them. "Curious," he finally agreed. "Perhaps there's something warm and soft in this one?"

Her hand suddenly gripped his bottom, as her brows flew up in an outrageous feint of innocent surprise. "Ah, I see what you mean! Yes, I've definitely found something softer than stone."

Snape cleared his throat to cover an involuntary growl of surprise. "Not if you keep that up for long." *Seven Hells, did I really just say that out loud?* The spark of gaiety in her eyes instantly transformed into a smoldering ember. *Apparently so.*

"You don't say?" she purred, sliding her other hand down from his shoulder blade to join its counterpart.

Realizing that he'd better regain control of the situation before it took control *of him*, Snape pried her hands delicately from his backside and took them in his own. She narrowed her eyes and pouted briefly, but soon giggled and tugged at his wrists, bringing his forehead down against hers. "Severus," she whispered; her smile wrapped around his name and shaped it into something beautiful.

They stood for some time with their hands clasped and brows gently touching, confirming on some primitive level that they were most assuredly in each others' presence. Hermione eventually nudged his nose playfully, inspiring a sharp chuckle. "What?" she demanded with another pout.

"Nothing, nothing." Despite her sharp mind, she was a Gryffindor to the core. Snape had long since perfected the art of aggravating the average Gryffindor, and this particular affectionate harassment had even greater appeal. She dropped her jaw in indignation and pulled harder on his hands, as if to draw his answer from him. This of course only produced the effect of drawing herself off balance as he had the greater strength and weight by a wide margin. *Come near, my pretty, said the spider to the fly.* With a few precise tugs at her wrists, he managed to twist her into a fall and catch her within the blink of an eye, scooping her against his chest and whirling her around to complete the illusion of being swept away.

"Eek!" she squealed, clutching his neck with both hands, then laughing. "My goodness, gravity seemed to lose hold for a minute there."

"Hmm, most fortunate that I was here to capture you." He carried her to the divan and sat down, keeping her bundled upon his lap.

She rolled her eyes. "You're so clever," she said indulgently, relaxing her grip to stroke his hair.

"I missed you, Hermione." He released her legs, which slid down the length of the divan as he rolled her body flat and tight against his chest.

"I missed *you*, Severus."

It began slowly, effortlessly. Another gentle nuzzling of noses, then faces, each breath rich with the flavor of each others' mouths. He barely brushed her lips with his at first, and though she tipped her head invitingly, he was in no hurry. After awaiting this night for the whole summer, he would savor every minute of it.

The kisses became more earnest, then insistent. She was so real, so solid, so *willing*. She shifted her weight, then wriggled in a futile attempt to pull away, which he thwarted with a firm grip and a deeper kiss. With a throaty growl of comprehension, she changed tactics, pushing his head back aggressively to make room to reposition herself in his lap. For the second time in recent memory, Snape's head smacked against the wooden frame of the backrest.

"Oh no!" she yelped, her eyes wide with contrition.

Snape shook his head. "What is it about you and this cursed divan?" He grinned, though, and after a quick, reassuring glance, she settled back down onto her knees, straddling his lap.

"Much better," she said, and he agreed completely.

It was soon quite clear that "better" was far too weak an adjective, even with the "much." Snape's hands began roaming of their own accord along her thighs and calves, and she scooted forward obligingly on his lap. In no time he discovered the vertical slits between the panels of her robe and burrowed his way to the smooth skin beneath the layers of fabric. Her little gasp spurred him on to pull her closer, though he deliberately kept his hands on the *outside* of the little cotton underwear.

"Severus." She seemed to be straining forward and backward at the same time, reveling in his grip on her bottom while eagerly pressing into his hips. *Great Goddess, it's good, so good...* Despite the layers of clothing between them, the heat and pressure were exquisite. His body demanded more and more, and he yielded to the instinct. Snape raised his hips slowly, rhythmically, lifting and turning her body into just the right places with his hands. She was as light as a feather.

"Oh, Severus!" She pulled her head back and his eyes flew open in alarm; had he gone too far? He was stunned by the sight. Her back and neck were markedly arched, her fists clenched in his robes. "Severus!"

Though caught up in his own pleasure, Snape suddenly wanted her to make it, wanted to watch her come just from the contact with his clothed body. "Yes, Hermione! Yes!"

"Don't stop... don't..." *Not an option, my lover...* He tightened his grip even further, impelling her against his body, his firmness, his heat.

It seemed there was an audible twang when her body finally snapped forward as the tension broke in wave after wave. She sagged against him, little cries rushing unbidden from her throat; as they slowed and quieted, he relaxed his grip and brought his hands up to her back to hold all of her. "So lovely... so beautiful," he whispered into her hair.

She shuddered one last time and sighed. "Oh, Severus. That was... oh, dear. I didn't know that could even happen without... just with kissing." She smiled blissfully. *Neither did I.* An absurd rush of pride flooded his body. *By the blood of Merlin, I'll soon be puffing out my chest and crowing if I'm not careful.*

They sat quietly for a moment in the afterglow, then Hermione raised her head from his shoulder. She didn't need to say a word; the glint in her eyes and the flick of her hands to his chest conveyed her intentions. "Ah, ah, ah," he reprimanded gently, putting his own hand over hers to keep it from dropping below his waist.

She glared at him dubiously. "Don't you 'ah, ah, ah' me! I mean to return the favor, Severus Snape!"

"Hush, girl," he said, pushing her head back against his shoulder. "There's no hurry. Be still and bask here in my lap; right now, there's nothing I want more."

39: Defense Against the Dark Arts

Chapter 39 of 47

The morning after the night before...

Snape held his breath a moment then exhaled, standing just outside the fourth floor classroom. He wasn't nervous, though it was a bit unsettling to recognize (at random intervals, nonetheless) that this was the proverbial beginning of the end. Tom Riddle had yearned for this post, to the point of cursing all of those who were granted it in his stead. He took another deep breath and held it. *Albus should have just given it to him. If Riddle had to face these nincompoops day in and day out, he'd have walked out on his own.* On that note, Snape shoved open the door and stalked to the podium.

The second-years were utterly dismal, which was hardly a surprise. Considering that Umbridge's tutelage was the only Defense instruction they'd ever received, he would have dropped dead from shock if even one of them could cast the *Expelliarmus*. Needless to say, he was alive and well at the end of the period, though sorely longing for a finger or three of Firewhisky.

Bloody hell. It's still better than Pettigrew. If only he could implant explosives in his students' undergarments.

Talking of which... As he stepped into the corridor, there was The Little Prat, looking no worse for wear from his altercation with Draco, now that he'd cleaned up. Hermione had queued up right beside the door, laden with books. The blissful expression with which she'd departed the night before had departed without a trace. Which, he knew full well, was for the best, but it still irked him. "Inside," he snarled, and tucked himself behind the door, fighting an insane urge to pinch her on the bum when she entered the classroom.

He made the same opening remarks he'd used with the second-years, noting without any particular satisfaction that this group at least seemed to understand even the polysyllabic words. He decided to start with nonverbal spells; sixth year was certainly an appropriate time to develop the skill, and he could do with a bit of silence at this

point. "What is the advantage of a nonverbal spell?"

Unbelievable. How could *anyone* NOT know the answer to this question? He'd expected, at the very LEAST, a smart remark about "silent but deadly," but as usual, the only hand in the air was Hermi--Granger's. *Shit*. After last night, calling on her in class felt downright awkward.

As usual, her answer was virtually a textbook quote. He wondered absently if she had eidetic memory and could simply read these things from the image of the page in her mind. Out loud, of course, he was obliged to rip her a new one, but he made a mental note to ask her about that later.

The class went as well as one might expect, which is to say pathetic, but at least it was *quietly* pathetic. The Prat paired up with Weasley, which was irksome; he should have faced off with Herm-Granger, if he expected to get any decent practice defending himself. *Still a slacker, then? One would think that your multiple encounters with the Dark Lord would have motivated you to work harder. He may make you his bitch yet, Potter, if you won't even bother to challenge yourself.*

After a while, Snape gave up on Weasley in disgust. "Here, let me show you--"

The next thing he knew, he was staggering into a desk as The Prat's screech of "Protego" echoed around the room.

"Do you remember me telling you we are practicing *nonverbal* spells, Potter?"

"Yes."

That right there... that was why he so despised The Little Prat. Well, one of many reasons, but definitely within the top three. A decent lad would drop his head with a guilty expression and take his lumps for failing the lesson of the day. *But not Potter, the Entitled One. Oh, no, he juts out his chin as though I'VE wronged HIM.* "Yes, sir."

"There's no need to call me 'sir,' Professor."

One thousand. Two thousand. "Detention, Saturday night, my office." He was getting better. It only took a count of two to calm the urge to *Kedavra* the little tosser, and he hadn't even *reached* for something to throw.

At the end of class, Hermione gave him the merest hint of a grin as she gathered up her books. It felt like the sun had emerged from a thundercloud. This was going to be a great year.

A/N: I finally had a chance to go through HBP and plan out the attack for the rest of the story. I can't promise frequent updates, but at least I'm getting back on it! I have to say, though, with Umbridge gone and Lucius in jail, I'm at rather a loss for antagonists. Looks like the conflicts will be mainly internal for this part. Heh heh heh. I SO love torturing Snape.

40: The Difference Between Day and Night

Chapter 40 of 47

A discussion of the first day of Year 6 ensues between our favorite couple.

He suspected something just from the sound of her knock. It was just a hair too brisk, a smidgeon too loud. Or neither of those, but something was definitely different, a minute variance that no one else would notice, yet sufficient to make his skin crawl.

She was smiling as she walked in, but it, too, was not quite right. There weren't enough crinkles around the eyes, perhaps, or maybe it was in the way she walked, or breathed. Had this been a professional encounter, Snape would pay meticulous attention to these details, her personal indicators of hidden distress. The knowledge of such things was quite useful to a spy.

To a lover, however, they served only to send his heart leaping into his throat. She'd been at Hogwarts a scant twenty-four hours, and already he'd offended her.

Behind neutral eyes, he steeled himself. *Bring it on, then, witch.*

He met her at the divan and she sat beside him readily enough, but the chill was unmistakable. After a brief but intense silence, he finally spoke. "You know, you needn't come visit every night if it isn't convenient."

She sat up straighter. "Good evening to you too, Severus."

Mother of Merlin, if I wanted games like this, I'd have taken Umbridge up on her offer! He folded his arms and waited.

She returned the gesture, but if there were a Hall of Fame for the Silent Chill, Snape would hold the seat of honor and they both knew it. She finally wrinkled her nose and broke the standoff.

"You aren't exactly easy to get along with, do you know?"

He responded with a raised eyebrow.

"In class today. I could tell you were annoyed that no one offered to answer about the nonverbal spells. But what else do you expect, when you promptly belittle the person who *does* answer?"

"Perhaps I mean my questions to be rhetorical," he said, bristling.

She glared. "But of course. Silly me, what professor asks questions in expectation of a response? This puts your examinations in a whole new light."

"Hermione Granger, if you have come here as my student to reprimand my teaching methods, I will be happy to show you the door and deduct House points."

To his deepest dismay, she stood up. "I can find the door myself."

Just let her go, let her go, let her go."Hermione, stop." She did, her hand already on the latch. "Just sit with me a moment." *Please.*

She let out a long, shaky breath and returned to the divan.

"You've known all along this wouldn't be easy," he began, his voice as soft as he could make it. "I treated you today as I have always treated you. As I must, and as you must do to me. This is no different from last year; why do you take such offense now?"

She gazed off into an empty corner of the room. "I don't know."

"Words I never expected to hear from your lips, dear girl. Could it be that you've spent the holidays daydreaming about our encounters after dark, and ignoring the reality of the caustic Potions Professor?"

She had to clear her throat to loosen her voice. "Not exactly. Though I suppose I didn't spend much time thinking about your classes, that's true."

"If it's any comfort, neither did I. But you know this is necess--"

"I KNOW!" she bellowed, cutting him off. "We're not in the classroom, Severus, there's no need to be condescending! I'm well aware of what must be done, I'm just having a little trouble with... the disparity. One minute I trust you enough to give myself over completely, the next I'm reeling from being humiliated. I'm not used to men saying 'I love you' in one breath, then insulting me in the next!"

Snape swallowed hard. "It was not necessarily an insult, you know," he attempted feebly. "You really had quoted the book."

That went over like a granite wall. Clearly a different approach was needed.

"Very well, very well. I admit, this is rather a dilemma. You understand, obviously, that the ruse is necessary. Yet I will admit, it feels most..." *unsportsmanlike* "... inequitable to speak to you in such a manner. It seems my reputation has finally caught up to me."

She made no response, but her glare softened considerably, and Snape was struck with a bold idea. "Perhaps you will do this for me, dear girl. Can you convince yourself that my words in the classroom have an alternate meaning? A secret code, as it were. For example, when I call you a 'know-it-all,' the intent is to compliment your sharp thinking. Or that every point I take from Gryffindor is meant to remind you of my affection." She tried to hide her smile, but could not. "And every belittling comment, unbeknownst to you alone, is a promise to set your body afire that very same night."

That made her laugh outright. "I should be so lucky!" Her smile faded quickly, though not completely. "And when the others in class, like Malfoy, remind me of your tender comments, what should I tell myself?"

"Hermione, if Draco Malfoy had any idea how delightful you are, he would throw himself at your feet and I would have to duel with him for your affections. Thus I am forced to deliberately poison his opinion of you on a regular basis."

She scoffed, but again could not hide her pleasure at the compliment. "Flatterer!" she mocked. "We both know Malfoy wouldn't have me because of what's in my blood."

No, Malfoy won't have you because of what's in your pants. "More fool him, then, my dear." He reached up and tentatively stroked her hair, entwining his fingers in the curls when she did not protest. "Hermione. I am sorry. I truly am. I have no desire to insult you; it's just part of the facade. You do know that, don't you?"

She sighed noisily, but nodded. "It's just strange. It wasn't as hard last year, when it was still so tentative. But now... I just want the charade to end, Severus. Just for once, I'd like to have a *normal boyfriend*, someone to hold hands with in the corridor and walk around the lake with."

This is the beginning of the end, then. He took her hand, letting nothing show in his face but a hint of self-deprecation. "Again I'm sorry, Hermione. I can only hope I will suffice."

41: The Three-Body Problem

Chapter 41 of 47

Checking in with Hermione once again, as she ponders recent developments--both with Our Hero and the Redhead Menace.

Why can't anything ever be SIMPLE?

Hermione woke up just after dawn on a *Saturday*, tired and grouchy, but with too much busy-brain to get back to sleep. She watched the sunbeams spread across the ceiling, down the far wall, and then settle onto the floor for their daily trek, all the while listening to the quiet breathing of her slumbering roommates. Padma and Parvati had kept her up late, giggling over the new *Witch Weekly* and its latest "beauty tips." They were precisely the sort of drivel Severus had mentioned once, ways to allegedly make oneself more attractive, since Merlin forbid any witch perceive that she was good enough just as she was. Hermione was glad Padma had been sorted into Ravenclaw; eventually she had to go back to her own dorm--and take her stupid magazine with her. Parvati and Lavender were bad enough without her along too.

Things had cooled off a bit with Severus. The first night back had been so delectably intense, only to be followed by that first day. They'd made up, and she really had forgiven him, mostly, but it was all just so blooming *frustrating*. Hermione saw the other girls' glances, noticed the lowered voices and discontinued conversations. She'd become the poster child for "What NOT To Do To Attract Boys," not just in Gryffindor Tower but, it seemed, in the entire castle.

She'd never bragged about Viktor; she'd never felt the inclination, and of course she also knew darn good and well that there was no NEED to brag. Every girl in the school was jealous that the famous Seeker had sought HER. But Viktor was studious and serious, having a need to prove to himself (or to his father, or to *someone*) that he was more than just a meatball jock. When he played with her, they had fun, but he was far more diligent about work than play. And after he left, Hermione's social scene had dried up and scattered like so many tumbleweeds.

In public, anyway. It was fun to have this diabolical little secret, true, and Severus was such a tasty challenge, sweet and sharp and always unpredictable. Yes, she could revel in the knowledge that all those smug looks from throughout the Great Hall were misguided, that if only they knew what she did with the stern, sexy enigma from the dungeons, they'd all be jealous once again. Such thoughts could tide her over from time to time, but in the end, Hermione Granger was sick and tired of being Just A

Friend.

Ron liked her. She could see it as plain as the freckles on his face. Hell, she'd seen it back in their fourth year, when he was too young and clueless to see it himself. Like Viktor, Ron *knew* her; he knew she was obsessed with studying and good grades, knew she wasn't afraid to speak her mind or argue with him (a behavior that would have the entire editorial staff of *Witch Weekly* rolling on the floor in agony as though cursed with a collective Cruciatu). It was *nice* to be liked by a guy who saw her for what she was.

Viktor had felt the same way without the benefit of years of shared adventures to create a bond. But Viktor was... complicated. He was through with school and lived far away, still playing Quidditch for the Vrastra Vultures. He had made some small noises about being traded to a British team, but nothing ever came of it. His agent, an incredibly overbearing and unpleasant man, considered Viktor's "appearance" a commodity--and what was worse, Viktor allowed this to happen. Sex appeal sold tickets, *ergo* Viktor needed to keep up a roguish/available image in the public sector. Trading to the Montrose Magpies in order to live within Apparating distance of his girlfriend would risk eliminating the 18-to-50-year-old female demographic from the stadiums.

And in many ways Snape was Viktor all over again. Older, sexier, and so much more intense for that Dark Mark on his arm--and paradoxically sweeter and more vulnerable as well. But with Voldemort and Dumbledore as Snape's "handlers," Viktor's agent was an indulgent pushover in comparison. Assuming Severus even survived the war looming like a karmic wrecking ball in the murky future, it didn't seem to matter which of his "masters" emerged victorious. It would take *years* before he'd reveal to Dumbledore that he'd taken up with a student, and if, Heaven forbid, Voldemort won the war, she'd be lucky if he didn't stuff her into a rocket and hide her on the moon somewhere.

But Ron...

Ron was just *there*, like a big friendly pooch, playful, loyal, and charming in his own goofy, unassuming way. Not as tragic as Harry, who seemed destined for perpetual bachelorhood. Sirius's death seemed to seal Harry up within himself, the cistern in his heart having been built deep and sturdy by his loveless family and multiple betrayals across the board. How Harry could ever trust anyone was beyond her, but against all odds, he had shared his heart with his godfather. Only to have this honest, strong relationship come crashing to a halt at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange. Hermione gripped the coverlet on her bed with both fists. *Tonks and Sirius couldn't kill you, you bitch, but I swear I will see it done, for taking that from Harry.* No quarter for that one.

She let go of the bedspread and willed herself to calm down and concentrate. No sense in getting all worked up about it *now*, on a sunny morning in Hogwarts. Today was Quidditch tryouts. Ron really, really wanted to play, and was very, very nervous about that dipshit, McClaggen. *What a gigantic flaming tosser.* McClaggen was arrogant and bossy--he could give Ferretboy Malfoy a run for his money. And Harry, bless his sweet heart, was trying so hard to be fair as the new Captain, he wouldn't just give the Keeper slot to Ron even though he wanted to give it as much as Ron wanted to have it.

All this fuss over a stupid game, she thought in annoyance for the millionth time, but she knew it was more than that. They loved doing it, for whatever reason, and Harry really did have talent. He might play against Viktor in the professional leagues someday. That thought brought a wicked smile to her lips. *Talk about a stadium full of the Young Female Demographic! Those two hotties zipping about for hours at a time, Wonky-Fainting at one another...* The fans would try to catch the Snitch and hide it in their handbags just to keep the show going.

Hermione halted in her reverie to smile again, basking in the knowledge that *both* of those athletic, sexy men had a place in their hearts for her. She peeked over at Parvati, drooling on her pillow, and delivered a catty look of her own for a change.

Another heavy sigh. Ron wasn't likely to make it in the big leagues. He just got too nervous up there, too worried about making a mistake to concentrate on doing it right. With a flash of insight, Hermione realized that this might just be what had kept Ron from asking her out to the Yule ball two years ago--and what had kept him at arm's length since then as well. It made sense. He'd prefer to go along with the status quo, even if it became bungled and miserable, than to take charge and risk blowing things completely. He might be stretched out on his four-poster bed right now, staring at the same sunrise and imagining the two of them out on a date, but deathly afraid to upset the current equilibrium by even asking if she was interested.

But if I did the asking, he'd absolutely have a paddy, wouldn't he? Ron had too many big brothers to "let a girl be in charge." It had to be his idea, his first step, lest Fred and George call him "Pussy Whipped Ronnie" for the rest of his life. Hermione almost laughed out loud, but caught herself before waking her roommates.

And behind all these scenes was Severus. The greatest complicating factor of all. She shivered, recalling the way he said he loved her. She'd never imagined he'd say such a thing, not in her wildest dreams. It had been rather terrifying, when she first had a moment to really think about it. He was so serious and grim, he couldn't have said that, couldn't have *felt* that, very often.

She wasn't at all sure that she felt the same in return. She wanted him; his silken voice and mysterious ways were downright addictive. But love? Her brow furrowed. *All I wanted was a little action!* And before that, she'd only wanted to learn some gods-damned Occlumency. Love was right out there with running off to the South Seas: an overreaction, far too intense for this point in her life. It carried the suffocating connotations of settling down, raising families, day jobs, laundry. She wanted a *boyfriend*, dammit, someone she could parade around with in front of those smug ding-bats and snog away some of the day's passions, not a lifelong commitment to long black hairs in the sink.

Hermione rolled over with a huff. Simplicity was all she wanted. Mostly.

She also wanted to feel Severus pressing her into his hips again, wanted that indescribable release that only he had ever given her, wanted *to return the favor*.

She gritted her teeth for a moment, then got out of bed and into her slippers. It was almost time for breakfast anyway. She didn't have to make any decisions right this minute, just get downstairs and join the boys and try to take Ron's mind off the Quidditch tryouts. They hadn't been down to see Hagrid in a while; maybe they could do that today. And hell, if Ron could at least keep his cool enough to make a good show during tryouts, she just *might* be able to help him garner an edge over the competition.

With a flick of her wand, she lit the lamps in the bathroom. That rascal Snape was rubbing off on her, after all.

42: The Challenge

Chapter 42 of 47

Hermione marshals a bit of a test for our hero.

An owl swooped down at breakfast and dropped a scroll onto Snape's plate. Very unusual. It said only "Detention. Tonight." Indeed, he thought. He ought to make her scrub the floor in his new classroom; even though Umbridge was long gone, she'd better not get in the habit of sending him owls.

An hour later, he caught her red-handed in Defense Against the Dark Arts, applying a very impressive hex to Draco Malfoy. He sprouted horns and a spiked tail without knowing it, and even his loutish friends were too amused (or surprised) to point it out to him. Snape was tempted to assign her punishment to the following night, as a *real* reprimand for both the owl and the hex, but he thought the better of it. She'd gone out of her way to make the request; there was probably a reason for it.

She arrived promptly at eight and he sat back in his chair to study her. "Miss Granger. You have a distinct look of mischief about you. Dare I ask what scheme you are obviously brewing?"

She raised her brows innocently. "Paranoid, Professor Snape? I was merely looking forward to another Occlumency lesson!"

He smirked and shook his head. "You are a better liar than that, Hermione. Or is that part of the bait as well?"

Laughing, she held her hands out for his. "Oh, very well. You've caught me. It's just that we haven't resumed our lessons, and I've been anxious to show you something." Her sly expression became more devious than ever.

"Show me something?" he said wryly. "I'm intrigued, I must say. You've kept a secret from me?"

"Several! I studied hard over the summer, I'll have you know! I set up a memory that I believe I can keep hidden from you at last."

Snape was a bit doubtful, but impressed nonetheless. She had developed considerable skill at Occlumency, but concealing memories without a trace was the ultimate goal; it was hard to believe she could have reached it yet. "I see," he said with a trace of condescension. "So... you have acquired a Pensieve?"

She sneered and quickly yanked her hands away to slap his. "Think you're clever, do you? On second thought, maybe I'll just keep it locked up a little longer!"

"Please do try, my dear," Snape said and raised his wand. "Perhaps you've mastered the finer points of Occlumency." She took her seat across from the desk, still grinning. "Or perhaps you'll find that your smug smile is a bit premature."

"Sounding a bit smug yourself, aren't you?" she said, laughing outright. "Do your best, then; just let me know when you give up."

I love you. "Oh, I will, as soon as I find it. *Legilimens!*"

Her mind yielded to him with customary ease, and he slipped into the flow of her thoughts without effort. She'd spent the evening working on a difficult Arithmancic proof and apparently solved it. Snape had passed his N.E.W.T. in Arithmancy, but after ten years he couldn't recall most of it even when he looked at his old homework parchments. If they weren't in his own handwriting, he wouldn't believe he'd ever learned the stuff.

He pushed deeper into her memory; it was undoubtedly something from over the summer, after all. He picked a few dates at random and called forth the significant events of those days. He was looking not so much for the unusual memory itself, but for the evidence of her efforts to hide it. The trickiest part of Occlumency was concealing the act of hiding memories; most people failed in that task and left a virtual trail in their minds. Though such a trail might not lead back to the memory itself, it certainly alerted any visitors that there had been tampering. A Legilimens like the Dark Lord would then resort to more destructive methods of intrusion to find the missing pieces.

Snape was even more impressed; there was nothing yet that suggested overt Occlumency. Deeper still, and still no signs. *You are either brilliant or lying, dear girl, and I doubt you are lying.* She could hear him; the overlap between their minds was now considerable. Her thoughts suddenly sparkled as her amusement colored them all with its gaily fleeting brush.

It was clear that the formal approach was necessary. One way to find a missing memory, after all, is simply to examine everything and look for a chronological gap. The internal clocks of the human mind were not perfect; anyone who has sat through History of Magic can attest to one hour seeming like three. But certain circadian rhythms and events (as well as blunt measures like the ignored but registered gonging of a grandfather clock in the hall) could be checked against the flow of memory. Large gaps in time could be disguised as sleep, but such technique was an advanced form of Occlumency that he doubted she had mastered. He prowled around her thoughts until he found her departure the prior June on the Hogwarts Express, and then traced forward meticulously, as only a scientist can.

Nothing. He spent an hour in her mind, much longer than he'd ever gone before at one sitting. He began to have some new insights into the extensive Legilimency sessions that Dark Lord typically imposed, as a blurring of self with other began after about twenty minutes. As he pulled back and recentered himself in his own mind, he made a note to research that effect and see if it could be exploited. But not at the moment; right then, it was apparently time to eat crow.

"I congratulate you, Hermione. Whatever it is, you have squirreled it away completely." His voice lowered in solemn admiration. "Well done, Miss Granger."

Her smile broadened; she was proud, and deservedly so. "I've had a good teacher," she said softly, but still aglow.

"I will not debate our relative contributions in this effort, Hermione," he said with a smirk. "But I will say I'm humbled; I did not expect you to attain such mastery. Again, well done." *You are one of the strongest sorcerers I know.*

Her eyes brightened and the impish grin returned. "And now do you want to see the memory that eluded you?"

Snape settled forward onto his elbows, amused. "For all the trouble you took to hide it, you seem eager to show me, young lady. Why is that?"

"Oh, I think it will all become clear... that is, if you have the courage to examine it."

He smirked. "That was disappointingly transparent, my dear. But you won this round, I suppose now I must concede to your whims. Are you ready?" She nodded. "*Legilimens.*"

43: 9/19/1996

Chapter 43 of 47

Hermione lets Snape in on her little secret.

A/N: Thanks to Vorona for beta-ing this chapter for me, ages ago, (while I was still posting chapters in the teens) and helping me balance sexy vs. scientific on the Legitimency!

* * * * *

She was shopping with her mother. He remembered the outing; he'd checked it during that first time through her memories, but he hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary. She'd hidden it expertly. *Well, well, a shopping trip.* Snape loved her sense of humor, but he would make her pay for this.

He was sure she'd tricked him into a gentleman's worst nightmare, namely hours of prodding through rack after rack of clothing without any actual purchases. It was a pleasant surprise to find that the trip was already over. Hermione and her mother boarded a trolley of some sort, bumping and jostling their way home to a nondescript row house with nasturtiums overflowing from the window boxes. He wondered if she had grown up in this house, and though he normally had no interest in such places, he absorbed as many details as he could from the fleeting glimpse of the exterior, just because it was *her home*.

She took leave of her mother and dashed up to her bedroom with a few small bags. One of them was labeled with a bookstore's logo; he wondered if perhaps she intended to read to him in this way. To his brief disappointment, that bag and others were tossed (carefully) onto her bureau and abandoned, except for one with a twisted paper handle that presumably came from some Muggle department store. She then pulled open her closet to reveal a full length mirror.

Though he was not fully grounded in his own mind and body, Snape reflexively raised his brows with a snide grin. So she intended to show him some new outfit? This could be interesting... to the point of being painful. He both hoped and dreaded that it would be a swimming suit. *Oh, you'll definitely pay for this,* he thought, and again her mind sparkled with laughter.

At that moment in the memory, Hermione closed her eyes. With nothing to see or hear, the memory became tactile in nature. Physical sensation was tricky in Legitimency; there were too many nerve endings feeding information to the brain at all times, even in silence and darkness. It weeded out nearly 99% of what it received automatically, never letting it register to the consciousness, but all the information was there, in a murky amalgam of distracting signals.

It took all of Snape's concentration to determine that she removed something slick from the dry paper bag. It was soft and thin like a handkerchief, but far too large--perhaps a shirt of some sort. Women's clothing was even more incomprehensible than men's, so Snape resigned himself to wait until she was ready to show him. When her eyes opened, she chuckled nervously and locked her bedroom door, then stepped in front of the mirror.

"Hello, Severus," she said, but he hardly noticed the words, too stunned by her reflection. She was wearing a green... *something*, absolutely Muggle in origin. It resembled nothing he'd ever seen in the wizarding world, not even on Knockturn Alley. Far too thin and tight to be a shirt, entirely impractical as a nightgown; its function, as far as he could tell, was to drive men utterly out of their minds.

"It's mid July," she continued. "I haven't seen you in weeks. I've been thinking about you, though."

She began to turn slowly before the mirror, peering at her reflection with a critical eye. "Do you like it, Severus? It struck me as something you'd like. Mum wasn't exactly thrilled to see me buy it, but she'll recover." She giggled mischievously, which caused the fabric to ripple in fascinating ways. "I like it. I never thought I'd buy something so *impractical*, you know. Rather like a ball gown, but worse--outrageously overpriced and you only wear it once in a great while." She giggled again, smoothing the microscopic skirt over her thighs.

"My roommates always look silly in that drafty old castle wearing thin little nighties like this. They end up shivering and hiding under blankets most of the time! Hardly the effect they were trying to achieve when they put them on. But there is a certain appeal to it, isn't there? Under the right circumstances, at least." She smiled wickedly, reaching up to stroke her hair and collect the few stray strands from her face. Raising her arms made the fabric pull taut in a number of fascinating places.

"I suppose if I wore something like this every day, it would become dull," she continued, again twisting her body to display every angle, every curve. "But when I saw it, I thought, 'I could wear that just for Severus.' And if it was chilly, I reckoned you'd let me warm up against you." She winked with yet another impish grin.

Hermione straightened before the mirror, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Severus." She placed both hands on the green fabric over her abdomen. Snape could watch, but not feel; the visual portion of the memory overwhelmed the weak tactile component. Which was, in Snape's current situation, tragically unfortunate. "I couldn't do this in front of you, I'd feel far too self-conscious." Hermione's eyes narrowed in the mirror. Her gaze was fixed on him... no, on her own eyes in her reflection. When he dared look away from her eyes, he found her hands gliding over her body, making the not-dress shimmer over the barely-concealed curves.

Her hands skimmed upward over the silk until the warm weight of a breast rested on each forefinger. She pursed her lips nervously and giggled. "I'm a bit embarrassed now, just knowing you'll be seeing it someday. But I do want you to see it." Hermione cleared her throat and her gaze suddenly flew to the ceiling. She sighed again and returned to the mirror, nipping her lower lip as if steadying her resolve.

Her eyes fell mercifully shut as she deliberately raised her hands up and around, and though Snape already knew what sensations to expect from her fingertips, he was overwhelmed by the exotic pangs produced by her body at the touch of those fingers.

"I've been studying, Severus," she said, her voice deeper, more breathless, her hands continuing their climb to reach into her hair once more. "I bought some books on Occlumency and Obliviation. Of course, I won't know for sure until I get back to Hogwarts, but I think I can hide this memory from you. If all goes as planned, then you won't see this memory until I've proven to you that I've become an Occlumens."

She took a step closer to the mirror. "You insisted that we hold back, Severus, until I could hide my memories. Well, now I've done it! Any other excuses up your sleeve?"

She grinned again, devilishly confident. "Just a rhetorical question, no need to remind me. The age-of-consent issue; I haven't forgotten. But I have good news for you, Severus. If all goes as planned, you will see this memory on Thursday, September 19. Not a particularly significant date in history, to be sure, but quite relevant to this memory. You see, that will be my seventeenth birthday."

Sweet mother of Merlin!

"Severus," she sighed, her breath briefly condensing on the mirror. "Are you ready? Do you want me?" Her voice dropped a major third. "I want you, Severus. I want you to touch me. Just like this." Once again her eyes fell shut as her hands dipped low this time, slipping below the edge of the silk onto the even softer thigh. When they traveled back up underneath the fabric, Snape caught his breath as, once again, he reeled under the delectable response of her body.

Once again her eyes opened, wrenching him from the tactile world to the visual. She twisted her body before the mirror again, making the microscopic skirt flare out to reveal just a tantalizing bit more of the woman beneath it. "I want to touch *you*. I want you. I'm so ready for you, Severus! Don't deny me any longer! Be my lover. Give yourself to me. Touch me. Take me."

And then he was standing in his office, those same smoldering eyes were but inches away, and he could feel the heat of her body, her breath, ~~her~~ *desire*, and in the same voice he'd just left in her memory, she said, "Tonight, Severus. Now."

His wand dropped to the floor, forgotten, as he pulled her into his arms. He managed to gasp, "Now," before they both dove into a kiss and the time for language was ended.

44: The Gift

Chapter 44 of 47

The moment we've all been waiting for...

"Oh, Severus, you and your buttons!"

She was laughing, but there was no mistaking the frustration behind it, and that was a thrill in itself. The transition from office to bedroom was a blur of heated kisses, interrupted by urgent tugs and staggered steps, but now that they'd arrived, his clothing demanded their focus. "Had you but notified me of your lewd intentions, miss, I would have worn something more suitable." She was attempting to loosen the cuffs of his shirt sleeves, which was not helping his own attempts to unbutton his robe. He wondered briefly if she was interfering on purpose, but one look at her shaking hands assured him she was in as great a rush as he.

What's your hurry anyway, you idiot! Six months ago such a thought would never have crossed his mind, but his recent rash of detached, perfunctory encounters had a sobering effect on him. Snape calmed his racing fingers and opened his buttons slowly and deliberately as a warm-up exercise in patience. The night was still young, and he was going to savor every minute of it.

He gently batted her away from fumbling with his cuffs. "All in good time, Hermione." She rolled her eyes as though ready to argue the point, and that *would* be a waste of time, so he hushed her with an irrefutable kiss.

"Severus." Somehow the robe had finally become loose enough to pull from his shoulders, and she ran her hands over his chest and shoulders as he wrenched free of those damned cuffs. He spared a wistful thought for that modern shirt he'd bought, with its elastic neckline and knit fabric, but only for a moment. He'd watched himself pull it off in the mirror and felt incredibly undignified wriggling out of the thing as it inverted and stretched overhead. He looked like a superposition of being born and a snake shedding its skin, neither image seeming appropriate to present to Hermione at a time like this. Buttons were unquestionably better, and once again, damn it, what was the rush?

He watched her touch him, her eyes closed and lips slightly apart. *She wants me.* It was just as unfathomable now as ever, but even more undeniable. *How?* How could a girl half his age be so smitten with him? It was impossible and incredible, and for a moment he had to close his eyes and lose himself to the sensation of her exploring fingers.

Another kiss and she pulled out the tails of his shirt from his trousers. *Goddess, yes!* Her hands slipped up beneath the shirt and glided over his back, making him gasp. "Hermione." How had he *ever* fallen asleep while she sat no more than a meter away reading her book?

She stepped back suddenly with a feral look and opened the first clasp on her robe. He hadn't made any attempt to undress her, still uncertain that she truly meant to go through with this. She watched for his reaction, her eyes gleaming triumphantly when he ground his teeth ever so slightly, and opened the second clasp, then the third. She was wearing the green shift under her schoolgirl's robes.

Not the bed, not yet. He knew he wouldn't last. Snape backed into the armchair, their hands entwined so she would be sure to follow, and pulled her into his lap. She smiled impishly and kissed him, nimbly unbuttoning the front of his shirt. His hands couldn't feel enough that beautiful green silk, nor the warm skin beneath it. He arched his back to make room for her to reach the buttons without having to scoot away.

When she reached the top of his trousers, he caught her hands in his own.

"Hermione." She furrowed her brow. "I *must* hear it, before we go any further... Is this truly your will?" If she had any doubts, it would be far better to hear them while he still had his pants on.

She rolled her eyes and snickered. "I believe I'm the one ripping your clothes off, not vice versa. Does that answer your question?"

"No, it does *not*." He gripped her hands more tightly, pulling them up against his chest. "You were hurt a short time ago by the constraints of our... situation. This will not change matters, except to sharpen such stings."

She sighed with an annoyed huff. "I know, Severus. I had figured that out, really. But since I have to endure the sarcasm no matter what, I might as well enjoy the rest of you, don't you think?"

Snape sat up straighter in the chair. "I'm quite serious." He hated the chill that his tone wedged between them, but he had to be sure. "If you offer this out of any sense of obligation, or any nagging fear that you'll be turned away if you don't surrender yourself--"

She rested a single delicate finger on his lips to silence him and leaned close. "Shh. It's lovely of you to be concerned about such things. But there's no need." She spoke slowly, looking him in the eye. "I am here because I choose you. I want you; I desire you. You, Severus Snape! Now will you please take me to your bed, or must I sign a bloody declaration of intent first?"

Wide-eyed, he nodded quickly and said only, "Yes, ma'am."

"You are a *goddess*." The taste of her. The way she sighed and moaned at the touch of his hands. This was what it was *supposed* to be like, what he'd heard of and dreamed of, but had cleanly eluded him all his life. He had stubbornly clung to the idea that adoration and sensuality existed in the world, even though all his experiences indicated that they were either the product of collective imaginations, or that they would never cross his path. He'd given up on finding it many times, mourned and resented it, envied it internally while excoriating it in public. And here it was, in his arms, his bed, his heart, embodied in this utterly impractical girl who could surely find passion anywhere and somehow, inexplicably, felt it for *him*. "Lover, yes."

He'd drawn the curtains of his bed before he undressed, kicking off his trousers into a corner of the bed. He was too thin, too pale, and he didn't want her to look at his Mark. The firelight filtering through the curtain was enough; he could see her face up close, and though that meant she could also see his, it couldn't be helped.

She raised her hands to halt him as he turned back around, kneeling in the center of the bed. *Thank the Goddess for curtains,* he breathed silently, knowing that her roaming gaze would take in little detail in the murky grey light.

"Severus." She, too, knelt, stopping about a foot away with her hands on his chest. Slowly she lowered them along his skin, until they reached the escutcheon of dark curls below his waist. *Mother of Merlin, don't change your mind now.* He would release her, of course, if she faltered, but *oh, goddess, oh, goddess...* Her hands were suddenly encircling him, warm and silken and so utterly, deliciously *not his own*.

She gave him a few tentative strokes, then let him go. She hadn't lost her nerve; he could hear it in her breath, and he opened his eyes. Hermione was leaning back into

the pillows, her arms open and welcoming. "Come here," she growled.

She was ready; her body unfolded like an orchid for him, lush and tropical. He lowered his head to kiss her again, hungrily now, in his certainty that she would have him. "Hermione, lover, are you ready for me?" he breathed, though there was no need to ask, but wanting to hear it all the same.

"Yes, Severus, yes." No more teasing, no witty repartee, just raw desire. He raised his body above hers and dragged the tip just once through her velvet folds, both of them gasping at the sensation. *She's ready all right.* He adjusted himself to the proper angle *warm bread... she smells like warm bread* placed his palms on either side of her shoulders and braced himself for that first thrust...

... and felt the blow of a sledgehammer on the left side of his chest.

"Oh, my God! SEVERUS! What's wrong!"

He had flung himself backward on instinct, even though he knew there was no one behind him attacking him. At first, all he could do was wave to Hermione, unable to reassure her that he was all right, because he wasn't at all certain that was true. He panted to catch his breath, quite different from the delicious breathlessness he'd been experiencing only a few seconds earlier, but the pain had already receded. Snape had endured many agonizing curses, and though he'd never felt anything like this, he recognized a magical onslaught when he felt one.

"Herm... Hermione..." She was at his side with a horrified look; he had to say something. He stroked her arms reassuringly until he had enough air to for speech. "I think Viktor Krum is having his revenge."

For once she neither replied nor asked a question of her own, just stared at him without comprehension.

"It would seem you've been cursed, my dear. Someone seems to have staked a claim on the territory between your legs. I believe that was but a warning shot across my bow, as it were. I've no doubt that proceeding another inch would have been my death. And wouldn't that have been a bloody difficult thing to explain to Albus!"

Her eyes bulged with outrage. "Viktor wouldn't do a thing like that!"

Snape shrugged. "Then one of your other lovers must also have a working knowledge of Dark magic. Being the Durmstrang student, Viktor seems like the most likely candidate—unless you've taken up with other Death Eaters before me." He knew that was a shitty thing to say, but it spilled out of him in the heady rush that comes from a close brush with death.

To his surprise, she did a bit of a double take. "Other lovers? Severus! Merlin's pink arse, I haven't had any other lovers, you wanker! And that includes Viktor! This will be... my first time." She hung her head as though this admission was shameful.

Oh.

He understood immediately what had happened, and he couldn't help himself. He laughed. Really, really laughed, until his face and sides hurt (in no small part because Hermione began flailing him mercilessly with her small fists when she got over the initial shock at his behavior). "What's so funny?" she demanded fiercely, over and over until he regained his composure.

"Seven hells, woman, you complain about my sour disposition and the one time I--OW!" Her knuckle landed on his funny bone that time, which was almost ironic enough to set him off again.

"Sorry. But what is it?"

Snape fell back onto the bed with a final chortle. "Well, dear girl, I've solved the mystery. I'm afraid I owe Mr. Krum an apology; he had nothing to do with this."

"And?"

He nearly started laughing again. "I'm afraid I have sabotaged myself this time. You see, dear girl, I vowed upon my life never to harm you." He raised his brows appraisingly, and she nodded. "That would include all forms of damage to your person." She still didn't get it, but he knew it would only be a matter of seconds. It was.

"Oh, my God, you can't do it because I'm a virgin and you'll..."

He started to chuckle, but it died on his lips; Hermione looked downright murderous. Snape coughed instead. "A rather inconvenient technicality, I'm afraid, my dear. I suppose I assumed Krum had broken you in, so to speak, but really, I hadn't given the matter much thought at all. Until right now."

She glared at him. Snape suddenly felt a little ridiculous, but damn it, that vow had been a very good idea at the time. He shrugged.

"I've never heard of anything so ridiculous! You have my *consent*, for Merlin's sake, and besides, it's not like you'd REALLY be 'damaging' me..." She looked up at him in indignation, as though it was somehow HIS fault that magic didn't take such mitigating factors into consideration. Snape shrugged again.

"Well, I'm most certainly not going to go out and find someone to 'break me in,' as you so elegantly put it... Damn it, Severus!"

"As if I planned it this way!" he barked. "Blame it all on me if you must but... what?" She had looked up suddenly with a feral gleam in her eye.

"You can't harm me through an act of your will, but *your* vow has no impact on *my* actions, correct?"

Snape's eyes gleamed as well. Hermione shoved his shoulders very hard, and he allowed himself to fall back onto the bed. "Brilliant girl," he said.

?: Day of the Jackal

Chapter 45 of 47

In the meanwhile, Snape, as he must, keeps focused on business...

"Oh! I beg your pardon, I wasn't expecting anyone."

Remus Lupin slouched over a huge mug of steaming coffee. He looked like shit. Snape expected as much; the man always looked like shit the morning after the full moon. At least with the Wolfsbane, he wasn't all bruised and bloodied to go with it. He'd undoubtedly spent a miserable evening chiding himself to keep off the furniture.

Snape stepped out of the fireplace at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and slumped into the chair opposite Lupin's at the long kitchen table. Lupin huddled under his wool blanket and breathed in the aromatic steam from his coffee for several minutes before he succumbed to curiosity. He spoke without looking up.

"Out with it already, Severus. I know you're not here to keep me company."

"Are we alone?"

Lupin tossed his head, smirking bitterly. "Of course. Who the hell else ever comes here?"

Snape refrained from commenting on the enticing atmosphere. "I need your help," he began, his stomach clenching at his own words. "A matter of utmost secrecy. You must agree in advance that, if you choose to help me, you will allow me to Obliviate all memory of your efforts. If you do not wish to help, I will still Obliviate this conversation. Will you concede to these terms?"

Lupin sat up straight, the blanket sliding from his shoulders, forgotten. "Mother of Merlin, Severus. Does it have to be *today*, of all times?" He knew better than to ask such a thing, and he accepted Snape's stony sneer as an affirmative. "Order business?" he asked weakly.

"Of course."

"Is Dumbledore involved?"

"The terms, Lupin. Do you agree?"

Lupin's brows raised indignantly; he understood there was no real choice being offered. "If this favor involves harming anyone--"

"No. It involves you and I alone, no other parties."

Lupin frowned, smelling a rat, but he'd known Snape long enough to recognize his unyielding determination in the matter. He sighed. "I'll submit to Obliviation if I must. But before I agree to anything, I want the truth up front. All of it."

"I'll submit to the truth if I must," Snape jeered in response. "But only enough to ease your overdeveloped conscience." Having said that, though, Snape found himself acutely uneasy and unusually tongue-tied. Lupin stared at him patiently, not even rolling his eyes at the delay.

"This is difficult," Snape finally confessed, which in itself was more painful than asking for the favor. *I WILL Obliviate every trace of this discussion!*

Lupin simply remained silent, neither encouraging him to speak nor casting an empathetic gaze. *One more for the cause*, Snape thought bitterly, then steeled himself for the plunge.

"I require training in an area of your... experience. Not the werewolf thing," he snapped impatiently at Lupin's wary frown. "I must pursue a... relationship. A sexual... a *homosexual* relationship. I must appear experienced." This was all he could manage for the moment; the urge to flee was becoming unbearable.

Lupin took a long time to speak, and when he did, there was a most unpleasant edge to his voice. "Really, now. Is this the best you can do, Severus?"

"You think I'm joking?" Snape seethed.

His amber eyes hardened. "You know, despite the fact that I'm considered gutter trash, there are *some people* who do, in fact, speak to me. I *am* occasionally privy to the news of wizard society." His knuckles whitened around the edge of the table, as though he meant to flip it over. "Bloody hell, Snape! How DARE you use a ruse like this to get in my pants! I ought to--" Lupin stopped short for one reason alone: in all the years he'd known Severus Snape, he had never seen the man turn purple or sputter.

"Erk... ip... GAH!" Snape's whole body snapped as though his brain had temporarily overloaded, then forcibly reconnected. "I will say this one time," he hissed. "The gossip you have heard is FALSE. But *because* of these rumors, I must now pursue an affair that is *unnatural* to me. And he must be convinced of *mysincerity*. I'm not attempting to *deceive* my way into your bed."

Mollified, Lupin sat back in his chair and resorted to staring once more. "So you've never--"

"Never." He didn't feel like hearing just how far the story had stretched.

"Not with Sirius--"

Snape waved his hand in a desperate plea for peace. "NEVER."

Lupin let out a heavy exhalation, his shoulders dropping, but his eyes were still distrustful. "But this came from--"

"I KNOW whence the rumors came. I started them myself." At the werewolf's skeptical glare, he sullenly added, "It was most expedient at the time, trust me."

At last Lupin folded his arms and rested his elbows on the table. "I see," he said quietly, the gears inside his head obviously winding again. "You made your bed, and now you have to lie in it?" Apparently he did not expect an answer, for he seemed content with Snape's heavily-lidded glower. "Why me?"

Snape felt the beginnings of a migraine. "Because you're the only bloody poofster I know who can keep his mouth shut besides Albus, and I will NOT ask HIM!"

Lupin scoffed, staring down at his coffee mug. "How flattering." He added, rather peevishly, "I'm not a poof, you know. I'm attracted to both men and women."

"I didn't know, and further, I don't *care*. By the Goddess, man, I'm not asking for your hand in marriage! Will you do this or not?"

"Oh, sure," Lupin said after a pause, his voice bitter and deliberate. "I'll teach you to make love to another man. For the cause, of course."

He leveled a vicious gaze, which caught Snape rather off guard. "For the cause," he agreed weakly.

"And after I surrender my body and my passion to a man who's hated me since we were children, you'll oh-so-kindly Obliviate me, so I won't have to bear the shame of it all. Right? Or so *you* won't. Which is it, Severus? Which of us would you spare from this 'dreadful burden'?"

Leave it to a Gryffindor to complicate a perfectly straightforward request. Yet even as he thought it, Snape knew this wasn't so simple. There was nothing logical about what he asked, or what Lupin must do. For a brief moment, Snape yielded to his baser instincts.

"I need your help, Remus," he said, his voice soft, tired, defeated. "Very soon, I must seduce a young man who deserves... better. I will lie and flatter and... fuck my way into his heart, which I will inevitably break. I have no choice. He has taken on a terrible mission for the Dark Lord. There's no way to persuade him to change his course, for he believes--correctly--that this is the only way to preserve his life, and that of his family. I can only hope that by posing as his lover, I can get close enough to undermine his efforts without leaving him open to blame."

Lupin shook his head, awestruck with contempt. "Have you never heard of compassion, Severus? Of friendship?"

Slamming his fist onto the table hard enough to make the coffee mug bounce, Snape leaned right into the other wizard's face. "Did I ask for your counsel? Presumptuous arse! You think a good paternal chat over a butterbeer will erase the terror of a direct threat from the Dark Lord himself?" Sensing that Lupin was suitably cowed, he sat back once more. "He already trusts me," Snape continued. "It's not enough. He needs to be... dazzled. To feel a bond so passionate as to outweigh the fear."

"A bond that doesn't actually exist." Lupin shuddered. "Do you honestly think you can fool this man into believing you're in love with him?"

Snape nearly laughed out loud. "That very thing is done every day, by far weaker liars than I. I told you, he's young. Inexperienced. Kind words and sex easily pass for love when you're seventeen."

Lupin palmed his forehead. "Seventeen? Are we talking about a *student*?" Snape was forced to gulp and respond with a nod. "May the Goddess have mercy on your soul, Severus. Do you know how humiliated he'll be when he finds out it was all an act?"

"No," Snape said, his voice thick and gravelly. "I only know how dead he'll be if I fail him. Will you help me or not?"

Lupin stared at him for a long time, then finally replied with unnerving gentleness. "Let me do it. Spare him the misery of being manipulated by a trusted professor. A *straight*, trusted professor."

If only... "Impossible. He's a pureblood Slytherin--he wouldn't tell you the time of day, much less his orders from the Dark Lord. It has to be me." Snape sighed heavily.

"And you think you can keep up the masquerade? That you can kiss him and touch him with enough... heat, that he'll believe you really feel it?"

Ah, there it is. I must first seduce you, to prove I can seduce Draco. How quaint. Snape closed his eyes and tipped back his head, breathing deeply. He slowly reached up and fingered the top button of his collar.

"Let's go to your room, Remus," he said, deep and silky with the barest hint of urgency. Amber eyes flashed to black and Lupin's mouth fell open with a little gasp. *So it begins.*

?: An Uninvited Guest

Chapter 46 of 47

A surprise awaits our beleaguered Severus.

A/N: ANother chapter entered out of order (mostly cuz people were requesting updates and this one was ready). Again, final story position will be determined later.

* ~ * ~ * ~ *

The caller was most definitely *not* Hermione. Not only was it far too early to expect her, but the knock sounded more like a battering ram than a knuckle. From behind his desk, Snape opened the door with his wand, ready to follow with a quick hex if necessary.

"Evenin', Perfesser Snape."

"It was," he muttered. "What brings you here, Professor Hagrid?" Snape didn't bother inviting him in; Hagrid had already shut the door and was making himself comfortable on the divan.

"Need a potion, I think--that is, I know I need one, I jus' hope you can make somethin' that'll do."

Disdainful glares didn't work on Hagrid, yet Snape put in the effort just for his own sake. "I hope I shall not be dreadfully overtaxed." He folded his hands atop his desk and peered coldly through half-lidded eyes.

Huzzah. I appear to have confused him. Snape waited a few more seconds as the giant nervously twisted strands of his beard, then gave up. "Hagrid, I can hardly get to work until you tell me what you need."

"Well, yeah, tha's just it, yeh know, I, uh, it's a bi' hard fer me teh describe, exac'ly..."

"Oh, for Goddess's sake, out with it!"

Hagrid looked affronted. "Steady on, there, Snape, no need ter go an' invoke the Deity! This's a delica' matter!"

"Hagrid." Despite himself, Snape was intrigued. Whatever the great oaf had done, he seemed genuinely upset about it--this was bound to be amusing. "Something is obviously amiss, and since it both involves you AND has progressed to the point where my services are required, I would imagine that the time for delicacy and caution has long passed. Can we just proceed straight to the crux of the matter, please?"

Hagrid was born without the capacity for guile, but he wasn't stupid. He eyed Snape coolly, then sat up straighter. "All right, Snape. It's a girl. She's got herself in a bad way, an' I need a potion teh take care o' things."

It felt like Christmas came early this year. Snape bit his tongue to keep from laughing aloud. *Professional, professional.* "I see. Dare I point out that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure?"

"No need ter go pointin' anythin' out ter *me*, Snape, I di'nt knock her up," the giant growled defensively. "I'm jes' tryin' ter keep the consequences under control."

Great Goddess, I hope it's not a student. Snape couldn't picture single female in the entire school who was foolish enough to turn to Hagrid as a discrete confidante, but one never knew. "I see. I am of course familiar with such potions. You understand that this is not the sort of thing I condone?"

"It's not up to you to make the decision, Snape, just to provide what's needed if you can. If it's any comfort to you, it's for her health; she's too soon after her last one to have another."

Charming. Snape couldn't wait to end this conversation. "Very well. How far along?"

Hagrid's nose shifted to a new angle, indicating he was probably frowning thoughtfully under all that facial hair. "She, um, lessee, this is November, and June was her time, so that'd be..."

"Six months! Mother of Merlin, Hagrid, why in seven hells did you wait this long?" There were laws against this sort of thing!

Hagrid returned Snape's reproachful stare without faltering in the slightest, then suddenly threw up his hands in comprehension. "Oh! No, no, no, Snape, she's not *human*. I'm the bloody gamekeeper, remember? One of my breedin' lassies got loose and she's got a yearlin' to take care of!" He scowled. "Merlin's sake, what kind of monster do you take me for?"

"Of course. I should have known. That simplifies the matter, then. What species?" Snape turned to the bookshelf behind his desk, where he kept the titles that did not belong in the hands of students.

"Centaura."

* ~ * ~ * ~ *

And there it is. Merry Christmas, everyone.

45: Snape's Best Week

Chapter 47 of 47

A brief glimpse into the new relationship developing in the dungeons.

Every day before Defense Against the Dark Arts, Snape prayed to the Goddess that no one misbehaved in class. He was more vicious than ever with his students, launching into a verbal lashing at the slightest hint of possible mischief. Squirming in one's seat was sufficient grounds to deduct House Points, even for students in Slytherin. Poppy Pomfrey began to grumble that the Hospital Wing ought to have stayed on the first floor, since so many students were detouring past Snape's classroom straight to her domain, with severe (but temporary) headaches and upset stomachs.

Any would-be miscreants were shot down long before they could create trouble. Not even a gaggle of Weasley twins could get a snide word in edgewise. Descriptions of Snape's wrath eventually led the other professors to cautiously avoid him. Dumbledore gazed at him with questioning concern at each and every meal.

Setting both a personal and a school record, Severus Snape didn't hand out a single detention in over three weeks.

He wasn't sure if she would arrive through the Floo or at the door, so he kept an eager eye on both places. Never had he skimmed through essays so quickly. He considered removing essays outright from his teaching repertoire, but rejected that notion; he had to have something to do in the early evening or he'd wear a groove into the flagstones with restless pacing.

A telltale knock, a sudden whoosh of flames, and all thoughts of essays and espionage were banished.

She might bring along her studies, or arrive empty-handed. On some nights she would arrive practically as the evening meal ended, while on others he waited as the candles burned low, tediously slogging through essays and lesson plans. It didn't matter. Every night, every *single* night she visited him. Never had he waited with such eager anticipation, and never had he been rewarded so consistently.

Darling girl. Snape had never experienced the rush of a new relationship--the playfulness, the exploration. What *fun* it was to discover places that made her sigh aloud when touched. What fun to be explored, by genuinely curious hands.

That he had ever found a hasty shag traded for a packet of high-grade Bulbadox powder to be satisfying was now unfathomable.

She turned up fairly late Saturday night, having attended one of Slughorn's parties. It put her in a bad humor. "I swear, they'd be unbearable if it weren't for Ginny. Praise to Merlin that she timed that Bat-Bogey Hex right when she did--if the Professor hadn't spotted her, I don't think I could stand going!"

Snape twirled a lock of her hair idly as she rested her cheek against his bare chest. "Why bother, then, love?" She raised her head and glared at him for a moment, but quickly lapsed back into coziness. "Come now, it's not as though you *need* to be in his good graces."

Hermione sniffed noisily. "Of course not. Silly me, taking advantage of an opportunity to mingle with an influential, well-connected mentor. One who could open doors to my career, for the price of a few distasteful parties."

Though he was tempted to comment that his sarcasm was rubbing off on her, his voice faltered as the meaning of her words came through. *'Distasteful acts' can be a very high price, indeed,* he thought bitterly, but kept it to himself.

"Besides," she continued, "the way things are going in Potions, I may very well *need* his approval." Her tone had changed; she was no longer joking around.

"Potions? What's the matter with Potions?"

Wrong question. He could feel her whole body snap with tension, and she promptly sat up and began collecting her robes. "Nothing's the matter!" she grumbled, which he believed not one iota. Snape sat up too, eyeing her sternly. "No, it's fine," she insisted, pulling on her blouse. "It just... These advanced lessons are a bit more challenging. For most of us. Including me." She yanked her robe down over her head with an audible pop; the top button launched across the bed.

Snape knew there was more to it than that, but let the matter drop.

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Author's Note: Wow. How long has it been since I worked on this story? I have a few free days before my next round of grant applications. It may take a while to get back into it... I think the first part was easier because I liked OotP so much more than HBP. Hard to get the groove going for the Canon timeline. And even worse, I've posted a few chapters out of order now. But I'm trying! Honest!